

Unlocking Organizational Atmospheres: Utilizing Employer Reviews and Dictionary-Based Analysis



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Abstract: This study investigates organizational atmospheres through dictionary-based content analysis of online employer reviews. Using the validated text analysis tool GANAiO and an exploratory approach, we analyze reviews of three major parcel delivery companies in Germany. We empirically identify recurring patterns, atmosphere types, and affective dimensions. Our mixed-method design combines quantitative frequency and dimensional analyses with qualitative content analysis to uncover the drivers behind specific atmospheres. The findings reveal distinct differences in atmosphere types across organizations and over time, offering theoretical and practical insights into how employees perceive and describe organizational atmospheres and how these can be systematically studied.



Keywords: heuristic methods, organizational psychology, business development, organizational atmospheres

Organisationale Atmosphären entschlüsseln: Eine Analyse von Arbeitgeberbewertungen mit diktionsbasierten Verfahren

Zusammenfassung: Diese Studie untersucht organisationale Atmosphären mittels diktionsbasierter Verfahren von Online-Arbeitgeberbewertungen. Unter Verwendung des validierten Textanalysetools GANAiO und eines explorativen Ansatzes analysieren wir Bewertungen von drei großen Paketzustellern in Deutschland. Empirisch identifizieren wir wiederkehrende Muster, Atmosphärentypen und affektive Dimensionen. Unser Mixed-Methods-Design kombiniert quantitative Häufigkeits- und Dimensionsanalysen mit einer qualitativen Inhaltsanalyse, um die Treiber spezifischer Atmosphären aufzudecken. Die Ergebnisse zeigen deutliche Unterschiede in den Atmosphärentypen zwischen Organisationen und über die Zeit hinweg auf und bieten theoretische wie praktische Einblicke darin, wie Mitarbeiter organisatorische Atmosphären wahrnehmen und beschreiben und wie diese systematisch untersucht werden können.

Stichwörter: Heuristische Verfahren, Organisationspsychologie, Unternehmensentwicklung, Organisationale Atmosphären

1. Introduction

Recently, organizational atmospheres are receiving growing scholarly attention (Jørgensen & Beyes, 2023; Julmi, 2017b). Generally, the work atmosphere can be defined as the affectively perceived quality of the immediate work environment. It constitutes a perva-

sive yet intangible phenomenon that surrounds individuals in a given space and shapes their experiences and behaviors (Julmi et al., 2024, p. 1). In organizational settings, they manifest in various ways—whether it is the uneasy tension during a performance review or the uplifting mood of a team celebration. These atmospheres are often instantly perceptible and can profoundly shape interactions, decisions, and overall experiences within the workplace. This stands in contrast to organizational culture, which refers to a set of established norms, values, and behaviors within an organization that are conveyed to new members through a socialization process (Schein & Schein, 2017). While organizational culture is an abstract, cognitive construct that is both challenging to grasp and resistant to change, the work atmosphere is an affective phenomenon that is intuitively accessible, situational, can shift rapidly and may coexist in diverse, even conflicting forms (Julmi, 2017c). Accordingly, atmospheric patterns capture not uniformity but the affective polyphony of organizational life. Despite their critical role in shaping employee satisfaction, productivity, well-being, and employer choice (Ashraf, 2019; Julmi et al., 2024; Radermacher & Herdejürgen, 2022), work atmospheres have so far received little attention in empirical organizational research—unlike the extensively studied concepts of organizational culture and climate (Ehrhart & Schneider, 2016; Giorgi et al., 2015).

The concept of atmospheres has only recently gained traction in organizational research, emerging prominently over the last decade (Jørgensen & Beyes, 2023). While their importance is widely recognized, much of the existing research has concentrated on practices aimed at deliberately shaping atmospheres. For example, De Molli et al. (2020) explore how the atmosphere of a film festival was intentionally crafted, while Leclair (2023) examines how atmospheres contribute to enhancing creativity processes. Additionally, researchers have investigated the role of atmospheres in facilitating learning (Elmholdt et al., 2018; Michels & Beyes, 2016; Michels et al., 2020; Thedvall, 2017; Wolf, 2019) and sensemaking processes (Knight et al., 2025; Vitry et al., 2020).

However, despite these advances, a critical research gap remains: Due to the lack of systematic empirical investigations into how organizational atmospheres manifest, differ, and exert influence, we still know relatively little about the types of atmospheres that emerge in organizational contexts. Without empirically grounded insights, it is difficult to develop a coherent theoretical framework. As a result, both academic theorizing and practical applications risk being built on vague assumptions rather than robust evidence.

In an initial attempt to address this gap, Eifert and Julmi (2025) developed the German Affective Norms for Atmospheres in Organizations (GANAiO)—a dictionary-based tool for computer-aided text analysis. They propose eleven distinct categories of organizational atmospheres. GANAiO offers considerable potential for theory development, particularly when applied to large-scale textual data (Hannigan et al., 2019; McKenny et al., 2018; Short et al., 2018). In this context, the employer review platform kununu serves as a valuable data source: unlike general review platforms, it explicitly prompts users to reflect on the work atmosphere in their organization (kununu, 2023). These reviews provide rich, naturalistic descriptions of employees' lived experiences of organizational atmospheres.

Recognizing the theoretical potential of combining a validated text analysis tool like GANAiO with a large corpus of atmosphere-related employee narratives, this study aims to take a first step toward empirically identifying typical organizational atmospheres and discovering how they change over time by applying GANAiO to kununu reviews. Given the novelty of applying GANAiO to analyze organizational atmospheres, our study adopts

an exploratory approach rather than a confirmatory or hypothesis-driven one. The primary objective is to uncover underlying patterns and dimensions within the data, particularly as the use of this dictionary in the context of organizational atmosphere has not been tested in prior research. By focusing on discovery, we aim to identify relevant trends and relationships that can serve as the foundation for future, more focused hypothesis testing. This approach allows for a more open-ended exploration of the complexities of organizational atmospheres, where predefined hypotheses may limit the identification of unexpected or nuanced findings.

This article is structured as follows: Firstly, we look at the theoretical background of atmospheres in organizations and the research concerning typical atmospheres and their relationships. Next, we describe the methodology employed in this study. The results section presents the key findings of our analysis, followed by a discussion of their implications. We then address the limitations of our study before concluding our paper.

2. Theoretical background

To situate our study theoretically, we begin by examining how atmospheres have been conceptualized in terms of affect and emotional experience. Schmitz et al. (2011) think of atmospheres as affective phenomena. Meanwhile, Russell and Pratt (1980, p. 311) try to grasp the meaning of affect and define it “as emotion expressed in language“. They investigate the affective quality of environments, which they describe as “the emotion-inducing quality that persons verbally attribute to that place“ (Russell & Pratt, 1980, pp. 311–312). To analyze these qualities, they propose a framework based on two dimensions: pleasure-displeasure and arousal-sleepiness. For instance, an environment that combines sleepiness and pleasantness is characterized as relaxing, while one that is both unpleasant and arousing is described as distressing.

While Russell and Pratt's (1980) framework adopts a dualistic perspective—strictly separating the environmental stimulus from its affective response—Julmi (2022) proposes a non-dualistic understanding of atmospheres. In this view, atmospheres and their effects are intertwined: for example, an atmosphere of sadness both evokes sadness in individuals and simultaneously renders the environment itself gloomy. Nonetheless, Julmi (2015, 2017a, 2022, 2024) builds on Russell and Pratt's (1980) model and introduces the circumplex model of affective atmospheres (figure 1), offering a refined framework for analyzing and understanding affective atmospheres. He conceptualizes atmospheres along the dimensions of inviting and repellent atmospheres, corresponding to pleasure and displeasure (valence dimension), and narrowing and widening atmospheres, corresponding to arousing and sleepy (arousal dimension) (for a discussion see Julmi, 2022). Inviting atmospheres draw individuals in, fostering engagement, while repellent atmospheres create an urge to leave. Narrowing atmospheres concentrate attention inward, emphasizing the spatially felt “here“, whereas widening atmospheres promote a sense of expansiveness, detachment, or openness to the surrounding space. Combining these dimensions yields four ideal atmosphere types: repellent-narrowing, inviting-narrowing, repellent-widening, and inviting-widening. As is common in circumplex models, the specific arrangement of axes (i.e., which dimension is placed on which axis) is arbitrary and does not affect the conceptual interpretation of the model.

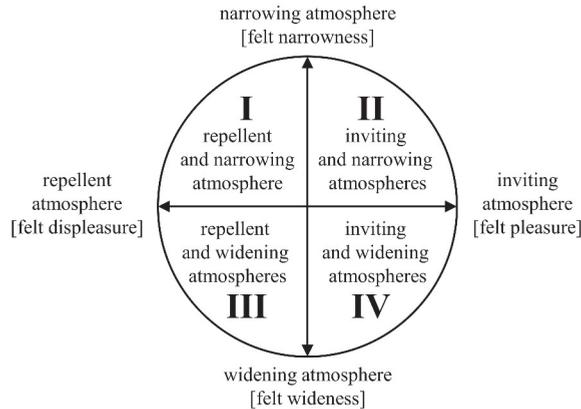


Figure 1: The circumplex model of affective atmospheres (Julmi, 2022)

Building on this model, recent research has begun to explore the concrete forms that organizational atmospheres can take. Notably, Eifert and Julmi (2025) identify eleven distinct atmosphere types within organizational contexts: feel-good, family, trust, team, start-up, open-plan-office, competitive, pressure-laden, surveillance, anxiety, and toxic. These atmosphere types can be tentatively grouped along the dimensions proposed in the circumplex model of affective atmospheres: while feel-good, family, trust, team, and start-up atmospheres tend to be inviting and widening, competitive, pressure-laden, surveillance, anxiety, and toxic atmospheres are more often repellent and narrowing. The open-plan-office atmosphere, in contrast, appears more ambivalent, comprising both inviting and repellent elements depending on contextual factors.

Furthermore, each atmosphere type is characterized by a specific vocabulary. For instance, a trust atmosphere is typically associated with terms such as honesty, sincerity, and sympathy, whereas a surveillance atmosphere is marked by notions of control and suspicion. These lexical markers not only help to distinguish different atmosphere types but also suggest that atmospheres can be identified and analyzed through the language used to describe them.

However, the categorization of atmospheres remains at an early stage. While initial findings indicate distinct patterns, possible overlaps between categories—for example between toxic and anxiety atmospheres—highlight the need for further conceptual refinement. By identifying typical atmospheres described on kununu and uncovering underlying patterns and dimensions within the data, hypotheses about the relationships between different atmosphere types (e.g., anxiety and toxic) can be developed. This contributes to advancing the empirical and theoretical understanding of work atmospheres.

The following section outlines the methodological approach used to gain deeper insight into these typical organizational atmospheres.

3. Methodology

3.1 Analytical approach

To research types of organizational atmospheres, we applied a computer-assisted text analysis approach to employer reviews. Our methodology builds on GANAiO, a dictionary

specifically developed for analyzing verbal descriptions of work atmospheres (Eifert & Julmi, 2025). In this study, we use GANAiO to classify large volumes of unstructured text data by identifying recurring patterns of how different atmospheres are described. The analysis combines a categorical perspective—assigning reviews to one or more of eleven distinct atmosphere types (e.g., toxic, start-up)—with a dimensional perspective that captures how pleasant or unpleasant (valence: -4 to +4) and how calming or activating (arousal: 1 to 9) an atmosphere is perceived. These scale ranges reflect the scoring system of the GANAiO dictionary, which uses a centered valence scale (to indicate polarity) and a unidirectional arousal scale (to indicate intensity).

To gain insight into the factors underlying these patterns, we complemented the dictionary-based analysis with qualitative methods. GANAiO's categorical approach allowed us to filter out reviews relevant to particularly salient developments. Building on this, we conducted an inductive analysis using MAXQDA, following the coding principles outlined by Gioia (2021). This enabled us to identify the drivers behind specific atmosphere types and to better understand the potential organizational, contextual, and experiential factors associated with their emergence and transformation. The integration of both quantitative and qualitative approaches thus offers a richer understanding of how employees experience and interpret the atmosphere in their organizations.

3.2 Data source and case selection

To empirically identify typical organizational atmospheres using GANAiO, we aimed to access a data source that would enable large-scale, naturalistic insight into employees' subjective experiences. Employer reviews offered a promising foundation for this purpose, as they capture firsthand reflections on workplace culture (Höllig, 2021, 2022) and atmosphere. We chose kununu—a major employer review platform in German-speaking countries—because it systematically collects structured feedback from current and former employees as well as applicants. This platform provides both qualitative narratives and quantitative ratings across multiple organizational dimensions, including corporate culture, diversity, working environment, and career & salary. Within the corporate culture section, reviewers are explicitly asked to describe the work atmosphere, leadership behavior, team spirit, communication, work-life balance, and the presence of interesting tasks. Each of these dimensions is also rated on a scale from 1 to 5, offering both qualitative and quantitative insights into organizational dynamics. Since GANAiO is specifically designed for German-language analysis, kununu's German-language reviews offered the ideal linguistic basis for our study.

To generate meaningful and comparable insights, we selected three major German parcel delivery companies—DHL, Hermes, and DPD—as case studies. These organizations were chosen for several reasons: First, parcel carriers are among the largest employers in Germany. Their large workforce is reflected in a substantial volume of employer reviews on kununu, providing a robust and empirically relevant dataset from which reliable insights into typical atmospheres within each organization can be derived. Second, selecting companies from the same industry sector ensures a high degree of contextual comparability. All three organizations operate under similar external conditions, including time pressure, tight delivery schedules, frequent customer interaction, and physically demanding tasks. Third, given these shared contextual factors, differences in the perceived work atmospheres are likely to result from internal organizational factors—such as leadership

behavior and management practices—rather than sector-specific conditions. This enhances the validity of cross-case comparisons and strengthens the explanatory power of the findings. Thus, we collected employer reviews of these three parcel carriers from the kununu platform, spanning from 2013 to 2022. Our dataset comprises comments on various aspects including the work atmosphere, communication, team spirit, leadership behavior, work-life balance, and interesting tasks, as research shows the relevance of these aspects for work atmospheres (Radermacher & Herdejürgen, 2022).

3.3 Data processing and analysis

Before applying the dictionary and analyzing the kununu data, we prioritized text preprocessing as a critical step in our research. This step is essential for ensuring high data quality and enhancing the reliability and validity of our results. The goal of preprocessing is to eliminate irrelevant text passages that may obscure meaningful patterns and consequently compromise the quality of text classification (Chai, 2023; Hickman et al., 2022; Kobayashi et al., 2018; Nandwani & Verma, 2021).

We closely followed the recommendations outlined by Hickman et al. (2022), derived from a systematic literature review in organizational research. Our preprocessing steps included tokenization, converting all letters to lowercase, and handling negations to avoid misinterpretation of results. Unlike the traditional approach of removing stop words, we opted not to include this step, as Hickman et al. (2022) suggest that the choice of dictionary determines whether stop words are considered in the analysis. Finally, we lemmatized all words—that is, we reduced words to their base or dictionary form (e.g., *running* → *run*)—to maintain consistency with the lemmatized corpus of our dictionary (Hickman et al., 2022). These preprocessing steps were implemented using Python version 3.11.5 to ensure efficiency and accuracy in our analysis (Reid et al., 2023).

After preprocessing our data, we proceeded to apply both categorical and dimensional models. Using the categorical dictionary, we analyzed how frequently employees of the parcel carriers described specific types of atmospheres. The frequency was calculated by counting how often each word appeared in the comments for a company and adjusting for the number of words in each dictionary category. Simultaneously, employing the dimensional model, we positioned the employer reviews within the valence-arousal space, enabling us to quantify the described atmosphere. In addition, we calculated the average atmosphere ratings for each type per company. We applied the categorical dictionary to identify all comments containing at least one word from a given atmosphere type. For these matched comments, we extracted the corresponding atmosphere ratings from kununu (1–5 scale) and computed the arithmetic mean.

To allow for meaningful comparisons across atmosphere types and companies, we calculated the normalized frequency of atmosphere-related words (NFARW, per 100,000 words). This measure reflects how frequently employees used words from a specific atmosphere category in their reviews for a given company, relative to the size of the category and the total word count. To avoid extremely small decimal values and improve readability, the resulting score was multiplied by 100,000. The normalization itself—ensuring comparability—was achieved by dividing the number of matching words by both the number of words in the respective category and the total number of words in all comments for the company (i.e., $\text{NFARW} = \text{number of word matches in company comments} / \text{category word size} / \text{total word count} \times 100,000$).

In our analysis, we compared the atmospheres of the three German parcel carriers. Next, we conducted an in-depth analysis of DHL to gain more insights as to, e.g., how an atmosphere changes over time. To this end, we conducted a time series analysis from 2013 to 2022. On one hand, we examined how frequently the atmosphere types at DHL were described on kununu over time. In that regard, we focused on comments with a rate of at least 0.02, meaning that at least 1 in 50 words was used to describe a specific atmosphere type (see figures 8 and 9). On the other hand, we also calculated the average atmosphere ratings without applying a quota, as there were often no hits with a quota, resulting in a rating of 0 (see figures 10 and 11). In addition, using the categorical approach, we subjected comments to a qualitative inductive content analysis to identify themes contributing to the prevailing work atmosphere. We also conducted word frequency analyses to further support our findings.

4. Results

4.1 Comparative analysis of DHL, Hermes and DPD

We used bar charts and scatter plots to depict the results of our analysis. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the NFARW values across companies and atmosphere types. In line with the results of Julmi et al.'s (2024) empirical study, we divided the results into categories of supposedly pleasant and unpleasant atmospheres (see section 2). As their study further revealed that the open-plan office atmosphere cannot be distinctly categorized as either positive or negative but rather lies somewhere in between, we have excluded it from our analysis.

The bar charts reveal that multiple types of atmospheres, both positive and negative, can coexist within a single organization. Notably, differences between the three parcel carriers are evident. Deutsche Post & DHL (hereinafter DHL) have relatively fewer descriptions of good atmospheres and more of bad atmospheres.

Compared to DHL and DPD, Hermes stands out for its notably positive organizational atmosphere, achieving the highest scores in four out of five categories of good atmospheres. The most pronounced difference appears in the trust atmosphere: Hermes reaches a NFARW score of 4.52, markedly higher than DPD's 3.49 and DHL's 2.57. This indicates that a trust atmosphere is described considerably more frequently at Hermes than at its competitors. Interestingly, start-up atmospheres are rarely reported in the parcel industry, and team atmospheres are less frequently described compared to feel-good atmospheres.

Regarding negative atmospheres, it is apparent that Hermes and DPD show similar scores, while DHL exhibits higher scores across all types of bad atmospheres. DHL, in particular, scores higher in fear, pressure, and surveillance atmospheres. Despite the lower frequency of team atmospheres, one might argue that competitive atmospheres are more prominent. However, this is not the case in any of the three companies.

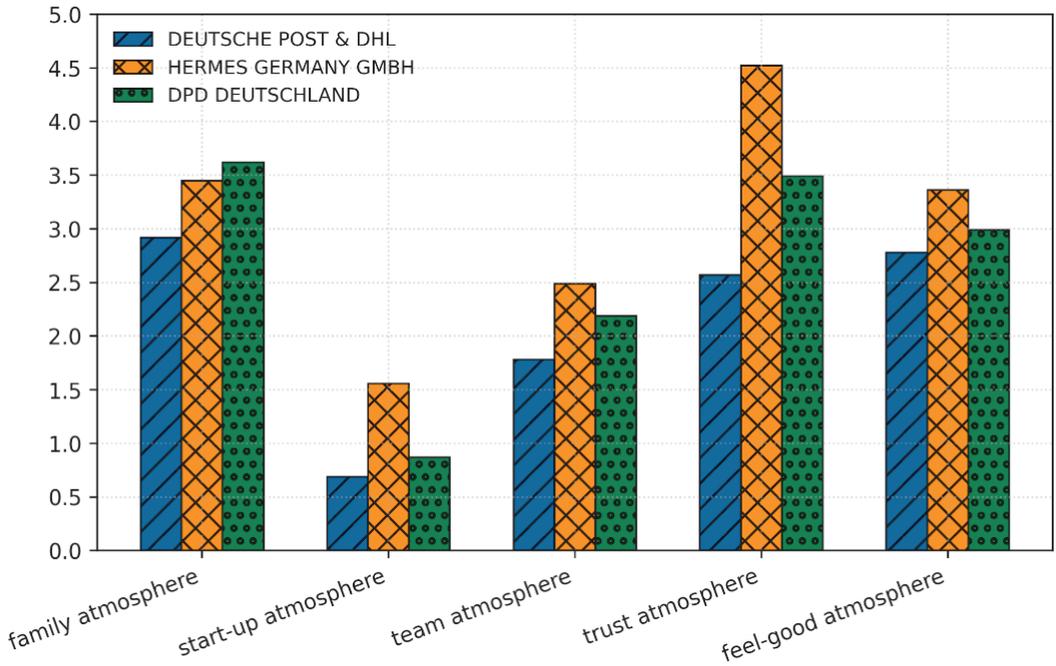


Figure 2: NFAW of positive atmospheres of parcel carriers in Germany

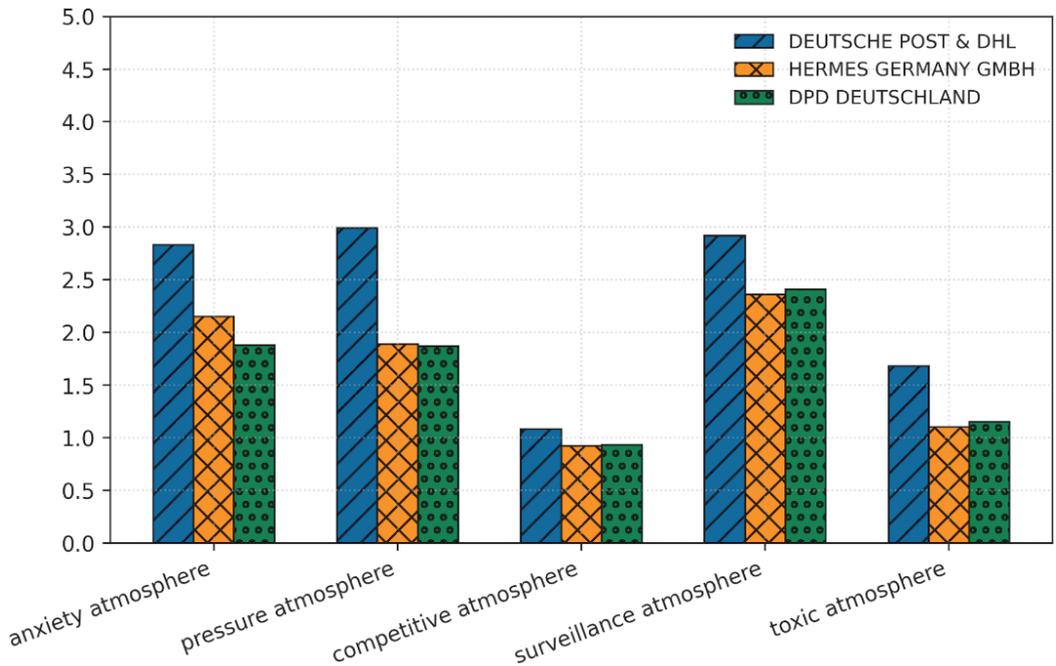


Figure 3: NFAW of negative atmospheres of parcel carriers in Germany

In addition to the categorial approach, we applied the dimensional approach of our dictionary. The results are shown in scatter plots in figure 4, 5 and 6. In each plot, every point represents a single employer review, positioned according to its average valence and arousal score. Taken together, the scatter plots illustrate how the reviews for each company are distributed within the valence-arousal space, offering a visual overview of the emotional tone and intensity of the described atmospheres.

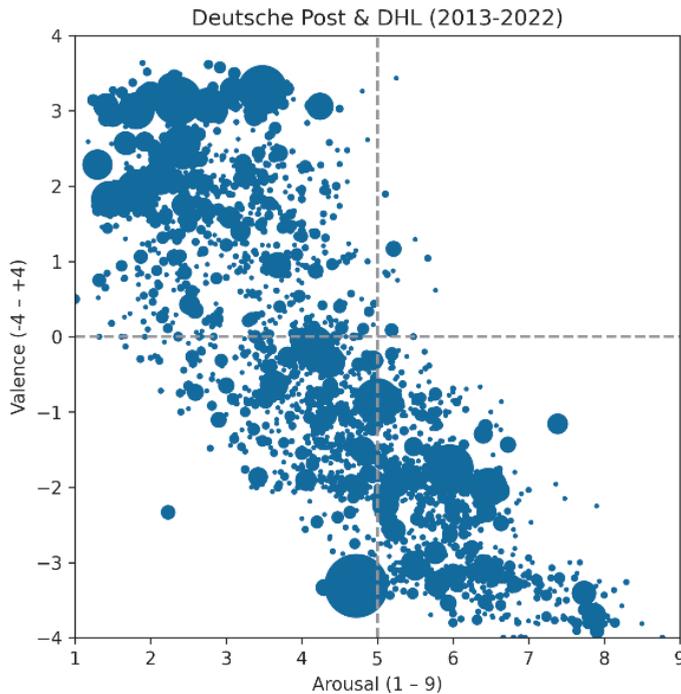


Figure 4: kununu comments on DHL in the valence-arousal-space

Notably, for all three parcel carriers, the ratings scatter predominantly in every quadrant except the upper right. This pattern indicates that a variety of typical atmospheres—ranging from pleasant and relaxed to unpleasant and tense—can coexist within a single organization. There is a tendency for more strongly centered points in the upper left quadrant, suggesting that positive, relaxed atmospheres slightly outweigh negative, tense ones in the parcel industry.

The condensed scatter plot for DHL can be attributed to its status as the largest delivery company with the most employees in Germany, resulting in a higher volume of ratings from DHL employees on kununu. Similar to the categorial analysis, Hermes and DPD exhibit more similarities to each other compared to DHL, further highlighting distinct differences of the organizational atmospheres within these companies.

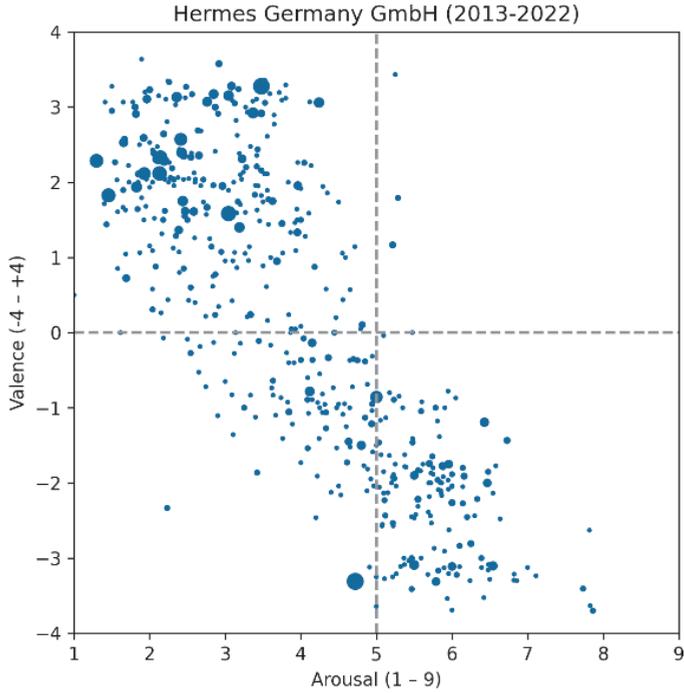


Figure 5: kununu comments on Hermes in the valence-arousal-space

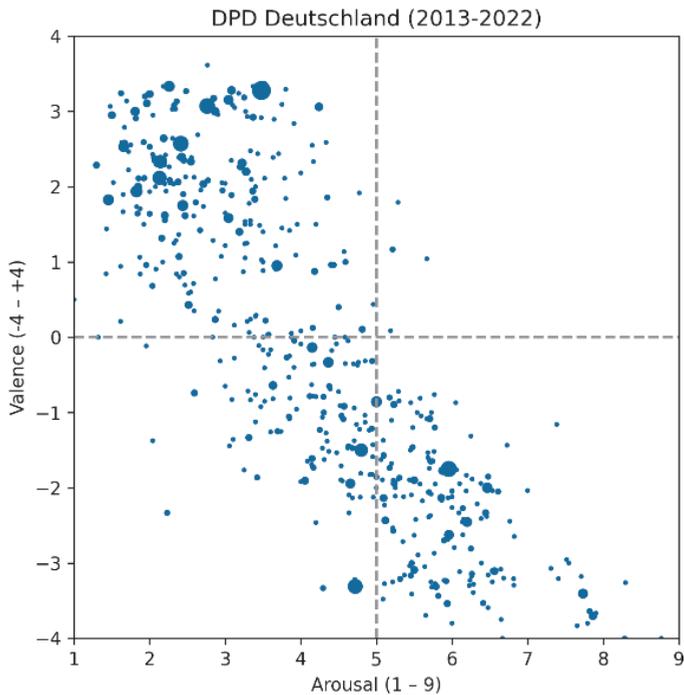


Figure 6: kununu comments on DPD Deutschland in the valence-arousal-space

To gain further insights into how atmospheres are perceived within these three companies, we calculated the average atmosphere ratings for each type (see section 3). The results are illustrated in figures 7 and 8, indicating that the qualitative perception of a particular “good” or “bad” atmosphere can vary between companies.

In alignment with the results shown in Figure 2, it is not surprising that Hermes achieves the highest average ratings for the feel-good, trust, and team atmosphere. Conversely, the start-up atmosphere scores best at DHL, while DPD has the highest-rated family atmosphere.

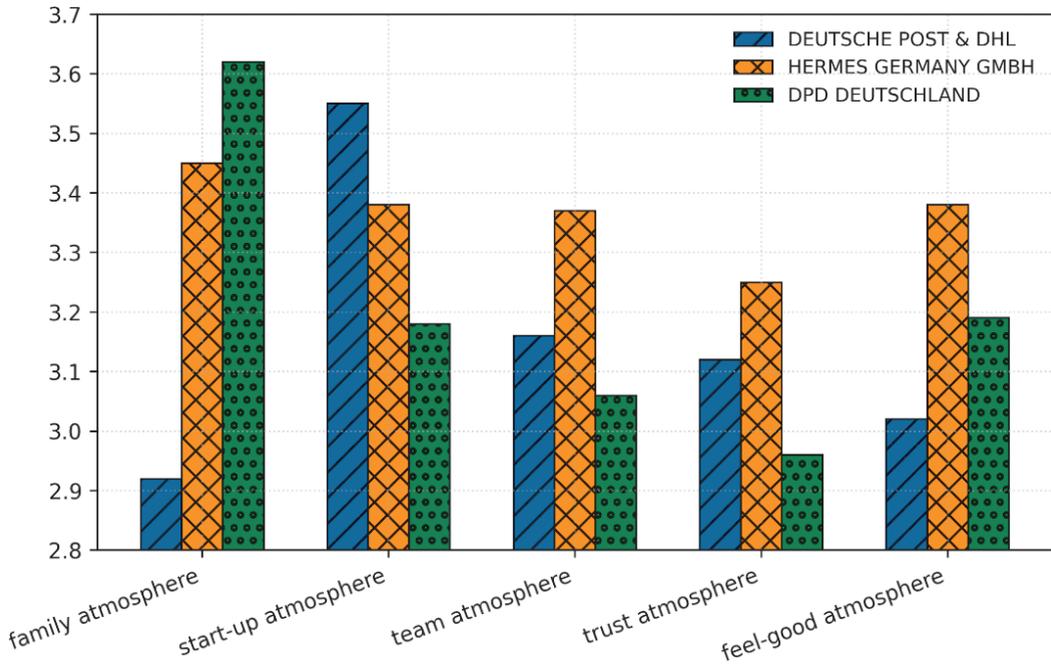


Figure 7: Average ratings per type and company for positive atmospheres

Taking a closer look at the average ratings for supposedly negative atmospheres, it comes as a surprise that DHL outperforms Hermes in each type but the pressure atmosphere. It is also unexpected that DPD achieves higher ratings than Hermes, despite the similar relative distribution of atmosphere types between these two companies. This suggests that the relative prevalence of certain atmosphere types in an organization must be separated from their qualitative assessment. For example, the surveillance atmosphere may be relatively more common at DHL than at Hermes, while it is perceived as particularly negative where it occurs at Hermes. As Hermes scores only 1.18 for surveillance atmospheres, this indicates that surveillance, supervision, and control create a very unpleasant atmosphere for employees.

Nonetheless, these results highlight areas for improvement within each company. While they provide an overview of potential issues, a more in-depth analysis is required to identify underlying causes and inform targeted interventions.

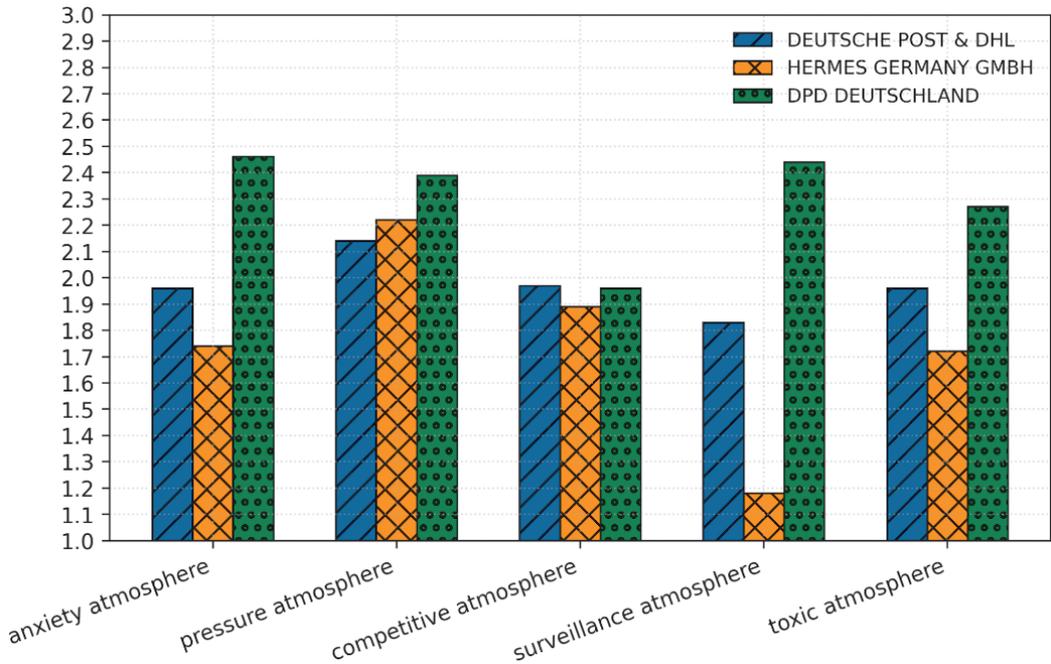


Figure 8: Average ratings per type and company for negative atmospheres

4.2 In-depth analysis of DHL

The application of the categorical and dimensional components of the GANAiO dictionary to the kununu data provides an overview of (1) the relative distribution of typical atmosphere types within an organization and (2) their perceived quality, based on user ratings on a five-point scale. However, this analysis does not yet reveal how organizational atmospheres evolve over time, nor does it identify the specific factors contributing to the perception of a given atmosphere.

To explore these questions in greater depth, we conducted a detailed case analysis of DHL. Compared to Hermes and DPD, DHL has a substantially larger number of reviews, offering a more robust empirical basis for longitudinal investigation. We applied the same categorical analysis to DHL’s reviews on a year-by-year basis. By examining the annual development of atmosphere types and their associated ratings, we aimed to uncover temporal trends and shifts in the perceived work atmosphere. Figures 9 and 10 present the NFARW values for DHL across both positive and negative atmospheres over the period from 2013 to 2022.

This longitudinal approach allows us to identify potential drivers of change within the organization and gain deeper insight into the dynamics of employee perception and satisfaction. The findings may offer valuable implications for organizational development, leadership practices, and workplace atmosphere interventions.

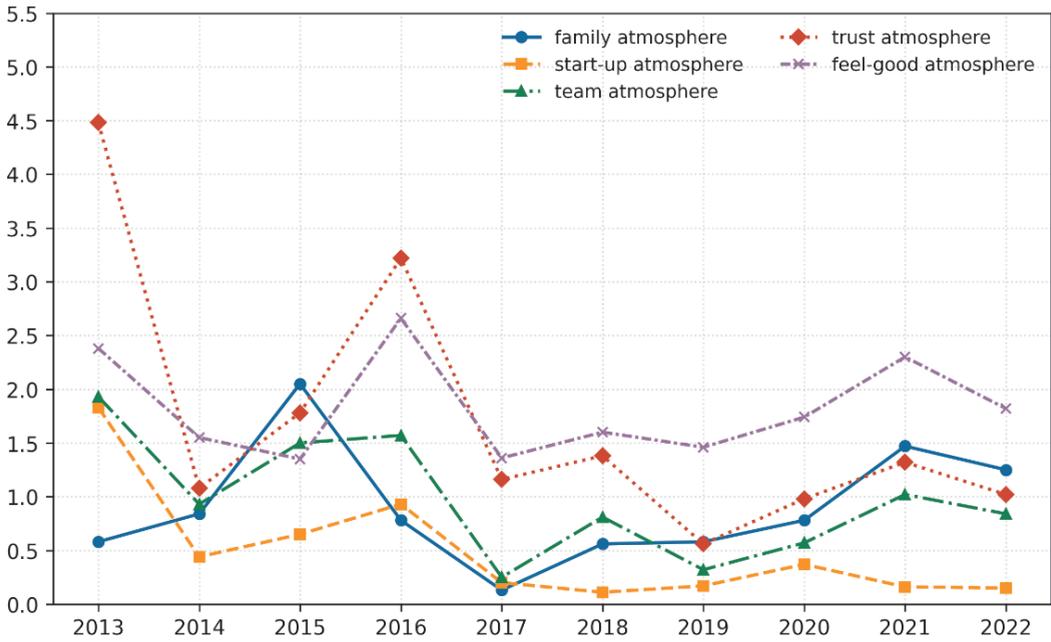


Figure 9: NFAW of positive atmospheres at DHL from 2013 to 2022

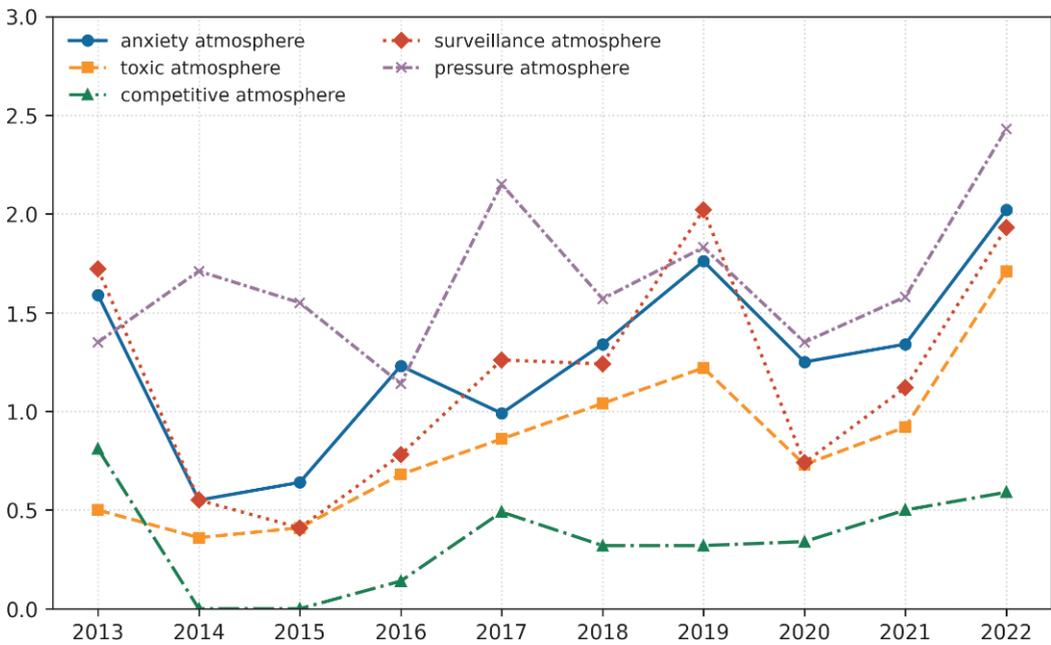


Figure 10: NFAW of negative atmospheres at DHL from 2013 to 2022

When examining the diagrams showing the distribution of typical positive and negative atmospheres over time at DHL, it becomes clear that these atmospheres are subject to fluctuations, exhibiting wave-like movements. Notably, the positive atmospheres, particularly trust and feel-good, peak in 2016. In contrast, the pressure atmosphere reaches its peak in 2017 and the surveillance atmosphere in 2019 among the negative atmospheres.

Interestingly, there seems to be an inverse relationship between positive and negative atmospheres. For example, there is a noticeable deterioration in positive atmospheres at two points: from 2016 to 2017 and from 2021 to 2022. Conversely, the scores for negative atmospheres increase from 2016 and again from 2020 onward. Specifically, opposite trends between the trust and surveillance atmosphere become evident. Consistent with previous findings, the competitive atmosphere shows a relatively constant and low score demonstrating fewer fluctuations compared to other types.

From 2021 onwards, the distribution of positive atmospheres decreases across all types, while descriptions of negative atmospheres increase, as evidenced by a noticeable kink in the graphs. This trend indicates a deterioration in the overall atmosphere at DHL starting around 2021, which is also visible in figures 11 and 12. These figures show parallels in the quantitative evaluation of atmosphere types at DHL, with some graphs running almost parallel.

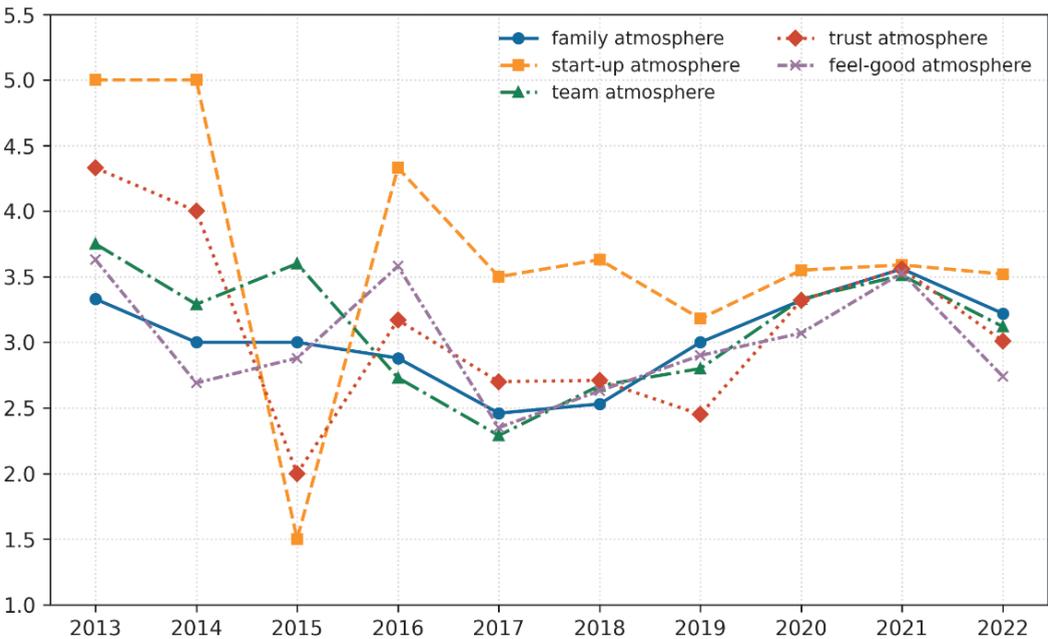


Figure 11: Average ratings for positive atmospheres per type and year at DHL

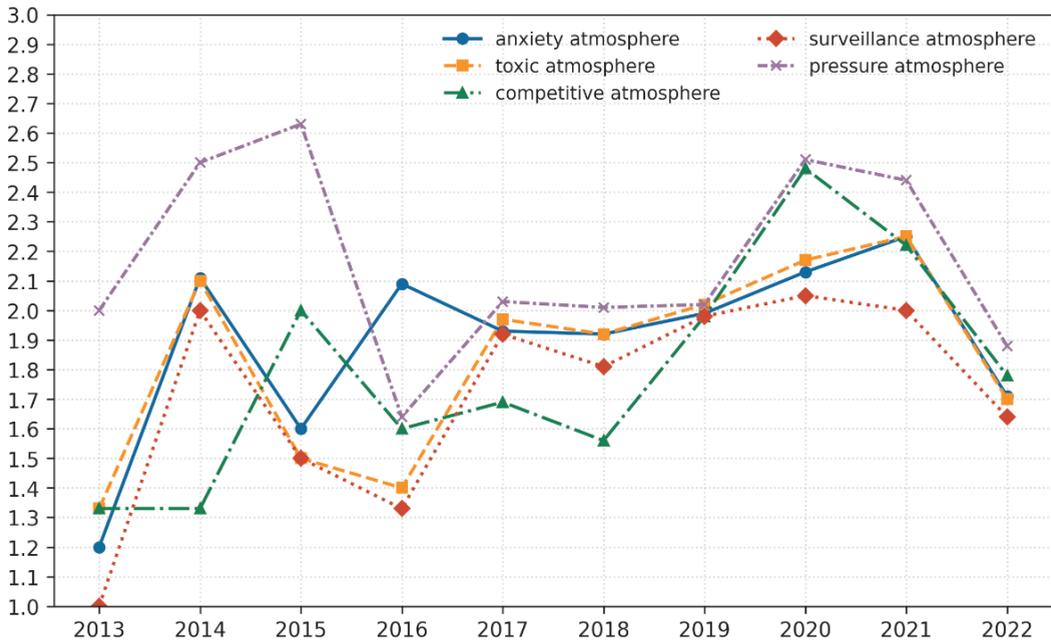


Figure 12: Average ratings for negative atmospheres per type and year at DHL

Concerning the pressure atmosphere in 2017, comments derived from 23 employer ratings provide revealing insights. Employees specifically denounced a high workload, largely attributed to the increasing volume of parcel deliveries. This surge in workload was compounded by a strong emphasis on profit and cost efficiency, leading to high stress, significant pressure, and extensive (unpaid) overtime. Moreover, poor communication was frequently criticized, both from managers and among team members. This lack of effective communication fostered an environment where cooperation was scarce. Instead of supporting one another, employees engaged in monitoring and reporting on each other and their managers, creating a competitive and distrustful atmosphere. As a consequence of these factors, employees reported a lack of work-life balance, feelings of exhaustion, anxiety, and pervasive bad moods. Ultimately, these conditions posed a significant risk to employees' health, as first, in the comments, employees speak of high sickness rates, and second, the negative impact of work-related stress on physical and psychological health is a well-researched subject (Ganster & Rosen, 2013; Ganster & Schaubroeck, 1991). This highlights the detrimental impact of a pressurized atmosphere on overall well-being, which is also confirmed in a recent study on the work atmosphere in Germany (Julmi et al., 2024).

The comments derived from 28 employer ratings describing a surveillance atmosphere in 2019 reveal similarities to the pressure atmosphere. Employees frequently lamented a lack of work-life balance, extensive overtime, and high workloads. Additionally, communication, leadership behavior, working conditions, overall atmosphere, and team cohesion were consistently described as poor. Team cohesion issues manifested in a lack of mutual respect, selfishness, gossip, arguments, and a tendency to play colleagues off against each other. Bullying, both by superiors and peers, was reported as a common occurrence. The

treatment of employees was often described as inhumane, with a noticeable lack of empathy. Instances of insults, humiliation, and sexism were frequently mentioned. Furthermore, employees felt that their ability to act independently was restricted by stringent guidelines and specifications, leading to a sense of constant surveillance. As a result, many employees reported going to work with stomach aches. Moreover, the surveillance atmosphere was described as chilly and as leading to a high sickness rate.

In addition to analyzing the pressure and surveillance atmospheres at DHL, we sought to understand the apparent deterioration of DHL's atmosphere in 2021. To do this, we gathered all comments from 2020 and 2021 and conducted a word frequency analysis for both years, comparing the results. Compared to 2021, the word "bad" was used 382 times more often to describe the work atmosphere at DHL. Conversely, the word "good" was used 229 fewer times than in 2020 to elaborate on the atmosphere. Additionally, mentions of "pressure" nearly doubled, and references to "bullying" more than doubled, indicating increasing issues with high workload and workplace harassment. Complaints about "overtime" also became more frequent, further implying that employees struggled with excessive workloads. This trend is underscored by the frequent use of terms like "stress" and "catastrophe". The increased occurrence of words such as "disrespectful", "blaspheme", and "anxiety" suggests that interpersonal relationships were deteriorating, leading to a perception of a toxic overall atmosphere at DHL. Moreover, the significantly higher mentions of "sick" gives the impression that DHL faced high sickness rates, which not only indicated poor employee health but also contributed to high operational costs and exacerbate the workload issue.

We suspect that the increase in workload was related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which triggered a boom in parcel deliveries due to lockdowns and business closures (McKinsey, 2022). To support our assumption, we closely examined word frequencies, particularly those related to the pandemic. The word "corona" was mentioned 145 times in 2021, compared to 40 times in 2022. Additionally, terms such as "corona measures" and "corona madness" further indicate that the pandemic significantly contributed to the increase in workload and stress. A closer analysis of the comments mentioning "corona" confirms this assumption. Employees reported working six days a week to manage the increased workload, similar to the Christmas holiday season rush. They also mentioned that some employees came to work while sick with COVID-19, driven by fear of being laid off and the overwhelming demand. This highlights the severe impact of the pandemic on working conditions.

The word frequency analysis and the inductive analysis of the comments reveal a consistent trend: DHL has faced significant problems with an excessive workload and stress. These issues correlate with a deterioration in the work atmosphere, posing health risks for employees and leading to high sickness rates. Viewed from the perspective of 2022, these findings indicate an urgent need for action at DHL to address these challenges and improve the work atmosphere.

In summary, our qualitative analysis of DHL's employer reviews, based on the NFARWs of negative atmospheres, revealed recurring elements of a pressure, a surveillance, and a toxic atmosphere. These findings align with the atmosphere types described by Eifert (forthcoming) but also illustrate their concrete manifestation in an organizational setting. Table 1 provides an overview of the three atmosphere types, including their general definition and the specific forms they took at DHL.

Atmosphere type	General description	Manifestation at DHL
Pressure atmosphere	Characterized by stress, excessive workload, strong performance pressure, and frequent overtime.	Rising parcel volumes during the pandemic; strict emphasis on profit and efficiency; extensive (often unpaid) overtime; high stress levels; reduced work-life balance.
Surveillance atmosphere	Marked by control, mistrust, micromanagement, and mutual monitoring among employees.	Poor communication; frequent monitoring and reporting of colleagues; lack of trust; selfish behavior and absence of mutual support.
Toxic atmosphere	Shaped by bullying, exclusion, disparagement, discrimination, and destructive communication.	Bullying by managers and colleagues; insults and humiliation; sexist remarks; gossip; inhumane treatment; lack of respect and empathy.

Table 1: Pressure, surveillance and toxic atmospheres at DHL

Taken together, these findings illustrate how abstract atmosphere types such as pressure, surveillance, and toxicity materialize in concrete organizational contexts, highlighting both the explanatory power of the GANAiO dictionary and the practical relevance of atmosphere analysis for understanding employee experiences.

5. Discussion

Based on the results presented in Section 4, we identify three central implications for researching organizational atmospheres: first, the importance of analyzing atmospheres at multiple organizational levels rather than solely at the company level; second, the need to investigate the relationships between different atmosphere types as well as their connection to structural and contextual factors; and third, the relevance of exploring how the dimensions of valence and arousal interact in the context of work atmospheres.

Given the diverse range of atmosphere types identified within a single company, it is likely that organizational atmospheres vary significantly across different locations, departments, and even teams. This variability underscores the complexity of organizational atmospheres and suggests that they should not be examined solely at the company level but also with attention to more localized contexts. While a company-wide analysis can reveal overarching trends, a more granular examination—focused on specific units or departments—may provide a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the prevailing atmosphere. Such a targeted approach can help uncover the root causes of unpleasant atmospheres and enable the development of more tailored management strategies that address the unique needs and conditions of different parts of the organization.

Furthermore, our results offer a promising foundation for developing propositions about the relationships between different types of organizational atmospheres. Understanding these relationships is crucial for advancing theoretical models of how work atmospheres emerge and interact, as well as for identifying potential trade-offs or reinforcing dynamics between different atmosphere types. By exploring such interconnections, researchers and practitioners can gain deeper insights into how certain atmospheres coexist, compete, or evolve in response to structural conditions and management practices.

One particularly striking finding is the apparent inverse relationship between trust and surveillance atmospheres. As the prevalence of one increases, the other tends to decline—suggesting that these two atmosphere types may be conceptual opposites. This observation invites further investigation into whether organizational trust and surveillance function as mutually exclusive dimensions, potentially shaped by leadership styles, monitoring practices, and internal communication norms.

Beyond the specific interplay between trust and surveillance, our findings also suggest a more general inverse relationship between positive and negative atmospheres over time. Periods marked by a decline in positive atmospheres tend to coincide with an increase in negative atmospheres, and vice versa. This pattern indicates that organizational atmospheres may not only vary independently but also evolve in systematic opposition, reflecting broader shifts in organizational atmospheres. One possible explanation is that external shocks such as the mentioned COVID-19-pandemic or internal organizational changes (e.g., restructuring, changes in leadership) simultaneously erode positive qualities such as trust, support, and appreciation, while amplifying negative experiences such as stress, pressure, or surveillance (Julmi et al., 2024).

At the same time, the distinctiveness of the atmosphere categories highlights that these shifts are not simply a matter of “positive replaced by negative”. Instead, specific constellations of atmospheres may emerge, where certain negative atmospheres become more salient as positive ones recede. This dynamic interplay underscores the value of studying atmospheres as relational phenomena, whose prevalence and intensity are shaped by organizational conditions, leadership practices, and external context. Future research could investigate whether these inverse dynamics reflect a structural trade-off between fostering positive and curbing negative atmospheres, or whether they are driven by shared contextual triggers that simultaneously suppress positive qualities and activate negative ones.

In addition, our longitudinal results reveal an asymmetry in how positive and negative atmospheres evolve over time. As shown in the average ratings of positive atmospheres (Figure 11), steep downward shifts are often observed, e.g. in 2015 and 2017, whereas improvements tend to occur only gradually over longer periods. In contrast, the average ratings of negative atmospheres (Figure 12) appear more stable. This suggests that exogenous shocks or intraorganizational changes can rapidly erode positive atmospheres by undermining perceived support and trust. However, recovering from such breaches of trust and re-establishing a positive atmosphere seems to require considerably more time. This finding highlights the fragility of positive organizational atmospheres and the difficulty of rebuilding them once they have been disrupted.

The data also highlight differences in how frequently certain atmospheres might occur across organizations. For instance, pressure and toxic atmospheres appear more frequently than competitive atmospheres, particularly within the parcel delivery industry, indicating that structural stressors and hierarchical control may foster certain negative atmospheres more than others.

Conversely, the absence of a start-up atmosphere might be attributed to the clearly structured work processes in this industry, which leave little room for entrepreneurial activities. Similarly, the lack of a team atmosphere could be because work is generally conducted with minimal group interaction. This raises important questions about the organizational and environmental factors that enable or inhibit specific atmosphere types.

Building on these findings, future research can test propositions such as:

- A high prevalence of a trust atmosphere is negatively associated with the prevalence of a surveillance atmosphere.
- Periods of decline in positive atmospheres are associated with subsequent increases in negative atmospheres, suggesting that organizational atmospheres may shift in systematic opposition rather than independently.
- Positive atmospheres deteriorate more rapidly in response to organizational shocks than they recover afterward, whereas negative atmospheres remain comparatively stable over time.
- Pressure and toxic atmospheres are more prevalent in high-demand, operationally intense environments than competitive atmospheres.
- The start-up atmosphere is significantly less likely to be found in traditional environments compared to innovation-driven environments.

Finally, as shown in Figures 4, 5, and 6, the data points predominantly cluster in the upper left and lower right quadrants of the scatter plots. This distribution suggests a potential tendency for positive work atmospheres to be associated with low arousal (i.e., calm or relaxed settings), while negative atmospheres may correspond to higher arousal levels, such as stress or agitation. This observation aligns with findings by Eifert and Julmi (2025), who argue that in organizational settings, positive experiences are often linked to stability and routine rather than excitement, which may explain why high-arousal positive atmospheres (e.g., enthusiastic or euphoric) appear less frequently in this context. Importantly, the negative correlation observed between valence and arousal in our data should not be taken as a universal principle but rather as a context-specific pattern that merits further investigation. While psychological research has debated whether valence and arousal are orthogonal or correlated dimensions (Kuppens et al., 2017; Yik et al., 2023), our exploratory findings suggest that, in work atmospheres, they may interact systematically.

6. Limitations

Our study comes with several limitations that need to be discussed. First, as stated in the introduction, atmospheres are affective phenomena that can shift rapidly—even from moment to moment—in response to social interactions, leadership behavior, or situational triggers. This inherent fluidity presents a fundamental challenge for empirical analysis. Since our study relies on employer reviews, which are retrospective and often reflect generalized impressions over extended periods of employment, momentary fluctuations in atmosphere are unlikely to be captured. Instead, the reviews are more likely to reflect recurring affective patterns that accumulate and persist in employees' perceptions over time. As such, our findings offer insights into more stable or dominant affective tones rather than short-lived moods. To better understand the dynamic nature of atmospheres, future research should incorporate methods that allow for the collection of more time-sensitive data.

Second, a further limitation arises from the nature of kununu data and the anonymity of its contributors. On kununu, both current and former employees, as well as applicants, can submit reviews—often without verifiable context regarding their role, tenure, or specific department within the organization. As such, it remains unclear whose perspective is

being captured and whether it is representative of the broader workforce. This introduces a potential self-selection bias. Research shows that individuals with particularly positive or negative experiences are more inclined to leave reviews on employer platforms, which may skew the overall sentiment (Marinescu et al., 2021). Therefore, the atmospheres distilled from such reviews might overrepresent extreme viewpoints while underrepresenting more moderate or ambivalent experiences. Moreover, the design of the platform itself can influence the type and tone of responses. For example, Cloos (2021) highlights how review structure and prompts can affect the informativeness and focus of user contributions. Accordingly, the extent to which our findings on the atmospheres at DHL, Hermes, and DPD can be generalized remains limited.

Third, it is important to acknowledge the inherent limitations of exploratory research. As Swaraj (2019) points out, exploratory research is typically conducted in fields where limited prior knowledge exists, with the aim of generating initial insights and identifying promising directions for future investigation. Its purpose is to detect relevant patterns, refine problem definitions, and develop theoretical propositions that can later be tested more rigorously. However, this approach does not allow for the robust testing of causal relationships or the formulation of generalizable conclusions. In our study, exploratory analysis served as a foundation for mapping the landscape of organizational atmospheres and highlighting areas of particular interest. Building on these findings, future research should pursue hypothesis-driven approaches to systematically examine the relationships between different types of atmospheres and organizational contexts. For example, the first proposition suggested in section 5 could form the basis of a longitudinal study aimed at examining whether inverse trends in the prevalence of trust and surveillance atmospheres can be observed over time. Therefore, exploratory research often serves as a crucial first step in hypothesis development, laying the groundwork for subsequent investigations into potential causal relationships.

Finally, our exploratory design does not allow for robust testing of causal relationships. Trend data, as we used, cannot establish causality between atmosphere types or their antecedents. While such analyses are valuable for detecting associations and temporal patterns, they fall short of identifying underlying mechanisms. Stronger causal insights could in principle be gained through experiments or controlled interventions (Shadish et al., 2002). Although GANAiO is primarily suited for naturalistic, large-scale text data, it could also be applied to experimental contexts if participants produce written responses (e.g., in vignette studies simulating organizational scenarios). Combining exploratory dictionary-based analyses with experimental or longitudinal designs would therefore provide a stronger basis for testing the propositions developed in this study.

7. Conclusion

This study used GANAiO, a validated dictionary-based text analysis tool, to explore and better understand organizational atmospheres. By applying an exploratory approach to a large corpus of German-language employer reviews, we were able to identify typical atmosphere types, detect patterns in their prevalence, and observe their distribution across companies and over time. These insights underscore that organizational atmospheres are diverse, dynamic, and context-sensitive—often varying significantly within a single organization.

Rather than aiming for generalizable conclusions, this research offers an initial empirical foundation for future studies. The propositions derived from our findings—such as the inverse relationship between trust and surveillance atmospheres—can guide more targeted, confirmatory research into the causes and consequences of specific atmosphere types.

As interest in employee well-being and the quality of workplace experience continues to grow, the study of organizational atmospheres provides a promising path forward. Tools like GANAiO can help uncover how atmospheres are perceived and experienced, laying the groundwork for both academic inquiry and practical reflection on how to create better organizational environments.

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