Using Artificial Websites in E-recruitment Research: An Example in Applicant Attraction

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Fake employer websites were created using Wix.com to manipulate recruitment messages. Several weeks after completing a questionnaire measuring personal values and job search behaviors, participants (N=433) viewed websites displaying Corporate Social Performance that espoused pro-environmental, pro-diversity, or pro-family-work balance values. While objective person-organization fit between the participants' values and the organizations' values was predictive of recruitment outcomes, this effect was mediated by participants' subjective person-organization fit. Respondents reported the internet as the main source of job seeking and few were not currently looking for work or employed, suggesting that experimental research using artificial websites with students may have ecological validity.

INTRODUCTION

Internet-based recruitment, or e-recruitment, has become exceedingly prevalent in practice, and recruitment scholars are quickly finding questions to be answered. Nevertheless, important gaps remain in understanding how materials presented on employer websites affect the attitudes and search behavior of potential applicants. Further, e-recruitment research has produced a great deal of nonexperimental research, where participants may evaluate Fortune 500 career websites (Braddy, Meade, & Kroustalis, 2006; de Goede, van Vianen, & Klehe, 2011; Gregory, Meade, & Thompson, 2013), and/or ecologically-deficient website materials, such as paper printouts (Behrend, Baker, & Thompson, 2009; Jones, Willness, & Madey, 2014) or vignettes of fictitious companies (Kim & Park, 2011). Other research has employed experimental designs using stimuli that were innovative at the time (e.g., Thompson, Braddy, & Wuensch, 2008), however, technology has advanced in sophistication and accessibility that now provides researchers the tools to build and construct realistic stimuli that closely mirror the websites typical applicants encounter in their job search.

The goal of this paper is not to diminish the important theoretical and practical contributions afforded by such research. Indeed, the previous e-recruitment literature informs and prompts the current study's aim to test a model of organizational attraction using an experimental design. Instead, this brief report illustrates the utility of accessible, user-friendly, and free website building tools to create realistic stimuli that allow for much needed experimental e-recruitment research.

This brief report contributes to the extant literature by answering calls for a) more experimental, generalizable research in organizational psychology (Highhouse, 2009) and b) research into the potential interactive effects of objective and subjective person-organization fit on organizational attraction (Ehrhart & Ziegert, 2005). First, this study explores the potential application of creating realistic artificial

employer websites as a method of studying how website materials influence important recruitment outcomes by offering an experimental manipulation of three common organizational values (pro-environmental, pro-family, pro-diversity). Secondly, person-organization fit (P-O fit) theory (Kristof, 1996) is applied to examine whether subjective, perceived P-O fit will mediate the relationship between objective P-O fit and recruitment outcomes. Moving past the problem of "paper-people," or more appropriately "paper companies," the implications of this research entail an appreciation of experimental design in recruitment research, as well as substantiation of the importance of considering subjective judgments of fit alongside objective fit.

Internet-based Recruitment and Organizational Attractiveness

Internet-based recruitment, commonly referred to as e-recruitment, is now a common avenue of sourcing and attracting potential applicants for many organizations within North America (Ployhart, 2006), and the increasing attention given to e-recruitment stems from the many benefits of using the internet to communicate recruitment information. For instance, websites allow a near infinite amount of information to be displayed in a manner that is at the discretion of the firm, and they do so at relatively low costs compared to traditional print methods (e.g., newspaper ads). Thus, company websites provide a medium by which organizations can present controlled information to the public and potential applicants. One of the primary outcomes studied in internet-based recruitment research is attraction to the organization.

Organizational attractiveness (OA) refers to a general attitude regarding a target organization. In this study, the general attractiveness of a potential employer is considered as participants will be unfamiliar with, and have limited information of, the organizations presented. OA has long been considered an important variable of interest in recruitment research, and scientists have identified many correlates, such as anticipated pride, job pursuit intentions, and person-organization fit (Chapman, Uggerslev, Carroll, Piasentin, & Jones, 2005).

Person-Organization Fit and Corporate Social Performance

Person-organization (P-O) fit broadly describes the compatibility between individuals and organizations. A recent meta-analysis by Chapman et al. (2005) illustrates the importance of P-O fit in predicting recruitment outcomes, showing perceived P-O fit to be correlated with both job pursuit intentions ($r = .50$) and organizational attraction ($r = .40$). Logic follows that individuals are attracted to, and perform optimal in, organizations that are similar to themselves, given that organizations may serve as an integral part of one's self-concept (Highhouse, Thornbury, & Little, 2007).

There are many antecedents to P-O fit that are typically made explicit in the recruitment process, such as the instrumental characteristics provided in a job description (e.g., duties, location, salary). One way that organizations have begun to communicate less salient organizational values is through Corporate Social Performance (CSP). CSP is "a construct that emphasizes a company's responsibilities to multiple stakeholders, such as employees and the community at large, in addition to its traditional responsibilities to economic shareholders" (Turban & Greening, 1996, p. 658). Positive CSP activities include community involvement, "going green", and fair treatment of employees. CSP, serving as a characteristic outside of instrumental job attributes, may allow the most qualified applicants to differentiate one prospective employer from another. Further, research has supported the link between displays of positive CSP and recruitment outcomes (Greening & Turban, 2000; Jones, Willness, & Madey, 2014).

The current study explores how three examples of CSP influence recruitment attitudes; a pro-environmental message, a pro-diversity message, and a pro-family-work balance message. Although the effect of these messages can be studied regarding their overall effect on recruitment outcomes, a more nuanced question is how do these messages influence people whom this information may be personally relevant for? For instance, Dineen, Ash, and Noe (2002) found that providing personalized feedback to applicants on a website has a positive impact on applicants' attraction to the company. Thus, when applicants are faced with information about an organization's values that are in line with their own values,

applicants will perceive themselves as a stronger fit than when that information is not in line with their own values.

An important distinction noted in the P-O literature is the difference between objective and subjective measures of fit (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). When considering the match between the values of a potential applicant and a potential employer, objective fit would refer to the congruence in values in an absolute sense (applicant values the environment – organization is an award-winning, eco-friendly company). Alternatively, subjective or perceived fit refers to the perceived congruence between an organization and individual, regardless of any actual similarities. For the current study, both measures were employed in order to examine their relationships in a web-based recruitment context.

A recent study investigating the effect of a pro-environmental message on job pursuit intentions found that the message increased job pursuit intentions but did not find support for the moderating role of personal values (Behrend, Baker, & Thompson, 2009). The authors hypothesized that individuals' pro-environmental values would either enhance (when high) or attenuate (when low) the effect of the pro-environmental message; however, there was no interaction found between the individual personal values and the CSP manipulation. Instead, the effect of the pro-environmental message on job pursuit intentions was mediated by the perceived reputation of the fictitious organization, prompting the researchers to reject the P-O fit model in favor of a signaling model (CSP > perceived organizational reputation > job pursuit intentions).

The current study extends this prior research by incorporating an objective and subjective measure of fit, as well as several additional recruitment outcomes. Further, the current study employs a more realistic stimulus (i.e., web-based versus print-out) and method of delivery (computer versus paper-and-pencil) than many previous tests. Following from the meta-analytic work previously detailed, the following predictions were made:

Hypothesis 1. *Objective P-O fit and subjective P-O fit will be positively correlated.*

Hypothesis 2. *Objective P-O fit will be positively correlated with anticipated pride, job pursuit intentions, and organizational attraction.*

Hypothesis 3. *Subjective P-O fit will be positively correlated with anticipated pride, job pursuit intentions, and organizational attraction.*

When considering how one would fit within an organization (distinct from job or group fit), applicants likely consider a myriad of factors from climate to reputation to values. While this may also include the value congruence between the applicant and the organization, it also captures other characteristics aside from values. Additionally, while objective fit may be related to recruitment outcomes, this study proposes that the influence of objective fit is mediated by subjective fit, whereby objective fit influences perceptions of fit, which then in turn influence recruitment outcomes.

Hypothesis 4. *Subjective P-O fit will mediate the relationships between objective fit and anticipated pride, organizational attraction, and job pursuit intentions.*

The last consideration in the current study are the relationships between organizational attractiveness, anticipated pride, and job pursuit intentions. Although empirical work is quite clear in their relatedness, there have been several models put forth to explain how their relationships function (Chapman et al., 2005; Highhouse, Lievens, & Sinar, 2003). This study contributes another test of the attitudes-mediated model, whereby it is predicted that organizational attractiveness will have a positive relationship with job pursuit intentions. Given that job pursuit intentions have a wide array of predictors beyond P-O fit, and organizational attractiveness is distinct from P-O fit, it is reasonable that the attractiveness of an organization could influence intentions to pursue employment independent of one's perceived value congruence with that organization. The hypothesized model is shown in Figure 1.

Hypothesis 5. Organizational attractiveness will positively predict job pursuit intentions.

FIGURE 1
HYPOTHESIZED MEDIATED MODEL
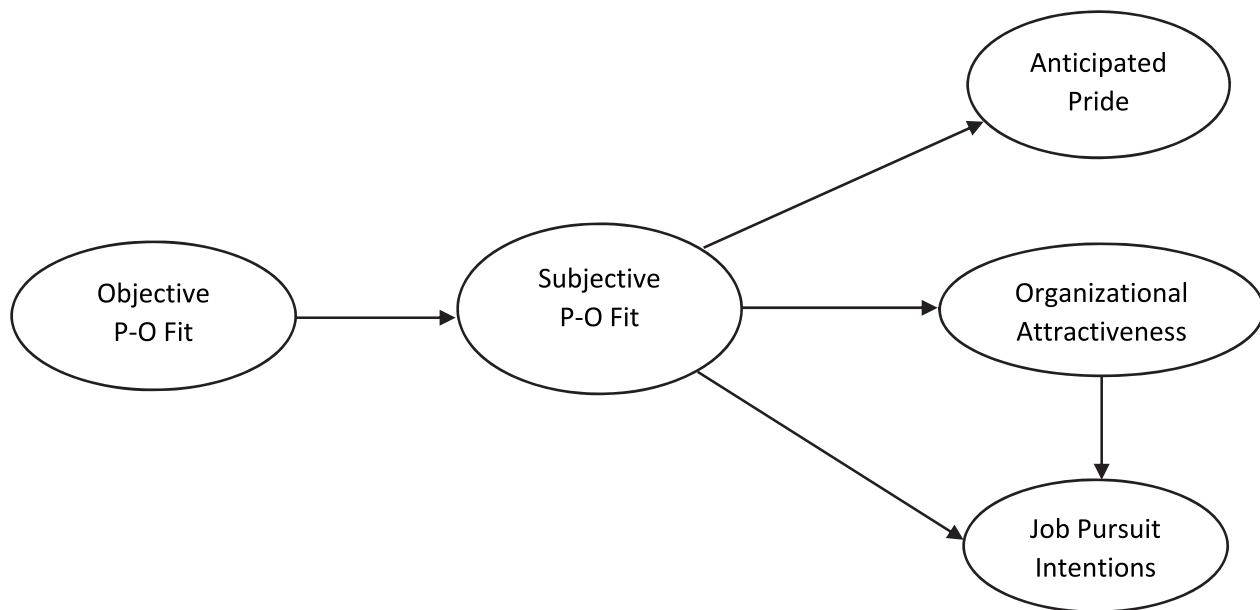
METHOD

Participants ($N = 433$) were recruited via an online recruiting system at two southeastern universities. Participants averaged 20 years old, with 65% reporting female, and only 16% of participants were unemployed and not currently seeking employment. When asked about their primary method for searching for employment, the majority chose the internet (52% chose employer websites, 24% chose internet job boards). Thus, it can be assumed that this population is relevant to internet job searches. Cases that were repeats or null responses were removed leaving 420 participants retained for final data analysis, with 225 participants completing both measures, and 195 completing measures at only time 1 or time 2 (inferential statistics did not differ when incomplete data was excluded).

Two fake companies with different names and website layouts were created via wix.com using photos and images from Google to manipulate CSP (see Appendix). After a pilot study demonstrated the equivalence of the two companies, data from the two companies were aggregated, leaving three conditions. The three conditions of CSP were diversity, family-community, and environmental concern. Each condition involved three photos demonstrating CSP (i.e., employees picking up trash), a short text promoting the CSR (i.e., "here at Endeavour Solutions, we take pride in doing our part to make the Earth better"), and a small symbol (i.e., recycling symbol).

Procedure and Measures

To reduce pre-test sensitization, at least a week prior to participating in the experimental conditions, participants filled out a survey including several attitudinal questions in regard to diversity, the environment, and family, as well as job search history and more than 20 filler items. To measure attitudes toward the CSP values manipulated in the websites, several items were rationally created. There are some empirically tested measures that exist for some of these attitudes, however, discrepancies in the scope of the current study (scale development versus estimating latent relationships) and the use of these measures in the past prompted the author to create items for this study. For instance, the length of some existing measures may have increased the likelihood of sensitizing participants (i.e., 15-item New Ecological

Paradigm scale; Dunlap, Van Liere, Mertig, & Jones, 2000). This project focused on the examination of relationships between latent variables and thus, psychometrically adequate and face valid measures of the three values were served through rational construction. Responses to attitudinal measures at time 1 were recorded on a Likert-type scale anchored from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Several weeks later at time 2, participants began the experiment on their computer and were first presented with the fictional website depicting one of the three conditions (see Figures 2 and 3 for examples). Afterward, participants filled out the other study measures (subjective P-O fit, anticipated pride, organizational attractiveness, and job pursuit intentions) using a Likert-type scale anchored from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Participant Values

There were three items measuring participants' environmental values ("I really care about the environment", "I take steps to help preserve the environment", "I don't really care about environmental issues"; $\alpha = .73$), two items measuring diversity values ("Diversity is not something companies should care about", "Diversity is not something important when it comes to a company's performance"; $\alpha = .58$), and four items measuring family and community values ("Organizations should care about the families of their employees", "Companies should take steps to give back to the local community", "My family life is very important to me", "Companies should make every effort to allow employees to balance their work and family lives"; $\alpha = .81$).

Organizational Attractiveness

Following the recommendations of recruitment scholars (i.e., Highhouse, Lievens, & Sinar, 2003), a three-item measure capturing general attitude and affect toward the target company was used: "This company is attractive to me as a place for employment." ($\alpha = .93$).

Anticipated Pride

A three-item measure from Cable and Turban (2003) was used, with a sample item: "I would be proud to identify myself personally with this company." ($\alpha = .93$)

Subjective Person-organization Fit

Perceived match with the organization was self-reported using a three-item measure: "My goals and values are similar to those of the organization." ($\alpha = .85$).

Job Pursuit Intentions

Four items adopted from Highhouse, Lievens, & Sinar (2003) measured intent to pursue employment: "If this company invited me for a job interview, I would go." ($\alpha = .87$).

RESULTS

A measurement model was constructed in AMOS using maximum likelihood estimation. Following a confirmatory approach, all latent variables were created with their corresponding indicators in AMOS and latent variables were allowed to covary. To evaluate model fit, a variety of indices were used to offer a balanced evaluation (Byrne, 2013). These indices included chi-square/degrees of freedom (χ^2/df), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the comparative fit index (CFI).

Despite a statistically significant chi-square (χ^2 (188, $N = 420$) = 376.27, $p < .05$), other fit indices demonstrated good fit with the data ($\chi^2/df = 2.00$, CFI = .946, RMSEA = .049; Hu & Bentler, 1999). The items created to measure values at time 1 in this study demonstrated low-to-adequate internal consistency (.73, .58, and .81), so factor loadings were examined. All items in the measurement model had statistically significant loadings on their respective constructs, all loadings exceeded .35, and loadings for the three value measures averaged .64.

TABLE 1
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN STUDY VARIABLES

	M	SD	Enviro	Fam	Diversity	Congruent	PO Fit	OA	AP	JPI
Enviro	5.3	.94	(.73)							
Fam	6.3	.71	**.20**	(.81)						
Diversity	5.1	1.5	**.11**	**.29**	(.58)					
Congruent	-	-	**.36**	**.38**	**.40**	-				
PO Fit	4.8	1.1	**.18**	**.19**	.08	**.23**	(.85)			
OA	4.7	1.3	**.21**	**.13**	-.01	**.16**	**.49**	(.93)		
AP	5.1	1.1	**.21**	**.26**	.12	**.22**	**.64**	**.47**	(.93)	
JPI	4.9	1.2	**.16**	**.20**	.10	**.15**	**.75**	**.61**	**.61**	(.87)

Note. Enviro = environmental values, Fam = family values, Diversity = diversity values, Congruent = objective person-organization fit, PO Fit = subjective person-organization fit, OA = organizational attractiveness, AP = anticipated pride, JPI = job pursuit intentions. Internal consistency estimates are provided in the diagonal. Bold values are statistically significant ($p < .05$).

To test the theoretical model in Figure 1, it was necessary to dichotomize objective P-O fit as value congruent or value incongruent. First, a median split was performed on the three value measures so that if participants endorsed a value above the median, they were labeled as having that value. If a score on a value measure fell below the median, the participant was labeled as not having the value. This resulted in a value score of 1 (holds value) or 0 (does not hold value) on each of the three measures. The last step was to code whether the value endorsed in the manipulation was congruent or incongruent with the participant's values. For instance, if a participant fell below the median on the pro-environmental measure and the participant viewed the website displaying environmental values, then the participant would be coded as incongruent.

After creating an objective measure of P-O fit (dichotomous value congruence), hypothesis testing proceeded. Correlations between the study's measures are shown in Table 1. Hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported via positive correlations between objective and subjective fit ($r = .23$, $p < .05$), and objective fit and organizational attractiveness ($r = .16$, $p < .05$), anticipated pride ($r = .22$, $p < .05$), and job pursuit intentions ($r = .15$, $p < .05$). Hypothesis 3 was also supported with medium to large correlations between subjective fit and organizational attractiveness ($r = .49$, $p < .05$), anticipated pride ($r = .64$, $p < .05$), and job pursuit intentions ($r = .75$, $p < .05$).

A structural model was specified and tested in AMOS, with relationships specified according to the model in Figure 1. Tests of the structural model suggest adequate fit of the observed data with the hypothesized model ($\chi^2/df = 2.89$, CFI = .952, RMSEA = .067 (.057 - .078)). Standardized structural relationships are shown in Figure 2 and were statistically significant ($p < .05$). Standardized indirect effects of objective P-O fit on anticipated pride (.19), organizational attractiveness (.14), and job pursuit intentions (.22) were modest but consistent with expectations and provide support for Hypothesis 5. Model statistics are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2
MEASUREMENT AND STRUCTURAL MODEL FIT STATISTICS

Model	χ^2	CMIN/df	CFI	RMSEA	RMSEA 90% CI
Measurement Model	376.27	2.00	.946	.049	.042 - .056
Structural Model	211.09	2.89	.952	.067	.057 - .078

Note. χ^2 = chi-square statistic, CMIN/df = chi-square statistic/degrees of freedom, CFI = comparative fit index, RMSEA = root mean square of approximation, and CI = confidence interval.

FIGURE 2
STRUCTURAL MODEL WITH STANDARDIZED BETA WEIGHTS
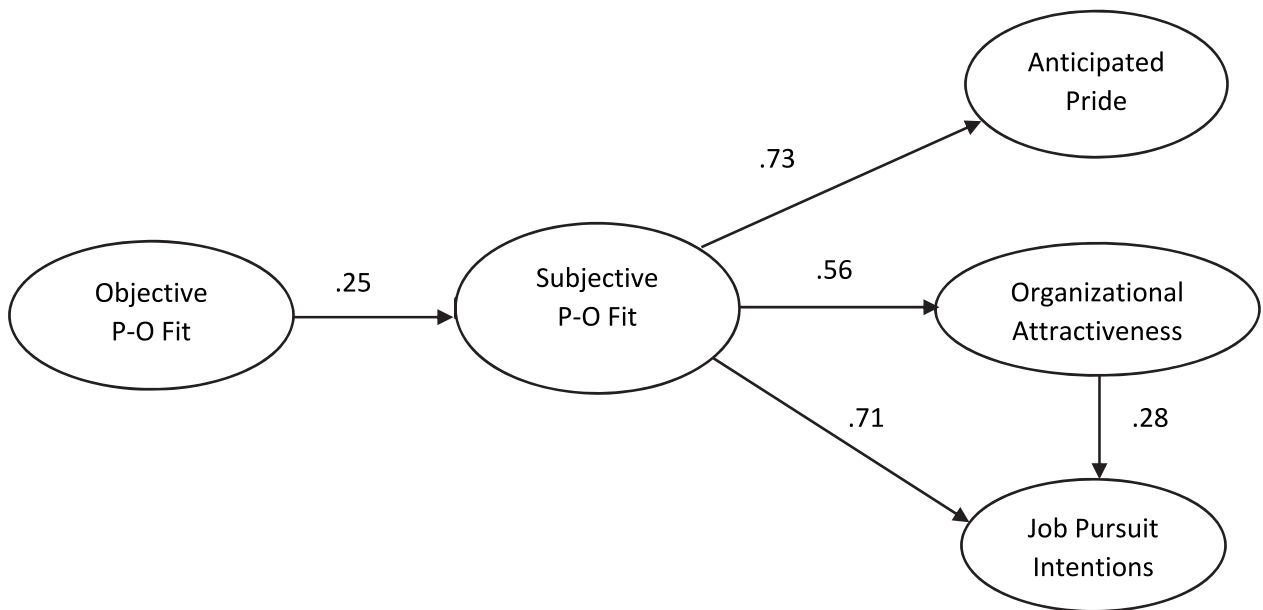
DISCUSSION

The overarching purpose of this study was to demonstrate the efficacy of creating artificial employer websites to conduct experimental e-recruitment research. To this end, a model of person-organization fit and applicant attraction was tested and supported in a sample of undergraduate students at two universities where employer websites were reported as the primary source of employer information. Although potential applicants have many sources of information, from word-of-mouth to mass media, the disruption and increased use of the internet has been noted by many recruitment scholars (Anderson, 2003; Badger, Kaminsky, & Behrend, 2014; Maurer & Cook, 2011).

There are a lot of characteristics that can be considered when evaluating the match between an organization and a potential employee, such as goals, culture, and demands/needs (Kristof, 1996). This study was concerned with examining the relationship between two fit measures regarding values and a variety of outcomes using an experimental design. In regards to objective P-O fit, or value congruence, it appears that individuals holding similar values to those espoused by a target organization are more likely to be attracted to that organization, anticipate experiencing pride if they were an organizational member, and report job pursuit intentions. Moreover, this objective fit informs the perceived match between the individual and the organization, which subsequently predicts their organizational attractiveness, anticipated pride, and job pursuit intentions.

Previous research has documented the main effects of personal values and CSP on recruitment outcomes, although there is no consensus on the intervening mechanisms by which these two effects interact. For instance, some research has failed to find that objective fit moderates the CSP-job pursuit intentions relationship (Behrend, Baker, & Thompson, 2009), while other studies argue that subjective fit mediates the relationships between CSP and recruitment outcomes, yet neglecting objective fit (Jones, Willness, & Madey, 2014). A longitudinal study by Cable and Judge (1996) found that job seekers' ($N = 96$) value congruence affected their subjective P-O fit, which in turn affected their job choice intentions. Their study operationalized value congruence by measuring participants' perception of organizational values and participants' personal values. Consequently, the authors proposed that future research use more objective measures of value congruence (Cable & Judge, 1996), and recruitment scholars have continued to call for research that incorporates both objective and subjective fit measures (Ehrhart & Ziegert, 2005).

The current study adopted an interactionist person-organization fit model proposing that objective P-O fit with an organization, operationalized as value congruence, influenced a potential applicants' recruitment attitudes through their perceived P-O fit. Results supported this model, suggesting that value congruence is an antecedent of recruitment outcomes via its effect on applicants' perceived fit with a potential employer.

CONCLUSIONS

This experiment provides promising evidence that creating artificial employer websites using free software may provide an ecologically sound method for investigating the recruitment process as it occurs on the internet. Indeed, the need for generalizable, experimental research in organizational psychology has been extolled by scholars in the field (Highhouse, 2009). Another benefit of this study was the use of more than one website layout, which could be problematic if reactions were systematic to a particular design or feature of one website. By using two different websites, and finding that they did not influence participant responses, the generalizability of the findings presented here are enhanced. Moreover, the fact that the majority of the sample reported being employed and/or looking for work (84%) as well as using the internet as the primary source of employer information (76%) suggests that students can provide an ecological population for testing e-recruitment models of organizational attraction.

Although this study extends nascent e-recruitment research, there are several limitations of note. First, a rational method of test construction was employed to develop measures of participant attitudes at time 1. For instance, to capture participants' general attitude toward the environment several items were adapted from previous scales (e.g., the NEP; Dunlap, Van Liere, Mertig, & Jones, 2000), however, the extent to which the measures capture the same construct is questionable. Nevertheless, using large multidimensional scales was not preferred because a) this study was concerned with participants' broad attitudes and not evaluating measures or exploring facets, and b) including much larger scales may have increased participants' sensitivity to the experimental manipulation. Future research could benefit from employing short, but psychometrically-sound value measures. In the present study, issues surrounding the rationally constructed value measures at time 1 would most likely have attenuated the relationships between objective fit and the outcome variables and thus, the findings of this study may be interpreted as a conservative test of objective fit's role in applicant attraction.

Another limitation of this study is the use of causal modeling. Rationale for using structural equation modeling was primarily due to the ability to test measures and structural relationships simultaneously. The use of an experimental manipulation and a time lag in data collection also prompted the use of causal modeling. Alternatively, the fact that all attitudinal data was collected from the same source and that all dependent measures were collected at time 2 is a legitimate concern for proposing causal relationships. Fit statistics, data collection at two time points, and nonsignificant correlations between measures collectively suggest that common source bias was not present or at least attenuated (Spector, 2006), however, future studies should replicate these phenomena with alternative sources and time-lagged designs.

Technology continues to advance in ways that bear implications for both scientists and practitioners. Although discussion of specific technologies is beyond the scope of this paper, advancements in online survey technologies may allow embedded links within surveys that allow participants to visit websites while tracking their behavior (clicks, time spent on page). On the other hand, collaboration with other disciplines can help build on the contribution that social and industrial/organizational psychologists offer recruitment practices. For instance, human factors researchers use physiological and behavioral measures (e.g., eye tracking) that may seem outside the expertise or impertinent to some management and I/O scholars, but there is clearly overlapping areas of interest, such as user experience. Multidisciplinary collaboration in these areas can serve the goals of more stakeholders than fragmented theorizing and disjointed empirical research.

Ultimately, the goal of this paper is to spur more experimental research in internet-based recruitment research. Scientists should turn toward further exploring the mechanisms by which recruitment materials affect potential applicants, specifically the inferences that underlie many of these attitudes. Now that there are outlets (e.g., Wix.com or weebly.com) to create realistic and functional websites that offer incredible amounts of customization, scientists can reap the benefits of these technologies via strengthening their research designs and materials.

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APPENDIX

Manipulation = Pro-diversity Message.

Manipulation = Pro-environmental Message.