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Assessing assessments

*How the usage of pre-employment testing impacts
recruitment outcomes*

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The usage of pre-employment testing, or PET in recruitment processes has steadily been increasing in the past decades. Previous research has focused on the value-proposition PET brings the company in terms of cost, efficiency and forecasting productivity. Limited attention has been given to the applicant perspective and outcomes of implementing PET in the recruitment process. This paper takes a marketing perspective of the usage of PET in recruitment processes and aims to investigate the relationships between fairness, the employer brand image and word of mouth, as well as understand how recruitment methods moderate these relationships. Findings from an experimental sample of 115 university students show that there are significant positive relationships between fairness, employer brand image and word of mouth. Further, significant differences between the three experimental conditions were identified implying that different recruitment methods result in different outcomes. Our results imply that the choice of recruitment method impacts outcomes such as employer brand image and word of mouth which acts as a representation of loyalty. This confirms and extends the existing literature and provides useful insights for employer branding practitioners. The thesis concludes with a discussion of limitations and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Employer branding, Pre-employment testing, PET, Word of mouth, Employer brand image, Loyalty, Fairness, Gilliland's theory on procedural justice

Introduction

Job seekers today commonly encounter PET in the recruitment process. PET, or pre-employment testing is a recruitment tool used by companies to ease the recruitment process and find the right talent. PET comes in different forms such as physical testing, personality testing, reading comprehension, cognitive ability testing as well as drug testing (Gilliland, 1993; Josefsson, 2023; Randstad, 2022). Recruitment methods are a balancing act between costs and potential employee outcomes for the employing businesses. These methods range from traditional methods, such as interviews and cover letters, to more technological solutions such as Linked-In headhunting and AI interviews (Muduli & Trivedi, 2020). An emerging trend within recruitment in Sweden from the past decade is PET (Josefsson, 2023). PET refers to the selection method used by companies to screen potential employees. The topic has received great attention, particularly from practitioners, in the last decades since hiring the best competencies is essential for all businesses (Mooney, 2002; Rudner, 1992; Randstad, 2022). PET is therefore used to be able to appropriately match specific skill sets among potential employees to employers.

The usage of PET introduces a justice paradox between practitioners and applicants (Cropanzano et al., 2007; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). Previous research has found an imbalance between recommended hiring practices and applicant perceptions which has resulted in this paradox. Personality and cognitive tests are expected to have the highest predictive validity, however, these tests fail to satisfy the justice concerns of applicants. These concerns relate to the perception that the tests aren't related to the job or representative of the candidates true abilities (Cropanzano et al., 2007; Gilliland, 1993). Rafaeli (1999) found that job applicants viewed knowledge tests as more job-relevant, less sensitive to time spent and more respectful of privacy compared to personality tests. This aligns with previous research showing that personality tests caused negative reactions from job applicants (Rynes & Connerley, 1993), suggesting that there is a difference in how different PET are perceived from the applicant's perspective. While much research on PET has focused on its validity, effectiveness and reactions (Gilliland, 1993; Hardy et al., 2017; O'Neill et al., 2017; Rudner, 1992), less focus has been on how these differences can be viewed from a marketing perspective. These tensions between effectiveness and perceived fairness highlight a challenge in today's recruitment practices.

The concept of procedural justice has been shown to influence employer brand image and applicant behaviour such as word of mouth and loyalty (Bauer et al., 2001; Cropanzano et al., 2007; Hausknecht et al., 2004., McCarthy et al., 2017). Since the introduction of PET in the 1990s, there has been an ongoing discussion regarding ethical, bias and legal concerns introduced by the usage of PET (Gilliland, 1993; Rudner, 1992; Scepura, 2020). Fairness and applicant reactions of PET have also been discussed in when applied in the hiring process (Ababneh et al., 2014; Celani et al., 2008; Gilliland, 1993). An applied theory within this research area is Gilliland's theory on procedural justice. Gilliland's theory (1993) refers to applicants' perceived fairness of a process within decision-making and the potential outcomes connected to it. By applying Gilliland's theory on perceived justice with PET, important insights can be gained since the reactions towards the recruitment process affect the business's ability to hire qualified applicants (Gilliland, 1993).

Another field of research connected to recruiting is employer branding. Employer branding is an interdisciplinary field connecting marketing and human resources by applying branding principles and practices to human resource management (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). In their seminal paper, Ambler and Barrow (1996) describe the employer brand as a package of functional, economic and psychological benefits and equal these with the traditional benefits a brand offers its consumers. Connected to this is the employer brand image, which can be described as the perceptions held by individuals of a company as an employer (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The employing brand aims to have a positive employer brand image and consequently be seen as an attractive employer by potential employees (Backhaus & Tikoo,

2004). Employer branding and employer brand image can therefore be seen as concepts to understand recruitment methods within a marketing context.

Word of mouth is another relevant concept from marketing and is traditionally described as informal, interpersonal communication about an organisation or its product (Bone, 1995; Van Hove & Lievens, 2009). Our study defines the concept of word of mouth as whether the participant would be willing to recommend the employer to peers after participating in a recruitment process similar to Hausknecht et al. (2004). In marketing contexts, word of mouth is often viewed as a result of brand loyalty and customer satisfaction (Bettencourt, 1997; East et al., 2008; Pang, 2021; Popp & Woratschek, 2017; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Previous research suggests that customer satisfaction has a positive effect on customer loyalty which in turn has a positive effect on word of mouth (Popp & Woratschek, 2017). Word of mouth can thereby be seen as an extension of loyalty. Within the recruitment literature, Hoppe (2019) and Stockman et al. (2020) have suggested a positive effect between employer brand image and word of mouth. Word of mouth can therefore be seen as a potential outcome of employer branding and the employer brand image. While prior research has examined word of mouth from the perspective of consumers and existing employees, there is limited insight into how potential employees and job seekers engage in word of mouth based on the recruitment process.

Although PET has previously been studied within management and HR fields, their impact in shaping employer brand perceptions and loyalty remains less studied in the marketing literature. While prior studies have addressed related concepts such as brand attractiveness (Georgiou & Nikolaou, 2020) and perception of the employer (Hausknecht et al., 2004), there is a lack of research specifically linking PET to perceived fairness, employer brand image and loyalty expressed through word of mouth. By applying marketing principles in a traditionally HR-dominated field, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how recruitment practices impact employer brand perceptions and outcomes. This offers valuable insight into how the potential employer is perceived from the job applicant's perspective, which can then be implemented to improve the employer brand image along with positive recruitment outcomes. Based on this we conducted a study that aimed to answer the following research questions:

How do perceived fairness and employer brand image impact word of mouth among job seekers? How are these relationships affected by different types of pre-employment testing?

The context of job seekers in Sweden is of interest as the usage of PET is still a somewhat new recruitment method in Sweden (Randstad, 2022). As it is a new phenomenon, there is limited research examining how these recruitment practices are perceived by job applicants within the Swedish context. Further, Sweden has a long history of strong labor movements

which continues to be embedded within the labor market (Bengtsson, 2022; Bengtsson & Berglund, 2012). Sweden is also currently facing high levels of unemployment compared to previous years resulting in high levels of competition within the job market (SCB, 2025). Based on this, Sweden provides a distinct context for our study. Additionally, university students provide a relevant context as they are close to entering the job market and therefore encountering a large volume of recruitment methods. Therefore, the context of the study is Swedish university students.

The justice paradox discussed earlier highlights an issue where efficiency and validity from the employer's point of view misalign with the perceived fairness of the potential employee (Cropanzano et al., 2007; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). The results from our study provide understanding and insights for both practitioners and academics regarding job seekers' perspective of the paradox. By understanding how the relationship between fairness, employer brand image and loyalty through word of mouth differs depending on the recruitment method used, businesses can adopt their early recruitment activities so that they generate more favorable outcomes. This allows them to attract potential employees and limit negative associations. Further, they can enhance the employer's brand image and generate more positive word of mouth by choosing the most appropriate recruitment method. Our theoretical contribution extends the marketing literature connecting PET with fairness, employer brand image and word of mouth in a Swedish context.

The following section of the paper introduces important theoretical concepts in the theoretical foundation including Gilliland's theory on procedural justice, employer brand image and word of mouth. Following, the methodology and experimental methods are presented and discussed. We then present the results and analysis and discuss the findings. The paper concludes by stating limitations and suggestions for further research.

Theoretical foundation

Word of mouth

The concept of word of mouth has been present in marketing literature for several decades (Afrahi et al., 2023), with studies finding strong relationships between word of mouth and consumer behavior (Van Hove & Livens, 2009). The most common definition of the concept is Bone's (1995) who describes word-of-mouth as an interpersonal communication, independent of the organisation's marketing activities, about an organisation or its products which has since been adapted to the field of employer branding (Afrahi et al., 2023). Within employer branding, word of mouth is performed by anyone outside of the organisation, anywhere, most commonly in person or digitally, with various motives and by individuals with no self-interest involved (Van Hove & Livens, 2009). In other words, word of mouth happens externally, outside of the organisation's control.

Word of mouth can serve as an expression of employer loyalty, influenced by fairness and employer brand image. In a consumer context, Popp and Woratschek (2017) found in their study that customer satisfaction positively influenced customer loyalty, which in turn led to positive word of mouth. Similar findings have been made in various areas including relationship marketing, service marketing and social media settings, where loyalty, satisfaction and brand purchase probability are determined by word of mouth (Bettencourt, 1997; East et al., 2008; Pang, 2021; Popp & Woratschek, 2017; Zeithaml et al., 1996). This suggests that a strong employer brand image can contribute to positive word of mouth through loyalty. Zeithaml et al. (1996) argue that loyalty can manifest in several ways including expressing a preference for one company over another or continuing to purchase from them. Applied to employer branding, this suggests that loyalty and satisfaction can be expressed through positive word of mouth. Based on this, we adopt the view that word of mouth reflects loyalty toward a potential employer. In the study, we refer to word of mouth as participants' willingness to recommend an employer to a peer, consistent with the definition used by Hausknecht et al. (2004). This enables us to treat word of mouth not simply as a communication behavior, but as an expression of loyalty.

Previous studies have shown that word of mouth affects how people view a brand. Within the research field of employment marketing, it is well established that word of mouth has a significant impact on how others view and interact with the brand (Collins & Stevens, 2002; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Panagiotidou et al., 2024; Patel & Dahlinh, 2020; Van Hoyer, 2012). Common themes of research involve employer attractiveness (Patel & Dahling, 2020) and credibility (Collins & Stevens, 2002; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Panagiotidou et al., 2024; Van Hoyer, 2012). Within the research field, positive word of mouth is established to have a significant effect on consumer outcomes (Keller, 1993; Collins & Stevens, 2002; Jaidi, et al., 2011; Panagiotidou et al., 2024; Van Hoyer & Lievens, 2009) whilst less is known regarding negative word of mouth (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Stockman et al., 2020). As the study refers to word of mouth in regard to recommendation intentions, the focus was on positive word of mouth.

Employer brand image

Another relevant research area for the study is employer branding. The concept of employer branding emerged as marketing theories concerning branding were applied to the labor market, integrating marketing with recruitment literature (Cable & Turban, 2001). Ambler and Barrow coined the term employer branding in 1996 and described it as a package of functional, economic and psychological benefits which could be equalled to the traditional benefits a brand offers its consumers (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Berthon et al., 2005). From the marketing perspective, it is argued that organisational images can be compared to brands and that jobs can then be compared to specific products, hence

viewing job seekers as consumers (Cable & Turban, 2001). Therefore, employer branding allows for a marketing perspective on recruitment within the study.

The research field of employer branding is both broad and vague in terms of concepts and definitions. Due to the competitive labor market, the interest in employer branding has increased and is still emerging as an important strategy to attract and retain qualified employees (Theurer et al., 2018). However, due to it being a multidisciplinary concept, the broadness of the field has created some challenges (Theurer et al., 2018). According to Theurer et al. (2018), there are issues associated with definitions and contributions, which create confusion and heterogeneity within the research field. The concept of employer brand image is commonly clustered with other similar concepts such as employer brand equity, corporate brand image, product brand image, organisational image and brand identity (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Bankings & Waterhouse, 2019; Knox & Freeman, 2006; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Younis & Hammad, 2021). Although the concepts are highly interconnected and share similarities, our study applied the concept of employer brand image.

Employer brand image can be defined as the perceptions held by external individuals of a company as an employer (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). In their seminal papers regarding employer brand image and recruitment equity, Cable & Turban (2001) propose three categories that make up the employer brand image as employer information, job information and people information. A common understanding is that employer brand image is subjective and fluctuating and thereby can be manipulated (Collins & Stevens, 2002; Knox & Freeman, 2006; Nawakitphaitoon & Sooraska, 2023). Employer brand image is the perception of both potential employees as well as current employees, although the former is more commonly researched compared to the latter (Liveness & Slaughter, 2016). As the study revolves around the impact of certain recruitment practices, we were therefore interested in the perspective of potential employees.

The concept of the employer brand image, or employer image was derived from marketing literature and adapted to the recruitment context through employer branding (Barbaros, 2020; Collins & Stevens, 2002). Cable & Turban's (2001) popular model of recruitment equity is an adapted version of Keller's (1993) Consumer brand equity model, conceptualizing employer brand image as derived from brand associations. This has since become an accepted precedent for employer brand images (Hoppe, et al., 2021; Myrden & Kelloway, 2015; Wehner et al., 2015; Younis & Hammad, 2021). They further equal consumers to job seekers, products to specific jobs and brand image to employer brand image (Cable & Turban, 2001; Knox & Freeman, 2006).

Among previous research regarding employer brand images, two theoretical perspectives have appeared; employer brand image within a holistic perspective and employer brand image within an elementalistic perspective (Livens & Slaughter, 2016). The first perspective focuses mainly on employer brand image relationship with employer attractiveness whilst the second explores, defines and tests dimensions and constructs of employer brand image (Livens & Slaughter, 2016; Barbados, 2020). Our study departed from the secondary perspective i.e. seeing employer brand image as a set of attributes. This perspective is further applied and discussed in the following section.

A common concession from previous literature is that the employer brand image consists of both instrumental (e.g. salary and location) and symbolic attributes (e.g. prestige and culture) associated with the brand which differentiates them from other companies (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Barbaros, 2020; Cable & Turban, 2001; Hussain et al., 2024; Livens & Slaughter, 2016; Yournis & Hammad, 2021). A particular weight has been associated with symbolic attributes as previous research has shown that it has a higher impact on organisation/employer attractiveness compared to instrumental attributes (Livens & Slaughter, 2016). Hence, previous studies have emphasised the significance of symbolic attributes and argued that instrumental attributes are less relevant. Based on this, our study focused on the symbolic attributes connected to employer brand image. Further on we will be referring to the symbolic attributes when discussing employer brand image.

Another common conception among previous literature is that the employer brand image positively impacts attraction to the brand (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Bankins & Waterhouse, 2019; Barbaros, 2020; Hoppe et al., 2021; Myrden & Kelloway, 2015; Wehner et al., 2015; Younis & Hammad, 2021). Other casualty relationships tested regarding employer brand image are brand reputations (Bankins & Waterhouse, 2019), employer familiarity and reputation (Cable & Turban, 2001), recruitment practices and organisational commitment (Hussain, et al., 2024) and application intentions (Knox & Freeman, 2006; Nawakitphaitoon & Sooraska, 2023; Verna et al., 2024).

Based on prior research, there are implications that there is a significant relationship between employer brand image and word of mouth that could be examined further. Hoppe (2019) has previously found a significant relationship between perceptions of the employer brand image and word of mouth intentions in their study regarding media-rich communication. Hausknecht et al. (2004) also tested the relationship between perceptions of the recruitment process on intentions to recommend employers to others and found a positive relationship. This also follows logical reasoning that those who enjoy and find the recruitment practices fair are also more likely to speak positively of their experience and the company. Stockman et al. (2020), furthering Hoppes's (2019) findings, present employer brand equity (a product of employer brand image) as a buffer for negative word of mouth on applicants' attraction. This

implies that if a brand has a good enough employer brand equity then negative word of mouth has less impact on applicants' attraction to the employer. Based on this, the following hypothesis was developed:

H1: Employer brand image has a positive impact on Word of mouth

Fairness

How applicants perceive the fairness of the selection process in recruitment, has been shown to influence their overall impression of the organisation (Cropanzano et al., 2007). This type of fairness, known as procedural justice, was first introduced in the context of applicant reactions in Gilliland's seminal work (Gilliland, 1993). In 1993, Gilliland introduced the question of perceived fairness from the perspective of the applicant's reactions to testing and selection decisions (Gilliland, 1993). This is stated to be one of the first theoretical models within the field of applicant reactions (Hausknecht et al., 2004). Before this, the focus of studying fairness in the context of PET had been on test bias, differential prediction and expected organisational productivity (Gilliland, 1993). The author argues that it is of importance for organisations since it concerns ethical questions, productivity and legal issues. Georgiou and Nikolaou (2020) state that the applicant reactions to selection methods also are of great importance since they play an important role in the attractiveness of the organisation and, hence, recruitment outcomes.

Based on previous literature, there is evidence that there is a connection between the recruitment process and applicant reactions concerning perceived fairness. Procedural justice concerns the fairness of the process or method leading to the outcome, in this case, the justice of the selection method. Which in turn is related to the applicant's attitude towards the organisation (Bauer et al., 2001; Dineen et al., 2004; Folger & Greenberg, 1985; Gilliland, 1993). As Gilliland's work has become a pillar of the field (Bauer et al., 2001) and provided explanations to how perceived fairness may impact applicant reactions, our study applied the theory of procedural justice.

According to Cropanzano et al (2007), a fair process is characterised by consistency, freedom from bias, accuracy, representation of relevant stakeholders and consistency with ethical norms. A fair process does not reflect whether the applicants like the process but rather whether they perceive it as ethical, unbiased and consistently applied. Procedural justice therefore refers to how decisions are made, not the outcomes themselves (Cropanzano et al., 2007). In the recruitment context, procedural justice concerns whether the applicant views the process to be fair regardless if they get the job or not. Previous research also suggests that there is a justice paradox between recommended hiring practices and how job applicants perceive them (Cropanzano et al., 2007; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). This paradox arises because the types of PET which have high predictive validity, like cognitive and personality

tests, fail to satisfy justice concerns from the job applicants' view. This creates a tension between the convenience and efficiency of the hiring company and the fairness perceptions of the job applicants. In our study, fairness is defined as a recruitment process that is transparent, unbiased, ethical and offers all applicants the same opportunity to present themselves and their abilities. This follows the conceptualization of Cropanzano et al. (2007) and Gilliland (1993). It is also important to stress that the definition does not relate to subjective preferences concerning whether the job applicants like or dislike the recruitment process.

Based on previous literature, we suggest that fairness in the recruitment process has a positive effect on both employer brand image and word of mouth. As discussed above, previous research shows evidence that fairness is an important factor in shaping how job applicants perceive the recruitment process and the organisation. Cropanzano et al (2007) emphasise this, stating that the recruitment and selection process is often the job applicant's first point of contact with the company. Thus, making this a critical point for shaping their impressions. If job applicants feel that they are treated fairly, without bias and are given the opportunity to present their true selves and abilities, they are more likely to view the recruitment process as fair (Gilliland, 1993; Cropanzano et al., 2007).

Previous studies have shown that fairness has a positive relationship with recommendation intentions (Bauer et al., 2001; Cropanzano et al., 2007; Hausknecht et al., 2004., McCarthy et al., 2017). Applicants who feel fairly treated are more likely to recommend the employer to their peers and develop a positive image of the organisation (Bauer et al., 2001; Cropanzano et al., 2007). This suggests that beyond contributing to a positive employer brand image, the perception of the employer as fair may also foster loyalty toward the potential employer. This loyalty is reflected in their intentions to recommend the company and engage in positive word of mouth. This aligns with Hausknecht et al (2004), stating that job applicants who have positive perceptions about the selection process are more likely to recommend it to others. Based on the previous section, we hypothesized that:

H2: Fairness has a positive impact on Word of mouth

There is limited research explicitly examining the link between fairness, employer brand image and word of mouth in the recruitment context. However, several studies have provided suggestions that fairness has a positive impact on organisation attractiveness (Bauer et al., 2001; Cropanzano et al., 2007; Hausknecht et al., 2004., McCarthy et al., 2017). Hausknecht et al (2004), found that organisational attractiveness, which they define as the perception or image the organisation has, has a positive relationship with applicant perceptions. The authors also found in their study that job applicants who perceived the selection process as fair were more likely to view the organisation favourably. They refer to this outcome as increased organisational attractiveness, which can be interpreted as equivalent to employer

brand image. This aligns with the findings of Georgiou and Nikolaou (2020) who conducted a study where they compared gamified assessments with traditional assessments. They found that the gamified assessments resulted in more satisfaction from the applicants, which in turn led to higher levels of fairness and organisational attractiveness compared to the traditional methods. Additionally, it has been shown that applicants who feel fairly treated are more likely to develop a positive image of the organisation (Bauer et al., 2001; Cropanzano et al., 2007). Based on the previous section, we hypothesized that:

H3: Fairness has a positive impact on Employer brand image

Pre-employment testing

PET is the usage of physical or digital testing applied in the recruitment process to evaluate job seekers. PET is commonly a part of the early stage of the hiring process for many organisations (Scepura, 2020). The purpose is to screen for desirable and suitable personality traits and characteristics for the organisation and the vacancy (Scepura, 2020). PET refers to several different tests where cognitive and personality tests are two of the more common types currently in Sweden (Randstad, 2022). Cognitive tests generally assess participants' capability in terms of problem-solving, IQ and reading comprehension whilst personality tests screen participants for sought after traits via self-reporting personality surveys or indexes (Rafaeli, 1999). Previous research has been conducted in different industries and sectors, e.g. the public sector (Mooney, 2002) and hospitality industry (Ravichandran et al., 2022). Studies have primarily been performed within the field of human resources and management (Mooney, 2002; Ravichandran et al., 2022; Rudner, 1992; Scepura, 2020). The use of PET has been increasing and is today a common way for companies to save time and costs in the selection process (Ravichandran et al., 2022).

Although PET is relatively new within Sweden, it is not a recent phenomenon globally. It is a well-established practice in the US and has been used for pre-screening potential candidates for decades (Rudner, 1992; Scepura, 2020). Rudner (1992) examined the effect of PET and employee productivity in the early 90s and stated that it was a common practice already in the 80s for companies in the US. Mooney (2002) describes that most people in the US who have applied for a job within a governmental agency have experienced a PET of some kind. Previously, it was common to perform PET as a written examination in a hall with other candidates with feedback being provided at a later date. This process was, from the job seekers' perspective, regarded as impersonal and slow and resulted in a loss of candidates to competitors (Mooney, 2002). As a consequence, the in-person tests were replaced by internet-based testing as a way to pre-screen potential candidates more effectively and in a shorter time, allowing for instant feedback and analysis (Mooney, 2002). Digital PET has over the past decades spread internationally and become more commonplace for companies recruiting in Sweden (Randstad, 2022).

The main academic discussion has been about the convenience of the hiring company and the potential issues and challenges associated with these selection methods. In the 90s, (Rudner, 1992) looked at legal, ethical and bias issues, among others. These are still challenges discussed today. Ravichandran et al. (2022) state that previous research shows that PET leads to improved job performance and satisfaction. However, there are also concerns about the validity and risks for discrimination connected to these types of pre-screening of job seekers. Biased algorithms, privacy issues and discrimination are also current issues being discussed (Scepura, 2020). This research stream showcases that the balance between convenience and potential biases has been contemplated for many years within the field. Previous research suggests that job applicants perceive different types of recruitment methods in different ways which in turn leads to different outcomes. Powell (1991) conducted a study that found that recruitment practices do significantly impact applicant perceptions in terms of perception of the job as well as job acceptance rate. This suggests that the type of recruitment method impacts applicant outcomes.

Previous research suggests that job applicants view traditional recruitment methods such as interviews and CVs more favorable compared to cognitive ability testing. Steiner and Gilliland (1996) developed a measurement scale in their study to measure how favorable different recruitment methods are in terms of perceived fairness and job relatedness. Their analysis showed that interviews and CVs are among the most favored recruitment methods both in France and the US. Their measurement scale has been used and adapted in multiple contexts since, strengthening the notion that interviews and CVs are perceived as more fair and job related compared to written-ability tests which can be likened to cognitive ability tests (Phillips & Gully, 2002; Hausknecht et al., 2004; Zibarras et al., 2025).

Cognitive PET is seen as more demanding from participants compared to traditional recruitment methods. Kluger and Rothstein (1993) tested the differences in cognitive demand required from participants in different recruitment methods. They similarly found differences among the partaking groups. Additionally, their analysis showed that differences in cognitive demand impacted applicant reactions. They found that the more cognitive involvement the less fairness and representation of one-self was experienced by participants which resulted in less positive applicant reactions. Rafaeli (1999) also suggests that PET compared to traditional recruitment methods involve cognitive participation. Kluger and Rothstein (1993) state that participants experienced more anxiety and stress whilst performing the test suggesting a high pressure situation where they are being evaluated. Based on previous literature, a logical interpretation is that a higher cognitive demand provides a higher stakes situation for applicants. This implies that in a traditional recruitment process that requires less cognitive demand from the applicant fairness plays a lesser role. Based on this reasoning, we therefore hypothesized:

H4: The effect of Fairness on Word of mouth is stronger in the cognitive PET condition group compared to the Control group.

Previous literature has studied the favorability of personality PET compared to other recruitment tests and has found less preference for it among applicants. Smither et al. (1993) suggest that personality tests are less job related compared to cognitive tests with concrete-items. Based on Steiner and Gillilands (1996) measurement scales based on fairness and job relatedness, personality testing in a recruitment setting has been deemed less favorable over cognitive PET in multiple contexts (Hausknecht et al., 2004; Phillips & Gully, 2002; Steiner & Gilliland, 1996; Zibarras et al., 2025). Rafaelis' (1999) study also supports this, stating that personality tests were seen as less relevant to the job and took more personal investment compared to cognitive testing. However, they did not find support that either group had a more favorable attitude towards the job offer. Rosse et al. (1994) found similar evidence, stating that a recruitment process with an interview and personality test was less favored over recruitment processes with either only an interview or an interview, cognitive test and personality test combined.

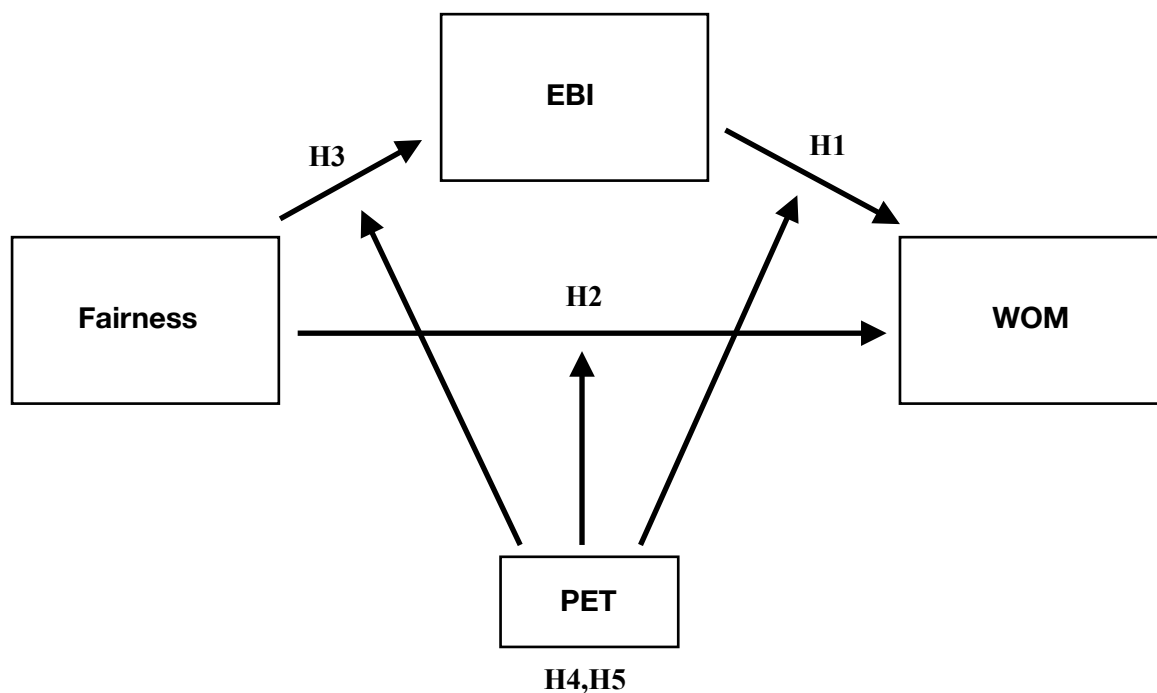
Personality testing in a recruitment process is seen as less job related, less objective and more invasive (Gilliland, 1993; Rafaeli, 1999; Rosse et al., 1994). Rosse et al. (1994) state that personality tests are harder for participants to interpret what is a desired answer which can lead to negative feelings. Rafaeli (1999) further states that personality testing requires "personal investments that lack a clear logic or rationale" (p.702). This further suggests that personality testing is perceived as emotionally exposing. As these types of tests evaluate your personality instead of your performance, it is reasonable that participants experience them as subjective and less job related compared to cognitive testing. Based on previous literature, a logical interpretation is that fairness is more important in a more subjective evaluation where participants have limited understanding of what is valued in the process. Based on this reasoning, we therefore hypothesized:

H5: The effect of Fairness on Word of mouth is stronger in the personality PET condition group than in the Cognitive PET condition group.

Conceptual model

Based on our conceptual framework, we present the following conceptual model:

Figure 1 - Conceptual Model



PET = Pre-employment testing

WOM = Word of mouth

EBI = Employer brand image

Methodology

Our study took an empiricist and positivistic approach to answer our research question. Field and Hole (2003) state that the foundation of empiricism is the approach of using observations and measurements to build scientific knowledge. Positivism is the philosophical position that the world consists of truths and facts that can be observed and views the researcher as merely the investigator and not a subjective participant (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Gray, 2018). Based on this philosophical perspective, our study used a deductive approach by performing an experimental methodology. Gray (2018) explains that deductive studies test hypotheses based on previously established research, often by collecting a large sample of observations. An experimental methodology was deemed appropriate as we were interested in investigating causality between variables (Söderlund, 2018), in this study: how fairness and employer brand image impact word of mouth. We applied Söderlunds (2018) key pillars of experimental methodology which consists of inclusion of participants placed in randomly allocated groups, which in turn receive different conditions that are later compared. Further, the independent variable must precede the dependent variable. Only the manipulated variable may differ among conditions, whilst all else remains constant. Finally, the independent and dependent variables must covary (Söderlund, 2018). The following section will present our

procedural and sample, pilot study, our used measurement scales and efforts to ensure the validity

Procedural and sample

To ensure control over variables and limit costs (Söderlund, 2018), a digital role-playing experiment was performed. The survey was administered using Qualtrics. In the first stage of the experiment, respondents were asked to imagine themselves as job seekers in a specific scenario (Appendix 1). Creating specific real-life scenarios is essential in this type of role-playing experiment (Söderlund, 2018). This is due to the aim of experiments being to make the respondents simulate a real life situation. The case described for the respondents was that they were students looking for their first full-time job after completing their studies. They have limited job experience, and come across a job listing on LinkedIn. The participants were then shown a generic job listing for a fictional company where the presented recruitment process was manipulated. They were randomly assigned to one of three in-between group conditions, following Söderlund's (2018) suggestions for experiments. Each group received a different explanation of the recruitment process. The first condition described a traditional job application process that required a CV and a cover letter, followed by the possibility of an in-person interview. The second and third conditions detailed a more comprehensive application process that included a CV, a cover letter, and a PET (either a cognitive ability test or a personality index) followed by the possibility of an in-person interview. The two groups receiving PET conditions were shown an example of what the test looked like. In all the conditions, the respondents were told that a week had passed by, and they had not received any information on whether they had moved on in the process or not after completing their application. (Appendix 2)

After exposure to the manipulation, measurements were conducted to measure the following variables: perception of procedural fairness, employer brand image, word of mouth intentions, and an attention check. The aim of the study was conveyed to the participants after their answers were submitted. Participants were able to move forward and backwards throughout the survey as they pleased and were instructed to read the manipulation thoroughly. The survey concluded with an attention check question where participants were no longer able to go backwards to ensure validity of the attention check.

The sample consisted of students enrolled at the School of Business, Economics and Law at Gothenburg University. The sample was chosen partly due to convenience and partly due to the study being focused on job seekers in Sweden who encounter PET within their job-searching. Therefore, university students were deemed an appropriate group to participate due to the assumption that they are more likely to be soon entering the workforce and familiar with common recruitment practices. Participants were recruited by their registered student emails and informed of the possibility of winning a gift card in a lottery if they participated in

the study, which according to Söderlund (2018) increases participation as well as mitigates attrition. 2784 emails were sent out to student emails who are registered at a bachelor's or master's programme at the School of Business, Economics and Law at Gothenburg University. Additionally, to avoid excluding non-programme students, flyers were set up on campus as well as having a session approaching students in person at the school entrance. These efforts resulted in 149 observations in the data collection.

Pilot study

As an initial step of the data collection process, a pilot study was conducted to confirm our assumptions, gain participant feedback and perform a manipulation check before proceeding with the main study. As emphasised by Söderlund (2018), a pilot study provides an opportunity to identify early warning signs and assess if there are any issues regarding the conditions. Additionally, the pilot study helped ensure that the survey was clear and understandable for the respondents. Furthermore, it allowed us to assess the practical aspects, including the randomization function to confirm that the manipulation was successfully implemented.

The pilot study included 10 observations and followed the same procedure and measurement scales as the main study. The results indicated that the scales captured a range, showing different levels of perceived procedural fairness, employer brand image and word of mouth, which provided sufficient support to move forward. However, 4 out of 10 participants failed the attention check, which is a critical aspect in the experiment context. This was however partly due to unclear instructions for participating in the pilot study. Due to our results, we gathered qualitative feedback from participants to improve the survey to ensure that the provided task was understood and measurements measured the correct responses. Based on respondent feedback, improvements of the description were made as well as adding explicit instructions emphasizing key parts that should be read carefully.

Measures

All measurement scales used in the study are based on previously established and tested scales. Minor adjustments were made in wording to align with our research topic. All variables were measured by a Likert scale of 1-5, with 1 being "*Strongly disagree*" and 5 being "*Strongly agree*".

Perceived fairness of recruitment practices: For this independent variable, we chose to adapt Kluger and Rothsteins (1993) measurement scales, which consists of four items regarding the perception of fairness of a test.

Employer brand image: For the mediating variable, Van Hoyes' (2008) measurement scale for image dimensions was used. This particular measurement scale was chosen as it includes

symbolic image dimensions and has been adapted and used in a number of studies regarding different industries (Van Hoyer & Lievens, 2009). A selection of the symbolic dimensions was used based on the dimensions possible for the participants to answer in the experiment. As this measurement scale is designed for a nursing home, we adapted the wording to our study. The scale consisted of seven items.

Word of mouth: The dependent variable was measured using the measurement scale provided by Van Hoyer (2008), as it is a commonly used measurement scale for word of mouth within a number of industries (Hoppe, 2019; Schlesinger et al, 2023). The scale consists of three items.

Validity

Measurement validity

Our study took account of the three types of validity when using measurement scales presented by Field and Hole (2003): content validity, criterion validity and factorial validity. Content validity was ensured by using previously established scales and literature that have been shown to measure the intended construct (Field & Hole, 2003). Further, to ensure criterion validity, we used measurement scales that had been used in a number of different contexts such as the healthcare sector (Van Hoyer, 2008), the Military sector (Van Hoyer & Lievens, 2009) and the university context (Schlesinger et al., 2024). As the measurement scales have previously been developed and tested we assessed previous studies usage of the measurements to provide acceptable factorial validity for our study (Field & Hole, 2003). The reliability of our measurements was secured by calculating Cronbach's alpha with a minimum score of 0,7 according to Field and Holes (2003) recommendations.

Internal & External validity

To ensure internal validity in the study, random allocation of condition groups was used to encourage equal groupings (Field & Hole, 2003) within the experiment. Measurements were conducted directly after exposure to manipulated variables to minimize risks of time passing, history, maturation and mortality presented by Field and Hole (2003). Finally, risks regarding instrument change and experimenter effects, which are created by the differences in the procedure (Field & Hole, 2003), were mitigated by using a digital manipulation and survey package, limiting experimenter impact.

In regards to external validity, although the study uses university students as participants, we argue they are a highly relevant group as our study regards job seekers, which university students either currently are or soon will be. Söderlund (2018) also states that university students are good participants in terms of reading comprehension and attrition. Further, to ensure external validity we addressed the potential issue of how some studies use too few participants to achieve statistical significance as statistical effect size decreases with the

number of participants (Field & Hole, 2003). Söderlund (2018) recommends a minimum of 30 participants per condition, which was the guideline that was aimed for throughout the study. However, once the data was cleaned one of the three conditions did not have a minimum of 30 participants. This limitation will be further discussed in the discussion section.

Data cleaning

After data collection, the responses were reviewed in an Excel sheet and then imported into SPSS and Stata for analysis. The survey was sent out to 2784 email addresses, resulting in 149 answers. Before proceeding with any of the statistical tests, data cleaning was performed. This step included addressing missing data and removing observations that failed the attention check. This step is important since missing data reduces the sample size, and all non-random data can potentially be biased (Hair et al., 2014). The survey was designed in a way that did not allow for non-responses. However, due to technical issues, a number of non-complete observations were submitted. The decision was made to retain outliers since the survey used a Likert scale, and the extreme values were expected and not considered biased. The non-complete observations along with observations that did not pass the attention check were removed in accordance with Söderlund (2018). It was noted that the control group had a higher attention check failure rate compared to the other conditions. This process resulted in a final sample size of 115 (n=115). Each of the data points was then summarized to create summated scales for the variables "Fairness", "EBI" and "WOM". Additionally, the experiment conditions were then programmed as a dummy variable.

Results

Descriptives

A mean score was computed for each of the measurement scales. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions, resulting in the distribution presented in Table 1. The valid sample (n=115) consisted of 57% women, 42% men, and 2% identifying as other. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 54 years, with a mean age of 24.5 years. In the conceptual model, "WOM" serves as the dependent variable, "EBI" as the mediator and "Fairness" the independent variable. The type of recruitment method (control group/cognitive PET/ personality PET) acts as the moderator in the model.

Table 1: Distribution of responses

<i>Condition</i>	Valid	Total	Attention check failure
Control	24	39	38 %
Cognitive	44	55	20 %
Personality	47	555	15 %

Ensuring the assumptions for analysis were met

To ensure that the assumptions for performing a multi-group SEM comparison, diagnostic tests for normality and homoscedasticity were conducted through graphical inspection in SPSS. Similarly, linearity was assessed using a scatter plot, which is a commonly used method for evaluating this assumption (Hair et al., 2014). The normality of residuals was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk tests, which indicated no significant deviation from normality ($p = .081$). Finally, multicollinearity was assessed by calculating the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), with values below 10 indicating no significant issues with multicollinearity. Additionally, no outliers were identified due to the usage of Likert scale questions. The sample size was smaller than the recommendation of a minimum of 30 observations per condition (Söderlund, 2018) so analysis was performed with this limitation in mind. Summated scales were used due to convergence issues in Stata, which resulted in any additional invariance analysis not being possible to perform. However, all summated scales for the conditions combined have a Cronbach's alpha value exceeding .8, indicating good internal reliability. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each summated scale for the separate conditions which resulted in values ranging from .73-.92, as they were above .7 they were also deemed acceptable.

Table 2: Descriptives of Measurement scales

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Cronbach's</i>
<i>WOM</i>	2.12	.88	.907
I would recommend the employer as an employer to	2.14	.96	
On the basis of my experiences with the employer, I would encourage others to apply here	2.03	.93	
I would recommend the employer to a friend looking for a job	2.18	.98	
<i>Fairness</i>	2.53	.86	.811
I think this recruitment process is fair	2.63	1.10	
Most people would say that this recruitment process is	2.80	1.05	

I believe that this recruitment process can predict whether I will be a successful employee	2.28	1.06	
I can see the connection between this recruitment process and performance	2.43	1.09	
<i>EBI</i>	2.52	.78	.839
I perceive the employer as honest by using this recruitment process	2.61	1.15	
I perceive the employer as down-to-earth by using this recruitment process	2.14	1.02	
I perceive the employer as trendy by using this recruitment process	3.23	1.31	
I perceive the employer as successful by using this recruitment process	2.39	1.03	
I perceive the employer as a leader by using this recruitment process	2.22	1.02	
I perceive the employer as well respected by using this recruitment process	2.56	1.04	
I perceive the employer as highly regarded by using this recruitment process	2.50	1.03	

Analysis

The first step of our analysis was goodness of fit tests conducted in Stata for the SEM model. The results indicated an acceptable model fit in regards to RMSEA, CFI, TLI, SRMR and Chi-square to move onto further analysis (Hair et al., 2019), (Table 3).

Table 3: Goodness of fit tests

Test	Cutoff (Hair et al., 2019)	Critical Value
RMSEA	<.05	0.00
CFI	>.95	1.0
TLI	>.90	1.0
SRMR	<.08	0.00
Chi-square	P > 0.05	0.00

SEM Group Comparison

To test our hypotheses a SEM multi group comparison was performed in Stata. First, a model without constraints was tested. Then two models with constraints: one with the direct effect held constant (constrained model 1) and another with the indirect effect held constant (constrained model 2) were tested and compared to the non-constrained model by conducting a likelihood-ratio test. The results of the likelihood-ratio test are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Comparison of models

<i>Model</i>	Chi2 (2)	Prob > chi2
Constrained model 1 (direct effects)	8.95	.0114
Constrained model 2 (indirect effects)	10.23	.0368

The results suggest that a significant difference between the conditions exists for both direct and indirect effects at a .05 significance level. To further understand the effects of the variables in each group we interpreted the following from the non-constrained group comparison analysis:

Table 5: Multi-group SEM Analysis

	<i>Standardized Coefficient</i>	<i>std.err</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>P> z </i>
Control Group				
Fairness -> EBI	.378016	.1715982	2.20	0.028
EBI -> WOM	.3373537	.1803322	1.87	0.061
Fairness -> WOM	.756771	.1662189	4.55	0.000
Fairness -> EBI -> WOM (Indirect effect)	.16778	.0703188	2.39	0.017
Cognitive PET				
Fairness -> EBI	.6172574	.1311255	4.71	0.000
EBI -> WOM	.6789522	.1439989	4.71	0.000
Fairness -> WOM	.0604439	.1535826	0.39	0.694
Fairness -> EBI -> WOM (Indirect effect)	.1699811	.0525357	3.24	0.001
Personality PET				
Fairness -> EBI	.4966982	.0885145	5.61	0.000

EBI -> WOM	.3506053	.1728292	2.03	0.042
Fairness -> WOM	.2726158	.13553	2.01	0.044
Fairness -> EBI -> WOM (Indirect effect)	0.0995928	.0424907	2.34	0.019

The analysis shows that all relationships in the model for each condition are positive and significant at a .05 confidence level with the exception of the relationship between employer brand image and word of mouth in the control group ($p = 0.061$) as well as the relationship between Fairness and WOM in the cognitive PET condition ($p = 0.694$). This indicates that H1 is supported in the cognitive and personality condition at a .05 significance level and at a .1 significance level for the control group. H2 is supported in all three conditions although the cognitive condition only has an indirect effect. H3 is supported in all three conditions. The results also show that the control group provides the strongest direct effect between Fairness and WOM (0.76) followed by the personality PET condition group (0.27) and a non-significant result for the cognitive PET condition group. However, for the indirect effect between Fairness and WOM, through EBI, the cognitive PET condition group has the highest impact (0.170), followed by the control group (0.168) and the personality PET condition group (0.10). Based on our findings, H4 is not supported whilst H5 is supported. Table 5 summarizes our hypothesis testing.

Table 6: Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Results
H1: Employer brand image has a positive impact on Word of mouth	Supported
H2: Fairness has a positive impact on Word of mouth	Supported
H3: Fairness has a positive impact on Employer brand image	Supported
H4: The effect of Fairness on Word of mouth is stronger in the cognitive PET condition compared to the Control group.	Rejected
H5: The effect of Fairness on Word of mouth is stronger in the personality PET condition group than in the Cognitive PET condition.	Supported

Discussion

Our study aimed to investigate the relationships between fairness, employer brand image and word of mouth when applying different types of PET within the recruitment process. The findings from our analysis shows that our suggested conceptual model is supported for the personality PET condition whilst being partly supported for the control group and cognitive PET condition at a .05 significance level. All significant relationships were in a positive

direction. Our results showcase that there is a significant difference in both the direct impact and indirect impact of fairness on word of mouth between recruitment methods. This implies that the usage of different recruitment methods results in different outcomes in terms of the employer brand image and word of mouth.

Interpreting hypotheses

H1: Employer brand image has a positive impact on word of mouth

Our results showed a positive relationship between employer brand image and word of mouth in the personality PET condition along with the cognitive ability PET condition at a .05 significance level whilst at a .1 significance level for the control group. Following a more lenient cutoff for significance at a .1 level (Söderlund, 2018) due to our small sample size for the control group, we thereby determine that there is a positive relationship between employer brand image and word of mouth in all conditions. This implies that for all tested recruitment methods if a positive employer image is held, it is more likely to recommend the employer to others as well as the opposite. This aligns with previous literature such as Hoppe (2019), Hausknecht et al. (2004) and Stockman et al. (2020). Our findings therefore further and strengthen previous literature regarding the positive relationship between employer brand image and word of mouth.

H2: Fairness has a positive impact on word of mouth

In all three conditions, our results showed a significant positive effect between fairness and word of mouth. In the control group and the personality PET group, there were both significant direct and indirect effects whilst the cognitive ability PET only showed significant indirect effect. This implies that for all tested recruitment methods, if the recruitment method is perceived as fair, it is more likely to recommend the employer to others as well as the opposite. This finding supports previous research demonstrating that fairness perceptions in recruitment are positively linked to the applicant's recommendation intentions (Bauer et al., 2001; Cropanzano et al., 2007; Gilliland, 1993; Hausknecht et al., 2004.; McCarthy et al., 2017). Our findings align with Hausknecht et al (2004), who found that job applicants with positive perceptions of the selection process were more likely to recommend it to others. Similarly, Cropanzano et al (2007) state that applicants that are fairly treated are more likely to recommend the job to a friend. Our findings therefore strengthen previous literature regarding the positive relationship between fairness and word of mouth in recruitment processes.

H3: Fairness has a positive impact on employer brand image

All three conditions showed a significant positive relationship between fairness and employer brand image. This implies that for all tested recruitment methods, if the recruitment method is perceived as fair, it is more likely to have a positive brand image. This is consistent with earlier findings where fairness had a positive impact on organisation attractiveness (Bauer et

al., 2001; Cropanzano et al., 2007; Gilliland, 1993; Hausknecht et al., 2004., McCarthy et al., 2017). This also aligns with Gilliland's (1993) seminal work examining applicants' reactions and perceived fairness of the recruitment process. Our findings extend the literature as there is limited research examining the impact of the concept employer brand image. We thereby provide evidence that the positive relationship is true also for perceived fairness and employer brand image, in addition to organisation attractiveness.

H4: The effect of fairness on word of mouth is stronger in the cognitive PET condition compared to the control group.

Opposite to expectations, the effect of fairness on word of mouth was not stronger in the cognitive PET condition compared to the control group. Whilst the control group had both a significant positive direct and indirect effect on word of mouth, the cognitive PET condition only had a significant indirect effect. This implies that fairness is more important for the control group than those in the cognitive ability group in terms of recommendation intentions and loyalty. This contradicts previous research which states that recruitment methods that are perceived as demanding and unrelated to the job should have a stronger effect on word of mouth (Rafaeli, 1999; Hausknecht et al., 2004; Georgiou & Nikolaou, 2020). One explanation for this could be that cognitive tests, especially if they are perceived as abstract (Smither et al, 1993), doesn't affect fairness and hence affect word of mouth to a lesser degree. Another explanation is the possibility of a type 2 error due to the small sample size, which will be discussed further in the limitation section. Our findings therefore contradict previous literature, suggesting that the effect of fairness on word of mouth is not stronger in the cognitive PET condition compared to the control group.

H5: The effect of fairness on word of mouth is stronger in the personality PET condition group than in the cognitive PET condition.

Our results showed that there is a significant difference in the effect of fairness on word of mouth for the different PET conditions. As previously stated, the personality PET condition showed both an indirect and direct effect whilst the cognitive condition only has a significant indirect effect. This implies that fairness is more important for the personality PET condition than those in the cognitive ability PET condition in terms of recommendation intentions and loyalty. This supports earlier research which suggests that there are differences between applicant reactions and outcomes depending on the type of recruitment methods the job applicant is exposed to (Rafaeli, 1999; Hausknecht et al., 2004; Georgiou & Nikolaou, 2020). According to Rafaeli (1999) and Hausknecht et al. (2004), personality tests are seen as less fair and job-related than cognitive tests which are supported by our study. Further, as Rosse et al. (1994) and Rafaeli (1999) stated, personal investment without abstract applications in personality testing leads to a vulnerability which deems fairness as more important for participants. Our findings therefore extend the literature providing evidence that fairness is

more important in terms of impact on word of mouth when using personality PET compared to the control group.

Theoretical implications

The findings from our study help resolve the research gap in understanding how recruitment methods impact the relationship between perceived fairness, employer brand image and recommendation intentions in the form of word of mouth. Our results show that there is a difference in effect on word of mouth between different recruitment methods, incorporating the employer brand image. This extends our understanding of employer branding and how marketing literature and models can be applied to recruitment methodology and literature. Additionally, our findings align with and extend the emphasis placed by prior research on the importance of understanding the justice paradox (Cropanzano et al., 2007; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). In alignment with this paradox, our findings suggest that practitioners benefit from understanding the job applicants' perspective of perceived fairness, rather than focusing solely on the validity and efficiency of the recruitment method.

Practical implications

Our results show that there are significant positive relationships between fairness, employer brand image and word of mouth in the context of job-seeking university students in Sweden. This provides employers and marketers with an understanding of the potential outcomes of the recruitment process. This strengthens the notion that the recruitment process can impact how job seekers view the employing brand and how they talk about it with others. It is therefore in the employing brands best interest to work on activities that improve their employer brand image and the perceived fairness of their recruitment practices if they want to achieve a good reputation within the job market among applicants. Our results further show that there are differences in the strength of the effect and significance between different recruitment practices. It is therefore important for employing businesses to incorporate potential long-term impacts in terms of employer brand image and word of mouth in addition to traditional metrics such as cost, efficiency, culture fit etc. when choosing to incorporate certain activities such as PET in the recruitment process.

Overall our study highlights the importance of employing businesses to be aware of how their recruitment practices impact their brand outside of traditionally viewed aspects such as productivity and cost. Our findings suggest that additional outcomes of the recruitment process are possible which can benefit the business in the future if incorporated correctly.

Based on our findings, we advise practitioners to be wary of implementing personality PET as it had the biggest effect on employer brand image and word of mouth whilst simultaneously being seen as the least fair out of the tested recruitment methods in previous literature (Phillips & Gully, 2002; Hausknecht et al., 2004; Steiner & Gilliland, 1996;

Zibarras et al., 2025). Therefore, if perceived fairness can't be guaranteed or motivated there is a risk of the employer brand being viewed poorly and minimising recommendation intentions among applicants.

Limitations & Future research

A limitation of the study is due to the small sample of 115 valid observations. Söderlund (2018) suggests that a minimum of 30 participants, preferably 50 per condition is to be preferred which was not achieved in our study. Hair et al. (2019) suggest that smaller samples increase the risk of type 2 errors: not rejecting a null hypothesis when it should be rejected. The small sample size therefore introduces potential reliability issues with our results. Further research, such as a replication study with a larger sample would be needed to confirm the results and strengthen our conclusion.

As our multi-group SEM analysis used summated scales instead of latent constructs due to convergence issues when performing the analysis in Stata, we were not able to analyze the invariance of the measurements. Therefore, we were not able to conclude that the measurements were interpreted in the same way in all conditions. This introduces a limitation to the study as we only could use Cronbach's alpha to ensure the invariance assumption was met. This could imply that the results are too much of a simplification to actually represent reality (Rutkowski, 2025).

The data consisted of a high level of observations that did not pass the attention check in the survey (23%). These were therefore removed as they could not be deemed as complete observations with the risk of participants not understanding the task provided. However, by removing observations a potential post-data collection bias could have been introduced which could have impacted the results and therefore the validity of the study. The issue of the high percentage of failed attention checks could be due to potential issues with the design of the experiment, how questions were asked or technical issues with the survey itself. There is also the possibility that the survey-design was not inclusive to participants with learning disabilities or those who participated whilst in an environment with distractions. Future research, if using a similar approach might gain a lower fail-rate if these issues could be mitigated by for example performing the experiment in-person instead of by digital survey.

Another limitation of the study that also regards the sample is due to the survey being distributed among students at the School of Business, Economics and Law at the University of Gothenburg. The sample consisted of mostly younger (average age 24), post-secondary educated participants who can be assumed to be looking at entry-level positions in the job market. To be able to generalize the results to other age groups, sectors and professional levels more studies should be conducted with a more diverse sample of the population. Future research could also involve comparing different sectors, ages and/or years of professional

experience from job seekers to further understandings of the recruitment processes impact on outcomes in addition to how fairness is valued.

Lastly, as the dependent variable was measured as an intention to a hypothetical situation instead of measuring actual outcomes in for example a field experiment, a limitation exists regarding intentions reflecting actual behaviors. Söderlund (2018) suggests that effects measured in intentions often result in larger significance than if actual behavior was measured. This was similarly the case in Folger et als (2022) study who first performed a hypothetical survey and then measured outcomes in a real setting. Söderlund (2018) also states that intentions still provide practical and theoretical significance. Therefore, it is possible that the significance of the effects in the study are exaggerated, however the results still provide an indicator in potential applicant behavior which can be studied further in a real recruitment context.

Conclusion

Our study investigated the relationship between fairness, the employer brand image and word of mouth as an extension of loyalty in recruitment processes connecting the previous literature within employer branding and Gilliland's theory on procedural justice. Further, we analyzed how different recruitment methods, incorporating PET, impact these relationships. Through an experimental method with multi-group SEM analysis, we concluded that our conceptual model is supported. Further, we identified significant differences in the model between the different condition groups.

Connected to the previously mentioned justice paradox (Cropanzano et al., 2007; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998), the study reinforces the importance of taking applicants' perceived fairness into account in the recruitment process, as we identified differences between groups in job applicants word of mouth intentions. Our study showcases that recruitment methods impact outcomes such as employer brand image and loyalty by word of mouth. This study contributes to existing literature by demonstrating that marketing theories can be applied to the recruitment context. Our results confirm previous research by showing significant positive relationships between perceived fairness, employer brand image and word of mouth. Furthermore, expanding the existing literature on how different types of PET lead to different outcomes. Employing brands should take these results into consideration when designing and planning recruitment methods to create a long-term strategy for their brand as an employer. To further our findings and add more validity and reliability to the results, we suggest implementing replication studies with a larger and more diverse sample that represents the population.

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Appendix 1 - Instructions in experimental survey

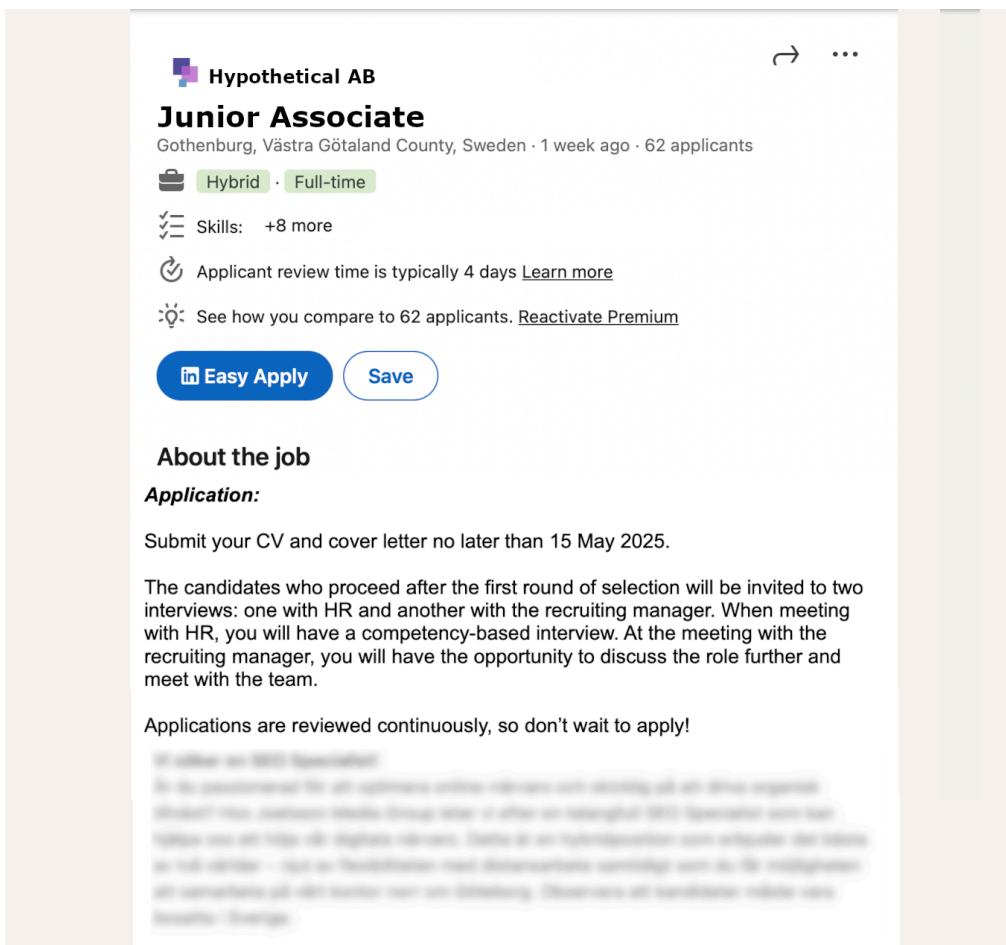
You are currently a student who is looking for your first full-time job after completing your studies. You have already applied to a few job postings but have yet to be hired for a position. As you are a recent graduate with limited job experience you are looking at a broad range of jobs such as junior associate positions within your field.

You're searching for jobs on LinkedIn when you stumble across this job listing from a company you have previously never heard of.

Please read the job posting thoroughly.

Appendix 2 - Manipulation in experimental survey

Control group:



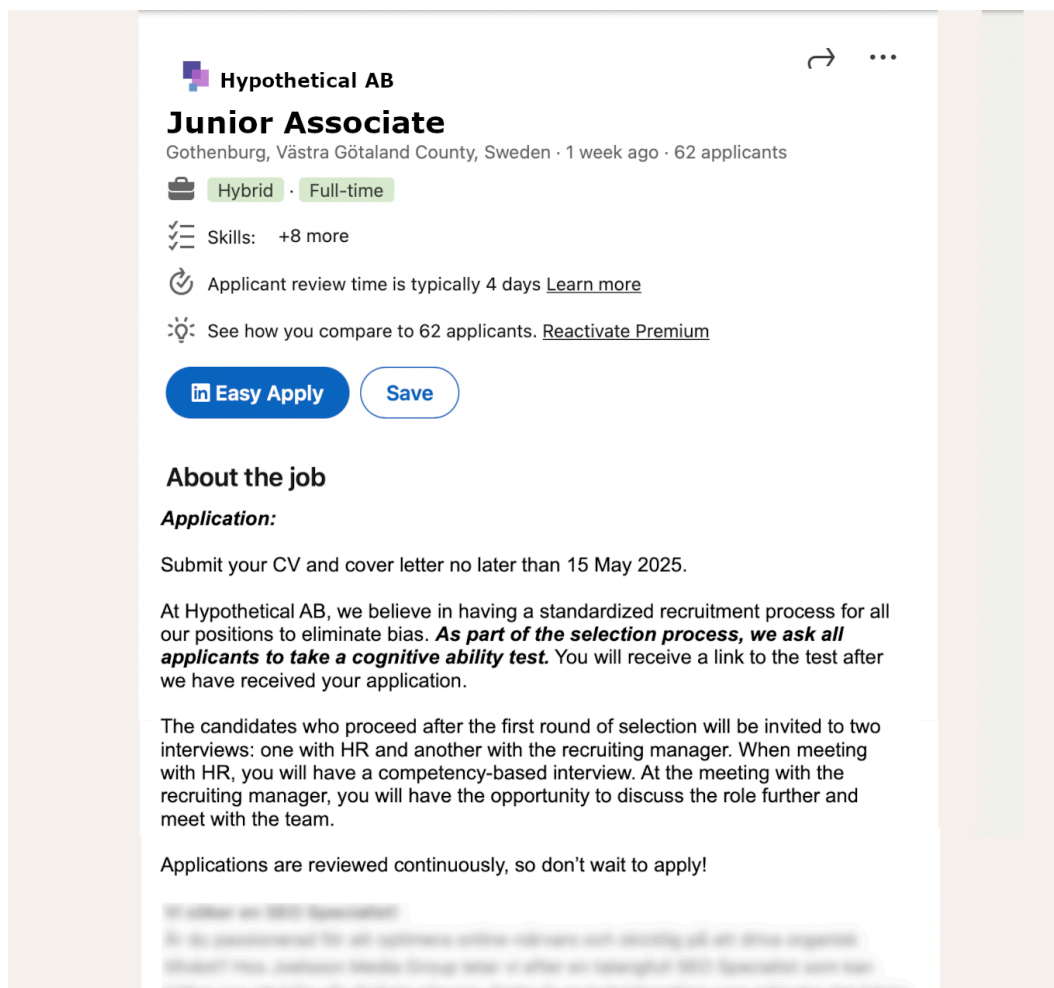
The screenshot shows a LinkedIn job listing for 'Junior Associate' at 'Hypothetical AB'. The job is located in Gothenburg, Västra Götaland County, Sweden, and was posted 1 week ago with 62 applicants. It is a hybrid, full-time position. The listing includes a 'Skills' section with '+8 more' skills, an 'Applicant review time' of typically 4 days, and a 'Reactivate Premium' option. There are 'Easy Apply' and 'Save' buttons. The 'About the job' section includes an 'Application' deadline of 15 May 2025 and details about the interview process: 'The candidates who proceed after the first round of selection will be invited to two interviews: one with HR and another with the recruiting manager. When meeting with HR, you will have a competency-based interview. At the meeting with the recruiting manager, you will have the opportunity to discuss the role further and meet with the team.' It also states 'Applications are reviewed continuously, so don't wait to apply!'.

You decide to apply for the job at Hypothetical AB and submit your CV and cover letter. You receive an auto-generated response from the recruiting manager stating that they have received your application and they will reach out if you move on in the recruitment process.

A week passes by and you have yet to receive information regarding if you have moved on in the process or not.

Condition 1: Cognitive ability test

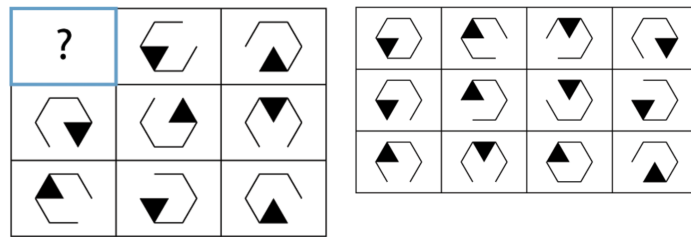
You decide to apply and submit your CV and cover letter. You receive an auto-generated response from the recruiting manager stating that they have received your application and provide you with a link to complete their cognitive ability assessment test within 7 days.



The next day when you are well-rested and in a calm environment, you complete the assigned assessment. The test takes 30 minutes to complete and you are tasked with logical problem solving sets similar to the ones below.

Time remaining: 00:45

Choose which one of the options best fits the missing symbol.



After completing the assessment you are not provided with any feedback and informed that the company will reach out if you move on in the recruitment process.

A week passes by and you have yet to receive information regarding if you have moved on in the process or not.

Condition 2: Personality fit index

The screenshot shows a job listing for 'Junior Associate' at 'Hypothetical AB'. The listing includes the company name, job title, location (Gothenburg, Västra Götaland County, Sweden), and the number of applicants (62). It also mentions the job type (Hybrid, Full-time) and skills (+8 more). There are buttons for 'Easy Apply' and 'Save'. The 'About the job' section includes an 'Application' section with a deadline of 15 May 2025. The text states: 'At Hypothetical AB, we believe in having a standardized recruitment process for all our positions to eliminate bias. **As part of the selection process, we ask all applicants to take a personality fit index test.** You will receive a link to the test after we have received your application.' It also mentions that candidates who proceed after the first round of selection will be invited to two interviews: one with HR and another with the recruiting manager. The text concludes with 'Applications are reviewed continuously, so don't wait to apply!'.

You decide to apply and submit your CV and cover letter. You receive an auto-generated response from the recruiting manager stating that they have received your application and provide you with a link to complete their personality fit index assessment test within 7 days.

The next day when you are well-rested and in a calm environment, you complete the assigned assessment. The test takes 30 minutes to complete and you are tasked with rating statements similar to the ones below.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

I prefer achieving my goals than assisting others to achieve their goals				
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5
I can work even when things are disorganised				
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5
If people are rude to me I just shrug it off				
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5
I am confident in my abilities to complete difficult tasks at work				
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

After completing the assessment you are not provided with any feedback and informed that the company will reach out if you move on in the recruitment process.

A week passes by and you have yet to receive information regarding if you have moved on in the process or not.