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Keywords
recruitment, employment, jobs, applicant, application, message, organization

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Running Head: RECRUITMENT MESSAGE SPECIFICITY

The Effects of Recruitment Message Specificity on Applicant Attraction to Organizations

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Abstract

We used the elaboration likelihood model from marketing research to explain and examine how recruitment message specificity influences job seeker attraction to organizations. Using an experimental design and data from 171 college-level job seekers, the results showed that detailed recruitment messages led to enhanced perceptions of organization attributes and person-organization fit. Perceptions of fit were found to mediate the relationship between message specificity and intention to apply to the organization. In addition, perceptions of organization attributes and person-organization fit were found to influence intentions to apply under circumstances of explicit recruitment information while attractiveness and fit perceptions were shown to influence application intentions under conditions of implicit recruitment information. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Key words: recruitment, organizational attraction, marketing

The Effects of Recruitment Message Specificity on Applicant Attraction to Organizations

Over the past decade, researchers have continued to call for more empirical research on the first phase of recruitment, or the period in which firms attract potential candidates and generate applicants (Barber, 1998; Rynes, 1991). Barber (1998) argued that the initial phase of recruitment may be the most critical stage since individuals that do not apply are rarely exposed to the later, more interpersonally intensive, phases. Further, Boudreau and Rynes (1985) argued that the ability of a firm to manage pre-interview information to increase applicant awareness and interest in learning more about organizational offerings is key to the economic utility of recruiting efforts. Despite the importance of this early stage of recruitment, little is known about the factors that influence application decisions (Barber, 1998).

There is some evidence that recruitment practices affect applicants' perceptions of the organization and intentions to apply. For example, applicant perceptions of organizational attributes, such as training, compensation and advancement opportunities, have been found to have positive effects on applicant attraction to firms (Powell, 1984; Taylor & Bergmann, 1987). Further, research demonstrates that recruitment practices affect applicants' general feelings of attraction towards, or beliefs about, fit with an organization (Kristof, 1996; Taylor & Bergman, 1987). Although these findings move us toward a better understanding of the early stage of recruitment, previous research has often lacked a theoretical grounding to explain how recruitment practices affect applicant perceptions (Breaugh & Starke, 2000; Rynes, 1991).

Some research suggests that the content of recruitment messages – particularly, more detailed information – may affect individuals' application intentions. For example, the results of studies by Rynes and Miller (1983) and Barber and Roehling (1993) showed that specific information regarding job characteristics influenced applicants' perceptions of organizational

attractiveness. Other research, however, has found either no or mixed effects regarding the role of ad specificity in the recruitment process (Belt & Paolillo, 1982; Mason & Belt, 1986). Given these mixed findings and the lack of a theoretical foundation in these studies, our understanding of recruitment processes may be enhanced to the extent that we can explain how and when detailed advertising will affect applicant intentions to apply to organizations.

Research and theory from the literature on marketing may provide insight into how the specificity of recruitment advertisements affects applicant perceptions. Theories from marketing research may be particularly effective for explaining the effects of recruitment because marketing advertisements, like recruitment advertisements, are intended to communicate information to influence the perceptions and actions of individuals (Cable & Turban, 2001). In the study of recruitment practices, theory and findings from research on the elaboration likelihood model (ELM), which has been used to explain the different routes through which advertisements affect consumer perceptions, may provide insight into how recruitment message content influences application perceptions.

In this study, we use ELM theory to examine the manner in which recruitment message specificity affects applicant attraction to organizations. In particular, we explore the effects of detailed recruitment advertisements on job seeker perceptions of organizational attributes, organization attractiveness, and person-organization fit. We also examine the mediating effects of attributes, attractiveness and fit in the relationship between recruitment message specificity and intentions to apply. In addition, we investigate the relative importance of the job seeker perceptions included in this study on intentions to apply to organizations under conditions of specific versus general recruitment information. We conclude by discussing the theoretical and practical implications of our findings and suggest directions for future research.

Background and Hypotheses

Although research on the effects of recruitment message content during the first phase of recruitment is limited (Barber, 1998), there is some evidence to suggest that recruitment messages that provide explicit or detailed information produce more favorable reactions than do non-specific or general messages. For example, Rynes and Miller (1983) found that increased amounts of information regarding specific job characteristics (e.g., salary, career paths, benefits) positively influenced applicants' perceptions of organizational attractiveness. Similarly, the results of a study comparing corporate and recruitment images showed that perceptions of image and intentions to apply were functions of the information available from the organization (Gatewood, Gowan & Lautenschlager, 1993). More specifically, the researchers found that recruitment image and intentions to apply to an organization were positively correlated with the total amount of information provided in an organization's advertisement. Related research that examines the recruiting effects of recruiter characteristics also provides support for the relationship between information specificity and applicant reactions. In particular, the results of such research show that how knowledgeable or informative a recruiter is influences the perceived effectiveness of the recruiter and subsequently, applicants' attraction to the organization (Connerly & Rynes, 1997; Harris & Fink, 1987; Powell, 1991). Several other studies also provide evidence that the level of detail provided in recruitment messages affects applicants' intentions to seek employment with organizations (Barber & Roehling, 1993; Gatewood et al., 1993; Herriot & Rothwell, 1981).

Although research generally suggests that more detailed information may lead to positive early recruitment outcomes (i.e., organizational attraction, perceptions of organizational attributes), it is not clear from these studies as to why more detailed information makes job

opportunities more attractive. One exception is Barber and Roehling (1993), in which they argued that specific information draws more attention from student job-seekers than does vague or general information. Related to the tenets of information processing theory (Bettman, 1979), which discusses the procedures consumers use in acquiring information and making choice decisions, this explanation highlights the importance of obtaining the necessary information about jobs and organizations to make informed decisions regarding whether or not to apply to an organization. Of particular importance to the study of recruitment processes is the implication that effective recruitment is dependent on an organization's ability to affect job seekers' decision effort by knowing what information the applicant requires at various stages of a job search. However, few recruitment studies have focused on the nature or content of the information required to induce job seekers to move from one stage to the next – specifically, to apply to organizations. Building upon the findings of prior research, we investigate the effects of recruitment message specificity on applicant intentions in this study.

ELM and Advertising Specificity

The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) from marketing research provides insight into how recruitment advertisements with detailed information may lead to positive recruitment outcomes. The ELM suggests that receivers of an advertising message are active participants in the persuasion process because they develop cognitive responses (e.g., thoughts, elaborations, etc.) in response to the stimulus to which they have been exposed (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Petty and colleagues (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981; Petty, Haugtvedt & Smith, 1995) argued that there are two routes through which persuasion affects the attitudes of receivers. The *central route* to persuasion takes place when the receiver of the message develops cognitions and attitudes toward the product, which was advertised through direct processing (e.g., consideration

and evaluation) of the arguments, ideas, and content found in the ad. Further, when advertisement information is processed centrally, individuals tend to develop more detailed beliefs about the advertised company or product (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). The second form of persuasion is the *peripheral route* in which receivers of the message develop perceptions about the product through cues other than the strength of the arguments in the message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). For example, advertisement viewers may develop beliefs about the company or product based on the credibility of the spokesperson in the advertisement (Lutz, MacKenzie & Belch, 1983). Because this form of persuasion does not involve the processing of detailed information, peripheral processing typically results in generalized rather than specific beliefs about the company or product (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981).

Although either processing route may lead to changes in company or product perceptions, the central route to persuasion can only occur when the receiver has the ability, and is motivated, to think about the content of the message. One condition under which receivers will be more motivated to process and evaluate the content of a message and to develop particular cognitions is when the ads have high personal relevance (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Through their added detail, specific advertising messages become more tangible to receivers and are therefore, more likely to be perceived as directly relevant to receivers and to enhance their abilities to process message content. Therefore, specific messages are likely to be processed through the central route of persuasion (Petty et al., 1995). On the other hand, when conditions of message specificity are not present, persuasion is more likely to occur through the peripheral route.

Marketing research has shown that message specificity has significant influence on people's cognitive and attitudinal reactions to the object of the information. For example, Petty and Cacioppo (1981) found that product messages with concrete arguments resulted in more

favorable cognitive responses regarding perceived attributes of the product than did messages with general arguments. Similarly, Benoit (1987) found that argument specificity was positively related to favorable cognitions about product brand and attitude change. Given empirical evidence of the influence of message specificity on company or product perceptions, we extend these findings to the area of recruitment to explore the effects of recruitment ad specificity on application attraction to organizations.

Recruitment Advertising Specificity and Job Seeker Perceptions

Several researchers (Barber, 1998; Behling et al., 1968; Goltz & Giannantonio, 1995) have proposed that during job search, applicants do not hold perfect information about important job attributes because they are difficult to observe as an organizational outsider. Accordingly, job seekers come to rely on other more observable attributes of the organization and job as signals for those that are missing when making a decision about whether they find a firm attractive or whether they want to accept its job offer. Cable and Turban (2001) argued that central processing of recruitment information should lead to enhanced beliefs about specific attributes of the organization. Given the argument that specific recruitment information is more likely to be processed centrally, we expect that more detailed recruitment information will result in favorable perceptions of organizational attributes. With more specific information about an organization's work environment and attributes, job seekers should also perceive that an organization is more likely to provide desired positive outcomes than is an organization that offers more general company information. Therefore, we also expect specific recruitment information to be predictive of applicant perceptions of organizational attractiveness.

Hypothesis 1a: Perceptions of organization attributes will be higher when recruitment messages are specific rather than general.

Hypothesis 1b: Perceptions of organizational attractiveness will be higher when recruitment messages are specific rather than general.

Models of person-organization (P-O) fit have grown increasingly popular as explanations of organization attraction and choice during the last decade (Kristof, 1996). P-O fit has been defined as the compatibility between people and organizations that occurs when at least one entity provides what the other needs (Kristof, 1996). In a recruitment context, P-O fit models generally argue that applicants tend to be attracted to, select, and remain in those organizations whose work environments best match their own personal characteristics (Cable & Judge, 1994; Kristof, 1996). Accordingly, empirical evidence highlights P-O fit perceptions as important predictors of job choice intentions (Cable & Judge, 1994).

Rynes, Bretz and Gerhart (1991) found that while job and organizational characteristics are responsible for early perceptions of organization fit, changes in fit assessments are due to more detailed job and/or organizational information. Similar to the arguments supporting realistic job previews (RJP), which are an organization's presentation of both favorable and unfavorable job-related information to job candidates (Rynes, 1991), more specific information may allow applicants to make more informed choices about whether or not to accept offers of employment (Wanous, 1973). In other words, the extent to which an organization conveys valid information about jobs and its values, culture and work environment, applicants' fit perceptions are likely to be more accurate (Cable & Judge, 1994; Kristof, 1996). More detailed information, like realistic previews, may help to screen out individuals whose needs are incompatible with the demands of the job or the culture of the organization. As previously discussed, central processing of recruitment messages should enhance beliefs about the specific attributes of an organization (Cable & Turban, 2001). Therefore, we also expect that the central processing of recruitment

practices will lead to perceptions about the ability of a job opportunity to meet job seeker needs.

Hypothesis 1c: Perceptions of person-organization fit will be higher when recruitment messages are specific rather than general.

Recruitment Advertisement Specificity and Application Intentions

Several authors have suggested that decisions to apply to an organization are often heavily reliant upon the general impressions of attractiveness that applicants hold about organizations (e.g., Belt & Paolillo, 1982; Rynes, 1991). Specifically, because of the small amount of information that is available to applicants early in the job choice process, applicants tend to base their initial application decisions on their perceptions and attitudes about organizations (Rynes, 1991). Given evidence that the level of detail provided in recruitment messages affects applicants' intentions to seek employment with organizations (Barber & Roehling, 1993; Gatewood et al., 1993; Herriot & Rothwell, 1981), the effects of recruitment message specificity may work through applicant perceptions of the organization. Consistent with the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981), more detailed company information may encourage direct processing of the information and enhance job seekers' perceptions of, and attraction to, organizations. Further, more favorable perceptions of organizations and their attributes may heighten job seekers' interest in certain organizations and subsequently, their intentions to apply to those organizations. As shown in Figure 1, we hypothesize an indirect relationship between recruitment message specificity and applicant intentions to apply – particularly that specific message content will lead to central processing and more positive cognitive evaluations regarding perceived organization attributes, organization attractiveness and P-O fit.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Hypothesis 2a: The relationship between recruitment message specificity and intent to apply to an organization will be mediated by perceptions of organization attributes.

Hypothesis 2b: The relationship between recruitment message specificity and intent to apply to an organization will be mediated by perceptions of organizational attractiveness.

Hypothesis 2c: The relationship between recruitment message specificity and intent to apply to an organization will be mediated by perceptions of person-organization fit.

Differences in Mediational Relationships

Generally, the findings of studies on recruitment message content suggest that providing explicit or detailed recruitment information produces more favorable reactions than does more general or vague information. Because such research focuses on the level or amount of detail in recruitment messages, the mere exposure to information is considered to be central to individuals' attraction to organizations. This argument, however, is antithetical to the assumption that people will use information presented in a recruitment advertisement to construct perceptions of an organization's work environment and analyze the match between their personal interests and the organization's characteristics. As discussed earlier, the amount of specificity in a recruitment advertisement is likely to lead to different routes of persuasion.

Recruitment advertisements that are specific in nature are likely to lead to central processing because job seekers will be able to process detailed information. In turn, central processing leads to specific and more cognitively involved beliefs about the company or product (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Specific cognitions are codified knowledge or beliefs regarding a

brand that include greater details about the product and require greater cognitive effort to process or retrieve (Heilman, Boman & Wright, 2000). Because perceptions of organization attributes and determinations of fit with an organization require job seekers to hold specific beliefs about an organization's characteristics (e.g., pay, culture, diversity) and to compare these beliefs with their personal needs and interests, such perceptions likely to be cognitively complex in nature. Thus, we expect that specific recruitment messages will lead intentions to apply through their influences on the more cognitively complex beliefs about organizational attributes and person-organization fit.

In direct contrast to specific recruitment messages, recruitment sources that provide only general information are likely to result in peripheral processing because there is no real information for job seekers to consider and process (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). As noted above, individuals tend to develop general cognitions or attitudes toward a brand when information is processed peripherally (Aaker, 1991). Perceptions of company attractiveness, which are global feelings toward a company or job, may be considered general cognitions in a recruitment context. Therefore, we would expect perceptions of attractiveness to have more influence over intentions to apply when recruitment messages are general.

Hypothesis 3a: Perceptions of organization attributes and person-organization fit will have more influence on intentions to apply to the organization than will perceptions of organization attractiveness when recruitment messages are specific.

Hypothesis 3b: Perceptions of organization attractiveness will have more influence on intentions to apply to an organization than will perceptions of organization attributes and person-organization fit when recruitment messages are general.

Method

Sample

Participants were 171 undergraduate students in a human resource management course at a large northeastern university. Although students participated as part of a class exercise on employment relationships, participation in the study was voluntary and each participant received extra credit toward fulfillment of course requirements. Course enrollment was 238 students, thus resulting in a response rate of 72%. Demographic information collected showed that participants were 45% women, 74% white and had a mean age of 20 years. In addition, 91% of participants were industrial and labor relations majors and approximately 70% were interested in exploring internship opportunities at the time of the study.

Study Design and Experimental Manipulations

This study included two recruitment message specificity conditions – specific or general – to which participants were randomly assigned. The manipulation was based on whether participants received specific or general information on the compensation and benefits, training, and professional and technical development opportunities provided by the company. Participants in the specific recruitment message condition read the following:

> Our company's cash compensation include, but are not limited to: high base pay that will be greater than the cash compensation at most of our industry competitors; variable pay that rewards each employee's personal performance and the company's success; and stock incentives for those whose primary responsibility is to directly impact profit or revenue. In addition, we offer flexible work arrangements such as flexible work weeks, telecommuting and job sharing, to accommodate personal and family needs and encourage work/life balance. Throughout your tenure with our organization, you will

> receive extensive training through direct job experience as well a through the many training programs the company offers. Each employee receives 40-80 hours of training annually through a variety of internal classes, self-paced learning programs, and corporate library resources. In addition, the company offers educational leaves of absence to enhance technical and business skills, and will reimburse 100% of each employee's tuition and other eligible fees for accredited education programs outside of regular working hours. Our company offers a comprehensive career development plan through which each employee and his or her manager map out a long-term career plan, determine the skills required and then devise an action plan to help achieve the objectives. Other development services and opportunities include individual development assessments, mentoring and performance coaching.

Participants in the general recruitment message condition read the same descriptive information on the company but were given the following information about the compensation and benefits, training, and professional and technical development opportunities offered by the organization:

> The company provides competitive compensation that assesses individual achievements in the context of company-wide results and provides strong financial rewards to top performers. We also offer a broad range of benefits and programs to help you achieve a healthy and balanced life. Our company takes its training responsibility seriously, investing millions each year in worldwide training programs so that all employees may achieve personal recognition and success. We offer employees convenient job-related training and information resources to help them lead our world-class company into the future. Because we value personal mobility and employee involvement, our company

offers a world of opportunity with unlimited challenges and endless possibilities. We will provide you with resources to guide you and develop your potential, helping you move forward with your career.

Procedures

Each participant received a packet containing task requirements, company information and questionnaires. The instructions informed participants that they were participating in a company-sponsored study to understand job seeker perceptions of organizations and the employment relationship in an effort to improve the recruitment and retention of key talent. After completing an initial questionnaire that asked for demographic information, participants reviewed the company information, which was compiled from, and formatted like, recruitment brochures from actual companies. The brochures contained general information (e.g., revenues, number of employees and locations, company values) on a fictitious consulting firm as well as the compensation and benefits, training, and professional and technical development provided by the company. After reading the company information, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire that assessed perceptions of organization attributes, organization attractiveness and person-organization fit, and intentions to apply for a job with this company.

Measures

Organization attributes. Eight items taken from Collins and Stevens (2002) were used to assess applicant perceptions of what the organization would provide in terms of pay and benefits, location, job and career opportunities, job security and work environment. Representative items included: “This organization has good prospects for career advancement” and “This organization would provide me with a good working environment.” All items used a seven-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree. The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .80.

Organization attractiveness. Attraction to the company was used to assess participants generalized attitudes and feelings toward the organization. Our six-item measure of attraction was adapted from Taylor and Bergmann (1987), but included additional items to provide a broader range of general assessments of the company. Sample items include: "I have a favorable impression of this company" and "Overall, a job opportunity at this company is very attractive to me". Items were rated on a seven-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .88.

Person-organization fit. Four items adapted from Judge and Cable (1997) were used to assess applicant perceptions of their fit with an organization. Representative items included: "This organization would be a good fit for me in terms of what I am looking for in a potential employer" and "The values and personality of this organization reflect my own values and personality." All items used a seven-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree. The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .90.

Intent to apply. Four items adapted from Taylor and Bergmann (1987) were used to assess applicant intentions to apply for a job with the organization. Sample items included: "If I were searching for a job, I would apply to this organization" and "If this organization offered me a job, I would probably accept it." All items used a seven-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree. The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .94.

Analyses

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to test hypotheses 1a – 1c. Because MANOVA tests the joint effects on two or more criterion variables by the independent variable, we used this analysis technique to assess whether or not significant differences exist for all attraction variables (i.e., organization attributes, organizational attractiveness, person-

organization fit) when comparisons are made between specific and general recruitment messages. Linear regression was used to test hypotheses 2a – 2c, 3a and 3b. For hypotheses 2a – 2c, we followed Baron and Kenny's (1986) three-step procedure for assessing the mediation effects. First, the independent variable should be significantly related to the mediator variables; second, the independent variable should be related to the dependent variable; and third, the mediating variables should be related to the dependent variable with the independent variable included as a predictor in the regression analysis. If these conditions hold, at least partial mediation is present. If the independent variable has a non-significant beta weight in the third step, then complete mediation is present. For hypotheses 3a and 3b, we split the sample based on the recruitment message specificity conditions and ran separate regression equations for each condition.

Results

Means, standard deviations and correlations of all variables are included in Table 1. To assess the effectiveness of the message specificity manipulation, participants were asked at the end of the study to indicate whether the company information provided was explicit and straightforward or implicit and vague. A chi-square test of differences in response patterns across the two conditions [χ^2 (1, N = 167) = 14.26, p < .001] suggested that participants correctly perceived whether they had received specific or general recruitment messages.

Insert Table 1 about here

Hypotheses 1a, 1b and 1c predicted that perceptions of organization attributes, attractiveness and person-organization fit, respectively, would be higher when recruitment

messages are specific rather than general. The MANOVA results via Hotelling's Trace (F [3, 167] = 4.37, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .07$) indicated that there were significant differences for the three attraction variables based on recruitment message specificity. The MANOVA results showed significant main effects of recruitment message specificity on perceptions of organization attributes (F [1, 170] = 11.58, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$) and person-organization fit (F [1, 170] = 3.86, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$). Mean responses by condition demonstrated that job seekers who received specific recruitment information had higher perceptions of organization attributes (M = 4.93, SD = .61) and person-organization fit (M = 4.67, SD = .96) than did job seekers who received general recruitment information (attributes: M = 4.59, SD = .70; P-O fit: M = 4.34, SD = 1.13). Therefore, hypotheses 1a and 1c were supported. Because the MANOVA results did not show a significant main effect for perceptions of organization attractiveness (F [1, 170] = 1.80, ns), hypothesis 1b was unsupported.

Hypotheses 2a, 2b and 2c predicted that the relationship between recruitment message specificity and intent to apply for a job with the organization would be mediated by organization attributes, organization attractiveness and person-organization fit perceptions, respectively. The results of the mediated regression analyses are shown in Table 2 and illustrated in Figure 2. As demonstrated in the tests of hypotheses 1a – 1c, message specificity had significant effects on perceptions of organization attributes and person-organization fit. Given a non-significant relationship between message specificity and perceptions of organization attractiveness, hypothesis 2b was unsupported. However, because the first requirement of mediation was met for organization attributes and person-organization fit as mediators, we continued the analyses for hypotheses 2a and 2c.

To test these hypotheses, we next regressed the dependent variable (i.e., intent to apply)

on the independent variable (i.e., message specificity). Satisfying the second requirement of mediation, the beta weight for message specificity was significant for intent to apply. We then regressed the dependent variable on the independent variable and the mediators (i.e., organization attributes and person-organization fit). Because the beta weight for organization attributes was not significant, hypothesis 2a was unsupported. However, the beta weight for person-organization fit was significant for the dependent variable, satisfying the third requirement for mediation. In addition, the beta weight for message specificity was not significant, indicating complete mediation. Therefore, hypothesis 2c was supported.

Insert Table 2 about here

Insert Figure 2 about here

Hypothesis 3a predicted that perceptions of organization attributes and person-organization fit would have more influence on intentions to apply to the organization than would perceptions of organization attractiveness when recruitment messages were specific. Alternatively, hypothesis 3b predicted that perceptions of organization attractiveness would have more influence on intentions to apply to the organization than would perceptions of organization attributes or person-organization fit when recruitment messages were general. Under conditions of specific recruitment information, the overall regression model was significant (F [3, 86] = 27.57, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .49$). In addition, while the beta coefficients for organization attributes ($\beta = .21$, $p < .05$) and person-organization fit ($\beta = .53$, $p < .001$) were significant, the coefficient for

the organization attractiveness variable ($\beta = .04$, ns) was not. Therefore, hypothesis 3a was supported. Under conditions of general recruitment information, the overall regression model was also significant (F [3, 88] = 86.52, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .75$). Further, the beta coefficients for organization attractiveness ($\beta = .25$, $p < .01$) and person-organization fit ($\beta = .66$, $p < .001$) were significant although the coefficient for organization attributes ($\beta = .01$, ns) was not. Therefore, hypothesis 3b was partially supported.

Discussion

We used marketing theory to extend prior recruitment research by exploring the influence of recruitment message specificity on applicant attraction to organizations. Based on the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981), we explored whether exposure to explicit recruitment information would produce more favorable applicant perceptions and reactions. First, our results confirmed the importance of recruitment ad specificity for influencing applicant perceptions of organization attributes and person-organization fit. Consistent with marketing research, these findings highlight that detail in recruitment advertisements may lead to positive applicant reactions. However, contrary to our expectations, recruitment message specificity did not have a direct effect on applicant perceptions of organization attractiveness. Taken together, the results of this study suggest that the specificity of recruitment advertisements may not lead to valenced judgments of organizations, such as perceptions of organization attractiveness. Instead, more detailed advertisements may provide job seekers with sufficient information to directly process information about the organization and persuade applicants to generate favorable perceptions of what the organization may offer potential employees and their fit with the organization and its culture.

Given industrial and consumer research which suggests that the psycholinguistic structure

(e.g., word choices, number of words used, etc.) of advertisements can influence readership (Rossiter, 1981), some may argue that the relationship between recruitment message specificity and applicant reactions found here may be explained by such factors. However, our study design and the findings of research on ad content and length provide support for ELM mechanisms as the underlying processes. For example, Soley (1986) showed that ads with moderate (i.e., between 101-150 words), moderately long (i.e., between 151-200 words) and long (i.e., more than 200 words) copy length aroused similar levels of interest among readers while short (i.e., less than 100 words) ads obtained significantly lower interest ratings. Although the recruitment messages used in this study were of differing lengths (e.g., general – 127 words, specific – 214 words), both messages were above the 100-word threshold identified by Soley (1986), thus suggesting that our results were not influenced by text length. A more recent study by Huhmann and his colleagues (2002) investigated the effects of copy length on readership, or how much attention was given to an ad, using a 100-word threshold and found that longer text yielded significantly lower readership than did shorter text. Applying these results to our study design, we would expect participants to have given more attention to our general recruitment message which had a shorter text length. However, the results of this study suggest that higher levels of attention and/or arousal were generated by the longer, more specific recruitment message, thus providing further support for an elaboration likelihood model. Additional research is needed to explore the joint effects of message specificity and message length within recruitment contexts.

We also examined the mediating roles of perceptions of organization attributes and person-organization fit in the relationship between recruitment message specificity and intentions to apply to organizations. Consistent with prior recruitment research that suggests that providing applicants with more information will positively affect their intentions to apply (Gatewood,

Gowan, & Lautenschlager, 1993; Herriot & Rothwell, 1981), our findings demonstrated a relationship between advertisement specificity and application intentions. In addition, we found that perceptions of person-organization fit mediated this relationship. Therefore, our results suggest that perceived fit may be responsible, at least in part, for the effects of recruitment message content on applicant intentions to apply to organizations and may provide an explanation for inconsistencies in prior recruitment research.

We also investigated the relative importance of the attraction variables included in this study on applicant intentions to apply under conditions of general versus specific recruitment information. Consistent with marketing theory, perceptions of organization attractiveness and person-organization fit influenced intentions to apply to the organization when recruitment messages were general. However, when specific recruitment information was available, perceptions of organization attributes and person-organization fit had relatively more influence on application intentions. These results suggest that when recruitment advertisements are general, applicants may be more influenced by inferences derived from available information, such as perceptions of organization attractiveness. In contrast, when recruitment messages are specific, applicants appear to develop more complex evaluations regarding organizational attributes when deciding on whether or not to apply to an organization.

While our findings are consistent with empirical evidence that highlights P-O fit perceptions as important predictors of job choice intentions (Cable & Judge, 1994), we were surprised that P-O fit was an important mediator under both conditions of specificity. In particular, we were surprised that P-O fit mediated the relationship between recruitment message and participant intentions to apply under conditions of low message specificity. It is possible that job seekers still develop perceptions of fit when provided with general information on

organizations. Alternatively, our findings may be reflective of the fact that all perceptions of fit during the initial stage of recruitment may be general in nature and only signal a basic understanding of the organization and what it offers. Future research on the development of P-O fit perceptions under different conditions of recruitment specificity is needed to better understand the relationship between recruitment message specificity and fit. Specifically, future research should include assessments of fit that require more detailed processing (e.g., perceptions of person-job fit), because it is likely that recruitment messages with greater specificity will have a greater affect on these fit assessments than would messages low in specificity. However, our findings underscore the importance of person-organization fit perceptions in affecting job seekers' intentions to apply to organizations.

We acknowledge certain limitations of our study. Given the various recruitment messages that job seekers may receive from organizations, we used an experimental design to investigate the unique influence of written recruitment messages on job seeker perceptions and intentions. However, the student sample and laboratory setting may limit the generalizability of the present findings. For example, although the study setting and materials were relevant to our sample given that most of the students were conducting internship searches at the time of the study, they may not have experienced the study's manipulations in the same manner as if they were actually being recruited by the organization described in the study. Additionally, because the job seekers in this study consisted of college students, the findings might be limited to educated job seekers. Therefore, further research on the effects of recruitment message specificity across different groups of job seekers is needed. Another limitation in our study is that we did not measure actual job choice decisions of applicants. Rather, we addressed calls in the literature to study applicant attraction and intentions to apply to organizations, which are the primary objectives of

recruitment (Rynes, 1991). Future research may extend our findings by tracking applicants through the recruitment process to determine whether the specificity of recruitment messages does have an impact on applicants' final job choices. In this study, additional concern may derive from the collection of data from a single source, which increases the likelihood that relationships found in our study may potentially be influenced by common method bias. However, if such a bias was the primary driver of our findings, we would expect to find significant relationships between all variables in our study, including those that are considered in hypotheses 2a – 2c, of which hypothesis 2b was not supported. Although we cannot preclude that some of our findings are inflated due to common method bias, it is unlikely that true relationships between the variables of interest are not at least partially responsible for our findings.

Finally, there are several important issues that we did not address in this study that should be addressed in future research. In particular, despite its importance to practitioners and researchers (Taylor & Collins, 2001), we were unable to test the relative effectiveness of different types of recruitment practices for attracting specific groups of job seekers that are of prime interest to organizations (e.g., more qualified or diverse candidates). Research from psychology and marketing literatures suggest that individuals may be differentially affected by the specificity of information depending on key individual differences. For example, experienced consumers tend to rely on more detailed information to make purchase decisions than do inexperienced consumers (Heilman, Bowman, & Wright, 2000), thus suggesting that recruitment researchers should examine if companies would be more likely to attract experienced job seekers through specific rather than general recruitment advertisements. Similarly, Meyers-Levy (1989) offer a selectivity model of information processing based on gender, in which females are argued to be influenced by a broader and more holistic set of beliefs than are males.

Related to recruitment, Meyers-Levy's (1989) model suggests that female job seekers may be influenced by recruitment advertisements that provide information on a wide-array of topics (e.g., compensation, work environment, career advancement opportunities), while male job seekers may be influenced by ads that focus on a narrow range of dimensions. Given additional research which suggests that it may be more important for companies to provide specific information on compensation than on other job characteristics (Barber & Roehling, 1993), future research should specifically examine what types of information should be specific relative to other types of information in recruitment advertisements and how different categories of applicants will react to these differences in specificity.

Despite these limitations, the results of this study have important practical implications. The results of this study suggest that recruiters may enhance their organizational recruitment processes by providing detailed information on what potential employees can expect to receive from the organization. Including information about promotion and development opportunities, compensation and benefits, and organizational policies may improve applicant perceptions of organization attributes and person-organization fit. Job seekers may view such organizations as having work environments that best match their own personal characteristics and needs and subsequently, be more likely to apply to these organizations. From an organizational standpoint, providing this level of detail in recruitment messages – particularly in recruitment literature distributed to college students – may help generate large pools of applicants who are likely to accept an offer if extended to them. Considering the results of additional research which shows that providing applicants with salary descriptions and information about company benefits in recruitment advertisements positively influences applicant quantity and quality (Kaplan, Aamodt & Wilk, 1991), specifying certain types of information may further help to increase the utility of

organizational recruitment systems. Beyond designing recruitment advertisements, the findings also suggest important points of emphasis in the recruitment process. When recruitment brochures are general, recruiters would be well served by emphasizing organizational characteristics that may enhance perceptions of organization attractiveness. However, emphasizing person-organization fit during the recruitment process despite the specificity of recruitment information may also encourage job seekers to apply to organizations, thereby increasing the utility and effectiveness of selection procedures by building larger applicant pools.

Overall, this study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it integrates the recruitment and marketing literatures and highlights a critical link between these two bodies of research. Specifically, this study offers a theoretical rationale to explain why individuals will react more positively to recruitment ads with detailed information or messages. Second, this study addresses Barber's (1998) call for more research on factors that influence application decisions and provides some explanation as to how recruitment advertisements influence job seeker perceptions and reactions. By concurrently examining several well-studied variables in the recruitment literature (e.g., organization attributes, organization attractiveness, person-organization fit), we test alternative explanations for the effects of recruitment advertisement specificity on application intentions. Further, with a focus on the content of the recruitment information required to induce job seekers to move from one stage to the next, we suggest areas for future research on how recruitment messages influence applicant cognitions, attitudes and behaviors.

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Table 1

Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix

Variable Name	Mean	S. D.	1	2	3	4
1. Organizational Attributes	4.76	.68	(.80)			
2. Organizational Attractiveness	4.98	.84	.67**	(.88)		
3. Person-Organization Fit	4.50	1.06	.74**	.68**	(.90)	
4. Intent to Apply	4.81	1.24	.67**	.62**	.79**	(.94)

Note. Alpha coefficients are presented on the diagonal in parentheses. N = 171; * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$.

Table 2

Summary of Regression Analyses for Mediating Effects of

Organizational Attributes and Person-Organization Fit

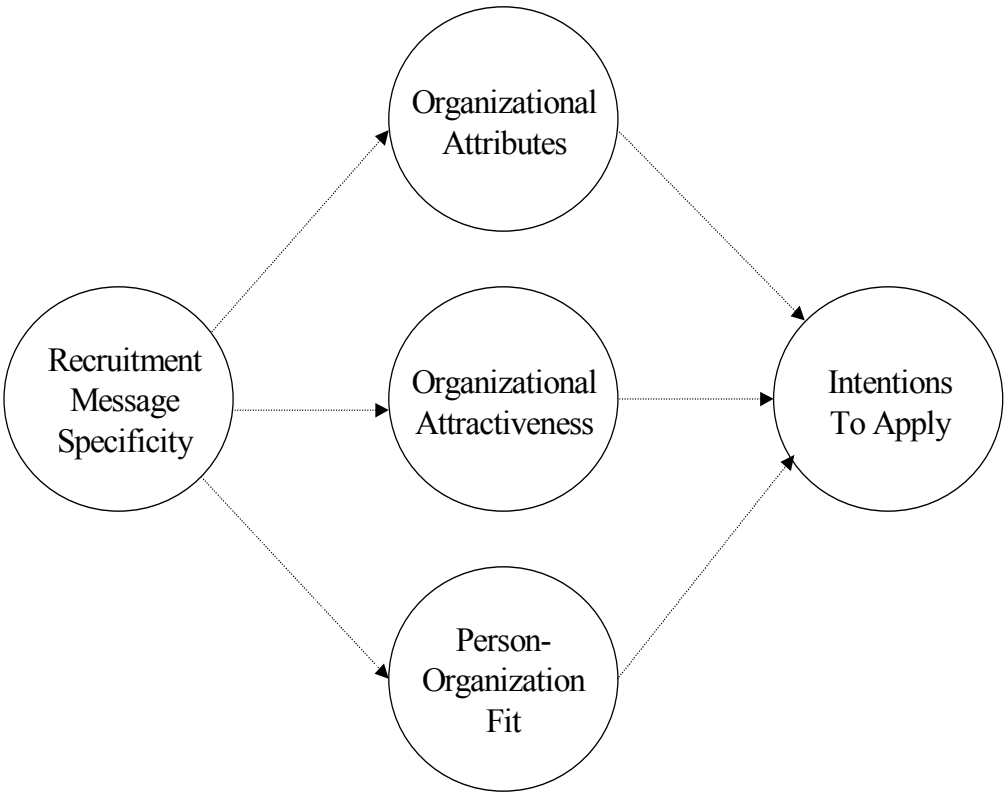
Step	Dependent Variable	Independent Variable(s)	B	SE B	β
1	Organization Attributes	Message Specificity	-.35	.10	-.26**
2	Intent to Apply	Message Specificity	.-.37	.19	-.15*
3	Intent to Apply	Message Specificity	-.04	.12	-.02
		Organization Attributes	.20	.13	.11
1	Person-Organization Fit	Message Specificity	-.32	.16	-.15*
2	Intent to Apply	Message Specificity	.-.37	.19	-.15*
3	Intent to Apply	Message Specificity	-.04	.12	-.02
		Person-Organization Fit	.71	.09	.60**

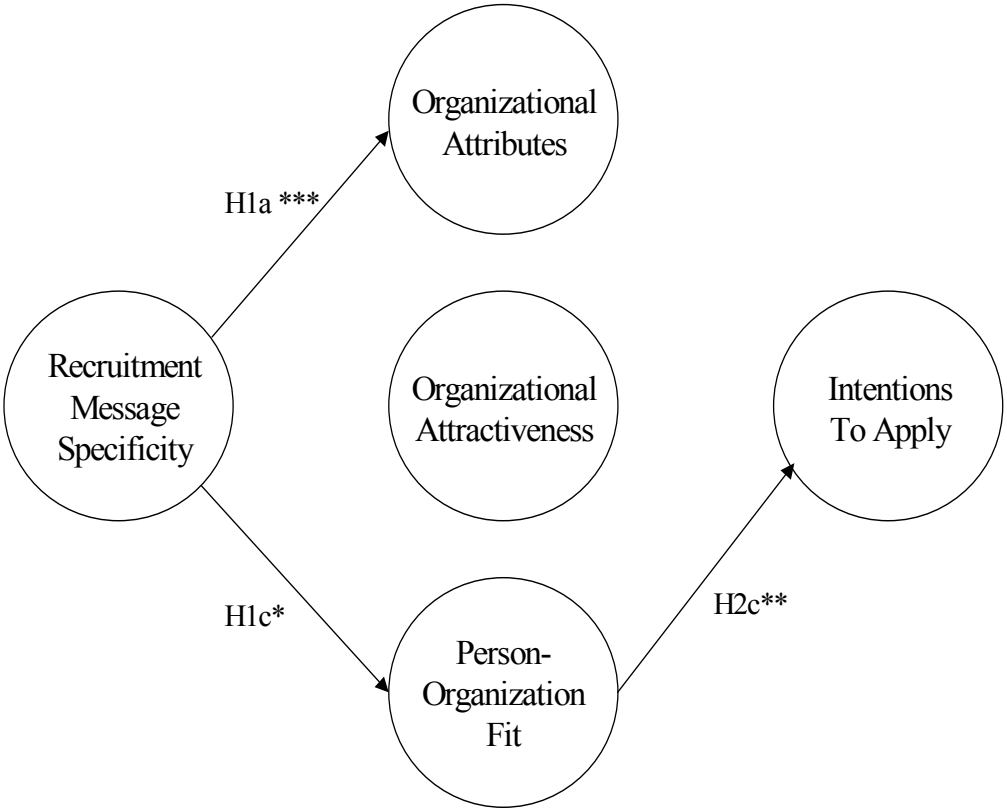
Note. R^2 = .07 (organization attributes) and R^2 = .02 (person-organization fit) for Step 1; R^2 = .02 for Step 2; ΔR^2 = .62 for Step 3 (*p*s < .05). * *p* < .05, ** *p* < .001.

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Hypothesized mediation model.

Figure 2. Results of mediated regression analyses. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.


Organizational Attributes
Recruitment Message Specificity
Organizational Attractiveness
Intentions To Apply
Person-Organization Fit


Organizational Attributes
H1a ***
Recruitment Message Specificity
Organizational Attractiveness
Intentions To Apply
H1c*
Person-Organization Fit
H2c**