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The Job That Calls My Name

Theoretical Explanations for Gendered Wording in Job Advertising and the Importance of Recruitment Communication: A Literature Review

One of the main goals of a (young) job seeker is to find a job that offers a valuable opportunity in their career and that also satisfies the professional curiosity. One of the most frequently visited labour market platforms for this purpose are job advertising portals. Browsing through job advertisements is a much more complex process than it may seem at first sight: numerous studies show that a job advertisement is usually the first encounter between the employer's offer and the expectations of the potential candidate. The primary goal of recruitment communication is to attract all job seekers who match the description in the advertisement, however, discriminatory references and implicit cues referring to one gender may be unconsciously coded into language, which therefore distorts equal application opportunity. The aim of this literature review is to synthesise the emergence, functioning and social implications of implicit gender references in job advertisements. The article introduces the topic through six main sections, broken down into theoretical components. The introduction is followed by a discussion of the gender gap at both national as well as international level, the basic principles of recruitment communication, the main explanatory theories of organisational behaviour, the effects of implicit gender references on the perceiver, and lastly, a discussion of gender linguistics is touched upon.

Keywords: recruitment communication, job advertisements, gender cues, implicit effect, discrimination

1. Introduction

We are living through a *war for talent* (Michaels et al. 2001), where every individual is looking for the perfect job to bring financial stability, along with professional and personal development in their career. Companies aim to secure the best employees through applicant attraction (Baum–Kabst 2014; Carpentier et al. 2019), and to achieve that they need to consider both traditionally printed recruitment advertisements and online recruiting websites, the two most important platforms for job seekers (Allen et al. 2007). Although both recruitment types have their advantages, since

printed recruiting advertisements belong to low-informational-recruitment (lacking the interactive, hyper-textual characteristics with the option of online searching for further data), and online recruiting websites are viewed as high-information-recruitment (with richer browsing possibilities), the trend in the latter has increased over the past decade, warranting in-depth study (Baum-Kabst 2014).

The aim of the author in the present literature review is to provide a summary of the theories and scientific contributions that sustain gendered differences in job advertising language and consequently, create considerable differences in an organisational context. The literature review introduces the gender gap and the institutional differences between men and women. Moreover, it revolves around the topic of recruitment communication, and theories that define the organisational behaviour of individuals. Nevertheless, it touches upon gender stereotype construction and the role language plays in the implicit effect of job advertising.

2. International contextualisation of gender differences

Male and female participation in the labour market has never been static, in fact, according to global statistics, it is a volatile phenomenon, which we refer to as gender gap. The term refers to “the systemic disadvantages that women and girls face when compared to boys and men, in terms of access to education, resources, income, power, and so on” (Fitzgerald 2021: 2). The World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index benchmarks gender parity and substantial differences across 146 countries in the labour market, with a special focus on the Economic Participation and Opportunity dimension, which is the second largest gap (there are four main gaps registered: 1. Economic Participation and Opportunity; 2. Educational Attainment; 3. Health and Survival; and 4. Political Empowerment). This index is considered the longest-standing index, which tracks progress of gender gaps and parity since 2006.

Drop to the top – although women occupy nearly half of the entry level positions, their hiring into leadership positions entered a deteriorating era, which continued dropping from 37.5% to 36.4% to 2024. “LinkedIn data shows that women’s workforce representation remains below men’s across nearly every industry and economy, with women accounting for 42% of the global workforce and 31.7% of senior leaders” (World Economic Forum 2024: 7). Out of the 146 countries Hungary stands on the 101st place in terms of the overall gender gap ranking, while in the Economic Participation and Opportunity it scored on the 72nd place – these numbers clearly show that there is still quite some room for improvement on a global scale. The Global Gender Gap Report stresses the fact that female recruitment remains a central issue in economic participation, which may foster a better and more effective inclusion in the labour market.

3. Recruitment communication

In general terms, recruitment can be defined as “the process of searching for applicants for job, from among whom the right candidates will be selected” (Łącka-Badura 2015: 2).

Through lab experiments, Chapman et al. (2005) found that job seekers consider more than 25 attributes when deciding about an organisation's level of attraction and likeability during the recruitment process. Today it is a great challenge for organisations to satisfy all the needs of talented graduates who have just stepped onto the labour market ready to contribute to the latest trends and innovations (Ardelt-Sharma 2021). For this reason, including the most desirable and useful pieces of information in an advertisement is crucial. The occurrence of market failure and the false allocation of data in a job advertisement can lead to applicant dissatisfaction and absent willingness to apply – a phenomenon known as *information asymmetry* (Wiktor – Sanak-Kosmowska 2021). Job seekers are often exposed to this information asymmetry (Nagy 1997), which makes the messages in an advertisement even more important in the immense flow of online information. Perkins et al. (2000) and Barber and Roehling (1993) posit the applicants' level of trust will be higher if they regularly see the company's job advertisements on online platforms before the application. An efficiently crafted job advertisement, therefore, is key to increasing brand trust, reaching out to job seekers, and thus attracting the best fitting applicants to the organisation.

4. Organisational behaviour: Theoretical explanations

Ridgeway (2011) suggests that everyday work relations allocate men and women to certain positions in a working environment; therefore, their access to power and rewards varies – known as the *job-matching process*. As part of this process, once individuals are employed and engage in social relations, these relations will have a direct effect on the activities they engage in, such as “the social networks they join, how they perform on the job, how they are evaluated, and the promotions they receive” (Ridgeway 2011: 93). The idea is further supported by the *self-determination theory* (SDT) (Deci-Ryan 1985), which suggests that an employee's motivation is activated based on three basic psychological needs for well-being: *autonomy*, *competence* and *relatedness*. Motivational theory examines the way individuals depend on their social environment (Ryan-Vansteenkiste 2023). Thus, if the organisational environment shows signs of discrimination, that will ultimately affect performance and organisational behaviour. Additional research built on SDT clarifies the way in which institutional discrimination maintains group-based inequalities in a society (Sidanius-Pratto 1999). The theory further highlights that “gendered language used in job advertisements likely serves as a covert institutional practice – one that is very subtle – that ultimately serves to reinforce existing gender inequality, keeping women out of areas that men (the dominant group) typically occupy” (Gaucher et al. 2011: 111).

Furthermore, according to Ridgeway (2011), individuals are organisationally determined by their sex role characteristics, which refers to the barometers of how well men and women fit in these institutional settings. In contrast, the *person-centred perspective* states that “the attributes individuals perceive they possess vary according to their sex” (Fagenson 1990: 204). It has been underpinned that men are perceived as aggressive, rational, competitive, self-confident and independent, while women

are seen by others as gentle, kind, emotional, understanding and helpful to others (Putnam–Heinen 1976; Schein 1973). Based on these assumptions, the *organisational structure view* was developed, which suggests that a person's view of their attributes will vary according to the position occupied in the organisational power hierarchy (Fagenson 1990). For example, if a woman is employed in a secretarial position and a man in a leadership position, there is a tendency that the long-term effect will culminate in hierarchical inequality, which will define their values of the self. Joan Acker (2006) emphasised that gender inequality in organisation hierarchy can be detected in divisions between paid and unpaid work, income and status inequality. As mentioned above in the organisational structure view, such organisational practices not only influence an organisational actor's self-perception, but also their intertwined career path. Gedikli strengthens the idea by stating that “occupations can play a significant role in structuring the social space and, thereby, can create or hinder pathways to social networks and opportunities” (2020: 123).

5. Gender stereotypes

As described above, both the job-matching process and gender segregation play an important role in defining and organising the social relations of male and female employees; however, these are not the only factors that escalate and sustain workplace inequality. If we take the traditional structure of the 40-hour, Monday-to-Friday workweek setup, an embedded assumption about the gendered nature of an ideal worker is revealed: it implicitly suggests that an ideal worker has no direct responsibility for the daily care of children, thus the ideal worker will rather be a man and not a woman (Acker 2006; Ridgeway 1999). Research suggests that the carried structures of power and control, division of labour and even behaviour own an “implicit cultural assumption about the gender [...] of the actors that will enact them” (Ridgeway 1999: 95). Such cultural assumptions might easily lead to unfair categorisation of men and women, ultimately strengthening *gender stereotypes* within an organisation. Although several definitions of gender stereotype exist, according to Hilton and von Hippel (1996) there is consensus among researchers that gender stereotypes “are beliefs about the traits, attributes and characteristics ascribed to various social groups” (Colella–King 2018: 8). When strong stereotypical beliefs are created, they may lead to stable expectations about men and women and the way it would be more appropriate for them to act (Renner–Masch 2019). “Stereotypes are cognitive schemes that associate specific attributes or behavior with males and females” (Eagly–Mladinic 1989: 544). Stereotype construction has the ability to make information processing easier, because individuals can rely on their previously stored information instead of evaluating all the incoming stimulus in the context of a new situation (Fiske 1998).

Since stereotypes are socially transmitted via family, media, literature, or institutions, they represent an individual's cultural beliefs deriving from shared beliefs. In terms of social perception, two types of stereotypes can be differentiated: prescriptive and descriptive. A descriptive stereotype indicates what men and women

are like, while a prescriptive stereotype designates how men and women should be (Heilman 2012). Based on this theoretical approach, Fiske and her colleagues (2002) introduced the Stereotype Content Model, which incapsulates stereotypes in two main dimensions, namely social warmth and competence. The social warmth dimension, on the one hand, includes communal attributes, and if warmth is indicated as high, it includes traits like helpfulness, emotionality, patience, yet if warmth is at a low level, it shows selfishness or unfriendliness. The same logic goes for masculine beholders, who contribute to the competence dimension at which agentic traits can be found. When indicators show high level of competence, those attributes include leadership skills, strength or intelligence, although when competence is at a low level, attributes will be constituted by irresponsibility, disorientation or weak leadership skills.

Maas and Arcuri (1996) were among the first ones who argued that language plays an essential role in transmitting gender stereotypes through language. As a matter of fact, the ultimate purpose of job advertising is to attract and attain the ideal candidate by embedding male and female references wording, respectively.

6. Implicit effects of job advertising

“Job seekers typically have limited information about jobs and organizations” (Wille-Derous 2017: 543). When it comes to determine what information is considered trustworthy in making job market choices, recruitment researchers rely on job market signalling (Derous-Decoster 2017; Spence 1973). This process, known as Spence’s (1973) *signalling theory*, has been extensively used in strategic and human resources management, as well as in entrepreneurship (Connelly et al. 2011). According to Spence (2002) job seekers often use job advertisements as a signalling source to gather data (e.g. corporate values, employment opportunities and organisational environment) about the organisation they are motivated to apply for. The theory marks the intertwined relationship between organisational signals and applicant signals, hence both sides have certain signalling authority towards each other (Connelly et al. 2011; Ganesan et al. 2018; Zarándné Vámosi – Kovács 2022).

Although Spence’s market signalling theory (1973) provides a complex explanation for how employer–employee communication takes place, if we exclusively zoom into the signals sent through a job ad, we find several elements that have a hidden or even unintended meaning: *implicit cues*. On the one hand, a cue is *hard-to-fake* (or honest) from the sender’s point of view, because signalling happens outside one’s conscious control based on the individual’s acquired qualities. On the other hand, cues are *hard-to-resist*, since recruiters constantly look for cues, candidates embed in their resumés as valuable information. Therefore, it can be argued that such implicit cues will be hard-to-fake from the recruiter point of view (by signalling through the job ad), and hard-to-resist from the job seeker point of view (by decoding the job ad).

“Language can be considered one of the subtle means of maintaining traditional gender arrangements, as language is an important vehicle for the transmission and maintenance of stereotypes” (Maass–Arcuri 1996: 194). The fact that language plays a crucial role in fostering gender stereotypical utterances has been supported by

numerous researchers (Hentschel et al. 2020; Mao et al. 2021; O'Brien et al. 2022; Stout–Dasgupta 2011; Verweken et al. 2013; Wille–Derous 2017, 2018). For instance, in their studies, Stout and Dasgupta (2011) recruited participants, who were asked to read descriptions of job advertisements in which the ideal candidate was either mentioned with masculine wordings (he/him) or referred to with *gender-fair* wording (his/her, he/she, employees). The study concluded that female participants were more likely to be motivated to pursue the job where they read gender-fair wording.

Eagly's (1987) *social role theory* (SRT) was the first to propose that the gender roles and physical differences men and women hold impact the way they behave (Wille–Derous 2017). Eagly and Wood (2016) explain that “sex differences and similarities in behavior reflect gender role beliefs that in turn represent people's perceptions of men's and women's social roles in the society in which they live” (Eagly–Wood 2016: 459). In other words, the way in which male and female behaviour is reorganised when given an occupational role in an organisational environment. Conventional gender roles are thus brought into the working environment and play an active part in recreating a new occupational role that is not necessarily congruent with the gender role (Eagly–Wood 2016). As women and men possess certain traditional or *original* gender roles (woman as housewife, man as breadwinner), later they will be more likely to enter those occupational fields which are associated with those traditional gender roles, respectively (e.g. men as firefighters, women as nurses) (Gaucher et al. 2011).

7. Gender linguistics

As a matter of fact, the gender roles and beliefs we have been socialised in determine the way we speak our language (Van Lange et al. 2012). Masculine or feminine-themed words or those associated with gender stereotypes are called *gendered wording* (Baxter et al. 2022). Stereotypically men-directed words include attributes such as ambitious, assertive and competent and are called *agentic wording*. On the other hand, female-directed words that include emotional, sensitive, kind, or compassionate are called *communal wording*. The two types of wording are familiar attributes that have been outlined previously in Fiske's (2002) work. Evidence suggests that although today there are social changes in the way women and men are expected to behave, the continuing belief that *communal traits* are more frequent for females and *agentic traits* are more likely to fit males is thus scientifically justified (Szabó 2024). Hentschel et al. (2020) examined how female students react to stereotypical gendered wording in job advertisements. They found that women did not like the content of job ads when the wording was agentic.

Louise Vasvári (2014) claims that although Hungarian as a language does not carry gender reference, yet as all languages, Hungarian can also encapsulate linguistic gender bias and distortion in other forms. For example, the nouns *herceg–hercegnő* is a good example to illustrate the differentiation: according to Vasvári (2014) through adding a suffix to a noun, gender becomes encoded into language. This phenomenon is referred to as a masculine form used as generic, meaning that although words are supposed to include both genders, in some languages the generic nature is activated,

which predominantly evokes masculine exemplars as well as mental images of masculinity (Formanowicz–Hansen 2022). When using such words that seem to target men only, as a consequence, women tend to feel excluded and become much less motivated to pursue a job when the advertisement contains masculine and not neutral language (Stout–Dasgupta 2011).

The question arises: what can be done to a more diverse, inclusive language use in a labour market context? Throughout the recent years a dilemma emerged among researchers. Some claim (Verweken et al. 2013; Horvath–Sczesny 2016; Hodel et al. 2017; Hentschel et al. 2018; Lindqvist et al. 2019) that the implementation of gender-fair language (also called gender-neutral language) would be the solution, however, another stream of research (Baxter et al. 2022; Chaturvedi et al. 2021; Fatfouta 2021; Hu et al. 2022) concluded that instead of neutralisation the use of word pairs would avoid exclusion. All in all, there is still a lot to be explored in the field of gendered wording in job advertising, which may open doors to a more inclusive, discrimination-free labour market and workplace culture.

8. Summary

The purpose of the present literature review was to provide a comprehensive understanding of the driving explanations and underlying theories behind the appearance of implicit gender cues in job advertising. The beginning of the article introduced the international context of gender gap and its subtypes and continued with some theoretical explanations of organisational behaviour. Following that, the importance of recruitment communication is presented, which draws attention to the direct effects on the labour market actors. From a linguistic point of view, the author provided a deeper insight into stereotype construction in language, and into the factors that influence the Hungarian language from a gendered communication angle. Nevertheless, as a focal point in this review, the not conscious influence of cues referencing a specific gender in a job advertising is also presented in a section that raises relevant research findings in the topic.

As we could see in the outlined sections, several successful attempts have been made on exploring and synthesising the causes as well as effects of discriminatory practices in recruitment processes; however, one could admit that we are not yet freed from the issue of labour market inequality. The author suggests that based on the theoretical foundation of the topic, there are three leading problems: 1. a lack of research in connecting application intention and gender distortion in job advertising (meaning which cues are most likely to affect the intention to apply to a job); 2. good practices in human resource management that successfully regulate the gender quota and equal opportunity for candidates; 3. the linguistic conceptualisation of the psychological and communicational competences required from applicants in the content of job ads.

More research done on the application intention of young university students would be a great opportunity to disseminate the results towards them as a practical scientific output. By doing so they would gain a more conscious, eye-opening understanding of their otherwise not conscious choices. Nevertheless, it would be highly recommended

to more frequently open free discussions about job choices and opportunities for young talents in the field they have chosen to acquire during their academic studies. Such initiations would not only invite them to think about their career opportunities as soon as possible, but to critically examine the possible risks and setbacks, such as gender discrimination, unfair treatment or the unequal representation of men and women in organisations or even in the implemented language of recruitment communication.

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