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**What Do Consistency and Personableness in the Interview Signal to Applicants?  
Investigating Indirect Effects on Organizational Attractiveness Through Symbolic  
Organizational Attributes**

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### **Abstract**

Personnel selection research has recognized the importance of providing applicants with both standardized (i.e., "consistent") and individualized (i.e., "personable") treatment during interviews. However, research has yet to examine the mechanisms underlying the effects of perceived consistency and personableness in the interview on applicants' attraction to organizations. Drawing from signaling theory, we investigate how interview consistency and personableness impact organizational attractiveness. To this end, we developed a conceptual model that proposes that applicants interpret perceived interview consistency and personableness as signals about what the organization is like in terms of symbolic organizational attributes (organizational competence and benevolence, Lievens & Highhouse, 2003), which in turn influence perceptions of organizational attractiveness. A longitudinal three-wave field study with 129 applicants showed that applicants' perceptions of both consistency and personableness positively impacted organizational attractiveness. Additionally, these effects were mediated by organizational competence perceptions, but not by organizational benevolence perceptions. Furthermore, consistency and personableness perceptions differed in their relative influence on organizational competence, benevolence, and attractiveness, with personableness perceptions being a more influential predictor. This study contributes to a nuanced theoretical understanding of how applicants interpret interviews as signals about how organizations treat their members.

**Keywords:** interview, consistency, personableness, applicant reactions, staffing

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The employment interview plays an important role for organizations in terms of selecting new employees, but also for applicants to gain information and form impressions of their prospective employer. Depending on how standardized (i.e., consistent across applicants) and how individualized (i.e., personable) applicants experience the interview, they are more or less attracted to the organization, which is reflected in their affective and attitudinal thoughts about the organization as a potential place to work or study (Chapman, Uggerslev, Carroll, Piasentin, & Jones, 2005; Highhouse, Lievens, & Sinar, 2003; Wilhelmy, Kleinmann, Melchers, & Götz, 2017). Similarly, to enhance their organizations' image, interviewers prefer interviews in which they can establish personal and informal contact to applicants as opposed to interviews that constrain such contact (Lievens & De Paepe, 2004).

There have been repeated calls to identify mechanisms that link the two critical dimensions of perceived interview standardization and individualization to applicants' attraction to organizations (e.g., Breugh, 2013; Derous, Born, & De Witte, 2004; Dipboye, Macan, & Shahani-Denning, 2012; Lievens & De Paepe, 2004; McCarthy et al., 2017). For example, Breugh (2013) pointed out that "more attention needs to be given to applicant perceptions of specific recruitment actions ... given that they likely mediate the relationships between an organization's recruitment actions and outcomes" (p. 391). This theoretical gap limits our understanding of how interviews serve as vehicles to convey an organizations' image. In addition, closing this gap would have practical implications as it would help organizations in considering what kind of image they want to create via interviews and to manage this image through communication and interviewer training.

This study aims to examine the mechanisms through which perceived interview standardization in terms of consistency and perceived individualization in terms of personableness contribute to applicants' attraction to organizations. Drawing on signaling theory (Bangerter, Roulin, & König, 2012; Spence, 1973), we develop and test a conceptual model (Figure 1) that links perceived interview consistency and personableness to symbolic organizational attributes (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Slaughter, Zickar, Highhouse, & Mohr, 2004). We argue that, apart from the factual information provided by interviewers, applicants use perceived interview consistency and personableness as signals for two kinds of organizational characteristics: organizational competence (the organization as a secure and reliable place to work) and organizational benevolence (the organization as a supportive and caring place to work). Our focus on these two attributes is in line with the two universal dimensions of social cognition that underlie human social interactions, namely competence and warmth (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). We posit that these symbolic organizational attributes mediate the effects of perceived interview consistency and personableness on organizational attractiveness, which is defined as people's general attitudes about the organization as a potential place for employment. In doing so, we advance past research and contribute to signaling theory by specifying signals (i.e., perceived consistency and personableness), but also by testing specific signaling mechanisms (i.e., perceived organizational competence and benevolence).

We test our model in a three-wave longitudinal study, which allows us to consider recruitment effects over and above applicants' initial attitudes towards the organization as well as long-term effects (i.e., several weeks after the interview) on organizational attractiveness (see Figure 1). Our study was conducted in a high-stakes setting of higher education recruitment, and thus in an actual selection context. The educational domain is relevant for studying recruitment

issues because many universities and colleges face similar challenges as companies (Sackett, Schmitt, Ellingson, & Kabin, 2001). For example, competition for good students is often high among universities (e.g., Colarelli, Monnot, Ronan, & Roscoe, 2012). Furthermore, as explained below, in the context of our study, admission decisions were based on selection interviews, which provides further similarity to selection practices in companies, and allowed us to focus on specific signals and signaling mechanisms in the interview.

### **Signaling Theory**

Signaling theory (Bangerter et al., 2012; Spence, 1973) is a general framework on how two parties with partly conflicting interests and incomplete knowledge exchange information. It has served as a theoretical foundation for research in domains as diverse as strategic management (e.g., Zhang & Wiersema, 2009), marketing (e.g., Connelly, Ketchen, & Slater, 2011), and recruitment (e.g., Jones, Willness, & Madey, 2014). For example, applied to interviews, signaling theory suggests that the way interviews are conducted provides information or, in other words, *signals* to applicants whether the organization is a good place to work (Celani & Singh, 2011).

Past research has shown that part of an organization's image as an employer can be understood as symbolic attributes in the form of personality traits that are ascribed to the organization (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Slaughter et al., 2004). In particular, Lievens and Highhouse introduced the instrumental-symbolic framework literature by positing that applicants' perceptions of organizations are partly a function of two types of information, namely instrumental attributes and symbolic meanings. While instrumental attributes refer to factual information such as pay or tuition fees, working hours, and training programs, symbolic meanings refer to less tangible characteristics such as personality traits that applicants infer from organizational information. Symbolic meanings can lead to trait-based perceptions of the organization, for example, as trendy, prestigious, or innovative (Slaughter et al., 2004).

Regarding recruitment outcomes, symbolic organizational attributes are especially important because they have been found to incrementally predict organizational attractiveness above and beyond instrumental attributes (e.g., Lievens & Highhouse, 2003).

A conceptual drawback of past research on signaling processes is that the precise signals and the underlying mechanisms have remained largely unexplored. For example, Jones et al. (2014) recently emphasized that “the mechanisms that link signals to outcomes – inferences that people draw from signals – are rarely tested, or even specified conceptually” (p. 385). To our knowledge, Jones et al. were the first to go beyond using signaling theory as a general explanatory framework. They found that communication about a company’s corporate social performance on web pages signaled to applicants that the prosocial orientation would also extend to them if they were to work for the company.

In line with Jones et al. (2014), we also go beyond signaling theory as a general explanatory framework and examine the mechanisms that link the two aforementioned elements of applicants’ interview experience, namely perceived consistency and personableness, to organizational attractiveness. Specifically, we expect that perceived interview consistency and personableness provide applicants with information on two symbolic organizational attributes: competence (in terms of the organization being a reliable and secure place to work) and benevolence (in terms of the organization’s good intentions towards its employees, Bangerter et al., 2012; Fiske et al., 2007).

### **Standardization and Individualization in Employment Interviews**

Of all the signals that applicants use to infer what it would be like to work for an organization, many stem from employment interviews (Rynes, 1989). Although interviews vary on many dimensions, variations in terms of the level of perceived standardization and individualization have been posited to be of particular importance for organizational

attractiveness (Dipboye et al., 2012). One of the most basic ways to enhance standardization is by keeping the interview consistent across applicants through the use of a standardized interview guide (Campion, Palmer, & Campion, 1997; Levashina, Hartwell, Morgeson, & Campion, 2014). Therefore, the present study focuses on interview *consistency*, which can be defined as reducing procedural variations across applicants (Bauer et al., 2001). For example, consistency may be achieved by using a list of questions that are asked to all applicants and mentioning this practice to the applicants.

Previous research has yielded mixed findings regarding the effects of consistency on various recruitment outcomes. On the one hand, some researchers posited that higher consistency might be more impersonal, make applicants feel less comfortable, and lead to a decrease in applicants' opportunity to present themselves, thereby reducing applicants' affective reactions and attitudes towards the company (Campion et al., 1997; Latham & Finnegan, 1993). Additionally, Levashina et al. (2014) pointed out that "interviewers and organizations perceive structured interviews to be less effective in recruiting" (p. 278). In line with this assumption, Conway and Peneno (1999) found more negative affect among applicants in reaction to structured interview questions compared to general questions. Similarly, other studies reported a negative effect of the degree of structure on applicants' job acceptance intentions (Farago, Zide, & Shahani-Denning, 2013) and on organizational attractiveness (Chapman & Rowe, 2002; Kohn & Dipboye, 1998).

On the other hand, it has also been argued that applicants might view consistency as face valid, professional, and fair (Boswell, Roehling, LePine, & Moynihan, 2003; Campion et al., 1997; Molgaard & Lewis, 2008; Smither, Reilly, Millsap, & Pearlman, 1993; Turban & Dougherty, 1992). For instance, meta-analytic results regarding recruitment processes in general (i.e., not only specific to interviews) revealed positive effects of consistency on organizational

attractiveness, acceptance intentions, and perceived procedural justice (Chapman et al., 2005; Hausknecht, Day, & Thomas, 2004). In contrast to this, however, other studies found that indicators for recruitment outcomes such as applicants' acceptance intentions and perceived procedural justice were not affected by interview consistency (e.g., Chapman & Zweig, 2005). In other words, despite its pivotal role, the effects of interview consistency perceptions do not seem to be well understood.

In addition to perceived interview consistency, perceived *personableness* constitutes another key element of applicants' interview experience. We define personableness as warm and friendly interviewer-initiated behavior that takes place over the course of the interview (Chapman et al., 2005; Liden & Parsons, 1986). Therefore, it is related to interpersonal warmth (Carless & Imber, 2007; Chapman et al., 2005; Turban, Forret, & Hendrickson, 1998). In contrast to rapport building, which occurs mainly prior to or at the beginning of the interview, applicants' perceptions of personableness are shaped throughout the whole interview. Perceptions of personableness may be achieved by asking questions to get to know the applicant, using appropriate small-talk, and acting in a trustworthy, personal, empathetic manner, for example, by maintaining eye contact, nodding, and smiling (Dipboye et al., 2012; Tullar, 1989; Wilhelmy, Kleinmann, König, Melchers, & Truxillo, 2016).

Past research on personableness mainly focused on interviewers' preferences and applicants' reactions in the interview. Research found that interviewers tend to place high value on establishing informal contact with applicants. Interviewers are well aware of the social function of the interview and want to send favorable signals about their organization's culture (Lievens & De Paepe, 2004; Wilhelmy et al., 2016). Indeed, applicants seem to prefer such a personable treatment in interviews. For example, in a laboratory experiment, applicants reacted more positively to interviews that were high on interpersonal warmth (Kohn & Dipboye, 1998).

The limited research investigating applicants' reactions to personableness generally indicates positive applicant reactions (Dipboye et al., 2012). Meta-analytic findings regarding interviews and other selection procedures further showed that applicants feel more attracted to organizations and are more likely to accept a job offer when personableness in the interview is perceived to be high (Chapman et al., 2005). In addition, Derous, Born, and De Witte (2004) discovered that applicants want and expect recruiters to put them at ease during the selection process, thus highlighting applicants' appreciation of personableness. Furthermore, Conway and Penno (1999) found that applicants had more positive affective reactions and were more willing to recommend the employer when interviewer warmth was perceived as high. However, we do not know why applicants react favorably to perceived personableness, even though this issue has both theoretical relevance (i.e., to understand the underlying signaling mechanism) and practical relevance (i.e., to provide recommendations to interviewers in how to evoke favorable applicant reactions).

In sum, our review of consistency and personableness in the interview leads to the conclusion that we need to understand how perceived consistency and personableness contribute to organizational attractiveness. More specifically, their effects on organizational attractiveness might depend on what impressions applicants gain of the organization. Figure 1 depicts our conceptual model of perceived interview consistency and personableness as signals, symbolic organizational attributes as signaling mechanisms, and their signaling effects on organizational attractiveness. We posit that perceived interview consistency and personableness serve as signals to applicants about the organization's competence and benevolence. As explained below, we further argue that there might be multiple signaling mechanisms and signaling effects for perceived interview consistency and personableness. In the following section, we present research questions and specific hypotheses derived from our model.

## **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

### **What Does Consistency Signal to Applicants?**

On the basis of signaling theory and previous research on organizational perceptions, consistency perceptions may serve as positive signals for applicants when evaluating the organization as a potential employer. Specifically, when applicants perceive the interview process to be consistent and standardized across applicants, they may infer that the organization is well-organized, secure, and reliable and thus, ascribe these traits to the organization. In other words, interview consistency might signal to applicants that the company treats its employees in a systematic and reliable way. Generally, the umbrella term “organizational competence” perceptions (also referred to as “competence”) has been used to capture trait inferences such as well-organized, secure, and dependable (Bangerter et al., 2012; Fiske et al., 2007; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Slaughter et al., 2004). Hence, perceived interview consistency may signal organizational competence, which, in turn, would lead to increased organizational attractiveness.

That said, there are also theoretical arguments for why perceived interview consistency might serve as a negative signal to applicants, and therefore might lead to negative recruitment effects. When applicants perceive the interview process to be consistent and standardized across applicants, they may infer that the organization is bureaucratic, indifferent, and cold. Specifically, when applicants perceive the interview to be conducted in a uniform way, they may deduce that employees are also not treated with much individual attention. Generally, the umbrella term “organizational benevolence” perceptions (also referred to as “boy scout” or “commitment”) has been used to capture trait inferences such as supportive, likable, and understanding (Bangerter et al., 2012; Fiske et al., 2007; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Slaughter et al., 2004). Hence, perceived interview consistency may signal a lack of organizational benevolence, which, in turn, would lead to lower organizational attractiveness. Given these opposing arguments, we pose the

following two research questions to explore the influence of consistency perceptions on organizational attractiveness (see Figure 1):

*Research Question 1:* Is there a positive influence of consistency perceptions on organizational attractiveness that is mediated by organizational competence perceptions?

*Research Question 2:* Is there a negative influence of consistency perceptions on organizational attractiveness that is mediated by organizational benevolence perceptions?

### **What Does Personableness Signal to Applicants?**

Contrary to interview consistency, establishing personable contact with applicants has been found to have mainly positive effects on applicants' attitudes and intentions towards the company. However, it remains unclear how personableness leads to these favorable reactions (Dipboye et al., 2012). Again, we posit that this element of applicants' interview experience serves as a signal regarding perceptions of benevolence and competence (Bangerter et al., 2012; Fiske et al., 2007). When applicants perceive attention and consideration as being part of the interview process, they may infer that the organization acts in the best interest of its employees in terms of being benevolent. Hence, we expect that personableness signals organizational benevolence, which, in turn, leads to organizational attractiveness.

In addition, we expect perceived personableness to provide not only an opportunity to assess the organization's level of benevolence, but also to gauge its level of competence. Indeed, Klotz et al. (2013) emphasized that applicants' perceptions of the organization's competence depend on trusting interactions between applicants and organizational representatives. Klotz et al. stressed that each interaction between applicants and potential employers during pre-employment processes provides an opportunity to strengthen or weaken perceptions of trustworthiness. From the applicants' perspective, perceptions of trustworthiness imply "the perception that the trustee [i.e., the organization] has the competence to fulfill obligations pertaining to any trust-based

agreements” (Klotz et al., 2013, p. 106). In a worst case scenario, “the interview context could lead applicants to conclude that the interviewer or the organization is not trustworthy, thereby causing applicants to decide to abandon their application to the organization” (p. 113) Hence, we expect that personableness signals organizational competence, which, in turn, leads to organizational attractiveness. In sum, we propose the following (see Figure 1):

*Hypothesis 1:* Organizational benevolence perceptions mediate the positive effects of personableness perceptions on organizational attractiveness.

*Hypothesis 2:* Organizational competence perceptions mediate the positive effects of personableness perceptions on organizational attractiveness.

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedures**

We tested our hypotheses using a field sample of individuals who were interviewed for a selective Bachelor’s program in organizational psychology at a Swiss university.<sup>1</sup> There were several reasons why this sample was appropriate for our study. First, the selection process for this study program was based solely on interviews. As is common at Swiss universities, no standardized admission tests nor any other tests were used for admission purposes. This enabled us to isolate the effects of interview process characteristics without any confounding influences of other selection procedures. Second, this selection setting was similar to selection practices in the private sector. Students had the choice between several universities with similar programs in this region, so that competition between this university and other universities was high. In addition, the Bachelor’s program involved very low tuition fees (as is common at Swiss

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to note that none of the authors were employed by the participating university, nor were any of the authors involved in the interviewing and selection process. In addition, none of interviewers and applicants were aware of the study topic or hypotheses.

universities) so that tuition was not an influencing factor in applicants' decisions. Third, the study program targeted individuals with work experience. More precisely, the only two prerequisites for being invited to the interview were a high school diploma (independent of the grade point average) and at least one year of work experience. Thus, our study was not based on a typical student sample, but on applicants with prior work experience who went through an actual selection process. Fourth, all interviews were conducted by a panel of two interviewers (see below). This ensured that the effects found could not be ascribed to one interviewer's personality and/or interviewing style and instead reflected how applicants experienced the interview.

Finally, this selection setting was appropriate for finding adequate variance in applicants' perceptions of interview consistency and personableness. The selection interviews were moderately structured, which is in line with recent recommendations<sup>2</sup> (Dipboye et al., 2012). Interview questions were based on interview guides, composed of six topical areas (see Appendix A). For each topical area there were two to five obligatory questions to be asked in the interview. This level of consistency can be situated between Level 2 and Level 3 of Huffcutt and Arthur's (1994) scheme that ranges from no constraints (Level 1) to complete standardization (Level 4). In addition, there were no instructions for conducting the interview in a personable way. Given the moderate level of consistency and no constraints on personableness in this context, we expected adequate variance in applicants' perceptions of both consistency and personableness in the interview.

On average, the interviews lasted 39.09 minutes ( $SD = 6.87$ ). Interviews were conducted in teams of 2 out of a pool of 17 interviewers. Interviewers were assigned to the interview dates

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<sup>2</sup> Although meta-analyses have shown that validity of interview scores increases through structure, there seems to be a point at which additional structure does not yield incremental validity (Huffcutt & Arthur, 1994; Huffcutt, Culbertson, & Weyhrauch, 2014).

based on their availability thus preventing any systematic effects. All the interviewers were well trained, having participated in interview training. Furthermore, 12 of the 17 interviewers had received additional interview training by other organizations or during their postgraduate training.

We used a longitudinal design to examine effects of perceived interview consistency and personableness on organizational attractiveness several weeks after the interview, and to be able to control for baseline values. Data collection was composed of three surveys completed at three different points during the interview process: prior to the interview (Time 1), directly after the interview (Time 2), and several weeks after the interview when applicants knew whether they had received an offer (Time 3). This design was repeated for three cohorts of applicants who participated in consecutive 3-month recruitment cycles of the university. Surveys were matched across time periods by using participant identification numbers.

One to two weeks prior to the interview, the first survey was mailed to 177 applicants along with an informed consent form and a cover letter. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasized. Furthermore, we assured participants that the survey results would be used for research purposes only, and that their responses would in no way influence selection decisions. A total of 176 participants provided valid pre-interview responses (99.4% of the original 177).

The second survey was handed to the participants directly after the interview. Participants were asked to complete the survey and to return it to a research assistant waiting next door. A total of 173 participants provided valid responses (97.7% of the previous 176).

A third survey was mailed to the original sample of 177 participants one week after they knew whether they were admitted to the study program, which was two to four weeks after their interview. Altogether, a total of 90 participants (50.8%) were admitted to the study program. A reminder was sent when we did not receive any response within two weeks. To increase the

response rate, participants were offered a report on the study results, the chance to win two out of eight movie theater vouchers, and an individual written feedback report on the Big Five personality traits if they returned the third survey (for this purpose, a short personality scale<sup>3</sup> was included in the third survey). In addition, we publicized the importance of the study through the university's homepage. A total of 129 participants provided follow-up responses (72.9% of the original 177). Of these 129 participants, 75% were female, and 66% of them had received an offer by the university. Their mean age was 24.98 years ( $SD = 5.74$ ), their mean work experience was 6.27 years ( $SD = 5.58$ ), and their mean interview experience was 5.13 interviews ( $SD = 5.55$ ).

Nonresponse bias analyses revealed no differences in age, gender, work experience, and interview experience among those who completed all three data collection surveys and those who only completed the Time 1 and Time 2 surveys, but not the Time 3 survey. However, participants who returned all three surveys significantly differed from participants who did not return the third survey with regard to outcome favorability. Drop-out at Time 3 was higher for applicants who were not admitted to the study program (44%) than for those admitted (11%),  $\chi^2(1) = 25.28, p < .01$ . Thus, we incorporated outcome favorability as a control variable in all data analyses that included follow-up data (see also Truxillo & Bauer, 2011).

## Measures

Unless stated otherwise, five-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* were used in this study. All original items and item adaptations are listed in Appendix B.

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<sup>3</sup> These personality data were not considered for data analyses in this study because the internal consistency of the short personality measure's ratings was low.

**Organizational attractiveness.** We measured organizational attractiveness at Time 1 (used as a control variable), 2, and 3 with four items adapted from Highhouse et al.'s (2003) validated general attractiveness measure, which is part of a broader organizational attraction inventory. One item of the original five-item measure ("I am interested about learning more about this company") was not used because applicants in the present study had already advanced significantly in the selection process (i.e., they were interviewed). As such, we expected that these applicants had already done a lot of research about the university. We modified the items to fit the context of a university instead of a company. Coefficient alpha for this scale's ratings ranged between .75 and .87.

**Interview consistency perceptions.** To measure consistency perceptions at Time 2, we used all three items of Bauer et al.'s (2001) consistency scale. Items were modified to capture the applicants' perspective and to refer to selection interviews instead of tests. The internal consistency of this scale's ratings was .74.

**Interview personableness perceptions.** To measure personableness perceptions at Time 2, we selected three items from scales measuring personableness and warmth (i.e., Carless & Imber, 2007; Harris & Fink, 1987; Liden & Parsons, 1986) and added a self-developed item. Items were modified to capture the applicants' perspective and to refer to selection interviews instead of tests. Coefficient alpha of this scale's ratings was .74.

To assess the distinctiveness of our independent measures, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). A two-factor model separating perceived interview consistency and personableness yielded good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(13) = 19.17$ , CFI = .98, TLI = .97, RMSEA = .05 [90% CI: 0.00–0.10,  $p = .41$ ], SRMR = .04, with a correlation between the latent factors of  $r = .21$ ,  $p < .05$ . In contrast, a single-factor model had poor fit,  $\chi^2(14) = 116.90$ , CFI = .60,

TLI = .40, RMSEA = .22 [90% CI: 0.19–0.26,  $p < .05$ ], SRMR = .14, and its fit was significantly worse than the fit of our proposed two-factor model,  $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 42.92$ ,  $p < .01$ .

**Organizational competence perceptions.** To measure organizational competence perceptions at Time 2, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed that three trait adjectives described the university to which they were applying. For this purpose, we selected those adjectives from Aaker's (1997) validated 9-item Competence scale that best fit the context of the university. Coefficient alpha of this scale's ratings was .74.

**Organizational benevolence perceptions.** Similarly, to measure organizational benevolence perceptions at Time 2, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed that five trait adjectives described the university to which they were applying. For this purpose, we selected those adjectives from the validated 9-item Boy Scout scale by Slaughter et al. (2004) that best fit the context of the university. Coefficient alpha of this scale's ratings was .86.

To assess the distinctiveness of our mediator variables, we conducted another CFA. A two-factor model separating perceived competence and perceived benevolence yielded good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(19) = 35.95$ , CFI = .96, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .08 [90% CI: 0.04–0.12,  $p = .10$ ], SRMR = .04, with a correlation between the factors of  $r = .73$ ,  $p < .05$ . In contrast, a single-factor model had poor fit,  $\chi^2(20) = 67.43$ , CFI = .90, TLI = .86, RMSEA = .13 [90% CI: 0.10–0.16,  $p < .05$ ], SRMR = .06, and its fit was significantly worse than the fit of our proposed two-factor model,  $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 152.65$ ,  $p < .01$ .

**Outcome favorability.** Outcome favorability refers to whether applicants received an offer from the organization. Outcome favorability has been found to be a pivotal factor in applicants' perceptions and attitudes upon feedback (e.g., Hausknecht et al., 2004). Thus, in line

with Truxillo and Bauer's (2011) recommendations, applicants' admission to the study program was used as an indicator of outcome favorability and as a control variable in our data analyses.

### Results

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and correlations among all study variables. Our research questions and hypotheses were examined in a path model using the lavaan package (Version 0.5-21) in the statistical environment R (Version 3.2.2, R Development Core Team, 2016). Confidence intervals for population values of unstandardized indirect effects were computed using bias corrected bootstrapping methods. In addition, following recommendations by Roth and MacKinnon (2012), we adjusted our multiple mediation analyses for baseline values; that is, pre-interview scores of organizational attractiveness were included as a control variable. Furthermore, as noted above, outcome favorability was used as a control variable in all analyses (cf. Truxillo & Bauer, 2011).

Following recommendations by McKinnon, Coxe, and Baraldi (2012), we first tested parts of our conceptual model separately to examine the individual influence of consistency and personableness perceptions before testing the full model. Regarding Research Question 1, we found that consistency perceptions had a significant positive indirect effect on organizational attractiveness through organizational competence perceptions when examining the influence of consistency perceptions individually (see Model 1 in Table 2)<sup>4</sup> because zero was not included in the confidence interval. Regarding Research Question 2, consistency perceptions did not have a significant indirect effect on organizational attractiveness through organizational benevolence

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<sup>4</sup> To avoid upwardly biased estimates due to cross-sectional data, path analyses in this study focused on follow-up organizational attractiveness (measured several weeks after the interview) as the outcome variable. However, all analyses were repeated with post-interview organizational attractiveness (measured directly after the interview) as the outcome variable and the pattern of results remained the same.

perceptions as the confidence interval included zero, and consistency perceptions had a positive instead of a negative indirect effect.

Next, we examined the influence of personableness perceptions individually (see Model 2 in Table 2). In contrast to Hypothesis 1, personableness perceptions did not have a significant indirect effect on organizational attractiveness through organizational benevolence perceptions as the confidence interval included zero. However, in line with Hypothesis 2, personableness perceptions had a significant indirect effect on organizational attractiveness through organizational competence perceptions because zero was not included in the confidence interval and personableness perceptions had the assumed positive indirect effect.

In addition, we tested the full path model with both consistency and personableness perceptions (Model 3, cf. Table 2) and compared the fit of a nested path model (a variation of Model 3) to examine the relative influence of consistency and personableness perceptions. Model 3 with freely estimated parameters for the paths from consistency and personableness perceptions to organizational competence, benevolence, and attractiveness yielded good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(4) = 4.81$ , CFI = 1.00, TLI = .97, RMSEA = .04 [90% CI: .00–.15,  $p = .46$ ], SRMR = .05. In contrast, the nested model that constrained the path coefficients from consistency and personableness perceptions to organizational competence, benevolence, and attractiveness to be equal fit the data less well,  $\chi^2(9) = 22.50$ , CFI = .91, TLI = .81, RMSEA = .11 [90% CI: .05–.17,  $p = .04$ ], SRMR = .09, and its fit was significantly worse than the fit of Model 3,  $\Delta\chi^2(5) = 17.69$ ,  $p < .01$ . Hence, consistency and personableness perceptions differed in their relative influence on organizational competence, benevolence, and attractiveness. In addition, the pattern of results of Model 3 were in line with those from Models 1 and 2 presented above (see Table 2) with the exception that consistency perceptions did not have a significant indirect effect on organizational

attractiveness when controlling for the influence of personableness perceptions whereas personableness perceptions had a significant indirect effect (through their influence on organizational competence) when controlling for the influence of consistency perceptions. Hence, when examining the influence of both predictors simultaneously, personableness perceptions were a more influential predictor of organizational attractiveness than consistency perceptions (see Figure 2).

## **Discussion**

### **Main Conclusions**

Considerable empirical evidence suggests that perceived standardization and individualization are major elements of applicants' interview experience (e.g., Chapman et al., 2005; Lievens & De Paepe, 2004). To better understand the underlying mechanisms behind the effects of standardization and individualization in the interview, we examined how perceived consistency and personableness affect applicants' perceptions of organizations' attractiveness. Specifically, we found that when applicants perceived higher levels of interview consistency or higher levels of personableness, they were more likely to perceive the organization as competent, which, in turn, made the organization more attractive. However, we found no support for the role of organizational benevolence perceptions as a mediator that went beyond the influence of organizational competence perceptions. Perhaps, for applicants, competence is a more important symbolic organizational attribute than benevolence because choosing a well-organized and efficient organization might enable them to perform well and set long-term career goals in that organization. This finding is also in line with the trust literature, which found that expectations of competence and reliability in personal relationships (i.e., cognition-based trust) are necessary precursors for expectations of care and concern to develop (affect-based trust, McAllister, 1995).

In addition, we found that when examining the influence of applicants' perceived consistency and personableness together on organizational attractiveness, personableness had an indirect effect on organizational attractiveness even when considering the influence of consistency. It makes sense that applicants have more information about how they are treated as an individual (e.g., personableness towards them) than on how other applicants are treated (e.g., consistency across applicants). Therefore, applicants may attach more importance to perceived personableness than to perceived consistency in interviews. In fact, our results suggest that applicants might see personableness as a trust-evoking and professional interview practice (cf. Klotz et al., 2013), thereby extrapolating these signals to the competence of the organization as a whole.

### **Implications for Theory**

Our study contributes to signaling theory in two ways. In prior research, signaling theory was used in an omnibus manner: As posited by Jones et al. (2014), in previous studies the underlying signaling mechanisms were either simply assumed or remained unspecified. Furthermore, one was left in the dark regarding the content of the signals. Conversely, the present study examined the inferences made regarding two specific signals (i.e., perceived interview consistency and personableness) and linked these signals to applicants' symbolic inferences about organizational attributes (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003) in terms of organizational competence and benevolence. Conceptually, our model sheds light on how inferences that applicants make may mediate effects of perceived interview consistency and personableness on organizational attractiveness.

As another theoretical contribution to signaling theory, this study is the first to examine whether different facets of a human resources (HR) practices such as employment interviews exert different signals. Prior research typically applied signaling theory to one specific HR

practice (e.g., employment interviews, job advertisements), even though that practice might have been composed of different features with differential signaling effects (see also Jones & Willness, 2013). Conversely, in the present study, we specified that different elements of applicants' interview experience (perceived consistency and personableness) might lead to different symbolic organizational attributes that are assumed by applicants. Of course, this also raises questions about the convergence of the signals emitted. As such, it was important to find that both components were interpreted as a signal of organizational competence, and that personableness perceptions had an indirect influence on organizational attractiveness through organizational competence when we examined the influence of consistency and personableness perceptions together.

### **Implications for Practice**

Signaling theory also has several relevant practical implications. Once organizations know which signals HR tools emit, they might proactively include cues in their recruitment communication to send those signals to applicants (Wilhelmy et al., 2017). As we found that interview features (particularly personableness) serve as signals to applicants about symbolic organizational attributes (particularly competence), organizations might design interview guides and interviewer training in a way that optimizes their signaling effects on symbolic organizational attributes and applicants' attraction to the organization.

Our finding that applicants' perceptions of personableness had an indirect effect on organizational attractiveness even when perceptions of consistency were considered suggests that interviewers should invest in some degree of personableness to leverage signals about the organization's competence and to maximize the effects of their recruitment efforts. For example, interviewers can nod, smile, and/or use a gentle voice when they address the applicant (Dipboye et al., 2012; Tullar, 1989). Moreover, we did not find evidence to support the belief that

consistency has negative effects on applicant perceptions and attraction (Campion et al., 1997; Latham & Finnegan, 1993). Thus, a key implication is that interview standardization – at least up to an intermediate degree of standardization – may not only be beneficial in terms of increasing reliability and validity of interviewer ratings (e.g., Huffcutt & Arthur, 1994; Huffcutt, Culbertson, & Weyhrauch, 2013; Huffcutt et al., 2014), but also in terms of organizational attractiveness.

In sum, to the degree that organizational policies and the existing legislation allow, we recommend using consistency and personableness for optimizing the recruitment effects of employment interviews. For example, to integrate *both* interview consistency and personableness in the same employment interview, standardized interview questions can be asked in a warm and friendly way. In addition, a multi-tiered approach might be used, in which standardized interview parts (for the purpose of selection) are combined with less restricted, more spontaneous interview parts (for the purpose of recruitment, see also Farago et al., 2013; Tsai & Huang, 2014).

### **Limitations**

Although the findings of this study are promising and provide valuable new insights into the interview process, the study is not without limitations. First, this study is mainly based on single-source survey data because all variables except outcome favorability (objective data provided by the organization) were measured via applicants' self-reports. Therefore, common method variance may have artificially inflated the relationships between the variables. However, as mentioned above, we applied surveys at three different points in time to create temporal separation of measurements and to reduce potential influences of common method variance.

Second, the data were collected within one single organization and setting (selection interviews for admission to a university program). In addition, our results come from a context of particular interviews, with a particular level of interview structure and a particular level of interviewer training. Although we chose an actual selection setting in which (a) we were able to

avoid several key confounds (e.g., influences of other selection procedures, interviewer idiosyncrasies), (b) there was competition between organizations with regard to applicants, (c) actual applicants with work experience were interviewed instead of a student sample, and (d) the levels of consistency and personableness allowed for adequate variance to occur in applicants' perceptions, future studies are needed to examine the generalizability of our results to other organizations, settings, and contexts.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This study might provide an impetus to investigate signaling effects of selection procedures such as employment interviews. In particular, we envision the following five key areas of future research. First, we welcome research that extends our signaling framework to different patterns of consistency and personableness. Specifically, an important question is whether the results of our study also apply to more extreme forms of consistency and personableness, or whether at some point consistency and personableness might have negative effects on recruitment outcomes in the form of an inverted U-shaped relationships. For example, a very casual atmosphere during recruitment could be experienced as unprofessional and reduce organizational attraction (cf. Klotz & da Motta Veiga, in press). In addition, it is not only important to understand how consistency across applicants may influence applicants' interview experience, but also how consistency *within* applicants could affect it. For example, past research indicates that treatment of applicants tends to vary within an interview (cf. Barrick, Swider, & Stewart, 2010; Wilhelmy et al., 2016), but the effects of this variation remain unknown.

Second, the present study took the first steps in explaining the "how" behind the effects of perceived interview standardization and individualization on applicants' attraction to organizations. However, it is also pivotal to consider *when* these effects occur. In other words, moderators of the effects of perceived interview standardization and individualization on

symbolic organizational attributes and recruitment outcomes should be examined. In terms of individual differences moderators, the person-organization fit literature (e.g., Slaughter & Greguras, 2009) suggests that some individuals (e.g., individuals high on agreeableness) are more susceptible to specific signals (consistency and personableness perceptions) than others. Future research is needed to disentangle the influence of interview features (e.g., actual levels of consistency and personableness) from applicants' preconceived notions about an interview's consistency and personableness.

Third, future research could assess feelings of trust created in the interview as trust may play a pivotal role in enhancing our understanding of how perceived organizational competence and benevolence influence recruitment outcomes. The classic framework of McAllister (1995) seems particularly promising because it differentiates two forms of interpersonal trust: cognition-based trust (i.e., trust grounded in beliefs about peer reliability and dependability) and affect-based trust (i.e., trust grounded in reciprocal interpersonal care and concern), which are in line with the dimensions of competence and benevolence.

Fourth, we believe that signaling theory might help bridge the gap between the recruitment and selection domains because it allows examining whether recruitment and selection emit the same signals to applicants (as posited by strategic HR management). Hence, future studies are needed that scrutinize the joint effects of signals emitted by HR tools along the different recruitment stages. Examples are media campaigns, recruitment ads, site visits, interviews, and other selection and recruitment procedures. To this end, qualitative research (see Pratt & Bonaccio, 2016) might be especially informative because it could evoke what kind of signals different practices emit and whether the signals of these different practices converge and spill-over.

Finally, future studies should consider a wider set of outcome variables. Whereas this study only examined organizational attractiveness, future studies might extend this line of research with other recruitment (applicant quantity and quality) and selection (validity) outcomes (Dipboye et al., 2012; Melchers, Ingold, Wilhelmy, & Kleinmann, 2015). This expansion would permit researchers to determine levels of interview consistency and personableness that maximize both recruitment and selection criteria. In addition, to prevent ceiling effects, it would be worthwhile to examine applicant samples with higher variability in their attraction to organizations, for example, applicants who do not have much choice on the job market because positions in their occupation are rare.

In sum, we encourage scholars to further incorporate a signaling framework into selection and recruitment research to better understand the intricacies of interactions between applicants and organizations, particularly applicants' perceptions and interpretations of these interactions. Future research should further illuminate how, why, and when variations in perceptions of selection practices enhance recruitment and selection outcomes.

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Table 1

*Means, Standard Deviations, Alpha Reliabilities, and Intercorrelations Between Study Variables*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<b>Control variables</b>										
1. Outcome favorability (provided by university)	0.54	0.50	(-)							
2. Baseline organizational attractiveness (Time 1)	4.77	0.36	.08	(.72)						
<b>Characteristics of the interview experience (Time 2)</b>										
3. Consistency perceptions	4.25	0.63	.01	.04	(.74)					
4. Personableness perceptions	3.91	0.61	.22**	.06	.15	(.74)				
<b>Symbolic organizational attributes (Time 2)</b>										
5. Organizational competence perceptions	4.46	0.49	.23**	.23**	.15*	.42**	(.74)			
6. Organizational benevolence perceptions	4.04	0.60	.16*	.26**	.17*	.45**	.59**	(.86)		
<b>Short-term recruitment outcome (Time 2)</b>										
7. Post-interview organizational attractiveness	4.71	0.45	.21**	.53**	.21**	.28**	.49**	.38**	(.75)	
<b>Long-term recruitment outcome (Time 3)</b>										
8. Follow-up organizational attractiveness	4.65	0.54	.32**	.49**	.13	.19*	.43**	.36**	.63**	(.87)

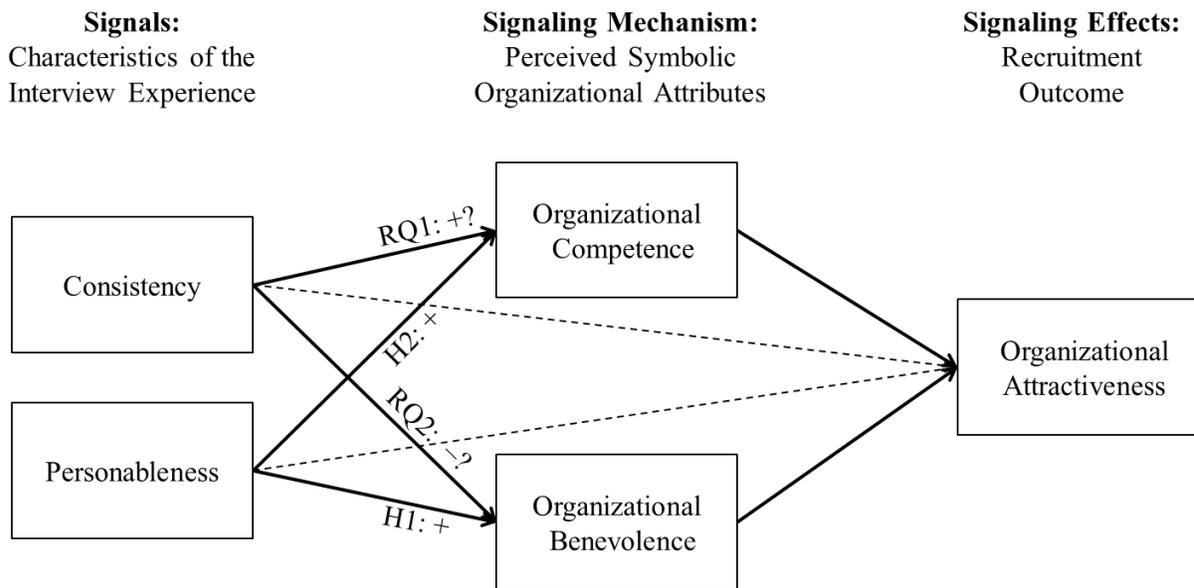
*Note.* Due to missing data, *N* for correlations ranged from 127 to 173. Internal consistency reliability estimates appear in parentheses on the diagonal. Outcome favorability was coded 0 = no offer; 1 = offer. All other variables were measured on a 1-5 Likert-type scale. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

Table 2

*Path Coefficients and Indirect Effects for Mediators and Outcome Variables for Tested Models*

Dependent variables and predictors	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
<b>Organizational competence</b>						
Consistency	.13 <sup>†</sup>	.07	–	–	.07	.07
Personableness	–	–	.31**	.07	.29**	.08
Outcome favorability	.17 <sup>†</sup>	.09	.12	.08	.11	.08
Baseline org. attractiveness	.25	.16	.23	.15	.23	.15
R <sup>2</sup>	.10		.22		.21	
<b>Organizational benevolence</b>						
Consistency	.19*	.08	–	–	.12	.08
Personableness	–	–	.39**	.10	.36**	.10
Outcome favorability	.12	.11	.05	.11	.05	.11
Baseline org. attractiveness	.49**	.17	.46**	.17	.46**	.16
R <sup>2</sup>	.13		.23		.22	
<b>Follow-up organizational attractiveness</b>						
Consistency	.03	.06	–	–	.03	.06
Personableness	–	–	-.02	.08	-.02	.08
Org. competence	.31**	.10	.32**	.10	.31**	.10
Org. benevolence	.05	.07	.06	.08	.05	.07
Outcome favorability	.24*	.09	.24*	.09	.24*	.09
Baseline org. attractiveness	.61**	.19	.61**	.19	.61**	.19
R <sup>2</sup>	.40		.40		.39	
<b>Indirect effects</b>						
	Estimate	BC 95% CI	Estimate	BC 95% CI	Estimate	BC 95% CI
Consistency → Org. competence → Follow-up org. attractiveness	.04	.003; .117	–	–	.02	-.012; .090
Consistency → Org. benevolence → Follow-up org. attractiveness	.01	-.012; .047	–	–	.01	-.007; .045
Personableness → Org. benevolence → Follow-up org. attractiveness	–	–	.02	-.039; .082	.02	-.034; .076
Personableness → Org. competence → Follow-up org. attractiveness	–	–	.10	.038; .207	.09	.036; .192

*Note:*  $N = 127$ . Unstandardized estimates and standard errors (*SEs*) are presented. Model 1 contains consistency perceptions as the predictor. Model 2 contains personableness perceptions as the predictor. Model 3 contains both consistency and personableness perceptions as predictors. In all models, applicants' baseline perceptions of organizational attractiveness and outcome favorability were included as control variables for the mediators and outcome. Models 1 and 2 were saturated models. Model fit of Model 3 (full model):  $\chi^2(4) = 4.81$ , CFI = 1.00, TLI = .97, RMSEA = .04 [90% CI: .00–.15,  $p = .46$ ], SRMR = .05. Org. = organizational; BC = bias corrected; 5,000 bootstrap samples. \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ ,  $p < .10$ ; (two-tailed).



*Figure 1.* Proposed relationships between perceived consistency and personableness (signals) and organizational attractiveness several weeks after the interview, as mediated by perceived symbolic organizational attributes. Solid lines represent indirect-effects, dashed lines represent direct effects. Baseline values of organizational attractiveness (i.e., measured before the interview) and outcome favorability (whether or not applicants received an offer from the organization) were included as control variables.

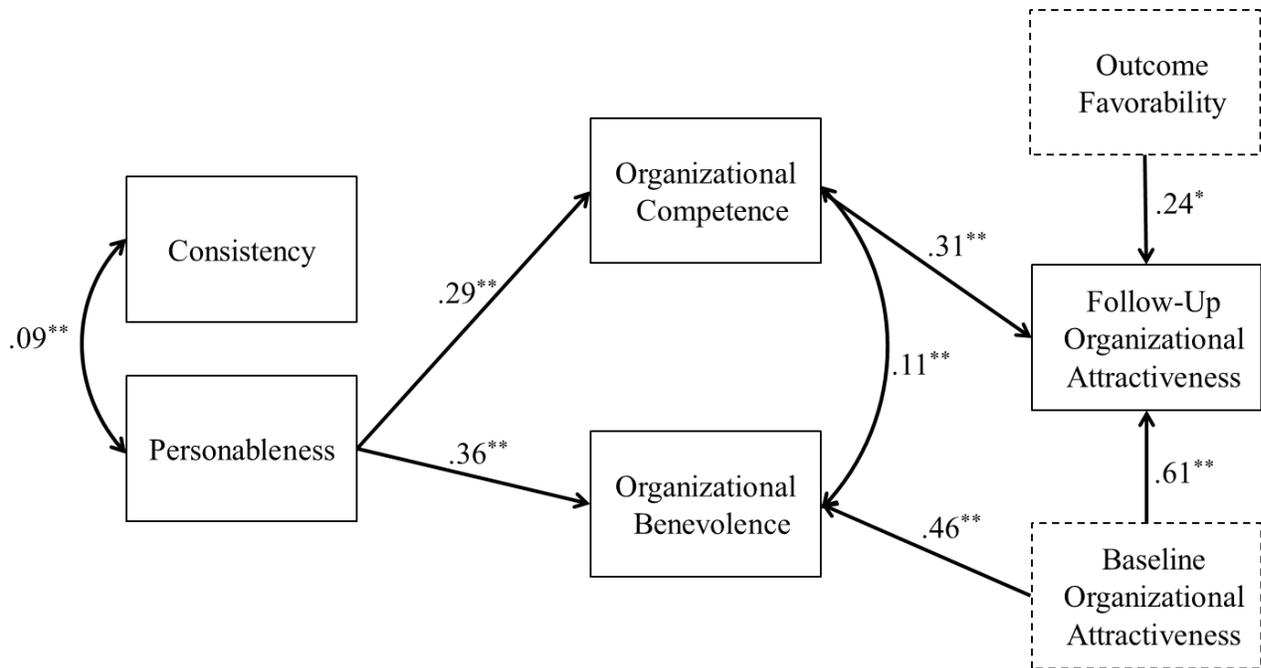


Figure 2. Unstandardized path coefficients for the full model (Model 3). Only significant paths are shown. Dashed boxes indicate control variables. Applicants' baseline perceptions of organizational attractiveness and outcome favorability were included as control variables for the mediators and outcome. All path coefficients are presented in Table 2.  $^*p < .05$ ;  $^{**}p < .01$  (two-tailed).

## Appendix A

**Sample questions from the interview guide sorted by topical areas**

## 1. Interest in psychology

*How would you explain what psychology actually is to someone who is not familiar with psychology?*

## 2. Realistic expectations regarding content and later occupation

*How do you envision your future professional occupation?*

## 3. Commitment

*Was there a period in your life in which you were especially burdened (in the sense of having a lot to do or having to deal with many things at the same time)? How did you deal with this challenge?*

## 4. Professional attitude

*How do you define yourself (your role) as a psychologist in problem solving?*

## 5. Social skills

*How would others (e.g., good friends, peers, colleagues) describe you? Is there a difference between your own description and that of others? If so, how do you explain this difference?*

## 6. Interest in interdisciplinary collaboration

*Can you think of specific fields of work where an interdisciplinary team would be ideal?*

## Appendix B

## Survey Items

Original Item	Item Source	Adapted Item as Used in this Study
<b>Organizational attractiveness</b>		
For me, this company would be a good place to work.	All items from Highhouse et al. (2003)	This university would be a good place for me to study.
This company is attractive to me as a place for employment.		This university is attractive to me as a place to study.
A job at this company is very appealing to me.		Studying at this university is very appealing to me.
I would not be interested in this company except as a last resort. (reverse-worded item)		I would not be interested in this university except as a last resort.
<b>Interview consistency perceptions</b>		
The test was administered to all applicants in the same way.	All items from Bauer et al. (2001)	I had the impression that the interview was administered to all applicants in the same way.
There were no differences in the way the test was administered to different applicants.		I believe there were no differences in the way the interview was conducted with different applicants.
Test administrators made no distinction in how they treated applicants.		I had the impression that interviewers made no distinction in how they treated applicants.
<b>Interview personableness perceptions</b>		
Interested in me	Liden & Parsons (1986)	The interviewers were interested in me as a person.
Trustworthy	Harris & Fink (1987)	The interviewers behaved in a trustworthy manner.
Empathetic	Carless & Imber (2007)	The interviewers were empathetic towards me.
	Self-developed	The interviewers addressed me as an individual.
<b>Organizational competence perceptions</b>		
Please indicate to what extent the personality traits describe [name of brand]:	All items from Aaker (1997)	Please indicate to what degree the following trait adjectives describe the university you are applying to:
Reliable		Reliable
Secure		Secure
Efficient		Efficient
<b>Organizational benevolence perceptions</b>		
Please indicate to what extent you agree that each of the following trait adjectives describe the organization:	All items from Slaughter et al. (2004)	Please indicate to what degree the following trait adjectives describe the university you are applying to:
Pleasant		Pleasant
Personal		Personal
Helpful		Helpful
Cooperative		Cooperative
Friendly		Friendly