

THESIS SUMMARY

Kincső Szabó

**Job preferences among young career entrants:
Application intentions and evaluations of gender-related signals
in job advertisements**

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I. Research background and justification of the topic

The process of job seeking encompasses much more than submitting a résumé or showing up for an interview. Entering the labour market marks a milestone for job-seeking individuals who have freshly graduated from high school, lack professional experience in the workforce, and have limited literacy in career orientation. They are the primary target of human resources, which aim to attract and retain the best fits for organisations. One way to achieve this is through communication in job advertisements, which allows the advertiser to convey organisational messages to potential applicants, for example, through work values, the positioning of the organisation, or work-related requirements (Walker and Hinojosa, 2013). By doing so, recruiters can signal information through non-disclosed, gender-related configurations, which will be implicitly (not consciously) perceived by potential candidates (Kim and Angnakoon, 2016).

Figure 1. Integrative approach to career communication (*own construct*)

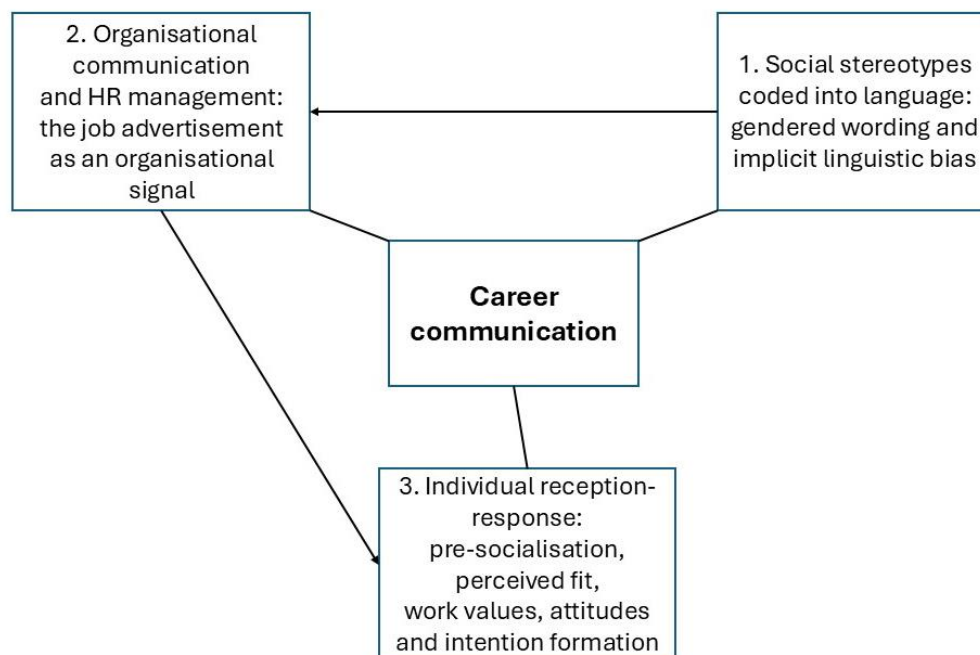


Figure 1 showcases an interrelated logic between the three levels of the research topic: the first level serves as the social-discursive context of the research topic, placing linguistic gender

stereotypes in the centre as a contemporary societal issue in the lives of career entrants. The second level marks the organisational context, namely, how job advertisements, developed by human resource management, can sustain gender inequality through words, which are decoded by job-seeking university students. The third level signifies the individual reception and response of career entrants, influenced by their pre-socialisation in career, perceived organisational fit, preference for work values, attitudes and job application intention. A full understanding of all three levels completes the triadic conceptual framework of the research topic.

Although the dissertation is grounded in a multidisciplinary framework, including sociopsychological, gender linguistic, organisational, and human resource approaches, the core of the topic is defined by its communication science foundation, which constitutes a substantial point of departure for the research. A job advertisement can serve as the first point of contact between the recruiter and the job seeker, through which the advertiser can implicitly communicate messages to the recipient about organisational culture, work values, or employer expectations. “(...) organisations must answer questions about what message to communicate and how to communicate it” (Walker and Hinojosa, 2013, p. 269). Consequently, message transmission does not occur solely through personal communication but also through the job advertisement itself as an essential recruitment tool.

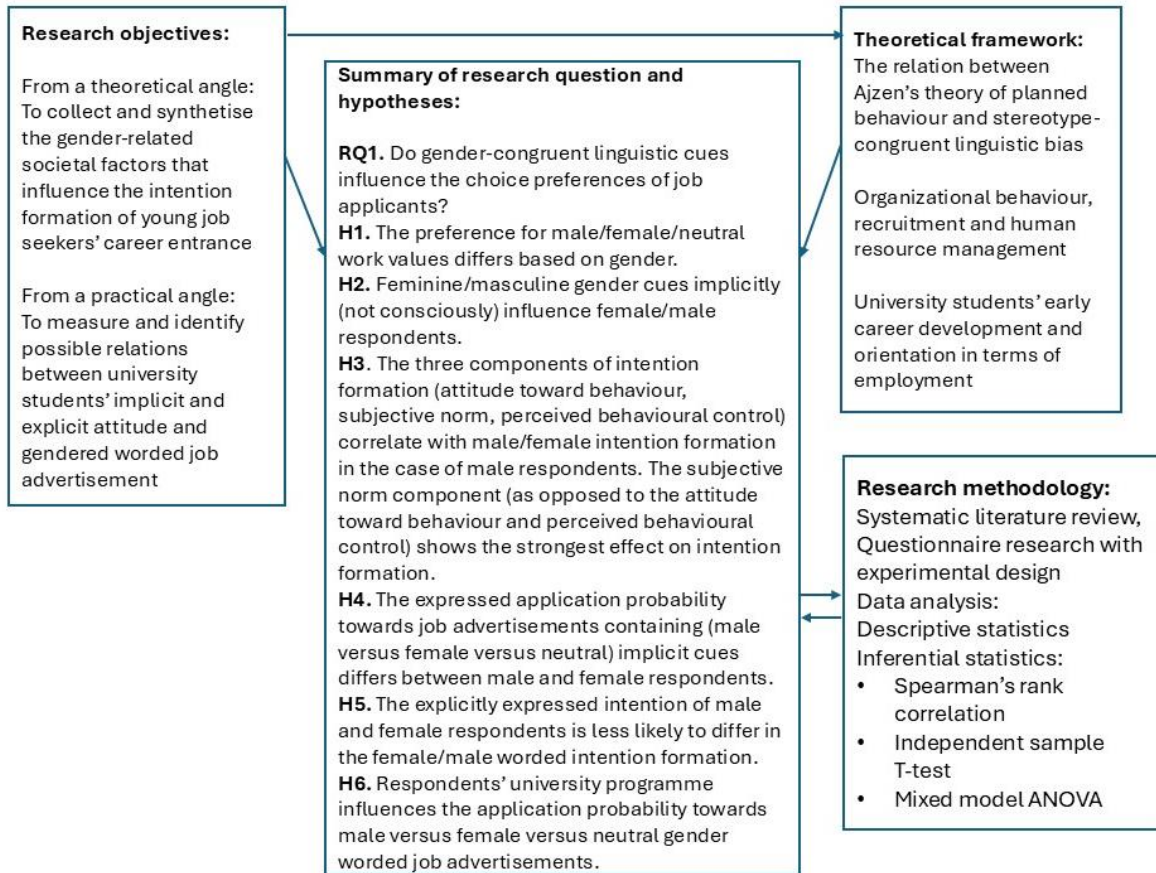
The Hungarian language is a grammatically gender-neutral language (Vasvári, 2014) – making no explicit reference to either femininity or masculinity. However, a growing body of research (e.g., Aluko et al., 2022; Baxter et al., 2022; Carpio and Fujiwara, 2023; Castilla and Rho, 2023; Denier et al., 2022; Hentschel et al., 2020; Lindqvist et al., 2019, Wille and Derous, 2018) has concluded that the descriptive words embedded in job advertisements are capable of eliciting implicit bias for male and female perceivers at the lexical level. “To attract the most promising graduates, it is important to know what motivates them to choose a particular position and why” (Chang and Tanford, 2018, p. 215). Applicants’ job application intentions are strongly influenced by job pursuit intentions (JPI), which encompass various organisational recruitment efforts (Ajzen, 1991; Chang and Tanford, 2018). Therefore, assessing the strongest source of a career entrant’s application intention (based on the three components determined by the theory of planned behaviour; Ajzen, 1991) helps uncover how job-seeking university students reflect on gender-related normative messages and how they relate to work in their education-to-work transition phase.

The central question of the dissertation is whether non-disclosed gender-related signal configurations implicitly coded into Hungarian-language job advertisements can influence job choice preference and application intention of young career entrants. Furthermore, whether stereotype-congruent and stereotype-incongruent wording results in increased intention formation toward a job application. The empirical research of the thesis focuses on solving this “puzzle”. Therefore, the aim is to map the work-related perceptions, career orientations, identity-shaping factors, and the principal components of both the explicit and implicit attitudes of young Hungarian university students at the outset of their professional careers.

Gender stereotypes may appear in job advertisements as hidden linguistic configurations that can distort – or even constrain – how men and women process information and how equivalently they decode the content presented. As a result, the symmetrical communication flow between employer and prospective employee is disrupted, potentially diminishing the perceived attractiveness of the position. Drawing on the market signalling theory (Spence, 1973), men and women interpret non-explicit signal configurations differently, since the lexical items used in job advertisements may carry masculine, feminine, or neutral connotations. These gender-marked signal configurations influence job seekers’ attitudes and their perceived fit (Vogel et al., 2016): women tend to apply for more stereotypically feminine (communal) positions, whereas men are more attracted to stereotypically masculine (agentic) roles (Formanowicz & Hansen, 2022).

The application intentions of the students participating in the study are conceptualised through Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behaviour (1991, 2006), which posits that intention formation consists of three core components (attitude toward the behaviour, social norm, perceived behavioural control). As outlined in the theoretical overview, numerous factors may shape an individual’s decision to apply for a job advertisement, including work socialisation, work values, career orientation, sociocultural characteristics, the grammatical structure of the Hungarian language, and stereotype congruence. The summary of my dissertation’s research model is outlined in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The research model of the dissertation (*own construct*)



When it comes to determining what information is considered trustworthy in making job choices, recruitment researchers rely on Spence's signalling theory (1973). According to Spence (1973), 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 to. 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., 2025; Ganesan et al., 2018; Zárádné Vámosi and Kovács, 2022). Based on the outlined premises, the following research question was formulated:

RQ: *Do gender-congruent linguistic cues influence the choice preferences of job applicants?*

Work values may also differ based on culture and gender. Pillók and Székely (2023) identified the challenges that Hungarian young university students (typically Generation Z) face in Hungary.

They found that the uncertainty of the future and financial instability are considered significantly bigger issues for them than family planning or housing. Besides culture-specific values, gender may also determine the appreciation of certain values. In their study, Waterwall et al. (2023) concluded that men and women tend to differ in that male applicants are more likely to prefer extrinsic job characteristics, while female applicants are more in favour of intrinsic job characteristics. The analysis of work values in an organisational setting is viewed to be an indispensable component of attitude research (Gorgievski et al., 2018); moreover, the evaluation and dedicated importance of work values may differ across men and women (Parry and Urwin, 2011). In line with these empirical results, I expect the following associations to emerge:

H1a. *The preference for male work values differs based on gender.*

H1b. *The preference for female work values differs based on gender.*

H1c. *The preference for neutral work values differs based on gender.*

Based on Greenwald (2002), implicit social cognition is an automatic, unconscious process that underlies social behaviour. Due to the untrustworthiness of self-report, social cognition researchers (fc., Fazio et al., 1986; Payne and Gawronski, 2010) proposed that prior experiences can influence individuals' responses – even when they are unable to consciously articulate their thoughts. Within this framework, the distinction between explicit and implicit processes is seen as a reflection of conscious versus unconscious mental content. Specifically, self-reports are understood to capture explicit, consciously accessible attitudes, whereas methods (e.g., IAT) that focus on automatic, not conscious perceptions are designed to tap into implicit, unconscious processes (also referred to as inner attitudes) (Chaiken and Bargh, 1993; Greenwald and Banaji, 1995). Although the dissertation does not measure standard implicit attitudes (that would be studied by, for example, the Implicit Association Test), it focuses on evaluations under non-disclosed experimental framing. Consistent with this theoretical evidence, I propose the following associations:

H2a: *Feminine gender cues implicitly (not consciously) influence female respondents.*

H2b: *Masculine gender cues implicitly (not consciously) influence male respondents.*

The theory of planned behaviour, introduced by Ajzen Icek (1991), posits that behavioural intention is what determines human behaviour. According to the theory, intention comprises three

basic components: attitude towards the behaviour (the thoughts and feelings towards the given object/phenomenon), subjective norm (expectations of others), and perceived behavioural control (the perceived capability of the individual). Each component has a direct effect on intention formation (Ajzen and Dasgupta, 2015), yet due to gender stereotypes, societal expectations also play an important role in shaping an individual's intentions, which is in line with TPB's social norm component (Camussi and Leccardi, 2015; Hugenberg and Sacco, 2008; Young et al., 2025). Therefore, based on these arguments, the following associations are expected:

H3a. *The three components of intention formation (attitude toward behaviour, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control) correlate with male intention formation in the case of male respondents.*

The subjective norm component (as opposed to the attitude toward behaviour and perceived behavioural control) shows the strongest effect on intention formation.

H3b. *The three components of intention formation (attitude toward behaviour, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control) correlate with female intention formation in the case of female respondents.*

The subjective norm component (as opposed to the attitude toward behaviour and perceived behavioural control) shows the strongest effect on intention formation.

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 and Derous, 2018). In fact, Van Lange et al. (2012) suggest that the gender roles and beliefs individuals have been socialised into determine the way we speak our language. 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 *agentive wording*. On the other hand, female-directed words that include emotional, sensitive, kind, or compassionate are called *communal wording*. A wide array of contemporary research agrees on the fact that implicit (not conscious, automatic) gender cues influence male and female recipients' perception and evaluation of job advertising (e.g., Aluko et al., 2022; Baxter et al., 2022; Carpio and Fujiwara, 2023; Castilla and Rho, 2023; Denier et al., 2022; Hentschel et al., 2020; Hodel et al., 2017; Kuhn et al., 2020; Lindqvist et al., 2019; Wille and Derous, 2018), which

may result in non-explicit linguistic bias towards the job seeking individual (Beukeboom and Burgers, 2017). In line with these arguments and empirical findings, I expect the following associations:

H4: *The expressed application probability towards job advertisements containing (male versus female versus neutral) implicit cues differs between male and female respondents.*

Although gender wording in job advertisements may differ by implementing communal (=female) versus agentic (=male) characteristics, in contrast to that, gender-neutral language (which makes no explicit reference to either masculinity or femininity) aims to avoid discriminatory acts that would otherwise lead to behavioural bias (Dickerson and Taylor, 2000) and workplace segregation (Heilman, 2012). With the use of gender-neutral language, the following hypotheses are drawn:

H5a. *The explicitly expressed intention of male and female respondents is less likely to differ in the female worded intention formation.*

H5b. *The explicitly expressed intention of male and female respondents is less likely to differ in the male worded intention formation.*

The socialisation process of an individual is influenced by several factors: family, friends, school peers, and coworkers all play a crucial role in the pre-entry socialisation of a young job seeker. According to Weidman (1989), the higher education environment serves as a context of anticipatory socialisation involving making choices of activities after completing school and attaining desirable goals in their career. Research suggests (Delaney and Devereux, 2025; Olmos-Gómez, 2021) that there is a significant difference between men and women in the study fields they choose, even if all fields belong to the social sciences. Generally, women are more likely to enter fields like communication and media science and sociology, whereas men are more likely to enter public governance or management areas (Macarie and Moldovan, 2015; Powers and Myers, 2017). Based on these findings, I propose the following hypothesis:

H6. *Respondents' study programme influences the application probability towards male versus female versus neutral gender worded job advertisements.*

II. Methodology

The dissertation's methodology relies on two primary analyses: a systematic literature review and an online questionnaire. First, to identify the methodological (e.g., measurement tools) and theoretical (e.g., research framings and definitions of gendered wording) foundations of the research topic, a systematic literature review was conducted as a preliminary study of the dissertation's main assessment. The review aimed to describe, measure, and synthesise this empirical research, focusing on the gender biases transmitted through the descriptive words in job advertising and their effects on male and female perception. Overall, 1054 articles were scanned (based on title and abstract), which was followed by the download of 24 relevant (and available) papers that met the specified inclusion/exclusion criteria: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods were found in the examined papers.

The main methodological base of the dissertation was an online, anonymous, self-completion questionnaire. In the Qualtrics-based questionnaire I used several items to measure university students' overall attitude: the work values they feel important, their general knowledge about both the Hungarian and international gender gap, their perception about the Hungarian pay gap, their thoughts on male-female tokenism and leadership, their act in different (male-congruent and female-congruent) occupations, their potential act in communal occupations vs. agentic occupations, their potential act in an imaginary job application situation (this last item involves several other items of intention formation). The dissertation's research design differs from classical reaction-time-based implicit measures (e.g., the IAT), as the gender coding of the stimuli is not disclosed to participants. Instead, in my research, indirectly assessed attitudes and responses to non-disclosed gender-related signal configurations have been examined, following Ajzen's (1991, 2006) Theory of Planned Behaviour Questionnaire (TpBQ). Table 2 summarises all the phases that comprise the procedure of the research.

	Research task	Research objectives	Date (interval)
I. Phase	Methodological pre-phase	Building on the multidisciplinary nature of the thesis, the aim was to carry out discussions with the experts/researchers of the interconnected fields and gain more	January – May 2023

		knowledge on the relevance of the topic.	
II. Phase	The creation of job advertisements	The three Hungarian job advertisements served as one of the main backbones of the research, as attitude and intention formation have been tested in relation to job advertising.	September 2023
III. Phase	Job advertisement testing	To minimise potential errors, misinterpretations, and any kind of linguistic distortions, I conducted experiment-like sessions, such as one-on-one conversations with university students, asking them to evaluate and comment on the advertisements I had created.	October – November 2023
IV. Phase	The creation of the research questionnaire	The research questionnaire aimed to apply the TPB framework and examine career-entering Hungarian university students' job application intention and perceived attitudes.	February – August 2024
V. Phase	Pilot test	To receive first-hand opinions and reflections from university students, I conducted a pilot test with 15 students from my class. Following the response, the students formulated constructive criticism on the linguistic style, interpretability, coherence, and outlook of the questionnaire.	October 2024
VI. Phase	Sampling	In the sampling phase, I gathered all higher education institutions from Budapest that have an active social science bachelor's study programme. I sought to work with the largest possible sample and to ensure that the proportion of respondents remained proportionate to the student populations of the respective universities.	October – November 2024
VII. Phase	Data collection	Among the objectives of the data-collection phase was to reach each university group in person, present the research topic,	January – May 2025

		communicate the relevance of the field, and provide participants with the opportunity to ask questions following completion of the survey.	
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Table 1. The summary of the research phases (*own construct*)

The questionnaire has been developed over six months with the help of (1) a statistical expert, (2) a sociologist, (3) a communication researcher, (4) two psychologists, and (5) two cognitive linguists. All these specialists assisted me with their own expertise to translate the three word inventories (namely Baxter et al., 2022; Denier et al., 2022; Gaucher et al., 2011) that were adopted from English sources into Hungarian. Based on the word inventories, three Hungarian job advertisements have been created containing distinct gender-related signal configurations. The translation of the word inventories into the Hungarian language was ensured by two cognitive linguists, two psychologists, and a communication researcher. Although all job advertisements start with the same job description (given the fact that the project assistant position is the same in all three), the following three main parts (*role description*, *psychological cues*, *work-family characteristics* based on Denier et al. 2021) differ in terms of male, female, and neutral signal configurations, respectively.

For the sake of gathering valuable, trustworthy responses, I organised and personally visited 17 university groups at 7 different Hungarian universities. Overall, 8 institutions responded, and 7 decided to accept my visiting request. All universities are based in Budapest and are the following: Corvinus University of Budapest, Budapest University of Technology and Economics, Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, Ludovika University of Public Service, Budapest Business University, Milton Friedman University.

Overall, 442 responses have been collected from the 17 university groups. After exporting the data into an Excel file, I merged the gathered data from the 7 universities and reviewed each question from each respondent. Following the execution of data cleansing, a total of 435 answers could be examined. The gender distribution of the sample is as follows: 321 females (73.79%) and 114 males (26.21%). The average age is 21,36 (ages ranged between 19 and 25). First-, second- and third-year students were all involved in the research.

For data analysis, the online software JASP (<https://jasp-stats.org/>) was used. JASP is a web-based, user-friendly online data analysis software that can run various analyses in quantitative methodology. In my dissertation, three types of inferential statistics were applied to the collected data: independent sample t-test, mixed-design ANOVA (also called MANOVA), and Spearman's rank correlation test.

III. The scientific findings of the dissertation

As the thesis has been built on a systematic literature review (offering a comprehensive summary of the implemented methods of my research field), a research questionnaire (serving as the main source of data collection), and, overall, twelve hypotheses and a research question, prominent findings have been yielded from the data analysis. The novelties of the thesis can be presented as follows:

- 1. Identification of differences between implicit and explicit attitude formation:** As Figures 12 and 13 showcase, respondents' attitude formation differs in whether they perceived and evaluated an explicit (conscious, self-reported) or implicit (not conscious, automatic) verbal signal. Men and women exhibit opposing attitudes in terms of explicit (conscious) and implicit (not conscious) perception of the presented cues. Male respondents' directly assessed evaluation is fuelled by stereotype-congruence, preferring masculine wording, while their implicit attitude aligns with stereotype-incongruence, preferring both female and neutral wordings in job advertising. Female respondents reported just the opposite of male attitude formation: female respondents' directly assessed evaluation is grounded in stereotype-incongruence, showing an increased probability of choosing male-typed attributes, but when exposed to non-disclosed signals, women tend to prefer more feminine and neutral cues in job advertising. Overall, explicit and implicit attitude formation significantly differ between male and female respondents.
- 2. Identification of differences between male and female intention formation:** Behavioural intention formation is composed of three main pillars: attitude toward the behaviour, social norm, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1999, 2006). Respondents evaluated statements that were formulated according to these three components. On one hand, female intention formation yielded the strongest statistical correlation with perceived behavioural control, which indicates the capability of the

individual. This result positively highlights female self-efficacy, perceiving themselves as capable of applying to a given job advertisement (which is the antecedent of actually performing a specific job). On the other hand, male intention formation resulted in the strongest correlation with the social norm component, that is, the perceived social pressure from members of the individual's environment. Amongst others, the finding can be primarily explained by the male-specific status syndrome, increased level of male stress, and social expectations imposed on men.

3. **Organisational behaviour and identity formation:** An identical implicit preference emerges across respondents. Both male and female university students would apply to the job advertisement with the neutral wording, with the highest probability percentage (Male=60.50%, Female=70%). Approaching the result from the role congruity perspective, young career entrants are more likely to perceive their gender as a background identity and foreground their worker identity, which they unconsciously associate with a neutral description (versus male and female stereotypical descriptions). This logic can be pivotal for human resource specialists in talent management.
4. **Hungarian language as the catalyst of gender stereotypes:** The linguistic basis of the dissertation's research is served by the three main sources: the word inventories of Gaucher et al. (2011) and Denier et al. (2022), and the gendered wording conceptualisation of Baxter et al. (2022). My research findings demonstrate that gendered wording (communal vs agentic words, intrinsic vs extrinsic traits) does influence male and female perception through job advertising, which thus creates bias for job seekers in the transmitted language. As H2, H4, and H5 indicate, words that hold reference to either femininity, masculinity or neutrality will, in fact, influence how the recipient evaluates his or her "fitting" job choice.
5. **The shift of women towards masculine orientation:** Gender discrimination and segregation at work have long been issues in organisational scenarios. A shifting tendency can be observed as female university students show a strong preference, both implicitly (H4) and explicitly (H5), towards masculine stereotypical attributes. More specifically, female respondents were more likely to positively evaluate extrinsic work values (stereotypical to men) and explicit intention formation containing masculine stereotype-congruent words (namely, confidence and team-management) than those with feminine stereotype-congruent words (typical to women).

6. Development of a novel methodological approach in implicit attitude measurement:

So far, the research questionnaire developed to measure behavioural intention (namely, Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour questionnaire, 2006) has been less implemented in organisational contexts. Therefore, one research scope was to test the questionnaire's applicability and whether it is feasible to measure intention formation towards job advertising, especially those that contain three distinct variables (female, male, and neutral wordings). The study explored the applicability of TPB-based measures to job-application intention in a recruitment-communication context.

As labour markets become more competitive and organisations strive to attract diverse talent, the subtle linguistic cues embedded in job advertisements have gained strategic importance. Within the examined sample, the dissertation asserts that gendered wording is not merely a stylistic choice but rather a psychological stimulus that shapes perception, attitude, and ultimately behavioural intention. The relevance of this topic emerges from several interconnected theoretical, methodological, and practical considerations, which have also been one of the main objectives of the thesis.

The findings reveal a striking divergence between directly and indirectly assessed evaluations and intention formation among male and female respondents. This distinction is crucial because recruitment research has historically relied heavily on explicit, self-reported measures, often overlooking the automatic, implicit processes that shape job seekers' perceptions and attitudes. By demonstrating this divergence, the thesis may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how job seekers interpret gendered signalling cues and how human resource management should consider more conscious signalling in their job advertising.

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V. List of own publications related to the topic

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