

Employer brand image and job application intention under digital discrimination expectations: A gender-moderated conceptual model

Dijital ayrımcılık beklentileri altında işveren marka imajı ve işe başvuru niyeti: Cinsiyetin düzenleyici etkisiyle kavramsal bir model

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Abstract

Digital recruitment increasingly relies on algorithmic screening and digital-footprint review, raising applicant concerns about biased evaluation. Drawing on signaling theory and on work in social identity threat, this conceptual paper examines the relationship between employer brand image and job application intention. It focuses on conditions of anticipated digital discrimination. Digital discrimination expectation refers to applicants' anticipation that an organization's algorithmic screening and digital footprint practices will disadvantage them based on a protected characteristic. We propose that this expectation weakens the positive relationship between employer brand image and job application intention. Employer brand communication is produced by the employer, and applicants who expect an unfair process have reason to discount it. We further propose that this weakening is more pronounced for female applicants, reflecting differential exposure to discrimination rather than an inherent gender trait. The study contributes to employer branding and recruitment literature. It offers new theoretical insight into how job seekers decide within technology-driven and potentially inequitable hiring systems. It also outlines directions for future empirical validation.

Keywords: Digital Recruitment, Employer Brand Image, Gender, Discrimination

JEL Codes: M31, M51, J71

Öz

Dijital işe alım süreçleri giderek daha fazla algoritmik ön eleme ve dijital ayak izi incelemesine dayanmakta, bu da adaylarda yanlış değerlendirilme kaygısı yaratmaktadır. Bu kavramsal çalışma, işaretleme kuramı ve sosyal kimlik tehdidi yazınından yararlanarak işveren marka imajı ile işe başvurma niyeti arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemektedir. Çalışmanın odağında, adayların dijital ayrımcılık beklediği koşullar yer almaktadır. Dijital ayrımcılık beklentisi, adayın bir örgütün algoritmik ön eleme ve dijital ayak izi uygulamalarının kendisini korunan bir özelliği nedeniyle dezavantajlı duruma düşüreceğine yönelik öngörüsünü ifade etmektedir. Çalışmada bu beklentinin, işveren marka imajı ile işe başvurma niyeti arasındaki olumlu ilişkiyi zayıflatığı öne sürülmektedir. İşveren markasına ilişkin iletişimi üreten taraf işverenin kendisidir. Sürecin adil işlemeyeceğini düşünen adayların bu iletişime daha az ağırlık vermesi beklenebilir. Ayrıca bu zayıflatıcı etkinin kadın adaylarda daha belirgin olduğu ileri sürülmektedir. Bu durum, cinsiyete içkin bir özellikten değil, ayrımcılığa maruz kalma düzeyindeki farklılıktan kaynaklanmaktadır. Çalışma, işveren markası ve işe alım yazınına katkı sunmaktadır. Teknoloji odaklı ve eşitsizlik üretme potansiyeli taşıyan işe alım sistemlerinde adayların karar süreçlerine ilişkin yeni kuramsal içgörüler ortaya koymakta ve gelecekteki ampirik doğrulama çalışmaları için yönler belirlemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dijital İşe Alım, İşveren Marka İmajı, Cinsiyet, Ayrımcılık

JEL Kodları: M31, M51, J71

Introduction

Digitalization has changed how organizations operate, interact with stakeholders, and create value (Loebbecke & Picot, 2015; Gilch & Sieweke, 2021). It has also opened new business models to them (Hänninen et al., 2017). Recruitment is one of the domains it has changed most. Digital platforms now shape how job seekers see and approach potential employers. A growing body of research highlights the role of organizational websites and social media platforms in influencing job application behavior (Baum & Kabst, 2014; Nikolaou, 2014). Companies build and spread their employer brand image mainly through online channels. That image matters for attracting and keeping talent in competitive labor markets. To appeal to top talent, companies strategically manage their brand through controlled content such as official advertisements, career pages, and corporate diversity statements. However, the digital environment is not solely defined by organizational communication. Information about companies is also spread through user-generated content, online reviews, and peer discussions on platforms such as LinkedIn, YouTube, and Instagram. These alternative sources can carry both positive and negative signals, often beyond the company's control.

Job application intention is the first behavioral gate in the recruitment process, so problems at this stage carry forward and compound at upcoming stages. Ostrom et al. (2024) found exactly this pattern across two studies. Algorithm-based evaluation lowered fairness perceptions, feedback acceptance, organizational attraction, and job acceptance intentions. Lavanchy et al. (2023) report the same across four studies. Applicants judge algorithm-driven recruitment as less procedurally fair than human-driven recruitment. This pattern changes what applicants can observe and infer about an organization's fairness. Gender also shapes how applicants respond to algorithmic recruitment. Ip (2025) found that awareness of gender bias in hiring algorithms lowers women's intention to apply. This held even among highly qualified candidates, and the size of the effect varied with the type of bias described. These findings support treating gender as a potential moderator rather than merely a control variable.

Given that applicants cannot fully verify an organization's fairness on their own, employer brand image becomes one of the strongest signals for applicants. Employer branding efforts compete with other information about the same organization. Inconsistent or critical third-party content shapes how job seekers perceive a company, and signaling theory calls this noise (Connelly et al., 2011). Coca-Cola, Nestlé, and Unilever all publish inclusion and non-discrimination policies online (The Coca-Cola Company, n.d.; Nestlé, n.d.; Unilever, 2024). Job seekers read such statements alongside third-party accounts rather than on their own. Negative public perception can follow from irresponsible behavior or from biased digital processes. It damages reputation, lowers employee engagement, and reduces application rates (Sweetin et al., 2013; Lin-Hi & Müller, 2013; Grappi et al., 2013).

Drawing on signaling theory, this paper argues that employer brand image functions as a key signal. It reduces applicants' uncertainty about organizational culture and fairness. The value of a signal, however, depends on the receiver's trust in its sender (Connelly et al., 2011). Most employer brand communication is produced by the employer itself. Applicants do not all form the same expectations. Research on stigma consciousness shows stable differences in how strongly people expect to be stereotyped and treated unfairly (Pinel, 1999). When applicants anticipate digital discrimination, such as algorithmic bias, they have reason to doubt that communication. Applicants read it against what they expect the hiring process to do, and it loses weight when the two diverge. Therefore, we argue that anticipated digital discrimination weakens the impact of employer branding on their job application intentions.

Importantly, these effects are not uniform across all job seekers. Research suggests that women are more sensitive to potential bias in male-dominated or opaque digital recruitment environments (Dutta & Mishra, 2021). Anticipating possible exclusion, female applicants examine employer brand signals more closely. Closer examination is not the same as greater influence. They weigh those signals against what they expect the hiring process to do. The discounts described above should therefore be stronger for them. Men, who are less likely to anticipate discrimination, have less reason to discount employer-controlled communication (Coffman et al., 2021). Türkiye offers a useful setting for this question. Female labor force participation stood at 42.0 per cent in 2024, the lowest rate among OECD countries (Ağar, 2025). The comparable figures are 85.1 per cent in Iceland and 82.4 per cent in Sweden. Female unemployment, at 11.8 per cent, is among the highest in the same group. Gender inequality in employment is therefore both measurable and widely discussed in Türkiye. These conditions matter for our argument. Applicants form expectations of unfair treatment where inequality is visible. Türkiye therefore motivates the question we ask. The propositions themselves rest on general mechanisms and are not specific to one country.

The literature has not yet examined how expectations of digital discrimination shape the link between employer brand image and job application intention. The moderating role of gender in that link is also underdeveloped. This study offers a conceptual framework that brings the three together. It asks how job seekers form application intentions when recruitment is digitally mediated.

By developing theoretical propositions, this paper aims to contribute to employer branding, recruitment, and diversity literature. It offers a timely perspective on recruitment in digital settings where fairness is increasingly scrutinized.

Conceptual approach

This paper is conceptual, so its evidence is the literature itself. We therefore set out how that literature was gathered and organized. The paper follows a theory synthesis approach, which builds a framework by connecting research streams that have not been read together (Jaakkola, 2020; MacInnis, 2011). The review supporting it is semi-systematic rather than systematic (Snyder, 2019). The relevant work is spread across marketing, human resource management, information systems, and social psychology. No single protocol reaches all of it.

We searched Scopus and Web of Science. The search combined terms from three groups. The first named the outcome: employer brand, employer image, organizational attractiveness, application intention. The second named the process: algorithmic hiring, AI recruitment, automated selection, digital recruitment, applicant reactions. The third named the problem: discrimination, algorithmic bias, algorithmic fairness, procedural justice. We require terms from at least two of the three groups.

We included peer-reviewed empirical and theoretical work in English published between 2015 and 2025. For the algorithmic hiring literature, we gave priority to studies from 2022 onward, since the technology and the evidence have both moved quickly. We retained foundational sources outside this window where a construct originates in them. Spence (1973) on signaling and Pinel (1999) on stigma consciousness are examples. Two exclusions follow from our focus. We left out work on algorithmic decision-making outside employment, unless it establishes a mechanism we apply to recruitment. We also left out work on firm-level diversity outcomes, which answers a different question from ours.

We organized the resulting material by the role it plays in the argument rather than by date or method. Signaling theory and social identity threat appear in the theoretical foundations. Diversity management supplies the observable content. Digital discrimination and its normative context have their own sections. The applicant-reaction studies inform the propositions.

Theoretical foundations

This framework rests on two theoretical perspectives and one applied literature. Signaling theory explains why applicants respond to employer brand image at all and make a signal work. Social identity threat and stigma consciousness explain why applicants differ in how they read the same signal. People who expect to be stereotyped or treated unfairly evaluate the same evidence against a stricter standard (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Pinel, 1999). Diversity management is not a theory, and we do not treat it as one. It is the applied literature that supplies the observable content applicant's judge. That content is what an organization does about inclusion, and whether it can be verified. Signaling theory explains the mechanism, social identity threat explains the variation, and diversity management supplies the evidence.

The signaling theory

Signaling theory provides the primary theoretical foundation for our framework. It explains how job seekers form perceptions and intentions during recruitment. Spence (1973) developed the theory to explain how job applicants convey their value to employers. It has since been widely applied in recruitment and employer branding research (Banerjee et al., 2020). In employment settings, both employers and applicants decide under imperfect information. Applicants rarely know what an organization is like from the inside. They therefore rely on observable cues such as employer brand, reputation, development opportunities, and work-life balance policy. These cues stand in for organizational quality and values (Cable & Turban, 2003; Liu, 2010; Connelly et al., 2011; Carpentier & Van Hove, 2021).

The direction of the signal is reversed in our framework, and this deserves a word. In Spence (1973) the applicant signals and the employer receives. We put the employer in the signaling position and the applicant in the receiving one. Reversal is common in employer branding research, but it is not automatic. It holds only under one condition. A signal runs from the party that holds private information to the party that lacks it. In Spence's model the applicant knows their own ability and the

employer does not. At the application stage the asymmetry runs the other way. The organization knows how it treats people, how its selection tools work, and what happens to applicants who raise concerns. The applicant knows none of this and cannot find out before applying. The employer is therefore the informed party here, and the applicant the one reading cues. This is why employer brand image can work as a signal at all. It is also why its credibility becomes the question.

Employer branding therefore works as a deliberate signaling mechanism. Organizations use it to reduce uncertainty for potential applicants. They communicate through official channels such as websites, job postings, and social media accounts (Muruganantham et al., 2021; Elbendary et al., 2024). What they send are claims about their values, culture, and employee experience. Some claims are tangible, such as salary and job stability (Zhu et al., 2014). Others are intangible, such as inclusivity, fairness, and employee well-being (Lee et al., 2018; Chhabra & Sharma, 2014). Consistent claims build stronger and more favorable brand associations among job seekers. That is how organizations set themselves apart from competitors (Aaker, 1991; Tanwar & Kumar, 2019).

The content of the message is only part of what makes a signal effective. The credibility and relevance of the source matter as much. In digital environments, where organizational communication coexists with user-generated content, job seekers are exposed to both company-generated and third-party information (Wilden et al., 2010; Myrden & Kelloway, 2015). Consequently, signals from organizations are interpreted alongside online reviews, social media discussions, and peer experiences, which may reinforce or contradict official employer branding messages. Managing employer image is harder as a result, and consistent, credible signaling matters more.

Signaling theory offers a vocabulary for this, and it is worth applying it directly to our case. Connelly et al. (2011) identify four properties that determine whether a signal works. Observability is whether the receiver can see the signal at all. Employer brand image scores well here, since recruitment sites and social media are open to anyone. Fit is whether the signal correlates with the quality it claims to convey. This is where employer brand image is weakest, because a firm can describe itself as inclusive without being so. Cost is what the signaler gives up by sending the signal. Signals that are expensive for a low-quality sender are the ones that receivers trust. Noise is the surrounding information that competes with the signal, and digital recruitment is noisy by design. Applicants read employer claims next to reviews, forum posts, and accounts of other applicants' experiences. The cost property deserves separate attention, because it carries most of the argument in this paper. Spence (1973) built signaling theory on signals that are costly to fake. Education worked as a signal because it costs less for an able candidate than for a less able one. Employer brand communication has no such property. A statement about inclusion costs an employer that discriminates exactly what it costs one that does not. In signaling terms it is cheap talk, and receivers have good reason to discount it (Connelly et al., 2011). Some employer signals do carry cost. Publishing pay-gap figures, submitting them to independent audit, or reporting representation data invites scrutiny that a poor performer would rather avoid. These are costly signals, and they should be read differently from the messaging around them. The distinction matters for Proposition 2. An applicant who expects digital discrimination discounts cheap talk, not the whole employer brand. Where the brand rests on verifiable, costly evidence, we expect the discount to be weaker.

Signals also carry implications for how individuals judge risk (Connelly et al., 2011). How positively a job seeker reads an organization's signals bears directly on the intention to apply. This matters most where algorithmic tools and opaque selection raise doubts about fairness. In such settings applicants examine diversity, equity, and inclusion signals more closely. Closer examination does not mean greater influence. A signal the applicant cannot corroborate carries less weight. The same is true of a signal that conflicts with what they expect the process to do.

Signaling theory therefore provides the foundation for understanding how employer brand image influences job application intention. It also shows where contextual moderators such as digital discrimination expectation and gender enter. We conceptualize employer brand image as a composite signal, built from firm-controlled and externally generated information. How applicants interpret that signal is what shapes their intention to apply.

Social identity threat and stigma consciousness

Signaling theory explains how a signal works, but not why two applicants read the same signal differently. For that we draw on work on social identity threat. Stereotype threat describes the apprehension people feel when a situation could confirm a negative stereotype about their group (Steele & Aronson, 1995). The threat is situational, since it arises inside an evaluative setting. Stigma consciousness moves the idea from the situation to the person. It captures stable individual differences

in how strongly someone expects to be stereotyped and treated unfairly, whether or not unfair treatment occurs (Pinel, 1999).

Two features matter for our framework. First, the judgment is anticipatory. It is formed before the evaluation rather than after it. Second, it varies between people who face the same objective procedure, because it reflects what they have experienced and what they expect. Recent evidence shows that anticipated discrimination has consequences of its own, including elevated stress, even when the anticipated treatment does not occur (Ong et al., 2026). This is the mechanism that produces variation in our model. Applicants who hold such expectations do not read employer claims differently because they are less trusting in general. They apply a stricter standard to the same evidence.

Diversity management as signal content

Diversity management is a strategic approach organization that is to recruit, retain, and develop people from varied backgrounds (Thomas, 1992; Yadav & Lenka, 2020). Definitions vary, but the term broadly covers differences in demographics, values, beliefs, and cultural background (Weber et al., 2018), visible and invisible alike (Kossek et al., 2006). Much of this literature asks what diversity does to firm performance. We ask for something narrower. Our question is what applicant can see of these practices, and what seeing them does to the employer brand signal. Diversity management enters our framework as signal content, not as an explanation of organizational outcomes.

Digital recruitment changes what there is to see. Selection decisions are increasingly made by systems that identify, screen, assess, and rank applicants (Black & Van Esch, 2020). These systems can reproduce bias when they are trained on historical hiring data (Raghavan et al., 2020). Applicants judge such procedures by whether they appear fair, and fairness judgments shape how they respond to the employer (Gilliland, 1993; Cropanzano et al., 2007). Two findings matter here. Algorithm-driven procedures are rated as less fair than human or human-assisted ones, whatever the outcome (Gonzalez et al., 2022; Lavanchy et al., 2023). Transparency changes this. When organisations explain how the system reaches its decision, informational fairness perceptions rise (Ochmann et al., 2024). Transparency is more than a compliance matter. It decides whether a diversity commitment can be checked at all.

What organizations say about inclusion is itself a visible practice. Employers communicate diversity through recruitment sites, job advertisements, and social media, and applicants read these alongside what they encounter in the process (Shen et al., 2009). The two do not always agree. An employer that advertises inclusion and then puts candidates through an opaque automated screen sends two signals at once. Applicants draw conclusions about the organization's intent from how the process is run, not only from what it claims (Koch-Bayram & Kaibel, 2024). Reactions to digital selection methods therefore feed back into the employer image the organization is trying to build (Folger et al., 2022). The applicant's experience of the process is part of the signal, not separate from it.

Diversity management therefore supplies the content of the signal, while signaling theory and social identity threat supply the mechanism. When stated commitments are visible and consistent with what applicants can verify elsewhere, the signal gains fit and cuts through the surrounding noise (Connelly et al., 2011). When they are vague, or contradicted by the process itself, the same signal loses credibility. Diversity practices do not raise application intention directly. They condition how much weight an applicant gives the employer brand signal, which is how observable cues work under incomplete information (Cable & Turban, 2003).

How much weight depends on what the applicant already expects. An applicant who anticipates digital discrimination applies a stricter standard to the same evidence. This is where gender enters. Women are more likely than men to anticipate unfair treatment in recruitment, and they watch employer signals more closely (Dutta & Mishra, 2021). Applying a stricter standard to the same evidence means employer claims lose more of their weight for them. The mechanism is not a separate one for women. It is the same mechanism working from a different starting expectation, which is what P4 proposes.

Digital discrimination in recruitment

Discrimination means treating someone less favorably because of who they are. The grounds include religion, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, age, education or income, political opinion, and disability (Edelman et al., 2017; Cheng & Foley, 2018). Most of this literature studies minority groups in physical workplaces and in everyday life (Edelman et al., 2017; Aydın et al., 2024; Jose & Sivaraman, 2023; Morando & Platania, 2024). Far less work asks how digitalization shapes the same behavior by employers and managers. Digital discrimination is our term for that gap, and it names one cost of technological advance. This study approaches digital discrimination from the applicant's side. Job seekers are affected not only by discrimination that occurs, but by the discrimination they expect.

The literature describes four angles on digital discrimination, each defined by what organizations and platforms do. The first angle concerns access to digital tools. Cheng and Foley (2018) define digital discrimination as internet-based conditions that privilege certain groups because of their background or personal characteristics. Weidmann et al. (2016) and Fisman and Luca (2016) show how unequal access narrows opportunities in education, employment, and housing. Access inequality is a barrier that operates before an application is made. Our construct concerns something later: what an applicant expects to happen once the process has begun.

The second angle concerns artificial intelligence and machine learning. Automated systems can disadvantage minorities and other groups without anyone intending it. Datta et al. (2015) found that Google showed advertisements for high-paying executive coaching to men more often than to women. Patterns of this kind can widen the gender pay gap. Discrimination persists in digital environments even where people assume automation removes it (Criado & Such, 2019). It enters through the assumptions of developers, through past decisions, and through society itself (Pasquale, 2015; O'Neil, 2016). Developers translate human judgment into code, and inherited prejudice travels with it.

The third angle concerns discrimination between individuals on digital platforms. Edelman et al. (2017) found that Airbnb guests with distinctively African American names were about 16 per cent less likely to have their requests accepted. We use this as an analogy rather than as evidence about recruitment, since consumer-platform screening and recruitment screening rest on different mechanisms. Both, however, show how visible identity cues shape outcomes in systems that appear neutral.

The fourth angle appears in recruitment itself. Many organizations screen the digital footprint of applicants (Lukaszewski & Johnson, 2018). Thatcher (2014) defines a digital footprint as the data individuals generate online, whether deliberately or not. Employers therefore review the social media accounts of people who apply. Applicants know this and manage it. Root and McKay (2014) show that students avoid posting content about sex, ethnicity, or drugs to protect how employers see them. Aydın (2019) adds that organizations also weigh cultural values, beliefs, and political views when they review these accounts. Discrimination is therefore possible at the screening stage, before any assessment begins.

The normative framework and the limits of verification

Discrimination in recruitment is not only an unfavorable outcome for the applicant. It is the breach of a norm, and that norm is stated in law. Equal treatment in employment is protected internationally by two ILO instruments. Türkiye has ratified the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention No. 111 (International Labour Organization, 1958) and the Equal Remuneration Convention No. 100 (International Labour Organization, 1951). Türkiye is also party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (United Nations, 1979). Domestically, Article 10 of the Constitution guarantees equality before the law (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti, 1982). Article 5 of the Labour Act No. 4857 states the principle for the employment relationship (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti, 2003). Law No. 6701 covers discrimination in employment and self-employment (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti, 2016b).

This matters how we read the applicant's expectations. An applicant who anticipates digital discrimination is not forecasting bad luck. They are anticipating that an organization will act against a rule that binds it. That is why the expectation carries moral weight, and why an employer claims that contradicts it reads as hypocrisy rather than as error. The prohibition of discrimination therefore does theoretical work in our framework. It supplies the standard against which the applicant measures the employer's signal.

Digital recruitment is no longer unregulated, and applicants increasingly know this. Three developments matter for our argument. The first is the European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2024). It classifies systems used for recruitment, selection, and candidate evaluation as high risk under Annex III. Deployers must run risk assessments, keep technical documentation, test for bias, and provide human oversight (Article 14).

Applicants have a right to know that an AI system was used and what part it played (Article 86). These obligations were deferred under the digital omnibus package and now apply from December 2027 (European Commission, 2026). The second is disclosure law at city level. New York City's Local Law 144 (New York City Council, 2021) requires an annual independent bias audit of automated employment decision tools, with the results published. Employers must also notify candidates before use. The law is instructive less for what it requires than for how it has worked. Wright et al. (2024) examined 391 employers and found that 5 per cent posted an audit and 3 per cent posted a notice. They call this null compliance, since observers cannot tell an exempt employer from a non-compliant one.

The third is the Turkish setting. The equality rules set out above apply here, but there is no binding artificial intelligence statute. Article 11 of the Personal Data Protection Law No. 6698 gives individuals the right to object to a result produced solely by automated processing (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti, 2016a). A national Artificial Intelligence Action Plan for 2026 to 2030 was issued by Presidential Circular in August 2026 (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 2026). It foresees algorithmic impact assessments for systems with high impact, including those used in employment. Those requirements are still to be written into secondary regulation.

Read together, these instruments share a structure. They impose duties on employers and they promise applicants information. What they do not yet deliver is verification the applicant can perform at the moment of applying. In the European Union and Türkiye, the obligations sit in the future. In New York they are met by a small minority. An applicant therefore faces an employer claim that is legally regulated in principle and unverifiable in practice.

This has a direct consequence for the model. Our argument in P2 rests on the applicant's inability to check what the employer says. Regulation that makes checking possible should therefore weaken the discounting mechanism. Where audit results are published and enforced, employer claims about fair treatment gain the observability that signaling theory requires (Connelly et al., 2011). The proposed weakening effect should be strongest in settings where regulation is absent or unenforced. It should be weakest where applicants can read an audit before they apply. This is the boundary condition that regulation supplies, and it is testable.

Digital discrimination as applicant expectation

The four angles above describe what organizations and platforms do. They say little about what job applicants think before they apply. Yet job seekers form judgements about the hiring process in advance. This study focuses on that judgement. We define digital discrimination expectation as an applicant's belief that a technology-based hiring process will disadvantage them because of a group characteristic.

Digital discrimination expectation is an anticipatory judgement tied to social identity. It is not a fairness evaluation made after the process ends. Digital discrimination expectation is the domain-specific form of the social identity threat described above, applied to technology-mediated selection. It differs from actual digital discrimination, which concerns what a system does rather than what an applicant anticipates (Cheng & Foley, 2018; Criado & Such, 2019). It differs from perceived algorithmic bias, which is a judgment about a system in general rather than about one's own likely treatment (Raghavan et al., 2020; Starke et al., 2022). It is narrower than anticipated discrimination (Ong et al., 2026), and narrower again than general discrimination expectations such as stigma consciousness, which are trait-like rather than tied to one setting (Pinel, 1999). It differs from procedural injustice, which is judged after the procedure has been experienced (Bies & Moag, 1986; Gilliland, 1993; Colquitt, 2001). It also differs from privacy concern, which is about how personal data are collected and used rather than about a disadvantaged outcome (Bauer et al., 2006).

The digital discrimination expectation construct differs from the justice perceptions studied in literature. Procedural, informational, and interactional justice are judged after the applicant has experienced the procedure (Bies & Moag, 1986; Gilliland, 1993; Colquitt, 2001). Digital discrimination expectation comes earlier. It is shaped whether a person applies at all. The two are still connected. An applicant, who expects group-based disadvantage, assumes that certain procedural rules will be broken. Those same rules predict fairness perceptions once the process has been experienced (Folger et al., 2022; Ochmann et al., 2024).

Applicants' reactions are also shaped by how people accept new technology. According to the Acceptance models, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are the critical factors that affect a person's willingness to adopt a tool (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003). However, job applicants are in a different position. The tool is not offered to the applicant as a choice. Its use is imposed, and the applicant becomes an object of the decision rather than a party to it. Recent studies point in the same direction. Digital tools can seem innovative and unfair to the same applicant at once (Folger et al., 2022). Applicants who read about AI-based selection in a job advertisement are less willing to apply (Wesche & Sonderegger, 2021). Transparency and human-like design increase perceived fairness, but they do not remove the concern (Ochmann et al., 2024). Therefore, technology acceptance explains part of the reaction, but it does not explain who expects unfair treatment.

This expectation has a factual basis in how these systems work. Reviews of algorithmic fairness show that automated decisions are not always seen as fair (Starke et al., 2022). Studies on algorithmic hiring show how bias can enter through data and design choices (Fabris et al., 2025). Reviews of AI-enabled

recruitment name discrimination as the most frequent ethical concern (Hunkenschroer & Luetge, 2022; Chen, 2023). Applicants also read diversity-related outcomes as a sign of trustworthiness (Arnestad et al., 2025).

The strength of this expectation, however, varies across applicants. Those with more personal experience of discrimination respond more negatively to algorithmic selection (Koch-Bayram & Kaibel, 2024). Applicants' race also interacts with selection outcomes in shaping these reactions (Bedemariam & Wessel, 2023). The same applicant can see a process as both innovative and unfair (Folger et al., 2022; Gonzalez et al., 2022; Lavanchy et al., 2023). This pattern is central to our argument. Digital discrimination expectation captures differences that neither technology acceptance nor post-decision fairness perceptions fully explain.

Taken together, literature makes two points. First, organizations can make a job more attractive by shaping how applicants see the position and the organization. Employer brand image is central to this process. Second, applicants bring expectations to the recruitment process before any direct contact with the organization. Application intention is therefore likely to depend on both employer brand image and digital discrimination expectation. The propositions below examine these relationships.

Employer brand image and job application intention

Organizations compete for qualified employees and recruiting them well is part of how they build advantage (Junça Silva & Dias, 2023; Ahmad et al., 2020; Sivertzen et al., 2013). Talented employees bring skills that organizations cannot easily build otherwise. Firms therefore invest heavily in attracting and keeping them (Cascio, 2014). Globalization, technology, mergers and acquisitions, and organizational structure all shape how recruitment is done (Ahmad et al., 2020). What an applicant wants from a future workplace is shaped in part by the company's image. An organization that wants talent therefore needs a favorable image (Cable & Turban, 2003). Cappelli (2001) makes the same point about brand and corporate image.

Employer brand image refers to how an organization is perceived as an employer by those outside it, including potential applicants (Berthon et al., 2005; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). The concept is often discussed alongside employer branding, which describes the organization's own efforts to shape that perception (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). These terms are sometimes used interchangeably, but literature distinguishes them, and so do we. Employer attractiveness and organizational attractiveness are evaluative judgments that follow from the perception rather than constituting it (Berthon et al., 2005; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Job application intentions sit further downstream again, since attraction and the intention to pursue a job are empirically separable (Aiman-Smith et al., 2001). This study takes employer brand image as the antecedent and job application intention as the single outcome. Each term is reserved for its own referent throughout.

The employer brand image, according to the instrumental-symbolic framework introduced by Lievens and Highhouse (2003), includes both instrumental and symbolic elements. Instrumental elements (working conditions) refer to tangible, concrete aspects provided by the organization, such as salary and career progression opportunities. On the other side, symbolic elements (competence) refer to the more subjective, abstract characteristics that shape how job seekers perceive the organization's personality (Van Hove et al., 2012, p.1). These symbolic traits help job applicants to connect with the organization's values, enhance their self-concept, and express their identity. Van Hove and Saks (2011) found that instrumental and symbolic dimensions predict organizational attractiveness more strongly for job seekers themselves than for the people around them. The perceptions of those others still matter. They add to what an applicant's own image perceptions explain. Thus, organizations attract potential applicants based on both the instrumental elements and the symbolic elements linked to their employer brand.

Employer brand image is the focus of this research. Several studies have examined its role in recruitment (Knox & Freeman, 2006; Lemmink et al., 2003; Younis & Hammad, 2021). Lemmink et al. (2003) asked how corporate image and employment image affect job application intentions. They surveyed 324 graduate business students and examined the dimensions of both images. Both had an independent positive effect on the intention to apply, which makes each an asset in the labor market. Younis and Hammad (2021) extended this to organizational attractiveness, adding social identity as a moderator. They surveyed fourth-year university students. Both corporate image and employer image were positively related to organizational attractiveness, and social identity partly moderated the relationship. Berthon et al. (2005) built on Ambler and Barrow's (1996) model and identified five dimensions of employer attractiveness: interest, social, economic, development, and application value. In practice,

these include innovative work culture, relationship quality, and career growth prospects. Together they shape employer branding, talent attraction, and retention.

These studies identify what shapes job seekers' perceptions and intentions. They also show how organizations can manage an employer brand to attract and keep talent. We therefore propose that a positive employer brand image increases job application intention.

P1 (baseline): Employer brand image has a positive impact on job application intention.

P1 is the model's starting point, not its argument. In digital recruitment, applicants have reason to question what employers say about themselves. The following sections examine when this signal holds its value, and when it does not. That is where P2 to P4 do their work.

The interaction between brand image and digital discrimination

Globalization, migration, and international competition have changed the composition of the labor market (Tatli, 2011). Organizations compete for skilled people by building a favorable employer brand image (Kele & Cassell, 2023). They invest in several areas: company reputation, ethical systems, work-life balance, inclusion and belonging, and corporate social responsibility. All these efforts aim to shape how potential employees see the employer (Samoliuk et al., 2022).

Organizations control some of the channels through which that image travels, such as advertisements and career pages. They do not control the rest. Information also moves through word of mouth and social media (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). Job seekers know this and use those channels. A positive branding effort can therefore still produce a negative perception (Stockman et al., 2020). Consider a company that advertises inclusive policies. Applicants may read the same policy differently, and some will still expect discrimination against sexual, ethnic, or religious minorities. Davies et al. (2018) suggest that employers segment their messaging to fit different needs. Segmentation without transparency invites a different problem, since a firm can quietly favor people who share its beliefs. Kele and Cassell (2023, p. 693) warn that such strategies can conceal "organizational bias and other negative behaviors that disadvantage marginalized groups."

The discussion so far has taken the organization's point of view. Digital channels give applicants a view of their own. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and LinkedIn carry information and content between users (Kashive et al., 2020). People use them to communicate, connect, and build relationships (Derks & Bakker, 2013). These exchanges offer a view of what a company intends, which may not match what it advertises. Applicants notice unethical or discriminatory conduct, and they know that employers, in turn, examine applicants' profiles (Aydın, 2019). Many applicants are therefore aware of digital discrimination. What matters for our argument is how that awareness changes their reading of employer signals. A signal is only as strong as the receiver's trust in its sender (Connelly et al., 2011). Most employer brand communication is produced by the employer itself. An applicant who expects the process to disadvantage them has reason to doubt it. Persuasion knowledge describes this response: when people recognize an attempt to persuade, they discount the message and attend to the motive behind it (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Attribution research points the same way, since a cause is discounted when another plausible cause is present (Kelley, 1973). Inclusive branding can be read as genuine commitment or impression management. An applicant who anticipates discrimination has grounds for the second reading. Therefore, we propose that:

P2: Digital discrimination expectation negatively moderates the positive impact of employer brand image on job application intention such that the effect is weaker when digital discrimination expectation is higher.

The opposite prediction is also defensible, and it deserves a direct answer. Signaling theory holds that signals matter more when uncertainty is high. On that reading, an applicant who expects discrimination faces more uncertainty, so a credible employer brand signal should carry more weight, not less. We accept this for one part of the signal and reject it for the rest. The argument holds where an applicant can verify the claim independently, through employee reviews, audited diversity reporting, or pay transparency. It does not hold employer-authored messaging, which the employer controls entirely and can produce at no cost. Since most employer brand communication is of the second kind, we expect the net effect to be a weakening rather than a strengthening. Where the verifiable component dominates, the weakening should be attenuated.

The role of gender

Researchers often treat gender as a moderator, and several findings bear on our model. Wenhold and Harrison (2021) examined how people perceive gender roles in daily life, in the media, and in their own

plans. Men with traditional views of gender roles held lower career expectations within those roles. Tanwar and Prasad (2016) used gender as a moderator between employer branding dimensions and job satisfaction. Employer branding raised job satisfaction overall, but what drove it differed by gender. Women weighted diversity and work-life balance practices more heavily. Men weighted reputation, training, and development opportunities. Alniaçık and Alniaçık (2012) report a related difference in employer attractiveness, with female applicants placing more weight on social value. These studies show that gender differences exist. They say less about why. Ahmad et al. (2020), for example, report differences in how employer branding works without identifying the mechanism behind them. Dutta and Mishra (2021) come closer. They find that employer brand image matters more for female than male applicants. They link this to socially constructed gender roles and to experience of discrimination, which make women more attentive to signs of bias. Our propositions build on this mechanism. We treat it as a pattern of exposure and experience, not as a property of gender itself.

Our propositions state gender as a binary, and this is a scoping decision rather than a claim about gender itself. The systems we theorize about operate on a binary themselves. Automated hiring tools infer gender from names, photographs, or video, and sort applicants into two categories (Keyes, 2018; Scheuerman et al., 2019). The applicant-reaction studies we build on also record gender categorically (Folger et al., 2022; Bedemariam & Wessel, 2023; Koch-Bayram & Kaibel, 2024), so a proposition stated over other categories could not be assessed against current findings. This scope does not make the binary adequate. Applicants whose gender identity falls outside a two-category scheme are not simply disadvantaged by it; they are misclassified before any evaluation begins (Keyes, 2018). For non-binary, trans, and gender-diverse applicants, the expectation of unfair treatment therefore has an additional source. Intersectionality sharpens the point, since disadvantage is not additive and several identities operate at once (Crenshaw, 1991). Those who hold multiple subordinate identities are often overlooked entirely (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Research on transgender employees reports a similar invisibility in diversity practice (Ozturk & Tatli, 2016). P3 and P4 are therefore stated for the binary categories used in the studies we build on. They should be read as claims about those categories, not about gender in general. Extending the framework here is not a matter of adding a category. It requires measures and samples that current research rarely provides, and we leave it to future work.

Gender enters the model through exposure, not through disposition. Women encounter discrimination in recruitment more often than men, and they hear about it from others more often (Grzelec, 2024). Repeated exposure changes how a person reads an employer's claim. Applicants who expect to be judged by their group membership watch closely for cues about how an organization treats people like them (Pinel, 1999). Employer brand image is one of the few such cues available before an application is submitted. Close attention makes a signal count for more in either direction. A credible signal weighs more heavily, and a doubted one is discounted more heavily. Existing work on gender and employer branding examines current employees, so the application stage remains largely untested. We therefore propose:

P3: Employer brand image has a stronger effect on job application intention for female applicants than male applicants.

P3 and P4 make different claims. P3 is a two-way interaction: gender conditions the strength of the link between employer brand image and application intention. P4 is a three-way interaction. It proposes that the moderating role of digital discrimination expectation, stated in P2, itself depends on gender. P3 concerns how much weight an applicant gives the signal. P4 concerns how much of that weight survives when the applicant expects bias. The two claims do not compete. In P4, gender matters through the expectation applicants bring, not through attention alone. Patriarchal norms rooted in cultural and belief systems shape social life in many countries (Aydın, 2019; Bakıcı & Aydın, 2020; Coffman et al., 2021). Organizations mirror these norms, which leaves women in disadvantaged positions at work (Adamovic, 2020). Women are therefore more likely to anticipate unfair treatment in digital recruitment. They also attend more closely to employer signals, as P3 states. When digital discrimination expectation is high, female applicants therefore have more reason than male applicants to discount employer claims. We therefore propose:

P4: Gender moderates the effect described in P2, such that the weakening effect of digital discrimination expectation on the employer brand image-job application intention relationship is stronger for female than for male applicants.

P4 implies a specific pattern. Employer brand image increases application intention under all conditions, as P1 states. What varies is the size of that effect. The effect is largest when digital discrimination expectation is low, for men and women alike. It is smallest when expectation is high and

the applicant is female. Male applicants follow the same pattern in a weaker form, since they are less likely to anticipate unfair treatment. Support for P4 therefore requires more than a significant three-way interaction term. The negative slope of digital discrimination expectation must be significantly steeper for women than for men (Dawson & Richter, 2006). One boundary condition deserves note. Where employer claims can be verified through third-party sources, the discounting mechanism should weaken, and the three-way pattern with it (Connelly et al., 2011). Figure 1 presents the full conceptual model.

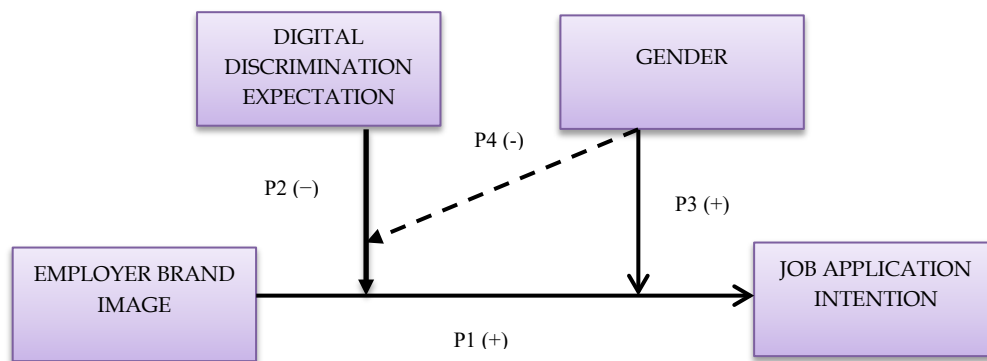


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Model

Note: (+) positive relationship (-) negative relationship

Dashed arrow: three-way interaction – gender conditions the moderating effect stated in P2, the weakening being more pronounced for female applicants.

Source: Developed by authors.

Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to work on employer brand image, digital discrimination, and gender. It offers a conceptual framework that connects the three to explain job application intention in digital recruitment. The contribution has three parts.

First, our study explores the impact of employer brand image on job application intentions, considering the moderating role of digital discrimination expectations among potential job applicants. While employer branding has received extensive attention in recruitment research, the role of digital discrimination expectations remains underexplored. Theorizing how these expectations shape the reading of employer signals fills that gap. It also connects employer branding to fairness perceptions in recruitment.

Second, existing work on employer brand image concentrates on current employees and on internal branding outcomes. Our study shifts the focus to prospective applicants. It positions employer brand image as an external signal that shapes how potential applicants behave. This reorientation widens the scope of employer branding theory and fits it to digital job search.

Third, our conceptual framework incorporates gender as a key moderating factor in how digital discrimination expectations shape the job applicants' interpretation of employer brand signals. While prior studies acknowledge gendered experiences in the workplace, they have rarely considered how gender influences branding perceptions and application intentions at the pre-employment stage. By proposing that female applicants examine fairness and inclusion signals more closely, and discount them more sharply when they anticipate digital bias, we offer a perspective on how gender operates in employer branding. In doing so, the framework offers a conceptual extension rather than a tested contribution. It identifies a condition under which employer brand signals lose their force.

We also state what the framework does not claim. Our construct is anticipatory, which separates it from the applicant reactions literature, where reactions follow an experienced procedure. It is formed before the encounter, which separates it from organizational justice, where procedural and informational fairness are judged afterwards. It concerns an applicant's expectation about their own treatment, which separates it from algorithmic fairness research, where the object of judgment is the system. Finally, it is an antecedent rather than an evaluative outcome, which separates it from work on employer attractiveness. The framework adds to these literatures rather than replacing any of them. These contributions combine signaling theory with work on social identity threat. Together they yield

propositions about when employer brand image influences job application intention, and when it does not. The framework is a starting point for empirical work on how digital recruitment practice meets individual differences.

Managerial implications

The framework is conceptual, so the suggestions below should be read as informed expectations rather than tested guidance. They follow from our propositions, and each would need empirical support before a manager acts on it with confidence. With that caution in mind, the framework points to four areas of practice.

First, employer brand image is the signal applicants read. Organizations should keep it consistent and inclusive across firm-controlled platforms and user-generated content. The first group covers websites, career pages, and official social media. The second covers online reviews and peer forums. Delivering authentic, diverse, and transparent communication is likely to help. Communication alone may not be enough where applicants already expect unfair treatment.

Second, our reasoning suggests that expectations of digital discrimination shape how applicants read an employer's signals. Managers concerned about this may wish to audit AI-based selection tools for bias. They may also explain plainly where technology is used in hiring, and what safeguards are in place. These steps are consistent with current evidence on applicant reactions, and they carry little downside. Whether they change application behavior is a question for future work.

Third, male and female applicants may read employer brand signals differently when they anticipate digital discrimination. If P4 holds, gender-sensitive recruitment communication would matter. Managers might tailor messages to concerns such as inclusivity, career progression, and work-life balance. The aim is to reach a wider range of potential applicants. We note that this is our most tentative claim. It rests on a three-way relationship that has not yet been tested.

Finally, a visible and responsive online presence is likely to support a favorable brand image. Providing transparent communication about the use of technology in hiring and safeguards against discrimination may reduce uncertainty and build confidence among applicants. Addressing concerns openly signals accountability. This suggestion draws on established work in employer branding, rather than on our propositions alone.

These suggestions are more than good practice. Each corresponds to a duty employers already face or will soon face. Notifying applicants that an automated tool is used is required under Local Law 144 in New York. Article 86 of the Artificial Intelligence Act will require it across the European Union. Auditing selection tools for bias is required annually in New York, and forms part of the risk management duties attached to Annex III systems. Keeping a person in the decision follows from Article 14. In Türkiye, applicants may already object to a result produced solely by automated processing under Article 11 of Law No. 6698 (KVKK). Managers who read these steps as compliance costs miss their second function. The same steps make an employer's fairness claims verifiable, and verifiability is what gives a claim signaling value. One caution follows. Meeting an anti-discrimination obligation is a legal floor, not a distinguishing signal. What an applicant can act on is evidence that the floor is being met, which is why publication matters more than policy.

Conclusion

Algorithmic screening and digital-footprint review are now routine in recruitment, and applicants know it. This paper asked how they respond to employer brand image when they expect such a process to treat them unfairly. The answer we propose is that the expectation changes the value of the signal.

Employer brand image raises application intention (P1), but the effect is not constant. It weakens as digital discrimination expectation rises (P2). Employer claims are produced by the employer, and an applicant who anticipates unfair treatment has reason to discount them. The effect also varies with gender. Employer brand image weighs more heavily for female applicants, who watch employer signals more closely (P3). They are also more likely to anticipate unfair treatment, so the weakening described in P2 is more pronounced for them (P4). The framework brings two theoretical perspectives together rather than choosing between them. Signaling theory explains why applicants attend to employer brand image at all. Social identity threat explains why the same signal reads differently to an applicant who expects to be judged by their group. Diversity management supplies the observable content against which employer claims are checked. No single perspective accounts for an applicant who reads the same message differently because of what they already expect.

Two implications follow. First, digital discrimination expectation is an anticipatory judgment, formed before any contact with the employer. It is therefore distinct from the fairness perceptions that dominate the applicant reactions literature. Second, employer branding cannot be assessed on its content alone, since the same signal carries different weight for applicants who hold different expectations. What the framework does not yet establish is how large these differences are. The limitations of the argument, and the research it invites, are set out below.

Limitations and further research directions

As a conceptual exploration, this study is limited by its theoretical nature and the absence of empirical testing. The framework explains how employer brand image, digital discrimination expectations, and gender may jointly shape job application intentions. The model has not been tested with data. Its validity and generalizability therefore remain open. Future research should test the propositions using a range of empirical methods. Surveys can examine the strength and direction of the proposed relationships across demographic groups. P4 needs particular care. Because it describes a three-way interaction, it can be tested with moderated moderation, using Model 3 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022). The interaction should then be probed with a slope difference test rather than by reading a plot (Dawson & Richter, 2006). Measurement is the second requirement. Established scales are available for employer brand image (Berthon et al., 2005) and for application intention (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Digital discrimination expectation has no validated measure, and developing one from the Stigma Consciousness Questionnaire (Pinel, 1999) would be a useful first step. Experiments may explore how job seekers react to digital employer branding strategies when they expect discrimination. Interviews and case studies could give context-sensitive insight into how digital discrimination is perceived and addressed in real recruitment settings. Testing other demographic characteristics, such as age, ethnicity, or disability, may also yield richer findings.

We propose the framework as a general one, although Türkiye motivated the question. Two conditions should shape how strongly the mechanism operates. The first is how visible gender inequality is in each labor market. The second is how widely algorithmic tools are used in hiring. Both vary across countries, so the strength of the proposed relationships should vary as well. Cross-cultural comparative designs would be the natural way to examine this.

Another limitation relates to the conceptualization of gender. The current model treats gender as a binary, for the reasons set out in theoretical development. This scope leaves out non-binary, trans, and gender-diverse applicants, whose expectations may form differently. Future research could extend the framework to gender identities beyond the binary. Doing so would deepen our understanding of how digital discrimination expectations operate across a broader spectrum of identities. It would also require measures and samples that applicant-reaction research rarely provides. Addressing these limitations would put the framework on empirical footing. That is what employer branding research needs as hiring becomes more automated.

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