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Organizational Recruitment Web Sites: The Influence of Web Site Aesthetics on Initial Affective Reactions to the Site and Subsequent Attraction to the Organization

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ORGANIZATIONAL RECRUITMENT WEB SITES: THE INFLUENCE OF WEB
SITE AESTHETICS ON INITIAL AFFECTIVE REACTIONS TO THE SITE AND
SUBSEQUENT ATTRACTION TO THE ORGANIZATION

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science
Applied Psychology

by
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the potential relationship between specific characteristics of organizational recruitment web sites and applicant attraction to the organization. Cober, Brown, Keeping, and Levy (2004) proposed a conceptual model that suggests web site aesthetics influence the applicant's attitude toward the web site which in turn influences applicant attraction. The current study provides a partial test of this model by examining web site aesthetics, prior attitudes toward the organization, initial affective reactions to the web site, perceptions of web site usability and post-viewing attitudes toward the site and the organization. Participants (N = 159) included undergraduate students using the Department of Psychology's Subject Pool at a medium-sized southeastern university. Data was analyzed using multi-level modeling. Results provide support that aesthetic characteristics influence participants initial affective reactions to the site. Also, participant's initial affective reactions influenced perceptions of usability, post-viewing attitude toward the web site, and attraction to the organization. Perceptions of usability also influenced attraction toward the organization and also partially mediated the relation between initial affective reactions and post-viewing attitude toward the site. Finally, post-viewing attitude toward the site partially mediated the relation between initial affective reactions and attraction to the organization as well as the relation between perceptions of usability and attraction to the organization.

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INTRODUCTION

As the Internet has become an increasingly popular tool for gathering and communicating information, organizations have begun to utilize it as a method of recruitment. In 2001, 90% of Fortune 500 companies reported using some form of on-line recruiting (Capelli, 2001). As one of the first methods of Internet-based recruiting, company websites have become increasingly popular among large organizations. In a 2003 survey conducted by iLogos, 94 percent of Global 500 companies reported having a company recruitment web site (iLogos, 2003). In contrast with traditional recruitment methods (e.g., newspaper advertisements, brochures), web sites can provide job seekers with considerably more information that can be accessed anywhere at any time, which may partially explain the popularity of such web sites (Cober, Brown, Blumental, Doverspike, & Levy, 2000).

Specifically, web sites often provide an individual's first exposure to an organization and its values. These first impressions are critical because the organizational image is associated with an individual's intentions to apply (Cober et al., 2000). Therefore, it is essential for organizations to create web sites that communicate pertinent information effectively. Likewise, organizations can emphasize unique characteristics as well as providing detailed job descriptions that may not be possible to communicate through traditional recruitment methods (Cober et al., 2000). This allows potential applicants to better assess their fit with the organization so that job seekers who perceive low levels of fit may self-select out, saving the organization time and money. Furthermore, applicants that perceive high levels of fit with the organization have been

found to report more positive work outcomes such as increased job satisfaction (Bretz & Judge, 1994; Cable & Judge, 1996; Saks & Ashforth, 1997), and higher organizational commitment (Cable & Judge, 1996; O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991; Saks & Ashforth, 1997). In summary, existing data suggests that web-based recruiting is becoming more prevalent, and furthermore, that such recruiting can have a variety of positive outcomes for an organization. Nonetheless, research on the effectiveness of web-based recruitment is relatively sparse. In the next section, I will review a model of how applicants may react to web site characteristics that was developed by Cober, Brown, Keeping and Levy (2004). Using that as my overriding framework, I will then discuss some of the specific empirical research relevant to this topic of web-based recruitment.

A Model of How Recruiting Web Site Characteristics Influence Viewer Impressions

Utilizing prior recruitment research as well as marketing literature and research on human-computer interaction, Cober et al. (2004) created a theoretical model examining the web site characteristics that are pertinent to the formation of a job seeker's attitude and attraction toward the organization (See Figure 1). According to the model's Propositions 1a-c, an individual's initial affective reactions to the web site are formed by the aesthetic characteristics of the site. The relationship between aesthetic characteristics and initial affective reactions are proposed to be moderated by prior feelings toward the organization (Proposition 2). Additionally, a job seeker's attitude toward the web site is a result of initial affective reactions, perceptions of usability, and the individual's search behavior (Proposition 9a, 10, 11). Most importantly, applicant attraction is formed through one's attitude toward the recruitment web site, and their attitude toward, as well

as their familiarity with, the organization (Proposition 8, 13, and 14). Next, I will discuss the empirical and theoretical support for each of these propositions.

Aesthetics

Coyle and Thorson (2001) suggest that manipulating aesthetic characteristics can focus an individual's attention on the web site. Specifically, textual format, color, graphics, and fonts can be manipulated to increase attractiveness and focus the user's attention. Additionally, recent research has found that aesthetic quality is significantly correlated with perceived usability and successful task performance (van Schaik & Ling, 2005). Specifically, participants, consisting of undergraduate students, were asked to complete ten information retrieval questions as well as a seven-item measure of aesthetic quality. The participants' ratings of web site aesthetic quality were correlated with participants' accuracy in completing the information retrieval task. However, the measure of aesthetics was broad and did not examine which characteristics of the web site may be associated with more positive ratings of aesthetic quality.

Schenkman and Jonsson (2000) found that the aesthetics of a web site accounted for a large portion of variance in overall impressions toward the site. Participants viewed 13 web sites and rated each site on six dimensions: complexity, legibility, order, beauty, meaningfulness, comprehension; in addition, participants also provided ratings of their overall impression towards the web site. Given that participants provided all seven ratings concurrently, it is not surprising that the six dimensions accounted for 86% of the variance in overall impressions. Of somewhat more interest to the current study, ratings of beauty were the best predictor of overall impressions. Beauty was simply described as

“how beautiful and appealing the person thought the page to be as opposed to how ugly it was” (Schenkman & Jonsson, 2000). Given this, it is difficult to determine what components contribute to the “beauty” of a web site.

Zusman and Landis (2002) manipulated three web sites to be attractive, average, or unattractive. The unattractive page was characterized by limited black-and-white text in a paragraph format. The average page contained “more engaging fonts, colors, and layouts” than the unattractive site (Zusman & Landis, 2002). The attractive web site was characterized by colors, stimulating text formatted with bullets, and pictures. It was found that the quality of the web site determined the participants’ attraction to the organization in a sample of undergraduate students. However, it is difficult to determine which characteristics influenced participants because several features, such as colors and bulleted text, were confounded (Braddy, Thompson, Wuensch, & Grossnickle, 2003).

Cober et al. (2004) suggest that unity is one of the most critical aesthetic elements in web site design. Unity is considered to be the degree to which design elements of the web site are connected in a meaningful way, creating a flow of information (Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998). In applying the principle of unity to web site design, Williams and Tollett (2000) suggests that repetition, alignment, and proximity should be used to create an effective site. Repetition is the use of repeating elements, such as colors and shapes. Alignment is the placement of elements in a meaningful way as opposed to placing them randomly. Proximity is the grouping of items by content to create a flow of information. The use of these characteristics should help create a site with high unity.

A second critical design element is that of contrast (Williams & Tollett, 2000). Contrast refers to making components of the web site that are different, look very different. The most common method of creating this is the use of contrasting colors but fonts and shapes may also be used (Cober et al., 2004). It has been suggested that contrast may be the one of the most important elements because it attracts the individual to the site initially (Williams & Tollett, 2000).

Initial Affective Reactions of Potential Applicants

Cober et al. (2004) define initial affective reactions as “the immediate spontaneous emotion evoked by a web site.” Affect has been classified by two distinct factors- positive affect and negative affect (Watson, Clark, Tellegen, 1988). Positive affect (PA) is associated with feelings of enthusiasm and excitement on one end of the continuum and boredom and tiredness on the opposite end (Watson, 1988). High negative affect (NA) includes feelings such as anger, fear, and guilt while low NA is categorized as feeling calm and relaxed (Watson, 1988). It is unlikely that this type of organizational recruitment web site will evoke feelings such as fear or distress, which are along the continuum of NA (Cober et al., 2004). While it is possible for a web site to evoke negative reactions, such as frustration due to navigation difficulties, it is unlikely that this would occur when initially viewing the web site. However, given that PA and NA are distinct variables, as opposed to being on a single continuum, an individual likely experiences degrees of both (Price, 1997). Given that, it is expected that individuals will report greater feelings of PA than of NA.

Specifically, aesthetic characteristics have been found to influence initial affective responses when examining product preferences. Veryzer (1993) examined initial affective reactions to three different products (i.e. microwave oven, suntan lotion bottle, and a natural sound machine) which were manipulated based on two design elements-unity and proportion. Proportion refers to the size relation of the parts to the other parts and to the whole product. Design experts determined the most desirable proportion for each product. Each product was manipulated to be high or low on the two dimensions such that four versions of each product were produced. Participants' initial affective reactions were consistently found to be significantly influenced by the products' aesthetics. Specifically, participants reacted more favorably to products that had high levels of unity. The interaction between unity and proportion was not significant in any case however. This finding was later duplicated by Veryzer and Hutchinson (1998). This study manipulated the products' unity and prototypicality, or the degree to which an item is a representation from the category in which it belongs. In examining initial affective reactions towards the new products, both design elements were found to significantly influence the participants' initial affective reactions such that more positive reactions were found to be associated with high unity products and prototypical products, compared to low unity products and products that were not considered to be representative of the category in which they belonged (Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998). The above research leads to the following hypotheses:

H_{1a}: Initial affective reactions will be more positive when viewing a web site with a high level of unity.

H_{1b}: Initial affective reactions will be more positive when viewing a web site with a high level of contrast.

Prior Attitude Toward the Organization

When searching for a job, the applicant may already have an attitude toward the organization through perceptions of the organization's reputation or their familiarity with the organization (Cober et al., 2004). Such attitudes have been repeatedly associated with applicant attraction (e.g., Gatewood, Gowan, & Lautenschlager, 1993; Lemmink, Schuijf, & Streukens, 2003) however this concept has been inconsistently labeled and measured.

Gatewood et al. (1993) found that potential applicants' ratings of corporate image, or "the image associated with the name of an organization," were most strongly correlated to the individual's level of familiarity with the company (p. 416). Additionally, corporate image was also significantly correlated with the probability of the potential applicant responding to the company's recruitment campaign. Gatewood et al. (1993) measured corporate image by a single rating on a five-point scale.

Turban, Forrett, and Hendrickson (1998) examined the influence of organization reputation on undergraduate students' perception of recruiter behaviors, job and organizational attributes (e.g. compensation, work environment), and attraction to the organization. Prior to an interview with the company, students completed a measure of organization reputation, which was indicated by six items. Organization reputation was specified by two factors: general company reputation and knowledge of the company. Results suggested that perceptions of recruiter behaviors as well as post-interview job and organizational attributes were positively influenced by organization reputation. However,

organization reputation was found to be negatively related to post-interview applicant attraction.

Cable and Turban (2003) utilized marketing research to expand upon the conceptualization of organization reputation, or “the status of a firm’s name relative to competing firms” (p. 2244). Specifically, they equated an organization’s reputation to a brand. A positive reputation, or brand, can impact outcomes, such as attraction, above and beyond the other characteristics of the job. Cable and Turban (2003) utilized the measure created by Turban et al. (1998); however the two factors were not combined as in the original study. Among a sample of undergraduate students, reputation perceptions influenced perceptions of job attributes which influenced intentions to pursue the job (Cable & Turban, 2003).

The present study likens Cober et al.’s (2004) prior attitude toward the organization to Cable and Turban’s (2003) organization reputation and utilizes Turban et al.’s (1998) two factor design. Additionally, this concept is distinct from Cober et al.’s (2004) organizational image in that it is the applicant’s perception of the organization’s character prior to exploring the organization’s web site whereas organizational image is the applicant’s perception of the organization’s character *after* browsing the web site. A similar distinction is made regarding Cober et al.’s familiarity construct.

Cober et al. (2004) suggest that the interaction between one’s prior attitude and their reaction to the web site’s aesthetics creates the applicant’s initial affective reaction. If the applicant is unfamiliar with the organization, the web site’s aesthetics will be more influential in determining their initial affective reactions. Conversely, if the applicant

views the organization's reputation very positively (or very negatively), the web site's aesthetics will be less influential in determining the applicant's initial affective reactions.

H₂: Applicants' prior attitudes toward the organization will moderate the relation between web site aesthetics and initial affective reactions such that the correlation between web site aesthetics will be stronger when applicants are less familiar with the organization (Cober et al., 2004).

Usability

Usability can be defined as "the extent to which a product can be used by specified users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction in a specified context of use" (Karat, 1997, p. 34). Palmer (2002) evaluated the literature on recruiting web sites and identified five system features that affect perceptions of usability including navigation, responsiveness, interactivity, content, and transition speed. Navigation refers to the organization of the site, allowing the user to move logically through the site to gain information. Responsiveness refers to the availability of feedback and answers to frequently asked questions. Interactivity is the option of customizing and interacting with the site. Content is the amount and variety of information provided by the web site, specifically goal-congruent information. Transition speed refers to the time it takes for the pages to be displayed.

Prior research has examined consumers' perceptions of usability based on the affect experienced from initial encounters with a given product. Specifically, Tractinsky, Katz, and Ikar (2000) examined reactions to and perceived usability of automatic teller machine (ATM) designs. Participants looked at the layout of nine ATMs, each differing

on their level of aesthetic quality (i.e. high, medium, or low), and rated each on their perceived ease of use. The results suggested that participant's reactions to the aesthetics of the ATM layout effected their perceptions of the machine's ease of use.

Zhang and Li (2005) examined affective reactions to a university's web site and perceived ease of use of that site. Participants included 194 undergraduates who were asked to browse the university's home page and consider the usefulness of the site in their own college life. Affective reactions, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and behavioral intentions (i.e. intentions to use the web site in the future) were measured. Results suggested that affective reactions had a significant impact on perceived ease of use as well as perceived usefulness. The results of these past studies provide support for the following hypothesis.

H₃: Initial affective reactions will significantly influence perceptions of usability, such that more positive initial reactions will be associated with more positive perceptions of usability.

Post-Viewing Attitude Toward the Web Site and Applicant Attraction

The post-viewing attitude toward the web site is believed to be more extensive and developed than initial affective reactions. As suggested by Cober et al. (2004), web site attitude is considered to be a combination of emotions and an evaluative component. This post-viewing attitude may be influenced by aesthetics, usability, prior attitudes toward the organization, and initial reactions.

First of all, it is likely that an individual's affective reactions to an object demonstrate a certain amount of influence on subsequent reactions. Fisher (2002) found

that positive affective reactions at work had a significant direct effect on organizational commitment. Additionally, Niklas and Dormann (2005) found that state affect significantly predicted state job satisfaction such that individuals reporting higher levels of negative affect also reported lower levels of state job satisfaction. Thus, although subsequent experience with a web site will alter a person's initial affective reaction to the website, it is also the case that the initial affective reaction may cause the person to interpret their subsequent experience with the website in a way that is consistent with this initial affective reaction. This provides the foundation for the next hypothesis.

H₄: Applicant's attitude toward the web site will be positively influenced by their initial affective reactions.

Next, research suggests that perceptions of web site usability will influence applicant reactions to the web site. A study by Braddy et al. (2003) operationalized navigational ease as the number of web pages one had to navigate through to acquire the desired information. Using a student sample, Braddy et al. (2003) found that participants in an easy navigation condition reported being more willing to apply for the position being advertised as well as reporting more favorable evaluations of the organization. Additionally, Palmer (2002) examined the relation between the five key system features defined previously and the users' perceived web site success. Web site success was examined by user ratings of satisfaction, likelihood that they would return to the site, and how frequently they used the site. Results suggested that users reporting higher levels of web site usability also reported higher levels of perceived web site success. Given this, the following is hypothesized.

H_{5a}: Applicant's attitude toward the web site will be positively influenced by their perceptions of usability.

Going beyond the above two hypothesis, it is also possible that usability perceptions may partially mediate the relation between initial affective reactions to the website and the applicants subsequent attitude towards the website. That is, although we expect a certain amount of consistency between the initial affective reactions and subsequent evaluation of the web site, it is possible that some of this relationship may be dependent on the perceived usability of the web site. This leads to the next hypothesis.

H_{5b}: Perceptions of usability will partially mediate the relation between initial affective reactions and the applicant's attitude toward the web site.

Post-viewing attitude may also influence subsequent applicant behavior. This is supported by the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) which asserts that individuals form beliefs about an object (e.g. a web site) by observing its characteristics. These beliefs are then used to develop attitudes toward the object. Behavioral intentions have been found to be partly a function of the attitude toward the object (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1973). In regards to the present study, if the individual has a very favorable attitude toward the web site, the individual's intention to apply, or attraction to the organization, will be stronger.

Additionally, in recruitment research, characteristics of the recruiter have been found to influence attraction toward the organization (Taylor & Bergmann, 1987). Applying this to web-based recruitment, Cober et al. (2004) suggest that applicant attraction will be influenced by their post-viewing attitude toward the site.

H_{6a}: Applicant attraction will be positively influenced by attitudes toward the web site.

Additionally, more distal attitudes (initial affective reactions to the website) are less likely to impact behavior than more proximal attitudes (attitude toward the website). This provides the support for the next hypothesis,

H_{6b}: Applicant's attitude toward the web site will mediate the relation between initial affective reactions to the web site and applicant attraction.

Perceptions of usability may also influence applicant attraction. Williamson, Lepak, and King (2003) had a sample of business students evaluate web sites and then rate these sites on ease of use. The results of this study indicate that individuals perceiving greater usability also reported higher levels of organizational attractiveness. Similarly, using a sample of more than 20,000 applicants for sales-oriented positions at several international corporations, Sinar, Reynolds, and Paquet (2003) found that perceptions of usability significantly predicted participants' impressions of the organization.

As previously discussed, an individual's perceptions of usability may contribute to his/her post-viewing web site attitude and influence applicant attraction. The previous research has failed to examine these three variables together though. An individual's perceptions of usability may contribute to his/her post-viewing web site attitude and this attitude may influence his/her attraction to the organization. This logic leads to the following hypothesis.

H_{6c}: Applicant's attitude toward the web site will mediate the relation between perceptions of usability and applicant attraction.

The Present Study

The purpose of the present study is to identify the potential effect of specific web site characteristics on applicant reactions to the web site and the organization. The study tests several relationships from the model proposed by Cober et al. (2004), including the selected variables of aesthetics, prior attitude toward the organization, initial affective reactions, perceptions of usability, post-viewing attitude toward the web site, and attraction to the organization. Specifically, the model tested in this study is presented in Figure 2.

METHOD

Participants

Participants consisted of 159 undergraduate students (105 female, 54 male) who were recruited through the Department of Psychology's Subject Pool. In exchange for completing the study, participants received research credit in one of their courses.

Materials

The web sites from existing organizations used in the present study were pre-selected based on several criteria. The sites were first selected to ensure that jobs were offered by the organization that would be of interest and relevance to the participants. Given that participants were not screened by major, organizations featuring a broad range of positions were selected. A preliminary set of web sites were then selected based on the aesthetic characteristics outlined previously (i.e. unity and contrast). The web sites were first evaluated by the researcher on the two dimensions. The selected sites from eight organizations were then rated by four undergraduate and graduate psychology students. Each individual received training from the researcher regarding the web site design characteristics. Specifically, the investigator provided detailed explanations of each characteristic and provided examples from Williams (2000). The raters were also asked to identify characteristics on sample web sites prior to rating the pre-selected sites. The raters then browsed the web sites and filled out an evaluation of the site indicating the extent to which the site exhibited the characteristics of unity and contrast (See Appendix A). The average interrater reliability for these ratings of unity and contrast of the websites was .73. Based on these evaluations, four web sites were selected (based on the highest

inter-rater agreement) that fulfilled the four categories to be examined: high unity and contrast, low unity and contrast, high unity and low contrast, low unity and high contrast.

The site with high unity and high contrast featured a single alignment throughout the pages, items were grouped together appropriately (e.g. headers were close to the corresponding paragraph), the layout of each page was repeated throughout the site (e.g. the same toolbar on each page, consistent placement of images), and a hierarchy of information was created with the use of a focal image and bold characters. The site classified as high unity and low contrast used a single alignment throughout most of the pages, grouped relevant items together, and repeated the layout of information on each page but did not have a focal point on the pages and did not consistently have a clear hierarchy of information. The web site with low unity and high contrast used more than one alignment on most pages and had space between headlines and the respective information such that the spacing was equal throughout the page creating no relationships between the information. Repetition was used throughout the site. Also, there was a focal point on each page as well as larger headings at the top of the pages and different colors were used to contrast headings from the other information. Finally, the site classified as low unity and low contrast used more than one alignment on most pages, did not consistently place items together, used some repeating elements (e.g. toolbar and headline format), and lacked a focal point on most pages and a clear hierarchy of information.

Instruments

Prior attitude toward the organization. Participants completed a measure of their prior attitude toward an organization. This was assessed using a measure created by

Turban et al. (1998) and modified by Cable and Turban (2003) (See Appendix B). Turban et al. (1998) developed the measure to be used in assessing organization reputation. In line with Turban et al. (1998), two indicators of prior attitude will be used given that there are “methodological advantages in having multiple indicators of a latent variable when conducting structural equation modeling.” (p. 32). Specifically, the measure is comprised of seven items, four of which assess reputation perceptions and three which assess familiarity with the organization. The present study found that the four-item scale of reputation perceptions has a coefficient alpha of .87 and the three-item scale of familiarity has a coefficient alpha of .93. The combined scale has a coefficient alpha of .91. All items were answered on a five point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

Initial affective reactions toward the web site. Participants also completed a measure of their initial affective reactions toward the web site. This was examined using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) (Watson et al., 1988) (See Appendix C). The internal consistency reliabilities were found to be .94, for PA, and .78, for NA. All items were answered on a five point Likert-type scale (1 = *very slightly or not at all*, 5 = *extremely*).

Perceptions of web site usability. Perceptions of usability were assessed using Palmer’s (2002) measure of web site usability and design (See Appendix D). This instrument includes eighteen items which are answered on a seven point Likert-type scale. The five dimensions of usability are assessed, including navigation (e.g., I find it easy to get this web site to do what I want it to do, 1 = *strongly agree*, 7 = *strongly*

disagree), responsiveness (e.g., This web site provides information such as Frequently Asked Questions, 1 = *the site is poor on this dimension*, 7 = *the site is terrific on this dimension*), interactivity (e.g., This web site offers customization, 1 = *poor*, 7 = *terrific*), content (e.g., The amount of information displayed on the screen was, 1 = *inadequate*, 7 = *adequate*), and transition speed (e.g., The rate at which the information was displayed was, 1 = *fast enough*, 7 = *too slow*). The five constructs in this instrument were found to be reliable with Cronbach's alphas ranging from 0.78 (responsiveness) to 0.96 (transition speed). The alpha for the overall scale is .90.

Post-viewing attitude toward the web site. Participants completed a measure of their post-viewing attitudes toward the web site itself. Attitude toward the web site was measured using a ten item questionnaire (See Appendix E). Responses to all questions were on a seven point Likert-type scale. Items from three scales were used to comprise this measure. Five items were used from Biehal, Stephens, and Curlo's (1992) questionnaire used to evaluate attitude toward an ad. Additionally, Coulter and Punj (1999) assessed attitude toward an ad with a three item questionnaire.. However, two of these items overlap with Biehal et al. (1992) (i.e., like/dislike, good/bad). As such, only the third item was used (favorable/unfavorable). Madden et al. (1988) used seven items to examine ad evaluation. Three of the items overlapped with the previous measures (i.e. like/dislike, good/bad, interesting/boring). The remaining four items were used for the present study (i.e. pleasant/unpleasant, tasteful/tasteless, refined/vulgar, artful/artless). The ten item scale was found to be reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of .94.

Applicant attraction. Finally, post-viewing attitudes toward the organization was assessed using a measure of organizational attractiveness created by Highhouse et al. (2003) (See Appendix F). The questionnaire consists of fifteen items, answered on a five point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). It includes questions examining the three components of organizational attraction including general attractiveness (e.g., For me, this company would be a great place to work), intentions to pursue (e.g., I would accept a job offer from this company), and prestige (e.g., This company probably has a reputation as being an excellent employer). The present study found that the Cronbach's alpha for the general attractiveness subscale was .55; for the intentions to pursue subscale as well as the prestige subscale alpha was .91. The Cronbach's alpha for the combined scale is .91.

Procedure

Before participants began, the researcher briefly described the study and answered any questions. The participants then completed the questionnaire regarding their prior attitudes toward the organization. Once completed, they viewed the first page of the recruitment section of a pre-selected web site for 15 seconds. Participants then completed the measure of initial affective reactions. They then viewed the web site for 6 minutes. The participants were told to examine the website as if they were trying to determine whether or not they would want to apply to this organization. Participants were also instructed to browse only the pages of the web site with career, job, and general company information and to avoid navigating to pages about specific products or services. At the end of this period they completed the measure of perceptions of usability as well as

attitudes toward the web site and the organization. The participants completed this procedure for four web sites (high unity and contrast, low unity and contrast, high unity and low contrast, low unity and high contrast). The order that the web sites were viewed was randomized across participants. Upon completion, participants were debriefed.

Data Analysis

Multi-level modeling (also known as hierarchical linear modeling, mixed models, etc) was used rather than traditional repeated measures analysis of variance. Multi-level modeling accommodates time-varying predictors unlike other methods. Repeated measures are at the within person level, or Level 1, and persons are Level 2. All predictors are at level 1 in the present study. For the predictor variables, random intercepts, and random slopes for predictors with significant slope variance across persons were modeled for all significance tests while effect size calculations were based on fixed slopes.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the variables of interest including means, standard deviations, and correlations. All variables are significantly correlated with each other except for negative affective which is significantly correlated with only perceptions of usability and post-viewing attitude toward the site.

Hypothesis Testing

To begin, the intra-class correlation (ICC) for the initial affective reactions variable (i.e. positive affect) was calculated. The ICC is a measure of the degree of dependency created by the repeated measurement between individuals. An ICC of zero indicates that the observations are independent, or that the Level 2 variable (i.e. persons) accounted for none of the variability. The ICC1 was .42 indicating a fairly large degree of dependency, which is to be expected with a repeated measures design. This indicates that the use of multi-level modeling is appropriate and the Level 2 variable must be taken into account.

Hypothesis 1_a stated that initial affective reactions would be more positive when viewing a site with a high level of unity. To test hypothesis 1_a, initial affective reactions from the two sites possessing high unity were compared to reactions from the two sites with low unity. Positive affective reactions were found to differ based on levels of unity ($F(473.13) = 113.59, p < .001$). Specifically, positive affective reactions were higher for sites possessing high unity ($M = 2.61$) compared to sites with low unity ($M = 2.08$). The unique effect size was .19, this is also referred to as the “pseudo r^2 ” (Cohen, Cohen,

West, & Aiken, 2003) or the reduction in residual variance (within-person). Negative affective reactions did not significantly differ between sites with high and low unity.

Similarly, hypothesis 1_b stated that initial affective reactions would be more positive when viewing a site with a high level of contrast. The initial affective reactions from the two sites with high contrast were compared to the two sites possessing low contrast. Positive affective reactions were found to differ based on levels of contrast ($F(472.3) = 7.99, p = .005$). Specifically, positive affective reactions were higher for sites with high contrast ($M = 2.42$) compared to sites with low contrast ($M = 2.27$). The pseudo r^2 however was only .015. Interestingly, negative affective reactions were also found to differ based on levels on contrast such that sites with higher contrast were associated with somewhat higher levels of negative affect ($M = 1.1$) compared to sites with low contrast ($M = 1.07$). The unique effect size, or pseudo r^2 , however was only .01.

Hypothesis 2, that prior attitudes toward the organization would moderate the relation between web site aesthetics and initial affective reactions, was not supported. However, there was a significant main effect for prior attitude toward the organization ($t(491.33) = 4.94, p < .001$).

Hypothesis 3 suggested that overall perceptions of usability would be positively related to initial affective reactions. This hypothesis was supported. The results indicated a significant positive relation between positive affect and usability ($t(108.17) = 8.86, p < .001$). The unique effect size was .14. On average, a one unit increase in positive affect was associated with a .41 unit increase in perceptions of usability. Negative affective reactions were not found to be a significant predictor of perceptions of usability however

it was approaching significance ($p = .051$). It is possible that range restriction may have weakened this effect as negative affective reactions varied very little ($M = 1.08, SD = .22$).

Hypothesis 4 stated that an individual's post-viewing attitude toward the site would be positively related to initial affective reactions. This hypothesis was also supported ($t(110.76) = 13.53, p < .001$) with a pseudo $r^2 = .311$. A one unit increase in positive affect was associated with a .69 unit change in post-viewing attitude toward the site. Additionally, negative affective reactions were negatively related to post-viewing attitudes ($t(19.17) = -2.73, p = .013$), but the unique effect size was only .01.

Hypothesis 5_a, that post-viewing attitude toward the site would be positively related to perceptions of usability, was supported ($t(112.3) = 25.6, p < .001$). The unique effect size was .56. On average, a one unit increase in perceptions of usability was associated with a .88 increase in post-viewing attitude toward the site. Hypothesis 5_b stated that perceptions of usability would partially mediate the relation between initial affective reactions and individual's attitude toward the web site. Using Baron and Kenny's (1986) approach, evidence for this is provided when the regression coefficient for positive affective reactions significantly predicts post-viewing attitude toward the site ($B = .69, p < .001$), when the regression coefficient for affective reactions significantly predicts perceptions of usability ($B = .41, p < .001$), the regression coefficient for usability perceptions significantly predicts post-viewing attitude ($B = .87, p < .001$), and when the regression coefficient for usability perceptions remains significant after controlling for affective reactions ($B = .78, p < .001$). Full mediation is supported if

affective reactions no longer significantly predict post-viewing attitude; partial mediation is supported if affective reactions are still a significant predictor ($B = .33, p < .001$). This hypothesis, suggesting partial mediation, was supported. To test the significance of the indirect path, the Sobel product of coefficients approach was used (Sobel, 1982). The mediating effect was found to be significant, $z = 8.4, p < .001$.

Hypothesis 6_a suggested that applicant attraction to the organization would be positively related to post-viewing attitudes toward the web site. This hypothesis was supported ($t(99.24) = 21.09, p < .001$) with a pseudo r^2 of .486. On average, a one unit increase in post-viewing attitude was associated with a .50 increase in attraction to the organization. Hypothesis 6_b which stated that individual's attitude toward the web site would mediate the relation between initial affective reactions, specifically positive affect, and applicant attraction was partially supported. A series of multi-level regression analyses provided evidence for partial mediation (i.e. positive affective reactions were a significant predictor of attraction to the organization after controlling for post-viewing attitude toward the site). The significance of the indirect path was tested, again using the Sobel approach. The mediating effect was found to be significant, $z = 10.48, p < .001$. Hypothesis 6_c, that individual's attitude toward the site would mediate the relation between perceptions of usability and applicant attraction was also partially supported. Another series of regression analyses were done which provided support for partial mediation (i.e. usability was a significant predictor of attraction to the organization after controlling for post-viewing attitude toward the site). Using the Sobel test, the indirect path was found to be significant, $z = 11.34, p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the impact of aesthetic characteristics on an individual's reaction to a web site and the organization. Specifically, the design characteristics of unity and contrast were examined. The results suggested that initial affective reactions differed as a function of the aesthetic characteristics of the web sites. Specifically, sites with high unity were found to elicit more positive initial affective reactions than sites with low unity. Likewise, sites possessing high contrast were associated with more positive initial affective reactions than sites with low contrast. This provides further support for the proposition that aesthetic characteristics influence user's reactions to the site.

Secondly, it was hypothesized that prior attitude toward the organization would moderate the relation between aesthetic characteristics and initial affective reactions. This was not supported; however there was a significant main effect for prior attitude toward the organization.

As hypothesized, initial affective reactions positively influenced perceptions of usability. This is in line with previous research by Tractinsky et al. (2000) and Zhang and Li (2005) which found that affective reactions to different technology were related to perceptions of ease of use such that more positive affective reactions were associated with more positive ratings of usability. Additionally, as previously suggested, negative affective reactions had very little influence on perceptions of usability. This is likely because the web sites did not evoke high degrees of negative affect, which is in line with Cober et al. (2004) proposed view of negative affective reactions.

Hypothesis 4, that an individual's attitude toward the web site would be positively influenced by their initial affective reactions, was supported. Specifically, reports of higher positive affect were associated with more positive attitudes toward the web site. This supports the logic that a person's initial affective reaction may cause them to interpret their later experience with the site consistent with their initial reaction. Again, negative affective reactions were examined, and while it was a significant predictor of attitude toward the web site, such reactions accounted for little of the residual variance.

Next, as hypothesized, perceptions of usability were found to positively influence post-viewing attitude toward the web site. Palmer (2002) found similar results; individuals reporting higher levels of usability also reported higher levels of perceived web site success (e.g. satisfaction, intentions to return to site). These findings suggest that usability should be an important consideration for organizations when designing their web site as it can influence the user's overall attitude toward the site. Hypothesis 5_b, that perceptions of usability would partially mediate the relation between initial affective reactions and the individual's attitude toward the site, was supported. This lends support to the logic that part of the reason why the initial affective reaction is predictive of the eventual attitude toward the website is because these initial affective reactions are predictive of usability perceptions.

Hypothesis 6_a was supported, suggesting that post-viewing attitude toward the web site positively influenced attraction to the organization. This is consistent with the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) as well as research by Ajzen and Fishbein (1973) which has found that behavioral intentions are partially the function of attitudes

toward the object. Specifically, in the present study, more positive attitudes toward the site were associated with higher levels of attraction to the organization. Next, it was hypothesized that one's attitude toward the site would mediate the relation between initial affective reactions to the site and attraction to the organization. Results provided support that post-viewing attitude partially mediated this relation. While it was proposed that proximal attitudes would be more likely to impact behavioral intentions than distal attitudes, this result suggests that attraction is also partially dependent on initial reactions to the site. Finally, hypothesis 6_c stated that one's attitude toward the site would mediate the relation between perceptions of usability and attraction to the organization. This hypothesis was partially supported; again, results provided support for partial mediation. Given this, perceptions of usability influence post-viewing attitude which in turn influences attraction, but these perceptions also directly influence attraction to the organization.

Practical Implications and Future Research

The present study underscores the importance of designing organization's recruitment web sites well. Design characteristics, such as unity and contrast can influence an individual's initial reaction to the site. In turn those initial reactions to the site have the potential to influence their decision to apply to the organization and return to the site. Given that there was a significant difference in reactions to the sites after only viewing the first page of the site for fifteen seconds, it is suggested that organizations should pay special attention to the first page that job seeker's are presented with, using established design characteristics. Additionally, organizations should emphasize making

the web site user friendly. Perceptions of usability can also influence a job seeker's attitude about the site itself and about the organization. To ensure that the web site is easy for job seeker's to use, organizations should conduct usability testing using individuals with no experience using the site. While recent research has emphasized the need to discourage unqualified job seekers from being attracted to the organization (Dineen, Ling, Ash, DelVecchio, 2007), features such as aesthetics and usability are likely to influence qualified job seekers as well.

Given the support found by the present study for a portion of the model proposed by Cober et al. (2003), future research should examine the other relations in the model. Specifically, it would be very beneficial to gather information about the participant's browsing/search behavior on the site. It is likely that an individual's attitude toward the site and the organization is at least partially a function of the information they encountered on the site.

Limitations

The present study may be limited due to its use of undergraduate students as participants. The participants in the present study were not searching for a job at the time of the study. However, this sample may be very appropriate given that they have likely experienced looking for a job or internship or will in the near future. According to Pew Internet and American Life (2002), 61% of the 18-29 year olds surveyed had used the internet to look for a job in contrast to 42% of 30-49 year olds and 27% of people 50-64 years old.

The use of actual web sites allowed a realistic experience for participants but it reduced the ability to contribute the findings to the aesthetic characteristics alone. Participants may have had prior experience using the site and therefore already developed an attitude toward the site and the organization. The present study examined participants' prior attitude toward the organization with ratings of familiarity and reputation but did not gather specific information about prior use of the site itself. Future studies should obtain this information from participants. Additionally, while the aesthetic characteristics were measured, there may be other differences between the sites that contributed to this difference (e.g. amount of information, pictures, etc). To avoid these limitations, it is possible to create sites for the specific purpose of the study. However, creating web sites using the design characteristics of interest may have resulted in such artificial web sites that the findings may not be practical. Specifically, a web site designed for the study could have been very poorly made, clearly exhibiting low unity and low contrast; however it is unlikely that such a web site would actually be encountered when looking for a job. It may be possible to design a site based off of an existing site to help maintain the realism.

Finally, the order in which participants completed the measures may have influenced their responses. Specifically, participants responded to the usability questionnaire followed by the measure of post-viewing attitude toward the site and attraction to the organization. As such, completing the usability measure may have primed the participants to respond in a certain manner, likely a consistent manner, to the subsequent questions.

Conclusion

With the popularity and wide-spread use of organization web sites as a recruitment tool, it is important for organization's to be informed when designing their site. Specifically, as the present study has found, it is important to use established design characteristics as well as techniques for improving usability. Initial affective reactions to the site, perceptions of usability, and post-viewing attitude toward the site can all impact a job seeker's attraction to the organization.

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APPENDICES

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Scale Reliabilities, and Correlations Among Variables.

Measure	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Prior Attitude Toward the Org.	3.41	.91	.91					
2. PA	2.34	.90	.36**	.94				
3. NA	1.09	.22	-.06	.08	.78			
4. Usability	5.2	1.07	.36**	.32**	-.09**	.90		
5. Post-viewing Attitude Toward the Site	5.18	1.23	.44**	.41**	-.10*	.76**	.94	
6. Attraction to the Org.	3.30	.92	.38**	.41**	-.04	.53**	.61**	.91

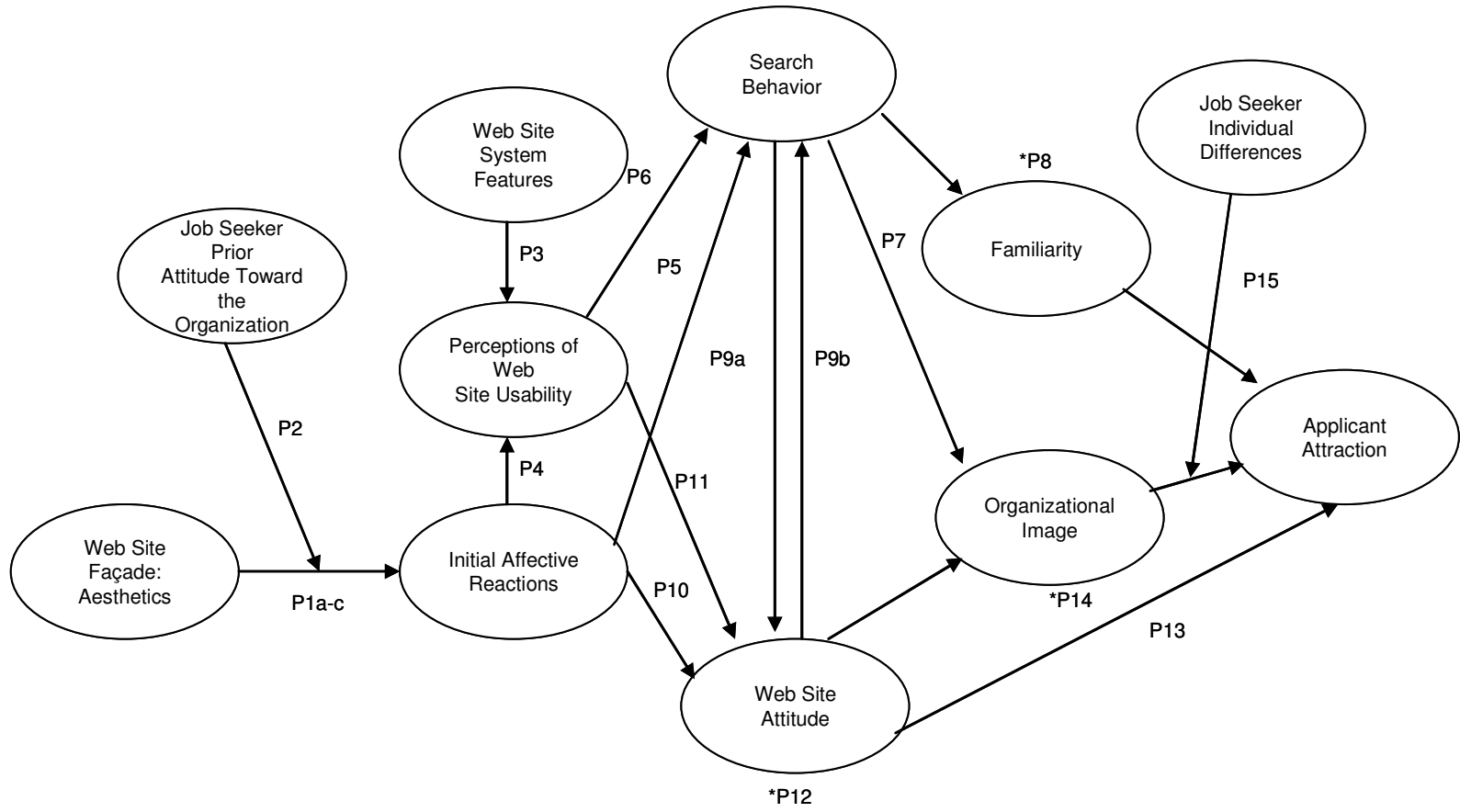
Note: Reliabilities for scales found in diagonal where appropriate

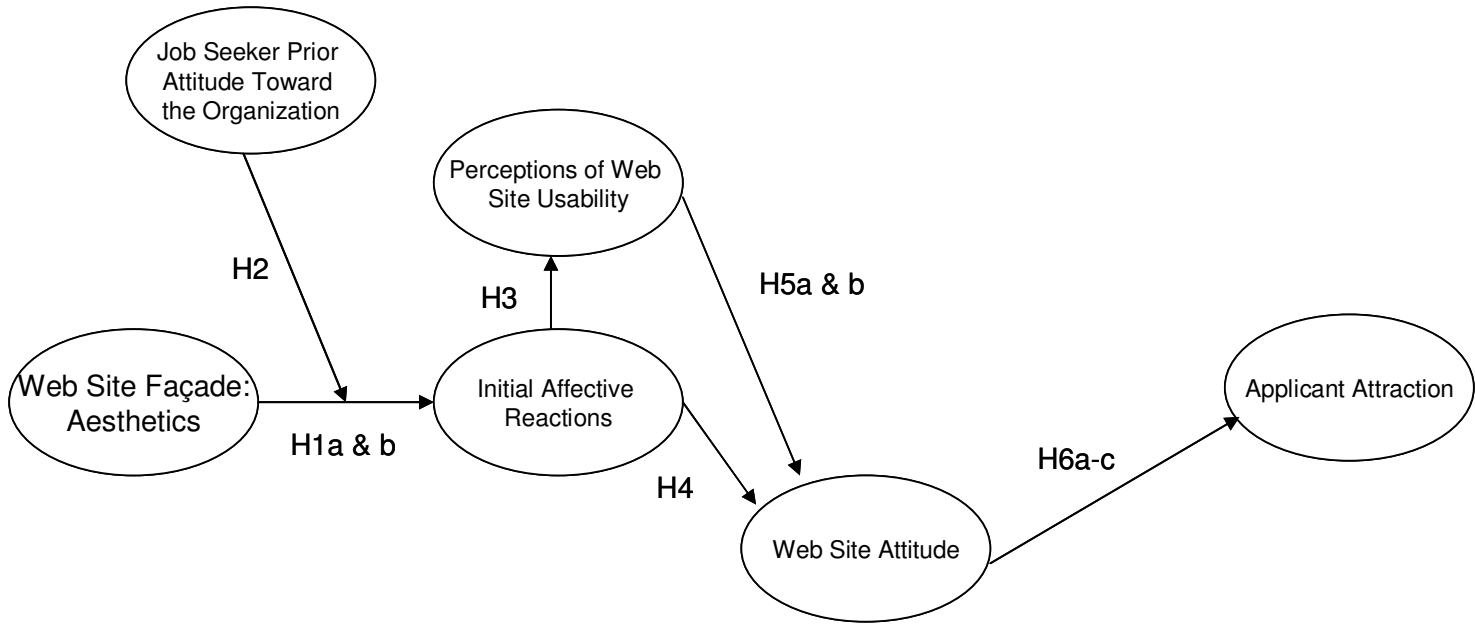
* $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Conceptual model of job seekers' reactions to and use of organizational web sites (Cober et al., 2004).

Figure 2. Model tested in the present study (adapted from Cober et al., 2004).





Appendix A: Web Site Evaluation Survey

URL: _____

Org.: _____

Alignment

- Items on each page are lined up with each other;
- One alignment is used consistently throughout each page.
- Horizontal as well as vertical alignment should be considered.

This web site...

Has all items on each page lined up with each other vertically

- Yes, all items are lined up
- Most or some of the items are aligned
- No, the items are not lined up with each other

Uses one alignment (e.g. left aligned, centered, right aligned) throughout each page

- Yes, one alignment is used throughout the page
- Two alignments are used
- No, multiple alignments are used throughout the page

Is aligned horizontally

- Yes, the web site is aligned both horizontally
- Most or some of the items are aligned horizontally
- No, this site is not aligned horizontally

Proximity

- Items that belong together are grouped together
- Headlines and respective paragraphs are near each other
- Spacing is used to separate unrelated elements

On this web site...

Items that belong together are clearly grouped together

- Yes, all the items are clearly organized
- Most of the items that belong together are grouped together
- No, it is unclear which items belong together

Headlines and the appropriate paragraphs are near each other

- Yes, headings and paragraphs are near each other
- Most paragraphs are near their related heading
- No, headlines and paragraphs are not near each other

Spacing is used to separate unrelated elements

- Yes, elements of the web site are separated clearly with spacing
- Most unrelated elements are separated by spacing
- No, spacing is not used to separate unrelated elements

Spacing is not used to separate section/paragraph headlines from the corresponding paragraph/information

- Yes, spacing is not used to separate headlines from the corresponding information
- Most headlines are not separated by spacing from the corresponding information
- No, spacing is used to separate headlines from corresponding information

Repetition

- Each page looks like they belong to the same company
- Colors, shapes, layout, or navigation buttons are repeated on each page
- On single pages, colors, shapes, or font are used repeatedly

On this web site...

Every page looks as though it is from the same company

- Yes, it is clear that each page belongs to the same company
- Most pages look like they came from the same company
- No, each page is different and looks as though it could be from a different company

Each page uses similar colors, shapes, layout, or navigation buttons

- Yes, similar colors, shapes, layout, and/or navigation buttons are used on each page
- Most or some pages have similar colors, shapes, layout, and/or navigation buttons
- No, each page uses different colors, shapes, layout, and/or navigation buttons

Individual pages repeatedly use similar colors, shapes, or fonts

- Yes, the page uses similar colors, shapes, and/or fonts repeatedly
- Some colors, shapes, or fonts are used at least twice but not throughout the page
- No, colors, shapes, and/or fonts are used more than once

Contrast

- Different elements are made to look very different
- A focal point is present on the page, creating a hierarchy of information
- Different colors, fonts, and/or graphics are used to draw your eye around the page

On this web site...

Elements that are supposed to be different look different

- Yes, different elements are distinctly different
- Some elements that are different look different but it is not always clear
- No, elements that are different do not clearly look different

There is a clear focal point on this web site

- Yes, there is a focal point
- No, there is no focal point

My eye moved around the page because of the use of different colors, fonts and/or graphics

- Yes, the colors, fonts, and/or graphics helped draw my eye around the page
- At times the colors, fonts, and/or graphics helped draw my eye around the page
- The colors, fonts, and/or graphics did not draw my eye around the page

Appendix B: Prior Attitude Toward the Organization Survey

(Cable & Turban, 2003)

Please respond to the following questions about this organization: _____

	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
I believe this is a company with a good public image.	1	2	3	4	5
I have heard a lot of good things about this company.	1	2	3	4	5
I believe this is a company with a good reputation.	1	2	3	4	5
This company has an excellent reputation on campus.	1	2	3	4	5
I know quite a bit about this company.	1	2	3	4	5
I am very familiar with this company.	1	2	3	4	5
I am familiar with this company's products or services.	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix C: Initial Affective Reactions Survey

(Watson et al., 1988)

Please answer the following questions in reference to the web site you just viewed.
Remember what you were feeling when you initially viewed the site.

To what extent did this web site make you feel...

	Very Slightly or Not At All	A Little	Moderately	Quite A Bit	Extremely
Interested	1	2	3	4	5
Distressed	1	2	3	4	5
Excited	1	2	3	4	5
Upset	1	2	3	4	5
Strong	1	2	3	4	5
Guilty	1	2	3	4	5
Scared	1	2	3	4	5
Hostile	1	2	3	4	5
Enthusiastic	1	2	3	4	5
Proud	1	2	3	4	5
Irritable	1	2	3	4	5
Alert	1	2	3	4	5
Ashamed	1	2	3	4	5
Inspired	1	2	3	4	5
Nervous	1	2	3	4	5
Determined	1	2	3	4	5
Attentive	1	2	3	4	5
Jittery	1	2	3	4	5
Active	1	2	3	4	5
Afraid	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix D: Usability Survey

(Palmer, 2002)

URL: _____

Please rate the web site on the following criteria using a 1 to 7 scale.

	Poor on this Dimension					Terrific on this Dimension	
a. Effective organization	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
b. Provides good career information	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
c. Presents a variety of careers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
d. Provides information such as FAQs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
e. Provides feedback mechanisms	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
f. Offers customization	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
g. Provides significant user interaction	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Please circle the response that best reflects your opinion of the web site you just used.

	Strongly Agree					Strongly Disagree	
1. I find it easy to get this Web site to do what I want it to do.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. I intend to browse this Web site again this semester.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. I intend to browse this Web site frequently in the future.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Inadequate					Adequate	
4. The amount of information displayed on the screen was:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Confusing					Clear	
5. The sequence of obtaining information was:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Not Predictable					Predictable	
6. The information on succeeding links from the initial page was:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Frustrating					Satisfying	
7. The Web site was:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Never					Always	
8. The layout of pages made tasks easier.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

	Too Slow						Fast Enough
9. The speed in which the computer provided information was:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. The rate at which the information was displayed was:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Very Unlikely						Very Likely
11. If you had a future need for information/service presented in this Web site, how likely is it that you would consider returning/using this site?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Appendix E: Post-viewing Attitude Toward the Web Site Survey

(Biehal et al., 1992; Coulter & Punj, 1999; Madden et al., 1988)

Please respond to the following items based on the web site you just viewed.

I thought this web site was...

Bad							Good
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Boring							Interesting
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Uncreative							Creative
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Uninformative							Informative
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Unpleasant							Pleasant
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Tasteless							Tasteful
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Unlikable							Likeable
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Unfavorable							Favorable
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Vulgar							Refined
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Artless							Artful
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Appendix F: Attraction to the Organization Survey

(Highhouse et al., 2003)

Please answer the following questions about the organization whose web site you just viewed. For all questions 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

	Strongly Agree				Strongly Disagree
1. For me, this company would be a good place to work.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I would not be interested in this company except as a last resort.	1	2	3	4	5
3. This company is attractive to me as a place for employment.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I am interested in learning more about this company.	1	2	3	4	5
5. A job at this company is very appealing to me.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I would accept a job offer from this company.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I would make this company one of my first choices as an employer.	1	2	3	4	5
8. If this company invited me for a job interview, I would go.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I would exert a great deal of effort to work for this company.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I would recommend this company to a friend looking for a job.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Employees are probably proud to say they work at this company.	1	2	3	4	5
12. This is a reputable company to work for.	1	2	3	4	5
13. This company probably has a reputation as being an excellent employer.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I would find this company a prestigious place to work.	1	2	3	4	5
15. There are probably many who would like to work at this company.	1	2	3	4	5