Received: 1 October 2021 | Revised: 24 April 2022 | Accepted: 19 June 2022

DOI: 10.1111/ijsa.12394

RESEARCH ARTICLE

International Journal of Selection and Assessment | Wiley

# Response to a crisis and applicant attraction: Signaling employer brand personality and organizational trust through warm and competent COVID-19 responses

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**Funding information**
Higher Education Commision, Pakistan

## Abstract

This paper investigates how organizations' response to a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic affects their employer attractiveness. Based on signaling theory, we argue that a COVID-19 response can signal an organization's employer brand personality, positively affecting applicant attraction. We conducted two experimental studies with employed and unemployed UK participants through Prolific Academic. Both studies indicate that a warm COVID-19 response leads to the highest employer attractiveness and job pursuit intentions, although a competent response was still more attractive than no response. Moreover, applicants use the warm and competent responses as signals of organizational warmth and competence respectively, building higher organizational trust. Limited support for the moderating role of applicants' personality was found. Implications during and beyond COVID-19 are discussed.

**KEYWORDS**
applicant attraction, competence, COVID-19, COVID-19 response, crisis, employer attractiveness, employer brand personality, job pursuit intentions, personality, trust, warmth

## Practitioner points

a. **What is currently known about the topic of your study**;
   - The COVID-19 pandemic compelled organizations to respond.
   - An organization's communication can signal its employer brand personality.
   - Employer brand personality can be evaluated based on warmth and competence.

b. **What your paper adds to this**;
   - Communicating a response to COVID-19 can help in attracting applicants.
   - A COVID-19 response can signal organizational warmth and competence.
   - A warm or competent response to a crisis can increase applicants' trust.
   - Limited support for the moderating role of applicants' personality was found.

c. **The implications of your study findings for practitioners**;
   - Respond to crises such as COVID-19 to enhance applicant attraction and trust.
   - Share attractive COVID-19 responses on the company website or through press.
   - Build applicants' trust, in times of crisis, through warm or competent messages.

  

- Emphasize warmth in the COVID-19 response to attract applicants and motivate them to apply.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

> "In this unprecedented time, P&G will be there for the employees, consumers, and communities who have always been there for us…" (https://us.pg.com/covid19/).

> "To meet the global challenge of COVID-19…IBM has resources…like supercomputing power, virus tracking and an AI assistant to answer citizens' questions…" (https://www.ibm.com/be-en/impact/covid-19)

To survive the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and remain attractive employers, organizations need to respond to this crisis and share their response with their stakeholders (Argenti, 2020). Consequently, employers are using different ways to communicate their COVID-19 response. For instance, some are emphasizing organization's warmth and support in their response (see P&G's response above), whereas others are highlighting their competence and skills to deal with this crisis (as shown in IBM response). Yet, there are others, which are communicating no or only limited COVID-19 response (e.g., H&M, https://www2.hm.com/nl_be/customer-service/h-m-coronavirus/information.html). Hence, how an organization communicates its response to a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic is a relevant question to evaluate its attractiveness as an employer. This is especially true for potential applicants. While searching for jobs, many applicants received information about an organization's COVID-19 response, either through organizational website or news stories in the press. Prior research has shown that applicants use sources such as website or press to evaluate potential employers (Theurer et al., 2021; Van Hoye & Lievens, 2005). However, little is known in terms of whether and how the COVID-19 response communicated via such sources could enhance applicant attraction.

Based on signaling theory (Spence, 1973), we expect that applicants use an organization's crisis response as a signal to make judgements about the organization as an employer. Moreover, we propose that developing a COVID-19 response in a way that signals the organization's employer brand personality will lead to positive perceptions regarding its employer brand and attractiveness. In terms of employer brand personality, an organization can be perceived along two fundamental meta-dimensions: warmth and competence (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). Organizational warmth reflects the extent to which an organization or employer is perceived as warm and well intentioned, whereas organizational competence reflects its ability and skill to act on its intentions. Research has shown that applicants' perceptions about an employer's warmth and competence affect their attraction towards the organization (Carpentier et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2021). However, we do not yet know how these dimensions can be deliberately signaled by organizations to manage their employer brand. Therefore, we conceptualize a warm COVID-19 response as one that signals the organization's warmth, friendliness, and support in responding to the pandemic, whereas a competent COVID-19 response as one that communicates organization's competence and capability to deal with it.

Accordingly, we propose that a warm (competent) COVID-19 response will signal organizational warmth (competence) and therefore positively affect potential applicants' employer attractiveness perceptions and job pursuit intentions. Furthermore, based on the supplementary fit perspective (Kristof, 1996), we expect that potential applicants' own personality dimensions (agreeableness and conscientiousness) will moderate the effect of a warm or competent COVID-19 response on their attraction. We test these propositions in two experimental studies. In Study 1, we examined the effect of a warm and a competent COVID-19 response (compared to no or a limited response) on applicant attraction by displaying these responses on an organization's official website. In Study 2, we combined warmth and competence in an organization's response to negative COVID-19 publicity and investigated organizational trust as an additional mediating mechanism.

The paper advances signaling theory by examining how communication during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic can signal employer attractiveness. The theoretical mechanisms (perceived organizational warmth and competence in Study 1 and organizational trust in Study 2) help to explain how and why a certain COVID-19 response is considered attractive. Additionally, the supplementary fit perspective informs about the specific conditions under which applicants might favor certain signals. Practically, this study is useful for organizations looking for ways to manage their employer brand and attraction, during and beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

## 2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

### 2.1 | Signaling theory

Signaling theory is one of the central theories in recruitment research. It is used to understand how potential applicants use information about organizations to make inferences about them as a place to work (Connelly et al., 2011). The theory relies on the information asymmetry principle (Bangerter et al., 2012). It suggests that since applicants have limited employment information, they rely on signals provided by organizations (e.g., organizational communication, interviewer activities) or from third parties (e.g.,

press, social media, word-of-mouth) to build impressions about employers (Wilhelmy et al., 2017). These pieces of information help applicants in deducing the specific characteristics of an organization's employer brand personality that in turn drive its employer attractiveness (Carpentier et al., 2019). During the pandemic, the COVID-19 response is an important piece of information for applicants. Hence, we argue that it can act as signal and can thus impact applicant attraction by signaling the organization's employer brand personality (i.e., organizational warmth and competence).

## 2.2 | Organizational warmth and competence

Similar to people, organizations too are evaluated based on two universal social perception dimensions: warmth/intention and competence/ability (Aaker et al., 2010; Kervyn et al., 2012). Warmth reflects perceptions of the extent to which an organization is well intentioned, pro-social, and sincere. Competence reflects its capability, intelligence, and skill to act on its intentions. The use of warmth and competence as two meta-dimensions to investigate organizations' employer brand personality is recommended in the employer branding literature (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016), although research is still scarce. As an example, Carpentier et al. (2019) found that applicants assess the communication characteristics of an organization's social media page to make inferences about its warmth and competence as an employer. Zhu et al. (2021) found that job seekers with different social identity needs are attracted to organizations that differ along these two dimensions. Whereas studies have investigated how applicants perceive an employer's warmth and competence, we do not yet know whether and how organizations can deliberately signal these traits in their employer brand management. In addition, research shows that context impacts how an organization's warmth and competence are evaluated (Aaker et al., 2010; Kervyn et al., 2012, 2014), so it is not clear which dimension will be most attractive in the context of a global health pandemic. For instance, some studies have shown that consumers' perceptions of an organization's competence had more influence on their purchase intentions than warmth perceptions (Aaker et al., 2012; Xue et al., 2020). Alternatively, Kervyn et al. (2014) found that framing the cause of a local environmental disaster in terms of its low warmth resulted in harsher judgments toward the organization than framing the cause related to incompetence. Hence, it is meaningful to investigate how during a crisis applicants evaluate an employer, based on COVID-19 responses signaling these two meta-dimensions.

Study 1 focuses on an organization's official website to display the COVID-19 responses. To provide a stringent test of our propositions, Study 1 employs two different control groups. The first is no response in which the organization does not provide a COVID-19 response at all. The second is a limited response in which brief information about the organization's COVID-19 response is presented. Moreover, the warm response was conceptualized as communicating the company's COVID-19 response in a kind and friendly manner, whereas the competent response shared the information in a competent and capable way (Wang et al., 2017).

Based on signaling theory, we propose that communicating the COVID-19 response in a warm or competent way will signal organizational warmth or competence to applicants, which in turn will increase attraction. For example, while looking for information about an employer, an applicant who reads a warm response on its website might imagine that the organization would also be a warm and friendly place to work and might be attracted to it. Similarly, an applicant reading a competent response to COVID-19 might consider the response as an indicator of the organization's overall competence, and would expect it to be a capable and attractive employer. Hence, Study 1 investigates the effect of a warm or competent COVID-19 response on applicant attraction, and whether the effects can be explained by perceived organizational warmth or competence, as compared to when no or a limited response is provided. To better understand how COVID-19 responses affect applicants' perceptions, we examined both an attitudinal attraction outcome, perceived employer attractiveness, and a behavioral intention outcome, job pursuit intentions (Highhouse et al., 2003).

*H1: A warm COVID-19 response will have a positive effect on (a) employer attractiveness and (b) job pursuit intentions as compared to no response and a limited response.*

*H2: A competent COVID-19 response will have a positive effect on (a) employer attractiveness and (b) job pursuit intentions as compared to no response and a limited response.*

*H3: A warm COVID-19 response will have a positive indirect effect on (a) employer attractiveness and (b) job pursuit intentions through perceived organizational warmth.*

*H4: A competent COVID-19 response will have a positive indirect effect on (a) employer attractiveness and (b) job pursuit intentions through perceived organizational competence.*

## 2.3 | Potential applicants' personality

In addition, signaling theory implies that organizational signals might be perceived differently by different recipients. In terms of organizational warmth and competence, prior research suggests that the preference for the two dimensions might differ based on demographic variables (Bennett & Hill, 2012; Xue et al., 2020) and job seekers' preferences (Zhu et al., 2021). Therefore, based on the supplementary fit theory (Kristof, 1996), we argue that applicants' own personality will play a role in influencing their attraction towards a warm versus competent COVID-19 response. The theory purports that potential applicants are more attracted to those organizations whose personality dimensions match with their own. In fact, a supplementary fit exists when the person and organization possess similar or matching characteristics, such as personality traits, values, needs (Cable & Edwards, 2004). Some studies also found that applicants prefer to work in those organizations whose personality dimensions are similar to their own (Slaughter & Greguras, 2009; Van Hoye & Turban, 2015). Hence, we expect that applicants will be more attracted towards a COVID-19 response whose signaled dimension (warmth or competence) matches with their own personality traits.

In terms of applicants' personality, we focus on agreeableness and conscientiousness to test our proposition. This is because conceptually, there is a lot of similarity between the nature and content of these personality dimensions with warmth and competence (Abele et al., 2016). Agreeableness reflects warmth and generosity. Individuals with a high level of agreeableness tend to be friendly and softhearted (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Conscientiousness reflects dependability and responsibility. A highly conscientious person tends to be well-planned and thorough. Hence, clearly there is a link between agreeableness and warmth and between conscientiousness and competence, as Aaker (1997, p. 353) also notes "Agreeableness and Sincerity both capture the idea of warmth and acceptance; Conscientiousness and Competence both encapsulate responsibility, dependability, and security." Agreeableness and conscientiousness are also practically relevant, as they are indicators of applicant quality (Van Hoye & Turban, 2015). The two dimensions seem even more valuable during the COVID-19 pandemic, as people high in agreeableness and conscientiousness seem to perform better than those with other personality dimensions (Götz et al., 2021). Hence, drawing from supplementary fit perspective and theoretical similarities between agreeableness and warmth and between conscientiousness and competence, we propose that applicants high in agreeableness will be more attracted towards a warm COVID-19 response, whereas those high in conscientiousness will be more attracted to a competent response.

*H5: For people high in agreeableness, the warm COVID-19 response will have a more positive effect on (a) employer attractiveness and (b) job pursuit intentions than the competent COVID-19 response.*

*H6: For people high in conscientiousness, the competent COVID-19 response will have a more positive effect on (a) employer attractiveness and (b) job pursuit intentions than the warm COVID-19 response.*

# 3 | STUDY 1 METHOD

## 3.1 | Participants

Study 1 was conducted with employed people from the United Kingdom (UK), working on full or part-time basis. Employed people are a relevant group of potential applicants because many organizations are interested in hiring people with prior work experience. Moreover, we chose employed people because there are limitations of using student samples for recruitment research (Breaugh, 2013). Hence, through Prolific Academic, we recruited 200 participants who had received higher education (at least a bachelor's degree) and were fluent in English for a participation fee of £1.9. Recent research is using online platforms such as Prolific to collect quality data (Aguinis et al., 2020). We requested people with higher education to get a more homogeneous sample to which we could align our experimental materials. To determine adequate sample size, we conducted power analyses using GPower 3.1.9.2. For *H1–H4*, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) for 80% power ($\beta$) and moderate effect size ($f$) = 0.25 at $p$ = .05 ($\alpha$) for four groups calculated a total minimum sample of 180 participants (i.e., 45 people per group). Thus, keeping incomplete data and failed attention checks in account, we recruited 50 people per group, a total of 200 participants. This sample was also adequate for moderation analyses (*H5* and *H6*), as only 77 participants (nearly 38 in each of warm and competence groups) were required for 80% power, moderate effect size ($f$) = 0.15, $p$ = .05 using linear multiple regression: fixed model test.

Study 1 and both its pretests were conducted in a 2-week period in December 2020 (from Dec 3 to 18). The data were collected at a time when the UK government had lifted its second lockdown (from Dec 2), the new variants of COVID-19 (UK; Delta) were not yet diagnosed, and vaccination for public had not yet started. After removing two participants who failed the attention check, two with incomplete data, one with a clear response pattern, and two outliers, a sample of 193 participants was retained for analysis. The sample had an average age of 34 years ($SD$ = 9.53) and an average work experience of 13 years ($SD$ = 9.23) with 78% working full time. Sixty-nine percent were female. Fifty-seven percent indicated that they looked for a job in the previous 12 months.

## 3.2 | Design and materials

We applied a between-subjects experimental design with four conditions (two control and two treatment groups). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. They were instructed to carefully go through the provided webpages of a potential employer named L&L and fill in their perceptions. No reference was made to COVID-19 in the study description or instructions. The first control group (no response) only saw the company's homepage, showing information about L&L, its products, and job vacancies. The other three groups (limited, warm, and competent COVID-19 response) also saw a COVID-19 webpage, displaying the company's COVID-19 response. A between-subjects design was used to make sure that participants were not aware of the different experimental conditions and our study purpose. Hence, we presented only one of the four conditions and asked them to evaluate the employer only once, rather than doing it four times (as would be the case if within-subjects was used). Moreover, we measured the dependent variables (employer attractiveness and job pursuit intentions) immediately after the experimental manipulation, that is, before the mediators (perceived organizational warmth and competence) and moderators (applicants' personality). This was done to avoid priming effects and reduce the chance of artificially boosting participants' employer evaluation (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017). Further, we recorded participants' viewing time to ensure that the material is not left unattended for an extended period.

Study 1 materials are shown in Supporting Information Appendix A. The limited COVID-19 response presented brief information about the organization's COVID-19 response. This response was kept neutral in nature and did not highlight a certain personality dimension. Supporting

external validity, we also noticed real organizations sharing such limited COVID-19 responses on their websites (e.g., H&M) and used those to develop our limited response. The warm and competent COVID-19 responses were developed using prior studies (Aaker et al., 2010; Kervyn et al., 2014), specifically the conceptualization used by Wang et al. (2017). They describe warmth dimension as warm, friendly, sincere, and kind, following which we developed the warm COVID-19 response as one that communicates the organization's COVID-19 response in a warm, friendly, and supportive way. For example, while introducing telework, the warm response mentions: "We support telework so that our employees can work from their homes, while balancing the needs of their families." The competent COVID-19 response signaled traits like competence, capability, intelligence, and skill (Wang et al., 2017). This message stressed upon the implementation and success of the organization's actions to deal with the pandemic. For instance, the same telework initiative was discussed here as: "By using latest research skills and intelligence, L&L has developed its own COVID-19 task force, which recommends various workplace strategies to the management, such as smart teleworking." Whereas both warm and competent responses were kept relatively uniform in terms of the company's COVID-19 initiatives (e.g., telework, virtual interviews) and length (183 and 177 words), the way the response was communicated differed as being either warm and friendly, or competent and capable. To design the webpages, actual company websites (e.g., P&G, Unilever, Amazon) were consulted. We also received feedback from five HRM/OB researchers about our materials.

#### 3.2.1 | Pretests

Two pretests were conducted through Prolific Academic to test the manipulations in a sample similar to Study 1: employed people from the UK. In the first pretest, 62 respondents ($M_{age}$ = 33 years, $SD$ = 9.62; 68% women) were randomly assigned to one of the three response conditions (limited, warm, and competent). First, there was no significant difference between the three conditions in terms of perceived realism ($F(2, 59) = 0.18$, $p = .84$). Next, we observed a significant difference between the three conditions with respect to the perceived warmth ($F(2, 59) = 14.77$, $p < .001$) and perceived competence ($F(2, 59) = 12.87$, $p < .001$) of the COVID-19 response. The limited response was perceived as less warm and competent than the other responses (see Table 1 in Supporting Information Appendix B). However, the warm and competent responses did not significantly differ in perceived warmth and competence (although the mean differences were in the expected direction). Based on these results and participants' feedback about the materials, we made some revisions mostly trying to make the warm response less competent (e.g., less concrete description of COVID-19 actions) and the competent response less warm (e.g., using a less supportive tone). The revised warm and competent responses were again tested in a second pre-test. Using a within-subjects design, 32 respondents ($M_{age}$ = 36 years, $SD$ = 11.01; 59% women) evaluated both responses (presented randomly) in terms of perceived warmth and competence. We used within-subjects because this design exposes participants to all the experimental conditions and allows them to use each condition as a reference or point of comparison for the other (Detenber et al., 1998). Hence, compared to between-subjects, within-subjects was more aligned to our goal of testing the stimulus material for differences between experimental conditions. A paired sample $t$-test indicates that the perceived warmth of the warm response was significantly higher than the competent response ($t(31) = 5.7$, $p < .001$, see Table 2 in Supporting Information Appendix B). Similarly, the perceived competence of the competent response was significantly higher than the warm response ($t(31) = 5.25$, $p < .001$). Participants' feedback about the responses also confirmed that they were able to clearly differentiate between the two responses as one being warm and friendly, and the other competent and skillful. Furthermore, it should be noted that whereas the pre-tests tested the perceived warmth and competence of the COVID-19 responses (i.e., the stimulus material itself), the main study measured the perceived warmth and competence of the organization. That is why, signaling theory was used to propose that a message/response crafted in terms of employer brand personality (warmth and competence) will signal that dimension as an organizational attribute to applicants (as shown in mediation hypotheses: *H3* and *H4*).

### 3.3 | Measures

Unless stated otherwise, items were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *completely disagree* to 7 = *completely agree*.

#### 3.3.1 | Employer attractiveness

Employer attractiveness reflects the generalized attitude towards an organization as a potential employer. The perceived employer attractiveness of the organization was measured with a 5-item scale from Highhouse et al. (2003). A sample item is "For me, this company would be a good place to work" ($\alpha$ = .94).

#### 3.3.2 | Job pursuit intentions

Job pursuit intentions refer to thoughts about an organization that specifically imply further action, such as to involve in active pursuit of a job. It was measured with a 5-item scale from Highhouse et al. (2003). A sample item is "If this company invited me for a job interview, I would go" ($\alpha$ = .88).

#### 3.3.3 | Perceived organizational warmth and competence

Both perceived organizational warmth and competence were measured with a 4-item scale by Wang et al. (2017). Sample items

are "I perceive the company as warm" (warmth, $\alpha = .94$) and "I perceive the company as competent" (competence, $\alpha = .92$).

#### 3.3.4 | Potential applicants' personality

Agreeableness and conscientiousness were both measured with a 10-item scale from the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP), corresponding to the broad trait domains as measured by the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Sample items are "I accept people as they are" (agreeableness, $\alpha = .78$) and "I make plans and stick to them" (conscientiousness, $\alpha = .88$), rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 5 = *completely agree*).

#### 3.3.5 | Explanatory variables

To capture the four experimental conditions, we created three dummy variables (i.e., limited response, warm response, and competent response), using no response condition as the referent category. However, based on our hypotheses, we also used the limited response as the referent group for some analyses.

#### 3.3.6 | Control variables

We controlled for five variables, which theoretically may influence how people perceive an organization's COVID-19 response and its attractiveness. The first is gender as Xue et al. (2020) found differences in terms of how females perceive the brand's warmth as compared to males. The second is work experience as people with less versus more experience might process recruitment information differently (Walker et al., 2008). The third is job satisfaction measured with one item by Cammann et al. (1983) on a 5-point scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 5 = *completely agree*). We controlled for job satisfaction because participants who report higher job satisfaction with their current employer might evaluate a potential employer differently than those who are dissatisfied. The fourth is job search status, which measured whether the participants looked for a job in the previous 12 months or not (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*). Participants who did not look for alternative work may evaluate the response and thus the employer differently than those who were genuinely job hunting. The fifth one is COVID-19 threat perceptions, which measured how strongly participants felt affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and might relate to how they perceive an organization's COVID-19 response. The variable was measured with a 4 item-scale by Imhoff and Lamberty (2020) on a 7-point scale, from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much* ($\alpha = .75$).

#### 3.3.7 | Post-experimental questions

At the end of the survey, we asked participants two open-ended questions about whether and why (1) L&L's COVID-19 response affected their attraction (only in the three response conditions) and (2) an organization's COVID-19 response would affect their attraction if they were actually looking for a job.

## 4 | STUDY 1 RESULTS

Table 1 provides the means of the mediating and outcome variables for the four conditions. Table 2 shows the overall means and correlations. Before analyses, we conducted preliminary data screening and found that the data met the necessary analytic assumptions like normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and normality of the error terms. Then, using the Lavaan package in R (Rosseel, 2012), we performed a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) with the mediating and outcome variables: employer attractiveness, job pursuit intentions, perceived organizational warmth, and perceived organizational competence. The CFA resulted in an acceptable fit, $\chi^2(129) = 395.65$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.90, SRMR = 0.04, RMSEA = 0.09 (cf. Hinkin, 1998; Hu & Bentler, 1999). Moreover, this four-factor model fit the data significantly better than a one-factor model, $\Delta\chi^2(6) = 1177.3$, $p < .001$, with all variables loading on the same factor, $\chi^2(135) = 1572.97$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.57, TLI = 0.51, SRMR = 0.16, RMSEA = 0.23, and than a two-factor model, $\Delta\chi^2(5) = 524.31$, $p < .001$, in which the two outcome variables and the two mediators were combined into single factors, $\chi^2(134) = 919.97$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.76, TLI = 0.73, SRMR = 0.13, RMSEA = 0.17.

**TABLE 1** Means and standard deviations of the mediating and outcome variables of Study 1 across conditions

| Variable | No response ($N = 48$) | Limited response ($N = 49$) | Warm response ($N = 49$) | Competent response ($N = 47$) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Employer attractiveness | 4.22 (1.41) | 4.59 (1.10) | 5.16 (1.36) | 4.83 (1.13) |
| Job pursuit intentions | 4.32 (1.12) | 4.67 (1.01) | 5.16 (1.10) | 4.66 (1.02) |
| Perceived organizational warmth | 4.96 (0.90) | 4.97 (1.31) | 5.60 (1.08) | 5.32 (1.04) |
| Perceived organizational competence | 5.08 (1.00) | 5.34 (0.80) | 5.41 (1.00) | 5.73 (0.83) |

*Note*: Standard deviations are shown in parentheses. All variables were measured on a 7-point rating scale ranging from 1 = *completely disagree* to 7 = *completely agree*.

**TABLE 2** Pearson correlations and internal reliabilities of Study 1 variables

| Variable | *M* | *SD* | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1.** Gender[a] | 0.69 | 0.46 | – | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **2.** Work experience (in years) | 13.2 | 9.23 | −0.21** | – | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **3.** Job satisfaction | 3.78 | 1.01 | 0.01 | 0.05 | – | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **4.** Job search status[b] | 0.56 | 0.50 | 0.14* | −0.17* | −0.30** | – | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **5.** COVID-19 threat perceptions | 4.16 | 1.30 | 0.10 | 0.09 | −0.08 | 0.16* | (0.75) | | | | | | | | | | |
| **6.** No response[c] | 0.25 | 0.43 | 0.02 | 0.02 | −0.00 | −0.05 | 0.15* | – | | | | | | | | | |
| **7.** Limited response[c] | 0.25 | 0.44 | 0.03 | 0.06 | 0.06 | 0.08 | 0.04 | −0.34** | – | | | | | | | | |
| **8.** Warm response[c] | 0.25 | 0.44 | −0.10 | 0.00 | −0.04 | −0.04 | −0.07 | −0.34** | −0.34** | – | | | | | | | |
| **9.** Competent response[c] | 0.24 | 0.43 | 0.06 | −0.08 | −0.02 | 0.01 | −0.13 | −0.33** | −0.33** | −0.33** | – | | | | | | |
| **10.** Agreeableness | 3.82 | 0.50 | 0.08 | 0.06 | 0.25** | −0.10 | 0.13 | −0.07 | 0.04 | 0.00 | 0.03 | (0.78) | | | | | |
| **11.** Conscientiousness | 3.67 | 0.64 | 0.02 | 0.11 | 0.17* | −0.13 | 0.05 | 0.02 | −0.09 | 0.11 | −0.04 | 0.30** | (0.88) | | | | |
| **12.** Perceived organizational warmth | 5.21 | 1.18 | 0.17* | −0.07 | 0.17* | −0.07 | −0.07 | −0.13 | −0.13 | 0.20** | 0.05 | 0.17* | 0.18* | (0.94) | | | |
| **13.** Perceived organizational competence | 5.39 | 0.93 | 0.11 | −0.03 | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.01 | −0.19** | −0.03 | 0.01 | 0.21** | 0.24** | 0.26** | 0.49** | (0.92) | | |
| **14.** Employer attractiveness | 4.70 | 1.30 | −0.01 | 0.04 | 0.12 | −0.07 | 0.03 | −0.22** | −0.05 | 0.21** | 0.06 | 0.19** | 0.22** | 0.39** | 0.44** | (0.94) | |
| **15.** Job pursuit intentions | 4.70 | 1.10 | −0.00 | 0.07 | 0.01 | −0.04 | −0.01 | −0.20** | −0.02 | 0.25** | −0.02 | 0.13 | 0.24** | 0.42** | 0.49** | 0.84** | (0.88) |

*Note*: Reliability coefficients are shown in parentheses along the diagonal of the table. Variables 3, 10, 11 were measured on a 5-point rating scale, variables 5, 12–15 on a 7-point rating scale.

[a]0 = *male*; 1 = *female*.

[b]0 = *no*; 1 = *yes*.

[c]Dummy variables were coded as: No response (1 = no response, 0 = limited response, 0 = warm response, 0 = competent response), Limited response (1 = limited response, 0 = no response, 0 = warm response, 0 = competent response), Warm response (1 = warm response, 0 = no response, 0 = limited response, 0 = competent response), Competent response (1 = competent response, 0 = no response, 0 = limited response, 0 = warm response).

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

**TABLE 3** Hierarchical regression testing the effect of COVID-19 response (Study 1)

| | Employer attractiveness | | | Job pursuit intentions | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Predictor | Step 1 | Step 2[a] | Step 2[b] | Step 1 | Step 2[a] | Step 2[b] |
| Control variables | | | | | | |
| Gender[c] | −0.01 | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.02 | 0.04 | 0.04 |
| Work experience (in years) | 0.02 | 0.03 | 0.03 | 0.07 | 0.07 | 0.07 |
| Job satisfaction | 0.12 | 0.13 | 0.13 | −0.00 | 0.01 | 0.01 |
| Job search status[d] | −0.04 | −0.04 | −0.04 | −0.03 | −0.04 | −0.04 |
| COVID-19 threat perceptions | 0.05 | 0.09 | 0.09 | −0.01 | 0.02 | 0.02 |
| COVID-19 response | | | | | | |
| No response | | | −0.13 | | | −0.14 |
| Limited response | | 0.13 | | | 0.14 | |
| Warm response | | 0.34** | 0.21* | | 0.35** | 0.20* |
| Competent response | | 0.23** | 0.10 | | 0.15 | 0.01 |
| $R^2$ | 0.020 | 0.100* | 0.100* | 0.006 | 0.084* | 0.084* |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | −0.006 | 0.061* | 0.061* | −0.021 | 0.044* | 0.044* |
| $\Delta R^2$ | 0.020 | 0.080** | 0.080** | 0.006 | 0.078** | 0.078** |

*Note*: The values in the table are standardized regression coefficients ($\beta$).

[a]Referent category: No response.

[b]Referent category: Limited response.

[c]0 = *male*; 1 = *female*.

[d]0 = *no*; 1 = *yes*.

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

To test H1a and H2a, we performed two hierarchical regression analyses with employer attractiveness as dependent variable. We entered the five control variables in the first step and three COVID-19 response conditions in the second step. In one analysis we used no response as the referent category (see step 2[a] in Table 3) and in the other, limited response (see step 2[b] in Table 3). Results indicate that as compared to no response, both the warm ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$) and the competent ($\beta = .23$, $p = .009$) response had a positive effect on employer attractiveness. However, as compared to limited response, only the warm response positively affected employer attractiveness ($\beta = .21$, $p = .02$). The competent response did not ($\beta = .10$, $p = .24$). Hence, H1a was supported but H2a was only partially supported. For H1b and H2b, we performed two similar hierarchical regression analyses using job pursuit intentions as dependent variable. Results indicate that as compared to no response, the warm response had a positive effect on job pursuit intentions ($\beta = .35$, $p < .001$). However, the competent response ($\beta = .15$, $p = .09$) did not. Similarly, compared to limited response, only the warm response positively affected job pursuit intentions ($\beta = .20$, $p = .02$), not the competent response ($\beta = .01$, $p = .94$). Hence, H1b was supported, but not H2b. Altogether, a warm COVID-19 response seems to have a more positive effect on applicant attraction than a competent response.

To test H3a and H4a, we performed mediation analysis using the Process macro v3.5.2 (Model 4) in SPSS with employer attractiveness as dependent variable. We entered perceived organizational warmth and competence as mediators, the three response conditions (limited, warm, and competent) as independent variables, and the five control variables as covariates. We computed standardized indirect effects with bootstrap sample size set to 5000, and confidence interval (CI) to 95% (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). In support of H3a, the indirect effect of a warm response on employer attractiveness through perceived organizational warmth was significant ($B = 0.15$, $SE = 0.08$, CI = [0.007; 0.316]). However, controlling for perceived organizational warmth, a warm response still had a significant direct effect ($B = 0.69$, $SE = 0.24$, $p = .004$, CI = [0.219; 1.154]). Furthermore, in line with H4a, the indirect effect of a competent response on employer attractiveness through perceived organizational competence was also significant ($B = 0.31$, $SE = 0.11$, CI = [0.104; 0.548]). To investigate the effects on job pursuit intentions (H3b and H4b), we performed the same mediation analysis with job pursuit intentions as dependent variable. In support of H3b, the indirect effect of a warm response on job pursuit intentions through perceived organizational warmth was significant ($B = 0.14$, $SE = 0.07$, CI = [0.014; 0.292]). Nonetheless, controlling for perceived organizational warmth, a warm response still had a significant direct effect ($B = 0.56$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = .004$, CI = [0.178; 0.943]). H4b was also supported as the indirect effect of a competent response on job pursuit intentions through perceived organizational competence was significant ($B = 0.30$, $SE = 0.10$, CI = [0.118; 0.518]).

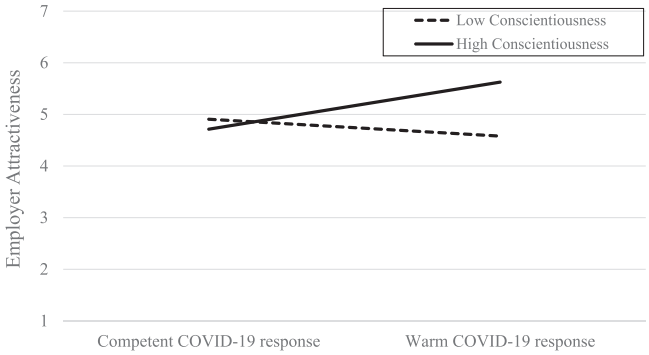


**FIGURE 1** Interaction effect of conscientiousness with warm versus competent COVID-19 response

To test H5, we conducted two moderation analyses using Process macro v3.5.2 (Model 1), one with employer attractiveness (H5a) and the other with job pursuit intentions (H5b) as dependent variable. A new dummy variable was created to distinguish the warm from the competent response (the control groups were not included in these analyses). Agreeableness was entered as moderator (mean centered before creating the interaction term), and the five control variables as covariates. Again, bootstrap sample size was set to 5000, and CI to 95%. Results indicate no significant interactions of applicants' agreeableness with a warm versus competent response for employer attractiveness ($B = 0.39$, $SE = 0.47$, $p = .40$, CI = [−0.535; 1.319]) and job pursuit intentions ($B = 0.19$, $SE = 0.41$, $p = .63$, CI = [−0.628; 1.020]). Hence, H5a and H5b were not supported. For H6, we conducted two additional moderation analyses, with employer attractiveness (H6a) and job pursuit intentions (H6b) as respective dependent variables. We entered conscientiousness as moderator (mean centered), the five control variables as covariates, and used the same dummy variable as in H5. Results show a significant interaction effect of a warm versus competent response with applicants' conscientiousness on employer attractiveness ($B = 1.02$, $SE = 0.39$, $p = .01$, CI = [0.247; 1.801]). To examine the specific pattern of the significant interaction, we plotted expected means for high and low (±1 *SD*) values of conscientiousness (see Figure 1) and conducted simple slope analyses. Contrary to H6a, for applicants high in conscientiousness, the warm COVID-19 response actually had a more positive effect on employer attractiveness than the competent response (conditional effect at $M + 1\,SD$ was 0.91, $SE = 0.34$, $p = .01$, CI = [0.247; 1.579]). For those low in conscientiousness, the difference between the warm and competent response was not significant (conditional effect at $M - 1\,SD$ was −0.33, $SE = 0.34$, $p = .33$, CI = [−0.999; 0.337]). No significant interaction effect was found for conscientiousness on job pursuit intentions ($B = 0.53$, $SE = 0.36$, $p = .14$, CI = [−0.173; 1.238]). Thus, H6b was also not supported.

### 4.1 | Analysis of post-experimental questionnaire

For the first open-ended question, overall 71% of participants (53% in limited, 78% in warm, and 83% in competent condition[1]) reported to be influenced by the organization's COVID-19 response. Participants shared that it was the employer's warmth (in the warm response) and competence (in the competent response) that attracted them towards the employer: *It is nice to know that the company cares about you. They have put their employees at the top of their priority list, which is an attractive trait for me as a potential employee* (female, 25 years, warm condition), *I felt more positive towards the company as they have a competent, carefully considered response to COVID-19, as compared to the way some other companies have behaved* (female, 27 years, competent condition). For the second question, 75% of participants said that they would be affected by a potential employer's COVID-19 response if they were actually looking for a job. In support of signaling theory, participants mentioned that the COVID-19 response not only affects the organization's attractiveness, but also signals what it is and stands for, beyond emergencies and pandemics: *The response of a company directly speaks to the type of employer they are* (female, 31 years, competent condition), *Even if the pandemic proves to be short-lived, we don't know what else might occur in the future. A COVID-19 response would make me feel confident that potential future issues could also be dealt with effectively* (female, 36 years, competent condition).

## 5 | STUDY 1 DISCUSSION

Study 1 shows that communicating a COVID-19 response in terms of employer brand personality can affect potential applicants' employer brand and attractiveness perceptions. This is especially true when the COVID-19 response is signaled in a warm rather than a competent way. Hence, during a crisis, sharing a warm response on an organization's website might help to attract potential applicants.

Apart from responding to a crisis through an organization's website, there are other situations and information sources (like digital media or press) that applicants might use as signals to evaluate a potential employer. Some of these are even beyond an organization's immediate control, such as the occurrence of negative events or spread of negative information/publicity. Prior research showed that applicants' exposure to negative publicity regarding a potential employer affects their attraction (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2005). However, there is limited research in terms of how organizations can manage their attractiveness during such negative events/publicity. In fact, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw several organizations (e.g., Tönnies, Greencore) trying to deal with such negative COVID-19 events (e.g., COVID-19 outbreak in the organization). Hence, it is important to understand how organizations' response to such negative events affects applicant attraction.

Furthermore, an employer might want to communicate both warmth and competence in its crisis response to attract applicants. This is in line with The Brands as Intentional Agents framework (BIAF) (Kervyn et al., 2012) which suggests that people use both warmth and competence to evaluate an organization. Using high and low levels of both dimensions, the theory purports a four-quadrant framework and suggests that organizations high on both dimensions

will elicit more favorable responses. However, presently there is limited evidence supporting that (Aaker et al., 2012). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, context impacts whether warmth or competence is more attractive (Zawisza & Pittard, 2015). Hence, using BIAF, we examine how the combined dimensions of warmth and competence (high and/or low levels) in organizations' response affect applicant attraction and whether high levels of both dimensions are necessary.

Additionally, it is also important to further examine why a certain combination of warm and competent response is attractive. In Study 1, we noticed that in addition to an indirect effect through perceived organizational warmth, a warm COVID-19 response still had a direct effect on applicant attraction. This indicates that another mechanism besides the signaling of organizational warmth underlies this effect. Thus, investigating additional mechanisms that might explain the effects of warm and competent responses on attraction will help understand how applicants' impressions are shaped by organizational signals. In this regard, we draw on organizational trust theory (Mayer et al., 1995) to propose how enhanced trust about the organization might be helpful in strengthening the positive impact of a warm and competent COVID-19 response. Trust is defined as an attitude that an agent will help achieve an individual's goals in uncertain situations (Kulms & Kopp, 2018). It is based on how individuals evaluate the benevolence, integrity, and ability of an organization (Mayer et al., 1995), thus capturing both perceived intentions (warmth) and ability (competence). The variable is crucial in processing recruitment information (Klotz et al., 2013) especially during COVID-19 as employers are recommended to build higher trust with their workforce (Newman & Ford, 2021). In terms of prior research, marketing studies explored the role of organizational trust to understand the effects of warm and competent brands. For example, Xue et al. (2020) found that brands high in warmth or competence are considered more trustworthy and are hence evaluated more positively. Hence, drawing upon organizational trust theory and prior literature, we argue that an employer that signals warmth or competence in its communication might develop a higher level of organizational trust that eventually affects its attractiveness. Applicants might be attracted towards an organization with a warm COVID-19 response because it leads to higher likelihood of trusting the organization's benevolence and integrity. Similarly, a competent response might be more appealing because it generates higher levels of applicants' trust and confidence in organization's ability to deal with the crisis.

## 6 | STUDY 2 HYPOTHESES

We conducted Study 2 to advance our understanding about the combined effects of signaling organizational warmth and competence in an organization's COVID-19 response and the explaining mechanism of organizational trust. Another prime purpose of Study 2 was to re-examine the research questions in a different COVID-19 context (negative event), using a different information source (press vs. website in Study 1), and with a different applicant group (unemployed vs. employed in Study 1). To do so, Study 2 presents information about an organization in the form of a news article, testing four different versions of the COVID-19 response, each with a unique combination (high and/or low) of both dimensions. Hence, Study 2 examines whether and how communicating high and/or low levels of organizational warmth and competence in an organization's COVID-19 response affects applicants' perceptions through organizational trust.[2]

*H1: COVID-19 response warmth will have a positive effect on (a) employer attractiveness and (b) job pursuit intentions.*

*H2: COVID-19 response competence will have a positive effect on (a) employer attractiveness and (b) job pursuit intentions.*

*H3: COVID-19 response warmth will have a positive indirect effect on (a) employer attractiveness and (b) job pursuit intentions through organizational trust.*

*H4: COVID-19 response competence will have a positive indirect effect on (a) employer attractiveness and (b) job pursuit intentions through organizational trust.*

Additionally, we exploratorily investigate the interaction effect of response warmth and competence on applicants' attraction.

## 7 | STUDY 2 METHOD

### 7.1 | Participants

Study 2 was also conducted through Prolific Academic with 200 UK participants. GPower analyses at 80% power and $p = .05$ showed that we need a minimum of 45 participants per group for moderate effect size ($f$) = 0.25 for a 2 × 2 ANOVA design. Contrary to employed people in Study 1, Study 2 was conducted with unemployed (and job seeking) people, having at least a high school degree. This was meant to check the increased generalization of our results by examining the perceptions of a different type of potential applicants. Boswell et al. (2011) emphasize that studying different applicant types like new entrants, employed applicants, unemployed jobseekers is helpful in understanding the organization's attractiveness as an employer. Study 2 and its pretest were conducted in a 3-week period in May 2021 (from May 14 to 31). At that time, the UK government planned to ease out its third lockdown restrictions (from May 17), vaccination was in progress, and new variants (Delta) had been diagnosed. After removing five participants who failed an attention check, 195 participants were retained. Participants had an average age of 29 years ($SD$ = 10) with fifty four percent female and 4% as other gender. Their average unemployment duration was 1.39 years ($SD$ = 1.39) with 89% having prior work experience ($M_{experience}$ = 7.5 years, $SD$ = 9.14). At the time of the study, 35% had received vaccination.

### 7.2 | Design and materials

We used a 2 (response warmth: high vs. low) × 2 (response competence: high vs. low) between-subjects design. Participants randomly assigned to

one of the four conditions were told that while looking for a job, they came across an online news article about a company called K&T. The news article discussed K&T's response towards the outbreak of COVID-19 in one of its branches, due to which 30 employees tested positive. The article first stated the COVID-19 problem. After that, each version framed the company's COVID-19 response in terms of one of the four combinations of warmth and competence (see Supporting Information Appendix A for Study 2 materials). The four versions were developed in line with the operationalization of a warm and competent response of Study 1. Moreover, prior studies (Kervyn et al., 2014), specifically those that manipulated the two dimensions to develop experimental scenarios were used (Huang et al., 2020) and we consulted actual news articles reporting real COVID-19 outbreaks in companies. For high warmth versions, the article discussed how the company adopted a well-intended and friendly approach to deal with the outbreak by showing care towards its employees, listening to their concerns, and so forth. Conversely, those low in response warmth indicated a lack of warmth and support in responding to the outbreak. Similarly, high competence versions discussed how the company is able to respond to the outbreak by implementing efficient measures, following concrete plans, and so forth to control its spread. Those low in response competence indicated lack of planning and implementation towards the outbreak. To ensure that the news article looks realistic, we included a quote from the company's spokesperson, an employee comment, and a brief commentary by the newspaper itself.

#### 7.2.1 | Pretest

Before Study 2, the materials were tested in a sample similar to the main study: unemployed (and job seeking) people from the UK. Using a within-subjects design, 24 respondents ($M_{age}$ = 33 years, $SD$ = 12.1; 46% women) evaluated the four versions of the news article (presented randomly) in terms of perceived warmth, competence, and realism. First, there was a significant difference between the four versions on perceived warmth ($F(2.14, 49.20) = 17.30$, $p < .001$) and perceived competence ($F(1.81, 41.63) = 21.30$, $p < .001$). Post hoc tests using the Bonferroni method revealed that for perceived warmth, high warmth responses were perceived as significantly higher than the low warmth ones ($p < .05$; see Table 3 in Supporting Information Appendix B). Similarly, for perceived competence, high competence responses were significantly higher than the low competence responses ($p < .01$). There was no significant difference between the four versions on perceived realism ($F(2.09, 48) = 2.2$, $p = .12$).

### 7.3 | Measures

Employer attractiveness ($\alpha = .94$) and job pursuit intentions ($\alpha = .92$) were measured the same way as in Study 1. Additionally, we measured organizational trust with a 5-item scale by Turel et al. (2008) on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *completely disagree* to 7 = *completely agree*. A sample item is "K&T is trustworthy" ($\alpha = .92$). A CFA showed that a three-factor model including employer attractiveness, job pursuit intentions, and organizational trust produced a satisfactory fit, $\chi^2(87) = 201.90$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95; SRMR = 0.03, RMSEA = 0.08, and fit the data significantly better, $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 245.27$, $p < .001$, than a one factor model, $\chi^2(90) = 447.18$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.88, TLI = 0.86, SRMR = 0.05, RMSEA = 0.14.

#### 7.3.1 | Explanatory variables

To capture the four conditions, we created two dummy variables, response warmth and response competence, each with two levels 0 (*low*) and 1 (*high*).

#### 7.3.2 | Control variables

Similar to Study 1, we controlled for the effect of gender and COVID-19 threat perceptions ($\alpha = .74$). In addition, we controlled for unemployment duration and COVID-19 vaccination status.

#### 7.3.3 | Post-experimental questions

The first question asked participants if they would consider applying/working for a company that experienced a COVID-19 outbreak and why (not). The second asked whether K&T's COVID-19 response affected their attraction towards the organization and why (not).

## 8 | STUDY 2 RESULTS

Table 4 provides the means of the mediating and outcome variables for the four conditions. Table 5 shows the overall means and correlations. The data met the preliminary analytic assumptions for further analyses. To test H1a and H2a, we performed a hierarchical regression analysis with employer attractiveness as dependent variable. We entered the four control variables in the first step, response warmth and competence in the second, and their interaction term in the third (see Table 6). Results indicate that whereas response warmth had a positive effect on employer attractiveness ($\beta = .45$, $p < .001$), response competence did not ($\beta = .19$, $p = .06$). Moreover, their interaction was also insignificant ($\beta = -.17$, $p = .15$). Hence, H1a was supported but H2a was not. Similarly, to test H1b and H2b, we performed another hierarchical regression analysis with job pursuit intentions as dependent variable. Similarly, response warmth had a positive effect on job pursuit intentions ($\beta = .39$, $p < .001$), whereas response competence ($\beta = .10$, $p = .29$) and the interaction term were not significant ($\beta = -.06$, $p = .65$). Hence, H1b was supported but H2b not. This indicates that, similar to Study 1, a COVID-19 response high in warmth leads to higher employer attractiveness perceptions and job pursuit intentions.

**TABLE 4** Means and standard deviations of the mediating and outcome variables of Study 2

| Response warmth | Response competence | *N* | Dependent variable | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Employer attractiveness | Job pursuit intentions | Organizational trust |
| Low | Low | 48 | 3.42 (1.10) | 3.56 (1.16) | 3.48 (1.21) |
| Low | High | 47 | 3.93 (1.38) | 3.86 (1.39) | 4.09 (1.12) |
| High | Low | 49 | 4.64 (1.24) | 4.58 (1.12) | 4.55 (1.04) |
| High | High | 51 | 4.63 (1.43) | 4.70 (1.29) | 4.65 (1.10) |

*Note*: Standard deviations are shown in parentheses. All variables were measured on a 7-point rating scale ranging from 1 = *completely disagree* to 7 = *completely agree*.

**TABLE 5** Pearson correlations and internal reliabilities of Study 2 variables

| Variable | *M* | *SD* | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1.** Male[a] | 0.42 | 0.50 | – | | | | | | | | | | |
| **2.** Female[a] | 0.54 | 0.50 | −0.93** | – | | | | | | | | | |
| **3.** Other[a] | 0.04 | 0.19 | −0.16* | −0.21** | – | | | | | | | | |
| **4.** Unemployment duration (in years) | 1.39 | 1.39 | 0.10 | −0.12 | 0.05 | – | | | | | | | |
| **5.** COVID-19 vaccination status[b] | 0.35 | 0.48 | 0.01 | −0.06 | 0.15* | −0.02 | – | | | | | | |
| **6.** COVID-19 threat perceptions | 3.77 | 1.32 | −0.04 | 0.07 | −0.08 | −0.06 | 0.18* | (0.74) | | | | | |
| **7.** Response warmth[c] | 0.51 | 0.50 | −0.02 | 0.01 | 0.02 | 0.05 | 0.07 | 0.06 | – | | | | |
| **8.** Response competence[c] | 0.50 | 0.50 | −0.00 | 0.02 | −0.03 | 0.01 | −0.11 | −0.06 | 0.02 | – | | | |
| **9.** Organizational trust | 4.20 | 1.20 | −0.05 | 0.03 | 0.05 | 0.08 | −0.01 | −0.06 | 0.34** | 0.15* | (0.92) | | |
| **10.** Employer attractiveness | 4.17 | 1.39 | 0.05 | −0.05 | 0.01 | 0.00 | −0.01 | −0.01 | 0.35** | 0.09 | 0.78** | (0.94) | |
| **11.** Job pursuit intentions | 4.18 | 1.33 | 0.03 | −0.02 | −0.01 | 0.00 | −0.02 | −0.02 | 0.35** | 0.08 | 0.79** | 0.89** | (0.92) |

*Note*: Reliability coefficients are shown in parentheses along the diagonal of the table.

Variables 6, 9–11 were measured on a 7-point rating scale.

[a]Categories include Female (1 = *female*, 0 = *male*, 0 = *other*), Male (1 = *male*, 0 = *female*, 0 = *other*), Other (1 = *other*, 0 = *male*, 0 = *female*).

[b]0 = *no*; 1 = *yes*.

[c]Both dummy variables (response warmth and response competence) were coded as 0 = *low*; 1 = *high*.

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

To test H3a, we performed mediation analysis using SPSS Process macro v3.5.2 (Model 4) with employer attractiveness as dependent variable. We entered response warmth as independent variable, organizational trust as mediator, and the four control variables and response competence as covariates. We computed standardized indirect effects with bootstrap sample size set to 5000, and CI set to 95%. In support of H3a, the indirect effect of response warmth on employer attractiveness through organizational trust was significant ($B = 0.72$, $SE = 0.15$, CI = [0.430; 1.016]). For H3b, we used job pursuit intentions as dependent variable. In line with H3b, the indirect effect of response warmth on job pursuit intentions through organizational trust was significant ($B = 0.70$, $SE = 0.14$, CI = [0.424; 984]). Controlling for organizational trust, response warmth still had a significant direct effect ($B = 0.24$, $SE = 0.12$, $p = .04$, CI = [0.004; 0.488].

To test H4a, we performed mediation analysis with employer attractiveness as dependent variable, response competence as independent variable, organizational trust as mediator, and the four control variables and response warmth as covariates. Result show that, despite an insignificant direct effect, the indirect effect of response competence on employer attractiveness through organizational trust was significant ($B = 0.29$, $SE = 0.14$, CI = [0.006; 0.575]), supporting H4a. For H4b, we used job pursuit intentions as dependent variable. In line with H4b, the indirect effect of response competence on job pursuit intentions through organizational trust was significant ($B = 0.28$, $SE = 0.14$, CI = [0.025; 0.566]), although its direct effect was not. Results of H3 and H4 show that a COVID-19 response high in warmth or competence can generate positive trust perceptions, which might attract applicants and motivate them to apply.[3]

## 8.1 | Analysis of post-experimental questionnaire

For the first open-ended question, 86% of participants said that they would consider applying/working for a company with a past

**TABLE 6** Main and interactive effects of response warmth and response competence (Study 2)

| Predictor | Employer attractiveness | | | Job pursuit intentions | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Step 1 | Step 2 | Step 3 | Step 1 | Step 2 | Step 3 |
| Control variables | | | | | | |
| Male[a] | −0.01 | 0.00 | −0.00 | 0.05 | 0.07 | 0.06 |
| Female[a] | −0.07 | −0.06 | −0.07 | 0.02 | 0.03 | 0.03 |
| Unemployment duration (in years) | −0.01 | −0.03 | −0.02 | −0.00 | −0.02 | −0.02 |
| COVID-19 vaccination status[b] | −0.02 | −0.03 | −0.03 | −0.02 | −0.03 | −0.03 |
| COVID-19 threat perceptions | −0.00 | −0.02 | −0.01 | −0.02 | −0.04 | −0.04 |
| COVID-19 response | | | | | | |
| Response warmth[c] | | 0.35** | 0.45** | | 0.36** | 0.39** |
| Response competence[c] | | 0.08 | 0.19 | | 0.07 | 0.10 |
| Interaction | | | | | | |
| Response warmth × Response competence | | | −0.17 | | | −0.06 |
| $R^2$ | 0.003 | 0.135** | 0.144** | 0.002 | 0.135** | 0.136** |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | −0.023 | 0.102** | 0.107** | −0.025 | 0.102** | 0.098** |
| $\Delta R^2$ | 0.003 | 0.131** | 0.010 | 0.002 | 0.133** | 0.001 |

*Note*: The values in the table are standardized regression coefficients ($\beta$).

[a]Categories include Female (1 = *female*, 0 = *male*, 0 = *other*), Male (1 = *male*, 0 = *female*, 0 = *other*), Other (1 = *other*, 0 = *male*, 0 = *female*).

[b]0 = *no*; 1 = *yes*.

[c]Both dummy variables (response warmth and response competence) were coded as 0 = *low*; 1 = *high*.

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

COVID-19 outbreak and shared that they would evaluate its COVID-19 response among other things to make that decision: *It depends on the quality of their response. Such as, have they listened to employee concerns and suggestions? Taken reasonable measures to curtail a future outbreak?* (female, 25 years). In the second question, 81% of participants who saw the article with low levels of warmth and competence reported to be influenced by the COVID-19 response, as compared to 71% in the other three groups. Analysis revealed that applicants in this group shared negative evaluations of the employer, owing to lack of trust: *A company that doesn't care enough about its employees to keep them safe from COVID-19 is a company I cannot trust, and I wouldn't want to work for someone I cannot trust*. (male, 22 years).

## 9 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

This paper contributes to the existing literature by showing how an organization's response to a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic impacts applicant attraction. Our results show that providing a warm or competent response can help in building positive applicant perceptions about the organization as an employer. Moreover, we found that an organization can successfully signal its employer brand personality through its COVID-19 response, which is related to higher employer attractiveness perceptions and job pursuit intentions. This is important because, creating and communicating an attractive employer brand through various communication and employer branding activities is one of the core purposes of employer branding (Van Hoye, 2016). However, very little is known in terms of how these perceptions could be created. Hence, this paper shows that organizations could consciously use its communication (such as its COVID-19 response) to signal its employer brand personality and increase attraction. In line with signaling theory, our results show that potential applicants try to deduce the personality of the organization based on the type and way of its communication (Carpentier et al., 2019). Hence, when an organization signals its COVID-19 response in a warm or competent way, applicants' perceptions about its warmth or competence as an employer increase, which ultimately enhances their attraction towards the organization. This is especially noted in Study 1 where a limited COVID-19 response was not attractive for applicants, as it did not provide any information about the organization's employer brand personality. However, crafting the response in a way that emphasize its employer brand personality may prove more effective. This is in line with Wilhelmy et al. (2019) who examined how applicants interpret characteristics of their interview experience as signals of organization's personality (benevolence and competence).

In addition to perceived organizational warmth and competence, Study 2 examined the role of organizational trust to further understand why warm and competent responses are attractive.

Results show that both response warmth and competence indirectly relate to employer attractiveness and job pursuit intentions through organizational trust. This further adds to the theoretical understanding of processing warm and competent signals, and indicates that because warm and competent responses help to build higher levels of trust with the organization, they are considered attractive. Our findings are consistent with studies in other domains examining the role of trust to explain warm or competent evaluations (Kulms & Kopp, 2018; Xue et al., 2020). Furthermore, we show how organizations can create higher trust perceptions among its applicants through its communication. This is important because building trust with applicants is a prerequisite for recruitment. Research has shown that higher levels of organizational trust correspond to higher employer attraction, job satisfaction, and employee performance (Klotz et al., 2013). Specifically, during uncertain times like COVID-19, creating higher levels of trust with talent is even more important (Newman & Ford, 2021). Hence, we suggest that during a crisis, organizations should enhance their applicants' trust by communicating its information in a warm or competent way.

Results of both our studies conclude that in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, communicating a warm response seems more attractive than a competent one. In Study 1, we found that a warm COVID-19 response leads to higher employer attractiveness perceptions as well as job pursuit intentions. Limited support for the effectiveness of a competent COVID-19 response was found (the competent response leads to higher employer attractiveness, but only compared to no response). Study 2 re-examined the robustness of Study 1 findings by examining the combined effects of the two dimensions, in a different context and sample. In line with Study 1, Study 2 found that only responses high in warmth led to higher employer attractiveness and job pursuit intentions. Thus, our findings suggest that communicating a warm response during an impactful and long-lasting health crisis helps in forming positive perceptions among different applicants, employed or unemployed. It might be that during the troubled COVID-19 times, applicants prefer an employer that emphasizes warmth and consideration in its response more than the one that stresses its capabilities. The primacy of warmth during a crisis is in line with Kervyn et al. (2014) who found that organizations' lack of warmth to deal with a disaster is more negatively evaluated compared to its lack of competence. Furthermore, Huang et al. (2020) discussed that providing high levels of both dimensions may not always be effective, as one dimension might weaken the perceptions about the other. For instance, a context requiring high warmth should not always be complemented with high competence as that might dilute perceivers' attention towards warmth.

Furthermore, Study 2 shows that organizations can still manage their attractiveness after confronting negative events and publicity. Negative events or information create bad impressions about organizations as places to work (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2005). However, our findings suggest that if organizations share their response towards such events, especially highlighting warmth and friendliness, they can regain applicants' trust and ultimately their attraction. This was especially noted in Study 2, where most respondents were still interested in applying/working for a company after a COVID-19 outbreak.

Lastly, we found limited support for the moderating role of applicants' personality. In both studies, we found no significant interactions between agreeableness and the responses. However, in Study 1, we found some support for a competing theoretical perspective, that is, complementary fit (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987) for conscientiousness. Similar to results by Schreurs et al. (2009), we noted that applicants high in conscientiousness seemed to value complementary dimensions like warmth and sincerity more. We did not replicate this interaction in Study 2.

## 9.1 | Limitations and future research directions

In terms of limitations, whereas the experimental design allowed us to draw causal conclusions and control the content, it is possible that in real life, potential applicants will process information differently. Hence, a real life test might be conducted. Moreover, we conducted the studies in the UK, at specific times during the pandemic. Hence, the results might not generalize to other countries or to other times in the pandemic. Another limitation is that we measured the mediating and outcome variables at the same time which is not ideal to test mediation. However, as we wanted to examine the underlying theoretical mechanisms and reasons that make a certain COVID-19 response attractive, we included mediating variables as well in our design (though we measured outcomes before mediators to reduce priming effects). Hence, further studies should inspect our hypotheses using other research designs, for example, longitudinal to measure the variables at different time points. In terms of future research, studies could investigate how other stakeholder groups (such as actual employees) might be affected by an organization's COVID-19 response. Further, apart from applicants' perceptions, investigating other pre-hire outcomes such as applicants' actual application decisions can also help to understand the impact of COVID-19 responses on recruitment decisions. Moreover, investigating how a warm or competent response works in other types of crises (e.g., financial, technological) can also provide insights about the effects of the two dimensions on an organization's attraction. Lastly, given the importance of social media and word-of-mouth to evaluate employer attraction, researchers could examine how responding to crises in a warm or competent way via these other means affects attractiveness perceptions.

## 9.2 | Practical implications

Practically, this paper informs organizations how important it is to communicate their response to crises with potential applicants and to signal their employer brand personality in this response. Our findings show that applicants use an organization's COVID-19 response not only to form general attitudes but also concrete intentions to pursue

the organization as a place of employment. Moreover, the paper demonstrates how to create favorable applicant perceptions through an organization's crisis response. Study 1 suggests that sharing attractive COVID-19 responses on an organization's official website, especially a warm one, might help in attracting potential applicants. Study 2 also shows that emphasizing warmth and compassion while dealing with negative COVID-19 events is especially beneficial, as it not only increases applicants' attraction, but also the perceived trustworthiness of the organization. Hence, during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic organizations should develop their communication (e.g., website, recruitment materials, press releases, etc.) keeping warmth in mind to signal their attractiveness and trustworthiness as an employer.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study was funded by the Higher Education Commission (HEC), Pakistan under grant number 50033262.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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## ENDNOTES

[1] We ran a one-way ANOVA to compare the three COVID-19 responses. A post hoc test revealed that the limited response was significantly different and less likely to affect participants' perceptions than the warm ($p = .02$) and competent response ($p < .01$). No differences were present between the warm and competent condition ($p = .82$).

[2] In addition, we repeated the mediation and moderation analyses from Study 1 to check their generalizability. We only report these findings briefly here to maintain paper focus and length. First, mediation analyses show a significant indirect effect of response warmth through perceived organizational warmth on employer attractiveness ($B = 1.11$, $SE = 0.16$, CI = [0.811; 1.443]) and job pursuit intentions ($B = 0.98$, $SE = 0.16$, CI = [0.702; 1.303]). Similarly, a significant indirect effect was found for response competence through perceived organizational competence on employer attractiveness ($B = 0.44$, $SE = 0.15$, CI = [0.155; 0.745]) and job pursuit intentions ($B = 0.42$, $SE = 0.14$, CI = [0.160; 0.723]). Furthermore, we found no significant moderation effects of applicants' personality (agreeableness and conscientiousness) on the relationship of response warmth and competence with employer attractiveness and job pursuit intentions.

[3] We reran all analyses without the control variables in both studies (Study 1 and 2). Similar results and patterns were found. The only difference was in Study 2, where without control variables, organizational trust fully mediated the relationship between response warmth and job pursuit intentions. With control variables, the mediation was partial. The comparative analyses suggest the rigor of our findings.

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Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

**How to cite this article:** Kanwal, H., Van Hoye, G., & Schollaert, E. (2022). Response to a crisis and applicant attraction: Signaling employer brand personality and organizational trust through warm and competent COVID-19 responses. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 1–17.
https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsa.12394