

# The crucial role of fear of negative evaluation for the application process

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## Abstract

*The aim of the study was to find out whether there is a connection between applicants and fear of negative evaluation and the use of recruitment agencies to search for a job. For this purpose, 230 test persons were questioned by means of a primary statistical data collection in the form of a written and standardized online survey. A positive correlation between fear of negative evaluation and the use of recruitment agencies of  $r=.37$  or  $r=.31$  was found.*

*A difference in terms of fear of negative evaluation or no fear of negative evaluation and the use of recruitment agencies to search for a job could be determined, but this cannot be adequately proven. It is advisable for recruitment agencies to establish a separate personnel marketing strategy for anxious applicants in the future. In addition, a concept for addressing anxious applicants should be developed.*

**Keywords:** Fear, Negative Evaluation, Application Recruitment Agencies.

## Introduction

Organizations nowadays compete for highly qualified personnel from various industries and professions.<sup>14</sup> The shortage of skilled workers is a global trend that now affects most sectors of the economy.<sup>55</sup> The limited availability of skills can have a negative impact on lab or productivity and is a hindrance to innovation developments.<sup>8</sup>

The advancing digitization and the further development of the online recruiting market make successful recruiting often an expert topic. Without expertise, the staffing time increases and the recruiting costs increase enormously.<sup>19</sup> Recruitment agencies are a crucial recruiting channel. More than 75 % of the companies see recruitment agencies as a suitable option for recruiting.<sup>5</sup> Companies often recruit exclusively through recruiting agencies.

The advantage is quickly apparent not only to companies, but also to applicants. Applicants are often under pressure to find a suitable job. This can affect applicants' wellbeing and cause anxiety.

Research has already dealt intensively with the construct "fear of negative evaluation".

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There are studies on the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and academic performance,<sup>10,26,27</sup> the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and buying behaviour,<sup>6</sup> the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and weight<sup>56,57</sup> and other contexts. So far, however, the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and the use of recruitment agencies for job search has not been investigated. This is what this study deals with.

Recruitment agencies know which applicants are using their services. This allows the personnel marketing to be adjusted and the application process to be optimized for anxious applicants. It is possible to address applicants in a more targeted and tailored manner. By knowing which applicants use recruitment agencies to search for jobs, companies know which applicants are being referred by recruitment agencies. This enables companies that use recruitment agencies to search for applicants to develop better personnel development strategies. In addition, a closer exchange with the recruiting agencies is also possible here in order to find suitable candidates for qualified positions even from the anxious applicants.

Ultimately applicants also benefit from the dissertation, especially anxious applicants. This means that these applicants know that they will be seen in the market and that they can receive job-search support from recruitment agencies.

The aim of this study is to find out whether more and more anxious applicants use the services of personnel service companies to find a suitable job. Therefore, this study explores the following research questions:

- How does fear of negative evaluation affect the use of recruitment agencies from applicants when looking for a job?
- Why do applicants who are afraid of negative evaluation use recruitment agencies to help them find a job?

## Theoretical Foundation

Etymologically, the word outsourcing comes from the Anglo-Saxon region. Out-sourcing is a combination of the words "outside" and "resourcing".<sup>49</sup> Accordingly, outsourcing is the external allocation or processing of resources or value-adding activities.

Due to developments such as globalization, the increased demands of consumers, the restructuring and reorganization of companies as well as the advancing information

technologies, outsourcing is becoming more and more important. Outsourcing enables companies to reduce costs and specialize in strategic core areas.<sup>20</sup> Originally, outsourcing involved labour intensive and costly manufacturing processes. Recently, however, more and more services have been outsourced<sup>20</sup> which are referred to as business process outsourcing (BPO).

The most common areas of activity that are outsourced are recurring and non-core services such as cleaning, security, building maintenance and catering.<sup>28</sup> Figure 2 shows the development of the BPO.<sup>49</sup> In recent years in particular, human resource outsourcing (HRO) has become increasingly popular.<sup>45</sup> As early as 2014, around 20 % of all outsourcing deals related to HR services.<sup>45</sup>

The most frequently outsourced personnel benefits are legal, salary and pension benefits. These services are directly followed by recruitment and selection, which are often outsourced.<sup>12</sup>

The recruitment process outsourcing (RPO) includes the outsourcing of processes that relate to recruitment to external service providers.<sup>49</sup> The RPO is thus a sub form of the HRO.

The advantages from a company perspective for the RPO relate to both efficiency and quality. This includes, on the one hand, the matching of applicants for vacancies, telephone interviews with applicants and a preselection of the best candidates.<sup>22</sup>

When developing a personnel selection process, it is important to ensure that it fits the position to be filled and the requirements associated with it. Objective and subjective properties play a role here. A decision for an applicant is made based on the personnel selection process. The most suitable applicant is hired. An evaluation should be carried out to check the quality of the personnel selection process. In the best case, a cost-benefit analysis is carried out and the selection process adapted accordingly for the next appointment.<sup>29</sup> The following figure shows the aptitude diagnostic process.

Application processes that are perceived negatively often result in applicants not accepting a job offer due to the negative application process. The behaviour of the recruiter in particular plays a major role.<sup>22</sup>

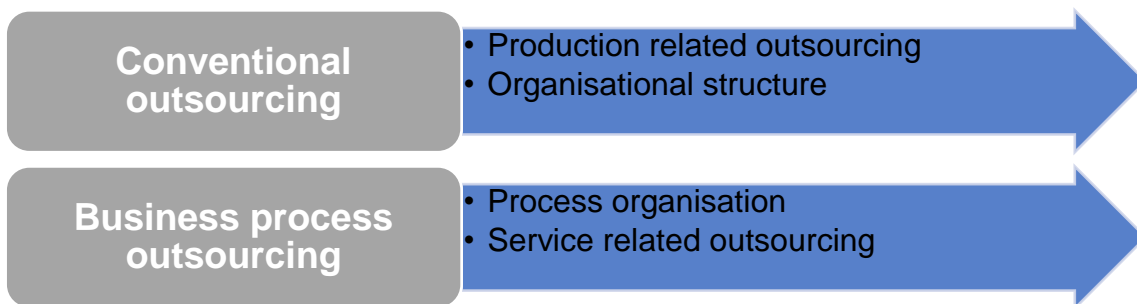


Figure 1: Conventional and business process outsourcing (own figure, 2021)

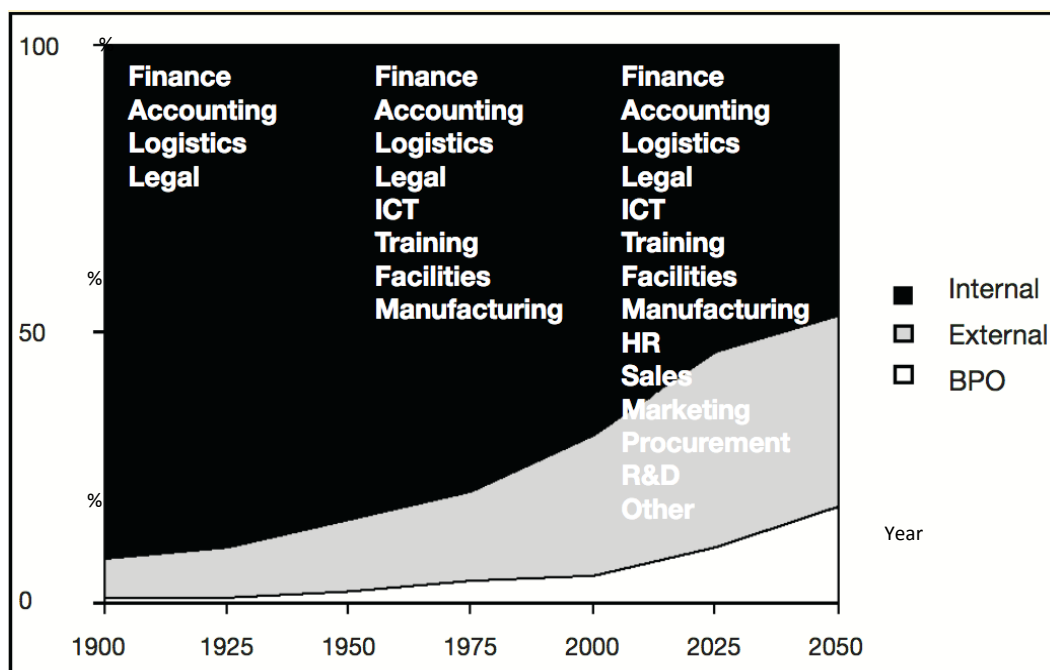


Figure 2: Development of BPO (changed from Riedl and Kepler)<sup>49</sup>

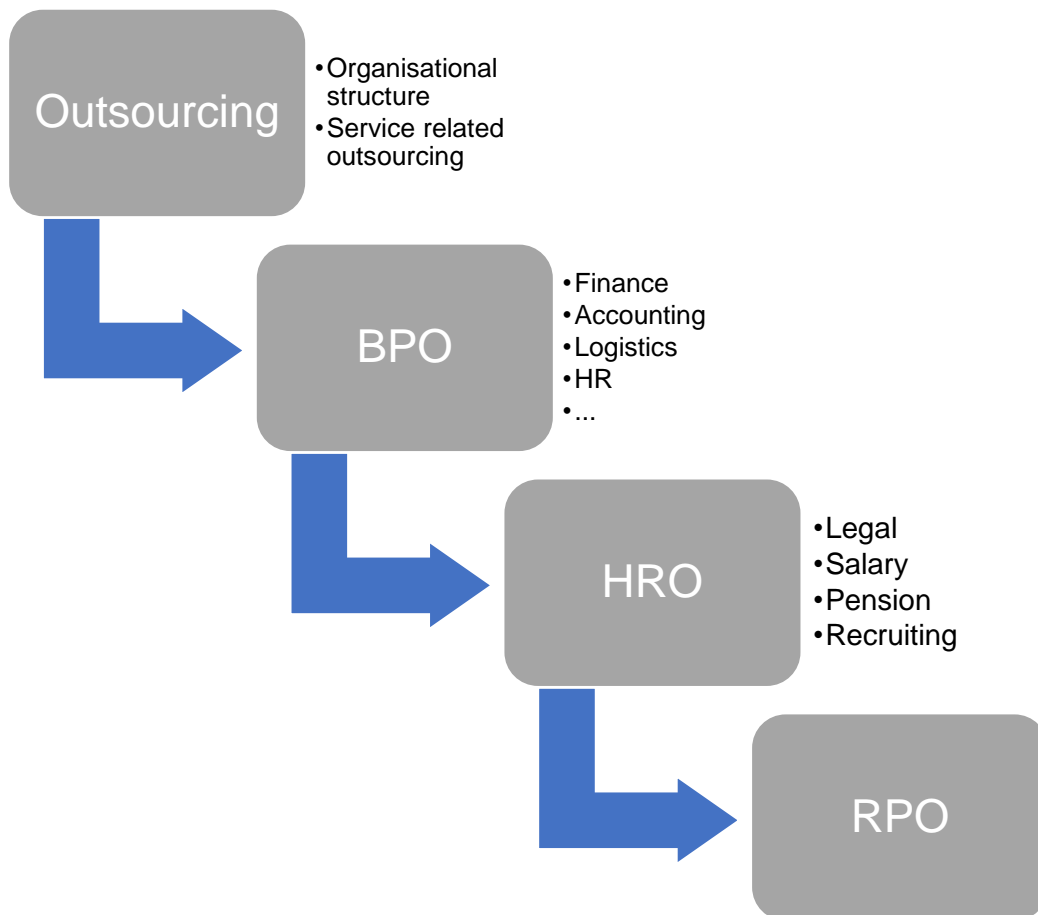


Figure 3: Classification of RPO in the concept of outsourcing (own figure, 2021)

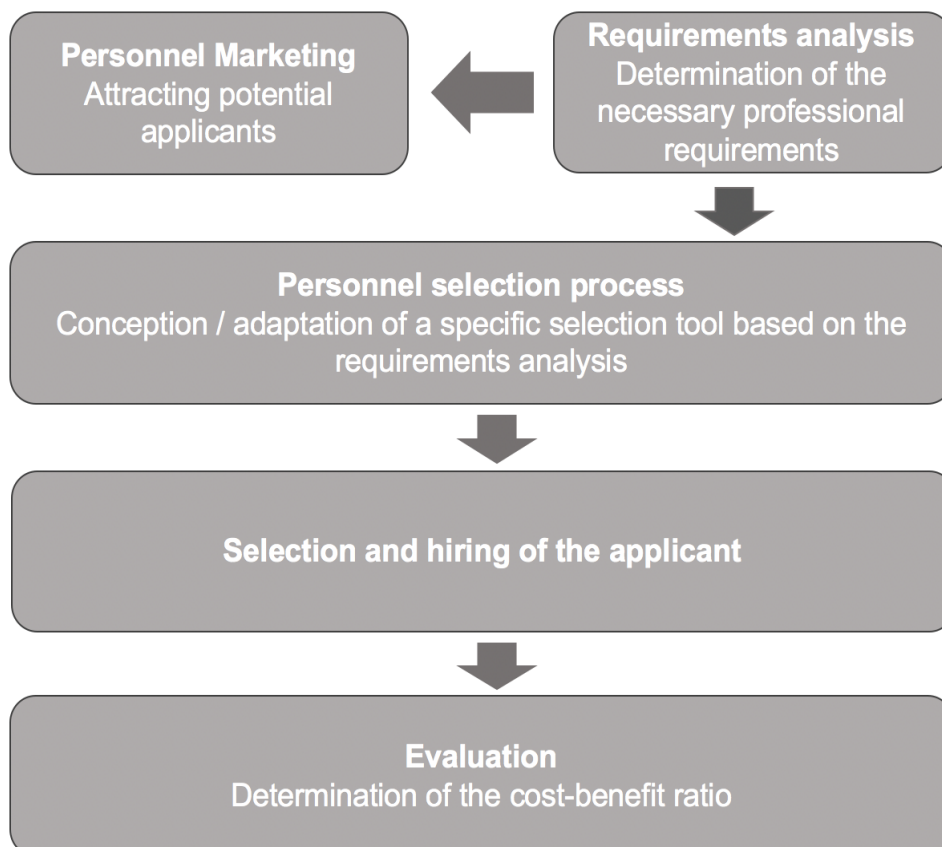
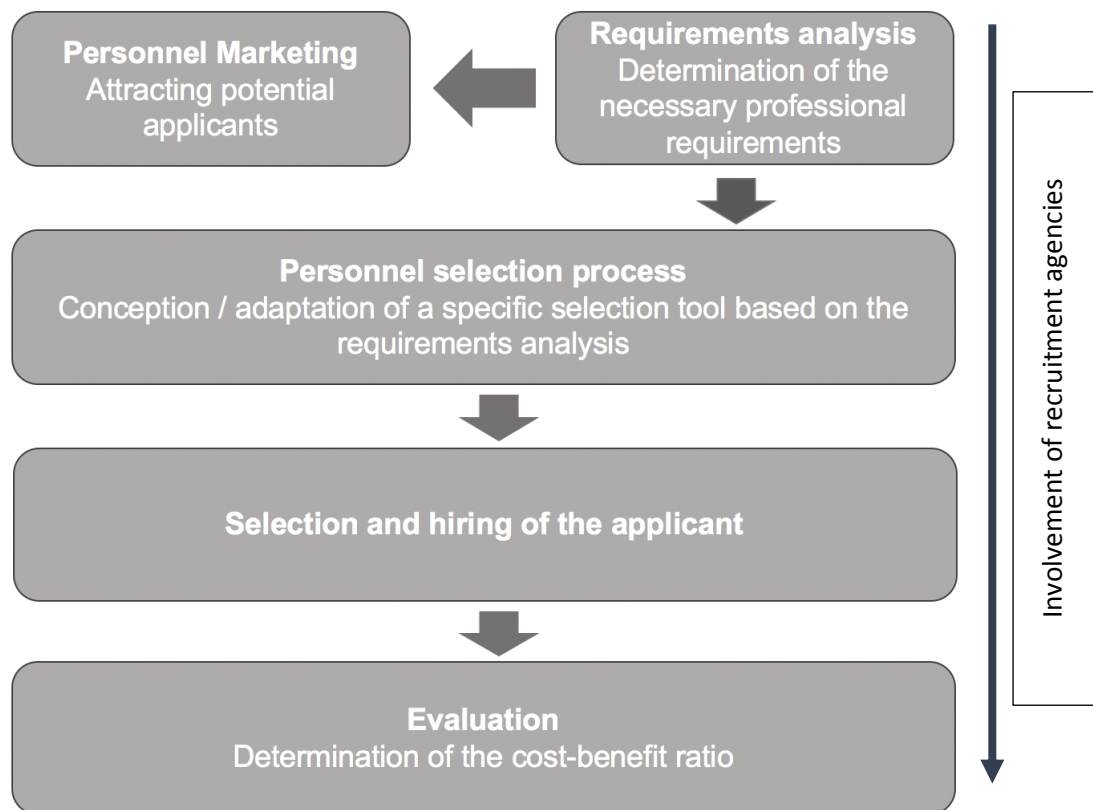


Figure 4: Schematic representation of the personnel selection process (changed from Kauffeld and Grohmann)<sup>29</sup>



**Figure 5: Schematic representation of the personnel selection process with recruitment agencies (changed from Kauffeld and Grohmann)<sup>29</sup>**

Doubts can arise, especially when using external service providers. Applicants may find it questionable whether service providers have the necessary internal knowledge of the respective company and the vacancy to be filled. If the recruiter has gaps in their knowledge in this regard, a valid filling of the vacancy or the accuracy of an applicant's fit for the vacant position cannot be guaranteed.

When applicants are aware of this, they often consider the application process to be unfair.<sup>22</sup> It is therefore extremely important for the recruiting process that the external service providers obtain detailed information about the company and the vacant position and that the recruiters are involved in the entire personnel selection process.

As far as the quality of the applicants is concerned, this information can be divided into two categories.<sup>18</sup> On one hand, there is objective and measurable information, which is often referred to as hard information. This information can be found in the applicants' curriculum vitae (CV) and certificates.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, there is the soft information which cannot be measured directly. This information is subjective and can only be determined through direct contact with the applicant. Interviews and discussions are used for this purpose.<sup>18</sup>

Employees in a human resources department or a specialist department can have preferences as to which information is more important. However, this preference does not always

match the needs of the company.<sup>18</sup> If HR service providers know these preferences of decision-makers as well as the needs of companies, they can support applicants with coaching. The external service providers can also act positively in favour of the applicants in subsequent discussions with the respective company and thus favour a positive end result. In the context of this study it is assumed that applicants are aware that external service providers can intervene in their favour to a limited extent.

Etymologically, the word "anxiety" comes from the Latin noun *angor* or the verb *ango*, which means to constrict and the word *angustus*, which means narrow. This makes it clear that anxiety has long been associated with an oppressive feeling.

The 5th Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders defines anxiety as an expectation of a future threat. In preparation for this threat, anxiety is associated with muscle tension and vigilance.<sup>1</sup> The difference to fear is also defined. Fear is the emotional reaction to an imminent threat. This threat can be real or only perceived. The autonomic arousal increases in preparation for a fight or flight.<sup>1</sup>

Fear is defined as an uncomfortable emotional state. This condition is characterized by a subjective feeling of tension, concern and excitement of the nervous system<sup>16</sup> which in turn can cause a feeling of tightness. Some physical reactions

occur during anxiety. The negative feelings can often predominate.

In learning psychology, learning is defined as a change in the behaviour of an organism as a result of expectations.<sup>25</sup> Fear

can also be learned. Seligmann<sup>52</sup> developed the preparedness hypothesis which deals with the biological limits of learning. There is a certain innate willingness to learn for certain stimuli.

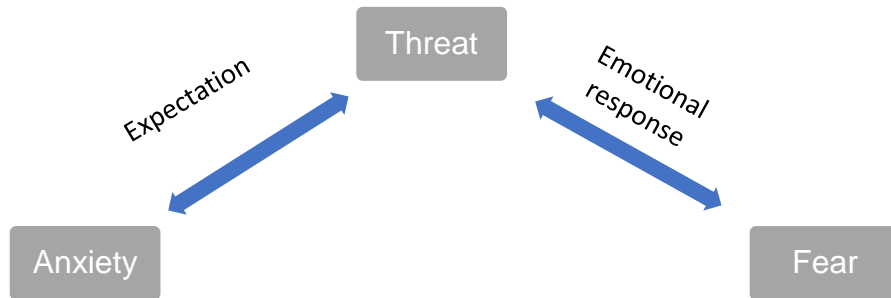


Figure 6: Relationship of anxiety and fear of a threat (own figure, 2021)

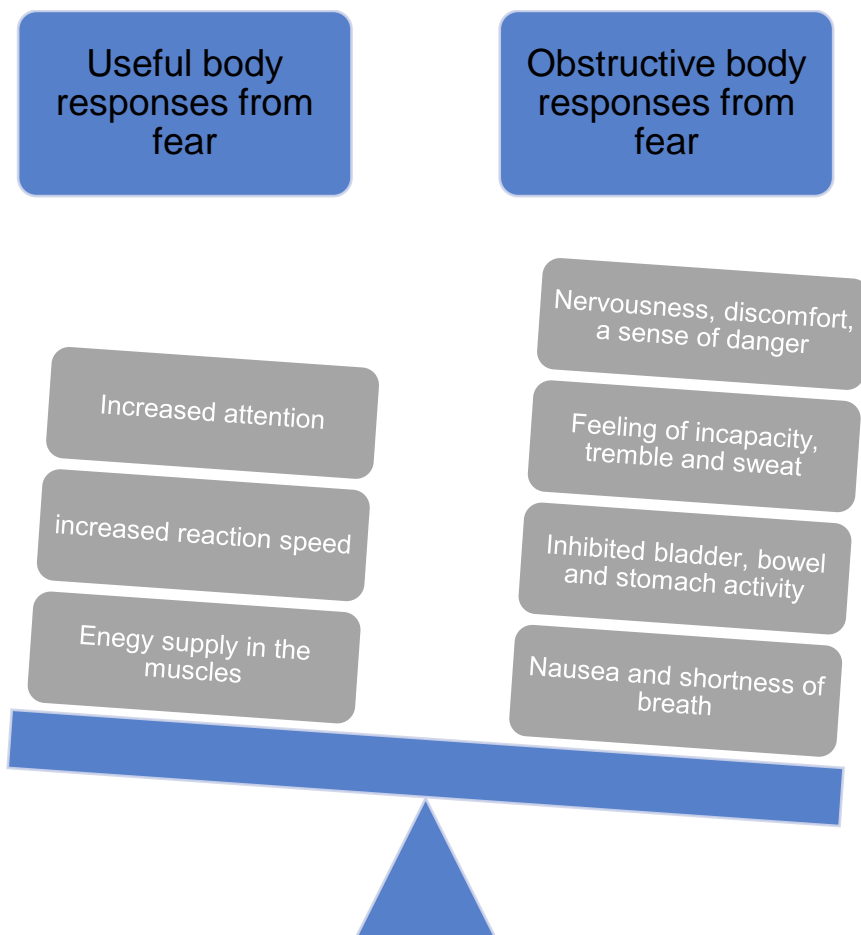


Figure 7: Useful and obstructive body responses from fear (own figure, 2021)



Figure 8: Two-Factor-Theory (own figure, 2021)

Willingness to learn a species depends on the natural environment to which it has adapted. For example, people learn to avoid a dangerous stimulus more easily than to consciously seek it out.<sup>25</sup> However, certain reactions to stimuli can also be learnt individually.

The two-factor-theory of Mowrer<sup>44</sup> is a classic learning theoretical model of the development and maintenance of fear. According to the two-factor-theory, avoidance is learned in two steps. First there is a classic conditioning. A negative stimulus (US) triggers fear (UR). After a few repetitions, this fear is transferred to the cue stimulus (CS).<sup>25</sup> Operant conditioning then takes place. By avoiding the classically conditioned fear stimulus, fear is reduced. The reduction in fear serves as a negative reinforcement, which reinforces avoidance behaviour and thus occurs more frequently.<sup>25</sup>

Lazarus' cognitive motivational theory of the emotion states that two assessments are important in the development of emotions. First, the situation (primarily appraisal) and then the coping options (secondary appraisal) must be assessed.<sup>37</sup> The primary appraisal assesses the event in terms of how important it is for one's own wellbeing. This is done in three steps. First of all, it must be checked whether the facts are relevant to the goal for the person or not. It is then checked whether the facts are conducive or hindering the achievement of the goal. In the third step, the type of ego participation is checked.<sup>37</sup>

In the secondary appraisal, the various options are checked in further three steps. For this purpose, it is first discussed who is to blame for the event. In the next step, the coping options for improving the situation are considered. In the last

step, the expectations for the future are examined more closely.<sup>37</sup>

We often encounter stress in everyday life<sup>35</sup> and stress is a situation in which demands are assessed as demanding or stressful as adaptive or coping resources. These requirements can include both internal and external requirements.<sup>36</sup> Stress can be triggered by various events such as illness, pain or the use of medication. But other triggers such as unforeseeable or unpleasant events, conflicts, cultural or environmental differences and fear, especially fear of something unknown, lead to stress.<sup>35</sup>

These triggers can be referred to as stressors. Stressors put organisms in a state of heightened alertness. Endogenous stressors emanate from the individual who feels stress himself. Exogenous stressors come from the environment and affect the respective individual.<sup>47</sup> Stress thus includes the entire process from stressor to stress. The stress is the reaction of an individual to the stressor.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, stress can also have positive and negative effects. In addition, positive and negative reactions to stress as a result of the same stressor can occur at the same time.<sup>33</sup> Eustress refers to stress associated with positive feelings and healthy physical reactions.<sup>33</sup> Thus, although eustress is perceived by the individual as burdensome in the short term, it ultimately leads to a positive assessment. Examples are the joy of a new job or the upcoming wedding.<sup>47</sup>

Distress, on the other hand, describes an individual's assessment of stressors in whom the stressors act as a potential source of danger.<sup>38</sup> This involves negative feelings, which lead to negative body reactions.<sup>33</sup> Examples of this are deaths, divorce, dismissals and exams.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1**  
**Cognitive-motivational theory of the emotion (own table, 2021)**

Stimulus (stressor)		
Primary appraisal		
Target relevance	Yes → Emotion	No → No emotion
Target congruence	Congruent → Positive emotions	Incongruent → Negative emotions
Type of ego involvement	Choice of emotion: - Anger - Guilt - Shame - ...	
Secondary appraisal		
Fault or merit	Fault - Guilt - Shame	Merit - Proud
Coping potential (example fault)	Mitigate guilt → Possibility to apologize	Strengthen guilt → No possibility to apologize
Forward-looking expectation	individual	

Frequently, threats in the surrounding area are only recognized by fear of those threats. The fear of certain environmental influences can therefore favour changes in our brain and organ function. This can lead to different behavioural reactions.<sup>9</sup> The individual can fight and resist the threat (fight), withdraw from the threat and flee (flight) or fall into a kind of paralysis (freeze)<sup>37</sup> as illustrated in the following figure. Fear can be described as performance emotion. This form of emotion is a reaction to impending failure.<sup>16</sup>

As already indicated, stress and anxiety can have both positive and negative effects. The Yerkes-Dodson law supports this assumption.<sup>16</sup> A low level of anxiety can be beneficial and a high level of anxiety is disadvantageous. Thus, fear has a performance-enhancing effect. However, if the anxiety level continues to rise, it will have a negative impact on performance.<sup>60</sup>

A personological approach tries to explain why different individuals behave differently in similar situations. Studies on this deal with the fear of failure which relate to the motive of avoiding failure.<sup>9</sup> This inclination is used to make decisions about risk preference, willingness to make an effort and maintaining a measure.<sup>4</sup> Fear of failure leads individuals to feel discouraged.<sup>17</sup>

Fear of negative evaluation or fear of evaluation is an increasing problem.<sup>46</sup> It belongs to the social anxiety disorders and is part of psychopathology and often the cause of depression.<sup>59</sup> A robust conservation factor relates to the

fear of negative evaluation.<sup>56</sup> When there is fear of negative evaluation, the focus is on worry and suffering. These components result from the fear of being belittled or judged inferior by others.<sup>21</sup> Exam anxiety comprises affective, cognitive, physiological and motivational components.<sup>46</sup>

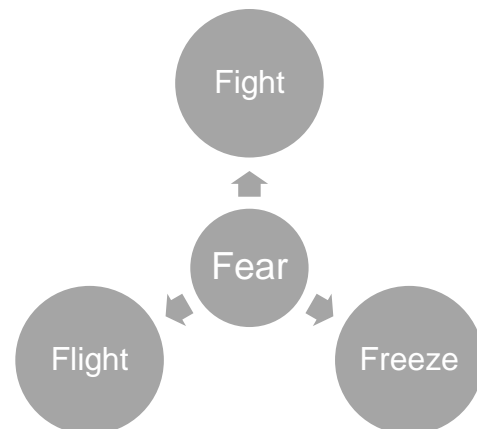


Figure 9: Reactions to fear (own figure, 2021)

The cognitive component is particularly important. This component is often referred to as “worry” and includes worries about an impending failure and the resulting possible consequences.<sup>46</sup> Often those affected by fear avoid exam-like situations. As a result, positive experiences with exams cannot be gained, which in the long term further increases the fear of exams.<sup>40</sup> Fear leads to feelings of stress on the part of those affected and the avoidance of situations in which appraisal anxiety occurs.<sup>23</sup>

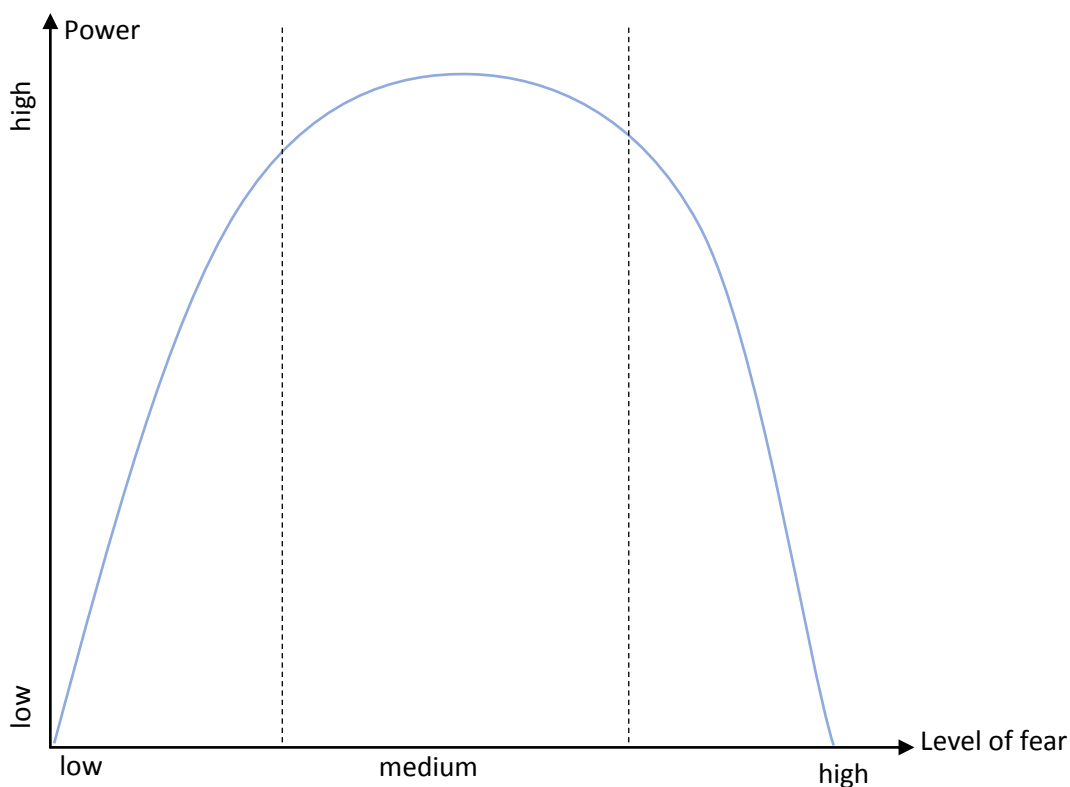


Figure 10: Yerkes-Dodson-Law (own figure, 2021)

The conditioning learned was called the Pavlovian reflex early on in psychology.<sup>34</sup> Anxiety problems have long been attributed to Pavlovian conditioning. This is particularly evident in the case of Little Albert by Watson and Rayner.<sup>58</sup> However, there are studies which show that many people who suffer from phobias do not show any conditioning results.<sup>41</sup> Also, studies are showing that people do not develop conditioned fears, although other people developed fears at the same events.<sup>15</sup>

One learning theory is that there is a relationship between an action and the result of it and an individual learns from it.<sup>53</sup> The probability of an action occurring is increased (by reinforcement) or decreased (by punishment) depending on the result. Avoidance learning is therefore a result of operant conditioning. For example, a person with social anxiety can avoid a party. Avoiding the party leads to less anxiety for the person. The reduced fear, in turn, increases the avoidance behaviour. The person has learnt that there is less fear in avoiding a party. This means that the likelihood that this person will also avoid parties in the future is high. Avoidance is probably learnt through negative reinforcement. Avoidance behaviour either reduces the occurrence of a stimulus or the resulting damage.<sup>24</sup>

The two-factor model assumes that it is a combination of classical and operant conditioning that favours the learned avoidance behaviour.<sup>43</sup> Mowrer<sup>44</sup> assumes that operant conditioning is more compatible with human behaviour.<sup>43</sup>

The two-factor theory was an influential theory for the treatment of anxiety disorders, but there are also criticisms of the model.<sup>24</sup> According to the model, avoidance and flight behaviour are motivated by a high level of fear. This theory thus rules out that flight and avoidance behaviour would not take place without fear.<sup>54</sup> Experiments proved this. Patients with anxiety disorder who prematurely end the treatment session in which they are confronted with their fears show similar clinical improvements as the patients who did not interrupt the session.<sup>34</sup> As clinical findings also indicate, fear sometimes, but not always, is involved in avoidance behaviour.<sup>34</sup>

There are different types of coping strategies. Problem-focused coping focuses on the threat itself. The attempt is made to eliminate the threat, evade it or reduce the threat. The goal of problem-oriented coping is to obtain

instrumental help. Emotion-related coping, on the other hand, tries to reduce the stress caused by the threat. Strategies for emotion-related coping are self-reassurance and reactions such as screaming or crying. Both types of coping are interrelated. Problem-oriented coping reduces the threat, thereby also reducing the emotional impact. But emotion-oriented coping also reduces the emotional burden. This gives the opportunity to view problems more calmly, which in turn can lead to more effective problem-oriented coping.<sup>39</sup>

There are other important distinctions between engagement and disengagement coping. The strategy of engagement coping tries to process threats and the associated emotions. Engagement coping thus also includes problem-oriented coping and partly emotion-oriented coping (seeking support, emotion regulation, acceptance). The strategy of disengagement coping, on the other hand, tries to escape threats and the associated emotions. This strategy is therefore mostly emotion-oriented. It tries to avoid unpleasant feelings.<sup>24</sup> In the short term, disengagement coping can be beneficial, but in the long term, this strategy will not solve the problem and is therefore unfavourable.

Active avoidance is behaviour that demonstrably prevents damage. Shock is often used here in animal experiments. This typically leads to an escape. In tests for passive avoidance, however, animals are placed on a platform. When the animal steps down, it receives a shock. The animal is thus taught that it can prevent the shock by passive avoidance (no movement). Successful coping can be learnt through passive avoidance.<sup>24</sup>

This mechanism also works for humans. The importance of a person's perceived control over their surroundings is decisive for sustainable fear reduction. For this, however, the people have to expose themselves to these supposed threats in order to be able to learn that they may not be so threatening. This is ground-breaking in therapy.<sup>24</sup>

Coping can also occur proactively before the actual threat occurs. Proactive avoidance can take place at the first warning signs of a threat.<sup>3</sup> Proactive avoidance attempts to prevent or at least mitigate dangerous situations. Taking control of the situation can reduce anxiety. This type of avoidance became known as the ability to act.<sup>42</sup>

**Table 2**  
**Problem-oriented and emotional coping (own table, 2021)**

<b>Problem-oriented coping</b>	<b>Emotional coping</b>
Threat	Strategies:
- remove	- Self-reassurance
- dodge	- Scream
- reduce	- cry
Objective: To receive instrumental help	Objective: To reduce the emotional burden



The fear of negative evaluations is diagnosed more and more frequently.<sup>46</sup> This fear is a form of anxiety disorder.<sup>59</sup> A robust conservation factor relates to the fear of negative evaluation.<sup>56</sup> The focus here is on the concern and suffering that results from the fear of being judged negatively by others.<sup>21</sup> This fear relates to performance situations and to the evaluation by other people. These situations are therefore often avoided by those affected. Fear leads to feelings of stress in those affected and the avoidance of situations in which evaluation anxiety occurs.<sup>23</sup>

Early psychology research already suspected a connection between fear and avoidance behaviour. It is easier for people to learn to avoid a hazard than to consciously seek it out.<sup>25</sup> If this is adapted to the application process, it can be assumed that individuals with fear of negative evaluation try to circumvent or avoid application processes. This could be done through the use of recruitment companies as the recruiters favour the application process. Therefore, the first directed relationship hypothesis is as follows:

**Hypothesis 1:** The higher is the fear of negative evaluations of people, the more often they use recruitment agencies in application processes.

Fear can cause both positive and negative reactions. Just as eustress can have positive effects and distress negative effects,<sup>33</sup> a low level of anxiety can also be beneficial, while a high level of anxiety can lead to an inability to act.<sup>16</sup> In relation to people with fear of negative evaluation and the application process, this could mean that there are different effects related to the fear level. A low to medium fear level could therefore increase one's own performance and therefore does not need the use of recruitment agencies. A high level of anxiety, on the other hand, could favour the use of recruitment agencies. Hence, the second directed difference hypothesis is as follows:

**Hypothesis 2:** People who are very afraid of negative evaluation, use recruitment agencies more often than people who are not afraid of negative evaluation.

Figure 11 shows the underlying theoretical assumptions that led to hypotheses 1 and 2 in a research framework. According to this, there is a connection between fear of negative evaluation and the use of recruitment agencies in application processes. The level of fear and the coping strategy influence this relationship.

**Methodology**

Quantitative surveys can also take place anonymously<sup>51</sup> which increases the likelihood of honest answers. Since the avoidance behaviour and the fear of negative evaluation have already been sufficiently examined, there is sufficient prior knowledge here to justify a quantitative study design. The present empirical work is a primary statistical data collection in the form of a self-conducted, written and standardized online survey.

A self-constructed questionnaire was used to examine the question of whether applicants fear of negative evaluation more of the when looking for a job use recruitment agencies. The self-constructed questionnaire consists of two existing questionnaires, the scale of fear of negative evaluation-5 (SANB-5),<sup>30</sup> the part of the stress and coping inventory (SCI)<sup>50</sup> which relates to coping strategies, as well as some self-constructed questions to collect demographic data. These are German-language survey instruments. The survey was also held in German.

The standardized questionnaire SANB-5 was chosen because it measures the fear of negative evaluation of an individual with its 5 items.

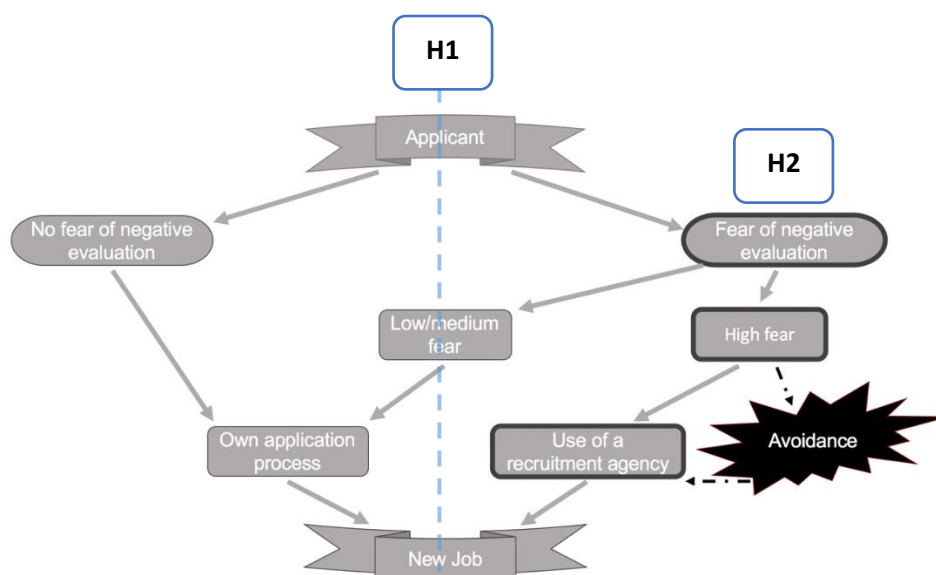


Figure 11: Research framework (own figure, 2021)

The selected part of the SCI questionnaire deals specifically with dealing with stress. The questionnaire is particularly interesting because it specifically deals with coping with stress by looking for people who can support you. This was a central aspect of the study. The composite questionnaire is explained in more detail.

On the first page of the questionnaire, a brief introduction to the examination was given. For this purpose, there were clues about the topic and the aim of this study. It was pointed out that the survey takes place anonymously and the data collected cannot be traced. Attention was also drawn to the fact that neither right nor wrong answer options exist.

The second page dealt with the legal regulations on data protection. A contact option for the author was provided and information was provided about the rights of the study participants. It was also explained which personal data is collected in this questionnaire and what purpose it serves.

It was informed about the possibility of cancelling the participation in the study. Only those who agreed to this data protection regulation, could continue to participate in the study.

Page three was for selection. Since only German-speaking people looking for work in Germany were to be interviewed, this was also asked. The answer options "yes" and "no" were available. The survey was only continued if this question was answered with "yes".

Demographic data was collected on page four. The fifth page dealt with the standardized questionnaire SANB-5, which is a short form of the fear of negative evaluation scale and consists of a total of 5 items.<sup>30</sup> This questionnaire deals with the recording of the personality trait "fear of negative evaluation". The answer format has four levels and ranges from "almost never applies" (1) to "almost always applies" (4). There are no negatively polarized items. The answers of the individual items can be subsumed into a total value or a mean scale value. The total value is between 5 and 20 raw value points and the mean scale value is between 1 and 4. The instructions in this questionnaire were adopted unchanged.<sup>30</sup>

Pages six to ten dealt with the standardized SCI questionnaire which includes the scales "Stressfulness", "Physical and psychological stress symptoms" and "Dealing with stress (coping)".<sup>50</sup> For the present study, only the scale "dealing with stress (coping)" was used. The scale consists of a total of 20 items, which are evenly distributed over the five facets "positive thinking", "active stress management", "social support", "hold on to faith" and "increased alcohol and cigarette consumption". The answer format is based on Likert scales, it has four levels and ranges from (1) "does not apply at all" to (4) "applies exactly".<sup>50</sup> For the evaluation, negatively polarized items are to be reversed. The answers of the individual items can be subsumed into a total value or

a mean scale value. The total value is between 20 and 80 raw score points and the mean scale value is between 1 and 4.

The instructions in the questionnaire were adapted to the examination and now read as follows: "How do you deal with stress in the application process? There are no right or wrong answers. Answer as spontaneously as possible and do not leave out any statement. ". In addition, the wording of the "Social Support" facet was adapted to the support provided by recruitment agencies. Because not the entire population could be questioned, the questionnaire was a partial survey by means of a random sample. The population of this study included all German-speaking people looking for work in Germany.

In order to be able to calculate the sample sizes for the hypotheses, a test strength of 95 % and an alpha of 5 % were used. Since these constructs have not yet been examined in this form and application interviews are test-like situations, comparative values from studies of fear of negative evaluation and test fear were used to calculate the sample. The sample size was calculated using the G\*Power 3.1 program. For the correlation hypothesis, an effect size of  $r = .30$  found for the construct<sup>46</sup> was used. This resulted in a sample size (N) of 115 subjects. For the difference hypothesis, an effect size of  $d = .43$  Jacobs<sup>27</sup> was used. This resulted in a sample size (N) of 60 subjects. The more conservative sample size was therefore that of the correlation hypothesis. The sample size of 115 subjects clearly exceeded with 230 evaluable data sets.

When selecting the test subjects, care was taken to address as many job seekers as possible from various industries and hierarchical levels in Germany. For this purpose, the questionnaire was published in the author's Xing and LinkedIn networks with the note that only participants who are currently looking for work were published.

In a randomized sample with a total of 5 participants, the link to the survey was put online as a pretest. There were only two spelling corrections. The questionnaire was published on 31st August, 2021 in the author's Xing and LinkedIn network. The survey lasted a total of 10 days and resulted in 230 evaluable data sets.

The data of the survey were collected by the SoSci Survey program. Then the data was exported from the SoSci Survey program to Microsoft Excel. Data cleansing and data preparation took place in Excel. The negatively polarized items of the survey were recoded.

First of all, the data records that do not currently relate to any German-speaking people looking for work in Germany were removed. Then the sum values of the data records of the SANB-5 as well as the selected part of the SCI were formed. All other variables that were not required for the evaluation were removed, so that only two variables and the demographic data were available for further evaluation.

In order to obtain more detailed information from the survey, the questions about fear of negative evaluation as well as questions 4, 13, 15 and 19 of the SCI questionnaires were first evaluated. Questions 4, 13, 15 and 19 of the SCI questionnaire deal with the coping strategy “Support from recruitment agencies”. The remaining questions of the SCI were not considered further for this investigation. The results were then divided into the categories fear of negative evaluation and no fear of negative evaluation. The respective groups are then divided into use of recruitment agencies and no use of recruitment agencies.

The statistical analysis was carried out using the JASP program into which the collected and processed data were transferred. The median split for the total values was carried out using descriptive statistics. In order to decide whether to use a parametric or non-parametric method, the data in the results section were checked in advance for normal distribution using JASP. Standard deviation, mean value, spread and frequency were calculated for all constructs. Skewness and kurtosis were also calculated for the data.

The Pearson's correlation coefficient was generated in order to establish a statistical connection between the individual fear of negative evaluation and coping differences. The level of significance was set at  $p < 0.05$  (5 %). Since the variable fear of negative evaluation is not normally distributed, the Spearman coefficient was generated in addition to the Pearson correlation. The Mann-Whitney U test was carried out to determine a statistical difference for the use of recruitment agencies for job search in connection with the fear of negative evaluation. A significance level of 5 % was also set here.

The SANB-5 is standardized in its implementation and evaluation and is therefore to be regarded as objective. Depending on the sample, Cronbach's alpha is between  $r = .84$  and  $r = .94$  and is therefore sufficiently reliable.<sup>30</sup> The

study "Construction and validation of a short form of the fear of negative evaluation scale (SANB-5)"<sup>31</sup> showed that this questionnaire is factorially valid and correlates very well with the original SANB version ( $.90 < r < .92$ ) and thus has a convergent and discriminant validity. In a study at the Bender Institute of Neuroimaging at the Justus Liebig University in Gießen, the criterion validity of the SANB-5 could be proven.<sup>30</sup>

The questionnaire is standardized in its implementation and evaluation and is therefore to be regarded as objective. Depending on the facet, Cronbach's alpha is between  $r = .74$  and  $r = .88$  and is therefore sufficiently reliable.<sup>50</sup>

**Results**

The survey consists of a total of 317 test persons, 230 of which are currently looking for a job and have agreed to the data protection declaration. This results in a sample with  $N = 230$  evaluable data records. The sample consists of 114 female (49.6 %) and 113 male (49.1 %) participants. 3 participants (1.3 %) did not feel that they belonged to any of these genders. The subjects are between 19 and 56 years old, the average age of the sample being 37 years and a standard deviation of 8 years.

The cumulative value of the variable “Fear of negative evaluation” is used to assign the distribution of subjects with fear of negative evaluation and without fear of negative evaluation. Up to a total of 10, the test persons are not considered to be anxious. From a total value of 11, the test persons are considered to be anxious. This resulted in the following distribution of the respondents.

The figures 13 and 14 show the distribution of study participants in the categories “fear of negative evaluation” and “no fear of negative evaluation” taking into account the respective gender allocation.

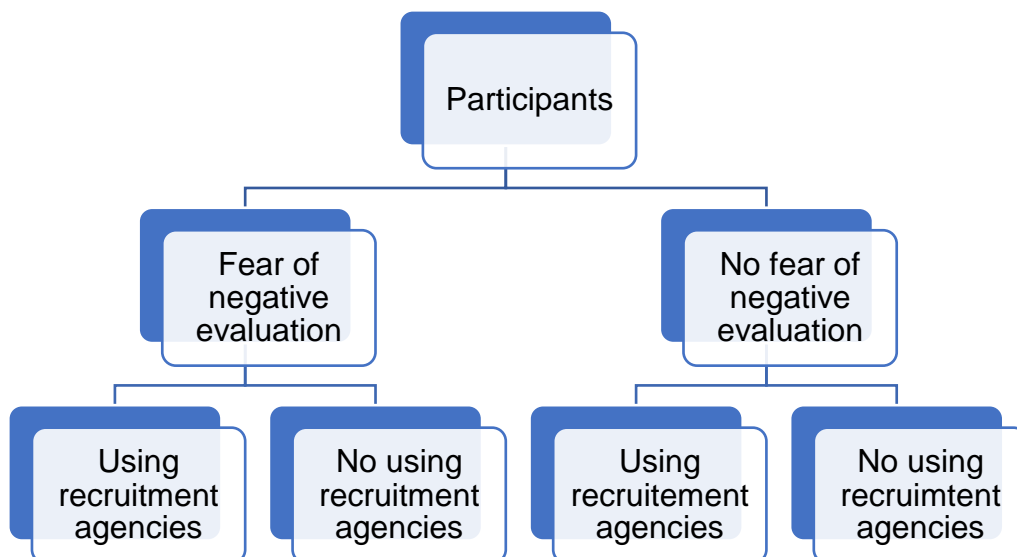


Figure 12: Distribution of the procedure for evaluating the data collected (own figure, 2021)

It can be seen that the distribution of men and women is relatively even among the participants with fear of negative evaluation. On the other hand, there are 3 times more men than women among participants who are not afraid of negative evaluations. However, it can also be seen that only a fraction of the participants are not afraid of negative evaluations.

The total value of the variable “Coping Strategy - Support” is used to assign the distribution of the test persons who use

or do not use recruitment agencies. Up to a total of 8, the test persons are not considered users of recruitment agencies. From a total value of 9, the test persons are considered users of recruitment agencies.

The figures 15 and 16 show the distribution of the study participants in the categories “using recruitment agencies” and “no using recruitment agencies”, taking into account the respective gender allocation.

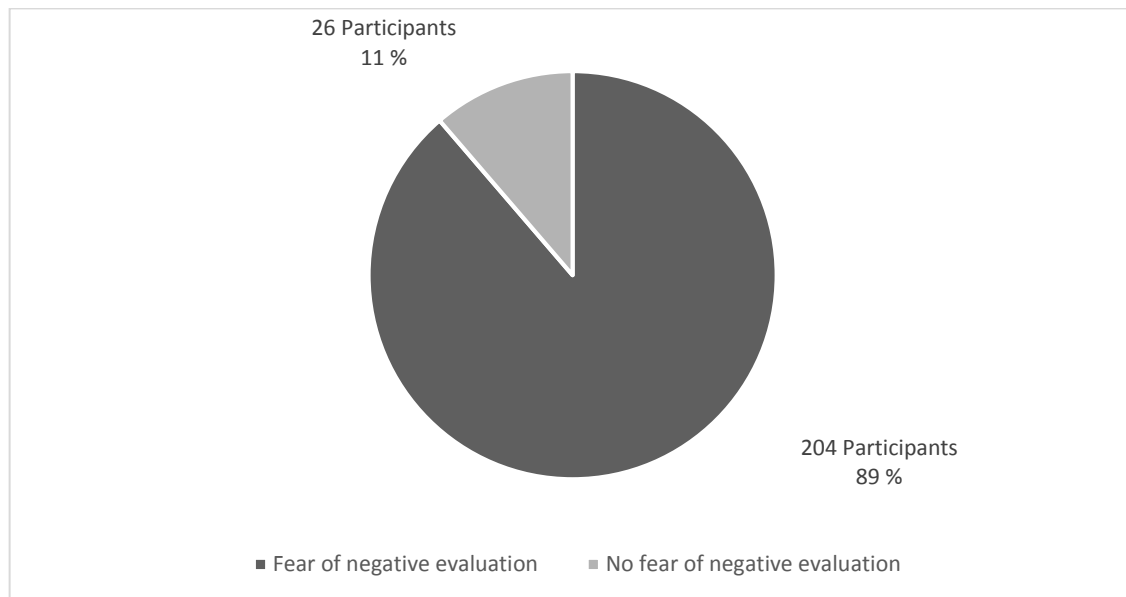


Figure 13: Distribution of the participants with and without fear of negative evaluation (own figure, 2021)

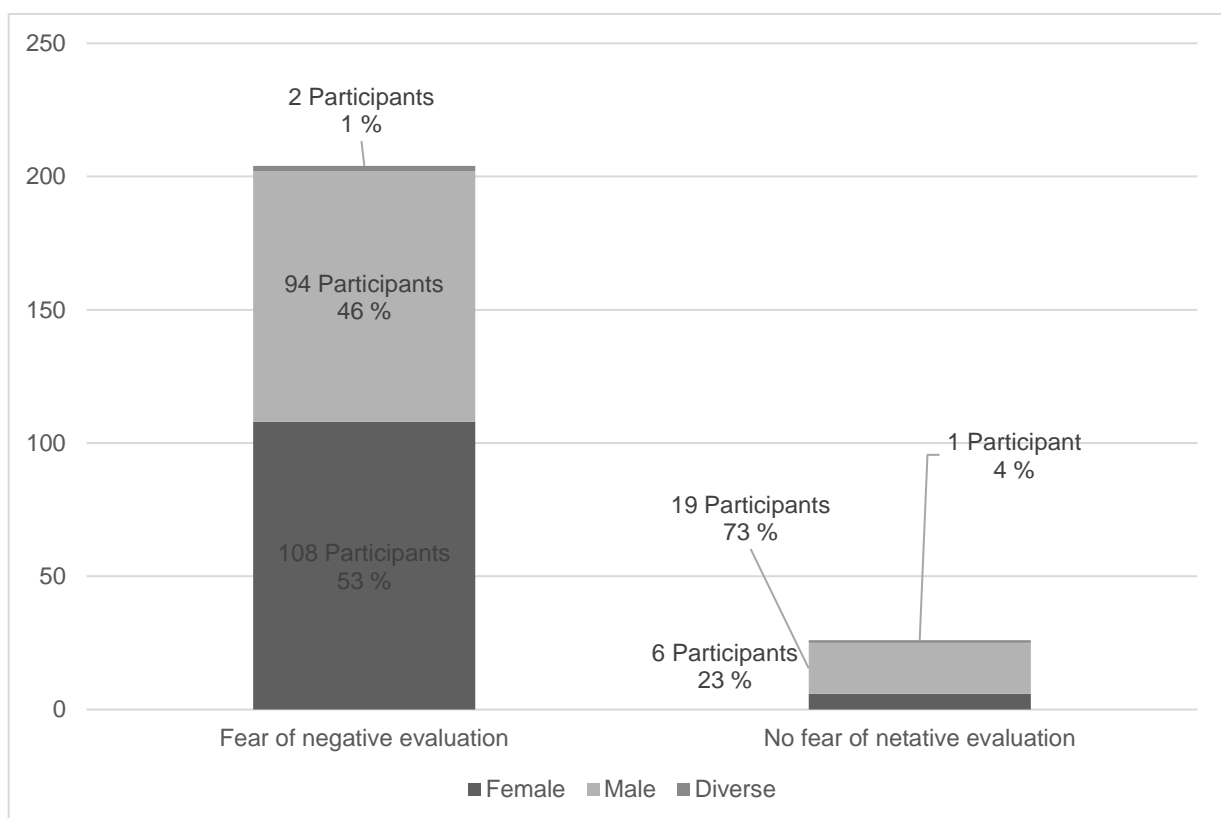


Figure 14: Distribution of participants with and without fear of negative evaluation by gender (own figure, 2021)

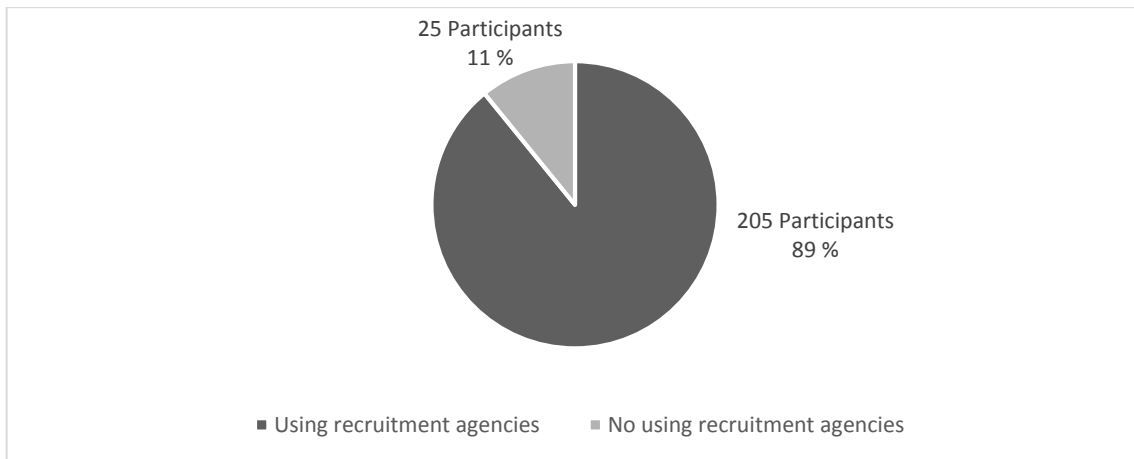


Figure 15: Distribution of the participants using and no using recruitment agencies (own figure, 2021)

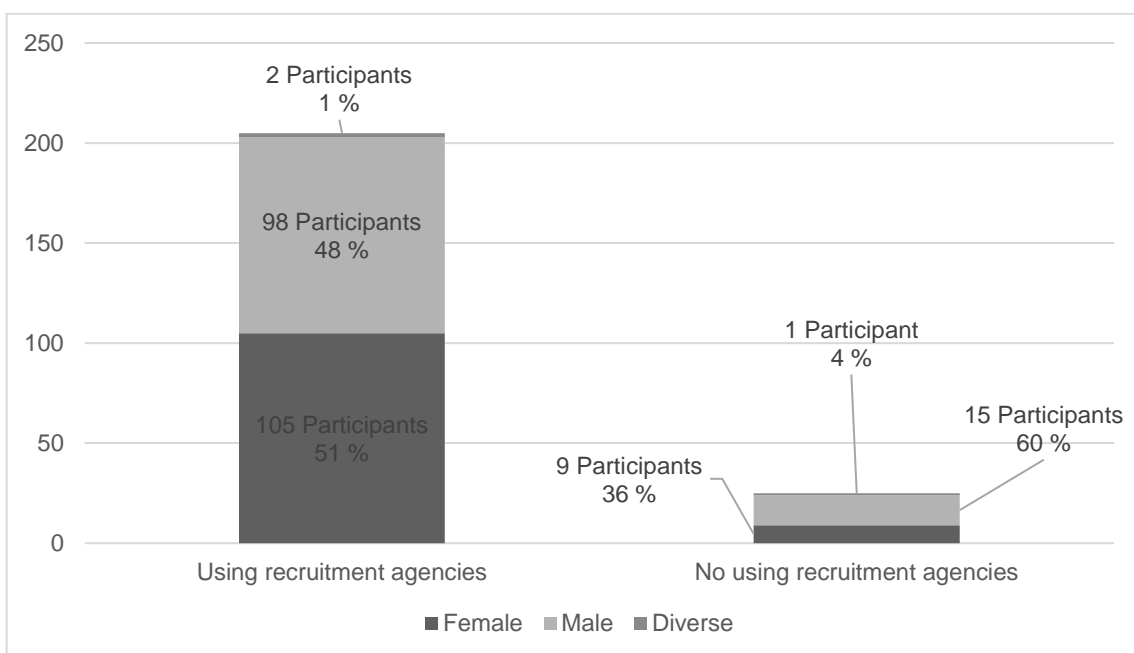


Figure 16: Distribution of participants using or no using recruitment agencies by gender (own figure, 2021)

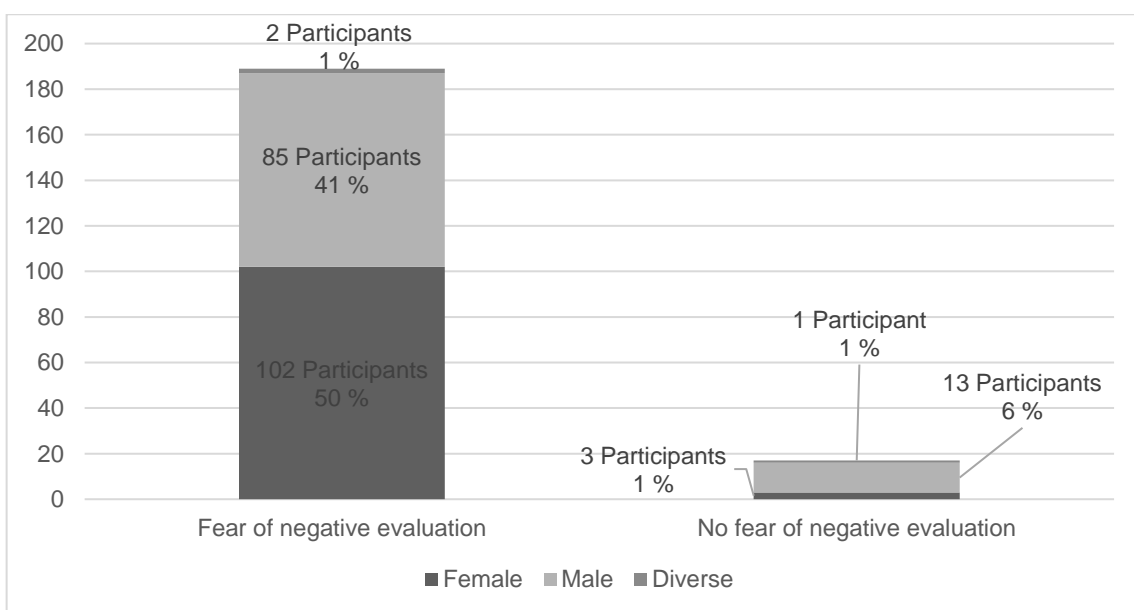


Figure 17: Comparison of fearful and no fearful participants and the use of recruitment agencies (own figure, 2021)

It can be seen that among the participants who use recruitment agencies, the distribution of men and women is relatively even. In the case of participants who do not use recruitment agencies, on the other hand, there are twice as many men as women.

Overall, 89 % (205 test persons) of those surveyed would use recruitment agencies to look for a job. Of these, 82 % (189 test persons) are afraid of a negative evaluation and only 7 % (16 test persons) are not afraid of a negative evaluation.

50 % of the fearful test subjects were female. In the male test subjects, the value was 41 %, which is still relatively balanced. In the case of the non-anxious respondents who would use recruitment agencies to look for a job, this needs to be viewed in a more differentiated manner. Men would use recruitment agencies 6 times more often than women. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistical data of the constructs gender, age, fear of negative evaluation and support from recruitment agencies.

For testing hypothesis 2, the dichotomous variables fear of negative evaluation and no fear of negative evaluation are artificially created by means of a median split. Here, the variables fear or no fear of negative evaluation are split with a point value of 14,000. As can be seen from figure 18, these variables are distributed almost in a ratio of 1:1. 108 participants are categorized as not anxious. This corresponds to 47 %. 122 participants were categorized as anxious which corresponds to 53 % of the participants.

For the variables fear of negative evaluation and support from recruitment agencies, the Z skewness and the Z kurtosis are first calculated. The Z-values indicate whether the data collected correspond to a normal distribution or deviate from it. To calculate the two Z-values, the skewness and the kurtosis are each divided by their standard errors. The values can be taken from table 3. The calculated Z-values are compared with the critical value of +/- 1.96 at  $p < .05$ . If the Z skewness or the Z kurtosis is  $> +/- 1.96$ , there is a significant deviation from the normal distribution.

A low value stands for a low fear of negative evaluation and a high value stands for a high fear of negative evaluation. From figure 19 it can be seen that the variable fear of negative evaluation is skewed on the left or steep on the right. The Z skewness is - 3.85, which means that there is a significant deviation from the normal distribution. The Z kurtosis is 0.98, which also indicates a slight deviation from the normal distribution.

A low value stands for a low proportion of support from recruitment agencies and a high value for a high proportion of support from recruitment agencies. Figure 20 shows that the support from recruitment agencies is skewed on the left and steep on the right. The Z skewness is - 6.28 which means that there is a significant deviation from the normal distribution. The Z kurtosis is 4.36, which also indicates a deviation from the normal distribution. For the difference hypothesis 2, the Shapiro-Wilk test and the homogeneity of variance are calculated using the Levene test. If both tests are significant i.e. whose  $p$ -values are below a level of 5 %, the assumption of a normal distribution and equality of variance are not fulfilled.

**Table 3**  
**Descriptive data of the survey (own table, 2021)**

	Gender	Age	Fear	Support
Valid	230	230	230	230
Missing	0	0	0	0
Median	2.000	37.000	14.000	12.000
Mean	1.517	36.909	13.313	11.870
Std. Deviation	0.526	8.320	2.191	2.444
Skewness	0.202	-0.047	-0.616	-1.004
Std. Error of Skewness	0.160	0.160	0.160	0.160
Kurtosis	-1.357	-0.744	0.314	1.396
Std. Error of Kurtosis	0.320	0.320	0.320	0.320
Minimum	1.000	19.000	7.000	4.000
Maximum	3.000	56.000	18.000	16.000

**Table 4**  
**Shapiro-Wilk test (own table, 2021)**

Test of Normality (Shapiro-Wilk)				
		W		p
Support	No fear	0.919	< .001	
	Fear	0.926	< .001	

Note: Significant results suggest a deviation from normality.

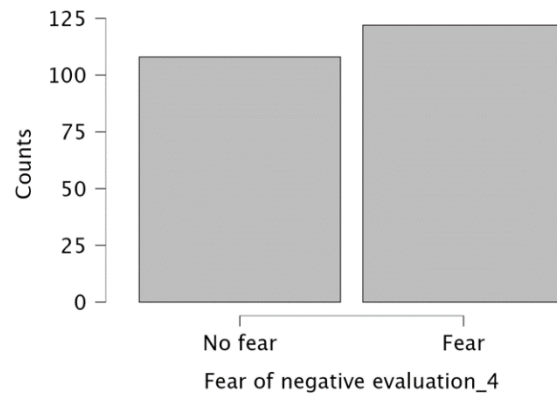


Figure 18: Frequency distribution of the variable fear of negative evaluation (own figure, 2021)

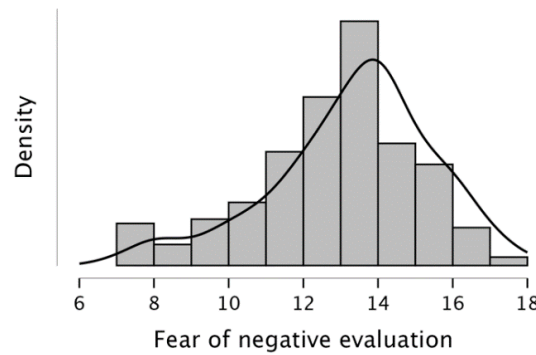


Figure 19: Distribution of fear of negative evaluation (own figure, 2021)

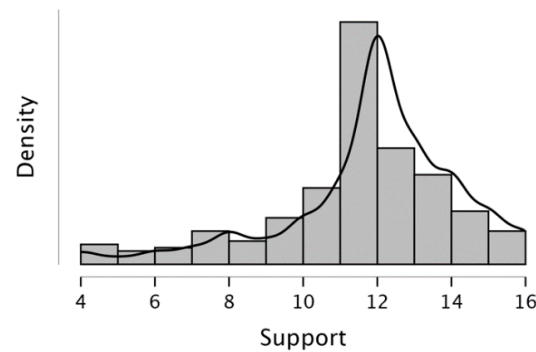


Figure 20: Distribution of support from recruitment agencies (own figure, 2021)

From table 4, it can be seen that the  $p$ -value  $<.001$  is less than  $.05$ . The Shapiro-Wilk test thus shows that the data are not normally distributed. Table 5 shows that the  $p$ -value  $.002$  is less than  $.05$ . Levene’s test shows that the homogeneity of variance is therefore not fulfilled.

**Table 5**  
Variance homogeneity (own table, 2021)

Test of Equality of Variances (Levene's)				
	F	df	p	
Support	10.130	1	0.002	

Hypothesis 1 is a directed relationship hypothesis. Here, the variable fear of negative evaluation and support from recruitment agencies when looking for a job are correlated and checked for significance on one side. As can be seen from table 6, a positive correlation between the constructs fear of negative evaluation and support from recruitment agencies in the job search could be determined with  $r=.37$ .

Since the calculated value  $p=<.001$  is less than  $.05$ , a statistically significant relationship can be assumed. After the variable fear of negative evaluation is not normally distributed, the Spearman coefficient is generated in addition to the Pearson correlation.

As can be seen from table 7, a positive correlation between the constructs fear of negative evaluation and support from recruitment agencies in the job search could be determined with  $r=.31$ . Since the calculated value  $p=<.001$  is less than  $.05$ , a statistically significant relationship can be assumed.

Hypothesis 2 is a directed difference hypothesis and is therefore tested unilaterally. Due to the violation of the requirements for the t-test, which were checked, the Mann-Whitney U test is used. The dependent variable is support from recruitment agencies when looking for a job. The independent dichotomous variable is fear of negative evaluation / no fear of negative evaluation.

**Table 6**  
**Pearson’s correlation (own table, 2021)**

Variable		Fear of negative evaluation	Support
1. Fear of negative evaluation	Pearson's r	—	
	p-value	—	
2. Support	Pearson's r	0.366	—
	p-value	< .001	—

**Table 7**  
**Spearman’s correlation (own table, 2021)**

Variable		Fear of negative evaluation	Support
1. Fear of negative evaluation	Spearman's rho	—	
	p-value	—	
2. Support	Spearman's rho	0.310	—
	p-value	< .001	—

**Table 8**  
**Independent Mann-Whitney U test (own table, 2021)**

	W	p	Rank-Biserial Correlation
Support	4620.000	< .001	-0.299
Note: For the Mann-Whitney test, effect size is given by the rank biserial correlation.			
Note: Mann-Whitney U test.			

As can be seen from table 8, a significant difference was found, since  $p < .001$ .  $p < .001$  is less than the significance level .05. Thus, a difference between the two groups with and without fear of negative evaluation is assumed. The negative effect can be rated as moderate with .3.

**Discussion**

Fear related to gender has been examined more frequently in science. In fact, the female gender is significantly associated with greater levels of anxiety and perceived stress than the male gender.<sup>7</sup> The survey of the study with regard to the sum values of the construct fear of negative evaluation brought a similar finding. Here, too, it can be seen that women are more fearful than men. An even clearer picture emerges if you look at the non-fearful study participants. Here 73 % of the non-anxious participants are men and only 23 % of the participants are women.

It is interesting that the distribution of anxious and non-anxious study participants is reflected almost in a ratio of 9:1. This would mean that most of the study participants are afraid of negative evaluations. The study participants, however, result from the network of personnel consultants. Since the hypothesis of this study aims at the fact that anxious applicants are more likely to use recruitment agencies when looking for a job than not anxious applicants, this effect could already have had an impact on the sample. Thus, there could be far more anxious applicants in the network than non-anxious ones. In addition, the wording of the introductory text of the study could have suggested that anxious applicants were explicitly sought to participate in the study and thus influenced the distribution of anxious participants. This could be checked in a follow-up study. However, it should also be noted that application situations

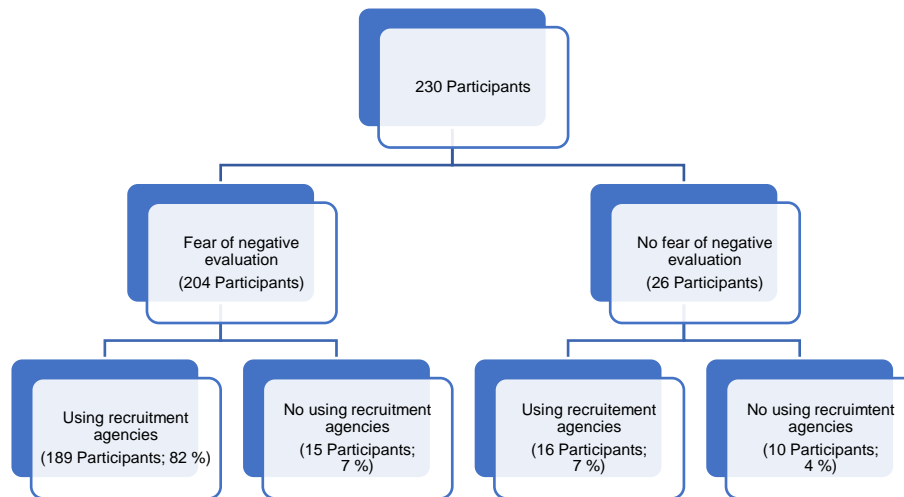
are often stressful situations. A healthy level of discomfort before job interviews is quite common. This fact could also contribute to the fact that there is generally more anxiety in the context of an application process than in other situations.

Overall, men and women almost equally often use recruitment agencies to look for jobs. The survey with regard to the total values of the construct support by recruitment agencies yielded similar findings. 90 % of the test persons were also classified as users of recruitment agencies when looking for a job, of which 51 % were women and 48 % men. The data of the test persons who do not use any recruitment agencies to search for a job should be viewed in a more differentiated manner. Men do not use recruitment agencies about twice as often. Here, too, the ratio of users of recruitment agencies to non-users of recruitment agencies is 9:1.

The fact that so many test subjects would use recruitment agencies to search for a job can partly be explained by the cognitive-motivational theory.<sup>37</sup> Stressful situations are assessed in two steps. First, it is checked whether the facts are relevant and beneficial for a person to achieve the goal. Using a recruitment agency is both relevant and beneficial when looking for a job. Avoidance behaviour or coping strategies are not always associated with fear.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, for example, people who are currently looking for a job can fall back on recruitment agencies, because this is another useful way to find a new job. However, it should also be noted here that the study participants came from the network of personnel consultants. So, it is not uncommon for more participants to use recruitment agencies.





**Figure 21: Distribution of all correlations (own figure, 2021)**

In order to illustrate the relationships more clearly, the results of the relationships were transferred to the model from the methodology.

It can be seen that there is a clear connection between anxious applicants and their use of recruitment agencies to search for a job. In order to consolidate this result, the constructs fear of negative evaluation and the use of recruitment agencies were also checked for correlation using the JASP statistics program. A positive correlation of  $r=.37$  could be determined here. Thus, the data from the survey show that there is a connection between applicants with fear of negative evaluations and the use of recruitment agencies to search for a job.

As there have not yet been any investigations into this relationship, the result cannot be discussed with comparative values. However, a number of literature sources support this connection. Application processes in particular can trigger increased anxiety and stressful situations in anxious people. Endogenous stressors such as the fear of being assessed negatively by others can put an individual in a high state of stress.<sup>47</sup> But especially people with fear of negative evaluation have the impression of suffering from high expectations of others due to their social desirability. Thus, exogenous stressors also have an effect on these people.<sup>47</sup>

There are various ways of dealing with anxiety triggered by stressors, such as flight and fight.<sup>37</sup> According to this, anxious applicants would “escape” the application process by working with recruitment agencies to find a new job. In fact, anxious applicants could also react with a “fight”. If the applicants knew that their fear would not make them successful in the regular application processes, they could “tackle” the job search by looking for support from recruitment agencies.

There are a variety of coping strategies that could explain the relationship between anxious applicants and the use of recruitment agencies. Accordingly, problem-focused coping tries to avoid or reduce the threats. In the case of the

dissertation, the threat is the regular application process. Engagement coping is a sub-form of problem-focused coping. An attempt is made to solve the problem by looking for support.

Another explanation for the use of recruitment agencies in job hunting for anxious applicants could be the Yerkes-Dodson-Law. According to this model, a medium level of anxiety increases performance. Only when the anxiety level is high, does the anxiety reduce performance?<sup>16</sup> When using recruitment agencies, anxious applicants are still exposed to their fears. In any case, you have to withstand job interviews with HR departments. However, they receive both professional and emotional support from recruitment agencies. Thus, the applicants only have to expose themselves to a medium level of anxiety, which in turn can have a performance-enhancing effect. Since individuals always try to avoid failure,<sup>9</sup> the use of recruitment agencies by anxious job seekers is helpful.

The coping strategy of proactive avoidance could also be an explanation for the use of recruitment agencies when looking for a job by anxious applicants. Here, the applicants would proactively prepare for the supposed threat of an “application interview” by avoiding or weakening the threatening situations.<sup>3</sup> The threat is weakened by the social support provided by recruitment agencies. This could help applicants feel in control of the situation. The fearful applicants retain the ability to act and they do not feel at the mercy of the situation and feel powerless.<sup>42</sup>

Applicants with fear of negative evaluation often use recruitment agencies to search for a job and applicants without fear of negative evaluation often look for a new job without the support of recruitment agencies. A significant difference between the two groups, fear of negative evaluation and no fear of negative evaluation and the use of recruitment agencies was found as the  $p$ -value was less than .05. However, a negative difference was found. This could mean that there is a difference between the fearful and the non-fearful group, but this is exactly the opposite as

assumed. It could also mean that anxious applicants often use recruitment agencies, but so do not anxious applicants. That would put the difference into perspective. The statistical result cannot therefore be interpreted without any doubt with the statistical evaluations used. Further investigations in this direction should be carried out in the future.

If one looks at the pure raw data from figure 21, it can be seen that although there is a difference between the two groups, non-anxious applicants still often turn to the support of recruitment agencies. Not as often as anxious applicants, but significantly more often than are not using recruitment agencies. This could also be due to the fact that individuals always try to avoid failure.<sup>9</sup> It is much more pleasant to receive support such as looking for a job completely independently. Here, too, it should be noted that application situations often trigger discomfort. This could also be the case with not anxious applicants. One often likes to avoid unpleasant situations. Thus, here too, proactive avoidance must be addressed.<sup>3</sup>

Another explanation for the fact that not anxious applicants often use recruitment agencies, could emerge from the following aspect. It is assumed here that recruitment agencies are involved in the entire recruiting process of a company. This means that recruitment agencies know exactly which qualifications are being sought. In addition, recruitment agencies can get in touch with the companies for the benefit of applicants in order to favour positive results for the applicants. If applicants are aware of this, they will certainly seek the help of recruitment agencies more often, regardless of their level of anxiety.

Based on the results of this study, recruitment agencies are advised to invest in personnel marketing and to advertise different target segments of applicants. The formation of target groups makes it possible to concentrate marketing instruments and marketing measures on a separate target group.<sup>32</sup>

Even if the segment of anxious applicants is very large, the non-anxious applicants should still be recruited. These applicants also make up a large part of the recruitment agency users.

In addition, recruitment agencies are advised to develop a concept for dealing directly with anxious applicants. The empathy of the recruiters should be part of this concept. Formulations and procedures have to be developed which help the recruiters to support the anxious applicants. In particular, a detailed briefing for applicants should be developed for this purpose.

After the complete development and evaluation of the concept, the recruitment agencies should develop a concept for employee training. The individual recruiters from recruitment agencies should be explicitly prepared to deal

with anxious applicants. Close cooperation between the internal academies of the recruitment agencies and psychologists and coaching experts to develop this concept is recommended.

The present study is a quantitative research design. The connection between fear of negative evaluation and the use of recruitment agencies to look for a job has not yet been researched. New subject areas are usually explored with qualitative research. Even if the effect of social desirability spoke against a qualitative study, a quantitative study did not have the same significance for a new topic as a qualitative study. In addition, possible reasons for using recruitment agencies in the case of anxious applicants could also be examined in a qualitative study. In the present study, these reasons were justified speculatively by means of literature research.

The wording of the SCI questionnaire was slightly adapted so that the "social support" facet was adapted to support from recruitment agencies. However, by adapting the standardized questionnaire, a deterioration in validity was accepted. In future studies, a new questionnaire should therefore be created to determine the search for support from recruitment agencies and validated in a test procedure.

Since the present study was an online survey, the study participants were more likely to be younger. The study participants keep between 19 and 56 years old with most of the study participants not older than 50 years old. This is because younger people are more often represented in the online tools. Therefore, a further investigation of this topic should be based on a written questionnaire and not an online questionnaire. This means that more study participants over the age of 50 can be addressed who are currently looking for work.

A range of demographic data and coping strategies were queried. However, the data evaluations and hypothesis tests were designed to only take into account the coping data on the subject of support by recruitment agencies. The data of the four coping strategies "positive", "alcohol and cigarettes", "active" and "religion" were not taken into account. In addition, it was not investigated further whether age or level of education played a role in the decision to use recruitment agencies. These differences should be explicitly examined and taken into account in future studies.

When evaluating the data collected, two different methods were used to determine the groups "fear of negative evaluation" and "no fear of negative evaluation". In the first part of the evaluation, the total value of the variable of the individual test subjects was used to determine the groups. It was then determined that the test subjects were considered not to be anxious up to a total value of 10. From a total value of 11, the test persons are considered to be anxious. In the second part of the study, the dichotomous variable was formed by means of a median split for statistical analysis in

order to obtain two relatively equally large groups of anxious and not anxious applicants. The different approaches to forming the two groups lead to different group sizes. This could cause confusion for readers. One method should be chosen in future investigations.

## Conclusion

The aim of the dissertation was to find out whether anxious applicants more often use the services of recruitment agencies to look for work. In order to achieve this goal, various models and theories on the development and management of fear were first critically analysed. In particular, Mowrer's two-factor theory, which includes classical and operant conditioning, is a central theory here.<sup>11</sup>

After a critical review of the theories, factors were identified which influence anxious people in avoiding and coping with fear. Accordingly, there are different coping strategies.<sup>24,39</sup>

Then it was to be considered whether the respectively analysed theories and models of fear and fear coping strategies could explain the decision-making processes for the use of recruitment agencies. In particular, the different coping strategies can help. In particular, the strategy of engagement coping can explain the use of recruitment agencies to search for a job with anxious applicants. Anxious applicants can seek specific support from recruitment agencies.

The first research question dealt with the question of how the fear of negative evaluation affects the use of personnel service companies when looking for a job. The results indicate that there is a connection between anxious applicants and the use of recruitment agencies to search for a job. Accordingly, anxious applicants are increasingly using recruitment agencies when looking for a job. It should be noted, however, that the results also show that a relatively large number of applicants use recruitment agencies to search for jobs without fear.

Therefore, recruitment agencies are advised to develop a separate personnel marketing strategy for anxious applicants in order to target anxious applicants on the job market. In addition, however, not anxious applicants should continue to be addressed in the market. Since the study has shown that a large number of anxious applicants would use recruitment agencies to search for a job, recruitment agencies should develop a separate concept for dealing with and addressing anxious applicants. The individual recruiters must be specially trained to deal with anxious applicants. In the best case, such a training concept is developed in cooperation with coaching experts and psychologists.

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