



## Determining the Moderating Role of Career Guidance in the Relationship Between Social Isolation and Job Search Self-Efficacy: A Study on University Students

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**Abstract:** *This study examined the relationship between university students' social isolation experience and job search self-efficacy. Demographic variables (gender and seniority) were examined to explain these relationships. In addition, the career guide's moderator role has been investigated on the relationship between social isolation experience and job search self-efficacy. Within the scope of the research, data were collected from 275 university students using the snowball method. The findings obtained from the sample revealed that social isolation experience was negatively related to job search self-efficacy. According to the results, there is no significant difference between men and women in terms of job search self-efficacy. This study also demonstrated that grade level is essential for explaining job search self-efficacy. Using structural equation modeling findings indicated that career guidance significantly moderated the relationship between social isolation experience and job search self-efficacy. These results suggest that feeling alone or excluded for undergraduate students may link to job search behaviors and decrease confidence in career decision-making.*

**Keywords:** Job Search Self-Efficacy, Social Isolation, Undergraduate Students, Career Guidance, Gender

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### 1. Introduction

Today's job market is complex and challenging for young adults and adolescents. Most university students are pessimist and indecisive because of unemployment rates, pressure in the work environment, unpredictable workplace conditions, and dynamic changes in the job descriptions (Storlie et al., 2016; Fearon et al., 2018), although some of them are more hopeful and confident about job search. Hence, it is essential to identify factors that hinder and facilitate job search behavior of university students. It has been proved in studies that high self-efficacy of job search has a direct effect on job search planning and job search behaviors (Fort et al., 2011). Job search self-efficacy refers to the beliefs of a person's ability to successfully implement his / her career appraisal activities, including the capability to communicate impressively with professionals in an area, including judgment about an individual's ability and values to successfully work out interests (Solberg et al., 1995).

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Interestingly, the researches related to the self-efficacy of job search have been conducted mainly among individuals who are already in business life (Wanberg et al., 2005; Slebarska et al., 2009; Maddy et al., 2014), unemployed individuals (Ashforth, 2000; Moynihan et al., 2003) and newly graduated from the university (Saks & Ashford, 1999). Also, job search self-efficacy is imperative within university students, and has been less studied in the career management literature (Isaac et al., 2018). For young people entering a new, dynamic, and complex work environment may be challenging. Hence, it is intended to extend research on job search self-efficacy among university students.

Additionally, little is known about the effects of demographic variables of students' job search self-efficacy. Therefore, it is crucial to consider grade experience and gender differences. For example, there are several studies about the effects of gender in career management in the literature explaining that different genders may experience self-efficacy factors differently. There is some evidence suggesting that girls tend to perform better at school than boys and give greater importance to academic achievement (Salmela-Aro & Tynkkynen, 2012). However, the differences between female and male undergraduate students for job search self-efficacy has not been investigated yet.

Moreover, the moderating variable that shapes the relationship between social isolation experience and job search self-efficacy has received less attention in the literature. Essentially, when a student feels too isolated in university, he or she may display avoidance behavior or vice versa. In this way, the empirical exploration of whether the relationship between social experience and job search behavior should be regulated with other supportive variables is provided.

Upon the explanation given above, this study examines (i) the role of social isolation experience on job search self-efficacy, (ii) the moderating role of career guide on the relationship between social isolation experience and job search self-efficacy and finally (iii) gender and seniority differences among undergraduate students' job search self-efficacy.

The structuring of the work continues with information about job search self-efficacy. In the hypothesis development, the relationship between job search self-efficacy and other variables in the study (social isolation, gender, seniority, and career guide) was examined. Then, detailed information was given about the sample and the measurement tools used in the study. Afterwards, information is given about the analyzes used in the study. In the last part of the research, the results of the research are explained and discussed.

## **2. Job Search Self-Efficacy**

The job search self-efficacy concept is adopted from the self-efficacy construct in social learning theory and adapted to career context (Mao et al., 2019; Matijaš & Seršić, 2021). Self-efficacy is one of the critical components of social learning theory and has been defined in various ways as a complicated and comprehensive construct. Bandura (1997) identified four primary sources of self-efficacy: (a) performance accomplishments, (b) vicarious experiences, (c) verbal persuasion, and (d) low levels of emotional arousal. Performance accomplishments (mastery experiences) are the most influential source of self-efficacy and are procreated by an individual's past successes. The most effective self-efficacy source is hypothesized to be the perceived determinations of one's preceding performance accomplishments (Bandura, 1997; Dunbar et al., 2018). The second source of self-efficacy is given as vicarious experiences and observing others performing the designated tasks, particularly when an individual has limited exposure or experiences to those tasks. Observing the people determined by individuals as role models is a fundamental mechanism of change in the formation of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

Additionally, self-efficacy can also be developed by receiving accurate and adequate social/verbal persuasion. The third source of self-efficacy, verbal persuasion, can come from guidance, recommendation, and/or verbal warnings from others (Matijaš & Seršić, 2021). Self-efficacy increases positively with inspirational and positive feedback such as encouragement. On the other hand, discouraging and negative harsh criticisms cause low self-efficacy. The fourth source of self-efficacy, a person's physiological state, is

raised from an individual's emotional or physiological situation. For example, a sense of desperation can negatively effect self-efficacy (Guindon & Smith, 2002; Guo et al., 2019; Bonnes et al., 2020).

To sum up, self-efficacy comprises the sum of individual's beliefs he or she is capable to organize and achieve the courses of activities required to produce desired skill in a given domain (Bandura, 1997; Dunbar et al., 2018); such as finding a job (Nesdale & Pinter, 2000; Zikic & Saks, 2009). Job search behavior has recently taken an essential place in the self-efficacy literature. The concept of job search self-efficacy was developed by researchers to better define self-efficacy perception in job search behaviors. Job search self-efficacy refers to the thought that one can successfully fulfill particular job search behaviors compulsory to acquire the desired employment outcome (Saks & Ashforth, 1999; Park et al., 2019). The job search self-efficacy is based on the beliefs and knowledge about personal abilities for job search (e.g., career exploration, career networking, using career resources, job search intensity) (Kanfer et al., 2001; Zikic & Saks, 2009).

In the literature, there is evidence that lowered self-efficacy levels have been shown to effect the employment process (Guindon & Smith, 2002). While lower levels of job search self-efficacy can extend unemployment, unemployed persons with higher job search self-efficacy spend more time searching for behaviors that may increment their employment opportunity (Moynihan et al., 2003; Zikic & Saks, 2009). Additionally, job search self-efficacy provides a more successful career path in the long term and a more comfortable transition to new jobs and positions (Ellis & Taylor, 1983; Eden & Aviram, 1993; Ashforth, 2000).

### 3. Hypothesis Development

#### 3.1. The Relationship Between Job-Search Self Efficacy and Social Isolation

This paper contends that social isolation – which refers to a “lack of meaningful social communication” (Cornwell & Waite 2009; Holt-Lunstad, 2015) is related to job search self-efficacy. Based on Bandura's (1997) theory, social support is an important area of research, and mainly is included in the of self-efficacy studies. As with other negative events, a lack of support from a spouse or close friend can assist in alleviate the help for isolation process (Liu et al., 2020). Researchers have found important positive correlations between self-efficacy and a supportive family or incentive social systems increasing employees' belief in themselves (Van Hoyer et al., 2009; Zikic & Saks, 2009). For example, it has been shown that perceived close relationships directly affect self-efficacy during university years (Bergin & Pakenham, 2015). Social isolation may be particularly evident in university cases, especially as university-age individuals move away from their homes and interact with new individuals outside their established social networks (Liu et al., 2020). Besides, social and technological changes and differentiation of many cases around them will create a difference in the way students communicate.

It is expected that university students' job search behaviors will be affected by social isolation during university years (Tani & Vines, 2009). A recent study conducted by Isaac, Pit, and Mclachlan (2018) showed that social isolation in medical students influences their career decision-making.

Social isolation has unfavorable effects on individuals' well-being, solidarity and social cohesion within society (Hawkley et al., 2008). In addition to having negative consequences for social relations, social isolation is an essential source of stress discussed in the literature (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Morgan & Boxall, 2020). Bergin and Pakenham's (2015) study conducted among university students, after controlling for gender and age, academic demands, higher social isolation levels and life/study balance, were each related to more significant symptoms of anxiety and depression. Furthermore, social isolation was also substantially related to lower grades of life satisfaction. This proposes that feeling socially isolated among other university students may have an especially destructive impact on student's well-being (Bergin & Pakenham, 2015). Findings in previous literature, suggest that a lack of social connectedness is related to increment distress in students (Pritchard & McIntosh, 2003). Therefore, the following hypothesis is offered:

***H<sub>1</sub>: There is a relationship between social isolation and job search self-efficacy.***

### **3.2. The Relationship Between Job-Search Self Efficacy and Gender**

This paper also proposes that job search self-efficacy is related to gender. Past studies have captured the positive links between gender and self-efficacy (Tien et al., 2009; Jalilvand et al., 2012;). In terms of gender, there were significant differences between male and female students influencing job search self-efficacy. The first reason is that traditional views of gender roles may affect women's self-efficacy linked to employment (Konle-Seidl & Bolits, 2016). According to the traditional view, while men are commonly involved in businesses, women need to pull themselves back. In connection with that view, women's job search self-efficacy is affected. Secondly, as Waters and Moore (2002) point out, social support was associated with greater self-confidence in both sexes, but women had less access to work-related social support than men (Slebarska et al., 2009; Rehman et al., 2021). This situation causes less self-confidence in women's job search behavior, while men will increase their self-confidence. As a last reason, it is necessary to mention the employment times when evaluating the sexes' difference. In a study conducted in Portugal, the research results about the start-up period of new graduates indicate that women spend longer in finding jobs (Stiwne & Alves, 2010). The fact that people themselves or those around them going through this process will affect women's confidence in a job search. Therefore, the following hypothesis is offered:

*H<sub>2</sub>: In general, male students experience more job search self-efficacy than female students.*

### **3.3. The Relationship Between Job-Search Self Efficacy and Seniority**

This paper also proposes that job search self-efficacy is related to seniority. Past studies have also captured that university students' self-efficacy increases over time (Brannick et al., 2005; Wright et al., 2012; D'Lima et al., 2014). For example, D'Lima, Winsler, and Kitsantas (2014) found that a higher level of course knowledge and interaction with experts influence students' self-efficacy. During university life, students acquire a lot of information about education and they get access to work resources. During university life, students acquire a lot of information about education and access to work resources. In addition, Gore (2006), who makes recommendations for the measurement of self-efficacy with new students, states that the main purpose of the students in the first years of the university is to get high marks. Subsequent studies supported this theory of Gore (2006) and emphasized that students' sense of self-efficacy related to job search was subsequently increased (Robbins et al., 2004).

In the first years of the university, students experience many social changes. These include separation from their families and entering a new social environment. Over time, students increase their self-efficacy by adapting to these social and cultural changes (Aryana, 2010; Arshad et al., 2015). This will affect their job search behavior. Therefore, the following hypothesis is offered:

*H<sub>3</sub>: In general, grade four (senior) students experience more self-efficacy in job search than junior students.*

### **3.4. The Moderating Role of Career Guidance**

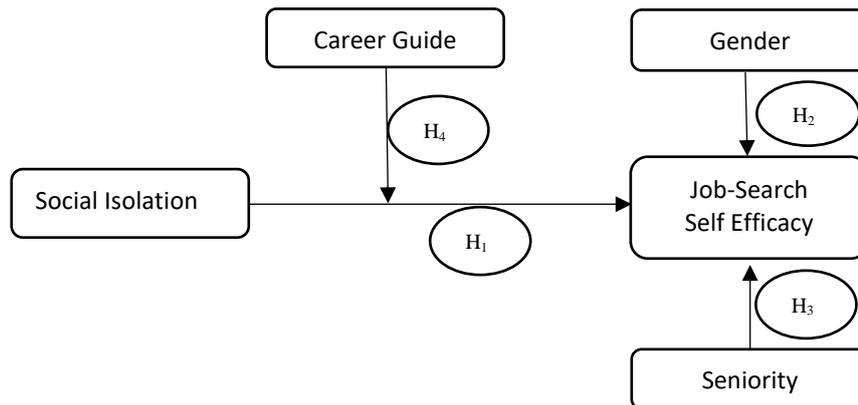
Career guidance can help students set personal goals and determine current and future decisions (Sun & Yuen, 2012; Zhang et al., 2020). Efficient career guidance provides a long-term vision for career planning, from which students can make use of by realizing their exact potential in life (Sun & Yuen, 2012). Career guidance is useful for better understanding of career choices and selecting their study paths to find the right one. In addition to this, together with career counseling, students spend more productive time in the university and show a more positive attitude.

The majority of university students declared that they experienced the job search process for the first time in their lives and described their first job finding experience very compelling after graduation (Dolfini, 2020). Specifically, faculty members have first-hand knowledge of their students' capability and training, as it relates to the opportunities and challenges in the field (Yang & Wong, 2020). Previous research indicates that, especially faculty members act as related models for undergraduate students (Nauta et al., 1998; Bartimote-Aufflick, 2016). These strong positions of the faculty members are very effective in the students' future decisions and their current attitudes due to their choice (Fouad et al., 2006).

It has been revealed that the negative relationship between social isolation experience and job search self-efficacy decreases with increasing career guidance levels. In a sense, a higher level of career guidance weakens isolation experience on job search self-efficacy. For example, Watts (2001) demonstrated that career guidance supports the development of societal structures. Roorda et al. (2011) also noted that the teacher-student relationship and mentoring role of teacher moderates the relationship between self-efficacy and school achievement and students' social behaviors. Therefore, the following hypothesis is offered:

**H<sub>4</sub>:** Career guide moderates the relationship between social isolation and job search self-efficacy.

**Figure 1.** Research Model



## 4. Method

### 4.1. Sample

Data was collected via a questionnaire survey from both three universities in the Marmara Region of Turkey. The survey was conducted with the participation of 120 male students and 155 female students. Ages of the participants of the survey were distributed as; 59.6% between the ages of 18 ve under (164 participants), 37.8% between 18-21 (104 participants), 2.5% between 21-25 (7 participants). The undergraduate students had different majors such as engineering, architecture, management, and economics. Most of the students participating in the research study in the department of business administration. The distribution of students according to departments is as follows; 36% (99 participants) is business department, 27.3% (75 participants) is economy department, 22.2% (61 participants) is architecture department, 14.5% (40 participants) is engineering department. Finally, the grade distribution of the participants is as follows; 42.5% (117 participants) are first grade, 18.9% (52 participants) are second grade, 17.8% (49 participants) are third grade, 20.7% are last fourth grade.

Data was collected in the spring semester of the 2018-2019 academic year. The authors preferred to collect data in the spring semester because it is expected that each student had sufficient experience in their universities. All questionnaires were collected face to face. All students were informed that his/her responses would remain anonymous and not be linked to them individually.

Additionally, students were assured that there were no wrong or right answers, and their honest answers were relevant. A total of 275 voluntary students completed the questionnaire, and there were no incentives for participating in the study. The answering of the instruments took approximately 15-20 minutes.

### 4.2. Measures

To test the research model, multi-item scales adopted from prior research for the measurement of variables were used. 5-point Likert scales ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" were used for measuring each construct namely, social isolation experience, career guide, and job search efficacy. Additionally, some variables were included as controls that play a key role in the investigation.

In this study, the parallel-translation method was used. Firstly, items were translated into Turkish and then retranslated into English by the authors of the study. Secondly, the suitability of the Turkish version of the questionnaire was revised and evaluated with three academics from Turkey, with human resource management knowledge.

Seven questions were adapted from the twelve-question scale for Hasan and Clark (2017) to measure the social isolation experience. Social isolation experience indicates feeling excluded and isolated in university.

Career guidance questions were adapted from Blondeau and Awad (2017). The four items covered the student-professor interaction in university.

Self-efficacy was assessed by asking three items adapted from Moynihan et al. (2003). Self-efficacy items indicated students' feelings about job searches in the future.

## 5. Analysis and Results

### 5.1. Measure Validity and Results

After data collection, all the major variables were checked for missing data and out of range score. After eliminating problematical questionnaires (20 questionnaires were de-scoped), the reliability and validity of variables were assessed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). In confirmatory factor analysis, the precise procedure was followed step by step and problematical items were eliminated. In the literature, CFI, IFI ve RMSEA coefficients of 0.90 and above is accepted as sufficient by Hair, Robert, and David (2000). The CFA showed a good fit index ( $\chi^2(39) = 71.557$ , CFI=0.97; RMSEA=0.55, IFI=0.97).

Table 1 demonstrates the correlations among variables. Table 1 also reports coefficient alphas, average variance extracted, composite reliabilities, and descriptive statistics. All the results are well beyond the threshold levels suggested by Fornell and Lacker (1981).

**Table 1.** Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

Variables	1	2	3
Isolation Experience	(0.75)		
Career Guide	-0.28**	(0.81)	
Self-Efficacy	-0.37**	-0.36**	(0.81)
Mean	2.1	3.3	3.6
Sdt.Dev.	0.88	0.95	0.85
Variance Extracted	0.51	0.55	0.59
Composite Reliability	0.80	0.81	0.82

Note: Numbers on diagonals indicate the square root of AVE. No correlation is greater than the corresponding square root of AVE. \* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$

### 5.2. Hypotheses Testing

To test the proposed hypotheses, structural equation modeling was used. Hypothesis 1 in Table 2 shows that social isolation experience is negatively related to job search self-efficacy ( $\beta = -0.43$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and model fits the observed data.

**Table 2.** Path Model

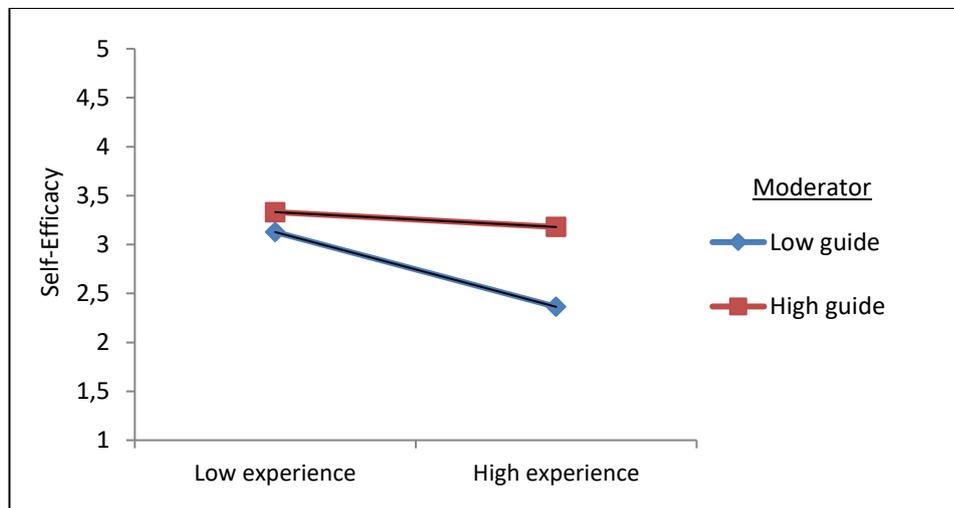
Relationship	Path value	t-value	Result
Isolation Experience_ Self-Efficacy	-0.43**	-5.29	Supported
$\chi^2(11) = 17.286$			
CFI = 0.99			
RMSEA = 0.04			
IFI = 0.99			

Moderated SEM analysis was used to test the moderator role of the career guide between social isolation experience and job search self-efficacy. As shown in Table 3, the interaction effect was found to be significant supporting H<sub>4</sub>. Figure 1 shows that in low guide conditions, students who have social experience show lower level job search self-efficacy.

**Table 3.** Interaction Effect of Career Guidance on Job Search Self-Efficacy

Hypotheses	Path	Moderator	ResResult
Main effects	Isolation exp_ Self-efficacy	-0.28**	Supported
	Moderator _ Self-efficacy	0.25**	
Interaction effects	Isolation exp*Moderator_ Self-efficacy	0.18**	Supported

**Figure 1.** Interaction Effect of Career Guidance on the Relationship between Social Isolation and Job Search Self-Efficacy



A hierarchical linear regression was applied to analyze H<sub>2</sub> and H<sub>3</sub>. Interestingly, our study demonstrated that gender didn't show any differences among job search self-efficacy. Both male and female students have job search self-efficacy ( $p \geq 0.01$ ). Moreover, it was found that senior students have more self-efficacy in a job search than junior students ( $p < 0.01$ ).

In this study, the relationship between social isolation experience and job search self-efficacy was investigated in a sample of 275 university students with different majors and degrees, studying at private and public universities in Turkey.

## 6. Discussion

In this study, the relationship between social isolation experience and job search self-efficacy was investigated in a sample of 275 university students who study at Turkish private and public universities and have different majors and different grades. It was hypothesized that social isolation experience would be negatively related to job search self-efficacy. Secondly, it was hypothesized that both gender and grade would have different effects on job search self-efficacy. Finally, it was hypothesized that career guidance would moderate the relationship of social isolation experience with job search self-efficacy.

The hypothesis stating that social isolation experience is negatively related to job search self-efficacy was supported. University students who feel more alone in their daily lives or did not get out more with their

friends had a more negative job search self-efficacy. In other words, feeling alone students resulted in feeling uncertain about their ability to get the job. Being isolated from other people might probably induce a negative mood and will result in having not an adequate and meaningful relationship with individuals (De Jong Gierveld et al., 2006). Additionally, our finding is consistent with Moore and Leung's (2001) study which showed the relationship among greater loneliness and lowered social self-efficacy.

Unexpectedly, no support was found for the second hypothesis that male students experience more job-search self-efficacy than female students. Most past studies have argued gender differences among job search behavior (Van Hooft et al., 2005; Tien et al., 2009). Contrary to the expectations, gender was not a significant effect on job search self-efficacy. This finding is consistent with the statement that no significant sex differences exist in job search behavior (Mau & Kopischke, 2001). Additionally, Kanfer et al. (2001) point out that while individual characteristics are positively associated with job search behavior, gender has a weak or null relationship.

This study also demonstrated that grade level is essential for explaining job search self-efficacy. Senior students have more self-efficacy. This finding especially highlights the felt adaptation for making a career decision. Douglass and Duffy (2015) noted that career adaptability and career decision self-efficacy are positively related. In other words, higher adaptability, more confidence, and optimism among undergrad students determine more efficacious job search behaviors.

An explanation for the moderating effect of career guidance on the relationship between social isolation experience and job search self-efficacy might be that students who feel excluded or alone in the university are demanding encouragement from their professors. Being provided with a guide in developing career goals and academic options, the students will feel certain about their abilities to get the job. For undergraduate students in our sample, the more significant support from the academic staff, the more self-efficacy in job searching behavior will exist.

## **7. Theoretical-Practical Implications and Limitations**

The results and conclusions mentioned need to be considered in light of several limitations. First, the study sample consisted of university students in the west of Turkey. In order to increase the generalizability of the study findings, future studies should obtain data from different geographic areas, cultural contexts, and countries.

The second concern is about using a cross-sectional design with the questionnaire. This study design did not provide findings to see real causality between the variables. For example, social isolation experience can be changed over time as gaining new friendships or romantic relations in the university. In this respect, a longitudinal study can be designed.

The third limitation has been considered to be the role of social isolation experience in predicting outcome variables. Future research should also continue to examine the antecedents of social isolation experience among undergrads. For example, individual differences (being introverted, attachment anxiety) and contextual factors (family education, ethnicity) should be investigated. Research into the antecedents of social isolation experience will carry essential implications for improving students' resources for making career choices.

From a practical perspective, our results may be useful for university staff and counselors who work with students. Career guides can be enhanced through courses in semester terms. Obviously, students prefer these credit courses. For example, Miller et al.'s (2018) study showed that career courses provide confidence about making a career choice. Faculty staff or counselors can build job search self-efficacy by shadowing alumni success stories, emphasizing students' strengths, thinking psychological aspects, and decreasing anxiety about job search behavior and being a mentor in academic life, for example, preparing a resume with the student. Specifically, in Turkey, building job search self-efficacy among undergrads is imperative and tough because there are 7 million university students (Council of Higher Education, 2019), and the unemployment rate for young adults who have university degrees is 13% according to national statistics.

In recent years, public and private companies have increased their efforts for building gender equality in business life. In this context, it is stated that the number of women employees should be increased in companies and their rights should be improved in business life (Casey, 2017). Also, gender role perceptions change with the new generation (Kabasakal et al., 2017). This change related to gender in professional life has been revealed in our research. Practitioners' examination of how gender roles in changing generation will affect job behavior will make an essential contribution to the literature. The findings of current research also carry important implications for organizations. Job search self-efficacy can also be used as an important tool pre-entry first perceptions with the working environment (Guan et al., 2013).

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