



Bachelor's Degree in Economics and Business

Chair of Marketing

Social Class and Gender Discrimination in Hiring: An Experiment in the Italian Legal Sector

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Academic Year 2024/2025

*A mamma Lara e papà Sergio,
che con infinito amore e immensi sacrifici
mi hanno permesso di arrivare fin qui.
Questa tesi parla di status e privilegio,
ma io so bene dove affondano le mie radici.*

*Grazie per aver creduto in me
e per avermi supportata in ogni momento.
Che sia solo l'inizio di un cammino che possa rendervi fieri.*

Ringraziamenti

Desidero ringraziare di cuore la Prof.ssa Maria Giovanna Devetag e la Prof.ssa Cinzia Calluso per la disponibilità, il supporto e i preziosi suggerimenti ricevuti durante la stesura di questa tesi. Il loro contributo è stato fondamentale per lo sviluppo della parte sperimentale e mi ha aiutata ad affrontare con maggiore consapevolezza un tema complesso e attuale come quello delle disuguaglianze nel mondo del lavoro.

Abstract

Despite the growing commitment to more equitable selection practices, several experimental studies show how socially connoted traits—such as gender or social class—can influence candidate evaluations in hiring processes, even when skills are equal. The purpose of this study is to determine whether, and to what extent, perceived social class and candidate gender influence the evaluations made by legal professionals in Italy.

To this end, we conducted an experiment based on an online questionnaire that we administered to 62 lawyers working between Rome and Milan. Each participant was presented with a fictitious curriculum vitae, constructed ad hoc to systematically vary two candidate characteristics: gender (man/woman) and social class (high/low), reported through indirect elements in the CV. Ratings were collected on seven dimensions: decision to recall or not to recall the candidate for an interview (call-back), competence, warmth, polish, status, commitment, and cultural matching with the company.

The results show that, although there is no statistically significant effect on the call-back rate, candidates perceived to be from a high social class receive higher average ratings on the remaining dimensions analysed. Furthermore, the gender of the evaluator emerges as a relevant variable: women who participated in the experiment tend to assign higher average scores than men, making them less selective. This aspect, still little explored in the literature, opens up a potential direction for future research.

The study contributes to the understanding of the implicit dynamics that influence selection decisions, highlighting how social and cultural signals can affect candidates' perceptions, even in the absence of objective differences in merit. Such evidence encourages reflection on the effectiveness of current selection practices and on the need to design fairer hiring procedures.

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1. Introduction

How much does merit really matter in hiring processes? And to what extent do characteristics such as social class or gender, while not directly relevant to the role, influence the evaluation of candidates? Starting from these questions, this paper aims to investigate how indirect signals of socioeconomic status and gender impact candidates' perceptions within the Italian legal sector.

In recent years, numerous studies in the field of sociology of work and social psychology have shown how career paths are determined not only by formal skills but also by implicit traits, cultural codes and more or less conscious biases. However, the literature on the Italian context still remains limited. This experiment aims to contribute to filling this gap by analysing how small indicators included in CVs (such as name, address, high school and personal interests) can activate stereotypes and influence the evaluative decisions of professional recruiters.

The relevance of this research is twofold: on the one hand, it is part of the scientific debate on indirect discrimination and the reproduction of inequality in high-selectivity contexts; on the other hand, it offers application insights for making selection processes more equitable, conscious and orientated toward the recognition of real, rather than perceived, merit.

The specific objective of the study is to test whether and how a candidate's social class and gender influence the evaluation of several dimensions, from the likelihood of being called back for an interview—"call-back rate"—to more subtle perceptions such as competence, warmth, polish, status, commitment, and cultural matching with the organisation.

Chapter 2 presents a critical review of the literature on discrimination in hiring processes, with a focus on the effects of gender and perceived social class. It also introduces Bourdieu's (1984) theory of capital as a theoretical framework and analyses two key experimental studies—Rivera and Tilcsik (2016) and Calluso and Devetag (2023)—which constitute the main empirical references for this research.

Chapter 3 describes in detail the experimental design adopted, illustrating the construction of fictitious profiles, the structure of the questionnaire, the methods of administration and the characteristics of the sample. It also presents the analytical dimensions used to evaluate participant responses, drawn from established psychological and sociological literature: call-back rate, competence, warmth, polish, status, commitment, and cultural matching.

Chapter 4 presents the results of the experiment, highlighting the trend of average scores across the different dimensions evaluated as well as the effect of the independent variables and covariates included in the models.

Chapter 5 critically interprets the results in light of the existing literature, relating the observed data to theoretical hypotheses and discussing the implications of the main trends that emerged, even in the absence of statistical significance.

Chapter 6 presents the study's main limitations and the practical and managerial implications of the results obtained, discussing possible strategies to make selection processes more equitable and suggesting directions for future research.

Finally, Chapter 7 offers a concluding reflection, summarising the main contributions of the research and emphasising the importance of questioning how seemingly marginal factors can systematically influence access to professional opportunities.

2. Literature Review

This chapter presents the main theoretical and empirical contributions that form the basis of the present research. It opens with a general overview of discrimination in hiring processes, focusing on the limitations of traditional methods and the increasing use of experimental approaches, such as audit studies based on fictitious CVs.

The review then focuses on two dimensions that are particularly relevant in highly selective contexts: gender and social class. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of capital, it explores the role that cultural and social signals, often implicit, can play in shaping perceptions of merit.

Finally, two recent experimental studies are reviewed—that of Rivera and Tilcsik (2016), conducted in the United States, and that of Calluso and Devetag (2023), carried out in the Italian context—which serve as the main empirical references for the present experiment.

i. Discrimination in Hiring

The concept of discrimination can be defined in various ways, from simple to more complex and systemic understandings. In its most basic form, discrimination refers to the unequal treatment of individuals in similar situations who differ in one or more characteristics—such as race, ethnicity, gender, (dis)ability, sexual orientation, or other statuses. It is inherently comparative: people are treated differently due to being assigned to a specific category that is neither chosen nor changeable (Fibbi et al., 2021).

Discrimination may be either direct or indirect. Direct discrimination occurs when individuals or groups are explicitly treated unequally. Indirect discrimination, on the other hand, arises when seemingly neutral rules, policies, or procedures disproportionately disadvantage one group over another. This form can be just as damaging, as it often goes unnoticed while perpetuating inequality. Importantly, indirect discrimination can occur even without conscious intent, as unjustified categorical differences may emerge independently of individual motivations (Fibbi et al., 2021). As Fredman (2011) puts it, “Equal treatment may well lead to unequal results” (p. 177).

The literature identifies multiple grounds of discrimination, from ethnicity and gender to age, religion, disability, social background and sexual orientation. While some of these factors—such as ethnicity or gender—have been extensively studied, others are receiving growing scholarly

attention. Historically, research has often focused on single categories, such as “ethnic discrimination” or “gender discrimination”. However, there is increasing awareness that these dimensions frequently intersect. This phenomenon, known as “multiple discrimination” or “intersectionality”, captures how different dimensions of difference can combine to reinforce, multiply, or sometimes neutralise each other (Khaitan, 2015; Fibbi et al., 2021).

Although diverse workforces have been shown to enhance organisational performance (Gassmann, 2001; Martin, 2014), studies suggest that individuals from traditionally discriminated groups still face substantial barriers when entering the labour market compared to members of dominant groups (Lippens et al., 2022; OECD, 2020; Quillian et al., 2017).

Discrimination in hiring has often been investigated through interviews, surveys or wage comparisons between members of majority and minority groups (Pager, 2007; Paradies, 2006; Zhang, 2008). Although useful to raise awareness, these methods may present some limitations. Self-reported data, in particular, are exposed to social desirability bias: respondents may provide answers they believe are socially acceptable, rather than expressing their real beliefs or behaviours. Because of this, it is challenging to detect the presence of actual discriminatory attitudes. Additionally, wage differentials between groups—though frequently interpreted as evidence of discrimination—may be influenced by various unobserved factors, such as differences in education quality, work experience, or job type. As a result, these methods struggle to isolate the direct effect of a specific characteristic (e.g., gender or ethnicity) on hiring outcomes.

To overcome these issues, researchers have increasingly relied on experimental methods, which allow for a more direct assessment of discrimination. A widely cited contribution is the study by Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004), which introduced the use of correspondence testing—also known as audit résumé studies—to detect discrimination in hiring. In this approach, researchers send fictitious CVs to real job openings. All CVs are identical in qualifications, skills, and experience but differ only in one specific characteristic—such as the applicant’s name, for instance, which signals ethnicity or gender. After sending them to a large number of employers, researchers compare the rate of positive callbacks (i.e., interview invitations) between the groups. Differences in responses can then be attributed to the manipulated variable, providing clear evidence of discriminatory behaviour in the hiring process.

ii. The Role of Gender and Social Class

Among the various grounds examined in the literature, this work focuses on two primary dimensions: gender and social class. Both operate through mechanisms that are often implicit but can significantly influence the perception of candidates. While gender has been the subject of numerous studies, social class remains a relatively under-explored dimension, despite the growing

attention it has received in more recent experimental research. The following paragraphs summarise the main findings that have emerged in the literature on these two areas.

Gender

Gender-based discrimination in hiring has been widely studied, although findings are not always straightforward. Some meta-analyses, such as that by Lippens et al. (2022), report that women tend to receive slightly more positive callbacks than men—around 4% more on average. However, Galos and Coppock (2023) found only weak evidence of a general bias in favour of women.

Importantly, results vary across industries. Women tend to be disadvantaged in men-dominated fields, while men are more likely to face discrimination in women-dominated sectors: a meta-analysis by Schaerer et al. (2023) supports this pattern, showing that women are penalised even in gender-balanced fields, whereas men experience negative bias only in sectors traditionally associated with female workers. Furthermore, gender bias is not limited to the recruitment phase. In higher-paying occupations, men continue to be advantaged, while women appear more often in lower-paid roles (Galos & Coppock, 2023). These dynamics contribute to vertical segregation: since top positions remain dominated by men, women may encounter barriers to promotion, even when hired at similar entry levels.

Hiring procedures also seem to reinforce, rather than reduce, existing imbalances in gender composition (Galos & Coppock, 2023). Some evidence suggests that motherhood introduces an added layer of disadvantage: according to Correll et al. (2007), mothers are perceived as less competent and receive lower salary recommendations, while fathers benefit from parenthood in terms of perceived reliability and commitment.

Moreover, interventions to mitigate gender bias have produced mixed outcomes. Isaac et al. (2009) found that demonstrating competence through performance records can reduce bias, as can presenting evidence that women perform well in male-typed tasks. However, these strategies are not without risk: women who clearly excel in male-stereotyped domains may be negatively evaluated for violating gender norms.

Social Class and Cultural Status

Although less explored than other forms of discrimination, social class and cultural status are increasingly recognised as relevant factors in hiring outcomes. Unlike characteristics such as gender or ethnicity, social class is difficult to define consistently and is not explicitly protected under most anti-discrimination laws. As a result, experimental designs vary widely in how they operationalise class—often relying on indirect signals such as address, hobbies, or educational background.

Several studies have shown that candidates from low-income neighbourhoods are at a disadvantage. In Jamaica, Spencer et al. (2019) found significantly lower call-back rates for applicants from poorer areas. Similarly, Bunel et al. (2015) observed that French candidates with a prestigious address were three times more likely to receive positive responses. However, the effect is not always consistent: Tunstall et al. (2013) found no such relationship in the U.K. Carlsson et al. (2018) reported that residential background had a significant effect only when combined with ethnic cues, reducing callbacks by 42%.

In India, studies on caste-based discrimination revealed that low-caste candidates needed to send 20% more applications to achieve the same response rate as high-caste peers (Siddique, 2011). Meanwhile, a small number of studies have explored class signals related to cultural capital. For instance, Thomas (2018) found that highbrow cultural markers benefitted women but not men. Conversely, Rivera and Tilcsik (2016) observed that law firms in the U.S. were more likely to prefer high-class men over both high-class women and low-class applicants of any gender. Interviews revealed that elite firms viewed upper-class men as a better fit for their organisational culture, while women were penalised due to assumptions about long-term commitment.

While evidence on social class discrimination is still limited and somewhat mixed, the available data suggest that subtle class markers can influence recruiters' decisions. Moreover, in some contexts, class intersects with race or ethnicity: for example, in the United States, black candidates may experience discrimination not only on racial grounds but also due to associations with lower socio-economic status (Harris, 1999, 2001; Kawachi et al., 2005; Williams, 1999). These intersections complicate attempts to isolate the effects of class, yet they reinforce the importance of addressing social background as a persistent and under-explored form of inequality.

This body of evidence challenges the dominant meritocratic narrative, which assumes that success in the labour market is driven solely by individual effort, ability, and perseverance. In reality, numerous studies have revealed that life chances are significantly shaped by one's family and social environment (Thomas, 2018; Rivera, 2015). In the United States, for instance, more than 40% of individuals born into the lowest income quintile remain there as adults, and over two-thirds never reach the middle class (Urahn et al., 2012). Children from wealthier families are over-represented in elite schools and universities, which facilitates access to high-status occupations (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010; Rivera, 2015).

While earlier explanations emphasised financial investment in education—as a means for privileged families to secure better resources for their children (Roemer, 2009; Roemer & Trannoy, 2015)—more recent research has highlighted additional mechanisms that extend beyond schooling. Studies show that even when candidates possess equal qualifications, the social background of candidates continues to influence their professional outcomes (Raitano & Vona,

2014, 2015). As a result, scholars have increasingly investigated how social and cultural advantages, often invisible, help reproduce elite status across generations (Bloise & Raitano, 2018; Rivera, 2015).

However, to better understand why and how seemingly secondary signals—such as communication style, personal interests, or educational background—can affect evaluations, it is necessary to adopt a broader theoretical perspective. In this direction is Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of capital, which offers a useful conceptual framework for analysing the role of invisible inequalities in selection processes.

iii. Bourdieu’s Theory of Capital

According to Bourdieu (1984), social inequality cannot be fully explained through economic resources alone. Instead, it is produced and maintained through the interplay of three forms of capital: economic, social, and cultural. Crucially, these forms of capital are most effective when inherited, and they contribute to maintaining privilege not only through material resources but also through access to networks and the internalisation of dominant cultural codes.

Economic capital is the most direct and visible form, allowing families to invest in education, extracurricular activities, private tutoring, and experiences that contribute to building a competitive CV. Social capital refers to access to influential networks that offer information and opportunities—from knowing the right schools to accessing internships or recommendations. Cultural capital, perhaps the most complex but highly relevant here, includes knowledge, habits, and preferences that are recognised and valued within specific professional and social contexts.

Importantly, Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital extends beyond formal credentials. It involves behaviours and preferences that often go unnoticed by those who possess them, yet play a decisive role in how individuals are perceived—especially in elite settings. These include, for instance, preferences for classical music or individual sports like sailing or tennis, participation in cultural institutions, or even a polished way of speaking. Such signals are rarely listed as formal job criteria, yet they shape how candidates are evaluated in terms of “fit” and potential.

These dynamics are particularly relevant in elite labour markets, such as law, consulting, or finance. Rivera’s (2015) ethnographic study of hiring practices in top-tier firms in the United States reveals that recruiters tend to favour candidates who resemble themselves—not only in educational background, but also in lifestyle, taste, and social manners. In this sense, the idea of “merit” becomes deeply intertwined with class-based cultural familiarity.

Against this theoretical backdrop, it becomes evident that informal class signals—however subtle—can systematically shape selection decisions, particularly in highly competitive sectors.

Although there are still few studies on these dynamics in the Italian context, recent contributions have begun to shed light on how they play out in local labour markets. Archival

research by Barone and Mocetti (2021) shows a surprising continuity in occupational status over centuries in Italy, indicating that access to professional opportunities remains closely tied to family background. Bloise and Raitano (2018) also found that family advantages persist even after controlling for education and measured skills, pointing to the influence of informal mechanisms such as networks and unobservable traits valued by recruiters.

These theoretical reflections are reflected in a number of experimental studies that have investigated the effect of class signals in highly selective occupational contexts. In particular, two recent research studies—one conducted in the United States by Rivera and Tilcsik (2016) and one in Italy by Calluso and Devetag (2023)—offer valuable evidence for understanding how social inequalities are reflected in candidate evaluations.

iv. Empirical Studies

This section presents two contributions central to the development of the present research: the study by Rivera and Tilcsik (2016), conducted in the U.S. context, and the more recent one by Calluso and Devetag (2023), focused on the Italian context. Both employ the résumé audit study methodology to isolate the effect of indirect class and gender signals on candidate evaluations, offering relevant insights into how these mechanisms work in elite selection practices. These two recent studies—in particular that of Calluso and Devetag (2023)—represent the main empirical reference on which the present research is based.

Rivera and Tilcsik (2016)

The relevance of cultural capital in hiring processes is examined in depth by Rivera and Tilcsik (2016), whose experimental study constitutes a key empirical reference for the present research. Drawing explicitly on Bourdieu's framework, the authors demonstrate how subtle signals of social class—though not formally required—can significantly influence candidate evaluations in highly selective professional contexts.

The study applies a résumé audit method to examine how class origin influences access to prestigious legal careers in the United States. By sending fictitious CVs to 316 top-tier law firms and systematically varying the applicants' social class and gender, the authors isolate the causal effect of class-based signals—such as hobbies, names, and extracurricular achievements—on employers' responses. All applicants had identical academic qualifications and professional experience to ensure that any variation in call-back rates could be attributed to class and gender cues alone.

The results show a striking pattern: male applicants from privileged backgrounds were significantly more likely to receive interview invitations compared to all other candidates. In contrast, women from similarly privileged backgrounds did not enjoy the same advantage.

Instead, they were penalised—receiving fewer callbacks than both high-class men and lower-class women. Rivera and Tilcsik attribute this disadvantage to a so-called “commitment penalty”, whereby higher-class women were perceived as less committed to demanding careers, possibly due to stereotypes linking them to traditional family roles or a presumed lack of financial necessity.

These findings align with Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital as a mechanism of social reproduction. The study shows how employers in elite law firms interpret signals such as hobbies, names, and achievements as indicators of this cultural capital. These signals, while not formally required for the role, operate as informal criteria to identify candidates who “fit” within the firm’s organisational and client culture. Moreover, the unequal treatment of high-class men and women highlights how the value of capital is mediated by gender: traits that are rewarded in male applicants may be penalised in female ones.

Overall, Rivera and Tilcsik (2016) provide compelling evidence that social class—and its interaction with gender—plays a significant role in shaping access to elite professions. Their findings reveal how informal signals and unspoken cultural expectations operate as invisible selection criteria, reinforcing the advantages of those who already embody the dominant “habitus”.

These results strongly align with Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital and symbolic power, showing how candidates are not evaluated solely on objective qualifications but also on how well they conform to elite norms of conduct and taste. Consequently, hiring practices in high-status sectors may appear meritocratic but in reality contribute to the reproduction of social hierarchies.

While their study offered a pioneering analysis of the role of status in selection processes in the United States, it remains unclear how generalisable these findings are to other contexts. To explore this aspect in the Italian context, Calluso and Devetag conducted a similar experiment, adapted to the legal labour market in Italy.

Calluso and Devetag (2023)

The recent study by Calluso and Devetag (2023) represents the first attempt to investigate these dynamics within the Italian labour market. Building on the experimental approach developed by Rivera and Tilcsik, their research applies a résumé audit methodology to explore how social class—and its interaction with gender—influences candidate evaluations in the legal sector.

In their field experiment, the authors developed four fictitious CVs representing the combination of two genders (man/woman) and two levels of social class (high/low), following a 2x2 factorial design. While academic qualifications, professional experience, and other core competencies were kept identical across profiles, class and gender were signalled through indirect cues. A total of 794 applications were sent to 455 law firms and legal departments in Rome and

Milan. All applications were submitted as spontaneous internship requests, a stage in the hiring process known to be highly influential in long-term employment outcomes, particularly in elite legal careers.

The results show a clear interaction effect between gender and social class. High-class men received the highest call-back rate, while low-class women were the least likely to be invited for an interview. Overall, being a man nearly doubled the chances of receiving a positive response, while being from a high-class background more than tripled them. Crucially, these advantages persisted despite identical qualifications, providing evidence of what the authors describe as a “direct class advantage”—one that operates independently of access to better education or credentials.

While these findings broadly align with those of Rivera and Tilcsik, they also reveal a key difference. In the U.S. context, privileged women were penalised compared to their lower-class counterparts—a result attributed to a perceived “commitment penalty”. In contrast, Calluso and Devetag found that privileged women in Italy still performed better than all lower-class applicants. These results suggest that, in the Italian context, class advantage may partially compensate for gender-based disadvantage. Nevertheless, low-class women remained the most penalised group overall, confirming that intersecting social identities can produce cumulative forms of exclusion.

To explain these results, the authors draw on Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital and the notion of symbolic fit. They argue that candidates from higher-class backgrounds may be perceived as more polished, competent, and culturally aligned with the expectations of elite legal environments. This interpretation is consistent with Rivera’s (2012) theory of cultural fit, according to which hiring decisions are shaped not only by merit but also by perceived similarities between candidates and existing members of the organisation.

Moreover, Calluso and Devetag point out that these dynamics are not limited to elite law firms. Class-based discrimination was observed across all types of employers, with stronger gender bias observed in corporate legal departments compared to law firms. Although Milan displayed slightly higher levels of discrimination than Rome, the overall patterns were consistent across both cities.

Their study thus offers a rare and nuanced perspective on how class and gender biases operate in the Italian labour market, providing a solid foundation for the present research and contributing to the literature in several ways. On the one hand, it provides some of the first experimental evidence on the joint effects of gender and social class in selection processes in Italy. On the other hand, it shows that, even in a regulated and highly skilled field such as the legal profession, candidate evaluations continue to be influenced by implicit social signals. The results also reinforce the idea that cultural capital plays a central role in the perception of “compatibility” with the work environment.

The present research builds directly on this work, taking its 2x2 experimental design and adapting it to a slightly different context to test whether the observed results are replicable and to further explore how social class- and gender-related biases work. To do so, we designed a field experiment targeting legal professionals, with the aim of systematically observing how indirect signals related to class and gender influence the evaluation of candidates.

3. Methodology

In line with findings in the literature, we conducted an experiment designed to explore these mechanisms in the Italian context. We created a questionnaire that we then distributed to lawyers employed in law firms and corporate legal departments based in Rome and Milan. In the questionnaire, each participant was offered a CV of a fictitious candidate, whom they would then have to evaluate on the basis of several dimensions and consider whether or not to call back for a possible interview at their firm.

i. Experimental Design and Candidate Profiles

The curricula used in the experiment were purpose-built and depict four distinct fictitious candidates, each representing a specific combination of gender and social class, based on Calluso and Devetag's (2023) study. In fact, the experimental design used the same 2x2 structure, with two variables manipulated: gender (man vs. woman) and social class (high vs. low), the latter indicated by indirect elements in the CV content.

In detail, four different versions of the two basic CVs shown in Table 1 were created to correspond to the same number of hypothetical candidates. The main contents of each CV are perfectly equivalent in terms of academic qualifications, professional experience, technical skills and linguistic competences.

Table 1. Overview of the elements included in the original baseline CVs. *Adapted from Calluso, C., & Devetag, M. G. (2023).*

**To preserve anonymity, the placeholders “XX” and “YY” have been used in place of actual firm names.*

Baseline CV A		Baseline CV B	
Work Experience			
1	Legal intern, XX* Law Firm, Rome (3 months)	Legal intern, YY* Law Firm, Rome (3 months)	
2	Intern, European Commission, Bruxelles (3 months)	Intern, ONU, New York (3 months)	
3	Teaching Assistant, La Sapienza University, Rome (1 year)		
Education			
University	MSc in Law at La Sapienza University, Rome Final score: 110/110 with honours Thesis in Commercial Law	MSc in Law at La Sapienza University, Rome Final score: 110/110 with honours Thesis in Corporate Law	
Erasmus	Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium (one semester)	Université Catholique de Lyon, France (one semester)	
Additional Information			
IT Skills	Proficient in Microsoft Office (Excel, PowerPoint, Word, Outlook), Google Suite, Google Analytics and both Windows and MacOS operating systems		
Soft Skills	• Problem solving • Teamwork skills • Communication skills and resilience	• Organisational skills in team settings • Leadership and time management skills in team dynamics	
Language Skills	Italian: Native, English: IELTS (C1), French: DELF (B2)		
Volunteering	Doctors Without Borders Italy	Red Cross Rome	

All four candidates were presented as recent law graduates from La Sapienza University in Rome, with a master’s degree awarded with the highest honours. The choice of this university was not accidental: unlike other Italian universities considered high-end, La Sapienza is considered a mid-range university, attended by students from heterogeneous socio-economic backgrounds. This setting made it possible to simulate realistic applications from young people who are highly qualified but do not belong to the educational elite, i.e., a category that accounts for a substantial portion of aspirants in the legal job market.

In line with evidence from the literature, using a non-elite university also allows for more accurate exploration of selection dynamics in the absence of a “super-elite” educational background, reducing possible bias associated with the university’s reputation (Rivera, 2015).

Geographic consistency was also ensured by choosing a university based in Rome, in line with the residence of the candidates, all of whom were described as domiciled in the capital.

To further strengthen the credibility of the profiles, each CV included an Erasmus semester (either at the Université Catholique de Louvain in Belgium or at the Université Catholique de Lyon in France), a three-month internship experience at a major Roman law firm, the same level of language skills (C1 certification in English and B2 in French), a comparable set of soft skills (team building, leadership, time management), similar computer skills (Office, Google Suite and macOS), and the same year of birth.

The only differences introduced were in marginal but strategically selected aspects to indirectly signal the candidate's social class affiliation and gender. Specifically, first and last name, residential address, high school attended, sports played and musical interests were changed (see Table 2).

Table 2. Indicators used to signal gender and social class across the four candidate profiles. *Adapted from Calluso, C., & Devetag, M. G. (2023).*

	Low-Class		High-Class	
	Woman	Man	Woman	Man
First Name	Consuelo	Antonio	Lavinia	Tancredi
Last Name	Valentini	Marini	De Santis	Mancini
Address	Via di Centocelle	Via della Magliana	Via del Corso	Viale dei Parioli
Secondary School	Technical (<i>Istituto tecnico</i>)	Technical (<i>Istituto tecnico</i>)	Classical (<i>Liceo classico</i>)	Classical (<i>Liceo classico</i>)
Sport	Latin American dance	Football	Horseback riding	Horseback riding
Musical Instrument	Guitar	Drums	Harp	Classical organ

As shown in the table, these elements—while not directly affecting professional competencies—were included to evoke cultural and social signals in evaluators that can be traced back to the candidate's socioeconomic background. The use of indirect signals, consistent with the methodology adopted in the benchmark studies, allows us to investigate the extent to which evaluations are influenced by characteristics that are not relevant to selection but are often loaded with implicit stereotypes. All other elements unrelated to the manipulated variables were held constant in each version so as to isolate more precisely the effects attributable exclusively to gender and perceived social class.

The choice of such items is based on the results of a preliminary phase of the project, conducted by another group of students within the same research track, with the specific aim of

identifying social signals useful for constructing experimental CVs. In that experiment, participants were asked to associate different first and last names, neighbourhoods of residence, schools attended, sports played and musical instruments with the social class they felt best represented them.

Our CVs were constructed on the basis of those responses, choosing those items that had received a sharper social classification. For example, the name “Lavinia” had been indicated as typical of a girl belonging to a high social class, while “Consuelo” was more frequently associated with a less privileged socioeconomic background. The same criterion was followed for areas of residence: “Viale dei Parioli” and “Via del Corso” were considered areas associated with affluent families, while “Centocelle” and “Magliana” were commonly associated with families with more modest incomes. The sport played was also used as an indicator: activities such as soccer and Latin American dancing were found to be associated with lower-middle classes, while horseback riding, due to its more exclusive nature and high costs, was used as a signal of higher class membership. Finally, among schooling, classical high school was interpreted as an indicator of a high socioeconomic background, while technical institute represented the opposite pole.

These profiles, thus constructed, were then integrated into the questionnaire submitted to the participants, the contents of which will be described in detail in the next section.

ii. Questionnaire Structure and Distribution

The experiment was based on the four CVs developed in the previous phase. To that end, an online questionnaire was created and made available via a link hosted on an institutional domain of Luiss Guido Carli University (luiss.it), thereby increasing its perceived credibility and presenting it as part of official academic research.

To prevent participants from being influenced by bias related to awareness of the experiment’s real purpose, we did not explicitly communicate the purpose of the research. Instead, we created a cover story, stating that the study was aimed at exploring new ways to improve the effectiveness of artificial intelligence-based resume screening systems. Specifically, the questionnaire was presented as part of a project to investigate the role of personal activities, interests, and organisational culture in predicting job performance, job satisfaction, and the development of soft skills within businesses.

The questionnaire was distributed over a three-month period to lawyers (associates, partners, and employers) working at law firms and corporate legal departments in Rome and Milan. Potential participants were contacted individually via email and LinkedIn and selected on the basis of their professional role and alignment with the research goal.

To reinforce the effectiveness of recruitment, each contact was accompanied by a personalised message, formulated to be credible and consistent with the proposed narrative.

The questionnaire distributed to participants was divided into two sections, both of which were designed to collect information useful for analysing the evaluations expressed on the profiles presented.

In the first section, participants were asked to review a potential candidate's CV as if they were being evaluated for an internship at their company. The CV was divided into sections (personal information, work experience, education, language skills, soft skills, volunteering, hobbies, and interests), and the information was made available via a Mouselab-type interface, with the contents of each section only visible by hovering the mouse cursor over the relevant box.

The second part focused on explicit assessments. First, participants were asked if, based on the information in the CV, the candidate would be invited to an interview at their company. Participants were then asked to provide reasons for their decision using an open-ended response, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Items used to assess the likelihood of a call-back. *Source: own elaboration.*

Call-Back	Response
Based on the information contained in the CV, would you invite this candidate for an interview at your company?	Yes / No
Could you please explain the reasons behind your decision?	Open-ended response

Next, a set of adjectives was proposed for the participant to rate on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely), in relation to the candidate examined. The dimensions included are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. List of adjectives used to assess participants' perceptions of the candidate, rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all; 5 = extremely). *Source: own elaboration.*

Dimensions	Rating
• Capable	1 to 5
• Self-confident	1 to 5
• Efficient	1 to 5
• Intelligent	1 to 5
• Skilled	1 to 5
• Friendly	1 to 5
• Well-intentioned	1 to 5
• Reliable	1 to 5
• Warm	1 to 5
• Good-natured	1 to 5
• Honest	1 to 5
• Articulate	1 to 5
• Refined	1 to 5
• Professional	1 to 5
• Sophisticated	1 to 5
• Well-educated	1 to 5
• Wealthy	1 to 5
• Well-connected	1 to 5
• Likely to get a prestigious job	1 to 5
• Likely to achieve a successful position	1 to 5
• Would show a sense of belonging	1 to 5
• Would be willing to work hard for the company	1 to 5
• Would be loyal to the company	1 to 5
• Would be willing to do what is necessary (e.g., work long hours) for the company	1 to 5
• Has interests similar to mine	1 to 5
• Is aligned with the culture of my organisation	1 to 5

Finally, a set of short anonymous demographic questions was included to refine the analysis, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Demographic questions included in the final section of the questionnaire. *Source: own elaboration.*

Participant Information	Response
• Please indicate your age.	Age
• What gender do you identify with?	Gender
• What is the highest level of education you have completed?	Education level
• What type of secondary school did you attend?	Secondary school
• Are you currently employed in a human resources position?	Yes / No
• What is your current job position?	Job position
• Please indicate your income bracket.	Income bracket
• Which of the following sports do you currently practise or have practised in the past? (Select all that apply)	Sport
• Which of the following instruments do you currently play or have played in the past? (Select all that apply)	Musical instruments

Each participant was exposed to only one resume, randomly assigned, in order to avoid direct comparison effects between profiles and ensure a more authentic assessment. In some cases, multiple individuals from the same company participated in the study, but independently and without any coordination between them.

Finally, the questionnaire was designed and administered in full compliance with with ethical standards and current data protection regulations. Specifically, the entire study complies with European Regulation 2016/679 (GDPR), which protects the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. All data were collected anonymously, processed in aggregate form, and used exclusively for scientific research. No information was used for commercial purposes or individual profiling.

Participation was restricted to individuals 18 years of age or older. Participants were informed that they could stop filling out the questionnaire at any time without consequences. Informed consent was acquired implicitly: voluntarily continuing to fill out the questionnaire was equivalent to informed acceptance of the terms of the research.

A detailed description of the sample and its demographic profile is presented in the following section.

iii. Sample Characteristics

A total of 62 professionals working in the legal field responded to the questionnaire, with a mean age of 39.69 years and a standard deviation of 10.56. The sample consisted of 29 women (47%) and 33 men (53%).

Regarding educational level, 53% of the participants had earned a bachelor's or master's degree, while the remaining 47% held a postgraduate master's or doctoral degree. Most respondents had attended classical high schools (53%), followed by scientific high schools (37%), linguistic high schools (5%), technical high schools specialising in business (3%), and finally industrial institutes (2%).

Only a minority portion of the sample (11%) were currently employed in HR, while 89% held other professional positions in the industry. In terms of income bracket, 61% of the participants claimed to earn more than 50,000 euros annually. The remainder were distributed among the lower brackets: 19% between 28,001 and 50,000 euros, 11% between 15,001 and 28,000 euros, and 8% under 15,000 euros.

iv. Analytical Dimensions

The evaluations expressed by the participants in the second part of the questionnaire allowed us to infer a set of analytical dimensions central to our study. First, the decision of whether or not to invite the candidate to an interview was used as a direct indicator of selection, corresponding to call-back rate, already adopted as the main dependent variable in the studies of Rivera and Tilcsik (2016) and that of Calluso and Devetag (2023).

Alongside this measure, we reconstructed six latent dimensions from the ratings provided on a Likert scale. The first two, competence and warmth, are derived directly from the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002; Fiske, 2018), a widely validated model used in social psychology to analyse the effects of stereotypes in social judgements. According to this theoretical approach, people tend to evaluate others primarily along two basic axes: competence, which is the degree to which an individual is perceived as capable, prepared, and professional; and warmth, which reflects the perception of helpfulness, sincerity, and trustworthiness. These two dimensions are not only universally recognised but also interact with each other in determining the overall judgement made toward an individual or group (Fiske et al., 2002; Fiske, 2018).

The other three dimensions—polish, status, and commitment—derive from more recent sociological literature analysing the role of social class in selection processes. The dimension defined as polish refers to the degree of sophistication, eloquence, and perceived cultural capital of the candidate, often associated with signs of education and deportment, which are particularly relevant in professional contexts of high selectivity (Rivera, 2012). The status dimension, on the other hand, summarises expectations regarding the candidate's potential for success, their social network, and the professional position they are expected to attain (Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016). Finally, the commitment dimension concerns the expected level of dedication, loyalty, and willingness to sacrifice for the company, an aspect that, as the studies by Rivera and Tilcsik (2016)

and Calluso and Devetag (2023) show, can be read differently depending on the gender and perceived class of the candidate.

To these five dimensions is then added cultural matching, which measures the perceived similarity between the candidate and the company's organisational culture. This variable is grounded in the literature on cultural fit, particularly in the work of Rivera (2012, 2015), who found that perceived similarity between candidates and recruiters plays a crucial role in access to elite positions, especially in highly selective professional settings.

These dimensions form the basis for the statistical analysis presented in the following chapter, which investigates how candidate characteristics influence each of these evaluations.

4. Results

The analyses were conducted through a series of multiple linear regression models, one for each of the dependent variables: call-back rate, competence, warmth, polish, status, commitment and cultural matching. In each model, the main independent variables were the gender and social class of the fictitious candidate. These were complemented by covariates related to the respondent: age, gender, education level, employment in human resources, income bracket, and two indices reflecting personal interests (sports and music).

All dependent variables were standardised using z-scores so as to express each score as a distance from the group mean. A score of zero corresponds exactly to the sample mean, while positive or negative values indicate a rating above or below the mean, respectively.

Categorical covariates were coded as dummy variables. For instance, participant gender was coded as 0 = woman and 1 = man, with the same principle applied to education level, HR employment status, and income bracket.

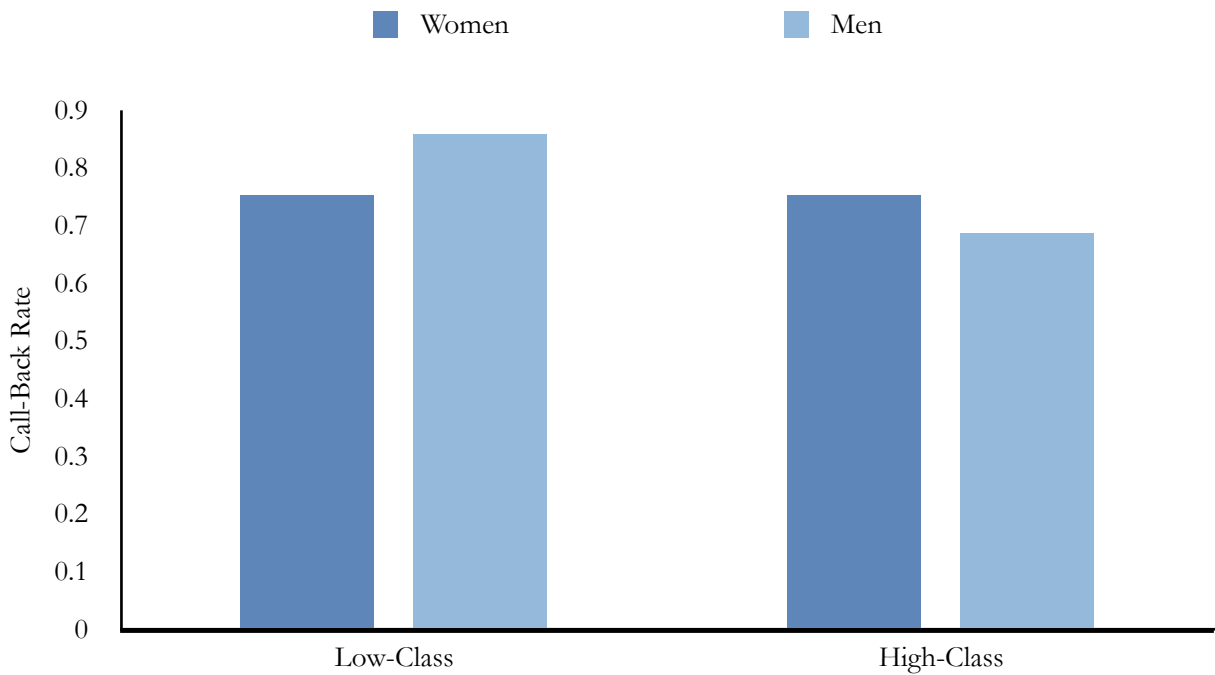
With regard to cultural interests, two standardised indices were constructed—one for sports and one for music. Each interest listed in the questionnaire was assigned a value of 0 or 1, depending on whether it was associated with a low or high social class, respectively, based on the classifications identified in the previous phase of the research. For each respondent, the percentage of interests associated with high social class out of the total interests selected was then calculated. The resulting index takes a value between 0 and 1: values close to 0 indicate interests predominantly associated with the low class, while values close to 1 reflect a greater closeness between the participant's interests and those typically attributed to the high social class.

The following paragraphs present the regression results for each of the dimensions analysed. We begin with the call-back rate—considered the primary dependent variable as it directly reflects the selection decision—and then continue with the latent dimensions reconstructed through the ratings provided by the participants.

i. Call-Back Rate

As shown in Figure 1, the call-back rate is high overall, with no significant differences between candidates: +0.75 for women of both low and high social class, +0.86 for men of low class, and +0.69 for men of high class. However, the differences observed at the descriptive level do not appear to be supported by statistically significant effects in the regression model.

Figure 1. Call-back rate received by candidates, broken down by gender and social class. *Source: own elaboration.*



As shown in Table 6, the model has a coefficient of determination of $R^2 = 0.26$, indicating that 26% of the variance in call-back scores is explained by the included variables. However, the F-test ($F_{10,51} = 1.791$, $p = 0.08$) indicates a potentially significant but statistically insignificant contribution.

Analysis of the individual predictors shows that neither gender ($\beta = -0.104$, $p = 0.353$) nor social class of the candidate ($\beta = -0.067$, $p = 0.547$) is significantly associated with the call-back rate. Among the covariates, there emerged a statistically significant effect for age ($\beta = -0.014$, $p = 0.046$) and participant's gender ($\beta = 0.339$, $p = 0.004$) and a marginally significant effect for participant's educational level ($\beta = -0.201$, $p = 0.079$). The other variables showed no significant effect.

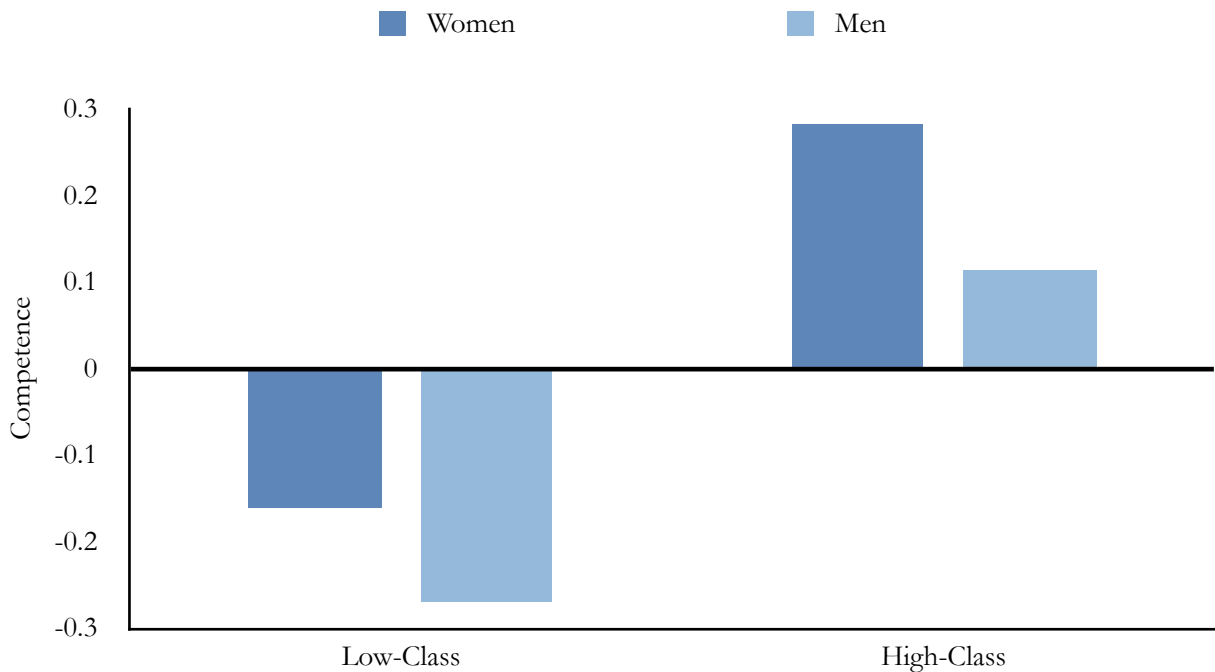
Table 6. Results of the multiple linear regression model for call-back rate. *Source: own elaboration.*

R² = 0.26, F_{10,51} = 1.791, p = 0.08				
	β	SE	t	p
Gender	-0.104	0.111	-0.938	0.353
Social Class	-0.067	0.110	-0.606	0.547
Age	-0.014	0.007	-2.050	0.046
Gender (Participant)	0.339	0.112	3.035	0.004
Education	-0.201	0.112	-1.793	0.079
High-School	-0.146	0.116	-1.256	0.215
HR	-0.053	0.170	-0.311	0.757
Income	0.013	0.074	0.173	0.863
Interests (Sports)	0.011	0.054	0.207	0.837
Interests (Music)	0.054	0.057	0.940	0.352

ii. Competence

As shown in Figure 2, competence scores are higher for high-class candidates than for low-class candidates. Specifically, standardised mean scores are negative for both genders in the low-class condition (women -0.16 , men -0.27), while they are positive for high-class women ($+0.28$) and slightly positive for men in the same condition ($+0.11$). However, the differences observed at the descriptive level are not supported by statistically significant effects in the regression model.

Figure 2. Perception of competence attributed to candidates, broken down by gender and social class. *Source: own elaboration.*



As shown in Table 7, the model has a coefficient of determination of $R^2 = 0.30$, indicating that 30% of the variance in competence scores is explained by the included variables. However, the F-test ($F_{10,51} = 2.187$, $p = 0.34$) indicates a statistically non-significant contribution.

Analysis of individual predictors shows that neither the gender of the candidate ($\beta = -0.226$, $p = 0.369$) nor his or her social class ($\beta = 0.394$, $p = 0.118$) are significantly associated with competence assessment. Among the covariates, the participant's gender shows a statistically significant effect ($\beta = 0.749$, $p = 0.004$), while sports interests show a marginally significant effect ($\beta = 0.212$, $p = 0.090$). The remaining variables show no significant effect.

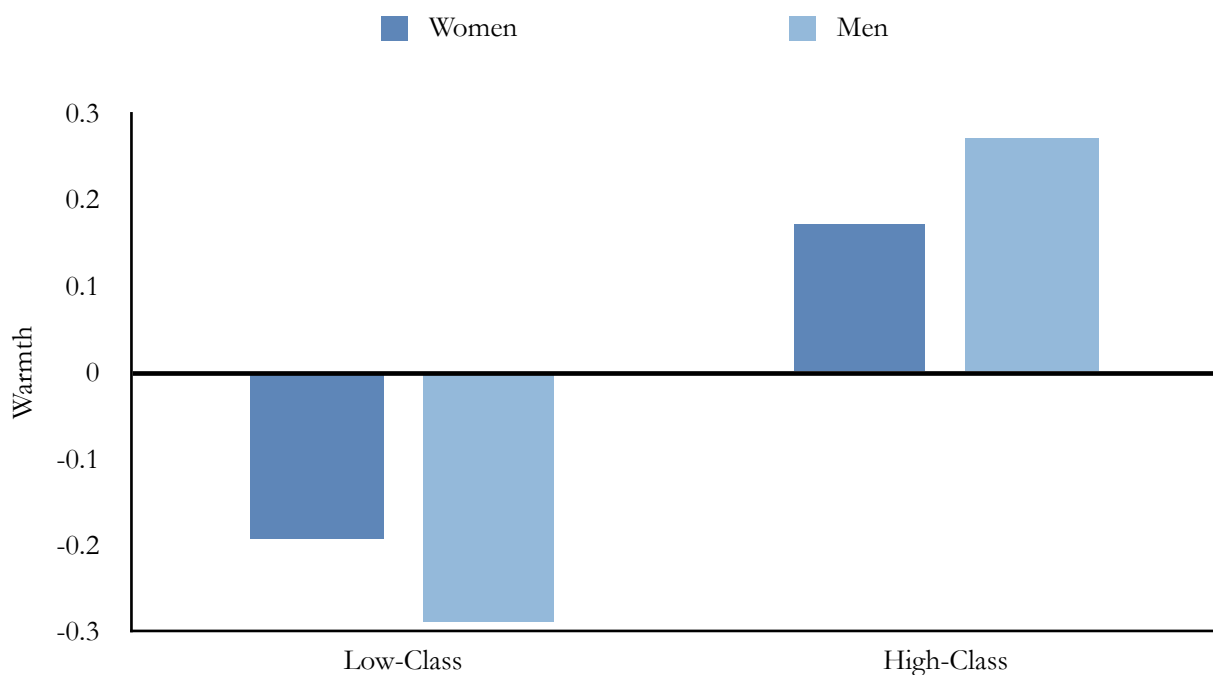
Table 7. Results of the multiple linear regression model for competence. *Source: own elaboration.*

R² = 0.30, F_{10,51} = 2.187, p = 0.34				
	β	SE	t	p
Gender	-0.226	0.249	-0.906	0.369
Social Class	0.394	0.248	1.588	0.118
Age	-0.009	0.015	-0.614	0.542
Gender (Participant)	0.749	0.251	2.978	0.004
Education	-0.383	0.253	-1.515	0.136
High-School	-0.246	0.262	-0.937	0.353
HR	-0.381	0.383	-0.997	0.324
Income	-0.043	0.167	-0.259	0.797
Interests (Sports)	0.212	0.122	1.731	0.090
Interests (Music)	-0.165	0.129	1.277	0.207

iii. Warmth

As shown in Figure 3, warmth scores are higher for candidates belonging to the high social class, both for women (+0.17) and men (+0.27). In contrast, low social class candidates obtain negative scores, with values lower than the overall average for both genders. In particular, low social class men report the lowest mean scores, -0.29 versus -0.19 for low social class women. However, the differences observed at the descriptive level do not appear to be supported by statistically significant effects in the regression model.

Figure 3. Perception of warmth attributed to candidates, broken down by gender and social class. *Source: own elaboration.*



As shown in Table 8, the model has a coefficient of determination of $R^2 = 0.26$, indicating that 26% of the variance in warmth scores is explained by the included variables. However, the F-test ($F_{10,51} = 1.785$, $p = 0.87$) is not significant, signalling that the overall model does not explain the observed differences in a statistically significant way.

Analysis of the individual predictors shows that neither the gender of the candidate ($\beta = -0.059$, $p = 0.819$) nor their social class ($\beta = 0.363$, $p = 0.161$) are significantly associated with the warmth rating. Among the covariates, the participant's gender shows a marginally significant effect ($\beta = 0.509$, $p = 0.055$), while musical interests are found to be statistically significantly associated with the dimension assessed ($\beta = -0.277$, $p = 0.042$). The remaining variables show no significant effects.

Table 8. Results of the multiple linear regression model for warmth. *Source: own elaboration.*

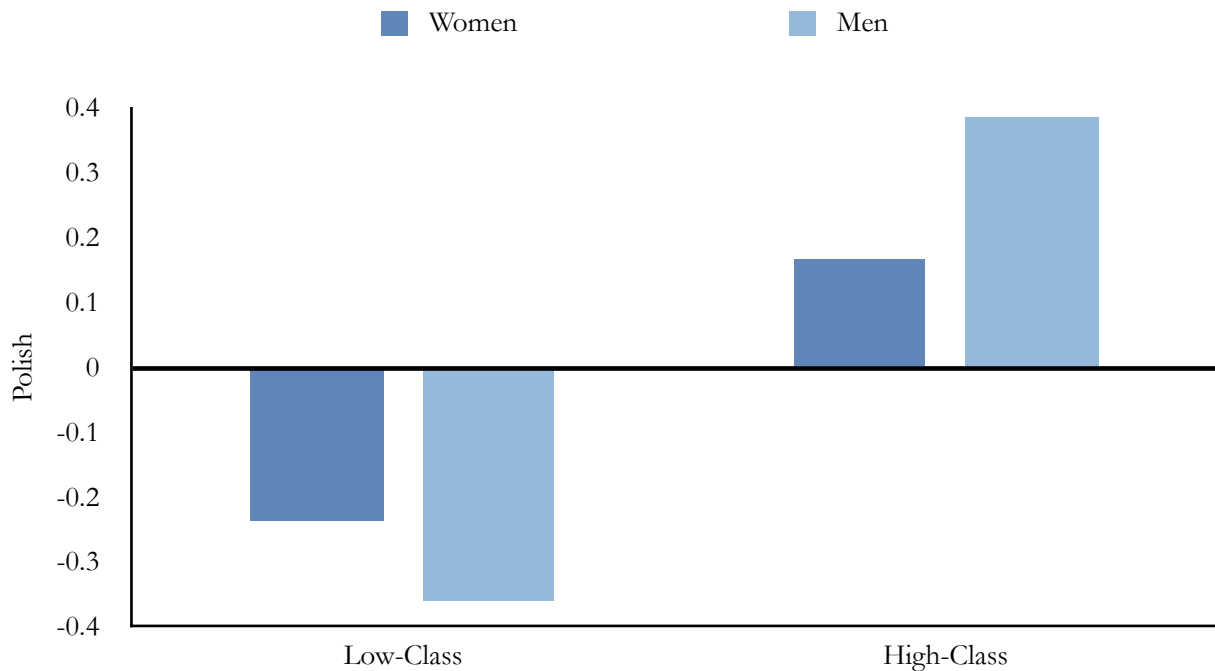
R² = 0.26, F_{10,51} = 1.785, p = 0.87				
	β	SE	t	p
Gender	-0.059	0.256	-0.230	0.819
Social Class	0.363	0.255	1.423	0.161
Age	0.001	0.015	0.086	0.932
Gender (Participant)	0.509	0.259	1.965	<i>0.055</i>
Education	-0.275	0.260	-1.057	0.295
High-School	-0.389	0.270	-1.443	0.155
HR	-0.329	0.394	-0.836	0.407
Income	-0.042	0.171	-0.244	0.808
Interests (Sports)	0.068	0.126	0.544	0.589
Interests (Music)	-0.277	0.133	-2.081	0.042

iv. Polish

As shown in Figure 4, polish scores are higher for high-class candidates than for low-class candidates. The standardised mean values are negative for both genders in the low-class condition (-0.24 for women, -0.36 for men) and positive in the high-class condition, with higher scores for men ($+0.39$) than for women ($+0.17$). The differences observed at the descriptive level are partially confirmed in the regression model.

Figure 4. Perception of polish attributed to candidates, broken down by gender and social class.

Source: own elaboration.



As shown in Table 9, the model has a coefficient of determination of $R^2 = 0.35$, indicating that 35% of the variance in polish scores is explained by the included variables. The F-test ($F_{10,51} = 2.744$, $p = 0.009$) is significant, signalling that the overall model explains the observed differences in the dependent variable in a statistically significant way.

Analysis of individual predictors shows that the candidate's social class shows a marginally significant effect ($\beta = 0.470$, $p = 0.055$). Among the covariates, the participant's gender shows a statistically significant effect ($\beta = 0.671$, $p = 0.008$), and musical interests are found to be negatively significantly associated with polish scores ($\beta = -0.314$, $p = 0.015$). None of the remaining variables show significant effects.

Table 9. Results of the multiple linear regression model for polish. *Source: own elaboration.*

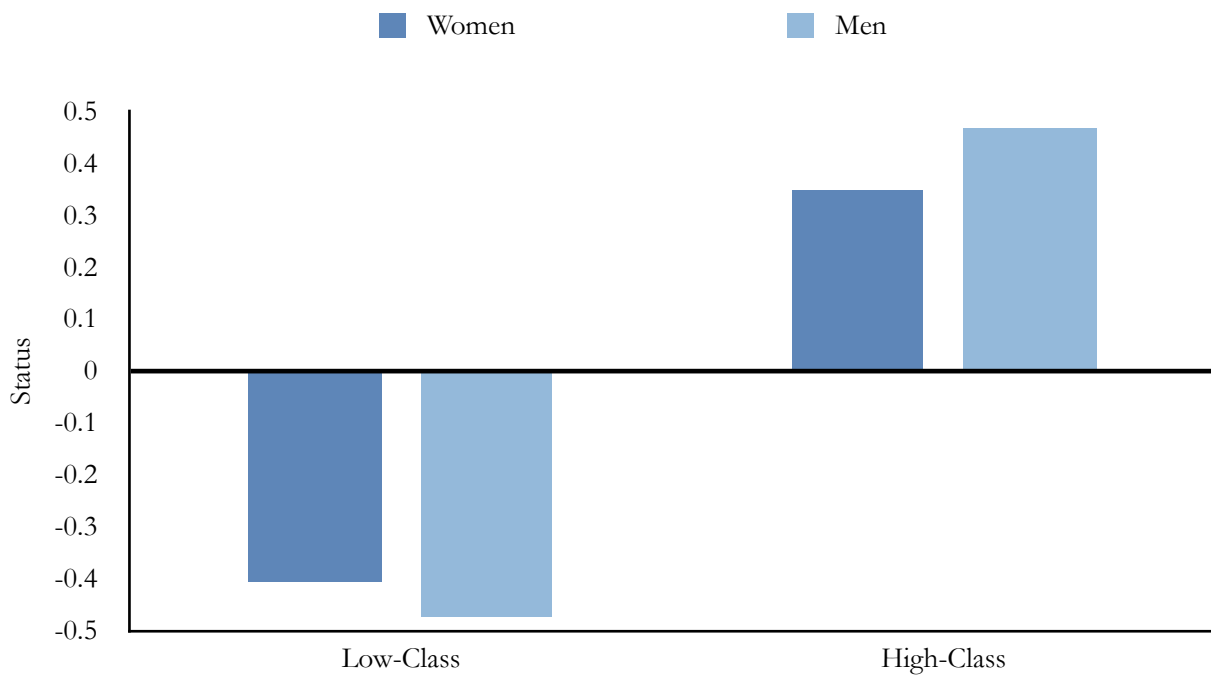
$R^2 = 0.35$, $F_{10,51} = 2.744$, $p = 0.009$				
	β	SE	t	p
Gender	-0.055	0.240	-0.227	0.821
Social Class	0.470	0.239	1.964	0.055
Age	0.002	0.014	0.121	0.904
Gender (Participant)	0.671	0.242	2.766	0.008
Education	-0.380	0.244	-1.561	0.125
High-School	-0.173	0.253	-0.682	0.498
HR	-0.474	0.369	-1.284	0.205
Income	-0.204	0.161	-1.272	0.209
Interests (Sports)	0.085	0.118	0.719	0.476
Interests (Music)	-0.314	0.125	-2.519	0.015

v. Status

As shown in Figure 5, status scores are significantly higher for high-class candidates than for low-class candidates in both genders. High-class men obtain the highest mean scores (+0.47), while low-class men report the lowest scores (−0.47). The differences observed at the descriptive level are partially confirmed by the statistical model.

Figure 5. Perception of status attributed to candidates, broken down by gender and social class.

Source: own elaboration.



As shown in Table 10, the model has a coefficient of determination of $R^2 = 0.28$, indicating that 28% of the variance in status scores is explained by the included variables. The F-test ($F_{10,51} = 2.015$, $p = 0.05$) is significant at the threshold level, suggesting that the overall model explains the observed differences in a statistically meaningful way.

Analysis of individual predictors shows that the candidate's social class is the only predictor significantly associated with status evaluation ($\beta = 0.707$, $p = 0.007$). None of the other variables show significant effects in the model.

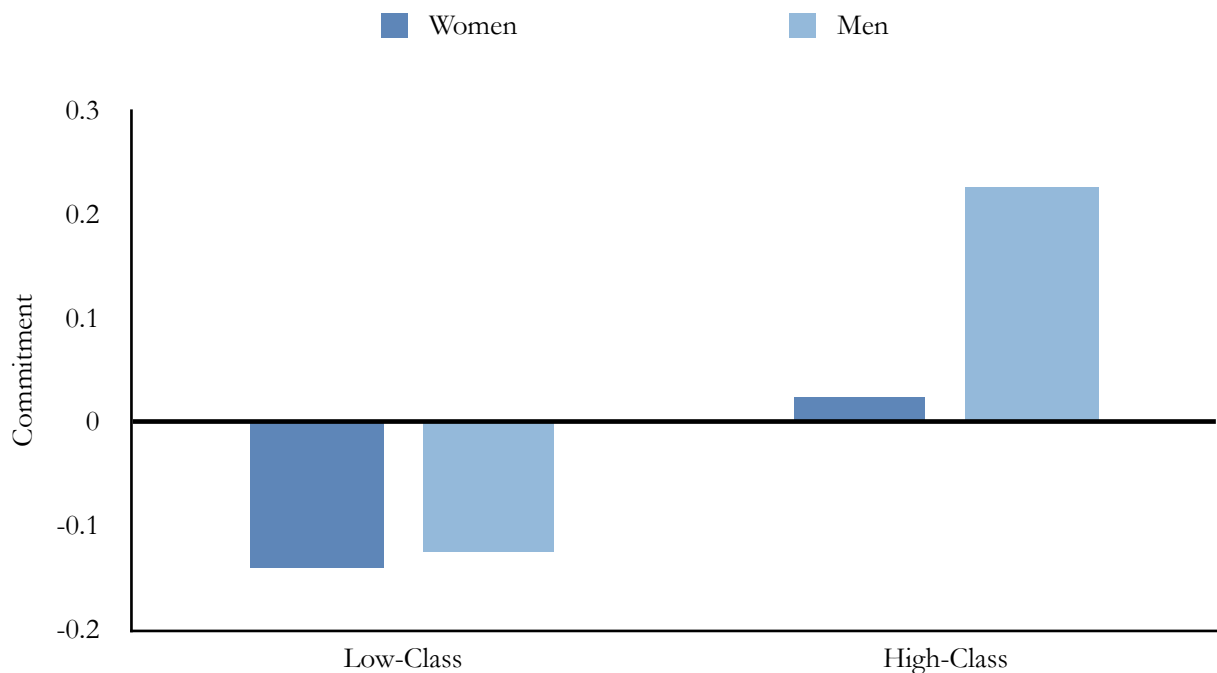
Table 10. Results of the multiple linear regression model for status. *Source: own elaboration.*

R² = 0.28, F_{10,51} = 2.015, p = 0.05				
	β	SE	t	p
Gender	-0.070	0.252	-0.278	0.782
Social Class	0.707	0.251	2.813	0.007
Age	-0.003	0.015	-0.175	0.862
Gender (Participant)	0.337	0.255	1.326	0.191
Education	0.057	0.256	0.225	0.823
High-School	-0.227	0.265	-0.855	0.397
HR	-0.285	0.387	-0.735	0.466
Income	-0.179	0.169	-1.061	0.294
Interests (Sports)	0.045	0.124	0.359	0.721
Interests (Music)	-0.170	0.131	-1.300	0.199

vi. Commitment

As shown in Figure 6, commitment scores are higher for candidates from the high social class, particularly men, who record the highest average value among the four groups (+0.23). High-class women score slightly positive (+0.02), while low-class candidates report negative scores in both genders (−0.14 for women, −0.13 for men). However, the differences observed at the descriptive level do not appear to be supported by statistically significant effects in the regression model.

Figure 6. Perception of commitment attributed to candidates, broken down by gender and social class. *Source: own elaboration.*



As shown in Table 11, the model has a coefficient of determination of $R^2 = 0.24$, indicating that 24% of the variance in commitment scores is explained by the included variables. However, the F-test ($F_{10,51} = 1.641$, $p = 0.12$) is not significant, signalling that the overall model does not explain the observed differences in a statistically significant way.

Analysis of the individual predictors shows that neither gender ($\beta = 0.053$, $p = 0.838$) nor social class of the candidate ($\beta = 0.120$, $p = 0.645$) is found to be significantly associated with commitment rating. Among the covariates, two significant effects emerged: participant's gender ($\beta = 0.573$, $p = 0.033$) and type of high school attended ($\beta = -0.568$, $p = 0.042$). None of the other variables showed statistically significant effects.

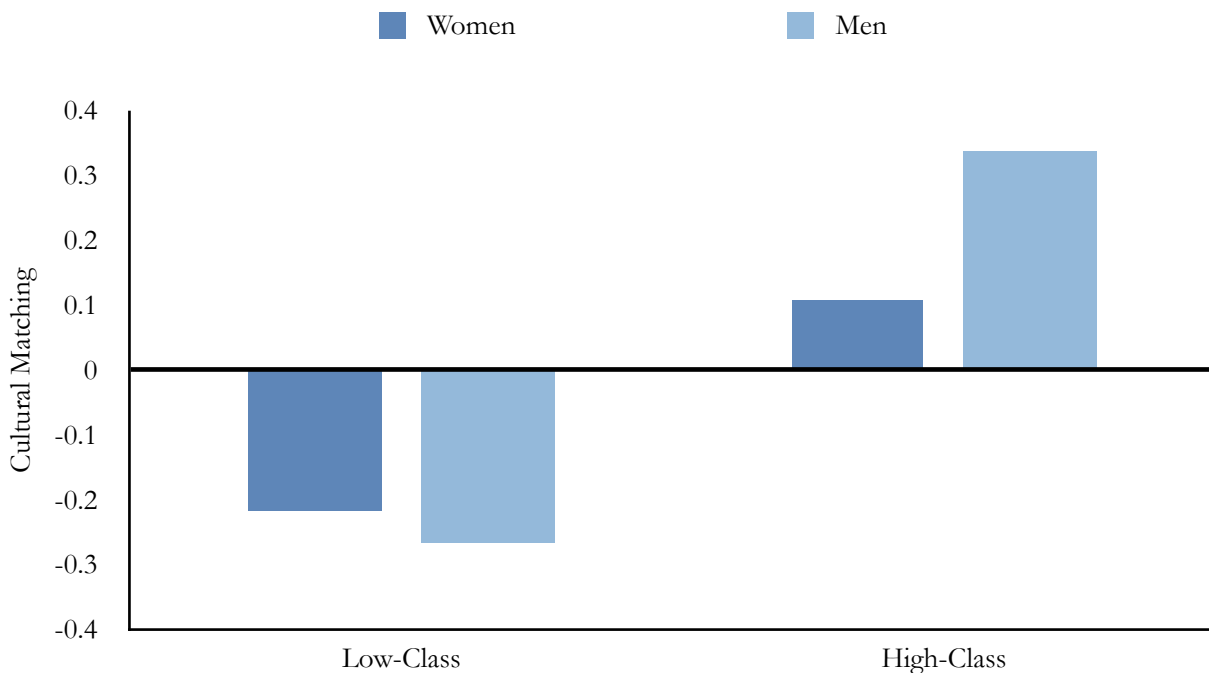
Table 11. Results of the multiple linear regression model for commitment. *Source: own elaboration.*

R² = 0.24, F_{10,51} = 1.641, p = 0.12				
	β	SE	t	p
Gender	0.053	0.259	0.206	0.838
Social Class	0.120	0.258	0.464	0.645
Age	0.013	0.016	0.847	0.401
Gender (Participant)	0.573	0.261	2.191	0.033
Education	-0.164	0.263	-0.624	0.536
High-School	-0.568	0.273	-2.081	0.042
HR	-0.389	0.398	-0.978	0.333
Income	-0.220	0.173	-1.270	0.210
Interests (Sports)	0.116	0.127	0.913	0.366
Interests (Music)	-0.221	0.134	-1.642	0.107

vii. Cultural Matching

As shown in Figure 7, cultural matching scores are higher for high social class candidates. Specifically, high-class women achieve an average score of +0.11, while high-class men achieve the highest value of +0.34. In contrast, low-class candidates report negative scores in both genders: -0.22 for women and -0.27 for men. The differences observed at the descriptive level are partially supported by the statistical model.

Figure 7. Perception of cultural matching attributed to candidates, broken down by gender and social class. *Source: own elaboration.*



As shown in Table 12, the model has a coefficient of determination of $R^2 = 0.29$, indicating that 29% of the variance in cultural matching scores is explained by the included variables. The F-test ($F_{10,51} = 2.178$, $p = 0.03$) is statistically significant, suggesting that the overall model significantly explains the observed differences in the dependent variable.

Analysis of individual predictors shows that the candidate's social class approaches statistical significance ($\beta = 0.456$, $p = 0.072$), indicating a possible marginal effect. Among the covariates, participant's gender is significantly associated with perceived cultural matching ($\beta = 0.872$, $p = 0.001$). The remaining variables show no significant effect.

Table 12. Results of the multiple linear regression model for cultural matching. *Source: own elaboration.*

$R^2 = 0.29, F_{10,51} = 2.178, p = 0.03$				
	β	SE	t	p
Gender	-0.031	0.249	-0.123	0.902
Social Class	0.456	0.248	1.834	0.072
Age	0.009	0.015	0.576	0.567
Gender (Participant)	0.872	0.252	3.464	0.001
Education	-0.196	0.253	-0.776	0.441
High-School	-0.356	0.262	-1.358	0.180
HR	0.195	0.383	0.509	0.613
Income	-0.278	0.167	-1.667	0.102
Interests (Sports)	0.132	0.122	1.078	0.286
Interests (Music)	-0.109	0.129	-0.843	0.403

5. Discussion

According to the results, with equal qualifications, candidates from less privileged social backgrounds tend to be rated less favourably on all dimensions examined, regardless of gender. The only exception is the call-back rate, which is high for all four profiles, with no significant variation by gender or social class. This finding, along with its possible interpretations, will be explored further in the next section.

i. Call-Back Rate

The high call-back rate observed across profiles suggests a certain generosity in judgements on the part of participants, likely due to the knowledge that the experiment would have no real consequences and that the evaluated resumes were fictitious. In a context with no real implications, it is possible that the judgements made were more generous than a real selection of personnel, resulting in reduced variability in the scores awarded.

In the statistical model, neither gender nor social class of the candidate shows significant effects on call-back. However, some covariates of participants turn out to be significant. In particular, age appears to be marginally significant: younger participants tend to call back more easily, suggesting a lower propensity for caution or stricter evaluation criteria. Similarly, participant gender appears to have a significant effect: women prove, on average, to be less selective than men.

Educational level, while not reaching the threshold of statistical significance, shows a marginal association with call-back rate: participants with higher educational qualifications seem to tend to be more cautious in evaluating candidates. This could reflect a higher degree of technical preparation or familiarity with professional selection criteria, leading them to make more restrictive judgements.

ii. Competence and Warmth

The dimensions of competence and warmth, central to the study of social perception, are derived from the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002). The model explains how people tend to evaluate groups and individuals along two basic axes: competence (understood as ability, intelligence, and effectiveness) and human warmth (kindness, empathy, and helpfulness). As illustrated in Table 13, according to Fiske et al. (2002), these two dimensions interact in determining the emotions and attitudes people form toward each other, forming the basis for the construction of shared social stereotypes.

Table 13. Stereotype Content Model. *Adapted from Fiske, Cuddy, Glick & Xu (2002).*

Competence		
Warmth	Low	High
High	Paternalistic prejudice Low status, not competitive Pity, sympathy (e.g., elderly people, <i>housewives</i>)	Admiration High status, not competitive Pride, admiration (e.g., in-group, close allies)
Low	Contemptuous prejudice Low status, competitive Contempt, disgust, anger, resentment (e.g., welfare recipients, poor people)	Envious prejudice High status, competitive Envy, jealousy (e.g., rich people , feminists)

According to what the model suggests, high-status groups (e.g., rich people) are generally perceived as competent but low in warmth, while low-status groups (e.g., poor people) tend to be seen as low in both warmth and competence. Within this pattern, certain subgroups of women (such as housewives) tend to be perceived as warm but less competent.

The results of our study partially confirm what the model predicts: candidates from high social class are perceived as more competent than those from low class, with clear directionality, even in the absence of statistical significance. The observed finding could reflect the influence of implicit signals related to social background, which, while not directly changing the judgement of competence, nonetheless guide its evaluation.

One particularly notable finding concerns upper-class women, who achieve the highest competence scores overall, outperforming not only their lower-class colleagues but also upper-class men. This result suggests that signals of belonging to a privileged class may offset, or even reverse, gender stereotypes related to presumed lower competence.

Finally, a marginal effect related to participants' sporting interests emerges: those who show preferences more typically associated with elite backgrounds tend to assign higher competence scores. This suggests that the cultural and social background of the evaluator, even through seemingly minor indicators such as personal hobbies, may influence ratings in subtle but detectable ways.

On the other hand, and contrary to the model's predictions, high-class applicants are also perceived to be warmer than low-class applicants. Standardised mean scores indicate that both genders in the low-class condition achieve lower-than-average values, while those in the high class report positive scores, with men in particular achieving the highest values. This finding, while not supported by a statistically significant effect, deviates from established evidence in the literature that high-status groups tend to be perceived as competent but lacking in warmth (Fiske et al., 2002). This reversal may depend on the specific context: since the candidates are all recent graduates lacking concrete power or responsibility, high status may have been interpreted more as a positive value than a competitive threat.

Another unexpected result concerns participants' cultural background. The more elitist their musical interests are, the more they tend to attribute low warmth scores to candidates. This association could indicate a greater perceived social distance or a more critical approach by those who identify with high cultural codes.

In both dimensions, the role of the participant's gender emerges consistently: women assign higher average scores in both competence and warmth, being less selective in their judgements. This finding, already observed in the call-back decision, suggests a more inclusive evaluative threshold on the part of women participants. In the case of warmth, the result is close to the significance threshold, confirming the tendency to be more generous in relational judgements.

iii. Polish, Status and Commitment

Low social class candidates are perceived to be less polished than high social class candidates, with a clear—though not statistically significant—trend confirmed in other dimensions such as competence and warmth. Consistency across dimensions suggests the presence of a recurrent evaluative pattern in which perceived membership in a higher social class positively influences the overall judgement of the candidate, including on aspects related to presentation and behaviour.

In addition, a significant effect related to the participant's musical interests emerges: those with musical tastes typically associated with the high class tend to attribute lower polish scores to

others. This result suggests that elements related to the cultural profile of the evaluator may influence the perception of others' sophistication, even in the absence of explicit indicators.

With regard to status, candidates from a high social class are also rated as having a higher status than those from a low class. This result supports the idea that perceived status is closely related to socioeconomic affiliation, even when explicit indicators of role or position are missing. A negative, albeit non-significant, effect is also observed for elite music interests: participants with music preferences more typically associated with the high class tend to attribute slightly lower status scores to others. Although not statistically significant, the finding fits into a pattern already found in some of the previously analysed dimensions, suggesting that the cultural profile of the evaluator may influence, albeit weakly, the perception of others.

In contrast, the results for the dimension of commitment, understood as perceived commitment and dedication in the candidate, show a somewhat counterintuitive distribution. In particular, the standardised mean scores indicate that upper-class men get the highest ratings, while both lower-class candidates receive below-average scores. This result is surprising, as one might expect candidates from less privileged backgrounds to be perceived as more motivated and determined by virtue of a greater "need" related to the job opportunity. In contrast, in our study, high status seems to be associated with higher perceptions of commitment, while low-class candidates are also penalised on this dimension.

Upper-class women, while ranking above the average, score significantly lower than men of the same social status, confirming findings from previous studies (Rivera, 2012) that gender and social class interact in the construction of perceived professional seriousness.

Although the candidate's social class is not found to be significantly associated with commitment rating in the regression model, two covariates with significant effects emerge. Among them, the type of high school attended by the participant shows a significant association: in particular, those who attended institutions typically associated with higher socioeconomic backgrounds—such as classical high schools—tend to attribute lower commitment scores to candidates. Although the reasons behind this association are not immediately evident, it may suggest that individuals from educational environments typically linked to higher socioeconomic status may rely on different cultural standards when evaluating candidates' motivation.

Finally, there is a non-significant but consistent trend with findings in other dimensions: participants with musical interests more attributable to the upper class tend to score slightly lower on the commitment dimension as well. Again, the cultural profile of the evaluator seems to exert an influence on the perceived motivation of candidates.

In all three dimensions, the role of the participant's gender emerges recurrently: women tend to assign higher average scores, being more generous in their evaluation. This is true for all polish, status, and commitment and is in line with what has already been observed for the

previous dimensions analysed. Although the effect does not always reach statistical significance, the systematic direction of the scores suggests the existence of different evaluative criteria between men and women.

iv. Cultural Matching

Cultural matching assesses the perceived compatibility between the candidate's profile and the corporate environment. In selection practice, the concept of cultural matching is often used to justify decisions based on value and behavioural affinities; however, the literature has also shown how it can conceal indirect forms of exclusion, especially against candidates from less privileged social backgrounds (Rivera, 2012).

In the present study, the candidate's social class shows a marginally significant effect, suggesting a systematic tendency to perceive high-class candidates as more compatible with the work environment. Although the result does not cross the threshold of statistical significance, the direction of the effect appears consistent with what has been observed in other dimensions, indicating a possible implicit preference for profiles that reflect cultural and social codes considered more akin.

Also in this dimension, the gender of the participant appears to be significantly associated with the evaluation expressed: women tend to give higher cultural matching scores, confirming greater openness or generosity in judgements, in line with what was observed for the other variables analysed.

Finally, there is a trend—though not significant—that is related to the evaluator's personal income. Participants with higher incomes tend to give lower cultural fit scores, suggesting a potentially more selective evaluative orientation in perceived fit with the organisation.

6. Limitations and Implications

The results of this study highlight how, given the same qualifications, a candidate's perceived social class systematically influences the evaluations they receive, even on dimensions that should theoretically reflect merit and competence exclusively. Although with some exceptions—such as in the case of the call-back rate—high-class candidates tend to be perceived more positively in terms of competence, warmth, polish, status, commitment and cultural compatibility.

Unexpectedly, the gender of the evaluator also proves to be a relevant variable since the data reveal that women are generally less selective than men, awarding higher average scores to all candidates on all dimensions. To date, there are no studies in the literature that systematically analyse whether—and how—the gender of the recruiter influences the overall evaluation of candidates from different profiles, regardless of their gender. This result thus opens a possible research direction to be explored with future investigations.

However, this study also has some limitations that are important to consider. First, the number of observations is limited, and the sample, although composed of industry professionals, is not representative of the entire population of recruiters. However, the results show clear and consistent trends, and it can be hypothesised that, with an expansion of the sample, some of the observed effects may reach statistical significance.

Second, the study was conducted as a simulated experiment and not in a real selection context. It is possible that participants' responses were impacted by their knowledge that there were no actual repercussions for their actions, as demonstrated by the call-back decision, which showed exceptionally high scores for all candidates.

Finally, the geographical context is limited to two cities, Rome and Milan, and the indirect signals used to manipulate social class (name, address, high school, hobbies) may not be interpreted in the same way by evaluators from other areas or with different backgrounds.

It is also important to note that the field under experiment—the legal one—was intentionally selected because it represents a professional field historically associated with highly selective, competitive and elite career paths. For this very reason, it was felt that the legal context constituted a particularly suitable setting for observing the impact of perceived social class signals. However, this very characteristic may limit its generalisability: the results obtained may not be replicated with the same intensity in other fields that are less competitive or less sensitive to status-related cultural codes.

Despite these limitations, the results obtained offer relevant insights into how extra-meritocratic elements can influence evaluation processes and help develop more informed selection tools capable of reducing the impact of implicit stereotypes and enhancing the real potential of candidates. The fact that candidates of high social class tend to be systematically perceived more favourably—even with equal skills—raises important questions about the fairness of the evaluation and selection criteria currently in use.

A first strategy could be to provide recruiters with training interventions to raise their awareness of implicit bias. However, it is also crucial to consider the possible counterproductive effects: in an attempt to avoid favouritism toward high-class profiles, there is a risk of activating overcorrection mechanisms, penalising actually competent candidates only to balance the perception of impartiality. This type of response thus risks creating new distortions that are no less problematic.

Among the most discussed strategies in the literature is the adoption of partially anonymous assessment tools (blind recruitment), in which CVs are stripped of information potentially influenced by class or gender stereotypes, such as name, address, high school, or personal interests. Some studies highlight how this strategy—if implemented correctly—can help reduce the impact of bias in the early stages of selection, improving the fairness of the process (Vivek,

2022). However, other findings pose more caution: in an experiment conducted in France, the introduction of anonymous CVs reduced the interview probability for minority candidates, producing an effect opposite to the desired one (Behaghel et al., 2015). In that case, anonymisation prevented recruiters from contextualising negative signals in candidates' backgrounds. These findings suggest that blind recruitment alone is not a universal solution but needs to be integrated into a broader review of assessment practices.

In light of these limitations, a promising alternative is the joint assessment of candidates. An experimental study by Bohnet et al. (2015) shows that when multiple profiles are assessed simultaneously, rather than separately, recruiters tend to rely more on objective criteria, reducing the influence of implicit stereotypes. This effect has been observed specifically for gender but could theoretically extend to other identity factors, such as perceived social class. In fact, comparative assessment—juxtaposing several candidates at the same time—seems to encourage a greater focus on actual skills, rather than consistency with predefined expectations (Bohnet et al., 2015). Integrating this kind of approach into selection practices could be a concrete step toward more objective, transparent and meritocratic evaluation processes.

7. Conclusion

The results of this research highlight how, even with the same qualifications, indirect signals related to social class can systematically influence the perceptions of candidates in selection processes. Names, addresses or schools attended—elements that should have marginal weight—end up guiding evaluations of central characteristics such as competence, polish, commitment and cultural compatibility. These mechanisms, however often unconscious, can contribute to consolidating invisible barriers, making access to certain opportunities more difficult for those from less privileged backgrounds.

Although the call-back rate does not show significant differences between profiles, the evaluations expressed along the other dimensions show a consistent pattern, which invites reflection on how much merit alone is not enough to ensure a truly fair evaluation. These evaluations, even when they do not result in direct selection, nonetheless contribute to building a reputational and symbolic advantage that is difficult to overcome. In highly selective professional fields such as law, these effects are particularly pronounced, as perceived status tends to overlap with—and sometimes override—actual competence. It is in these invisible asymmetries that the real game of opportunity is often played out, and it is these that need urgent reflection today.

The experiment conducted also highlighted the role—unexpected but relevant—of the evaluator's gender. Women, in fact, were on average more generous in their judgements than

men. As this topic remains under-explored in the literature, this finding opens up an interesting line of research that shifts the focus not only on the candidates but also on the decision makers.

Even with its inevitable limitations—from the simulated nature of the context to the small number of observations—this experiment aims to offer a small contribution to understanding how, even today, career paths and professional recognition can be influenced by extra-meritocratic factors. Processes that are only seemingly neutral can in fact convey, in subtle but persistent ways, forms of inequality that are difficult to detect.

Such evidence suggests the importance of developing more informed selection tools. Solutions such as joint assessment of profiles, adoption of partially anonymous CVs, or critical reflection on what information is really needed to evaluate an application may represent concrete steps toward fairer processes. At the same time, it is crucial to avoid mechanical or compensatory approaches that, in an attempt to correct one bias, end up introducing others.

What ultimately emerges is a call for awareness. Evaluating a candidate is never a neutral act, and making selection processes fairer means not only correcting procedures but also questioning the implicit codes that guide our choices. If we really want to reward merit, we must first learn to recognise it even when it does not coincide with dominant social expectations.

Ultimately, the findings of this study demonstrate that meritocracy is not only a matter of criteria but also of context. Building fairer evaluation systems means creating conditions in which skills can emerge and be recognised regardless of the background from which they come. Because after all, true talent does not always announce itself with the right codes—but that does not mean it deserves to remain invisible.

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