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The signalling effects of nonconforming dress style in personnel selection contexts: do applicants’ qualifications matter?

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ABSTRACT

For job applicants to achieve their goal of making a favourable impression on recruiters, they need to be responsive to the social norms that a personnel selection setting prescribes. One clear social norm in selection contexts is professional dress. Here we explore the consequences that follow from failing to conform to this normative dress code. Specifically, in two studies, we test three contrasting theoretical accounts concerning the effects of nonconformity in dress style on hirability perceptions. We found evidence that the exact impact of dress style depends on the applicant’s qualifications. Whereas low-qualified applicants were punished for dressing in a nonconforming way, high-qualified applicants were granted leeway when violating norms of attire. In Study 2 we replicated and explored three possible mediators of this effect – perceptions of warmth, competence, and power – and found some (very weak) evidence that the observed interaction effect was mediated by perceptions of power. Consistent with the notion of idiosyncrasy credits, our results indicate that highly qualified applicants enjoy greater leeway to flout social norms without facing negative consequences.

“There can be little doubt that the ultimate and essential cause of fashion lies in competition.” – Flugel (1950)

Individuals continuously strive to present themselves in a favourable light, such that others will think highly of them. This striving is especially strong in high-stakes competitions, such as personnel selection contexts (Barrick et al., 2009). One way to create a favourable image is to conform to established social norms of behaviour (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004), and one clear norm in the context of personnel selection is professional dress. As the adage decrees, one should dress for the job one wants. In other words, if you want the part you should at least know how to look the part. Folk wisdom aside, the effects of dress style on perceived hirability are not straightforward, and existing theoretical perspectives yield inconsistent predictions.

Extant literature provides three contrasting theoretical perspectives regarding the signalling effects of dress style. According to the first perspective, conformity in dress style has a positive effect on applicants’ hiring chances. In general, people make significant efforts to learn and adhere to dress codes and other social norms. Conformity to such norms signals one’s willingness to comply with group expectations, and so reduces the likelihood of social rejection (Kruglanski & Webster, 1991; Levine, 1989). According to a second, more recent perspective, however, job applicants may actually benefit from a nonconforming dress style. A growing body of research indicates that norm violations and other forms of nonconformity signal that people can afford to follow their own volition in spite of situational constraints, an affordance that is associated with power (Van Kleef et al., 2011; Bellezza et al., 2014; Stamkou et al., 2018). Finally, a long-standing third perspective highlights the importance of applicants’ qualifications in shaping responses to nonconformity. According to Hollander (1958), highly qualified individuals possess so-called idiosyncrasy credits, defined as “the degree to which an individual may deviate from the common expectancies of the group” (p. 120). Due to such idiosyncrasy credits, highly qualified applicants should be allowed to flout social norms in terms of professional dress without facing negative consequences.

The goal of the present research is to test the competing hypotheses that follow from these three contrasting theoretical perspectives. In doing so, we contribute to the literature in several ways. First, we explicate three contrasting theoretical accounts concerning the effects of nonconformity in dress style, and examine the (interacting) effects of nonconformity and qualifications on selection outcomes. Second, we advance personnel selection research (Ruetzler et al., 2012; Sebastian & Bristow, 2008; Peluchette & Karl, 2007) by showing that the current consensus regarding the effects of violating dress norms may actually be subject to a previously untested boundary condition (i.e., qualifications). Third, we execute an experimental study among professional recruiters, allowing us to test the power-signalling effects of nonconformity (Van Kleef et al., 2011; Galinsky et al., 2008) in a relevant organizational context.

Dress style as a signalling mechanism in selection contexts

Social norms are the customs, traditions, standards, rules, values, and fashions that are commonly understood by members of a group and which serve to guide behaviour without...
the force of laws to generate proper and acceptable conduct (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Accordingly, we define nonconformity as behaviour that infringes upon one or more principles of socially normative behaviour (Van Kleef et al., 2015). One way in which people interact with social norms on a day-to-day basis is through dress style, or fashion, and one’s choice to follow or deviate from prevailing fashions signals important information about one’s social standing and aspirations. Indeed, fashion has been described as “an outward emblem of personal distinction or of membership in some group to which distinction is ascribed” (Sapir, 1937, p. 140). In short, dress style, be it by t-shirts or ties, serves as a salient signalling mechanism that advertises the balance between an interest in and capacity to adhere to social norms, versus a desire and capacity to deviate from such norms.

Recently, Bangerter et al. (2012) applied signalling theory (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1973; Zahavi, 1975) to the context of personnel selection. Signalling theory suggests that each social situation involves signalling systems consisting of a sender, a receiver, and a signal that is associated with an underlying characteristic that is otherwise unobservable in that specific situation (Connelly et al., 2011). In personnel selection contexts, applicants have information that is not directly available to recruiters, such as information about their personality, knowledge, skills, and abilities (Bangerter et al., 2012). To gain access to such information, the recruiter (receiver) has to interpret an applicant’s (sender’s) observable behaviours as signals of underlying job-related characteristics. One such interpretable signal is the applicant’s chosen style of dress, in particular, the extent to which (i) the candidate understands what constitutes normative attire in a selection setting, (ii) possesses sufficient resources to have access to such attire, and (iii) chooses to subscribe to this prescriptive norm. Given that knowledge regarding what constitutes appropriate dress is widespread, and that many affordable options exist for adhering to the norm, the most salient signal might then be the applicant’s choice to conform to or deviate from the norm.

The conformity perspective: conformity in dress style as a positive signal

As a general rule, conformity signals a willingness to adhere to group expectations, and so serves to avoid social disapproval (Kruglanski & Webster, 1991; Levine, 1989). An abundance of studies have demonstrated that an individual’s dress style does indeed influence how they are evaluated by others: High school students’ dress style influences perceptions of intelligence and scholastic ability, both among students and teachers (Behling & Williams, 1991); teaching assistants wearing formal clothes are perceived as more intelligent (though less interesting) than teaching assistants wearing informal clothes (Morris et al., 1996); and clients are more likely to return to formally dressed therapists than to casually dressed therapists (Dacy & Brodsky, 1992). Dress style is an important predictor of selection outcomes as well. Indeed, a meta-analysis of Barrick et al. (2009) showed that applicants’ physical appearance (including dress style) was a stronger determinant of interview ratings than either impression management tactics or (non)verbal behaviours during the interview. In general, existing research suggests that wearing formal, business dress (e.g., a suit) results in applicants being perceived as more trustworthy, intelligent, and competent (Ruetzler et al., 2012; Sebastian & Bristow, 2008; Peluchette & Karl, 2007). Anything too far outside of these norms (e.g., jeans) hurts applicants’ hiring chances (e.g., Barrick et al., 2009).

Thus, according to this first theoretical perspective, conformity in dress style signals a willingness to adhere to social norms in a selection context. This leads to the hypothesis that applicants who violate dress norms are perceived as less hirable than applicants who conform to dress norms.

Hypothesis 1: An applicant with a nonconforming dress style is perceived as less hirable than an applicant with a conforming dress style.

The nonconformity perspective: nonconformity in dress style as a power signal

Van Kleef et al. (2011) drew upon the approach/inhibition theory of power (Keltner et al., 2003) to explain why in some situations, nonconformity can actually lead to positive social outcomes. According to Keltner et al. (2003), high-power individuals encounter relatively few social constraints and more resource-rich environments, which disinhibits their behaviour. In contrast, low-power individuals are subject to stronger social constraints, threats, and punishments, which inhibit their behaviour. Research has indeed shown that power leads individuals to act with reduced concern for social constraints and consequences (Galinsky et al., 2008). Thus, compared to their low-power counterparts, high-power individuals are more likely to ignore normative constraints and to act in a goal-consistent manner (Guinote, 2007), based on their dispositional inclinations (Chen et al., 2001) and momentary desires (Van Kleef & Côté, 2007), which also renders them more likely to exhibit socially inappropriate behaviour (e.g., Van Kleef et al., 2015; Bargh et al., 1995; Galinsky et al., 2006).

Given the behavioural freedom that power affords, it is possible that observers might invert the association and assume that individuals who display norm-violating behaviour are more powerful than those who behave normatively. In support of this possibility, Robinson and Reis (1989) showed that individuals who interrupt others are perceived as more assertive than those who follow the normative social script and listen attentively. Roulin et al. (2011) also found that applicants who provided unique answers to job interview questions were evaluated more positively than applicants providing non-unique answers. In a series of experiments, Van Kleef et al. (2011) showed that people who violated a variety of social norms (e.g., by dropping cigarette ashes or putting their feet on the table) were perceived by others as powerful, and were in some cases preferred as leaders (Van Kleef et al., 2012). Research by Stamkou et al. (2018) showed that deviant artists are accorded greater influence than artists who conform to prevailing artistic styles. Finally, Bellezza et al. (2014) showed that customers dressed in a nonconforming style when entering an elegant boutique, and professors wearing nonconforming attire during a lecture were perceived as more competent than those dressed in a more conforming manner. Bellezza et al. coined this phenomenon “the red sneakers effect”. Notably, Bellezza et al. observed this effect to be strongest in
contexts where expectations regarding normative behaviour and standards of formal conduct were especially clear, such as in the case in selection settings.

Thus, according to this second theoretical perspective, applicants who violate norms in terms of dress style signal that they have relatively high levels of power that enable them to dress as they please. This leads to the competing hypothesis that applicants who violate dress norms are perceived as more hirable than applicants who conform to dress norms.

**Hypothesis 2:** An applicant with a nonconforming dress style is perceived as more hirable than an applicant with a conforming dress style.

**The qualifications perspective: qualifications as a boundary condition**

Hollander’s (1958) concept of social currency in the form of idiosyncrasy credits suggests a third possibility regarding the effects of (non)conformity. According to Hollander (1958), individuals can accumulate idiosyncrasy credits that grant them leeway to deviate from common expectations. Applied to a personnel selection context, possession of such idiosyncrasy credits would allow people to self-verify – creating a social reality that verifies one’s self-concept (Swann, 1983) – rather than to self-enhance (Swann et al., 1989). There are two variables that tend to increase one’s credit balance: 1) an individual’s task competence and 2) an individual’s general characteristics (e.g., status, agreeableness, and sociability) (Hollander, 1958). So far, research has mainly focused on the latter, in particular status. Over the past 60 years, substantial evidence has accumulated that higher status, once attained, does indeed allow greater nonconformity (Berkowitz & Macaulay, 1961; Jetten et al., 2006; Sherif & Sherif, 1964). For example, Sherif and Sherif (1964) showed that in adolescent groups the latitude of acceptable behaviour was greater for leaders of the group than for lower-status group members.

In personnel selection contexts, applicants are judged in a personal rather than a social context, making it difficult to assess the degree to which they are generally respected or admired by others (i.e., status; Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Cheng et al., 2013). In contrast, applicants’ competence is relatively easy to assess through resumes. Indeed, resumes commonly serve as an initial screening of applicants’ qualifications, knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics required for the advertised role (Zibarras & Woods, 2010). Thus, if relevant task competence increases one’s idiosyncrasy credits in a similar manner to status, highly qualified applicants should be allowed to flout social norms in terms of professional dress without facing negative evaluative consequences. Along these lines, Moore et al. (2017) found that elite applicants (i.e., applicants in the 90th percentile of interviewer evaluations) were more likely to receive a job offer when they reported a stronger motive to self-verify and communicated in a manner that made them appear more authentic. In contrast, among less-qualified applicants, who possessed insufficient credits to disregard social norms in favour of self-verification, the motive to self-verify was either unrelated to the likelihood of receiving a job offer (i.e., for applicants between the 25th and 75th percentile of interviewer evaluations) or associated with a lower likelihood of receiving an offer (i.e., for applicants in the 10th percentile of interviewer evaluations).

Relatedly, Tenney et al.’s (2007) calibration hypothesis suggests that (over)confidence backfires and leads to lower credibility ratings as soon as observers encounter evidence that an individual’s expressed confidence is unwarranted (Tenney et al., 2008; Sah et al., 2013; also see Anderson, Ames & Gosling, 2008). As nonconformity, by virtue of its independence, signals confidence (Moscovici & Nemeth, 1974), nonconformity should be subject to the same boundary condition. That is, signals of confidence and volitional capacity emitted by nonconformity may undermine a person’s social attractiveness, unless such signals are backed by credible information regarding the person’s actual qualifications (Stamkou et al., 2018).

Thus, according to the third theoretical perspective, qualifications will moderate the effect of nonconformity on hirability ratings. That is, nonconformity in dress style should undermine the perceived hirability of low-qualified applicants (i.e., applicants with a low-quality resume) but not of high-qualified applicants (i.e., applicants with a high-quality resume).

**Hypothesis 3:** An applicant’s qualifications and (non)conformity of dress style interact in predicting hirability ratings, such that a nonconforming dress style negatively affects hirability ratings for low-qualified applicants but not for high-qualified applicants.

**Study 1**

Study 1 sought to test these three competing hypotheses regarding the effects of nonconformity in dress style within a personnel selection context where dress codes are strictly defined.

**Method**

The hypotheses and methods for Study 1 were preregistered prior to the data collection. For the full preregistration document, please refer to this study’s open science framework (OSF) webpage (osf.io/k6gh3).

**Participants and procedure**

We used a 2 (conforming vs. nonconforming dress style) x 2 (low-quality vs. high-quality resume) between-subjects design with random assignment. A power analysis (Faul et al., 2009) showed that we needed a minimum sample size of 395 to have 80% power to detect a small increase (\(r^2 = .02\)) in explained variance in hirability by the hypothesized interaction effect, with an \(\alpha\) of .05. Participants were recruited through a Dutch internet panel. As previous studies have shown that people above 50 have different perspectives on professional dress norms (e.g., Kurihara et al., 2014; Menahem & Shvartzman, 1998), we restricted the age range from 18 to 50. A total of 460 participants fully completed our online survey in exchange for €2.10 (about US$ 2.30). We removed 3 duplicate cases and a further 68 cases because of failed
attention checks (i.e., “What was the applicant wearing?”). Our final sample consisted of 389 participants (188 men and 201 women), with a mean age of 33.41 years \((SD = 8.51)\). Most participants were currently employed \((88.9\%)\) and their work experience ranged between 0 and 32 years \((M = 12.64, SD = 8.09)\). About a third of our sample \((32.1\%)\) indicated having some hiring experience.

All participants were presented with a job advertisement for an HR manager at a professional service firm. The advertisement listed a number of responsibilities (e.g., responsible for the development and maintenance of the corporate HR policy), tasks (e.g., managing a team to deliver strong service, being involved in wider strategic projects), and requirements (e.g., Bachelor’s degree, fluent in Dutch and English, knowledge of Dutch labour law, strong communication and organisation skills). Next, participants were presented with one of two resumes and one of two pictures of an applicant, wearing either conforming or nonconforming clothing. We explained that the picture was taken immediately prior to the job interview. Since gender affects perceptions of power (e.g., Johnson, 1976) and there are clearer norms regarding business dress for men than for women (Trethewey, 1999; Peluchette & Karl, 2018), we followed Van Kleef et al. (2011) and Bellezza et al. (2014), and presented a male applicant only. Participants were asked to rate the hirability of the applicant. To check for suspicion and attention, we asked the following two questions at the end of the survey, “What do you think this study was about?” and “What was the applicant wearing?”. None of the participants accurately guessed the goal of the study.

**Manipulation of dress style and qualifications**

To generate and pre-test our (non)conformity stimuli, we took 18 pictures of one male “applicant” wearing different clothes and had these images assessed by a separate sample of 228 MTurk workers. Each participant rated 1 out of the 18 pictures on a number of adjectives, of which a subset was related to (non)conformity, using a 7-point scale, with 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. The two pictures that differed most on the nonconformity-related adjectives (e.g., nonconforming, eccentric, original, casual), while remaining undifferentiated on all other adjectives (e.g., sloppy, rude, amoral, improper), were chosen for the actual experiment. In the conforming condition, the applicant wears a black suit, black leather shoes, a white shirt, and a blue tie. In the nonconforming condition, the same applicant wears a grey jacket, striped sweater, white shirt, blue tie, dark blue jeans, and sneakers (see Appendix A).

The applicant’s resume, in terms of education, work experience, knowledge, skills, and abilities, was used to manipulate qualifications. Specifically, we manipulated qualifications based on educational background, job experience, traineeships, and language skills. For example, the high-qualified applicant had several years of experience as a HR specialist, a relevant traineeship and internship in HR, and a Master in HRM, while the low-qualified applicant had several years of experience in unrelated jobs (i.e., store manager, taxi driver, and web editor) and a Bachelor in information and communication technology (see Appendix B).

**Manipulation checks**

In the actual experiment, we crossed the resumes with the (non)conformist dress styles. Participants’ perceptions of qualifications (manipulated through the resumes) might therefore be attenuated by the applicant’s dress style. Similarly, participants’ perceptions of (non)conformity (manipulated through dress style) might be influenced by the applicant’s resume. For this reason, our manipulation check concerning whether our dress-style manipulation indeed signals (non)conformity was conducted among a separate sample of 50 MTurk workers, who we asked to rate the nonconformity of the applicant based on four adjectives (nonconforming, eccentric, original, casual; \( \alpha = .68 \)), using a 7-point scale, with 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. Participants rated the applicant with a nonconforming dress style \((M = 5.23, SD = 0.79)\) as significantly more nonconforming than the applicant with a conforming dress style \((M = 2.33, SD = 1.25)\). \(t(49) = 15.63, p < .01, d = 4.47\). To test whether our manipulation of qualifications was successful, we presented participants with the job advertisement and the two resumes and asked them to rate the extent to which the two applicants were qualified for this particular job, using a 7-point scale, with 1 = totally unqualified and 7 = totally qualified. Participants rated the high-qualified applicant \((M = 6.42, SD = 0.86)\) as significantly more qualified than the low-qualified applicant \((M = 3.20, SD = 1.70)\), \(t(49) = 10.88, p < .01, d = 3.11\).

**Hirability**

We assessed hirability with four items based on the measure of Cole et al. (2007). The items are: “How likely is it that you would be interested in interviewing this applicant?”, “How likely is it that you would recommend the applicant to be hired?”, “If hired for the hypothetical position, how likely is it that this applicant would succeed in the job?”, and “What is your overall evaluation of the applicant?”. Participants rated the first three items on a scale ranging from 1 = very unlikely to 6 = very likely, and the last item on a scale anchored by 1 = very negative and 6 = very positive. Coefficient alpha was .93.

**Control variable**

According to Giannantonio and Hurley-Hanson (2006) perceptions of appearance norms develop over time through observing the organization’s workforce and hiring patterns. Indeed, Dellinger (2002) demonstrated that workplace culture plays an important role in the creation of professional dress norms. Furthermore, work experience influences explanations for nonconforming behaviour (Hilton & Sluzgiski, 1986). For these reasons, we controlled for work experience in our analysis. Work experience was measured with the open-ended question, “How many years of work experience do you have?”.

**Results**

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations of our study variables. To test our competing hypotheses, we regressed hirability onto work experience, resume quality,
Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of all variables in Study 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Age</td>
<td>33.41</td>
<td>8.51</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Gender</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Work experience</td>
<td>12.64</td>
<td>8.09</td>
<td>0.86**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Dress style</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Resume</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Hirability</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>-1.14**</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.11*</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>.38**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 389. Gender is coded as 0 = female, 1 = male, dress style is coded as 0 = conforming and 1 = nonconforming, and resume is coded as 0 = low quality and 1 = high quality. Hirability was measured on a 6-point scale.

** p < .01, * p < .05 (two-tailed)

and dress style in Step 1 and added the interaction term of resume quality and dress style in Step 2 (see Table 2). As expected, resume had a strong positive main effect on hirability, b = 0.39, 95% CI[0.29,0.48], t(385) = 8.23, p < .01, d = 0.84. In Step 1 of the regression analysis, we observed a marginal negative effect for non-conformist dress style, b = −0.09, 95% CI[−0.19,0.001], t(385) = −1.95, p = .052, d = −0.20, which provides some support for the conformity perspective (Hypothesis 1), but no support for the nonconformity perspective (Hypothesis 2). Furthermore, consistent with the qualifications perspective (Hypothesis 3), Step 2 of the regression analysis shows that resume and dress style significantly interacted, b = 0.09, 95% CI[0.002, 0.19], t(384) = 2.01, p = .04, d = 0.21. Deconstructing this interaction (see Figure 1) revealed that when accompanied by a high-quality resume, a nonconforming dress style had no effect on perceptions of hirability, b < 0.01, 95% CI[−0.13,0.13], t(384) < 0.01, p = .997, d < 0.01, whereas when accompanied by a low-quality resume, a nonconforming dress style led to lower perceptions of hirability, b = −0.19, 95% CI[−0.32,−0.06], t(384) = −2.81, p = .01, d = −0.29.

**Discussion**

The goal of Study 1 was to test three competing hypotheses regarding the effects of nonconformity in dress style within a personnel selection context. In contrast to the nonconformity perspective (Hypothesis 2), applicants with a nonconforming dress style received lower hirability ratings than applicants with a conforming dress style, although this effect was marginally significant. These findings provide some support for the conformity perspective (Hypothesis 1). Furthermore, and in line with the qualifications perspective (Hypothesis 3), our results revealed an important boundary condition of the negative effects of nonconformity – the strength of the effect depends on the applicant’s qualifications. Consistent with Tenney et al.’s (2007) calibration hypothesis, a nonconforming dress style reduced the perceived hirability of low-qualified applicants. However, consistent with Hollander’s (1958) notion of idiosyncrasy credits, high-qualified applicants were at liberty to flout conventions of normative attire without incurring negative evaluations.
There are several limitations to Study 1 that should be noted. First, our applicants were presented with only one (male) applicant, limiting the generalizability of our findings. Second, our participants were not professional recruiters and so may have made different attributions about our jeans-wearing job applicant than would a savvier sample. In general, nonconforming behaviour leads observers to search for contextual cues that might reveal causal explanations (Ramsay et al., 1997). As experienced recruiters possess more context-relevant experience and knowledge, they should be better placed to quickly consider a wider range of causal explanations for nonconforming behaviour (Hilton & Slugoski, 1986).

**Study 2**

The goal of Study 2 was to provide a second test of our competing hypotheses, among actual recruiters, and with a larger and more diverse set of applicants. In addition, Study 2 explored three auxiliary constructs with the goal of isolating the underlying signalling mechanism responsible for the observed effects. We chose to examine two constructs that play an important role in judgements of people in general (Cuddy et al., 2011), and applicants in particular (Agerström et al., 2012): warmth and competence. Furthermore, as non-conforming individuals are often perceived as more powerful than those who behave more normatively (Van Kleef et al., 2011, 2015), we also examined power as a possible underlying signalling mechanism.

Warmth (e.g., empathy, kindness, friendliness, and trust-worthiness) and competence (e.g., intelligence, skill, and efficacy) are two fundamental dimensions in social judgement (Cuddy et al., 2011). Both attributes play a role in hiring evaluations (Agerström et al., 2012), although competence is of more primary importance (Cuddy et al., 2011). Previous research has shown that the conformity of one’s dress style influences perceptions of warmth and competence. For example, Behling and Williams (1991) showed that high school students wearing faded jeans with holes, a t-shirt, and untied tennis shoes were rated lower on intelligence and academic achievement than high school students wearing a suit. Sebastian and Bristow (2008) examined the relationship between dress style and attributions of expertise and likeability in an educational setting and found that formally dressed professors were perceived as having more expertise, but were also deemed less likable than professors who violated the dress norm.

Dress style can also act as a power-signalling mechanism: applicants who violate norms in terms of dress style signal that they have relatively high levels of power that enable them to dress as they please. Power refers to the relative degree of asymmetric control or influence an individual possesses over resources (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). In a selection context this refers to the authority and influence one seems to have in one’s current job. Van Kleef et al. (2011) showed that individuals were indeed perceived as more powerful when they helped themselves to someone else’s coffee supply, violated rules of bookkeeping, dropped cigarette ashes on the floor, or put their feet on the table.

As the signalling functions of dress style have not yet been tested in a personnel selection context, we formulated the following overarching research question:

**Research Question:** To what extent is the interaction effect of resume and dress style on hirability ratings mediated by perceptions of warmth, competence, and power?

**Method**

**Participants and procedure**

We contacted recruiters in person and by mail and posted the link to the survey on LinkedIn and Facebook groups related to recruitment. As per Study 1, we restricted our age range to between 18 and 50. Our sample consisted of 70 Dutch recruiters (15 male and 55 female) with a mean age of 28.83 (SD = 5.41) and an average of 3.91 years (SD = 4.08) of recruiting experience. In total, they had assessed between 3 and 3000 applicants (M = 123.13, SD = 376.46). We used a 2 (nonconforming vs. conforming dress style) x 2 (low quality vs. high quality resume) within-subjects design. The recruiters provided a total of 269 ratings and the number of ratings in each condition varied between 61 and 74 (M = 67.25, SD = 5.85).

We took pictures of six “applicants” (three men and three women) in various outfits. For each applicant, we chose the final conforming and nonconforming outfits based on a pilot study (N = 62) using the same procedure as in Study 1. The pictures that differed most on the conformity-related adjectives while being similar on all other adjectives were chosen for the actual experiment. We manipulated the applicants’ qualifications via resume quality (i.e., education, work experience, internships, and traineeships). For the male applicants we used the two resumes from Study 1. For the female applicants, we created two new resumes (i.e., a low-quality and a high-quality resume) using the same procedure as in Study 1. Participants were presented with the same job advertisement as in Study 1, followed by the four resumes in random order. The resumes were paired with a randomly selected picture of one of the applicants, matched on gender (see Appendix A for example pictures). Participants then rated the power, warmth, competence, and hirability of each of the four applicants.

**Measures**

**Hirability**

We used the same four items as in Study 1. Coefficient alpha was .91.

**Power**

Perceived power was measured with 4 items adopted from Van Kleef et al. (2011). An example item is, “This person enjoys considerable authority”, with 1 = definitely not and 7 = definitely. Coefficient alpha was .89.
**Warmth and competence**

We assessed the two fundamental dimensions in social judgement, namely warmth and competence (Cuddy et al., 2011), by asking participants to rate to what extent (1 = definitely not; 6 = definitely) the applicant is tolerant, warm, good natured, and sincere (warmth; α = .90) and competent, confident, independent, competitive, and intelligent (competence; α = .89).

**Confirmatory factor analysis**

As participants’ ratings of hirability, power, warmth, and competence showed significant intercorrelations, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to confirm that these were independent constructs. As each participant rated multiple applicants on these dimensions, we first averaged the ratings per participant. The results showed that a model in which the four factors were allowed to covary provided a reasonable fit to the data, $\chi^2 (113) = 237.78, p < .01$, TLI = .84, CFI = .87, RMSEA = .13, SRMR = .08. More importantly, the four-factor model fitted the data significantly better than a one-factor model, $\Delta \chi^2 (6) = 295.73, p < .01$, $\chi^2 (119) = 533.51, p < .01$, TLI = .50, CFI = .56, RMSEA = .23, SRMR = .16, or a two-factor model with the items of hirability, power, and competence loading on the first factor and the items of warmth loading on the second factor, $\Delta \chi^2 (5) = 218.34, p < .01$, $\chi^2 (118) = 456.12, p < .01$, TLI = .59, CFI = .64, RMSEA = .20, SRMR = .15. These findings indicate that participants’ ratings of hirability, power, warmth, and competence can be meaningfully distinguished from one another.

**Results**

Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of all variables in Study 2.

| Table 3. Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of all variables in Study 2. |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                 | M               | SD              | 1               | 2               | 3               | 4               | 5               | 6               |
| Age             | 28.83           | 5.41            | -               | -               | -               | -               | -               | -               |
| Gender          | 0.21            | 0.41            | .30*            | -               | -               | -               | -               | -               |
| Experience      | 123.13          | 376.46          | .31*            | -0.01           | -               | -               | -               | -               |
| Power           | 3.49            | 0.45            | -0.18           | -0.27*          | .05             | -               | -               | -               |
| Warmth          | 3.93            | 0.43            | -0.33*          | -0.27*          | .00 .34**       | -               | -               | -               |
| Competence      | 4.02            | 0.44            | -0.22           | -0.35**         | -0.04           | .55**           | .77**           | -               |
| Hirability      | 3.44            | 0.58            | -0.11           | -0.31*          | .09 .65**       | .35**           | .46**           | -               |

$N = 70$. Participants rated the power, warmth, competence, and hirability of four applicants, using a 2 (nonconforming vs. conforming dress style) x 2 (low quality vs. high quality resume) design. In this table, we present the average scores on power, warmth, competence, and hirability across applicants. Gender is coded as 0 = female, 1 = male. Work experience is represented by the number of applicants the participants have hired, Power, warmth, competence, and hirability were measured on a 6-point scale.

**Because of the mixed design, we used Linear Mixed Models (LMMs) to test our hypotheses (West et al., 2006).** We nested ratings within each participant and used a random-intercept model, to account for the fact that multiple ratings came from the same participant. Again, residual had a strong positive main effect on hirability, $b = 2.06, 95\% CI[1.79, 2.33]$, $t(206) = 15.06, p < .01, d = 2.10$, and no main effect emerged for nonconformity in dress style, $b = -0.06, 95\% CI[-0.34,0.22]$, $t(225) = .044, p = .66, d = -0.06$. As expected, resume and dress style interacted, though marginally, $b = 0.39, 95\% CI[-0.78,0.01]$, $t (223) = 1.92, p = .056, d = 0.26$. Deconstructing this interaction (see Figure 2) revealed that for applicants with a high-quality resume, dress style did not affect perceptions of hirability, $b = -0.02, 95\% CI[-0.35,0.31]$, $t(123) = -0.13, p = .90, d = -0.02$, whereas for applicants with a low-quality resume, a nonconforming dress style led to lower perceptions of hirability, $b = -0.39, 95\% CI[-0.59,-0.16]$, $t(81) = -3.49, p < .01, d = -0.78$. Again, these findings provide the most support for Hypothesis 3 (qualifications perspective).

**Figure 2.** Estimated marginal means of the effects of applicants’ qualifications and dress style on hirability perceptions in Study 2.
Exploratory analyses

To answer our research question, we repeated these LMM analyses with perceived warmth, competence, and power as the dependent variables. For warmth, we found a positive main effect of resume, $b = 0.33$, 95%CI[0.17, 0.49], $t (197) = 3.97, p < .01$, $d = 0.57$, but no main effect for nonconformity in dress style, $b = 0.003$, 95%CI[−0.17, 0.17], $t (214) = −0.30, p = .98$, $d = −0.04$, and no interaction effect of resume and dress style, $b = 0.18$, 95%CI[−0.06, 0.42], $t (212) = 1.45, p = .15, d = 0.20$. For competence, we again found a positive main effect of resume, $b = 0.92$, 95%CI[0.74, 1.10], $t (203) = 10.05, p < .01, d = 1.41$, but no main effect for nonconformity in dress style, $b = −0.07$, 95%CI[−0.26, 0.12], $t (225) = −0.72, p = .48, d = −0.10$, and no interaction effect of resume and dress style, $b = 0.06$, 95%CI[−0.20, 0.33], $t (222) = 0.47, p = .64, d = 0.06$.

For power, we again found a strong positive main effect of quality of resume, $b = 1.03$, 95%CI[0.87, 1.29], $t (220) = 7.86, p < .01, d = 1.06$, but no main effect for nonconformity in dress style, $b = −0.04$, 95%CI[−0.30, 0.23], $t (249) = −0.27, p = .79, d = −0.03$. Resume and dress style did show a marginally significant interaction, $b = 0.33$, 95%CI[−0.04, 0.70], $t (246) = 1.73, p = .08, d = 0.22$. For applicants with a high-quality resume, dress style did not affect perceptions of power, $b = −0.05$, 95%CI[−0.31, 0.21], $t (124) = −0.37, p = .71, d = −0.07$, but for applicants with a low-quality resume, a nonconforming dress style led to lower perceptions of power, $b = −0.32$, 95%CI[−0.58, −0.06], $t (101) = −2.42, p = .02, d = −0.48$.

In addition, we used a product of coefficients approach (Sobel, 1982), based on a multiple mediation model using LMM, to examine whether the interaction effect of resume and dress style on hirability was mediated by perceptions of warmth, competence, and power. We only found a marginally significant indirect effect for power, $z = 1.88, p = .06$. For applicants with a high-quality resume, power did not mediate the effect of dress style on hirability perceptions, $z = 0.38, p = .70$. Yet, for applicants with a low-quality resume, power did mediate the effect of dress style on hirability perceptions, $z = 2.27, p = .02$.

Discussion

Study 2 provided an additional test of the effects on nonconforming dress style on hirability perceptions, this time among actual recruiters. Recruiters are in a good position to understand applicants’ role expectations in terms of social rules, and attributional responses to norm violations (Ramsey et al., 1997). In contrast to the conformity perspective (Hypothesis 1) and the nonconformity perspective (Hypothesis 2), dress style did not have a direct effect on hirability ratings. In line with the qualifications perspective (Hypothesis 3), the results showed that low-qualified applicants are punished for behaving in a nonconforming way; recruiters rated these applicants lower on hirability when they violated professional dress norms, whereas applicants with a high-quality resume seemed to have more leeway.

Study 2 also explored three potential signalling mechanisms of dress style. We found some, albeit very weak, support for the mediating role of power: low-qualified applicants (but not high-qualified applicants) are confered less power when they violate dress norms than when they conform to dress norms. Importantly, for low-qualified applicants, power partially explained the effect of dress style on hirability perceptions. Thus, in line with the qualifications perspective, when an applicant’s brash behaviour is inconsistent with their qualifications, this behaviour backfires and leads to lower perceptions of power and therefore lower hirability ratings. We found no evidence for the signalling mechanisms of either warmth or competence.

General discussion

The goal of the present research was to test three contrasting theoretical accounts concerning the effects of nonconformity in dress style. In two studies we found that nonconforming dress styles undermine the perceived hirability of low-qualified applicants but not of high-qualified applicants. The present study contributes to the literature in a number of ways.

First, whereas previous studies in the field of personnel selection indicated that violations of professional dress norms hurt applicants’ hiring chances (e.g., Barrick et al., 2009; Ruetzler et al., 2012; Sebastian & Bristow, 2008; Peluchette & Karl, 2007), our results indicate that these norms only matter for applicants with a relatively weak resume. Although we found a marginal direct effect of nonconformity in dress style on hirability ratings in Study 1, this effect did not replicate among a sample of recruiters (Study 2). Therefore, the present studies advance personnel selection research by showing that the current consensus regarding the effects of violating professional dress norms may actually be subject to a previously untested boundary condition (i.e., qualifications).

Second, we explicated three contrasting theoretical accounts concerning the effects of nonconformist dress style in a hiring context. Our results showed that, in contrast to the conformity perspective (e.g., Barrick et al., 2009; Ruetzler et al., 2012; Sebastian & Bristow, 2008) and the nonconformity perspective (Van Kleef et al., 2011; Bellezza et al., 2014), dress style has only a small and marginally significant negative effect ($d = −0.20$) on hirability ratings in Study 1 and no direct effect on hirability ratings in Study 2. However, consistent with the qualifications perspective (Hollander, 1958; Moore et al., 2017), our results revealed small but significant interaction effects between qualifications and dress style in both studies ($d = 0.21$ in Study 1 and $d = 0.26$ in Study 2). Specifically, high-qualified applicants who dressed in a nonconforming way were rated similarly compared to when they dressed in a conforming way. This effect is consistent with Hollander’s (1958) notion of idiosyncrasy credits, whereby highly qualified individuals can flout social norms without sanction. In contrast, and in line with Tenney et al.’s (2007) calibration hypothesis, when low-qualified applicants dressed in a nonconforming way, this brash behaviour backfired and hurt their hiring chances. The size of this negative effect was small ($d = −0.29$) in our sample of online platform workers (Study 1) and large
(d = −0.78) in our sample of professional recruiters (Study 2).

Third, our study contributes to the literature on self-verification vs. self-enhancement (Cable & Kay, 2012; Moore et al., 2017; Swann et al., 1989) by showing that the consequences of these impression management tactics depend on applicants’ qualifications. In general, studies within a personnel selection context show that self-enhancement rather than self-verification creates more favourable impressions among recruiters (e.g., Ellis, West, Ryan, & DeShon, 200; Peck & Levashina, 2017). However, these previous studies did not differentiate between low-qualified and high-qualified applicants. In fact, we know relatively little about which attributes help highly qualified applicants stand out during the later stages of the selection process, where other applicants may be equally attractive (Highhouse & Johnson, 1996). One notable exception are the studies by Moore et al. (2017), who showed that for top applicants it helps to self-verify. However, in line with our findings, they found no effect of self-verification for those applicants who are highly qualified but fell below the 90th percentile, and a negative effect of self-verification for low-qualified applicants (Studies 1 and 2). We believe the applicant in our study is highly qualified for the HR manager position, but would not be ranked among the top 10%: the applicant is relatively junior and has only one relevant HR job and no managerial work experience. Thus, to clarify the effects of self-verification for high-qualified applicants, it would be interesting to follow Moore et al.’s (2017) approach and replicate our study among top applicants, as self-verification through non-conforming dress style might lead to more favourable impressions among elite applicants.

Fourth, we are the first to examine the power-signalling effects of nonconformity among actual recruiters. In contrast to previous studies (Van Kleef et al., 2011; Bellezza et al., 2014; Stamkou et al., 2018), we did not find a direct effect of nonconformity on power perceptions. In fact, our results revealed that nonconformity led to lower (rather than higher) perceptions of power for low-qualified applicants. Although we found a medium-sized effect (d = −0.48) of nonconformity on power for low-qualified applicants, the interaction effect of qualifications and dress style was small (d = 0.22) and only marginally significant. It might be that in personnel selection contexts the power of applicants is generally low, as it is the recruiter who controls and determines outcomes. Thus, the context of the present study might have attenuated the power-signalling effects of nonconformity.

**Limitations and suggestions for future studies**

There are several limitations to the present research. Both studies were conducted in the Netherlands, where deviations of social norms might be more acceptable compared to other countries (Heinrichs et al., 2006; Stamkou et al., 2019). In addition, professional dress norms might be less strict for HR professionals (the job advertisement we used in the present study) than for other occupational groups. For these reasons, future studies might further test the boundary conditions of nonconforming behaviours in different occupational and cultural contexts. We also note that in our two studies, the nonconforming applicant was still properly groomed. In a study conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, grooming practices were shown to have the strongest influence on evaluations of candidates by potential employers, stronger than piercings, tattoos, or attire (Ruetzler et al., 2012).

It is also worth noting that although the task of evaluating resumes has relatively high fidelity and experimental realism, it is important to replicate our findings in a high-stakes selection context among actual applicants. This is especially important because the interaction effects were relatively small. When testing the effects of nonconformity among actual applicants, it is imperative to test the effects of nonconformity at a wider range of qualification levels than high vs. low, as Moore et al. (2017) found that the effects of self-verification depend on the percentile ranking of the applicant. Furthermore, we measured perceptions of power and hirability at the same time and from the same source, which could have artificially inflated the relationships between our study variables. This suggests a need for more studies on power signalling outside of the laboratory context, in which the measurements of the variables are separated in time and collected from multiple sources.

Finally, whereas we situated this work in the context of personnel selection, it may be of interest to researchers interested in the (self-reinforcing) process of undesirable social and organisational behaviours in general. If highly qualified people are allowed to violate norms in the early selection phase, this may invoke a self-reinforcing process, potentially leading to undesirable social and organisational behaviours in general (Van Kleef et al., 2011).

**Practical implications**

Applicants’ dress style is one of the first pieces of information that a recruiter will assess. Because applicants are largely in control of their own dress style, professional appearance can be used as a deliberate attempt to regulate appearance for self-presentation purposes. Our results offer the first empirical evidence that dress style only plays a minor role: Low-qualified applicants will have a small advantage if they closely adhere to professional norms regarding business attire. On the other hand, high-qualified applicants appear to be at liberty to signal a more idiosyncratic sense of style. Of course, assessing one’s relative standing among an unknown applicant pool might not always be easy, and so the most prudent fashion choice on interview day may well be to suit up.

**Conclusion**

The present study shows that nonconforming behaviour can backfire when accompanied by evidence that such posturing is not matched by one’s qualifications. Intriguingly, inaccurate signals have also been found to lead to harsh social punishment among non-human species. For instance, as a signal to would-be antagonists, paper wasps (Polistes dominulus) naturally develop distinct facial markings when they achieve a socially dominant position. The markings operate as a kind of karate belt that signals relative formidability to would-be interlopers. When Tibbetts and Izzo (2010) artificially painted
these dominant markings onto non-dominant wasps, the wasps were quickly attacked and punished. Such social punishment is hypothesized to act as a mechanism for keeping signals honest. Although the social hierarchies of paper wasps are clearly distinct from professional recruitment, the present findings suggest that such regulation of signals is also present in the context of personnel selection.

Notes

1. Without controlling for gender of the applicant, the interaction effect of dress style and resume is marginally significant, $b = 0.38, 95\%CI=[-0.01,0.78], t(234) = 1.91, p = 0.057, d = 0.25$. Without controlling for work experience, the interaction effect is not significant, $b = 0.32, 95\%CI=[-0.07,0.72], t(232) = 1.61, p = .11, d = 0.21$, though the simple slopes show the same pattern.

2. Without controlling for gender of the applicant or work experience, the interaction effect of resume and dress style on warmth and competence remains insignificant.

3. Without controlling for gender of the applicant, the interaction effect of dress style and resume is marginally significant, $b = 0.33, 95\%CI=[-0.05,0.70], t(243) = 1.72, p = 0.086, d = 0.22$. However, without controlling for work experience, the interaction effect is not significant, $b = 0.28, 95\%CI=[-0.08,0.65], t(253) = 1.50, p = .13, d = 0.19$.

4. The indirect effect remained marginally significant without controlling for gender, $z = 1.88, p = .06$, or work experience, $z = 1.79, p = .07$.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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References


Appendix A. Pictures of the Applicants in Conforming and Nonconforming Dress

Pictures used in Study 1: Examples of pictures used in Study 2:

Note. The pictures were not anonymized in the actual experiment.

Note. The pictures were not anonymised in the actual experiment.
Appendix B. Resumes

Resume of high-qualified applicant:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Surname</th>
<th>David</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Amsterdam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Anderson</td>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>06–37,802,159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street</td>
<td>Leeuwenlaan 11</td>
<td>email</td>
<td><a href="mailto:david.a@gmail.com">david.a@gmail.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zip code</td>
<td>1056 EM</td>
<td>Date of birth</td>
<td>2 July 1987</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Professional Experience**

01/2013 – 01/2017 HR specialist, Bretax, the Netherlands
- Responsible for a wide range of HR tasks
- Providing indispensable analytical support in major consultancy projects
- Improving and connecting datasets and creating added value by making concrete action plans based on insights
- Point of contact for employees for diverse HR issues
- Developing diverse working condition rules

09/2012 – 01/2013 Traineeship HRM at Heineken, the Netherlands
- Fulfilled the role of advisor and trainer

- Writing adverts to generate candidates
- Working with hiring managers and HR to create email announcements for new hires
- Entering data into spreadsheets or databases
- Participating in HR team and all staff meetings
- Assembling personnel and benefits files
- Creating an internal intern community and organizing an intern lunch every month
- Helping interns with HR-related questions

**Education**

09/2010 – 07/2011 Master Business Administration: Specialization in Human Resources at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
09/2006 – 07/2010 Bachelor in Business Administration at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
08/2000 – 06/2006 Pre-University Education

**Languages**

Dutch Native
English Fluent
Spanish Fluent

Resume of low-qualified applicant:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Surname</th>
<th>Brian</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Woerden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Peterson</td>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>06–37,802,159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street</td>
<td>Lijsterstraat 5</td>
<td>email</td>
<td><a href="mailto:peterson.b@gmail.com">peterson.b@gmail.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zip code</td>
<td>1067 BB</td>
<td>Date of birth</td>
<td>20 August 1987</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Professional Experience**

01/2013 – 01/2017 Assistant Store Manager at Consumer Electronics Store
- Responsible for helping to run the store on a day to day basis by assisting with launching retail initiatives, general store maintenance and training new staff
- Meeting and greeting customers when they enter the shop
- Operating the till and handling financial transactions
- Answering queries from shoppers
- Receiving deliveries from suppliers
- Cataloguing stocks & performing inventory checks
- Undertaking cleaning and housekeeping duties

09/2012 – 01/2013 Assistant Store Manager at the super market Albert Heijn
- Supporting the store team and manager to increase revenue streams and profit targets
- Providing a friendly and helpful service to customers
- Maintaining high standards of presentation and cleanliness across the store
- Approaching customers that may require assistance if you are on the shop floor
- Carrying out the stock replenishment
- Ensuring all areas of the store remain tidy at all times

11/2011 – 07/2012 Taxi Driver
11/2008 – 08/2011 Content manager/web editor at Kodak
- Making sure site content is up to date

**Education**

09/2005 – 07/2008 Bachelor Information & Communication Technology – no diploma
08/2000 – 06/2005 Higher General Secondary Education

**Languages**

Dutch Native
English Basic
Other activities Fitness, running, weight-lifting