Reactions to gender-(counter)normative behavior online in the United States: attraction and hiring implications

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Abstract

Purpose – Research indicates that inconsistent gender norm presentations are met with backlash, which is particularly damaging to women. With social media use in selection rising, it is important to understand if this remains consistent for job applicants on social media.

Design/methodology/approach – In two experiments, this study investigates hiring managers’ reactions to job applicant (in)consistent gender norm-based communication on Facebook (n = 197) and YouTube (n = 203). Participants located in the United States were asked to review social media materials, reported perceptions of task and social attraction, and make hiring recommendations.

Findings – Inconsistent with work on backlash in face-to-face settings, results demonstrated that masculine communication styles on social media may be detrimental to job seekers, and this was more pronounced for male job seekers. Feminine presentation styles had more favorable results.

Practical implications – The findings challenge the long-held understanding that men have more leeway to behave in agentic ways in job seeking contexts. While this may remain true in face-to-face settings, these findings suggest that social media, lacking media richness, may be a context in which males experience backlash for agentic behavior.

Originality/value – The research offers a novel perspective investigating traditional gender expectations in the digital realm, paving the way for a more comprehensive understanding of gender in employment contexts. This study contributes to the growing body of research on online behavior and expands understanding of how hiring managers react to gender norms in the era of social media.

Keywords Social media, Employee selection, Gender norms

Paper type Research paper

Social media (SM) sites have seen exponential growth. Current estimates suggest over 302 million active SM users in the United States (US), comprising 91% of the population, and 5.18 billion people world-wide, comprising 64.4% of the worldwide population (Statista, 2023). Given that most job seekers have SM footprints, and that SM may offer valuable information beyond carefully constructed resumes, SM sites are routinely used to gather information about job candidates during the hiring process (Roth et al., 2013). Indeed, a Society for Human Resource Management (2016) survey found that 70% of HR managers use SM as a screening tool. A study by Career Builder found that 57% of managers found reasons to reject job applicants based on information available about those applicants via SM, and 47% of managers indicated that if they could not find applicants online, they would be less likely to call them for an interview (Press Room, 2018). In this same survey, 27% of managers indicated that they did not hire candidates due to poor communication skills on SM.
Although these statistics and those like them are generally based on a US sample, evidence suggests that these practices are used in many other countries as well. For instance, 72% of total LinkedIn users are outside the US (Apollo Technical, 2022). Additionally, the online recruitment and selection markets are well established in Europe and North America and experiencing strong growth in Asia and Africa (Arora, 2023). Despite this game changing development in employee selection, little research has explored how self-presentation on SM impacts hiring decisions.

Self-presentation is a process individuals use to manage others’ perceptions of them (Leary, 1995). Whether self-presentation goals are conscious or subconscious, these outward expressions are aimed at being perceived in specific ways by different audiences (Goffman, 1967), and often have multiple motivations, ranging from self-verification (Swan, 2011) to appearing favorable to others. Regardless of the underlying motivation, self-presentation attempts have consequences for our personal and professional lives.

This notion sparked vigorous academic inquiry, providing insight into the role of self-presentation in employee selection, performance ratings, and promotions in offline settings (e.g. Barrick et al., 2009; Higgins et al., 2003). Today, we see an increasingly complex employee selection landscape because SM provide novel venues for self-presentation. Simultaneously, SM facilitate easier background checking opportunities with fewer boundaries, leading some to refer to modern day personnel selection as the “Wild West” (Davison et al., 2016, pp. 16), while others contemplate necessary legal ramifications (Levashina et al., 2017).

Given SM’s impact on the selection process, our work explores selection-relevant reactions to applicant gender (counter)normative self-presentation online in a US sample, and if systematic differences in gender expression impact hiring managers’ judgments. As explicated by social role theory, it is expected, even subconsciously, that individuals generally adhere to gender norms, and those behaving counternormatively (against gender norms) will be perceived negatively (Eagly, 1987). Studies conducted in face-to-face settings have supported this, with results demonstrating that job seekers behaving counternormatively during the hiring process (e.g. women using self-promotion) experience less favorable outcomes (Rudman and Glick, 1999; Phelan et al., 2008; Rudman and Phelan, 2008). However, these expectations and reactions might result in different outcomes online because SM platforms have fewer normative constraints, creating a space for individuals to be less inhibited and more comfortable violating common gender norms (Bargh et al., 2002). Interestingly, there is universality to gender role attitudes, however how they are enacted and what they mean vary country to country (Weziak-Bialowolska, 2015). For instance, the Czech Republic has a more egalitarian view of gender norms than does Poland (Weziak-Bialowolska, 2015). Because of this and its exploratory nature, we limited our study to the US.

**Literature review**

*Gender norms*

Norms are constraining expectations and rules that influence the outward expressions of individuals within a society, and gender norms inform men and women how they ought to feel, think, and behave (Kulik and Olekalns, 2012). Despite evolving gender expectations (Hsu et al., 2021; Wood and Eagly, 2012), “Gender continues to be a driving force in world politics and economics, as evident by the struggles of women to attain parity in political and economic institutions, the transformative impact of the #metoo movement, and the falling birthrates in many nations as women opt for careers instead of large families” (Eagly and Sczesny, 2019, p. 1). These norms prescribe that men should be agentic, assertive, controlling, and unemotional, whereas women should be communal, caring, dependent, and empathetic.
(Kulik and Olekalns, 2012). Even if one does not personally ascribe to these norms, they may feel forced to display normative behavior (Kulik and Olekalns, 2012), despite self-verification motives (drive to align one’s outward representations with their self-concepts; Swan, 2011). Instead, this drive is balanced with the desire to maintain a desirable image (Goffman, 1978). Thus, conforming to gender norms is vital in the pursuit of a positive self-image, and individuals manage their presentations to be consistent with stereotypical gender social norms.

This is particularly true because counternormative gender displays are met with backlash for both genders, but this backlash tends to be more negative for women (Kulik and Olekalns, 2012). Expectancy violation theory (Burgoon and Dillman, 2015) explains this pattern (Kulik and Olekalns, 2012; Heilman and Wallen, 2010; Rudman and Fairchild, 2004) by describing two types of counternormative gender violations: positive and negative. When women deviate from their expected communal and warm behaviors by behaving assertively, competently, and competitively, the resulting evaluation highlights the negative deviation (e.g. behaving assertively when others were expecting warmth; Fiske et al., 2002; Kulik and Olekalns, 2012). In contrast, men experience more positive outcomes for counternormative warmth, as acting warmly is perceived as a positive deviation from the expected assertive behavior (Hilty and Carnevale, 1993).

This has problematic implications for the workplace as assertive independent behavior are seen as competent (Fiske et al., 2002) and leader-like (Eagly and Karau, 2002) yet gender norms carry over into this domain such that women are expected to be caregiving and warm, and men agentic and assertive in the workplace (Eckes, 2002; Fiske et al., 2002). Thus, generally men are seen as more competent and prototypical leaders because of their use of assertive behavior, while women face additional challenges because their ascribed gender norms are not strongly associated with competence (Kulik and Olekalns, 2012). For instance, research has shown that women are expected to use the flexible work schedules to do more household tasks, whereas men are expected to use the flexibility to increase productivity at work (Lott and Chung, 2016; Hilbrecht et al., 2008; Chung and van der Lippe, 2020).

Indeed, women must be warm and competent to be effective, whereas men need only be competent (Kulik and Olekalns, 2012). This is highlighted in the selection process, where, in general, people are supposed to self-promote and behave in competent, agentic ways. This presents a dilemma for women who need to be seen as competent, yet still likable and warm. Competent displays by women – even during the hiring process – are viewed more negatively, resulting in lower ratings of social skill, likeability, and hirability (Heilman, 2001; Rudman, 1998; Rudman and Glick, 1999). Buttner and McEnally (1996) found that men communicating competently were viewed as the most persuasive and hirable. Women using the same competent style were viewed as less persuasive and hirable, even more so than women using less competent communication. Therefore, women who use the same competent yet counternormative behavior as men, even when they successfully convey a competent image, are still viewed negatively and thus are disadvantaged (Carli, 2001) in the hiring process.

Self-presentation on social media

However, communication via SM affords different self-presentation strategies than offline communication. SM is often an asynchronous (communication not occurring in real time) self-presentation tool that enable users to carefully and strategically present themselves over time, often in less constrained ways because there is a sense of anonymity. When interacting online, individuals do not see others face-to-face, which creates a sense of detachment from real-life consequences (e.g. Barlett, 2015), allowing individuals to feel more comfortable expressing themselves without fear of immediate judgment or social repercussions.
Social impact theory (Latané, 1981) suggests that asynchronous communication lessens normative pressures because of the greater distance of space and time between message senders and receivers as compared to traditional face-to-face interactions. In these contexts, “many behaviors are considered appropriate, and little negative feedback is received if a norm is violated” (Guadagno and Cialdini, 2007, p. 491), providing leeway for counternormative presentations. Unconstrained communication about oneself online results in more authentic presentations of self (Spies Shapiro and Margolin, 2014). Indeed, Facebook users reported being less likely to follow gender-based norms when engaging in self-presentation online (Oberst et al., 2016).

Additionally, media richness theory suggests different modes of communication provide differing richness, such that face-to-face communication (e.g. an interview) provides more cues to help message receivers better understand the attempted communication (Daft and Lengel, 1986). Leaner media (i.e. via Facebook) is less conversational, thus fails to incorporate non-verbal cues such as tone, gestures, facial expressions, and this leads to the receiver inferring meaning from less rich communications (Daft and Lengel, 1986).

Individuals are more likely to behave outside of prescribed societal norms on SM (Barlett, 2015) due to higher levels of anonymity and the resulting reduced social pressure (Suler, 2004). Likewise, individuals are less likely to follow prescribed gender norms (Oberst et al., 2016; Postmes and Spears, 1998), rendering SM a context for identity sensemaking even among transgender and gender questioning individuals (Kosenko et al., 2018). Given that, compared to offline settings, SM presentations seem to rely less on socially prescribed roles (Spies Shapiro and Margolin, 2014). Therefore, it is prudent to understand how counternormative self-presentation is viewed in a job-seeking context, especially in less rich communication channels. Although preliminary studies indicate individuals feel less pressure to behave in gender normative ways online (e.g. Oberst et al., 2016), little work has explored the impact of counternormative gender displays in job seeking scenarios. As noted earlier, hiring managers routinely access information about potential job candidates’ available online (Press Room, 2018). A recent study found that managers hiring decisions were impacted by SM site information that was both job relevant (e.g. education, training, skills) and irrelevant (e.g. sexual orientation, use of profanity and sexual behavior; Zhang et al., 2020). However, little is known about the consequences of gender role and gender norm violations via SM.

Current study
This exploratory work seeks to understand the effect of gender (in)consistent expression via SM on hirability. One important factor influencing hirability is interpersonal attraction, which is the positive evaluation of another. Individuals who are the object of attraction are highly influential (Berscheid and Walster, 1978; Cialdini and Goldstein, 2002). Berscheid and Walster’s (1978) basic proposition is that the more attraction person A feels toward person B, the more effort person A will exert in attempts to communicate with person B. Not surprisingly, numerous studies have found a positive relationship between applicant attraction and hiring decisions (e.g. Barrick et al., 2010; Gallois et al., 1992). However, interpersonal attraction comprises of multiple dimensions. Of particular interest to the current research are social and task attraction because these dimensions are a direct consequence of communication behavior (as compared to dimensions such as physical proximity, physical appearance, receipt of personal rewards, and attitude similarity; McCroskey et al., 1975). Social attraction reflects judgments of likeability, answering questions of “do I want to be friends with this person,” whereas task attraction concerns judgments of competence, answering questions related to “does this person have the requisite capabilities to be effective in their role?” Given that women often face the likability/
competency dilemma (i.e. “woman are either seen as likable, but incompetent, or as competent, but unlikeable; Schneider et al., 2010, pp. 363), we investigate if this dilemma also exists within a SM context.

Thus, we explore the role of the backlash effect from counternormative displays on SM during a simulated hiring process to understand if hiring managers’ judgments are impacted by counternormative displays on SM. Because SM encourages counternormative behavior, perhaps counternormative behavior will not result in backlash. However, it may be that because gender norms are so pervasive in the workplace (Eckes, 2002; Fiske et al., 2002), violations accessible via SM might carry over and impact manager perceptions during the hiring process.

**Methods**

We extend the work presented at the 50th Hawaii International Conference on Systems Sciences by Brouer et al. (2017) by exploring counternormative self-presentations on Facebook and YouTube. Among popular SM sites, Facebook remains the dominant platform for communication (2.85 billion active users), with YouTube trailing closely behind (2.29 billion active users; Statista, 2021). According to recent numbers on Statista (2021), Facebook and YouTube far exceed Instagram (1.38 billion), Twitter (397 million), and LinkedIn (66.8 million) in number of users. The Facebook experiment leverages text-based communication, while the YouTube experiment employs a richer, video-based stimulus.

**Experimental design**

Experiments were completed online via Qualtrics. Once recruited and consenting, participants were presented with scenario information about a hiring decision they need to make for a person with a gender-neutral name, Jesse Johnson:

Imagine you are a hiring manager in the following scenario. An applicant named Jesse Johnson has reached the final rounds of a job interview. She[he] has the same qualifications as the other applicants, all of which are highly qualified. As a measure to differentiate the applicant pool, you decide to screen each applicant’s personal Facebook page [YouTube channel].

After being presented with the scenario, participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions using a 2×2 design (male/female applicant × masculine/feminine presentation style; Appendix 1). In both experiments, the stimulus materials were designed to mimic more recent validations of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974). Specifically, we sought to make the feminine condition present Jesse Johnson as compassionate, warm, sensitive to the needs of others, tender, affectionate, gentle, and sympathetic. In the masculine condition, the stimulus materials communicated Jesse Johnson as having a strong personality, dominant, aggressive, and willing to take a stand.

After reviewing the stimulus materials, participants were directed to survey pages where they rated the applicant (i.e. Jesse Johnson) on attraction and were asked to make a hiring recommendation.

**Facebook Experiment.** Four mock Facebook profiles were designed to directly replicate the look and feel of a real Facebook page, reflecting each of the four conditions. To manipulate gender, we presented a female picture or a male picture in the profile picture area. Self-presentation style was manipulated by varying the types of posts and comments displayed on each page. The feminine conditions displayed communal and expressive presentations, whereas the masculine conditions displayed instrumental and agentic presentations. For instance, the word cloud cover picture in the feminine condition highlighted the words life, love, dream, hope, and acceptance, and the masculine condition highlighted the words success, goal, win, and growth. In the feminine condition, a post about graduation read...
“Honors tassels ordered. So grateful for my family. I couldn’t have done it without them.” The masculine condition graduation post read “Honors tassels ordered. Graduation from top school confirmed. Now on to more great things.” Appendix 2 summarizes the differences between stimuli and a sample screen shot is provided in supplemental material.

**YouTube Experiment.** In each condition, participants viewed a video of Jesse Johnson having conversation with an ambiguous person. Jesse Johnson’s gender was manipulated by either showing a female speaker or a male speaker. The counterpart in the conversation was greyed out to minimize attributional processes (e.g. gender, attractiveness, etc.) and the counterpart’s script remained constant across all four conditions. Jesse Johnson’s self-presentation style was manipulated by varying their script to reflect masculine and feminine demeanor consistent with the BSRI, mimicking the self-presentation themes from the Facebook experiment (see Appendix 3 for scripts).

**Validation of Stimulus Materials.** Given the overlap in presentation style and consistent verbiage across the two experiments, we conducted a manipulation check using only the Facebook stimulus materials. Upper-class undergraduate business and MBA students were recruited from a large Northeastern university (N = 254), and consisted of primarily white (74%), 50% male participants with an average age of 23.23 (SD = 4.68).

The stimulus materials were assessed using 10 items (α = 0.82) based off the BSRI (Bem, 1974) conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity (e.g. Heilbrun, 1976; Spence *et al.*, 1975). Sample items include “Jesse Johnson is very gentle,” Jesse Johnson is aware of the feelings of others,” and “Jesse Johnson can recognize his[her] talents and abilities and verbalize them when needed” (reversed). Higher scores reflect femininity, and lower scores reflect masculinity. We found support for our intended representation of masculinity and femininity \[F(3, 250) = 31.69, \ p < 0.01\] where, regardless of male or female applicant conditions, the masculine conditions were rated significantly lower (2.27 and 2.31) than feminine conditions (2.90 and 2.95).

**Participants**

Given the exploratory nature of this work, we sought a generalizable population of working individuals with recent experience making hiring decisions. Participants were recruited from online survey panels (Facebook study from MTurk and the YouTube study from Prolific Academic), restricted to US respondents to minimize possible cross-cultural gender-norm effects. Before being informed of the study details, potential participants were screened using the following questions: (1) Is English your first language? (2) Are you currently employed? (3) Have you ever been responsible for a hiring decision at work? and (4) Have you been responsible for at least one hiring decision in the last 2 years? Respondents indicating “no” to any of the screening questions were redirected to a separate page informing them they are ineligible to participate and were removed from the study. We ensured a minimum sample size of 45 per condition, and 180 per study to meet statistical power of 0.80, as determined by G*Power 3.1.

**Facebook Experiment.** A total of 197 respondents passed the screening process and successfully completed the online survey. The sample worked full-time (average 41.27 h/week, SD = 6.91), most of which made at least one hiring decision within the last year (98%) and mainly held managerial roles (92%). The sample was made up of 65% male, average age of 33.15 years (SD = 8.24). Respondents were primarily White (73%), with 6% Black, 10% Hispanic, 8% Asian, and 3% Other.

**YouTube Experiment.** Of the 203 respondents that made it through the screening process, 57% were male with a mean age of 38.34 (SD = 9.82). The sample was made-up full-time employees (average 41.41 h/week, SD = 6.36) with 74% of the respondents working at a managerial level and 85% responsible for at least one hiring decision in the last year. The
sample was primarily White (83.7%) and included 4.4% Black, 3.4% Hispanic, 5.9% Asian, and 2.6% Other.

**Measures**

**Social and task attraction.** Each were measured with a 6-item measure of attraction (McCroskey *et al.*, 2006). Example social attraction items include: “It would be difficult to meet and talk with Jess Johnson” (R), “I would like to have a friendly conversation with Jesse Johnson,” and “Jesse Johnson would be pleasant to be with” (Facebook experiment $\alpha = 0.92$; YouTube experiment $\alpha = 0.94$). Sample task attraction items include: “I could count on Jesse Johnson getting the job done,” If I wanted to get things done I could probably depend on Jesse Johnson,” and “I couldn’t get anything accomplished with Jesse Johnson” (R) (Facebook experiment $\alpha = 0.81$; YouTube experiment $\alpha = 0.87$).

**Hiring ratings.** Participants were asked “Would you recommend hiring Jesse Johnson for the job to which he/she is applying for?” and responded with “yes” or “no.”

**Results**

Initial analysis is reported in Table 1. As expected, social and task attraction were significantly and positively correlated in both experiments (Facebook $r = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$; YouTube $r = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$). Across both experiments, hiring ratings were significantly correlated with social attraction (Facebook $r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$; YouTube $r = 0.73$, $p < 0.01$) and task attraction (Facebook $r = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$; YouTube $r = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$).

One-way ANOVA tests were conducted to assess mean differences in social and task attraction across conditions in both studies (Table 2). Significant mean differences on social attraction were observed between groups in both the Facebook experiment [$F(3, 192) = 14.73$, $p < 0.01$] and the YouTube experiment [$F(3, 197) = 21.38$, $p < 0.01$]. Post hoc analysis revealed the feminine presentation style was favorable compared to the masculine presentation style in both experiments. The male-masculine condition was significantly worse than the female-masculine condition in the Facebook experiment, but there was no difference between these conditions in the YouTube experiment. No significant mean differences on task attraction were observed between groups in the Facebook experiment [$F(3, 191) = 1.79$, $ns$] but were observed in the YouTube experiment [$F(3, 195) = 4.08$, $p < 0.01$]. Similar to social attraction,

<table>
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<th>M</th>
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<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>n = 197</td>
<td>2. Race</td>
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<td>–</td>
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<td>3. Age</td>
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<td>4. Social Attraction</td>
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<td>5. Task Attraction</td>
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<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.07</td>
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<td>–</td>
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<td>6. Hiring Ratings</td>
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<td>Study 2</td>
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<td>–</td>
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<td>n = 203</td>
<td>2. Race</td>
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<td>–</td>
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<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Age</td>
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Note(s): Study 1 = Facebook Experiment; Study 2 = YouTube Experiment; Gender coded 0 = male, 1 = female; Race coded 0 = White, 1 = non-White; Hiring Ratings coded 0 = no hiring recommendation, 1 = hiring recommendation; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$; $p < 0.10$

Source(s): Authors work

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables
the feminine presentation style seemed to be favored for task attraction in the YouTube experiment, with the male-masculine condition faring the worst.

Lastly, we assessed the association of social and task attraction scores with hiring ratings using logistic regression because of the binary dependent variable (Table 3). Across both studies, controlling for gender, race, and age, social attraction has a stronger impact on hiring ratings (Facebook experiment: $B = 1.79, p < 0.01$; YouTube experiment $B = 3.19, p < 0.01$) as compared to task attraction (Facebook experiment: $B = 0.91, p < 0.10$; YouTube experiment $B = 2.05, p < 0.01$).

**Discussion**

We sought to understand the role of applicant gender-based (counter)normative self-presentation via SM on hiring managers’ perceptions of attraction and decisions about hiring. Interestingly, and inconsistent with previously understood backlash effects, data from our

<table>
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<th>YouTube Experiment</th>
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<tr>
<td>Male-Masculine</td>
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</table>

**Table 2.**

ANOVA's for social and task attraction

**Note(s):** Different superscripts denote means that differ at $p = 0.05$ level within each quadrant

**Source(s):** Authors work

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Model 2</th>
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<td>Social attraction</td>
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<td>Task attraction</td>
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<td>Constant</td>
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</table>

**Table 3.**

Results for hiring ratings

**Note(s):** N Facebook = 193; N YouTube = 197 Gender coded 0 = male, 1 = female; Race coded 0 = White, 1 = non-White; $^*p < 0.01$; $^\dagger p < 0.05$; $^\ast p < 0.10$

**Source(s):** Authors work
two experiments demonstrate that feminine presentation styles on SM are more favorable, regardless of applicant gender. Moreover, male-masculine conditions had the lowest attraction scores indicating that males demonstrating masculine presentation styles online may be particularly vulnerable to negative valuations from hiring managers. These results suggest that females may have more leeway in utilizing masculine communication behavior. Though the female-masculine condition had more negative assessments for social attraction than either of the feminine conditions, this condition still fared better than the male-masculine in the Facebook experiment. A similar, though not as robust, result was shown for task attraction in the YouTube experiment, where female-masculine did not significantly differ from both feminine conditions, while the male-masculine was significantly lower than these same conditions.

There are three unexpected findings worth exploring. First is the main effect of presentation style on attraction indicating that feminine presentation styles fare better on SM than masculine presentation styles. This is contrary to most selection research, which generally supports that, in traditional settings, agentic impression management tactics like self-promotion (entitlements, enhancements, exemplification, etc.) lead to more favorable hiring evaluations than communal impression tactics like ingratiation, especially for men (e.g. Amaral et al., 2019).

Self-promotion tactics such as defending one’s own beliefs, or being dominant, assertive, and having a strong personality, have historically been viewed as positive masculine traits (e.g. Ballard-Reisch and Elton, 1992). Thus, masculine presentation styles should produce more favorable hiring decisions. However, our results suggest that SM may present a unique context in which hiring managers prefer communal, empathetic presentations. One explanation comes from theory on e-mail communication and emotion perception. Byron (2008) theorized that because email communication is marked by fewer emotional cues (damaging emotional perception accuracy) and reduced feedback, email communications are particularly vulnerable to the Negativity Effect, which is the likelihood that receivers will “inaccurately perceive emails as more intensely negative than intended by the sender” (p. 314). Messages intended to convey positive emotion are perceived as neutral and messages intended to convey neutral emotion are perceived as negative or hostile.

Initial support for the negativity effect was demonstrated by Cheshin et al. (2011) in their finding that resolute behavior was interpreted as anger in text communication. Interestingly, emoticons do not seem to ease this effect (Waltcher and D’Addoria, 2001). Together with our findings, it may be that masculine presentation style, which might be perceived as neutral in face-to-face settings, are perceived as more intensely negative through SM, and thus lead to more negative interpersonal evaluations. Here, masculine presentation via SM results in lower likeability, while simultaneously receiving no benefit in terms of perceived competence.

The second unexpected finding is that males using masculine presentation styles fared the worst. Again, this finding is contrary to selection research that suggests that males are more successful at using self-promotion and competent presentation styles in the selection process (Rudman, 1998). The Negativity Effect might also provide some insight here. Based on the Source-Message-Channel-Receiver model (SMCR; Berlo, 1960), Byron (2008) further theorized that sender gender will moderate the Negativity Effect such that this effect will be stronger for male email senders as compared to female email senders. Given general expectations of males being less expressive with positive emotions and more expressive with negative emotions (e.g. Hess et al., 2010; Rotter and Rotter, 1988), message receivers are hypothesized to be more sensitive to (i.e. scan for) cues indicating negative emotion from men as compared to women (Byron, 2008).

Because SM channels are characterized by lower emotional cue availability, the Negativity Effect suggests that males are more likely perceived harshly, opposed to their female
counterparts. That is, because social role expectations lead us to more readily associate men with anger and contempt, the Negativity Effect is exacerbated for males’ communications in a context where emotional cues are limited. Indeed, we see this effect more strongly in the Facebook conditions due to textual communication, void of “nonverbal cues to embellish meaning” (Bordia, 1997, p. 100). Recall that YouTube provides richer and more varied forms of communication, such as the physical environment and actors’ nonverbal cues. Interestingly, this points to near opposite patterns found on SM vs face-to-face context of how gender and self-presentation styles interreact to form impressions.

Lastly, the different attraction patterns observed across Facebook and YouTube conditions indicate more social attractiveness sensitivity, but less task attraction sensitivity, on Facebook. These two platforms differ in terms of purpose. Facebook, being a social networking site, has historically been a tool to facilitate personal relationship building (i.e. connecting with friends and family), whereas YouTube is a content community used for information sharing and knowledge acquisition (e.g. do-it-yourself content, vlogs, reviews, demonstrations, etc; Smith et al., 2012). It may be that Facebook primes viewers to be more sensitive to interpersonally relevant cues (e.g. social attraction) but does not trigger viewers to make judgments on the presenters’ competence (e.g. task attraction). On the other hand, because YouTube is geared toward skill/knowledge demonstration and provides a more media rich context, viewers might have more opportunity to make judgments on both social- and task-attraction.

**Practical implications**

This work provides initial evidence that applicant gender and gender-normative presentation impact hiring-relevant reactions, which could have direct legal and ethical implications (Jeske and Shultz, 2016; Slovensky and Ross, 2012). Although our research was exploratory and experimental in nature, others have found that even without conscious bias, employers could be held liable just for looking at SM sites without explicitly using them to make hiring decisions (Lam, 2016). Thus, understanding that hiring managers act as agents of their organizations, deliberate steps should be taken to ensure screening practices and hiring decisions comply with nondiscrimination laws (Lam, 2016). Moreover, these types of practices, and their potentially (un)intentional discriminating consequences, functionally signal organizational values and inform perceptions of corporate character (e.g. Brouer et al., 2021; Men and Sung, 2022). Negative valuations of corporate character can harm critical organizational outcomes through adverse consumer and employee perceptions (e.g. Davies et al., 2004; Stanaland et al., 2011).

Together, this points to the need for organizations to establish training programs and formalized policies around their use of SM as a screening tool (Lam, 2016). On a general level, training should focus on expanding awareness and familiarizing hiring managers with unconscious bias that exist in hiring scenarios. Hiring managers should be trained on how perceptions gleaned via information available online might differ based solely on the communication mode, and that it may appear harsher or ruder than face-to-face exchanges. Adjusting evaluations accordingly could help employers avoid overlooking qualified candidates based on self-presentation style alone. Most importantly, however, organizations should establish clear rules around the practice of screening applications through SM, and ensure hiring managers are familiar with these policies.

Though the legal and ethical considerations are the burden of organizations, job seekers also should heed these implications and understand that content about themselves available online influences hiring outcomes. Our results suggest that although all applicants should be wary of using masculine presentation styles through SM, men especially should be aware that utilizing masculine communication behaviors could appear expressly harsh to hiring managers.
Limitations and future directions
Our work must be viewed considering its limitations. First, we utilized a novel experimental
design. Though randomized experiments afford a high level of control and increase internal
validity (Stone-Romero, 2002), they also may call external validity into question. However,
works comparing the external validity of experimental methods to field research finds no
advantage of the latter over the former (e.g. Dipboye and Flanagan, 1979; Highhouse, 2009;
Locke, 1986; Stone-Romero, 2002). Highhouse (2009) suggests that experiments may offer
more support for our ability to generalize across contexts if “operationalization of the
constructs are true to the constructs themselves” (p. 562). We leveraged the most common SM
platforms, broadening domain representativeness. In the Facebook condition, the content
available is typical and consistent with the kinds of self-disclosure content found on nearly all
SM platforms today, including career-oriented platforms such as LinkedIn. Additionally, the
Facebook condition represents one end of the contemporary media spectrum in terms of
generally static presentation of self while the YouTube condition leverages self-generated
video content which is becoming increasingly popular (e.g. TikTok). Thus, although our
study is exploratory, the development of our stimuli was guided by specific media
characteristics, which should improve external validity.

Second, our studies collected data from panel sources (e.g. MTurk), which poses some
concerns. Our respondents were not industry specific. This limits our ability to draw claims
about boundary conditions and generalizability beyond the studied participants. For
instance, both study samples were disproportionately White and male, compared to the
general US population. Though this reflects the general demographics of US managers (US
Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023), it limits our ability to test the effects of hiring managers’
race and gender on their hiring reactions and decisions. Moreover, respondents were asked to
make assessments and hiring decisions about a hypothetical applicant for a non-descript
position, which may vary based on context-specific conditions. Whereas experiments help
uncover the causal relationships and underlying mechanism that could generalize across
organizations, other methods such as field or observational research help uncover boundary
conditions that allow us to generalize to specific organizations (Highhouse, 2009; Stone-
Romero, 2002), which were not explored in the current study. Third, three of our variables
were collected cross-sectionally. Task attraction, social attraction, and hiring
recommendations were all collected post-stimulus materials and thus could be subject to
common method bias. Thus, future research should explore hiring managers’ reactions to
gender-normative behavior on SM using different designs and sampling methods, including
investigating actual selection processes.

Third, given the exploratory nature of these experiments, our research narrowly focused
on applicant gender within only two SM types and in only one country, the US. Other
meaningful social categories should be explored under the broader concept of normative
adherence, such as race, ethnicity, age, and in other countries (e.g. older women appear to be
more vulnerable to backlash effects in face-to-face settings; Krings et al., 2023). Though not
tested, the gender of the hiring manager may also play a role in these results. Moreover, new
SM platforms are continuously emerging, creating new and novel contexts for self-
presentation. For instance, TikTok and Instagram Reels have significantly shifted the way in
which content is created and shared to favor short video material, which provide a great deal
of media richness. Further, though not as widely used, LinkedIn is geared toward
professional communication and might demonstrate different attraction patterns (e.g.
masculine styles might appear more appropriate in this context). These questions and
contexts should be explored.

In the current paper, we test two forms of attraction as explanatory factors between the
applicant’s gender self-presentation style and hiring recommendations. Though a necessary
first step in our exploratory study, a fourth limitation is that we did not include other factors
that may also help explain this relationship. For instance, similarity might be a mediator worth exploring, as it might inform hiring recommendations. Wayne and Liden (1995) found that employee impression management impacted managers’ ratings of employee performance through perceived similarity, and not through liking. Though elements of attraction are associated with perceived similarity (e.g. Montoya et al., 2008), perceived similarity was not explicitly tested in the current model. Relatedly, objective similarity (e.g. homophily) might be an area of fruitful future exploration. Understanding how the hiring managers’ own gender and gender presentation combinations might impact their valuations of applicants could help unpack the psychological mechanisms informing hiring decisions. Though we control for gender, we do not explicitly test this relationship. Future research should explore these relationships.

As a final note, the authors acknowledge that the use of SM in employee selection has critical ethical and legal implications beyond the scope of this paper. We do not intend to promote this practice. Rather, given that hiring managers often use SM as a source of information in making hiring decisions, our goal was to explore the potential issues of such practices. We hope this work helps stimulate needed conservations around selection within the increasingly complex SM landscape.

References


Statista (2023), “Number of internet and social media users worldwide as of September 2023”, available at: https://www.statista.com/


### Appendix 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-presentation style</th>
<th>Jesse Johnson’s gender</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculine</td>
<td>Male-Masculine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>Female-Masculine</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Source(s):** Authors work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cover picture</th>
<th>Word cloud with words: life, love, dream, hope, acceptance, etc.</th>
<th>Word cloud with words: success, goal, win, growth, organization, etc.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First post</td>
<td>“Another great day thanks to the hard work of my interns”</td>
<td>“If my interns don’t get their acts together at work, I will be posting a call for new staff.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link to NPR vlog</td>
<td>“I could use your support in listening to my latest work”</td>
<td>“Check out my latest piece on NPR DC!! Not saying I’m awesome- but I might be.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to comment under link to NPR article. Commentor: “great work, Jesse!”</td>
<td>“I wish a few things were done differently, but my boss has final say on these things…”</td>
<td>“It would have been easier if I wasn’t working on so many other pieces!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation post</td>
<td>“Honors tassels ordered. So grateful for my family. I couldn’t have done it without them.”</td>
<td>“Honors tassels ordered. Graduation from top school confirmed. Now on to more great things.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source(s):** Authors work

### Table A1. Experimental conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender-(counter) normative behavior online</th>
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</thead>
</table>

### Appendix 2

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Facebook page element</th>
<th>Feminine</th>
<th>Masculine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Cover picture</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Source(s):** Authors work

### Table A2. Summary of Facebook self-presentation styles

### Appendix 3

**Script in feminine condition of YouTube experiment**

Counterpart: *“I heard you just graduated from Cornell University with honors, congrats!*  
Jesse Johnson: “I am so grateful for my family. I couldn't have done it without them.”  
Counterpart: *“What are you doing now?”*  
Jesse Johnson: “I'm a freelance writer for National Public Radio. I have a new piece about D.C. Residents not being able to buy booze in New Hampshire. I'll send it to you. I could use your support listening to my latest work.”  
Counterpart: *“I listened to that piece but did not know who wrote it. Great work, Jesse!”*  
Jesse Johnson: “I wish a few things were done differently, but my boss has final say on these things.”  
Counterpart: *“How was work today?”*  
Jesse Johnson: “Today was another great day thanks to the hard work of my interns.”

**Script in Masculine Condition of YouTube Experiment**

Counterpart: *“I heard you just graduated from Cornell University with honors, congrats!*  
Jesse Johnson: “Graduating from a top school – check! Now to move on to more great things.”  
Counterpart: *“What are you doing now?”*
Jesse Johnson: “I’m a freelance writer for National Public Radio. You should check out my latest piece about D.C. Residents not being able to buy booze in New Hampshire. I’m not saying I’m awesome, but I might be.”

Counterpart: “I listened to that piece but did not know who wrote it. Great work, Jesse!”

Jesse Johnson: “It would have been easier if I wasn’t working on so many other pieces!”

Counterpart: “How was work today?”

Jesse Johnson: “If my interns don’t get their acts together at work, I will be posting a call for new staff.”

Source(s): Authors work

Supplemental

Example stimulus

Source(s): Authors work

Corresponding author

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