original article

I believe what I see: Impact of attire and academic degree on evaluation of personality traits of a politician

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BACKGROUND
The image of a politician primes people to judge his/her personality traits. Voters are looking for such qualities as honesty, intelligence, friendliness, sincerity, and trustworthiness. Most studies, however, concentrate on the evaluation of faces, and only some take into account the candidate's attire.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE
The research included 320 participants between 18 and 78 years. It aimed to assess whether the parliamentary candidate's attire affects voters' evaluation of his personality traits. A description of his program was also presented to determine whether it affected the candidate's evaluation. Participants observed four versions of a fictional candidate's election materials: the candidate dressed in a formal suit or dressed casually and dressed formally or casually but bearing a doctor's degree. We used a self-constructed questionnaire to evaluate selected traits of the candidate's character.

RESULTS
The findings revealed that participants believed an individual in casual wear to be more *active*, *attractive*, *open to people and the world*, *friendly*, *honest*, and *reliable*, and only more *smart*, and *effective* while dressed formally. Also, the academic degree proved to be of importance. Accordingly, the same person with a doctorate was additionally evaluated as *competent*, *responsible* when dressed casually, and *responsible* when wearing a suit. It confirms the assumption that the informal dress and academic degree are most influential. The program description proved to be of no significance.

CONCLUSIONS
Our study shows that the way the candidate was dressed affected the evaluation of his personality characteristics. The participants attributed the casually dressed candidate the traits expected from a politician.

KEY WORDS
formal attire; casual wear; academic degree; personality traits; program

BACKGROUND

The complexity of the environment compels humans to select the incoming data in order to make sense of the ongoing events and take appropriate action. As a consequence, their knowledge is limited. Moreover, most decisions are made under constraints of limited time (Kruglanski, 2013). Therefore, humans use simple rules of thumb, which Newell and Simon (1972) dubbed heuristics (see also Simon, 1990). Tversky and Kahneman (1974) concentrated on errors or biases linked to the use of heuristics, and it is mostly understood in this sense due to the bestselling book by Kahneman (2011). On the other hand, Gigerenzer (2008) believes that heuristics enable fast and good decision-making despite the limitations of time and knowledge. They certainly are helpful in everyday situations, but they do not guarantee the evaluations' and decisions' validity as is often the case in electoral decisions. Moreover, heuristics prompt people to concentrate on selected, specific aspects of information, excluding the data that contradict their values and beliefs.

Another significant factor that affects our decisions is the first impression. It might be worth recalling that the first impression appears to play a significant role in evaluating individuals we encounter for the first time. We attribute personality traits to them and decide whether they are intelligent, competent, trustworthy, or dull, unreliable, and cunning (Benoit & McHale, 2003; Conner et al., 1975; Hoegg & Lewis, 2011; Landry & Sigall, 1974; Langlois et al., 2000; Olivola & Todorov, 2010; Rosenberg & McCafferty, 1987; Veneti et al., 2019). Miller et al. (1986) as well as Buchanan (2012) found that opinions about American presidents were shaped by the following central characteristics: competence, leadership, trust, and reliability. Also, Lalancette and Raynauld (2019, p. 1) found that "…voters are looking for specific qualities in political leaders, including honesty, intelligence, friendliness, sincerity, and trustworthiness, when making electoral decisions. Image management techniques can help create the impression that politicians possess these qualities". Similar results were obtained in studies conducted in Portugal, Spain, Ireland, Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, Hungary (Costa & Ferreira da Silva, 2015), Poland (Stencel, 2010), Latvia (Zakrizevska, 2018), and Switzerland (Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009).

It is worth noting that we tend to hold on to already formed opinions. An opinion already formed will affect how a given person is perceived and evaluated, resulting in the omission of many important factors. It is closely linked to how our brain works. The brain selects the incoming data to avoid overload due to our working memory limits (Kaczmarek & Markiewicz, 2018; Klingberg, 2009). So it should come as no surprise that a series of studies found inferences about a politician's traits based on his appearance correlated with voters' electoral behaviors (Banducci et al., 2008; Martin, 1978; Todorov et al., 2005). Moreover, the image is usually believed to be a testimony to individual skills and social position besides personality (Bennett, 2016; Cwalina et al., 2011; Domke et al., 2002; Howlett et al., 2013). Hence, appearance proves to be more critical in creating a political image than the election program (see Berggren et al., 2010; Lawson et al., 2010). Moreover, even such details as the choice of an appropriate photograph of the candidate or the color of his or her clothes significantly differentiate the assessment of the political image in the eyes of voters and, as a consequence, may determine the electoral failure or success of the candidate.

As mentioned above, a vital factor priming electoral decisions is the appearance of a politician. Studies on the techniques of influencing others show that attractive people are better perceived and evaluated (Aronson et al., 2019; Cialdini, 2006; Langlois et al., 2000). One of the fundamental regularities of physical attractiveness is the illusion that "beautiful is good and wise." As a result, people tend to believe that physical attractiveness is closely associated with other desired characteristics such as intelligence, independence, and better adaptation (Leary, 2019). No wonder politicians try to take advantage of this fact, realizing that you also need to look good to be judged positively. Furthermore, Waismel-Manor and colleagues (2010, 2011) noted that good-looking politicians gain more TV coverage both in Israel and the U.S.A. They suggest that "television journalists cover better-looking congresspersons in order to attract the attention of audiences" (Waismel-Manor & Tsfati, 2011, p. 457). Accordingly, politicians who know how to present themselves well are becoming media stars – political celebrities – who take special care to impress their voters. That is why self-presentation's ability plays a vital role in today's political life (Ferreira da Silva, 2019). Hence, creating and modifying the candidate's image is one of the key tasks of contemporary political marketing (Bennett, 2016; De Landtsheer et al., 2008; Cwalina et al., 2011; Falkowski & Cwalina, 2019; Liutko, 2015; Rosenberg & Mc Cafferty, 1987; Scammell, 2015; Schill, 2012). Consequently, a candidate-centered approach has become predominant in electoral politics, emphasizing creating an image of a political candidate that his/her voters favor. It also escalated the importance of the personal characteristics of politicians.

It is assumed that the presidential debate of 1960 between the Republican candidate Richard Nixon and the Democratic representative John F. Kennedy started this approach. The majority of commentators agreed that Kennedy looked great while Nixon looked pale and tired. It was also the way they were dressed that appeared to be essential for the general impression. Kennedy was wearing a dark suit which made

him clearly visible and dominant, and Nixon was clothed in a light gray suit that blended into a light background. Surveys conducted after the debate indicated that those who watched it on TV claimed victory for Kennedy, while those who listened on the radio believed that Nixon had won. Those findings' validity was disputed since most of the evidence was impressionistic and anecdotal (Kraus, 1996; Vancil & Pendell, 1987).

These doubts were dispelled by the experiment performed by Druckman (2003), in which one group of participants watched a television version of this debate, and the other group listened to its audio version. The study found that "television viewers (2.57, with a standard deviation of 1.40) were significantly more likely to think Kennedy won the debate than audio listeners (3.28, 1.30, $t(166) = 3.39$, $p < .01$). This is compelling evidence that television – by enhancing the impact of an image – can make a difference in overall candidate (debater) evaluations" (Druckman, 2003, p. 568). Moreover, television viewers were more apt to rely on personality traits than audio listeners.

Yet most studies concentrate on the importance of faces in creating a first impression (Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009; Franklin & Zebrowitz, 2016; Lawson et al., 2010; Little et al., 2007; Olivola & Todorov, 2010; Over & Cook, 2018; Over et al., 2020; Poutvaara, 2014; Stewart et al., 2009). Only some studies report links between clothing and the first impression (Burns & Lennon, 1993; Damhorst, 1990; Howlett et al., 2013; Reid et al., 1997). Paek (1986) found that changing the clothing style of an individual from 'daring-conservative' to 'dressy-casual' gave rise to his different personality traits. But to the best of our knowledge, no research was conducted on the impact of attire on election outcomes. However, Maran et al. (2021) performed a study on the impact of informal clothing on CEOs' approval and charisma and found that "a more casual style of attire not only makes these leaders appear more charismatic, but the increase in perceived charisma also boosts their appeal among their potential followership" (p. 95). Also, more participants reported they would vote for the less formal CEO as their own leader.

It might be a result of dress code modifications that correlate with social, cultural, and economic changes (see Ford, 2021). Therefore, the present study aimed to determine whether the manner of dress (casual versus formal) of a political candidate impacts the evaluation of his personality traits. Also, both the formally and casually dressed candidates were presented as having an academic degree. A description of his program with all presented versions was included to evaluate whether it influenced the candidate's evaluation. We posed the following research questions:

RQ1: Do voters rate a parliamentary candidate dressed in formal or informal attire better?

RQ2: What personality traits do they attribute to the candidate dressed formally?

RQ3: What personality traits do they attribute to the candidate dressed casually?

RQ4: Does an academic degree affect voters' evaluation of the candidate?

RQ5: Does the description of an election program affect voter's evaluation of the candidate?

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

PROCEDURE

We presented a fictional parliamentary candidate since some studies report priming effects due to the previous knowledge, attitude, and feelings for a particular politician (Balmas & Sheafer, 2010; Lee et al., 2020; Miller & Krosnick, 2000). We also chose a male candidate since "the perception of female leaders is regrettably heavily affected by stereotypes (e.g., Brescoll, 2016), ratings of them would likely be skewed due to gender bias" (Maran et al., 2021, p. 89). We assumed that such choices would enable adequate evaluation of the influence of the clothing style on the candidate's attributes. He was either casually or formally dressed, and we selected very formal attire to make the distinction as clear as possible (see Figure 1).

The candidate was given a ubiquitous Polish name – Adam Kowalski – and the description of his program did not include any information about his party affiliation to exclude the influence of political leaning of the participants. The description was identical for all versions of the photograph and took the following form:

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I was born and raised in Lublin, and here I received my school education and completed my university

Figure 1

Two modes of dressing of the parliamentary candidate. Source: Free Adobe Stock base

studies. Currently, I run my own business, in which I successfully use my knowledge and experience. My company employs several dozen people from Lublin and its surroundings, and I do my best to use the professional potential of my employees for the benefit of both parties. I have also been the president of the "Give Yourself a Chance" Association for four years, which fights addiction problems among young people. I try to spend my free time with my family, with whom I admire the beautiful Lublin landscapes during bike trips.

I do not want to make any lofty promises. However, I would like to assure you that as an MP of the Republic of Poland, I will represent the local community with dignity, commitment, and determination to solve the most critical problems of our city and region.

Therefore, I ask for your vote, which will allow me to serve our country and our city well.

Four versions of presenting the same candidate along with the identical program description that differed in the manner of depicting him were used:

I. The candidate was dressed formally, and there was no information about the academic degree.

II. The candidate was casually dressed, and there was no information about the degree.

III. The candidate was dressed formally, and we included the information that he was a doctor of economic sciences.

IV. The candidate was casually dressed, and we included the information that he was a doctor of economic sciences.

Also, a self-constructed questionnaire was administered to evaluate the attributes of the candidate's character. We selected the following traits based on the review of available reports on the subject: *active, attractive, intelligent, competent, responsible, open to people and the world, friendly, effective, honest, credible* (Buchanan, 2012; Costa & Ferreira da Silva, 2015; Hoegg & Lewis, 2011; Olivola & Todorov, 2010; Rosenberg & McCafferty, 1987; Veneti et al., 2019). The evaluation was made on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 meant a very low intensity of a particular trait and 5 meant a very high intensity. In addition, the respondents were asked if they paid more attention to the photograph or the program description, and which of them affected their evaluation of the candidate to a greater degree.

PARTICIPANTS

The research included 320 participants between 18 and 78 years (the average age was 44 years). The group was equal in terms of gender. As far as education is concerned, 5% of participants had completed primary education, 14% had completed basic vocational education, 42% had completed secondary education, and 39% had completed tertiary education. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The participation was anonymous and voluntary, and there was no time limit. The Bioethics Committee of the University of Economics and Innovation in Lublin approved the study (consent no. 3/19/2020), and all participants gave their informed consent for taking part in the survey.

RESULTS

The findings of the present study confirmed the impact of an image on the evaluation of a politician. At the first stage, we calculated the highest means of attributes assigned to the person shown in a picture. An analysis of mean values presented in Table 2 reveals that an individual in casual wear was believed to be more *active, open to people and the world, friendly, honest* and *reliable* than the one dressed formally, and only more *smart, competent*, and *effective* while wearing formal attire. The academic degree resulted in strengthening the above-described impressions except for *effectivity*.

The data presented in Table 2 give a very general picture since they show only differences in mean values of the evaluation of the candidate by participants. Therefore, we performed a statistical analysis to measure the significance of differences between the mean values of attributes assigned to the person shown in the picture. The analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics 24 PS IMAGO 4.0. We used the *t*-test for dependent samples and a 95% confidence level. It made it possible to assess the significance of differences between the means discussed (see Table 3). The differences were statistically significant in most cases except two. The formally dressed candidate was believed to be smarter and more effective only when presented without an academic degree. It confirmed

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of participants

Gender		Education level				Age
Females	Males	Primary	Basic vocational	Secondary	Tertiary	
160	160	17	44	133	126	18-78

Table 2

Summary of means of attributes assigned to a given individual

Attribute	Image							
	Formal wear (suit)		Casual wear (sweater)		Academic degree (Ph.D.) + formal wear (suit)		Academic degree (Ph.D.) + casual wear (sweater)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Active	3.66	0.91	3.98	0.81	3.84	0.96	4.21	0.79
Attractive	3.58	1.02	3.62	0.97	3.85	0.98	3.81	1.00
Smart	3.98	0.75	3.81	0.82	4.30	0.74	4.21	0.75
Competent	3.86	0.79	3.75	0.84	4.25	0.78	4.26	0.70
Responsible	3.75	0.88	3.79	0.83	4.10	0.82	4.13	0.73
Open to people and the world	3.42	1.03	4.17	0.85	3.55	1.00	4.36	0.76
Friendly	3.16	1.00	4.11	0.82	3.48	1.02	4.24	0.77
Effective	3.83	0.81	3.69	0.79	4.00	0.83	4.04	0.79
Honest	3.27	0.94	3.71	0.84	3.58	0.97	3.97	0.85
Reliable	3.35	0.95	3.72	0.87	3.70	0.96	4.09	0.78

the observations that the parliamentary candidate dressed informally was rated better in all the above-enumerated attributes.

The next step was analyzing differences between images depicting different attire and the possession of an academic degree. It was observed that differences between all versions for all traits examined were statistically significant except for *friendliness* in versions II and IV. In these versions, the candidate was dressed informally, and holding an academic degree did not influence the participants' opinions (see Table 4).

Answers to the question concerning the difference between the impact of the image versus the program description on the evaluation of the candidate made it possible to assess the significance of these two variables. It was found that the image was more influential, and the difference was statistically significant. As depicted in Table 4, only the difference between the means of the fourth version did not reach statistical significance, i.e., when the candidate was wearing a sweater and had an academic degree. Nevertheless, the observed influence of the photograph on the candidate's evaluation was also stronger in this case. It suggests that respondents considered the image to be more significant for them than his program.

It confirms the observations that people pay more attention to a politician's appearance than to the program (Hultman et al., 2019; Mannetti et al., 2016). It might explain the growing tendency to create a good image of the politicians in political campaigns. After all, what is the use of presenting a lengthy program if people are paying attention to the appearance? However, Julina et al. (2015) found that the candidate's program also influenced the evaluation of the candidate. It may be since their study concerned political marketing at the local, regional level. Furthermore, the study was conducted in Indonesia, and the discrepancy may result from social and cultural differences, since most papers report studies conducted in Western countries.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study confirmed the impact of an image on the evaluation of a politician. At the first stage, we calculated the highest means of attributes assigned to the person shown in a picture. Participants attributed the casually dressed candidate positive personality traits while the individual in the formal attire was believed to be more competent. Also, the academic degree proved to be influential. Accordingly, the same person as depicted in former pictures but having a doctorate was evaluated as more competent, responsible, and open to people and the world when dressed casually and only more responsible while dressed in a suit. On the other hand, the program description did not affect the evaluations.

Interestingly, it is in contradiction to the observations of Paek (1986), who found no differences in the evaluation of the personality traits of a stranger

Table 3

Summary of the significance of differences between means for different types of an image (Version I vs. Version II; Version III vs. Version IV)

Attribute	Type of image	*M*	*SD*	*p*	Attribute	Type of image	*M*	*SD*	*p*
Active	I	3.66	0.91	**< .001**	Open to people and the world	I	3.42	1.03	**< .001**
	II	3.98	0.81			II	4.17	0.85	
	III	3.84	0.96	**< .001**		III	3.55	1.00	**< .001**
	IV	4.21	0.79			IV	4.36	0.76	
Attractive	I	3.58	1.02	.678	Friendly	I	3.16	1.00	**< .001**
	II	3.62	0.97			II	4.11	0.82	
	III	3.85	0.98	.663		III	3.48	1.02	**< .001**
	IV	3.81	1.00			IV	4.24	0.77	
Smart	I	3.98	0.75	**.008**	Effective	I	3.83	0.81	**.020**
	II	3.81	0.82			II	3.69	0.79	
	III	4.30	0.74	.090		III	4.00	0.83	.745
	IV	4.21	0.75			IV	4.04	0.79	
Competent	I	3.86	0.79	.080	Honest	I	3.27	0.94	**< .001**
	II	3.75	0.84			II	3.71	0.84	
	III	4.25	0.78	.710		III	3.58	0.97	**< .001**
	IV	4.26	0.70			IV	3.97	0.85	
Responsible	I	3.75	0.88	.678	Reliable	I	3.35	0.95	**< .001**
	II	3.79	0.83			II	3.72	0.87	
	III	4.10	0.82	.984		III	3.70	0.96	**< .001**
	IV	4.13	0.73			IV	4.09	0.78	

Note. Types of images: Version I – formal wear (suit); Version II – casual wear (sweater); Version III – formal wear and academic degree (Ph.D.); Version IV – casual wear and academic degree (Ph.D.). Significant differences are highlighted in bold.

dressed in a conservative and casual style. Other reports, however, emphasize the role of attire in making inferences about the personality of the individual presented to the participants of the studies (Damhorst, 1990; Gurney et al., 2016; O'Neal & Lapitsky, 1991; Peluchette & Karl, 2007).

Our study suggests that informal dress and academic degree are most influential. It also explains – at least to some degree – the outcome of Poland's current presidential election. Also, other studies reveal that clothing affects the credibility of the person advertising the goods (O'Neal & Lapitsky, 1991) as well as the evaluation of university professors (Gurney et al., 2016; Lightstone et al., 2011).

These findings confirm that attire plays a significant role in many areas of community life. Indeed, we are not able to completely change our physical appearance, but we can take care to adapt the outfit

to the situation and the expectations of the audience. Hence, studying the influence of clothing style on the potential audience seems worth the effort.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Our findings suggest that less formal dress might be preferable in attracting people, but it certainly demands further studies covering a larger number and a more diverse range of subjects. An interesting and so far neglected factor of influence is the academic degree. To the best of our knowledge, Cialdini (2006) mentions the influence of a professor title yet not in a political context. We also do not know much about the effects of different settings and cultures on influencing others. Therefore, further studies considering different levels of persuasive influence and cultural

Table 4

Summary of the significance of differences between means for different types of images (Version I vs. Version III; Version II vs. Version IV)

Attribute	Type of image	M	SD	p	Attribute	Type of image	M	SD	p
Active	I	3.66	0.91	**.009**	Open to people and the world	I	3.42	1.03	.089
	III	3.84	0.96			III	3.55	1.00	
	II	3.98	0.81	**< .001**		II	4.17	0.85	**.002**
	IV	4.21	0.79			IV	4.36	0.76	
Attractive	I	3.58	1.02	**.001**	Friendly	I	3.16	1.00	**< .001**
	III	3.85	0.98			III	3.48	1.02	
	II	3.62	0.97	**.009**		II	4.11	0.82	.051
	IV	3.81	1.00			IV	4.24	0.77	
Smart	I	3.98	0.75	**< .001**	Effective	I	3.83	0.81	**.005**
	III	4.30	0.74			III	4.00	0.83	
	II	3.81	0.82	**< .001**		II	4.04	0.79	**< .001**
	IV	4.21	0.75			IV	3.69	0.79	
Competent	I	3.86	0.79	**< .001**	Honest	I	3.27	0.94	**< .001**
	III	4.25	0.78			III	3.58	0.97	
	II	3.75	0.84	**< .001**		II	3.71	0.84	**< .001**
	IV	4.26	0.70			IV	3.97	0.85	
Responsible	I	3.75	0.88	**< .001**	Reliable	I	3.35	0.95	**< .001**
	III	4.10	0.82			III	3.70	0.96	
	II	3.79	0.83	**< .001**		II	3.72	0.87	**< .001**
	IV	4.13	0.73			IV	4.09	0.78	

Note. Types of images: Version I – formal wear (suit); Version II – casual wear (sweater); Version III – formal wear and academic degree (Ph.D.); Version IV – casual wear and academic degree (Ph.D.). Significant differences are highlighted in bold.

differences would help plan any campaign aiming to influence others.

It was also noted that differences in the procedure used might result in discrepancies concerning the role of factors studied. Studies on the impact of a red dress on influencing others may serve as an example. Bashir and Rule (2014) reported that the color red enhanced a communicator's persuasiveness, but Kramer's (2016) research did not confirm this result. There was, however, a significant difference between these two studies. Bashir and Rule (2014) used static pictures while Kramer's (2016) subjects were watching video recordings. It suggests the need for further studies on the dress's formal and casual style using dynamic presentations.

Studies of Mannetti et al. (2016) confirmed our observations that the program description pre-

Table 5

Summary of the significance of the impact of the image versus program description on the evaluation of the candidate

Type of image	Description		Photo		p (description vs. photo)
	M	SD	M	SD	
I	3.62	1.15	4.01	0.89	**< .001**
II	4.06	0.84	4.16	0.81	**.001**
III	3.97	0.99	4.11	1.00	**.002**
IV	3.93	0.83	3.99	0.95	.187

Note. Types of images: Version I – formal wear (suit); Version II – casual wear (sweater); Version III – formal wear and academic degree (Ph.D.); Version IV – casual wear and academic degree (Ph.D.). Significant differences are highlighted in bold.

sented alongside the candidate's image did not modify the evaluation of his competencies. On the other hand, Lev-On and Waismel-Manor (2016) observed that the impact of a candidate's appearance on voters depends on the elections' informational context. As suggested by the Indonesian study, cultural factors may also be important (Julina et al., 2015). Therefore, it should be taken into account in further research. Such studies should also include subjects of varied background characteristics, making it possible to reveal other significant factors.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study shows that the way the candidate was dressed affected the evaluation of his personality traits. The participants attributed the casually dressed candidate the traits expected from a politician. It is worth recalling that other studies found that voters expect such traits in political leaders (see Background). In addition, it confirms the significance of the first image, since these opinions were formed after having a look at the picture presented to the participants. An opinion already formed will affect how a given person is perceived and evaluated, resulting in the omission of many important factors. Therefore, we not only concentrate on certain details but tend to ignore and forget messages that include too much information. It might be a reason why a description of the candidate's program proved to be less important than his garments.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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