Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 124 (2026) 104887

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Social Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jesp

"If you agree with me, it must be true": Social verification creates shared reality and consolidates impressions

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Shared reality
Impression formation
Social verification
Job recruitment
Motivated cognition

ABSTRACT

A scarcely studied route to shared reality is the social verification of one's impressions, a process that should promote impression consolidation. We tested this prediction across four experiments ($N = 1342$) using a hiring-decision paradigm. Participants evaluated pairs of similarly qualified applicants based on brief descriptions and portrait photos, made hiring decisions alongside a fictitious partner, and received either verification or no verification of their choices. Impression consolidation was assessed via subsequent speeded trait attributions. We expected stronger consolidation following verification, reflected in greater evaluative choice-consistency (i.e., attributing more positive traits to chosen than unchosen applicants), indexed by signal detection theory's discriminability, as well as increased accessibility (response latencies). Participants also reported experienced shared reality with the partner. Across studies, social verification reliably increased experienced shared reality and choice-consistent discriminability. Accessibility effects, in contrast, were inconsistent and context-dependent. Experiment 3 showed that verification enhanced choice-consistent discriminability only for recruitment-relevant traits. Experiment 4 showed no trait-specific consolidation for explicit, implied, or unrelated profile traits beyond evaluative choice-consistency. Moreover, across studies, experienced shared reality was positively associated with choice-consistent discriminability, but not with accessibility. Together, these findings indicate that social verification selectively consolidates impressions by stabilizing their evaluative structure—particularly on relevant domains—rather than by uniformly enhancing accessibility. Therefore, our results showed that even brief verification from an unfamiliar partner can strengthen shared reality and reinforce impressions primarily through increased evaluative consistency. Implications for impression formation and motivated cognition are discussed.

Making confident judgments about others is often challenging, particularly when information is ambiguous, complex, or unfamiliar. Shared reality—the alignment of perspectives between individuals regarding a specific target—provides a mechanism for reducing such uncertainty (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). While prior work has focused mainly on how individuals adjust their evaluations to align with others' views, for example, through audience tuning (Echterhoff & Higgins, 2017, 2025), less is known about the complementary but theoretically distinct process of social verification, in which another individual confirms a person's initial impressions. Verification not only fulfills epistemic and relational needs (Masi & Echterhoff, in press; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2024) but may also shape impressions through impression consolidation—enhancing the accessibility of social information (Wagner et al., 2024) and strengthening internal consistency across evaluations and traits (Asch, 1946; Hamilton, 1981). The present research directly investigates this possibility in the context of a collaborative hiring decision task.

To understand how shared reality shapes impressions, it is necessary to consider their nature. Impressions are cognitive representations that organize evaluative and trait information around a person's identity and guide social interactions (Asch, 1946; Fiske, 1992; Hamilton, 1981; Uleman & Kressel, 2013). These representations are not mere lists of traits, but organized structures in which evaluative judgments and trait inferences are interrelated and mutually constrain one another. Such impressions are characterized by internal consistency and accessibility of interrelated social information (Higgins, 1996; Srull & Wyer, 1989). Precisely, internal consistency reflects the extent to which different elements of an impression—such as trait attributions and overall

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2026.104887
Received 11 March 2025; Received in revised form 26 January 2026; Accepted 29 January 2026
Available online 2 February 2026

evaluations—support one another within a coherent representational structure. While impression formation is often studied as an individual cognitive process, social and collaborative contexts also play a critical role. Communication about others—through gossip and attitude sharing—can create convergence in impressions (Kashima, 2014; Ruscher & Hammer, 2006; Smith & Collins, 2009). From this perspective, strengthening an impression through communication entails reinforcing the relational links among its elements, such that information aligned with an initial judgment becomes more internally coherent and accessible while alternative interpretations are increasingly constrained.

A primary experimental tool for studying such interpersonal convergence and its influence on impressions is the Sharing-Is-Believing (SIB) paradigm (Higgins et al., 2021). In SIB, a communicator describes a target to an audience who has pre-expressed positive or negative opinions. When the target information is ambiguous, the communicator's description tends to shift to match the audience's view. This process is called audience tuning (Echterhoff & Higgins, 2017; Higgins, 1992). Tuning reflects a motivation to establish shared reality—a sense of mutual understanding about the target—which reduces uncertainty and increases confidence in the judgment (Higgins et al., 2021; Kopietz et al., 2010). Importantly, audience tuning and shared reality also shapes memory and impressions: individuals tend to recall information about the target in ways consistent with the tuned description (Echterhoff & Higgins, 2017), and traits emphasized by the audience become more accessible (Wagner et al., 2024; Wagner & Echterhoff, 2025). By reducing uncertainty and fulfilling epistemic and relational needs, shared reality guides social judgments (Echterhoff & Higgins, 2021).

However, audience tuning focused on how individuals adjust their judgments to align with others' views. A complementary pathway to shared reality is social verification, wherein a person's initial impressions are confirmed by another individual (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Social verification similarly satisfies epistemic and relational needs: agreement with a partner increases confidence and trust, whereas disagreement often induces uncertainty, discomfort, and reduces liking toward the partner (Fazio, 1979; Clement & Krueger, 2000; Festinger, 1957; Ross et al., 1977; Shrauger & Jones, 1968). For instance, Rossignac-Milon et al. (2024) showed that when participants' hiring choices were verified by a partner, they reported higher shared reality, epistemic trust, and relational motivation compared with a no-verification condition.

Shared reality arising from social verification differs from other social processes. Unlike social consensus, which reflects objective group-level agreement and impersonal support to one's perspective (Ross et al., 1977; Ruscher & Hammer, 2006), shared reality from social verification is a subjective, interpersonal experience that fulfills both relational and epistemic needs and increases feelings of being on the same page with another person (for further discussion, see Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Hillman et al., 2023). Social verification further differs from balance theory mechanisms, which require the verifier to be liked to influence impressions of a third party (Gawronski et al., 2005). In contrast, social verification effects emerge also in minimal interactions with strangers (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2024), suggesting that verification itself—not pre-existing partner evaluations—is the primary driver of responses to feedback.

Despite such advances, it remains unclear how social verification influences the internal structure of impressions themselves. People are motivated to achieve coherence, sometimes even at the cost of introducing bias into their initial cognitions (Echterhoff et al., 2009; Simon & Read, 2025). In decision contexts, impressions are often organized around prior choices, with subsequent decisions adjusting to maintain coherence with the selected option. Building on this coherence premise, we propose that receiving social verification may shape impressions along two key dimensions. First, verification may increase accessibility, making trait attributions easier to generate because relevant information is more readily available, akin to effects observed in audience tuning (Eitam & Higgins, 2010; Wagner et al., 2024). Second, verification may enhance internal consistency, strengthening choice-consistent attributions across traits by aligning subsequent judgments with prior decisions (Asch, 1946; Cohen, 1961; Hamilton, 1981; Srull & Wyer, 1989; Zajonc, 1960). For example, extending Rossignac-Milon et al.'s (2024) paradigm, when a job applicant is chosen and that choice is verified by a partner, subsequent evaluations may become more accessible and consistently positive for the chosen applicant, and more accessible and consistently negative for a non-chosen applicant. In contrast, the absence of verification may induce doubt, weakening the consistency and accessibility of resulting impressions.

1. The present research

We conducted four experiments to investigate the role of social verification in impression formation in a collaborative hiring decision task. We predicted that receiving social verification (vs. no verification) from a study partner would enhance the experience of shared reality with that partner. Beyond this experiential effect, we tested whether verification promotes impression consolidation—defined as the tendency for subsequent impressions to become more accessible and choice-consistent with prior evaluative choices. This prediction draws, first, on classic accounts of impression formation emphasizing people's tendency to maintain coherence betweentraits and overall evaluations. Initial choices thus provide a scaffold for subsequent consistency-preserving judgments. Second, it builds on shared reality theory, which suggests that others' verification of one's choices can strengthen the cognitive representations underlying social impressions.

Choice consistency may therefore manifest as more positive impressions of chosen applicants and more negative impressions of non-chosen applicants, consolidating prior evaluations. In other words, if social verification rendered choices subjectively appropriate and real, verified impressions should consolidate in a choice-consistent direction, reflected in a polarization between positive and negative trait attributions for previously chosen versus non-chosen applicants. This effect may also be trait-specific, such that receiving verification strengthens attributions of applicant-relevant positive (vs. negative) trait information for chosen (vs. non-chosen) applicants more than for traits unrelated to the applicant (i.e., traits not mentioned in the applicant profile). In addition, impression content about the target was expected to become more accessible under verification, reflected in faster attribution times. Importantly, although consistency and accessibility both characterize impressions, they reflect distinct—though potentially interrelated—aspects of impression consolidation. Effects may therefore differ across these dimensions, and assessing both allows us to determine whether verification selectively influences consistency, accessibility, or both. Finally, we expected that the self-reported experience of shared reality elicited by verification would be associated with these consolidation effects.

In all experiments, participants sequentially chose one of two job applicants. They were informed that another person (in fact, a computer-simulated agent) was performing the task in parallel and that their decisions would be shared after each trial, as in Rossignac-Milon et al. (2024). Applicants were presented with ambiguous descriptions of their personality and behaviors, containing both positive and negative traits, along with facial photographs pretested to be evaluatively neutral (in Experiment 3, only photographs were presented). This ambiguity was intended to create uncertainty, encouraging participants to seek verification and shared reality.

Impression consolidation was measured using a trait attribution task, inspired by Wagner et al. (2024), that assessed both the rate and speed of trait attributions to applicant photos, with some adjustments across experiments. From the perspective of shared reality theory, responses on the attribution task reflect the extent to which participants' impressions of a target person's characteristics are affected by prior social verification. Facial images were chosen as targets because of their strong mnemonic value and their tendency to spontaneously elicit associations with identity information and impressions (Todorov et al., 2015).

In Experiment 1, we predicted that verified (vs. non-verified) decisions would produce faster and more consistent attributions of positive traits to chosen applicants and negative traits to non-chosen applicants. Social verification was expected to polarize impressions of chosen and non-chosen applicants even if initial evaluations were not strongly divergent (spreading effect; Brehm, 1956; see also Simon & Read, 2025). Experiment 2 replicated this paradigm while addressing procedural confounds. Experiment 3 tested whether consolidation is constrained by domain-relevance—emerging more clearly for domain-relevant traits than irrelevant traits—and whether it persists when impressions are formed under more minimal conditions, based on faces alone. In Experiments 1–3, the attribution task consisted of a two-alternative forced choice task, with one positive and one negative trait choice, which might facilitate the detection of polarization from social verification.

Finally, in Experiment 4, we aimed to pinpoint evaluative and trait-specific (i.e., semantic) dimensions of social-verification effects on impression consolidation. Different from Experiment 3, traits were distinguished not by domain relevance but by their pertinence to each profile description. Thus, we examined whether verification increased not only positive characterizations of chosen (vs. non-chosen) applicants, but also trait-specific attributions— that is, the attribution of traits that were explicitly stated or implied in applicants' profiles relative to unrelated traits (i.e., traits not present/implied in profiles). To better isolate trait-recognition processes, participants completed a single-trait attribution task with yes/no responses rather than a two-alternative choice task.

Across all experiments, participants were expected to report higher shared reality with verifying partners than with non-verifying partners.

All studies, measures, manipulations, and data/participant exclusions are reported in the manuscript or its Supplementary Materials (SM). Experimental protocols, materials, and analysis scripts are available at https://osf.io/ptgzd/?view_only=282747d97f6a4b41a5cb51a158c0d7f3 Experiment 4 was pre-registered (https://aspredicted.org/6e7ir7.pdf), with any deviations noted.

2. Experiments 1 and 2

Experiment 1 provided an initial test of social verification effects on impression consolidation. In Experiment 1, the verification screen displayed the applicant chosen by the partner alongside the participant's chosen applicant. Repeated exposure to a chosen face may lead to more positive evaluations (i.e., mere exposure, Duke et al., 2014; Zajonc, 1968), thus inflating impression consolidation. Thus, Experiment 2 was conducted to replicate Experiment 1 while ruling out the possible role of mere exposure to the verified pictures. For both experiments, we hypothesized that social verification (vs. no verification) by the partner would enhance the sense of shared reality and strengthen impression consolidation in a subsequent trait attribution task. Impression consolidation was measured as the tendency to make choice-consistent trait attributions to previously chosen applicants, with faster response latencies indexing greater accessibility of trait information.

We also controlled for potential confounds, specifically mood in Experiment 1 and partner's liking in Experiment 2. We expected verification to increase positive mood, as it should be perceived as a positive experience, and increase liking of the partner, as we tend to like people who agree with our opinions, whereas no verification is likely to increase dissonance and negative feelings due to the inconsistency between one's own judgment and that of others (Hillman et al., 2023). Moreover, positive mood and pleasant interaction-related feelings may even increase impression consolidation, as they can improve memory for details (e.g., Kieckhaefer & Wright, 2015; Madan et al., 2019). Nevertheless, we expected that the manipulation of verification would have an effect on shared reality and on impression consolidation independent of these confounding factors.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Design

Participants were assigned at random to one of two conditions (social verification: yes vs. no). Two applicant types (chosen vs. non-chosen) were defined based on the participant's prior hiring choices. Trait attribution responses and latencies, and the explicit measures related to the experienced shared reality were the main dependent variables.

2.1.2. Power analyses and participants

In all experiments, we collected Prolific users from the UK and the US who were required to speak English fluently and have no prior recruiting experience. Because no published research provided clear benchmarks for the expected effect sizes of social verification on impression consolidation, sample sizes were determined a priori using power analyses conducted with G*Power (Faul et al., 2009), based on the smallest effect size of interest. For Experiment 1, it indicated that 260 participants were required to detect a small-to-medium effect ($d = 0.35$, Funder & Ozer, 2019) for the difference between verification and no-verification conditions (power = 0.80, $\alpha = 0.05$). After excluding one participant for incomplete data, the final sample comprised 259 participants (127 females, 132 males, $M_{age} = 41.26$, $SD_{age} = 13.24$; verification $n = 131$, no verification $n = 128$).[1]

In Experiment 2, we expected a reduction in effect due to more stringent conditions. A G*Power analysis suggested 278 participants for a smaller effect ($d = 0.30$) in a test comparing verification conditions differences in choice-consistency (power = 0.80 at $\alpha = 0.05$; we conducted one-tailed tests due to our confirmatory, directional hypotheses based on Experiment 1). We collected 291 participants, of which nine were excluded because of incomplete data. Ultimately, we considered 282 participants (107 females, 175 males, $M_{age} = 33.30$, $SD_{age} = 9.74$; verification $n = 150$, no verification $n = 132$). These sample sizes were also sufficient for observing differences in sense of shared reality due to verification, as we found effects larger than $d = 2.77$ (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2024; Studies 1a-1b).

2.2. Materials

Applicant profiles. To increase difficulty and epistemic needs, we used ambiguous applicant profiles (see SM1), following Rossignac-Milon et al. (2024). Forty-one Prolific users (32 females, 9 males, $M_{age} = 30.97$, $SD_{age} = 9.61$) acted as recruiters, rating ten profiles on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 9 (definitely) for a middle management role. Each profile included two positive (e.g., 'The applicant makes decisions quickly') and two negative behavioral descriptions (e.g., 'Occasionally, when he reaches a decision, he does not consider all relevant information'). On average, ratings hovered near the midpoint, confirming the profiles' ambiguity ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 0.52$).

Applicant photographs. Each applicant was presented with a facial photograph to ensure that participants could later identify them during the attribution task. First, pictures were pre-tested to be as ambiguous as possible, with ratings close to the neutral point (0) on a scale from −3 to +3 for competence and attractiveness—two key dimensions in recruitment (Pireddu et al., 2022). This ambiguity was intended to increase uncertainty about spontaneously perceived traits during hiring decisions. Thus, thirty-five Prolific users (20 females, 15 males, Mage = 25.71, SDage = 4.10) were shown 112, realistic, front-facing AI-generated faces representing White male adults with neutral expressions (Karras et al., 2019). These were rated on attractiveness (1 item) and competence (3 items pertaining to competence, intelligence, and efficiency, see Pireddu et al., 2022) on a scale from 1 to 7. We selected ten

[1] The asymmetries may be due to imperfect control over Inquisit Web's random assignment of new participants to conditions, which occurred after some participants prematurely ended the experiment.

faces from the pool (some were changed from one experiment to the other to generalize the results beyond the set, see OSF for the pictures; Experiment 1: $M_{competence} = 4.65$, $SD_{competence} = 0.34$; $M_{attractiveness} = 4.64$, $SD_{attractiveness} = 0.20$; Experiment 2: $M_{competence} = 4.45$, $SD_{competence} = 0.25$; $M_{attractiveness} = 4.39$, $SD_{attractiveness} = 0.33$).

Trait attribution task. This task measured key parameters of impression consolidation. It was operationalized as the tendency to associate chosen and non-chosen applicants with positive and negative traits, respectively, with the assumption that a positive trait should be attributed to a chosen applicant more frequently and more easily than to a non-chosen applicant (and the opposite for a negative trait). Target applicants were presented at random with their photo in the center of the screen, with two traits, one positive and one negative, displayed at the bottom left and right of the screen. The list of traits was generated through internal discussion to include traits deemed relevant for hiring decisions (e.g., (in)competent, (un)intelligent; see SM2 for the lists; Pireddu et al., 2022). The traits were presented randomly and never in direct semantic opposition—for example, 'organized' was never paired with 'disorganized' but with another trait—to increase task difficulty and encourage participants to pay closer attention.

Participants were asked to select the trait that best described the applicant as quickly as they could. We excluded trials involving the two applicants that did not match the assigned verification condition (see Procedure), because they were irrelevant to the focal measures and including them would have unnecessarily prolonged the experiment. The measure consisted of 24 trials. Each of eight applicants appeared three times, paired randomly with different trait pairs.

Self-report measures. We used the Shared Reality-Target Scale (abbreviated in SR-T, 5 items, Rossignac-Milon et al., 2024) to measure the influence of the verification manipulations on the sense of shared reality with the partner (e.g., "*Mike and I are on the same wavelength about the applicants*", 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Moreover, we tested the effect of verification on shared reality related constructs, epistemic trust (3 items, e.g., "*I trust Mike's opinion about the applicants*", 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), and relational motivation (3 items, e.g., "*I would like to spend more time with Mike*", 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

We also measured some competing variables to test the robustness of our predictions. In Experiment 1, we measured the influence of social verification on positive and negative mood with the short PANAS (Thompson, 2007). In Experiment 2, we measured feelings toward the partner after verification with a single item (-5 = negative, $+5$ = positive). All scales, in these and subsequent experiments, showed high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.84$).[2]

2.2.1. Procedure

See Fig. 1 for a graphical representation. Inquisit 4.0.10 (Millisecond Software) was used for programming all experiments. Participants engaged in an online collaborative task, working with a (fictitious) partner, Mike, to choose the best applicant for a middle-management position. They were told they had been paired with the first available person in a continuous, rolling recruitment process (see SM3 for the advertisement). Participants were instructed to pay close attention to the information provided, including applicant photographs, and were asked to remember this material for later tasks.

To enhance credibility, participants were told to wait for the connection to be established, then they typed a personal nickname and were introduced to Mike, who greeted them by name. These interaction screens included animations (e.g., jumping dots for 5 s) simulating real-time online connection and deliberation by Mike. Then, during the decision phase, participants reviewed pairs of applicants, with photos and profile descriptions displayed sequentially at their own pace, before choosing an applicant by clicking on their photo. After deciding, participants viewed feedback indicating Mike's choice (5 s).

The experiments differed in feedback design. In Experiment 1, feedback showed participants' and Mike's choices as two side-by-side photos: identical photos indicated verification, different photos indicated no verification. In the verification condition, this setup risked inflating positive bias due to higher exposure to the chosen applicant, whose photo was displayed twice while the non-chosen applicant was not shown at all. Experiment 2 removed this asymmetry by displaying both applicants' photos in two labeled columns ("You chose:" and "Mike chose:"), with chosen photos framed in green. Verification highlighted the same photo in both columns; no verification highlighted different photos. To enhance realism, four of five feedback responses were consistent with the assigned condition (verification or no verification), with the single inconsistent response always occurring between the second and fourth trials to avoid primacy or recency effects.

After this phase, participants completed the attribution task and questionnaires in that order in Experiment 1, as our primary interest was in consolidation effects measured through the attribution task. In Experiment 2, we reversed this sequence to test the robustness of the effects when trait attributions were delayed, thereby increasing memory demands. Participants were informed that Mike was completing these tasks simultaneously. Finally, participants were debriefed about the deception procedure and compensated for their participation.

2.2.2. Analytic approach

All analyses were conducted using R 4.4.2. For this and the subsequent experiments, we analyzed the attribution task using signal detection theory (SDT; Herzog et al., 2019; R package *psycho*, Makowski, 2018). Although SDT was originally developed to measure perceptual discrimination, we applied it here to compute discriminability (d') as an index of choice-consistent trait attribution. Specifically, we defined each participant's chosen applicant as the target and the non-chosen applicant as the distractor. Attributions of positive traits to the chosen applicant were coded as Hits, and positive attributions to the non-chosen applicant as False Alarms (FA). Because each trial required participants to select one trait from a positive–negative pair, choosing the positive trait inherently meant rejecting its negative counterpart, which ensured a symmetric calculation of discriminability for both applicants. Higher discriminability, therefore, indicates a stronger tendency to make choice-consistent trait attributions for both the chosen and the non-chosen applicant. If verification strengthened impression consolidation, we expected a larger Hit–FA difference (i.e., $d' = z(\text{Hit}) - z(\text{FA})$) under verification relative to no verification. Other SDT parameters were not reported, as they were not theoretically relevant to our hypotheses.

Latencies were analyzed as a measure of cognitive accessibility of traits in relation to verification and applicant choice, with extreme observations removed trial-wise per participant using the interquartile range method before averaging. Multiple observations were adjusted using the "Holm" method. Statistical assumptions for parametric models were checked, and when violated, robust standard errors were used (see SM8). We also re-analyzed the data using generalized mixed models, which may be used as an alternative to SDT (DeCarlo, 1998). Since results were unaffected, we chose to report discriminability only because we viewed it as easier to interpret for the reader (see SM9).

We thus tested whether verification fostered a sense of shared reality with the partner and whether impressions were consolidated more following it (i.e., higher discriminability and faster latencies). We

[2] We included some exploratory measures, the results of which are included in the SM. In Experiment 1, we assessed the self-reported perceived competence of applicants, with similar results (SM4). Experiment 2 measured memory for the sources of decisions (SM5). In Experiment 2, we included a similar trait attribution task immediately after the main task, this time focusing on traits less related to hiring than competence, which found no effects (i.e., morality) (SM6); Experiment 3 better addresses domain-relevance. Experiments included a suspiciousness open question before debriefing: we report descriptive differences and a re-analysis on non-suspicious participants only (SM7).

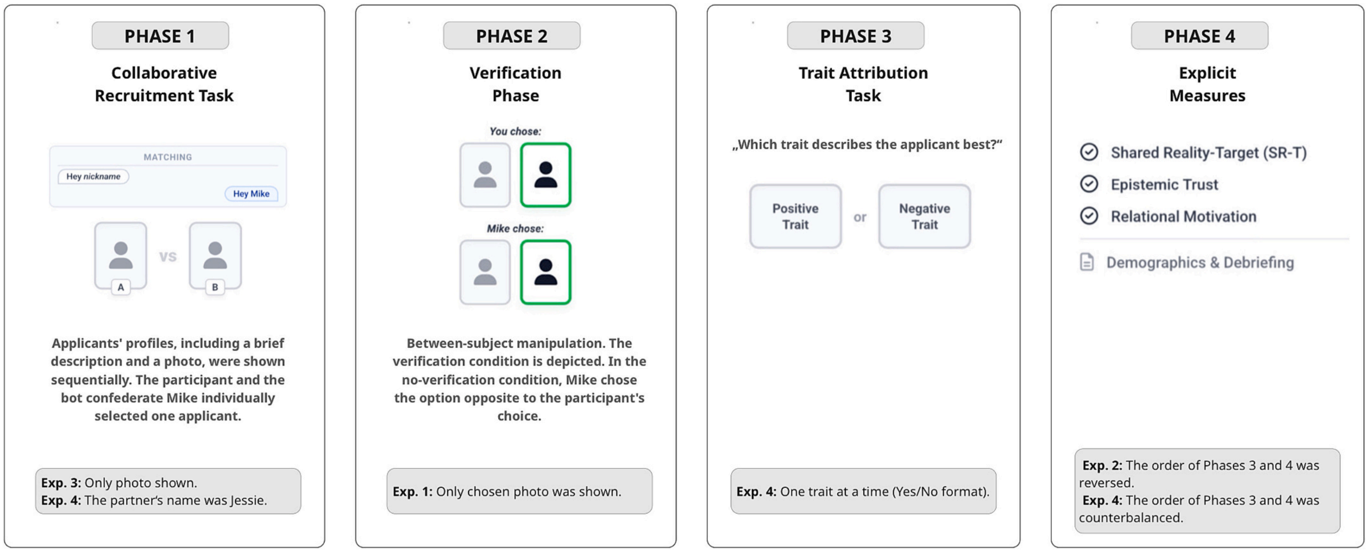

Fig. 1. Summary of the Experimental Procedure. Changes between Experiments are Noted within each Phase.

further examined the process, looking at the association of consolidation with the sense of shared reality (SR-T) and related constructs (epistemic trust, relational motivation). We calculated correlations across conditions, which reflect the extent to which verification-based shared reality relates to impression consolidation. We tested the robustness of our findings by including mood and partner liking as covariates to rule out alternative explanations. To analyze differences in negative mood due to verification, we used robust standard errors because the normality of residuals assumption was violated (R package *lmtest*, Zeileis & Hothorn, 2002). In Experiment 2, we reported tests with one-tailed *p*-values because of the directionality of our hypotheses based on Experiment 1.

3. Results

3.1. Experiment 1

Descriptive analyses are depicted in Table 1.

Shared reality measures. As expected, verification (vs. no verification) increased the sense of shared reality measured with SR-T, $t(235) = 30.07$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.92$ 95%CI [3.48, 4.36], epistemic trust, $t(251.23) = 17.18$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.17$ 95%CI [1.85, 2.48], and relational motivation, $t(252) = 6.48$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.82$ 95%CI [0.56, 1.07]. Interestingly, verification did not affect positive mood, $t(253) = 1.22$, $p = .223$, $d = 0.15$ 95%CI [−0.09, 0.40], or negative mood, $t(257) = 0.46$, $p = .645$, $d = 0.06$ 95%CI [−0.19, 0.30]. Effects of verification on SR-T remained significant when statistically controlling for positive and negative mood, $t(254) = 30.24$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.79$ 95%CI [3.38, 4.20].

Impression consolidation. Importantly, receiving verification (vs no verification) increased discriminability in the attribution task, $t(254) = 3.52$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.44$ 95%CI [0.19, 0.69]. It also did so when positive and negative mood were included as covariates, $t(254) = 3.48$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.43$ 95%CI [0.19, 0.68].

When looking at the differences in latencies in a 2 (verification vs. no verification) x 2 (chosen vs. non-chosen) ANOVA we found that participants who received verification were faster than those who did not, $F(1, 256) = 9.12$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.20$ 95%CI [0.07, 0.33], and that they were faster for chosen targets than non-chosen ones, $F(1, 256) = 6.37$, $p = .012$, $d = 0.17$ 95%CI [0.04, 0.29]. The interaction was non-significant, $F(1, 256) = 2.12$, $p = .146$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$ 90%CI [0.00, 0.04]. The main effect of verification was still significant when accounting for the effects of positive and negative mood, $F(1, 256) = 6.00$, $p = .02$, $d = 0.31$ 95%CI [0.06, 0.55].[3]

Association of SR-T and consolidation. A correlation table including measured variables is in the SM (Table SM10.1), here we report key findings (*p*-values adjusted across six tests). We observed a positive association of SR-T with discriminability ($r = 0.23$ 95%CI [0.11, 0.34], $p < .001$ $p_{adj} < 0.001$) and a negative one with the latencies (i.e., faster; $r = -0.21$ 95%CI [−0.32, −0.09], $p < .001$ $p_{adj} < 0.001$), meaning that an increased sense of shared reality favored impression consolidation. The two consolidation parameters were not correlated ($r = -0.08$ 95%CI [−0.20, 0.04], $p = .265$, $p_{adj} = 0.646$). Only positive mood was positively correlated with SR-T ($r = 0.17$ 95%CI [0.05, 0.29], $p = .007$, $p_{adj} = 0.028$), but not with the other variables.

3.2. Experiment 2

See Table 1 for descriptive analyses.

Shared reality measures. Verification (vs. no verification) increased the sense of shared reality measured with SR-T, $t(244) = 31.14$, $p_{one\text{-}tailed} < 0.001$, $d = 3.99$ 95%CI [3.55, 4.42], epistemic trust, $t(260) = 18.40$, $p_{one\text{-}tailed} < 0.001$, $d = 2.28$ 95%CI [1.97. 2.59], and relational motivation, $t(278) = 6.59$, $p_{one\text{-}tailed} < 0.001$, $d = 0.79$ 95%CI [0.55, 1.03]. Verification increased positive feelings toward the partner, $t(274) = 8.65$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.05$ 95%CI [0.79, 1.30]. The effect of verification on SR-T resisted when feelings was included as covariate, $t(211) = 26.83$, $p_{one\text{-}tailed} < 0.001$, $d = 3.21$ 95%CI [2.86, 3.57].

Impression consolidation. Moreover, receiving verification (vs no verification) increased discriminability in the attribution task, $t(279) = 2.33$, $p_{one\text{-}tailed} = 0.010$, $d = 0.28$ 95%CI [0.04, 0.51]. This effect did not change when including feelings as a covariate, $t(279) = 2.11$, $p_{one\text{-}tailed} = 0.015$, $d = 0.25$, 95%CI [0.02, 0.49].

Differences in latencies, tested in a 2 (verified vs. not verified) x 2 (chosen vs. non-chosen) ANOVA, showed that participants were faster for chosen targets than non-chosen ones, $F(1, 280) = 9.97$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.19$ 95%CI [0.07, 0.31], but the other effects were non-significant, verification: $F(1, 280) = 0.11$, $p_{one\text{-}tailed} = 0.370$, $d = 0.04$ 95%CI [−0.19, 0.27]; interaction: $F(1, 280) = 0.11$, $p = .870$, $\eta_p^2 < 0.001$ 90%CI [0.00, 0.01]. When controlling for feelings, the effect of verification

[3] In Experiments 1 to 3, an analysis of latencies on only choice-consistent trait attributions produced the same results (see SM9).

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations (in Parentheses) of Experiments 1 and 2 as a Function of Verification and, for Latencies only, whether the Applicant Was Chosen.

	Experiment 1				Experiment 2			
	Verification		No Verification		Verification		No Verification	
SR-T	5.70 (0.69)		2.59 (0.96)		6.05 (0.64)		2.74 (1.11)	
Epistemic trust	5.63 (0.95)		3.44 (1.11)		6.10 (0.86)		3.69 (1.31)	
Relational motivation	5.33 (1.05)		4.42 (1.19)		5.60 (1.08)		4.65 (1.32)	
Hit/False alarm rates	84.4/76.1		77.7/77.8		86.6/77.7		80.4/76.4	
Discriminability (d')	0.28 (0.59)		0.03 (0.55)		0.31 (0.62)		0.13 (0.66)	
Positive mood	3.32 (0.78)		3.18 (0.88)		–		–	
Negative mood	0.78 (0.59)		0.88 (0.49)		–		–	
Interpersonal feelings	–		–		3.48 (1.61)		1.55 (2.11)	
	C	*NC*	*C*	*NC*	*C*	*NC*	*C*	*NC*
Latencies (*ms*)	1689 (462)	1741 (491)	1883 (477)	1897 (481)	1748 (510)	1797 (549)	1729 (553)	1774 (550)

Note. C = Chosen Applicant, NC = Non-Chosen Applicant. SR-T (Shared Reality-Target), epistemic trust, and relation motivation were measured on scales ranging from 1 to 7, mood on a scale from 1 to 5, and feelings on a scale from −5 to +5.

remained non-significant, $F(1, 280) = 0.57$, $p_{\text{one-tailed}} = 0.223$, $d = 0.09$ 95%CI [−0.14, 0.33].

Association of SR-T and consolidation. A complete table is reported in the SM (Table SM10.2) (*p*-values adjusted across five tests). We observed a positive and significant association between SR-T and discriminability but not reaching the standard threshold when adjusted for multiple tests ($r = 0.13$ 95%CI[0.01, 0.24], $p_{\text{one-tailed}} = 0.017$, $p_{\text{one-tailed, adj}} = 0.087$), and no association of SR-T with the latencies ($r = 0.03$ 95% CI[−0.09, 0.15], $p_{\text{one-tailed}} = 0.335$, $p_{\text{one-tailed, adj}} = 0.500$). Also, the correlation between the two parameters of consolidation was non-significant ($r = 0.07$ 95%CI[0.05, 0.19], $p = .268$, $p_{adj} = 0.999$). Feeling toward the partner was positively associated with SR-T ($r = 0.62$ 95%CI[0.54, 0.69], $p < .001$, $p_{adj} < 0.001$) but not with the other variables.

3.3. Discussion

Across both experiments, social verification reliably increased experienced shared reality, epistemic trust, and relational motivation toward the partner. Most importantly, verification promoted choice-consistent impression consolidation, reflected in increased attributions of positive traits to chosen applicants and negative traits to non-chosen applicants. Effects on accessibility were less consistent, emerging in Experiment 1 but not in Experiment 2. Verification did not influence mood, though it increased positive interpersonal feelings, which did not account for consolidation effects.

The partial inconsistency between experiments highlights the need for further testing. Moreover, because stimuli in Experiments 1 and 2 were selected for presumed job relevance, it remained unclear whether consolidation occurs only for domain-relevant traits or also for traits aligned with a general evaluation but irrelevant for recruitment. To address this limitation, we conducted the next experiment.

4. Experiment 3

This experiment tested whether impression consolidation following verification depends on the domain relevance of traits. We considered two possibilities. First, consolidation might be stronger for domain-relevant traits (e.g., competence, intelligence) than for irrelevant ones (e.g., sentimentalism, athleticism), consistent with the idea that shared reality prioritizes task-relevant information—in this case, identifying suitable applicants (Eitam & Higgins, 2010). Alternatively, verification may produce a generalized evaluative shift in which impressions spill over into unrelated domains (e.g., halo effect, Gräf & Unkelbach, 2016; Zysberg & Nevo, 2004). To test these competing predictions, all traits were pretested and categorized as either relevant or irrelevant for hiring decisions.

A second aim was to examine whether social verification shapes impressions formed from faces alone. Faces are sufficient for rapid and spontaneous judgments and recruitment decisions (Todorov et al., 2015). In the absence of profile descriptions, participants must rely entirely on facial cues when evaluating applicants (Hackel et al., 2022; Pireddu et al., 2022). These judgments are malleable and can shift according to momentary goals, with downstream consequences for social interactions (Lin & Adolphs, 2023). Because the faces were pretested to be ambiguous and to elicit uncertainty regarding applicants' suitability for the role, we expected verification to consolidate face-based impressions to a similar extent as in Experiments 1–2.[4]

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Design

We employed a 2 (social verification: yes vs. no) x 2 (trait relevance: relevant vs. irrelevant) between-subject design. Applicant choice (chosen vs. non-chosen) was created based on the individual hiring decisions. The key dependent variables were the same as in the previous experiments.

4.1.2. Power analyses and participants

Sample size was based on the smallest effect found for choice-consistent discriminability ($d = 0.28$) targeting power = 0.80 ($\alpha = 0.05$). For testing our competing hypotheses about trait relevance, we simulated with G*Power the sample size required for the main effect of relevance and the interaction of a 2 (verification: yes vs. no) x 2 (trait relevance: relevant vs. irrelevant) between-subjects ANOVA on discriminability with the same target effect size and power threshold. We obtained 403 Prolific users. After removing two participants with incomplete data, 401 participants remained (198 females, 203 males, $M_{age} = 41.43$, $SD_{Age} = 12.43$, Verification Relevant = 111, Irrelevant = 105; No Verification Relevant = 97, Irrelevant = 88).

Sensitivity power analyses suggested that this sample size was sufficient to observe interaction effects of $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$ for latencies in a 2x2x2 mixed ANOVA (MorePower, Campbell & Thompson, 2012) and a simple correlation between variables of $r = 0.13$ (G*Power) with power = 0.80 and $\alpha = 0.05$.

4.2. Materials

We used the applicant's pictures from Experiment 2. Also, we created a list of 32 positive and negative pairs of relevant traits, and 32

[4] We conducted another study similar to this one but with one key difference. This study included a within-subjects manipulation of domain-relevance. We found unexpected effects that we attributed to the distraction due to the saliency of the within-subject relevance manipulation, which may have changed the task's goal to discriminating between relevant and irrelevant traits instead of deciding between positive and negative traits. Results are presented in SM11.

irrelevant traits, to be used in the attribution task. A pretest was conducted on 40 Prolific users (24 female, 31 male, 1 other/non-binary, $M_{age} = 39.48$, $SD_{age} = 12.77$) to isolate eight relevant and eight irrelevant pairs of traits (2 items, e.g., "How relevant is this trait to judgments about an applicant's job qualification?", 1 = not at all, 7 = very much). To avoid confounding valence with relevance, positive and negative traits were assessed in two independent samples, and average relevance of each pair was calculated after recomposing them. The eight relevant traits were perceived as more relevant (e.g., competent – incompetent; $M = 6.02$; $SD = 0.36$) than irrelevant ones (e.g., sentimental – unsentimental; $M = 2.06$; $SD = 0.46$). The complete list is provided in SM2.

4.2.1. Procedure

The order of the tasks was identical to Experiment 1, but the feedback page was structured as in Experiment 2. The only differences concerned the attribution task. First, to enforce the choice between inconsistent response alternatives, this time we presented traits in semantically opposite pairs (e.g., competent vs. incompetent). Second, to enhance reliability, the number of trials increased from 24 to 48 per condition, with each of the eight faces presented six times using different trait pairs.

4.3. Results

Descriptive analyses are presented in Table 2.

4.3.1. Shared reality measures

We tested the effect of receiving verification on our self-report measures of shared reality. We did not have any reason to expect an influence of relevance of the traits on these variables. However, since we measured them after exposure to either one or the other type of trait in the attribution task, we controlled for it in a 2 × 2 factorial ANOVA. Receiving verification increased the experience of SR-T more than no verification, $F(1, 397) = 500.93$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.18$ 95%CI [1.05, 1.31], which was also higher when the previous task was dealing with relevant rather than irrelevant traits, $F(1, 397) = 5.29$, $p = .022$, $d = 0.12$ 95%CI [0.02, 0.22]. The interaction was non-significant, $F(1, 397) = 0.40$, $p = .538$, $\eta_p^2 < 0.001$ 90%CI [0.00, 0.01]. Similarly, verification increased epistemic trust, $F(1, 397) = 95.67$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.52$ 95%CI [0.41, 0.62], and relational motivation, $F(1, 397) = 7.37$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.14$ 95%CI [0.04, 0.25]. No other effects were significant ($p > .09$).

4.3.2. Impression consolidation

Regarding impression consolidation, Levene's test indicated a violation of homogeneity, $F(3, 397) = 17.98$, $p < .001$; therefore, we employed robust standard errors (R package *lmtest*). The analyses showed that there was an effect of relevance, such that discriminability was higher for relevant (vs. irrelevant) traits, $F(1, 397) = 66.26$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.82$ 95%CI [0.61, 1.02]. Importantly, we found that, across relevance conditions, social verification (vs. no verification) increased discriminability, $F(1, 397) = 6.35$, $p = .012$, $d = 0.25$ 95%CI [0.06, 0.45]. We also observed an interaction between verification and relevance, $F(1, 397) = 5.62$, $p = .020$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$ 90%CI [0.001, 0.04], indicating that verification increased choice-consistent attributions of relevant traits compared to no verification, $t(397) = 3.39$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.34$ 95%CI [0.14, 0.54], but not differently when traits were irrelevant, $t(397) = 0.12$, $p = .904$, $d = 0.01$ 95%CI [−18, 0.21].

The 2x2x2 mixed ANOVA on latencies revealed that participants were faster when traits were relevant than irrelevant, $F(1, 397) = 39.95$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.63$ 95%CI [0.43, 0.84], and when the applicant was previously chosen than not, $F(1, 397) = 28.94$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.54$ 95%CI [0.34, 0.74]. The interaction between verification and applicant choice was significant, $F(1, 397) = 16.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$ 90%CI [0.01, 0.07]. Participants that were verified attributed traits more quickly when applicants were chosen (vs. non-chosen) compared to when they were not verified. Also, the interaction of relevance and applicant choice was significant, $F(1, 397) = 26.76$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$ 90%CI [0.03, 0.10]. Participants attributed relevant traits faster to chosen than to non-chosen applicants, but the difference was reduced when traits were irrelevant. These effects were qualified by an interaction between the three factors, $F(1, 397) = 8.04$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$ 90%CI [0.003, 0.05]. A simple effects analysis on this interaction showed that traits were attributed to chosen applicants faster than non-chosen applicants, but only when verified and when the traits were relevant, $t(397) = 8.76$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.88$ 95%CI [0.67, 1.08]. There was no difference in the latencies of the other three combinations of the conditions, $t(397) < 1.53$, $p > .127$, $d < 0.15$.

4.3.3. Association between SR-T and consolidation

We tested associations between our variables (see Table SM10.3). Since we assumed that the association between SR-T and the consolidation parameters would be higher for high-relevance traits across samples, we conducted regression analyses testing the effect of SR-T on our consolidation parameters with domain-relevance as a moderator. For discriminability, we found a non-significant effect of SR-T, $b = 0.04$ 95%CI [−0.006, 0.09], $t(397) = 1.69$, $p = .092$, which was qualified by a significant interaction with domain-relevance, $b = 0.06$ 95%CI [0.008, 0.11], $t(397) = 2.29$, $p = .022$ (See Fig. 2). The slope of SR-T in the relevant condition was significant and positive, $b = 0.10$, 95%CI [0.04, 16], $t(397) = 2.97$, $p = .003$, while it was non-significant in the irrelevant condition, $b = -0.01$, 95%CI [−0.09, 06], $t(397) = -0.41$, $p = .684$.

The regression on latencies, as a function of SR-T, applicant choice, and relevance, had no main effect of SR-T, $b = -0.21$ 95%CI [−52.22, 0.8.80], $t(397) = -1.39$, $p = .164$, but an interaction of SR-T with applicant choice, $b = 0.12.77$ 95%CI [0.008, 0.11], $t(397) = 3.40$, $p < .001$, showing that SR-T prediction of faster latencies was stronger for chosen, $b = -0.34.48$ 95%CI [−66, −3.01], $t(443) = 3.40$, $p = .03$, than for non-chosen applicants, $b = -8.94$ 95%CI [−40.40, 22.63], $t(443) = -0.55$, $p = .558$. We found no other significant interaction effects involving relevance, $t < 1.48$, $p > .139$.

4.4. Discussion

In Experiment 3, we analyzed boundary conditions of our assumptions. Again, verification produced a stronger sense of shared reality compared to no verification. Moreover, we observed that verification influenced both parameters of impression consolidation for traits relevant to the domain but not for irrelevant traits. This pattern was further corroborated by the association of self-reported shared reality with discriminability for relevant but not for irrelevant traits. However, SR-T predicted latencies only as a function of applicant choice, not trait relevance. These findings underscore the conditions that enable verification to strengthen the consolidation of workplace-related impressions.

5. Aggregate analysis

Experiments 1–3 shared similar designs and measures, which allowed us to conduct meta-analytic aggregate analyses on discriminability and latency differences across the whole sample ($N = 749$). For Experiment 3, only data from the relevant-trait condition was included. Two mixed-effects models were fitted (R package *lmerTest*, Kuznetsova et al., 2017) to account for study-level heterogeneity: both models included a random intercept for each study, and for latency analyses, an additional random intercept accounted for the multiple observations per participant. We report both standardized effect sizes (R package *effectsize*, Ben-Shachar, 2020) and unstandardized differences, though it should be noted that methods for calculating effect sizes in mixed-effects models remain debated.

Across the studies, verification increased the experience of shared reality, $b = 1.47$, 95%CI [1.41, 1.54], $t(745) = 42.68$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.13$ 95%CI [2.91, 3.34], epistemic trust, $b = 0.99$, 95%CI [0.91, 1.08], t

Table 2
Means and Standard Deviation (in Parentheses) of Experiment 3 as a Function of Verification and Traits Domain- Relevance, and, for Latencies only, whether the Applicant Was Chosen.

	Relevant traits				Irrelevant traits			
	Verification		No Verification		Verification		No Verification	
SR-T	5.38 (0.92)		3.12 (1.11)		5.10 (0.95)		2.96 (0.94)	
Epistemic trust	5.05 (1.27)		3.89 (1.18)		4.86 (1.26)		3.68 (1.03)	
Relational motivation	5.04 (1.22)		4.72 (1.05)		5.01 (1.19)		4.70 (1.13)	
Hit/FA rates	90.0/63.5		86.5/69.2		62.2/54.2		60.4/52.7	
Discriminability (d')	0.95 (0.99)		0.61 (0.73)		0.21 (0.53)		0.19 (0.52)	
	C	*NC*	*C*	*NC*	*C*	*NC*	*C*	*NC*
Latencies (*ms*)	1588 (426)	1769 (488)	1631 (453)	1665 (438)	1909 (507)	1920 (503)	2002 (462)	1990 (459)

Note. C = Chosen Applicant, NC = Non-Chosen Applicant. SR-T, epistemic trust, and relation motivation were measured on scales ranging from 1 to 7.

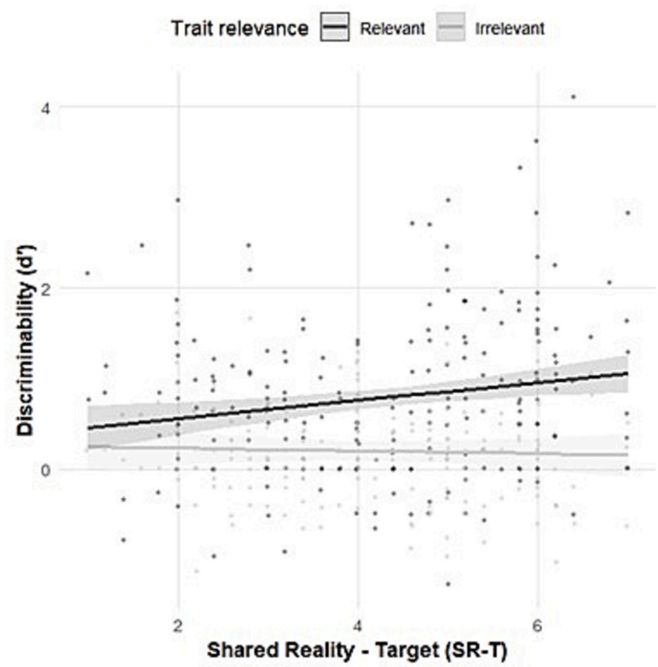

Fig. 2. Interaction between Self-Reported Shared Reality (SR-T) Following Verification and Trait Relevance on Choice-consistent discriminability in Experiment 3. Shaded Areas Represent 95% Confidence Intervals, and Individual Data Points Are Shown.

(744) = 23.60, $p < .001$, $d = 1.73$ 95%CI [1.56, 1.90], and relational motivation, $b = 0.38$, 95%CI [0.29, 0.46], $t(745) = 8.80$, $p < .001$ $d = 0.65$ 95% CI[0.50, 0.79].

Importantly, verification increased discriminability—choice-consistent trait attributions—relative to no verification, $b = 0.12$, 95%CI [0.07, 0.17], $t(744) = 4.97$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.36$ 95%CI [0.22, 0.51]. Latencies did not differ by verification, $b = 22.66$ 95%CI [−11.82, 57.17], $t(736) = 1.28$, $p = .198$, $d = 0.09$ 95%CI [−0.05, 0.24]. Yet, responses to chosen applicants were faster than to non-chosen applicants, $b = 34.16$ 95%CI [27.14, 41.17], $t(21036) = 9.54$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.13$ 95%CI [0.10, 0.16]. These effects were qualified by a significant interaction, $b = -18.09$ 95%CI [−25.11, −11.08], $t(21036) = 5.05$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.07$ 95%CI [0.04, 0.10], showing that responses to chosen applicants were faster under verification than under no verification, $b = 81.51$ 95%CI [11.03, 151.99], $t(798) = 2.27$, $p = .023$, $d = 0.16$ 95%CI [0.02, 0.30], whereas there was no such a difference for non-chosen applicants, $b = 9.15$ 95%CI [−61.36, 79.66], $t(800) = -0.37$, $p = .799$, $d = 0.02$ 95%CI [−0.12, 0.16].

Across the full sample, experienced shared reality (SR-T) was correlated positively with choice-consistent discriminability, $r = 0.17$ 95%CI [0.10, 0.24], $p < .001$, $p_{adj} < 0.001$, but not with latencies, $r = -0.07$ 95%CI [−0.14, 0.00], $p = .054$, $p_{adj} = 0.109$. This indicates that SR-T specifically relates to choice-consistent attributions in social verification.[5]

5.1. Discussion

Across Experiments 1–3, verification consistently influenced impression consolidation, though effects varied by the specific parameter. The aggregate analysis confirmed that verification increased both discriminability and, under certain conditions, the speed of choice-consistent attributions. However, the association between verification-based SR-T and impression consolidation was observed only for choice-consistent discriminability, not for latencies.

By design, these studies could not determine whether verification consolidates the exact traits presented in applicants' profiles. In the attribution task, traits shown to the participants were not necessarily included or implied in the applicant's profiles, and Experiment 3 did not include profiles at all. Consequently, we could not distinguish between a general evaluative bias induced by verification—enhancing attribution of any positive (vs. negative) trait to chosen (vs. non-chosen) applicants regardless of profile content—and a trait-specific evaluative bias, which would facilitate attribution of traits consistent with those inferred from the applicant's profile.

6. Experiment 4

This study was designed to more precisely delineate the scope of the previously observed effects of shared reality from social verification, with implications for understanding the underlying processes. Specifically, we examined whether verification influences impression consolidation not only through evaluative mechanisms but also through trait-specific (i.e., semantic) ones (Srull & Wyer, 1989). To do so, we matched the traits in the task to each applicant's profile description, including explicitly stated traits, implied traits, and traits unrelated to the profiles. In a new attribution task, each picture was paired with a single trait. Participants indicated whether it described the applicant (yes/no, as in

[5] We conducted an additional mixed-effects model including Experiment 4; however, this analysis should be interpreted cautiously. Unlike Experiments 1–3, which used a two-trait choice task, Experiment 4 employed a single-trait yes/no task, changing what counts as choice-consistency—selecting the consistent trait from a pair versus judging the truth of a single trait. We aggregated across trait types and focused on the main effect of verification. Verification increased SR-T, $b = 1.57$, $t(1141) = 58.22$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.45$ 95% CI [3.26, 3.63] and discriminability, $b = 0.09$, $p < .001$, $t(1140) = 5.33$, $d = 0.32$ 95%CI [0.20, 0.43]. For latencies, a verification × applicant choice interaction, $b = 17.42$, $t(21592) = 5.02$, $p <. 001$, $d = 0.07$ 95%CI [04, 10], showed faster trait attribution only for selected applicants, $b = 60$, $p = .038$, $d = 0.11$ 95%CI [0.01, 0.22]. SR-T correlated with discriminability, $r = 0.14$ 95% CI[0.08, 0.20], $p < .001$, but not with latencies, $r = -0.03$ 95%CI[−0.09, 0.03], $p = .240$. These results indicate that, despite procedural and measurement differences, verification effects were consistent overall.

Wagner et al., 2024), allowing us to test differences by trait type and valence. In other words, unlike Experiments 1–3, this experiment tested whether verification increases the tendency to attribute traits that have been genuinely inferred from each applicant's profile (i.e., recognition rates).

Building on previous studies, we expected verification to produce an evaluative bias, such that positive traits would be attributed more strongly to chosen applicants and negative traits to non-chosen applicants. In addition, we hypothesized a trait-specific evaluative bias,[6] in which verification effects would be stronger for traits explicitly mentioned or implied in applicants' profile descriptions than for unrelated traits. For example, for chosen applicants, explicit and implicit positive traits should be attributed more consistently than negative traits, and both should be attributed more than unrelated traits.

We also examined differences between the attribution of explicitly stated and implied traits, consistent with prior research in spontaneous trait inferences showing that both types are encoded during impression formation. Explicit traits should be attributed most readily because they were directly stated in the profile (i.e., true recognition), followed by implied traits (i.e., false recognition), which should be inferred from applicants' behaviors, and then unrelated traits (see Todorov & Uleman, 2002). Differences in response latencies were explored without specific expectations due to inconsistent findings across our previous studies. For similar reasons and given the introduction of the new attribution task, we also explored their associations with experienced shared reality. The experiment was pre-registered (https://aspredicted.org/6e7ir7.pdf).

6.1. Method

6.1.1. Design

The design was a 2 (verification condition: yes, no) x 2 (chosen candidate: yes, no) x 3 (trait type: explicit, implied, unrelated) x 2 (trait valence: positive, negative) with verification manipulated between-subjects.

6.1.2. Power analyses and participants

A sample size determination analysis (MorePower, Campbell & Thompson, 2012) showed that, for power = 0.80, $\alpha = 0.05$, and a small-to-medium effect ($\eta_p^2 = 0.02$, as in Experiments 1–3) of social verification on the evaluative dimension (2x2x2 interaction), and on the trait-specific dimension (2x2x2x3 interaction), we needed a minimum of 388 participants. To allow for sample attrition, we collected 400 Prolific users. Following Prolific guidelines, we included two attention checks, and none of the participants failed them. Three participants left with partial data and were excluded, leaving 397 participants (197 females, 203 males, $M_{age} = 40.94$, $SD_{Age} = 11.86$; verification $n = 197$).

Sensitivity power analyses suggested that this sample size was also sufficient to observe interaction effects of $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$ for latencies in a 2x2x2x3 mixed ANOVA (MorePower) and correlations of $r = 0.14$, with power = 0.80 and $\alpha = 0.05$ (G*power).

6.2. Materials

Applicant photographs. We used the same applicant pictures of Experiment 3.

Applicant profiles and traits. We created ten new profile descriptions, each including two positive and two negative trait-specific pieces of information, of which one explicitly stated in the text, followed by a related behavior, and one implied by the applicant's behaviors. Each profile was also associated with one positive and one negative unrelated trait, not mentioned or implied in the profile. Forty Prolific users (21 male, 15 female, 4 non-binary/other, $M_{age} = 43.67$, $SD_{age} = 12.40$) tested the ten profiles in random order. After reading the text, they answered a question for each item ("The applicant is [trait]") using a scale from −4 (not at all) to +4 (extremely), confirming that implied traits were truly inferred ($M_{positive} = 2.39$, $SD_{positive} = 0.76$; $M_{negative} = 2.30$, $SD_{negative} = 0.99$), while unrelated traits were not ($M_{positive} = -0.08$, $SD_{positive} = 1.03$; $M_{Negative} = -0.30$, $SD_{Negative} = 0.75$). Moreover, as in previous experiments, profiles were rated as ambiguous for deciding on whether to hire the applicants (scale 1–9, $M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.48$).

As an example, a profile was: "The applicant consistently puts effort into his work. He is *meticulous*, checking for accuracy and makes sure everything is completed properly. He often pressures others to review their work multiple times. He is *rigid*, becoming frustrated when others don't meet his standards.", which suggested the explicit traits in italics but also implied traits like *diligent* and *demanding*. Unrelated traits were *inventive and uncreative* (see OSF for the complete materials; we also tested antonyms of the presented/implied traits, which analysis is reported in the SM9).

Single-trait attribution task. To test trait-specificity of consolidation, we asked participants to decide whether a single trait, one per trial, applies to the applicant's pictures by pressing one of two keys ("S" and "K") associated with either "yes" or "no", as quickly as possible. Participants completed 80 trials, ten per applicant, that is, one trial per trait type by valence combination (including the antonym trials). We added a self-paced break after 40 trials.

Explicit measures. We measured SR-T, epistemic trust, and relational motivation. We also explored associations with self-reported ambiguity intolerance, a trait that could correlate positively with verification-induced consolidation and tendency to create a shared reality (13 items, McLain, 2009; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$; correlations are reported in SM10).

6.2.1. Procedure

The hiring decision task followed that of Experiments 2 and 3, except for different profiles. For the partner, we used a gender-neutral name for an English-speaking population, Jessie. We counterbalanced the order of the shared reality–related scales and the attribution task, unlike in Experiments 1–3, to experimentally control for potential order effects.[7]

6.3. Analytic approach

Discriminability was calculated based on trait-specific differences in "yes" responses using SDT. To compute discriminability, we needed to define which trait served as the signal and which as noise. We therefore calculated it for three contrasts: explicit vs. implied, explicit vs. unrelated, and implied vs. unrelated, treating the more diagnostic trait as the signal. For example, in the explicit–unrelated contrast, explicit traits attributed to their target applicant were counted as Hits, whereas unrelated traits attributed to the same applicant were counted as False Alarms. The same coding scheme was applied to the other contrasts. Compared to Experiments 1–3, this approach aligns more closely with standard SDT practice, providing a measure of recognition accuracy.

This allowed us to test two hypothesized effects: a 2 (verification) × 2 (trait valence) × 2 (applicant choice) interaction indicating that verification (vs. no verification) enhances discriminability for any positive (vs. negative) trait attributed to chosen (vs. non-chosen) applicants (evaluative bias), and a 2 × 2 × 2 × 3 (contrast type) interaction indicating that this effect is stronger when the traits are tied to the applicant profile rather than unrelated (trait-specific evaluative bias).

[6] In the pre-registration, trait-specific bias was called semantic-specific bias.

[7] Due to a programming error, the order in which participants were presented with the measures was not saved, so we could not examine its influence, if any.

7. Results

See Table 3 for descriptive statistics.

7.1.1. Shared reality measures

A series of t-tests showed that verification (vs. no verification) increased self-reported shared reality, $t(361) = 42.62$, $p < .001$, $d = 4.49$ 95%CI[4.10, 4.87], relational motivation, $t(394) = 8.02$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.81$ 95%CI[0.60, 1.01], and epistemic trust, $t(338) = 23.79$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.59$ 95%CI[2.30, 4.87].

7.1.2. Trait-specific discriminability

We fitted a 2x2x2x3 mixed ANOVA targeting the discriminability indexes of the contrasts. See Table 4 for the results. We found a significant interaction of trait valence, applicant choice, and contrast type ($p = .036$). Specifically, discriminability compared between implied vs. unrelated traits for non-chosen applicants was higher for choice-consistent (i.e., negative) traits than for choice-inconsistent (i.e., positive) traits, $t(2220) = 2.57$, $p = .010$, $d = 0.05$ 95%CI[0.01, 0.10]; the other comparisons were non-significant, $t(2220) < 1.39$, $p > .168$. The effects related to evaluative and trait-specific biases were non-significant. Descriptively, we could observe increased discriminability for implied and explicit traits (vs. unrelated) under verification (vs.no verification), especially when trait valence and applicant choice were in a choice-consistent match (e.g., positive traits attributed to chosen applicants) (see SM12 for a graphical representation).

7.1.3. Exploratory analyses

Alternative discriminability calculation: Choice-consistency. The pre-registered analyses used SDT based on trait-type contrasts emphasizing trait-specific attributions. This coding might underestimate evaluative effects not tied to the recognition of specific traits, as it emphasizes contrasts between trait types. To address this potential constraint, we conducted an exploratory analysis in which the signal and noise were defined similarly to Experiments 1–3: positive traits attributed (response "yes") to previously chosen applicants were coded as Hits, and the opposite as FAs. This SDT coding predominantly addresses evaluative choice-consistency, that is, consistency of trait valence with one's prior choices about the applicant, rather than trait type. Moreover, the attribution task, which required binary yes/no responses to unique positive and negative traits, allowed us to compute discriminability separately for chosen and non-chosen applicants differently from the task of Experiments 1–3. Trait type could still be included as a moderator.

Thus, we conducted a 2 (verification) x 2 (applicant choice) x 3 (type of trait) mixed ANOVA (see Table 5). We found a main effect of social verification, $p = .033$: Verification increased choice-consistent trait attributions to any type of target to a greater extent than did no verification (see SM12 for a graphical representation).

Latencies. We fitted a 2x2x2x3 mixed ANOVA targeting latencies of the attribution task. See Table 6 for the results. We found a significant interaction of verification and trait valence ($p = .017$), and an interaction between verification and trait type ($p = .024$). These effects appeared to be mainly driven by faster attributions of positive than negative implied traits under no verification, $t(384) = 2.12$, $p = .035$, $d = 0.22$ 95%CI [0.01, 0.42]. These interactions were qualified by a three-way interaction between verification, trait type, and trait valence, $p =$

Table 3
Means and Standard Deviation (in Parentheses) of Experiment 4's Variables as a Function of the Experimental Conditions.

	Trait valence	Verification						No verification					
SR-T		5.98 (0.67)						2.48 (0.94)					
Epistemic trust		6.00 (0.82)						3.42 (1.29)					
Relational motivation		5.63 (1.15)						4.68 (1.21)					
		Exp vs. Unr		Imp vs. Unr		Exp vs. Imp		Exp vs. Unr		Imp vs. Unr		Exp vs. Imp	
		C	*NC*	*C*	*NC*	*C*	*NC*	*C*	*NC*	*C*	*NC*	*C*	*NC*
Hit/FA rates (trait-specificity)													
	Positive	50.76/ 48.35	50.51/ 51.39	52.41/ 48.35	50.38/ 51.39	50.76/ 52.41	50.51/ 50.38	50.00/ 52.25	52.50/ 51.38	50.87/ 52.25	49.12/ 51.38	50.00/ 50.87	52.50/ 49.12
	Negative	50.25/ 50.38	53.55/ 50.13	51.52/ 50.38	57.11/ 50.13	50.25/ 51.52	53.55/ 57.11	53.37/ 51.12	48.87/ 46.75	51.25/ 51.12	49.00/ 46.75	53.37/ 51.25	48.87/ 49.00
Discriminability (trait-specificity)													
	Positive	0.06 (0.84)	−0.02 (0.88)	0.09 (0.90)	−0.02 (0.77)	−0.03 (0.78)	0.01 (0.84)	−0.05 (0.87)	0.02 (0.77)	−0.03 (0.83)	−0.05 (0.82)	−0.03 (0.88)	0.07 (0.85)
	Negative	−0.01 (0.86)	0.09 (0.82)	0.02 (0.77)	0.16 (0.76)	−0.03 (0.88)	−0.08 (0.76)	0.05 (0.77)	0.05 (0.78)	−0.005 (0.76)	0.05 (0.78)	0.05 (0.75)	−0.004 (0.83)
		Explicit trait		Implied trait		Unrelated trait		Explicit trait		Implied trait		Unrelated trait	
		C	*NC*	*C*	*NC*	*C*	*NC*	*C*	*NC*	*C*	*NC*	*C*	*NC*
Latencies (*ms*)													
	Positive	1527 (428)	1496 (429)	1519 (411)	1534 (438)	1529 (416)	1556 (440)	1478 (466)	1468 (456)	1459 (439)	1484 (475)	1436 (428)	1478 (451)
	Negative	1512 (417)	1477 (420)	1519 (394)	1533 (379)	1517 (448)	1519 (388)	1491 (443)	1518 (458)	1454 (462)	1443 (426)	1521 (463)	1510 (459)
Hit/FA rates (choice-consistency)		50.76/ 50.25	53.55/ 50.51	52.41/ 51.52	57.11/ 50.38	48.35/ 50.38	50.13/ 51.39	50.00/ 53.37	48.87/ 52.50	50.87/ 51.25	49.00/ 49.12	52.25/ 51.12	46.75/ 51.38
Discriminability (choice-consistency)		0.02 (0.86)	0.07 (0.85)	0.01 (0.81)	0.16 (0.80)	−0.05 (0.82)	−0.03 (0.81)	−0.08 (0.82)	−0.08 (0.83)	0.001 (0.82)	−0.001 (0.79)	0.02 (0.80)	−0.11 (0.79)

Note. C = Chosen Applicant, NC = Non-Chosen Applicant, Exp = Explicit Trait, Imp = Implied Trait, Unr = Unrelated Trait. SR-T, epistemic trust, and relation motivation were measured on scales ranging from 1 to 7. Discriminability was calculated either as trait-specificity or as choice-consistency as specified in the analysis section.

Table 4
ANOVA Table for the Model Testing Trait-Specific Discriminability in Experiment 4 as a Function of Verification Condition (Yes, No), Applicant Choice (Chosen Vs. Non-Chosen), Trait Contrast (Explicit Vs. Unrelated, Implied Vs. Unrelated, Explicit Vs. Implied), And Trait Valence (Positive, Negative).

Effect	DFn	DFd	GG ε	F	p	ηp^2	90%CI
Verification	1	395	–	0.14	0.711	0.001	[0.00, 0.01]
Trait valence	1	395	–	1.23	0.268	0.003	[0.00, 0.02]
Applicant choice	1	395	–	0.37	0.542	0.001	[0.00, 0.01]
Contrast type	2	790	0.6223	0.89	0.366	0.002	[0.00, 0.01]
Verification x Trait valence	1	395	–	0.36	0.547	0.001	[0.00, 0.01]
Verification x Applicant choice	1	395	–	0.18	0.671	0.001	[0.00, 0.01]
Verification x Contrast type	2	790	0.6223	2.92	0.079	0.007	[0.00, 0.02]
Trait valence x Applicant choice	1	395	–	0.32	0.569	0.001	[0.00, 0.02]
Trait valence x Contrast type	2	790	0.6064	1.29	0.265	0.003	[0.00, 0.01]
Applicant choice x Contrast type	2	790	0.6049	0.04	0.878	0.001	[0.00, 0.01]
Verification x Trait valence x Applicant choice[a]	**1**	**395**	**–**	**2.24**	**0.135**	**0.005**	**[0.00, 0.02]**
Verification x Trait valence x Contrast type	2	790	0.6064	0.10	0.802	0.001	[0.00, 0.01]
Verification x Applicant choice x Contrast type	2	790	0.6049	0.04	0.890	0.001	[0.00, 0.01]
Trait valence x Applicant choice x Contrast type	2	790	0.6211	4.04	0.036*	0.01	[0.001, 0.03]
Verification x Trait valence x Applicant choice x Contrast type[b]	**2**	**790**	**0.6211**	**0.40**	**0.570**	**0.001**	**[0.00, 0.01]**

Note: We applied Greenhouse-Geisser (GG) corrections as the sphericity assumption was violated. In bold the hypothesized effects: [a] evaluative bias; [b] trait-specific evaluative bias. * $p < .05$.

Table 5
Anova Table for the Model Testing Discriminability as Choice-Consistency in Experiment 4 as a Function of Verification Condition (Yes, No), Applicant Choice (Chosen Vs. Non-Chosen), Trait Type (Explicit, Implied, Unrelated).

Effect	DFn	DFd	F	p	η_p^2	90% CI
Verification	1	395	4.56	0.033*	0.011	[0, 0.03]
Applicant choice	1	395	0.13	0.714	0.001	[0, 0.01]
Trait type	2	790	2.30	0.100	0.005	[0, 0.02]
Applicant choice	1	395	3.15	0.077	0.008	[0, 0.03]
Verification x Trait type	2	790	1.26	0.284	0.003	[0, 0.02]
Applicant choice x Trait type	2	790	1.26	0.284	0.003	[0, 0.02]
Verification x Applicant choice x Trait type	2	790	0.22	0.806	0.001	[0, 0.01]

Note: * p < .05.

.021. Specifically, under no verification vs. verification, implied negative traits were attributed faster to applicants, $t(575) = 1.92$, $p = .054$, $d = 0.16$ 95%CI [0.00, 0.32], as well as positive unrelated traits, $t(575) = 2.14$, $p = .033$, $d = 0.18$ 95%CI [0.01, 0.34], but the other contrasts were not different, $t < 1.36$, $p > .17$.

Association of SR-T and consolidation. We explored correlations between shared reality, epistemic trust, relational motivation, and intolerance of ambiguity with impression consolidation parameters (full tables are reported in SM10). Here, we focus on the associations of each set of key variables with SR-T. Following our main hypotheses of discriminability as trait-specificity, we calculated aggregated values as a function of whether the applicant was chosen, the trait valence, and the explicit vs. unrelated and implicit vs. unrelated contrasts. We did not find any significant associations with any of the contrast-specific discriminability indexes ($rs < 0.08$, $p > .12$, $p_{adj} = 99$, adjusted across 11 tests).

Because verification affected latencies, we also tested the association with aggregated values as a function of valence and applicant choice, but we did not find any relevant correlation ($rs < 0.05$, $p > .21$, $p_{adj} = 99$, adjusted across seven tests). Following the significant effect of verification on choice-consistency's discriminability, we also tested whether such a difference could be related to differences in self-reported shared reality. We thus calculated the average choice-consistent discriminability per participant by aggregating values. We found small evidence of a positive association with SR-T ($r = 0.11$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.21], $p = .03$),

Table 6
ANOVA Table for the Model Testing Latencies in Experiment 4 as a Function of Verification Condition (Yes, No), Applicant Choice (Chosen Vs. Non-Chosen), Trait Type (Explicit, Implied, Unrelated), and Trait Valence (Positive, Negative).

Effect	DFn	DFd	GG	F	p	η_p^2	90% CI
Verification	1	384	–	1.32	0.252	0.004	[0.00, 0.01]
Trait valence	1	384	–	0.39	0.533	0.001	[0.00, 0.01]
Contrast type	2	768	0.99	1.47	0.232	0.004	[0.00, 0.01]
Applicant choice	1	384	–	0.32	0.571	0.001	[0.00, 0.01]
Verification x Trait valence	1	384	–	5.71	0.017*	0.015	[0.001, 0.04]
Verification x Contrast type	2	768	0.99	3.76	0.024*	0.010	[0.001, 0.03]
Verification x Applicant choice	1	384	–	0.48	0.490	0.001	[0.00, 0.02]
Trait valence x Contrast type	2	768	0.99	1.19	0.304	0.003	[0.00, 0.02]
Trait valence x Applicant choice	1	384	–	0.75	0.386	0.002	[0.00, 0.02]
Applicant choice x Contrast type	2	768	0.99	1.27	0.281	0.003	[0.00, 0.02]
Verification x Trait valence x Contrast type	2	768	0.99	3.87	0.021*	0.010	[0.001, 0.03]
Verification x Trait valence x Applicant choice	1	384	–	0.05	0.817	0.001	[0.00, 0.01]
Verification x Applicant choice x Contrast type	2	768	0.99	1.02	0.360	0.003	[0.00, 0.02]
Trait valence x Applicant choice x Contrast type	2	768	0.98	1.13	0.323	0.002	[0.00, 0.02]
Verification x Trait valence x Applicant choice x Contrast type	2	768	0.98	0.61	0.546	0.002	[0.00, 0.01]

Note: We applied Greenhouse-Geisser (GG) corrections as the sphericity assumption was violated. * p < .05.

but the effect did not resist multiple tests adjustment ($p_{adj} = 0.17$, adjusted across four tests), and it had no relation with the other variables.

7.2. Discussion

Experiment 4 demonstrated that verification does not selectively strengthen memory for traits explicitly or implicitly presented in the profile. Nevertheless, exploratory analyses centered on choice-consistency revealed support for a verification effect, which led to an enhancement of choice-consistent evaluative attributions. However, no distinction was observed based on trait type. No relevant effects were observed regarding accessibility.

8. General discussion

When faced with ambiguous information, people often align their impressions with a partner, a process guided by shared reality (Echterhoff & Higgins, 2021). However, most studies have focused on one route to shared reality: tuning to a partner's evaluation of a target. A second route—forming an impression first and then receiving someone else's verification—has been theorized but seldom tested (Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2024). To this end, we conducted four experiments to test how crucial verification is in creating shared reality and in shaping impression structure in a collaborative hiring decision paradigm.

Across all the experiments, social verification increased experienced shared reality, as well as epistemic trust and relational motivation toward the partner. Verification also influenced impression consolidation, but only for specific parameters. We found support for choice-consistent discriminability—the tendency to attribute positive traits to chosen versus non-chosen applicants—in Experiment 1, and Experiment 2 showed that this effect could not be explained by mere exposure. The effect persisted when profile descriptions were removed, relying solely on applicants' faces, and was stronger for domain-relevant traits, that is, for traits pertinent to recruiting decisions (Experiment 3). These findings were further supported by an aggregate analysis of Experiments 1–3. In contrast, trait-specific discriminability—the tendency to attribute traits explicitly contained in an applicant's profile versus unrelated traits—was not influenced by verification in Experiment 4.

Regarding accessibility, another aspect of consolidation, the results were inconsistent. Verified participants made faster trait attributions in Experiment 1 but not in Experiment 2. Experiment 3 showed faster attributions for chosen applicants, a pattern confirmed by an aggregate analysis of Experiments 1–3. Yet, Experiment 4, which used an apparently more cognitively demanding task, did not show consistent effects.

Correlational analyses showed that the experience of shared reality (SR-T) scores were related to certain consolidation parameters. Experiments 1 and 3 supported a link between SR-T and discriminability measured as choice-consistency, particularly for relevant traits, whereas Experiment 2 showed only marginal support. Aggregate analyses across Experiments 1–3 confirmed this positive correlation. SR-T, however, was not associated with trait-specific discriminability in Experiment 4. Regarding accessibility, a correlation of SR-T with faster responses emerged only in Experiment 1; the aggregate analysis and Experiment 4 showed no significant association.

These findings align with shared reality theory (Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2024), demonstrating that social verification increases the subjective sense of shared reality as well as related epistemic and relational motives. Unlike Sharing-is-Believing studies, which focus on aligning with a partner's attitude without accounting for initial impressions (Echterhoff & Higgins, 2017), our paradigm had participants make an initial hiring choice before seeing the partner's decision. When the partner's choice matched theirs, participants reported greater shared reality, epistemic trust, and relational motivation, showing that people value affirmation of their judgments. These effects also speak to the role of instrumental others in the creation of shared reality. Prior work shows that shared reality is easier to establish with goal-instrumental partners and that this promotes actual success (Elnakouri et al., 2023). In our recruitment task, participants may have perceived their partner as instrumental in completing a goal-directed activity. SR-T scores were higher when participants were assigned to the relevant traits condition than the irrelevant one (Experiment 3), suggesting participants valued collaboration when the task aligned with the shared goal of selecting suitable applicants. Future research should examine how verification-based shared reality shapes outcomes in real collaborative contexts.

We also expanded work on impression formation by examining verification as a factor that strengthens impression coherence. The recruitment task likely created uncertainty, prompting participants to seek coherent impressions (Wagner et al., 2024), with verification satisfying this need. We hypothesized that confirming one's own opinion with a partner's would increase consolidation, as verification should reduce uncertainty and thereby stabilize impressions. Signs of this pattern emerged across experiments but were stronger for choice-consistent discriminability than for other parameters (trait-specific discriminability, accessibility).

Experiments 3 and 4 delineate important boundary conditions of social verification. Experiment 3 showed that verification facilitated choice-consistent trait attributions only when traits were domain-relevant, suggesting that verification selectively strengthens evaluations and traits when they matter in the given situation. By contrast, Experiment 4 focused more narrowly on the semantic consequences of verification and yielded no evidence for trait-specific consolidation, that is, enhanced attribution of traits related to the profiles.

Several factors may account for the null effects observed in Experiment 4, including (i) high cognitive load, (ii) interference between traits of different applicants and trait types, and (iii) greater reliance on general evaluative impressions. First, the memory demands of the paradigm—ten traits per applicant across multiple candidates—may have exceeded participants' capacity, leading fine-grained trait information to decay. Second, despite efforts to differentiate profile content, some traits may have been perceived as semantically similar, increasing confusion between profiles' mnemonical traces and thus reducing trait-specific discriminability. In addition, although traits were pretested for profile relatedness, they were not pretested for perceived domain relevance, which was instead central in Experiment 3. As a result, we cannot determine whether domain-relevant but profile-unrelated traits elicited more "yes" responses than irrelevant unrelated traits, potentially attenuating trait-specific discriminability (i.e., the extent to which explicit or implied traits were selected more frequently than unrelated traits). If traits varied idiosyncratically in perceived domain relevance, these effects may have averaged out—possibly explaining why we observed a significant main effect of verification on choice-consistent discriminability of a magnitude comparable to that in Experiment 3. Still, such interference effects cannot be ruled out yet and may be resolved only with more refined materials.

A third and final possibility is that Experiment 4's findings reflect a genuine psychological process characteristic of social verification. Exploratory analyses on choice-consistency suggested that participants mainly retained a general evaluative impression of applicants' suitability. This was reflected in a tendency to attribute choice-consistent (vs. choice-inconsistent) traits, irrespective of trait type. Specifically, it may be that, under verification, evaluative impressions may persist and guide subsequent attributions beyond trait-specific information (e.g., Schneid et al., 2015). When selecting the best candidate, participants may form a general, summary evaluative representation of each applicant (e.g., as likable or competent), which is subsequently reinforced through verification and relied upon more than trait-specific representations in later judgments (Srull & Wyer, 1989). Importantly, this does not mean trait-specific representations were absent; they may have simply played a minor role in guiding later social judgments in this context. Alternative designs and measures will be needed to determine the extent to which trait-specific verification effects can be detected following verification.

Across four studies, social verification reliably promoted choice-consistent impression consolidation, but its effects on accessibility were comparatively fragile and context-dependent. Rather than reflecting a limitation, this dissociation is theoretically informative: verification appears to primarily stabilize the structure and coherence of impressions, rather than the momentary accessibility of features of these impressions. Accessibility is transient, influenced by timing and cognitive load (Higgins, 1996). Consistent with this, faster attributions emerged when measured immediately after the hiring decision (Experiment 1) but not after a delay, that is when measured following explicit judgments (Experiment 2), likely due to increased interference. Accessibility effects were also limited to domain-relevant traits (Experiment 3) and were even reversed under high cognitive load, with verification slowing responses for implied traits (Experiment 4). Taken together, these findings indicate that verification does not serve as a general facilitator of accessibility; rather, its influence depends on processing conditions, whereas its impact on consistency is comparatively more robust across tasks and designs.

This pattern also bears on the development of shared reality theory and motivational accounts of impression formation. Wagner et al. (2024; see also Wagner & Echterhoff, 2025) showed that audience tuning—-spontaneous alignment with a partner's evaluation—enhances impression accessibility in a single-target attribution task, indicating that shared reality can increase the ease of trait use under favorable processing conditions. The present findings suggest that accessibility is less consistently influenced by social verification. Accessibility thus emerges as a boundary-dependent outcome rather than a defining feature of verification-based consolidation. This highlights an unresolved question: verification-based and alignment-based routes to shared reality have not been directly compared in how they affect specific consolidation measures. Addressing this gap will be essential for clarifying whether different routes to shared reality exert distinct cognitive consequences during impression formation.

We also examined the relation between SR-T and impression consolidation. Choice-consistent discriminability showed the strongest association, particularly for domain-relevant traits, a pattern also evident in the aggregate analysis. However, these correlations were modest ($r = 0.11$ to 0.23). Also, no reliable associations emerged with accessibility. By definition, shared reality reflects the subjective experience of having common inner states with another person. SR-T captures this reflective sense of commonality, whereas consolidation likely occurs at a more implicit level, relying on rapid, intuitive processes with limited introspective access. This does not imply that shared reality is irrelevant for consolidation; rather, SR-T may reflect the experience of verification under conditions that facilitate impression consistency, even if it does not perfectly mirror the strength of consolidation. Such partial dissociations between subjective experience and cognitive effects are well documented in social cognition (Gawronski et al., 2020). Hence, shared reality may support impression consolidation even when introspective measures fail to fully capture it. Future work could clarify this relation by employing process-proximal indicators of shared reality (e.g., behavioral or linguistic convergence; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021) and by examining conditions under which subjective shared reality more closely tracks consolidation outcomes.

Importantly, we analyzed intraindividual factors that could have explained our findings beyond shared reality. Mood and feelings toward the partner, which can influence memory, did not undermine shared reality as the key outcome of verification's effects. Although verification increased positive feelings (but not mood), and feelings and positive mood correlated with SR-T, neither reduced the effect of verification on choice-consistent consolidation, nor did they correlate with consolidation parameters. We also ruled out the influence of mere exposure as Experiments 2 to 4 used a feedback display that presented applicant photos simultaneously, with chosen candidates highlighted, yet verification effects persisted. Thus, our findings are robust to these potential alternative explanations.

Yet, it is important to acknowledge that we could not rule out all alternative explanations. One such possibility is perceived consensus, which is known to increase attitude clarity and perceived correctness (Petrocelli et al., 2007). Consensus typically provides impersonal and numerical support to one's view (e.g., "85% agreed"), whereas social verification is subjective and relational. Our design intentionally emphasized the experience of being personally affirmed by a peer, engaging relational motives alongside epistemic trust—features more characteristic of verification than of consensus. Still, our studies cannot determine whether consolidation arises primarily from the informational value of agreement or from the interpersonal experience of being verified.

Further investigation is needed to determine whether our findings generalize beyond the current stimulus set of White male adult applicants and specific context. For example, verification may also influence impressions in legal settings, such as jury decision-making, where confirmation of decisions based on ambiguous evidence could amplify existing prejudices and biases.

Overall, our findings suggest that social verification contributes to the creation of shared reality and that this process can shape impression consolidation via increased choice-consistency in trait attribution tasks. In doing so, our studies broaden current understanding of how dyadic processes and motivational drivers influence evaluative and semantic aspects of mental representations.

Open practices statement

All studies, measures, manipulations, and data/participant exclusions are reported in the manuscript or its Supplementary Materials. Experimental protocols, materials and analysis scripts are at https://osf.io/ptgzd/. Experiment 4 was pre-registered (https://aspredicted.org/6e7ir7.pdf), with any deviations noted. In the course of preparing this work, the authors employed ChatGPT-5 exclusively for language editing of a few paragraphs in the Introduction and Discussion sections. All content was subsequently reviewed and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final published version.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Matteo Masi: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Gerrit Lamers:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Gerald Echterhoff:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Funding

This work was supported by the German Research Foundation (DFG) undergrant number EC 317/10-2, project number 397530566 (P9 in FOR2812).

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

We thank Ullrich Wagner, Anna Groß-Hardt, and Linda Melsheimer for their help with this research, and E. Tory Higgins, Angelina Vasquez, and Shaheed Azaad for their comments on an earlier draft of this

manuscript.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2026.104887.

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