

# The Power of Creative Cover Letters: Opening Doors to Job Interviews



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Snr 2087201

Master's Thesis

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January 2024

## **Technologies**

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ChatGPT – Sparring for ideas and asking for feedback.

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## **Abstract**

The cover letter plays a vital role in job applications, serving as the initial introduction to potential employers. However, with the fierce competition and the overwhelming number of job applications employers receive, it is crucial to find a way to stand out. Writing a creative cover letter might be a way to secure an interview. The standard definition of creativity is defined by the combination of novelty and appropriateness (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). This study aims to evaluate the level of creativity in each authentic cover letter and its likelihood of being invited for an interview. A total of 51 letters were collected and assessed for creativity, including novelty, appropriateness, and overall creativity. The survey involved 126 participants, each rating six letters for their creative qualities. Additionally, the study sought to identify creative elements in cover letters through content analysis. Our findings emphasize the significance of appropriateness as a primary consideration in cover letter writing. Furthermore, job applicants are encouraged to incorporate novel elements such as familiar metaphors, concrete self-disclosures, and storytelling to write a truly creative cover letter.

*Keywords:* cover letters, creativity, novelty, appropriateness, interview.

## Introduction

In today's competitive job market, a well-written cover letter can be the difference between securing an interview for your desired job or getting lost in the pile of applications. This letter, also known as a job application letter, is a powerful tool that introduces you, showcases your qualifications, and convinces employers to take a closer look at your resume (Baugh, 1991; Alward, 2011). The importance of the cover letter is that it plays a central role in making a strong case for why you're a good fit for a specific job (Alward, 2011). The resume and cover letter play a pivotal role as initial impressions, influencing whether an applicant is perceived as a serious contender or just another candidate (Fredericks, 2021). Establishing a positive first impression is vital for securing interviews, as emphasized by Fredericks (2021).

In this study, several non-academic sources are incorporated alongside academic ones to delve deeper into the subject. According to various websites, a "creative" cover letter is essential to stand out amidst numerous applications (Indeed, 2023; Jobbird, 2023). Unlike the CV, where space is constrained, the cover letter provides greater creative freedom (James et al., 1994). There is largely consensus that creativity consists of two elements.

Novelty is the first aspect that is required for creativity. For an idea to be considered novel, it needs to be original, unusual, and unique (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). For example, adding a metaphor like "Facing these challenges is like climbing a mountain" brings a novel and original touch to the narrative. Guilford (1950) underscored the importance of originality, defining it as novelty and in the context of uncommon behaviors.

Appropriateness is the second aspect of creativity. For an idea to be considered appropriate, it must align with the context in which it is used (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). According to Runco (1988) is balancing originality (novelty) with fit and appropriateness vital. For example, the metaphor "Facing these challenges is like climbing a mountain" is not

only novel but also appropriate to the context of cover letters, showcasing professional suitability.

Although previous studies have delved into various aspects of cover letters, including their impressiveness (Knouse et al., 1988), sentence structures (Arista, 2015) and persuasion strategies (Al Abbad et al., 2019), there remains a notable gap in the thorough examination of creative elements. In particular, the existing literature lacks an in-depth exploration of novelty and appropriateness in cover letters. To my knowledge, the work of Breabin (2023) is the only research that uses experimental design to explore these elements in self-created cover letters.

Unlike experimental designs, this study takes a descriptive approach, using authentic written cover letters to examine the interaction between novelty and appropriateness. Inspired by research in a related context by van der Zanden et al. (2022), which revealed that original dating profiles concluded more metaphors and concrete self-disclosure statements. In addition, text originality positively influenced impression formation and intention to date. Therefore, I aim to align this study with the insights from Van der Zanden et al.'s (2022) research.

Drawing parallels with the other study (Van der Zanden et al., 2022), I expect a positive relationship between the perceived creativity of a cover letter and the impression it leaves about the applicant's suitability for a job. Therefore, I anticipate possible implications for the probability of receiving an invitation to an interview. This novel approach could fill the existing gap in understanding the impact of creativity (novelty and appropriateness) in cover letters and make a valuable contribution to the literature on this topic. By investigating the influence of creativity in cover letters, I aim to better understand the impact on the recruitment process. This understanding can assist applicants in creating more compelling cover letters and enable employers to identify candidates who can bring unique value to their organizations. Therefore, the overarching research question is: "What is the effect of

perceived creativity, measured as a combination of novelty and appropriateness, in cover letters on the likelihood of receiving a job interview invitation?".

## **Theoretical background**

### **The importance of cover letters in job applications**

The cover letter serves as a crucial component of job applications, alongside resumes or CVs, and serves as the initial introduction of an applicant to potential employers (McDowell, 1987; Baugh, 1991; Alward, 2011). The cover letter acts as a descriptive overview of the candidate's curriculum vitae (Fredericks, 2021), focusing on the candidate's connection between their CV and the specific role they are seeking (Giles 1909). The cover letter's main objective is to convince employers of the applicant's suitability for the job by highlighting relevant skills, experiences, and accomplishments (Guan Eng Ho & Henry, 2021). Thereby, well-crafted cover letters can notably enhance the likelihood of a job candidate securing employment (O'Reilly, 2005)

There are several tips for creating an engaging cover letter. Skillful use of the English language in cover letters improves the chances of job seekers being considered for employment (McMasters, 2004). It is crucial to avoid informal language and jargon (McMasters, 2004). Effective cover letters should be concise, well-defined, and tailored to the specific job vacancy (Garon, 1995). A well-written cover letter contains crucial components such as highlighting relevant skills, experience and achievements while addressing the specific requirements of the recipient (Harolds, 2013).

According to experts such as James et al. (1994) and Guan Eng Ho and Henry (2021), cover letters offer individuals an opportunity to present themselves in a favorable light and highlight their unique qualifications. To effectively manage the impression they make, individuals can employ strategies such as selective self-disclosure, integration, and self-promotion (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). However, there is a need to stand out among the

competition and the multitude of job applications received by employers. Indeed (2023), a job site, states that the use of creativity in a cover letter can make the letter more memorable and distinct from conventional formats (Indeed, 2023). Furthermore, Guan Eng Ho and Henry (2021) suggest that creativity in a cover letter enhances an applicant's visibility and potentially improves their chances of securing an interview. In exploring the facets of creativity, scholars have continually revisited its fundamental elements. Therefore, the definition of creativity needs further clarification for this study.

### **Defining creativity**

Initially, Stein (1953) provided a definition of creativity as the generation of something that is new and acknowledged as tenable, useful, or satisfying within a particular group, with a strong emphasis on the central role of novelty. Guilford (1950) further reinforced this notion by closely associating novelty with originality. He emphasized that ideas must deviate from the ordinary, and novel ideas should be suitable within the given context. Building upon this, Sternberg and Lubart (1998) expanded the concept by highlighting the dual requirement of novelty and appropriateness in creative work. They emphasized that the essence of creativity lies in the unexpectedness of novelty, coupled with the ability to adapt to task constraints. Runco and Jaeger (2012) further emphasized that novelty alone is not sufficient for creativity; appropriateness also plays a crucial role in the creative process. The first element encompasses novelty, originality, uniqueness, and unusualness, while the second element refers to appropriateness, value, utility, effectiveness, adaptability, and usefulness (Mayer, 1999; Runco & Jaeger, 2012). This principle aligns with Runco's earlier emphasis on striking a balance between originality and appropriateness, which is vital in the creative process (Runco, 1988).

Furthermore, Diedrich et al. (2015) conducted research on the relationship between novelty and appropriateness. Their findings indicated that higher levels of novelty often



correlate with greater creativity, while the role of appropriateness is more complex. For novel ideas, appropriateness contributes to creativity, but for less novel ideas, appropriateness does not consistently enhance creativity. This finding is consistent with the work of Runco and Charles (1993), who found that ideas perceived as unoriginal and appropriate were considered less creative. Thus, appropriateness appears to play a lesser role in determining creativity and acts as a secondary factor in distinguishing between creative and less creative ideas.

In summary, these various perspectives converge on two fundamental aspects of creativity: novelty along with appropriateness. Novelty encompasses elements such as originality and uniqueness, while appropriateness refers to the usefulness and adaptability of ideas. Both factors are essential in the creative process.

### **Creativity in cover letters**

In the context of cover letters, this suggests that the concept of "novelty" encompasses the incorporation of fresh and distinctive elements that set the letter apart from conventional ones, as novelty is closely associated with the concept of originality (Guilford, 1950). Original writing styles encompass, for example, grammatical structures, vocabulary usage, and choosing different ways of expressing ideas, such as figures of speech, images, metaphors, rhetorical devices, and sentence structures (Kumar, 2022). In addition, the use of unique and concrete words, metaphors, and figures of speech, evoke emotions, mental imagery, and sensory experiences for the readers (Jones, 2015; Gao Z, 2017; Simonton, 2009). Moreover, employing concrete language reduces perceived distance and shapes impressions not only of the text itself but also of the individuals involved (Douglas & Sutton, 2010). Essentially, this suggests that within the context of cover letters, the integration of new and distinctive elements, synonymous with the concept of "novelty", is paramount to distinguish the letter from conventional letters. This multifaceted novelty could include grammatical structures, vocabulary use, and the strategic selection of various literary

elements, such as stylistic figures, images, metaphors, rhetorical devices, and sentence-building patterns, which evoke emotions, mental images, and sensory experiences in readers and contribute to the overall formation of impressions.

Appropriateness in cover letters, in this study, is seen as the alignment of novel elements with appropriateness, reflected in the way the text is written, including phrasing, word choice, and stylistic details. Cover letters should have flawless grammar and typography, use simple and precise language, remain concise, and favour the active voice (Fox, 1981). Therefore, it is considered appropriate to maintain good organization, structure, and spelling, while also demonstrating how qualifications align with the requirements of the job (Wells et al., 1981; McDowell, 1987). Furthermore, maintaining a balanced tone with relevant yet concise information, in line with the job description, contributes to the overall appropriateness of a cover letter (Admin, 2021; Doyle, 2022; Herman, 2016). Thus, it can be concluded that cover letters typically adhere to industry-specific structures, content standards, and tones, which in this study refers to being appropriate.

Based on these (theoretical) findings, I predict that the influence of novelty on perceived creativity depends on a high level of appropriateness in a cover letter. This prediction is based on the understanding that novelty along with appropriateness is needed in a work to be considered creative (Runco & Jaeger, 2012; Sternberg & Lubart; 1998). Thereby, appropriateness in cover letters is very important because they must comply with industry-specific structures, content standards, and tone, as explained by Wells et al. (1981) and McDowell (1987). Therefore, the first hypothesis is formulated:

**H1:** The effect of novelty on perceived creativity is moderated by a high level of appropriateness.

## **Evaluation of creative people**

In addition to examining the impact of novelty and appropriateness on creativity, it is also important to explore their influence on an employer's assessment of a candidate and subsequently, the probability of receiving an interview invitation. Relevant research has been done on the positive effects of using creativity.

Van der Zanden et al. (2022) conducted a study on impression formation in online dating profiles. Their study specifically examined the impact of text originality in online dating profiles on the perception of intelligence and sense of humor. The findings revealed a positive correlation between text originality and the perception of these positive traits, ultimately leading to enhanced attractiveness and increased dating intention (Van der Zanden et al., 2022). These results are in line with the claims made by Niu and Sternberg (2006) and Sternberg (1985), who argue that creativity is strongly linked to other positive attributes like intelligence, wisdom, and morality (Niu & Sternberg, 2006; Sternberg, 1985). The positive correlation of text originality with perceived intelligence (Van der Zanden et al., 2022) could suggest that a well-written cover letter, which demonstrates linguistic and intellectual level through, for example, accurate vocabulary, clear arguments, and strategic information presentation, may improve the applicant's perception of intelligence, potentially increasing the likelihood of an invitation to an interview.

In addition, Van der Zanden et al. (2022) conducted a content analysis of dating profiles, to determine specific textual features. The findings underscored the importance of incorporating novel and appropriate stylistic elements, such as metaphors and self-disclosure, to improve text originality (Van der Zanden et al., 2022). Previous research has also emphasized the impact of both content and style on the originality of texts (Berger and Packard, 2018; Simonton, 1989). In the context of cover letters and their influence on interview invitations, the findings of Van der Zanden et al. (2022) emphasize the significance of metaphors and concrete self-disclosures in shaping perceptions of originality, and

consequently, in forming impressions. By incorporating metaphors and concrete self-disclosure in cover letters, the perceived level of creativity could be enhanced, thereby increasing the likelihood of making a positive impression and receiving an invitation for an interview.

A recent study examined the perceptions of creative individuals (Katz et al., 2022). The findings revealed that individuals can form impressions of an individual's creativity without consciously realizing it. The study specifically focused on an individual named "Trevor" and found that participants who held positive views of Trevor's creativity also had a favorable overall impression of him. Additionally, the study found that people's impressions of Trevor's creativity were linked to their likelihood of considering him for employment, their expectations of his contributions to the company's success, and to some extent, their decision to hire him (Katz et al., 2022). In the context of cover letters, this implies that incorporating elements that showcase creativity, whether in the content (novelty) or style (appropriateness), may contribute to forming positive unconscious impressions and consequently could influence the employer's decision-making process regarding job opportunities.

Furthermore, there have been other studies conducted in the field of creativity. Studies in fields like management and organizational psychology have been motivated by the belief that incorporating creative ideas can provide a competitive advantage (Amabile, 1988; Gilson, 2008). Moreover, assessments of an individual's creativity can influence decisions related to job opportunities and promotions (Blair & Mumford, 2007; Uzzi & Spiro, 2005). In the context of cover letters, this suggests that when a candidate is perceived as creative it may positively impact the employer's perception and increase the likelihood of receiving an invitation for further consideration in the hiring process.

Breabin's (2023) thesis on creativity in cover letters provides evidence for the significance of appropriateness the perceived quality of the candidate and the intention to

invite them for an interview. Interestingly, the study also revealed that while appropriate but non-novel elements resulted in the highest perceived candidate quality. The findings indicate that job applicants should ensure that their cover letters are always appropriate.

In summary, as suggested by Runco & Jaeger (2012) and Sternberg & Lubart (1998), creativity consists of a balance between novelty and appropriateness. Novel elements, such as metaphors and concrete-self disclosures enhance perceived text originality (Van der Zanden et al., 2022). At the same time, the importance of appropriateness in a cover letter, highlighted by Fox (1981) and reinforced by sticking to industry-specific standards (Wells et al., 1981; McDowell, 1987), plays a crucial role. In this study this refers to ensuring novel elements align with what is expected professionally, avoiding any perception of inappropriateness or deviation from set standards. Additionally, this could indicate that the applicant understands social norms, making the applicant perceived as competent and suitable for the job. Moreover, considering other research findings (Van der Zanden et al., 2022; Katz et al., 2022), it is plausible that adding creativity to a cover letter might positively impact how an applicant is assessed, influencing the impressions formed and potentially increasing the likelihood of getting invited for an interview. Therefore, the formulated hypothesis is:

**H2:** Novelty in a cover letter will positively influence the chances of an invitation to an interview, but only if it is appropriate.

Lastly, I expect that the perceived creativity in a cover letter will positively influence the chances of being invited for a job interview. It aligns with the findings from previous studies of creativity on impression formation (Van der Zanden et al., 2022; Katz et al., 2022), which suggest that positive perceptions of creativity contribute to favorable overall impressions. Thereby, apart from the discussion of exactly where creativity comes from, I also just want to measure it directly and expect that letter writers who are found to be more

creative are more likely to be invited for an interview. Therefore, the third hypothesis is formulated:

**H3:** Perceived creativity in a cover letter has a positive effect on the likelihood of receiving an invitation to a job interview.

### **Creative elements**

The second objective of this study is to discover the textual attributes that determine the perceived creativity within cover letters. Similar to the research of van der Zanden et al. (2022), I expect perceived creativity to manifest itself in both content and style. Following the research of van der Zanden et al. (2022) and Breabin (2023), I want to delve into specific elements that I expect to contribute significantly to creativity: metaphors and concrete self-disclosures. In addition, I want to investigate the presence of storytelling in cover letters, an aspect that remains relatively unexplored in the existing literature on this topic. Below, I will explain what this means in detail.

### **Metaphors**

Metaphors enhance the quality of a text by introducing innovative and imaginative comparisons between different ideas (Gibbs Jr, 1994). By connecting unrelated concepts, metaphorical language aids in explaining complex notions through relatable comparisons (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For instance, encouraging unconventional thinking, such as "Thinking outside the box", could stimulate creativity. Metaphors have a greater impact on capturing attention and persuading the audience compared to literal language (Boozer et al., 1991; Sopory & Dillard, 2002). They achieve this by evoking emotions and leaving lasting impressions (Forceville, 2008). Additionally, Ward and Gaidis (1990) highlight in their study on metaphors in promotional communication that metaphors also enhance brand recall as they require more cognitive processing time than literal language (Ward & Gaidis, 1990). Moreover, metaphors are of great importance in job applications because they serve as a

powerful means of effectively conveying information and exceed the impact of purely abstract descriptions (Krumboltz, 1990). This view is consistent with stylistic preferences discussed by Lindauer (2009) and LeBoutillier (2003), who emphasise the strong correlation between originality, vividness and imagination. Metaphors possess the ability to evoke emotions in readers, stimulate mental imagery and trigger sensory experiences (Jones, 2015; Gao Z et al., 2017; Simonton, 2009).

The findings of Van der Zanden et al. (2022) concluded that profile texts with stylistic originality incorporated metaphors as a delicate balance between novelty and appropriateness. In a complementary study, Breabin (2023) explored the efficacy of incorporating novel and contextually appropriate metaphors in cover letters, emphasizing the significance of appropriateness. Consequently, this suggests that in the context of cover letters, the use of metaphors should be carefully weighed against appropriateness.

The skillful use of novel metaphors requires a delicate balance between originality and comprehensibility (Hartung et al., 2020). Metaphors like "versatile as a general surgeon" as opposed to a simple statement like "I am versatile" (Breabin, 2023) or comparing multitasking skills to "juggling multiple responsibilities" vividly showcase applicants' skills while remaining contextually appropriate. Another example is illustrating adaptability by comparing yourself to a "chameleon". The findings of a study conducted by Sopory and Dillard (2002) on the persuasive effects of metaphors indicate that metaphors are more effective in persuasion than literal language, especially when the metaphor is novel.

Consistent with the codebook of Van der Zanden et al. (2022), this study also distinguishes between conventional/familiar metaphors and novel metaphors when defining the codebook. Familiar metaphors encompass instances where a metaphorical expression in a text is either a fixed word combination used metaphorically or a trope, representing a commonly used metaphorical expression (Van der Zanden et al., 2022). Novel metaphors, on

the other hand, refer to occurrences of metaphorical expressions in a text that appear fresh and are not part of a commonly used word combination or a frequently used trope (Van der Zanden et al., 2022).

In conclusion, I expect to find both familiar and novel metaphors in cover letters. People might use it in cover letters, as it is an original and lively way to describe things (Lindauer, 2009; LeBoutillier, 2003) and could attract attention and persuade more effectively than straightforward language (Boozer et al., 1991; Sopory & Dillard, 2002). It is expected that through incorporating metaphors, applicants could increase their chances of being remembered by potential employers, as metaphors serve as a means to convey information in a memorable manner (Krumboltz, 1990) and create lasting impressions (Forceville, 2008). Therefore, it can be inferred that the use of metaphors may help applicants stand out and make a lasting impact.

### **Self-disclosure**

The second element I focus on in this analysis is self-disclosure. Self-disclosure involves intentionally sharing personal information with another person (Collins & Miller, 1994). It plays an important role in relationship development (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Varying in depth and breadth, self-disclosures evolve through relationships, starting from lower intimacy and information levels to deeper and more extensive disclosure as the relationship progresses (Altman & Taylor, 1973). People tend to favor those open in sharing personal information, perceiving them as sincere and trustworthy (Collins & Miller, 1994; Ajzen, 1977).

Self-disclosure is like an invitation to share your experiences and communicate with others (Pearce & Sharp, 1973). When applying for a job, people use different strategies in their application letters to show their strengths and skills, helping employers understand them better (Soroko, 2012). Soroko's research on self-presentation in application letters found



various strategies, including boasting, connecting success to personal qualities, supporting claims with reported achievements, and providing specific details such as proper names and specifications related to personal qualities, achievements, and job descriptions (Soroko, 2012). In another study about impression management in employer interviews, interviewers' perceptions of applicants who promote themselves and are transparent are linked to positive evaluations, while creating a slightly different image has a negative connection (Roulin et al., 2014).

The depth and breadth of self-disclosure are influenced by various factors, as studied by Derlega and Chaikin (1977), including cultural norms, relationship closeness, context, and the perceived trustworthiness of the recipient. This implies that the extent of personal details disclosed in a cover letter may differ depending on the nature of the role and the specific requirements associated with it. In addition, research by Greene et al. (2006) demonstrated that moderate and appropriate self-disclosure positively influences relationship satisfaction. This is in line with Tidwell and Walther (2002) who indicated that inappropriate self-disclosure can lead to negative consequences, such as discomfort or decreased attraction within relationships.

The findings of Van der Zanden et al. (2022) indicated that perceived original profile texts included more concrete self-disclosure statements. In their research, the quality of self-disclosure was associated with the use of concrete details. Previous studies suggest that the appeal of creative work is linked to vivid descriptions of concrete experiences, sensations, and desires, rather than abstract ideas (Simonton, 1986; Simonton, 2009). A self-disclosure such as "I worked on numerous projects at company X" lacks specificity and fails to convey the nature of those projects. Consequently, a more specific self-disclosure like "During my job at company X, I actively participated in a project where I assumed the role of a public order coordinator, overseeing..." would provide the employer with a more vivid and detailed

account of my professional experiences. Moreover, concrete statements are generally seen as more truthful compared to abstract statements (Hansen & Wänke, 2010). For example, self-disclosures “I’m a good communicator” may seem less credible to recruiters if they are not backed up by concrete evidence. Moreover, concrete language enhances visualization, making information less ambiguous (Elliot et al., 2015), more memorable (Sherer & Rogers, 1984), and perceived as more truthful (Hansen & Wänke, 2010). Concreteness reduces perceived distance and shapes impressions not only of the text but also of the individuals involved (Douglas & Sutton, 2010).

In conclusion, referring to the research by Van der Zanden et al. (2022), in our codebook, we characterize concrete self-disclosure as the occurrence in which an individual discloses concrete and specific personal information about themselves in their cover letter. The expectation that concrete self-disclosures in cover letters are positively related to creativity and the anticipation of finding them during coding is based on several findings. First, the findings of Van der Zanden et al. (2022) suggest a link between original profile texts and the use of concrete self-disclosures. Second, previous studies emphasize that the success of original work is associated with vivid descriptions of concrete experiences, sensations and desires rather than abstract ideas (Simonton, 1986; Simonton, 2009). Moreover, literature on concrete language suggests that this not only increases the credibility of information but also enhances visualization, making it less ambiguous, more memorable, and perceived as truer (Hansen & Wänke, 2010; Elliot et al., 2015; Sherer & Rogers, 1984).

### **Storytelling**

The aspect of storytelling in cover letters is the third area of focus in this analysis. Storytelling is a powerful means of creating meaning through narration and projection, highlighting its central role in the process of meaning-making (Lewis, 2006). It involves a dynamic and interactive exchange, where an individual narrates a story to captivate the

audience and effectively convey messages (Sundin et al., 2018). The power of storytelling is further underscored by narrative theory, which defines a story as a narrative that explores successive connected actions and their consequences. (Gilliam & Flaherty, 2015). Skillful storytellers present actions in a coherent manner, emphasizing specific points or events (Smart & DiMaria, 2018).

Bangerter et al (2014) conducted a study on the significance of storytelling in selection interviews. Their findings showed that storytelling in these interviews mainly emphasised situational story aspects rather than the actual actions or results the candidates had achieved. The study identified three types of responses: stories, pseudo-stories (where a brief description of general events was given) and self-descriptions. These responses were found to be indicative of recommendations from professional recruiters. Recruiters were more likely to recommend applicants who presented a greater number of stories and pseudo-stories, attaching importance to the narrative content of their answers related to past behavior. In contrast, self-descriptions, which consisted of isolated statements, resulted in fewer hiring recommendations.

Moreover, Smart and DiMaria (2018) highlight the importance of storytelling in job interviews. They emphasize that good storytelling in job interviews involves telling stories about a candidate's education, experience, and knowledge. These stories should show how the candidate's skills and experiences align with the requirements of the position. They argue that well-crafted stories provide an engaging and compelling narrative that goes beyond mere statements. The process of carefully evaluating experiences serves as the basis for constructing these narratives. By pinpointing particular instances of skills and abilities, experiences can be woven into a clear storyline. As more experiences add up, a collection of stories can be formed (Smart and DiMaria, 2018). Although this article and research mainly

focus on storytelling in job interviews, these insights can also be applied to cover letters because of their contextual similarity.

Storytelling aligned with impression management is a powerful strategy for organizational influence (Bangerter et al., 2014; Smart & DiMaria, 2018). Through self-presentation, individuals aim to shape others' perceptions, and narrative theory suggests that presenting experiences and facts in a story format is the most effective approach (Smart & DiMaria, 2018). Well-crafted narratives play a vital role in showcasing one's skills and leaving a lasting impact, thereby enhancing the success of job searches (Smart & DiMaria, 2018). The essence of a narrative lies in its ability to depict a series of events experienced by characters, where their reactions and actions give rise to new developments until the story reaches its conclusion (Bruner, 1990). Including concrete and vivid details in stories enables others to visualize and emotionally connect, making them more persuasive than arguments based only on facts or statistics (Fryer, 2003).

Drawing up from insights of Smart and DiMaria (2018) this implies that in the context of cover letters, storytelling could manifest as a structured and narrative-driven presentation of a candidate's education, experience, and skills, demonstrating a clear alignment with the requirements of the position. In addition, it involves a compelling and convincing narrative that goes beyond simple declarative expressions (Smart and DiMaria, 2018). Similar to the findings in interviews (Bangerter et al., 2014), storytelling in cover letters could mean emphasizing situational narrative elements and providing context to actions and experiences. For example, applicants in cover letters could focus on the context of their achievements or challenges instead of just describing the actions or results. By providing a richer background it can help the reader understand the circumstances and motivations (Smart and DiMaria, 2018). Therefore, storytelling in cover letters could involve avoiding overly general or

context-free expressions and instead providing detailed and contextual narratives. See Appendix D for an example of storytelling in a cover letter.

To determine storytelling in cover letters, I include the following aspects in the codebook. Firstly, I look for a clear narrative structure in chronological order (Smart & DiMaria, 2018), in which they use this structure to convey their experiences. Thereby, assessing the level of detail in the descriptions provided, as storytelling is often characterized by rich, vivid details that help the reader visualize the events or experiences being shared (Fryer, 2003). For example, simply listing experiences and achievements and not going into detail when describing them is not considered storytelling. I will evaluate whether the content demonstrates causal and temporal connections, as effective storytelling connects events or experiences in a way that conveys a sense of cause and effect over time (Gilliam & Flaherty, 2015). Stories often engage emotions as well as logic (Fryer, 2003). Therefore, I look for elements in the cover letter that might evoke an emotional response, reinforcing not just what the applicant did but how they felt or the impact of their actions.

Taken all together, the use of (novel) metaphors, concrete self-disclosures, and storytelling are expected to be positively related to the creativity of cover letters. Therefore, the last hypothesis is formulated:

**H4:** (Novel) metaphors, concrete self-disclosures, and storytelling have a positive effect on perceived creativity.

## **Methodology**

### **Research design**

I used a quantitative research design to investigate the effects of novelty and appropriateness of a cover letter on the likelihood of receiving a job interview invitation. Firstly, a total of 51 cover letters from diverse sources were collected. The purpose of this

study was to understand the assessment of each cover letter on creativity, and the likelihood of receiving a job interview invitation.

The study included three independent variables: novelty, appropriateness, and overall creativity. The two dependent variables were the likelihood of receiving a job interview invitation and overall creativity. To examine H1, a multiple regression analysis was used to examine whether the effect of novelty on perceived creativity depends on the degree of appropriateness. For H2 and H3, examining the primary effect of novelty and the interaction effect between novelty and appropriateness on receiving an invitation to a job interview, another multiple regression analysis was conducted. The interaction term was aimed at examining whether the relationship between novelty and invitation probability depends on the appropriateness level. To confirm the positive association between the overall perceived creativity and job interview invitations (H4), a final regression analysis was conducted. The second objective of the study was to identify creative elements in cover letters. For this purpose, a content analysis and a correlation analysis were conducted to examine which elements of a letter are correlated with perceived creativity.

### **Sampling**

This study involved the participation of 116 individuals. Participants were gathered using a convenience sampling method, chosen for its ease and practicality in collecting data without specific prerequisites for assessing perceived creativity. Participants were required to be at least 16 years old. Convenience sampling involved selecting people who were readily available and met the study's criteria. The survey link was shared on the researcher's social media (LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp). Data collection lasted for 2.5 weeks, with 126 people participating. All participants, even those who didn't finish the survey, were included in the data analysis because their partial responses added value to the study, leading to slight variations in sample sizes for different survey questions.

Participants had a mean age of 28 years ( $SD = 10.25$ ). Of the respondents, 4% chose to review only English letters, 22.2% chose to review only Dutch letters and the majority (65.9%) chose to review both English and Dutch letters. This choice was influenced by the fact that the authentic cover letters included both Dutch and English letters. Letters were assigned based on participants' language preferences to ensure a broad assessment. More than half of the participants identified themselves as female (56.3%), 32.5% identified themselves as male and 4% identified themselves as non-binary. The majority (34.1%) reported having a full-time job and 26.2% were students.

## **Materials**

51 letters had been collected for this study, in which was given informed consent. A key question I aimed to explore was the originality of these letters. Instead of creating fictitious cover letters, I chose to use authentic letters sourced from external submissions. These job application letters were acquired by putting out a public request on social media and setting up an anonymous drop box for submissions. All letters underwent a thorough review to remove any identifiable information, ensuring that none of the 51 cover letters used in this study could be traced back to their original authors.

I selected only the initial 500 characters of each letter (equivalent to one A4 page) for the survey. Multiple websites state that the average cover letter fits on one A4 page (Toufik, 2023; Indeed, 2023). This approach helped create a sample with consistent text length, ensuring anonymity.

## **Measurement**

All variables in this study were assessed using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). The first independent variable focused on perceived novelty, evaluated through three statements: "This cover letter is novel," "This cover letter is uncommon", and "This cover letter is distinctive." These statements were drawn

from Runco and Jaeger's (2012) theoretical framework. The second independent variable, perceived appropriateness, was measured using three items: "This cover letter is appropriate," "This cover letter is suitable for a job vacancy", and "This cover letter fits the content of job applications." This scale was adapted from Breabin (2023). The mean of the novelty scale was 4.01 ( $SD = 0.60$ ) and the reliability was acceptable ( $\alpha = .79$ ). The mean of the appropriateness scale was 4.89 ( $SD = 0.54$ ) and the reliability was also acceptable ( $\alpha = .77$ ). To evaluate the overall creativity of the cover letter, a single item, "This cover letter seems creative to me," was used. The mean score for perceived creativity was 4.01 ( $SD = 0.81$ ). Additionally, the dependent variable, the likelihood of receiving a job interview invitation, was measured through one item: "If I were a recruiter, I would invite the job applicant for an interview". The mean for receiving an invitation to an interview was 4.85 ( $SD = 0.69$ ).

## **Procedure**

Each participant underwent three phases in the survey: (1) introduction and demographic questions, (2) assessing letters, and (3) concluding remarks and debriefing.

Initially, participants received a warm welcome and were briefed on the study's procedures. This section encompassed the study's title, purpose, expected duration of the survey, voluntary participation notice, clarification on absence of potential risks or benefits, data retention period of minimum 10 years with potential access by other researchers, provision of a unique code for response removal upon request, and endorsement by the Ethical Review Board of the School of Humanities and Digital Sciences at Tilburg University. Contact information for researchers was also supplied for inquiries or complaints. Participants could choose to consent to these terms to proceed; declining would redirect them to the end of the study.

Consenting participants answered demographic questions (age, gender, current employment status) and specified their reading language preferences. Participants could



choose between Dutch or English letters. The option both (Dutch and English) was also available. This determined which cover letters they would evaluate. Subsequently, participants assessed five application letters, rating them on a scale from 1 to 7 based on the defined scales (see measurement section). Finally, participants were thanked, debriefed, and allowed to share comments and suggestions. See Appendix C for the complete information letter and debriefing.

## **Content Analysis: Textual Characteristics in Cover Letters**

### **Method**

The second part of the study was a content analysis to address the research question about the text features predicting the perceived creativity of cover letters. I made a codebook based on previous research from Van der Zanden et al., (2022) which can be found in Appendix C. For the content analysis, all 51 cover letters were coded based on the features from the codebook. Finally, the score per feature for each letter is related (correlation) to perceived creativity.

### **Material**

All 51 cover letters were coded on all features defined in the codebook manually. The main categories and features in the codebook were established based on the research from Van der Zanden et al. (2022) and the literature. The codebook consisted of 3 categories: features of self-disclosure, metaphors, and storytelling. The features on which all 51 letters were coded were: number of concrete self-disclosures, number of fixed/familiar metaphors, number of novel metaphors and presence of storytelling (binary).

### **Procedure**

I went through each letter and counted how often I came across of each of these features. The score is a sum of how many times I came across each feature.

*Concrete self-disclosure features.* Manually coding was used to detect specific self-disclosure features. For information to qualify as specific, it needed to trigger vivid mental images (West, 2000) and provide concrete evidence (Bangerter et al., 2014). Any statement in which an applicant disclosed personal details was treated as a self-disclosure segment. However, I was looking for concrete self-disclosures. For example, "My passion for problem solving was evident in my role at XXX" is not concrete. But "My passion for problem solving was evident in my role at XXX, where I initiated and implemented a successful strategy to streamline operations" is concrete.

*stylistic features (metaphors).* Two stylistic features were coded: the occurrence of fixed metaphors (e.g. "Think outside the box") and novel metaphors (e.g. "I have a hands-on, flexible, agile mindset").

*storytelling.* This included presenting information through a story and creating a connection between facts, experiences, and personal elements. By telling a story, an applicant not only highlights skills and experiences but also brings them to life in a way that is engaging and compelling (Smart & DiMaria, 2018). See appendix D for an example of storytelling.

## **Measurement**

Following the coding, all data was imported into SPSS. Variables were generated for each feature. The independent variables (novel metaphors, fixed/familiar metaphors, and concrete self-disclosure) were treated as continuous variables. Storytelling, another independent variable, was measured as a binary variable (yes/no). The dependent variable was overall perceived creativity of the letter based on the previous assessment of participants. Then, a correlation analysis was conducted to see the relationship for each feature with the perceived overall creativity.

## **Results**

### **Interaction effect on perceived creativity**

The first goal of this study was to determine the predictive effect of the interaction between novelty and appropriateness on perceived creativity within cover letters. A multiple regression analysis was conducted with novelty and appropriateness and their interaction as predictors and perceived creativity as the outcome variable.

The model incorporating novelty, appropriateness, and interaction showed significant explanatory power, accounting for 80.2% of the variance in perceived creativity ( $R^2 = .802$ ,  $F(3, 50) = 63.73$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This indicates that around 80.2% of the variability in perceived creativity can be attributed to the combined influence of novelty and appropriateness. The assumption of normally distributed residues was met, and so was the assumption of homoscedasticity.

The regression analysis showed that both novelty and appropriateness significantly predicted perceived creativity. Novelty showed a significant effect ( $b = 1.05$ ,  $\beta = .78$ ,  $t = 10.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that letters that were seen as more novel were also rated as more creative. Appropriateness also showed a statistically significant effect ( $b = 0.27$ ,  $\beta = .18$ ,  $t = 2.37$ ,  $p < .022$ ), though the impact appeared comparatively weaker than that of novelty.

Surprisingly, the interaction effect between novelty and appropriateness did not significantly predict perceived creativity ( $b = -.126$ ,  $\beta = -.062$ ,  $t = -.81$ ,  $p = .442$ ). Thus, apart from their individual effects, the interaction effect of novelty and appropriateness had no significant effect on perceived creativity. Therefore, H1: “The effect of novelty on perceived creativity is moderated by a high level of appropriateness” is not supported.

### **Interaction effect on the invitation for an interview**

To determine the interaction of novelty and appropriateness in a cover letter on the probability of receiving an interview invitation, a multiple regression analysis was performed. The predictors included in the analysis were novelty, appropriateness, and interaction, while the outcome variable was the invitation for an interview.

While the assumption of normally distributed residues was met, homoscedasticity assumptions were not fulfilled, this makes the model less reliable. The model, incorporating these predictors, accounted for a substantial proportion of the variance in receiving an interview invitation ( $R^2 = .785$ ,  $F(3, 50) = 57.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ), emphasizing the importance of considering both novelty and appropriateness in cover letters.

The regression analysis, evaluating the relationship between novelty, appropriateness, and invitation to an interview, indicated that both novelty ( $b = 0.55$ ,  $\beta = .48$ ,  $t = 6.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and appropriateness ( $b = 0.73$ ,  $\beta = .57$ ,  $t = 7.40$ ,  $p < .001$ ) significantly predicted the likelihood of receiving an invitation. Interestingly, appropriateness has a larger beta coefficient, indicating that changes in appropriateness are more strongly related to the probability of receiving an interview invitation than changes in novelty. Higher scores on both novelty and appropriateness correlate with a greater likelihood of receiving an interview invitation.

However, the interaction effect between novelty and appropriateness was not significant ( $b = -0.05$ ,  $\beta = -0.03$ ,  $p = .741$ ). This suggests that while novelty and appropriateness independently influence the invitation likelihood, their combined effect did not significantly affect the outcome. Thus, no support was found for H2.

### **Relationship between perceived creativity and an invitation to job interview**

The study aimed to determine if perceived creativity in a cover letter has a positive effect on the likelihood of receiving an invitation to a job interview. A linear regression analysis was conducted with perceived creativity as the predictor and the likelihood of receiving an invitation for an interview as the outcome variable. The assumption of normally distributed residues was met, and so was the homoscedasticity.

The model with perceived creativity as a predictor explained a significant proportion of the variance in interview invitation, accounting for 65.4% ( $R^2 = .654$ ) of the variability,

with a significant F-value ( $F(1, 50) = 92.52, p < .001$ ). The regression analysis revealed a significant and positive association between perceived creativity and the likelihood of receiving an invitation for an interview ( $b = 0.68, \beta = .71, t = .809, p < .001$ ). Thus, H4 is supported.

### **Relationship between creative elements in cover letters and perceived creativity**

Lastly, the aim was to examine if (novel) metaphors, concrete self-disclosures, and storytelling relate to higher perceived creativity. Correlation analyses were conducted with novel metaphors, concrete self-disclosures, and storytelling, separately as the independent variables and perceived creativity as the dependent variable. Storytelling was measured as a nominal variable (present/absent).

The average use of familiar metaphors in cover letters was 1.84 ( $SD = 1.21$ ) and the average use of novel metaphors was 0.96 ( $SD = 1.11$ ). Additionally, the average use of concrete disclosures was 2.53 ( $SD = 1.55$ ). Storytelling was used in more than half of the letters (72.5%).

Notably, the independent variable novel metaphors ( $Z_{\text{skewness}} = 2.42$ ), and the dependent variable perceived overall creativity ( $Z_{\text{skewness}} = -2.54$ ) were found to deviate from normal distribution. Hence, bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals were calculated for these correlations.

The study observed that familiar metaphors had a positive association with perceived creativity ( $r = .37, p = .008$ ). This correlation explained 13.7% of the variability. The bootstrapped 95% CI [0.05, 0.61] did not cross zero, indicating a significant effect. The presence of novel metaphors had no significant correlation with perceived creativity ( $r = .28, p = .044, 7.84\%$  explained variance, 95% CI [-0.01, 0.50]). Furthermore, concrete self-disclosures showed a positive correlation with perceived creativity ( $r = .33, p = .018$ ), explaining 10.89% of the variance. The bootstrapped 95% CI [0.07, 0.59] did not cross zero,

indicating a significant effect. Regarding storytelling, a positive correlation with perceived creativity was found ( $r = .27, p = .053$ ), explaining 7.29% of the variance. The bootstrapped 95% CI [0.01, 0.54] did not cross zero, indicating a significant effect.

In summary, familiar metaphors, concrete self-disclosures, and storytelling showed significant positive associations with perceived creativity in cover letters. While the effect of novel metaphors on perceived creativity was not found to be significant. Thus, H5:” (Novel) metaphors, concrete self-disclosures, and storytelling have a positive effect on perceived creativity” is only partly supported.

## Discussion

The first hypothesis proposed that perceived creativity would be predicted by the interaction between novelty and a high level of appropriateness. According to the dual requirement of novelty and appropriateness in creative work (Sternberg & Lubart, 1998; Runco & Jaeger, 2012), the relation of novelty with perceived creativity in cover letters was expected to depend on achieving a high level of appropriateness. Referring to the importance of appropriateness in a cover letter (Breabin, 2023; Fox, 1981; Wells et al., 1981; McDowell, 1987). However, the findings did not support this hypothesis, challenging the expected moderation effect. This finding contrasts with theories about the dual requirement of novelty and appropriateness for creativity (Diedrich et al., 2015, Runco & Jaeger, 2012). The absence of a significant interaction implies that although both novelty and appropriateness independently positively relate to perceived creativity, their combined effect could not be measured in this study. An explanation is that the assessment of this hypothesis was complicated by the overall presence of appropriateness throughout the data. The observed lowest score of 3.6, close to the middle of the scale, and only two scores below 4 hindered a comprehensive evaluation of the appropriateness spectrum in this context. Thereby, cover

letters are expected to meet certain standards of appropriateness (Fox, 1981; Wells et al., 1981; McDowell, 1987), so instances of inappropriateness might be rare.

Hypothesis 2 suggested that the positive influence of novelty in cover letters on the likelihood of receiving an invitation to interview depended on the interaction with appropriateness. The results revealed significant individual main effects for both novelty and appropriateness, with appropriateness having a greater main effect than novelty. This contradicts the theory that suggested appropriateness served as a secondary factor (Dietrich et al., 2015; Runco, 1988). However, the significance of appropriateness aligns with Breabin's (2023) results, who also found a significant effect of appropriateness on the intention to invite them for an interview. The larger main effect of appropriateness suggests that it is important that cover letters are sufficient to industry standards and certain norms to get a job interview (Fox, 1981; Wells et al., 1981; McDowell, 1987). Surprisingly, there was no significant interaction between novelty and appropriateness in terms of interview invitations. The reason I expected this was theoretical perspectives from the creativity literature, which emphasize the need for novelty combined with appropriateness in creative work (Runco & Jaeger, 2012; Sternberg & Lubart, 1998). In addition, Van der Zanden's et al. (2022) results suggested that perceived originality in profile texts is related to finding a balance between novelty and appropriateness. Moreover, there was a positive influence of creativity on impression formation (Van der Zanden et al., 2022; Katz et al., 2022). In addition, Amabile (1988) suggested that creative ideas can provide a competitive advantage. Therefore, the assumption underlying H2 was that the interaction of these factors would be positively related to impression formation and thus the likelihood of receiving an invitation to a job interview. It is plausible to suggest that this lack of interaction could also be attributed to the fact that all the cover letters were appropriate. Leaving little room to explore the impact of novel and inappropriate letters on the likelihood of receiving an invitation for an interview.

Consequently, the need for cover letters to meet appropriateness standards (Admin, 2021; Doyle, 2022; Herman, 2016) makes cases of inappropriateness relatively rare. Thus, measuring an interaction effect in cover letters can be challenging, given that appropriateness can be considered a fundamental requirement in the composition of a letter. In other words, when the cover letter is not appropriate, it goes straight into the bin.

Hypothesis 3 stated that perceived creativity in a cover letter has a positive impact on the likelihood of receiving an invitation to an interview. This hypothesis draws on theoretical perspectives from creativity (Runco & Jaeger, 2012), emphasizing the role of novelty and appropriateness, as well as insights from studies on impression formation (Van der Zanden et al., 2022; Katz et al., 2022), which forms the basis for H3.

The positive relationship between perceived creativity and the likelihood of receiving an invitation resonates with the arguments put forth by Van der Zanden et al. (2022) and Katz et al. (2022), suggesting that creativity contributes to favorable impressions, ultimately influencing interview invitations. Drawing a parallel with Van der Zanden et al. (2022), the positive correlation observed between perceived creativity and intelligence in their study could suggest that a well-written and creative cover letter not only communicates originality but could also convey a certain level of intellectual sophistication. This aligns with the idea that creativity is associated with favorable qualities such as intelligence (Niu & Sternberg's, 2006). The results of this study also echo the findings from the study examining perceptions of creative individuals (Katz et al., 2022), indicating that perceived creative letters potentially could shape unconscious impressions. These unconscious impressions could play a crucial role in the employer's decision-making process, influencing considerations for a job and expectations about the candidate's contribution to the company's success. Overall, the results highlight that a creative cover letter positively relates to the likelihood of receiving an interview, through positive impression formation.



Hypothesis 4 aimed to determine the separate relationship of the elements—(novel) metaphors, concrete self-disclosures, and storytelling—with the perceived creativity within cover letters. The findings reveal significant associations with familiar metaphors, concrete self-disclosures, and storytelling on perceived creativity in cover letters. However, novel metaphors did not show statistical significance in this relationship.

The positive correlation between familiar metaphors and perceived creativity aligns with previous research highlighting the persuasive impact of metaphors (Boozer et al., 1991; Sopory & Dillard, 2002). The expectation that metaphors would contribute to the creativity of cover letters is supported by the idea that they attract attention, persuade effectively, and leave lasting impressions (Boozer et al., 1991; Forceville, 2008). In addition, the results align with Van der Zanden et al. (2022), who found a positive correlation between metaphors and perceived creativity. Therefore, the study provides empirical evidence supporting the role of metaphors in enhancing perceived creativity. Thus, the results suggest that the use of familiar metaphors in cover letters could attract the attention of employers and leave lasting impressions, and therefore relate positively to perceived creativity.

The positive correlation between concrete self-disclosures and perceived creativity is consistent with the theoretical premise that concrete language enhances visualization, reduces ambiguity, and is perceived as more truthful (Hansen & Wänke, 2010; Sherer & Rogers, 1984). In addition, it supports the idea that metaphors evoke emotions and reduce the perceived distance (Douglas & Sutton, 2010), therefore, might contribute to the overall perceived creativity. Finally, the results are in line with the results of the study by van der Zanden et al (2022), who also found that concrete self-disclosures related positively to the perceived originality of texts. The findings extend the existing literature by establishing a link between concrete self-disclosures and creativity in the context of cover letters. Thus, the

results suggest that providing specific and vivid personal details in cover letters relates positively to perceived creativity.

The positive correlation between storytelling and perceived creativity supports the notion that narratives create significance, humanize facts, and establish emotional connections (Smart & DiMaria, 2018). The study's findings confirm the effectiveness of storytelling in work-related contexts and highlight the importance of presenting experiences and skills in a narrative form. This aligns with the persuasive and influential nature of narrative communication in impression management (Bangerter et al., 2014). Therefore, the results suggest that the use of storytelling in cover letters positively relates to perceived creativity.

The non-significant correlation between novel metaphors and perceived creativity contrasts with the positive association observed for familiar metaphors. This finding implies that while metaphors generally enhance creativity, there exists a nuanced connection between novel metaphors and creativity specifically within the context of cover letters. A possible explanation for this is that metaphors effectively vividly depict and communicate information more memorably (Krumboltz, 1990). However, when a metaphor is overly vivid and novel, it may overstep the appropriate boundaries of a cover letter. Maintaining a balanced tone and providing relevant but concise information that matches the job description is crucial for ensuring the overall appropriateness of a cover letter (Admin, 2021; Doyle, 2022; Herman, 2016). Consequently, individuals may tend to rely on metaphors that are already familiar in the context of cover letters as a way to ensure their appropriateness, which is in line with the importance of striking a balance between originality and comprehensibility (Hartung et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, the study underscores the important role of familiar metaphors, concrete self-disclosures, and storytelling elements in shaping the perceived creativity of cover letters,

offering valuable insights for job applicants seeking to write impactful and creative cover letters.

### **Theoretical implications**

The study challenges existing theoretical perspectives, notably from Sternberg and Lubart (1998) and Runco and Jaeger (2012), by not finding significant interaction effects between novelty and appropriateness in the context of cover letters. This prompts a reconsideration of the assumption that the impact of novelty on perceived creativity is contingent upon achieving a certain level of appropriateness in cover letters, as it might heavily depend on the context. The absence of this interaction suggests an independent influence of novelty and appropriateness on the perceived creativity of cover letters.

The prominence of appropriateness across all cover letters in the study indicates its inherent presence in the job application context. This emphasizes the theoretical importance of appropriateness, echoing Breabin's (2023) thesis that adhering to appropriateness standards is crucial in cover letters. The rarity of instances of inappropriateness in the data suggests that, within the limits of professional communication, maintaining appropriateness could be a standard expectation rather than a varying factor.

The study aligns with previous research, particularly Van der Zanden et al. (2022) and Katz et al. (2022), by establishing a positive relationship between perceived creativity in cover letters and positive impressions. This connection extends further to suggest that a creatively crafted cover letter may convey a level of intelligence, in line with Niu and Sternberg's (2006) arguments and Van der Zanden et al. (2022) findings. This insight contributes to understanding how creativity in cover letters can influence not only impressions but also perceptions of the applicant's intelligence.

Moreover, the research on specific creative elements, such as metaphors, concrete self-disclosures, and storytelling enriches theoretical perspectives on the composition of creative cover letters.

### **Practical implications**

Job applicants are advised to prioritize appropriateness in their cover letters, as the study indicates its inherent presence and potential role in shaping perceptions. Crafting cover letters that adhere to appropriateness standards (Admin, 2021; Doyle, 2022; Herman, 2016), ensures a baseline of professional communication that is well-received by potential employers.

The practical implication of a positive relationship between perceived creativity and the likelihood of receiving an interview invitation underscores the importance of creativity in cover letters. Job seekers should recognize that a creative presentation can shape employers' impressions, potentially influencing decisions related to employment and expectations of the candidate's contributions to the organization.

While the study did not find a significant interaction between novelty and appropriateness due to almost no dispersion of inappropriateness, job applicants are encouraged to use both elements in their cover letters, as they have independently a significant effect. This involves infusing novel elements such as familiar metaphors, concrete self-disclosures, and storytelling while maintaining appropriateness. A thoughtful approach to originality and appropriateness can contribute to the overall impact of a cover letter.

The practical implications highlight the positive associations of concrete self-disclosures and storytelling with perceived creativity in cover letters. Job seekers are encouraged to use familiar metaphors, and include specific and vivid personal details, as well as narrative elements, to write a creative cover letter. This involves creating a clear mental image for the employer and engaging them in a compelling narrative.

In conclusion, the theoretical and practical implications derived from this study provide valuable insights into the dynamics of creativity in cover letters, guiding both job applicants and employers in understanding and leveraging creative elements within the professional context.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Due to time constraints, the number of participants in this study was limited. However, the quantity of participants is not a crucial factor in our research findings. This is because we also had multiple letters that were evaluated by a minimum of six individuals, making the assessment highly reliable. In contrast, if we had relied on only two coders who may not have been completely unbiased towards the conditions, the reliability would have been compromised. In addition, the study did not delve into industry-specific nuances that might influence the perception of creativity.

Moreover, the survey's duration of 15 minutes has been identified as a possible factor contributing to participant fatigue, which in turn raises concerns about the reliability of the responses provided. To tackle this matter, I propose the implementation of a pilot study that assesses participant engagement and allows for the fine-tuning of the survey's duration.

The research conducted on the relationship between storytelling elements and perceived creativity in cover letters has provided valuable insights. However, it is important to acknowledge a limitation that arises from the difficulty in defining and measuring storytelling within this specific context. Storytelling is a complex concept that can vary in its definition depending on the context. In the context of cover letters, there is a lack of standardized criteria or universally accepted definitions for what constitutes effective storytelling. Unlike in interviews, where researchers have examined the narrative structures employed by candidates (Bangerter et al., 2014), there is relatively limited literature on storytelling in cover letters. Evaluating storytelling in cover letters involves a certain level of subjectivity, as there

can be diverse interpretations of what makes a compelling narrative. Although I have attempted to establish clear criteria for assessing storytelling elements, the absence of a standardized measure or established benchmarks could introduce variability in how others perceive and evaluate storytelling.

To improve future research, it would be useful to increase the selection of letters, especially by including a diverse range of jobs that include both jobs where creativity is less emphasized (such as doctors and lawyers) and jobs where it is more important (such as designers). It is expected that in jobs where creativity is valued, a letter showing creative skills would receive more positive reviews compared to industries with more rigid expectations.

### **Conclusion**

This study investigated the relationship between different aspects of creativity (novelty and appropriateness) in cover letters and their relationship to perceived creativity, as well as the likelihood of receiving an invitation to an interview. Contrary to initial expectations, the interaction between novelty and appropriateness was not found to significantly predict perceived creativity and the likelihood of receiving an invitation to a job interview. However, this could be attributed to the fact that the dataset did not contain novel/inappropriate cover letters, so these hypotheses could not be measured. The relation of appropriateness in securing a job interview was unexpectedly found to be more significant than novelty. This was not necessarily expected, as theories about creativity insist that novelty serves as a primary factor and appropriateness acts as a secondary factor (Runco & Jaeger, 2012; Dietrich et al., 2015). However, this demonstrates that the application of creativity varies depending on the context in which it is used. In the context of cover letters, it is hugely important to remain appropriate and can thus be seen as a prerequisite before someone can start being original or creative. Therefore, the study highlights the challenge of assessing the interaction between novelty and

appropriateness in contexts where appropriateness is a standard expectation. In addition, the results emphasize the importance of perceived creativity in positively shaping impressions and increasing the likelihood of receiving an interview invitation. Job applicants could use familiar metaphors, concrete self-disclosures, and storytelling elements to make their cover letter more creative. Overall, these findings provide valuable guidance for individuals seeking to write creative cover letters in the competitive job market.

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## Appendix A

### Scales (1-7 Likert scale)

#### 1. Perceived novelty (self-made from Runco and Jaeger, 2012)

*1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree)*

This cover letter is novel

This cover letter is uncommon (reverse coded “commonplace”)

This cover letter is distinctive

#### 2. Appropriateness (adapted from Breabin, 2023)

*1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree)*

This cover letter uses appropriate language

This cover letter is suitable to use for a job vacancy (reverse codes “unsuitable”)

This cover letter fits the content of job applications

#### 3. Overall creativity (self-made)

*1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree)*

This cover letter seems creative to me

#### 4. Intention to invite for a job interview (adapted from Breabin, 2023)

*1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree)*

If I were a recruiter, I would invite the job applicant for an interview.

### Demographic questions

**What is your age?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**What is your gender identity?**

Male

Female

Non-binary/third gender

Prefer not to say

**What is your current employment status?**

Employed full-time

Employed part-time

Self-employed

Unemployed

Student

Retired

Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Which language(s) can you understand when reading?**

Dutch

English

Both



## Appendix B

### Codebook content analysis

CODEBOOK OF FEATURES					
Category	Feature	Definition	Measurement	Examples	
Self-disclosure features	Presence of concrete self-disclosure	The occurrence of personal information that is specific and concrete as it evokes a clear imagery, for example by describing an assignable location, product, activity, period or moment. This could also involve information that specifies other information that is provided.	Manual coding: Total number of concrete self-disclosure statements in the text	<p>"Being a resident of X myself gives me a good knowledge of the area and the pain points within the different neighbourhoods."</p> <p>"I always read through important pieces back to front to make sure I haven't made any spelling mistakes."</p> <p>"I gained a lot of experience through various internships, including at X in X. During the internship at X, I was involved in the refurbishment of the acute cluster of the X"</p>	
Metaphors	Presence of fixed metaphors	The occurrence of a metaphorical expression in the cover letter text that is (a) a fixed word combination that is used metaphorically, or (b) a trope, meaning a metaphorical expression that is particularly common in the context of cover letters.	Manual coding: Total number of metaphors in the text	<p>"Think outside the box" (Fixed Word Combination)</p> <p>"Open doors to new opportunities" (Fixed Word Combination)</p> <p>"Hit the ground running" (Fixed Word Combination)</p> <p>"Bridge the gap" (Trope)</p> <p>"Climb the ladder of success" (Trope)</p> <p>"Red line throughout my life" (Trope)</p>	
	Presence of novel metaphors	The occurrence of a metaphorical expression in the cover letter text that appears novel and is not a fixed word combination that is used frequently or a trope that is often heard in a job application process.	Manual coding: Total number of novel metaphors in the text	<p>"I am versatile like a general surgeon."</p> <p>"Clown philosophy: turn a mistake into an opportunity"</p> <p>"Having the fire to push boundaries"</p>	
Storytelling	Presence of storytelling	The presence of narrative elements or storytelling techniques in cover letters that involve incorporating aspects that structure a compelling story, highlighting personal experiences, skills, or achievements through a coherent flow of events to a desired end.	Manual coding: Binary: absent (0) or present (1) in the text	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Narrative structure in chronological order, in which they use this structure to convey their experiences</li> <li>2. Assess the level of detail in the descriptions provided</li> <li>3. Assess if content demonstrates causal and temporal connections</li> <li>4. Look for elements in the cover letter that might evoke an emotional response, i.e. how they felt or the impact of their actions.</li> </ol>	

## Appendix C

### Information letter

Dear participant,

You are invited to take part in this online survey. This survey is a part of the research study: Creativity in cover letters. The survey is conducted as part of the master Communication and Information Sciences at Tilburg University.

**Purpose and procedure:** The purpose of this study is to understand the assessment of job applicants on the basis of a cover letter. You are going to read five job application letters. After each letter, a set of questions will appear on your screen asking you to evaluate the letter and the candidate. Please answer the questions based on your own perception of the letter. It takes around 10 minutes to answer the survey.

**Potential Risks and benefits:** You are ensured that there will be no negative impact from participation in this study. You will receive no compensation for participating in this study. When you participate in this study you will contribute to scientific research which can lead to a better understanding of the assessment of applicants based on cover letters.

**Participation:** Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary. You may reject participating in this study or stop your participation at any time. All participants are guaranteed that there will be no consequences in the case of opt-out. If you want us to delete your data you can send us an email with your unique ID and we will remove your responses. Your unique ID is  $\{e://Field/Random\%20ID\}$

**Data use:** When signing this form, you will give permission to collect and use your answers for this study. All participants will remain anonymous and no personal information will be stored. The responses to the survey will be stored for at least 10 years and may be made available for other researchers.

**Ethical Approval:** This study was approved by the Ethical Review Board of the School of Humanities and Digital Sciences of Tilburg University. Code: REDC2020.15a

**Contact:** If you have any questions about this study you can contact Monique Pollmann (m.m.h.pollmann@uvt.nl) or Anouk van der Linden (a.j.h.vdrlinden@tilburguniversity.edu). If you have a complaint about this study, you can also contact the “Research Ethics and Data Management Committee” of Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences via tshd.redc@tilburguniversity.edu

### Consent form

By continuing with this study, I confirm that ...:

...I have read and understood the study information.

...I know that it is possible to contact the principal investigator to ask questions about the study by emailing to m.m.h.pollmann@uvt.nl or a.j.h.vdrlinden@tilburguniversity.edu

...I know that my participation is voluntary.

...I can withdraw from the research once participation has begun, without any negative

