What Defines Charisma in Female Political Leaders? A Study of Perceptions of Charismatic Female Politicians

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Abstract

This study aims to examine how leadership styles influence perceptions of charisma in female political leaders. While the representation of female leaders have increased in the political arena is increasing, there is limited research examining how perceptions of leadership styles influences whether female leaders are seen as charismatic or otherwise. 66 undergraduate psychology students from a large private Malaysian university participated in a survey experiment. We manipulated descriptions of leaders in the survey experiment across three different conditions - female leaders who are portrayed as portraying male-only, female-only, or a combination of male and female (androgynous) leadership styles. It was hypothesized that female leaders who adopted a combination of male and female leadership behaviours would be perceived as more charismatic than the other two groups. Results from this study, however, showed that female leaders were perceived as being most charismatic when portraying feminine-inclined leadership styles. Findings from this study provide initial evidence that perceptions of charisma in female political leaders may hinge on how followers perceive female leaders to conform to established gender norms and gender role congruity.

Key words: Charismatic leadership, gender, political leaders

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The role of charisma in organizational leadership continues to be an area of intense research, and has been for the past two decades. The concept of charisma was first coined by Weber (1968), who defined a charismatic person as an individual gifted with extraordinary power and qualities. He depicted charisma as a "supernatural trait" that surfaced in some leaders during a time of crisis (Weber, 1968). Charismatic leadership has often been used interchangeably with other terms such as "visionary", "transformational" and "inspirational" as all of these forms of leadership whether implicitly or explicitly incorporates the concept of charisma (House & Howell, 1992). It is, however, important to acknowledge that subtle differences exist between these terms, and for the purposes of this paper, the term charisma is used as the central construct following Weber's original definition.

The qualities of a leader that differentiates them from the non-leaders and the followers are usually the centre of many leadership studies (Jackson & Parry, 2007). However, the criteria needed to be a successful leader and to obtain power also relies on the perception of others – and in the context of leadership, followers' perceptions (Ensari & Murphy, 2003; Pfeffer, 1977). Subordinates' perception of leader's traits can thus affect subordinates' cooperation and the commitment, as well as their loyalty towards the leader (Meindl, 1995; Pfeffer, 1977). This is most evidently the case with perceptions of charisma, which is strongly dependent on how followers view their leaders. It is for this reason that research on charismatic leadership has tended to focus on the perceptions and traits of leaders as attributed

towards them by followers. These charismatic leaders' traits may then translate to salient behaviours that are observed by followers as being likable, being able to provide a sense of belongingness, and motivating subordinates to exceed expectations (Somani & Krishnan, 2004

To date, an overwhelming number of leadership roles are occupied by males, particularly in organization, military and politics, while the representation of females in similar capacities are somewhat limited (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This may be because leadership is traditionally defined as a 'male-oriented' role as leadership requires more agentic characteristics such as being more decisive, competitive and aggressive (Diekman & Goodfriend, 2006; Powell, 2011). However, the number of female leaders who has taken over leadership positions has increased throughout the years, suggesting that perceptions of leadership are evolving to a point where they are less strongly associated with traditional gender stereotypes.

Several contextual factors may also explain why the overwhelming numbers of leaders are males. The glass ceiling phenomenon, for instance, has been well-documented a key phenomenon limiting female leaders' appointment in leadership roles. This phenomenon is a gender based prejudice and discrimination where women are being excluded from promotions in corporations (Baxter & Wright, 2000; Eagly & Karau, 2002). The glass ceiling phenomenon also partly explains very few females hold major high ranking positions in both corporations as well as in politics (Eagly & Karau, 2002). However, it is seen that more and more women are breaking through the glass ceiling - education opportunities and the persistence of many women's movements that fought for gender equality have allow these women to assume more leadership position than before (Wirth, 2009).

Central to how the glass ceiling phenomenon shapes perceptions towards female leaders is the fact that society perceives gender differences as having a strong influence on leadership styles. The preference for male leaders can be explained further via role congruity theory, in which a group will be assessed positively when their traits and characteristics are in line with the relevant social roles of the group (Diekman & Goodfriend, 2006). As the behaviours used to fulfil leadership roles are more masculine oriented, females may be perceived as being less effective, or even inappropriate if they assume a leadership position (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This is due to the apparent incongruity between female traits and the nature of leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women are expected to perform their leadership roles using more communal forms of leadership, which tends to involve more collaborative, relationship-oriented styles of leadership. Conversely, men are expected to perform their leadership roles following more agentic styles, which stresses competition-oriented qualities such as dominance, aggressiveness, confidence and assertion (Eagly & Karau, 2002). However, this dichotomy of leadership behaviours based solely on agentic and communal styles may be too simplistic and not necessarily hold in today's societal, organizational and political environment. It is plausible to consider that female leaders themselves may also portray adopt more agentic-style approaches in their leadership style, whilst the opposite may also be true for male leaders who adopt more communal-style approaches to leading.

Although the number of female representations in the political leadership is becoming increasingly evident, female politicians are still a minority in contrast with the overwhelmingly male representation in the political arena. To date, the political context was considered to be "stubbornly masculine" (Randall, 2002) due to the fact

that women were previously excluded from the political world along with the firm expectations of "traditional" gender roles (Fox & Lawless, 2011). Krook (2010) suggested that there are a few factors that may contribute to the lack of women in the political world, including gender disparity in political objectives, biases of other political leaders in drafting candidates and the biases in the voter's perception of competent leaders. She also added that potential female candidates are not enthusiastic to contend as they may fear the prejudices that other political leaders have of them (Krook, 2010). Thus, within the context of politics, role congruity appears more pronounced, as political leadership is perceived in general as a masculine role, inconsistent with female social roles. Many female political leaders were constantly restricted by the expectations of how women should perform as political leaders, and that this could have limited their involvement and representation in the politics. Although much attention is given to the study on charisma and the study of gender difference in leadership, there is limited research done on gender differences in perceptions of charisma. In previous studies, transformational leadership is often linked with traits such as agreeableness, focus on relationships and nurturance, which are then related to more transformational leadership style (Bass, Avolio, & Atwater, 1996; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Powell, 2001)

This raises the question as to whether the attributes of charisma is associated with more of a male or female behaviours one, as charismatic females are largely underrepresented in comparison with male charismatic leaders. In this study, I revisit the charismatic theory of leadership by conducting further studies on charisma in female leaders, particularly female political leaders. The main research question for this study is "What qualities must a female political leader have to be perceived as charismatic?" To the best of my knowledge, no extensive research has been

conducted on grounds of charismatic female leaders. As such, it is my intention that the present study sheds some light on the topic and perhaps allows for a greater understanding of how charisma is attributed towards female political leaders. In this study, I designed and conducted an experiment assessing how perceptions of charisma in female leaders would differ depending on the extent to which they portray agentic or communal styles of leadership.

Hence, the study is an experiment where the leadership behaviours of these female leaders are manipulated so that we are able to measure the perceived charisma of the leader. This experiment aims to study if gender stereotypes still affect the perceptions of charisma in female political leaders. The hypothesis tested here is:

Hypothesis 1: Female political leaders who are portrayed as adopting mixture of masculine and feminine behaviours will be seen as most charismatic.

This mixture of masculine and feminine behaviours is also used interchangeably with the term androgyny. This presumes that the leadership styles of these female leaders comply with both social gender roles and the traditional leadership roles.

<center>Method</center>

Design. This study is a self administered survey experiment, utilizing a single factor between subjects design whereby the dependent variable is perceptions of perceived charisma of female leader based on the description of their behaviours. The experiment consists of three different conditions - female leaders who exhibit the male-only (agentic inclined) leadership styles, female-only (communal inclined) and a mixture (androgynous inclined) leadership styles. The perceived charisma of the female leaders is measured using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ)

adopted for the purposes of the present study. The MLQ is measured on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 4(indicating frequently, if not always). Higher scores on the five transformational subscales (idealized influence (behaviour), idealized influence (attributed), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individual consideration) indicate higher perceived charisma.

Participants. Sixty-six (66) participants were recruited from a large private university in Malaysia for this experiment study. Participants averaged 21 years of age and consisted of 25 males and 41 females.

Materials. In this study, written descriptions of female leaders were manipulated across the different conditions by modifying the behaviours portrayed by the leader. There are three sets of female leader description which is the male-only, female-only and androgynous description of the female leader's leadership style. The MLQ-5X is used in this study as a measure of charisma in female political leaders to test the perceived charisma of the leaders. The MLQ 5X consists of nine subscales; five in transformational, three in transactional and one in laissez- faire leadership styles (Bass & Avolio, 1992). This questionnaire has been used in many past researches to examine transformational- transactional leadership (Muenjohn & Armstrong, 2008; Rowold & Heinitz, 2007; Tejeda, Scandura & Pillai, 2001). In addition, the MLQ is the most suitable measure to be used here as it emphasizes on the outcome of the leaders' leadership on their followers (Conger& Kanungo, 1998). This measure is reliable at $\alpha = 0.86$ and is thus suitable for the purposes of the present study and within the present context.

Pilot Study. 30 students participated in the pilot study where there were 10 students in each condition. A pilot study was conducted prior to the actual experiment as a trial run to assess the impact as well as the usability of the leaders' descriptions

and the participants' ability to comprehend the questionnaire items. It was found that the participants had no issues understanding of the items, and that the measures were suitable for use in the present context.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions. In all conditions, participants were asked to read the short description of the female political before completing the MLQ. Subsequently participants were required to return the survey back to the researcher after completion. All steps were repeated with the short description of the female political leader with feminine inclined style, masculine inclined style, and the description of the female political leader using a combination of feminine and masculine style (see Appendix A). The entire study took no longer than 10 minutes.

Analysis

To examine the relationship between description of the female leader's leadership behaviours and the perceived charisma of the female leader, a one-way between subjects ANOVA is utilized in order to investigate the perception of charisma of the female leader in three different conditions, which are the masculine-inclined leadership, androgynous leadership and feminine-inclined leadership styles.

Results

The ANOVA results reveal that there is a significant difference between the female leader's leadership description and her perceived charisma, $F(2, 63) = 6.430$, $p = 0.003$. This showed that an observable distinction can be seen between the types of leadership styles and the perception of charisma in the female leader. The means and standard deviation of the different types of leadership traits utilised by the female leader is shown in Table 1. From this table, it is seen that the mean of the female leader who utilises female-only leadership traits were perceived as most charismatic

(M= 66.46, S.D. = 7.00), followed by female leaders employing the androgynous leadership trait (M = 62.77, S.D.= 7.05), and finally the female leaders using the male-only leadership behaviours was portrayed as least charismatic (M = 58.23, S.D. = 7.05). These results suggest that participants perceived female leaders as most charismatic when the leader portrayed behaviours that were feminine-inclined and conformed more to their gender roles. In contrast, female leaders portraying masculine-inclined leadership behaviours were evaluated as being the least charismatic across all three conditions.

Condition	Mean	Standard Deviation
Masculine-Inclined	58.23	8.696
Androgynous	62.77	7.050
Feminine-Inclined	66.45	7.002

Table 1. *Means and Standard Deviations Across the Experimental Conditions*

Post-hoc analysis was conducted to assess possible differences between each condition. Results from the ANOVA analyses with Bonferroni correction show that there is only a significant difference between female leaders who utilizes the male-only and female-only leadership styles (p = 0.002), but no distinction was seen between the androgynous leadership condition with masculine-only or feminine-only leadership styles. This shows that participants only perceive levels of charisma to be different in the leaders who portray the male-only leadership styles and the leaders who portray female-only leadership styles. Nonetheless, the results further suggest that participants did not perceive levels of charisma to be any different between female leaders who portrayed the androgynous leadership styles with female leaders who portrayed female-only leadership styles or male-only leadership styles. Results from this study suggest that the hypothesis that female leaders who adopted

androgynous leadership styles will be perceived as most charismatic was not supported, leading to the rejection of Hypothesis 1.

As a general difference between each group was not apparent, I conducted additional tests to assess possible differences between the three groups on all five subscales of transformational leadership. An analysis of all the individual subscales of the transformational leadership style in Table 2 shows that female charismatic leaders are perceived as more charismatic in terms of individualised consideration, $F(2, 63) = 29.110$, $p = 0.000$ and intellectual stimulation $F(2, 63) = 4.963$, $p = 0.010$ in comparison to other groups. There were no significant differences between description of the female leaders on the on the subscales individualize influence (behaviour), $F(2, 63) = 1.365$, $p > .05$; individualized influence (attributes), $F(2, 63) = 2.064$, $p > .05$ and inspirational motivation, $F(2, 63) = 1.632$, $p > .05$. This shows that the participants assume that there are no effects of these subscales on the perceived charisma of these leaders. Moreover, there were no effects of androgynous leadership traits on perceived charisma across all transformational subscales.

Transformational Leadership Subscale	Condition	Mean	Standard Deviation
Individualize Influence (Behaviour)	Masculine-Inclined	12.09	2.617
	Androgynous	12.50	1.921
	Feminine-Inclined	13.14	1.699
Individualized Influence (Attributes)	Masculine-Inclined	11.82	1.763
	Androgynous	12.50	1.994
	Feminine-Inclined	12.95	1.838
Inspirational Motivation	Masculine-Inclined	13.91	1.477
	Androgynous	13.14	1.699
	Feminine-Inclined	13.14	1.726
Intellectual Stimulation	Masculine-Inclined	11.27	2.831
	Androgynous	12.59	2.130
	Feminine-Inclined	13.45	1.870
Individual Consideration	Masculine-Inclined	9.14	2.587
	Androgynous	12.05	1.495
	Feminine-Inclined	13.77	1.875

Table 2. *Means and Standard Deviations for the Four Transformational Leadership Subscales*

Discussion

Results from the study offers initial experimental evidence that, utilizing a mixture of feminine and masculine leadership styles does not significantly, nor positively define the perception of a female leader's charisma in the political context. It is however found that female leaders who adopted a feminine-inclined approach when leading were considered most charismatic as compared to masculine-inclined or androgynous leadership styles. The hypothesis that female leaders who utilises the androgynous leadership traits will be perceived as most charismatic was not supported.

The results, however, provide some initial answers the second research question, and suggest that gender stereotypes still affect the perceptions of charisma and leadership in female leaders. The results are also consistent with role congruity theory, whereby women are likely to be evaluated more positively when their behaviours are more in line with their gender roles while they were negatively evaluated when they go against these roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Based on Chin (2004) female leaders were viewed more positively when they decide to use more collaborative means and consensus building to reach a solution as it is more appropriate with their gender.

Findings from this study are also consistent with findings from Powell, Butterfield and Bartol's study (2008), in which the authors concluded that individuals favoured a female transformational leader ("gender-role-congruent leaders") as compared to a male transformational leader ("non-gender-role-congruent leaders"). Hence, females are perceived as being more charismatic when they use female-only behaviours (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In contrast, female leaders who portray masculine inclined behaviours were the least charismatic as they may be subjected to less than desirable perceptions, thus reducing the perception of charisma in them. Results from this study are also consistent with Chin's (2004) study, where female leaders were perceived less favourably when they portray a more masculine side of themselves.

An alternative explanation as to why female leaders who used feminine inclined leadership styles was seen as most charismatic could may be due to the fact that some feminine behaviours such as collaboration, cooperation and mentoring plays a important role in transformational leadership (Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Johnson, 1990). This is consistent with the majority of transformational leadership theory which

currently emphasises importance of more communal traits (Bass & Riggio; 2006; Carless, 1998; Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Rosener (1990) in particular, that females preferred to inspire others to collaborate on group efforts while men preferred to use the conventional transactional leadership styles motivated by extrinsic rewards (see also Alban-Metcalfe and Alimo-Metcalfe, 2000; Carless, 1998).

Transformational leadership is a common practice in present day organizations and it is deemed a very useful practice of leadership styles. It is seen that more females are associated with effective leadership styles (Eagly, 2007) and these feminine traits are not only becoming more widely accepted in contemporary times (Eagly & Carli, 2003) but are also encouraged due to its effectiveness in our dynamic and competitive economy (Powell et al., 2008). Masculine-inclined leadership traits scored the lowest in charisma, a possible reflection of how contemporary leadership effectiveness is less dependent on traditional, leader-centred approaches to leadership (Eagly, 2007).

Another possible explanation for the lack of significance in between conditions may be due to differences between perception of charisma based on the inference and observation of different behaviours portrayed by the female leader. For a female leader to be perceived as charismatic, they may need to be seen as portraying and demonstrating these androgynous behaviours, rather than just being *depicted* as androgynous leaders. The current study uses written description or vignettes to describe these leaders. These written descriptions have been used vastly for various experimental studies in the area of leadership (Bartol & Butterfield, 1976, see also Dafna & Dove, 1985; Powell et al, 2008) as it allows the researcher to have more control and consistency for the needed leadership styles (Levy, Cober & Miller,

2002). However, a written document may not be appropriate to describe and portray a charismatic leader.

Another reason for the possible lack of a significant difference between the androgynous and masculine and feminine-inclined conditions could be due to the fact that masculine-inclined behaviours and female-inclined behaviours were more polarized, thus leading to a more conspicuous and observable difference between these two conditions. In addition to that, most studies were used to explain only male and female inclined traits (Eagly, 2007; Gershenoff & Foti, 2009; Powell et al, 2008; Ritter and Yoder, 2004). Previous studies that were conducted on androgynous leadership were mostly non-experimental studies (Johnson, 2011; Kark, Waismel-Manor & Shamir, 2012; Park, 1997) but were not directly related to examining gender differences in perceptions of charisma.

Results from the one way ANOVAs conducted showed only a difference in the participants' perception of charisma in the female leaders who used male-only and female-only styles on individual consideration and intellectual stimulation. The significant difference on these two subscales may be because individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation are perceived as more feminine-inclined traits than inspirational motivation and individualized influence. The difference in the perception of charisma in the individualized consideration subscale has nonetheless been shown by Hackman, Hills, Fumiss, and Paterson (1992), stating that femininity was positively correlated with individualized consideration.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The present study has several limitations which warrant some consideration and possible improvements for future research. The written description of the female leaders may not have sufficiently detailed to portray the leader convincingly enough

for participants to distinguish between the female-only and androgynous conditions. Further, charismatic leaders are often perceived as being articulate, being able to attract and inspire others through effective communication (Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Groove, 2005). However, the verbal and non verbal used by charismatic leaders is absent and cannot be adequately represented through the use of written leader descriptions. For future research, videos could be used to portray the behaviours of these leaders in richer detail. Future research can employ the use videos in place of written leader descriptions in order to more authentically depict charisma (see Davis & Gardner, 2012; Awamleh & Gardner, 1999). The use of videos may also be important in examining if the language and rhetoric used by leaders (Conger, 1991; Den Hartog & Verburg, 1997) along with their portrayed non verbal body language has an impact on influencing perceptions of charisma across male and female leaders. (Bass, 1985, 1990; Willner, 1984).

Finally, the study's generalizability is limited through the use of a student sample. Recommendations for future studies would include conducting the study with participants from an organizational setting, in which the participants may be individuals who have greater experience as followers, or are themselves leaders.

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Appendix A – Leader Descriptions

Description of Female Political Leader based on Feminine Style

Leader X is the leader of country A and she is a person who is nurturing and relationship-focused approach when leading her country. She displays empathetic leadership behaviours and is not afraid to show concern for her people. She is affiliation centred and is willing to make huge personal sacrifices for the benefit of her people. She is very articulate when she has opinions or ideas about an issue, and empowers her subordinates to make decisions that affect the country. She is relationship-oriented and believes that achieving a particular goal is dependent on input from the people. Whenever a problem arises, she emphasizes teamwork and collaboration as she believes that this enables effective idea production and everyone feels like they are contributing to finding a solution to the problem.

Description of Female Political Leader based on Masculine Style

Leader X is the leader of country A and she is a person who is aggressive and task-focused approach when leading her country. She displays aggressive leadership behaviours and is not afraid to be assertive when it comes to getting things done.   She is very goal centred and strong willed person who makes sure that her target goal is met by both her subordinates and her people. She is very articulate when she has opinions or ideas about an issue, and takes a strong personal stand in decisions that affects the country. She is task oriented and believes that achieving a particular goal is dependent on her leadership. Whenever a problem arises, she emphasizes on quick problem solving by analyzing and acting decisively to solve the problem as she believes that is the most effective way to attack and counter the problem.

Description of Female Political Leader based on a Combination of Masculine and Feminine Style (Androgynous)

Leader X is the leader of country A and she is a person who is both aggressive and task-focused but also a nurturing and relationship-focused approach when leading her country. She displays empathetic leadership behaviours but is not afraid to be assertive when it comes to getting things done. She is a goal centred person who ensures that her goals are met but is willing to make personal sacrifices for her people when needed. She is very articulate when she has opinions or ideas about an issue, and while she takes a strong personal stand in decisions that affects the country, she also empowers her subordinates to make decisions that affect the country. She is both task and relationship-oriented, and believes that achieving a particular goal is dependent on both her leadership and input from the people. Whenever a problem arises, she tackles the problem analytically but she still emphasizes on teamwork and collaboration as she believes that this enables effective idea production and everyone feels like they are contributing to finding a solution to the problem.

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