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Masculinity is in the Eye of the Beholder: The Impact of Personal Characteristics on the Gendering of Personality Traits

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Many societies have recently experienced rapid and divisive social change regarding the fluidity of gender. This has opened up a divide between those who have reconceptualized what "woman" or "feminine" means versus those who militantly embrace traditional gender norms. Thus, individuals in the same community may have wildly different conceptions of whether they perceive personality traits as typically masculine, feminine, or gender neutral. This study assesses whether individuals' perceptions of the masculinity or femininity of certain character traits conform to traditional expectations, and whether they are conditioned by respondent characteristics. We use a short survey of 36 of the most commonly-cited character traits associated with leadership, sampling 1,255 respondents in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. We find that individual characteristics of age, gender, and political ideology have a powerful impact on individuals' perceptions of the inherent masculinity or femininity of personality traits.

Keywords: gender stereotypes, personality traits, cross-national analysis, masculinity, femininity, double bind

Introduction

Studies in the social sciences have noted the negative impact of the "double bind" facing women leaders and candidates, which suggest that women must demonstrate both masculine and feminine attributes in order to achieve the same success men can achieve by demonstrating only masculine attributes (Dittmar 2015; Eagly and Carli 2012). This builds on an understanding of gendered trait associations, where individuals associate specific traits such as “warmth” or “understanding” with women and femininity or “assertiveness” or “confidence” with men and masculinity.[1] Since the traits most commonly associated with men and masculinity are also the ones most commonly perceived to be those associated with good leadership, this reinforces masculine-dominated leadership evaluation and culture.

However, in recent years notions of gender have become much more fluid within some segments of society, including both a reformation of gendered associations and biases as well as a decoupling of gender from the traditional male-female dichotomy (Shair-Rosenfield and Valdini 2025; Van der Pas et al. 2024). These shifts toward greater fluidity and less binary, coupled with an increasing number of women entering the workforce and as leaders in politics, business, and society, have implications for these long-standing gendered associations of leadership traits. Research in psychology has begun to investigate the effect of individual-level variables on the gendered associations with attributes, demonstrating that factors such as respondent gender can change the level of gendered association with a particular word (Hentschel et. al 2019). It could be, for example, that the trait of being “assertive” is no longer strongly associated with men, which would mean, in turn, that people seeking an “assertive” leader would be less likely to assume that a man is best for that role.

[1] See Schneider and Bos (2014) for a review of the political science literature relying on these gendered associations.

And, perhaps more importantly, these shifts are unlikely to have occurred uniformly across society. That is, while some groups may be updating their associations of traits with a particular gender, there is little reason to believe that all people, no matter their beliefs, are updating in response to cultural changes in gender roles and norms. Some may, instead, feel threatened and grip on to traditional beliefs even more.

This study assesses whether individuals' perceptions of the masculinity or femininity of certain character traits are conditioned by individual traits such as respondent gender, age, political ideology, and national residency. We use a short survey of 36 of the most commonly-cited character traits associated with leadership, sampling 1255 respondents in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. This sample enables us to compare across respondents in similar environments – all are advanced industrial democracies with relatively comparable levels of women's higher education and labor force participation rates, and where English is the dominant spoken language – while gaining leverage over individual-level factors that may drive gendered trait associations. Our findings indicate that respondent gender and political ideology exert the strongest influence over non-traditional gendered trait associations, and the interaction of gender and age produces a gender gap between younger respondents.

Gender stereotypes and trait associations

Even as times change, questions remain about whether traditional gender stereotypes impact the fates of women seeking leadership roles such as elected office. The association of communal stereotypes – such as being emotional, passive, and cooperative – with women is a well-documented, worldwide phenomenon (Alexander & Anderson 1993; Huddy & Terkildsen 1993; Sanbonmatsu 2002; Holman, Merolla, & Zechmeister, 2011, 2016; Valdini 2019). As Eagly and Karau (2002) explain, this association can have negative consequences

for women leaders because leadership roles are associated with agentic, or male, stereotypes. That is, stereotypical masculine traits, such as being assertive, ambitious, and aggressive, are seen as the traits that good leaders possess (Funk 1999; Koenig et al. 2011; McDermott 2016). Thus, women, due to their association with communal stereotypes, are deemed less fit for leadership. This issue – often referred to as "role incongruity" or a type of "double bind" – requires women candidates to navigate the difficult waters between presenting themselves as masculine enough to be a leader while retaining enough feminine characteristics to avoid punishment for female role-incongruence (Eagly & Carli 2012).

However, over the past two decades, many societies have experienced shifts in their understanding of the fluidity of gender and associated norms, altering everyday language usage through latent and purposeful effort (Saguy & Williams 2022). This change may subsequently alter the association of leadership traits – such as being assertive and rational – with masculinity, which would thus lessen the pressure of the double bind for women leaders. Recent scholarship has investigated the impacts of these recent societal shifts, and offers mixed evidence about whether the gendered associations with personality traits are changing. While some studies have demonstrated that stereotypes and the resulting word associations are surprisingly durable (e.g., Sczesny et. al 2019), others found that changes in social roles are causing shifts in the gendered associations of traits (Charlesworth et. al 2022; Eagly & Wood 2012; Koenig & Eagly 2014). Thus, our previously stable assumptions about what people associate with masculinity and femininity are now on shakier ground.

The lack of consensus in the scholarship on gendered trait associations suggests that there could be factors that shift stereotype associations for some but not for others. For example, recent research in psychology has begun to investigate the effect of individual-level variables on the gendered associations with attributes, demonstrating men and women have different assumptions about, for example, the level of agency of men compared with women

(Hentschel et. al 2019). In addition, Charlesworth and Banaji (2022) consider the impact of demographic differences such as gender, race, and age on the stereotypical association of men with careers and women with family, and find these individual differences contribute to the pace of stereotype change. Much of the existing scholarship, however, utilizes individual differences such as age or gender as controls, not as independent variables in the theory.

While scholars have begun to recognize the impact of individual differences on gendered assumptions, we argue that the growing gulf within societies between those people who *have* versus those who *have not* modernized their understanding of gender demands that scholars focus even more on how individual differences between people shape their understanding and expectations for gender and leadership. That is, the modern gendered climate in democracies around the world is more divisive than it has been in several decades; there is more disagreement among people about what masculinity and femininity entail, and substantial numbers of people are completely breaking with past understandings of gender while others are gripping harder to hold on to traditional gender roles and expectations. There are many reasons for this growing gulf in societies, but one of the most powerful drivers could be the rise in right-wing media that targets young men.

As certain people have broadened their understanding of gender and the traditional behaviors associated with men and women, others have reacted to this societal shift by adopting a more militant and extreme devotion to traditional gender associations. This backlash, characterized as "misogynist radicalization" by Wescott et al. (2024), frequently manifests in the online sphere, with figureheads such as Andrew Tate promoting regressive and sexist ideas about women's expected roles and behaviors (Wescott et al. 2024). In such spaces, hostile sexism is normalized and rewarded, as women are characterized as both threatening as well as subhuman and only acceptable in traditional roles of service (Bates 2020; Renström & Bäck 2024). Not all people are equally likely to encounter this content;

because they are more likely to rely on social media for information, these misogynist online influencers are particularly powerful in the minds of young men (Harff & Schmuck 2024; Renström & Bäck 2024).

Thus, we argue that individual differences in people are critical for understanding gendered associations and norms. The differences in how people understand gender have increased in recent years; substantial segments of society are being exposed to militant hatred of women while others are opening their understanding of gender to be more fluid than ever before. As a result, we can no longer make blanket assumptions about gendered traits and be confident that most people will fall within that expectation.

Demographic and political sources of differences in gendered trait associations

A multitude of factors could impact how a person perceives the level of masculinity or femininity inherent to a personality trait. In this study, we consider a combination of demographic traits – gender and age – as well as learned behavior – one's own political ideology, recalled exposure to a female leader – that are commonly studied as potential sources of differences in gendered trait associations.

While there is no current literature that specifically addresses the impact of a respondent's age on whether they associate a personality trait with masculinity or femininity, there is substantial literature on the impact of age on the use and composition of gendered understandings, stereotypes, and sexism. The findings in this field are divided: some, such as Allen et al. (2022), show that youth understanding of gender is more fluid than for older generations, even as young people are not necessarily a homogenous group with respect to this perspective. Others find that gender stereotypes of women associated with change and men with stability is consistent across age (Brown et al. 2011; Eagly et al. 2020). Still others offer evidence of a 'U' shaped curve of hostile sexism in which younger men and older men

have the highest levels, with a drop during middle age (Ferregut et al. 2017; Hammond et al. 2018). Thus, clear expectations cannot be drawn from existing literature focusing specifically on the relationship between age and gendered understanding.

Nevertheless, we anticipate a positive correlation between age and traditional gender associations of traits. Because younger generations have been raised in an environment with higher levels of women's labor force and political participation, exposure to which has been shown to alter beliefs in gender equality (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Kroska and Elman 2009), younger people may see traits as less clearly defined by gendered associations than their older counterparts. Especially in the context of shifting perceptions in gender roles and norms, the #MeToo era, and generational turnover, it is likely that the same set of traits may elicit varied perceptions about their masculinity or femininity among younger respondents, leading to our first hypothesis:

H1: (Age) As age increases, so does the likelihood that personality traits are associated with a more traditional understanding of masculinity and femininity.

While there have been changes in recent years regarding the value of traditional notions of masculinity, the patriarchal structure of society means that those elements associated with masculinity continue to be valued above those associated with femininity (Connell 2005; DiMuccio & Knowles 2020). Thus, we expect that men will be more hesitant to "give up" that which is seen as most valuable by society, and will thus be more likely than women to associate traditionally masculine traits with themselves. In addition, because men are the beneficiaries of the patriarchy, they may (subconsciously) resist gender equality and thus less likely to allow gender flexibility in the traits. Recent online misogynist radicalization among men further suggests this relationship is likely to be true. Women, on the other hand, benefit from equality, and will thus be more likely to view traditionally masculine traits as more gender-fluid. In addition, because femininity is still devalued

(though certainly less so than in years past), we expect women to be more likely to associate traditionally masculine traits with women; i.e., women want to be associated with those traits that are more valued in society. Scholarship on gendered views of these associations paint a relatively consistent picture, showing that male and female respondents more strictly and consistently associate communal (feminine) traits with women, but women less strictly and consistently associate agentic (masculine) traits with men (Eagly et al. 2020; Hentschel et. al 2019). This leads to our second hypothesis:

H2: (Gender) Men are more likely to associate traditionally masculine traits with themselves, while women will have a more fluid association of traits with gender.

Due to the rise of toxic masculinity that is most exemplified by online discourse and thus most likely to shape views and beliefs of social media natives (i.e., those younger than Gen X), we further consider whether there is a persistent or increasing divergence between the youngest men and women that is not true for older men and women. That is to say that younger men – frustrated by women "taking their jobs," outperforming them in secondary and tertiary education settings, and spurred on by social media influencers wider claims about gender wars – deviate from their young female counterparts in their broader views on gender egalitarianism and traditional gender roles (e.g., Off et al. 2022). As a result, the divergence between younger men and women should grow, rather than shrink, compared to their middle-aged counterparts, leading us to expect that the gendered gap shrinks in a more linear fashion from the youngest to the oldest respondents in our third hypothesis:

H3: (Interaction of Age and Gender): Younger men and women are more divided on the association of traits with a specific gender, while the difference between men and women in older generations is negligible.

From the standpoint of political views and experiences, two dimensions may shape gendered stereotype associations. One of the most common elements of the left-wing policy platform, no matter the country, is the focus on increasing equality in society. People who identify with left-wing political ideology, should therefore be less tethered to traditional beliefs that associate men and women with particular traits. Right-wing ideology, on the other hand, emphasizes the value of tradition and the (often fictional) glories of the past, seeing feminism as a threat to core values (Lovenduski & Norris 2003; Celis & Childs 2012; Bernardez-Rodal et al. 2022). In line with long-standing theories in political science, we expect respondents on the right side of the ideological scale to be more likely to mirror the traditional gendered associations of these traits; those on the left side of the ideological scale should perceive traits in a more fluid way:

H4a: (Left-wing Ideology) People with left-wing ideology are more likely to hold more fluid associations of traits with gender, whereas people with right-wing ideology are more likely to associate traits with traditional gender roles.

Beyond the right-wing focus on tradition, there is an undercurrent of misogyny through some right-wing ideology, particularly in those parties on the far right (Sauer 2020; Spierings 2020; Bernardez-Rodal et al. 2022). This manifests as both hostile sexism, which is based in a fear of women, as well as benevolent sexism, which rests on the perception that women are childlike and need protection (Glick & Fiske 1996). Particularly at the extremes of this ideology, women are commonly portrayed as inherently flawed, often simultaneously as too weak as well as too powerful, and thus that which is feminine is inherently flawed as well. Thus, beyond the simple gendered associational difference we previously posited with respect to respondent political ideology, we also expect that as a respondent's ideology moves to the right, they are more likely to associate personality traits that have negative connotations with femininity rather than masculinity. This is due to a perception that what is

masculine is positive and what is feminine is not, and some traits can be considered to hold fairly exclusive negative connotations (e.g., manipulative) compared to others:

H4b: (Right-wing ideology) People with right-wing ideology are more likely to associate negative traits with femininity than those on the left-wing.

Finally, when an individual is exposed to women in leadership roles, this can directly communicate women's capacity for or association with traits commonly associated with political leadership, even if it is not someone that individual has voted for. For example, a country as a whole may become more exposed to women's leadership roles when women hold high offices – prime minister, pivotal cabinet posts, seats on the highest judiciary, leadership roles in the legislature – and this may dispel long-standing associations of gender with forms of leadership. However, as Franceschet et al. (2012) note, this effect may depend on how people view elected women; exposure may be insufficient when that exposure is largely superficial and/or infrequent. Instead, recall of gendered leadership to which an individual is exposed may be more indicative that the mechanism of exposure has really taken effect. In this context, it is not sufficient that women hold roles to which citizens are exposed, from national offices to local councilors, but also whether citizens have taken note such that they remember women in such positions, leading to our final hypothesis:

H5: (Exposure) Individuals who recall women's representation as officeholders are more likely to classify traits as neutral or not tied to a specific gender than people who do not recall women's representation as officeholders.

Research Design & Case Selection

Because our theory rests on how people perceive and interpret words, we limited our case selection to countries in which English is the dominant language. Previous research has

shown that many languages are distinctly gendered, with gendered linguistic structures subsequently affecting respondent views about gender-related issues (c.f. Liu et al. 2018; Shair-Rosenfield & Liu 2023). Thus, to reduce the chance that the effects of linguistic structure, rather than cultural or social uses of language, lead to specific response outcomes, we limited our evaluation to five countries where English is the dominant spoken language: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Despite this, we also acknowledge that English may or may not be used in identical ways cross-nationally. In addition, while these countries share a dominant language, there are substantial differences in their recent history of women's political participation and electoral success. Therefore, the survey responses can help us to identify commonalities and differences in respondent perceptions about the gendered association of characteristics commonly used to assess qualification to hold political leadership positions and to win elected office.

To address these issues, we conducted a series of surveys with respondents from Amazon's Mechanical Turk service in the USA and from Prolific in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the UK. All surveys were gender-balanced and data collected in March 2023. After excluding responses with missing data on one or more of our key predictors and control variables, our final sample of 1255 respondents includes: 294 from Australia, 272 from Canada, 163 from New Zealand, 257 from the United Kingdom, and 269 from the United States. We received ethical approval from (REDACTED) for study number (REDACTED).

In our study, thirty-six traits, drawn from the most frequently used in the political science literature from batteries included in the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem 1981) and Personality Attributes Questionnaire (Spence et al. 1975), were shown to respondents. For each trait, respondents were asked to rate the trait on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from extremely feminine to extremely masculine, with the response option 'neither feminine nor masculine' as the median response on the scale. Following the trait rating, respondents

answered a short series of demographic questions, including age, gender self-identification, educational attainment, relationship status, whether they had children at home, political ideology, and to name 1-2 political office holders in their country. The final category of office holders was hand-coded to account for received exposure to leader gender dynamics, with responses coded '0' if no female name was given and '1' if at least one female name was given. We also control for educational attainment (on a 5-point scale), relationship status (1=married, 0=all others), whether the individual has children at home (1=yes, 0=no). Table 1 lists the descriptive statistics of key predictors and controls in our sample, with histograms showing the distribution of each variable in the Appendix.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variable	N	Mean	St. Dev	Min	Max
Age (~10-year groups)	1255	1.488	1.295	0	5
Sex	1255	0.504	0.500	0	1
Ideology	1255	3.166	1.463	1	7
Female leader recall	1255	0.331	0.471	0	1
Education	1255	2.526	1.110	0	4
Married?	1255	0.400	0.490	0	1
Children at home?	1255	0.410	0.492	0	1

For ease of interpretation of our results vis-à-vis our hypotheses, we group the traits into three categories as commonly defined by the extant literature as "masculine," "feminine," or undefined by a gender or having a negative connotation. It is important to reiterate that we are not applying our own gendered logic or definition to these traits; the goal here is to understand whether traits typically assumed to be associated with masculinity, femininity, and ungendered/gender neutral or negative connotations carry these associations for people today. Table 2 indicates which traits fall into each of these categories based on commonality in the way multiple literatures (e.g., the Bem Sex Role Inventory, Personality Attributes Questionnaire, and various political science scholars) use and/or classify them.

Table 2. Analyzed traits, classified in the extant literature by gendered connotation

Masculine	Feminine	Neither/negative
Assertive	Compassionate	Intelligent
Competitive	Hardworking	Serious
Competent	Gentle	Authentic
Aggressive	Honest	Decisive
Tough	Sympathetic	Insincere
Ambitious	Cautious	Manipulative
Articulate	Cheerful	Coarse
Self-sufficient	Sensitive	Stubborn
Forceful	Trustworthy	Inflexible
Independent	Understanding	Impulsive
Self-confident	Warm	Careless
Rational	Emotional	
	Talkative	

On our scale, lower values ('1' and '2') correspond to more "feminine" ratings, a '3' as the "neither feminine nor masculine" median rating, and higher values ('4' and '5') corresponding to more "masculine" ratings. In other words, for the dependent variable of each trait, a higher value means the trait was rated as more masculine on a 5-point Likert scale, with a value of '3' indicating a trait is viewed as neither feminine nor masculine (i.e., "gender neutral"). To understand the root of gendered associations of individual traits, we turn to tests of our hypotheses about the influence of different demographic and experiential characteristics.

Results

We conduct OLS regressions for each of the traits using our hypothesized predictors, control variables, and country. We report the results of our analyses in the Appendix, with "masculine" traits in Table B1, "feminine" traits in Table B2, and "neutral" and "negative" traits in Table B3. Recall that our first hypothesis predicted younger respondents would be less likely to rate traits along traditionally expected gendered lines than older respondents. This means that younger respondents should give lower (less masculine) ratings for the so-

called “masculine” traits in Table B1 and higher (less feminine) ratings for the so-called “feminine” traits in Table B2 than older respondents. We found no support for these expectations (results in Tables B1 and B2 of appendix). Regardless of whether we examine age with 5- or 10-year groupings, the youngest respondents never rate masculine or feminine traits in less traditional ways than their older counterparts. Contrary to our expectations, increasing (older) age is often positively associated with non-traditional gendered associations for many traits; however, most of these associations fail to reach statistical significance except for the feminine trait of ‘cheerful,’ which older people rate as more masculine at a statistically significant rate.[2]

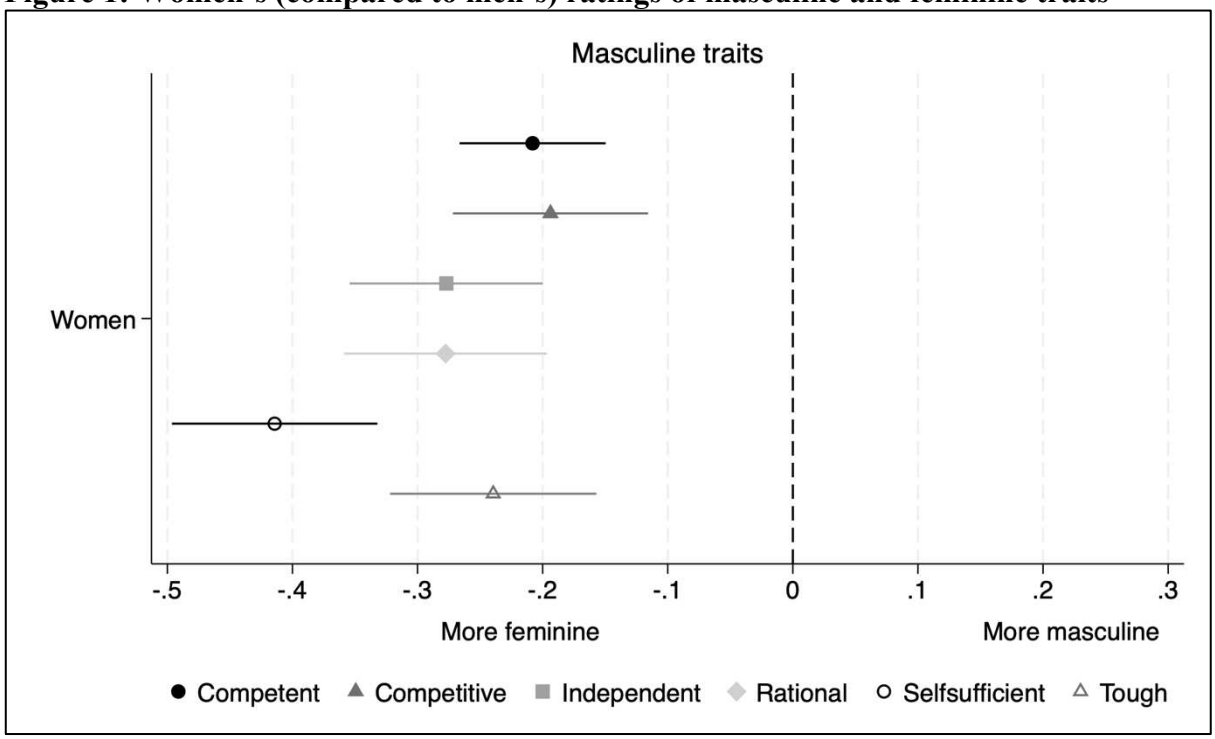
With respect to our second hypothesis that men are more likely to associate traditionally masculine traits with themselves while women will have a more fluid association of traits with gender, we find much greater support on almost all traits. Using male respondents as the baseline, the only masculine traits not rated more feminine by women compared to men are ‘aggressive’ and ‘forceful,’ which both have more negative connotations than other masculine traits and thus might not be labels women would prefer to

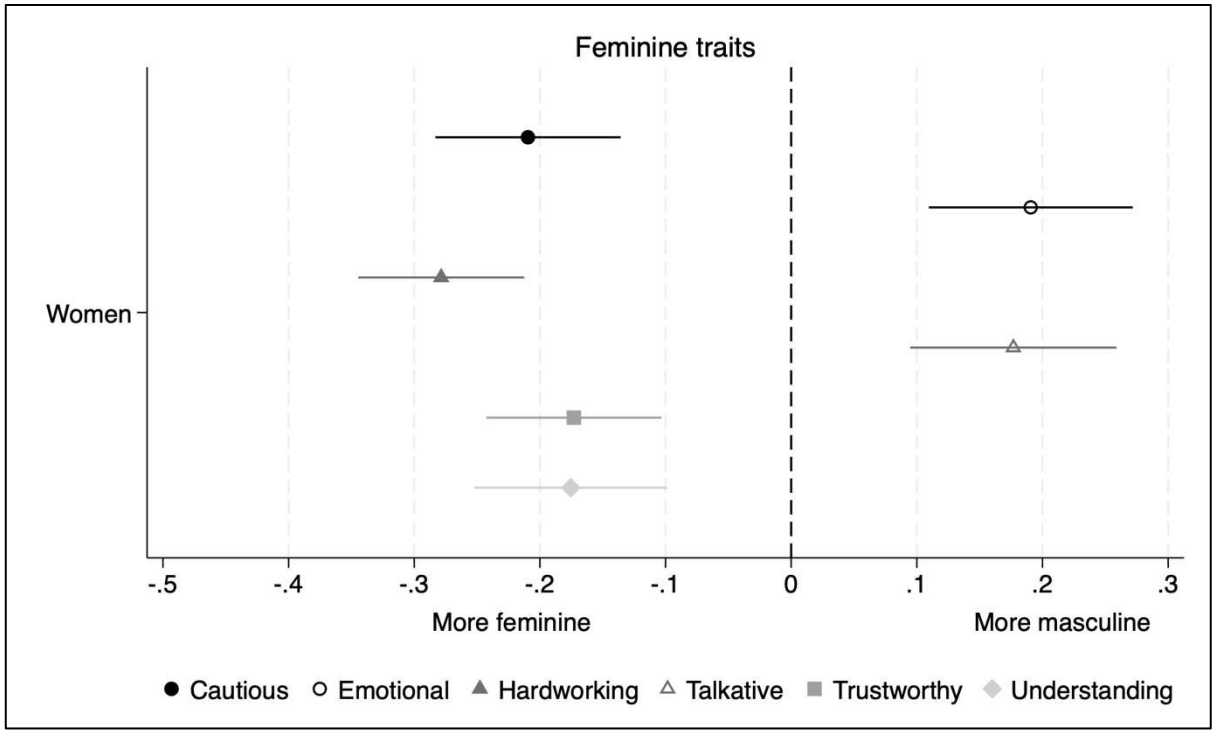
[2] It is worth noting that “angrier” masculine traits – ‘aggressive,’ ‘assertive,’ and ‘tough’ – are rated less traditionally by older respondents than younger respondents. There is no clear reason for why older respondents should label these as more feminine than younger respondents. However, it is important to highlight that the point estimates for these traits actually indicate that younger respondents typically put these traits at an average rating of 3.5-4, meaning the modal response is closer to a 4 than a 3, while older respondents typically put these traits at an average rating of 3-3.5, meaning the modal response is closer to a 3 than a 4. This may reflect that older respondents are simply more likely than their younger counterparts to rate many traits as more neutral and less gendered.

apply to themselves. Feminine traits are more mixed, with 10 of the 13 traits still rated more feminine by women, although 'cheerful' and 'gentle' fail to reach significance at p=0.05. The other three traits rated more masculine by women – 'emotional,' 'sensitive,' 'talkative' – are traits that are often used as feminine traits that make individuals less appropriate for leadership roles. Think, for example, of critiques of Hillary Clinton's tears during the 2008 presidential campaign as signifying that she was too "emotional" for the job of president. As such, it seems less surprising that men still consider these three traits to be associated with femininity, but women are less convinced that this is the case.

Figure 1 shows how the significant masculine and feminine traits map out, with the coefficient plots reporting how women rate each trait *compared to men* (the baseline category). All plots to the left of the dashed reference line indicate traits that women rated more feminine than men did, and all plots to the right of the dashed reference line indicate traits that women rated more masculine than men did. The top graph shows strong and consistent that women perceive these so-called masculine traits as more associated with femininity, with all point estimates and 95% confidence intervals on the left-hand (more feminine) side of the reference line of men's responses for each trait. Conversely, the bottom graph indicates women's perceptions of feminine traits are less consistent, with point estimates and 95% confidence intervals sometimes to the left (more feminine) and sometimes to the right (more masculine) of the reference line of men's responses for each trait.

Figure 1: Women's (compared to men's) ratings of masculine and feminine traits



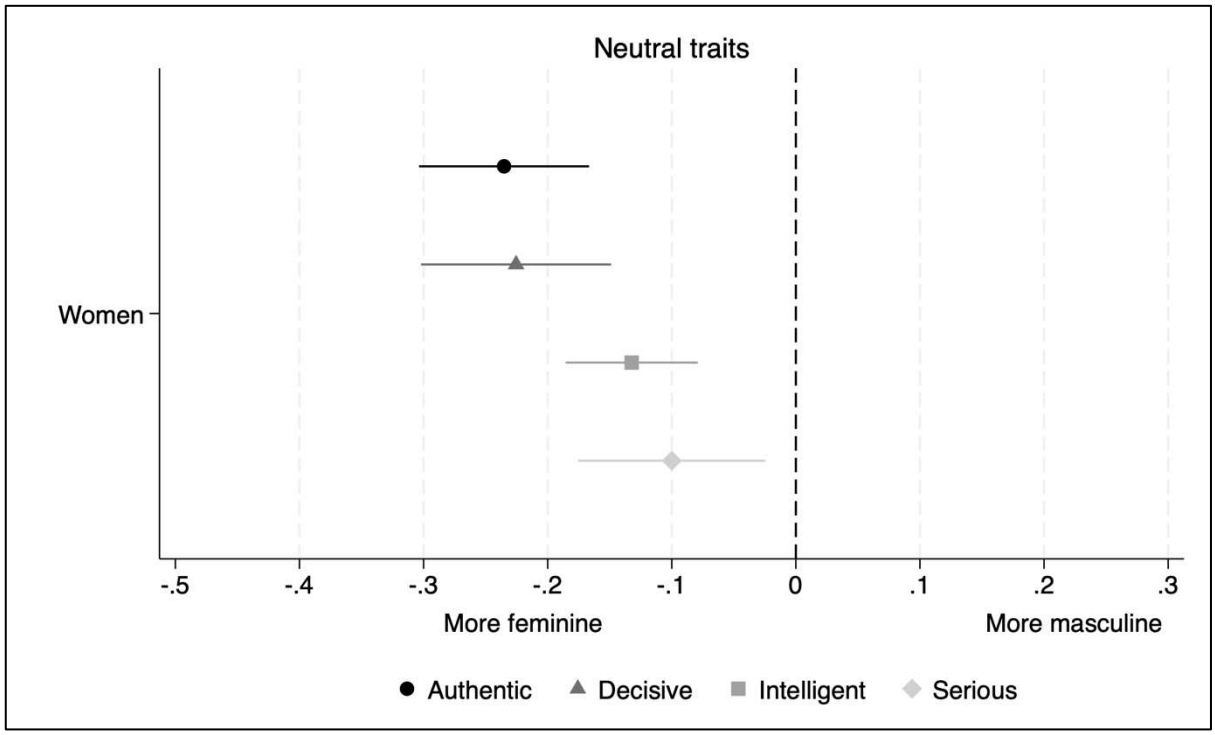


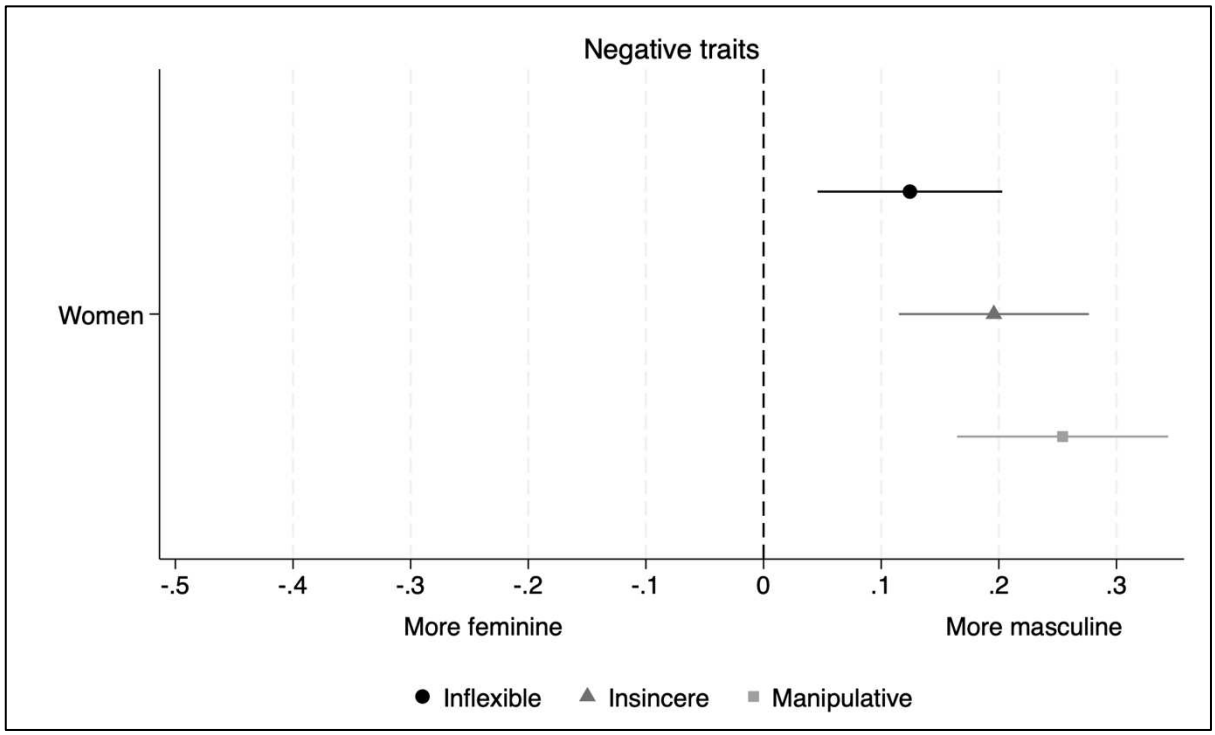
Two particular findings stand out amidst these general patterns. First, the so-called masculine traits that women associate the least with masculinity compared to men's ratings include numerous traits categorized by scholars as barometers of "competence." That women consider being 'independent,' 'rational' and 'self-sufficient' to be traits that are less

masculine than men do is indicative of a clear divergence in who women perceive to personify the very traits linked to evaluation of leaders as competent and effective. The same is true for so-called feminine traits of being 'hardworking' and 'trustworthy,' where women associate these more "desirable" leadership characteristics with femininity moreso than men.

In neutral and negative traits, a similar finding about the distinction between men's and women's associations holds. Women consistently rate the neutral traits as more feminine and the negative traits as more masculine compared to men. The only exception to this pattern is more feminine but statistically insignificant ratings for the negative traits 'coarse,' 'impulsive,' and 'stubborn.' Figure 2 depicts these distinctions. Once again, traits that evoke "competence" – 'intelligent' and 'serious' – are rated as more feminine by women than men, but this is even more pronounced for characteristics such as being 'decisive' and 'authentic.' This latter so-called neutral trait often runs counter to how women are portrayed by the media and in political evaluations, where they are more subject to accusations of being "fake" (Parry-Giles 2014) and face higher penalties for being associated with corruption scandals (Carlin et al. 2020). It seems that women are much more likely to associate their gender with traits that are more commonly thought of, and much more frequently portrayed, as being the purview of men and masculinity.

Figure 2. Women's (compared to men's) ratings of neutral and negative traits





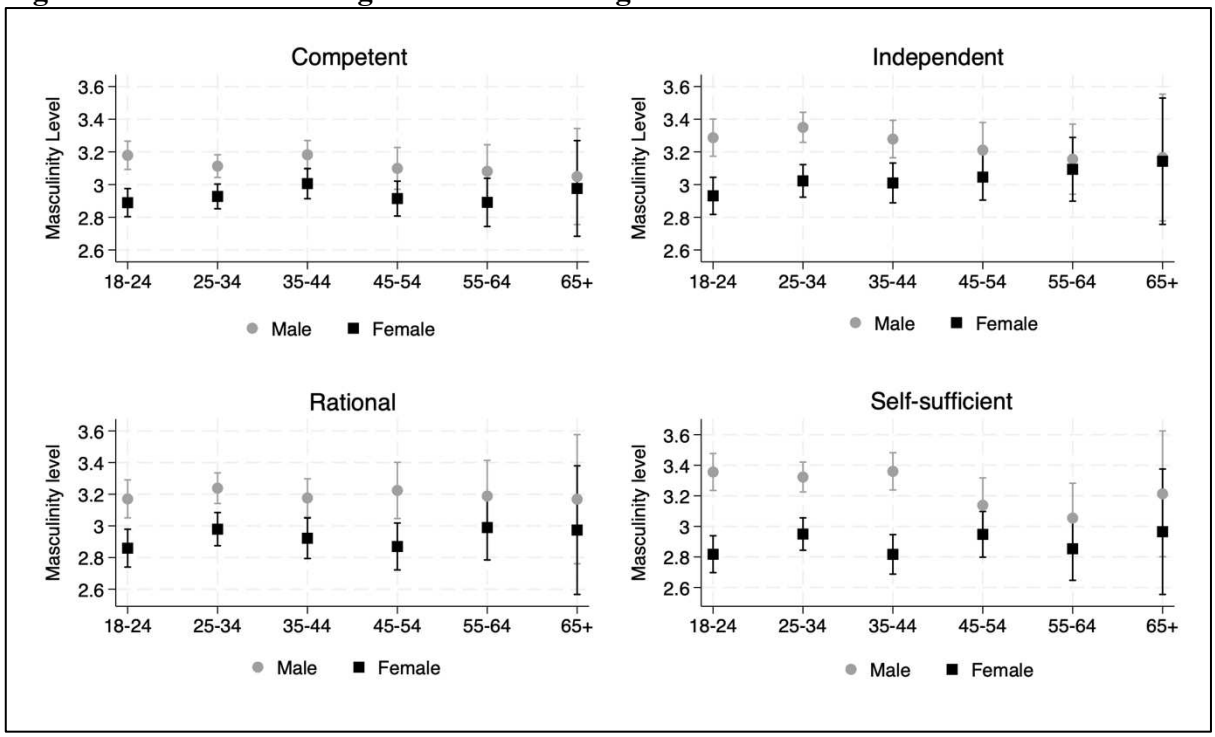
At the opposite end of the spectrum are the negative traits of being 'inflexible,' 'insincere' and 'manipulative.' All of these traits, usually given for poor evaluations of people in leadership roles, are rated as more masculine by women than their male counterparts. In addition to associating femininity with positive neutral traits, women are also

more likely to associate masculinity with negative traits that are often what women are accused of being and which run counter to the positive neutral traits. For example, the trait of being 'authentic' could be thought of as the opposite of 'insincere' – as previously noted, media portrayals of female candidates often tend to highlight where women display evidence of or are accused of being the latter rather than the former (Parry-Giles 2014). Yet, women's responses offered the reverse interpretation of these characteristics, rating being 'authentic' as more feminine and being 'insincere' as more masculine compared to their male counterparts. Taken together with Figure 1, these results suggest clear support for H2.

Regarding our third hypothesis on the interaction of age and gender, we run the same models with the interaction term and find support (see Appendix C for full results tables); younger men and women are indeed more divided on the association of traits with a specific gender, while the difference between men and women in older generations is negligible. The predicted probabilities from these models depicted in Figures 3, 4 and 5 highlight the traits for which there is statistically significant divergence between men and women in certain age categories and where there is clear evidence of variance in the size of those gaps across age groups. Across these figures, a noteworthy pattern emerges: the traits in each gender categorization grouping that demonstrate these gendered age gaps are almost always the traits that are rated in the aggregate (in Figures 1 and 2) as being most "gender-neutral" out of the grouping. For example, Figure 3 depicts a statistically significant and substantive gap between male and female respondents in the youngest age groups (18-24 and 25-34 years old) for the traits 'competent,' 'independent,' 'rational,' and 'self-sufficient;' here, younger female respondents give feminine average ratings (i.e., below a value of 3) and younger male respondents give masculine average ratings (i.e., above a value of 3) before average ratings converge more among older respondents. These are the exact traits in Figure 1 that are closest to the "gender-neutral" line of 3. Taken together, the data depicted in Figures 1 and 3 suggest

that the aggregate "gender neutrality" of these traits is actually obscuring a key difference at the intersection of respondent sex and age: younger women's more feminine ratings and younger men's more masculine ratings are effectively cancelling each other out for these traits that appear less gendered than traditional associations have suggested they should.

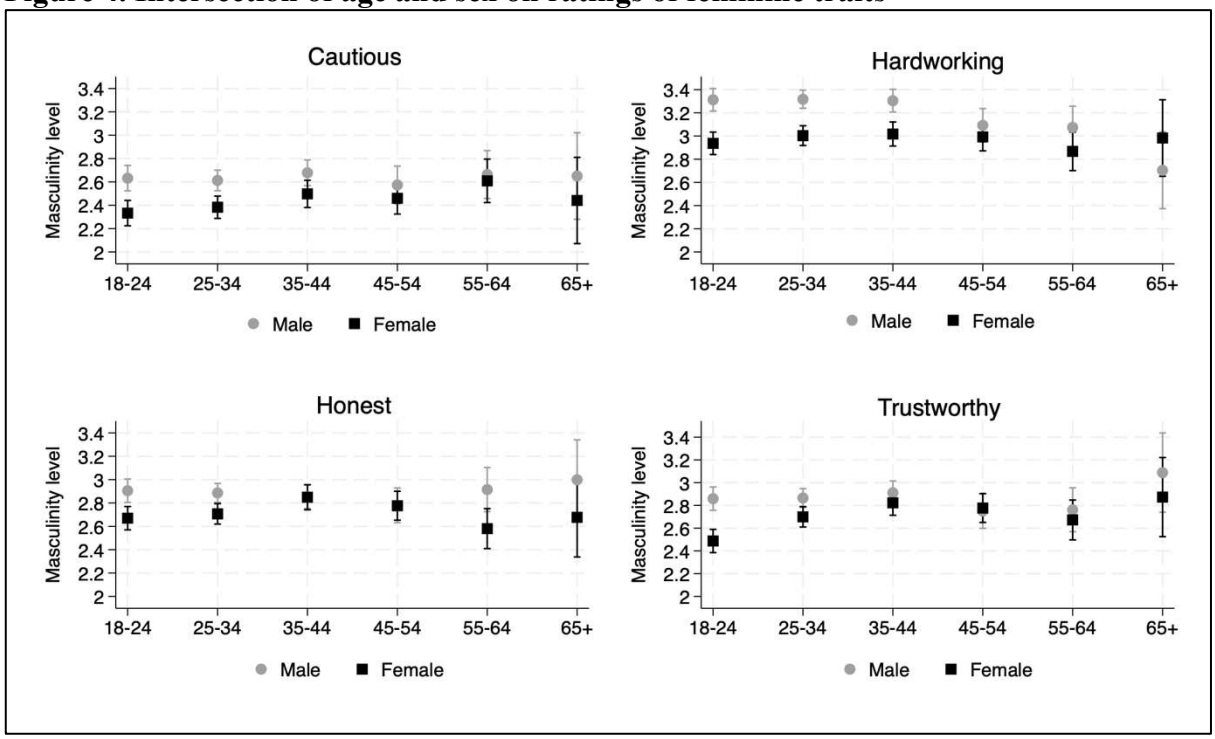
Figure 3. Intersection of age and sex on ratings of masculine traits



A comparable trend is evident in considering the differences between Figures 1 and 4. Figure 4 depicts a statistically significant and substantive gap between male and female respondents in the youngest age groups (18-24 year olds) for the traits 'cautious,' 'hardworking,' 'honest,' and 'trustworthy,' where the youngest female respondents give more feminine average ratings while the youngest male respondents give less feminine average ratings before ratings. For 'hardworking,' this gender gap actually extends to the next two age groups of 25-34 and 35-44, reflecting an especially persistent association for women in age cohorts where they are more likely to have worked all of their lives and also coincides with the ages at which they are most likely to have caring responsibilities. Once again, the sum of Figures 1 and 4 suggest that greater gender neutrality ratings for traditionally feminine-

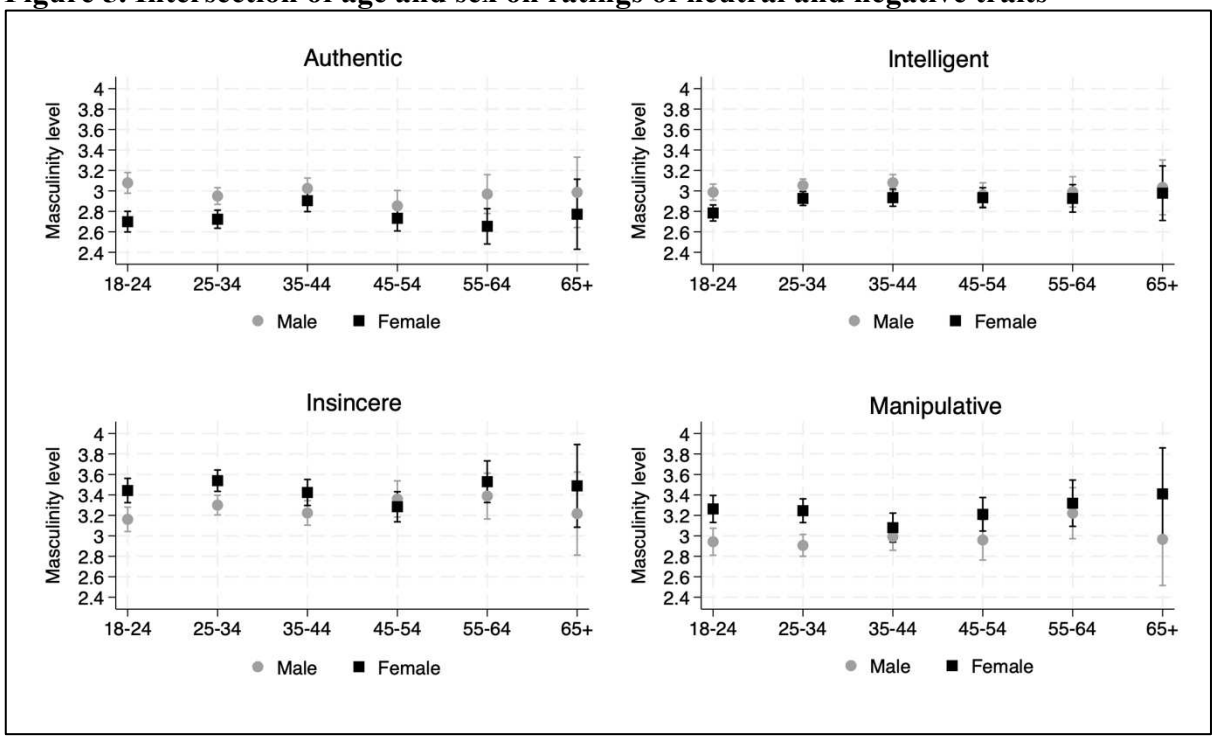
associated traits mask the gap between more feminine ratings by younger women balancing out with less feminine ratings by younger men.

Figure 4. Intersection of age and sex on ratings of feminine traits



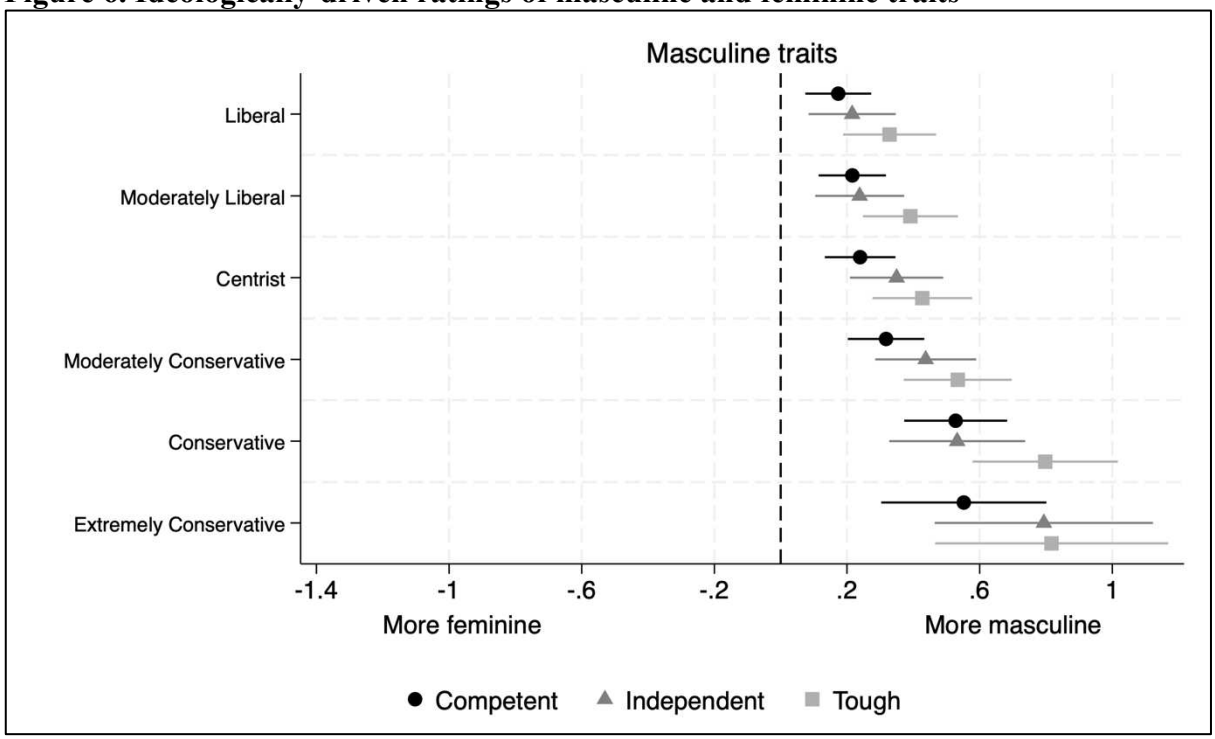
Finally, a similar trend is reflected in Figures 2 and 5 with respect to the neutral traits of ‘authentic’ and ‘intelligent’ where the youngest female respondent groups give more feminine average ratings while the youngest male respondent groups give less feminine average ratings. In the reverse direction, younger women offer a more masculine rating to the negative traits of ‘insincere’ and ‘manipulative’ compared to younger men; ratings then converge more among older respondents. All four of these traits are those closest to the “gender-neutral” line of 3. This once again reinforces that greater gender neutrality ratings for neutral-associated traits conceals a gap where more feminine ratings by younger women are balanced out with less feminine ratings by younger men, while greater gender neutrality for negative traits conceals a gap where more masculine ratings by younger women is offset by less masculine ratings by younger men.

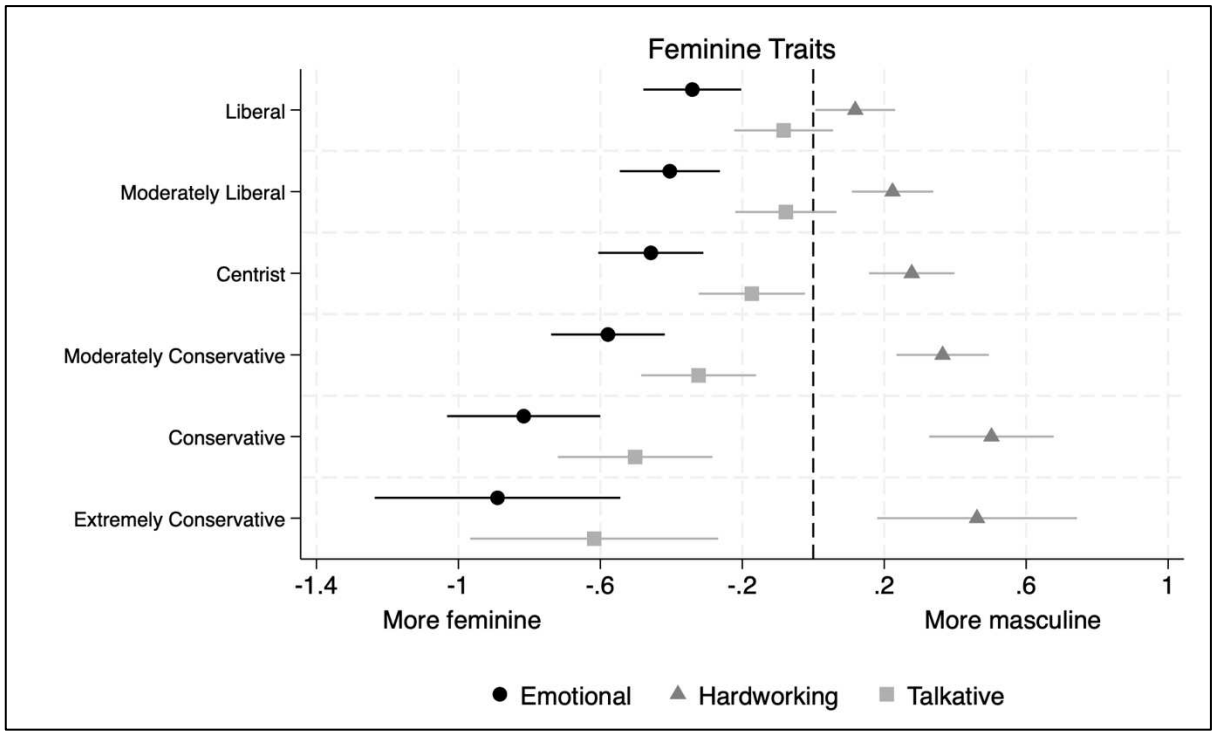
Figure 5. Intersection of age and sex on ratings of neutral and negative traits



With respect to our fourth set of hypotheses that closer adherence to stereotypical gendered associations becomes more likely as individuals identify as more conservative in their political ideology, our results in Tables B1-B3 indicate the data support these expectations; this is also reflected in the association of negative traits with femininity as one identifies as more conservative. Given that we rely on a convenience sample, our respondents skew away from the more conservative end of the spectrum, meaning that the association we identify would likely be even stronger if the sample were evenly distributed to reflect individuals with beliefs across the ideological spectrum. Even so, the results shown in Figure 6 bear out substantial support for our theoretical expectations, with respondents who identify as "extremely liberal" as the baseline category responses set at the dashed 0 line.

Figure 6. Ideologically-driven ratings of masculine and feminine traits



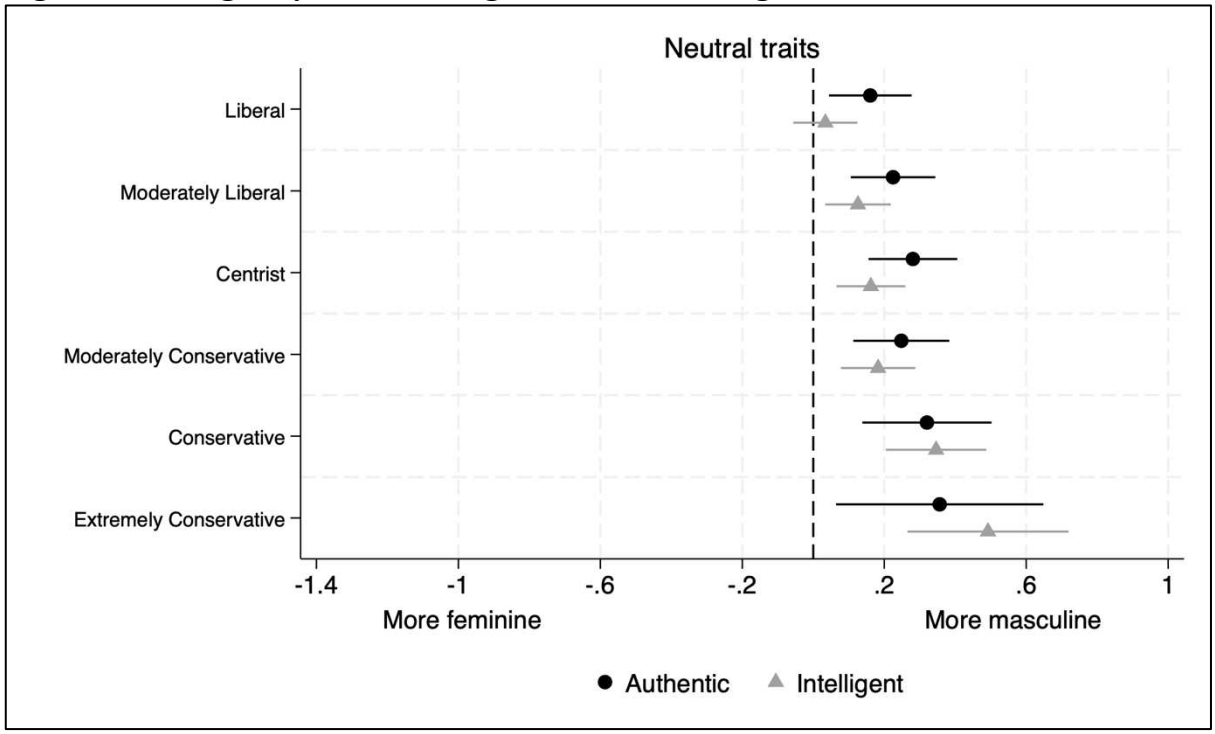


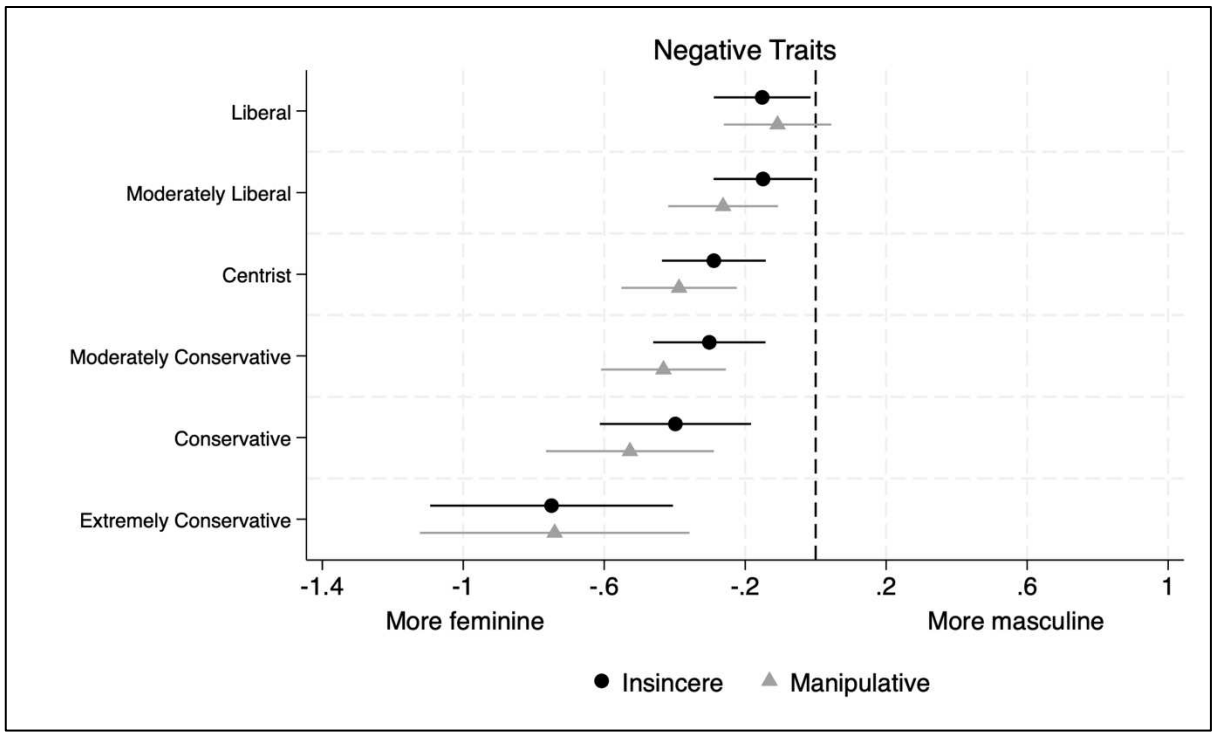
For masculine traits, moving down toward the conservative end of the ideological scale corresponds to increasing likelihood of rating the trait as more masculine for 'competent,' 'independent,' and 'tough' at 0.05 levels. For 'ambitious,' 'articulate,' 'assertive,' and 'self-confident,' the pattern is less linear and/or less statistically significant in

the sense that respondents in the more centrist ideological groups do not follow the general pattern of more masculine ratings than more liberal respondents or less masculine ratings than more conservative respondents. For feminine traits, moving downwards toward the conservative end of the ideological scale corresponds to an increasing likelihood of rating the trait feminine for 'emotional' at the 0.05 level; the same pattern holds for 'gentle,' 'sensitive,' and 'talkative' but where the coefficients fail to meet 0.05 significance levels for some groups in the center of the ideological spectrum. In contrast, the so-called "feminine" traits of 'hardworking' and 'trustworthy' were rated more masculine (at 0.05 levels) when moving toward the more conservative end of the ideological spectrum. This latter finding reflects scholarly disagreement about whether these traits should be considered as so-called "feminine" traits, as they likely invoke for more conservative respondents' views of hardworking breadwinners (who are typically male). Thus, the results depicting these divergent patterns in Figure 6 largely support H4a.

There is a similar divergence for neutral and negative traits. More conservative respondents rate all neutral traits as more masculine compared to more liberal respondents, particularly being 'authentic' and 'intelligent,' which we might expect given that they are commonly perceived as having relatively positive associations with leadership. However, multiple negative traits are rated by more conservative respondents as more feminine at the 0.05 level, including 'insincere' and 'manipulative.' Most of the other negative traits are rated in a relatively gender-neutral way or trending toward feminine, but they fail to reach statistical significance across ideological groups and/or in a linear pattern. Figure 7 depicts these distinctions, suggesting further support for H4a and H4b.

Figure 7. Ideologically-driven ratings of neutral and negative traits





Finally, we find no evidence to support our fifth hypothesis that people who recall women's representation as officeholders are likely to classify traits differently than those who do not recall such exposure. The coefficient for this predictor fails to reach statistical significance in all models except the "feminine" trait of 'cheerful,' where those who recall

being exposed to female officeholders are more likely to rate this trait as more masculine compared to counterparts who do not recall a female officeholder when asked.

Among our control variables, we were surprised to find that educational attainment reaches conventional levels of statistical significance only for a few traits and often in inconsistent ways. For example, more education generally correlates with more masculine ratings of 'competitive' and more feminine ratings of 'cheerful,' while a university or postgraduate education correlates with more masculine ratings of 'rational.' For the remainder of the traits, no statistically significant differences were shown when separating out by the different educational attainment categories. The controls for relationship status and parental responsibility for children at home rarely reach conventional levels of statistical significance and have infrequent and only substantively minimal effect when they do.

Accounting for alternative explanations and robustness

Because our data set includes multiple countries, it is an understandable concern that cross-national differences further explain variation in and deviation from previously-assumed gendered trait associations. For example, people from countries with higher women's higher education and labor force participation rates, having been exposed to increasingly frequent demonstrations of women's capacity, may be more likely to classify traits as gender neutral or not tied to a specific gender than people from countries with lower women's higher education and labor force participation rates. Our main models account for this possibility with the inclusion of country-level dummies, where Australia is the baseline case in Tables B1, B2, B3, C1, C2 and C3.

Our results show that there is limited evidence for country-level differences across the range of traits. The exception is the US, which is the only outlier among the group for some masculine, feminine, neutral and negative traits. American respondents, when the coefficient

reaches statistical significance, are always more likely to associate traits in the traditionally-expected gendered ways with the exception of 'hardworking' and 'honest,' which they rate as more masculine.[3] This may be due to the higher levels of religiosity in the US compared with our other cases. The only other statistically significant outcomes are in Canada, where ratings for 'cheerful' (feminine) and 'assertive' and 'competitive' (masculine) converge with more traditional gendered associations. However, these results comport with various perspectives about how exposure to women's capacity may influence gendered associations and norms: the US has the lowest women's labor force participation rate in this group of cases but there is limited variation in the rate among the rest of the countries. Furthermore, despite being relatively average on the women's labor force participation rate, Canada is the only other country in the group besides the US that has not had a female executive for longer than a few months, and that exposure was decades ago.[4]

Alternatively, we model the role of country-level influences on gendered trait associations by removing country dummies and instead clustering our models by country case. This produces limited change to the results, with almost no substantive differences and only slight increases or reductions in statistical significance for a handful of the key predictors in the models reported in Appendix D. Overall, it is unsurprising that country-level differences are minimal in these models, given that the variation between these five countries in women's labor force participation rates and women's occupation of high-profile or

[3] It is also important to recognize that American respondents were sourced from Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform rather than Prolific for the other four cases. This is a minimal difference, given the inclusion criteria we applied in both cases, but still worth recognizing as a potential driver of modest statistical differences such as those indicated in our results.

[4] Kim Campbell was Canadian Prime Minister from June 23rd to November 4th in 1993.

executive political positions is relatively modest in a comparative sense. Thus, we remain confident that country-level factors exert little direct impact on differences in gendered trait associations compared with the individual-level factors we identified.

Conclusion

While it is certainly true that many people continue to associate personality traits with a traditional understanding of masculinity or femininity, our purpose in this study was to question the assumption that gendered associations are consistent for everyone. Using a cross-national data set of survey respondents in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and USA, we found evidence that there is significant variation in the levels of masculinity and femininity associated with commonly-used traits. In particular, we found a powerful difference in how men versus women associate gender with traits, as well as how young men and young women diverge from one another. These findings are particularly important in light of the growing differences in support for extreme right parties among young men and women; the difference that we find in how young men and women understand leadership traits could be a part of why the youth gender gap in support for extreme right parties is dramatically outpacing other ages. We also found evidence that political ideology exerts a strong effect on whether individuals maintain the traditional associations of certain traits as inherently masculine or feminine, as well as a pattern of those who identify ideologically as right-wing as more likely to associate negative traits with femininity. All of these results are important for candidates to keep in mind as they formulate their campaign and publicity strategies, as it is clear that ideology, gender, and age change how people interpret the masculinity and femininity of words, as well as the value they attach to them.

Our findings suggest that recent changes in how people understand gender may reflect a non-uniform effect on gendered associations, and thus that scholars must consider

individual differences in their understanding of associations with masculinity, femininity, and consequent relevance for the double bind on female leaders and candidates. For some, leadership traits continue to be viewed as masculine and thus inherently unavailable to women, but for others, there is greater fluidity in how leadership traits are understood, thereby making leadership an inherently less exclusively masculine endeavor. Yet, our finding on the youth gender gap also raises questions about the sustainability of this fluidity.

Our study complements recent scholarship questioning the persistence of gendered trait associations (e.g., Charlesworth et. al 2022; van der Pas et al. 2024), extending their findings beyond the US case. Notably, there are limited differences across the five countries we include, suggesting a relatively common usage of terms by gendered associations even though the countries have different experiences of women's political leadership, labor force participation, and political participation. Future research could extend this further by including more cultural variables such as religious adherence or religiosity—which may be important factors shaping views on gender—analyzing similar English-speaking countries such as Ireland, including less economically developed English-speaking countries such as Ghana or Liberia, or investigating differences in countries speaking other languages where the linguistic structure does not require subjects holding distinct traits to "take" gender, such as German, Dutch, Estonian and Hungarian.

Data availability statement

All data and replication code necessary to reproduce all analyses included in this manuscript are available at https://osf.io/hfxk9.

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