

Reading the face of a leader

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Women (but not men) with both high and low facial masculinity are perceived as competitive leaders, finds new study co-authored by a Cambridge Judge Business School academic.

Past studies have shown that, in competitive settings, people prefer both male and female leaders to have masculine facial characteristics – because these are perceived as signalling competitive personality traits.

A new academic study finds, however, that low facial masculinity in

[women](#) is also linked in people's minds with competitiveness, and not only to cooperation – suggesting that traits of facial masculinity in men and women are interpreted differently.

"Whereas men in competitive settings benefit from high levels of facial masculinity, women fare well when they either look particularly masculine or when they do not look masculine at all," concludes the study published in the journal *Academy of Management Discoveries*.

The practical implications of these findings, says study co-author Jochen Menges, work both ways for women: while there may be less of a disadvantage to some women than previously assumed based on traditional facial-characteristic leadership theories, recruitment in competitive settings "may be biased" against women whose faces simply fit in the middle between masculine-looking and not masculine looking at all.

"This study challenges gender theory that says women with feminine facial characteristics are associated with communal behaviour and nurturing, while men with masculine features are associated with being driven and competitive," says Menges. "The study finds that it's much more nuanced – that when women look very feminine people associate competitiveness with them as well."

More masculine [facial characteristics](#), as shown in digitally altered photos of a man and a woman in the study, include thicker and flatter eyebrows, a squarer jaw and more pronounced cheekbones.

The study – entitled "Reading the face of a leader: Women with low facial masculinity are perceived as competitive" – was co-authored by Cambridge Judge PhD alumnus Raphael Silberzahn of IESE Business School at the University of Navarra in Barcelona, and Jochen Menges, University Lecturer in Organisational Behaviour at University of

Cambridge Judge Business School and Professor of Leadership at WHU
– Otto Beisheim School of Management in Germany.

The study cites Yahoo's Marissa Mayer, Hewlett Packard's Meg Whitman and Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg – three high-profile women executives – as having three particular things in common: "They are all top-level leaders in highly competitive companies, they are all women, and none of them look particular masculine." In fact, the study finds, that in S&P 500 companies, "a greater range of facial masculinity is present among women CEOs compared to men CEOs."

The researchers based their findings on a series of studies involving hundreds of American adult participants, a mixture of men and women.

In one study, participants selected a suitable leader of a company that "has many rivals and competes heavily" from a series of images showing faces of women or men with digitally altered degrees of masculinity, while in another study participants were asked to assign certain competition-themed statements (such as "She wants it her way or you're out" and "He treats others with respect to a degree, but mostly believes he is right") to such modified images.

Among the results: For women leaders, more than 50 per cent of study participants associated such statements as "She was feared by those around her" or "There is only one boss, and that is her" with both a low-masculinity and high-masculinity image of the same woman. For men leaders, the statement "Coworkers consider him very driven" was associated by 64 per cent of participants with high-masculinity images compared to 33 per cent for low-masculinity images, while "Doesn't tolerate people trying to act like they are smarter or wiser than he is" had a 63 percent link to a high-masculinity image compared to 27 per cent for a low-masculinity image.

"Our findings suggest that there has been a misalignment between past research and the reality," says Menges, emphasizing that feminine-looking women have a better chance of being seen as leaders than previously thought.

More information: R. Silberzahn et al. READING THE FACE OF A LEADER: WOMEN WITH LOW FACIAL MASCULINITY ARE PERCEIVED AS COMPETITIVE, *Academy of Management Discoveries* (2015). [DOI: 10.5465/amd.2014.0070](https://doi.org/10.5465/amd.2014.0070)

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