

Feeling the backlash in hiring: When female athletes break traditional gender norms

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Abstract 469

Role congruity theory posits that leadership behavior is characterized by masculine, or agentic roles, characteristics not stereotypically attributed to women (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The managerial position continues to be perceived as a masculine position, which provides a male with a perceived advantage over an above a female, based solely on his gender (Schein, 2007). This would suggest that the masculine cue of "athlete" would provide athletes an advantage when applying for management positions because of the masculine traits (i.e., aggressive, ambitious, independent, self-confident) associated with the role of athlete are similar to the traits associated with good managers or leaders. However, role congruity theory also suggests that when women engage in masculine or male-dominated roles or behaviors such as those necessary in management and leadership positions, they are evaluated less favorably than men because such management and leadership roles are more stereotypically associated with men (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

When evaluating the influence of athletic participation on perceptions of managerial success (i.e., hiring preference, perceived competence, anticipated likeability) for entry-level management positions, female athletes only gained advantage over other candidates in likeability, providing partial support for the first aspect of role congruity (Burton, Grappendorf, Henderson, Dennis, & Field, in press). That is the role of athlete demonstrated that female athletes possessed the skills necessary to at least be perceived as a more likeable manager when compared to male athletes and male and female non-athletes. However, the second aspect of role congruity was also supported; female athletes were penalized for demonstrating the role of athlete and offered the lowest salaries of all candidates (Burton et al.). This suggests that there are important perceptions operating among those evaluating female athletes for management positions. Yet it is unclear how the role of athlete may simultaneously hurt and help female athletes in evaluations of managerial success. An additional component to understanding how women are perceived as successful managers is through evaluation of attractiveness.

The role of attractiveness in hiring decisions has been studied for over thirty years including Dion, Berscheid, and Walster's (1972) infamous study indicating that attractive people enjoyed more advantages and had more desirable personality traits. Attractiveness is a potential variable that is related to role congruity theory, and has implications in the hiring process and for salary recommendations. The perceptions regarding an individual's gender role are related to his or her physical appearance. Though research over the years has been inconclusive, physical appearance provides significant cues for determining an individual's gender role (Deaux & Lewis, 1983, 1984) as perceived attractiveness influences beliefs about an individual's femininity or masculinity (Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979). Major and Deaux (1981) found that attractive persons are perceived as more sex-typed. Specifically, researchers have found that attractive women were rated as more feminine than unattractive women (Drogosz & Levy, 1996). Attractiveness or a lack thereof, is particularly salient for women (Abramowitz & O'Grady, 1991). Therefore, gender characterizations (i.e. femininity) can be enhanced by attractiveness (Gillen, 1981). When evaluating preference for managerial positions, unattractive women were seen as more masculine than attractive women, and were perceived to be more decisive and motivated, and ultimately were preferred for managerial jobs over attractive women (Heilman, 2001; Heilman & Stopeck, 1985; Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979). Therefore, the purpose of this research was to further investigate the influence of attractiveness on perceptions of female athletes' success in managerial positions.

Method: Participants were given a packet containing a consent form, a female job candidate's r, sum,, a photograph of the candidate (treatment condition), and a questionnaire asking them to evaluate the r, sum, for hiring recommendations, competence, anticipated liking for the applicant, and initial salary offers for an entry-level management position in a sport organization. Participants were shown one of two different photographs for this study. Each photograph was black and white, 3" x 5" in size, depicting a female applicant from the waist up wearing no jewelry or eyeglasses. Each of the photographs was pre-rated prior to data collection. Consistent with the researchers' categorization of the photographs, Photograph 1 received an average score of 4.25 (range=1-feminine, 7-non-feminine) and photograph 2 received an average score of 1.72. On the basis of the pre-ratings, the researchers categorized Photograph 1 as non-feminine, and Photograph 2 as feminine.

Data was analyzed using t-tests for independent means to test for differences between the two treatment conditions on hiring recommendations, competence evaluations, likeability, and salary offers. Results for this study indicate that feminine-looking athletes have a significant advantage over non-feminine-looking athletes on all dependent measures. Feminine-looking athletes were significantly more likely to be hired ($M=5.92, SD=0.83$) than non-feminine-looking athletes ($M=5.62, SD=0.89, p<.001$).

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In addition, feminine-looking athletes scored higher on competence ($M=5.95$, $SD=0.67$) than non-feminine-looking athletes ($M=5.76$, $SD=0.74$, $p<.05$); anticipated liking (feminine: $M=5.81$, $SD=0.87$; non-feminine: $M=5.17$, $SD=1.04$, $p<.001$); and salary offer (feminine: $M=7.20$, $SD=2.93$; non-feminine: $M=5.33$, $SD=2.60$, $p<.001$). T-tests were also used to examine whether or not male evaluators' appraisal of the applicants differed from that of female evaluators. Female evaluators were more likely to give feminine athletes higher likeability ratings ($M=5.95$, $SD=0.89$) than male evaluators ($M=5.52$, $SD=0.75$, $p<.05$). The same was true for non-feminine athletes, who were given higher likeability ratings by female evaluators ($M=5.33$, $SD=1.02$) than by male evaluators ($M=4.90$, $SD=1.06$, $p<.05$). There were no statistically significant gender differences that emerged on the other three dimensions of hiring (i.e., hiring recommendation, competence, or salary offer).

Results of this research indicate that the role of athletic participation may be mediated by perceived level of attractiveness for female athletes. Athletes perceived to be less feminine were more harshly evaluated for entry-level managerial positions. Therefore, though demonstrating the agentic roles of manager, the non-feminine female athletes may have been perceived as too masculine, and were negatively evaluated for potential managerial positions. In light of the research findings, further discussion regarding the implications for female athletes and hiring managers will take place.