

THE DOUBLE BIND OF FEMININITY: THE LIKEABILITY PENALTY AND THE COMPETENCE-ATTRACTIVENESS PARADOX AMONG WORKING WOMEN IN MEDAN

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Abstract

Women in the formal workforce often face a double bind dilemma, where the need to demonstrate competence conflicts with expectations of femininity. This study analyzes the influence of the likeability penalty and the competence-attractiveness paradox on promotion opportunities and work engagement among female employees in Medan. A quantitative explanatory design was applied, with data from 100 respondents selected through purposive sampling. A five-point Likert scale questionnaire was used, and data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (SEM-PLS). Results indicate that the likeability penalty negatively affects promotion opportunities ($\beta = -0.296$; $p = 0.008$), while the competence-attractiveness paradox has a dual effect: positively influencing perceived competence ($\beta = 0.318$; $p = 0.004$) but negatively affecting promotion opportunities ($\beta = -0.211$; $p = 0.029$). Promotion opportunities significantly improve work engagement ($\beta = 0.427$; $p = 0.000$). These findings underscore persistent gender bias, aligning with Role Congruity Theory, and highlight the need for competence-based promotion policies.

Keywords: Double Bind Dilemma, Likeability Penalty, Competence-Attractiveness Paradox, Promotion Opportunities, Work Engagement.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary workplace, women continue to navigate a complex landscape shaped by persistent gender norms and organizational expectations. Although women's participation in the formal workforce has significantly increased, structural and perceptual barriers rooted in gender stereotypes remain deeply embedded in professional environments. One of the most enduring challenges is the double bind of femininity, a dilemma in which women are required to demonstrate high levels of competence and assertiveness—qualities traditionally associated with leadership—while simultaneously conforming to societal expectations of warmth, agreeableness, and emotional sensitivity. This contradiction places women in a disadvantaged position: behaving assertively may invite negative social judgments, whereas fulfilling feminine expectations may cause others to perceive them as less capable of leadership.

This double bind becomes particularly evident in Indonesia, including the city of Medan, where traditional gender norms intersect with modern organizational demands. Despite efforts to promote gender equality, subtle biases continue to influence workplace evaluations, career advancement decisions, and perceptions of women in leadership. Preliminary findings from a pre-survey conducted in December 2024 involving 25 female employees highlight that promotion decisions are often influenced not only by objective performance indicators but also by subjective factors such as interpersonal likability, social preference, and physical attractiveness. These tendencies illustrate that women frequently encounter the likeability penalty—social backlash for demonstrating competence—and the

competence–attractiveness paradox, in which attractiveness may enhance perceived capability but paradoxically reduce opportunities for career advancement.

Such phenomena reinforce broader theoretical explanations, particularly Role Congruity Theory, which posits that prejudice arises when individuals display behaviors that conflict with societal expectations for their gender. For women, leadership qualities such as assertiveness and authority often clash with stereotypical norms of femininity, resulting in biased assessments that hinder their advancement. These biases not only restrict access to leadership positions but may also diminish women’s overall work engagement, as limited promotion opportunities negatively affect motivation, commitment, and psychological investment in the organization.

Given this context, there is a critical need to empirically examine how the likeability penalty and competence–attractiveness paradox shape women’s career trajectories in Medan’s formal sector. Understanding these dynamics will provide deeper insights into the subtle mechanisms that perpetuate gender inequality and impede women’s professional growth. Furthermore, the findings of this study are expected to inform organizations about the urgency of implementing competence-based promotion systems and fostering inclusive workplace cultures that support women’s engagement and long-term career development. By addressing these issues, organizations can contribute to reducing gender disparities and enhancing the overall effectiveness and fairness of the workforce.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Double Bind Dilemma

The double bind dilemma reflects the tendency for women who display assertiveness and competence to be perceived as less likable, whereas those who present themselves as warm and agreeable are judged as less competent (Heilman, 2012). This contradictory expectation places women in a challenging position where demonstrating professional capability may lead to social backlash, while fulfilling traditional feminine norms may undermine perceptions of leadership readiness. In the modern workplace, this dilemma continues to shape how female employees are evaluated, particularly in environments where gender stereotypes remain prevalent.

Likeability Penalty

The likeability penalty further reinforces the double bind dilemma by emphasizing the negative social consequences that women face when they behave assertively in professional settings. Women who adopt competitive, decisive, or dominant behaviors traits typically associated with leadership are often considered less likable, which in turn reduces their chances of receiving promotions or other forms of career advancement (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Conversely, women who exhibit warmth and agreeableness may be socially favored but are frequently perceived as insufficiently competent to occupy higher-level positions. This dynamic creates a no-win situation, where neither assertiveness nor agreeableness adequately supports women’s leadership trajectories.

Competence - Attractiveness Paradox

Another barrier experienced by women is the competence - attractiveness paradox. Research has shown that while physical attractiveness can benefit women in social situations, it may produce negative consequences in professional contexts. Women perceived as physically attractive are often subject to stereotypes that portray them as less competent, particularly in roles requiring authority or technical expertise (Johnson et al., 2010). Conversely, women who demonstrate high levels of competence are sometimes judged as socially less attractive or less approachable, reducing their acceptance within organizational networks (Livingston et al., 2012). This paradox severely constrains women's access to leadership pathways and limits the recognition of merit-based performance.

Role Congruity Theory

The urgency of this study is further reinforced by Role Congruity Theory, which explains how discrimination arises when there is incongruity between socially expected gender roles and leadership roles that require competence, assertiveness, and authority (Eagly & Karau, 2002). According to this theory, women who display behaviors aligned with leadership expectations are often judged as violating norms of femininity, leading to perceptions of being less likable. Conversely, when women adhere to feminine norms such as warmth and agreeableness, they are frequently viewed as lacking the competence necessary to assume leadership roles. This theoretical framework highlights the structural nature of gender bias within organizations and underscores the relevance of examining the likeability penalty and competence–attractiveness paradox in workplace settings.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative approach with an explanatory design, aiming to examine the causal relationships among variables, namely the likeability penalty and the competence- attractiveness paradox, in relation to promotion opportunities and work engagement among women working in the formal sector in Medan. The choice of design was based on Creswell and Creswell (2018), who argued that explanatory research is appropriate for testing the influence of independent variables on dependent variables through structural model analysis.

The population of the study consisted of female employees in the formal sector in Medan. From this population, the sample was determined using purposive sampling, with criteria requiring respondents to be women who had worked for at least two years in either private or public organizations and were within the age range of 21 to 45 years. Considering the adequacy of sample size for Structural Equation Modeling Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) analysis, the number of respondents was set at 100. Hair et al. (2021) emphasized that this number meets the minimum threshold required to generate stable model estimations.

The research instrument was a questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from one (“strongly disagree”) to five (“strongly agree”). The likeability penalty construct was adapted from indicators developed by Rudman and Phelan (2008), which measure the

social barriers faced by women who display assertive behavior. The competence–attractiveness paradox construct was measured using indicators developed by Johnson et al. (2010), capturing perceptions of the interaction between physical attractiveness and competence in the workplace. Promotion opportunities were assessed based on respondents’ perceptions of their likelihood of career advancement, following indicators proposed by Heilman (2012). Meanwhile, work engagement was measured using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) developed by Schaufeli et al. (2002), which consists of three main dimensions: vigor, dedication, and absorption.

Data analysis was conducted using SEM-PLS through the SmartPLS 4 software. The analysis procedure included both the evaluation of the outer model and the inner model. The outer model evaluation assessed construct validity and reliability, with indicators considered valid if factor loadings were at least 0.70, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) exceeded 0.50, and reliability was confirmed with Cronbach’s alpha and Composite Reliability values above 0.70. Subsequently, the inner model evaluation assessed the model’s predictive power using the coefficient of determination (R^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), and hypothesis testing based on path coefficients and p-value significance. This procedure was deemed appropriate as SEM-PLS is well-suited for models with relatively small sample sizes and complex latent variable structures (Hair et al., 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Description

The study involved 100 female employees working in the formal sector in Medan. The majority of respondents were aged 26–35 years (54%), followed by those aged 21–25 years (28%), and the remaining 18% were aged 36–45 years. In terms of education, most respondents held a bachelor’s degree (62%), while 24% had a diploma and 14% held a postgraduate degree. Based on job positions, staff-level employees dominated the sample with 68%, while the remainder occupied supervisory and lower managerial roles. These characteristics indicate that the sample represents women working primarily at lower to mid-level positions, who are more likely to face the likeability penalty and the competence–attractiveness paradox in their career development.

Outer Model Evaluation

The outer model analysis was conducted to assess the validity and reliability of the research instruments. The results showed that all indicators had loading factor values above 0.70, thus fulfilling the requirement for convergent validity. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for each construct ranged from 0.56 to 0.72 (> 0.50), indicating that the indicators explained more than half of the variance of their respective constructs. Reliability testing also showed that Composite Reliability (CR) values ranged between 0.83 and 0.91, while Cronbach’s Alpha ranged from 0.79 to 0.88, all exceeding the threshold of 0.70. Therefore, the constructs were considered valid and reliable.

Inner Model Evaluation

The inner model evaluation revealed that the R^2 value for Promotion Opportunity was 0.58, while the R^2 value for Work Engagement was 0.62. This indicates that the likeability penalty and competence–attractiveness paradox together explained 58% of the variance in promotion opportunities, and along with promotion opportunities, explained 62% of the variance in work engagement. In addition, a Q^2 value of 0.41 was obtained, indicating that the model possesses good predictive relevance.

Path Coefficient

The path analysis produced several important findings. First, the likeability penalty had a significant negative effect on promotion opportunities ($\beta = -0.296$; $p = 0.008$). This finding confirms that the greater the social barriers experienced by women who are perceived as less likable when demonstrating competence, the smaller their chances of being promoted. Second, the competence–attractiveness paradox had a significant positive effect on perceived competence ($\beta = 0.318$; $p = 0.004$), but exerted a negative effect on promotion opportunities ($\beta = -0.211$; $p = 0.029$). This suggests that although physical attractiveness enhances perceptions of competence, in the context of career promotion it often becomes a hindrance. Third, promotion opportunities had a significant positive effect on work engagement ($\beta = 0.427$; $p = 0.000$). Thus, the greater the perceived opportunities for advancement within the organization, the higher the level of engagement demonstrated by female employees. Overall, this model demonstrates that the likeability penalty and the competence–attractiveness paradox are real barriers for women working in the formal sector in Medan. Although competence and attractiveness contribute to shaping positive perceptions, gender-based stereotypes continue to reduce promotion opportunities, which ultimately undermines work engagement.

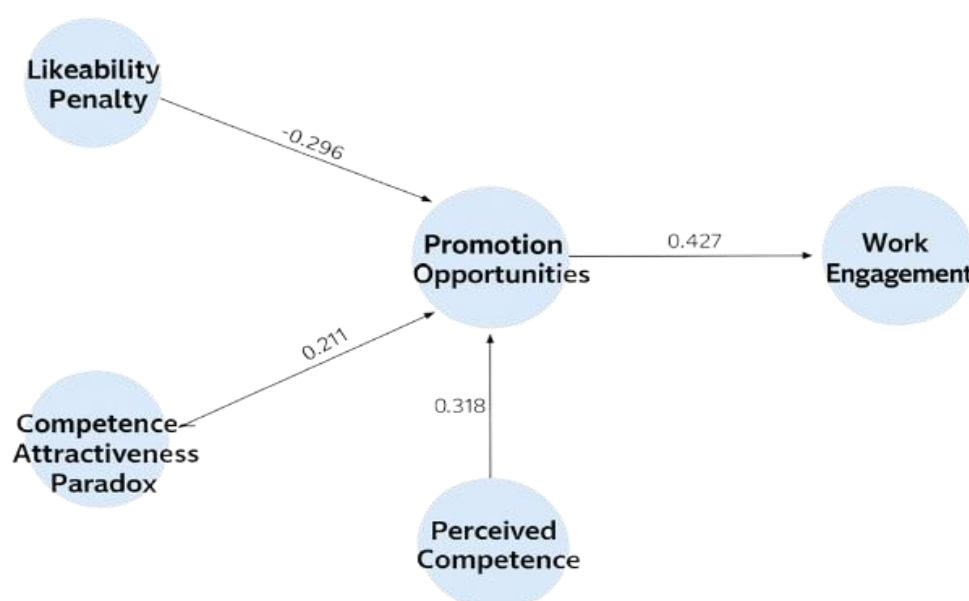


Figure 1. Path Coefficient Diagram

The findings of this study reveal that the likeability penalty has a significant negative effect on women's promotion opportunities. This result reinforces Role Congruity Theory, which posits that gender discrimination occurs when women's displays of competence are perceived as incongruent with expectations of femininity that emphasize warmth and cooperation (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Consequently, women who act assertively and demonstrate high levels of competence often encounter social resistance, thereby diminishing their chances of attaining leadership positions. This result is consistent with the work of Rudman and Phelan (2008), who found that competent women were often rated as less likable, thereby reducing their likelihood of promotion. Another finding highlights the dual effect of the competence–attractiveness paradox. On the one hand, physical attractiveness enhances perceptions of competence among working women (Johnson *et al.*, 2010). On the other hand, in the context of promotion opportunities, physical attractiveness exerts a negative effect. This aligns with the study of Livingston *et al.* (2012), which found that physically attractive women are often perceived as less serious or unsuitable for strategic leadership roles, a phenomenon known as the beauty is beastly effect. Thus, the competence–attractiveness paradox presents a unique dilemma for women in Medan's workforce, where strength in one dimension may hinder progress in another.

Furthermore, the study establishes that promotion opportunities have a significant positive impact on work engagement. This underscores that when women perceive genuine prospects for career advancement, they display higher levels of dedication, vigor, and absorption in their work. These findings support Bakker and Demerouti's (2017) Job Demands–Resources Model, which emphasizes that organizational resources such as promotion opportunities function as job resources that enhance employee engagement. In other words, promotion opportunities not only influence career trajectories but also strengthen intrinsic motivation and work commitment. The implications of this study are twofold. Theoretically, the results affirm the relevance of Role Congruity Theory in explaining the biases experienced by working women and extend its applicability to the local context of Medan. Practically, organizations must acknowledge that gender-based biases remain barriers to women's careers, necessitating promotion policies that are more objective and competence-based rather than reliant on social perceptions. At the individual level, female employees need to develop personal strategies, such as enhancing competence and strengthening professional identity management skills, to mitigate the effects of the likeability penalty and the competence–attractiveness paradox.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that female employees in Medan face a tangible double bind dilemma of femininity in the workplace. The analysis indicates that the likeability penalty has a significant negative effect on promotion opportunities, meaning that competent and assertive women are often perceived as less likable, thereby diminishing their chances of attaining strategic positions. The competence–attractiveness paradox demonstrates a contradictory influence: while physical attractiveness enhances perceptions of competence,

it simultaneously becomes a hindrance in the context of promotion opportunities. Moreover, promotion opportunities were found to have a significant positive effect on work engagement, as the prospect of career advancement within the organization enhances women's dedication, vigor, and absorption in their work. These findings affirm that gender-based biases continue to play a major role in shaping women's career dynamics, consistent with the explanation provided by Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be proposed. First, organizations should design promotion policies that are more objective, emphasizing competence-based evaluations to minimize gender biases arising from the likeability penalty and the competence-attractiveness paradox. Second, comprehensive human resource development programs are needed to support women in strengthening their professional identity, including leadership training, perception management, and inclusive career mentoring. Third, female employees themselves should develop personal strategies through capacity building, self-image management, and communication skills in order to cope more effectively with the pressures of gender stereotypes. Through these measures, promotion opportunities can become more equitable, work engagement can be enhanced, and greater gender equality in the workplace can be achieved.

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