

# FEMINIZATION OF LEADERSHIP?

## An interest in digital leadership depending on gender

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### INTRODUCTION

Ideas of an ideal leader contribute to gender inequality at the management level (Burel et al., 2020; Kohaut & Möller, 2022). Implicit assumptions about leadership personalities are male-dominated (Schein, 1973), which is at odds with implicit assumptions about femininity (Koenig et al., 2011). The Role Congruity Theory describes the incongruence between the female role and the masculine leadership ideal (Mai et al., 2017).

Digital transformation is changing the world of work through the technologization of work tools and the virtualization of work processes. Along with that, a new, digital understanding of leadership arises that focuses on competencies to be successful in the digital (technical competencies) and complex environment (interpersonal competencies). Those new leadership competencies are increasingly female-associated (Gilli et al., 2022; Imbery et al., 2022; Philip et al., 2023).

Some authors see an opportunity for a **Feminization of Leadership** by combining changing leadership skills, becoming more female-associated due to digitalization, and the low proportion of female leaders (Burel et al., 2020). However, many concepts of digital leadership competencies also require technical skills such as the rather male-stereotyped, adept handling of software and hardware. It is, therefore, questionable whether digital leadership can contribute to the Feminization of Leadership.

"In today's digitalised world, stereotypical female strengths such as openness, the ability to reflect, empathy, and moderation skills are in demand more than ever before. These stereotypical female skills shape the standards applied to leaders today."  
Reimer/Onaran (2020)

"In an increasingly networked world [...], the need for communicative leaders is growing. For leaders who have the ability to network, integrate ideas and create a vision. Future-oriented skills that are more often attributed to women in particular."  
Gierke (2020)

**Achieving gender balance in decision-making and politics**  
"There are still far too few women in leading positions. [...] This is the case even if gender parity exists at the lower levels. If top positions are held exclusively by men for a long time, this shapes the recruitment pattern for successors, sometimes only due to unconscious bias. Having both women and men represented is crucial for successful leadership."  
European Commission (2020)

### OBJECTIVE

This study aims to describe the effect of female- and male-stereotyped – further referred to as *agentic* and *communal* – digital leadership competencies in job advertisements on the application intentions of female candidates. That is, to observe the extent to which digital leadership appeals to women or, on the contrary, discourages them with technical requirements.

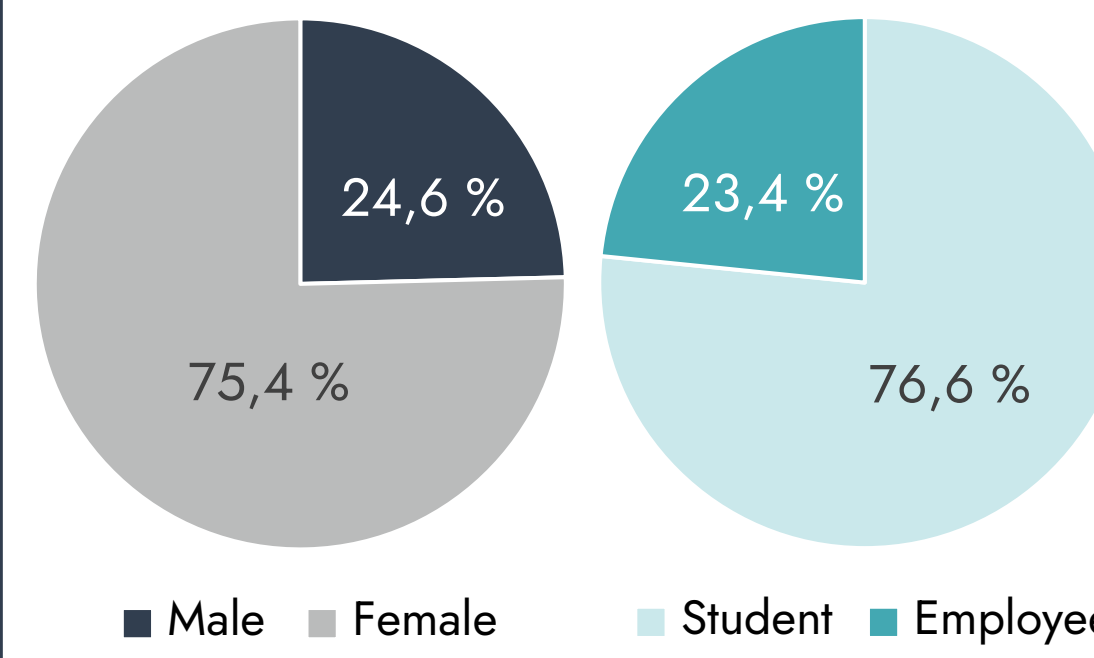
### HYPOTHESES

- H1: Job advertisements with agentic connoted digital leadership competencies lead to a lower motivation to apply among female applicants than male applicants.
- H2: Job advertisements with communal connoted digital leadership competencies lead to a higher motivation to apply among female applicants than male applicants.
- H3: Job advertisements with neither agentic nor communal connoted digital leadership competencies lead to a lower motivation to apply among female applicants than male applicants.

### METHOD

An **experimental study** with a **repeated measures design** was conducted in which female and male participants **assessed twelve connoted** digital leadership competencies in fictitious **job advertisements** concerning their **motivation to apply**. Motivation was measured on a five-point rating scale with the item "I would apply for this leadership position."

Participants (n = 171)  
- worked in a digital environment and  
- were (open to) being a leader

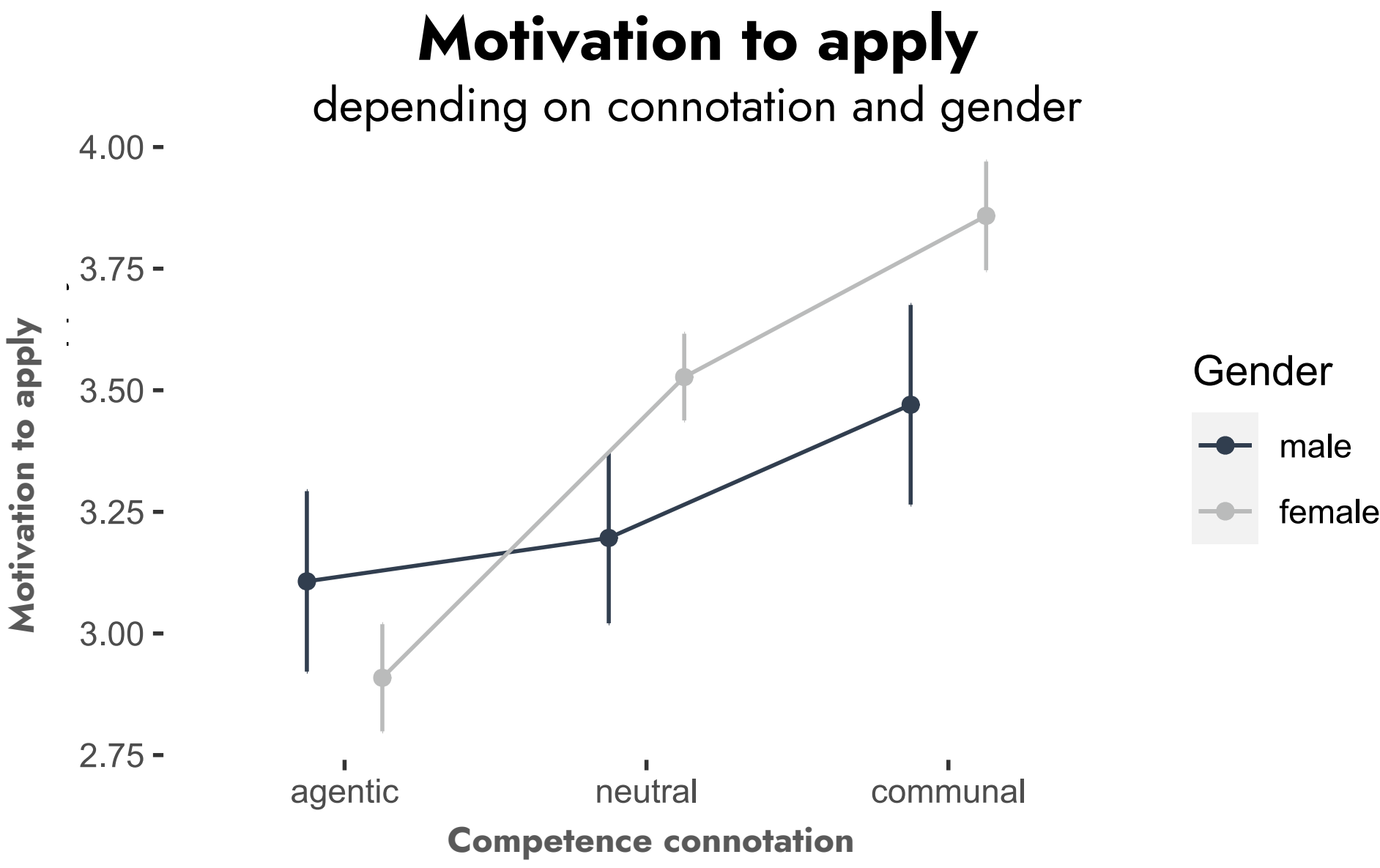


"Our company is seeking a leader with a high willingness for **lifelong learning**. You should be open to new experiences and enjoy developing yourself further."

The twelve leadership competencies integrate digital leadership concepts by Gilli et al. (2022), Imbery et al. (2022), and Philip et al. (2023). The connotations were theoretically evaluated based on a merged dictionary comprising communal and agentic connotated terms.

Agentic	Communal	Neutral
Technical understanding	Connective competence	Transformation competence
Strategic thinking	Communication skills	Lifelong learning
Data analysis	Customer orientation	Change orientation
Autonomy	Cooperation competence	Transdisciplinarity

### RESULTS



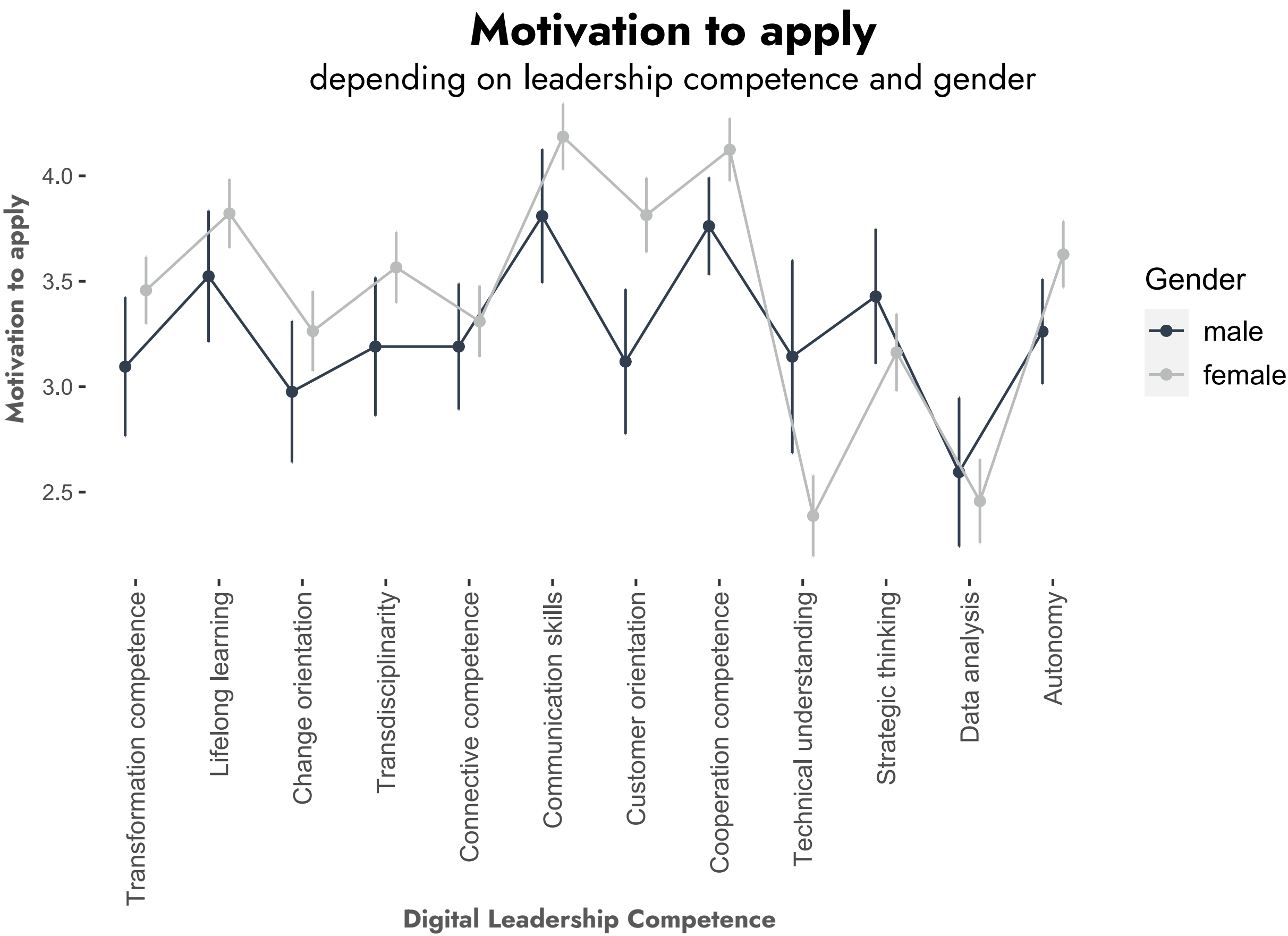
The 2 (gender: male, female) x 3 (competence connotation: agentic, communal, neutral) analysis of variance for the extent of application intention revealed a significant main effect for the factor competence connotation,  $F(1.89, 319.56) = 37.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .183$ , as well as a significant interaction of competence connotation and gender,  $F(1.89, 319.56) = 9.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .052$ . The main effect of gender was not significant,  $F(1, 169) = 2.99$ ,  $p = .086$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .017$ . A pairwise comparison of means revealed no significant difference between female and male applicants for digital leadership skills with agentic connotations,  $t(169) = 1.45$ ,  $p = .145$ , and a significantly higher application intentions for communal connotations (0.39 points),  $t(169) = 2.92$ ,  $p = .004$ , and for neutral connotations (0.32 points),  $t(169) = 2.53$ ,  $p = .012$ .

Women are the least motivated to apply for agentic job advertisements and the most motivated for communal job advertisements; there is no significant difference for men.

H1: ✗ H2: ✓ H3: ✗

### DISCUSSION

- Women are the least motivated to apply for agentic job advertisements and the most motivated to apply for communal job advertisements.
- Men's motivation to apply did not differ depending on the connotation.
- Although women and men are equally attracted by the average of agentic competencies, **technical competencies** have the potential to have a deterrent effect on female applicants.
- Interpersonal competencies** linked to a concern for others result in a high motivation to apply in female applicants.
- The stronger motivation of female applicants for neutral leadership competencies points to a **less agentic general understanding of leaders**.



### LIMITATIONS

The distribution of participant's characteristics in the sample is uneven, limiting the result's *external validity*. The online questionnaire survey partially meets the quality criteria of quantitative research. Using theoretically sound digital leadership competencies, their standardized embedding in the fictitious job advertisement, and the repeated measures design justify good *internal validity*. The questionnaire's *reliability* is limited due to the low internal consistency of the connotation groups of digital leadership competencies. However, it was possible to interpret the results by exploring the individual digital leadership competencies. The use of a standardized online questionnaire and pooled static methods ensures *objectivity* in the evaluation process.

### CONCLUSION

- The connotation of digital leadership competencies influences female applicants' evaluation of a job advertisement.
- Communal leadership competencies increase a female applicant's attractiveness assessment of a leadership position.

The findings ...

- ... contribute to the discussion on a Feminization of Leadership through digitalization.
- ... help to develop practical implications for the use of digital leadership competencies in job advertisements.
- ... support the awareness of self-ascribed lack of fit due to unintentional gender stereotypes in a human resources or career guidance setting by reframing the candidate's perspective on her leadership capabilities and fit.

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