

Report: Exploring Gendered Language in MBA Admission Applications

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Introduction

Two years ago, the Rotman School of Management's Admissions Office added a new reflection question to its MBA application: List 3-5 attributes or characteristics that best describe you. The varied responses to this question provided a unique pool of linguistic data from which to analyze how applicants use language to present themselves. I hypothesized that female applicants would use more feminine language and male applicants would use more masculine language. I also hypothesized that an applicant's use of masculine language would be predictive of admission to the MBA program.

Methodology

I reviewed a sample of over 2,700 applications, which contained approximately 1,500 unique descriptive words used to answer this reflection question. Using the academic research of Danielle Gaucher, Justin Friesen and Aaron Kay, I coded the most frequently used words as masculine, feminine or neutral.¹ I then compared the rates at which these gendered words appeared for male and female applicants. I assigned each applicant an average gender score between -1 and 1, coding feminine words as -1, neutral words as 0 and masculine words as 1. I ran statistical regression analyses, using this gender score as the independent variable, to predict the applicant's gender and admission to the MBA program.

Findings

My results indicate that male and female applicants use gendered language at almost the same rates. Interestingly, both male and female applicants use more masculine words to describe themselves than they do feminine words. The data describes this similarity between the ways that men and women present themselves, but it cannot explain the reason for this similarity in response. It is possible that applicants to business school, as a group, have traits that would be traditionally defined as "masculine", or they have traits that would lead them to describe themselves using more masculine terms. It is also possible that applicants choose to self-present in a more masculine way based on expectations that business school is a hyper masculine environment. Of course, it is also possible that this masculine-leaning self-

¹ Gaucher, D., Friesen, J., & Kay, A. (2011). Evidence That Gendered Wording in Job Advertisements Exists and Sustains Gender Inequality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 101 (No. 1), pages 109–128.

presentation has nothing to do with business school, but rather exists in everyday word usage. Regarding the predictive power of the applicant's gender score, I found that this score was neither predictive of the applicant's gender nor the applicant's admission to the program.

While I was confident this data would show that female applicants self-present with more feminine language and male applicants self-present with more masculine language, this was not the case. Nor did this data indicate any statistical significance between the gendered language applicants use to describe themselves and their admission to the program. Based on these results, it appears that language is not a source of gender bias in MBA admissions applications.

Limitations

When considering the reliability of my findings, there are several important limitations to acknowledge:

- Poor data quality (i.e. full sentences, blanks, etc.) meant excluding many applicant records from my analysis
- Based on time constraints, I only gender-coded words that appeared with a frequency of 10x or greater, which meant that only 77% of applicant words were coded
- The gender dictionary I used is limited in its scope, thus subjectivity was required when coding the majority of applicant words into gendered words

Further Study

There are numerous ways to extend and improve the findings of this study, as well as other areas of interest worth exploring:

- Develop or find a more substantial gender dictionary to remove subjectivity when coding applicant words
- Gender-code 100% of applicant words
- Re-run regressions once applicants have more refined gender scores (i.e. after gender-coding all words)
- Gender-code all referee data to examine the dislocation between applicants' self-presentation and referees' description
- Find a control sample (e.g. this reflection question on an undergraduate admission application) in order to isolate the effect of business school
- Compare the applicant words to those used in marketing materials to understand how the admissions office might be signaling the "right" words to use
- Analyze other potential aspects of gender bias in the words, such as the use of superlative language
- Analyze MBA outcomes for each applicant to find possible correlations between certain words and success in the program

Implications

The results of this study indicate a standardization in the way both male and female applicants present themselves. What we do not know, however, is the authenticity of this self-presentation. Is it a coincidence that men and women present in nearly identical ways or is

there something else that explains the lack of deviation? Perhaps these standardized responses from male and female applicants reflect that the question “List 3-5 attributes or characteristics that best describe you” does not yield a genuine, authentic-self response. This begs one final question: How might we ask MBA admission questions in such a way that there is no “right” or “wrong” response in the applicants’ eyes, but rather a space to reflect who they really are?