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UNDERSTANDING HUMOR IN FEMALE LEADERSHIP

by

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A project in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the University Scholars Program

Seattle Pacific University

2018

Approved _____

Date _____

In this preliminary research, I explored the relationship between humor and female leadership. Individuals who were asked to answer an online questionnaire report that there is a relationship between humor and female leadership. A discussion as to how this research can be utilized is included.

What a woman does not risk being called sarcastic and hateful if she throws the merry dart or engages in a little sharp shooting. No, no it's dangerous – if not fatal.

Kate Sanborn, *The Wit of Women*

Picture the person you most admire. Would you consider them a leader? If yes, have they ever made you laugh? Humor has been hypothesized to have a positive effect on individual and group performance in a professional setting (Avolio, Howell, & Sosik, 1999, p. 219). Good leaders are reported to be “rated higher in humor, even after controlling statistically for other attributes” (Priest & Swain, 2002, p. 169).

Despite research supporting the relationship between humor and leadership, few researchers have explored the relationship between humor and female leadership (Vecchio, Justin, & Pearce, 2009, p. 171). When gender is explored in the context of leadership, it is often associated with effectiveness. In addition, levels of effectiveness can be correlated to humor (Avolio, Howell, & Sosik, 1999, p. 219).

If we consider the relationship between the level of effectiveness and humor, then we can explore the effectiveness of female leadership and the impact humor has on the effectiveness of female leadership. As evidence of the correlation, Robinson and Smith-Lovin found “that a higher proportion of men’s humor is differentiating, while a higher proportion of women’s humor is cohesion-building” (2001, p. 123). In other words, women’s humor encourages trust, while men’s humor is more likely to cause division in the work place.

Due to the lack of research conducted on humor in female leadership, this research investigates the relationship between humor, gender, and leadership effectiveness. To explore the

relationship between these factors, I asked individuals what they thought about the relationship between humor and their experiences with female leaders. For this research, female is defined as a person who identifies as a woman. Humor is defined as the act of making jokes to elicit a response.

My research focuses on the relationship between humor and female leadership as measured by individuals' attitudes. The results show that some people believe there is a correlation between humor and female leadership, but does not prove conclusively that there is a correlation between the two factors. This preliminary research used the variable of people's attitudes towards this relationship, instead of measuring the correlation between variables of humor and female leadership.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Humor as it relates to gender

It can be hypothesized that humor is influenced by, and influences, cultural perceptions of gender. Kotthoff identifies "four dimensions of joking as especially sensitive to gender: status, aggressiveness, social alignment, and sexuality" (2006, p. 4). Kotthoff further argues that gender "still influences humor, sometimes overtly, sometimes covertly" (2006, p. 4).

Humor has a history of being gendered. In analyzing humor as it relates to gender, we can uncover other implications. Little refers to the comedy of women in her novel, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, as "renegade comedy" that "mocks the deepest possible norms, norms four thousand years old" (Little, 1983, p. 18). Gilbert elaborates, "Indeed, marginal humor may empower the powerless, may invert and subvert the status quo and, in doing so, may make the dominant culture uncomfortable. Humor is inextricably linked to power" (1997, p. xvii). It is

important to note that this statement is made in reference to being a humorous woman in a male dominated society.

If we are to assume humor is linked to power and gender, we can credit women with likely utilizing humor to their benefit throughout history (Walker, 1985, p. 101). Walker notes that American women's humor in literature often elicits an emotional response from readers. The humor has commented on personal matters beyond "political corruption or human hypocrisy" (1985, p. 102). In this way, women are able to touch a wider audience that can relate to the humor they were using, versus a humor that caters predominately to a man's response. This utilization further points to the correlation between humor and gender.

Paul E. McGhee (1979) explored the relationship between "female development and different aspects of humor responsiveness, such as laughing or smiling, joking, and clowning" (p. 183). McGhee reports, "Because of the power associated with the successful use of humor, humor initiation has become associated with other traditionally masculine characteristics, such as aggressiveness, dominance, and assertiveness" (1979, p. 183). While McGhee is referencing research conducted in 1979, it can be argued that this association still exists. If a person identifies as a woman, that gender identification bears the weight of an expected behavior (Gilbert, 2003, p. xv). These expectations impact humor in delivery and in reception.

Humor can shape how we accept or reject our female leaders, as well as our levels of comfortability and trust in their leadership. Lastly, Crawford concludes, "Gender is conceived as a system of meanings that influences access to power, status, and material resources. Humor is conceived as a mode of discourse and a strategy for social interaction. Within this theoretical framework, it is argued that women and men use humor in same-gender and mixed-gender settings as one of the tools of gender construction" (2003, p. 1413). This research explores

individuals' attitudes towards the factors of comfortability and trust as it relates to female leadership in a professional setting.

Hypothesis 1. The individuals asked to answer the questionnaire will report that they “agree” or “strongly agree” that there is a relationship between humor and female leadership.

Humor as it relates to leadership effectiveness

When Hillary Clinton ran for Senate in 2000, she appeared on the *Late Show with David Letterman*. Letterman recalled meeting President Bill Clinton. He explained to the then First Lady that her husband came off as “standoffish” and probably thinks of him as a “boob”. She quickly responded, “No, no, I don’t think it’s that at all. I think he’s just curious as to why you’ve never made a joke about him”.

Responding to the effectiveness of candidates appearing on talk shows, Gilbert writes, “... ‘There is no more efficient way to convey a potential leader’s humor and modesty; it’s a terrific way to humanize the Product’ (75)” (2003, p. xii). Keeping in mind the relationship between humor and gender, humor can have a positive impact on leadership effectiveness. Humor can impact how a leader is trusted, and whether or not others feel comfortable being around a “funny” female leader.

Humor and the reception of humor can be complicated. O’Connell explains that Freud struggled with understanding humor fully and its implications (1976, p. 313). Freud explained that humor combines maturity with the denial of reality (O’Connell, 1976, p. 313). Malone continues to explain the complexity of humor by stating that humor is received differently based on whether a man or a woman is delivering the joke (1980, p. 360). While this may be true, current research shows that this complexity can be quantitatively measured by having individuals report on the effectiveness of leaders.

Effective leaders display humor. Rotondo and Decker report, “Clearly, effective managers possess leadership ability in order to affect change in followers, and one promising area of focus is the relationship between humor and leadership” (2001, p. 450). Humor functions as a way for people to maintain constructive relationships in the workplace (Holmes, 2006, p. 26). Supportive humor, often expressed by women in a professional setting, has been shown to be the most effective in fostering a productive work environment (Gilbert, 2003; Holmes, 2006). Supportive humor does not divide groups of people by making jokes that specifically ostracize an individual or a culture. Instead, supportive humor makes light of relatable topics in the work place, or leans toward self-deprecation. This can foster a community that laughs in response to the same humor.

Humor allows for relatability that contributes to the effectiveness of a leader in a professional setting. Norrick and Chiaro note, “As a multi-functional socio-pragmatic device, humor performs a variety of functions in the workplace. As a solidarity strategy, humor typically contributes to the smoother achievement of work objectives” (2009, p. xxi). Humor can influence relationships in the workplace. Norrick and Chiaro continue, “The analysis of workplace humor in different groups suggests that multiple aspects of individual identity, in particular simultaneous membership of more than one subordinate group, expands the range of opportunities for individuals to contribute rapport-enhancing, boundary-marking humorous utterance to enliven mundane, primarily transactionally-oriented workplace discourse” (2009, p. xix).

Ingratiation is defined as “an attempt by individuals to increase their attractiveness in the eyes of others so as to influence those others’ behaviors” (Cooper, 2005, p. 766). Effective leaders positively utilize ingratiation. Cooper continues, “Past research on humor indicates that it has the ability to induce a positive affect (Carnevale & Isen, 1986; Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987). Accordingly, individuals should be attracted to others who use humor effectively (Byrne

& Neuman, 1992). Preliminary research has shown, in fact, that subordinates' liking for their supervisor is significantly related to the supervisor's frequency of humor expression (Cooper, 2002a)" (2005, p. 765). This supports the argument that there is a relationship between humor and leadership effectiveness.

There is a positive correlation between trust and humor (Hampes, 2009, p. 254). Hampes writes, "A number of studies (Mutthaya 1987; Hampes 1992; and Hampes 1994) have shown that those high in humor also tend to be high in intimacy. According to Erikson (1963) trust is one of the necessary conditions for intimacy to occur. Sternberg (1986:121) claims that intimacy involves 'being able to count on the loved one in times of need'" (2009, p. 253). This correlation between humor and trust may positively relate to leadership effectiveness. If a leader is humorous, they are more likely to be trusted.

Conclusively, effective leaders have been shown to use humor. Arguably, this is because the use of humor in a workplace improves productivity. Humor reduces stress and encourages camaraderie. Research also supports the argument that the utilization of humor in a professional setting encourages familiarity amongst co-workers (Norrick and Chiaro, 1979, p. xix). Humorous leaders are arguably more likely to be trusted, and foster comfortability in a workplace. This research measures for people's attitudes towards trust and comfortability as it relates to humorous female leaders.

Hypothesis 2a. The individuals asked to answer the questionnaire will report that they "agree" to the statement that they trust the leadership abilities of a woman if she is funny.

Hypothesis 2b. The individuals asked to answer the questionnaire will report that they "agree" to the statement that they are more comfortable around a "funny" female leader.

METHODS

Context and Sample

This study was conducted using a Qualtrics questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed using email and the social media platform, Facebook. Therefore, the participants were not specifically selected. The sample size consisted of 46 individuals. Those who answered the questionnaire predominately identified as women. Their ages ranged from 21 to 78 years of age. The mode showed that a majority of people who answered the questionnaire were 22 years of age.

Procedures

A Qualtrics questionnaire, with an accompanying consent form and a filmed four minute standup routine, were distributed via Facebook. The standup routine was of a woman addressing her experiences in female leadership. Individuals who were invited to answer the questionnaire via Facebook were asked to watch the standup routine and sign the consent form before completing the Qualtrics questionnaire. The consent form was made available online through DocuSign. The Qualtrics questionnaire was programmed so that the individuals could answer the questionnaire anonymously. Participants also could only take the questionnaire once. Answered questionnaires were collected from April 26th, 2018 to May 3rd, 2018.

Survey Measures

Relationship between humor and female leadership. The Likert scale was used to measure the attitude of individuals responding to the statement, “I think there is a relationship between humor and female leadership”. The answer options included, “Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neither Agree or Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree”. The following question requested, “Explain your reasoning behind Question 1”. There was a space made available for a free response. The Likert scale has been used to measure people’s attitudes

to facial reactions as well as statements (O'Quin & Aronoff, 1981, p.349). Before answering this question, participants were asked to watch an accompanying standup routine relevant to the questionnaire content. However, there was no way to confirm that participants did watch the filmed standup routine. Therefore, those who watched the routine may have provided different answers than those who did not view the routine before completing the questionnaire.

Relationship between trust and female leadership. The Likert scale was also used to measure the attitude of individuals responding to the statement, "I am more likely to trust the abilities of a woman if she is funny". The answer options included, "Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neither Agree or Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree". The following question requested, "Explain your reasoning behind Question 3". There was a space made available for a free response. Before answering this question, participants could watch an accompanying standup routine relevant to the questionnaire content. Survey questions on trust do not provide definitive results, as the definition of trust can vary. However, reports of trust levels can be generalized across differing people groups (Miller and Mitamura, 2003, p. 69). Reports of trust levels can be generalized when considering the age and gender identification provided by participants when answering this questionnaire. It is important to note the danger of generalization, even though it is often utilized when measuring trust (Miller and Mitamura, 2003, p. 68).

Relationship between comfortability and female leadership. The Likert scale was also used to measure the attitude of individuals responding to the statement, "I feel more comfortable around a 'funny' female leader". The answer options included, "Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat

Agree, Neither Agree or Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree”. The following question requested, “Explain your reasoning behind Question 5”. There was a space made available for a free response. Before answering this question, participants could watch an accompanying standup routine relevant to the questionnaire content.

Age and Gender Identification of Participants. For the last two questions, participants were asked what year they were born and what their preferred pronouns are. This information provided insight into how questions were answered depending on age and gender identification. Age and gender identification did not have a relationship with questionnaire answers.

Data Analysis

The three hypotheses were tested using the questionnaire, in which participants had to provide answers that fell on the Likert scale. This research measures people’s attitudes in response to statements made regarding humor as it relates to female leadership. This research does not explore the correlation between the factors of humor and female leadership. It is designed to be a small-scale study. The hypotheses were further tested by asking participants to explain their answers. Explanations provided further insight into the participant's understanding of the relationship between humor and female leadership.

The questions on the Qualtrics questionnaire accounted for two aspects of the relationship between humor and female leadership, trust and comfortability. The questionnaire also accounted for the participants’ belief that there is a relationship between humor and female leadership. The answers provided served to directly support the hypotheses.

RESULTS

Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the results from Question 1 in which participants were asked to respond to “I think there is a relationship between humor and female leadership”. Out of 46 respondents, 20 answered “Agree”, 4 answered “Strongly Agree”, 12 answered “Somewhat Agree”, 7 answered “Neither Agree or Disagree”, 2 answered “Somewhat Disagree”, 1 participant answered “Disagree”, and 0 participants answered “Strongly Disagree”. Of the responses, the minimum is 1.00, the maximum is 6.00, the mean is 2.70, the standard deviation is 1.10, and the variance is 1.21. With a confidence level of 95%, the margin of error is plus or minus 0.32, 32%. While this margin of error might seem alarming, it is relative to the small sample size. The participants’ answers to Question 1’s statement reflect their attitude regarding the relationship between humor and female leadership.

Figure 3 and Figure 4 show the results from Question 3 in which participants were asked to respond to “I am more likely to trust the leadership abilities of a woman if she is funny”. Out of 46 respondents, 4 answered “Strongly Agree”, 10 answered “Agree”, 14 answered “Somewhat Agree”, 11 answered “Neither Agree or Disagree”, 4 answered “Somewhat Disagree”, 3 answered “Disagree”, and 0 participants answered “Strongly Disagree”. Of the responses, the minimum is 1.00, the maximum is 6.00, the mean is 3.22, the standard deviation is 1.30, and the variance 1.69. With a confidence level of 95%, the margin of error is plus or minus 0.38, 38%. The participants’ answers to Question 3’s statement reflect their attitude regarding the relationship between trust and female leadership.

Figure 5 and Figure 6 show the results from Question 5 in which participants were asked to respond to “I feel more comfortable around a ‘funny’ female leader”. Out of 46 respondents, 6 answered “Strongly Agree”, 17 answered “Agree”, 10 answered “Somewhat Agree”, 9 answered

“Neither Agree or Disagree”, 3 answered “Somewhat Agree”, 1 answered “Disagree”, and “0” participants answered “Strongly Disagree”. Of the responses, the minimum is 1.00, the maximum is 6.00, the mean is 2.76, the standard deviation is 1.22, and the variance is 1.49. With a confidence level of 95%, the margin of error is plus or minus .35, 35%. The participants’ responses to Question 5’s statement reflect their attitude regarding the relationship between comfortability and female leadership.

Furthermore, Question 2, Question 4, and Question 6 asked participants to explain their answers given for Question 1, Question 3, and Question 5. Participants were provided a free space for their explanations. Many participants displayed prior knowledge about the relationship between humor and female leadership. One participant wrote, “There are different styles of female leadership. Research shows that leadership qualities that are valued in men (assertiveness, drive, etc.) actually make women less ‘likable.’ Humor can be a great way to bridge that gap.” Participants also displayed varying interpretations of the questions asked. One participant noted, “Humor helps you cope with the challenges of being a female leader.” Many participants also noted that while humor is an important part of being an effective leader, it is not a necessary trait for a female leader to possess.

Other participants also reported having not given the relationship any thought. Commonly used words included “approachable, relatability, and positive”. Fewer participants reported that trust plays a role in the relationship between humor and female leadership. While participants expressed that humor helps build trust, they also reported that it is not as important, especially in a professional setting. Participants were not asked to consider the relationship between trust and humor. Therefore, their answers may have varied depending on whether or not participants considered the relationship between humor and trust beforehand.

Lastly, participants noted that comfortability relates to humor, but not necessarily to female leadership. Many participants noted that any person can take a joke too far, which can lend itself to creating an uncomfortable work environment. One participant noted, “Females who are serious are more intimidating. I feel like I have less of a way to connect with them”. Other participants noted that humor helps with relatability which then fosters comfortability.

Hypothesis 1, Hypothesis 2a and Hypothesis 2b are correct. Individuals asked to answer the questionnaire reported that they agree and strongly agree that there is a relationship between humor and female leadership. Individuals asked to answer the questionnaire reported that they trust the leadership abilities of a woman if she is funny. Individuals asked to answer the questionnaire reported that they are more comfortable around a “funny” female leader.

DISCUSSION

This study is a preliminary investigation into the relationship between humor and female leadership in the workplace. This small scale study is not intended to prove correlation between humor and female leadership, but instead is meant to provide insight into people’s attitude towards the topic. The questionnaire was intended to start exploration in to present day reactions to humor in female leadership.

Results showed that a majority of participants “agree” that there is a relationship between humor and female leadership. A majority of participants “somewhat agree” that they are more likely to trust the leadership abilities of a woman if she is funny. Lastly, a majority of participants “agree” that they feel more comfortable around a “funny” female leader.

It is important to note that many people reported that they “somewhat agree” that there is a relationship between humor and female leadership, positive or negative. None of the collected

data was especially definitive. Answers were not overwhelmingly similar. It is also interesting to note that only two people who reported their pronouns to be “he/him” took this survey. A majority of people who completed this questionnaire identified as “she/her” and “they/them”. Of the 46 people who completed this questionnaire, 13 of them reported that they were born in 1996. This means that many people who answered this questionnaire were 22 or 23 years of age.

The data collected speaks mostly to the attitudes of a young community who identify as “she/her” and “they/them”. It could be argued that this small scale study suggests that there is both agreement regarding the role humor plays in female leadership, and a lack of thought surrounding the topic. This knowledge can serve to encourage thought surrounding the topic of humor as it relates to female leadership. Many noted that humor impacted their ability to trust, as well as their comfortability, with a female leader. If we consider these reports, we can be more conscious of our perception of female leaders. Female leaders can be made more aware of how their use of humor might impact how they are perceived, and how they can best utilize this knowledge to their advantage.

Limitations and Next Steps

This small scale study had many limitations. The questionnaire was distributed and collected within a two month time frame. Had there been more time, more answers probably would have been collected. This questionnaire was also only distributed online. It is likely that this prevented people of an older age, people who do not own a computer, and differently abled people to not have access to this questionnaire. If this research is continued in some capacity, it is important that accessibility is stressed. While the literature review accounted for various perspectives, this

research did not. Further research should account more intentionally for the factor of ethnicity. This will provide a more diverse pool of participants.

The wording of the questionnaire questions could have been interpreted differently depending on the participant answering. This is noted in the results. It is difficult to analyze data when there are too many factors. This research accomplished its mission of exploring people's attitude towards the relationship between humor and female leadership. However, it did not further explore correlation between humor and female leadership directly. An exploration of correlation could produce constructive results that could then be applied. Moving forward, research surrounding humor and female leadership should focus on one specific aspect, such as trust. While similar research has been conducted, this field has yet to receive much attention.

It is important that the exploration of humor and the role it plays in female leadership continues. Women have always been leaders, but research does not represent this as much as it should. Humor is just one factor that can impact the perception of a woman in a professional setting. If we continue researching the impact that this single factor can have, women can utilize this knowledge to their advantage. Perhaps, this can begin to make up for the disadvantages society has historically granted them.

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APPENDIX

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	I think there is a relationship between humor and female leadership.	1.00	6.00	2.70	1.10	1.21	46

Figure 1: Statistical analysis of reported answers addressing the statement, “I think there is a relationship between humor and female leadership.”

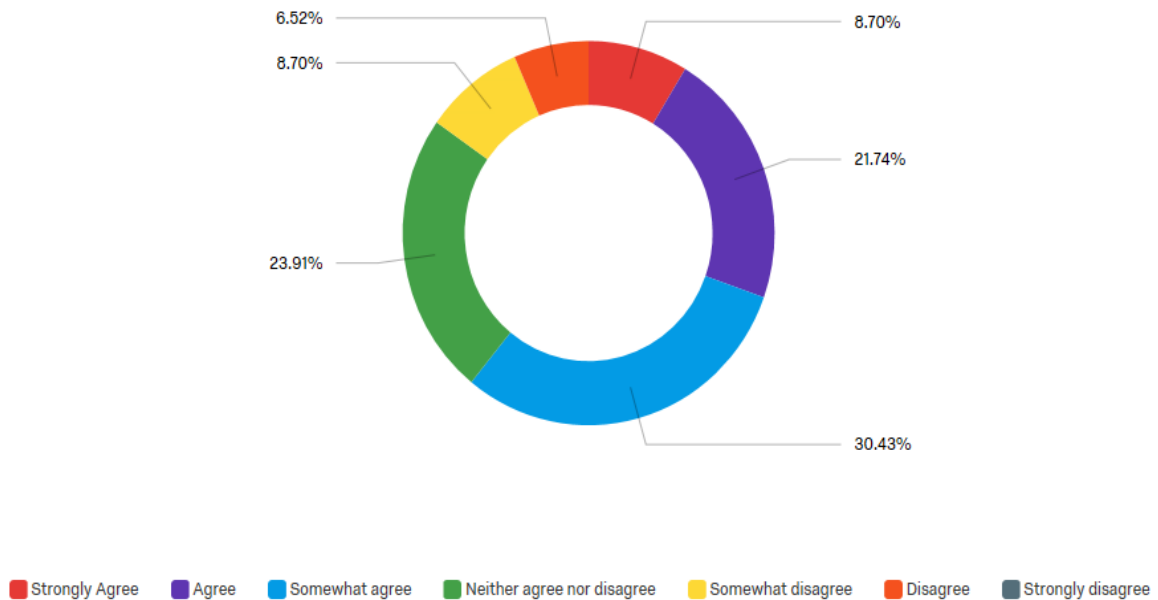


Figure 2: Broken down percentages of the answers to Question 1.

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	I am more likely to trust the leadership abilities of a woman if she is funny.	1.00	6.00	3.22	1.30	1.69	46

Figure 3: Statistical analysis of reported answers addressing the statement, “I am more likely to trust the leadership abilities of a woman if she is funny.”

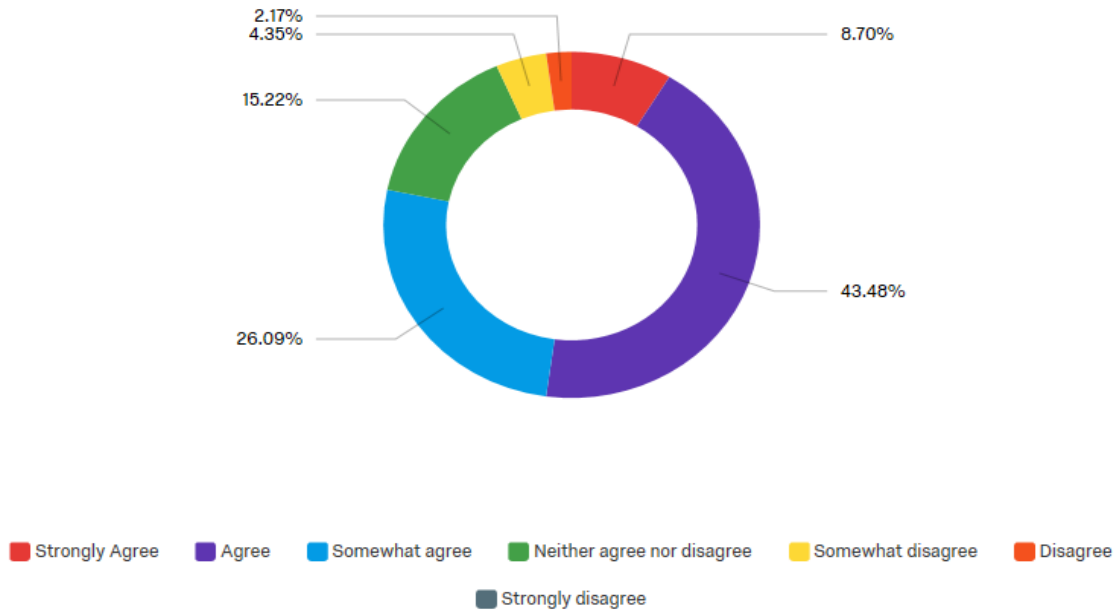


Figure 4: Broken down percentages of the answers to Question 3.

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	I feel more comfortable around a "funny" female leader.	1.00	6.00	2.76	1.22	1.49	46

Figure 5: Statistical analysis of reported answers addressing the statement, "I feel more comfortable around a 'funny' female leader."

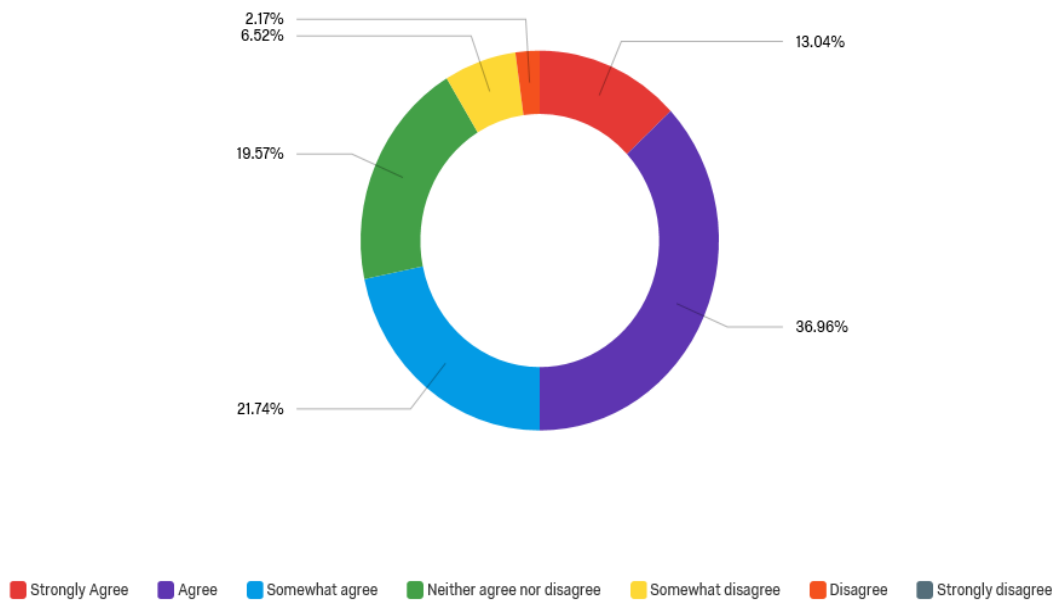


Figure 6: Broken down percentages of the answers to Question 5.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My utmost thanks to Dr. Ruth Ediger for her feedback and support through the completion of this project. Thanks also to Mark Oppenlander for his encouragement and revisions. I also would like to thank my family and housemates for their constant emotional support.