INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN ECONOMICS & MANAGEMENT SCIENCES

OPEN ACCESS JOURNAL

Vol 11, Issue 1, (2022) E-ISSN: 2226-3624

Perceived Traits for Future Women Academic Leaders in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions

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To Link this Article: http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJAREMS/v11-i1/11692 DOI:10.6007/IJAREMS/v11-i1/11692

Published Online: 16 March 2022

Abstract

Malaysian higher education institutions are currently dominated by the female gender, according to the Ministry of Higher Education 2020's statistics. However, the number of women academics becoming top leaders such as Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Dean, and such is still lacking behind other countries. Many factors hinder women academics from climbing up positions like patriarchal perceptions, socio-cultural biases, balancing work-life, or their personality – e.g., lack of self-confidence. When we addressed the traits of leaders, women academics should possess exceptional leadership traits that can help them become effective leaders in the future. Hence, the main purpose of this study is to identify perceived traits of women academics to become leaders in Malaysian higher education institutions. Nevertheless, the population in this study was limited to Malaysian public universities only, with 96 respondents from both genders. The study method was a descriptive and quantitative method that used simple random sampling based on Cochran's formula for an unknown population. Several limitations are discussed to help future research expand the literature on women academics in the Malaysian context. Overall, the research questions of this study have been answered thoroughly, and the study concluded that regardless of socio-cultural settings, women academics will always be associated with feminist traits of leadership.

Keywords: Higher Education, Leadership, Traits, Women Academic.

Introduction

In today's world, women have gained momentum in higher education due to the feminism campaigns (The American Federation of Teacher, 2011). For instance, following World War 2, women's equality continued to spread in the forced labor environment during the war where more women enter the jobs market (The American Federation of Teachers, 2011). Thanks to the feminist campaigns, women are now making achievements in a profession that men once controlled. However, they are constantly outnumbered at the top management level and considered less to be appointed in leadership positions than men in higher education institutions (Chin, 2011). Even if they are being promoted, their posts are frequently designated as interims or provisional (Steward, 2009).

Historically, gender imbalance in higher education is very common. As in the early 1800s, only a tiny percentage of women became professors in the U.S.A, and despite demographic shifts, the number of female academic leaders is relatively poor over the globe (Chin, 2011; Parker, 2015). Similarly, higher education institutions in Ireland were aggressive toward women's presence due to the affluent middle-class men's stronghold in the nineteenth century (Harford, 2018). Also, in the early days of Malaysian higher education, the number of female lecturers was restricted to the number of female students enrolled in universities (Omar, 1993). This made many men hold top positions like Vice-Chancellor and its deputy, dean, and deputy instead of women in Malaysian higher education institutions (Omar, 1993).

Even until now, the number of top leaders in Malaysian higher education institutions is still considered scarce. For instance, the first woman appointed as Vice-Chancellor was Datuk Rafiah Salim, who became Universiti Malaya's Vice-Chancellor in 2006 (The Star, 2006). Then, only four other women have been appointed as Vice-Chancellors in Malaysian public higher education institutions (Almaki et al., 2016). As of 2021, there are three women are currently holding Vice-Chancellor in Malaysian public universities; they are Prof. Dato' Dr. Nor Aieni Mokhtar of Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, Prof. Dr. Raha Abdul Rahim of Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka and the latest appointment is Prof. Ts. Dr. Hajah Roziah Mohd Janor of Universiti Teknologi MARA (Bernama, 2021).

The Environment in Higher Education Institutions for Women

Despite the growing awareness, the gender gap still can be seen in higher education institutions globally (Kapareliotis & Miliopoulou, 2019). Women academics continue to face personal leadership characteristics and academic pressures that shield them from joining and staying in higher education managerial roles (Kasim, 2010). One of the reasons is due to the obstacles in their personal and professional progress (Almaki et al., 2016) especially for the first few years of the job adaptation phase (Hacifazlioğlu, 2010). Most of the time, they must go through it more strictly because their responsibilities as mothers interfere in their careers (Hacifazlioğlu, 2010).

The higher education sector has been said to be one of the few places where no one wants to be a manager (Peterson, 2014). The demands on academic reputation or merit heighten the gender differences since the prerequisite to be in the top academic positions is to have a professorship and become a prominent researcher (Machado-Taylor et al., 2007 as cited in Carvalho & Machado, 2010). In addition, the organizational support, mentoring program, or available resources are also missing for women academics due to power disparity (Khan & Siriwardhane, 2021). Hence, many women decide to delay their career advancement.

According to Evers and Sieverding (2015), women often take time to reach the top of a professorship or similar senior job in higher education institutions after completing a PhD. They further added that men had higher academic self-efficacy and a more positive attitude toward being professors than women because men felt their intellectual abilities were superior in the educational career path. This is because women mainly attributed their career with child-related responsibility to why they decided not to pursue leadership positions in higher education institutions (Evers & Sieverding, 2015). As a result, women academics generally start their careers later than their male counterparts. They are less likely to follow a conventional route that begins with a lecturer that develops through the levels of becoming senior lecturer, associate professor, and full professor (Bagilhole & White, 2011). Thus, it is

crucial to examine why women must have the desire or strive to enter top management leadership in higher education institutions (Morley, 2013).

The Traits Approach Perspectives

The Skills, Traits, and Transformational Leadership Approaches can help organizations understand how women lead (BlackChen, 2015). For instance, several leadership traits in the transformational approach relate to the feminist leadership views, like women's rising in politics (Wakefield, 2017). Similarly, the trait theory can also predict leadership qualities in employees (Zaccaro, 2007). Therefore, this can help management to decide on strategies to find potential or emerging leaders regardless of gender (Ng et al., 2008; Cherry, 2018). Equally, the traits approach is believed appropriate to recognize emerging leaders in both men and women (Robbins & Judge, 2019). Thus, since the primary purpose of this study is to identify the perceived traits needed for women academics in Malaysian public higher education institutions to be leaders, in Table 1 below is the summary list of traits and characteristics of women academics from some past studies globally:

Table 1
The Traits of Women Academics in Higher Education Institutions Globally

No.	Authors	Paper Title	Objectives	Traits or Characteristics Mentioned
1.	Yıldırmış et al (2021)	Women Leaders in Higher Education in Turkey During the Pandemic: The Illusion of Gender Equality	The paper presented the lived experiences of women academic leaders in higher education institutions during the pandemic period by explaining more on the gender equalities for women on formal and informal support tools (Turkey).	**Page 64 – 66:** Learnable Collaborative Supportiveness Careful Knowledgeable Caring Understanding Fair
2.	Macfarlane (2018)	The Perspectives of Women Professors on the Professoriate: A Missing Piece in the Narrative on	The paper analyzed women's role-perception as professors in higher education institutions (UK).	**Page 10:** Resilience Confidence Assertive Negotiation skills

		Gender Equality in the University		
3.	Reis & Grady (2018)	Women as University Presidents: Navigating the Administrative Labyrinth	The paper identified and explained the navigational experiences of women presidents in public research universities (U.S.A.).	**Page 103 – 104:** Intellectual – getting credentialed Passionate Critical thinker **Page 106 – 108:** Risk-taker Reputable Ability to reflect Ability to re-create
4.	Harford (2018)	The Perspectives of Women Professors on the Professoriate: A Missing Piece in the Narrative on Gender Equality in the University	The paper examined the lives of academics on gender equality across countries, systems, and institutions in Ireland.	**Page 9 – 13:** Interpersonal skills Resilient Caring Hardworking Nurturing Sociable – good networking Independent
5.	Mayer et al (2017)	Emotional intelligence in South African women leaders in higher education	This study aimed to explore South African women leaders working in higher education institutions to identify women leaders' strengths, foci, and possible areas of development.	**Page 6-7** Self-regard Emotional Self-awareness Assertiveness Independent Self-actualization Empathy Social responsibility Sociable
6.	Dea & Shibeshi (2015)	Exploring Gender Stereotypes through Managerial Process: Implication for Women Advancement, in Case of	The paper explored gender stereotypes in the managerial process and their implication for women's careers in WolaitaSodo University (Ethiopia).	**Page 7 – 11:** Awareness of other's feeling Creative Helpfulness Kindness Submissive Sympathetic Diligent Hardworking

		WolaitaSodo University		Independent Intelligent Logical Cooperative Fair Good listener Inclusive Intuitive Sociable Appreciative Tactful Encouraging Energetic Open-mindedness Enthusiastic Optimistic Sincere Trustworthiness
7.	BlackChen (2015)	To Lead or Not to Lead: Women Achieving Leadership Status in Higher Education	The paper examined the underpinning theories of leadership approaches, cultural and structural environments, barriers, and opportunities for women academics in higher education institutions.	**Page 155 – 156** Intelligence Self-confidence Self-determination Integrity Sociable **Page 158:** Dedicated Committed Creative Initiative Willingness Risk-taker Supportive Nurturing Respectable
8.	Mayer et al (2015)	Meaningfulness of work for a diverse group of women working in higher education institutions.	This paper explored the meaningfulness of work for women leaders working in higher education institutions in South Africa and internationally.	**Page 191** Responsible Committed Helpful Friendly Understanding Creative Ethical

				Page 192 Happy Sociable Positivity Compassionate Respect for others Passionate
9.	Airini et al (2011)	Learning to Be Leaders in Higher Education: What Helps or Hinders Women's Advancement as Leaders in Universities	This paper identified the reasons why university helped and hindered women academics from moving into career ladders. Also, it provided helpful evidence of development programs in supporting women to become leaders in higher education institutions in New Zealand.	**Page 46** Self-efficacy Self-motivation **Page 52 – 55** Able to balance job Assertive Self-belief Committed Self-confidence Teamwork ability **Page 56 – 58** Sociable – good networking Usefulness Independent
10.	Wolverton et al (2006)	Leading Ladies: Women University and College Presidents: What They Say about Effective Leadership	This paper reported the importance of leadership tenets of women academic leaders and advised these women to other women who aspire to become leaders in higher education.	**Page 61 – 63** Competent Credible – reputable Trustworthy Communicator – visible Understanding Future-oriented Careful Able to balance job Consciousness **Page 64 – 66** Usefulness Emotional stability Purposeful Prepared

Research Aim and Questions

Over the decades, all the traits mentioned in the summary table above have been reviewed in gender leadership studies. Most of the traits are similarly discussed and perceived toward the women academics when they become leaders or when they feel the traits are needed to become leaders in other socio-cultural. Hence, the main aim of this study is to identify the perceived leadership traits of women academics in Malaysian higher education institutions. The research questions include:

1. What is the perception toward women academics as leaders in Malaysian higher education institutions?
2. What are the perceived traits needed for women academics to become leaders in Malaysian higher education institutions?
3. Are the perceived traits needed for women academics to become leaders in Malaysian higher education institutions similar to past research outcomes?
4. What is the satisfaction level toward women academic leaders in Malaysian higher education institutions?

The study was conducted since research on women academics in Malaysia is still limited as several worldwide studies largely overlooked them (Morley et al., 2017). We acknowledged the major limitation is on finding past literatures based on Malaysian context. This has encouraged us to contribute to the body of knowledge on women academics in Malaysia since their impact on Malaysia's modern world is barely recognized by many. Furthermore, the study also found that no matter how much women criticized and grieved on the dearth of their gender in top management roles in higher education, none of them aspired to be a Vice-Chancellor or even a Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Morely et al., 2017). Although this study is not about how passionate women want to become leaders in higher education institutions, the perception of women academics on themselves in Morely, Berma and Hamid (2017) is reflected in this study's findings and discussion. Thus, this study should be regarded as a preliminary inquiry for further extensive research to explore the lives of women academic as leaders in the Malaysian.

Methodology

The research design used in this study is descriptive and quantitative research. The study proposed that the population is from various academic positions, ages, and years of experience working in higher education. The simple random sampling was chosen in this study, which comprised approximately 384 academics in Malaysian public universities. The reason to use this technique is that the study could not identify the size population due to its vast number and geographic dispersed (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). Since the study could not determine the population size thus, we used Cochran's formula (1977) to identify the necessary sample size.

The study referred to the unknown population size, assumed the maximum variability, equal to 50% (p=0.5), and took a 95% confidence level with ±5% precision. A 95 % confidence level gives us Z values of 1.96. Z is the selected critical value of desired confidence level; p is the estimated proportion of an attribute present in the population, q=1-p and e are the desired level of precision. The calculation for the necessary sample size is as follow

p=0.5 and hence q=1-0.5 = 0.5; e = 0.5; z =1.96

n0 = (1.96)2 (0.5) (0.5) / (0.5)

= 384.16

So, it means 384 respondents are needed for this study

Nevertheless, out of 384 estimated sample sizes, 119 respondents answered the questionnaires, but only 96 completed them. The study was unable to identify the reasons why the 23 respondents did not complete the survey. Due to confidentiality rules, the study did not keep track of respondents' details (e.g., names, phone numbers, or emails). The other limitation to identifying the population size is private and confidential figures and statistics from several Malaysian public universities. At the same time, it required extra time and resources to apply for figures and statistics from each public university due to Movement Control Order (MCO) that is currently implemented in Malaysia. Hence, it is difficult to retrieve the population size because of the WFH setting being applied in many public universities. Hair et al (2013) stated that the sample should represent the population and have sufficient participants based on the limitations mentioned. However, the rules of thumb for most studies consider it appropriate to get a sample size of more than 30 but less than 500 (Roscoe, 1975), as cited in Hashim, 2010; Memon et al., 2020).

The primary method of data collection was used in this research study. A structured and self-administered questionnaire-based survey was carried out for data collection using survey links in email invitations and text messaging. The survey questions of this study were adapted from Vasilevskyte (2016); McLendon (2018) as their scope of studies is also in the same area of this study, which is on women's gender. The questionnaire has been formulated and adapted accordingly to meet the study's objectives:

1. Demographic Background - The information requested helped in ascertaining data pertinent to the overall questionnaire.
2. Perceptions on Women Leaders - This section was concerned with the credibility of women leaders and factors affecting them in top-level administrative positions in higher education institutions.
3. Traits Needed for Women to be Leaders – This section focused on 25 traits needed for women to become academic leaders in higher education institutions.

Descriptive statistics were used to categorize the data and to make comparisons of the data. At the same time, inferential testing was used to identify satisfaction toward women academic leaders in Malaysian public universities. The study also has tested the questionnaire for Cronbach's Alpha since the survey was passed through an online link. According to Taber (2018), an acceptable internal consistency can be accomplished by obtaining Cronbach's alpha values of 0.7 or above. However, the other researcher, such as Pallant (2001), states Cronbach's Alpha value above 0.6 is already acceptable and considered as high consistency of a measure (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The rule of thumb for Cronbach's Alpha value is shown in Table 2. The Cronbach's Alpha for Section B (Perception in Women as Leaders) is 0.681, indicating that all items in Section B are considered acceptable. Thus, the level of internal consistency of the factors range is moderate. For section C, the scale has zero variance and will be bypassed. Therefore, reliability testing is not needed. As a result, the questionnaires used in this study are reliable and relevant.

Table 2
Rule of Thumb of Cronbach Alpha (Mulud, 2017)

Cronbach's alpha	**Internal Consistency**
$\alpha \geq 0.9$	Excellent
$0.9 > \alpha \geq 0.8$	Good
$0.8 > \alpha \geq 0.7$	Acceptable
$0.7 > \alpha \geq 0.6$	Moderate
$0.6 > \alpha \geq 0.5$	Poor
$0.5 > \alpha$	Unacceptable

Findings and Discussion

Demographic Profile

Table 3 below shows the demographic background of 96 respondents who completed the survey questionnaire, and all of them are from Malaysian public universities. The study opted out of the name of the public universities due to the confidentiality setting. Therefore, the respondents are generally acknowledged working in public universities for the rest of the findings and discussion parts. Most respondents participated in this study are female academics (n=69, 71.9%) compared to male academics (n=27, 28.1%). The age of the respondents is mostly between 35 to 44 years old (n=39, 40.6%), and the lowest numbers are between 25 to 34 years old (n=15, 15.6%). For the education level, only n=2 (2.1%) respondents hold bachelor's degrees while the rest have master's degrees and PhD with the same percentage (n=47, 49.0%). The study received experienced respondents where the majority of them have more than 10 years of working experience in higher education institutions (n=69, 71.9%) and n=21 (21.9%) have been working more than 5 years but less than 10 years.

Table 3
Demographic Background of Respondents

Variables	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	27	28.1
	Female	69	71.9
Age	25-34 years old	15	15.6
	35-44 years old	39	40.6
	45-54 years old	24	25.0
	55 and older	18	18.8
Education level	Bachelor's Degree	2	2.1
	Master's Degree	47	49.0
	PhD	47	49.0
Years of working experience	Less than 1 year	3	3.1
	At least 1 year but less than 3 years	1	1.0
	At least 3 years but less than 5 years	2	2.1

	At least 5 years but less than 10 years	21	21.9
	10 years or more	69	71.9

Perception on Women as Leaders

The study then asked the respondents on the leadership preference based on genders, whether they prefer to have men or women as leaders in the universities. Referring to Table 4, choosing gender preferences as leaders is not important for most (n=54, 56.3%). However, n=36 (37.5%) of the respondents feel they would vote for men instead of women. The result in Table 4 is similar to many studies that revealed men have higher chances to be leaders than women (Omar, 1993; Chin, 2011; Sharma, 2012; Parker, 2015; Reis, 2015; Abdallah & Jibai, 2020). Perhaps, these n=36 respondents who choose the male gender to be leaders still believe that men can lead better than their women colleagues because of the socio-power culture in Malaysia (Morley et al., 2017). Since most Malaysian citizens are Muslim, choosing women to be leaders is rare in Islamic societies (Sharma, 2012). Likewise, women academics in Ireland also face a similar situation despite cultural and religious differences. Thus, Harford (2018) acknowledged that most people are indeed afraid of women who have power because of the perception that it violates their traditional expectations of genders.

Table 4
Gender Preference for Leadership Positions

Variable	Responses	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender preference for leadership positions	Male	36	37.5
	Female	6	6.3
	Not too important	54	56.3

Table 5 represents the respondent's perceptions of genders leadership abilities. For effective leadership, although n=47 (49.0%) feels that it is not too important between genders, n=41 (42.7%) still think that men are more effective than women to be leaders (n=8, 8.3%). Thus, the gap percentage on this perception between men and women is still varying significantly. Reis and Grady (2018) expressed that it is undeniably challenging for women to manage the leadership labyrinth. This is because men often perform straightforward linear jobs and are quickly promoted to leadership because they follow an anticipated job pattern unlike women (Eagly & Carli, 2007). In addition, male leaders are always perceived as being more objective, minimizing the chances for women to be regarded as leaders (Dea & Shibeshi, 2015).

The same result shows the perception of effective conflict management where the percentage differences are also significant between men and women. Only n=6 (6.3%) of them believe that women handle conflicts well as leaders, whereas n=50 (52.1%) feel that conflict management is best for men leaders instead. One respondent in Harford's (2018) study admitted that she felt slightly reluctant to apply for a leadership position due to her incapacity to deal with conflict. She saw hostile confronts, behavior change, and unending working hours experienced by a woman dean previously. However, Kiamba (2008) argued that women excel in conflict management than men because they have good interpersonal

skills because they have understanding and patience traits. Therefore, this study assumed that due to Malaysian culture and disparity in socio-power our respondents still think men are more competent in handling conflicts because women are afraid to confront the conflicts.

Nevertheless, when it comes to effective listening and understanding abilities, the gap difference between men and women is slight as the difference is only n=29 (male, 30.2%) and n=28 (female, 29.2%). It is surprising that in Malaysian culture, male leaders are favored as having effective listening and understanding abilities that are usually more relevant to female leaders. Like any other culture globally, women are typically perceived as more caring than men (Harford, 2018). Thus, it is a good sign in the Malaysian context that men leaders are now moving toward caring responsibilities, which is different from the standard perception of society.

Table 5
Genders Perception on Leadership Abilities

Variables	Responses	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Effective leadership	Male	41	42.7
	Female	8	8.3
	Not too important	47	49.0
Effective conflict management	Male	50	52.1
	Female	6	6.3
	Not too important	40	41.7
Effective listening and understanding	Male	29	30.2
	Female	28	29.2
	Not too important	39	40.6

Table 6 shows whether the respondents feel women have difficulty being promoted in Malaysian public universities. There are n=37 (38.5%) who thought women do not have the problem, while n=34 (35.4%) said otherwise. The percentage gap does not vary much if we also consider the number of "maybe" responses with n=25 (26%). The study assumed that the respondents who choose the "maybe" option may feel either women have difficulty or no difficulty at all because they may or may not have experienced the issue. BlackChen (2015) stated that women have significant progress into leadership positions in higher education institutions. However, according to one respondent in Macfarlane (2018), in a particular situation, the promotion opportunity personally depends more on who is the leader or who is more skilled because not all male leaders will endorse their same gender. Moreover, women's promotion opportunity in higher institutions has become further visible because of the predominated perception that "all professors are male, heavy and dress in black-suits" are no longer the standard assumption of society (Harford, 2018).

Table 6
Women gender is difficult to get the promotion

Variable	Responses	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Women gender is difficult to get the promotion	Yes	34	35.4
	No	37	38.5
	Maybe	25	26

Next, the study examined the factors of leadership, which they perceived should be possessed or acquired by women academic to be leaders. We asked this question to see if personality traits are considered critical factors in appointing women academics as leaders. Table 7 shows that the personality traits factor is the third-highest factor (n=66, 22.1%) for nominating women academics as leaders. Women have been proven to acquire various skills in leadership and can be good leaders theoretically (BlackChen, 2015). In the U.S.A., for instance, they have been praised for having excellent leadership abilities because they demonstrate great personality traits associated with successful and effective leadership (Eagly, 2007). However, Dea and Shibeshi (2015) countered that to be leaders in the academic sector women should not show their feminine traits like trusting, sharing, caring, empathy, and empowering. Hence, this issue is discussed further in Table 8 from the Malaysians point of view.

Table 7
Factors Needed for Women Academics to Be Leaders

Variables	Ranking	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Acquire relevant knowledge and skills	1	84	28.2
Direction and alignment	2	78	26.2
Personality traits	3	66	22.1
Execution and performance	4	58	19.5
PhD holder	5	12	4.0
Total		298	100
Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1. Valid cases n=96, percent 100.0%			

In the traits section, the study gave 25 perceived traits to the respondents to choose at least 5 required traits that are considered crucial for women academics to possess to become leaders in higher education institutions. These 25 traits can be viewed in Table 8, of which in this table the study also has ranked it accordingly to the multiple responses of the respondents. Figure 1 also shows the graph distribution of the perceived traits from highest to lowest score. The first ranking of the perceived traits needed for women academics to be leaders is self-determination (n=42, 8.8%). There is no surprise that women academics need to have determination attributes when working in the educational sector, especially if they want to be academic leaders in a higher education institution. The list of common women academics' traits was discussed in studies by Northouse (2009); BlackChen (2015), in which self-determination is one of the traits. Determined people are ready to show themselves, take the lead, and survive hardship because a part of being determined is demonstrating power at times (Northouse, 2009). Therefore, to be effective leaders in higher education,

women academics must be determined by any possible means (BlackChen, 2015) because of the challenges women have to endure, such as stereotyping.

In the second-ranking is the self-motivation trait (n=40, 8.4%). This trait is also correspondent with a study by Arini et al (2011), as stated in Table 1. Similarly, one respondent in Reis & Grady (2018) mentioned that she enjoyed challenges and new things so much that she decided to nominate herself for the leadership position in a higher education institution and got it. Additionally, a woman professor in the U.K. said that people who dispirit us could make us more resilient in overcoming challenges if we twist them into something positive. Another suggested fighting for our pitch and telling people what we think to survive the obstacles (Macfarlane, 2018). Thus, when women are keen to show their interests and enjoyment in the academic world, it can help them become effective transformational leaders because they can inspire and motivate others too (Dea & Shibeshi, 2015).

Then, usefulness falls under the third-ranking with n=38 (7.9%). The result of this study is also correlated with a statement by a woman dean in Reis & Grady (2018), where she had good interpersonal skills, specifically in negotiating, in which she would rise and speak up against men in the higher education institutions. Moreover, women have been praised many times for their excellent leadership in which their leadership styles are often linked with valuable works (BlackChen, 2015). Being useful, such as becoming trustees to reach an agreement or stretching budgets, will allow women academics to become leaders (Northouse, 2009; BlackChen, 2015). In addition, the usefulness trait has been discussed in the studies by Airini et al (2011) and Wolverton, Bower & Maldonado (2006) – summary Table 1.

The fourth trait is self-efficacy (n=34, 7.4%). Self-efficacy for women leaders is one of the most common traits discussed in many works of literature. The respondents in the study by Airini et al (2011) also proposed women academics acquire good self-efficacy to become leaders. For example, according to two-woman university presidents in Reis & Grady (2018), women always need to uphold themselves in traditional men's positions because people will either become jealous or suspicious of us. Hence, it is important for women academics not to show poor self-image or be reluctant to carry on leadership responsibilities in university (Dea & Shibeshi, 2015).

Compassion (Mayer et al., 2015) and supportive (Dea & Shibeshi, 2015; Mayer et al., 2018; Emil & Sahin, 2021) traits share the same fifth ranking with n=32 (6.7%). Similarly, the result of authors mentioned beforehand showed that women leaders are more supportive than men, and they can lead to better teamwork with followers in achieving the mission and vision of the organization. In addition, within the top 10 perceived traits listed in both Figure 2 and Table 8 are sociable (n=29, 6.1%), resourcefulness and self-confidence (both n=26, 5.4%), highly committed (n=24, 5.0%) productive (n=22, 4.6%) and competence (n=20, 4.2%). The lowest 5 ranks of the perceived traits are ambitious with no score at all (rank 21), openness (n=2, 0.4%), innovative and solicitude (both n=4, 0.8%), creative (n=5, 1.0%) and activeness (n=7, 1.5%). All these traits have been mentioned and discussed by past literatures in Table 1.

The ambitious trait has no score in the Malaysian higher education environment, probably since many people do not like ambitious women. However, it is hard to get the generalized perception of why Malaysian academics are not akin to ambitious women because the socio-power culture debate is still ongoing. Perhaps, according to the former woman Vice-Chancellor at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Tan Sri Dato' Seri Prof. Emerita Dr. Sharifah Hapsah Syed Hasan Shahabudin, men do not enjoy having assertive women in

Malaysian culture as they do not like women who speak up and deliver excellent outcomes, let alone choosing women as leaders (Sharma, 2012). Correspondingly, in countries where Islamic culture is the majority, young boys are trained to create towers, reinforcements, and create a secret group, while young girls are raised to be good friends, obedient, play with dolls and help their mothers instead (Hejase et al., 2013). Hence, many Malaysian women had a severe problem in their socially reproductive responsibilities that became normalized and naturalized, giving them trim options to acquire diverse leadership abilities in higher education institutions (Morley, Berma, & Hamid, 2017).

Figure 1. Graph Distribution for perceived traits of women as leaders

Table 8
Ranking of perceived traits of women as leaders

Variable	Ranking	Responses	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Women's Traits	1	Self-determination	42	8.8
	2	Self-motivation	40	8.4
	3	Practicality	38	7.9
	4	Self-efficacy	34	7.4
	5	Compassion	32	6.7
	5	Supportiveness	32	6.7
	6	Sociable	29	6.1
	7	Resourcefulness	26	5.4
	7	Self-confidence	26	5.4
	8	Highly committed	24	5.0
	9	Productive	22	4.6
	10	Competence	20	4.2
	11	Stress-tolerance	17	3.6
	12	Perseverance	16	3.3

	13	Knowledgeable	15	3.1
	13	Assertiveness	15	3.1
	14	Emotionality	11	2.3
	15	Ethical	10	2.1
	16	Humility	9	1.9
	17	Activeness	7	1.5
	18	Creative	5	1.0
	19	Solicitude	4	0.8
	19	Innovative	4	0.8
	20	Openness	2	0.4
	21	Ambitious	0	0
	Total		480	100.0%
Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1. Valid cases n=96, percent 100.0%				

Inferential Testing

Test on Mean

Finally, this paper identified the level of satisfaction towards women leaders. An inferential statistic was used to determine a random sample of data taken from a population to describe and make inferences about the population. Below is the hypothesis on the mean level of satisfaction, and in Table 9 is the range of mean score by (Latif and Abdul, 2017).

H_0: The level of satisfaction towards women leaders in the department is not high
H_1: The level of satisfaction towards women leaders in the department is high

Table 9
Range of Mean Score (5 Likert Scale) (Latif & Abdul, 2017)

Ranges	**Level**
0.00 – 1.50	Very low
1.51 – 2.50	Low
2.51 – 3.50	Moderate
3.51 – 4.50	High
4.51 – 5.00	Very high

As stated in Table 10, the mean value for the satisfaction towards women as a leader in the department is 3.53. According to the range mean score of 5 Likert scales in Table 8, the mean value obtained is categorized as high. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis (H_1) is accepted. Thus, the respondents in this study are highly satisfied with the women leaders in their departments. Comparably, a study by Zenger and Folkman (2012) showed that more female leaders were regarded as significantly stronger leaders by their superiors, colleagues, subordinates, and other associates than their male peers – and the higher their leadership level posts, the greater the disparity increases (i.e., in leadership effectiveness by gender by position – female top management, executives and senior team members scored 67.7%, while males scored 57.7%).

Table 10
Mean for the Satisfaction towards Women as a Leader in The Department

Variable	Mean range
Satisfaction towards Women as a Leader in The Department	3.53

Conclusion

Our paper has proven that even though the world is progressing to the modern era, stereotyping still exists in organizations, specifically higher education institutions. Based on Table 6 - Genders Perception on Leadership Abilities, our respondents, regardless of men and women, still think males are the most effective leaders compared to females. It is pretty astounding that most female respondents also voted men as effective leaders because previously, Eagly et al (1995) noted that women become more competent in a female-dominated environment and men in theirs instead. To support, according to the Minister of Higher Education Malaysia (2020), women academics are 37,401, and men academics are 28,987 in Malaysian higher education institutions. Therefore, it is safe to say that the female gender dominates higher education institutions in Malaysia. Hence, this paper argues with the study by (Eagly et al., 1995).

Perhaps, until today, the stereotyping thinking comes not only from men towards women but also from women to women themselves. However, since many studies focus more on men's perception of women's ability to lead, thus, we rarely hear about women's perceptions that can also contribute to the high level of perceived bias and stereotyping in gender leadership. Still, it is also worth noting that our study also asked three responses of answers "Yes," "No," and "Maybe or Not too Important" for some of the survey questions. Thus, it is also essential to consider the "Maybe, or Not Too Important" answers. This is because the study assumed the respondents were contemplating deciding between men and women or the genders' abilities to lead are not their concern as long as they can lead.

In addition, regarding the perceived traits of women academic leaders for this study, the respondents believed that women academics should have self-determination on becoming leaders (Ranking 1). In contrast, compassion (Ranking 5), supportiveness (Ranking 5), sociable traits (ranking 6) are still the central matter of women's traits of becoming leaders. Many past studies discussed these three traits (refer to Table 1) as rationalizing why women have been elected as leaders and why women can lead better than men with these traits across industries (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Radu et al., 2017; Chamorro-Premuzic, 2021). Furthermore, with these internalized gender-stereotypic traits about their leadership competence, female leaders may gain confidence by making collaborative choices in line with their colleagues' expectations (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). With this, we concluded that the perceived traits needed for women academics to become leaders are not much different from other socio-cultural perspectives worldwide. Therefore, women will always be perceived with feminist traits when it comes to leadership qualities.

As a final point, with these outcomes of the study, it is hoped that higher education institutions could develop programs that promote gender equality in leadership and remove or minimize leadership bias and stereotyping. Also, the top management in higher education institutions could come out with strategic planning in encouraging and training emerging leaders among women academics so that they will be more confident to become academic leaders, e.g., leadership mentor-mentee programs that not only prepare them for leadership responsibilities but also developing leadership traits that can fit with everyone in across the levels. Supports from all stakeholders are highly encouraged, too, as women tend to feel

overwhelmed with the burden of the academic responsibilities and family duties that hinder them from applying for leadership posts.

Limitations and Future Directions

The study acknowledged several limitations in the study. The first limitation is the quantitative method, population, and sample size of the study. The quantitative method was restricted to only structured questions, so the respondents' experiences were also limited. Then, the population of this study only were public universities in Malaysia. Thus, the data analyzed cannot be generalized together with private universities setting. Subsequently, since the Covid-19 pandemic hit worldwide, many organizations have been forced to WFH. Hence, we could not move around freely across states in Malaysia to collect data from the 20 public universities scattered all over Malaysia and had to opt for an online data collection process since our data collection phase was done during the MCO implemented by the government. We contacted each public university for the sample size data. However, we had not received any responses even after the phase was completed. Another limitation is during the online data collection process, where the response rates received were low. It is assumed some of the potential respondents did not receive the emails (e.g., full inbox), and as mentioned previously, some of them did not complete the whole survey questions. Therefore, it is suggested for future research to collaborate with any Malaysian higher education institutions, both public and private sectors, with mixed-method instruments after the MCO is lifted and state-cross is allowed again to achieve a substantial sample size and to rich the data.

Second, the study is descriptive and mainly looks at descriptive data analysis. Although it is hoped that this study can be suggested to higher education institutions to develop strategic planning for women academics' career progression, its impact is minimal. Hence, the study proposes future research to conduct a longitudinal study and meticulously come out with a model or approach that can significantly help the higher education institutions plan out a policy or program that includes perceived traits as a variable to identify emerging leaders among women academics. The traits model or approach should also support gender equality and remove gender biases in higher education institutions. At the same time, future research should look further into why some women academics with doctorate degrees hesitate to advance in their careers, as discussed in several studies, including by Bagilhole & White (2011); Evers & Sieverding (2015), especially in the Malaysian context. All these areas are needed to explore the lived experiences of women academics in Malaysia as the research on them is still limited.

Correspondingly, the existing literature reviews have discussed a lot of the gender leadership gap in corporate firms but little in higher education institutions. Many studies did not include Southeast Asia's higher education context for women leaders (Nguyen, 2013). Malaysia specifically, is seldomly mentioned in global research for women and leadership studies (Morley et al., 2017). In addition, according to Mohajeri et al (2015), the studies on gender inequality in higher education institutions are inadequate in many countries because of the individual, socio-cultural and organizational barriers. This is true for some cultures and religions as women studies are sometimes considered prohibited and off-limits to be discussed further. For instance, Arik & Akboga (2018) found that 32.65% of Muslim majority countries (16 out of 49 countries) did not write and publish any research or articles in women's studies. Nevertheless, this should not discourage women's studies as the areas are needed to explain the reasons for gender discrimination and how to solve it, especially in

Muslim countries or where the majority of society are Muslims (Arik & Akboga, 2018). Therefore, it is hoped there will be more studies in Malaysian culture or in any similar cultures on the representation of women academicians as leaders for generalization that can conform to the literatures mentioned.

Acknowledgment
This paper was funded by an internal grant from the Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Selangor (600-IRMI 5/3/DDF (F.P.P.) (031/2019). The research was also conducted with ethical approval from Universiti Teknologi MARA Research Ethics Committee (R.E.C./03/2021 (MR/127).

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