



THE “IDEAL” MANAGER PROFILE: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The Management role has undergone several changes over time, with different requirements for those wishing to occupy this position. The evolution of research in the field, changes in the curricula of management courses, and the demands posed by new scenarios and organizational structures, among other factors, call for a new definition of the roles and functions of the manager. In addition to these changes, societal transformations regarding gender equality opportunities have contributed to the feminization of the role, thus implying a reflection on the impact of these changing roles on the manager's profile. This study is based on a case study that aims to respond to this need by proposing to identify the profiles of managers over time in Portuguese society. Additionally, it aims to study the role of gender as a moderating/mediating variable, using a sample consisting of management students from a public university. For this purpose, a self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data at three different times (pre-2008; 2013-14; 2023), containing a list of personal and professional attributes for the identification of the ideal manager profile. It is expected that the results will show different profiles over time, account for the influence of the above mentioned societal changes on the profiles of the ideal manager, as well as identifying the effect of gender on the definition of these profiles.

Keywords: manager profiles, manager role, higher education, gender, longitudinal methodology

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1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The role of manager has undergone significant changes over time, evolving from a mechanical, task-centered, and bureaucratic perspective (Fayol, 1916/2013; Morgan, 2006) to more organic, culture-centered, and strategically oriented perspectives (Mintzberg, 1973; Morgan, 2006; Wickert et al., 2021). These transformations in the content and role of management have had implications for how management is practiced within organizations (Abdelgaffar, 2021; Marathe et al., 2020), shaping the expectations for those aspiring to become managers and build careers in this field. Economic, social, and technological challenges have prompted internal transformations within organizational structures and cultures (Abdelgaffar, 2021; Hassard & Morris, 2022), challenging traditional management profiles (Marathe et al., 2020). A central element in this transformation has been the role of management schools, through theoretical production, research, and the development of curricula aimed at preparing future managers (Marathe et al., 2020; Mousa et al., 2022). It is within this dynamic social and organizational context that this study seeks to identify the ideal manager profile and trace its evolution over time based on the perceptions of undergraduate management students. In Portuguese universities, these transformations materialized with the implementation of the Bologna Process at the end of the first decade of the 21st century (David & Abreu, 2007; Reichert & Tauch, 2004). Recently, management programs have undergone several changes, placing greater emphasis on ethics, social responsibility and sustainability, diversity and inclusion policies, and artificial intelligence (e.g. Abdelgaffar, 2021; Hassard & Morris, 2022; Marathe et al., 2020) to align with international guidelines related to curricular accreditations, United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (Macht et al., 2020) and Principles for Responsible Management Education (Henderson et al., 2019). Therefore, it is of great relevance to understand how these changes have affected the profile of the manager.

In addition to these transformations within universities, there has been a progressive feminization of management programs (Chaleta et al., 2020). In this context, it is also important to explore how gender may contribute to explaining potential differences in the perception of the ideal manager profile.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research originated from a previous project (Fernandes & Cabral-Cardoso, 2003) that utilized a sample of students from the undergraduate Management course at a Portuguese university. The initial study aimed to explore gender stereotyping of managers using a quantitative methodology. A questionnaire was administered to the target population, asking respondents to describe five stimuli based on a set of personal attributes and professional competences: "someone who engages in management activities" (a gender-neutral stimulus), "woman," "man," "female manager," and "male manager."

As part of the ongoing project, additional data was collected and grouped into three distinct time periods to develop a cross-sectional study focused on gender and managerial profiles (Table 1). The first period, covering 2002-2008, corresponds to the pre-Bologna management curriculum, which was characterized by a more instrumental and technical approach, with little systematic focus on ethical, sustainability, and inclusion issues. This period was longer than the others because bachelor's degrees were five years in duration, and data was collected from students entering their first year of management studies. These years were grouped into a single period because they occurred before the Bologna Process, during which the curriculum remained stable.

The second time encompasses data collected between 2013-2014, a phase when the changes brought about by the Bologna Process had already been fully integrated into the educational system. During this period, there was a growing awareness of a management approach more engaged with social and ethical issues, along with a strategic perspective.

The most recent period corresponds to the 2023-24 academic year, during which, as a result of various accreditation processes, management curricula began to emphasize not only social concerns but also sustainability, particularly environmental sustainability. In addition to these considerations, management programs increasingly focused on entrepreneurship, introducing courses that aimed to integrate new management approaches with innovation, initiative, and creativity.

Building on this previous project, the current study was developed with the following objectives: to identify the "ideal" manager profile, to explore how this profile has changed over time, and to examine the role of gender in defining the "ideal" manager profile. The study focused on participants who were asked to characterize the gender-neutral stimulus, "someone who engages in management activities"—essentially, the ideal manager.

In the first two time periods, the questionnaire was administered in paper format during classroom sessions. For the most recent period, the questionnaire was distributed online using Google Forms to management students at the School of Economics and Management, University of Minho. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: sociodemographic characterization of the participants, characterization of the manager profile based on personal attributes and professional competencies, and identification of students' expectations regarding their future careers as managers. For this article, only the data collected from sections 1 and 2 were analyzed.

Table 1. Time Periods and Sample Characterization

TIME PERIODS			SEX		AGE			NATIONALITY		YEAR	
2000-08	2013-14	2023-24	F	M	MIN	MAX	AVER	PT	OTHER	3	4-5
94	94	51	146	93	17	42	21,3	228	11	165	74
39,3%	39,3%	21,3%	61,1%	38,9%				95,4%	4,6%	69%	31%

3. RESULTS

To identify the ideal manager profile, we began by conducting a principal components analysis, specifying the extraction of three factors based on prior research (Fernandes & Cabral-Cardoso, 2003), as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Principal Components Analysis

	FACTORS	ALPHA	ITEMS	AVER	LABEL	SAMPLE ITEMS
Factor Analysis KMO 0,862 Loadings >= 0,455	F1 High-Performance Profile	0,947	31	4,29	High-Performance Profile	Dynamic; Responsible; Efficient; Able to plan; Able to adapt; Competent; Determined; Innovative; Organized; Able to decide; Lider; Intelligent; Assertive; Competitive; Rational
	F2 Diminished Femininity	0,855	11	2,53	Diminished Femininity Profile	Romantic; Maternal; Feminist; Sensitive; Emotional; Domestic; Fragile; Victim
	F3 Authoritarian Masculinity	0,781	09	2,79	Authoritarian Masculinity Profile	Authoritarian; Rigid; Insensitive; Aggressive; Chauvinist

Based on the output of the factor analysis, the following dimensions emerged. The first factor suggests a manager profile centered primarily on instrumental traits and skills related to three normative dimensions of the ideal manager: efficiency, leadership, and entrepreneurialism. We have named this factor the High-Performance Profile (F1). The second factor reflects a classic stereotype of femininity, emphasizing nurturing roles, emotional sensitivity, domesticity, and a perception of fragility and victimhood, labeled Diminished Femininity (F2). These dimensions seem to align with conventional societal expectations of women, where traits such as being maternal, romantic, and domestic are highlighted. Finally, the third factor corresponds to adherence to traditional, often rigid norms, coupled with authoritarian attitudes that may exhibit insensitivity or aggression. It also implies a chauvinistic perspective that asserts male superiority and control. This last factor is associated with Authoritarian Masculinity (F3).

These three dimensions appear to contribute in contradictory and differentiated ways to the overall manager profile. The first dimension aligns positively with what can be considered an ideal manager, while the other two dimensions are negatively related to this profile (see Table 3).

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of the Three Factors

Descriptive Statistics									
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
FACTOR1	239	2,90	5,00	4,2906	,42473	-,596	,157	,431	,314
FACTOR2	239	1,00	4,00	2,5302	,60530	-,497	,157	-,095	,314
FACTOR3	239	1,11	4,33	2,7927	,61829	-,011	,157	-,423	,314
Valid N (listwise)	239								

To examine temporal variations in the perceived "ideal" manager profile, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare three distinct time periods (independent variable) against the composite scores representing each "ideal" manager profile (dependent variable). Results indicated significant differences in the definition of the "High Performance Profile" ($F = 10.25$, $p < .001$), suggesting its evolution over time (Table 4).

Table 4. ANOVA Summary Table for Managers' Profiles by Time Periods

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
FACTOR 1	Between Groups	3,432	2	1,716	10,250	<,001
	Within Groups	39,503	236	,167		
	Total	42,934	238			
FACTOR 2	Between Groups	,894	2	,447	1,222	,297
	Within Groups	86,307	236	,366		
	Total	87,201	238			
FACTOR 3	Between Groups	,083	2	,042	,108	,898
	Within Groups	90,901	236	,385		
	Total	90,984	238			

Post-hoc Bonferroni comparisons (Tables 5 and 6) revealed a significantly higher mean score for the 2000-2008 period ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 0.36$) compared to both the 2013-2014 period ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.40$) and the 2023 period ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.50$). However, no significant difference was found between the 2013-2014 and 2023 periods ($p = .06$).

ANOVA results did not indicate significant differences for the "Diminished Femininity Profile" and the "Authoritarian Masculinity Profile," suggesting that time did not influence the definition of these profiles.

Table 5. ANOVA Descriptives

		Descriptives							
		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
FACTOR 1	2000-2008	94	4,4187	,36021	,03715	4,3449	4,4924	3,45	4,97
	2013-2014	94	4,2653	,40074	,04133	4,1832	4,3473	3,13	5,00
	2023	51	4,1012	,50003	,07002	3,9606	4,2418	2,90	5,00
	Total	239	4,2906	,42473	,02747	4,2365	4,3447	2,90	5,00
FACTOR 2	2000-2008	94	2,5464	,55650	,05740	2,4324	2,6604	1,36	3,82
	2013-2014	94	2,4632	,64820	,06686	2,3305	2,5960	1,00	3,64
	2023	51	2,6239	,60713	,08501	2,4531	2,7946	1,00	4,00
	Total	239	2,5302	,60530	,03915	2,4531	2,6074	1,00	4,00
FACTOR 3	2000-2008	94	2,8085	,63702	,06570	2,6780	2,9390	1,44	4,33
	2013-2014	94	2,7695	,58233	,06006	2,6502	2,8888	1,44	4,00
	2023	51	2,8061	,65766	,09209	2,6211	2,9911	1,11	4,00
	Total	239	2,7927	,61829	,03999	2,7139	2,8714	1,11	4,33

Table 6. Post-Hoc Comparisons for Managers' Profiles by Time Periods Using Bonferroni

		Multiple Comparisons							
		(I) PERIOD	(J) PERIOD	Mean	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval		
				Difference (I-J)			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
FACTOR 1	Tukey HSD	2000-2008	2013-2014	,15340*	,05968	,029	,0126	,2942	
			2023	,31747*	,07115	<,001	,1496	,4853	
		2013-2014	2000-2008	-,15340*	,05968	,029	-,2942	-,0126	
			2023	,16407	,07115	,057	-,0038	,3319	
		2023	2000-2008	-,31747*	,07115	<,001	-,4853	-,1496	
			2013-2014	-,16407	,07115	,057	-,3319	,0038	
	Bonferroni	2000-2008	2013-2014	,15340*	,05968	,032	,0095	,2973	
			2023	,31747*	,07115	<,001	,1459	,4890	
		2013-2014	2000-2008	-,15340*	,05968	,032	-,2973	-,0095	
			2023	,16407	,07115	,066	-,0075	,3356	
		2023	2000-2008	-,31747*	,07115	<,001	-,4890	-,1459	
			2013-2014	-,16407	,07115	,066	-,3356	,0075	
	FACTOR 2	Tukey HSD	2000-2008	2013-2014	,08317	,08821	,614	-,1249	,2912
				2023	-,07746	,10517	,742	-,3255	,1706
			2013-2014	2000-2008	-,08317	,08821	,614	-,2912	,1249
				2023	-,16064	,10517	,280	-,4087	,0874
2023			2000-2008	,07746	,10517	,742	-,1706	,3255	
			2013-2014	,16064	,10517	,280	-,0874	,4087	
Bonferroni		2000-2008	2013-2014	,08317	,08821	1,000	-,1295	,2959	
			2023	-,07746	,10517	1,000	-,3311	,1761	
		2013-2014	2000-2008	-,08317	,08821	1,000	-,2959	,1295	
			2023	-,16064	,10517	,384	-,4142	,0930	
		2023	2000-2008	,07746	,10517	1,000	-,1761	,3311	
			2013-2014	,16064	,10517	,384	-,0930	,4142	
FACTOR 3		Tukey HSD	2000-2008	2013-2014	,03901	,09053	,903	-,1745	,2525
				2023	,00241	,10794	1,000	-,2522	,2570
			2013-2014	2000-2008	-,03901	,09053	,903	-,2525	,1745
				2023	-,03660	,10794	,939	-,2912	,2180
	2023		2000-2008	-,00241	,10794	1,000	-,2570	,2522	
			2013-2014	,03660	,10794	,939	-,2180	,2912	
	Bonferroni	2000-2008	2013-2014	,03901	,09053	1,000	-,1793	,2573	
			2023	,00241	,10794	1,000	-,2578	,2627	
		2013-2014	2000-2008	-,03901	,09053	1,000	-,2573	,1793	
			2023	-,03660	,10794	1,000	-,2968	,2237	
		2023	2000-2008	-,00241	,10794	1,000	-,2627	,2578	
			2013-2014	,03660	,10794	1,000	-,2237	,2968	

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

To assess the influence of gender on the perceived "ideal" manager profile, linear regression analyses were conducted. Results indicated no significant relationship between gender and

profile scores, suggesting that gender does not differentially impact the definition of the profiles. Subsequent exploratory analyses comparing profiles by gender also yielded no significant differences.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our findings reveal three distinct profiles contributing to a differentiated and contradictory conceptualization of the ideal manager. The High-Performance Profile, primarily centered on instrumental traits and skills aligned with efficiency, leadership, and entrepreneurialism (Barba-Sanchez et al., 2022), emerges as the dominant idealization. This profile merges elements of bureaucratic and strategic management (Fayol, 1916/2013; Mintzberg, 1973; Marathe et al., 2020) and aligns with contemporary emphasis on entrepreneurship (Marethi et al., 2020; Schultz, 2022). Its prevalence extends beyond academia, as evidenced by its alignment with societal representations (Observador, 2021).

In contrast, the gendered profiles of Diminished Femininity and Authoritarian Masculinity occupy negative and exclusionary positions. These profiles reflect traditional gender stereotypes (Ferry, 2024) but are explicitly rejected by management students in favor of a modern, neoliberal, and gender-neutral ideal (Niemi & Weaver-Hightower, 2021). However, it is also important to argue that the neoliberal nature of the High-Performance Profile can be understood as gendered, as it promotes a normative form of masculinity centered on competition, success, and an individualistic perspective (Mavin & Yusupova, 2022). While students reject conventional gender constructions like Diminished Femininity and Authoritarian Masculinity, which carry negative connotations, the neoliberal profile introduces a new form of masculinity that remains persistent and largely unquestioned in terms of gender relations in the workplace.

Temporal analysis indicates that while the negative association of gendered profiles remains consistent, the High-Performance Profile has evolved. The profile was more strongly endorsed in the 2000-2008 period compared to subsequent periods (2013-2014 and 2023). Although Western societies today are characterized by neoliberal discourses around work and management (Bal & Dóci, 2018; Mudge, 2008) — explaining the prominence of such profile in our sample — it is notable that students from the earliest academic years tend to place less emphasis on this profile. This shift may reflect generational values (Casanova et al., 2021), with younger generations increasingly questioning neoliberal work regimes. It could also be a result of curriculum diversification and the growing interdisciplinary nature of management education (Marathe et al., 2020), which fosters a more nuanced and less rigid understanding of managerial roles. In fact, Portuguese bachelor's programs in management have recently undergone significant changes, incorporating ethical concerns and issues of diversity and inclusion (Gomes & Eugénio, 2021), which challenge the neoliberal nature of the High-Performance Profile. Therefore, we argue that the curriculum of management programs should continue this

trend, promoting a diverse and inclusive view of management regarding what it means to be a manager and who should occupy leadership positions.

Finally, the absence of gender differences in the construction of the ideal manager profile suggests a shared internalization of the modern, neoliberal management ideal by both male and female students (Niemi & Weaver-Hightower, 2021). This challenges traditional gender expectations in management. Paradoxically, while Western societies have made strides toward gender equality through education, institutional, and governmental initiatives — promoted in part by the European Union — they also emphasize a neoliberal regime that obscures gender inequalities, focusing on individual responsibility for success without considering broader social and cultural gender structures (Mavin & Yusupova, 2022). This investment may have influenced students' perceptions of gender relations. As noted earlier, the persistence of the neoliberal managerial profile among students shows that they tend to overlook its gendered nature. Both male and female students often adopt this profile as the legitimate standard for success.

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