



# Symbolic Interaction in Women's Leadership: Articulation of Meaning and Influence

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**Abstract.** This article discusses the role of symbolic interaction in the context of women's leadership. Symbolic interaction refers to the process of attribution and giving meaning to symbols and signs that represent a person's role and identity. In the context of women's leadership, symbolic interactions play an important role in articulating meanings related to women as leaders and the impact on their perception and influence in professional environments. And, through symbolic interactions, women leaders can manage and change these perceptions by articulating meaning through symbols, body language, and verbal communication. The articulation of this meaning can shift the existing paradigm and help strengthen the image of strong and effective female leadership.

**Keywords:** leadership, symbol, women

## 1 Introduction

Women's leadership has developed rapidly in recent decades, and the concept of symbolic interaction provides an interesting insight into how meanings and symbols can shape the perception and influence of women's leadership. This article will discuss how symbolic interactions operate in the context of women's leadership, and how these symbols can shape perceptions and dynamics within organizations. In Dadi Ahmadi's journal [1] it is stated that the initial development of symbolic interaction came from two schools of thought, the first being Chicago which was pioneered by [2] Blumer argued that human studies could not be conducted in the same way as research on inanimate objects. He takes a scientific approach through life histories, autobiographies, case studies, diaries, letters and nondirective interviews which emphasize the researcher's observations. The Chicago School sees humans as creative, innovative and in unpredictable situations. Meanwhile, the Iowa school of thought was pioneered by Manford Kuhn with his work on the concept of self-testing through 20 questions (Twenty Statement Self-Attitude Test), two of which are about ordering variables and locus variables. The ordering variable states the relatively prominent interests held by individuals, and the locus variable states the general tendency of individuals to identify consensual groups, where the assessment is carried out using two categories, namely consensual and subconsensual. In short, symbolic interaction emphasizes that human actions and social meaning are understood through symbolic interaction, where individuals give meaning to objects, situations, or people. In female leadership, symbols such as clothing style, body language, and daily actions can shape

perceptions and interpretations from the leader to team members or the environment around them.

## **2 Discussion**

### **2.1 Symbolism in Appearance and Body Language**

Symbolism in appearance and body language refers to the use of symbols and body language to convey messages, values, identity, and emotions indirectly. It is a powerful form of non-verbal communication and can often have a profound impact on perception and social interactions. According to [3], in nonverbal communication there are seven characteristics that differentiate nonverbal communication from verbal communication, one of which is artifactual, namely communication carried out in the form of artifacts (objects or goods) that a person uses, such as how to dress, make-up, vehicles used, houses and tools used. The following are examples of how symbolism is used in appearance and body language:

1. The clothing and accessories a person chooses may reflect certain cultural values, status, affiliations, or identities. For example, a female leader's choice of formal and professional attire can communicate authority and competence.
2. Colors can have strong emotional and cultural connotations. For example, the color red may be interpreted as a symbol of strength and passion, while the color blue may be associated with stability and trust.
3. Body movements, including stance, posture, and facial expressions, can convey messages about emotions, beliefs, or goals. For example, a smile can convey openness and positivity, while folded arms can indicate defensiveness.
4. Eye contact is a powerful way to send a message of trust, sincerity, and interest. Looking someone in the eye when speaking can increase the connection and strengthen the message conveyed.
5. Hand movements and gestures are often used to emphasize or illustrate spoken words. For example, raising the index finger as a sign of emphasis on a certain subject.
6. Body posture can reflect an open or closed stance. Standing straight and open may indicate confidence, while a closed body position may signal discomfort or a lack of confidence.
7. The way a person styles their hair or appears physically can also have meaning. For example, a neat and tidy hairstyle might be interpreted as a symbol of professionalism.

Symbolism in appearance and body language can vary based on culture, context, and personal interpretation. A female leader's clothing choices and physical appearance can be a powerful symbol. They can articulate a professional image, authority, or even recognition of gender equality. Meanwhile, gestures or body language, facial expressions and other physical movements play a role in communicating a sense of self-confidence, empathy and strong leadership.

### **2.2 Perception and Influence in Women's Leadership**

Female leadership that uses symbolism wisely can create a strong image that inspires and motivates, because appearance and body language play a significant role in shaping the perception and influence of a female leader. The way a female leader looks and uses her body language can influence how she is seen by others, how she is received in her leadership role, and how she influences her followers. The following are some important aspects related to the perception and influence of appearance and body language in women's leadership:

1. **Confidence and Authority:** A neat, confident and professional appearance can give the impression that a female leader has authority and competence in her role. Upright body language, eye contact, and a genuine smile can reinforce this message. This perception can have a stronger influence on the people around them.
2. **Nonverbal Communication:** Body language such as hand movements, facial expressions, and body posture can convey a leader's emotions, beliefs, and views. A female leader who is able to control and convey her body language clearly can strengthen her verbal message and help build connections.
3. **Connectedness and Empathy:** Body language that reflects empathy, connectedness, and concern for others can help female leaders create emotional bonds. Eye contact, smiling, and open body movements can strengthen positive relationships and build support.
4. **Stereotype Breaking:** Appearance and body language that is unconventional or goes against traditional gender stereotypes can help change perceptions about women in leadership roles. For example, a female leader who uses strong and assertive body language can help break the perception that women do not have effective leadership.
5. **Motivation and Inspiration:** A strong appearance and energetic body language can provide motivation and inspiration to followers. Dynamic body movements and enthusiastic facial expressions can help radiate positive energy and enthusiasm in the work environment.
6. **Consistency and Integrity:** Matching a woman leader's appearance and body language with her words and actions can help build an image of consistency and integrity. This is important for building trust from followers.
7. **Conflict and Stress Management:** Calm and controlled body language in conflict or stressful situations can provide calm to followers and demonstrate effective leadership.

The ability to read a situation and adjust appearance and body language according to the context is also an important skill in influencing and leading successfully.

### **2.3 Case Study: The Role of Female Leaders in Symbolic Interaction**

Apart from Susi Pudjiastuti, former Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries of the Republic of Indonesia with her unique and understated style, or Najwa Shihab, a journalist and presenter with the iconic "Mata Najwa" talk show program. Najwa is known as a journalist who is critical and analytical in conducting interviews, her work has made her one of the most respected female figures in Indonesia. Not only in these two female figures, women's leadership in Indonesia has developed rapidly and the concept of symbolic interaction provides an interesting view of how meanings and symbols can shape the perception and influence of women's leadership. Minister of Foreign Affairs, Retno Marsudi recently became a sensation with her appearance which often attracted attention. He became the spotlight when he wore shoes with different colors. A news portal specifically for women also reviewed it with the title "4 Chic Lady Boss Outfits for Minister of Foreign Affairs Retno Marsudi". Retno is said to be the most fashionable official, and interestingly the clothes and accessories she wears are local Indonesian products. Both Susi, Najwa and Retno are a handful of Indonesian female leaders who use symbolism to pave the way for other women to take on leadership roles. Through the use of symbolism in speaking at conferences, media appearances, and involvement in social initiatives, they have succeeded in inspiring a new generation of women to become leaders. and interestingly the clothes and accessories he wears are local Indonesian products. Both Susi, Najwa and Retno are a handful of Indonesian female leaders who use symbolism to pave the way for other women to take on

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#### **2.4 Mentors and Role Models: Encouraging Positive Change through Symbolic Interaction**

Successful female leaders who can become mentors and role models can help articulate the positive symbolism of female leadership to the younger generation. Through powerful symbolic interactions, women leaders are able to help change perceptions, encourage ambition, and motivate positive change in individuals or groups. Their ability to be a consistent symbol of inspiration and role model can have a profound, long-term impact on an individual's development and growth. Forbes, a business and economics magazine located in the United States is one of the leading business publications in the world. This magazine focuses on topics related to business, economics, investment, technology and leadership. Apart from making the list of the richest people in the world, Forbes also lists individuals under the age of 30 who have achieved extraordinary achievements in various fields in Asia. Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia includes the names of individuals who have the potential to shape and change the world and bring positive change in the regional and global scope. The aim is to recognize young leaders who have changed industries, made a positive impact on society and will hopefully continue to contribute to changing the world in their respective fields. These three Indonesian women are included in the Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia list, they are: Amanda Susanto Cole, CEO and Founder of Sayurbox, an online platform for shopping for vegetables, meat and fruit. This woman, who graduated from the University of Manchester, initially worked for a private company in Jakarta before quitting and building her own business. Although in 2017 Sayurbox almost closed because it did not get funding from investors. However, with his persistence and hard work, he managed to get funding from Patamar Capital, worth 200,000 – 300,000 dollars in 2018. And, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Sayurbox achieved momentum with a 5-fold increase in demand via its platform. In 2021, Sayurbox succeeded in obtaining funding worth 5 million dollars from PT Astra Digital International; Christianti Indiana, founder of Sociolla or Social Bella, an e-commerce platform that sells beauty products. The business is present in physical retail and has expanded to Vietnam. Women who graduated from the Australian Billy Blue College of Design succeeded in getting funding from Venture Capital, such as EV Growth and Temasek worth 52 million US dollars in 2018 to 2019; Eileen Kamtawijoyo is the founder of Populix, a consumer survey platform that connects researchers with respondents from various industries throughout Indonesia. This woman who graduated from Cambridge University initially worked at Djarum Group and then founded Populix in 2018. Populix is one of 10 startups led by women and was successfully selected for the second wave of Xcelerate Unicorn Indonesia. Populix succeeded in getting funding from Intudo Ventures amounting to 2.3 million dollars. With Populix technology, SME businesses can conduct market research more efficiently and affordably. This woman who graduated from Cambridge University initially worked at Djarum Group and then founded Populix in 2018. Populix is one of 10 startups led by women and was successfully selected for the second wave of Xcelerate Unicorn Indonesia. Populix succeeded in getting funding from Intudo Ventures amounting to 2.3 million dollars. With Populix technology, SME

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### 3 Conclusion

Symbolic interaction in women's leadership is how to understand symbolism as a tool for forming perceptions so that leadership goals and positive changes in the work environment and society as a whole can be realized. Through actions and decisions, women leaders can illustrate how to overcome challenges, adapt, and take responsibility with a positive attitude. It can provide inspiration and create identification, when someone sees someone they admire overcome challenges and achieve success, it can be a strong encouragement for others to follow in a similar footsteps. It can even break stereotypes about women, namely when other people/the environment sees women succeeding in fields that may be considered unusual, this can break down boundaries that are considered abnormal or unreasonable. Symbolic interactions are able to communicate values and ethics, where female leaders become examples for others about how to live according to these values. Women leaders are agents of change in shaping perceptions, inspiring and guiding others around them towards positive change.

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