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Usability News is a free web newsletter that is produced by the Software Usability Research Laboratory (SURL) at Wichita State University. The SURL team specializes in software/website user interface design, usability testing, and research in human-computer interaction.

[Barbara S. Chaparro](#), Editor

Know Your Typefaces! Semantic Differential Presentation of 40 Onscreen Typefaces

[Dawn Shaikh*](#) - User Experience Researcher (Seattle/Kirkland UX Team)

Summary. This article presents results from a study investigating the personality of typefaces. Participants were asked to rate 40 typefaces (from serif, sans serif, display, and handwriting classes) using semantic differential scales. Responses are shown by typeface class and individual typeface using scaled scores. These results are helpful to practitioners when deciding which typeface to use for online text.

INTRODUCTION

While there has been quite a bit of research on the perception of printed type, there has not been a thorough investigation into the perception of onscreen type. This article presents the results from an investigation of the perceived personality of 40 onscreen typefaces (10 from serif, sans serif, display, and handwriting classes). The results presented here are from the responses of 379 participants who completed an online survey using semantic differentials. The semantic differential provides participants with a sample of nonsense text and a set of bipolar adjectives on a scale that has varying points of intensity. Each used a 7-point scale which allowed participants to judge both direction and intensity of their responses (Osgood & colleagues, 1957). Figure 1 shows a sample.

Humb exas frof moof? A seart shing o183 dureck de
poch. Fiss pla th marticather wishell owney lival.
Jo Lecry poss mar, adel wook daustion gre questraw
deny. Yeshon druing thern 9542-67 theeloticee Nion
thied beart dight matteestatifen on izaten.

Instructions:

After looking at the nonsense text above, click the circle that most accurately represents your judgment of the font's characteristics.

Passive	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Active
Warm	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Cool
Strong	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Weak
Bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Good
Loud	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Quiet

Happy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Sad
Delicate	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Rugged
Calm	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Exciting
Feminine	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Masculine
Hard	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Soft

The screenshot shows a web-based evaluation form for typefaces. It includes several semantic scales with radio button options:

- Old ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Young
- Cheap ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Expensive
- Beautiful ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Ugly
- Fast ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Slow
- Relaxed ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Stiff

Below these scales is a text area for a sample and a legibility question: "This typeface is legible." with response options: Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Disagree.

At the bottom right, it shows "3 of 20" and a "Next Font-->" button.

Figure 1. Examples of text sample, semantic scales, and legibility question.

The responses reduced down to three factors to describe the typefaces: Evaluative, Potency, and Activity.

- **Potency** reflects typefaces that are seen as having **strength, power, or force**.
- **Evaluative** reflects typefaces that are viewed as having **value, worth, and importance**.
- **Activity** reflects typefaces that are considered to be **full of energy, movement, and action**.

The factors were correlated; Potency and Activity were positively correlated, and Potency and Evaluative were negatively correlated. Table 1 shows the typefaces evaluated by class. Clicking on the typeface name, or class, displays the corresponding scale results. Figure 2 shows the results by typeface class. The scale results are helpful to practitioners as they decide which typeface to use for online content. It is important to present online text in a typeface that is consistent with the meaning of the text. For example, a designer would not want to present content that is "strong" in meaning in a Scripted typeface. Likewise, a Display typeface would not be a good choice for content that conveys "high value" or "beauty".

Table 1. Typefaces evaluated using semantic differential scales.

<u>Serif</u>	<u>Sans Serif</u>	<u>Display</u>	<u>Script/Handwriting</u>
<u>Calisto</u>	<u>Arial</u>	<u>Agency</u>	<u>Bradley Hand</u>
<u>Cambria</u>	<u>Berlin Sans</u>	<u>Bauhaus 93</u>	<u>Brush Script</u>
<u>Centaur</u>	<u>Calibri</u>	<u>Chiller</u>	<u>French Script</u>
<u>Courier New</u>	<u>Century Gothic</u>	<u>Broadway</u>	<u>Gigi</u>
<u>Georgia</u>	<u>Consolas</u>	<u>Curlz</u>	<u>Informal Roman</u>
<u>High Tower Text</u>	<u>Corbel</u>	<u>Impact</u>	<u>Kristen</u>
<u>Lucida Bright</u>	<u>Lucida Console</u>	<u>Juice</u>	<u>Lucida Handwriting</u>
<u>Perpetua</u>	<u>Incised 901 Lt BT</u>	<u>Papyrus</u>	<u>Viner Hand</u>
<u>Poor Richard</u>	<u>Trebuchet</u>	<u>Playbill</u>	<u>Monotype Corsiva</u>
<u>Times New Roman</u>	<u>Verdana</u>	<u>Tempus Sans</u>	<u>Vivaldi</u>

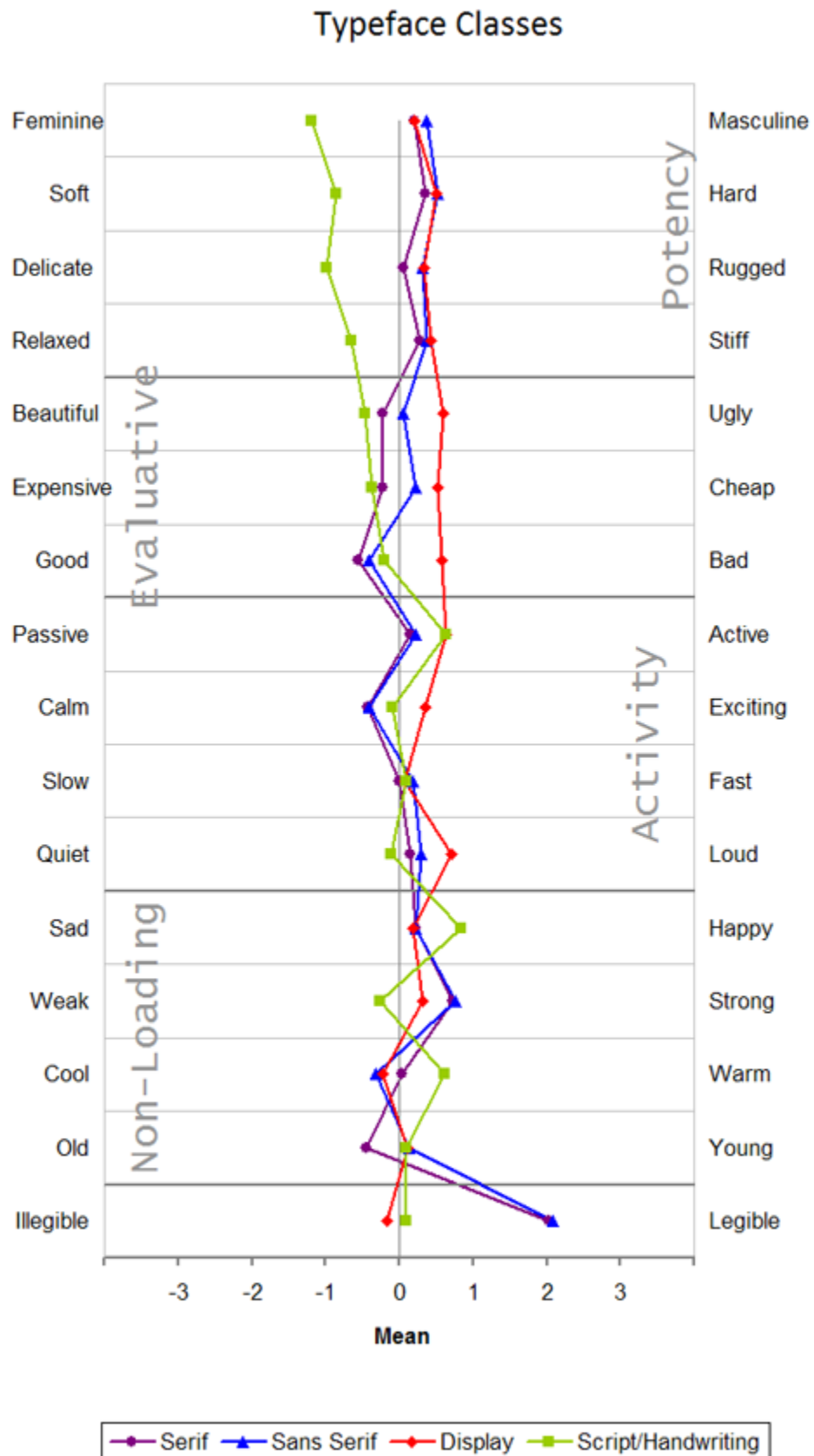
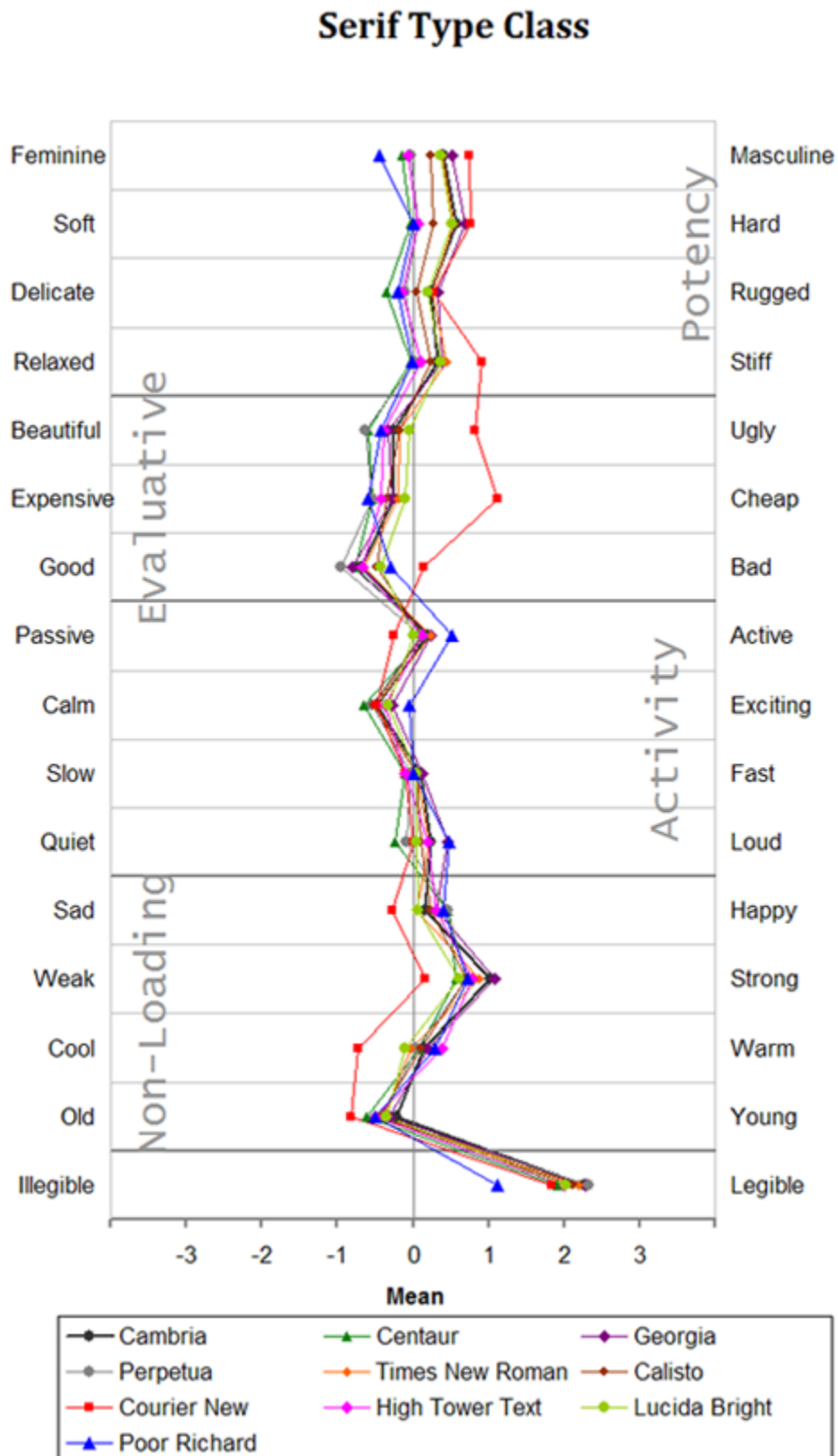
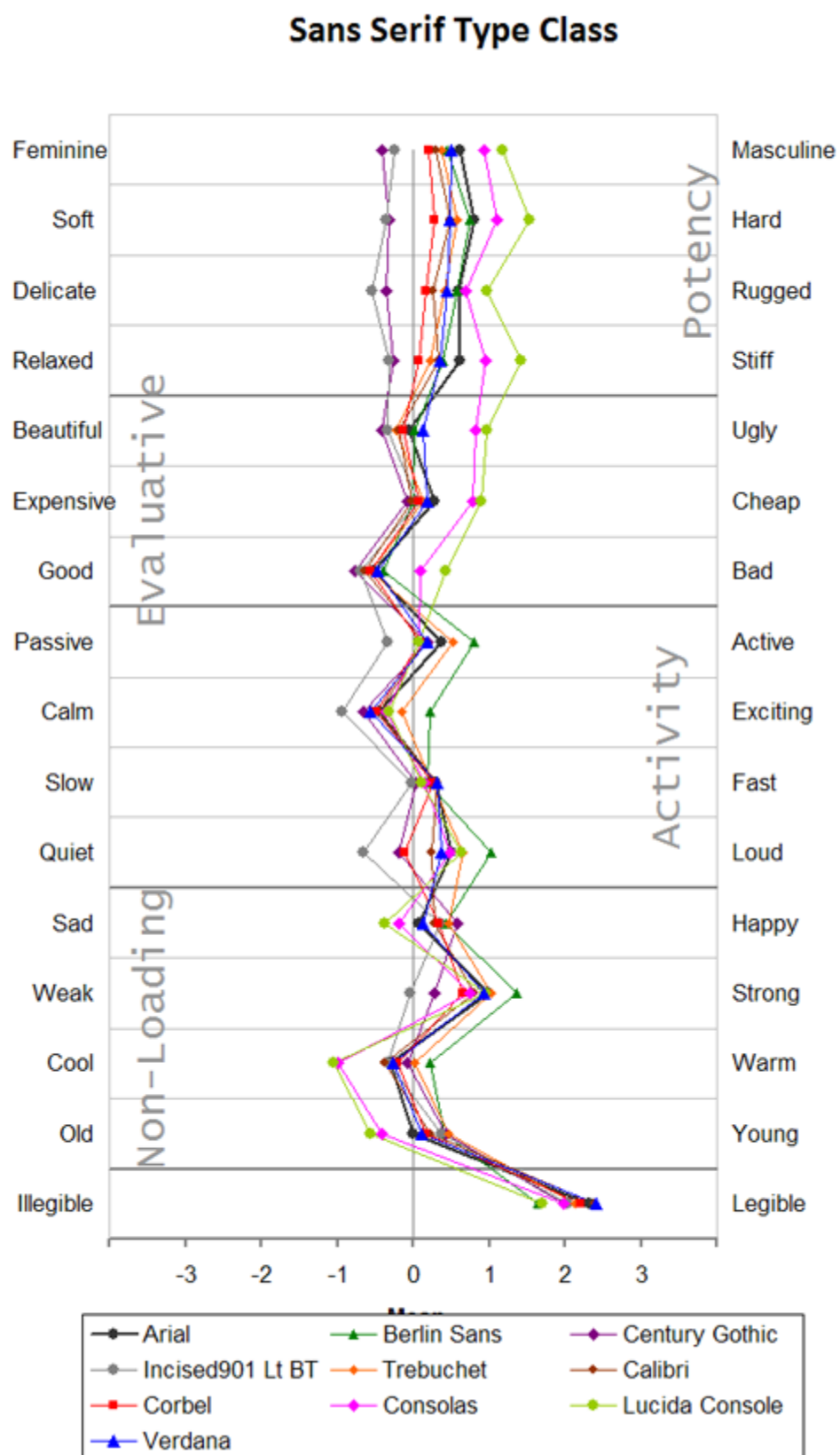


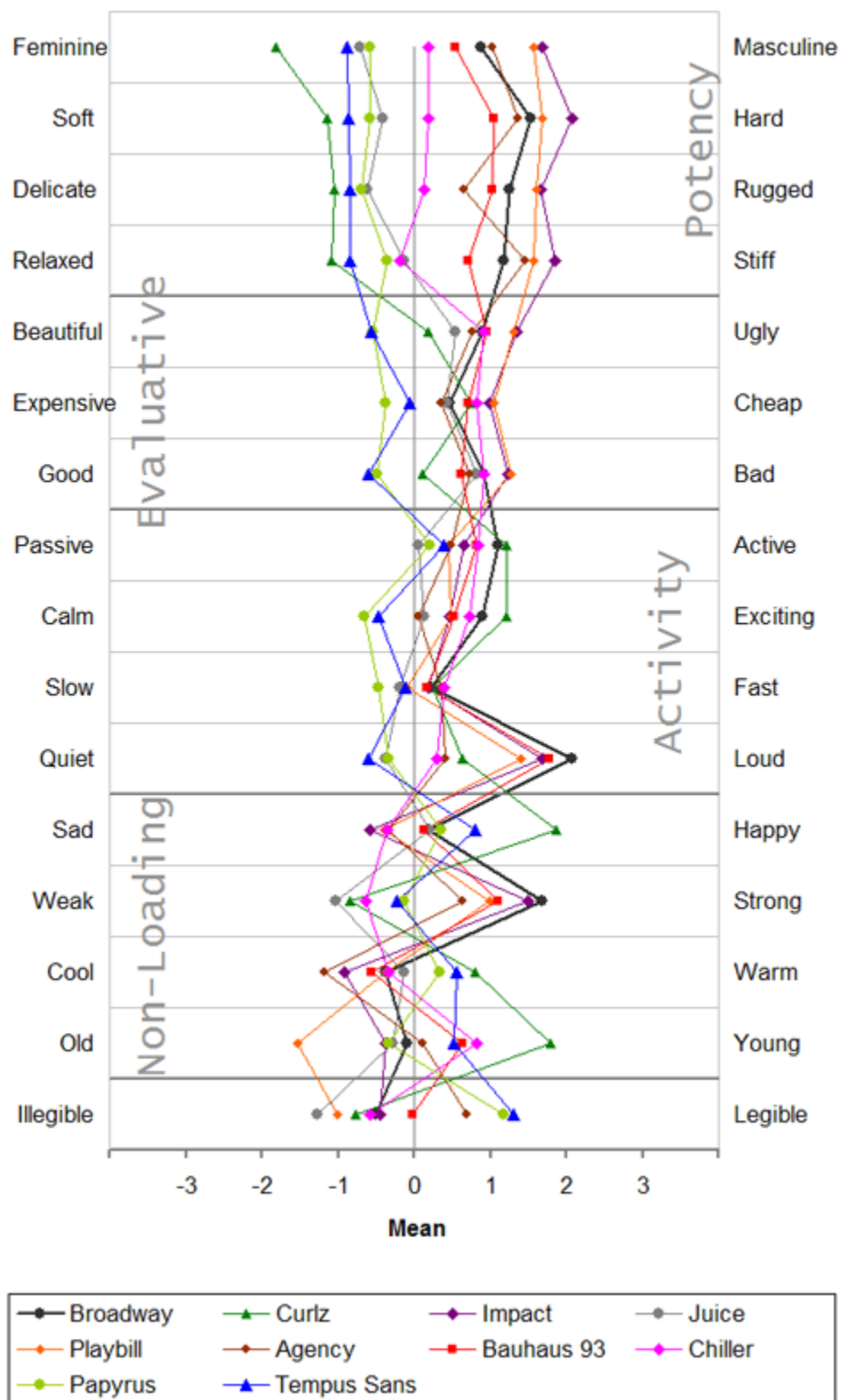
Figure 2. Results by typeface class.


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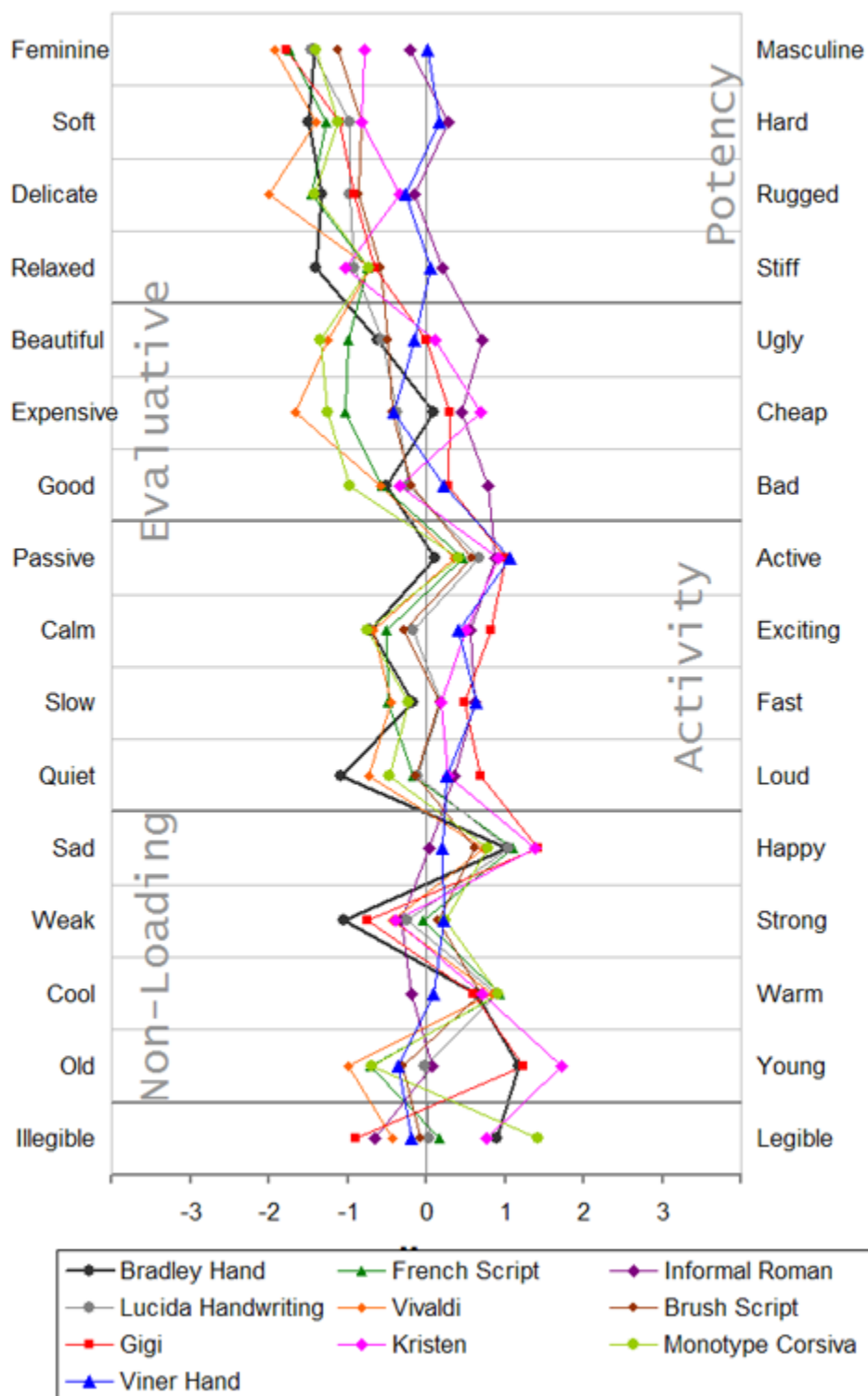
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Display Type Class



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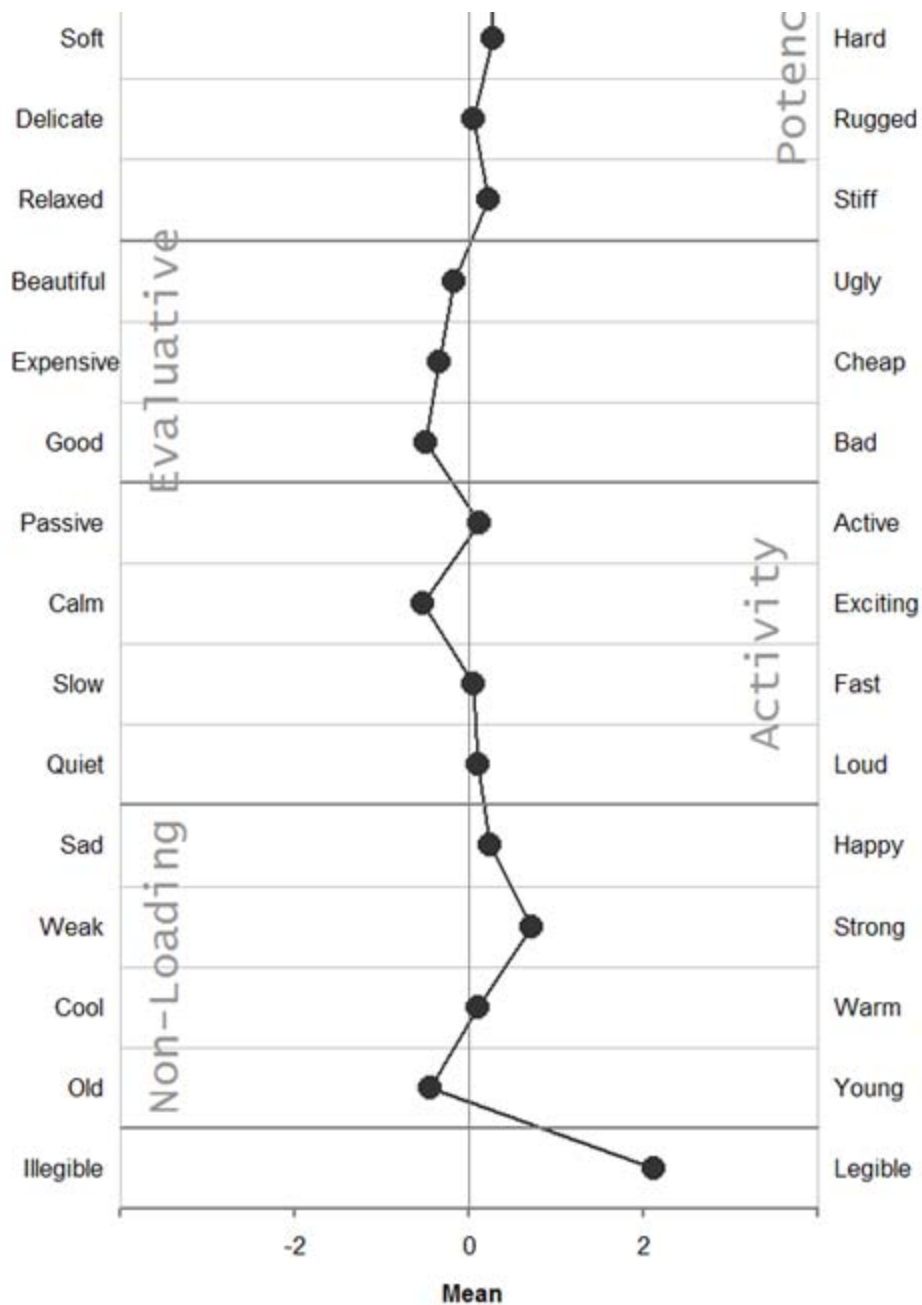
Script/Handwriting Type Class



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Calisto

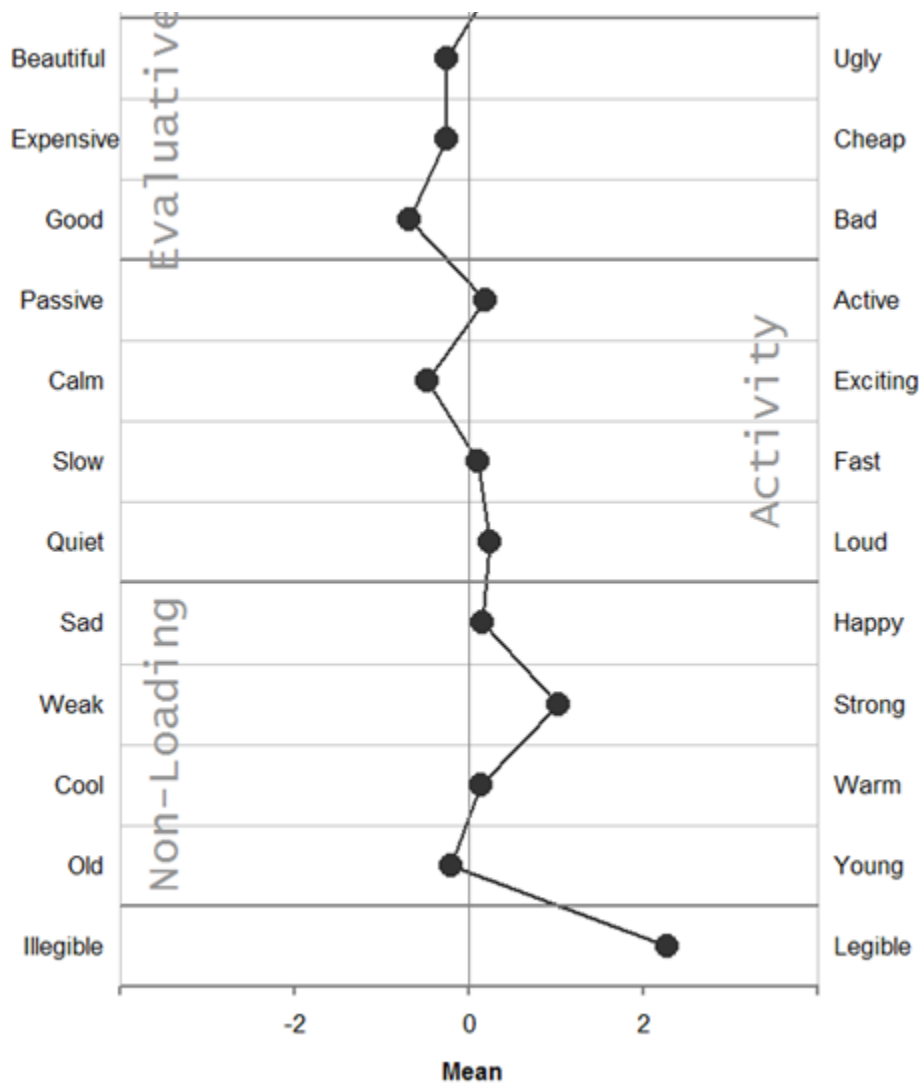




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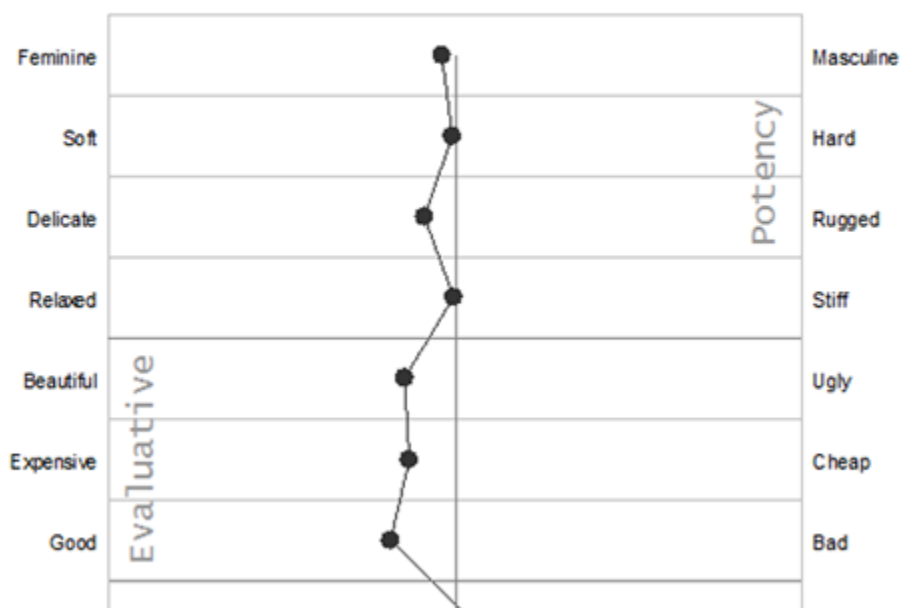
Cambria

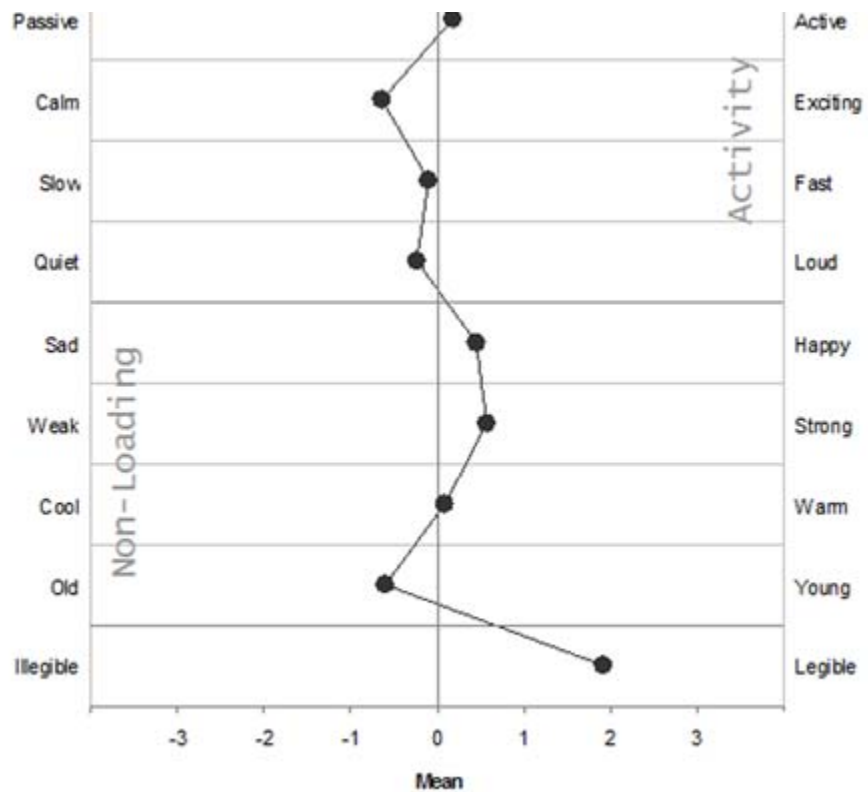




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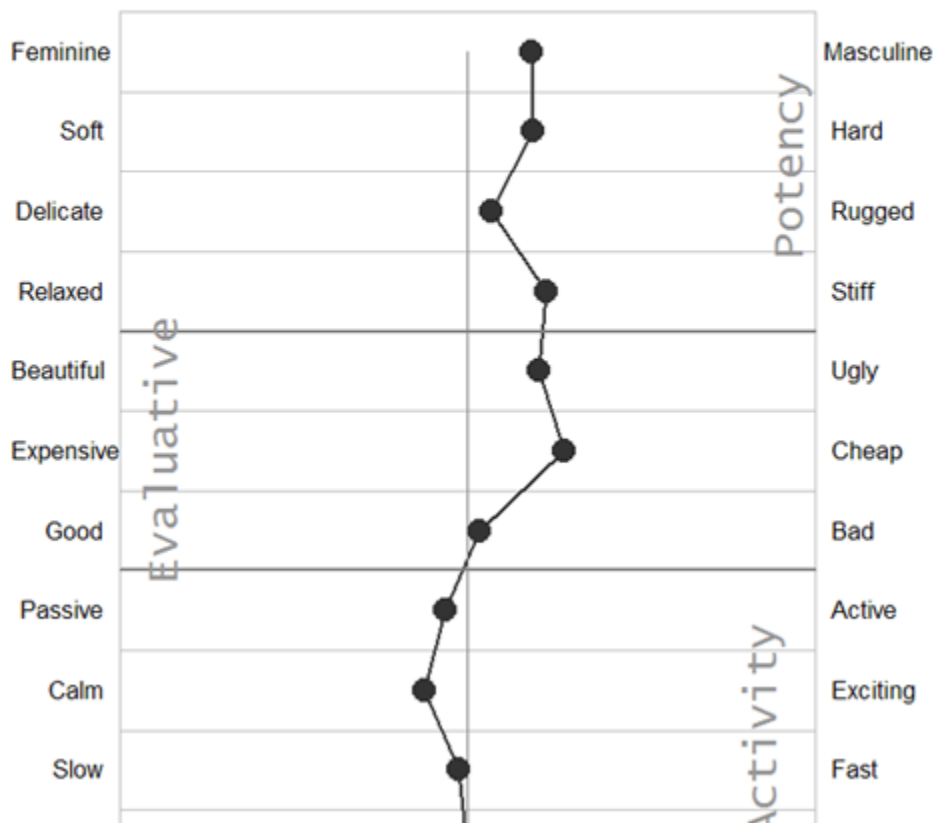
Centaur

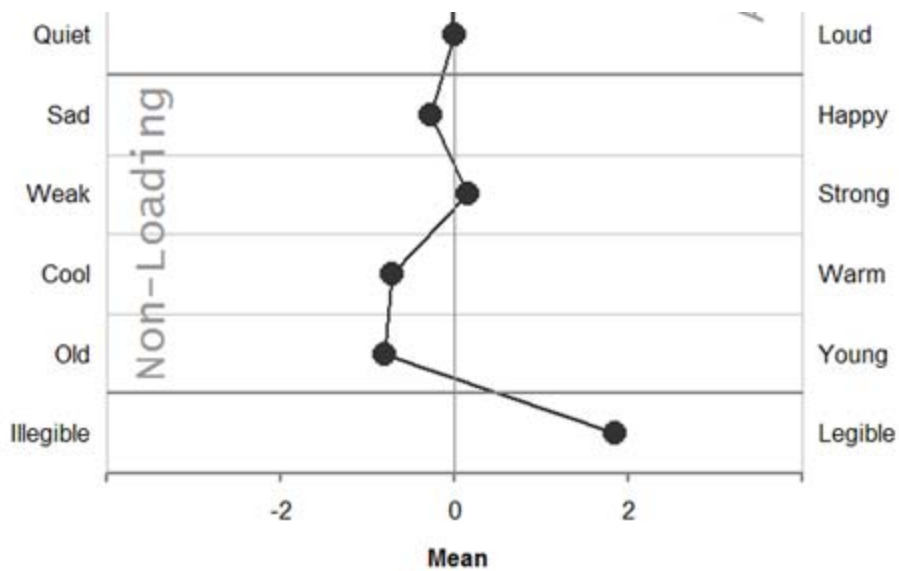




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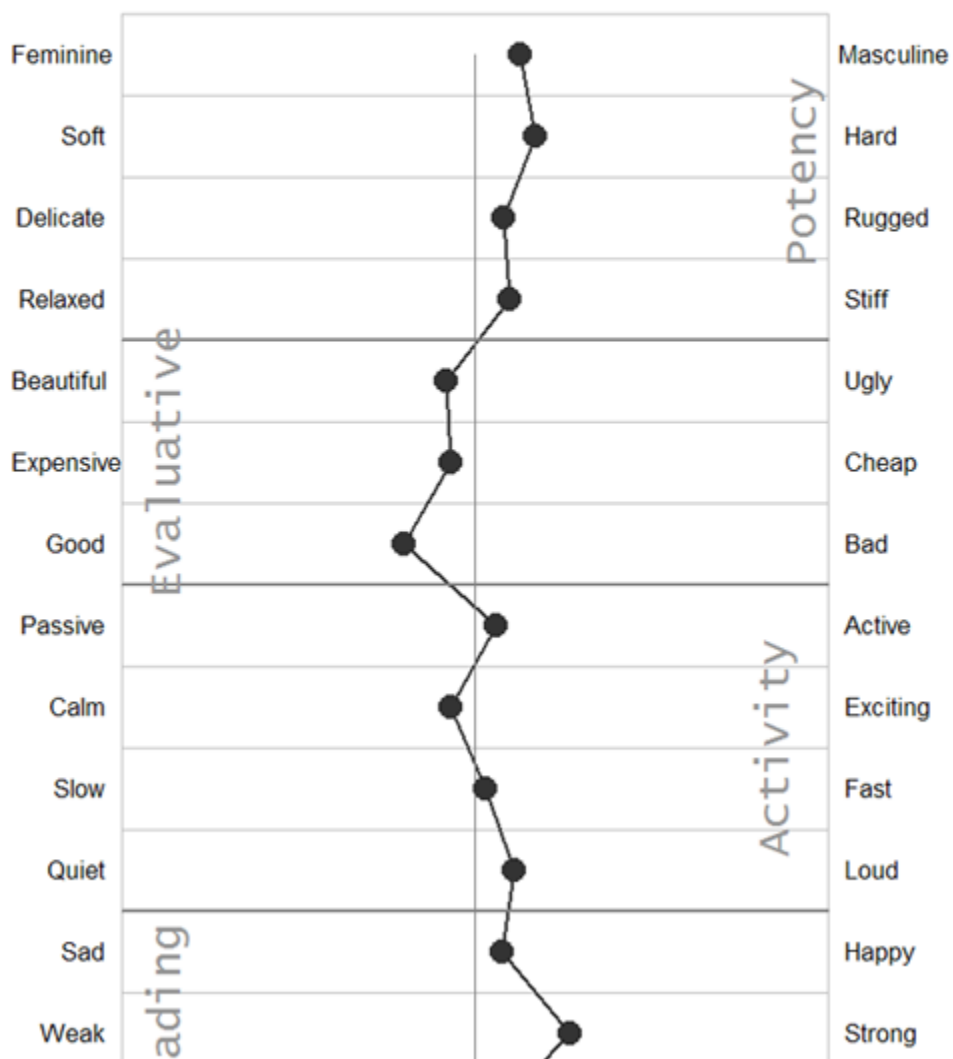
Courier New

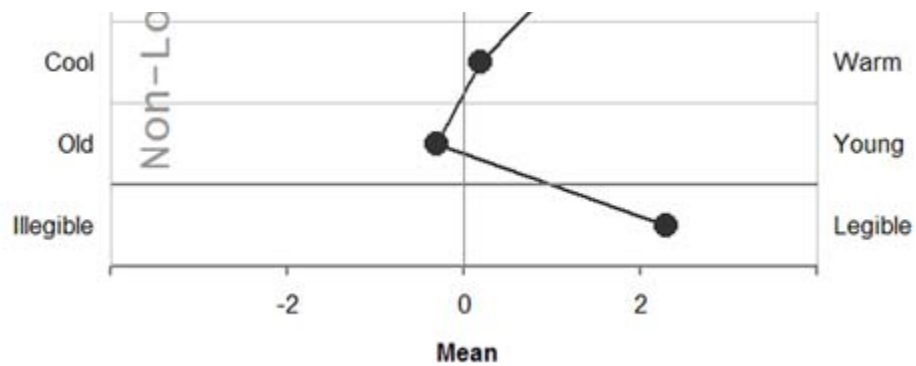




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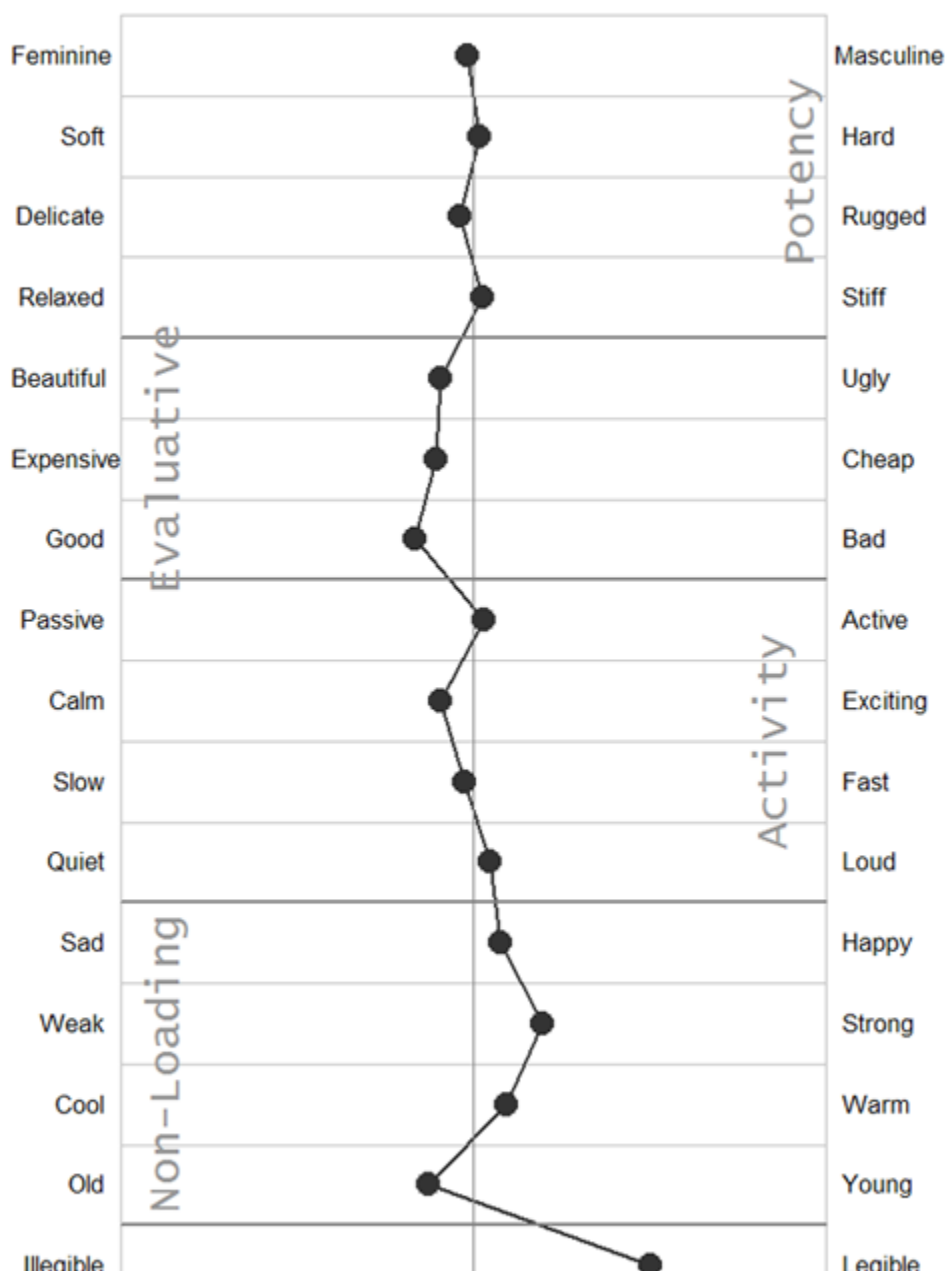
Georgia

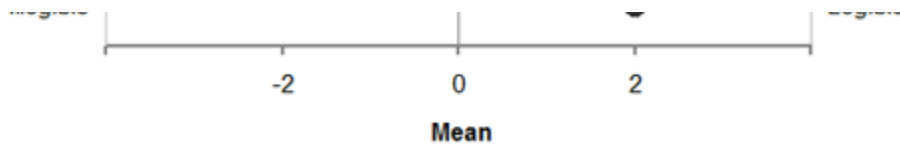




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High Tower Text

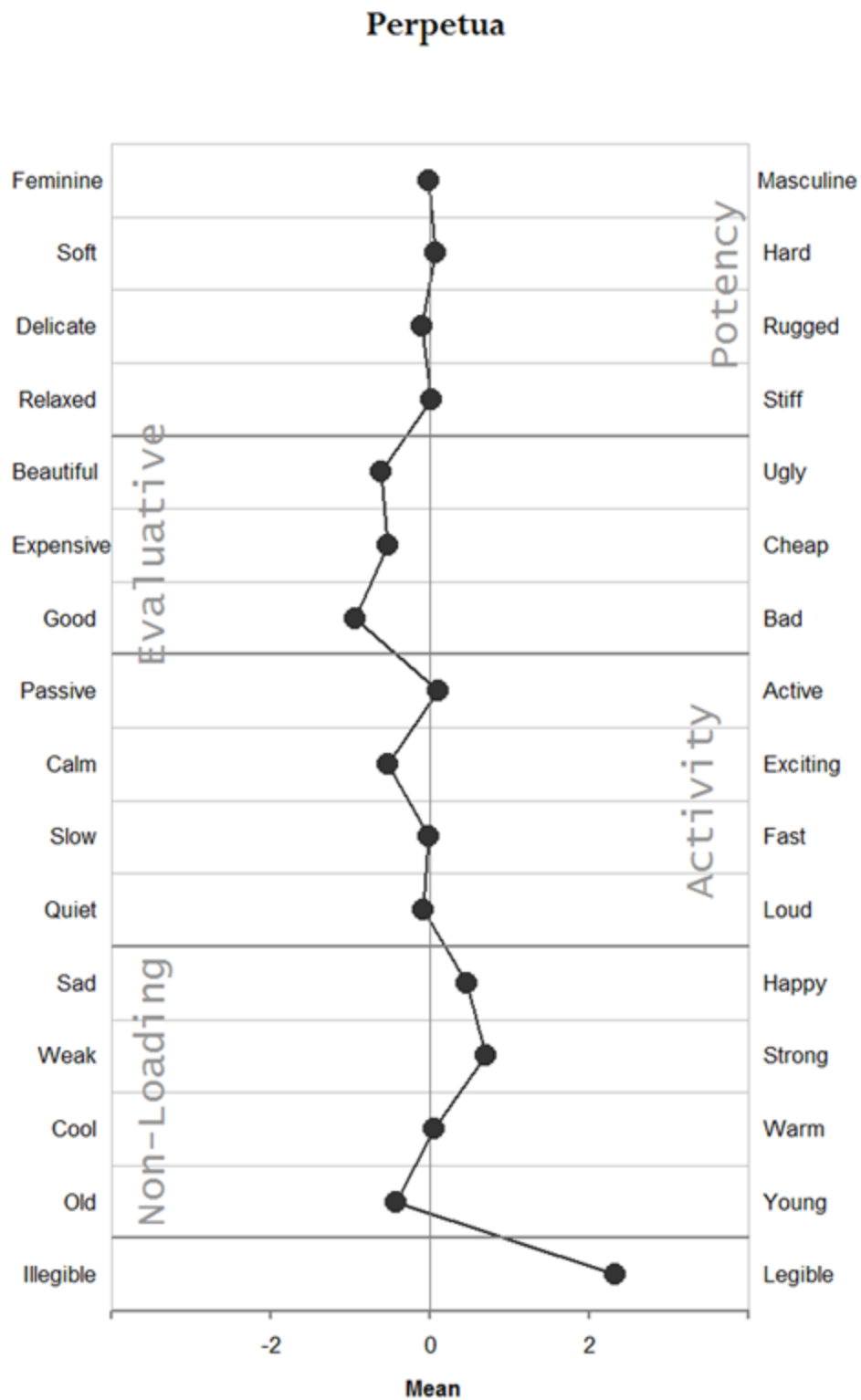




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Lucida Bright

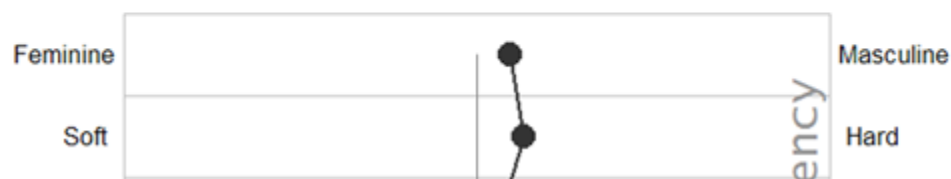


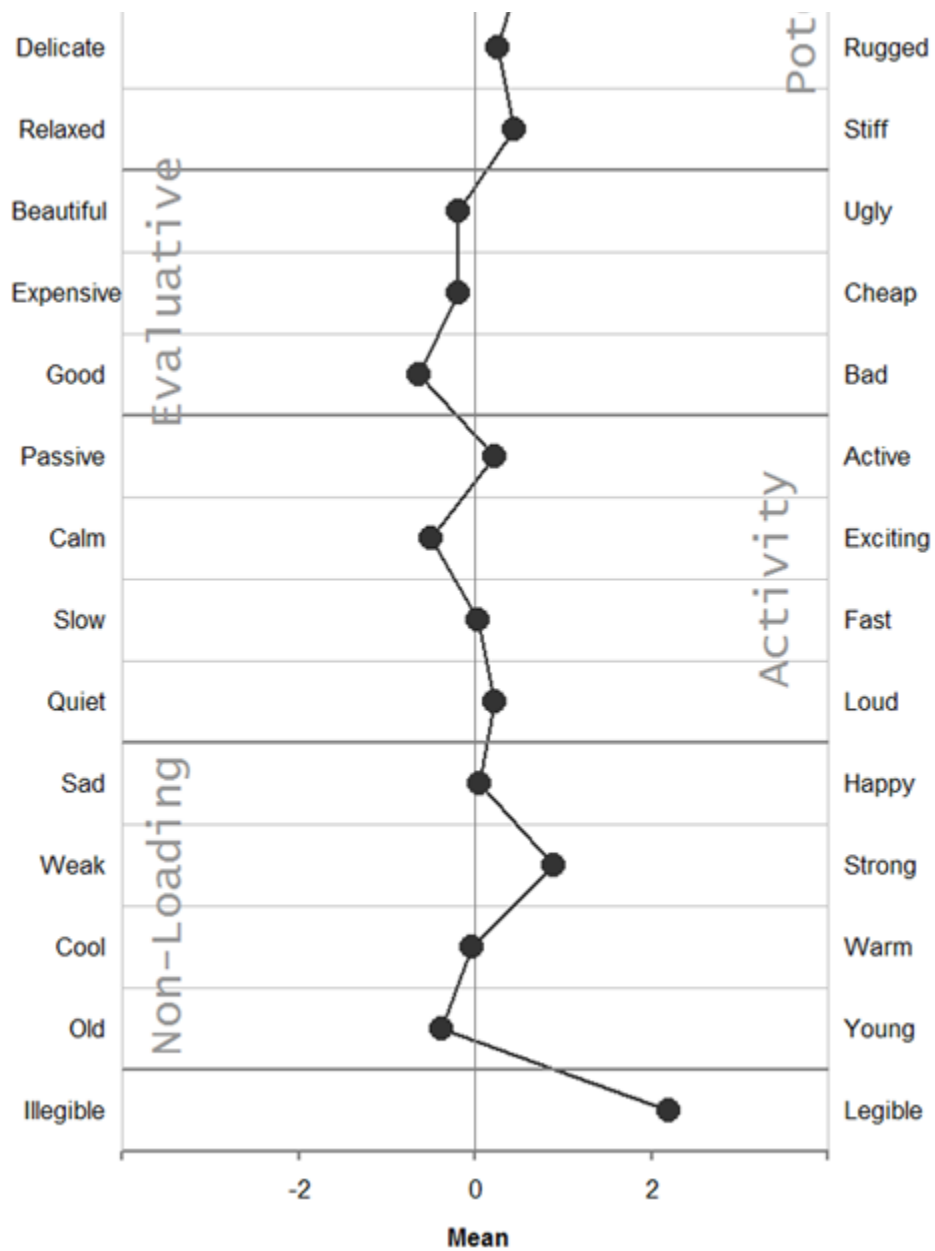
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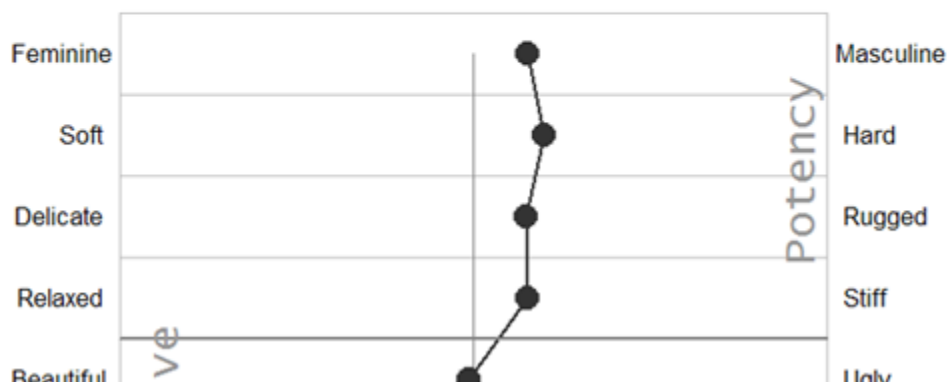
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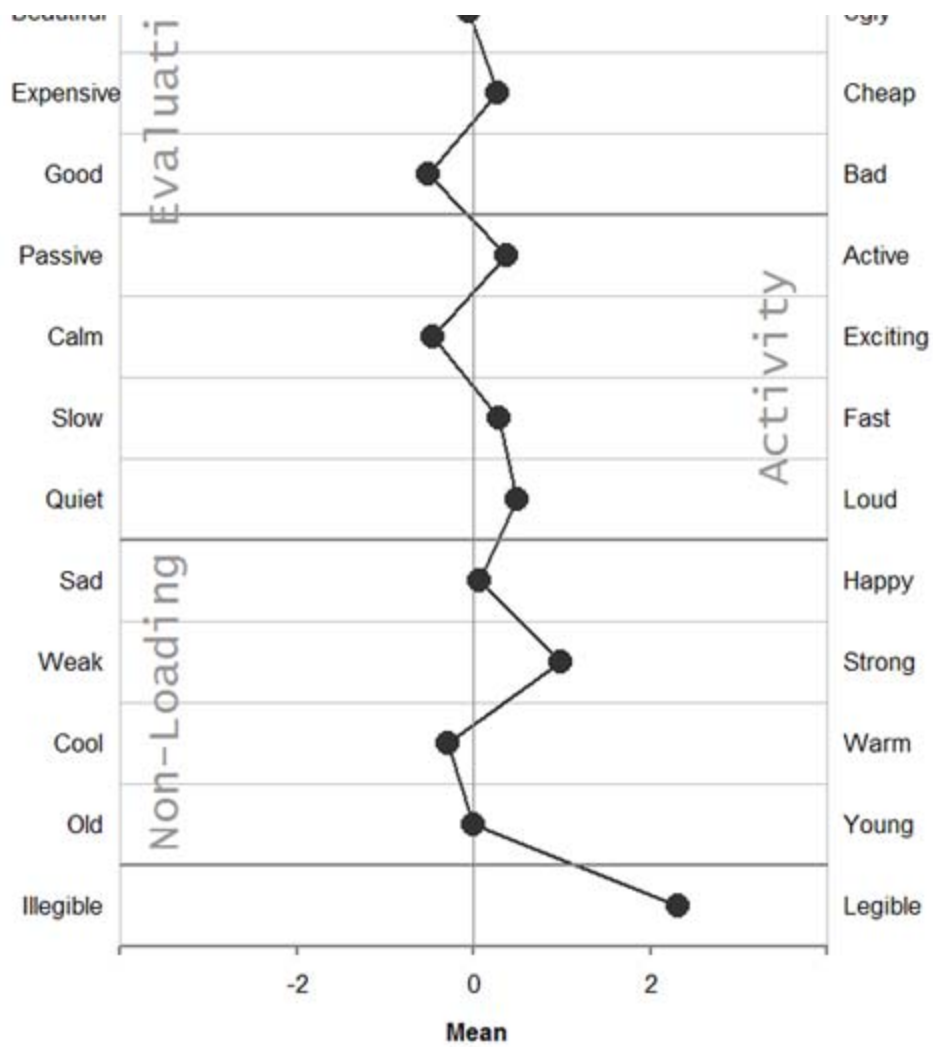




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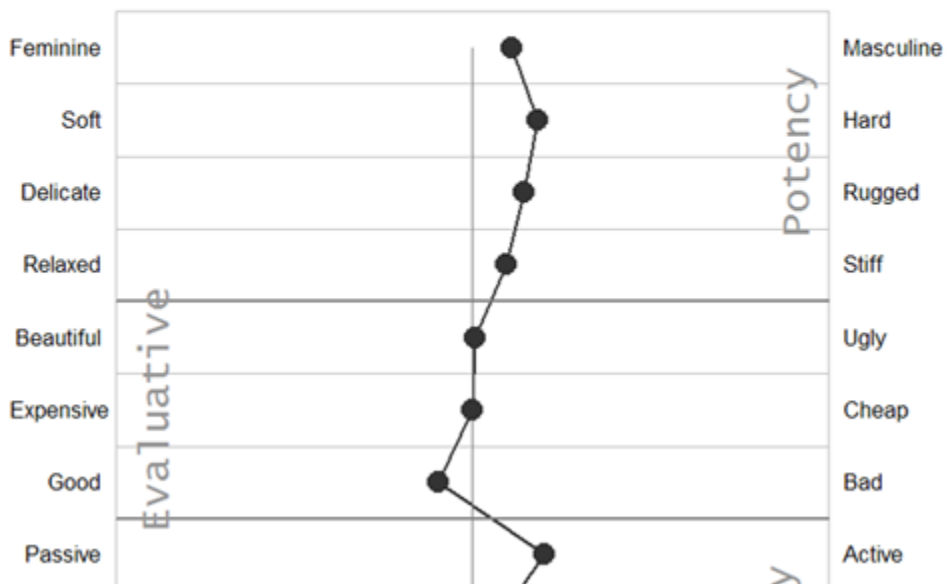
Arial

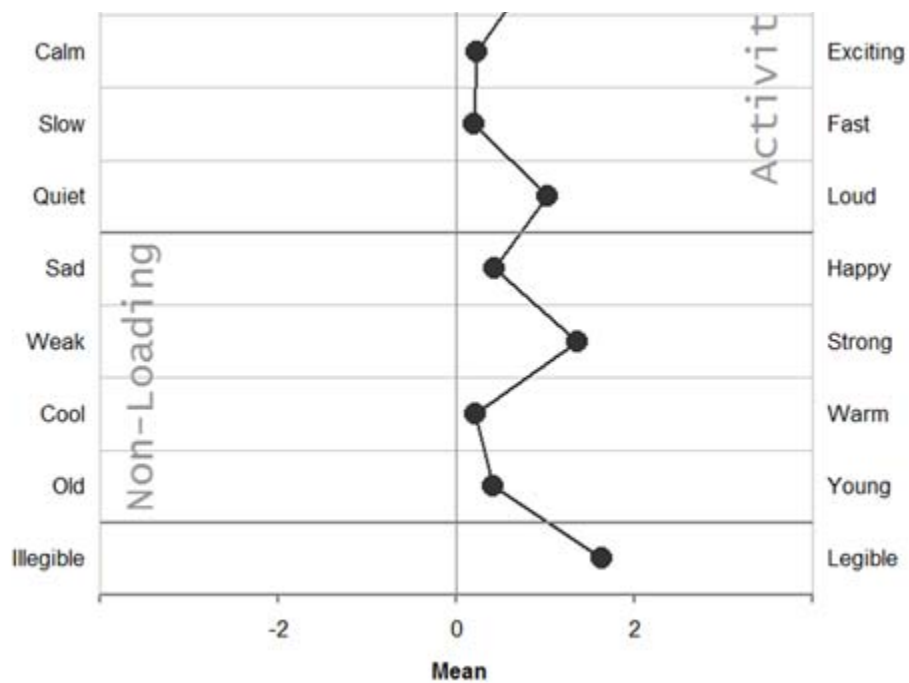




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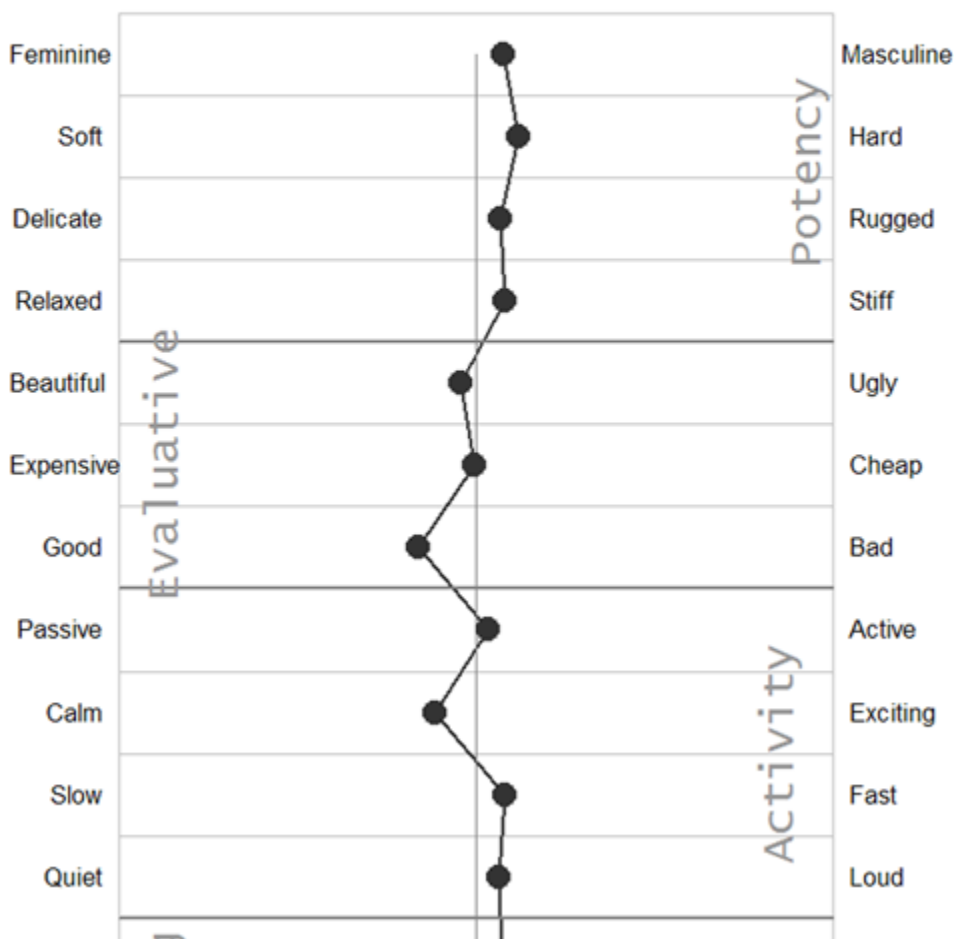
Berlin Sans

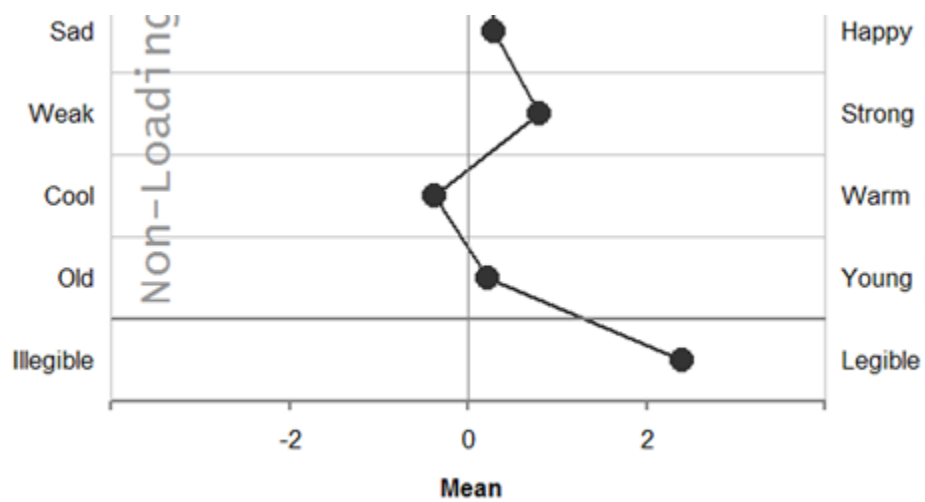




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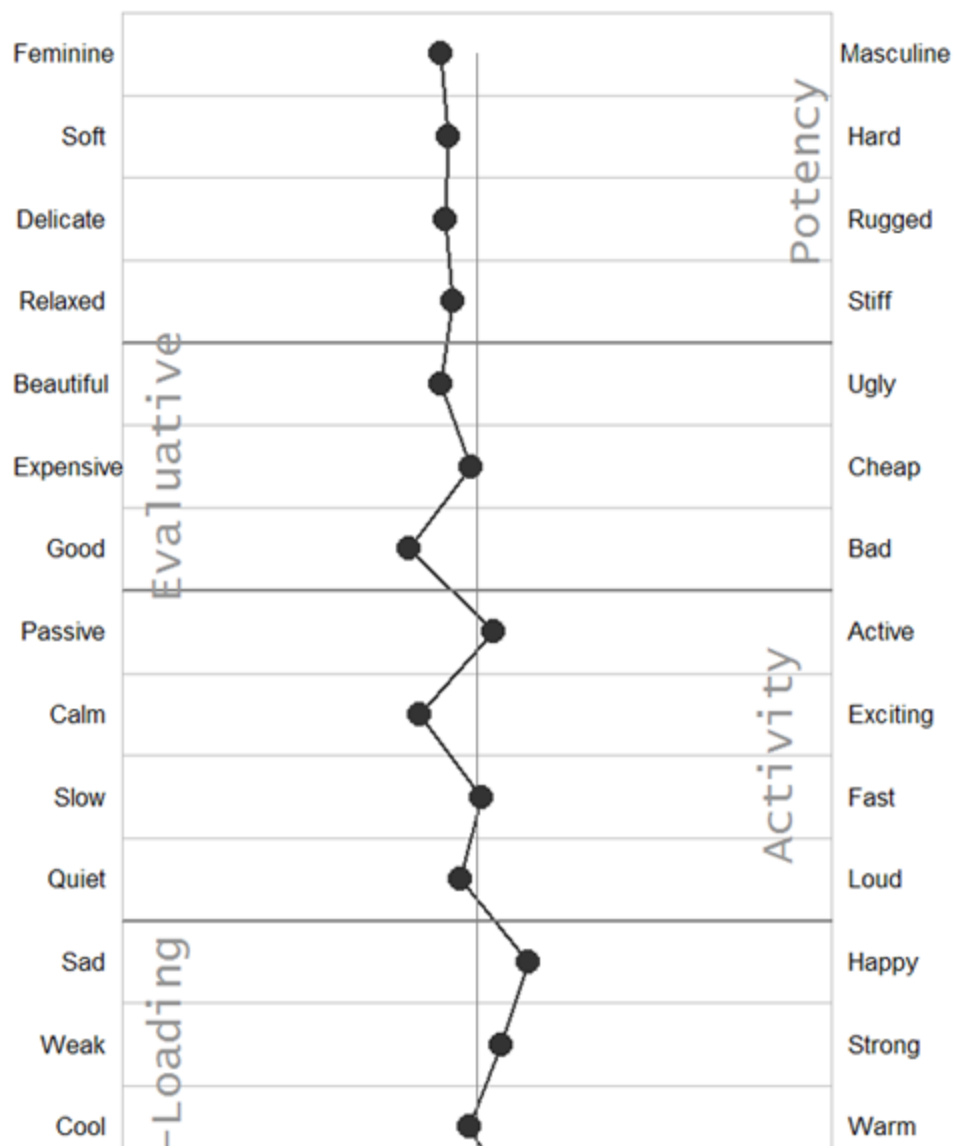
Calibri

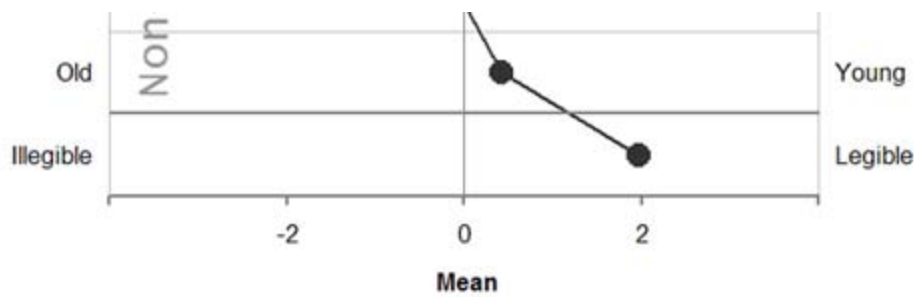




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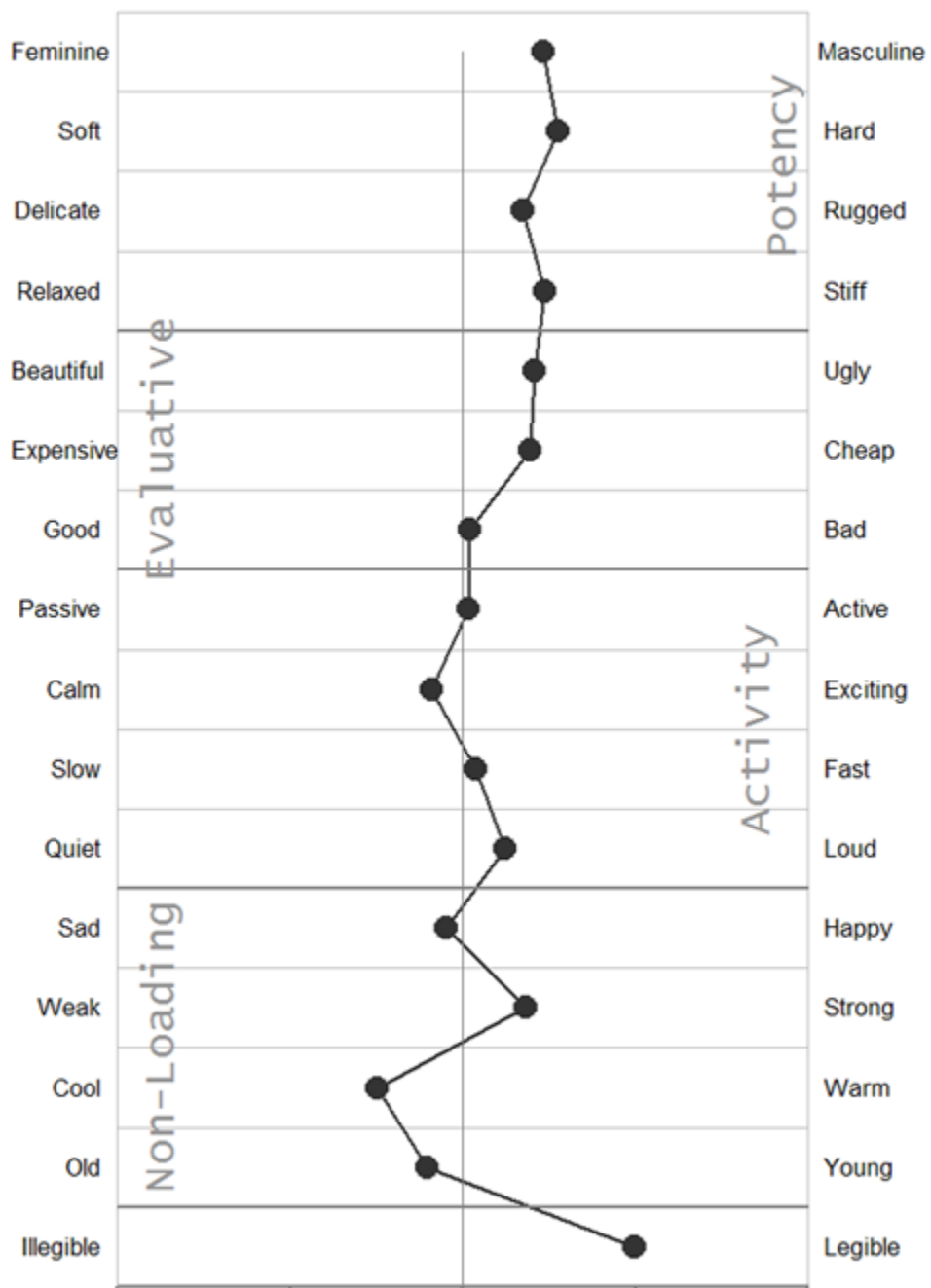
Century Gothic





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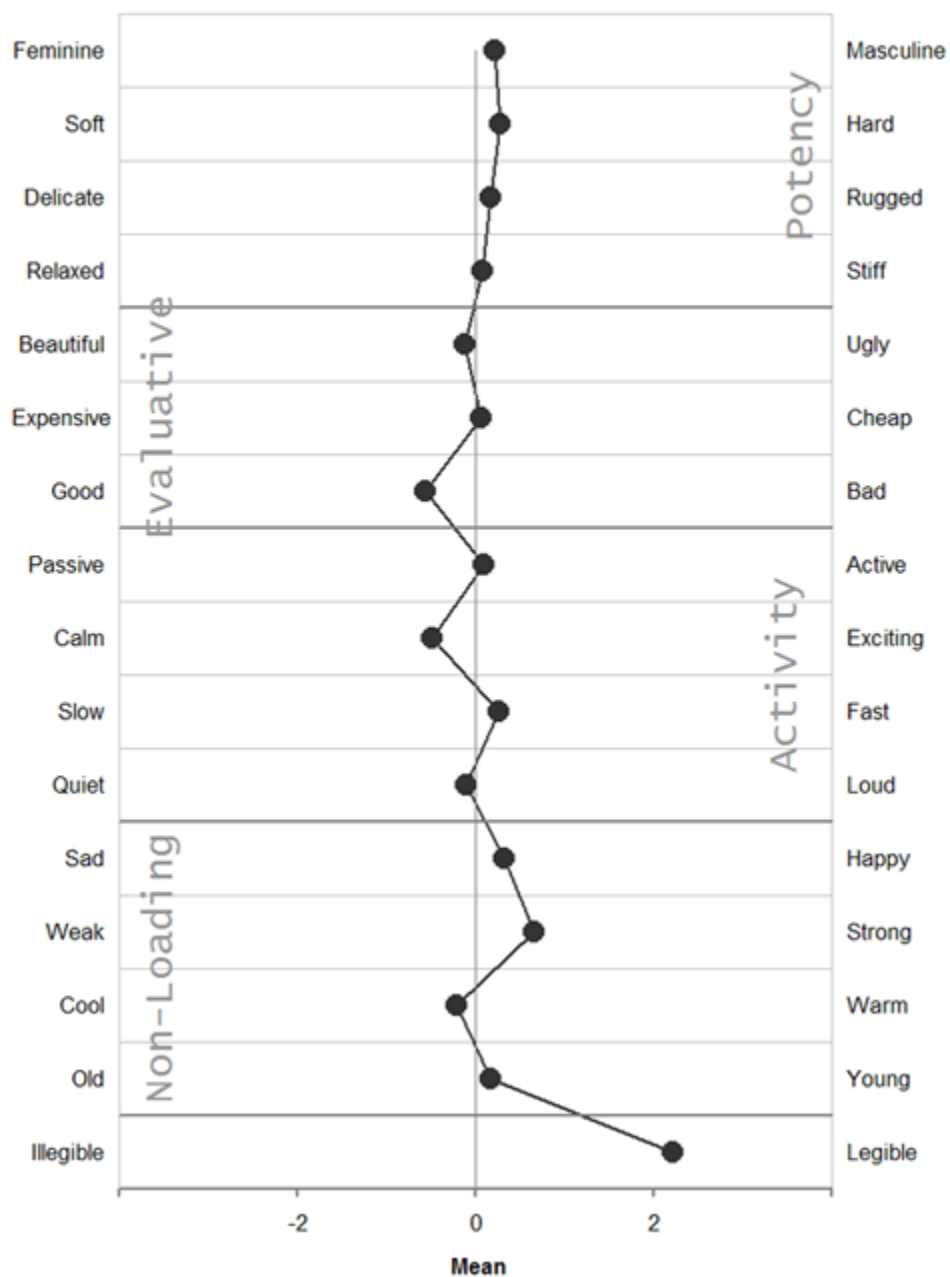
Consolas



-2 0 2
Mean

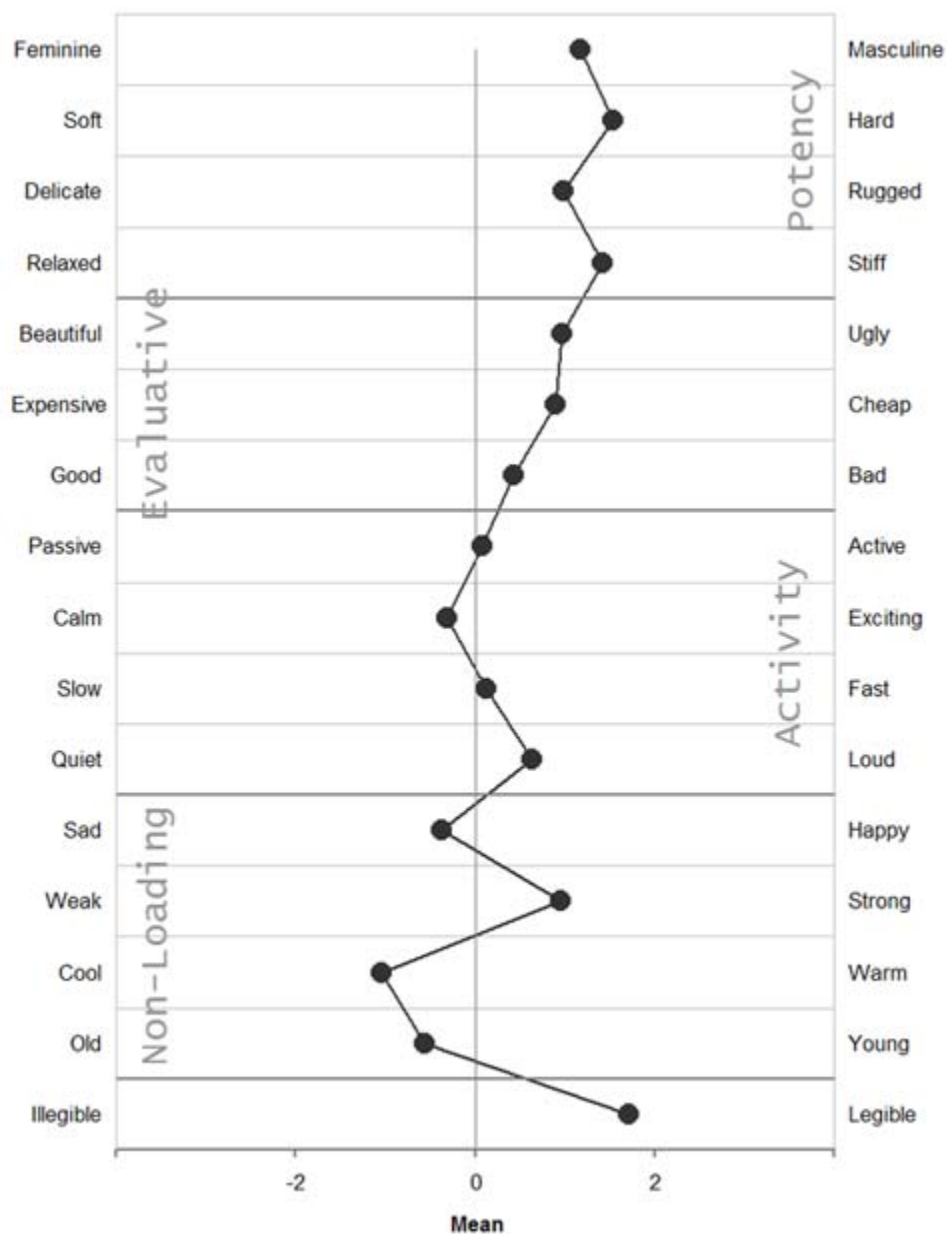
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Corbel



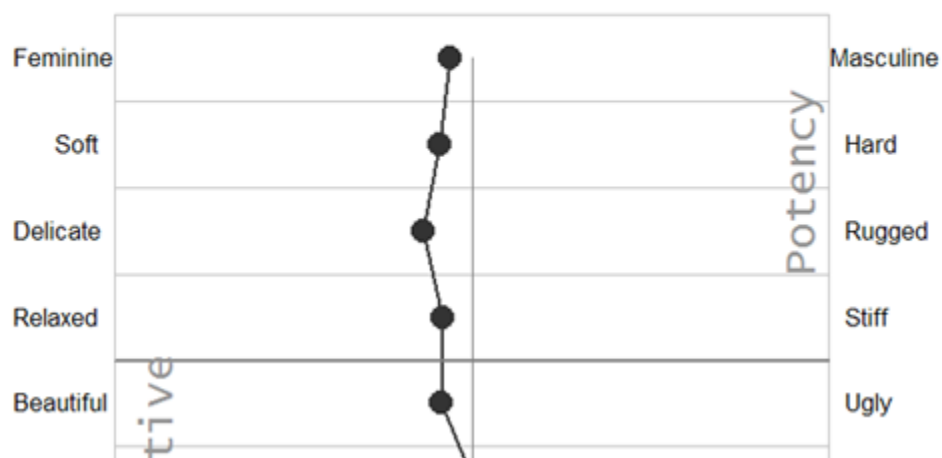
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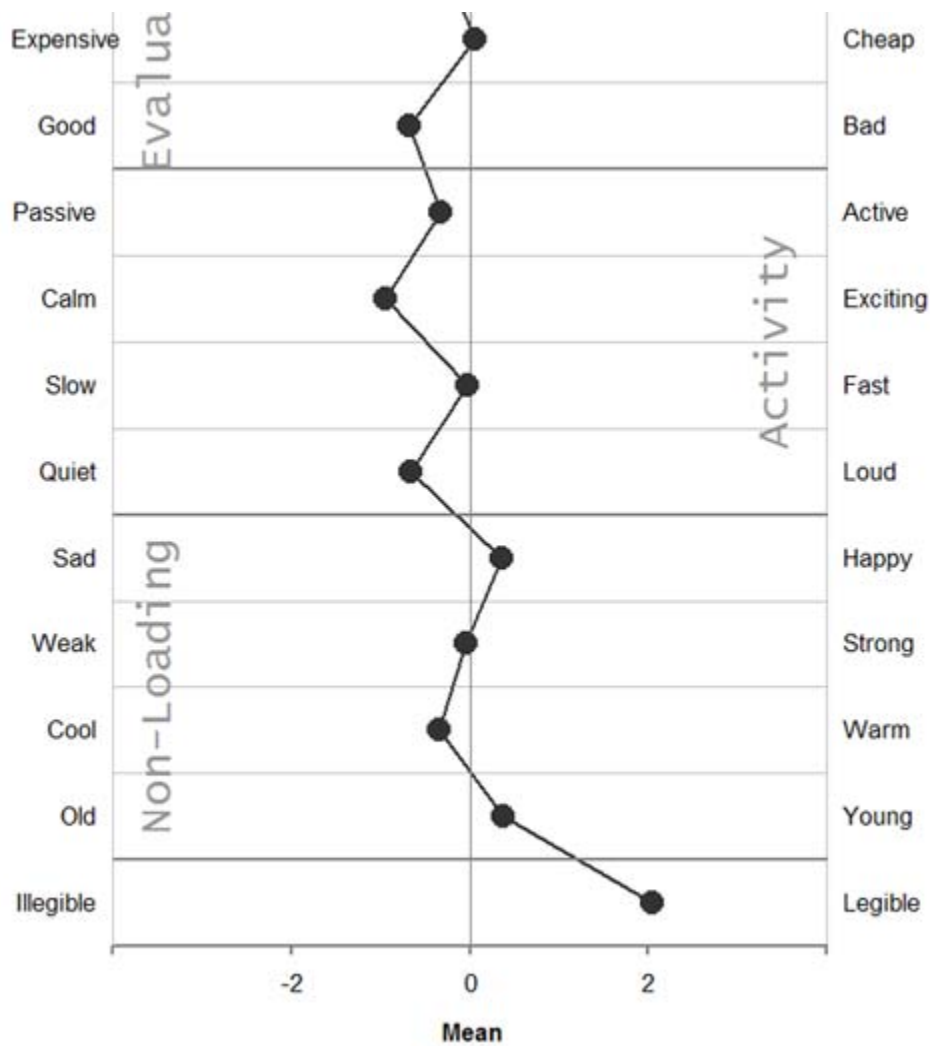
Lucida Console



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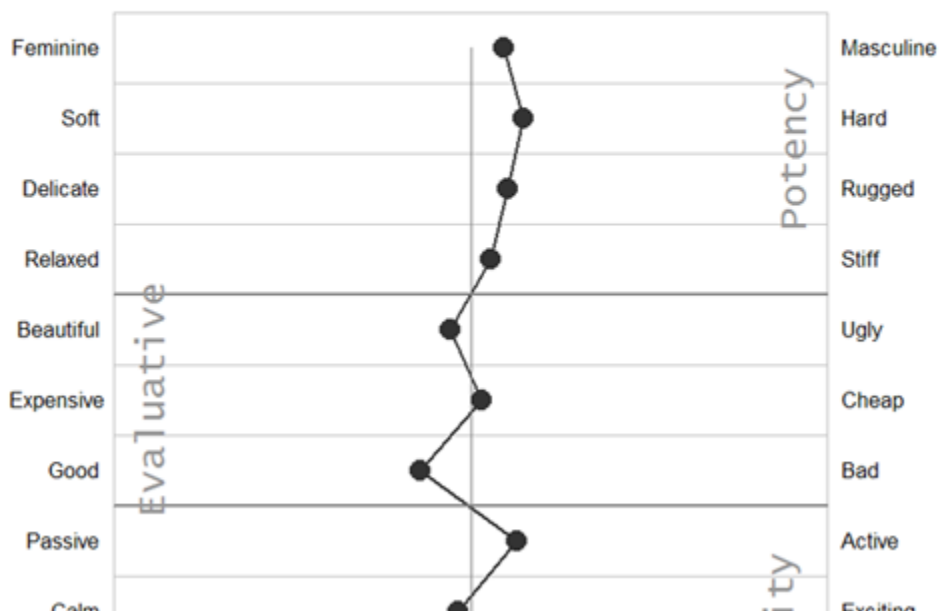
Incised901 Lt BT

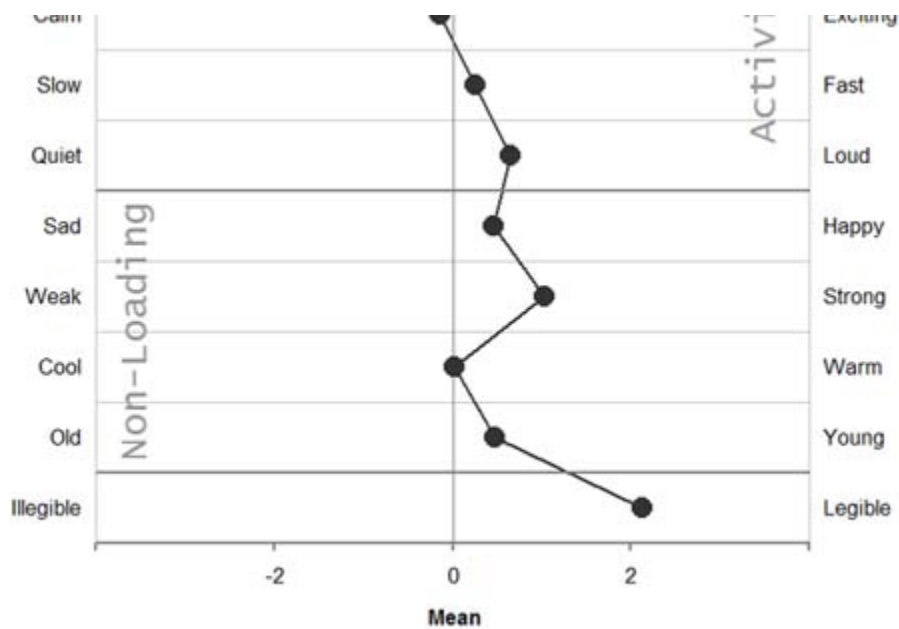




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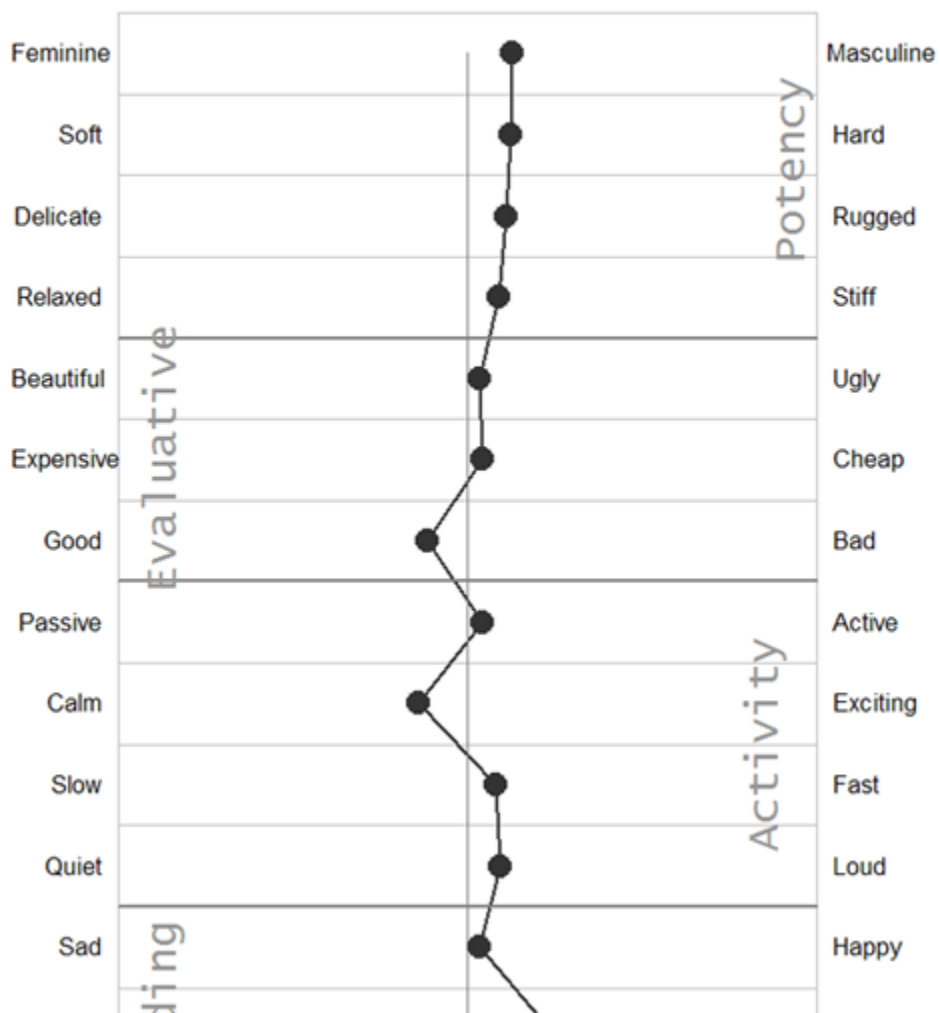
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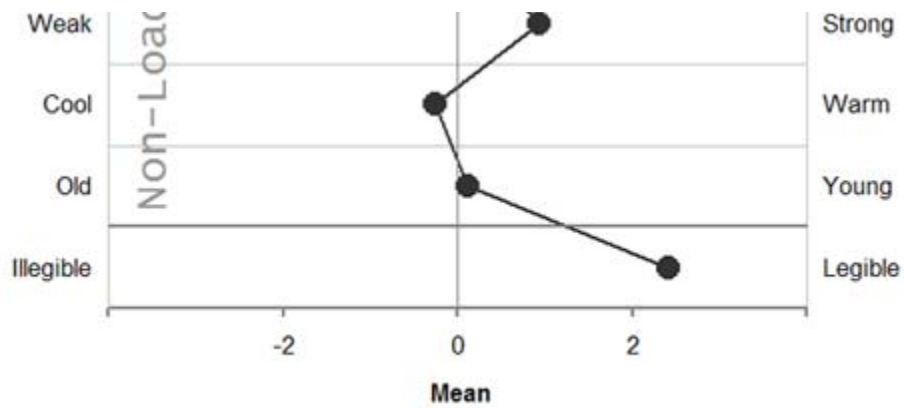




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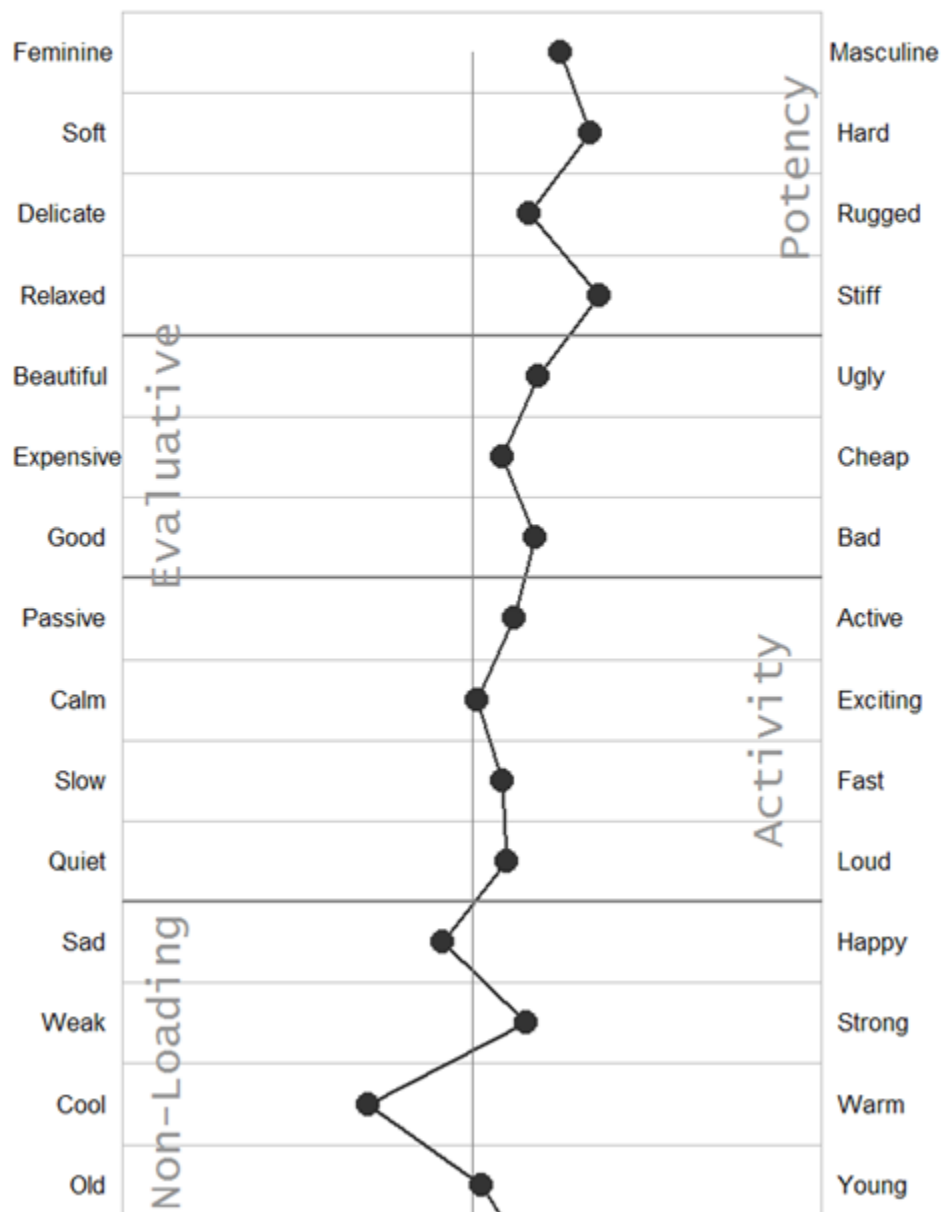
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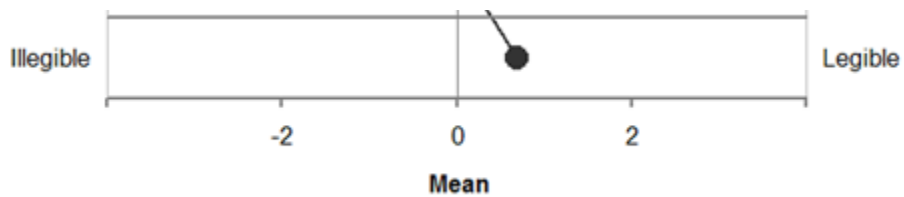




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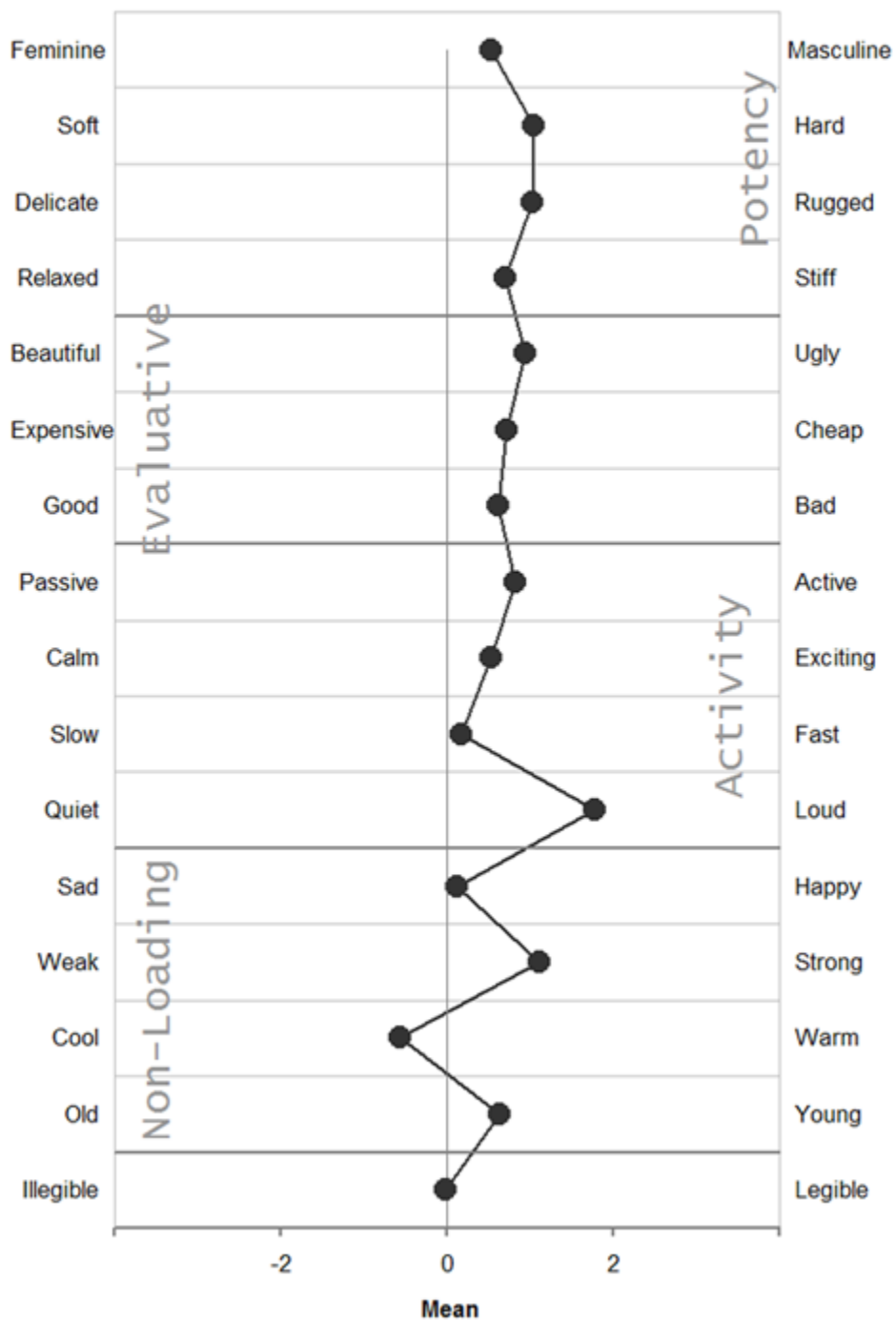
Agency

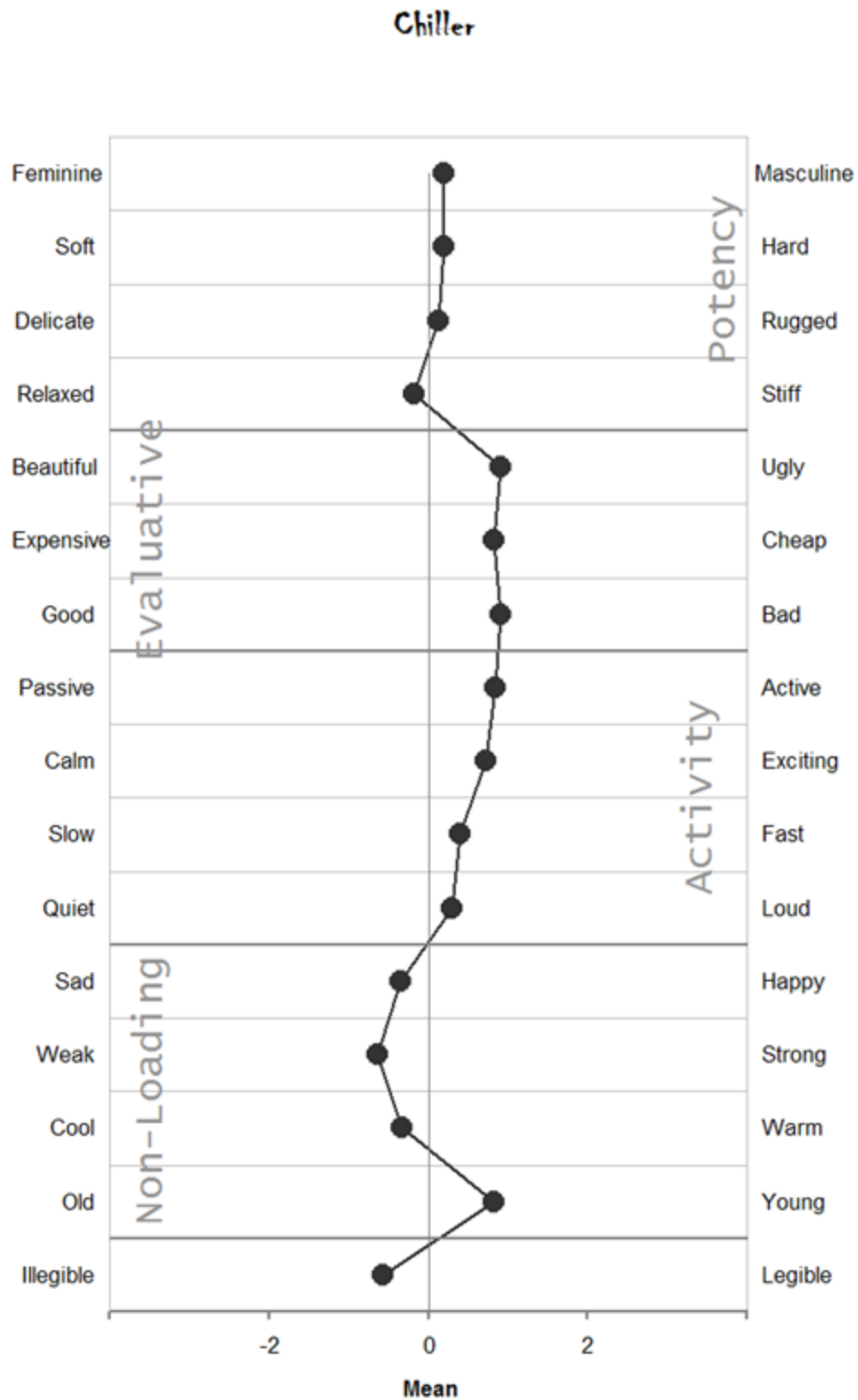


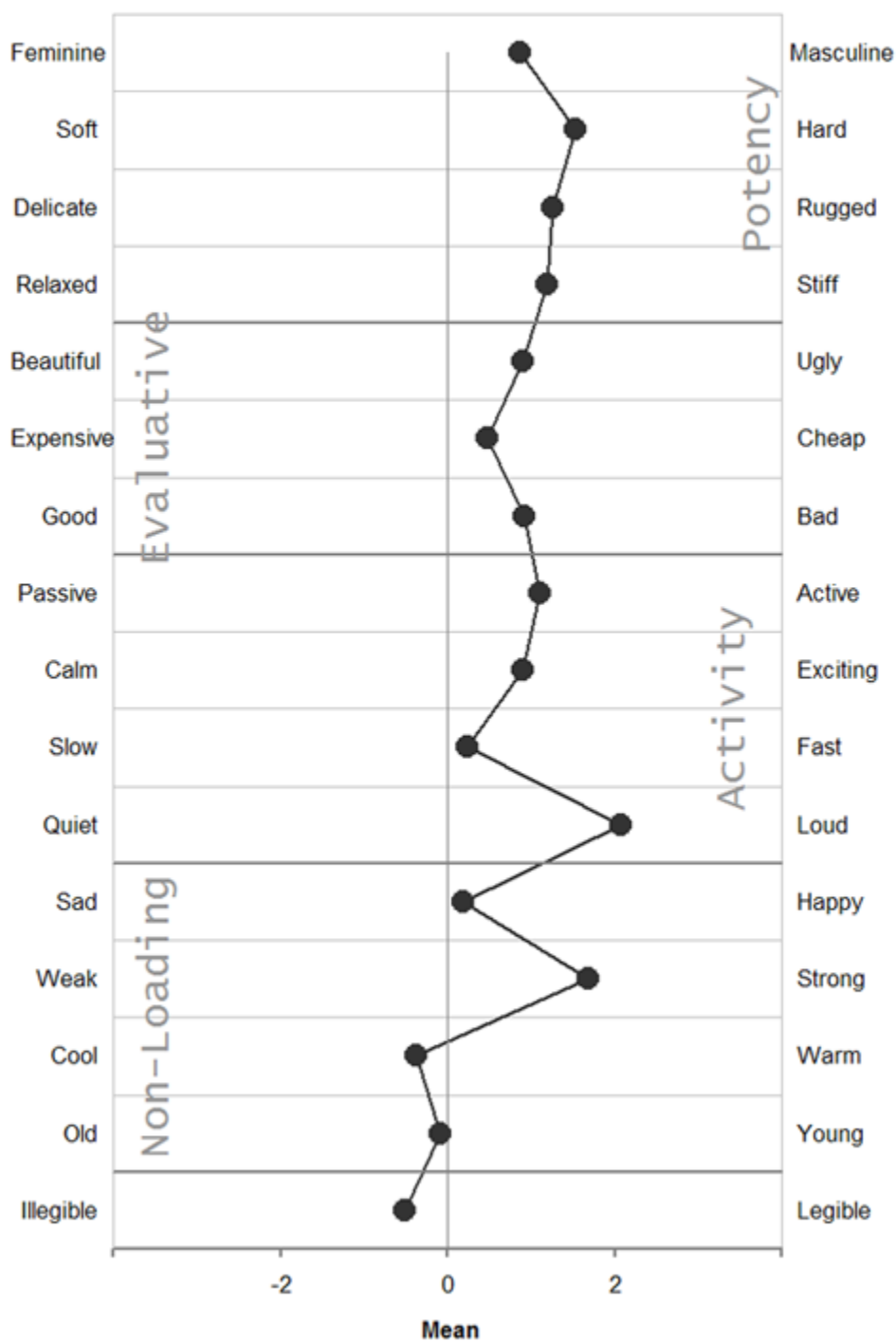


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Bauhaus 93



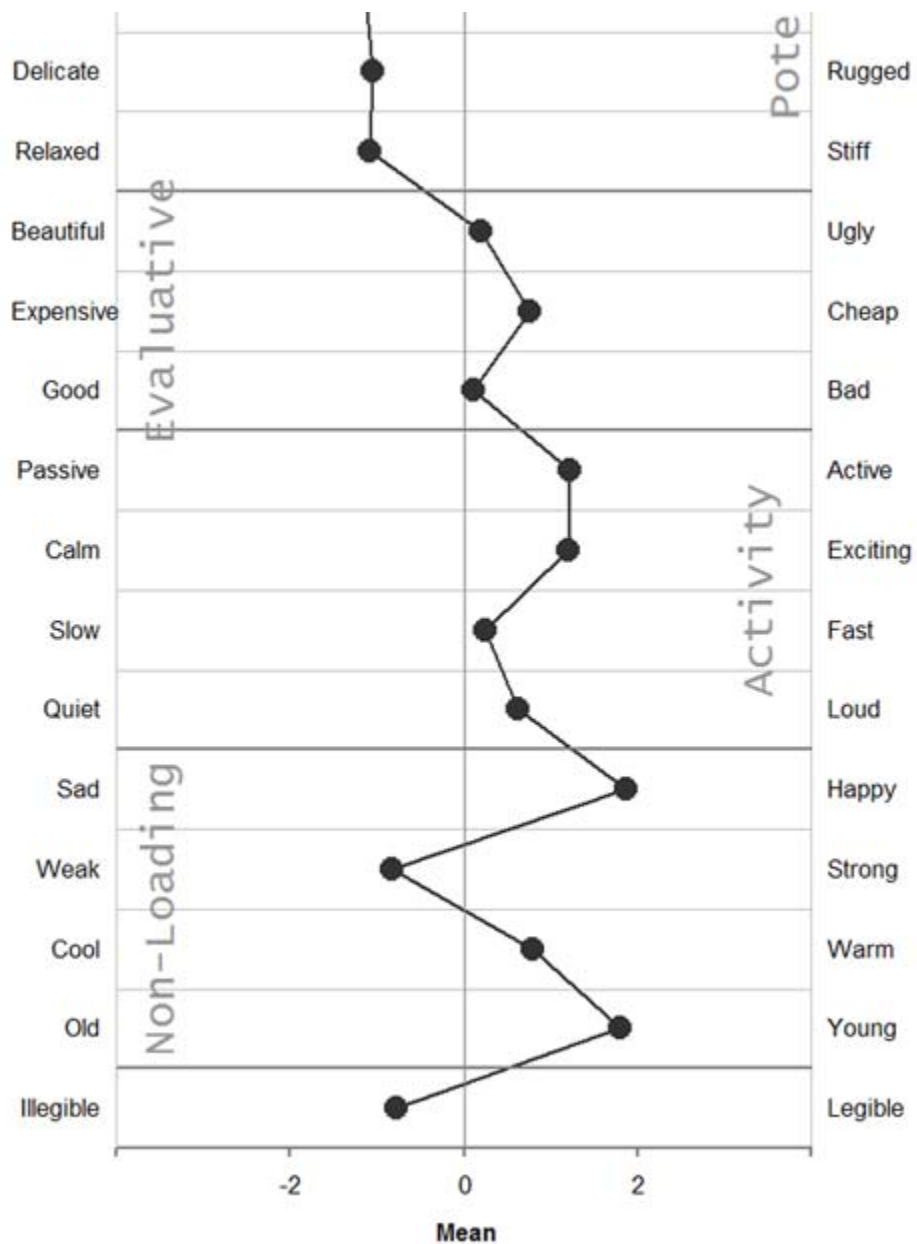
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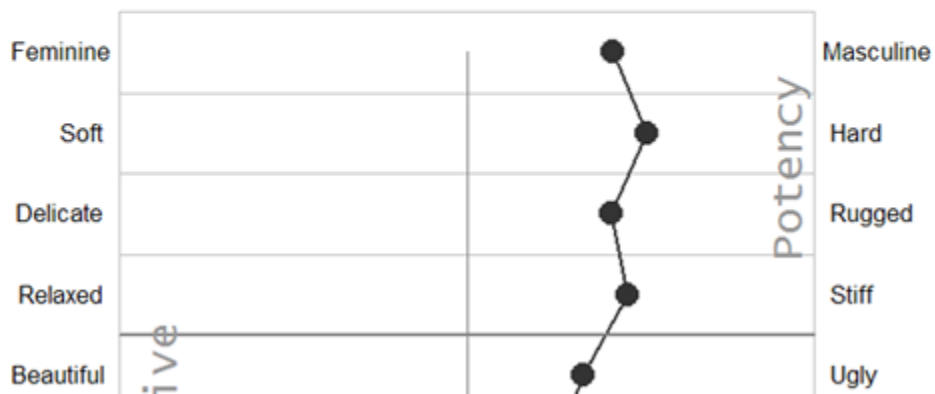
Curly

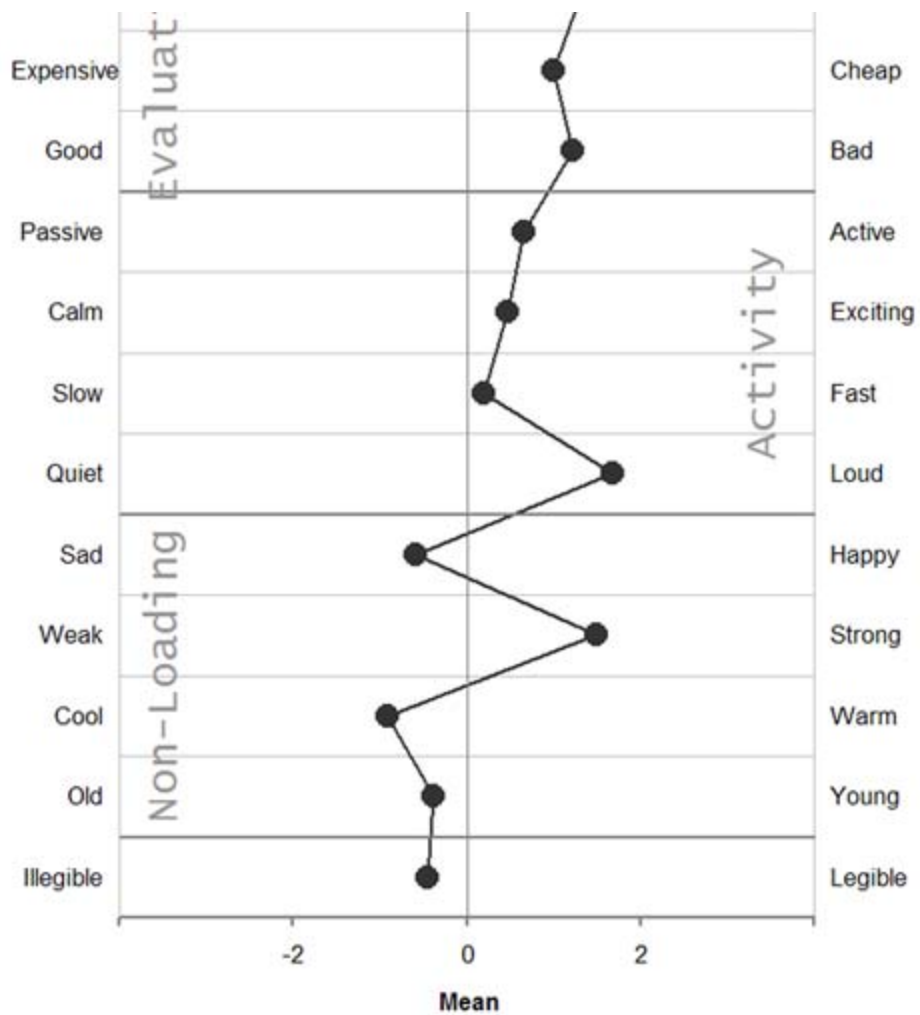




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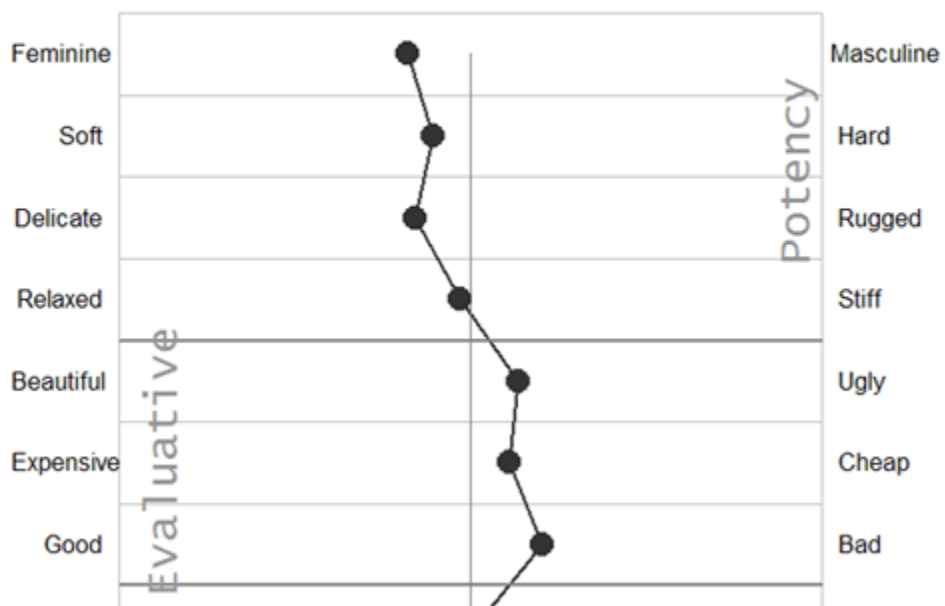
Impact

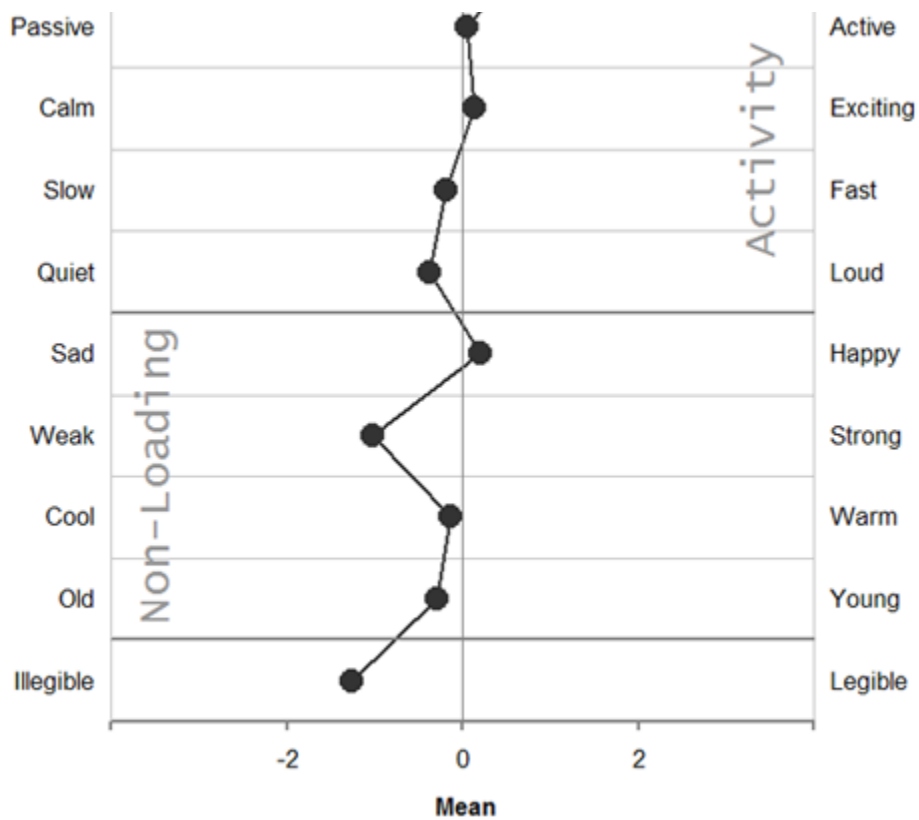




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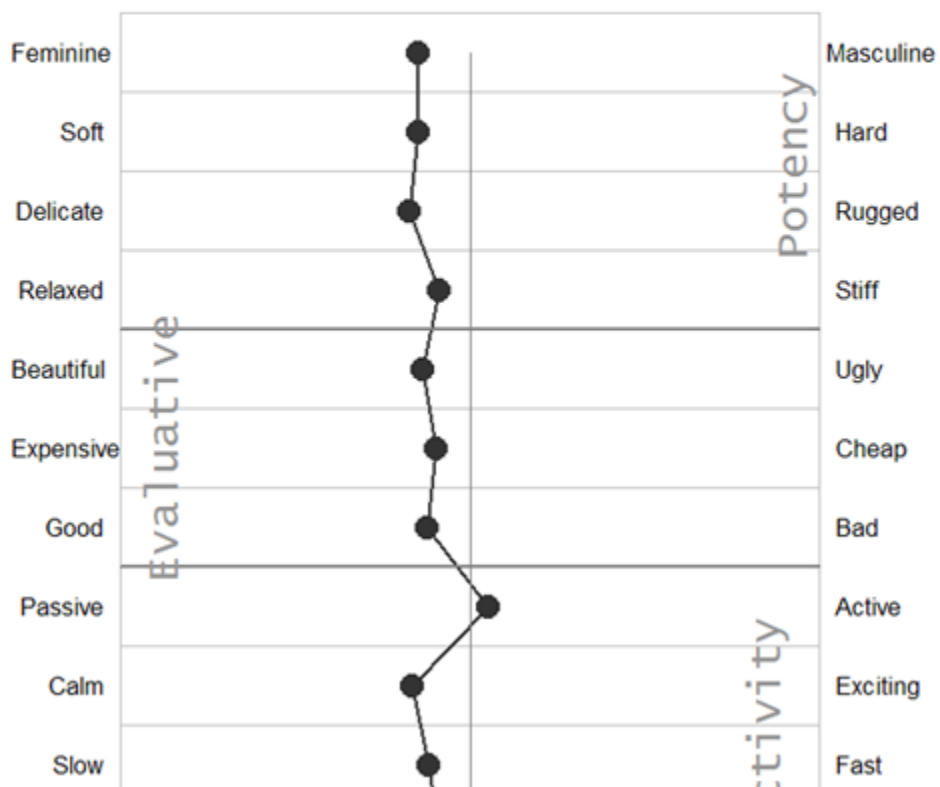
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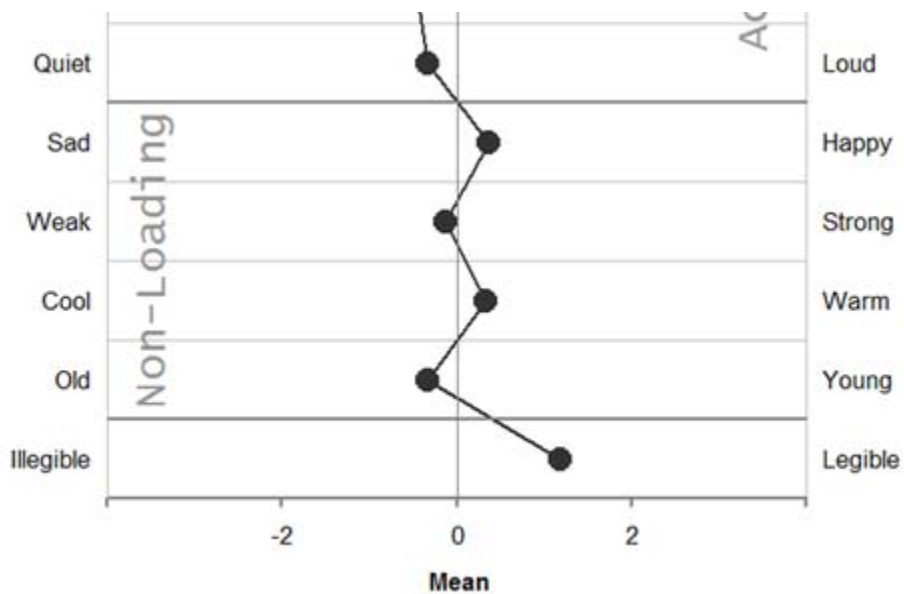




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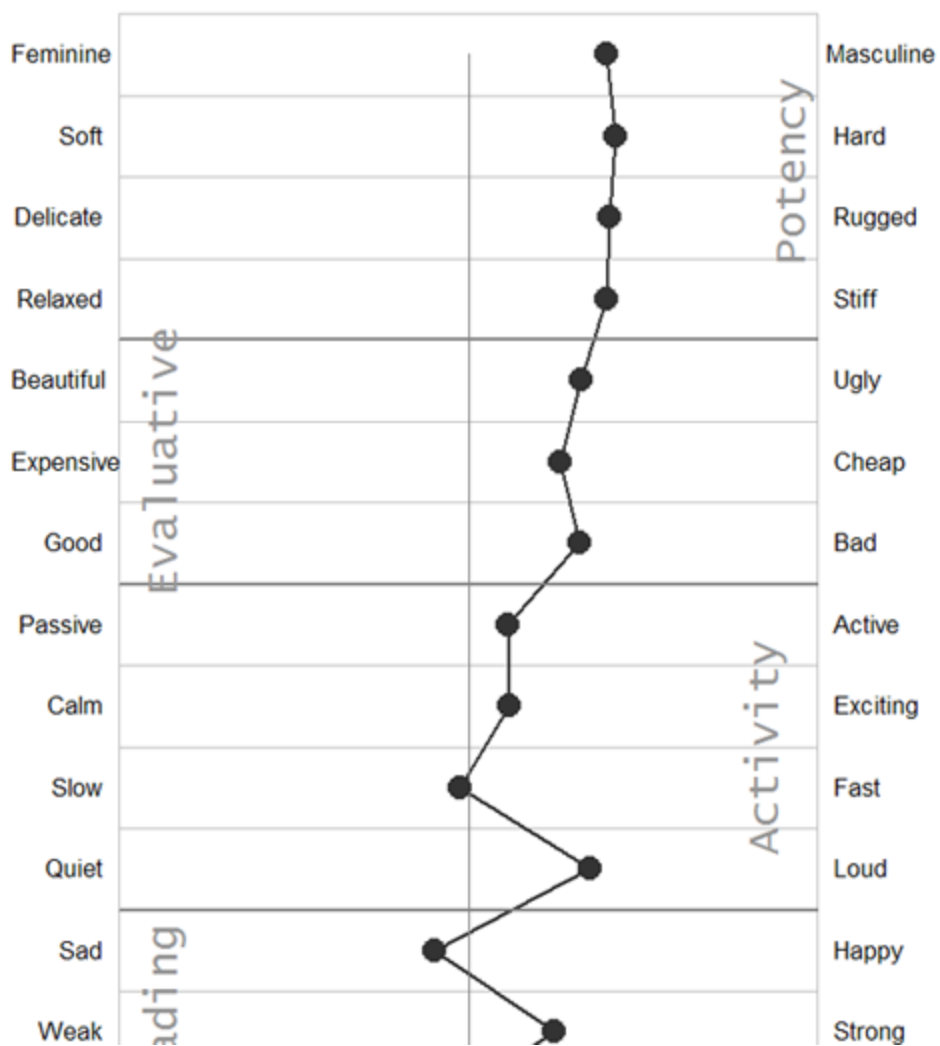
Papyrus

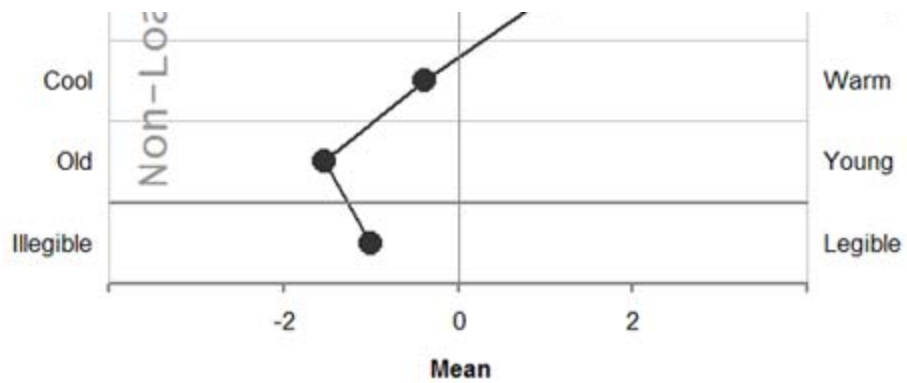




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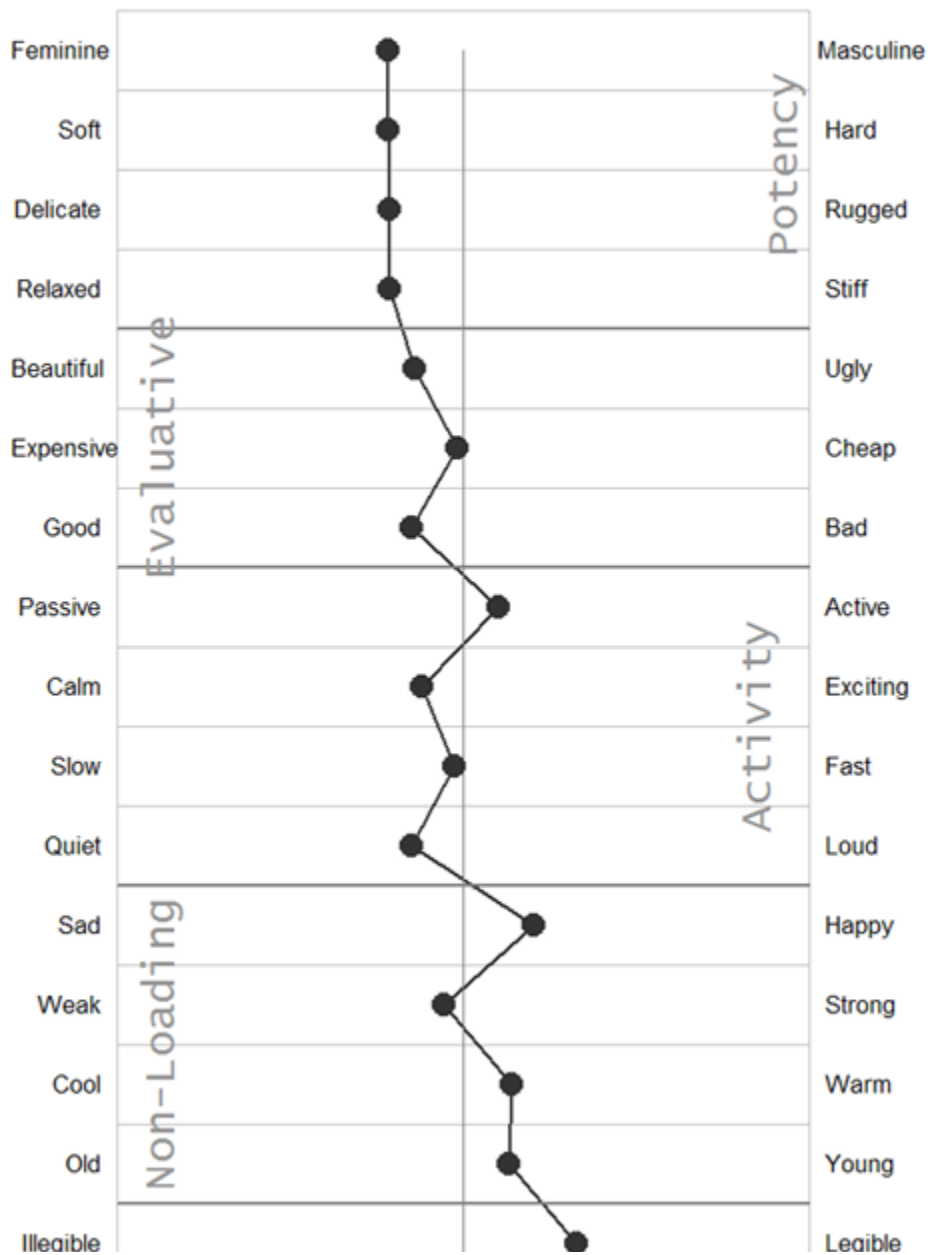
Playbill





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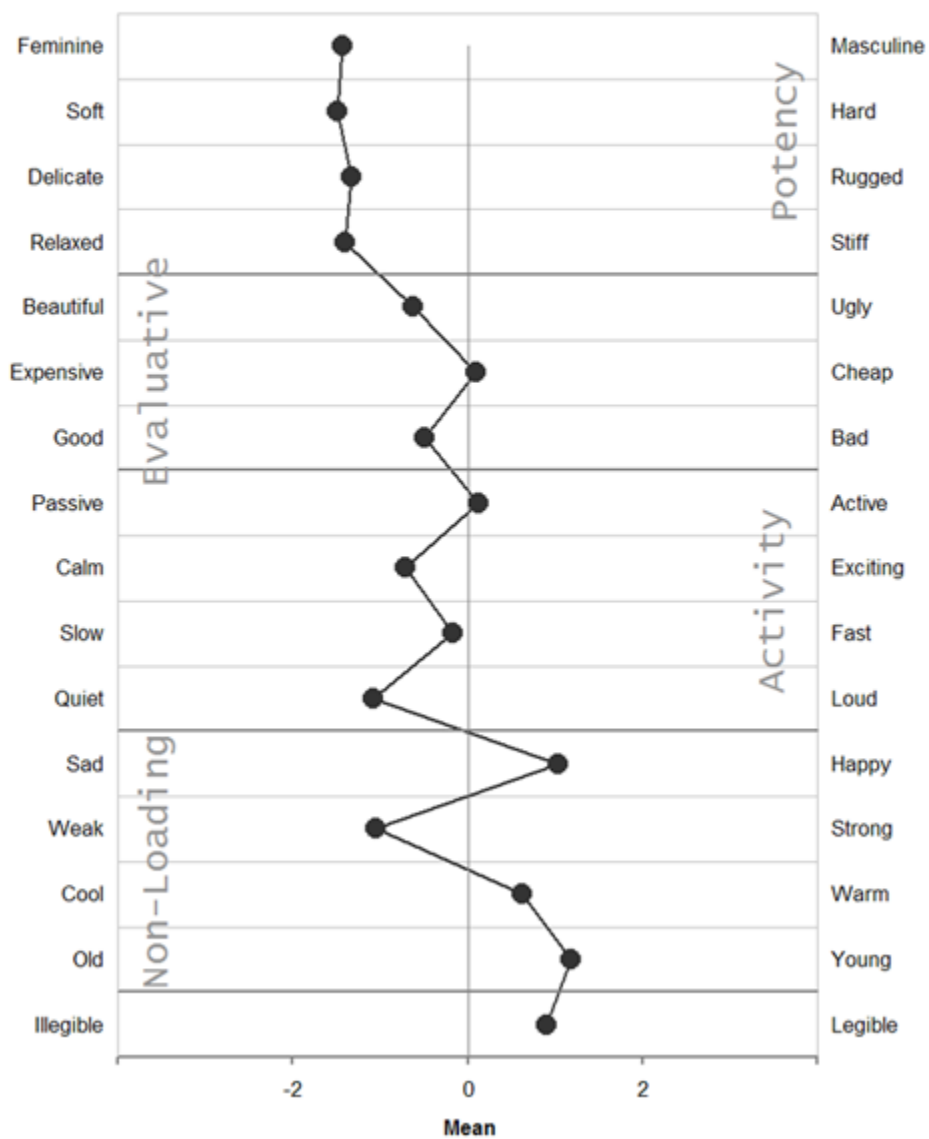
Tempus Sans





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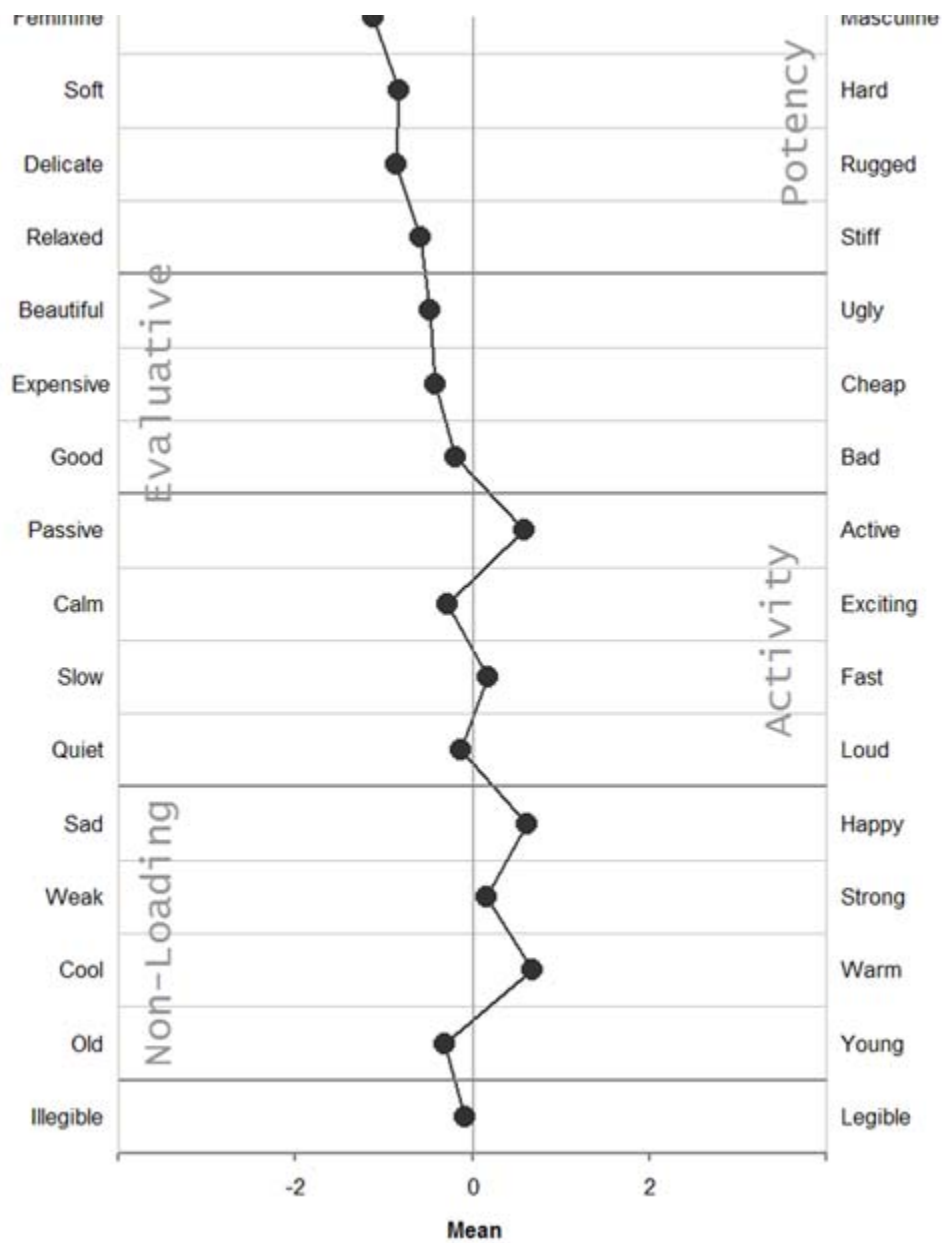
Bradley Hand



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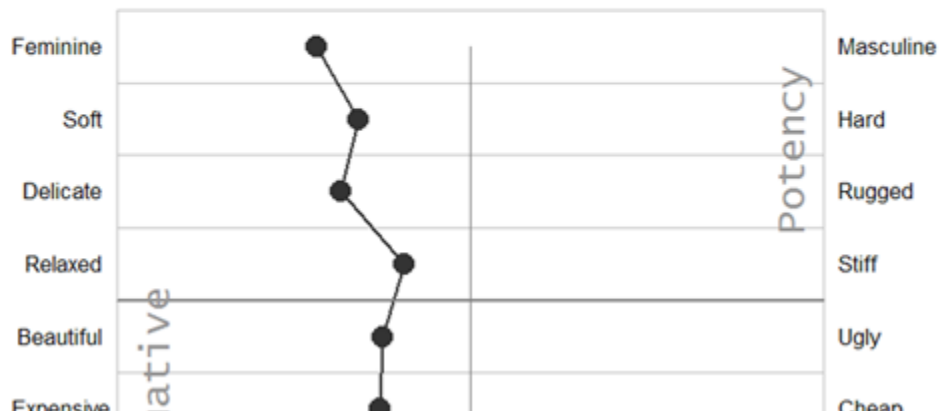
Brush Script

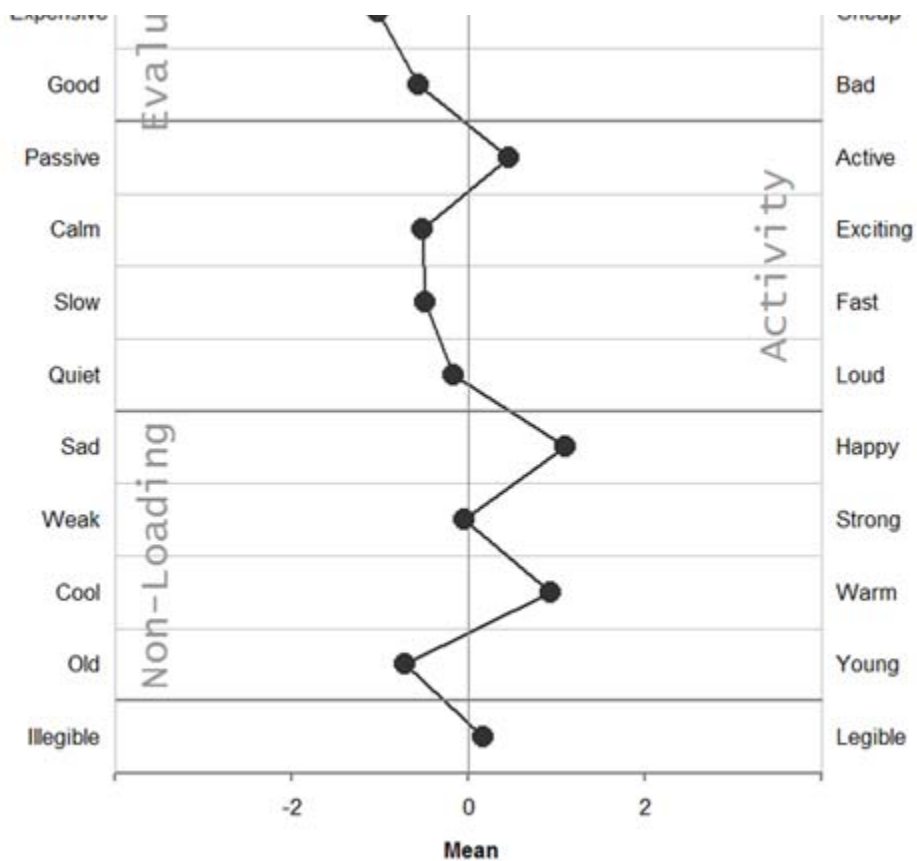




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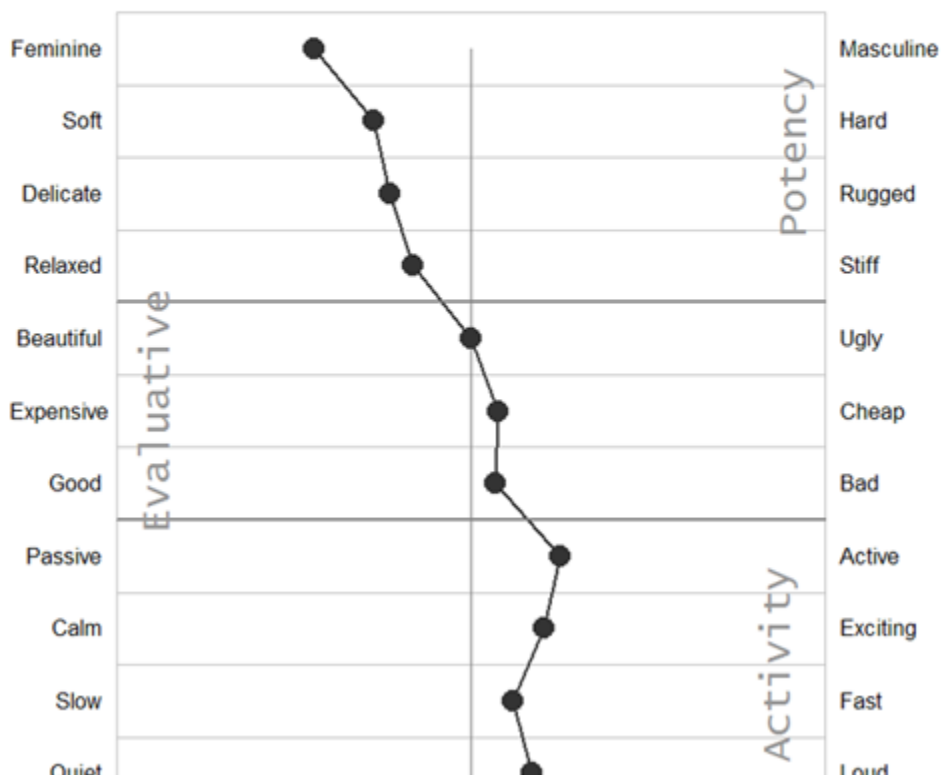
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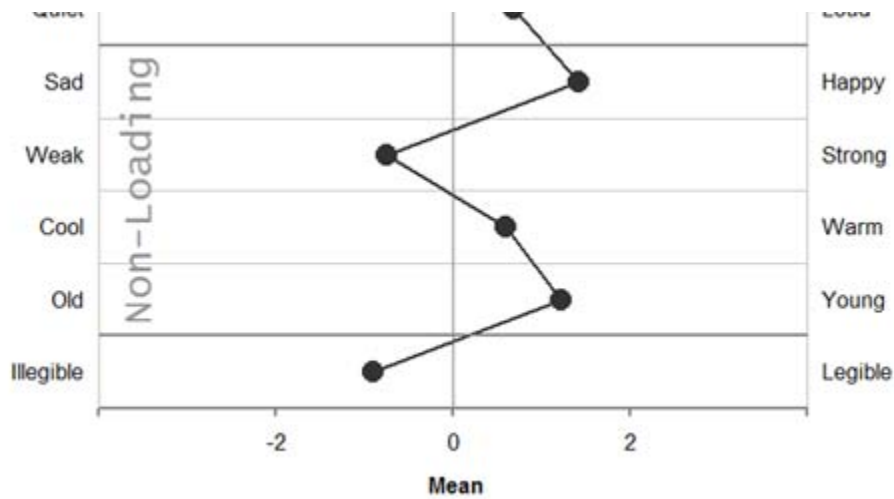




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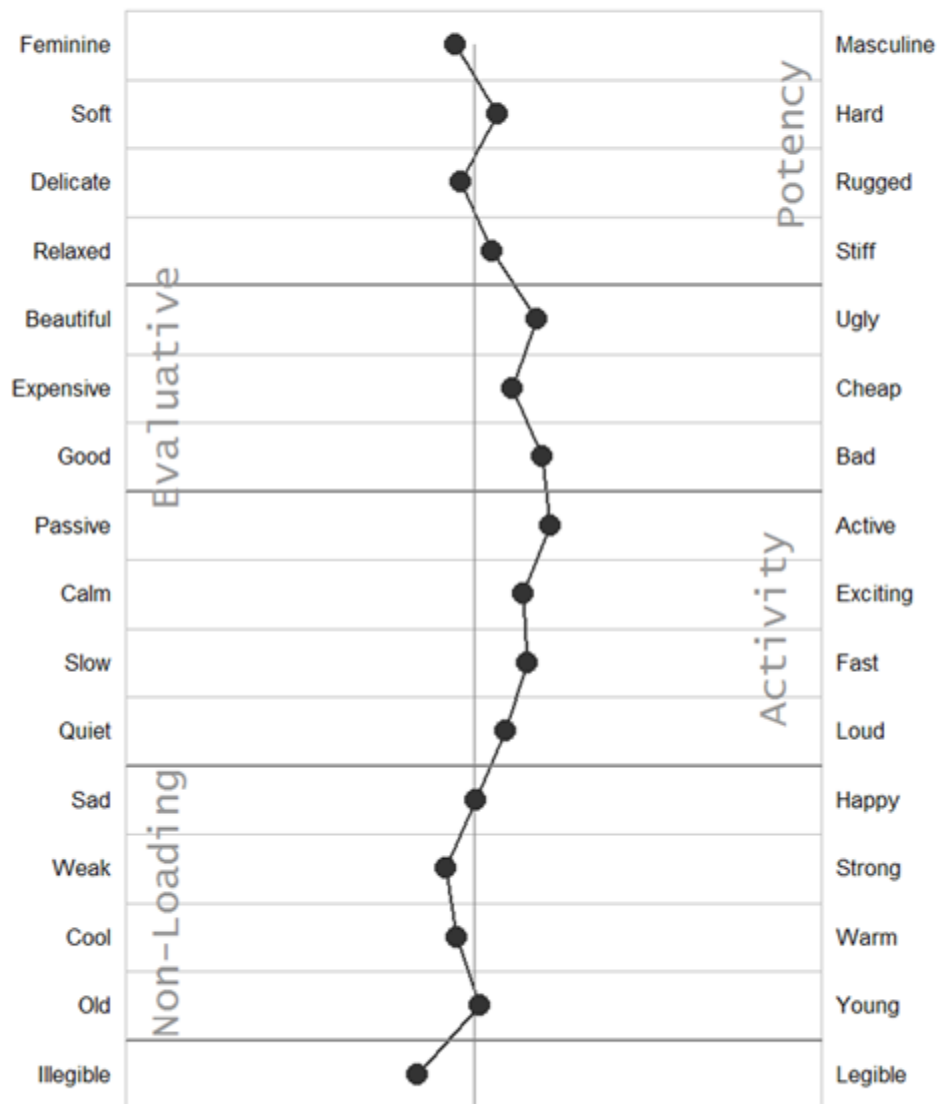
Gigi

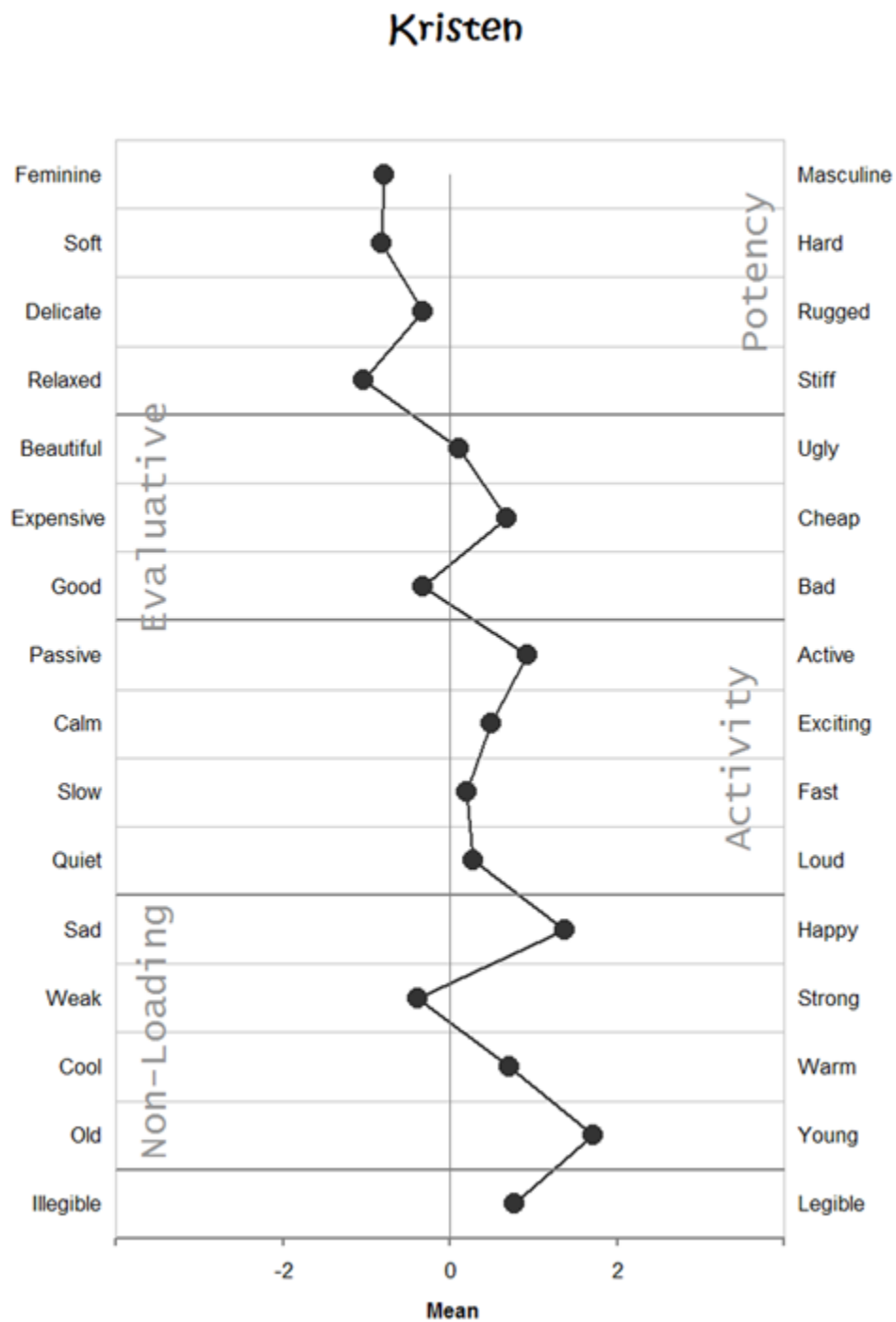


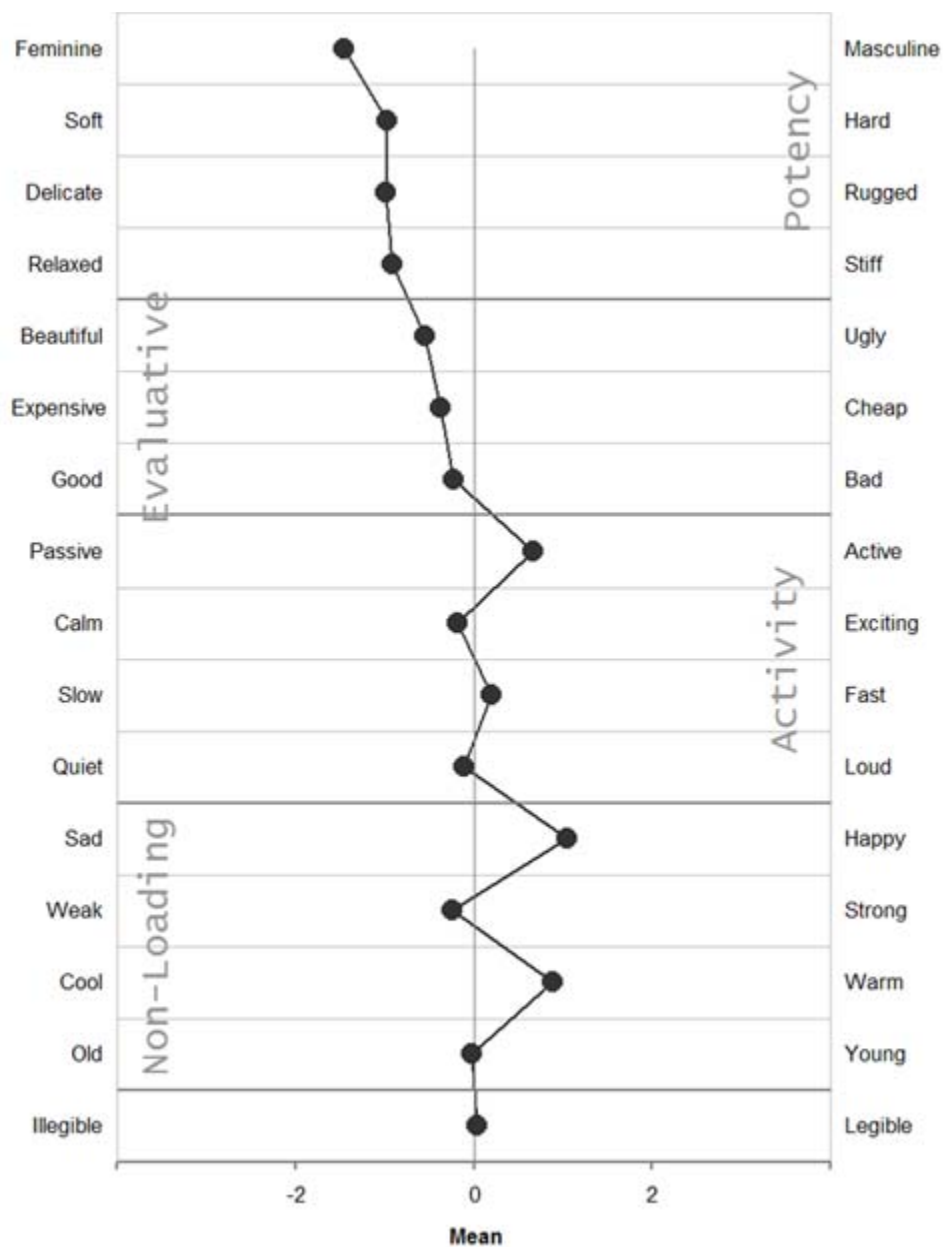


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Informal Roman

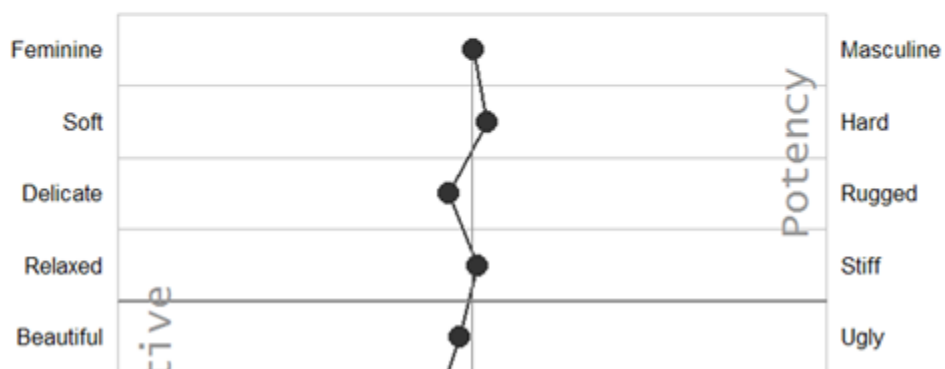


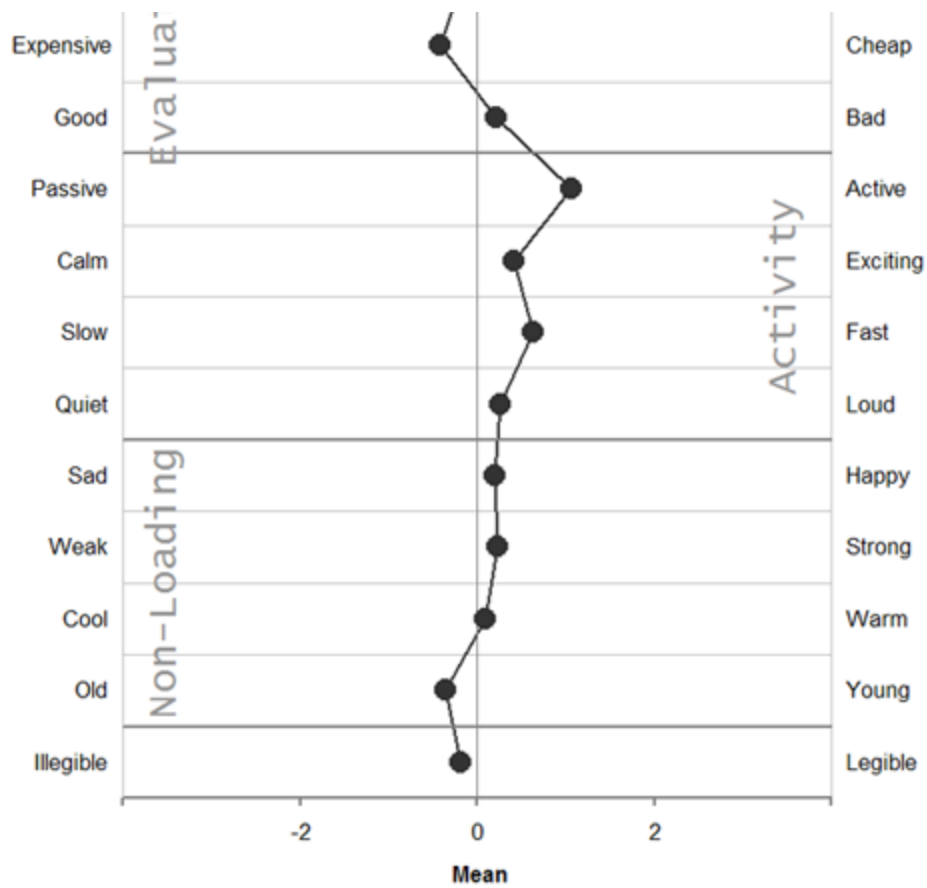
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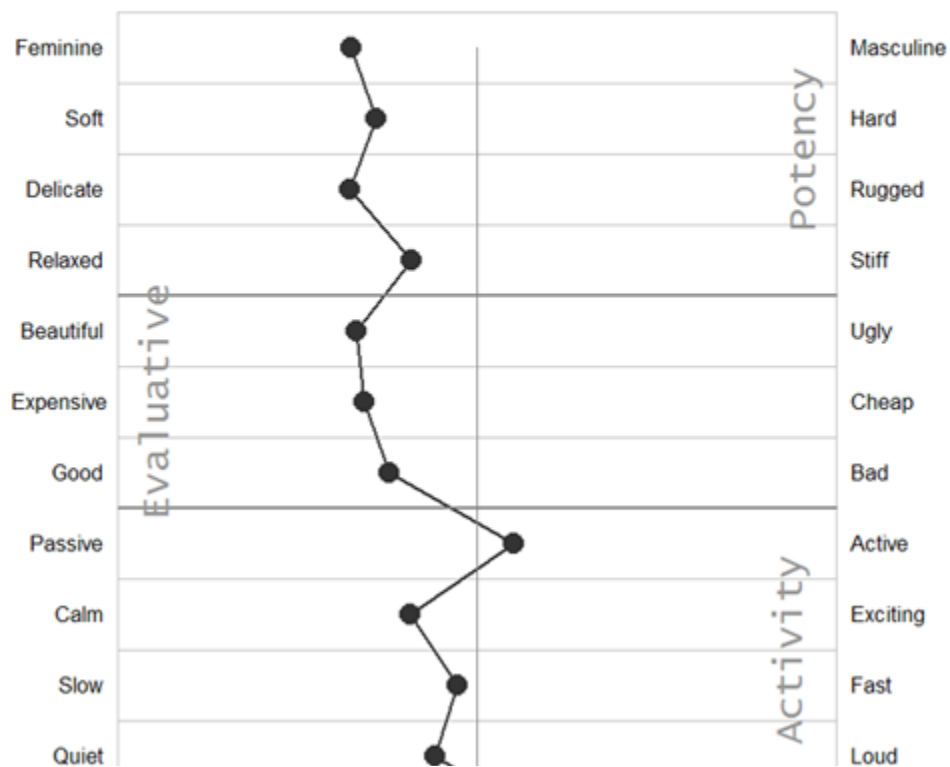
Viner Hand

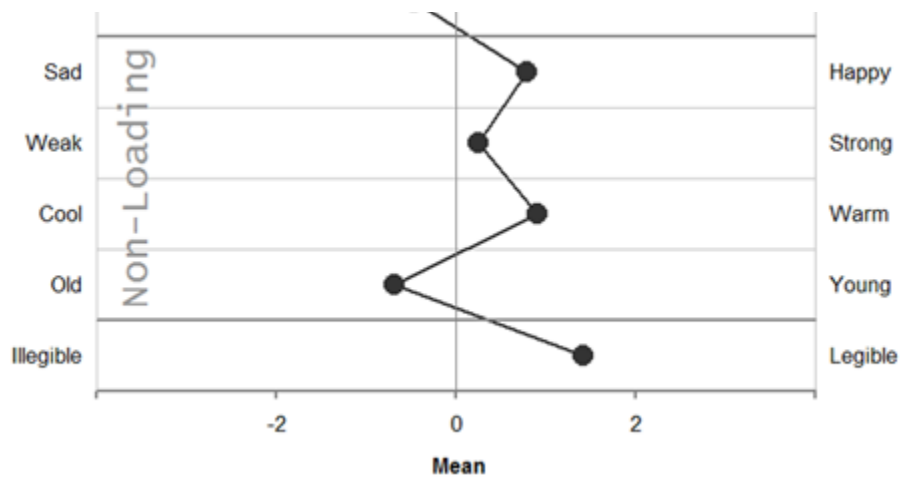




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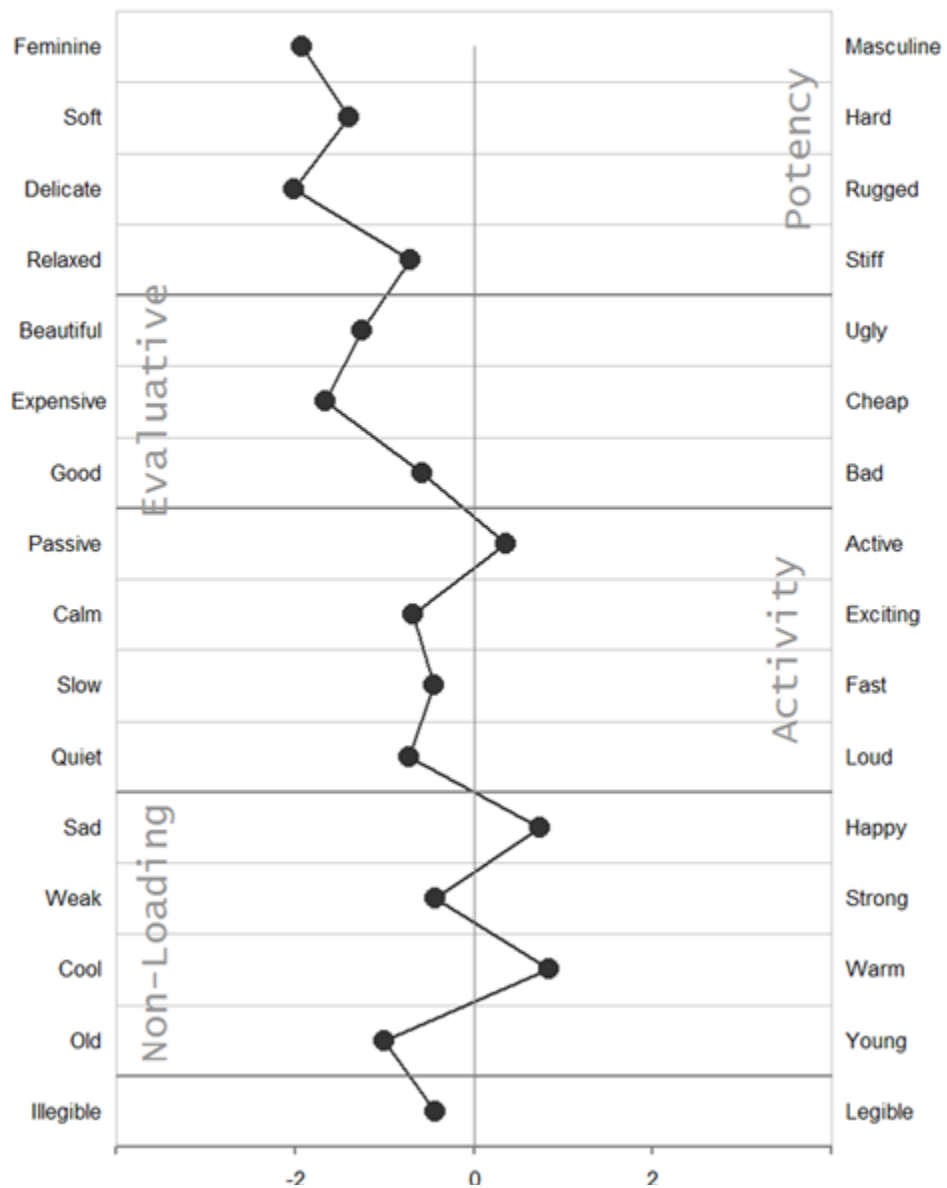
Monotype Corsiva





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Vivaldi



-
-
-
Mean

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*Note: This article presents a small portion of findings from Dawn Shaikh's dissertation investigating the perceptions of typeface personality. Please contact [Dr. Shaikh](#) for more information.

REFERENCES

Osgood, C. E., Suci, G. J., & Tannenbaum, P. H. (1957). The measurement of meaning. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

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