Agent Gender and Sex-Typed Social Influenceability in Online Communication

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A computer-based online simulation is conducted where a computer agent with a contrived (male or female) gender identity interacts with consumers to guide their shopping for digital cameras. The results of an experiment show that when a female agent uses an aggressive sales tactic, the female agent suffers from a significant loss of her trustworthiness. However, the same sale aggressiveness demonstrated by a male agent does not negatively influence the subjects’ perceptions about the male agent’s competence and benevolence, nor is the subjects’ intention to trust the male agent negatively affected. Implications for effective gender-based salesmanship in e-marketing are discussed based on the experimental findings.

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Past research in gender and social influence has repeatedly found that men are generally more influential than women in most persuasion settings (Carli 2001). Men have power and status based on expertise and authority; the typical role of men is to lead, direct, and accomplish goals through job-related competence; thus, men are “agentic.” Since persuasion is about changing attitudes and dominating over other’s issue positions, persuasive attempts could basically be considered a masculine, rather than a feminine, task. Thus, it is not surprising that men exert more social influence when it comes to hard-core persuasion than women do. However, women might achieve social influence differently. The traditional social role of women is that of care-taker. Women are expected to be domestic, communal, and submissive. Having relatively lower social status and less power than men do, women are expected to be nice and benevolent, not necessarily display power, assertiveness, and dominance. Having genuine interest in others well being, benevolent and feminine individuals are trusted by others and their recommendations can be accepted equally well.

To date, gender research has found ample evidence that gender-stereotypical sex roles are prevalent in interpersonal relationships. In this study, I revisit gender influenceability in the e-commerce context where consumers interact with a computer agent while shopping. The context of human-computer interaction (HCI) provides a unique environment where social characteristics, such as personality, of a computer agent can be created or even manipulated (Moon and Nass 1996). For example, a computer agent can be given an artificial gender identity that emulates that of a human being. How would people treat a computer agent when the agent assumes a human-like gender identity?

In this study, a computer agent simulation is conducted where a computer agent with a contrived male or a female gender identity (the first experimental factor) interacts with consumers who are in the market for digital cameras. The “gendered” agent provides product information and shows four cameras with detailed attribute descriptions. During the consumer shopping process, the gendered agent uses two different levels of sales aggressiveness (the second experimental factor). I argue that an agent’s counter product recommendation for a more expensive item could be interpreted as a display of confidence, aggressiveness and even self-interest, all of which are strong male stereotypes (Bem 1974). Based on sex-role stereotypes, a male agent’s use of aggressive sales tactic may be viewed as more acceptable than a female agent’s use of the same sales tactic. An overly dominating and aggressive sales tactic used by a female agent may likely face consumer distrust because such behavior violates the traditional female sex-role.

The social influenceability of a computer agent in online communication is enhanced through consumers’ perceptions of the agent’s competence and benevolence. The more competent and the more benevolent the agent is perceived to be, the more likely consumers are to have intentions to trust the agent. Thus, I associate the influenceability of a (male or female) computer agent with subjects’ trust in the agent. Next, I discuss the multi-dimensionality of consumer trust by examining cognitive, affective, and intentional aspects.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

In this paper, I examine agent influenceability in terms of consumer trust. The basic premise of this paper is that a communicator can achieve higher social influence when one is trusted than not. Therefore, earning consumer trust means acquiring social influence. The importance of trust in interpersonal relationships as well as online-based relationships cannot be overstated in marketing. Golembiewski and McConkie (1975) note that “perhaps there is no single variable which so thoroughly influences interpersonal and group behaviour as does trust...”. Trust is the fundamental driver of interpersonal relationships and social order (and disorder) and has been studied extensively. Trust facilitates one’s decision-making when finding relationship and/or business partners. In the sales literature, the dependability of a retail salesperson is among the buyer’s most critical concerns. Furthermore, trustworthiness is found to be of the greatest importance among the many characteristics of a salesperson (e.g., friendly relationship, personable style, patient buying assistance, and quick service) for the buyer to determine future business with the salesperson (Hawes, Rao, and Baker 1993).

Consumer trust is multidimensional—having cognitive, affective, and intentional aspects (Lee 2002). Cognitive trust is based on an agent’s competence. Lewis and Weigert (1985) views trust as predictions and expectations that an agent will perform a job competently. The definition of trust by Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna (1985) suggests that trust is merely the degree of confidence one thinks about a relationship. Another definition by Zaltman and Moorman (1988) suggests that trust represents the extent to which the parties can predict one another’s performance; having faith that the other party will perform in a responsive manner with expertise and knowledge.

Trust also has an affective component. Luhmann (1979) suggests that true trust begins where (cognitive) knowledge ends. Benevolence refers to genuine interests in the other party’s welfare (Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna 1985), and a “genuine responsiveness” to the needs of the other party (Friedland 1990). In close interpersonal relationships, trust is often conceptualized in terms of attributions concerning the partner’s benevolence (Deutsch 1962; Giffin 1967; Pearce 1974). Benevolent partners have genuine, friendly interests in the other party’s welfare (Rempel and Holmes 1986), aside from their egocentric motives (Mayer, David, and Schoorman 1995). Thus, perceiving a partner’s benevolence includes feeling close to and cared by a partner who is on the trusting side, because the partner cares about the trustor’s best interest, not his or her self-interest.

Finally, trust is intention. Giffin (1967) cites risk as an essential element of trust. When one trusts another, something is risked by the trustor. Zaltman and Moorman’s (1988) definition of trust adds the “intentional” dimension to the meaning of “trusting.” Often trust represents the trustor’s willingness to depend on the trustee in a complex, uncertain, and risky situation. According to Rousseau et al. (1998), trust is better understood as the intention to rely on a partner-a psychological state to accept vulnerability based on positive feelings (affective basis) and expectations (cognitive basis) (Rousseau et al. 1998, p. 395). If one truly trusts an agent, one must be willing to rely on the agent in the decision-making process (Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande 1992), and willingly be ready to place one’s resources at the disposal of the agent (Coleman 1990; Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna 1985; Zand 1972). Accordingly, trusting intentions can be defined as the willingness to delegate decision power to the party to be trusted.

Given that consumer trust can have three aspects (competence, benevolence, and trusting intention), if a “gendered” agent demon-
strates a recognizable aggressiveness in his/her sales tactic, what role does the agent’s sex play in subjects’ evaluation of the competence and benevolence of the agent, and the intention to trust the agent?

**HYPOTHESIS**

Past research in gender influence has found that in general men are perceived to be more influential than women. Gender stereotyping includes greater scrutiny of women’s assertive leadership behaviors and greater acceptance of men’s display of competence and knowledge. Carli (2001) notes that “men have more right to act as authorities as than women do, and that women must communicate communal motivation more than men. As a result, not only would people generally be more open to the influence of men than that of women, but women’s influence would be more conditional than men’s, dependent on the use of an influence style that corresponds prescriptively to the stereotypical female role” (p.726).

As noted earlier, empirical evidence shows that women are in general less influential than men are in persuasive communication setting. Such influenceability differential by agent gender depends on the context of interaction with various moderating influences in operation. People are more open to the influence of men than that of women, and more importantly, whatever influence women can achieve may be more conditional than men’s. Gender-typing of the task is one example; women’s influence is found only in feminine and domestic tasks (Carli 2001). The importance of masculine competence might become more pronounced in masculine areas such as technology and management than in feminine areas (Carli 2001). The Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright 1994) also suggests that consumers expect the content and type of message (e.g., information on masculine products) to be consistent with the characteristics of a communicator (e.g., male gender identity).

Since competence and power are masculine traits, unless women temper their expertise or agency with displays of communality, warmth, and niceness, prescriptive sex stereotypes can reduce competent women’s likeability and influenceability (Rudman and Glick 2001). Such prescriptive sex stereotype can penalize women whose communication style appears to be too agentic and masculine (Rudman and Glick 2001). A male communicators’ display self-confidence can be taken as competence; while similar presentation of masculine assertiveness by a female communicator can create a backlash effect in the form of losing audience trust (Rudman and Glick 2001).

Agent’s sex and sales aggressiveness are the two focal manipulation factors in this experimental study. The experimental procedure and simulation protocols are as follows. Agent’s sex was manipulated using gender-typical names (John or Jane) and faces (a male or a female cartoon face with the warm script). In order to vary the levels of aggressiveness in sales tactic, recommendation price and a display of agent’s self-confidence were used. Under a more aggressive condition, the agent would counter the consumer’s original choice of camera with another camera that was 10% more expensive and said “I am sure that this is a superior choice than your earlier choice of camera.” In a less aggressive condition, the agent quoted a price that was 10% less expensive for the same camera and said “I think you might like this camera better than your earlier choice of camera.” In both conditions, the cameras recommended by the agent were identical except for the price.

Making a recommendation that can invalidate a subject’s own choice is a dominating behavior in itself and can trigger reactance to the invasive recommendation (Fitzsimmons and Lehmann 2004). When the sales recommendation involves a price upgrade, it can be considered a display of confidence, independence, dominance, and even self-interest, all of which are strong male stereotypes (Bem 1974). Therefore, I hypothesize that when a female agent make a price upgrade recommendation, she will suffer from significant loss of consumer trust in terms of deterioration of perceived competence, benevolence, and trusting intention—due to the mismatch of her dominating/aggressive behavior with the submissive and compliant female stereotype. However, a male agent’s identical behavior will less likely result in the loss of his trustworthiness as a result of the male stereotypes of self-assurance and dominance. Accordingly, my research hypothesis addresses these sensitivity differentials based on agent gender on all three dimensions of consumer trust, when the agent makes an aggressive price upgrade recommendation.

**H1:** As the agent adopts a higher, as opposed to a lower, level of aggressiveness in sales tactic:

(a) the perceived competence of a female agent will diminish to a greater extent than the perceived competence of a male agent will;

(b) the perceived benevolence of a female agent will diminish to a greater extent than the perceived benevolence of a male agent will; and

(c) subjects’ intention to trust a female agent will diminish to a greater extent than their intention to trust a male agent will.

In the next section, I explain the experimental procedure that tests the aforementioned research hypotheses using a computer agent simulation.

**METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a 2 (agent gender: male and female) X 2 (aggressive price recommendation: 10% less expensive and 10% more expensive) between-subject design. Subjects were recruited from a population of young adults (undergraduate college students) in a large land-grant US University. Undergraduate students were deemed appropriate for this online consumer behavior experiment, because they generally spend considerable time on the Internet. A total of 95 students participated in the experiment. Students were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions.

**Interface Protocol.** The experiment required some computer-programming resources in order to enable different social characteristics of the computer agent, e.g., agent gender. Macromedia’s Authorware 5.2 was utilized to create the prototype of the agent program. The base protocol of the shopping simulation included several sections including (1) a brief introduction of the agent (in the male agent condition, a male face with the name of John was projected on screen; in the female agent condition, a female face introduced her as Jane); (2) provision of information about important features of digital cameras (e.g., resolution, screen size, and zoom size) (3) Agent’s request for subject input regarding the importance of each feature when purchasing a digital camera; (4) Agent’s presentation of four cameras that could match the respondent’s preferences revealed from the preference inquiry in section #3; (5) subject choice of one camera among the four cameras shown in section #4; and (6) Agent’s recommendation of a different camera that had two levels of upgraded features and was 10% more (or less) expensive than the subject’s earlier choice of camera in section #5.

**Measures.** Competence is the confidence in the agent’s capability with respect to the role performance. The following measurement items were adopted and modified from what had been origi-
nally proposed by Smith and Barclay (1997), Geller (1999), and Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande (1992): (1) When it came to camera, [Agent name] knew enough to give me a good advice; (2) I trust [Agent name]’s expertise in cameras; (3) I had confidence in [Agent name]’s knowledge about cameras.

The following measure for benevolence were modified from the previously published scales by Ganesan (1994), Hawes, Rao, and Baker (1993), and Price and Arnold (1999): (1) [Agent name] seemed to care about me; (2) [Agent name] made me feel good; (3) [Agent name] was like a friend during the shopping experience; I felt close to [Agent name] during the shopping; and (5) [Agent name] responded to my needs in a caring way (a new item created for this study).

Trusting intentions were measured using the following items modified from by Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande’s measures (1992): (1) I was willing to let [Agent name] make important choice decisions for me; (2) I was willing to trust [Agent name] to make camera purchases even when I was unable to monitor his/her activities; and (3) I would be comfortable giving [Agent name] responsibility to make camera purchase decisions for me. At the end of experiment, respondents were debriefed and thanked for their participation. Reliability for the three trust scales was acceptable (Competence Chronbach’s alpha=0.77; Benevolence Chronbach’s alpha=0.90; Trusting Intention=0.74) and thus a summed score of each trust construct was used for subsequent statistical analyses.

**Manipulation Check.** All subjects answered correctly when asked about the gender of the agent they interacted with while shopping for cameras. Subjects were also asked to choose from the following whether the camera recommended by [Agent name: John or Jane] was (1) more expensive; (2) the same price; or (3) less expensive than their own choice. All subjects answered correctly. Respondents then evaluated the level of aggressiveness of agent’s sales tactic using a 5-point scale ranging from “not at all aggressive” (=1) to “extremely aggressive” (=5). Respondents evaluated the agent recommending a 10% price upgrade with strong self-confidence to be more aggressive (M=2.98) than the agent recommending a 10% price discount (M=2.58, t=2.06, p=0.04). In order to check for potential confounding, the agent’s attractiveness and likeability were measured using a seven-point semantic differential scale. The results of t-tests demonstrated that the male and female agents did not differ significantly in terms of attractiveness (t=0.29, p=0.76), likeability (t=0.08, p=0.93), attitude toward agent (t=0.51, p=0.60), perceived agent warmth (t=0.77, p=0.44), or perceived agent coldness (t=0.32, p=0.74). In addition, for the item of “I was confident about the agent’s expertise,” the male and female agents did not differ significantly (t=1.41, p=0.16), although the male agent received a slightly higher mark (Mmale=3.66, Mfemale=3.44).

### Results

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted using the three summed scores of agent competence, agent benevolence, and trusting intention as dependent variables and two manipulation factors (agent gender and aggressive price recommendation). The mean figures are shown in Table 1. The multivariate test showed that the MANOVA model was overall significant (Wilks’ Lambda=0.02, p=0.00; Hotelling’s T=36.81, p=0.00). The multivariate main effect of agent gender on the three trust scales was only marginally significant (Wilks’ Lambda=0.92, p=0.00; Hotelling’s T=0.08, p=0.06), and the multivariate main effect of aggressive price recommendation was insignificant (Wilks’ Lambda=0.93, p=0.12; Hotelling’s T=0.06, p=0.12).

In order to test the research hypothesis, I examined the interaction effect between agent gender and aggressive price recommendation on each trust construct. Given the sex role stereotype, female agent’s aggressive product recommendation (i.e., recommending a product that is more expensive than the anchor price) is incongruous with the typical female sex role; it was earlier hypothesized that subjects’ trust perceptions about the female agent’s competence, benevolence and trusting intention would erode to a greater extent than their perceptions about the male agent would.

The results of planned contrast tests showed that H1 was overall supported. For the female agent, the perceived competence diminished significantly (F1, 46=4.03, p=0.05) when the agent adopted a more aggressive sales tactic (M=13.47) than when the agent adopted a less aggressive sales tactic (M=14.70). However, for the male agent, the difference in perception of the agent’s competence by the higher recommendation price (M=15.20) compared to the lower recommendation price (M=14.25) was not significant (F1, 45=1.29, p=0.26). Thus, H1a was supported. Interestingly, there was directional evidence, while insignificant, that the male agent could be perceived to be more competent when he recommended a higher-priced camera compared to when he recommended a lower-priced camera, which was opposite to what was observed with the female agent, because her attempt at up-selling did weaken subjects’ perception about the female agent’s competence. For the male agent, the perceived benevolence did not diminish significantly (F1, 45=0.30, p=0.58) as a result of increasing sales aggressiveness (Mhigh price=14.25 vs. Mlow price=15.03). However, the same attempt to switch subjects to a higher-priced item resulted in a significant weakening of the perceived benevolence of the female agent (F1, 46=5.28, p=0.02, Mhigh price=16.59 vs. Mlow price=14.28), thereby supporting H1b. The contrast test between the male and female agents again demonstrated female vulnerability in terms of trusting intention. A more aggressive sales tactic did not affect subjects’ intention to trust the male agent (F1, 45=0.79, p=0.37; Mhigh price=8.50 vs. Mlow price=9.18), but it negatively affected subjects’ intention to trust the female agent (F1,

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agent Gender</th>
<th>Sales Tactic</th>
<th>Competence</th>
<th>Benevolence</th>
<th>Trusting Intention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Non-Aggressive</td>
<td>14.29</td>
<td>15.03</td>
<td>9.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>15.20</td>
<td>14.25</td>
<td>8.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Non-Aggressive</td>
<td>14.70</td>
<td>16.59</td>
<td>9.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>13.47</td>
<td>14.28</td>
<td>7.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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4.37, p=0.04; M_{high\ price}=7.61 vs. M_{low\ price}=9.00). Thus, H1c was also supported.

I also checked for potential influences of subject sex on three trust constructs and found no significant main effect of subject sex, nor was the interaction effect between subject sex and agent gender on competence, benevolence, and trusting intention found to be significant.

DISCUSSION

Among various communicator attributes that enhance influenceability, competence and benevolence are essential factors people use to assess the validity of information provided by the communicator. A competent agent can provide valid information because s/he knows what is right and wrong based on expertise and knowledge. A benevolent agent will provide the best information within his/her knowledge based on genuine willingness to help and serve customers. Biernat and Fuegen (2001) note that "the very essence of gender stereotype defines men to be instrumentally competent and agentic compared to women" (p.707).

The gender stereotypes also prescribe women to be less task-competent and more submissive than men because women are traditionally associated with the homemaker role (Fuegen et al. 2004). Leadership traits are also gendered (Kawakami, White, and Langer 2000). Since leaders are expected to be competent, task-oriented, masculine, and even “charismatic,” a successful leadership role may conflict with the traditional female gender stereotype. Carl (2001) notes that since people are more open to the influence of men than that of women, whatever influence women can achieve is more volatile than men’s. Kawakami, White and Langer (2000) describe a women’s paradox. If women adopt a masculine leadership style, they will be disliked and if they adopt a nurturing female leadership style, they will be liked, but deemed incompetent. Thus, when women hold leadership positions, they are vulnerable to “prejudiced evaluations and lowered effectiveness” (Eagly et al 1995, p.126).

While the gender of a communicator could be a peripheral cue (background variable) rather than central (issue-relevant) information in the context of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM, Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983), subjects often associate communicator gender with content expertise, such as men have more expertise than women, for example in technology arena. The Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright 1994) proposes that experts deliver strong messages and non-experts deliver weak messages. Thus, male salesmen are expected to make strong recommendations based on competence and confidence, whereas female sales associates are expected to deliver weaker (and benevolent) product recommendations. When these expectations are violated, consumers might engage in deep cognition to look for an answer. If the source (a female agent) has an apparent self-interest (e.g., seeking more profits) in her advocacy for higher priced products, “the inconsistency between message and source is interpreted as a manipulative mal-intent and evokes a negative response” (Artz and Tybout 1999, p.52). My experiment results suggest that male communicators’ display self-confidence in technology can be taken as competence; a display of masculine assertiveness by female communicators can engender a backlash effect in the form of her losing consumer trust.

IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study shed light on salesmanship and leadership for both genders. For male salesperson, competence is the major influence factor and a male agent who is perceived to possess sufficient expertise and competence can make a strong sales recommendation to upgrade consumers’ product choice without losing his credibility. Introduction of higher-priced items by a male agent can be even viewed as a display of expertise and self-confidence in content knowledge especially in the sales of male-oriented products. On the other hand, women stereotypically are not expected to have much expertise in technology. Therefore, a female (and supposedly non-expert) agent’s recommendation of higher-priced cameras could have triggered consumer doubt of her hidden motives, and as a result, consumers might have readjusted their evaluation of her based on this evidence of dishonesty and self-interest. A better sales technique for a female agent that could have been a recommendation of an alternative which provides a better value to a customer. A subtle delivery of non-aggressive product recommendations by a female agent could have been taken as a sign that she is honest and cares about the customer, thereby possibly enhancing her influenceability via a display of feminine benevolence.

Given the fact that during the past decade, the number of women occupying and seeking managerial and leadership positions have grown exponentially, my results have important implications for women in leadership positions. Women in leadership positions in male-dominated areas should not lose benevolence and genuineness while they seek higher social influenceability through masculine charisma. A woman leader in a managerial position who appears to be competent and benevolent at the same time, demonstrating an androgynous leadership style may likely achieve higher social influence than a female leader who is simply masculine and dominating (Bem 1974).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this experiment was to examine the sex-typed influenceability of male and female agents when a computer agent utilizes two different product recommendation styles. In one condition the agent attempted to switch consumers to a more expensive alternative, and in the other condition, to a less expensive product. If the agent were an effective persuader, subjects would likely trust the agent even after the price upgrade attempts. On the other hand, if the agent were not an effective persuader, such attempt would be detrimental to the agent’s credibility. How would the agent’s gender interact with individuals’ evaluation of the agent competence, agent benevolence, and their intentions to trust the agent?

This study revisited the issue of gender and social influence in the e-commerce context where consumers interacted with a computer agent program that had a contrived gender identity. The results of my study confirmed female vulnerability when she assumed an assertive salesman style that is inconsistent with typical female stereotype. It was found that the female agent suffered from a significant loss of influenceability when she adopted an aggressive recommendation style. Subjects thought that the more aggressive female agent was less competent, less benevolent, and thus they were less likely to trust her.

Based on the experimental findings that subjects’ judgment of agent’s trustworthiness was affected solely by the contrived gender identity, not by what the agent did or said, I argue that male and female agents could achieve social influence differently because an individual’s initial assessment of the agent’s trustworthiness is socially constructed, being affected by prevailing sex role stereotypes. Male salespersons could enhance their competence and product expertise to increase their influenceability. Female salespeople should communicate their genuine interest in the customer’s welfare and their willingness to serve the customer. In male-
dominated product areas, a female agent might not want to make aggressive product recommendations hastily, because the gender stereotype could cause a backlash and harm her credibility.

The limitation of this experiment is that I used only one consumer electronics product that could be rather male-oriented. Eagly, Karau, Makhijani (1995) found, in their meta-analysis, that leadership effectiveness depended on the gender-typing of a task, i.e., men are more competent than women in male-oriented domains, and women are more effective than men in female-oriented arenas. Future research should examine how product gender-typing can interact with communicator gender identity in achieving high social influence. For example, if a female product (e.g., lipstick) is used, a female, as opposed to a male, agent has higher content expertise. In such a case, will a female agent still be penalized for an aggressive upgrade recommendation? How will a male agent be viewed if he makes aggressive recommendations for the products he does not have much expertise? Since the current experiment provides evidentiary data of online viewers’ discriminatory practice toward female-gendered computer agents who behaved in a masculine style, future research needs to investigate whether online viewers would seek the same level of gender-norm compliance from male-gendered agents in online sales encounter.

In conclusion, by adopting a unique research context in which a computer agent interacts with human consumers, I found that computer agents in human-computer interaction (HCI) are not free from sex-role stereotypes, even if the gender identity of the computer agent is contrived. Female identity becomes a disadvantage when the job description requires an assertive salesman style that is inconsistent with typical female stereotype. Therefore, marketers are advised to select different sales technique if their online agents are “gendered.”

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