You Like Mars ... I Prefer Venus: Gendered Responses to Marketing Communications

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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15665/gender/v04/GCB-04

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Advertisements, product designs and styling, as well as other marketing artifacts (e.g., packaging, coupons, web sites) are testimonies about consumer culture and consumer preferences. Through the use of images, words, message claims, objects, aesthetics, color, etc., marketers try to convey meanings about their offerings. Audiences decode, process, and respond to these communication efforts. Yet, this seemingly straightforward process is laden with potential communication pitfalls. For instance, ads are designed using symbols, textual conventions, and cultural experiences that should be shared by both the reader of the ad, and the creator of the ad (Scott 1994a, b). The reader of the ad uses his or her knowledge of these shared symbols and experiences to understand the message the advertiser is trying to communicate. Individuals differ in their interpretations of advertisements according to both personal experience and group membership (McCracken 1987, 1989; Scott 1994b). Thus, a reader’s unique demographic characteristics, experiences, and personality will influence the meanings that s/he “reads” into the ad. Given that people select, distort, and create messages according to their personal perceptions (Lannon and Cooper 1983), and that male and female consumers read text through the filter of sex-specific concerns (Stern 1994), gender is a key variable influencing how someone interprets a particular marketing communication effort or aesthetic execution (see Holbrook 1986).

This special session addresses three aspects of the role of gender in marketing communication. All three papers share common theoretical foundations, but expand from these into different and innovative research directions. Nelson’s paper investigates the role of morality, as measured by the World View Questionnaire, (Stander and Jensen, 1993), with respect to charitable appeals in advertising. Her findings confirm that males and females react differently to prosocial and self-oriented advertising appeals for a cancer charity. Females prefer the prosocial appeal, and males favor the help yourself appeal. Moreover, her investigation confirms that males and females have different moral orientations. Males tend to be Kantian in their orientation (i.e., valuing justice and individual rights) versus females that tend to be more caring oriented. Finally, Nelson also shows that gender differences that she observed with respect to ad choice disappear if moral orientation is considered in the analysis. This suggests that in the case of preference for charitable appeal, the gender differences that were originally accounted for are driven by underlying personality differences between both sexes.

Kacen, and Navasaitas’ paper brings together several streams of research: spokes persons in advertising, reader response theory and gender issues in information processing. More specifically, they investigate what meanings consumers take away from an ad and how these meanings differ depending on the genders of the advertising spokes person and of the
viewer of the ad. They anticipate that in this study, both males and females will respond more favorably to the GMC Jimmy truck ad when the gender of the spokes person matches the viewer's gender. They also anticipate that females will use more adjectives and emotion words, and will list more claims than males when describing the truck ad. Conversely, males will use more self-referential statements than females when they describe the ad. Overall, Kacen and Navasaitas' paper contribute to a more thorough understanding of gender differences in consumers' responses to advertising spokes persons, detailing the chief psychological processes that are at play in this type of persuasive communication.

The third paper in this special session addresses a somewhat ignored aspect of marketing communication: product design and aesthetics. Brunel shows that males and females evaluate product aesthetics differently. The results indicate that males and females exhibit significant differences in aesthetic evaluation, attitude toward the product and purchase intention. Moreover, the results confirm that there are product categories (clock in this case) that are more salient to women, or for which gender differences are greater. Finally this paper shows significant gender differences in information processing. The results suggest that females integrated the displayed information to a greater degree than males. Females used the available information to make inferential judgements about attributes they had not received information about. Males did not. As a whole, this experiment substantiates the importance of gender in the study of consumer responses to product form and function. Findings are consistent with the understanding that product aesthetics communicate information used in consumer's judgments, and principles and theories developed in the advertising domain are also shown to apply in this communication context.

Taken together, these three studies represent significant developments in our understanding of gender issues in marketing and persuasive communication. They build on complementary streams of research and introduce novel findings. We trust that these would generate a spirited discussion under the guidance of Jonathan Schroeder. His social-psychological background and his research expertise in advertising and gender issues make him a particularly well-suited discussion leader for this special session.