Information Processing Differences Between Men and Women: Theory and Preliminary Findings

Sanjay Putrevu, Brock University, St. Catharines, Canada

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15706/gender/v06/GCB-06

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Sex is frequently used as a basis for segmentation for a significant proportion of products and services. Such segmentation seems consistent with the ascribing of specific skills/personality traits to the two sexes and the observation that men and women have unique interests and knowledge associated with their respective social roles. From a marketing and/or advertising perspective, the relevant research question is whether such differences translate into consistent differences in information processing and judgment.

INFORMATION PROCESSING DICHOTOMIES

According to the Selectivity Hypothesis proposed by Meyers-Levy (1989), sex differences emerge because, under certain conditions, men are more likely to be driven by overall message themes or schemas and women are more likely to engage in detailed elaboration of message content. Specifically, men are classified as heuristic processors who often do not engage in comprehensive processing of all available information before rendering judgment. Instead, they seem to rely on various heuristics in place of detailed message elaboration. Women, on the other hand, are classified as comprehensive processors who attempt to assimilate all available information before rendering judgment.

An alternative explanation for the sex differences comes from research in the area of cognitive psychology which suggests that there are two types of elaboration (Einstein and Hunt 1980; Hunt and Einstein 1981) that facilitate comprehension in alternative ways. One type of elaboration is called relational processing and emphasizes similarities or shared themes among disparate pieces of information. It might occur spontaneously when people receive many similar message cues. The second type of elaboration, item-specific processing, stresses attributes that are unique or distinctive to a particular message. It might occur spontaneously when people receive multiple message cues that are, in context, largely unrelated.

Men who are primarily concerned with self-focused, agentic goals are more likely to focus on those message attributes that are most likely to affect them directly (i.e., item-specific processing). Women who are driven by relationship-oriented, communal goals are more likely to consider all aspects of the message since they are interested in its global impact (i.e., relational processing).
METHOD AND RESULTS

The sample consisted of 36 undergraduate students (18 male and 18 female) from a mid-sized university. Subjects were exposed to an eight-page excerpt that was positioned as a newly created university magazine. The excerpt contained the ads featuring Progresso Chicken Noodle Soup and Brita Water Filters that appeared on the third and sixth pages, respectively. After all subjects returned the magazine, they responded to the dependent measures – unaided recall and cognitive responses. The cognitive responses were coded into attribute-, category-, and other-thoughts by two judges (agreement rate = .85). The two sexes did not differ in terms of number of items recalled (6.11 and 6.39 for men and women, respectively; \(t = -.67; p > .10\)) or total thoughts (Progresso: 2.11 and 2.33 for men and women, respectively; \(t = -.74; p > .10\); Brita: 2.22 and 2.50 for men and women, respectively; \(t = -.81; p > .10\)). This pattern of results does not support the selectivity hypothesis. However, men generated more attribute thoughts than women for both target brands (Progresso: .94 and .56 for men and women, respectively; \(t = 2.50; p < .05\); Brita: 1.06 and .61 for men and women, respectively; \(t = 2.56; p < .05\)) and women generated more category thoughts than men for both target brands (Progresso: .56 and 1.00 for men and women, respectively; \(t = -2.20; p < .05\); Brita: .50 and 1.00 for men and women, respectively; \(t = -2.30; p < .05\)). These results are consistent with the portrayal of men as item-specific processors and women as relational processors.

DISCUSSION

In sum, neither the cognitive-response data nor the recall data support the selectivity hypothesis’s prediction that female processing is more comprehensive than male processing. However, the results support the notion that men use a more item-specific processing style and women use a more relational processing style when processing print advertisements. The advertising implications of such processing differences are as follows: men, as item-specific processors, would value attribute-based messages that bring out the distinctive or unique features of the claim. This suggests that ads targeting men should downplay those features that are common to the product category but should instead highlight those few features that are unique to the advertised brand. In contrast, women, as relational processors, would value category-based messages that focus on the common themes of the claim rather than its unique features. When targeting women advertisers might benefit by focusing on features that are common to the product category and highlighting how the advertised brand fits in with other brands in the product category. In sum, advertisers might want to use attribute-based copy while targeting a predominantly male audience and a category-based copy while targeting a predominantly female audience. Similarly, visuals in ads targeting men should highlight the distinctive nature of the selected attribute(s), and visuals in ads targeting women should focus on the common theme underlying the various attributes.

REFERENCES

