Men and Women Watching and Reading: Gender, Media, and Message Effects in Advertising

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - In marketing, gender is commonly used as a basis for market segmentation because it is one of a few variables that meet the criteria for successful strategy implementation: (1) gender is easily identifiable, (2) gender segments are accessible, and (3) gender segments are large enough to be profitable (Darley and Smith 1995). For advertisers, this practice suggests the importance of understanding how males and females respond to persuasive appeals because ad messages are one of the major ways of communicating with these consumer groups. Ads are typically targeted to one or both of these segments, and their effectiveness may depend on how males and females respond to the ads.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In marketing, gender is commonly used as a basis for market segmentation because it is one of a few variables that meet the criteria for successful strategy implementation: (1) gender is easily identifiable, (2) gender segments are accessible, and (3) gender segments are large enough to be profitable (Darley and Smith 1995). For advertisers, this practice suggests the importance of understanding how males and females respond to persuasive appeals because ad messages are one of the major ways of communicating with these consumer groups. Ads are typically targeted to one or both of these segments, and their effectiveness may depend on how males and females respond to the ads.

The goal of our study is to investigate gender differences in responses to advertising. Our basic thesis, which builds on the research by Meyers-Levy and Sternthal (1991) and Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran (1991), is that females are predisposed to a detailed information processing strategy whereas males are predisposed to heuristic message processing. Specifically, we examine how these predispositions interact with two characteristics of the ad, type of media and framing of the message, in determining males' and females' responses to advertising. These characteristics can support either detailed or heuristic processing, and our general argument is that an individual will respond to the ad more favorably when ad characteristics support the use of strategy this individual is predisposed to.

The Effect of Media. The existing literature (Chaudhuri and Buck 1995; Batra 1986) suggests that messages presented in print provide an opportunity for high message processing because in print individuals may choose an optimal pace to process the message, stopping to consider the arguments and elaborating on them at will. In contrast, broadcast ads are fleeting and not under the control of the viewer.

Integration of these findings with the notion of gender differences in information processing strategies suggests that print ads allow, while broadcast ads inhibit, the use of processing strategy females are predisposed toward, namely, detailed processing. The fact that print ads allow detailed processing, however, doesn’t mean that they cannot be processed in a heuristic manner. In fact, we expect that males, by virtue of their inclination toward heuristic processing, will not use the opportunity to elaborate on print ads but instead will process them via a peripheral route similarly to how they would process broadcast ads. We further suggest that an individual will enjoy the experience of watching the ad to a greater extent when the ad permits him or her to use the processing strategy the individual is predisposed to. Thus, we hypothesize a two-way interaction between gender and type of media:

\[ H_1: \text{Females will report a more favorable viewing experience for print than for broadcast ads.} \]
\[ H_2: \text{Males will report equally favorable viewing experiences for print and broadcast ads.} \]

The knowledge of how individuals feel while viewing the ads is certainly interesting yet not very helpful for predicting consumer behavior. A more complete picture of gender differences in responses to advertising requires addressing the issue of ad effectiveness, which we conceptually define as the potential of an ad to influence behavior and operationalize through a) intentions to buy a product; and b) likelihood of recommending the product to friends and/or family members (WOM communication). Specifically, we suggest that when a message is processed in a manner consistent with predispositions, it will not only result in a more pleasant viewing experience but will also be more effective:

\[ H_3: \text{Females will report more intentions to a) purchase the product, and b) to engage in WOM communication for print than for broadcast ads (because they will process print ads in a detailed manner).} \]
\[ H_4: \text{Males will report equal intentions to a) purchase the product, and b) to engage in WOM communication for print and for broadcast ads (because they will process both in a heuristic manner).} \]

The Effect of Message Framing. In addition to the effect of media, we also wanted to investigate whether males and females respond differently to positively and negatively framed messages. For the purposes of our study a negatively framed ad is one which emphasizes losses if one does not use the product, and a positively framed ad is one which emphasizes gains that result from using the product. Two studies (Levin and Gaeth 1988; Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy 1990) confirmed that people respond differently to positively and negatively framed messages. In general, it has been shown that when there is little emphasis on detailed processing, the ad is more persuasive when it is framed positively than when it is framed negatively; however, when detailed processing is emphasized, persuasion is greater when the message is framed negatively than when it is framed positively.

The implication of these findings for our research is that positively framed messages are more likely to be effective for males than for females because they resonate more with a heuristic, rather than with a detailed processing strategy. We expect this difference to be most salient for broadcast ads because in this case both type of media and message framing will support the processing strategy males are predisposed to and discourage the females’ predisposed processing strategy. Thus, we suggest:

\[ H_5: \text{Among all conditions, males will report the most intentions to a) purchase the product, and b) to engage in WOM communication for positively framed broadcast ads.} \]
\[ H_6: \text{Among all conditions, females will report the least intentions to a) purchase the product, and b) to engage in WOM communication for positively framed broadcast ads.} \]

Study and Results. The experimental design involved three between-subject conditions: gender, type of media (print vs. broadcast) and message framing (positive vs. negative). Seventy undergraduate business students (34 males and 36 females) participated in our study.

The expected interaction between type of media and gender on viewing experience was close to the significant level \((p=.12)\) with the means in the predicted direction. The results of simple effects
tests indicated that females reported a significantly more favorable viewing experience for print than for broadcast ads ($M_{\text{print}}=4.91 > M_{\text{broadcast}}=3.89$, $p<.05$), thus providing support for $H_1$. Consistent with $H_2$, there was no variation in males' responses to print and broadcast ads ($p>.90$).

Regarding ad effectiveness, the interaction effect between gender and type of media was marginally significant for the purchase intentions ($p<.10$) and highly significant for the likelihood of recommending product to friends and/or family members ($p<.05$). The simple effects tests revealed that females reported significantly more intentions to buy the product ($M_{\text{print}}=5.88 > M_{\text{broadcast}}=4.81$, $p<.05$) and to engage in WOM communication ($M_{\text{print}}=5.75 > M_{\text{broadcast}}=4.19$, $p<.05$) after viewing print rather than broadcast ads. Thus, hypotheses 3a and 3b are supported. Consistent with hypotheses 4a and 4b, no significant differences between males' responses to print and broadcast ads were found for either purchase intentions ($p>.40$) or WOM communication intentions ($p>.50$).

Testing $H_5$ and $H_6$, we found that three-way interaction among gender, type of media, and message framing was marginally significant for intentions to buy the product ($p=.11$) and highly significant for intentions to engage in WOM communication ($p<.05$). As predicted by $H_5$, males reported the highest intentions to recommend the product ($M=4.43$) after watching positively framed broadcast ad. Consistent with $H_6$, females reported the lowest scores on both intention to buy the product ($M=3.70$) and likelihood to engage in WOM communication ($M=4.61$) in this condition.

Taken together, these results suggest that an individual responds more favorably to the ad when its characteristics support the use of processing strategy this individual is predisposed to. Specifically, females enjoyed the experience of viewing the ad to a greater extent and reported more behavioral intentions when the ad encouraged detailed rather than heuristic processing. As regards males, they reported equally favorable responses to print and broadcast ads, however, when both type of media and message framing encouraged heuristic processing, males rated ad as the most effective.

References


