The Moderating Effect of Self-Monitoring on Consumer Response to Gender Role Portrayals

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - During the last three decades, a substantial body of knowledge has accumulated on the moderating role of self-monitoring with respect to consumer behavior (Gangestad and Snyder 2000). One area in which our knowledge about the moderating effect of self-monitoring is limited is consumer attitudes toward commercial gender role portrayals. The topic is of considerable importance since gender identity can be a key aspect of brand positioning. The effectiveness of persuasive messages can therefore be considerably enhanced by knowing which consumer characteristics moderate the responsiveness to gender role portrayals; and self-monitoring could be one of these potential moderators.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/9150/volumes/v32/NA-32

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During the last three decades, a substantial body of knowledge has accumulated on the moderating role of self-monitoring with respect to consumer behavior (Gangestad and Snyder 2000). One area in which our knowledge about the moderating effect of self-monitoring is limited is consumer attitudes toward commercial gender role portrayals. The topic is of considerable importance since gender identity can be a key aspect of brand positioning. The effectiveness of persuasive messages can therefore be considerably enhanced by knowing which consumer characteristics moderate the responsiveness to gender role portrayals; and self-monitoring could be one of these potential moderators.

The primary theoretical sources we rely on are Wood and Eagly’s (2002) biosocial model of gender differences and self-monitoring theory (Gangestad and Snyder 2000; Snyder 1974). Wood and Eagly (2002) view gender roles as a result of social interaction whereby women and men learn to display particular behaviors in society. From this point of view, both gender (biological sex) and gender roles (masculinity and femininity) may shape specific behavior patterns, either independently or in interaction. On the other hand, the theory of self-monitoring suggests that people with a high expressive control may be motivated by social recognition and status more than people with lower levels of expressive control (Gangestad and Snyder 2000; Snyder 1974). Based on these theoretical accounts, the following hypotheses are developed:

H1a: Higher levels of self-monitoring lead to a higher identification with masculine gender roles.
H1b: The positive relationship between self-monitoring and masculine gender identity is stronger for women than for men.
H2a: High self-monitors respond more favorably to masculine gender role portrayals than low self-monitors.
H2b: High self-monitoring women respond more favorably to the masculine role portrayal of their sex than high self-monitoring men.

To test these hypotheses, two empirical studies are presented that use different methodological approaches. Study 1 relies on cross-sectional data to demonstrate that, independently of gender, high self-monitors identify more with masculine gender roles than low self-monitors. In study 2, we use an experimental design to show that high self-monitors respond more favorably than low self-monitors to brands featuring a strongly masculine positioning. As a result, H1a and H2a are supported and H1b and H2b are not supported. The studies show that high levels of self-monitoring lead to a strong identification with masculinity for both women and men and this is manifested in their positive responses to masculine gender role portrayals, too. At an applied level, this means that advertisers may well benefit from enhancing the masculine image of their brands, at least in the studied product category. This is even more so since low self-monitors do not reject masculine role portrayals either.

These results point to several intriguing directions for future research. First, it would be interesting to explore whether high self-monitoring people, be they men or women, react positively to masculine-type portrayals in real ad settings. A second avenue for future research would be to investigate the moderating role of self-monitoring on attitudes to “gendered” product categories (e.g. wine, SUVs, fashion) and brands (e.g. Marlboro, Always). Third, it would also be worthwhile to examine the generalization of the framework in a broader cross-cultural perspective. The present studies were conducted in a Western society dominated by a masculine rather than a feminine orientation (Hofstede 1980, 1991, 1998). Future research may undertake comparative studies in several countries with varying levels of masculinity/femininity scores.

REFERENCES