Who Uses Stereotypes Against Saleswomen? Femininity As Self-Schema and Biases in Trust Judgment

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While the idea that schemas can explain individual cognitive processes is well accepted in academia, to date, few studies in marketing have demonstrated that consumers’ femininity as self-schema can affect perceptions of others in exchange relationship. This paper examined how consumers’ femininity as self-schema could moderate their trust judgments in the context of computer-simulated online shopping. The first experiment demonstrated how consumer femininity could possibly be related to the use of sex-role stereotypes against female sales agents. High feminine individuals appeared to distrust a female sales agent whose sales approach was incongruent with feminine sex role. In contrast, low feminine individuals’ trust judgment of a female agent was independent of her compliance to sex role. The second experiment measuring response latency demonstrated that the distrustful reactions to a gender-norm dissonant female agent by high feminine individuals required short response time, which suggests such negative trust judgments could be a result of schema-based, quick processing instead of detailed, elaborate processing. Discussions of the experimental findings and future research directions are offered.

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INTRODUCTION

Consumers receive a wide variety of commercial stimulations everyday in marketplace and have to selectively notice only a subset of information. Markus (1977) suggested that consumers’ selective tendency in attention and judgment tasks could be guided by internal cognitive structures, so-called self-schema (Markus 1977). The focus of this paper is gender schema (Bem 1981; Meyers-Levy 1988), particularly femininity self-schema, as cognitive beliefs about oneself as a feminine, caring, expressive, and compassionate person (Bem 1974).

The idea of schemas as a construct for explaining cognitive processes has received wide acceptance from social psychologists. Among many things that define individuals’ self-identity, gender is one of the most fundamental elements. Self-perception provides a kind of lens through which one sees the world and others (Markus, Smith, and Moreland 1985), and it is plausible to believe that individuals’ strong identification with one specific sex role will have an impact on judgments made about others.

According to Bem (1985), individuals can be schematic or aschematic with respect to gender role. Furthermore, Hudak (1993) found that individuals who use gender as primary self-schema (e.g., feminine schematics) are more reliant on stereotypes and less able to appreciate individuating information, which can result in systematic biases in social judgment tasks. Hepburn (1985) also noted that sex-role stereotypes are the functional equivalent of gender schema.

While the extant social psychology literature sheds light on the link between gendered self-schema and potential biases in social judgment tasks, to date there are few studies in marketing which directly tested how consumers’ awareness of own psychological gender, particularly femininity, can moderate trust judgments made about others in exchange relationship. I report two experiments exploring the relationship between femininity as self-schema and the use of sex role stereotypes against saleswomen in the context of computer-simulated online shopping.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Femininity

Markus (1977) noted that “self-schemata are cognitive generalizations about the self, derived from past experience, that organize and guide the processing of self-related information contained in the individual’s social experiences” (p.64). Drawing on gender schema theory, femininity as self-schema can be developed throughout socialization process, and contains information about desirable social qualities, frames, and scripts. For example, beliefs about oneself as a warm, caring, expressive, and communal person might be a primary content in an individual’s femininity schema (Bem 1974). For example, a person may repeatedly receive negative social feedback whenever she acts out of her gender role. Such consistent feedback is then encoded as future guidance of behavior in her self-schema. If similar reinforcements are received repeatedly overtime, she is likely to develop a strong justification for her “feminine-self.” Her general behavioral predispositions will be aligned with the primary self-schema; and her judgment criteria of socially acceptable behaviors for self and others will reflect such a mental focus.

The Use of Stereotypes against Female Sex role Dissonance

In consumer behavior research, the issue of sex role has been studied by several researchers. For example, Meyers-Levy (1988) found that female consumers favored other-sensitive, communal messages as opposed to self-oriented messages, but this effect was demonstrated only when sex role schema was activated through priming. She also found that female consumers used both self- and other-information when judging product quality whereas males used only self-information. This suggests that individuals who are chronically feminine (with strong femininity self-schema) would want to receive nurturing and caring social feedback themselves, and could become overly stressed by aggressive and insensitive gestures.1

Earlier studies of women and social influence found that when women display masculine traits, they can face social rejection and lose trust from peers (Carli 2001; Lee 2007). Kawakami, White, and Langer (2000) pointed out that this gap between job requirement and feminine sex role is a double bind, leaving women unsure of how to behave in social relationship. Because most leadership positions require some masculine maneuvering skills to achieve goals, Kawakami et. al. (2000) maintained that women leaders should learn to free themselves from the bond of self-stereotyping as a feminine person.

Still, women’s use of masculine style involves substantial social risks particularly in the initial impression formation stage. Nieva and Gutek’s (1980), in their sex role congruence hypothesis, suggested that behavior that is incongruent with one’s gender role is evaluated negatively. Earlier studies supported this hypothesis. Bradley (1980) found that masculine female leaders were disliked by peers. Eagly, Makhijani, and Klonsky (1992), in their meta-analysis, concluded that there are negative social consequences for female leaders who are aggressive and masculine.

While the extant literature in social psychology and management clearly shows some evidence for prevailing sex role stereotypes in social relationships, what has not been discovered so far is who uses such stereotypes against women. Conventional wisdom would suggest that people who possess a higher social status will find a violation or minority stereotypes to be unacceptable. We think differently. Evidence from the social psychology literature suggests that whereas high-status individuals’ in-group bias tend to be automatic and positive (Rudman, Feinberg, and Fairchild 2002), minorities’ in-group bias tends to be negative at the non-conscious level, because members of minority groups absorb the society’s negative view even when their conscious beliefs contradicts self-inflicting stereotypes that are prevalent in a society (Jost, Burgess, and Mosso 2001).

The System Justification Theory (SJT: Jost and Banaji 1994) also states that minorities are subject to the tendency to devalue own group. Apparently, this theory does not necessarily predict that all

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1On the other hand, masculinity concerns with “the achievement of goals external to the interaction process” (Gill et al. 1987 p.379). Because masculinity is focused on manipulation of others to attain self-goals, it involves separating oneself from others. Masculinity directs attention to individuating and diagnostic information to achieve effectiveness rather than becoming sensitive to others’ feelings.
members of a minority group will subscribe to self-denigrating stereotypes. Rather, we believe that a minority individual’s negative social judgments of in-group members (or similar others) can be facilitated by how much one justifies the unfair status quo system while self-stereotyping oneself as a prototype minority. In other words, individuals who see themselves as a feminine person (with the activation of femininity as the primary self-schema) might readily use the femininity self-schema as a guidance of social judgment for others who are similar to self. Therefore, high feminine individuals may likely discriminate a female who is acting out of sex role; and more so because she is closer to their psychological profile.

By incorporating the existing stereotype literature to the marketing exchange relationship context, this paper investigates the question of who uses discriminatory sex-role stereotypes against female sales agents in online sales relationships. Specifically, we examine how consumers’ femininity as self-schemas could be related to the use of sex-role stereotypes against saleswomen. Our first prediction is that those individuals who strongly identify themselves as a feminine person will likely to discriminate an aggressive (hence counter-schematic) female sales agent. This hypothesis is examined in Experiment 1 by employing two different levels of sales aggressiveness displayed by male and female sales agents during the sales development process. We predict that high feminine individuals will respond more negatively to an aggressive than to a non-aggressive female sales agent. In a similar vein, we predict that low feminine individuals’ trust judgments will not affected by the varying levels sales aggressiveness of the same gendered agent.

We also believe that high feminine consumers’ distrustful responses to aggressive female agents could occur rather automatically. For high feminine individuals, the femininity schema is chronically active during social judgment tasks. In order to examine this implicit process of sex role stereotyping, we adopt response latency technique in Experiment 2.

Our research hypotheses are summarized as follows.

Hypothesis 1: Consumer femininity will be positively related to the use of sex-role stereotypes against female sales agents in marketing exchange relationships.

Hypothesis 2: Because high feminine individuals have strong and readily accessible femininity as self-schema, they will require short response time while judging a counter-schematic female agent to be distrustful.

Measuring Femininity

We use Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) to identify individuals with strong and weak femininity as self-schema. Femininity is a psychological trait that is separate from masculinity. The F scale in BSRI includes 20 items of feminine self-stereotyping, including how strongly one sees oneself as a warm, caring, tender, compassionate, emotional, expressive, and feminine person.

We follow Markus et al.’s (1982) view on femininity as self-schema; and agree that every individual can be relatively schematic with respect to femininity. Because femininity is a universal and psychological profile, those score high on the F scale could include both sexes. In other words, we believe that femininity is an archetypical trait of both sexes, and hence does not need to be prototyped under female sex only (Jung 2004). Studies in the social psychology literature also found evidence for the independent nature between femininity and masculinity. For example, March and Byrne (1991) found that femininity and masculinity were two differentiated, additive sources of individuals’ positive self-concept. Likewise, Lobel (1994) found that feminine males made affective judgments that were quite distinctive from masculine males, often behaving similar to feminine females.

Dependent Variables: Trust as Social Judgment

Trust is essential for effective sales relationships and organization management (Dunn and Schweitzer 2005). Trust is multidimensional having both affective and cognitive components. First, trust is a belief that one’s partner is benevolent (i.e., affective trust), and competent (i.e., cognitive trust) (Ganesan 1994; McAllister 1995). Specifically, benevolence is warm trust (for example, “I trust her because she cares about her customers”), and refers to a salesperson’s genuine and friendly interests in the customer’s welfare (Friedland 1990). In close interpersonal relationships, trust is often conceptualized in terms of attributions concerning the partner’s benevolence (Giffin 1967). Competence is cognitive trust, reflecting a customer’s confidence about a salesperson’s expertise and specialized knowledge in a given product category.

Not only competence and benevolence are two key pillars of trust judgment in marketing exchange relationships (Ganesan 1994), a recent study by Judd et al. (2005) from the social psychology literature also posited that competence and warmth are the two fundamental dimensions of general social judgment.

EXPERIMENT 1

Design and Procedure. Individuals’ femininity was measured two weeks prior to lab experiment. We used the 20 items of F scale from the original BSRI (1974) which demonstrated acceptable inter-item reliability (Chronbach alpha=.80). Using median-split, we grouped subjects into two (high and low) feminine groups.

In order to test hypothesis 1, we developed two different levels of sales aggressiveness in the context of computer simulation of digital camera shopping. The experimental design was 2 (sales aggressiveness: aggressive vs. non-aggressive) X 2 (agent gender: male vs. female agents) X 2 (Femininity: high vs. low) between-subject design. Ninety-six subjects were recruited from a population of undergraduate college students from a large State University and were assigned randomly to one of the four treatment conditions.

2Markus et al. postulate that individuals could have separate schemata for masculinity and femininity. Bem (1982), in her rebuttal to Markus et al.’s (1982) self-schema theory, noted that androgynous individuals are not schematic with regard to gender. She further noted that gender schematics include only those who are sex-typed (feminine females or masculine males). Bem’s typology includes androgyny (those high on both masculinity and femininity) and undifferentiated (those low both dimensions); hence cross sex-typed individuals (feminine males and masculine females) are often ignored. We take Markus’s view on this issue. In this paper, we are interested in discovering the moderating effects of femininity (as a universal phenomenon for both sexes) rather than the effects of sex-typing on individuals’ trust judgment.

3While a recent examination by Oswald (2004) employing both young- and old-generation samples suggested that there are significant positive relationships between sex and gender, because most men were categorized as masculine and most women as feminine, it should be noted that sex and gender could often contradict within same-sex.
Who Uses Stereotypes Against Saleswomen? Femininity as Self-Schema and Biases in Trust Judgment

Specifically, this experiment required interactive shopping program to enable different levels of sales aggressiveness. Using Macromedia’s Authorware, we created a prototype of shopping simulation involving a gendered computer agent. The base protocol of the shopping simulation included several modules including (1) a brief introduction of the agent; (2) provision of information about important features of digital cameras (e.g., resolution, screen size, zoom size, and price); (3) Agent’s request for shopper input regarding the importance of each feature when purchasing a digital camera; (4) Agent’s presentation of initial four cameras that could match the subject’s preferences revealed in module #3; (5) subject’s choice of one camera among the four previously shown alternatives, and (6) final choice and wrap up.

In module #5, once subjects chose one camera, the sales agents suddenly interrupted the shopping process by saying “I have just received product information about a new camera that might interest you.”” Then, in the aggressive condition, the agent presented the new camera with two upgraded features, which was 10% more expensive than the subject’s earlier choice. The aggressive agent also strongly recommended the new camera with strong self-confidence by saying “This is the superior choice than your earlier choice. Choose this one.” In the non-aggressive condition, the agent’s recommended camera had exactly the same product specification except that it was priced 10% lower than the subject’s earlier choice of camera. In addition, the non-aggressive agent used a soft and submissive language while making a recommendation, such as “Given your preferences for digital cameras, I thought this new camera might interest you.” A manipulation check confirmed that subjects saw a significant difference in aggressiveness between these two conditions (Magg=2.98 vs. Mnon=2.58, t=2.06, p<0.05).

Agents’ competence and benevolence were measured each using multiple items, which were borrowed from previous trust studies in marketing and modified to fit our specific research context. Agent’s competence was measured with the following four items on a 5-point Likert scale: (1) When it came to cameras, Agent John (Jane) knew enough to give me a good advice (Smith and Barclay 1997); (2) I trusted Agent John’s expertise in cameras (Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande 1992); (3) I had confidence in Agent John’s expertise (Geller 1999); and (4) I was confident in Agent John’s knowledge about cameras.

Benevolence was measured using the following five items: (1) Agent John (or Jane) seemed to care about me (Price and Arnould 1999); (2) Agent John made me feel good (Hawes, Rao, and Baker 1993); (3) Agent John was like a friend during the shopping process (Ganesan 1994); (4) I felt close to Agent John during the shopping (Price and Arnould 1999); and (5) Agent John responded to my needs in a caring way. Both competence and benevolence showed acceptable inter-item reliability (Chronbach’s alphas>0.7).

Results. In order to test hypothesis 1 which predicted that consumer femininity would be positively related to the use of sex-role stereotypes against female sales agents in sales relationship, we initially conducted ANOVA analysis. Using ANOVA, we found no significant main effects of sales aggressiveness on competence (F1,78=0.58, p=0.44). Agent aggressiveness had a marginally significant effect on benevolence (F1,78=3.87, p=0.05). Subjects evaluated that the aggressive agent to be benevolent than the non-aggressive one. The effects of agent gender on competence (F1,78=1.31, p=0.25) and benevolence (F1,78=0.01, p=0.92) were both insignificant.

Importantly, we found a significant three-way interaction between agent gender, sales aggressiveness, and consumer femininity on competence (F1,78=7.19, p=0.00) and on benevolence (F1,78=4.84, p=0.03). Further contrast tests (see Table 1) showed that low feminine individuals did not evaluate the female sales agent’s competence (Magg=14.17 vs. Mnon=14.13, t=-0.03, p=0.97) or benevolence (Magg=15.33 vs. Mnon=15.80, t=0.33, p=0.74) differently and did not negatively affected by her display of aggressiveness. In other words, low feminine individuals did not penalize a female sales agent who was counter-schematic acting out of her submissive gender role. In contrast, high feminine individuals’ evaluations of the aggressive female agent’s competence (Magg=12.50 vs. Mnon=15.64, t=4.19, p=0.00) and benevolence (Magg=13.42 vs. Mnon=17.82, t=2.72, p=0.01) were significantly lower than their evaluations of the non-aggressive female agent (See Figure 1). Therefore, hypothesis 1 was supported.

For the male sales agents, high feminine individuals equally trusted the aggressive and non-aggressive agents in terms of competence (p=0.12, ns) and benevolence (p=0.73, ns). With marginal significance, we found evidence that high feminine individuals appeared to perceive the aggressive male agent to be more competent than the non-aggressive male agent (Magg=15.67 vs. Mnon=13.71, t=-1.66). Because high feminine individuals trusted male agents and distrusted female agents when the same level of sales aggressiveness was used, it was an apparent use of sex stereotypes against female sales agents on their part.

Discussion of Experiment 1

The results of Experiment 1 clearly supported our first research hypothesis. After conducting Experiment 1, we concluded that consumers’ femininity as self-schema could be related to the use of disadvantageous sex-role stereotypes against female sales agents. That is, the more strongly one is aware of his/her feminine-self, the more likely one is to use sex role stereotypes when judging trustworthiness of female sales agents. Given that over two-thirds of high feminine individuals were women, it seems paradoxical that high feminine individuals were using more strict rules when judging similar others than dissimilar others. However, our result is consistent with earlier experimental evidence found in the social psychology literature which suggested that minorities’ in-group bias tends to be negative.

What is not clear from the results of the Experiment 1 was whether the use of negative bias against similar others was a result of quick, non-thoughtful processing or elaborate, effortful processing (Wegener, Clark, and Petty 2006). Bem (1982) earlier noted that “the very phenomenon of sex typing derives from the salience of cognitive availability (p.1193). She further noted that gender schematic individuals have “a generalized readiness to encode and organize information … in terms of … femininity to which they are highly attuned.”

If high feminine individuals were to engage in effortful, systematic processing when facing a female agent making aggressive sales offers, they should ignore the contrived gender identity of the computer agent as a spurious cue. But the results of Experiment 1 revealed that high feminine individuals’ trust judgment was determined primarily by sex role congruence even when the sex of computer agent was artificially contrived. We believe that high

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4In the male sales 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. Both genders received similar evaluation in terms of attractiveness(t=-0.29, p=0.76), likeability(t=0.08, p=0.93), perceived warmth(t=-0.77, p=0.44) or coldness(t=-0.32, p=0.74).

5On screen, attribute information and a product picture was shown for each camera. We did not include any brand names, because that might interfere with the effects of experimental factors on subjects’ trust judgment.
feminine individuals’ application of negative stereotypes to a gender-norm dissonant female agent is based on heuristic, schema-based processing which relies on easily retrievable femininity schema. In order to test our second research hypothesis which posited that high feminine individuals’ use of sex role stereotypes against counter-schematic females is due to readily accessible femininity schema, we adopt response latency techniques in Experiment 2.

Another issue Experiment 1 was the technical nature of the shopping product. Since digital camera is a relatively technical product category, most expert sales agents in practice are dominantly men. It is possible that respondents may have confounded agent gender with product expertise. We address this issue in Experiment 2 by controlling for the level of agent product expertise for both agent genders.

**EXPERIMENT 2**

The purpose of the second experiment is to replicate the first study, and test our second research hypothesis by measuring response latency when consumers are offered a product recommendation by aggressive or non-aggressive female sales agents. Markus, Crane, Bernstein, and Siladi (1982) found that individuals with strong self-schemas about gender, particularly feminine schematics, remembered more feminine than masculine attributes in memory tasks, required shorter processing times for “me” judgments to feminine qualities, and showed higher confidence in their self-judgments. Markus (1977) suggested that strong self-schemata could make individuals resistant to counter-schematic information.

Since high feminine individuals are believed to have well-developed femininity self-schema, they can readily use femininity schema to reject an aggressive saleswoman based on sex role incongruence. Given that schematic processing occurs automatically and quick, we predict that the response latency of high feminine individuals who face an aggressive female sales agent will be, on average, short.

Much of the existing stereotyping research in social psychology has been guided by the distinction between automatic and controlled processes (Devine 1989). In essence, the process in which stereotypes operate is automatic, and one has little control over the initial activation of the prejudice. In contrast, controlled processes are the means to resist or avoid the actual utilization of activated stereotypes. For example, let’s think of a person who is well-aware of the cultural stereotypes about a (minority) group but conscientiously does not agree with them. When this person meets a counter-schematic, in group individual she might be able to control the activated stereotypes by elaborating message arguments and counter-arguing self-aware stereotypes. It is important that she has sufficient cognitive ability and motivation to resolve the conflict between self-love and naturally occurring stereotypical thoughts.

What is interesting about women as a minority group is that they do not resist stereotypical evaluations of other women (e.g.,

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Consumer Femininity</th>
<th>Agent Gender</th>
<th>Agent Aggressiveness</th>
<th>Competence Mean</th>
<th>Competence S.D.</th>
<th>Benevolence Mean</th>
<th>Benevolence S.D.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>High Feminine Subjects</strong></td>
<td>Male Agent</td>
<td>Non-aggressive</td>
<td>13.71</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>14.43</td>
<td>5.94</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>0.12</td>
<td>-0.35</td>
<td>0.73</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Female Agent</td>
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<td>1.03</td>
<td>17.82</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>12.50</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>13.42</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>t (p)</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>0.00*</td>
<td>2.72</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low Feminine Subjects</strong></td>
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<td>Non-aggressive</td>
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<td>2.43</td>
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<td>Aggressive</td>
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talkative, gullible, unintelligent, emotional) (Jackman 1994) and tend to endorse them. Most women do not “fight” negative in-group bias as blacks do. Therefore, they end up endorsing self-denigrating stereotypes toward other women. Because women’s automatic sex stereotypes are not controlled, they can readily apply them to other women who acted in a manner that is aggressive and overly confident.

The negative valence of subjects’ trust judgment coupled with short response latency by high feminine individuals when facing sex role incongruence will demonstrate that this kind of biases in trust judgment used by high feminine individuals is indeed due to strong and readily accessible femininity as self schemata.

Design and Procedure. Experiment 2 again employed a 2 (agent gender: male vs. female) X 2 (agent aggressiveness: aggressive vs. non-aggressive) X 2 (femininity high vs. low) between-subject design. Unlike Experiment 1, the shopping protocol began with detailed information of the featured sales agent’s experience, establishing the agent as a digital camera expert who had extensive experiences and a successful career in a leading international online shopping site. A total of 102 undergraduate business students participated in Experiment 2 and was assigned to one of the four treatment conditions.

Two weeks prior to the experiment, subjects’ femininity was measured using in 20 items in Bem (1974)’s original F scale. Subjects were broken down to high and low femininity using

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In contrast, Blacks intentionally try not to apply stereotypic traits, such as lazy, low social status, to their ethnic identity. Sinclair, Hardin, and Lowery (2006, p.535), citing Jackman’s (1994) study, said that “the segregation that often isolates modern African American communities enables them to collaboratively develop means of interpreting their disadvantaged status that do not require internalizing negative stereotypes. In contrast, women work, socialize, and live with men. For this reason, they do not have as much physical and mental space to develop such collaborative protective strategies.”
median-split. About two thirds (66%) of female subjects were categorized as high feminine, and 62% of male subjects were categorized as low feminine individuals. The sex-femininity category association was statistically significant ($\chi^2=9.06$, $p=0.00$) but not deterministic in nature.

The aggressiveness manipulation was identical with Experiment 1, except the fact that the price difference between the two aggressive conditions was greater at this time (a 30% price increase in the aggressive condition versus a 20% price reduction in the non-aggressive condition). This manipulation was successful. Subjects saw a significant difference in terms of sales aggressiveness between the two conditions ($M_{agg}=3.33$ vs. $M_{non}=2.81$, $t=-2.68$, $p=0.00$). Subjects did not perceive the agent’s product expertise ($M_{male}=4.23$ vs. $M_{female}=4.47$, $t=-0.98$, $p=0.32$) or career experience ($M_{male}=4.29$ vs. $M_{female}=4.54$, $t=-1.06$, $p=0.28$) differently by agent gender. In addition, male and female agents were viewed as being equally attractive ($M_{male}=3.40$ vs. $M_{female}=3.49$, $t=0.33$, $p=0.74$).

Using the Authorware software, we could measure response latency time particularly in the module #5 of the shopping protocol. We measured the latency between the time when the agent made a recommendation of a new camera of his or her choice (time 1) and the time the subject actually clicked to make a final choice between the two cameras being considered (time 2). Once the shopping simulation is over, we measured subjects’ trust judgment using the same scale as the Experiment 1.

Results. We conducted an ANOVA analysis using response latency (time2-time1) as the dependent variable and agent gender, agent aggressiveness, and consumer femininity as predictor variables. The overall model was insignificant ($F_{7,95}=1.42$, $p=0.20$). The only notable effect was the negative influence of agent aggressiveness on response latency. Individuals on average spent less time when the agent’s new product offer was aggressive as opposed to non-aggressive ($M_{agg}=8.10$ vs. $M_{non}=10.24$, $t=2.47$, $p=0.01$).

Further contrast tests (see Table 2) revealed that high feminine individuals who were facing an aggressive female agent were primarily driving this time difference. High feminine individuals took 4 more seconds of considering the new product offer when it was made by the non-aggressive female agent ($M=10.63$ seconds) than when it was made by the aggressive female agent ($M=6.25$ seconds, $t=4.66$, $p=0.00$). However, for the male agent, high feminine individuals spent almost an equal amount of time irrespective of his display of aggressiveness ($M_{agg}=9.33$ sec vs. $M_{non}=10.81$ sec, $t=0.69$, $p=0.49$) (Figure 2). Therefore, hypothesis 2 was supported.

Low feminine individuals did not show any significant difference in response latency between the aggressive and the non-aggressive female agents ($p=0.24$, ns). They took an equal amount of time for aggressive and non-aggressive male agents ($p=0.58$, ns). The fact that high feminine individuals were quicker making a decision when facing an aggressive female than a non-aggressive female suggests this decision could be schema-based processing facilitated by easily retrievable femininity as self-schema.

Next, we investigated whether the negative valence of trust judgments toward female sex role dissonance by high feminine individuals was again replicated in Experiment 2. As expected, high feminine individuals’ use of stereotypes to sex role dissonance was demonstrated in benevolence judgment ($M_{agg}=12.12$ vs. $M_{non}=16.25$, $t=2.16$, $p=0.03$), but not in the competence evaluation ($M_{agg}=13.78$ vs. $M_{non}=16.92$, $t=2.16$, $p=0.03$) (see Table 2). Since Experiment 2 explicitly manipulated the agent’s expertise upfront in the shopping simulation, agent’s competence was predetermined by the expertise manipulation. In sum, high feminine individuals perceived the aggressive female agent to be less caring, less friendly, and distant than the non-aggressive female agent. In contrast, high feminine individuals did not perceive the benevolence of a male agent to differ by his sales aggressiveness ($p=0.30$).

Additionally, low feminine individuals could possibly be using negative biases in trust judgments made about similar others when they had the aggressive male agent as a shopping partner (See Table 2). While low feminine individuals did not discriminate an aggressive female agent, they gave significantly a significantly lower evaluation to the aggressive male agent than the non-aggressive male agent on both competence ($M_{agg}=12.00$ vs. $M_{non}=15.41$, $t=2.65$, $p=0.01$) and benevolence ($M_{agg}=12.11$ vs. $M_{non}=16.23$, $t=2.24$, $p=0.03$). Low feminine individuals did not respond differently to the high and low levels of female sales aggressiveness ($p>0.2$).

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

While the idea that schemas can explain individual cognitive processes is well accepted in academia, to date, few studies in marketing have demonstrated that consumers’ femininity as self-schema can affect perceptions of others. The most interesting finding of this study was the identification of the users of sex role stereotypes. In Experiment 1, we found that high feminine individuals had a tendency to make biased trust judgments when facing female aggressiveness. The second experiment employing response latency technique demonstrated that high feminine individuals’ distrustful responses to counter-schematic females could be due to the primacy of femininity in their cognitive system. Sex role stereotypes seemed to occur automatically to high feminine individuals and they were inevitably more reliant on sex role stereotypes in trust judgment tasks. Surprisingly, high feminine individuals did not appear to factor aggressiveness into consideration when judging men’s trustworthiness. This suggests that high feminine individuals could be particularly vulnerable to masculine dominance and manipulation by men in sales and negotiation relationships.

One troubling point of the research findings was that most of high feminine individuals (about two-thirds) in our sample were women themselves. Is it really inevitable that high feminine individuals should use self-denigrating sex role stereotypes to similar others? Why can’t they suppress automatically activated, self-inflicting stereotypes (Devine 1989)?

Interestingly, we found evidence that low feminine individuals could be applying negative biases to aggressive males but not to aggressive females. Considering that aggressiveness is a typical male characteristic, the driver of low feminine individuals’ distrust of aggressive males may not be sex role incongruence. Do people in general require a more strict code of conduct from similar others than from dissimilar others? This will be another interesting research question which warrants research attention. We need more research.  

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1Subject also perceived the aggressive agent to be more pushy ($M_{agg}=4.11$ vs. $M_{non}=3.17$, $t=-3.21$, $p=0.00$) and more selfish ($M_{agg}=4.42$ vs. $M_{non}=3.32$, $t=-4.68$, $p=0.00$) than the non-aggressive agent.

2Given that there was no difference in response latency between the conditions of the aggressive and the non-aggressive male agents ($M_{agg}=8.31$ sec, $M_{non}=9.15$ sec, $t=0.55$, $p=0.58$), it is difficult to say that low feminine individuals’ distrust of aggressive males is a result of schema-based processing or a well-thought-out decision. But attitudinally, low feminine individuals apparently distrusted a male sales agent who was aggressive.
TABLE 2
Response Latency (Experiment 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consumer Femininity</th>
<th>Agent Gender</th>
<th>Agent Aggressiveness</th>
<th>Reaction Latency Mean</th>
<th>Reaction Latency S.D.</th>
<th>Competence Mean</th>
<th>Competence S.D.</th>
<th>Benevolence Mean</th>
<th>Benevolence S.D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Feminine Subjects</td>
<td>Male Agent</td>
<td>Non-aggressive</td>
<td>10.81</td>
<td>6.82</td>
<td>16.00</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>18.62</td>
<td>4.45</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>9.33</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>14.23</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>16.76</td>
<td>5.73</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>t (p)</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Agent</td>
<td>Non-aggressive</td>
<td>10.63</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>16.92</td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td>16.25</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>13.78</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>12.12</td>
<td>5.81</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>t (p)</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>0.00*</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>0.04*</td>
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<td>Low Feminine Subjects</td>
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<td>4.09</td>
<td>15.41</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>16.23</td>
<td>4.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>8.31</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>12.00</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>12.11</td>
<td>5.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>t (p)</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>0.03*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Agent</td>
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<td>10.33</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>16.00</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>18.41</td>
<td>4.48</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>8.43</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>14.75</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>15.95</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 2
Response Latency (Experiment 2)

High Feminine Group
in this direction to better understand the potential implications of judgment bias moderated by perceived self-target similarity in exchange relationships.

Managerially, marketers need to develop different communication strategies when selling to high and low feminine individuals. For example, a masculine female salesperson who challenges traditional female sex role may not be welcomed by high feminine individuals with a strong feminine self-stereotyping tendency. In contrast, individuals with weak femininity schemata can learn to trust a female agent regardless of her compliance with gender norm. However, low feminine individuals could be easily turned off by aggressive sales offers if made by male agents. Therefore, there is an opportunity that marketers could develop customized sales protocols for these two distinct groups.

The limitation of this study is that we had only one product scenario. Digital camera could be considered a male dominant product category where male sales agents supposedly have greater product expertise than female sales agents. In order to address this concern, our second experiment controlled for the level of agents’ expertise and still found the evidence of negative biases in trust judgments by high feminine individuals when facing aggressive female expert agents. We believe that high feminine individuals’ quick and distrustful judgment of female computer agents based on agents’ contrived gender identity is troubling but real. Why do high feminine individuals who are gentle, caring, and compassionate themselves pass more negative, heuristic judgments at the hint of female sex role dissonance? Do high feminine individuals’ well-developed schemata actually sensitize the perception of schema-incongruity (Mandler 1982; Lee and Schumann 2004)? Or do people high in femininity have a strong prevention which represses any risk-taking attempts in human relationships (Higgins 2002)? Future research should continue to investigate the deep psychological reasons for human biases in social judgment and further explore the strategic implications of consumers’ self-schema in relevant communications contexts.

REFERENCES


