



# ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

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## **Perceptions of Changing Beauty Norms: an Exploratory Study**

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The goal of this research is to examine consumer perceptions of recent attempts to diversify the stereotype of female beauty. This work analyzes consumer comments posted to Facebook pages to identify emergent themes that represent consumer sentiment and attitudes about shifting stereotypes of beauty in the media.

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# **“Because its 2016”: Documenting the Persistence of and Challenge to Gender Stereotyping in the Marketplace**

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## **Paper #1: Identifying and Explaining the Sex-Gap in Consumer Responses to Product Failures: Gender Stereotypes Create Victims Out of Women**

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## **Paper #2: Female Gamers: An Investigation of Gendered Consumer Vulnerability**

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## **Paper #3: Resistance to Gender Stereotyping in Advertising Institutions**

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## **Paper #4: Perceptions of Changing Beauty Norms: An Exploratory Study**

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### **SESSION OVERVIEW**

This session highlights the complex ways gender stereotypes are both perpetuated and challenged in today's marketplace across a variety of contexts, and through the use of varying methodologies. Conflicting stereotypes and treatments of men and women are persistent in society and play out in billion dollar industries, from fashion to beauty products to video games. Women are on the one hand shown disdain and contempt, and on the other defended and coddled (Glick and Fiske 1996). Both sexes are expected to adhere to gender norms, which are reflected and reinforced in marketing (Mazur 1986; Zayer and Coleman 2015; Zayer and Otnes 2012). The current research investigates i) the treatment of men and women by industry and society and its relevance to the marketplace, and ii) how gender stereotypes are maintained and combated in these intersecting domains. This session explores these issues across a wide range of intersecting domains (industry, consumer protection/regulation, online communities, and male-dominated subcultures) with methodological diversity (qualitative methods, experiments, and archival data analysis).

The first paper identifies a novel way in which gender stereotypes play out in the marketplace and its implications for firms and consumer protection. Across tens of thousands of consumer complaints with various agencies, consumers were more likely to complain about a harmful product failure when the victim was a woman as opposed to a man. Experimental evidence further supports this finding. Evidence for the role of gender stereotypes in this process is also presented (i.e., men are seen as independent agents while women are cherished and protected).

The second paper presented looks at how women are stereotyped and treated in the historically male-dominated domain of video gaming, where women are sexualized and seen as imposters. Drawing from social dominance theory (which explains the origin and maintenance of social hierarchies and oppression), female gamers were interviewed to understand the harassment experienced by wom-

en in gaming (both on and offline). Women's experiences of disempowerment and vulnerability caused by interactions with the gaming industry and culture decrease their expectations for cultural change.

The third paper offers a more positive outlook on the possibility for change by drawing from institutional theory to explore the macro forces that contribute to the resistance of gender stereotypes in advertising institutions. This research analyzes in-depth interviews with advertising professionals from the United States, United Kingdom, and Turkey, in order to shed light on the regulatory, normative, cultural and political forces that facilitate or hinder individuals within these organizations in resisting gender-stereotypical content in advertising.

Finally, the fourth paper utilizes social media as a tool for examining how consumers are reacting to changes of beauty stereotypes in the media. Brands have begun to feature plus-size models in the media more frequently. This research uses an iterative approach to identify themes in Facebook comments that represent consumer sentiment and attitudes about shifting stereotypes about beauty in the media. Overall, although there is approval for diversifying the definition of beauty, a strong discourse of promoting obesity and unhealthy behavior is also present.

## **Identifying and Explaining the Sex-Gap in Consumer Responses to Product Failures: Gender Stereotypes Create Victims out of Women**

### **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Every year, thousands of consumer complaints are made to regulatory agencies, including the Consumer Product Safety Commission, Federal Trade Commission, among others. These incidents often cause severe injury or death, and cost the U.S. more than \$1 trillion annually (CPSC). They are the basis for numerous lawsuits and recalls, and can cost companies millions of dollars. Therefore, consumers' perceptions of harm, blame, and desire for punishment, are of great consequence for many institutions.

The current research asks if the sex of the victim matters is how such incidents are interpreted and reported. We draw from ambivalent sexism theory (Glick and Fiske 1996) to understand how gender stereotypes shape consumers' perceptions of product failure incidents. Specifically, because gender stereotypes present men as independent agents and women as dependent and requiring protecting, we proposed that when a woman (vs. a man) is a victim of a product failure, consumers will i) see increased harm done, ii) blame the company more, and iii) show an increased tendency to complain about the product failure.

Benevolent sexism is a specific form of sexism that presents women as, fragile, pure, and requiring protection (Glick and Fiske 1996). This paternalistic view of women has the consequence of denying women agency and efficacy; those seen as more capable of suffering are increasingly seen as passive and as victims of negative outcomes (Gray and Wegner 2009). Conversely, men are stereotyped as tough, independent agents, and these traits are associated with a diminished capacity for suffering and pain (Gray and Wegner 2009; 2011). Thus, gender stereotypes have the consequence of presenting women (vs. men) as more capable of being victims. We should there-

fore observe that consumers will be more likely to complain about a product failure when the victim is a woman vs. a man.

Study 1 analyzed over 13,000 consumer complaints to the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) and found that a disproportionate number of complaints were made for female vs. male victims, despite the fact that a) male injuries were on average more severe, and b) hospital records show that men are more frequently the victims of product-related injuries (National Electronic Injury Surveillance System 2014). Moreover, female victims most outnumbered male victims when a husband was complaining about a harm done to his wife vs. a wife complaining about a harm done to her husband. These results are consistent with stereotypes of men as being tough, independent agents, and women as fragile and requiring protection. To help support this claim, a state-level measure of gender stereotyping (associating men with careers and women with housework) was obtained from a large dataset (Xu, Lofaro, Nosek, and Greenwald 2016;  $n = 926,310$ ). Using hierarchical linear modeling, it was found that state-level endorsement of traditional gender stereotypes predicted the victim sex-gap in consumer complaints at the state-level, controlling for the ratio of men and women in each state.

For Study 2, a similar analysis was conducted on 833,112 vehicle complaints made to the National Highway and Traffic Safety Administration's Office of Defects. Victim sex could not be assessed directly, but we searched each complaint for the words "wife" and "husband," which largely corresponded to husbands referring to incidents involving their wife, and vice versa (respectively). As in Study 1, there was a significant victim sex-gap in consumer complaints, despite the fact that men get in more accidents and drive 1.5 times more miles per year than women (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety 2015).

Having illustrated a real-world tendency to increasingly report product failures when the victim is a woman (vs. man), we conducted a series of experiments to further capture and illuminate this effect. In Study 3, participants (100 men, 105 women,  $M_{age} = 37.76$ ) were presented with a scenario adapted from a complaint filed with the CPSC, where a parent complained that their child's finger was able to get stuck in the viewing hole of a kaleidoscope toy and required medical assistance. We manipulated the sex of the victim in a between-subjects design. Participants then rated the blameworthiness of the child, parent, and manufacturer. As predicted, participants saw the female victim as less at fault than the male victim, and saw the manufacturer and the parents as more at fault when the victim was female (vs. male).

Past work has shown that benevolent sexism, and paternalistic stereotypes more broadly, depict groups such as women as high on warmth (kind, sociable, sincere), but low on competence (e.g., efficacy, confidence) (Glick and Fiske 1996; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick and Xu 2002). Targets perceived in this way are easier to think of as victims (Gray and Wegner 2009; 2011), and elicit sympathy, pity, and the desire to help and protect (Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick 2007; Grey and Wegner 2011; Fiske et al. 2002). Study 4 ( $n = 342$ ,  $M_{age} = 39.03$ ) tests the role of these perceptions in judgments of male vs. female victims and company blameworthiness. Participants read a scenario where a man vs. woman was the victim of a reading lamp exploding, causing cuts and lacerations. Participants rated the seriousness of the incident, their emotional response (sympathy, pity, desire to help and protect), and manufacturer blame (seeing the manufacturer as at fault, wanting reimbursement for the victim, and wanting to complain to a regulatory agency or file a lawsuit).

Results found that participants saw the situation as more serious, and blamed the manufacturer more, when the victim was a

female (vs. male). Moreover, the effect on manufacturer blame was mediated by perceived harm and the participants' emotional response to the victim (i.e., sympathy, pity, desire to help and protect). In other words, gender stereotypes make it easier to see women (vs. men) as victims, and explained the observed effect of victim sex on manufacturer blame.

Across 4 studies, we provide evidence of a sex-gap in how people attribute blame to companies for product failures, and that gender stereotypes (i.e., men as independent agents and women as requiring protection) can help explain this sex-gap. Implications for consumers, companies, and consumer regulation are discussed.

## Female Gamers: An Investigation of Gendered Consumer Vulnerability

### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In 2014, an Internet culture war ensued called #Gamergate, in which an alliance of anti-feminist video gamers began criticizing and threatening feminist gaming advocates who argued for greater positive representation of women in the video gaming industry (Parkin 2014; Schroeder and Borgerson 2015). Despite the recent surge in public harassment and sexism against women in the gaming community, females represent a growing demographic in the \$15.4 billion video gaming industry. However, both men and women believe playing video games to be a "particularly masculine pursuit" (Selwyn 2007, p. 533). In a consumption context largely categorized as a "man's world", our research aims to understand how female video gamers experience, navigate, and cope with the male-dominated culture.

We ground our analysis in social dominance theory, which explains the origin and consequence of social hierarchies and oppression and assumes that we must understand the processes that maintain and produce discrimination at multiple levels of analysis, including cultural ideologies, institutional practices, and relations of individuals (Pratto, Sidanius and Levin 2006). Our investigation takes a similar approach to understand how multiple processes, at different levels, work together to create a potentially vulnerable consumption environment (Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg 2005). Our research employs a phenomenological approach that focuses on the lived experience (Pollio 1982) of thirteen female gamers between the ages of 20-29, who were interviewed to better understand how female gamers experience and make meaning from their interactions within a gendered consumption context.

Our findings suggest the gaming subculture is characterized by a prevalence of gender-based consumer harassment, systematic disempowerment in the marketplace, and a defeatist attitude toward future cultural change. Due to space limitations, we use one participant's experiences to exemplify our collective findings.

### Prevalence of Gender-based Consumer Harassment

"Gamer girl" stereotypes contribute to an environment wherein female gamers are harassed and disrespected through verbal abuse in online chat communication and being hounded within games themselves.

It's kind of like we are not taken seriously. We have to be separated from "real gamers." Like the game is not for us; they just forget about us as gamers. But, there are not other options really, you just have to do or not play. And sometime people can be just mean. You get called all sorts of really derogatory things, whether you are winning or

losing. You are losing because you are a girl or winning because you are a whore. (Corrine)

Corrine, a video game store manager and gamer, agrees with other participants that "gamer girls" are stereotypically sexualized and perceived as imposters in the gaming community.

### Disempowerment in the Marketplace

Female gamers' negative gendered experiences extend to the offline, retail environment, as participants discussed discrimination in purchasing video games. Female gamers develop coping strategies to merely shop for games—not just play them. Corrine states that while she is working, customers often seek out advice from men and she advises female colleagues to "develop tough skin." She also experiences gender-based disempowerment as a female shopper.

For us, going into a [video game store], everyone just assumes that you are there buying a game for a significant other. Going in as a shopper, a lot of time you are approached differently because you can't be there buying a game for yourself...right? ... I don't think that they are realizing they are doing it, I don't think it's a purposeful thing but it's just an ingrained thing. It's a male thing. (Corrine)

Corrine's warnings reflect a disempowerment discourse similar to Henry's (2005) work, identifying experiences of disempowerment as a function of self-perceptions emerging from systematic inequities (e.g., social class, access to material and economic resources). Our research highlights gender disparities in the gaming community, as women often adopt the role of "impotent reactors" who must constantly confront the potential for subjugation and "prove" themselves in the gaming community.

### A Defeatist Attitude toward Cultural Change

Participants discussed potential solutions to improve the female gaming experience; however, participants were doubtful the industry or gaming community would change. Corrine discussed her pessimism.

Their hands are tied, they really are...because they don't want to lose the male gamers or the female gamers. They have systems where you can report a player, and yes if they get reported so many times they get removed from the game and their computer code is band from playing the game. But with a quick reset of the computer, you can get back on...their hands are tied. (Corrine)

Corrine and others remain doubtful that the actors and marketplace institutions, with the power to bring about change, are actually motivated to do so.

Collectively, our findings suggest consumers experience multidimensional vulnerability (e.g., individual, marketplace, and cultural) in a gendered consumption environment. At the individual level, our findings depart from existing consumer research by highlighting how consumers can experience discrimination and harassment in multiple dimensions during a consumption encounter; experiencing negative social value both "in play" through in-game harassment and "at play" through verbal assaults in chatrooms while playing. At the marketplace level, gendered disempowerment is rarely explored as part of the shopping process. In addition, the gendered retail employee perspective offers dimensionality to an understanding of vulnerable experiences in a consumption field. At the cultural level, female

gamers experience hopelessness associated with the prospect of changes within the field. The culturally embedded gamer girl stereotype provides a foundation upon which characteristics of consumer vulnerability flourish, including a culture of gender-based consumer harassment, systematic disempowerment in the marketplace, and conflicting actions and attitudes toward future cultural change.

### Resistance to Gender Stereotyping in Advertising Institutions

#### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Scholars have pointed out the long history between marketing and gender (Maclaran 2012; Bettany et al. 2010). Research exploring gender portrayals in advertising across different countries has often been examined using Hofstede's cultural values of masculinity/femininity (Hofstede 1980) or has focused on identifying stereotypical portrayals. Other scholars have taken a macro perspective revealing how advertisers think about gender in the creation of ads, but focus on one site of study (see for example Shao, Desmarais and Weaver 2014 work on ad practitioners in China). More recent research advocates for an institutional perspective in examining gender portrayals in advertising (Zayer and Coleman 2015) where multiple actors contribute to an iterative process whereby certain gender ideologies are privileged and disseminated throughout society. The current research uses institutional theory as a foundation to examine how advertising professionals engage in "institutional resistance" (Lawrence 2008) with regard to the use of gender stereotypical messages in advertising.

Specifically, through the analysis of in-depth interviews, we examine how advertising executives across the U.S., UK, and Turkey conceptualize the use of gendered messages in their advertising institutions and the strategies they engage in to resist (or comply with) stereotypical gendered practices.

Forty-three in-depth interviews were conducted with advertising professionals across a range of agencies and cities, and with professionals serving in varying ad functions including strategy, creative, account planning. The three countries were selected as sites for data collection because they provided an opportunity to observe varying institutional forces at play—differing regulatory environments, varying cultural values and norms. Initial exploratory analysis was conducted to compare and contrast how ad professionals conceptualized the use of gender in advertising and how (if) they engaged in resistance to the use of gender stereotyping.

In the U.S., three strategies were identified with regard to how individuals engaged in resistance to employing gender stereotypical advertising messages. These included 1) personal normative stances 2) resistance based on incentives and 3) resistance based on perceived cultural norms. That is, individuals engaging in resistance drew from narratives and discourses at various levels—the personal, organizational and socio-cultural levels.

In the UK, our exploratory analysis reveals similar resistance strategies to those in the United States. Comparative analysis of these contexts, in which regulatory and cultural influences are different, exposes specific ways in which varying individual and institutional factors inform each other to either facilitate or impede resistance or conformity strategies. In applying their own personal beliefs and values, some of the advertising professionals resisted perceived normative dilemmas and, further, demonstrated a sense of responsibility to consumers to produce engaging, rewarding content. Some also referenced governmental and industry regulatory measures, which in some cases supported their resistance efforts or affected the saliency of resistance concerns. Further, these regulatory measures reflected

or affected perceived cultural norms. At other times, when regulation and personal normative stances were absent or not salient, professionals referenced business-driven incentives.

Ad professionals in Turkey possessed a keen understanding of the importance of gender issues in advertising and discussed how the Turkish advertising landscape remained plagued by structural (i.e. decision making processes within the agencies, agency-client relationship) as well as cultural problems in the appropriate portrayals of gender. In addition, the agency environment was described as one of the most gender equal working spaces within the country, with women dominating top management teams. However, despite this, professionals pointed to the fact that in the current structural and cultural systems and political climates of Turkey, they were largely not able to resist stereotypical gendered advertising practices. Turkey was described as experiencing an increasing level of conservatism with meaningful class and ethnic differences. As such, advertising professionals tried to negotiate the advertising landscape, including balancing the demands of clients who were risk-averse in this dynamic culture. This unique climate may provide one explanation for the discrepancy between personal and institutional objectives stated by ad professionals in the responsibility that advertising executives felt with regard to gender stereotyping.

In sum, our initial analysis suggests that the strength and interaction of regulatory structures and cultural norms influences individual advertising professionals' resistance (or conformity) strategies by framing the ways in which they approached issues of gendered representations. When both cultural and regulatory practices reinforced stereotypically gendered messages, professionals had more difficulty resisting problematic depictions. Yet, they were highly aware of the importance of gender issues, in part as they had to negotiate cross-cultural issues between global clients and national markets. When regulatory and cultural practices discouraged stereotypical representations, concerns over stereotypical representations posed a less salient dilemma and did not require professionals to grapple with personal normative critiques.

### Perceptions of Changing Beauty Norms: An Exploratory Study

#### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Society has long struggled with how women are portrayed in the media, particularly stereotypes of beauty. The traditional beauty stereotype depicts ultra-thin women – sizes that are unobtainable for most women. Indeed, the negative effects of idealized imagery on female self-perceptions are well documented (Micu, Coulter and Price 2009). Recently, some brands have diverged from the thin-ideal by featuring women of different sizes and shapes. How are consumers reacting to this divergence of beauty? Provided the public calls to feature more realistic size women, it could be consumers are embracing these changes. However, prior work has demonstrated female consumers prefer thin imagery, despite it impairing their self-perceptions. Thus, there seems to be contradictory findings in how consumers perceive images of beauty in the media. The purpose of this study is to examine consumer response to recent events in which brands have demonstrated more inclusivity of different body types.

A qualitative study was conducted to address the research question: How are consumers reacting to changing images of women in the media that deviate from traditionally constructed beauty norms? To examine this research question, we concentrated on three specific events in the past year: the plus size clothing retailer Lane Bryant's lingerie ad campaign #Imnoangel, plus size model Tess Holliday being featured on the cover of People magazine's "body issue,"

and plus size model Ashley Graham being featured on the cover of Sports Illustrated magazine. Consumer comments posted to stories from the Facebook page of CNN, Yahoo, NBC, and Huffington Post were downloaded. These outlets were chosen because they are representative of mainstream media. To gauge initial consumer response we downloaded comments that were published at the time of the event. A total of 6,000 posts were downloaded. Specifically, for each news outlet's Facebook page, a total of 500 comments were downloaded. This resulted in a total of 2000 comments for each event. To ensure an authentic catalog of response was captured, the comments included consumer posts in the form of response to the story as well as dialogue between consumers. For each event the downloaded comments were posted within 48 hours of the story.

As is customary in qualitative research (Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets 2013), our analysis iterated with our data collection. Though this process, both researchers independently sought to identify emergent themes, while referring back to the literature (Spiggle, 1994). We then deliberated, debated, and iterated to identify a set of convergent themes. Following the guidelines offered by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 62) our coding was influenced by our research question.

The following findings represent the prevailing theme from each event identified at this stage of analysis.

The most prevalent theme emerging from comments related to Tess Holliday's appearance on the cover of People magazine focuses on health concerns related to obesity and whether it is appropriate to make a clinically overweight woman into a "role model." Additionally, the tone of comments discussing Holliday's unhealthy weight tended to be vitriolic critiques: *"Enjoy your diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, increased stroke risk, increased risk of pregnancy complications and birth defects, and certainty of being an UNEMPLOYED model once this silly 'fat acceptance' fad is over."*

While obesity and health concerns are present in online comments about Ashley Graham's Sports Illustrated swimsuit edition cover, the most prominent discourse here centered around whether or not a body type such as Graham's belongs on the cover. Commenters who felt Graham was overweight tended to criticize Sports Illustrated for featuring an unattractive larger woman in the issue. Additionally, there was a strong sentiment that this particular cover pandered to an overly politically correct society: *"That large girl should not be in that tiny swimsuit. If she wants to pretend that she's attractive and pretend that she's not overweight, that's fine for her. But I don't need your 'curves' agenda shoved into my face when I'm trying to enjoy reading a magazine."*

Interestingly, the dominant discourse surrounding the Lane Bryant #Imnoangel campaign was less about the appropriateness of featuring plus size models and more about whether the models truly represented "plus-size" women or were a more idealized version of plus-size: *"All these girls in this pic are a size 14-16, which is the smallest size Lane Bryant offers. Lane Bryant why don't you market to the type of clients who really shop from your stores? To me this company is still marketing the 'smaller' sized females and are fearful to advertise the real BIG GIRLS!!"*

Across all three events, the predominant theme identified thus far focuses on the health of the featured plus size models. The majority of these comments indicate anger and frustration that unhealthy women are being presented in mainstream media outlets and lament that these changes only further the obesity crisis facing the US.

These findings lend evidence to the notion that consumer schema has a significant and important impact on attitudes. Congruity theory is a helpful framework for understanding how consumers respond to brand images that are not consistent with their existing

schema. In the case of the Sports Illustrated swimsuit edition, the dominant discourse is one that indicates many consumers found the image of a plus sized model to be incongruent with their brand schema for the magazine. This led to negative comments about both the model and the brand. Similarly, the strongly negative sentiment toward Tess Holliday appears to be rooted in consumers' perceptions of what the cover model of People magazine's "body issue" issue represents as a role model. On the other hand, Lane Bryant is a brand identified with plus size women so we see the discourse is less focused on the models being too big and rather on whether they were plus sized enough.

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