



2016

Resistance to Gender Stereotyping in Advertising Institutions

Linda Tuncay Zayer

Loyola University Chicago, ltuncay@luc.edu

Catherine Coleman

Texas Christian University

Ozlem Hesapci

Bogazici University

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/business_facpubs

 Part of the [Business Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Zayer, Linda Tuncay; Coleman, Catherine; and Hesapci, Ozlem. Resistance to Gender Stereotyping in Advertising Institutions. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 44, : 236-240, 2016. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, School of Business: Faculty Publications and Other Works,

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications and Other Works by Department at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Business: Faculty Publications and Other Works by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).
© Association for Consumer Research 2016

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