



Research Review

Revisiting gender differences: What we know and what lies ahead<sup>☆</sup>

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Abstract

Efforts to identify and understand gender differences have a long history that has sparked lively debate and generated much public interest. Although understanding gender differences is pivotal to consumer researchers and marketers, investigations into this issue by such individuals have been few in number, often weak in theory, and rather limited in progress made. This paper strives to reinvigorate such inquiry. We begin by describing four major theories of gender differences (socio-cultural, evolutionary, hormone-brain, and the selectivity hypothesis) and then assess relevant research from 2000 to 2013 in marketing, psychology, and biomedicine. From this, five conclusions emerge: Males are more self-oriented, while females are more other-oriented; females are more cautious responders; females are more responsive to negative data; males process data more selectively and females more comprehensively; and females are more sensitive to differentiating conditions and factors. We conclude by identifying several areas of opportunity for advancing our understanding of gender differences.

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**Introduction**

It’s common knowledge that companies market their products differently to males and females. They might position a convenience meal to working moms rather than dads, develop luxury brand relationships online for men but employ more personal messages for women, or develop child-targeted advertising that focuses on different benefits for girls versus boys. Although many factors such as expertise or interest differentiate the genders (e.g. men may have more interest in automotive goods and women in home furnishings), the study of gender extends beyond such obvious differences, attempting to understand more fundamental gender differences in, say, processing, attention, or skills, and uncover how and when they affect behavior. Even though male–female differences are often small and between-gender variance is frequently smaller than that observed within each gender, gender differences that recur and the factors that qualify them are not only intriguing but also frequently consequential. Gaining insight into gender differences is important for researchers in both psychology and marketing. For consumer psychologists, understanding how males and females differ in their cognitive processing styles, affective responses, and reactions to marketing stimuli is essential for anticipating their product choices and preferences. And such knowledge can be highly informative for marketing practice where gender is a common building block of the customer portfolio.

Research in psychology has produced a sizable body of findings on gender differences as well as rich theoretical discussion on key debates (e.g., Eagly & Wood, 2013). In consumer psychology and marketing, the study of gender differences has been less programmatic and robust. Although here scattered gender studies exist, in general gender has been treated as an interesting moderating variable and less as a subject of theoretical inquiry. Given the importance of gender differences across disciplines and their downstream implications

for companies, more systematic theory-based research is needed in consumer psychology.

This article provides an overview of the main theoretical approaches to the study of gender and reviews recent empirical evidence of gender differences in both psychology and marketing, with an emphasis on consumer psychology. In the sections that follow, we first describe three theoretical approaches that encapsulate much of the current thinking about gender differences: the (a) socio-cultural, (b) evolutionary, and (c) hormone and brain science approaches. A fourth theoretical perspective, which originated in consumer research and was developed by the first author and a colleague, is also described, namely the selectivity hypothesis. Most empirical findings of gender differences can be explained by more than one of these perspectives. Further, all approaches to gender study now acknowledge the role of both biological (nature) factors (e.g., physical differences, evolved traits, hormonal influences) and socio-cultural (nurture) factors (e.g., social and cultural role learning, stereotyping, the role of media and marketing messages). Although the terms “sex” versus “gender” tend to be used more in the biological versus social–psychological literatures respectively, we use these terms interchangeably. After reviewing the literature in areas where gender differences are reliably observed, we offer our conclusions and identify opportunities for advancing extant knowledge.

Our literature search included six academic journals from the Business Source Premier database (*JCR, JM, JCP, JMR, JA, MktgSci*) for the years 2000–2013, with gender-related terms appearing in titles or article abstracts. Psychology (PsychInfo) and health (PubMed) databases were also searched, but due to their size, searches were restricted to meta-analyses and reviews. We reduced the abundant publications that resulted by assigning priority to experimental research and using our judgment to compile a fairly comprehensive and representative array of topics on gender differences that are of relevance to consumer psychology.

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