

# Gender Difference in Persuasibility: The Moderating Role of Product Type and Source Expertise

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## Abstract

Conducting an experiment in the consumer behavioral context, this study examines 3 moderating variables influencing gender difference in persuasibility: communicator sex, source expertise, and sex role orientation (product type). Testimonial advertisements for two products, one is masculine and the other is feminine, were presented to college students and their responses to the advertisements were collected and analyzed. Some 2-way and 3-way interactions were found in attitude toward advertisement, brand attitude, and purchase intention. Results suggested that women are not more persuasible than men. Both men and women have better brand attitude when the advertised product is endorsed by a person less familiar with the product. Possible explanations are discussed.

**Keywords:** Gender Difference, Communicator Sex, Source Expertise, Product Type

## Introduction

Are women more obedient, influenceable, and persuasible than men? In the 1960's, the answer to this question was "Yes," and was duly reported in the social psychology texts of the day. For over two decades, social psychologists accepted the generalization that women had submissive and dependent nature.

Studies in gender conformity also suggest there is greater tendency for females to conform to group norms than their male counterparts. For instance, Hollander & Julian (1965) found differences in the behavior of the sexed conforming higher

female conformity with groups. Similarly, Allen & Crutchfield (1963), Crowne & Leverant (1963), and Endler (1966) have reported evidence that females tend to conform more than males.

However, the social psychological research on female persuasibility and conformity is not without contrary reports. Extensive reviews by both Maccoby & Jacklin (1974) and Eagly (1978) show that while a number of studies report great female persuasibility, the proportion of studies finding this difference is not that substantial when compared to the total number of sex-difference investigations conducted. Studies by Allen & Levine (1969), Goldberg(1974), and Hoffman & Maier (1966) show no conclusive support that females conform more than males. Eagly & Carli (1981) also suggest that women are more easily influenced than men and are more likely to conform in group pressure situations that involve surveillance. Approximately 1% of the variance in these behaviors is accounted for by sex.

Sex difference in persuasibility has also received attention by consumer researchers. Such researchers, as well as marketers, assume that gender can influence consumer responses to marketer-initiated persuasive messages, e.g., advertising, sales promotion, etc. Like recent research in social psychology, studies in consumer behavior about gender difference in persuasibility are inconclusive, which means several moderating factors must be taken into account to predict consumers' responses to advertising and their adoption of products. Thus, the current study attempts to examine the impact of 3 factors on persuasibility in consumer behavioral context: communicator sex, product type, and source expertise.

## **Literature Review**

### **1. Communicator Sex**

A possible situational factor influencing female persuasibility is the cross-sex context for females created in past studies by utilizing predominantly male communicators. Greater female persuasibility may have been confounded by the cross-sex context of the communication situation. Women are more influenceable only when the message is conveyed by males. For example, In the earliest report,

Knower(1935) found greater opinion change when the communicator and recipient were of opposite sex. Haiman(1949) reported a tendency for females to be more persuaded by a male communicator( $p < .07$ ), whereas with a female communicator he found no difference between male and female subjects. Using meta-analysis, Eagly & Carli (1981) found an association between the sex of the researcher and the outcome of the experiment, such that both male and female researchers were more likely to find results favorable to their own sex.

There are a number of theoretical reasons for thinking that communicator sex might statistically interact with sex of the recipient in influencing opinion change. Shaffer (1975) suggested that communicator sex may influence sex differences in opinion change through interpersonal attraction. Another consideration is that normative pressures governing the expression of opinions may vary with the make-up of the communicator-recipient dyad. Female recipients may follow a norm of deference to male authority and consequently manifest more opinion change when exposed to a male communicator, whereas males may adhere to a norm of chivalry and hence show more opinion change when exposed to a female communicator (Eagly, 1978:97). This explanation stems from the theory that distributions of women and men in status are different.

In U.S. society generally, males occupy a disproportionate number of high-status roles while females occupy a disproportionate number of lower-status roles. Role-related expectancies that persons in lower statuses should comply with those in higher statuses may cause greater female influenceability in cross-sex contexts. Since formal statuses in laboratory experiments on social influence are typically equal, greater degrees of female influenceability may simply reflect the behavioral confirmation of status inequalities embodied in the wider culture through such social-psychological mechanisms as the self-fulfilling prophecy (Eagly, 1983). Utilizing live male and female communicators within a fully randomized repeated-measures design, Ward et. al. (1985) found moderate support for the hypothesis.

Although the above consideration seems to be quite plausible, there is still inconsistency among research findings. Morelock (1980) reported mild tendencies for subjects to be more persuaded by same-sex communicator, while Miller & McReynolds (1973) found no overall effect of communicator sex or its interaction

with sex of recipient. One remaining field study (Chaiken, 1979) did find that females agreed with communicator more than did males, but there was no communicator by subject sex interaction. The Ward et. al., (1985) study mentioned above even found that male subjects exposed to a female communicator changed their opinions as much as those exposed to a male communicator did.

Studies in consumer behavior, like those in social psychology, also addressed the inconsistent impact of the communicator and respondent sex on the evaluation of an advertisement. For instance, consumers preferred advertisements featured a opposite-sex spokesperson, and the ad with a male communicator invoked more purchase intention from female consumers (Baker & Churchill 1977). Petroschius & Crocker (1989) reported that male communicator generated more positive evaluations of distinctiveness and quality, and male subjects perceived the ads more believable.

On the other hand, Frieden (1984) found that the sex of an advertising spokesperson had no impact on consumer perceptions and did not significantly alter consumer attitudes. Therefore, communicator sex alone could not fully explain gender difference in persuasibility. At least two other factors must be considered simultaneously.

## **2. Sex Role Orientation**

The first factor could account for the inconsistent findings on communicator by subject sex interaction is the sex role orientation of experimental tasks. Goldberg (1968) found that college women gave higher ratings to identical articles when the author of the article was portrayed as a male rather than a female. Among the three significant findings he reported, two were for traditional masculine fields (law and city planning), and one was for a sex-neutral field (linguistics). Sistrunk & McDavid (1971) proposed that gender difference in conformity may be a function of sex-oriented tasks that have been employed in the experiments with certain tasks being more relevant to one sex than the other. However, they found female subjects conformed very frequently to the female sources on the masculine items, a finding inconsistent with Goldberg (1968). Finally, the results of a quantitative meta-analysis done by Swim et. al. (1989) indicated that a greater difference in ratings of male and

female target persons (with men being rated more favorably) when the stimulus materials were masculine, regardless of the raters' gender.

In consumer research, the term "Experimental task" usually refers to evaluation of "Advertised product." In lieu of the logic in the studies previously mentioned, the influence of communicator may be related to the "gender type" of product. In summarizing the literature in social psychology, several hypotheses can be drawn. First, in Goldberg (1968), women gave higher ratings to articles in masculine field by a male author; therefore one can hypothesize that women will have more favorable attitude toward advertisements with an male endorser for a masculine product. Second, derived from Sistruck & McDavid (1971), women will have better attitude toward a masculine product when it is endorsed by a female. Finally, suggested by Swim et. al. (1989), for a masculine product, male communicator will be perceived as more likable than his female counterpart.

### **3. Source Expertise**

Another moderator for gender persuasibility is source expertise. Expertise has been defined as the ability to perform product-related tasks successfully (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987), and people who are perceived as being able to make valid assertions about a product are perceived as having greater expertise (McCracken, 1989). Expertise can be obtained in number of ways, including, for example, formal training in the subject matter. A doctor in a drug advertisement is effective presumably because of the perception for expertise gained through medical training. Another means to obtain expertise is through product-related experiences, including product purchase and usage (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987; Brock, 1965; Woodside & Davenprot, 1974).

Numerous researchers have examined the effectiveness of endorsers with product-related experience. For example, studies in persuasion show that experienced sources are more effective than inexperienced sources in changing attitudes, particularly of people who are not motivated or able to process, people who initially have a negative opinion about the issue or product, or people who have an opinion counter to the endorser's (Brock, 1965; Petty & Brock, 1981; Petty, Cacioppo & Goldman, 1981; Rhine & Severance, 1970). In addition, marketplace experience of

market mavens (individuals who have general marketplace knowledge) makes them important sources of market and product information to less informed consumers (Feick & Price, 1987). To summarize, this study expects that a female consumer will be more persuasible by a female expert in the case of masculine product category.

## Method

### 1. Design and Subjects

This experiment is a 2x2x2x2 between-subject design conducted in a testimonial advertising context. The independent variables were 3 ad-related variables: the types of products advertised (masculine/feminine), the sex of endorser (male/female), the expertise of endorser (expert/non expert), and a personal variable, the sex of subject (male/female). This resulted in 16 conditions; that is, 8 versions of advertisements viewed by either males or females. A total of 50 college students, 25 males and 25 females, served as subjects.

### 2. Stimuli

The Stimuli in this study were testimonial ads portraying different products endorsed by different persons. A pilot was conducted to decide the levels of the first independent variable, type of product advertised. A sample of 11 college students (6 males and 5 females) rated a list of 15 products/services<sup>1</sup> on a nine-point masculine-feminine scale (4 represented extremely masculine, -4 represented extremely feminine, and 0 meant neutral). Motor oil was rated as the most masculine product ( $M = 2.64$ ), and skin lotion was the most feminine ( $M = -2.18$ ),  $F = 74.08$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ . There was no significant difference between men's and women's perceptions. To minimize the effects of prior experience with established brands, both skin lotion and motor oil were named "Nova," a fictitious and gender-neutral brand name. The ads were written in the form of radio scripts to help eliminate potential confounding effects from elements typically found in print ads (photos layout, typeface, etc.) and

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<sup>1</sup> These products/services were accounting, beer, car repairing, cellular phones, cola, dish detergent, interior design, microwave ovens, motor oil, plumbing, skin lotion, sofa, stereo systems, and vacuum cleaner.

broadcast ads (music, camera angles, etc.). Every effort was made to equalize the ads for the two products. Both copies consisted of 3 paragraphs and about 102 words, only different in some key words describing product features.

The manipulation of the other two independent variables, the sex of endorser and the expertise of the endorser, was accomplished as follows. The person who made the testimonials was identified as either Mark Porter (male endorser condition) or Mary Porter (female endorser). Both were hypothetical persons. In the expert-endorser condition, this person was identified as either a dermatologist (in skin lotion ads) or a mechanical engineer (in motor oil ads). In the non-expert condition, the spokesperson was an MBA student.

### 3. Dependent Measures

Subjects expressed their attitudes toward the ad (Aad) on three seven-point scales (weak vs. strong, ineffective vs. effective, not persuasive vs. persuasive). These items were averaged to form an Aad index (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.87$ ). Subjects also evaluated the advertised brand on three seven-point scales (bad vs. good, unfavorable vs. favorable, unsatisfactory vs. satisfactory). Their responses were averaged to form an Ab index (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.91$ ). Purchase intention was assessed by subjects' agreement with the following statements: "I would like to have an opportunity to try Nova Motor Oil (Skin Lotion)," "If I were in market today buying motor oil (skin lotion), I would choose Nova." These items were averaged to form a PI index (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.69$ ).

Perceptions of the advertising spokesperson's expertise, trustworthiness, and likability were measured on six five-point scales. Subjects indicated whether they agreed that the endorser was an experienced user and knowledgeable about the product (expertise), honest in his/her testimonial and trustworthy (trustworthiness), likable and similar to the subjects (likability). These items were averaged because of high reliability (For expertise, Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.86$ ; for trustworthiness, Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.76$ ; for likability, Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.34$ ).

### 4. Procedure

Subjects were randomly assigned to see one of the eight advertising copies.

Each subject received a booklet containing a cover story, the target advertisement, and dependent measures. The cover story was used to provide a rationale for the study and was followed with a passage which was described as an ad prototype. Subjects were asked to read the passage carefully as if they were in a test marketing study, and then to fill out a 2-page evaluation form. On this form, subjects responded to manipulation and confound checks, measures of attitude toward the testimonial ad, attitude toward the advertised brand, and purchase intention. After subjects were finished, they were thanked and completely debriefed. The procedure took about 10 minutes.

## Results

The least square means for the dependent measures in the 16 experimental conditions are included in Table 1.

### 1. Manipulation Checks

Perception of the endorser expertise were manipulated successfully. Subjects perceived the expert endorser to have higher expertise ( $M = 3.375$ ) than the non-expert endorser ( $M = 2.583$ ;  $F = 6.45$ ,  $d/f = 1/32$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

The success of choosing a masculine/feminine product was assessed by asking subjects their purchasing experience and the number of brands they could name. All the female subjects and 50% of males bought skin lotions before, while 92% of males and 42% of female bought motor oil. Also, female subjects correctly recalled more brands of skin lotion than males did ( $M = 4.8$  and  $2.5$  respectively,  $t(46) = 2.44$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), but males didn't recall significantly more brands of motor oil than females ( $M = 2.45$  and  $2.16$  respectively). General speaking, these results confirm the choice of skin lotion [ motor oil ] as a feminine [ masculine ] product because females [ males ] have more purchasing experience and product knowledge.



**Table 1 Cell means in the 16 experimental conditions**

	Female Endorser				Male Endorser			
	Expert Source		Non-Expert Source		Expert Source		Non-Expert Source	
	Feminine Product	Masculine Product	Feminine Product	Masculine Product	Feminine Product	Masculine Product	Feminine Product	Masculine Product
<u>Female subjects:</u>								
Ad Attitude	3.78	3.56	2.33	3.11	5.11	4.0	3.22	3.44
Brand Attitude	3.55	4.11	3.44	5.0	5.11	4.11	4.33	4.67
Purchase Intention	3.0	3.16	1.67	3.5	3.17	2.5	2.5	2.5
Source Trustworthiness	3.33	3.5	3.33	3.67	3.50	2.83	3.00	2.67
Source Expertise	3.13	3.50	2.33	2.75	4.0	2.83	2.83	2.67
Source Likability	3.33	3.33	3.67	3.67	3.33	3.00	3.00	3.00
<u>Male subjects:</u>								
Ad Attitude	2.89	3.78	4.11	2.89	4.78	3.22	3.22	3.56
Brand Attitude	4.11	4.78	4.78	4.33	4.11	4.33	4.78	3.33
Purchase Intention	2.50	2.67	3.17	2.67	2.83	3.33	3.17	2.50
Source Trustworthiness	2.50	3.33	3.67	3.00	3.17	2.83	3.83	1.83
Source Expertise	3.17	2.83	3.00	2.33	4.00	3.67	2.67	2.67
Source Likability	3.33	4.00	3.33	2.67	3.33	3.67	4.00	3.33

## 2. Attitude toward the Advertisement (Aad)

ANOVA on Aad did not provide support for the hypothesis. Only one main effect, source expertise, was significant. Advertisements featuring an expert invited better evaluation ( $M=3.88$ ) than those using a non-expert endorser ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $F = 3.69$ ,  $df= 1/32$ ,  $p<0.0638$ ). No other main effect or interaction was found.

## 3. Attitude toward the Brand (Ab)

ANOVA on Ab revealed a significant 3-way interaction, Product Type X Expertise X Subject sex ( $F = 4.82$ ,  $df = 1/32$ ,  $p < 0.0355$ ). This effect is illustrated in

Figure 1 and Figure 2. Feminine product endorsed by a non-expert received highest evaluation from male subjects ( $M=4.78$ ) but lowest evaluation from female subjects. In contrast, masculine product endorsed by a non-expert received most favorable attitude from female subjects but least favorable attitude from males.

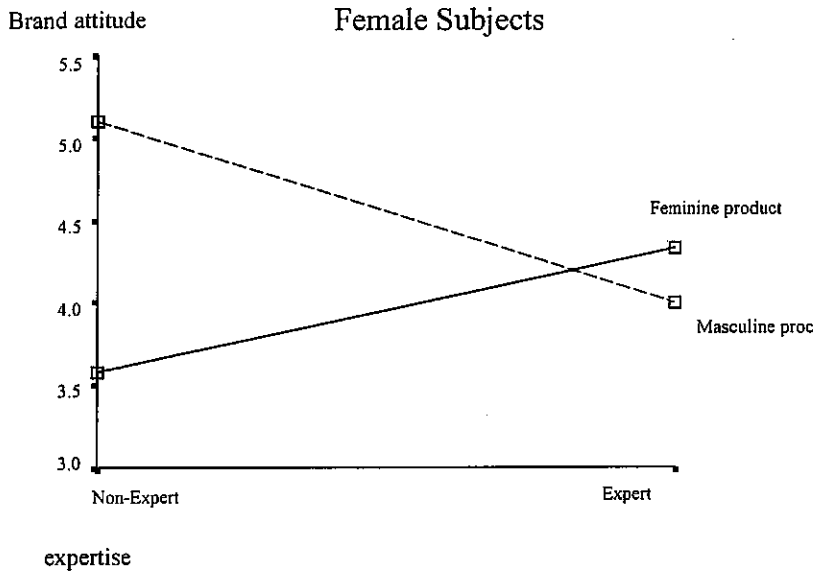


Figure 1 Brand Attitudes of Female Subjects

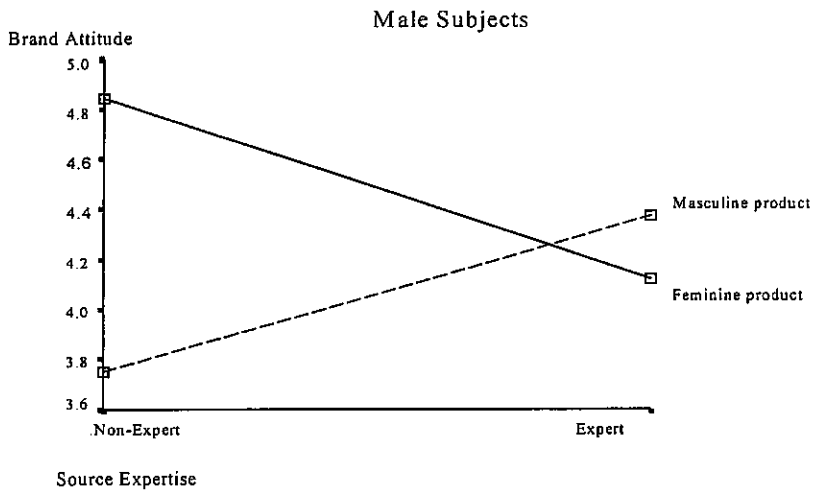


Figure 2 Brand Attitudes of Male Subjects

#### 4. Purchase Intention.

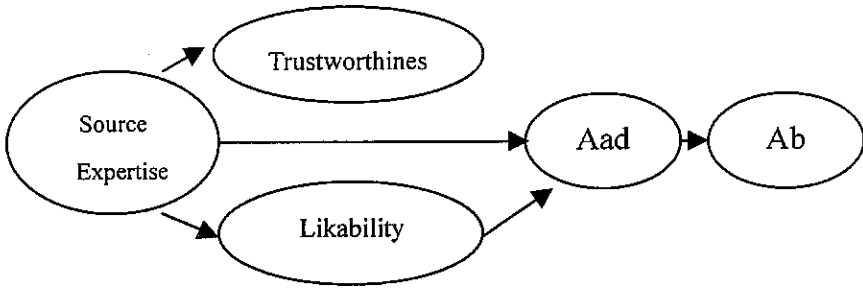
The results in this analysis is similar to those in Ab. Only the 3-way interaction, Product Type x Expertise x Subject sex, was significant ( $F = 4.34$ ,  $df = 1/32$ ,  $p < 0.0453$ ). Feminine product endorsed by a non-expert invoked highest and lowest purchase intention from male ( $M = 3.17$ ) and female subjects ( $M = 2.08$ ), respectively. The findings were reverse in masculine product condition, and the difference between male and female subjects' purchase intention ( $M_s = 2.58$  and  $3.00$ , respectively) became smaller.

#### 5. Perception of the Endorser

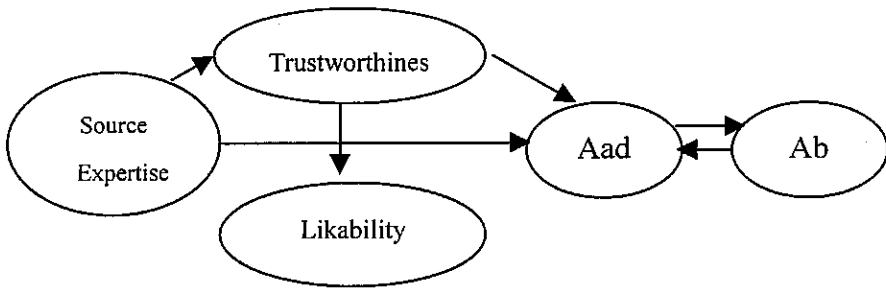
Perceptions of the endorser likability and trustworthy were also examined. The results indicate no significant difference on endorser likability across the design ( $M = 3.375$ ). However, there's a 2-way (Product Type x Endorser sex,  $F = 7.48$ ,  $df = 1/32$ ,  $p < 0.0101$ ) and a 3-way (Product Type x Expertise x Subject sex,  $f = 6.29$ ,  $df = 1/32$ ,  $p < 0.0174$ ) interaction on trustworthy. The 2-way interaction occurred because female endorser was seen as more trustworthy in the masculine product condition ( $M_{female\ endorser} = 3.38$ ,  $M_{male\ endorser} = 2.54$ ), but almost as honest as male endorser in the case of feminine product. The 3-way interaction indicated that male subjects' perception of non-expert endorser varied with the product type. Male subjects perceived non-expert endorser as more credible for feminine product than for masculine product. Female subjects, on the other hand, hold consistent perception of the two types of endorser across the two products.

#### 6. Persuasion Process

The mediational impact of the perceptions of endorser was examined by path analyses conducted separately for males and females (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The structural equation modeling was conducted using the maximum likelihood estimation method in LISREL 8.3. The model for females shows a good fit: chi-square statistics = 5.11 ( $df=4$ ,  $p=0.28$ ), Root Mean Square Residual (RMR) = 0.098, Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) = 0.92. The modified model fit index for males are as follows: chi-square = 4.17 ( $df=3$ ,  $p = 0.24$ ), RMR = 0.065, GFI = 0.94. The paths are shown in Figure 3 and 4.



**Figure 3 Persuasion Process for Female Subjects**



**Figure 4 Persuasion Process for Male Subjects**

For female subjects, Figure 3 shows that source expertise directly influences Aad, as well as indirectly through source likability. Taken together with the ANOVA results on Ab, it seems that females prefer non-expert endorser for a unfamiliar product because of the perceived similarity between the endorser and themselves. However, Figure 4 shows that for male subjects, perceived trustworthiness mediates the effect of source expertise on Aad. Therefore, while females prefer an endorser who is likable, males will be persuaded by an endorser who can be trusted. In addition, for male subjects there exists a reciprocal relationship between Aad and Ab, suggesting males may use non-source information (e.g., product attributes described in the ad copy) to form brand attitudes.

## Discussion and Conclusion

By conducting an experiment in the consumer behavioral context, this study examined the gender difference in persuasibility. Consumer's responses to a fictitious testimonial advertisement were collected. The moderating roles of communicator sex, product type (sex role orientation), and source expertise were investigated. Some supportive main effects and interactions were found, but not all of the hypotheses were followed.

First, this study found expert endorser did not always have superior persuasiveness. An expert did stimulate more favorable attitude toward the advertisement, as hypothesized; however, this favorable attitude did little, if any, influence on the formation of brand attitude. In fact, the mean score of brand attitude in the expert endorser condition was lower than that in the non-expert endorser condition. When consumers reads an ad about or intends to buy a product with which they not very familiar (for example, a product related to the opposite sex), they turn to an endorser who is not with high expertise but similar to themselves (in this study, the non-expert endorser is set to be a student, the same status as the subjects). Feick & Higie (1992) proposed and provided support for the possibility that source similarity, rather than source expertise, will be an important determinant of influence when the advertised is of high preference heterogeneity. Could the failure of an expert endorser's persuasiveness be attributed to the preference heterogeneity of this study's experimental products --skin lotion and motor oil? To answer this question, further research has to be done.

Second, consumer's perception of the endorser is moderated by endorser sex, product type, source expertise, and subject's own sex. Examining the variation of perceived trustworthiness of endorser, we can conclude that an endorser will be considered more trustworthy when 1) this endorser is not supposed to be knowledgeable about the product he/she is recommending, like the case in which a female endorser speaks for motor oil, or an MBA student talks about skin lotion; 2) the recipient of the advertising message is not familiar with the advertised product. One possible explanation for this phenomenon would be that the advertising message adopted in this study was so strong (or plausible) that it made people think the not-

so-professional endorser is speaking his/her true feelings and real experience with the product.

Third, this study did not find evidence for the interaction of communicator sex and recipient sex; however, after including perceived trustworthiness as a covariate in all analyses, we found some interesting effects. Perceived trustworthiness of endorser is significant in all analyses, which means this factor is the major source of variation in dependent measures. Most of the results remained the same, except those in the analysis of brand attitude. With the covariate included, an interaction of endorser sex and subject sex appeared. Male endorser stimulated significantly better brand attitude from female subjects than female endorser did. But female endorser did not have similar effects on male subjects. Of course, since it is not a priori analysis, it is inappropriate to conclude that females are more persuasible by a male communicator. Further research can manipulate the trustworthiness of endorser and then test for the existence of the interaction mentioned above.

Finally, consistent with recent research, this study did not find much evidence for women's greater persuasibility. Nor did it find that women have prejudice against their own gender. More replications of this study must be done to explore if this phenomenon is confounded with social desirability, or as many social psychologists claim, gender stereotype is diminishing in today's society.

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