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Men and masculinities in a changing world: (de)legitimizing gender ideals in advertising

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Abstract

Purpose – Conversations surrounding gender are sweeping the globe as the voices and lived experiences of people are being heard and shared at unprecedented rates. Discourses about gender in advertising are embedded in cultural narratives and legitimatized by a broad system of institutional structures and actors, at both macro and micro/consumer levels. This study aims to explore how consumers (one type of institutional actor) engage in legitimizing/delegitimizing messages of gender in the marketplace.

Design/methodology/approach – This research draws on a qualitative approach, specifically the use of in-depth interviews with men across three global contexts.

Findings – This research identifies the ways in which men engage in (de)legitimizing messages of masculinity in advertising such as reiteration, reframing, ascribing to alternate logics and prioritizing personal norms.

Research limitations/implications – Across three contexts, this research theorizes the (de)legitimization of gender ideals in advertising and situates consumer narratives within broader institutional forces, providing a holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

Practical implications – Understanding the ways in which individuals either accept or reject gendered ideals in media aids advertising and marketing professionals in tailoring messages that resonate with audiences.

Social implications – Understanding how individuals negotiate their gender and the messages they deem as legitimate are crucial to understanding gender issues related to consumer welfare and public policy.

Originality/value – While research has examined advertising practitioners' views regarding gender from an institutional perspective, research on how consumers construct and maintain the legitimacy of gendered messages in the marketplace is scarce. This research theorizes and illustrates the (de)legitimization of gender ideals across three contexts.

Keywords Gender, Masculinity, Consumer research, Advertising, Qualitative research, Institutions

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Conversations surrounding gender and masculinities are sweeping the globe as the voices and lived experiences of people are being heard and shared at unprecedented rates. Movements such as #metoo and #TimesUp are flooding social media around the world – movements that are increasingly capturing the attention of women and men alike (Mcnamara, 2018). In the midst of these disruptions, the deeply institutionalized nature of gender in society persists – the nation-state concerns of China over the popularity of K-pop

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(Korean pop music), which features “effeminate” boy bands (Baculinao, 2017) and the recent controversy over Gillette’s “The Best Men Can Be” campaign featuring a progressive anti-toxic masculinity message (Chiquillo, 2019) are just two illustrations. These examples bring to fore the shifting nature of gender discourse at a global level, as well as how hegemonic forms of gender can become untethered at particular socio-historic moments in time. Thus, it is more important now than ever for marketers and advertisers to understand how fluid notions of gender are shaped in culture and across the globe. Prior scholarship focuses on the changing content of gender ideals; however, how and why these gendered messages are deemed legitimate (i.e. appropriate and desirable) and accepted in the marketplace is often neglected.

Gender discourses and ideologies are embedded in cultural narratives and legitimatized by a far-reaching system of institutional structures and actors – at the cultural (macro), market (meso) and consumer (micro) levels. Advertising serves as a powerful influencing force in how consumers negotiate gender in their daily lives. Existing scholarship has sought to compare and contrast consumers’ responses to advertising across so-called masculine and feminine cultures and highlights stereotypical portrayals across cultures (Nelson and Paek, 2008; Zhang and Shavitt, 2003). However, gender both contributes to identity myths and is also a discursive practice that is ongoing and subject to “intervention” and “resignification” (Butler, 1999). While institutions shape consumers’ lives through discourses that legitimize certain goals (Swidler, 2001), consumers play an integral part in shaping and reiterating what is legitimate or “desirable, proper or appropriate” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574) as well.

Our research explores the experiences of consumers in three countries such as the USA, China and Spain, which serve as global contexts and localized voices to illuminate the ways in which consumers engage in (de)legitimizing gendered messages in advertising. We maintain that institutional disruptions across these three nations with regard to the political, economic and socio-cultural environments in which they are embedded, form an ideal breeding ground for the formation of delegitimization strategies among consumers. Thus, we ask, what strategies do consumers use in legitimizing and delegitimizing gender in advertising?

This research is important for several reasons. First, from a theoretical perspective, it addresses the often-neglected interactions between micro-level consumer experiences, meso level forces and macro-level changes (Jafari and Goulding, 2013) by examining consumers in light of the institutional contexts in which they live. That is, language, along with government, church, property and family are among the great institutions (Cooley, 1909/1956) of the world. Advertising text is one form of language that is central to developed consumer cultures and emerging markets alike. Moreover, within advertising, gender is one of the most prominently used social resources (Jhally, 1987), often reiterating gendered expectations (Goffman, 1979). Next, scholars have long highlighted advertising as both creation of culture and a reflection of culture. From a managerial perspective, advertisers survive, in part, on their ability to offer consumers a legitimized version of self – particularly of an identity that is gendered. However, now more than ever, notions of gender are being contested in everyday life and across media and advertising. Finally, in addition to the theoretical and managerial implications, what is deemed legitimate in terms of gender as exemplified in advertising holds profound consumer welfare implications. Legitimate gender ideals in society provide a blueprint for how individuals can experience their own gender identities and how they live their lives – scripts, which can serve to restrict individual performances of gender or make people feel vulnerable or ostracized (Zayer and Otnes, 2012).

Literature review

Gender as socially constructed

Gender is a multifaceted construct that remains a "central organizing feature of identity" (Schroeder, 2003, p. 1). Indeed, the literature on self and identity in relation to gender is vast (see recent summaries by Maclaran *et al.*, 2017; Zayer *et al.*, 2017). Importantly, past scholars have illuminated the socially constructed nature and performativity of gender (Butler, 1999; West and Zimmerman, 1987). For example, Butler (1999, p. 278) states that gender is "real only to the extent that it is performed" while West and Zimmerman discuss the "doing" of gender. In consumer and marketing research in particular, prior to the 1990s, gender was primarily used as a variable, while more recent scholarship has exemplified the "cultural turn" (Maclaran *et al.*, 2017, p. 355), challenging binaries and the conflation of sex and gender. Gender identity (masculinity/femininity), for example, is distinguished from sex (male/female). Importantly, research in marketing has revealed how the market, including advertising and media institutions, continues to construct and maintain the myths associated with masculinity and femininity – what to aspire to, what to emulate and what to reinforce (Pollay, 1986; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004). Indeed, individuals perform gender in light of their perceptions about gender role norms and the messages they hear from the marketplace (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson, 2013; Zayer *et al.*, 2012), within social interactions (Hein and O'Donohoe, 2014) and socializing forces (Littlefield and Ozanne, 2011). In the following sections, we examine past scholarship at the intersection of gender and advertising, paying special attention to the research in each of the three contexts we examine the USA, China and Spain.

Gender and advertising in the United States of America

While advertising research examining US contexts has largely focused on stereotyping of women (Courtney and Whipple, 1983), more recent research has explored men and masculinities in advertising and media (Garst and Bodenhausen, 1997; Gentry and Harrison, 2010; Gulas and McKeage, 2000; Pompper, 2010). For example, Pompper (2010) highlights differences in the perceptions of masculine identities of African-Americans (e.g. hypermasculinity), Asian-Americans (e.g. feminization), Hispanics/Latinos (e.g. caballerismo; machismo) and Caucasians – images that play out in the media. American masculinities, albeit shifting, continues to be marked by homophobia and a fear of the feminine (Brannon, 1976; Kimmel, 1994). Moreover, traditional masculine ideals of success, sexual prowess, strength and rugged individualism (Hirschman, 2003) co-mingle with more contemporary notions. Domesticity, family, a focus on the body, for example, (Ostberg, 2010; Zayer *et al.*, 2012) can be seen in popular media in the USA (and thereby globally because of its wide reach). However, despite this co-mingling, some researchers point out an increasingly self-oriented sense of masculinity is depicted in advertising (Branchik and Chowdhury, 2013). Men's conceptualization of gender ideals in the marketplace, as well as images reiterated in advertising exemplify depictions both rooted in the more traditional pillars of masculinity (e.g. strength, wealth and athleticism), as well as more recent ideals, such as an emphasis on being an involved father (Gentry and Harrison, 2010). Masculinity at the turn of the twenty-first century could be characterized as commoditized as men were increasingly marketed to and offered visions of masculinity for consumption (Kimmel, 2012). In sum, gender in the USA is and has been for the past few decades, fragmented and wrought with tensions between traditional and more contemporary notions, as a global consumer culture increasingly commoditizes forms of masculinity. We now turn to gender research in China – its roots, and the tensions that are present in that culture with regard to gender.

Gender and advertising in China

Confucianism has strongly governed perceptions, depictions and realities of gender in traditional China since the sixth century BC. The majority of recent studies in this area have focused on gender depictions and stereotypes of women, whereby traditional Chinese women assumed subservient roles. Even though modern China demonstrates openness to the West, modern Chinese women and men still appear to reject the depictions of strong women in advertising (Ng and Chan, 2014). In a longitudinal study spanning two decades beginning in the 1980s, Ye *et al.* (2012) found growing Western influences over time resulted in notable increases in the portrayal of female models as beauty or sex objects, the use of younger models and the frequency of female nudity. The latter findings were corroborated by Lin (2008). Several studies found that such images fail to capture the mindset of modern Chinese women (Barry, 2012; Chan *et al.*, 2012; Chan and Ng, 2013; Hung *et al.*, 2007; Sin and Yau, 2001).

In contrast, Chinese manliness is captured in two ideals: "Wen" and "Wu" (Louie, 2002). Wen alludes to "accomplished," "accomplishment" and "civilization" – characteristics of culture and learning attributed to high-ranking mandarins (Creel, 1970). Wu indicates strength, military force and power, as well as the "ability to withstand feminine charms" (Louie, 2002, p. 29). An ideal combination of Wen and Wu stresses skill and strategy over violence, and values cultural attainments over physical attributes (Song, 2004; Wang, 2003). Further, Shaw and Tan (2014) in a comparative content analysis found that Western male models were more frequently depicted as tough, macho and androgynous, whereas Asian male models were more often vigorous and cheerful.

Modernization and the opening up of China to the outside world, which began in 1978, has perpetuated a tension between traditional values and gender roles with the dominant Western notion of masculinity (Song, 2004). Shao *et al.* (2014, p. 337), in their exploration of the perspectives of Chinese advertising practitioners, found that "interviewees consistently noted that the process of portraying gender occurred at the intersection of Western and Chinese cultural forces." Practitioners in this study realized the importance of anchoring traditional gendered concepts in Confucian values, while simultaneously including the modern values of economic power and hedonism associated with Western capitalism. Thus, in China, tensions again emerge, this time between modernization and traditional notions of gender rooted in Confucianism. Next, we examine gender and advertising in Spain – a country that has also been subject to considerable change in recent years.

Gender and advertising in Spain

Scholarship in gender studies has noted that often times gender stereotypes cut across cultures because of historical divisions of labor that are prevalent worldwide (López-Zafra and García-Retamero, 2012; Matud *et al.*, 2011; Valls-Fernández and Martínez-Vicente, 2007). However, gender and gender ideals in advertising in Spain are rooted in unique social and political dynamics that have occurred within the country (Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2014; Lobo, 2011). For instance, López-Zafra and García-Retamero (2012, p. 445) discuss the lasting influence of an era of Franco rule (until 1978) where women's voting rights and agency were limited but note the rapid change thereafter positioning Spain as an "exemplar of gender progress." In their survey of men and women across three regions in Spain, the authors find a substantial shift in gender role perceptions of women, an incremental shift in the perception of men's gender roles, and a movement toward more equal role distribution. Royo-Vela *et al.* (2008) also find a movement toward gender equality in their content analysis of Spanish commercials, but that the traditional family model (i.e. women depicted as housewives/

mothers and men working outside the home) still persists. Indeed, Gutiérrez *et al.* (2014, p. 225) note in their three-decade comparative study of gender in Spanish society:

> While there have been important changes in the conception of femininity and masculinity, today's social memory still retains very distinct symbols, actions and places for 'men' and for 'women', which prevents the existence of truly egalitarian societies.

Thus, across three countries, gender ideals continue to shift, ebbing and flowing with increased globalization, westernization, and political and economic changes, leading to fluidity of gender and a state of flux of institutionalized gender ideals. While much past scholarship has focused on the changing content of gender ideals, there is little research that examines how these gendered messages are deemed legitimate (i.e. appropriate and desirable) and accepted in the marketplace. It is with this gap in mind that we focus our inquiry into how messages of gender in advertising are maintained and reiterated, as well as how they are open to change, leading to destabilizing deeply entrenched notions of gender.

Theoretical background

Legitimization

We foreground our discussion of how consumers experience gendered representations in a changing world by first situating how gender is legitimated within broader institutional structures. Suchman (1995, p. 574) defines legitimacy as a "generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions." Although the establishment of legitimacy provides institutions credibility and aids in maintaining stability, institutions can also be open to change. A range of research has explored how an array of actors such as authoritative bodies (Anand and Watson, 2004), intermediaries (Delacour and Leca, 2017) and institutional entrepreneurs (Déjean *et al.*, 2004) play an important role in the legitimation process. However, less research has focused on how consumers can resist established institutional codes – particularly consumers who do not actively interact with one another in a defined space or "arena of action" (Dolbec and Fischer, 2015) or have no intent to create or legitimize a new market (Martin and Schouten, 2014; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013), but rather are fragmented in the marketplace. Indeed, early work in institutional theory by Cooley (1909/1956, pp. 313-314) highlights how individuals and institutions are interdependent and that "the individual is always the cause, as well as the effect of the institution." As advertising scholars have noted (Scott, 1994; Stern, 1999), consumers are not passive processors of gendered messages, but rather, they actively engage in the meaning-making process. Indeed, Scott (2008) refers to LaTour (1986, p. 267), who states:

> The spread in time and space of anything – claims, orders, artifacts, goods – is in the hands of people; each of these people may act in different ways, letting the token drop, or modifying it, or deflecting it, or betraying it, or adding to it, or appropriating it.

In this vein, past scholarship has called for the importance of understanding institutional forces as they relate to global identities (Jafari and Goulding, 2013), as well as institutional dynamics related to advertising (Gulas *et al.*, 2010; Walsh *et al.*, 2014; Zayer and Coleman, 2015). Indeed, McCracken (1986) notes that advertising systems serve as instruments in conveying cultural meanings to consumers. We find that within advertising systems, individuals not only reiterate but also display agency to contest institutionalization of hegemonic gender ideals. In turn, finally, we identify patterns of (de)legitimization among consumers who refashion, reject and reframe gendered ideals in advertising. That is, our research examines how one group of institutional actors – male consumers – actively legitimize and delegitimize messages of masculinity in advertising. In the next section, we detail the context and methodology for this research.

Context and methodology

Context

We focus our inquiry on men, as gender increasingly takes on a fragmented and commoditized form for them (Kimmel, 1994, 2012). Moreover, marketing and advertising scholarship have a long and rich history of research on women, gender and advertising; however, men as gendered beings are often overlooked (Gulas and McKeage, 2000; Zayer and Coleman, 2015). Thus, the current research provides an opportunity to dig deeper into an area that has historically been under-researched.

Past scholarship has documented how experiences of gender are influenced on an individual level by factors such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, age and geography, among other factors (Beynon, 2002; Pompper, 2010). However, these lived experiences cannot be separated from the historical time period and the varying economic, political and sociocultural forces in which they are embedded. For this reason, we examine men in three global contexts that are situated across three time periods within the last 15 years. We draw from consumer interviews across three contexts in North America, Asia and Europe to demonstrate the strategies consumers use in legitimizing and delegitimizing gender ideals in advertising. Thus, we take a "bottom-up" perspective in institutional creation and diffusion (Scott, 2008, p. 192) by examining consumer narratives while recognizing the "top-down" influences of the discourses surrounding gender at a macro level in each context, which are reiterated and reflected in various forms of advertising. We specifically chose to examine the USA, China and Spain because:

- these countries embody a range of cultural practices and values; and
- their changing economic, political and socio-cultural environments have led to a state of flux in gender roles.

That is, we chose contexts in which change has disrupted the socio-historic patterning of gender and consumer identity myths, and thus, became ideal sites to examine gender and the (de)legitimization process.

First, the three regions selected in these countries not only span across three continents but also vary across cultural practices and values, including gender norms and gender role expectations. Indeed, House *et al.* (2010) groups the USA, Spain and China as part of distinct cultural clusters of Anglo, Latin Europe and Confucian Asia, respectively. Further, we examine these three contexts in the spirit of Appadurai (2008, pp. 13, 8) conceptualization of culture, not as a "substance" but a "dimension of phenomenon that attends to situated and embodied difference" and one that illuminates "communi[ties] of sentiment" from collective readings of media. Second, each context serves as an ideal setting to examine how consumers respond to messages of gender because each country underwent institutional disruptions during the time of data collection with regard to economic, political and social-cultural factors. Below we discuss the significant disruptions occurring in each country in more depth and follow with a discussion of the methodology used.

USA: The early 2000s marked a time of shifting gender roles, the emergence of the metrosexual – a commercialized masculine ideal based on distinct grooming practices, aesthetics and a sense of recognition of femininity in one's identity – and an increased conceptualization of men as shifting from producers to consumers (Schroeder and Zwick, 2004). Recognizing the potential of the male consumer, new products were developed (e.g. Unilever's introduction of the now iconic Axe body spray in a growing grooming products market), advertising agencies tried to decipher the “new” American man and programming was created to show off the new metrosexual aesthetic (e.g. *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*). More broadly, the USA was reeling from the September 11th terrorist attacks and recovering from the “dot-com” bust, a recession that lasted from 2001-2003.

China: At the time of our data collection in 2010, Hu Jintao was President of China. His administration was characterized by “scientific development and harmonious society” (Zheng and Tok, 2010). This blend of socialism with Confucian principles was drafted to meet demands from the larger Chinese society for greater democracy, transparency, accountability and rule of law. It generated a national pride in the technological and economic achievements within China and signaled the country’s role on the world stage as a contributor to the larger “harmonious world” (Zheng and Tok, 2010). After three decades of reform, in 2010, China grew to be the second largest economy in the world (Yao and Zhang, 2011). Outside of China, the world was in the throes of a serious economic recession. Foreign manufacturers sought the China market because of its size and as a viable outlet for luxury goods. Interpreting their leader’s stance as encouragement, the Chinese demonstrated curiosity about and attraction to Western lifestyles and goods. It is at this juncture of change that uncertainty and tensions related to male gender roles and values also thrived, including the rise of the “middlesex,” a well-mannered and well-groomed white-collar male paralleling the Western metrosexual (Hird, 2009). Indeed, Hung *et al.* (2012, p. 125) discuss China as “an ideal context in which to investigate how consumers negotiate among conflicting values in a globalizing world.”

Spain: Data was collected in Spain in 2015 during a time of political change as a third political party emerges with significant support from the youth vote – a move that is in stark contrast to the two-party political system, which has typically dominated the country in recent decades. Spain has also been hard hit economically by the worldwide recession and has one of the highest unemployment rates in the EU – a rate of nearly 21 per cent nationally and even higher among the youth (Economically Active Population Survey, 2016). Spain, just as China and the USA, is also marked by shifting gender roles as traditional ideals co-mingle with more progressive ideals.

By examining these three sites, we are able to demonstrate that our findings are robust across time periods, cultures, economies and geographies. That is, the purpose of our research is not to delineate profiles for each country, but rather to seek out consumers’ roles in the (de)legitimization process and to demonstrate their robustness across contexts and across socio-historic moments.

Methods

Within these contexts, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 48 men, ranging in 18-34 years of age. Younger individuals were chosen because they tend to hold more gender fluid ideals (Laughlin, 2016). In addition, men and notions of masculinity have not only been fragmented (Kimmel, 2012) and at times contradictory (Zayer *et al.*, 2012; Hein and O’Donohoe, 2014) but also have been a highly contested issue worldwide in relation to advertising in particular (Gurrieri, 2019). Yet, men are still perceived as “outside” the sphere of influence of gendered advertising (Zayer and Coleman, 2015). Thus, these elements served as important factors in sampling young men, as (de)legitimization of gender ideals is the main focus of inquiry. Further, gender can be a domain that is surrounded by stigma for men. Indeed, as Hein and O’Donohoe (2014, p. 1302) note, “gender acts are always influenced by the presence of an audience.” Thus, interviews were used because it is a technique that is best suited for sensitive topics under investigation over focus groups, for example, where individuals may be "reluctant to express their feelings and behaviors in a group setting" (Belk *et al.*, 2013, p. 41).

Informants were asked "grand tour" questions (McCracken, 1988) regarding their perceptions of gender in their society, their own notions of gender, their responses to various gender role depictions, if they engage in personal comparisons to advertising portrayals, among other questions. Interviews followed generally accepted guidelines by building rapport (i.e. "tell me about yourself [. . .]") and moving from broad to more specific questions (Belk *et al.*, 2013). For example, researchers queried, "what are your thoughts in general about gender roles in society?" and "what are your personal views on gender roles?" Interviews then focused more narrowly on advertising depictions of gender with questions such as "how do you think men (women) are portrayed in advertising in general?" and "what ideals of masculinity (femininity) do you most often see in advertising?" During the interviews, the researchers also asked about informants' reactions to gendered ads, including any perceived influence on themselves or others. Interviews lasted between 50 min to 3 h in total length. The longer interviews were during the first set of data collection in which follow up interviews were conducted for further elaboration on discussed topics. As the data collection progressed and the research questions refined, interviews typically lasted approximately 1 h.

More specifically, 16 men living in a large city in Northern China were interviewed in their native Mandarin Chinese language by a trained research assistant in China and overseen by one of the co-authors who served as a faculty member at a university in China. Subsequently, the interviews were translated into English. They were paid ¥100 or approximately $16 for participating in the interview. In addition, 21 men living in the Midwestern USA were interviewed by one of the co-authors who resides in the USA. Informants in the USA were put into a lottery for a $25 gift card. In total, 11 men from Spain were interviewed in English (10 were from Southern Spain while one grew up in Northern Spain and had just recently moved to the USA). Interviews conducted in English were appropriate because all of the informants were undergraduate or graduate students attending a university where the course work was completed in English (one informant was an employee at the university but studied English extensively); thus, all participants were fluent in the English language. The interviews in Spain were conducted by one of the co-authors with the assistance of another co-author who serves as faculty at a university in Spain. Informants in Spain were given t-shirts as incentives to participate in the study. Incentives were tailored according to the needs of each data site and data was collected in all three sites until theoretical saturation was reached. All interviews were taped and transcribed, generating 531 pages of single-spaced text. Table I includes detailed information about the informants across the three research sites.

Analysis

The research team sought out emergent themes and patterns in the data (McCracken, 1988), engaging in comparison and contrast between the data sets to refine the categories that were salient. Initial codes such as "realism," "bricolage" and "tensions" where then further refined and collapsed. Themes were agreed upon and differences in interpretation were resolved through discussion between the researchers. To supplement our analysis, the researchers also used QSR NVivo12 software. Following the analytic practice of past advertising research (Chalmers *et al.*, 2015), researchers used open coding to explore themes present in the consumer narratives and selective coding to mapping these themes to notions of legitimacy. Thus, the use of the qualitative data analysis software ensured additional checks on the trustworthiness of our data. In sum, we compared and contrasted the data, seeking

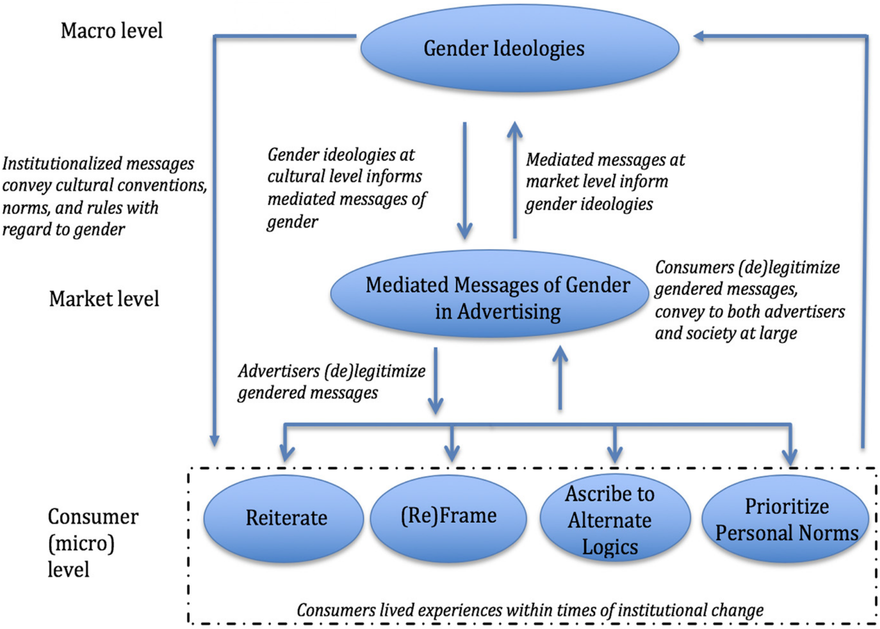
Informant pseudonym	Biographical information
*US informants**	
Andy	28 years old, single, Caucasian, some graduate education
Bob	26 years old, single, Caucasian, a college degree
Bobby	30 years old, single, Caucasian, a college degree
Bruce	28 years old, single, Caucasian, a graduate degree
Chris	22 years old, single, Caucasian, some college education
Doug	27 years old, engaged, Caucasian, a graduate degree
Gary	28 years old, single, Caucasian, a college degree
Jason	26 years old, single, Caucasian, a college degree
Joe	34 years old, single, Caucasian, a college degree
Jordan	24 years old, single, Asian American, a college degree
Larry	25 years old, engaged, Caucasian, some graduate education
Luther	25 years old, single, Caucasian, a college degree
Mick	25 years old, married, Caucasian, some graduate education
Mike	27 years old, single, Caucasian, a graduate degree
Neil	24 years old, single, Caucasian, a graduate degree
Paul	28 years old, married w/two kids, Caucasian, a college degree
Pete	23 years old, single, Caucasian, some graduate education
Ron	29 years old, single, Hispanic man, a college degree
Scott	25 years old, single, Caucasian, some graduate school
Tom	28 years old, single, African American, a college degree
Victor	29 years old, single, Hispanic, college education
China informants	
Aaron	23 years old, single, Asian, a college degree
Charles	33 years old, single, Asian, a graduate degree
Derek	29 years old, single, Asian, a college degree
Ethan	31 years old, married, Asian, a college degree
Gary	29 years old, single, Asian, a college degree
Jackie	25 years old, single, Asian, a college degree
Jerry	28 years old, single, Asian, a college degree
Jimmy	22 years old, single, Asian, some college
Joseph	22 years old, single, Asian, a college degree
Liu	28 years old, single, Asian, some graduate education
Martin	30 years old, married, Asian, a graduate degree
Neil	23 years old, single, Asian, a college degree
Ruby	23 years old, single, Asian, a college degree
Tiger	24 years old, single, Asian, a college degree
Thomas	22 years old, single, Asian, some college
Stone	22 years old, single, Asian, a college degree
Spain informants	
Ángel	24 years old, single, Spanish, some graduate education
Daniel	20 years old, single, Spanish, some college
David	18 years old, single, Spanish/American, some college
Germán	21 years old, single, Spanish, some college
Guillermo	26 years old, single, Spanish, a college degree
Juan	25 years old, single, Spanish, some graduate education
Luis	27 years old, single, Spanish, some graduate education
Mateo	26 years old, single, Spanish, some graduate education
Pablo	24 years old, single, Spanish, some graduate education
Rafael	28 years old, single, Spanish, some graduate education
Ricardo	24 years old, single, Spanish, some graduate education

Table I.
Informant information

out instances where patterns and systematic differences emerged across the data, as well as identifying any cases that did not fit our initial findings.

Findings

Past scholars have pointed out both the resilience and fluidity of traditional gender norms at varying levels of analysis. These include consumers' lives (Schroeder and Zwick, 2004), advertising institutions (Zayer and Coleman, 2015) and in society (Harris, 1995). Zucker (1977, p. 726) states, "[. . .] social knowledge once institutionalized exists as a fact, as part of objective reality, and can be transmitted directly on that basis." That is, gender ideals persist over time due, in part, to institutionalization efforts by actors who disseminate and reiterate such messages. However, this "objective reality" can be changed through a variety of factors – particularly if these notions are not viewed as legitimate. Because institutions and actors are embedded in dynamic and changing social systems, notions of gender can progress over time as certain notions are legitimized and others are cast aside. Below, we demonstrate how gendered messages are legitimized drawing from consumer narratives across the three contexts we examine. Consumers' legitimation practices are intertwined with other actors and institutional forces (and detailed in prior research, e.g. Zayer and Coleman, 2015) and while we highlight these elements in our framework, our primary focus is on illuminating consumer (micro-level) strategies and how they interact with other institutional elements (Figure 1). That is, in times of institutional change, which serve to destabilize existing identity myths, we focus our inquiry on our central research question: what strategies do consumers use in (de) legitimizing gender in advertising? First, we briefly highlight the saliency of institutionalized gender ideologies. Next, we outline the consumer strategies used in this landscape.


Macro level
Gender Ideologies
Institutionalized messages convey cultural conventions, norms, and rules with regard to gender
Gender ideologies at cultural level informs mediated messages of gender
Mediated messages at market level inform gender ideologies
Market level
Mediated Messages of Gender in Advertising
Consumers (de)legitimize gendered messages, convey to both advertisers and society at large
Advertisers (de)legitimize gendered messages
Consumer (micro) level
Reiterate
(Re)Frame
Ascribe to Alternate Logics
Prioritize Personal Norms
Consumers lived experiences within times of institutional change

Note: *Building on the model of Zayer and Coleman (2015)

Figure 1.
How consumers (De) legitimize gendered messages in advertising*

Institutionalized gender ideologies

Gender ideals are not static; therefore, many informants discussed ideals that were salient in different life stages and in response to shifting and fluid cultural and socio-cultural norms – sometimes creating tensions. For example, American informants Pete and Luther explain that there is no singular message (i.e. "theoretical model" in Scott, 2008) for how a man should behave in today's society. In comparison to women, Pete states "guys can feel a little more free to do their own thing," although Luther proclaims "it does get confusing." Indeed, Luther reveals that he is constantly trying to decode appropriate [legitimate] behaviors both in and out of a marketplace of masculinities that are highly fragmented.

Past scholarship has demonstrated institutionalization is based on increasing three articulated forces. The first is the normative pillar, which emphasizes identity and network ties and draws on moral legitimacy. Secondly, there is an increasing objectification of shared beliefs, indicative of the cultural-cognitive pillar and drawing on culturally supported legitimacy. Thirdly, there are increasing returns indicative of the regulative pillar, which privilege the role of incentives as a motivational force in life and drawing on what is sanctioned (Scott, 2008). Further, at times, these three forces can and do intersect, interact and reinforce one another. Indeed, we see in our data that consumers draw from established and deeply embedded gender ideologies and discourses, as well as mediated messages of gender within advertising. At times these messages are accepted as legitimate and incorporated into their sentiments and practices, while at other times they are rejected or reframed. These understandings of gender, in turn, serve to reshape and refashion the notions of gender in society and they impact how gendered messages in advertising are received as well.

Normative forces: In our data, normative forces are at play as men conceptualize their gender ideals and in the images they find appropriate in advertising. For example, three Spanish informants, Daniel, David and Germán discuss the importance of taking care of family as part of ideal masculinity. For example, Germán explains his ideal:

> A man who works for the family, cares about them, keeps the problems of work for himself. The guy who has also time to spend with his wife and his friends.

Indeed, if we look more broadly to Spanish culture, a focus on traditional models of family is a deeply entrenched norm in society although it is in a state of transition because of institutional forces (e.g. family policies, see, for example, the work of Mínguez, 2009 examining institutional factors and family cultural models).

Cultural-cognitive forces: Informants actively accept traditional and commonly accepted tropes of masculinity and ascribe to these ideals per perceived cultural codes. They mimic the traditional markers of masculinity, such as wealth, success and the attainment of women that they see in advertising. For example, Bob, a man from the USA, points to "confidence," "success" and "a lot of toys," as key components of society's expectations for how men are supposed to be – ideals, which he believes are often reiterated in advertising. Cultural-cognitive forces firmly ground one Chinese informant as he discusses an ad featuring a tennis champion. Stone explains, "he has given me much inspiration and that a man should experience a lot [. . .] I think he's the ideal man image [. . .] It is [the Gillette ad] saying to youngsters like me that if you want to be successful, you should use this." Conversely, some informants discussed distaste for what they believed falls outside of the shared notions of legitimate masculinity in their culture using terms such as "creamy boys" (Liu) and "middlesex" (Joseph) in China and "metrosexuals" (Victor) in the USA.

Regulative forces: We also observed that some informants adhere to traditional notions of masculinity, not because of norms or cultural codes, but because they felt it was in their best interest to do so. Exemplifying regulative forces – they did not want to take on the "costs" of switching to new, riskier ideas or felt like they received increasing returns from certain sanctioned ideologies. For example, one Chinese man discusses his exploration of different ideals, settling on an ideology that provides the most incentives for him in the eyes of his family and in his work life. Joseph reflects on his high school days, "[. . .] everyone around was looking to the pop stars, who were dressed a little feminine. I thought that was fashionable and adopted it as an ideal." However, he explains he could not enact this ideal because "[. . .] my parents would not let me. And, now I have started to work, I want to be more like those successful business people, confident and optimistic [. . .] rather than appearing like middlesex." Indeed, in a hierarchical culture such as China (Yau, 1994), Joseph reveals the regulative force his parents have on his actions.

Consumer strategies of (De)legitimation of gendered messages

The above examples illustrate the powerful force of institutionalized norms, cultural conventions and regulative practices in which consumers are embedded. With this foundational understanding, we now turn to our main research question, which explores the micro-level instances of (de)legitimization among consumers as they navigate, negotiate and shape macro-level shifts. We find evidence of four consumer strategies as follows: reiteration, reframing, ascribing to alternate logics and prioritizing personal norms – in our data across all three countries and discuss them below. Importantly, we note that these represent a continuum of acceptance to increased resistance to established and deeply institutionalized notions of gender.

Reiteration: Some informants easily locate and adhere to scripts on gender put forth in advertising. Neil, a Chinese informant, discusses his response to a Johnny Walker ad he has brought to the interview as exemplifying his sense of ideal masculinity:

> So I have this alcohol. I only knew this was foreign liquor, but as to what it is or what meaning it has, I had no idea. But after the ad, [my father] put this bottle at a special place.

Later, he states the ad is "inspiring" and "if I go out and have a drink, I might order this first because of the advertisement." Thus, Neil claims the brand Johnny Walker (and its historically Scottish roots) and firmly associates it with his gender identity, so much so that he engages in public consumption of the brand because it aligns with his gender ideals. It is telling that Neil highlights both the "foreign" (i.e. Western) nature of the brand, as well as that through the practices of his father, it becomes a symbol for inspiration – one that is reinforced through the physical placement of the bottle in a sacred space. Interestingly, the specificities of the cultural context also come to fore, as issues of "face" (Baker and Clammer, 1979; Yau, 1994) are highlighted. That is, Neil is very aware that he maintains "face" so as long as his actions are appropriate and takes his cue from both his father and the ad. However, importantly, at a broader level, we can see how as markets shift by disruptive capitalist forces, identity narratives are correspondingly reshaped and what once was meaningless becomes a vessel for gender expression.

Luis, a Spanish informant, articulates the prevalence of idealized masculine depictions in advertising. He states:

> They [advertisers] are [saying to] you all the time [. . .] you need to go to the gym [. . .] I think I feel like a little pressured but not very uncomfortable because I think I have to give the best version of myself, so it involves going to the gym as well [. . .] So for me it's not harmful, maybe for another person [. . .].

While Luis actively recognizes the role of the advertiser is offering a cultural prescription for a fit body, instead of rejecting this "pressure," he continues to seek this ideal and to be "the best version" of himself.

At times, men acknowledge new or emerging ideals of masculinity portrayed in the media but still cling to established ideals – such as that of the athlete. One Chinese informant, Stone, remarks,

> [. . .] the image is changing. You can see this from ads, and men are getting more familiar with cosmetics than women. I don't like this, for I don't think this is what a man should be like. I think the real man should be like Roger Federer, who has won about 16 championships.

Stone adds that some advertising "shows a path to success," indicating his gender ideals pull from both advertising and sports, which he deems as legitimate sources. Moreover, the emphasis on materialism, achievement, and success exemplify a reiteration of Western values which stray from traditional values of modesty in Chinese culture (Bond *et al.*, 2011).

Thus, advertising remains a powerful force in the notions men find legitimate in terms of their gender identities. While they may draw from other sources such as family, peers, sports and other media, men continue to reiterate the dominant messages provided for them in markets – similar to what Hall (1993) refers to as operating within the "dominant code."

Reframing: The second strategy we observed in our data was the use of frames in the mediation of meaning. Goffman's (1974, p. 21) concept of the cultural frame or what he refers to as "schemata of interpretation" allows people to "locate, perceive, identify and label" events to develop meaning and do so with agency (Benford and Snow, 2000). Campbell (2005, pp. 48-49) defines frames as "metaphors, symbols and cognitive cues that cast issues in a particular light and suggest possible ways to respond to these issues."

Some informants delegitimize gendered messages in the marketplace and reframe them in light of their own experiences and needs. Gary, a Chinese informant, rejects advertising that portrays male models who "have been packaged to perfection." Gary states:

> I'm very rational when I buy things and won't pay too much attention simply because of the spokesperson or the ads. I usually do some research [. . .] [make] the most rational decision.

Thus, by rejecting perceived ideals imposed on him by advertisers, Gary is in a sense simultaneously reinforcing the masculine ideal of the man as the rational being. That is, he reframes the notion of what he deems legitimate in terms of gender – not of attaining "perfection" but of being "rational." Indeed, although not made explicit, his "packaged to perfection" language embodies a reaction against marketized forms of masculinity – likely exemplified by an increasingly intruding force of Westernization.

In another example, Luther from the USA, emphasizes that individuality is a part of ideal masculinity and notes "an ad does not affect who I am" and "I know who I am." He further delegitimizes the role of advertising to dictate what appropriate gender ideals are and instead reframes his experience as being an independent thinker. In a similar vein, US informant Mick recognizes the cultural pressures that advertising conveys:

> I think it's probably the pressure or ideal [. . .] to kind of look good at all costs [. . .] I think everyone is forced into being someone they may not be able to afford to be.

He is able to disregard these ideal notions of gender because "in my opinion, masculinity is sort of [. . .] stand out, being your own person." Thus, both Luther and Mick express reactions against highly formulaic presentations of marketed masculinity that emerged in the 1990s and 2000s.

Spanish informant Mateo explains how he reframes his understandings of gender based on political and social-cultural changes he deems as significant in Spanish culture – in particular, the changing political structure and the force of globalization. Mateo explains:

> [. . .] the young people are rais[ed] with a different culture, totally different from their parents. A more globalizing culture than the deep tradition in the past from Spain. Because as you know, we had like 60 years ago, we had a [dictator] [. . .] so a very repressive culture [. . .] My generation [in terms of gender]? [. . .] I think it's [. . .] global [. . .] before the woman was the one who [. . .] ruled the house [. . .] nowadays in my generation both are taking the decisions [. . .].

In addition, while Mateo acknowledges that the shift in gender roles may be "frustrating" for some men, he reflects on it as not a force to resist but as something that is a sign of the times.

Ascribing to alternate logic of authenticity: The third strategy we observe among our informants is alignment with the logic of authenticity. Institutional logics are defined by Friedland and Alford (1991, p. 248) as "a set of material practices and symbolic constructions, which constitutes its organizing principles and which is available to organizations and individuals to elaborate." These are essential to the maintenance of institutions. Deinstitutionalization occurs not only when existing institutional logics are perceived as no longer effective but also when an alternate logic emerges that challenges the status quo. That is, at times, institutional logics may be undermined (delegitimatized) and replaced by other logics. In our data, we identify an alternate logic of authenticity.

In the desire for authenticity, our informants display a nuanced understanding of the commercialized forces behind gendered images, including how marketers and advertisers craft their messages to different target audiences. For example, Joe from the USA states that ad depictions of metrosexuality fall outside of his boundaries of what he deems "acceptable," stating it "turns me off" because he is "not sure if this guy is completely masculine or somewhat feminine." Interestingly, he is also attuned to a classic masculine icon in American culture and displays resistance to it. He states,

> [. . .] we are somewhat programmed to think of ourselves as [. . .] like the 'Marlboro Man' and we all want to be that rough and tough guy [. . .] [there] may be a good percentage of people [who] look at this and they say, 'well, I am sick of looking at the guys that look like the Marlboro Man' and looking at a guy who's more real.

Thus, despite the heavily commercialized masculine identities of the metrosexual and the Marlboro Man, these depictions do not resonate with Joe. He also plainly articulates his recognition of ideals thrust upon him by advertisers and instead opts for more "real" depictions of gender in advertising, rejecting legitimized images in the marketplace.

Similarly, Pablo, a man from Spain, dislikes an ad with a muscular model, indicating "it is not the real situation in the real life" and laments about the retouching of photos in advertising. Another Spanish informant, Germán, discusses a model in an ad as "super strong but you know it is not real." Instead, he elaborates on his ideal as, "people that actually like who they are, they would like to look exactly like they are." Indeed, several informants talked about wanting to be "natural," "classic," a "normal guy," and used phrases like "be real with people" and "dare to be themselves, despite what others might think." One Chinese man discusses his resistance to advertising and materialism with a sense of pride in his "uniqueness." Charles states:

> Most of the ads here have girls or houses, as the definition for successful man, but this one [ad] portrays a man holding a book, very knowledgeable [. . .]. I don't care much about the material stuff [. . .]. People like us are unique [. . .]. What we care [about] is not fashion [or] a cell phone in trend.

Jordan, an informant from the USA, explicitly discounts advertising as a legitimate resource for his gender identity. He states frankly,

> I would not think that most people would take commercials as applying to your real life. Yeah [. . .] to some extent maybe I can see, like I said when you see sports ad and commercials you [glean] some ideals from there like hard work [. . .] I mean you can relate to it but you can't [. . .] generalize that and apply that to your life.

Thus, unlike the middle-class, stay-at-home dads in Coskuner-Balli and Thompson's (2013) study on subordinate cultural capital, rather than looking to the market to build cultural legitimacy for their gender identities, some of our informants rejected commodified and marketized forms of gender. Perceived as inauthentic, men instead engaged in ascribing to alternate logics.

Prioritizing personal norms: We also identify in our data instances when individuals' personal norms supersede institutional forces, including ideals portrayed in advertising systems. At times, informants' reactions were visceral as is the case with Jerry, a Chinese man, who rejects an ad stating, "if you are a normal male, you should feel some kind of repul[sion] to this ad." Chris from the USA discusses his dislike for an ad featuring what seems to be a sexual encounter between a man and a woman in a club.

> That type of ad disgusts me. More of where I have come in my life at this point. Random sex is just wrong. And it's like 'names optional,' that's wrong they are going to go home together and they don't even know who they are [. . .] That's kind of what disgusts me in the ad [. . .] It pressures you, until you bring yourself back down to earth and say I shouldn't be like this [. . .]

Juan, a man from Spain puts forth similar norms, this time discussing his distaste of an ad depicting a male gaze, "for me this is the worst [. . .] the man is a [. . .] womanizer, he does not care [about] the girl [. . .]" That is, Chris and Juan both reject the "playboy" imagery despite the fact that these ads typify a long held ideal in terms of hegemonic masculinity (Harris, 1995). Thus, across contexts, we observe that men, at times, choose to prioritize their personal norms, setting boundaries of what they find morally acceptable and appealing in advertising and delegitimizing ideals that cross these moral boundaries.

In sum, we identify four patterns of (de)legitimization of gender ideals – reiteration, (re)framing, ascribing to alternate logics and prioritizing personal norms – that are robust across the informant narratives in the USA, China and Spain. We also find that these forums do not necessarily standalone but can also be interwoven with one another. For example, Mick from the USA engages in reframing his rejection of masculine ideals as establishing not only a sense of (American) individuality but also looks to his personal norms to guide his actions. Responding to an ad featuring beer that uses sex appeal, he labels the ad as "superficial" and explains "that's like the anti-standard. Like that is what [. . .] I do not want to be." Thus, Mick simultaneously frames his rejection of masculine ideals imposed by the media as reinforcing his own sense of masculinity – or "being your own person" while at the same time relying on his own moral compass.

Discussion

Throughout our data across three contexts, we find that individuals actively engage in the (de)legitimation of gender ideals portrayed in advertising. That is, they engage in resistance to "preferred" readings produced within dominant power structures (Hall, 1993, p. 513), exemplifying, at times, what prior scholarship has found as "oppositional decoding" (see, for example, Steiner's, 1988 analysis of Ms. magazine's "No Comments" section). Indeed, the rejection and refashioning of gendered ideals in advertising have become a reality in the current consumer landscape, decades after Hall's initial conceptualization of how communication is encoded and decoded. In addition, while research from advertising agencies has demonstrated younger consumers do not define themselves along traditional gendered lines in and out of the marketplace (Laughlin, 2016), little research has theorized the process of delegitimization of gender ideals. The current research fills that gap.

Past work on institutions recognizes that institutional structures can diminish or disappear over time through a process of deinstitutionalization. Indeed, Oliver (1992) outlines three forces toward deinstitutionalization as follows: functional, social and political. Firstly, a functional pressure can emerge when "performance levels" (Scott, 2008, p. 196) associated with an institution are deemed as problematic. That is, within advertising, changing consumer preferences can serve as market pressure and can stimulate change in certain advertising practices. For example, our informants discuss how advertisers are showing a broader range of masculinities, which at times are received favorably and at other times the source of tensions. In addition, an alternate logic of authenticity permeates the consumer narratives where, for many individuals, a logic based on perceived "realness" is replacing the appeal of idealized masculine standards. Indeed, authenticity is an often-cited discourse in advertising (Beverland *et al.*, 2008; Stern, 1994) and more broadly in consumer culture (i.e. individuals negotiating an "authentic self" in McCracken, 2008). Tied to the notion of institutional logic is cultural framing, whereby consumers mediate gendered messages and frame their agentic understandings in ways that speak to their own identities. Akin to Hall's (1993) notion of "negotiated" decoding, some men in this study operate within and straddle hegemonic notions of masculinity. However, unlike Hall's (1993, p. 516) conception, they do not actively privilege hegemonic notions while allowing for "exceptions to the rule," but instead opt for what they believe are to be their own constructions of masculinity altogether (e.g. asserting their independence and individuality). Finally, consumers' own normative understandings sometimes supersede market pressures, as the market is not always deemed a legitimate identity source. Indeed, past research has demonstrated how institutional actors, including consumers, may attempt to change the market with varying levels of success (Dolbec and Fischer, 2015; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013). Just as Zayer and Coleman (2015) find advertisers assert their own moral codes on the production of advertising, the consumers of gendered messages in this study relied on their moral compasses.

Secondly, pressure can emerge in changing symbolic systems in the form of social forces that can fragment "normative consensus" (Scott, 2008, p. 198), leading to divergent voices and practices. That is, as gender role norms in society continue to be fluid, there is a fragmentation of beliefs and "legitimate" ideals, thus adding instability to once solid institutional structures. One informant articulates this fragmentation of ideals – Luther from the USA, "I do not think there are a lot of standards for guys. You can pretty much act any way you want. You are still a guy, you know." However, not all informants were comfortable with changing norms, sometimes referring to gender fluid portrayals as "weak" and "weird." That is, tensions emerge with any change in society and these tensions have to be negotiated by individuals and advertisers alike.

Thirdly, pressures can also include political forces or power structures that support the status quo (Scott, 2008). For example, in the USA, there has been much recent discussion in the spirit of the #TimesUp movement of the toxic culture of advertising agencies and interest in bringing about change with regard to gender issues in the advertising industry (Stein, 2016). Moreover, several resolutions have been proposed and passed (Europe in particular), which aim to use regulative forces to tackle issues of gender in advertising (e.g. see the role of European interventions as discussed in Grau and Zotos, 2016). Indeed, our informants, at times, displayed resistance to stereotyped advertising and called for more regulative forces in the industry.

In sum, we demonstrate through our data that in times of social, economic and political change that accentuate disruptions in identity myths, consumers cling to hegemonic notions of gender that serve to reiterate institutionalized gender ideals. However, we also observe that consumers seek to delegitimize certain gender ideals imposed by advertisers in three ways as follows: reframing, using alternate logic and prioritizing personal norms. In fact, we see evidence in our data of functional and social pressures, which serve to aid delegitimizing gender ideals across the three contexts. We also note political and regulative pressures, particularly in the USA and Spanish contexts. Despite variations in culture, time and differing institutional climates, our findings are robust. Below, we detail implications for theory, advertising practice, consumer welfare and public policy and offer ideas for future research.

Implications

Our research holds important implications for theory, practice, consumer welfare and public policy. Understanding the ways in which individuals not only contribute to the reiteration and legitimization of gender ideals in advertising but also reject and delegitimize such messages, highlights the ways in which individuals can bring about change in broader societal discourses over time. Indeed, Scott (2008, p. 128) emphasizes that past scholars "too often have neglected to address questions of who and how with regard to institutional effects". By examining three contexts across three continents and three historical time periods, our findings are robust. Not only do we detail forms of delegitimization of gender ideals in advertising not previously identified in the literature but also we situate our consumer narratives in broader institutional forces and pressures that are impacting the symbolic system of advertising to provide a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under examination. We also provide a complement to the research that examines institutionalization of messages by advertising professionals (Zayer and Coleman, 2015). Finally, we echo the call for further research on the connections between ideological resistance and anti-consumption by Russell *et al.* (2011), as a rejection of advertising ideals holds significant consequences for the consumption of brands.

In this vein, our findings are relevant to advertising and marketing practitioners. Understanding both the content of gender ideals – fragmented, fluid or otherwise, as well as the ways in which individuals either accept or reject gendered ideals in media aids advertising professionals in tailoring messages that resonate with audiences. A profound shift in consumer behavior, particularly among younger audiences has been a focus on "purpose-driven" branding. Indeed, a recent industry report reveals over half of consumers 16-34 years of age believe brands should be a "force for good" (WARC, 2018). Therefore, the extent to which gendered ad messages are deemed legitimate by audiences (in traditional, as well as in "new" media) is of utmost importance to industry professionals, for both brands and agencies alike. A shift in the advertising landscape with regard to gender can already be seen by recent campaigns. For example, Unilever's Dove for Men brand boasted a "Real Heroes" global campaign featuring fathers and their children. The firm's Axe brand, traditionally known to depict men in a one-dimensional manner, has also recently sought to be more "inclusive" and portray a more diverse sense of masculinity through their global "Find Your Magic" campaign (Neff, 2016). The ad shows different types of men and poses the question, "who needs a six pack [. . .] when you've got your thing?" Most recently, Gillette's anti-toxic masculinity ad (Chiquillo, 2019) focuses on men's "best" selves, including acting as a role model for future generations of boys and men. These campaigns are part of a larger global plan by some of the world's leading advertisers, such as Unilever and Procter & Gamble, as well as agency and technology firms such as WPP and Google, in conjunction with the United Nations to eliminate gender stereotyping in advertising (Unstereotype Alliance, 2019). This effort has put forth the unstereotype metric, which aids in assessing gender stereotypes in advertising. Other industries beyond those in consumer packaged goods, technology and advertising could benefit from such alliances and metrics focused on gender and social change in that it adds both credibility and authenticity to its branding efforts.

Relatedly, gendered messages in advertising are a social resource used by consumers in identity construction. The extent to which men are resistant or vulnerable to gendered messages is of utmost importance to not only men's lives but also to gender relations within societies. For example, Vokey *et al.* (2013) find over half of all magazine ads contain one of four "hypermasculine" depictions such as toughness, danger, callousness toward women and/or violence. Thus, examining the ways in which men accept or reject advertising ideals holds profound consumer welfare implications and thereby serves as a focal point for public policy. For example, a recent European Parliament resolution on gender equality in the media sector underlines "[. . .] stereotypes in advertising and in other media products have a potential impact on children's socialization, and subsequently, the way they view themselves, their family members and the outside world" (EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, 2018). In sum, this research advances theory on institutional effects, aids industry professionals in how gendered messages are received by audiences and illuminates the centrality of gender issues with regard to consumer welfare and public policy.

Future research

Further research is needed to uncover additional forces and pressures at the macro level and other underlying mechanisms that contribute to the (de)legitimization of ideals in advertising. Looking ahead, additional research could also focus on emerging economies, for instance, to reveal understandings not captured in the USA, China and Spain. Importantly, past work by consumer researchers argues for the importance of understanding power differentials based on intersecting identities, including age and class distinctions with regard to gender ideals. Thus, it is important to note that a limitation of our research is that most of the informants in this study have at least a high school education, and many have university and graduate degrees; although the sample did include students, as well as working professionals from different geographies. Although our aim is not to detail the conceptualizations of gender (e.g. Holt and Thompson's, 2004 man of action masculinity), class may also be an organizing force in the institutionalization of advertising messages. For example, Moisio *et al.* (2013) posit that upper class men may have more flexibility in identity ideals. Future research should not only address issues of social class but also look to the tenets of intersectionality to build on our findings.

In conclusion, gender, and in particular masculinities, continues to be a focal point of conversations taking place across the globe. Understanding how men negotiate their gender identity and the messages they deem as legitimate (i.e. appropriate and desirable) is a vitally important part of not only business practice and building theory but also crucial to moving forward an agenda of greater dialogue and understanding of gender issues.

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