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Breaking Gender Binaries

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ABSTRACT

Advertisers have begun to acknowledge that an increasing number of consumers do not support the traditional gender binary, believing that gender is dynamic and lies on a continuum. Changing views, practices, and findings regarding gender are not well addressed in current advertising research due to a lack of knowledge regarding newer gender terminologies and a reliance on incompatible gender concepts and measures. This article discusses and develops conceptualizations and measures of gender for different types of future advertising research. Drawing on a review of the extant literature regarding portrayals of nonbinary people in advertising, gender-related ad processing, and the effects of these ads on consumers, this study proposes ideas and guidelines for future research that aim to deepen our understanding of gender in advertising and advance more inclusive advertising research that addresses gender developments in a changing world. These ideas and related recommendations build on conceptualizing and measuring gender and focus on analyzing nonbinary content portrayals, diverse consumers' processing of ads, and the social and commercial effects of nonbinary portrayals.

Most social science studies, including research in advertising, apply measures of gender, typically distinguishing between two categories: male and female. Current developments in society, however, show that gender may exist beyond a binary measurement and may take many forms. For instance, more than 12% of U.S. millennials identify as transgender or gender nonconforming; about half of this group believes that traditional conceptualizations of binary gender are outdated, instead perceiving gender as a spectrum (Kenney 2021). The ongoing emergence of nongendered language shows the understanding of gender is rapidly evolving (Rodgers 2021). These changes have inspired new legislation in several countries—such as Australia, Canada, Germany, and India—which now legally recognize gender indeterminacy, including nonbinary classifications (Dickens 2018). These significant developments have also given rise to a growing opposition, leading some countries to take countermeasures. For example, the Chinese government responded to evolving gender perceptions by proposing the teaching of masculinity in schools (Wang, Chen, and Radnofsky 2021), while the country's media representatives announced a media ban on "effeminate" aesthetics (Timmins 2021).

Advertisers have also begun to respond to new gender perceptions in recognition of the increasing number of consumers who do not support or conform to the traditional gender binary but instead view gender as a fluid, dynamic continuum. By depicting diverse and nonbinary people, advertisers can signal progressive values and position themselves as socially conscious. Notable examples include Gillette's ad featuring a transgender teen who is taught to shave for the first time by his father; Mastercard's "True Name" commercial, which features transgender people choosing a name to put on their credit cards; and the Starbucks "What's Your Name?" campaign, in which a transgender person orders a cup of coffee (Dua 2021). These ads have received wide attention in the media—garnering positive responses for their progressive, liberating, and empowering practices, as well as critical commentary and accusations of hypocrisy (Smith 2021). However, despite such prominent present-day advertising practices, advertising researchers generally continue to conceptualize gender as a binary rather than a spectrum.

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This article examines current conversations about gender and lays the groundwork for its reimagination in advertising theory, research, and practice. We start by explaining the main gender-related terminology and then suggest new conceptualizations and measurements of gender. Based on a review of prior advertising research, we develop guidelines and ideas that build on new nonbinary gender conceptualizations and measures. The guidelines and ideas specifically address the analysis of content portrayals, the processing of ads by consumers, and the commercial and social effects of nonbinary portrayals. Reimagining the concept of gender can deliver more accurate results in future research and contribute to a better understanding of a new advertising practice and theory, thus promoting more inclusive advertising research for a changing world.

From a Gender Binary to Gender Continuum: Sex, Gender, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression

The current conversation about gender comes with new terminologies that are sometimes quite complex. Here, we describe crucial gender-related concepts that are used in the extant literature and provide operational conceptualizations and measurements as bases for the subsequent discussion.

The traditional binary concept revolves around sex—which is assigned at birth— in an embracement of the biological criteria used to classify a person as male or female (e.g., genitalia, reproductive organs, and chromosomes). The concepts of sex and gender are often confused or believed to be synonymous. Gender describes the socially constructed aspects of femininity and masculinity and the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors associated with a person's sex (American Psychological Association 2012). The gender binary is the notion that there are only two sexes (male and female), an individual can only be one sex, and gender is determined biologically (Garfinkel 1967). However, Judith Butler (1990) argued that sex and, thus, also gender are socially constructed, as a small percentage of the population does not have clearly identifiable sex organs at birth or has chromosomal typing that does not fit patterns associated with the male or female sex (i.e., intersex people). If gender is socially constructed, it can change over time and vary among contexts; thus, it should be considered a nonbinary concept. In this study, we use *gender* as an umbrella term that can include both the gender binary concept inspired by the idea of biologically determined gender as well as socially constructed gender concepts that are nonbinary and fluid. When needed, we use labels and distinguish between binary and nonbinary gender concepts.

An important nonbinary concept is *gender identity*, which describes an individual's personal sense of gender and is conceptualized as a spectrum with "male" and "female" at either end point. Gender identities are developed by children through gender socialization—that is, the learning process of how to behave according to a society's gender expectations and gender roles (Stockard 2006)—as conducted by their parents, teachers, and schools. The terms *transgender* and *gender nonconforming* describe gender identities that do not correspond to the individual's sex assigned at birth or its related social norms. The term *transgender* includes gender identities and practices that exist outside sex and traditional gender categories. Ekins and King (2006) argued that *transgendering* is an umbrella term that includes four major phenomena: (1) medically assisted "body migrating" (e.g., via surgery), which is a permanent form of transitioning from one gender to another; (2) temporarily crossing gender lines or switching between genders (e.g., crossdressers); (3) "ungendering," the aim of which is to eliminate gender binary indications and retreat from masculinity or femininity; and (4) moving "beyond gender" by redefining the existing systems of the self, the body and its parts, sexuality, and gender. Gender identities can also vary among intersex people—those born with several different sex characteristics indicating neither female nor male sex. Intersex people are often assigned male or female at birth, but they may identify with another sex later in life, continue to identify with their assigned sex, or identify as nonbinary. In contrast, *cisgender* describes people whose gender identity corresponds with their assigned sex at birth.

The external presentation of gender identity through, for instance, clothing or physical characteristics is called *gender expression*, which exists on a spectrum with "masculine" and "feminine" at either end point. Androgyny lies in the middle of this spectrum and refers to nonbinary gender expression composed of a combination of masculine and feminine characteristics (Siebler 2012). Gender identity and gender expression are distinct concepts and include varying degrees of conformation to gender norms. An individual may identify as a man, woman, both a man and a woman, or neither a man nor a woman. Similarly, an individual may express gender through a combination of both masculine and feminine traits. Although these concepts are often related (e.g., men who are masculine), gender expression does not necessarily correlate with gender identity. For instance, a person may identify as a woman but dress in a masculine way. Both

Table 1. Overview of main gender concepts.

Concept	Definition	Binary versus Continuous/Stable versus Fluid	Categories
Sex	Sex assigned at birth refers to biological criteria for classifying a person as female or male, such as genitalia, reproductive organs, or chromosomes.	Binary and stable	Female versus male
Gender	Gender refers to the socialized aspects of femininity and masculinity and to attitudes, feelings, and behaviors associated with a person's sex.	Binary and stable (as biologically determined) or nonbinary and fluid (as socially constructed)	Female versus male Feminine to masculine; male, female, diverse
Gender identity	Gender identity refers to a person's personal sense of gender.	Continuous/nonbinary and fluid	A range with male and female as end points
Gender expression	Gender expression refers to the external presentation of gender identity and may include clothing or physical characteristics.	Continuous/nonbinary and fluid	Ranges from masculine to feminine with androgyny as a midpoint

gender identity and expression are dynamic, flexible constructs. *Gender fluidity* refers to the changing of a person's gender expression or gender identity—or both—over time (Bosson, Vandello, and Buckner 2018). Table 1 provides an overview of the main binary and nonbinary gender concepts, their definitions, and their categories.

An individual's gender expression is often used by others to identify and categorize an individual's gender. Social categorizations are internal representations or mental models used to classify people into social categories instead of viewing them as individuals with unique attributes (Allport 1954). The observer's categorization occurs rapidly and often unconsciously in response to a visual assessment of their physical characteristics (e.g., clothing, body shape). While social categorizations enable people to make sense of the world, they also lead to stereotypical evaluations and biases. Stereotypes are socially shared ideas and generalizations about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of a social category (Hilton and Von Hippel 1996). Many practices supporting the new perspectives on gender attempt to challenge traditional gender stereotypes and endorse gender equality. A notable advertising example is femvertising (female empowerment advertising) (Åkestam, Rosengren, and Dahlén 2017), which often depicts women in an androgynous way by incorporating both masculine qualities (e.g., athleticism, ambition) and feminine traits (by focusing on nurturing).

Another concept clarification refers to gender and sexual orientation, which are often discussed together (Moleiro and Pinto 2015), as indicated by the umbrella term *LGBTQIA+* (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex, asexual, plus other noncisgender and nonstraight identities). However, sexual orientation cannot be inferred from gender identity or vice versa. For instance, a person who identifies as female could be either heterosexual or homosexual.

The diverse gender terminology raises questions regarding the most appropriate conceptualizations and measurements of gender for different topics and research questions. Figure 1 presents the framework for research on gender in advertising that was developed based on current research in this area. It builds on a comprehensive conceptualization and measurement of gender that has consequences for the application of different methods that, in turn, are related to different topics. This stream of research is typically concerned with assessing the gender (identity or expression) of a respondent or model rather than problematizing the idea of gender as a social construct or the social norms contributing to sexuality and gender inequality as proposed in queer theory (for a recent discussion of the theory in the marketing field, see Pirani and Daskalopoulou 2022).

Conceptualizing and Measuring Gender

More than 25 years ago, Peñaloza (1994) highlighted the shifting nature of gender boundaries both culturally and historically; thus, a dualist conceptualization of gender in marketing and advertising research is likely to deliver unsatisfactory results. Research questions investigated on the foundation of gender binary concepts are better addressed on the basis of nonbinary concepts, such as gender identities or expressions. For instance, the congruence effect between

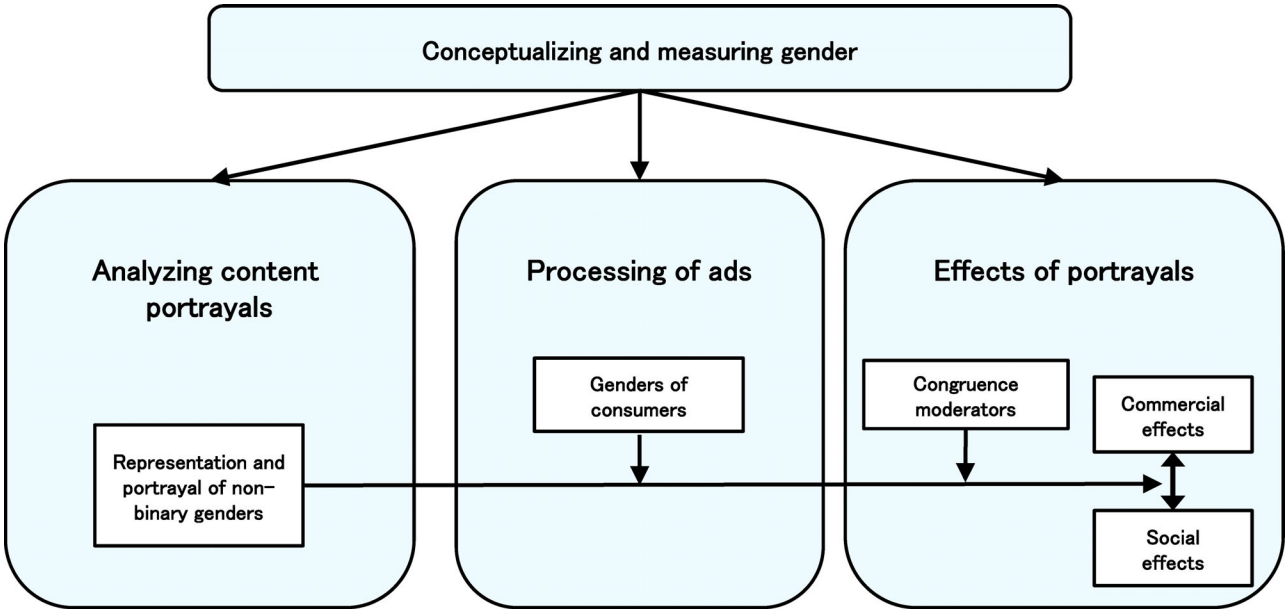

Figure 1. Research on gender in advertising.

consumer and brand gender is better explained by gender identity than biological sex, because continuous measures better capture variation in the relevant variables (Neale, Robbie, and Martin 2016). An advertising example is research on aggressive humor. Consumer responses to aggressive advertising have been shown to vary by gender, reflecting the assumption that masculinity is more positively related to aggressiveness than femininity (Smith, Ellis, and Benson 2001). While earlier studies applied a gender binary concept as a moderating variable for analyzing the effects of aggressive humor (Swani, Weinberger, and Gulas 2013), subsequent studies have employed gender identity, resulting in a better explanation of gender's role as a moderator in the relationship between aggressive humor and consumer response (Weinberger et al. 2017; Yoon and Kim 2014).

Overall, advertising research has relied on binary measures of respondents' gender; applied binary gender manipulations in advertising messages; and used binary gender assessment of portrayals in advertising. The use of binary concepts is recommended when the research question focuses on a simplified binary gender distinction (e.g., advertising stimuli for the use of contraceptives). Because nonbinary measures of gender promise more differentiated results and more explanatory power, nonbinary gender measures should be preferred when gender is a relevant research category. Simplistic binary measures can be added for the sake of comparison. Moreover, from an ethical perspective, researchers should question whether the use of binary concepts potentially increases gender stereotyping and hinders inclusiveness.

Measuring Gender of Respondents

Regarding the measurement of respondent gender in surveys or experimental studies, a first step toward breaking binaries involves the employment of a third gender option that captures gender indeterminacy, such as nonbinary, intersex, or third-sex classifications. However, to better reflect the notion of a gender continuum and a fluid and nonstable gender concept, continuous measures should be used. The measurement of gender identity is often more relevant than gender expression in explaining gender-determined values, perceptions, evaluations, and behaviors. If both gender identity and expression are relevant in a study—for instance, because people with nonbinary gender identities can employ binary gender expressions or researchers want to know what gender a person identifies as versus what gender the person expresses—both measures should be included. Even if the scale items for measures of gender identity and expression are identical, the corresponding introductory questions will differ (e.g., "Describe your gender identity" versus "Describe what gender you express").

While several scales for measuring gender identity have been developed over the years (e.g., Markus et al. 1982; Spence, Helmreich, and Stapp 1975), the oldest and still most commonly used measure of gender identity is Bem's Sex Role Inventory (1974). Bem's

measure includes two subscales for masculinity and femininity, viewing them as orthogonal constructs coexisting in varying degrees within individuals. In many prior studies, the results of these subscales are interpreted based on a median split, with the subject's gender identity determined from their scoring above the median in one gender and below the median in the other. Scoring above the median in both the masculine and feminine categories indicates androgyny, while scoring below the median in both categories indicates indeterminacy. These categorizations may prove helpful, but they should be applied cautiously, as they artificially place individuals in closed gender categories. Egan and Perry (2001) proposed a new measure of gender identity that views gender as a multidimensional construct, with four subscales measuring the following: gender typicality (i.e., the degree to which individuals typify their gender category); contentedness with assigned gender; the degree of pressure felt to conform to gender norms and stereotypes; and intergroup bias (i.e., the belief that one's own gender is superior to the other). Martin et al. (2017) extended this measure, suggesting that gender identity should also consider identification with both genders to better address the concepts of androgyny and dual identities. Both measures focus on gender identity development in children and are more complex than Bem's scale, which has fewer items (but a broader applicability). All identity measures are continuous and able to capture even small changes over time in an individual's gender identity and expression, thus assessing the stability and fluidity of gender within individuals.

Measuring Gender Portrayals in Ad Content

In content analysis studies, gender identities of people in advertising are not usually verbally articulated or clearly salient and therefore are difficult to identify, with the potential for coders to mix up concepts. For instance, transgender individuals are not limited to crossdressers and thus are difficult to identify (Ekins and King 2006). Due to the great complexity of gender identity, gender expression that can be visually assessed should be coded and used cautiously as an indicator of gender identity. Also, context information and advertising narratives can provide hints regarding gender identity, such as the activities in which endorsers are engaged, their settings, and their conformation to or challenge of gender stereotypes. Sensitive coding employing established gender identity scales, such as Bem's Sex Role Inventory, and multiple coders with diverse gender identities are recommended, in addition to coder note taking regarding what information on gender identity or expression has been coded.

Manipulating Gender in Ad Messages

In experimental studies, Eisend (2019) indicated that creating stimuli "that depict endorsers and imagery beyond a sex-binary concept of gender requires a mix of imagery, plots, iconography, and appeals that represent the diversity of gender concepts." (p. 76). For these types of studies, indications of gender identity that extend beyond visual characteristics (e.g., narratives, slogans, context information, and explicit statements by the endorser) are recommended to increase awareness of the endorser's nonbinary gender. Experimental stimuli are categorical variables, and it is recommended to use at least three categories (e.g., masculine, feminine, androgynous) or, ideally, more.

In terms of the response measures in experimental studies with nonbinary gender manipulations, it is important to be aware that consumers may not reveal their true opinions or evaluations. Most empirical studies rely on explicit self-reporting measures, and these may suffer from social desirability bias when gender is a sensitive topic for particular individuals (Brunel, Tietje, and Greenwald 2004). Implicit measures, such as observed behavior, or physiological and neuroscientific measures (e.g., facial expressions, heart rate) (Bell et al. 2018) might be more appropriate for investigating responses toward nonbinary gender and the unconscious mechanisms underlying these responses.

Table 2, which distinguishes among the three categorizations of measuring gender in advertising research, as well as the main gender concepts (binary as well as gender identity and gender expression as nonbinary concepts), summarizes this discussion.

Prior Research and Gaps, Theories, and Future Research

Despite advertising practices increasingly including nonbinary people, research on nonbinary genders in advertising remains limited. This hinders comparison due to inconsistent conceptualizations and measures, leading to only a vague picture of the ad portrayal of nonbinary people, the processing of ads by consumers of various genders, and the effects of nonbinary portrayals on consumers. The extant research also lacks respective theories for explaining these phenomena. Thus, advertising research needs guidelines and recommendations to further develop and advance this stream.

Table 2. Measuring different gender concepts.

	Gender Concepts		
What Is Measured?	Binary	Gender Identity	Gender Expression
Gender of respondents	Sex and binary gender of respondents can be measured and both concepts can be distinguished.	Established measures available (e.g., Bem's Sex Role Inventory).	Established measures available (e.g., Bem's Sex Role Inventory). Gender expression provides less explanatory power compared to gender identity.
Gender portrayals in ad content	Sex and binary gender can be coded but not distinguished.	Difficult to code. Use gender expression as a proxy variable, infer cues on gender identity from the context, if available. Requires multiple coders. Use established measures (e.g., Bem's Sex Role Inventory).	Easier to code based on visual representation and context information. Requires multiple coders. Use established measures (e.g., Bem's Sex Role Inventory).
Manipulation of gender in ad messages	Sex and binary gender of the endorser can be manipulated; the two concepts are indistinguishable unless further details are provided.	Can be manipulated by visuals in combination with revelations about gender identity, context information, ad narratives, etc. It is reduced to categorizations (e.g., masculine, androgynous, feminine).	Can be manipulated by visuals and, if necessary, by revelations about gender identity, context information, ad narratives, etc. Is reduced to categorizations (e.g., masculine, androgynous, feminine).
Recommendation for using various gender concepts and measures	Use only if the research question focuses on a simplified binary gender distinction (e.g., advertising stimuli for the use of contraceptives).	Prefer continuous scales of gender identity when assessing gender effects, as they capture more variation in gender and thus better explain the variance in the dependent variables.	If needed, measure gender expression next to gender identity (using continuous scales). Use gender expression as an imperfect proxy for gender identity in content analysis studies if gender identity cannot be reliably assessed.

The following discussion describes the main topics and areas for future advertising research. To identify relevant quantitative studies, we performed a search of electronic databases (EBSCO and Google Scholar) using keywords.[1] We distinguish among three main research topics: content portrayals, processing of ads, and effects of portrayals. Each topic is similarly organized in the following sections, describing past research and their shortcomings, discussing the most relevant theories for research on the topic, and providing recommendations for future research. While most theories can be applied to more than one topic, in this case they were each assigned to the topic for which they provide the strongest explanation, with cross-references to other topics added when appropriate. Table 3 summarizes the main topics addressed by the framework in Figure 1, including research practices and gaps identified by our review, as well as directions for future research.

Analyzing Content Portrayals

Prior Research and Research Gaps

Quantitative research has examined how the gender of the endorser is depicted and whether nonbinary people are included in advertising. Shaw and Tan (2014) found that, in Western societies, such as the United States, male models are more likely to be portrayed as androgynous than in Eastern societies, such as Taiwan and China. Milillo (2008) found that women depicted in lesbian-targeted media are more likely than those in mainstream media to deviate from the traditional gender norms of femininity, as they are more likely to be depicted as androgynous or variable in their weight and age. As for the (re)presentation of nonbinary people, only a few studies have examined media (including advertising) portrayals. Boyd-Bowman (2017) investigated whether LGBTQIA+-targeted media represents different gender norms than those in mainstream media, ultimately finding no differences in advertisements. They also found that visibly transgender or butch models are underrepresented when compared to their estimated percentage in the population (Boyd-Bowman 2017; Nölke 2018).

This brief review shows that while endorsers are portrayed as nonbinary, and nonbinary people appear in advertising, research on the subject is rare and hardly comparable. Instead, research focuses on various nonbinary concepts and measures (e.g., androgynous gender expressions versus people with nonbinary

Table 3. Research on gender in advertising: Topics, research practices and gaps, and future research directions.

Topic	Prior Research and Gaps	Directions for Future Research
Analyzing content portrayals	The extant content-analysis research has neglected the portrayal of nonbinary genders, as it is difficult to generate sufficient and adequate advertising data. Prior research has not applied theories that explain the occurrence, representation, and portrayal of nonbinary people in advertising.	• Use social role theory and evolutionary psychology to explain the representation of nonbinary genders in advertising. Integrate both theories, as both assume that gender differences can emerge and change and that they are shaped by the cultural-temporal environment. • Investigate the production site of advertising as an empirical vehicle for the theories. • Conduct content analysis based on large databases of advertisements. • Develop a new standardized coding scheme to assess how nonbinary people are portrayed by adapting existing coding schemes for gender roles. • Consider the intersectionality of portrayals.
Processing of ads by consumers	Prior research lacks a consistent theoretical explanation for processing of ads by consumers differing in gender. Research is scarce on how consumers' gender identities affect the processing of ads with nonbinary people.	• Selectivity hypothesis and gender self-schema are theories with low explanatory power for gender-related ad processing. • Social categorization and social identity theory better explain the processing of ads in relation to consumers' genders and can address its relationship with portrayals of nonbinary genders in advertising.
Effects of portrayals	The extant research indicates that congruence between the gender identities of endorsers and consumers are important influencing factors. The extant research has focused exclusively on commercial advertising effects, ignoring social effects. The extant research has focused on gender as a unidimensional concept and neglected interactions with other identity dimensions.	• Commercial effects can be explained by congruity theory; social effects can be explained by cultivation theory, social cognitive theory, and intergroup contact theory. • Consider additional moderators that capture the complex interplay among endorser, consumer, message, media, and context. • Investigate the valence of social effects and their transfer to commercial effects. • Consider gendered language when investigating the effects of nonbinary portrayals in advertising. • Use an intersectional research approach to explain inconsistent results in previous research and examine how consumers respond to multiple and overlapping identity characteristics.

identities). Previous research has yet to provide a consistent theoretical framework to explain why nonbinary genders are seldom or incorrectly portrayed in advertising.

Relevant Theories

The major theoretical approaches to explaining the representation and portrayal of nonbinary genders include social role theory and evolutionary psychology. Social role theory explains the representation of nonbinary genders and why they became more visible over time (Eagly 1987). The historical division of labor between men and women created distinct gender-role expectations. While women were traditionally expected to adopt a communal role (characterized as nurturing and yielding), men were expected to assume an agentic role (characterized as assertive and instrumental). Social role theory assumes that gender differences are malleable, vary across cultures, and change over time. The ongoing trends in some societies toward greater role similarity, fewer differences in role expectations, and an increased congruity in the socialization of men and women have eroded gender differences in several cultures (Diekman and Eagly 2000). This erosion explains why societies have become more open to nonbinary genders, leading to their increased appearance in advertising.

An alternative interpretation of why nonbinary genders are underrepresented in advertising is provided by evolutionary psychology, which argues about sex rather than gender. It assumes that the human mind comprises a set of evolved mental mechanisms that emerged as solutions to specific adaptive problems encountered by our ancestors (Griskevicius and Kenrick 2013). Evolutionary psychology predicts that the strongest differences between the sexes emerge when they face different adaptive problems (Buss 1989). This especially applies in the domains of mating and reproduction, in which women make greater investments in their offspring and are simultaneously

more limited than men in the number of offspring they can produce. Men, by contrast, compete to attract the most healthy and fertile women. These differences have shrunk due to social evolution (e.g., more men now engage in nurturing and parenting). Such changes due to social evolution provide an explanation for the increase in the appearance of nonbinary persons in advertising.

Future Research

Social role theory and evolutionary psychology offer compatible theoretical perspectives for analyzing portrayals. According to Archer (1996), socialization can reflect the differing adaptive requirements of men and women. Both approaches suggest that the way in which gender-specific behavior is expressed differs across time and culture. Even if evolutionary psychology assumes some universal and stable sex differences, evolution also endows people with the flexibility to cope with diverse environments. Thus, new gender differences—often significantly shaped by the cultural-temporal environment—can emerge and change. Future research can adopt an integrative approach informed by both theories to explain how the representation of nonbinary people in advertising depends on contextual factors, particularly time and culture. A comprehensive empirical approach that addresses the question of why nonbinary genders are underrepresented in advertising should include the production site of advertising, which is dominated by male gatekeepers (Thompson-Whiteside 2020; Windels and Lee 2012). The gender identities of individuals working at advertising agencies can help in empirically assessing the applications of the theoretical explanations provided here.

Because the appearance of nonbinary genders in advertising practice is a recent phenomenon, there are limited data from which to estimate this group's representation via quantitative content analysis. Although an increasing number of companies include nonbinary individuals in their campaigns, only an estimated 0.3% of ads in the United States feature transgender people. Simultaneously, the nonbinary gender community makes up an estimated 1% (at least) of the population (Flemming 2021), and more than 12% of U.S. millennials identify as transgender or gender nonconforming (Kenney 2021). As this topic gains importance, the data available to advertising researchers will increase. In the meantime, researchers must perform content analysis with the aid of large databases to identify sufficient examples of advertising with nonbinary endorsers.

The extant empirical research has focused on the representation of nonbinary genders in advertising but has not provided a thorough analysis of their portrayal. To generate comparable data across related studies, a standardized coding scheme that assesses how nonbinary people are portrayed must be developed. Research can draw upon existing coding schemes for gender roles employing variables (e.g., roles, background, setting, and products) to distinguish between male and female gender roles (e.g., Eisend 2010; Furnham and Lay 2019). These categories can be used as the basis for describing portrayals of nonbinary genders in advertising. The coding of further identity categories can help describe intersectionality—that is, a person's intersecting social categories (e.g., gender, race, sexuality, religion), which can be both empowering and oppressing (Hall et al. 2019). The consideration of intersectionality in advertising can help draw a more representative picture of the world's complexity via depicting endorsers who belong to multiple minority groups simultaneously (e.g., a transgender person with an immigration background). Current advertising research reduces minority groups to a single identity dimension.

Processing of Ads

Prior Research and Research Gaps

The results of studies examining the way in which consumer gender explains their processing of advertising suggest that examining binary gender can lead to different findings than examining nonbinary gender concepts. For instance, De Meulenaer et al. (2018) investigated responses to stereotypical versus counter-stereotypical portrayals in advertising. While they did not find any differences between women and men, they found that masculine individuals and individuals that score low on feminine-role orientation prefer stereotyping, while feminine and feminine-role-oriented individuals responded negatively to stereotyping. Using binary gender measures seems to explain less variance in consumer responses and therefore undervalues the role of respondents' gender in evaluating gender stereotypes. Accordingly, Fischer and Arnold (1994) provided empirical evidence that the sex, gender-identity, and gender-role attitudes of consumers are unique predictors in shaping attitudes and behaviors. In line with this notion, some scholars have used consumers' gender identity as an explanatory or moderating variable to explain their processing of advertising.

Several studies have concluded that consumer gender identities and expressions have greater explanatory power than binary gender in analyzing various responses to traditional and nontraditional gender roles in advertising. Coughlin and O'Connor (1985) could not find any significant differences in purchase intentions based on respondents' sex but did find differences based on gender-role identity, with the authors finding that androgynous females and males showed similar responses to ads. However, masculine women responded more negatively to nontraditional female roles, while masculine men responded less favorably to traditional role portrayals. Jaffe (1994) found that not all women respond similarly to traditional versus nontraditional gender portrayals; the response depends on the woman's gender identity. The results of the study confirmed that androgynous women responded similarly to both portrayals. Masculine women, however, preferred nontraditional gender portrayals. Jaffe and Berger (1988) revealed that androgynous and masculine women prefer nontraditional over traditional gender roles, while the opposite holds true for feminine women.

Morrison and Shaffer (2003) showed that, as a result of self-referencing (i.e., in this context, the state of being primed to associate an ad and stimuli with the self), consumers with traditional gender-role orientations perceive nontraditional gender roles depicted in ads as activities they performed in the past. In turn, this may override their gender-role orientations and elicit more favorable responses to nontraditional gender portrayals (Morrison and Shaffer 2003).

Yoon and Kim (2014) investigated consumer responses to comedic violence in advertising and found that masculine individuals responded more favorably toward highly violent and humorous advertising than feminine individuals did. In an extension of this research, Weinberger et al. (2017) examined the vividness and legitimacy of aggression in comedic advertising, determining that while feminine individuals responded negatively to high levels of aggression, masculine individuals preferred high levels of aggression in scenarios containing justified insults or provoked aggression.

Feiereisen, Broderick, and Douglas (2009) looked at gender identity congruity between female consumers and ads. They found that congruity between the female consumers' gender identities and the gender identity portrayed in a given ad led to more positive responses to the advertising. Chang (2006a) determined that masculine and feminine ad–self-congruity depends on individual differences in masculinity and femininity as well as on hedonic and utilitarian product types and affective states. The priming of femininity or masculinity influences ad–self-congruity, which, in turn, influences consumers' advertising evaluations. Masculine ad–self-congruity leads to more positive evaluations of utilitarian products when consumers are happy, and feminine ad–self-congruity increases the favorability of hedonic products when consumers are sad. The author also tested whether binary gender moderates the effects but did not find any significant result and concluded that masculine and feminine ad–self-congruency rather than (binary) gender explains the variance in responses to feminine or masculine. In a follow-up study, Chang (2006b) investigated how masculinity and femininity at the cultural level influenced responses to utilitarian and image appeals in advertising. While individuals in masculine cultures responded more favorably to utilitarian appeals, consumers in androgynous cultures responded equally well to both appeals.

Lee and Lee (2016) examined the influence of consumers' gender identities on the effects of sex appeal advertising. They found that androgynous males showed the most positive responses, while feminine males displayed the least positive attitudes. Furthermore, while androgynous males and females responded the most positively to models of the opposite sex, feminine males and females responded more positively to models of the same sex.

Overall, this research stream indicates that consumers' gender influences their ad processing; however, a consistent theoretical framework explaining this influence is still lacking. Specifically, the way in which consumers' gender influences their processing of ads depicting nonbinary portrayals has largely been neglected in prior research. Most advertising research applied binary measures of consumers' gender to investigate processing of advertising stimuli. The few studies that have included both binary and nonbinary gender measures indicate that the latter is likely to explain more variation in response variables, because binary measures artificially dichotomize a continuous phenomenon and thus lose predictive power.

Relevant Theories

Consumers' gender influences information processing. The selectivity hypothesis asserts that while women comprehensively process multiple cues simultaneously, men engage in selective processing by attending to individual cues that are readily available, highly salient, and relevant to the situation (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991; Meyers-Levy 1989). For instance, Darley and Smith (1995) found that women are

comprehensive processors who adjust their processing to situation-sensitive product cues, while men show no differences in their information processing for differing products. In addition, Sun et al. (2010) found that women adopt relational and comprehensive processing, while men prefer selective processing. Schmitt, Leclerc, and Dubé-Rioux (1988) determined that biological sex—but no other gender concepts—predicted information processing and evaluation. Nonetheless, researchers who suspect gender identity's greater relevance in information processing and interpretation have challenged these findings (e.g., Hogg and Garrow 2003). A literature review by Nelson and Vilela (2012) questioned the support for the selectivity hypothesis, stating that previous studies had used inconsistent measures of gender and offered no explanations for why or how gender matters. They suggested that research must include nonbinary gender concepts to gain a better understanding of how gender influences processing in advertising.

Another theoretical approach that explains consumers' processing of nonbinary genders is gender self-schema, which assumes that individuals differ in how gender is incorporated into their self-concept (Markus et al. 1982). Although research indicates that gender identity influences the way in which consumers process and interpret data (Hogg and Garrow 2003), empirical applications of this theory in consumer and advertising research have produced weak, ambiguous results regarding the influence of gender self-schemas on consumer behavior (e.g., Gentry and Haley 1984; Kahle and Homer 1985; Schmitt, Leclerc, and Dubé-Rioux 1988). Thus, gender self-schemas are less appropriate for researching consumers' gender effects in advertising processing. Social categorizations and social identity theory seem to be preferable theories for explaining gender-related processing, and they also help explain consumers' responses to ads and, thus, the effects of these ads. These theories incorporate nonbinary gender concepts on both the respondent and ad portrayal sides.

An observer's social categorization of someone's gender occurs in response to a visual assessment of their physical characteristics. Social categorizations can lead to stereotypical evaluations and biases (Hilton and Von Hippel 1996). Gender stereotypes help people understand the multifaceted social world and make it easier to process new information by allowing people to rely on previously stored knowledge. Because gender stereotypes are a projection of one's own perceptions and values, they are emotional and biased; any normative deviations are disturbing and likely to be evaluated negatively. Social identity theory (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1985) sheds light on these biases, suggesting that individuals partly define themselves in terms of membership in a social group and distinguish between those belonging to in-groups and those in out-groups. For instance, cisgender consumers consider women and men to belong to the in-group and gender-nonbinary people to belong to the out-group. These categorizations are stable mental structures that allow for quick evaluations of stimuli as when people fit into prototypical social categories. The categorizations performed by others also form the individual's social identity and promote positive, self-relevant outcomes, such as self-esteem, as well as group-relevant outcomes and loyalty to an in-group (Tajfel 1978). Advertising research indicates that consumers respond positively to ads with endorsers who belong to or target an in-group (e.g., Forehand and Deshpande 2001; Sierra, Hyman, and Heiser 2012) and that these responses can transfer to the ads' products and brands (Phua 2014).

Only limited research explains how consumers respond to nonbinary gender stimuli in advertising (Read-Bullock 2018; Read 2020). Recent brain research suggests that nonbinary gender categorizations may lead to negative responses toward them. This is because people may initially process gender information as linear and objective—in line with societal concepts of gender—but later experience it as subjective and nonbinary (Freeman et al. 2010). Thus, individuals who do not fit into binary gender categories may disrupt the perceptual processes of observers. These disruptions reduce the consumer's ease of processing and lead to negative responses. This explains why companies might prefer to depict endorsers who confirm binary categories, as they are evaluated more positively.

Future Research

Gender influences ad processing, so researchers are encouraged to consider nonbinary gender concepts—alongside binary ones, if needed—to better understand the role of gender in respondents' processing of advertising. Social categorization and social identity theory are preferable theoretical concepts that help explain the processing of ads by consumers of different genders, including ads with nonbinary people. The concept of gender identity can help explain the underlying process involved in consumers' evaluations of advertising, particularly in terms of gender portrayals. The potentially negative responses of processing ads with nonbinary portrayals are best explained

by incongruent social categorizations, in-group versus out-group thinking, and consumers' reduced ease of processing. Thus, future research might consider determining ways to increase the ease of processing and blur boundaries between social categories (e.g., by using new gender narratives or increasing consumers' exposure to and contact with nonbinary people) (see intergroup contact theory; Allport 1954).

Effects of Portrayals

Prior Research and Research Gaps

Several studies have examined the specific effects of nonbinary endorsers in advertising. Cowart and Wagner (2021) investigated the effects of nonbinary gender expression by comparing the influence of female, male, and androgynous endorsers. Heterosexual consumers displayed negative responses to an androgynous endorser but positive responses to a female endorser. In a follow-up experiment, the androgynous endorser received more positive evaluations when associated with a luxury brand. The authors also found that responses by male participants were generally less positive.

Frankel and Ha (2020) investigated the effects on consumers of drag queen imagery in fashion advertising. They found that consumers who were tolerant of drag queens responded more positively to explicit imagery of drag queens, but the responses did not differ for implicit imagery. Holiday, Bond, and Rasmussen (2018) and Holiday (2018) investigated movie trailers that featured either a cisgender or transgender coming-of-age story and collected responses from both parents and children. They found that conservative parents were more likely to support censorship of the trailer depicting the transgender story, while liberal parents were more likely to engage in active mediation with their children in response to the same trailer.

Read (2020) examined cognitive and affective processing and responses to advertising campaigns that feature racially ambiguous and androgynous endorsers. She found that while responses to racially ambiguous endorsers were positive, responses to androgynous endorsers were less positive. However, when participants received news stories about gender and racial identities beforehand, subsequent evaluations were more positive.

Garst and Bodenhausen (1997) found that advertising images with either androgynous or traditionally masculine endorsers influenced male participants' attitudes about gender roles. Men who expressed fewer traditional attitudes supported more traditional gender roles after exposure to traditional masculine endorsers. A study by Martin and Gnoth (2009) revealed that male participants responded in line with their own gender identity to male endorsers who were depicted as masculine, feminine, or androgynous. However, while feminine men preferred feminine endorsers in a private context, they preferred masculine endorsers in collective contexts. The authors concluded that the individuals' beliefs of being judged as similar to the endorser mitigated the effects of the endorser's gender identity on their attitudes.

Kim et al. (2013) conducted a cross-cultural study in Indonesia and Korea. They found that male decorative models in cosmetic advertisements that challenged traditional gender roles positively influenced advertisement effectiveness. This relationship was moderated by religiosity and religious affiliation. In particular, when compared to non-Muslims, Muslims held significantly more negative attitudes toward male decorative models.

Research on the effects of femvertising also fits into this research stream. The few quantitative studies in this area found that female participants showed more positive responses after being exposed to femvertising compared to traditional television advertisements (Åkestam, Rosengren, and Dahlén 2017; Drake 2017). However, companies' femvertising messages should be congruent with their values and actions to be effective (Abitbol and Sternadori 2019). While femvertising can be perceived positively, as it can help increase viewers' self-esteem by redefining beauty standards, it can also be perceived negatively when companies capitalize on feminism (Feng, Chen, and He 2019) and do not promote gender equality within the company itself; this phenomenon is called *fempower-washing* (Sterbenk et al. 2022).

This review reveals that nonbinary gender portrayals in advertisement lead to more negative responses by consumers than traditional, binary portrayals—particularly among men and consumers with conservative gender attitudes. Nonetheless, previous research lacks comparability, as it uses divergent nonbinary concepts (e.g., androgyny versus transgender). Further, there is no comprehensive theoretical framework explaining the evidence in the extant research. Previous research has focused almost exclusively on the commercial advertising effects of nonbinary genders, ignoring the social effects. It has focused on gender as a unidimensional concept and neglected its interactions with other identity dimensions. Similarly to research on the processing of ads, studies investigating responses to nonbinary gender identities in advertising often apply binary

measures to assess the gender of the respondents, although nonbinary measures promise to explain more variation in response variables.

Relevant Theories

The theories introduced under the topic of ad processing—social categorization and social identity theory—also provide insights into related advertising effects. Meanwhile, the following theories focus on either commercial or social advertising effects. Commercial effects can best be explained by congruity theory, which refers to the match between advertising stimuli and consumers as members of a specific social category. In this theory, members of a gender in-group associate a product with their in-group rather than with their gender out-group (Maldonado, Tansuhaj, and Muehling 2003). A higher correspondence between an endorser's portrayal and the consumer's gender beliefs or gender identities leads to more positive responses (Oakenfull 2012; Orth and Holancova 2003).

Relevant theories regarding social advertising effects are cultivation theory, social cognitive theory, and intergroup contact theory. The socialization effects of the portrayals of nonbinary people in advertising are explained by cultivation theory, which focuses on the long-term cultivation of views and values developed through media consumption (Gerbner et al. 1980), and social cognitive theory, which also includes media consumption and emphasizes learning through observation (Bandura 1994). Both theories refer primarily to perceptual effects. The depiction of nonbinary genders can lead to negative social effects, such as xenophobia, stereotyping, and prejudice, but can also have positive social effects by raising awareness about nonbinary people and the challenges in their lives. This can increase acceptance and understanding. Intergroup contact theory (Allport 1954) predicts that interpersonal contact between the majority and minority in a society can reduce negative attitudes, prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination against an out-group. For individuals who do not come into personal contact with nonbinary characters, media representations (including advertising) can serve as major sources of information about members of those groups (Read-Bullock 2018). In line with this idea, research shows that exposure to transgender characters in media can positively influence attitudes toward transgender people (Gillig et al. 2018).

Future Research

The theories just described suggest that consumer characteristics must be considered—for instance, by means of moderating variables—when testing the effects of depicting nonbinary genders in advertising. Such moderating variables include but are not restricted to respondents' gender identities and variables related to the tolerance of nonbinary genders, such as religiosity, authoritarianism, political ideology, class status, educational level, tolerance of minorities, masculinity as a cultural value, geographical region (e.g., urban or rural), and temporal changes. Furthermore, various individuals may derive unique meanings from exposure to nonbinary genders in advertising. Exploring these divergent meanings may further improve our understanding of the effects of gender in advertising. A more complex analysis can also consider the congruence of more than two variables, including the endorser, consumer, message, media, or context, with increasing congruence likely to result in more positive effects.

Although including nonbinary gender in advertising can lead to potential positive social effects, advertising messages are short and simple and cannot depict the complexity of people's lives and run the risk of misrepresenting or stereotyping social groups. Stereotypical portrayals can result in negative social impacts by increasing prejudices and negative attitudes toward nonbinary people, according to similar research on other minorities and disadvantaged groups, such as women and older people (Åkestam 2017; Eisend 2022; Tunaley, Walsh, and Nicolson 1999). The lack of research on the social effects of nonbinary gender in advertising indicates a need for more studies particularly on the degree and valence of these effects. Such research could reveal the connection between social, non-brand-related effects and commercial, brand-related effects (Åkestam 2017). Negative social effects, such as negative feelings toward nonbinary people in advertising, can transfer to the advertised brands. Although the inclusion of nonbinary genders can signal progressive values of a company, it also bears the risk of "rainbow washing," that is, negative evaluations of a company and its brand when consumers detect superficial support, hypocrisy, or even contradictions between a company's actions and words (Li 2022). Therefore, future studies should include both commercial and social effect variables, investigate their relationships, and explore the mechanisms that counter potential negative responses to nonbinary people in advertising.

Another topic that has drawn increasing attention is gender in language. Language can be considered gender neutral (i.e., without a reference to gender or referring to all genders), gender specific (i.e., binary

references, such as he and him), or gender biased (i.e., language that excludes one or more genders, such as "mankind" instead of "people," "housewife" instead of "homemaker") (Artz, Munger, and Purdy 1999). Gendered language has been employed in advertising, but hardly any research has investigated its corresponding effects. Further research is thus required in this domain, as gender in language has social effects, and gender-neutral language can contribute to a greater acceptance of gender equality and diverse gender identities.

Finally, intersectionality provides a promising avenue for future effect studies. Because consumers derive meaning from several factors, including the evaluation of advertising cues (Stern 1999), considering multiple identities and the intersectionality of advertising endorsers can help clarify the inconsistent results in existing research (see, for instance, Rößner, Gvili, and Eisend's 2021 research on the disentangling effects of religious and ethnic minority endorsers in advertising). An intersectional approach in quantitative research can improve our understanding of diverse social categories and the accuracy of predicting various outcomes (Bauer et al. 2021). Social categories such as gender, race, class, and sexual orientation relate to one another and jointly influence the processing of and responses to portrayals in advertising. Thus, the sole manipulation and measurement of gender-related variables could produce an incomplete picture and neglect differences in portrayals. Beyond the increased explanatory power that comes with considering intersectionality, this approach is socially relevant and can enact social change, promote inclusion, and reduce prejudice.

Intersectionality finds its opposition in the homogeneity of majority norms. In Western societies, gender norms are often based on the majority group (i.e., White groups). Because the majority is exposed mostly to endorsers who reflect society's dominant gender norms, the majority judges minority individuals on the basis of society's persistent gender norms, increasing prejudice and discrimination (Boyd-Bowman 2017; Thompson and Keith 2001). This jeopardizes the well-being of individuals of nonbinary genders who belong to a minority group (e.g., ethnic, religious, or sexual orientation). Negative consequences may include higher levels of body dissatisfaction, lower self-esteem, and eating disorders (Nölke 2018). Further research is needed that focuses on theoretical explanations and implications for researchers and practitioners in regard to how consumers are affected by the intersectionality of endorsers in advertising.

Conclusion

Gender perceptions and values have changed, and more and more consumers do not support or conform to the traditional gender binary but instead view gender as a fluid, dynamic continuum. Current advertising practices offer examples of novel, unique, and successful campaigns with nonbinary endorsers, but advertising research has not well addressed advertising practices and societal developments due to a lack of knowledge regarding the new gender terminologies and a reliance on binary gender concepts and measures. The current article provides considerations for conceptualizing and measuring nonbinary gender in future advertising research that are likely to increase the predictive power of the influence of gender in future studies. The article further contributes to a better understanding and development of advertising practice and theory and to promoting more inclusive advertising research for a changing world.

Disclosure Statement

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

Note

1. The following keywords were used (sorted alphabetically): agender, ambiguous gender, androgyn, Asian pop culture, bigender, cosmopolitanism, drag, gender ambiguity, gender ambiguous, gender binaries, gender expression, gender fluidity, gender identity, gender norms, gender role identities, gender transition, genderqueer, intersex, LGBT, non-binary, nonbinary, queer, sex ambiguity.

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