Positive gender congruency effects on shopper responses: Field evidence from a gender egalitarian culture

Tobias Otterbring [a,e,*], Roopali Bhatnagar [b], Peter Samuelsson [c], Sylvie Borau [d]

[a] University of Agder, School of Business and Law, Department of Management, Universitetsveien 17, 4630, Kristiansand, Norway
[b] Aarhus University, Department of Management, Fuglesangs Allé 4, 8210, Aarhus V, Denmark
[c] Karlstad Business School & CTF, Service Research Center, Karlstad University, Universitetsgatan 2, 65281, Karlstad, Sweden
[d] Toulouse Business School, 20 Boulevard Lascrosses, 31068, Toulouse, France
[e] Institute of Retail Economics, Regeringsgatan 60, 103 29, Stockholm, Sweden

A B S T R A C T

This field study examined how customer-employee interactions are affected by the congruency between an employee's gender and the perceived gender image of the consumption context in one of the most gender equal cultures in the world (Scandinavia). Mystery shoppers had a service encounter with an employee across a set of physical commercial settings that were classified according to their gender image. The mystery shoppers noted the gender of the employee, provided employee evaluations, and indicated word-of-mouth (WOM) ratings. Shoppers who had a gender congruent service encounter (e.g., a female employee in a "feminine" consumption context) reported more favorable employee evaluations and WOM ratings than shoppers who had a gender incongruent service encounter (e.g., a female employee in a "masculine" consumption context), with the impact of gender congruency on WOM ratings mediated by employee evaluations, particularly with respect to competence inferences. These findings highlight the ethical dilemma of a positive gender congruency effect, as it can generate superior consumer responses but also risks resulting in gender occupational segregation.

The customer-employee interaction is crucial to the success of companies in the hospitality, retail, and service industries. This interaction serves as a basis for customer perceptions about products and services, guides quality inferences, and influences impressions of companies' financial success (Mittal and Lassar, 1996; Solomon et al., 1985). The customer-employee relationship and its impact on key customer outcomes has been analyzed in several studies (Arditto et al., 2020; Bitner et al., 1990; Lieven, 2016). Among the multitude of variables affecting this relationship are cues ranging from smiling (Berg et al., 2015; Otterbring, 2017; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2008) and physical attractiveness (Quach et al., 2017; Söderlund and Julander, 2009; Warhurst et al., 2000) to body type (Babin et al., 1995; King et al., 2006; Otterbring and Shams, 2019) and athletic appearance (King and Auschaitrakul, 2021; Otterbring et al., 2018; Su et al., 2021), but also the ethnicity, age, and gender of an employee (Chang et al., 2015; Fischer et al., 1997; Gerlach et al., 2016; Lieven, 2016; Linzmajer et al., 2019).

One gender-linked cue is the level of match or congruency between

an employee's gender and a consumption context's gender image (as feminine, masculine, or relatively neutral). For example, customers have been shown to prefer receiving information about home improvements from male rather than female employees in do-it-yourself (DIY) contexts, since "heavy" DIY settings have a stereotypic male connotation (Foster, 2004; Sparks, 1991). Similar findings have been obtained for consumption contexts with a more feminine undertone. Foster and Resnick (2013) found customers to identify a health-and-beauty store as feminine, both due to the "feminine" products sold there and the abundance of female employees working in the store. Consequently, customers preferred to approach female employees for assistance in this specific shopping setting. More recently, Beldad et al. (2016) focused on whether the congruency between an employee's gender and the product's perceived gender image could influence customers' evaluations of the employee and the shopping setting, while simultaneously having an impact on purchase intentions in a web shop context. The results showed that congruency between the virtual employee's gender and the product gender resulted in a more favorable perception of the online shop,

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higher levels of trust in the virtual employee, stronger credibility beliefs in the product information, and increased purchase intentions. However, the customer's own gender did not impact these results.

Interestingly, no studies have been conducted to examine gender congruency effects resembling those delineated above in actual physical commercial contexts (e.g., in store settings with real employees). Specifically, the literature is lacking an investigation of whether such congruency effects may shape customers' perceptions of the employee with whom they interact and their overall evaluations of their shopping experience in terms of loyalty-related aspects and variables linked to virality. To fill this gap in the literature, and given its practical relevance for companies, the present study tests how customer-employee interactions affect shoppers' subsequent responses as a function of the congruency between the employee's gender and the consumption context's perceived gender image. With this research objective, we contribute to the literature in two distinct ways. First, we test and provide empirical support for our congruency-based predictions under ecologically valid conditions, thus generalizing prior work and advancing the theorizing in our topic domain. Such generalizability attempts have been stressed as a key strength in a time characterized by an almost exclusive emphasis on student and online panel samples, who mainly participate in research under controlled lab conditions or in front of computer screens (Baumeister et al., 2007, Cialdini, 2009; Otterbring, 2021a, b; Otterbring et al., 2020; Pham, 2013). Second, our findings highlight the ethical dilemma of a positive gender congruency effect. On the one hand, it can be economically beneficial for companies by means of generating favorable consumer responses, as demonstrated in the current research. On the other hand, however, it may inadvertently perpetuate horizontal gender inequality, leading to gender occupational segregation in recruitment practices and biased decisions on the job market and beyond (e.g., in education).

1. Theoretical background

Sales and service settings typically permit a personal, face-to-face interaction between customers and employees. In absence of any prior information about an employee, customers pick up visible cues and make inferences based on the employee's personality, gender, dress style, and the overall store environment. These cues, in turn, influence customers' attitudes and purchase intentions (Baker et al., 2002; Bitner, 1992; Hwang et al., 2020; Terblanche, 2018). As suggested by inference theory (Nisbett and Ross, 1980), individuals act as "intuitive scientists" to draw inferences about a stimulus based on environmental cues. In this process, they are aided by knowledge structures and heuristics. Knowledge structures can be conceptualized as ideas about objects and events, while heuristics are the mental shortcuts used to preserve and quickly use these knowledge structures in an effortless way. The gender of an employee is one of the most prominent cues and hence a salient social category that customers rely on, as it immediately triggers gender stereotypes and associated schemas (Prendergast et al., 2014).

Gender schema theory (Bem, 1981) proposes that certain characteristics are specifically associated with masculinity and femininity. For instance, masculinity is associated with strength, technology, and an interest in things, while femininity is associated with sensitivity, emotions, and an interest in people (Chang et al., 2015; Deaux, 1984; Iacobucci and Ostrom, 1993; Meyers-Levy, 1988; Otterbring et al., 2021a). These gendered notions are strong determinants of occupational choices in society, to the extent that many occupations are dominated by one gender (Browne, 2006; Luoto, 2020; Pettinger, 2005). Indeed, meta-analytic reviews and cross-cultural studies have revealed large gender differences in occupational interests, with women (men) typically reporting a greater interest in people-oriented (things-oriented) occupations (Lippa, 2010; Su et al., 2009). A cross-cultural study across 53 nations investigated gender differences in occupational interests and found women (men) to be more interested in people (things) in all the studied nations (Lippa, 2010). As a result, women are over-represented

in people-oriented jobs (Lippa et al., 2014), even in the most gender equal societies in the world, such as in Scandinavia (Almås et al., 2020).

Due to these robust gender differences, men are perceived to be more suited to heavy lifting in construction work or to handle analytic tasks in financial trading, whereas women are perceived to be more suited for service roles like flight attendants and nurses. Typically, sales and customer service occupations are also dominated by women (Brockbank and Airey, 1994; Pilcher, 2007; Sparks, 1992), especially if the consumption context or the typical products and services purchased therein align with femininity (e.g., female salespeople for health products, cosmetics, and home decoration, but male salespeople for electronics, building materials, and outdoor items). These gender associations not only relate to occupations, but also to product aesthetics and the way retail contexts and products are positioned. For instance, more functional products tend to be categorized as masculine, whereas more hedonic products are often categorized as feminine (Schnurr, 2018). Just like human characteristics, the physical features of a product, including its color, shape, fragrance, and material, are also seen to determine its personality and gender (Borau and Bonnefon, 2020; Fugate and Phillips, 2010; Govers and Schoormans, 2005; Otterbring et al., 2021a). Lighter colors, rounder shapes, and soft, smooth, or shiny surfaces are typically perceived as feminine, while darker colors, sharper shapes, and rough, matte surfaces tend to be viewed as more masculine (van Tilburg et al., 2015).

Some findings indicate that the associations evoked by the gender of an employee and the perceived gender image of the consumption context should be aligned or congruent for a service encounter to be evaluated more favorably (Foster, 2004; Foster and Resnick, 2013; Spangenberg et al., 2006; Sparks, 1991). Existing research has shown positive effects of conceptual congruency and the perceived fit between different factors on key customer outcomes (Graf et al., 2018; Grohmann, 2009; Lee and Labroo, 2004; Van Rompay and Pruyn, 2011). Such findings align with theories on processing fluency, or the ease with which a stimulus can be processed, with more easily processed stimuli generally evaluated more favorably (Alter and Oppenheimer, 2009; Reber et al., 2004; Winkielman et al., 2003), partially due to their greater familiarity and credibility (Alter and Oppenheimer, 2008; Otterbring et al., 2016; Schwarz et al., 2021; Song and Schwarz, 2009). Furthermore, according to the classic prototype preference effect, prototypical exemplars of a neutral category (e.g., a female employee in a "feminine" consumption context) are preferred over atypical ones (e.g., a male employee in a "feminine" consumption context), largely because of their superior familiarity and fluency, thereby explaining why greater typicality tends to increase liking (Graf et al., 2018; Landwehr et al., 2011; Langlois and Roggman, 1990; Vogel et al., 2021).

Following the line of logic delineated above, the congruency evoked by an employee whose gender matches the gender image of the consumption context should lead to a sense of likeability, with downstream effects on employee evaluations and other shopping-relevant responses (Schnurr, 2018). Given that customers' brand attitudes and spokesperson evaluations are more positive when the brand and the spokesperson are matched in terms of relevant characteristics (Kamins and Gupta, 1994; Misra and Beatty, 1990; Till and Busler, 2000), we predict that a congruency between an employee's gender and the gender image of the consumption context should result in more favorable employee evaluations, with positive spillover effects on customers' word-of-mouth (WOM) ratings. We base the latter linkage on the notion that frontline employees constitute an integral part of the firm in which they work, inseparable from the service delivered to customers (Bitner et al., 1990; Rosenbaum et al., 2020; Söderlund, 2018; Solomon et al., 1985). Therefore, customers' evaluations of employees are typically used to draw firm-related inferences, which means that positive employee evaluations should translate into more favorable firm evaluations (Friman et al., 2020; Hartline and Jones, 1996; Liao and Chuang, 2004; Söderlund, 2020). As such, we postulate that one way to trigger more favorable consumer responses is to achieve a congruency between the

gender of an employee and the consumption context's perceived gender image. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H1. Shoppers evaluate an employee more (vs. less) favorably under conditions of congruency (vs. incongruency) between the employee's gender and the consumption context's perceived gender image.

H2. Shoppers give more (vs. less) favorable WOM ratings under conditions of congruency (vs. incongruency) between the employee's gender and the consumption context's perceived gender image.

H3. The impact of gender congruency on WOM ratings (H2) is mediated by shoppers' employee evaluations, with shoppers evaluating an employee more favorably under conditions of congruency (vs. incongruency), resulting in higher WOM ratings.

2. Methodology

The present study was based on data from mystery shoppers, collected by a service provider offering mystery shopper data in Scandinavia. The total sample comprised 515 store visits by mystery shoppers at 15 distinct consumption contexts in Sweden (e.g., building materials, home decoration, books; see the Appendix). The shoppers filled out a brief questionnaire dealing with their store visit. Specifically, they stated their impressions of the employee with whom they mainly interacted while being in the store and indicated whether the employee responsible for their primary service encounter was a man or a woman. The proportion of female employees (61.6%) was generally larger than that of male employees (38.4%), consistent with the notion that women are over-represented in sales and service occupations (Brockbank and Airey, 1994; Pettinger, 2005; Pilcher, 2007; Sparks, 1992). Having indicated the gender of the employee, the shoppers then rated this person using four items (i.e., competent, engaged, friendly, and happy) on a scale from 1 (disagree) to 10 (agree). These items were averaged to form a composite index of employee evaluations ($\alpha = 0.92$). We used these items as indicators of employee evaluations, because each of them has been shown to predict a wide range of variables associated with global evaluative judgments, such as customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions linked to loyalty and WOM, but also objective metrics of firms' financial success (e.g., Gao & Mattila, 2014; Schneider et al., 2009; Torres & Kline, 2013; Tsai & Huang, 2002; Wolter et al., 2019). The mystery shoppers also rated their willingness to recommend the store to friends and colleagues on an 11-point scale (0 = not at all willing; 10 = very willing). Single-item measures are valid if they, as in the current case, represent clear and unambiguous constructs (Bergkvist and Rossiter, 2007; Otterbring, 2020). Participants scoring more than three standard deviations away from the group-specific means on the employee evaluations items and the WOM ratings were treated as outliers and were excluded from the analyses. This resulted in the exclusion of 26 service encounters from the analyses.

To classify the consumption contexts in terms of their gender image, the first author categorized the 15 contexts into three distinct categories: masculine, feminine, and neutral. Among the contexts perceived to have a relatively more masculine gender image were the following settings: petrol/automotive accessories, electronics, telecommunications, sports/outdoor, and building materials. The female contexts included health/body, flowers/garden, home decoration, and accessories such as earrings, jewelry, and necklaces, whereas the neutral contexts consisted of optics, books, color/wallpaper, department store, apparel, and shoes.

To ensure that the gender image classification was not biased, a separate validation study was conducted on an independent sample of 81 participants (50.6% female, $M_{age} = 33$ years) through the online panel Prolific. Participants in the validation study rated each of the consumption contexts on a single-item scale (1 = masculine; 2 = neutral; 3 = feminine). Results confirmed the categorization stated above, with a strong correlation between the independent sample and the classification made by the first author (Spearman's $\rho = 0.90$, $p < .001$). Indeed,

the perceived gender image of the feminine contexts ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 0.28$) was rated as significantly more feminine than the masculine contexts ($M = 1.56$, $SD = 0.26$; $F(1, 80) = 333.92$, $p < .001$), with the neutral contexts falling in between these two extremes ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 0.15$) and differing significantly from both the feminine ($F(1, 80) = 112.94$, $p < .001$) and the masculine contexts ($F(1, 80) = 227.53$, $p < .001$). Therefore, we used the original gender image classification in our main analyses. Men and women did not differ significantly in their responses and the inclusion of participant gender as a between-subjects factor did not change the nature and significance of these results, consistent with the notion that gender congruency effects do not occur as a function of participants' own gender (e.g., Beldad et al., 2016; Krishna et al., 2010; Pinar et al., 2014; Yorkston and De Mello, 2005).

3. Results

Following the analytic approach advocated by Spangenberg et al. (2006), we coded the congruency between the employee's gender and the gender image of the consumption contexts in three distinct categories, ranging from incongruent, through neutral, to congruent. Gender congruent settings ($n = 225$) included all instances where male employees interacted with shoppers in masculine contexts (i.e., petrol/automotive accessories, electronics, telecommunications, sports/outdoor, and building materials) and where female employees interacted with shoppers in feminine contexts (i.e., health/body, flowers/garden, home decoration, and accessories). Gender incongruent settings ($n = 56$) included all instances where male (female) employees interacted with shoppers in feminine (masculine) contexts. The remaining service encounters ($n = 208$) were characterized by male and female employees interacting with shoppers in gender neutral contexts (i.e., optics, books, color/wallpaper, department store, apparel, and shoes). While cell sizes across congruency conditions differed considerably, comparisons involving other predictors, including gender-related ones, often entail much greater discrepancies in cell size ratios (e.g., Folwarczny and Otterbring, 2021; Jonason and Luoto, 2021). Importantly, the higher (lower) prevalence of congruent (incongruent) cases aligns with our fluency account, given the close connection between typicality and processing fluency (e.g., Graf et al., 2018; Reber et al., 2004; Landwehr et al., 2013; Winkielman et al., 2003).

3.1. Tests of primary hypotheses

A one-way ANOVA, with gender congruency (incongruent, neutral, congruent) as the independent variable, revealed a significant impact on employee evaluations ($F(2, 486) = 3.44$, $p < .05$). Follow-up post-hoc tests (LSD) revealed that shoppers in the incongruent condition ($M = 8.27$, $SD = 1.78$) evaluated the employee with whom they interacted significantly more negatively than shoppers in the neutral ($M = 8.70$, $SD = 1.29$; $p < .05$) and congruent ($M = 8.80$, $SD = 1.26$; $p < .01$) conditions, whereas these latter conditions did not differ significantly ($p = .46$). Thus, H1 was supported; see Fig. 1A.

A similar analysis on WOM ratings also revealed a significant effect of gender congruency ($F(2, 486) = 4.83$, $p < .01$). Supporting H2, follow-up post-hoc tests (LSD) revealed that shoppers in the incongruent condition ($M = 7.45$, $SD = 2.49$) gave lower WOM ratings than shoppers in the neutral ($M = 7.97$, $SD = 1.78$; $p = .05$) and congruent ($M = 8.25$, $SD = 1.59$; $p < .01$) conditions, whereas these latter conditions did not differ significantly ($p = .10$); see Fig. 1B.

To examine whether employee evaluations mediated the impact of gender congruency on the shoppers' WOM ratings (H3), we performed a simple mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 4; Hayes, 2017). Note that this analysis is conceptually equivalent to a moderated mediation analysis, given that our congruency factor captures the interaction between employee gender and the perceived gender image of the consumption context. Gender congruency (incongruent = −1, neutral = 0,
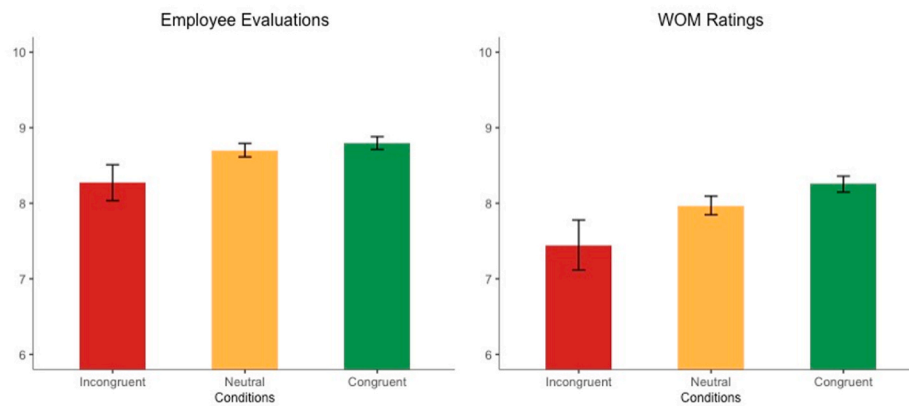
Fig. 1. A–B: Gender congruency effects on employee evaluations (left) and WOM ratings (right). *Note:* Error bars represent standard errors of the mean. The y-axis has been truncated to enhance readability.

congruent = 1) was the predictor, employee evaluations served as the mediator, and WOM ratings acted as the outcome variable. This analysis revealed a significant positive impact of gender congruency on shoppers' employee evaluations ($b = 0.21$, s.e. $= 0.09$, $t = 2.32$, $p < .05$) and a significant total effect of gender congruency on shoppers' WOM ratings ($b = 0.36$, s.e. $= 0.12$, $t = 3.04$, $p < .01$). In addition, employee evaluations had a significant positive impact on shoppers' WOM ratings ($b = 1.09$, s.e. $= 0.03$, $t = 31.62$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, when the 'WOM ratings' variable was regressed on both gender congruency and employee evaluations, the size of the congruency effect on this variable was clearly reduced ($b = 0.14$, s.e. $= 0.07$, $t = 1.97$, $p = .05$; see Fig. 2). Finally, a bootstrapping procedure that generated a sample size of 5000 was used to assess this mediation effect. The results indicated that the indirect effect through employee evaluations was significantly different from zero (95% CI $= [0.01, 0.45]$). Thus, consistent with H3, the impact of gender congruency on shoppers' WOM ratings was mediated by more favorable employee evaluations under conditions of gender congruency (vs. incongruency).

3.2. Exploratory analyses on warmth and competence

Warmth and competence constitute the two universal dimensions of social perception, with warmth comprising facets such as friendliness, and competence associated with ability aspects (Fiske, 2018; Fiske et al., 2007; Judd et al., 2005). Considering that warmth and competence have been shown to influence outcomes such as customer satisfaction, purchase intentions, and loyalty-related constructs (Andrzejewski and Mooney, 2016; Gao and Mattila, 2014; Wang et al., 2016), we tested whether our gender congruency findings specifically emerged for one of these dimensions or, alternatively, whether our results held across both warmth and competence.[1] This investigation, while exploratory, enabled us to provide a more nuanced view of the mechanism underlying our results. We used the most characteristic items for warmth and competence, as available in our dataset, and thus relied on "friendly" and "competent," respectively (cf. Söderlund and Berg, 2019). While these items were highly correlated ($r = 0.72$, $p < .001$), they are still theoretically distinct. Furthermore, the variance inflation factors (VIFs) were only slightly above 2.00, well below the standard cutoff values of 5 (Hair et al., 2006) or 10 (Neter et al., 1989), indicating that multi-collinearity is unlikely a threat to the interpretation of our results.

To test the roles of warmth and competence into the interplay between gender congruency and WOM ratings, we proceeded as follows. First, we conducted a simple mediation analysis with competence and warmth as parallel mediators (PROCESS Model 4). Next, we tested two

contrasting serial mediation models, with competence (vs. warmth) as the first mediator and the alternative warmth-competence dimension as the subsequent mediator (PROCESS Model 6). The simple mediation model revealed a positive impact of gender congruency on shoppers' competence ($b = 0.25$, s.e. $= 0.09$, $t = 2.65$, $p < .01$) and warmth inferences ($b = 0.14$, s.e. $= 0.09$, $t = 1.66$, $p < .10$)[2] as well as a significant total effect of gender congruency on their WOM ratings ($b = 0.36$, s.e. $= 0.12$, $t = 3.04$, $p < .01$). Moreover, when the 'WOM ratings' variable was regressed on gender congruency, competence, and warmth, the size of the congruency effect on WOM ratings was clearly reduced ($b = 0.15$, s.e. $= 0.08$, $t = 1.95$, $p = .05$). Importantly, the indirect effect through competence was significantly different from zero (95% CI $= [0.02, 0.26]$), whereas that of warmth was not (95% CI $= [-0.03, 0.21]$), suggesting that competence is the main driver for the congruency-WOM ratings link. Supporting this notion, a serial mediation model with competence as the first mediator and warmth as the second mediator showed a significant indirect effect through competence and, in turn, warmth (95% CI $= [0.02, 0.18]$) as well as a significant indirect effect solely through competence (95% CI $= [0.02, 0.26]$) but did not reveal a significant indirect effect through warmth (95% CI $= [-0.09, 0.06]$). Additionally, the alternative model with warmth as the first mediator and competence as the subsequent mediator found no evidence of serial mediation (95% CI $= [-0.02, 0.14]$). Taken together, these results suggest that gender congruency mainly modifies shoppers' competence inferences of the employee with whom they interact, with positive spillover effects on warmth and WOM ratings.

4. Discussion

The present research sought to examine whether an in-store interaction with an employee may affect shoppers' responses due to the congruency between the employee's gender and the consumption context's perceived gender image. Consistent with our congruency account,

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[1] We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting these analyses.

[2] One-way ANOVAs revealed a significant impact of gender congruency (incongruent, neutral, congruent) on warmth ($F(2, 486) = 3.68$, $p < .05$) as well as competence ($F(2, 486) = 4.48$, $p = .01$). Follow-up post-hoc tests (LSD) for warmth revealed that shoppers in the incongruent condition ($M = 8.50$, $SD = 1.75$) evaluated the employee with whom they interacted significantly more negatively than shoppers in the neutral ($M = 9.01$, $SD = 1.21$; $p < .01$) and congruent ($M = 8.97$, $SD = 1.22$) conditions, whereas these latter conditions did not differ significantly ($p = .71$). Similar post-hoc tests for competence revealed that shoppers in the incongruent condition ($M = 8.41$, $SD = 1.86$) evaluated the employee significantly more negatively than shoppers in the neutral ($M = 8.91$, $SD = 1.35$; $p < .05$) and congruent ($M = 9.03$, $SD = 1.26$; $p < .01$) conditions, with these latter conditions not differing significantly ($p = .39$).
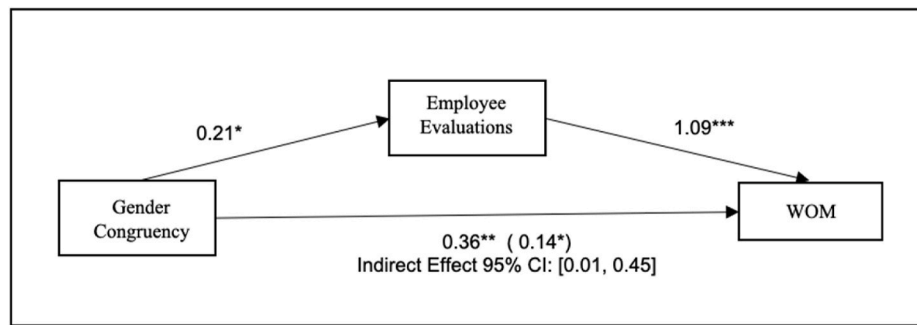
Fig. 2. Employee evaluations as the mediator for the gender congruency-WOM ratings effect. Note: *p ≤ .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

a field study including more than 500 store visits by mystery shoppers in a developed and highly gender egalitarian society (Scandinavia) revealed that a match between the employee's gender and the consumption context's perceived gender image resulted in significantly more favorable employee evaluations and WOM ratings, with the positive impact of gender congruency on WOM ratings mediated by more favorable employee evaluations, especially regarding competence inferences. The latter finding suggests that gender congruency primarily influences shoppers' expertise, credibility, and trustworthiness perceptions, and hence the "hard" competence dimension of social perception, which creates synergies on inferred empathy, emotionality, and other "soft" values associated with the warmth dimension. Ultimately, the sum of these changes generates more positive responses on shoppers' willingness to recommend the store they have visited to friends and colleagues, with such a metric linked to both loyalty and sales growth (Baehre et al., 2021; Reichheld, 2003). Notably, our positive gender congruency results differ markedly from other recent investigations, which have found that gender congruent (incongruent) stimuli produce negative (positive) consumer responses (e.g., Liljedal et al., 2020; Åkestam et al., 2021).

4.1. Contribution and implications

At a general level, our work contributes to the growing body of research focusing on how various gender cues may evoke differential consumption responses. Specifically, the present research is the first to examine gender congruency effects between employees and consumption contexts in physical commercial settings, thereby adding generalizability and ecological validity to this stream of theorizing. Such fieldwork has repeatedly been called for by scholars in psychology, marketing, and consumer behavior (Gidlöf et al., 2021; Machín et al., 2020; Otterbring and Rolschau, 2021; Otterbring et al., 2021b; Pham, 2013).

Our findings, based on mystery shopper data from Sweden, suggest that shoppers prefer to interact with employees whose gender is congruent with the perceived gender image of the consumption context, and that this may impact companies' financial success, given that WOM ratings and similar variables are strongly related to long-term profitability (e.g., Gupta and Zeithaml, 2006; Oliver, 1999; Otterbring and Lu, 2018). These results may seem remarkable, considering that Sweden is one of the most gender equal nations in the world – ranked 1st in the European Union on the Gender Equality Index (2019) and 4th on the Global Gender Gap Report (2020). As such, our results indicate that, at least in the short term, it may be detrimental for companies to implement employment strategies based on gender quotas, as this may negatively influence consumers' evaluations of the employees with whom they interact and, consequently, result in less favorable WOM ratings. Strategies such as gender quotas also risk reducing people's freedom of choice by emphasizing equality of outcome at the expense of equality of opportunity. Indeed, if interventions based on gender quotas are implemented such that more women (men) are prioritized in

male-dominated (female-dominated) occupations, some men and women may not get the chance to work in gender-congruent occupations, despite their willingness to do so and the strong empirical evidence for (large) gender differences in occupational interests (Lippa, 2010; Su et al., 2009).

On the other hand, recommending companies to apply a hiring strategy where female (male) employees are automatically prioritized for occupations with a feminine (masculine) connotation may have negative societal and economic consequences. First, it may increase gender occupational segregation, particularly in more (vs. less) egalitarian cultures where gender occupational stereotypes are paradoxically stronger (Breda et al., 2020). Second, it may harm the long-term success of companies who openly employ such hiring practices. Indeed, gender equality has not only been stressed as a top priority for sustainable businesses according to the sustainability goals set by the United Nations (2020), but the lack of gender diversity in the workplace may also negatively affect companies' innovation potential and their staff members' WOM tendencies (Keeling et al., 2013; Østergaard et al., 2011). Thus, the current findings underscore the ethical dilemma of a positive gender congruency effect, as it may perpetuate gender inequality and inspire hiring practices linked to gender occupational segregation (e.g., employing women in "feminine" occupations and men in "masculine" occupations), while still generating positive consumer responses.

The design of gender-neutral consumption contexts or gender-neutral employee styles (e.g., through unisex company clothing or store uniforms) could constitute one potential way to mitigate the perpetuation of gender stereotypes while preserving commercial efficacy. Indeed, our results showed that the gender-neutral consumption contexts never evoked worse employee evaluations or WOM ratings than the congruent ones. Consequently, a potential practical implication of the current research could be to either create gender neutral in-store designs or rely on strategies where employees who work in shopping settings that do not match their gender signal gender-neutral characteristics rather than gender-typical ones to their customers. Another possible solution to curb customers' stereotypic employee evaluations and achieve greater gender parity at work could be to communicate specific employee skills to customers in the beginning of a service encounter, as such a strategy may "turn off" certain gender stereotypes and hence mitigate the congruency findings reported herein.[3]

4.2. Limitations and future research

The present research is not without limitations. Our dataset did not specify the gender of the shoppers, although information from the

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[3] Of note, while stereotypes typically have a negative connotation related to biased beliefs and prejudice, gender stereotypes are not necessarily bad as informational cues, as they tend to result in accurate rather than inaccurate inferences and person perceptions at the aggregate level (e.g., Beeghly, 2021; Jussim et al., 2018; Swim, 1994).

service provider suggests that roughly two-thirds of the shoppers were women. While the lack of this demographic detail somewhat limits the confidence in our congruency conclusions, it should be noted that gender congruency effects have frequently been found to operate irrespective of consumers' own gender (e.g., Beldad et al., 2016; Krishna et al., 2010; Neale et al., 2016; Wilder et al., 2018). Nevertheless, future research should optimally examine the role of shoppers' own gender and the gender composition of each customer-employee dyad to get a better understanding of different gender (in) congruency effects. Whereas similarity-attraction and homophily theories postulate more favorable consumer responses in male-male and female-female dyads (Byrne, 1997; McPherson et al., 2001; Montoya and Horton, 2013), sexual selection theory rather implies the reverse and hence seems to favor opposite-sex over same-sex dyads (Anderson and Simmons, 2006; Miller, 2011), at least in certain consumption contexts (Griskevicius et al., 2007; Hill and Durante, 2011; Otterbring, 2018; Prendergast et al., 2014).

Relatedly, as we did not clearly rule out competing conceptualizations or measure our proposed mechanism of processing fluency, this means that our employee evaluations mediation – which we attribute to processing fluency – is not necessarily the only mechanism through which our results emerged. Notably, a recent review documented that the vast majority (over 80%) of articles in psychology and marketing who used the concept of processing fluency did *not* measure this construct (Graf et al., 2018). Moreover, among the minority of articles (120 of 604) who tried to capture the fluency experience, many relied on measures that did not align with the most established construct definitions, and instead used items reflecting consequences or sources of fluency (e.g., eye-catching, attractive, complex, organized), highlighting the difficulty to formalize and measure this state in a sufficiently precise manner. Still, future work drawing on a fluency account should preferably provide empirical evidence for the role of this mental process on top of conceptual arguments, with the single-item measure proposed by Graf et al. (2018) representing one valid way to capture the relative ease with which various stimuli (combinations) can be processed.

Finally, it is important to note that our findings may not have occurred *despite* Sweden being one of the most gender egalitarian nations in the world, but possibly exactly *because* of this fact. Indeed, research suggests that gender differences in personal values are larger in gender egalitarian cultures, either because women and men have more internalized gender stereotypes in such cultures (Breda et al., 2020) or because they have more liberty to freely enact their intrinsic preferences (Charles and Bradley, 2009; Falk and Hermle, 2018; Schwartz and Rubel-Lifschitz, 2009; Schmitt et al., 2017; Stoet et al., 2018). Consequently, a larger proportion of women and men in gender egalitarian cultures may actively choose to work in gender-specific occupations. The proportion of female employees in the current investigation was largest in consumption contexts with a feminine gender image (85.7%), still large in contexts with a neutral gender image (74.5%), but substantially smaller in contexts with a masculine gender image (24.5%).[4] These findings align with the thesis that women (men) typically favor people-oriented (things-oriented) occupations (Lippa, 2010; Schmitt et al., 2017; Su et al., 2009) and with scholarly work suggesting that gender differences in occupations are largest in the most gender egalitarian nations, such as Sweden and Switzerland, while smaller in less gender egalitarian nations, such as Bulgaria and Tunisia (Charles and Bradley, 2009). Therefore, although the magnitude of gender differences in occupational interests is not always strongly related to gender egalitarianism (Lippa, 2010; Schmitt et al., 2017; Su et al., 2009), a fruitful avenue for future research would be to conduct a study similar to ours in nations that differ markedly in egalitarian gender roles, gender socialization, and sociopolitical gender equity to further test the

robustness, generalizability, and replicability of the present findings.

Appendix:. Consumption contexts

Masculine.

1. Petrol/automotive accessories
2. Electronics
3. Telecommunications
4. Sports/outdoor
5. Building materials

Feminine.

1. Health/body
2. Flowers/garden
3. Home decoration
4. Accessories (e.g., earrings, jewelry, necklaces)

Neutral.

1. Optics
2. Books
3. Color/wallpaper
4. Department store
5. Apparel
6. Shoes

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[4] Pearson's chi-square analyses revealed that each of these proportions differed significantly (all $ps < .05$).

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