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Gender (In)Equality in Social Media Ads: Effects on University Students' Attitudes, Purchase Intentions, and nWoM

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Abstract

This study examines the effects of gender equality and inequality representations in social media advertising visuals on university students' responses. Emphasizing the critical role of gender representation in digital marketing, the research investigates its impact on social perceptions and brand-related outcomes. Using an quantitative, experimental, survey-based design, 272 university students from a public university in Türkiye were exposed to fictional food processor advertisements designed to reflect either gender equality or inequality. The findings reveal that the advertisement visual portraying gender inequality significantly decreased attitudes toward the ad and weakened purchase intentions, while increasing negative word-of-mouth (nWoM) intentions compared to the equality-based visual. Moreover, attitude toward the advertisement was found to fully mediate the relationship between advertisement type and both purchase intention and nWoM. These results provide empirical evidence that gender-equal portrayals can generate more favorable consumer responses, while stereotypical representations may pose substantial reputational and commercial risks. The study underscores the importance for marketers of adopting equality-oriented messaging strategies and demonstrates that such approaches can enhance consumer attitudes and key business outcomes within the university student demographic.

Keywords: *Gender Equality, Stereotypes, social media, Advertising, Consumer Behavior*

Öz

Bu çalışma, sosyal medya reklam görsellerinde toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği ve eşitsizliği temsillerinin üniversite öğrencilerinin tepkileri üzerindeki etkilerini araştırmaktadır. Araştırma, dijital pazarlamada toplumsal cinsiyet temsilinin kritik rolünü vurgulayarak, bunun sosyal algılar ve marka sonuçları üzerindeki etkisini incelemektedir. Bu amaçla nicel bir araştırma yürütülmüştür. Anket temelli- deneysel bir araştırma deseni aracılığıyla, Türkiye'deki bir devlet üniversitesinden 272 üniversite öğrencisine, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği veya eşitsizliğini yansıtacak şekilde tasarlanmış kurgusal bir mutfak robotu reklam görseli gösterilmiştir. Bulgular, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitsizliği içeren reklam görselinin, reklama yönelik tutumları önemli ölçüde düşürdüğünü ve satın alma niyetlerini zayıflattığını, aynı zamanda cinsiyet eşitliği içeren görsele kıyasla olumsuz ağızdan ağıza iletişim (nWoM) niyetlerini artırdığını ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca, reklama yönelik tutumun, reklam görseli türü ile hem satın alma niyeti hem de nWoM niyetleri üzerindeki etkileri arasındaki ilişkiye tamamen aracılık ettiği bulunmuştur. Bu sonuçlar, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliğine dayalı temsillerin daha olumlu tüketici tepkileri oluşturabileceğine dair ampirik kanıtlar sunarken, kalıpyargısal temsillerin önemli itibar ve ticari riskler oluşturabileceğini göstermektedir. Çalışma, pazarlamacılar için eşitlik odaklı mesajlaşmayı benimsemenin önemini vurgulamakta ve bu tür stratejilerin üniversite öğrencisi demografisi içinde tüketici tutumlarını ve temel iş metriklerini iyileştirebileceğini göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliği, Kalıp Yargılar, Sosyal Medya, Reklamcılık, Tüketici Davranışı*

Introduction

Advertising not only significantly influences audience lifestyles, values, attitudes, and behaviors (Lima & Casais, 2021), but also continues to profoundly shape our perceptions and ideas about the role of girls and women in society (IMS, 2020). As a key component of this influence, gender portrayal in advertising has received significant attention for many years (Middleton et al., 2020). Since firms frequently use traditional gender roles to promote their products and brands in advertisements (Eisend, 2019), portrayal of gender roles in advertising has led to the crystallization of female identity over the years (Lima & Casais, 2021). Especially, these advertisements use gender-stereotypical portrayals of females as merely housewives, mothers, sexual and decorative object (Negm, 2024). However, participation of women in the labour force and education level has increased during the last decades and gender roles have significantly changed professionally and socially (Knoll et al., 2011; Ahmadli, 2023). Thus, the roles of men and women in the traditional family structure have changed, giving way to gender roles based more on sharing (Savaş, 2018). Avoiding stereotypes and ensuring equal opportunities for all genders across various aspects of life is a key focus of gender policies and a fundamental social goal in many societies (Åkestam et al., 2017). Today, harmful gender-stereotypical portrayals of females in advertising can be seen as a form of inequality treatment (Eisend, 2010; McKenzie et al., 2018; Lucka et al., 2021; Slak Valek and Picherit-Duthle, 2021). Indeed, in recent years, the potentially negative effects of using stereotypes in advertising have been highlighted in literature and practice (Åkestam et al., 2021). The use of female stereotypes in advertising is damaging to women and society (Middleton et al., 2020) and also have led to public outcries, consumer boycotts, and immense costs due to lawsuit claim (Lucka et al., 2021).

Alhtough growing awareness of gender inequality and increasing demands for authentic representation have driven a shift toward more progressive advertising strategies such as femvertising (Drake, 2017), gender stereotypes depicted in advertisements have remained unchanged (Lima & Casais, 2021; Negm, 2024). Women are still frequently portrayed in stereotypical and sexualised roles in advertising (IMS, 2020). Santoniccolo et al. (2023) also stated that, media representations, especially those that stereotype, sexualize or objectify women, are still prevalent. This situation also holds true for advertisements shown in Türkiye. For example, a study by Alabay (2023) found that more than half of the advertising texts contained expressions related to gender inequality. However, according to UNDP Türkiye - CEID (Association for Monitoring Gender Equality) Turkey's Gender Equality Performance from 2000 to 2019 report shows that the Gender Equality Index (GII) values decreased from 0.554 to 0.306, demonstrating that gender gaps are narrowing rather quickly (UNDP, 2022). Although overall gender equality has improved, this progress is not yet fully mirrored in media and advertising representations. In parallel, social media has become an integral part of daily life for internet users, prompting more firms to leverage these platforms. This progress in gender equality may stem from well-educated young generation. Younger generations are more likely to engage with and purchase from brands that actively challenge gender stereotypes and portray women authentically in their advertising; moreover, gender equality in advertising can result in up to a 10x increase in sales (Circana, 2024). Therefore, it is crucial to examine the reactions to advertisements that contain stereotypical gender roles, which can be characterized as gender inequality especially with the growing influence of the younger generation in Türkiye.

On the other hand, social media has become an integral part of daily life for internet users, prompting more firms to leverage these platforms to advertise their products and brands (Geng et al., 2021). With the rise of social media, advertising has become even more pervasive and influential in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors (Kumar et al., 2016). Social media platforms provide a constant stream of images and messages that can reinforce or challenge traditional gender norms. However, there is a limited study on the effect of gender inequality in the context of social media advertising (Eisend, 2019). Roth-Cohen et al. (2023) state that while traditional media advertising frequently

depicts gender roles, research on gender portrayal in online platforms remains rare. Grau & Zotos (2016) also recommend investigating gender inequality on online platforms. Given that university students in Turkiye represent a socially aware and digitally active demographic, understanding their reactions to gender portrayals in advertising is particularly important. Previous studies have primarily focused on consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions (Eisend, 2019; Åkestam et al., 2017), but few have explored the effect of gender equality in social media advertising on word-of-mouth (WOM) — a key behavioral outcome that reflects consumers' willingness to share or criticize brand messages (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). By integrating negative WOM as a dependent variable alongside ad attitude and purchase intention, this study contributes to filling this research gap.

Moreover, the social media context introduces additional complexity. Each platform — for example, Instagram's visual culture, TikTok's entertainment-based format, and Facebook's traditional user demographics — creates distinct advertising environments (Ji et al., 2022; Kumar et al., 2016). In this study, the advertising visuals were adapted from Instagram, one of the most visually oriented and engagement-driven platforms among young adults. This choice is supported by prior research demonstrating that Instagram is widely used for brand interactions and advertising engagement among university-aged users globally (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Casaló et al., 2020; Alalwan, 2018). The platform's visual dominance and high user involvement make it a relevant and ecologically valid medium for examining the effects of gender portrayals in advertising.

Shortly, while there has been an increase in advertising that promotes gender equality and challenges stereotypes, there remains an insufficient knowledge in understanding consumer reactions to social media advertising that explicitly depicts gender inequality. This study focuses on reactions of Turkish university students to gender inequality (vs. gender equality) social media advertising. Specifically, the primary objective of this study is to investigate the impact of gender inequality (vs. equality) in social media advertising on consumers' attitudes toward the advertisement, purchase

intentions, and negative word-of-mouth (WoM). Additionally, the study aims to examine the mediating role of consumers' ad attitude in the relationship between gender inequality (vs. equality) in social media advertising and its influence on purchase intentions and negative WoM.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Gender Inequality in Advertising

Advertising serves as a significant cultural platform where gender inequality manifests in contemporary society. As influential media tools, advertisements not only reflect existing social norms but actively shape and reinforce gender stereotypes (Grau & Zotos, 2016). The historical trajectory of gender representation in advertising reveals persistent patterns that have contributed to broader societal inequalities.

Since Goffman's (1979) seminal analysis, research has consistently documented how advertising portrays women and men in fundamentally different ways. Women have traditionally been depicted in domestic settings, as caregivers, or as decorative objects, while men appear as authority figures and professionals (Knoll et al., 2011). These representations normalize restrictive gender roles and maintain power imbalances between genders.

Research suggests that women, particularly younger demographics and individuals with heightened awareness of gender equality issues, exhibit increased sensitivity toward the representation of gender roles in advertising. These groups tend to favor brands that adopt more egalitarian portrayals rather than reinforcing traditional stereotypes (Drake, 2017). This critical awareness is significant considering women's tremendous economic influence—they control the dominant share of global consumer expenditure (Carter, 2024) and are expected to control 75% of discretionary spending by 2028 (NielsenIQ, 2024). However, recent large-scale content analyses demonstrate that stereotypical gender portrayals in advertising remain persistent despite increasing awareness and policy efforts (Åkestam et al., 2021; Santoniccolo et al., 2023; CreativeX, 2025). These studies collectively indicate that while brands increasingly embrace

equality-focused campaigns, many continue to rely on traditional representations of women, especially in digital and social media advertising contexts.

Recent systematic reviews have further illuminated the multifaceted psychological impact of advertising on women's self-perception. Dai (2025) documents how both traditional and digital advertising formats contribute to negative self-image among women, with particularly pronounced effects on adolescents and young adults. This research highlights the persistent gap between women's growing economic influence and their continued stereotypical representation in advertising media.

Gender inequality in advertising operates through three primary mechanisms. First, stereotypical gender role portrayals confine individuals to traditional expectations, with women shown in domestic environments and men in professional or leadership contexts (Middleton et al., 2020). Second, sexual objectification reduces individuals—predominantly women—to their physical attributes, disregarding their agency and other personal qualities (Tuncay Zayer & Coleman, 2015). Third, unrealistic beauty standards promote unattainable ideals that contribute to body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem, particularly among women (Janssen & Paas, 2014). It is worth noting that gender inequality in advertising affects men as well, albeit differently. Men are often portrayed as emotionally restrained and physically powerful, creating restrictive expectations that limit the expression of vulnerability and nurturing behaviors (Huhmann & Limbu, 2016). These representations reinforce harmful notions of masculinity that contribute to broader gender inequalities.

The digital transformation of advertising has introduced new dimensions to gender representation. While traditional stereotypes persist in digital environments, social media platforms have also created opportunities for more diverse portrayals and enabled consumers to critique problematic representations (Roth-Cohen et al., 2023; Herrando & Martín-De Hoyos, 2022). However, the nature and extent of gender stereotyping varies significantly across different advertising formats and platforms. Research on original digital video advertising suggests that while central figures are more likely to be men than women, both genders are increasingly portrayed in non-stereotypical activities and roles compared to traditional media (Aramendia-Muneta et al., 2020). Importantly, large-scale research has shown that visual content amplifies gender bias more powerfully than text, with images exerting stronger psychological impact on viewers (Guilbeault et al., 2024), suggesting that the medium through which advertising is delivered plays a critical role in how gender stereotypes are perpetuated. Nevertheless, platform-specific differences remain significant. Recent research by Yin & Abdullah (2024) reveals that social media platforms like TikTok have become new venues for gender bias, where female users frequently encounter various forms of discrimination despite the platforms' seemingly progressive nature. Similarly, gender representation patterns differ across platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, with each platform's unique content formats and algorithmic mechanisms influencing how gender stereotypes are perpetuated or challenged (Campos-Pellanda et al., 2022). UNESCO's 2024 report warns that social media often amplifies rather than diminishes gender stereotypes, with documented negative effects on girls' well-being, learning outcomes, and career aspirations.

The societal impact of these representations is significant. Research demonstrates that stereotypical gender portrayals influence individuals' perceptions of appropriate roles from an early age, shaping career aspirations and personal relationships (Rubie-Davies et al., 2013). Economically, the association of genders with specific product categories reinforces traditional divisions of labor and responsibility, limiting women's roles as consumers and decision-makers (Gu, 2022).

In response to growing awareness and criticism, some positive changes have emerged. The "femvertising" movement represents advertising that empowers women and challenges stereotypes (Sylvendhal, 2017). However, critics argue that these approaches often engage in "woke-washing"—superficial activism that fails to address underlying structural inequalities (Middleton & Turnbull, 2021). Recent scholarship has further

complicated this picture, with Elyamany (2024) arguing that femvertising often manufactures consent for a neoliberal version of feminism that commodifies rather than truly advances gender equality. Regulatory initiatives have also been implemented to address gender inequality in advertising. Many countries have established legal regulations and self-regulatory mechanisms to limit sexist advertising (Slak Valek & Picherit-Duthler, 2021), such as the UK's Advertising Standards Authority rules prohibiting harmful gender stereotypes (McKenzie et al., 2018).

In conclusion, gender inequality in advertising represents a complex phenomenon that both reflects and reinforces broader societal inequalities. The disconnect between women's economic power and their stereotypical representation in advertising highlights a significant gap in marketing practices. While increasing awareness and industry changes are gradually shifting practices toward more equitable representations, addressing gender inequality in advertising requires continued collaborative efforts from researchers, industry professionals, regulatory bodies, and consumers to create media environments that promote equality and respect for all individuals regardless of gender.

The Effect of Gender Inequality (vs. Equality) in Social Media Ads On Consumers' Responses

Gender stereotyping reinforces rigid and often inaccurate beliefs about femininity and masculinity. These stereotypes perpetuate gender inequality, hindering equal opportunities and fueling discrimination in various aspects of life (Sun, 2024). Especially the stereotypical view of women shows women restricted to certain social roles and undermines gender equality (Rubie-Davies et al., 2013). Female role stereotypes such as homemakers in traditional roles and decorative women roles as sexual object in advertising are considered as a treatment of gender inequality (Grau & Zotos, 2016; Bermúdez-González et al., 2022). And the role and portrayal of women in advertising can influence responses of consumers (Urlage, 2021). For instance, portrayal of women in sexist advertising leads to negative consumer attitudes towards a

company and advertising (Andersson & Schytt, 2017; Tokmak, 2017). Stereotyped portrayals of gender can lead to lower levels of ad attitudes, brand attitudes, and in some cases purchase intentions for both men and women when compared to non-stereotyped portrayals (Åkestam et al., 2021). Studies also examining the effects of stereotypical advertisements, particularly from the perspective of women, show that stereotyped portrayals in ads lead to lower levels of ad and brand attitude and purchase intention (Ford et al., 1991; Antioco et al., 2012; Janssen & Paas, 2014).

Conversely when advertisements positively portray women, there is an increased likelihood of a positive impact on long-term brand relationship as well as short-term behavior change (Urlage, 2021). For instance, ads promote gender equality (such as femadvertising) leads to positive ad attitudes and purchase intention than traditional advertising (Åkestam et al., 2017; Drake et al., 2017). Teng et al. (2021) stated that egalitarian portrayals of women, showing a working woman and her husband sharing chores, were more effective in promoting a food product than traditional depictions of women as housewives. From perspective of gender, Abdallah et al. (2018) stated that men also respond positively toward a brand they perceived as truly supporting gender equality. Teng et al. (2021) also state that women are more likely to favor advertisements that portray women in a more equal way. In this context, , the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1. Gender inequality (vs. equality) in social media advertising generates lower (higher) levels of attitudes towards the social media advertising.

H2. Gender inequality (vs. equality) in social media advertising generates higher (lower) levels of negative WoM.

H3. Gender inequality (vs. equality) in social media advertising generates lower (higher) levels of purchase intention

Direct and Mediator Role of Attitude toward the Ad on Purchase Intention and Negative Wom.

Ad attitude refer to the tendency to react favorable or unfavorable responses to a specific advertise-

ment during a given exposure (Lutz, 1985). Advertisements that are sensitive to gender equality, consumers tend to elicit more positive responses (Koç et al., 2024). Thus, brands positively portray women in their ads, ad attitudes begin to become more positive (Urlage, 2021). Unlike advertisements that promote gender equality, advertisements depicting gender inequality lead consumers to have less favorable ad attitudes (Huhmann & Limbu, 2016). According to the theory of reasoned action, higher attitude results in higher desired behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Based on this theory, literature shows that there is a positive relationship between ad attitude and purchase intention toward the product promoted in the ad (Sallam & Algammash, 2016; Lee et al., 2017; Herrando & Martín-De Hoyos, 2022).

On the other hand, advertising portrayals of women and men have a presumed negative influence on others and it negatively impacts brand-related affect (Åkestam et al., 2021). Lower ad attitudes can lead to negative behavior toward the brand (Slak Valek & Picherit-Duthle, 2021). For instance, gender inequality in ads leads to harm to people's attitudes towards ad may resulting in boycotts and negative WoM (Grougiou et al., 2020; Lucka et al., 2021 Middleton and Turnbull, 2021). On the contrary, gender equality depicted in advertisements 80% more likely to be liked, shared, or commented on social media among young women (Sylvendhal 2017; Pillay, 2020). For example, Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty which challenges (female) gender stereotypes and empowers woman (Åkestam et al., 2017) generating a great deal of positive eWoM (Lim & Zhang, 2021). In this case, it can be argued that there is a negative relationship between ad attitude and negative WoM.

When it comes to comparison of gender inequality and gender equality situations in the relationship between ad attitude and purchase intention and negative WoM, equity theory can be a guide in explaining the reactions of consumers. According to equity theory, when individuals perceive inequality they feel a strong motivation to achieve equity or reduce inequity (Adams, 1965). In terms of advertising, when consumers perceive gender inequality in ads, they may show strong motivation to react compared to gender equality.

Offensive ads that humiliate women lead to serious and powerful reactions. For instance, an advertisement by Dolce & Gabbana received massive protests in Europe (Chan et al., 2007). Lucka et al. (2021) also stated that gender inequality in advertising have led to public outcries and consumer boycotts. Thus, gender inequality in ads due to increased awareness may trigger strong reactions (Tuncay Zayer & Coleman, 2015) and may strengthen the effect of consumers' attitudes on purchase intention and negative WoM.

In the light of all these explanations, we propose that ad attitude will positively influence purchase intention; negatively influence negative WoM and the effect of ad attitude on both purchase intention and negative WoM will be stronger in gender inequality condition compared to gender equality condition.

H4. The positive effect of attitude towards the social media advertisement on purchase intention will be stronger when consumers exposed to a gender inequality in social media ad compared to gender equality.

H5. The negative effect of attitude towards the social media advertisement on negative WoM will be stronger when consumers exposed to a gender inequality social media ad compared to gender equality.

In addition to all this, this study propose that attitude towards the advertising should be considered as a mediator in the relationship between gender inequality (vs. equality) on purchase intention and negative WoM. The main reason for this, ad attitude play a crucial role in shaping the consumer's ad attitude the brand and their purchase intention, either through direct or indirect pathways (Sallam & Wahid, 2012). Thus, attitude towards the advertising is considered a causal mediating variable in the process through which advertising influences consumer reactions (MacKenzie et al., 1986). A consumer's preference to choose, consume, recommend, and endorse a product/service to others is profoundly impacted by his/her attitude (Pillai et al., 2022). In this direction, consumers' reactions to gender inequality and gender equality in social media ad may occur through their attitudes toward these ads. Thus we propose that social media ad content related to gender (e.g.,

inequality vs. equality) may effect negative WoM and purchase intention through ad attitude.

H6. Ad attitude mediates the relationship gender inequality (gender equality) in social media advertising on a) purchase intention and b) negative WoM.

Methodology

Research Design and Variables

This study adopted a quantitative, experiment-based survey design to test the proposed hypotheses. Specifically, a single-factor experimental design was employed in which participants were exposed to one of two advertising conditions and then completed a structured questionnaire. The independent variable was gender ad type (inequality vs. equality), and the dependent variables were ad attitude, purchase intention, and negative word-of-mouth (nWoM).

The experimental procedure was structured in several sequential stages to ensure methodological transparency: the development of advertising stimuli, pilot testing, data collection, and data analysis. Each phase is detailed below.

Stimulus Development

Two static advertising visuals were specifically developed as experimental stimuli for a hypothetical food processor brand named *BOX*. Both visuals were designed to simulate Instagram-style advertising posts, combining a single image with a brief caption to replicate the aesthetic and format of real social media advertisements. This approach ensured ecological validity while allowing strict experimental control over the visual elements. Each condition used identical layouts, color schemes, and typography to isolate gender representation as the sole manipulated factor.

Stimulus 1 (Gender Inequality Condition): The first advertisement portrayed a young professional woman who has just returned home from work and is preparing food alone in a modern kitchen. She stands at the counter, wearing a white blouse and a black-and-white striped apron, focused on operating a blender filled with vegetables. In the background, a man dressed in business attire is leaning against the doorframe, absorbed in his phone and not participating in the cooking process. A wall clock indicates the early evening hours. The overall atmosphere suggests post-work fatigue and an unequal distribution of household responsibilities. The tagline under the image — *"With BOX, cooking after work is now much easier"* — positioned the product as a time-saving convenience tool that alleviates the woman's domestic workload.

Stimulus 2 (Gender Equality Condition): The second advertisement presented a working couple who have both returned from work and are preparing a meal together in a similarly modern home kitchen. The man is operating the same blender on the countertop while the woman, dressed in business-casual attire, slices vegetables beside him. They are positioned side by side, smiling and engaged with each other, emphasizing collaboration, balance, and mutual respect. The kitchen background is neatly arranged, reinforcing an everyday domestic scene. The same tagline — *"With BOX, cooking after work is now much easier"* — appeared below, but in this case, the message reinforced shared convenience and equality rather than burden reduction.

Both visuals were kept static (without any motion, music, or narration) to maintain experimental precision and prevent potential confounding effects related to sound, movement, or dynamic storytelling. Consequently, this study specifically focuses on visual advertising content rather than video-based formats. The manipulation between conditions thus effectively represented *gender inequality* versus *gender equality* portrayals in social media advertising.

The product category — a food processor — was selected because household appliances are often used in advertising to reinforce gender stereotypes (Gu, 2022), and women are frequently depicted as homemakers in such contexts (Eisend, 2010). Focusing on a single, gender-neutral product type ensured consistency across stimuli and enhanced internal validity, as the study's hypotheses

and design did not aim to compare different product categories.

Pilot Test and Manipulation Check

A pilot test was conducted with 30 participants to ensure that the manipulations of gender inequality and equality were perceived as intended. Participants were asked to evaluate whether the depicted scenes represented equal or unequal gender roles in household settings. The pilot confirmed that participants accurately distinguished between the two conditions, validating the effectiveness of the manipulation.

Participants and Data Collection

The main study was conducted with 272 undergraduate students from a public university in Türkiye, recruited through convenience sampling. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 years (M = 21.1, SD = 1.7), with 57.4% identifying as female and 42.6% as male.

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire, distributed immediately after exposure to the experimental stimuli. The survey included validated scales measuring ad attitude, purchase intention, and negative word-of-mouth, all adapted from prior studies. The survey method allowed the systematic collection of participants' attitudinal responses within a controlled environment following the experimental manipulation.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and ethical approval for the study was obtained from the university's Research Ethics Committee. The research sessions were conducted in a controlled classroom environment to ensure that all participants viewed the advertisements under identical conditions and that extraneous influences were minimized.

Measures

Dependent variables were ad attitude, purchase intention, and negative word-of-mouth (nWoM). Ad attitude was assessed using five items adapted

from Sternadori and Abitbol (2019); purchase intention was measured with four items adapted from Alalwan (2018); and negative word-of-mouth was assessed using three items adapted from Bougie, Pieters, and Zeelenberg (2003).

All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The reliability coefficients (Cronbach's α) for all scales exceeded the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, as recommended by Hair et al.(2010). (See Table 1 for all items and their reliability coefficients).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics software. Descriptive statistics and reliability analyses were first conducted to evaluate the measurement scales. Subsequently, independent-sample t-tests were performed to compare mean differences between the experimental conditions.

To test the mediating role of ad attitude between gender ad type, purchase intention, and negative word-of-mouth, the study employed Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap samples, following the recommendations of Hair et al. (2010). All reliability coefficients (Cronbach's α) exceeded the threshold of 0.70, indicating acceptable internal consistency for the measurement scales.

Results

Manipulation Check

As a check of gender ad type manipulation, a 5-point scale was used with one item: This brand's social media advertisement does not include an unequal approach between men and women. As expected, participants' perceptions of equality differed significantly across groups. The score about perceived equality in the gender equality advertisement condition was greater than the score in the gender inequality condition (t = 13,911, p = 0,000; Mean$_{equality}$ = 4,01; Mean$_{inequality}$ = 2,01). Thus, results show that advertisements showing gender equality and inequality achieved their purpose and the manipulation was successful.

Reliability and Validity

Before testing the hypotheses, the measurement model was tested for reliability and validity. This study used scales (ad attitude, purchase intention and negative WoM) that were already proven to be valid and reliable in previous research. Thus confirmatory factor analysis implemented to check factor structure. Firstly, it is checked various goodness of fit statistics in order to see whether the factor structure has been verified. The results demonstrate fit validity (χ^2/df: 3,62; GFI: 0.90; NFI:0.924; CFI:0.96; NFI: 0.95; RMSEA: 0.09). Results of CFA also show that all factor loadings are significantly above 0.70 (Hair et al., 2010). Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated to determine the reliability of the scales. Since the Cronbach's alpha coefficient exceeded 0.70, it was concluded that the scales were reliable. (Hair et al., 2010). AVEs of the variables were between 0.75 and 0.83 greater than 0.5 threshold, indicating that good convergent validity (Hair et al., 2017). Table 1 shows the factor loadings of the scales, Cronbach's alpha coefficient and AVE results of measurement items.

Table 1. Measurement items

Variables	Items	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's Alfa	AVE
Ad attitude	Tut1	0.89	0.95	0.75
	Tut2	0.92		
	Tut3	0.92		
	Tut4	0.89		
	Tut5	0.72		
Negative WoM	Nwm1	0.93	0.94	0.83
	Nwm2	0.88		
	Nwm3	0.93		
Purchase intention	Sn1	0.91	0.95	0.80
	Sn2	0.90		
	Sn3	0.87		
	Sn4	0.91		

Table 2. Fornell–Larcker Criterion for Discriminant Validity

	Attitude toward the Ad	Negative WoM	Purchase Intention
Ad attitude	**0.866**	−0.553	0.785
Negative WoM	−0.553	**0.911**	−0.441
Purchase Intention	0.785	−0.441	**0.894**

Note: Diagonal elements are the square root of AVE; of-diagonal elements are the correlations among constructs.

Test of Hypotheses

The independent sample t-tests were conducted to test the H1, H2 and H3 hypotheses. The results of these hypotheses shown in Table 3. The results of H1 show that participants who were exposed to the gender inequality treatment in the social media ad exhibited lower levels of ad attitude (Mequality = 3.63; Minequality = 1.91; t= 16.173; p<.05). The results of H2 show that participants who were exposed to the gender inequality treatment in the social media ad exhibited higher levels of negative WoM (Mequality = 1.81; Minequality = 3.25; t= -10.940; p<.05). The results of H3 show that participants who were exposed to the gender inequality treatment in the social media ad exhibited lower levels of purchase intention (Mequality = 2.88; Minequality = 1.90; t= 9.096; p<.05).

Process analysis was used to test the other hypotheses of the study. Process is frequently used in experimental studies where the independent variable is manipulated in the marketing literature (Bozkurt, 2023). Hayes (2018)' PROCESS Model 1, employing 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% confidence intervals, was used to reveal moderation effect of gender ad type on the relationship between ad attitude and purchase intention and negative WoM for fourth and fifth hypotheses.

H4 proposes that the positive effect of ad attitude on purchase intention will be stronger when consumer exposed to a gender inequality in social media ad. The findings showed that gender ad type significant moderation effects on the relationship between ad attitude and purchase intention (β: 0.23; CI: {0.043, 0.416}; p=0,015). Figure 1 shows the graphical representation of the effects of the interaction term (gender ad type x attitude towards the ad). Specifially, the effect of ad attitude on purchase intention stronger for individuals who exposed to gender inequality in ad (β: 0.76; CI: {0.390, 0.671}; p=0,01) compared to gender equality in ad (β: 0.23; CI: {0.043, 0.416}; p=0,000). Therefore, H4 was supported.

Table 3. Independent Sample t-Tests Results

Variable	Treatment	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Equality of variances	t	df	p
Ad attitude	Gender equality	127	3.63	0.83	0.752	16.173	270	0.000
	Gender inequality	145	1.91	0.90				
Negative WoM	Gender equality	127	1.81	0.93	0.000	- 10.940	265.87	0.000
	Gender inequality	145	3.25	1.22				
Purchase Intention	Gender equality	127	2.88	0.87	0.912	9.096	270	0.000
	Gender inequality	145	1.90	0.89				
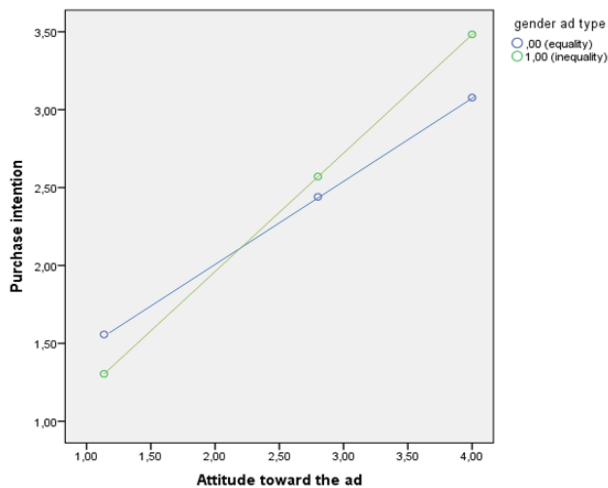
Figure 1: The Moderating Role of Gender Ad Type on The Relationship Between Ad Attitude and Purchase Intention.

H5 proposes that the negative effect of ad attitude on negative WoM will be stronger when consumer exposed to a gender inequality in social media ad. The findings showed that interaction term (gender ad type x attitude toward the ad) was not significant on the relationship between ad attitude and negative WoM (β: -0.13; CI: {-0.43, 0.15}; p=0,359). Thus, H5 was not supported.

This study also explore the mediating role of ad attitude on the relationship between gender ad type condition (0 = equality, 1= inequality) on purchase intention (H6a) and negative WoM (H6b). Model 4 of the PROCESS, employing 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% confidence intervals, was used to analyse this mediation effects (Hayes, 2018). As shown in the test of H1, gender ad type (independent variable) significantly affects ad attitude (mediator), such that participants who were exposed to the gender inequality treatment in the social media ad exhibited lower levels of ad attitude (β: - 1.71; CI: {-1.921, -1.504 } t= 16.173; p= 0.000).

Second, ad attitude significantly affect on the purchase intention (dependent variable) (β: 0.66; CI: {0.569, 0.755} t= 14.010; p= 0.000). But, direct effect of gender ad type on purchase intention was not significant (β: 0.15; CI: {-0.075, 0.379} t= 1,318; p= 0.18). Importantly, the indirect effect of gender ad type on purchase intention through ad attitude was significant (β: -1.13; CI:-1.361, -0.927). Since confidence interval did not include 0 (Hayes, 2018), ad attitude mediated the relationship between gender ad type and purchase intention. Therefore, H6a was supported. These results show that through their ad attitudes, participants who were exposed to gender inequality ad (compared to those exposed to gender equality ad) exhibited lower purchase intention.

On the other hand, ad attitude significantly affect on the negative WoM (β: -0.28; CI: {-0.436, -0.142} t= -3.881; p= 0.001). Direct effect of gender ad type on negative WoM is significant (β: 0.93; CI: {0.576, 1.294} t= 5.134; p= 0.000). Importantly, the indirect effect of gender ad type on negative WoM through ad attitude is significant (β: 0.49; CI: 0.196, 0.844). Since confidence interval did not include 0 (Hayes, 2018), ad attitude mediated the relationship between gender ad type negative WoM. H6b was supported. These results show that through their ad attitudes, participants who were exposed to gender inequality ad (compared to those exposed to gender equality ad) exhibited higher negative WoM.

Conclusion and Discussion

In all societies from past to present, traditional gender roles have been imposed on men and women. The construction of these gender roles has given men superiority and placed women in a secondary position (Vargel Pehlivan, 2017). Studies conducted in recent years have revealed the negative

consequences of these gender stereotypes (Åkestam et al., 2017; Lucka et al., 2021). Today, gender-stereotypical portrayals of females in advertising seen as a gender inequality treatment. However, female stereotypes still have been used in advertising. RVD's 2018 report (as cited in Eczacıbaşı, 2020) that traditional gender roles have dominated 10 years of television advertising content and only Only 35 percent of the main character in these advertisements were women and most were depicted in household care or childcare related roles. However, new study also show that the visibility level of female main characters was %48 in 2024 in Turkey (RVD, 2025). In parallel with this progress, it is important to reveal the attitudes and behavioral intentions of young people in Türkiye towards advertisiments depicted gender inequality in this study.

Our results show that participants who were exposed to gender inequality in advertisements indicated significantly lower levels of ad attitude, lower levels of purchase intention and higher level of negative WoM compared to participants who were exposed to gender equality in advertisements. These results are consistent with previous studies in the literature. For instance, Abdallah et al. (2018) found that men respond positively toward a brand they perceived as truly supporting gender equality. Teng et al. (2021) also stated that egalitarian portrayals of women were more effective in promoting a food product than traditional depictions.

This study also revealed that ad attitude on purchase intention was significantly positive and this effect was stronger for participants who were exposed to a gender inequality in social media ad. This result show that ad attitude is an important predictor of purchase intention among young Turkish consumers, especially in gender inequality situations. The main reason for this may be that ads that contain inequality elicit stronger reactions from audicendes. Indeed, Lucka et al. (2021) also stated that gender inequality in advertising have led to public outcries and consumer boycotts. On the other hand, ad attitude on negative WoM was significantly negative. However this effect did not differ significantly between participants exposed to gender inequality in social media ad and those

who were not. In other words, whether the ad was inequality-themed or not, the relationship between ad attitudes and negative WoM remained similar.

Besides direct and moderation effects, this study also explore the mediating role of ad attitude in the relationship between gender ad type and purchase intention and negative WoM. The results showed that indirect effect of gender ad type on purchase intention through ad attitude was significant and the indirect effect of gender ad type on negative WoM through ad attitude is significant. Specifically, gender ad type (inequality vs. equality) affect how participants evaluate the ad. When this evaluation (ad attitude) is positive, participants tend to purchase the product; when it is negative, they are more likely to say negative things about the ad or brand to others. These results highlight the central

Specifically, ad content related to gender (e.g., inequality vs. equality) shapes how favorable or unfavorable student consumers feel about the ad, which in turn influences their behavioral responses. When attitudes are more favorable, consumers are more likely to report higher purchase intentions and less likely to engage in negative word of mouth. These findings highlight the ad attitude is a critical mediator in linking gender ad type and student consumers' responses.

This research has several significant implications for businesses, advertising agencies and managers. Advertising decision makers about a product or a brand should be aware that gender inequality depicted in ads, lead to lower attitudes, purchase intentions and higher negative word of mouth especially if the target market consists of young consumers. Young consumers show more favorable attitudes and responses regarding equality in ads. Thus, including gender equality in advertisements can increase the likelihood of purchase by encouraging consumers to develop more positive attitudes toward those advertisements. At the same time, this approach can prevent damage to a brand's reputation by reducing negative WoM. Given that gender inequality plays a stronger role in the effect of attitudes on purchase intention, one should be very careful about advertising that includes inequality (e.g., women predominantly cooking and doing housework).

On the other hand, this study found that ad attitude plays a mediating role between gender ad type and both negative word-of-mouth (nWoM) and purchase intention. This finding contributes to the theoretical literature by demonstrating that consumers' cognitive and affective evaluations of advertisements serve as a key psychological mechanism linking gender portrayals to behavioral outcomes. In other words, rather than gender representation directly shaping consumer behavior, its influence operates through the formation of ad attitude, offering a more nuanced understanding of how gender equality messages affect persuasion.

From a managerial perspective, this study highlights the importance of developing advertising strategies that go beyond product promotion and instead focus on shaping positive consumer attitudes. Managers and practitioners should avoid themes that may be perceived as gender inequality and design communication strategies that emphasize egalitarian, inclusive, and respectful representations. Such messages not only contribute to social progress but also strengthen brand image and foster positive consumer engagement.

Limitations and Future Resarch

While this study provides valuable insights, several methodological limitations should be acknowledged to contextualize the findings and guide future research.

First, the sample consisted exclusively of undergraduate students from a single public university in Türkiye. Although this group represents an important segment of the young consumer population, it may not fully reflect the attitudes and behaviors of individuals from other age or demographic groups. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution and not generalized to non-student or older consumers. Future research should replicate this study with more diverse samples from various universities, regions, and age cohorts to enhance external validity.

Second, the study employed an experimental design using static advertisement visuals to manipulate gender portrayals. While this approach ensured greater experimental control, it did not capture the dynamic and multisensory nature of video advertisements, which incorporate elements such as sound, motion, narrative, and non-verbal cues that can influence consumer responses. Future studies could compare the effects of static and video-based advertisements, examining how different media formats shape perceptions of gender roles on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook.

Third, the advertisement stimuli used in this research simulated an Instagram post depicting a scenario of gender inequality in a domestic context — a woman preparing dinner after returning from work. Although this design effectively reflected everyday gender representations, alternative forms of inequality in professional, educational, or public domains may evoke different consumer reactions. Future research could extend this framework by testing similar manipulations across varied social contexts.

Fourth, the study focused on a single, gender-neutral product category (a food processor) to maintain internal validity and stimulus consistency. However, consumer reactions to gender portrayals may differ across product types — particularly between traditionally male- and female-oriented categories. Future studies could examine whether the observed effects remain consistent across a broader range of product classes.

Finally, while this research identified ad attitude as a mediating mechanism between gender portrayals and behavioral outcomes such as purchase intention and negative word-of-mouth, future studies could explore additional psychological and brand-related variables (e.g., brand image, loyalty, or perceived authenticity). Moreover, employing qualitative methodologies such as in-depth interviews or focus groups could yield richer insights into the cognitive and emotional mechanisms underlying consumer responses to gender portrayals in advertising.

Declarations

Ethical Approval: Ethical approval was granted by Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal University Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol 2025/53; Meeting 2025/01; 20 Jan 2025).

Informed Consent: Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before exposure to the advertising stimuli and completion of the questionnaire; sessions were administered in a controlled classroom setting.

Data Availability: Due to privacy and confidentiality considerations, raw survey data are not publicly available. De-identified datasets and analysis materials (e.g., codebooks and PROCESS outputs) are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

AI Disclosure: No artificial intelligence–based tools or applications were used in the conception, analysis, writing, or figure preparation of this study. All content was produced by the authors in accordance with scientific research methods and academic ethical principles.

Authors' Contributions: Both authors contributed to study conception and design, stimulus development, data collection, data analysis, and manuscript writing; both authors reviewed and approved the final version.

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