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Gender representations and user engagement in social media posts of companies: Dream crazier or keep walking?

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Gender stereotypes;
Diversity;
Social media;
User engagement

Abstract Harmful gender stereotypes perpetuated and reinforced via gendered corporate communication can have deeply adverse consequences—particularly for women. Although a rich body of work has examined gender representation and its effects on advertising, there are hardly any insights into corporate social media communication. It is important to examine this as social media is a critical channel for stakeholder engagement, especially when leveraging its visual affordances. Hence, we conducted a visual social semiotic content analysis of 543 Instagram posts of international B2C companies to see how companies represented gender on social media and how various aspects of gender representation are related to user engagement. We found both diverse and inclusive gender portrayals and the sticky persistence of stereotypes. While women were depicted more as individual, central figures compared to men—allowing women to gain more visibility—women were more often associated with female gender-stereotypical topics than men. While no differences were found between gender representations and user engagement, user engagement differed between visuals showing men and women when considering their ethnicity. As such, we offer five evidence-based recommendations on how companies can contribute to gender equity by addressing gendered communication on social media.

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1. Do companies dream crazier on Instagram, too?

Gender equity is one of the most important goals of contemporary society and part of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By joining the SDGs, many corporations have committed to facilitating gender equity. Companies influence gender equity in many ways (e.g., via communication, which influences the construction and perception of gender and challenges or reinforces gender stereotypes; Aldoory & Toth, 2021). Campaigns such as Nike's "Dream Crazier," which highlighted female athletes who have broken stereotypical barriers in sports, and Gillette's "The Best Men Can Be," which addressed issues of bullying, sexism, and traditional male identities, are examples of companies addressing issues of gender equity via their communication campaigns.

Content with positive *gender equality measure* scores, which quantify gender bias in advertisements and messages, enjoy a 56% rise in brand reputation, are 35% more likely to score high on the brand relationship index, and drive purchase intent by 42% among total and female consumers (SeeHer, 2023). Further, strong consumer expectations of corporate involvement in social issues (Dhanesh, 2020; Marschlich & Dhanesh, 2024) and Gen Z's distrust of brands whose ads reinforce negative gender stereotypes (Ferraro et al., 2023) are some of the drivers pressurizing companies to address deeply ingrained gender injustices via messaging and communication.

Extant research on gender-related communication efforts—including how companies represent gender—has focused heavily on advertising communication (e.g., Campbell et al., 2023; Eisend et al., 2023; Furnham & Lay, 2019; Viglia et al., 2023) yet much less on public relations and corporate communication (Aldoory & Toth, 2021), which differ significantly from advertising. Unlike advertising driven by persuasive intent, corporate social media is driven by user engagement, social monitoring, and social customer relationship management (Li et al., 2021). According to the *persuasion knowledge model* (Friestad & Wright, 1994), when consumers recognize the persuasive intent of advertising, their persuasion coping mechanisms are activated, and they process ads differently from non-advertising messages like corporate social media posts. Thus, corporate social media could be an arena to authentically communicate corporate commitment to gender equity without triggering defensive mechanisms in users. In addition, gender is used to segment an ad's target audiences, prompting companies to create gender-specific messaging for different audiences and products (De Meulenaer et al., 2018; Matthes et al., 2016). However, regardless of the target audience or products, companies can use social media to reach beyond consumers and maintain a consistent stance on gender representation. Finally, unlike ads that repeat, corporate social media offers unique and diverse content (Li et al., 2021; Rietveld et al., 2020), enhancing opportunities to show equitable gender representations across more posts. Therefore, corporate social media offers a distinct platform from advertising to showcase corporate contributions to gender representation. Prior research has mostly focused on text-based gender representations with little insight into visual gender representation on corporate social media despite the relevance of social media in today's information and entertainment environment and the shift to visual communication on social media (Eisend et al., 2023; Roth-Cohen et al., 2023).

Furthermore, user engagement is a key reason for examining gender representations on corporate social media. To engage social-media-savvy, socially conscious millennials and hypermodern consumers who expect companies to be more socially responsible (Abitbol & Lee, 2017; Marschlich & Dhanesh, 2024; Reilly & Hynan, 2014), companies might employ fairer and more diverse representation of gender on social media. Unlike traditional, one-way advertising via print and television that is thrust involuntarily on viewers, social media allows for two-way, voluntary interaction (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021) with likes and comments providing immediate affective feedback on aspects of gender representation (Lee et al., 2018). Finally, social media platforms that foreground imagery over text have fostered a culture of visual rhetoric, wherein consumers prefer visual over text, and content with images generates stronger engagement online (Brubaker & Wilson, 2018; Dhanesh et al., 2022; Li & Xie, 2020Y. Li & Xie, 2020). The social media affordances of visual engagement can trigger online debates and conversations, further spreading and amplifying corporate messages of gender equity compared to traditional advertising (Eisend & Roessner, 2022; Wiid et al., 2023).

As such, our study examined how companies visually represented gender in their communication on Instagram and its effects on user engagement. We chose Instagram because it is primarily a visual-oriented platform that 80% of social media marketers use to engage with consumers, making

it more relevant than other visual platforms like YouTube and TikTok (Statista, 2024). We employed Kress and Van Leeuwen's (1996) approach to visual social semiotics because it provided a framework to decode the complex meanings embedded in visual communication to understand how different elements like the composition of a visual or the interaction between the visual and the viewer contribute to the overall message. In this way, the approach allowed us to understand what gender visuals show, how gender is portrayed, and how these portrayals interact and engage with viewers.

Our findings can contribute to theory and practice in multiple ways. Theoretically, they can enhance insights into gender representation in corporate social media communication (distinct from advertising). The study also generates empirical insights into aspects of visual representations of gender that engage users the most, augmenting emergent research on organization-generated visual content on social media. Practically, we offer recommendations to communication practitioners who can leverage social media not only to be a force for social good but also to generate business returns by engaging with gender equity in business and society.

2. Gender representation in corporate communication

Although corporate communication includes a plethora of paid, earned, shared, and owned media, most research on gender representation falls within the broader umbrella of diversity and inclusion within paid media or advertising research (Campbell et al., 2023; Eisend et al., 2023; Taylor, 2023; Viglia et al., 2023), which we review later in Section 2. Campbell et al. (2023, p. 1) define diverse representation in advertising as "the fair and proportional portrayal of diverse groups in a particular promotional setting or medium." Diverse representation can include various attributes such as gender, sexual orientation, age, beauty, body size, physical and mental ability, socioeconomic status, and race and ethnicity. It can also include the intersectionality of these representations, or the representation of an individual's interconnecting and overlapping social categories like the portrayal of an older, Black, transgender individual, or a young, Arab female (Campbell et al., 2023; Eisend et al., 2023).

This study draws on an integrated conceptual theoretical framework that examines associations among diverse aspects of representation (e.g., gender and its various social and commercial effects; Campbell et al., 2023), and on a theoretical framework that specifically focuses on nonbinary representation and its outcomes (Eisend & Roessner, 2022). According to Campbell et al. (2023), representation of diversity across areas like age, beauty, body size, gender, sexual orientation, physical and mental ability, and race and ethnicity can generate positive and negative social outcomes. While accurate representations can create feelings of inclusion and self-esteem, inaccurate or absent representations can create, reinforce, or challenge stigma and negative stereotypes.

Gender stereotypes are personal beliefs that certain attributes differentiate men from women, including physical characteristics like age, height, roles, activity preferences, personality traits, and occupational status (Deaux & Lewis, 1984). According to the stereotype content model, stereotypes address two main dimensions of content: competence and warmth, with men typically associated with competence and women with warmth (Fiske et al., 2002). This includes exclusively depicting women as sensitive to others' needs, affectionate, sympathetic, warm, tender, gentle, compassionate, and empathetic. Conversely, men are portrayed as objective, competitive, strong, tough, intelligent, ambitious, dominant, aggressive, and competent. Women are also typically associated with stereotypical compassion-related soft issues like poverty, education, childcare, grooming, and health care. In contrast, men are associated with tough topics or hard issues like policy, politics, security, economics, and science and technology (Bauer & Carpinella, 2018; Carpinella & Bauer, 2021; Hentschel et al., 2019). Harmful gender stereotypes inflict deeply negative consequences. For instance, stereotypes of women as warm and communal and of leaders as assertive and competent can trigger negative attitudes toward women leaders in the workplace (Getchell & Beitelspacher, 2020; Spencer et al., 2019), and outdated gender stereotypes of women as caregivers and men as providers could reduce opportunities for personal and professional self-development (Durante & Rittweger, 2021).

An extensive body of research on gender portrayal in advertising has shown that in addition to the portrayal of gender stereotypical topics and traits, stereotyping occurs across other variables like the central characters' role, location, background, and the type of argument they offer (Furnham & Lay, 2019; Khalil & Dhanesh, 2020). For instance, most research has shown that women tend to be consistently portrayed in familial,

dependent roles as spouses, parents, and homemakers while men are shown in nonfamilial or professional roles like workers, professionals, and celebrities (Furnham & Lay, 2019; Khalil & Dhanesh, 2020; Kitsa & Mudra, 2020; Lim & Furnham, 2016; Verhellen et al., 2016). Although women have also been increasingly portrayed as professionals, these portrayals are limited to so-called caring occupations like nursing or teaching, and men are typically depicted as the capable partner or the wiser, more mature, and more authoritative counterpart—regardless of their status or profession (Aramendia-Muneta et al., 2020).

Closely related to role depiction, location can also be stereotypically featured with women being portrayed as mostly being at home, whereas men are more likely to be shown outdoors or at work (Khalil & Dhanesh, 2020; Prieler, 2016; Verhellen et al., 2016). Research has also shown that women are more likely than men to appear with children in the background. In addition, men are more likely than women to be depicted as offering arguments based on factual information or scientific evidence, while women are shown giving opinions and personal views (Furnham & Farragher, 2000; Furnham & Mak, 1999; Khalil & Dhanesh, 2020).

Most of this literature has examined gender as a binary concept, while societal debates on a heteronormative approach to fluid gender identities have been on the rise. We draw upon Eisend and Roessner's (2022) conceptual framework on gender in advertising research that links the representation and portrayal of nonbinary genders to its commercial and social effects. The traditional gender binary concept revolves around notions of sex and gender. While *sex* is based on biological criteria used to classify a person at birth as male or female, *gender* refers to the social construction of femininity and masculinity (Campbell et al., 2023; Eisend & Roessner, 2022). The *gender binary* refers to the notion that there are only two sexes, that a person can only belong to one sex, and that gender is determined biologically.

A recent articulation of a nonbinary concept is *gender identity*, which describes an individual's personal sense of gender on a spectrum with male and female at either end. In addition, *gender expression*, or the external manifestation of gender identity, exists on a spectrum of masculine and feminine at either end. Often, gender and sexual orientation are discussed together, as indicated by the term LGBTQIA+[1] (Campbell et al., 2023; Moleiro & Pinto, 2015).

As well as examining gender representation of individual attributes, scholars have highlighted the need to examine intersections of gender portrayal with other factors like age and ethnicity (Campbell et al., 2023; Eisend et al., 2023). Despite their increasing consumption power, not only are older people rarely represented in advertising (Campbell et al., 2023; Eisend & Roessner, 2022), but when they are, it tends to be men, while women are typically shown as young (Aramendia-Muneta et al., 2020; Prieler, 2016; Verhellen et al., 2016). Depictions of gender can also intersect with ethnicity. Most studies on depictions of ethnic minorities refer to Black, Asian, and Latin-American ethnic minorities in the US and show that ethnic minorities are underrepresented and often depicted in stereotypical ways (Eisend et al., 2023).

Since the foundational studies by Dominick and Rauch (1972) and McArthur and Resko (1975) on gender roles in television commercials, 50 years of work on gender portrayal in advertising has consistently shown that males appear more often than women and that women are depicted in stereotypical ways, especially in terms of the roles they play (Eisend, 2019; Furnham & Lay, 2019; Grau & Zotos, 2016; Roth-Cohen et al., 2023). However, the extent of stereotyping appears to have decreased slightly over time. *Femvertising*, or advertising that shows female empowerment, has been on the rise (Windels et al., 2023), while male depictions have witnessed subtle changes, shifting from traditional masculine portrayals to more diverse roles (e.g., those in the private or decorative sphere; Shinoda et al., 2021). These changes are context-dependent and occur at different speeds in different societies and cultural contexts (Khalil & Dhanesh, 2020).

Although this body of literature on gender representation is robust, there continues to be little research on nonbinary depictions of gender, and scholars have called for research to look beyond the gender binary and examine diverse gender identities (Eisend & Roessner, 2022). Further, recent reviews of the literature have shown that little research has examined several diversity attributes simultaneously, and scholars have called for examining intersectionality in future research. In turn, this can inclusively reflect the increasing social complexities of the world around us (Campbell et al., 2023; Eisend et al., 2023).

Finally, most studies on gender representation have focused on advertising in traditional media, (i.e., print and television), neglecting other

[1] Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex, asexual, plus other gender identities

avenues like social media (Eisend et al., 2023; Roth-Cohen et al., 2023). Some studies, however, have shown emerging evidence for diverse representations of gender roles and identities. For instance, Wiid et al. (2023) found that while beauty brands continue to primarily use female models in their Instagram communications, there is an increased use of gender-queer and agender models potentially to attract new markets. However, Wiid et al. (2023) examined images on Instagram without distinguishing between advertising and nonadvertising social media posts.

This study adds to this emerging body of work on gender representation in corporate social media by examining nonadvertising corporate social media posts. In line with Rietveld et al. (2020), we define *corporate social media content* as corporate communication on the company's own social media account. Following Campbell et al. (2023), we define *diverse gender representation* in corporate social media content as the fair and accurate portrayal of diverse gender identities and their intersectionality with variables like race and ethnicity in the company's social media account. Drawing on the variables incorporated in theoretical frameworks of diverse gender representation (Campbell et al., 2023; Eisend & Roessner, 2022) and variables examined in previous studies on gender representation (Furnham & Lay, 2019; Khalil & Dhanesh, 2020), our study examined gender representation across diverse aspects including gendered topics, traits, roles, location, argument, background, age, and ethnicity. Responding to the critiques of the current body of literature, we also went beyond the gender binary and examined diverse gender identities (Eisend & Roessner, 2022) and the intersectionality of these identities (Campbell et al., 2023; Eisend et al., 2023).

3. User engagement with gender representations

In addition to representation, we examined how corporate social media content interacted with viewers, as one of the strengths of corporate social media communication is the increased ability to engage users compared to traditional media (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021). Across the fields of marketing, advertising, consumer research, strategic communication, and public relations, terms like social media engagement, digital engagement, online engagement, user engagement, public engagement, and audience engagement are typically used to refer to engagement between organizations and their audiences over social media (Brubaker & Wilson, 2018; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). This study has adopted the term *user engagement*, which could refer to engagement between organizations and various audiences over social media (e.g., consumers, employees, influencers, and activists) who might engage with gender representations in corporate social media content. Although theoretical explications of user engagement have expanded to include multiple dimensions of engagement, including cognitive, affective, and behavioral, most empirical research on user engagement with corporate social media content has measured it using first-level engagement metrics (i.e., likes, comments, retweets, and shares), as they can reflect users real-time and natural responses toward and engagement with the message (Brubaker & Wilson, 2018; Kim & Yang, 2017). As such, we used the number of likes, comments (and their valence), and shares of corporate social media posts to measure effectiveness and examine differences in user engagement depending on how people are represented in the posts. The engagement metrics can indicate the amplification and spread of gender representations in corporate social media posts.

Social media platforms tend to foreground visual imagery over text, but only limited research has examined the influence of visuals in engendering user engagement with corporate social media posts—particularly on topics related to corporate social issues management (Abitbol & Lee, 2017; Reilly & Hynan, 2014). Even less research has examined user engagement with corporate communication from a gender perspective except for emergent research on consumer engagement with online femvertising (e.g., Chen & Feng, 2024). This dearth of research is unfortunate as engendering user engagement via social media is one of the crucial conduits to effecting social change and generating relational and reputational returns. The aforementioned review of literature informed two research questions that guided our study:

1. How is gender visually represented in corporate social media posts?

2. Which aspects of visual gender representations are associated with user engagement?

4. Method

To answer these research questions, we conducted a quantitative content analysis, which allowed us

to identify and quantify the frequencies of certain features of gender representations in companies' social media posts. Our content analysis used a visual semiotic approach (Bell, 2001) to capture and meaningfully measure the visual content of social media posts. The *visual social semiotics approach* examines how visual content like images and videos convey meaning within different social contexts, focusing on three aspects (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001):

1. Composition (i.e., arrangement of the depicted individuals including their prominence);

2. Representation (i.e., how people are depicted in the visual, including their role and their characteristics such as age and ethnicity); and

3. Interaction between the depicted and the viewer (e.g., through direct eye contact).

4.1. Sample

The final sample consisted of 543 social media posts from 15 US-based business-to-customer (B2C) companies on Instagram that visually represented gender in their posts. We focused on publicly known companies for their commitment to gender-related issues and chose UN Women Unstereotype Alliance members and UN Women Global Innovation Coalition for Change members as our initial company sample. We excluded organizations that are nonprofit, not on Instagram, and not B2C companies. We chose US-based companies because most of the companies in the selected alliances and coalitions were US-based, and we aimed to avoid the effect of country of origin, which could influence gender representations. Our final sample covered company posts from different industries, namely telecommunications (AT&T and Cisco), technology (Facebook, Google, Microsoft, DELL, HP, and LinkedIn), consumer goods (Johnson & Johnson, Mattel, P&G, and Unilever), food and beverages (Mars), and financial services (JPMorgan Chase and Citi).

We chose Instagram because it represents the largest and fastest-growing visual-based social media platform with more than 2 billion users in early 2024 (Statista, 2024). In addition, 90% of Instagram users follow at least one business on the platform (Instagram, 2022). At the same time, as Rietveld et al. (2020) noted, studies on consumer engagement with visual content on Instagram are rare, as the previous focus was on Facebook. We focused exclusively on Instagram, as the comparability with other platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, which focus much more on longer videos, is limited. This study also did not aim to take a comparative approach.

To determine the data for analysis, we manually identified the social media posts that featured at least one person to allow us to examine gender representations. The person(s) in the picture had to be depicted in the foreground of the post and could not just be part of the visual's background. This is relevant to performing a visual semiotic analysis (Bell, 2001). We coded all suitable posts in the period from July—December 2023.

4.2. Procedure and measurement

The coding was done at the social media post level, so the unit of analysis is a single post. If more than one picture or video was part of one social media post, only the first one was coded. For coding, we considered the social media post's visuals and text. To measure gender representations and user engagement in corporate social media posts, we developed an extensively tested and refined codebook. In addition to formal categories, for each post, the type of visual content, organizational content type (e.g., promotion of products, social engagement/sustainability/CSR), product type, product and issue type, and gender stereotypical topic (feminine, male, neutral) were coded. Next, a visual-semiotic-approach-based content analysis (Bell, 2001) was carried out. First, compositional meaning was determined by measuring a person's salience. *Compositional meaning* refers to how certain aspects—in our case, humans—are depicted and possibly interact with each other (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). Following Valentini et al. (2018), we coded whether the visual depicts one person or several and whether it shows one or two persons or a group (i.e., more than two persons) as central figures.

Next, we coded categories to measure the interactive and representational meanings, doing so at the individual person's level (main characters 1 and 2) or the group depicted in the visual. *Interactive meaning* refers to how visuals interact with viewers and suggest the attitude viewers should take toward what is presented. To measure interactive meaning, we coded contact with the viewer and whether it was a close-up, medium, or long shot (Bell, 2001; Jewitt & Oyama, 2001). Next, we coded the *representational meaning*, which refers to how people, places, and things are depicted in visuals. To measure this, we coded the background against which the central figure was portrayed in terms of gender (e.g., a male central figure was depicted with a male group in the

background), as well as the central figure's or the group's age group, gender, and ethnicity (Eisend, 2010). Moreover, we coded the type of argument the figure(s) depicted made in the visual (i.e., nonfactual, factual, or not applicable), the location or context (i.e., private, professional and public, mixed, or not visible; adapted from van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020), and the role of the figure(s) (i.e., dependent/relative to others, autonomous/independent from others, or mixed; Eisend, 2010). Finally, if applicable, we coded trait gender stereotypes to explore whether the person(s) depicted in the visual was portrayed using feminine or masculine traits (or a mix), following the shortened Bem sex role inventory suggested by Mateo and Fernández (1991). Two coders coded the material, and reliability was determined using Cohen's Kappa, ranging between 0.775 and 1.0. Overall, Cohen's Kappa is 0.926, implying a good-to-high intracoder reliability.

5. Results

5.1. Reinforcing gender stereotypes through gendered topics

Overall, we found that almost half of all posts dealt with topics that are traditionally perceived as feminine (45.1%, n = 245), followed by posts on gender-neutral topics (40.5%, n = 220), while 14.4% of posts were on male topics (n = 78). We found that women were more likely than men to be presented in posts dealing with topics that are stereotypically perceived as female (i.e., soft issues like corporate social responsibility, female empowerment, and support of racial minorities). In addition, men were more likely to be portrayed in topics stereotypically perceived as male or in hard issues like climate change or financials (see Figure 1). Regarding the visualization of groups, female groups were more likely to be associated with stereotypical female topics than male groups, and they were not portrayed with masculine topics at all. Hence, when women were shown in a group, they were even more likely to be portrayed with feminine topics than when women were depicted as a single central figure in the post, which can reinforce existing gender stereotypes.

5.2. Composition: Females are more salient in visuals than males

Overall, we found that most visuals present only one character (40.5%, n = 253) or several characters with two main characters (24.9%, n = 154). Visuals with groups of people in which we could not identify a main figure (20.7%, n = 128) and group visuals in which we could identify one main character (13.4%, n = 83) appeared least frequently. In social media posts with one or two main characters, we found that more than half of the depicted central figures are female (n = 274, 56.1%), while 43.0% (n = 210) are male. Only four main characters (in two posts) could be identified as transgender (0.8%). We found significant differences in people's salience between men and women as main characters (see Figure 2). Women were more visible as a single central figure (60.5%, n = 153) or as the main character of a group (64.6%, n = 53), while men became more visible in visuals in which two central figures were shown (54.6%, n = 83).

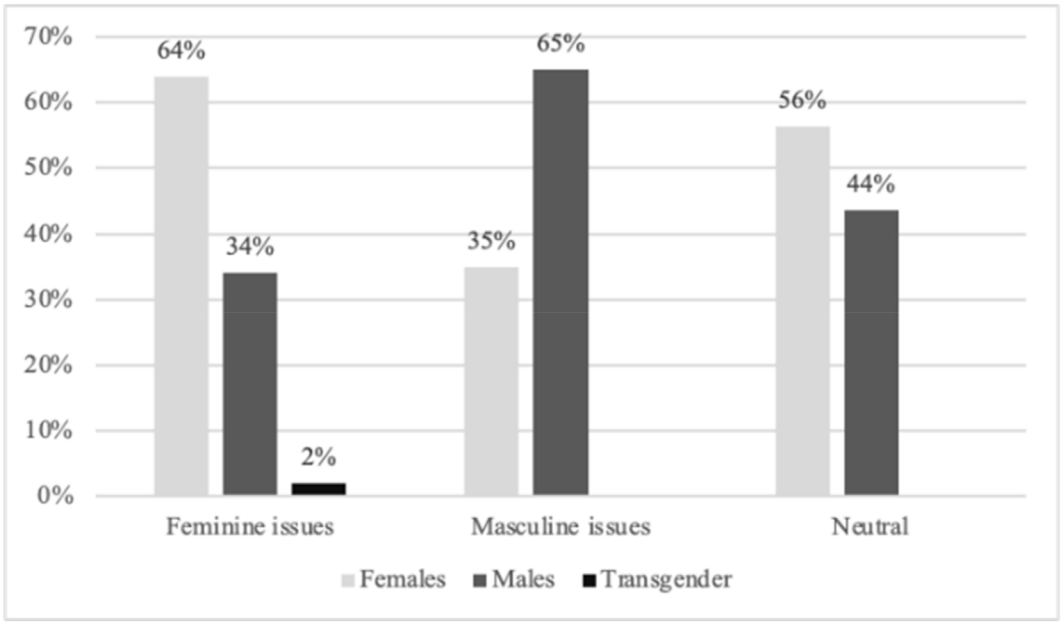
5.3. Interaction: Females and males interact similarly with viewers

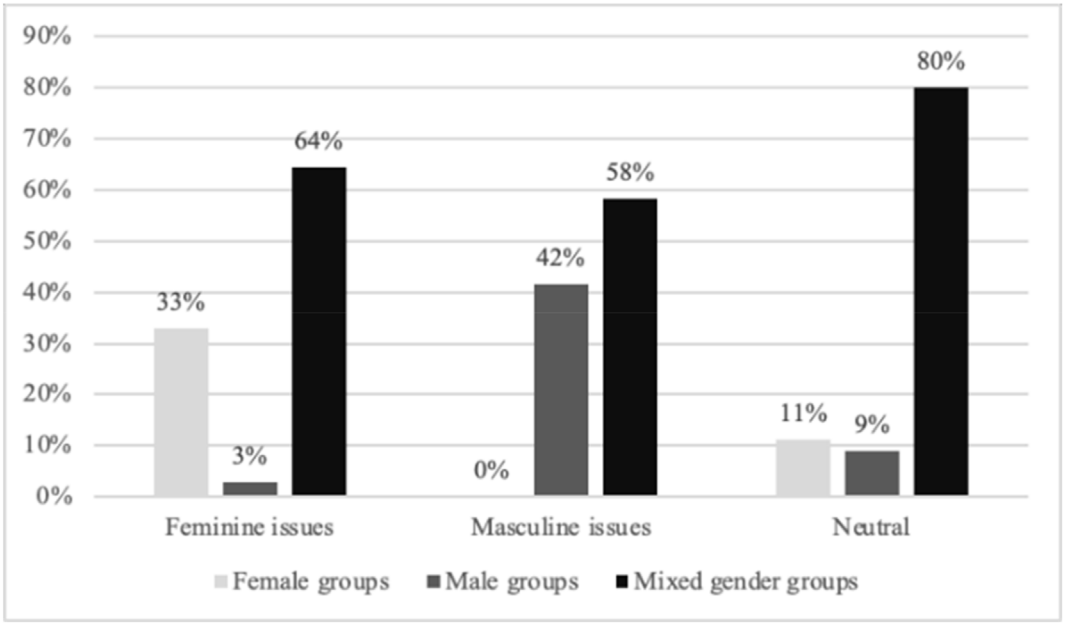
At the level of interactive meanings in visuals, individuals depicted as main characters in a visual were mostly looking away from the camera (46.3%, n = 226; i.e., indirect contact with the viewer was established), while the rest were either directly looking into the camera (35.0%, n = 171), or a mix of both (in the case of videos, 18.7%, n = 91). In most of the visuals, the main characters were shown in a close-up shot (41.8%, n = 204), followed by mixed shots applied in videos (35.7%, n = 174). The main characters were seen much less frequently from a medium distance (16.6%, n = 81) or further away (long shot, 5.9%, n = 29). The nature of Instagram can probably explain this result, as people tend to look at the visuals on their phones rather than on a screen. Looking at gender representations, we could not find significant gender differences in how the contact between the main character(s) and the viewer was established. Our results also did not reveal gender differences in distance (i.e., whether we can see a close-up, medium, or long shot). Our results imply that females and males depicted in visuals interact similarly with the viewer. This may help establish gender equity via corporate social media posts as interactive meanings in visuals can be related to establishing power relations between the subjects in the visuals and the viewers.

5.4. Representation: Gender-stereotypical traits and gender differences in background and age reinforce traditional depictions

In addition to the interactive meaning in visuals and the person's salience and visibility (i.e., the

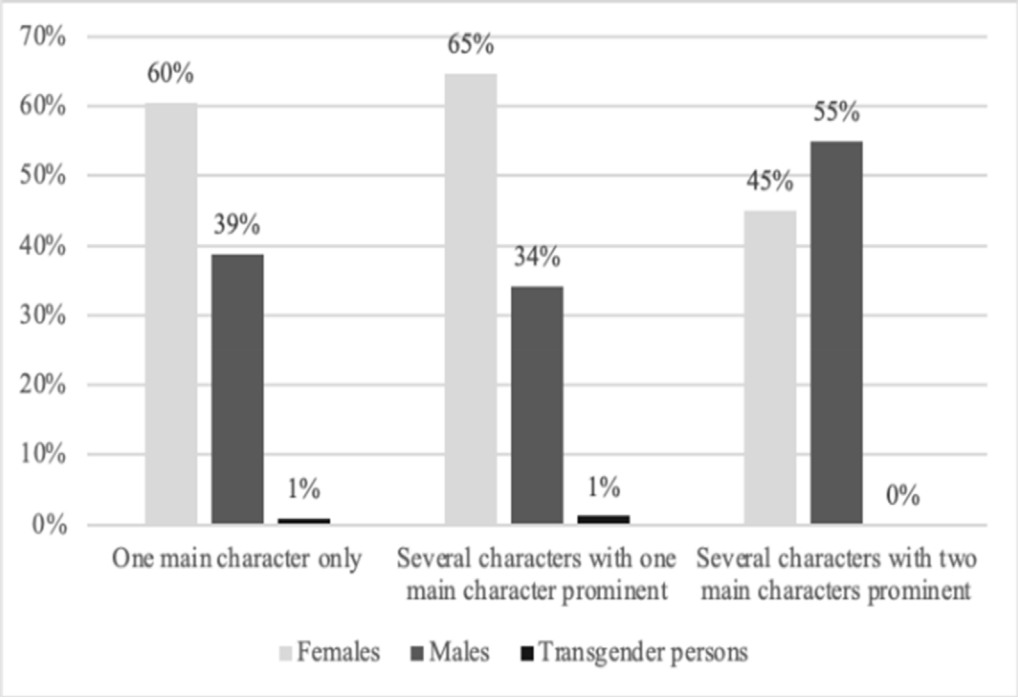
Figure 1. Gender representations across issues for visuals





compositional meaning), it is critical to look at how a person is portrayed (i.e., the representational meaning, including which traits are portrayed or emphasized). Across visuals with one or two main characters, almost half of all central figures (48.0%, n = 234) were depicted as gender-neutral, followed by people demonstrating masculine traits (34.2%, n = 167). Significantly fewer people were shown with feminine traits (12.3%, n = 60) or a mix of feminine and masculine traits (5.5%, n = 27). However, our results revealed significant gender differences in the representation of gender stereotypical traits. Women were more likely to be depicted with stereotypically female traits (e.g., honesty, affection, warmth, and compassion) than men. In contrast, men and women were equally likely to be portrayed as having stereotypically masculine traits (e.g., being objective, competitive, strong, ambitious, and competent; see Figure 3). Women were also more likely to be depicted with a mix of female and male stereotypical traits than men.

Figure 2. Salience of cisgender males, cisgender females, and transgender persons

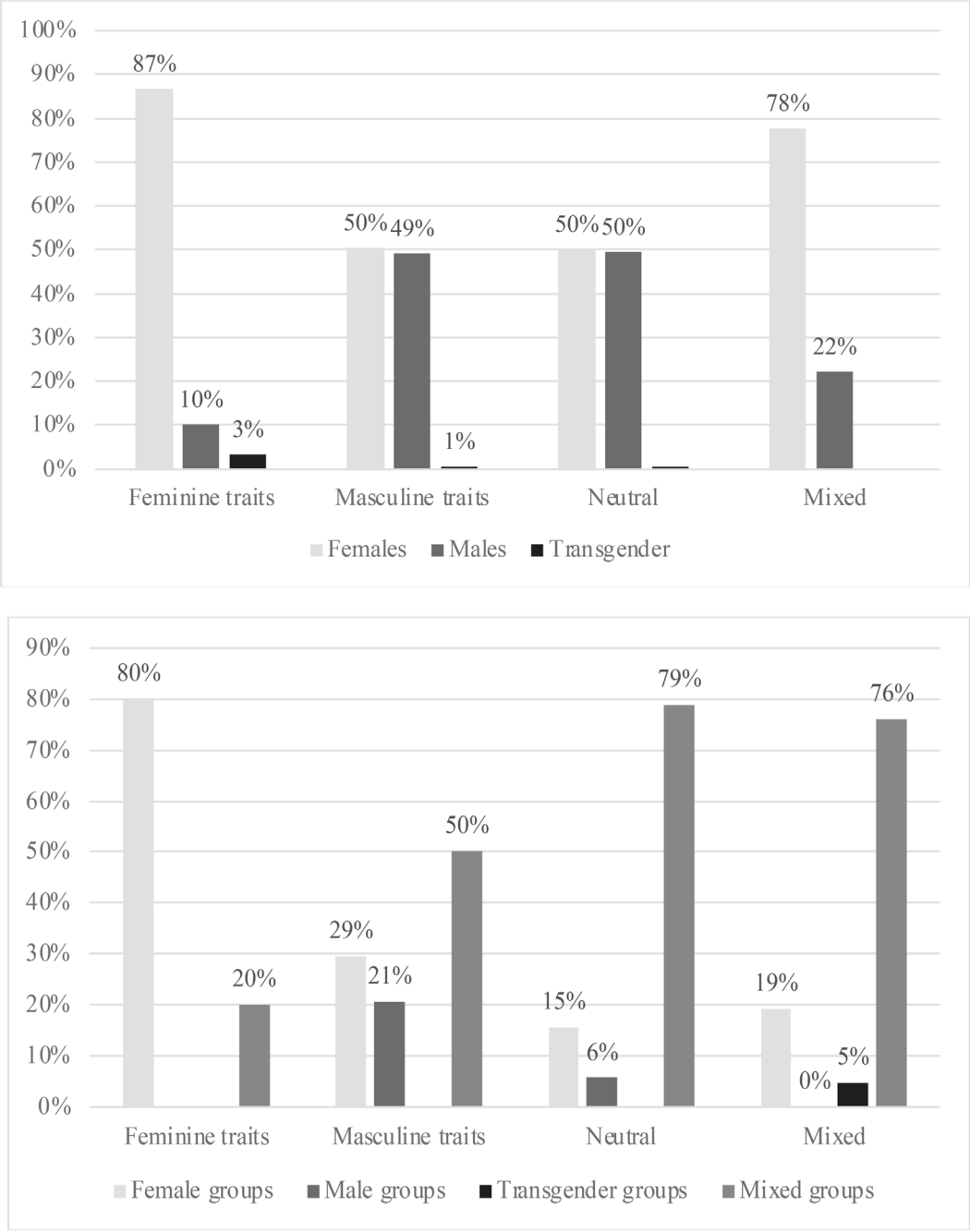


In line with this, individuals in female groups were more likely to be portrayed in a stereotypical feminine manner (with female stereotypical traits) than male groups and vice versa. This finding indicates that women are, in general, more likely to be ascribed masculine characteristics than men feminine ones. This, in turn, implies that women are more likely to conform to masculinity than men to femininity, thus reproducing and perpetuating patriarchal assumptions in which men (and masculinity) are considered the norm.

Further, our results found significant gender differences in the background presented. If pictures showed people in the background and women were visualized as the main actors in the foreground, women were more likely to be seen in the background than men. This result was also found vice versa: when men were the main actors, they were typically visualized with male groups in the background. Extant scholarship has indicated similar results (Furnham & Lay, 2019; Khalil & Dhanesh, 2020). If females are mostly shown with other females and males mostly with other males, this might be an obstacle to gender equity and diversity as the focus might be more on the differences between genders than on the similarities. However, it is also worth noting that in many of the visuals with main characters, no background with people could be identified (77.5%, n = 378). In the remaining visuals, the background consisted of mixed-gender individuals (10.9%, n = 53), predominantly or exclusively female people (8.6%, n = 42), and predominantly or exclusively male individuals (3.1%, n = 15).

Further, our findings revealed that, in general, most of the main characters shown are middle-aged (47.3%, n = 231) or younger (35.7%, n = 174). Young people (13.9%, n = 68) or children (3.1%, n = 15) are depicted less frequently. However, we found significant age differences in gender representations (see Figure 4). Women were more likely to be young, while men were more likely to be older. In contrast to visuals with single protagonists, our results showed no differences in age between male and female or mixed-gender groups. In group visuals, women and men are thus portrayed more diversely in age. One positive result is that we did not find differences in ethnicities in the gender representations, which is a chance for establishing diversity. Overall, more than half (52.7%, n = 257) of the main actors depicted in the posts were White/Caucasian, followed by Black/African American (23.0%, n = 112), Asian (14.8%, n = 72), and Latinos/Hispanics (6.8%, n = 33). Only occasionally did we see Middle Eastern/Arab individuals (1.2%, n = 6) or other ethnicities (1.6%, n = 8).

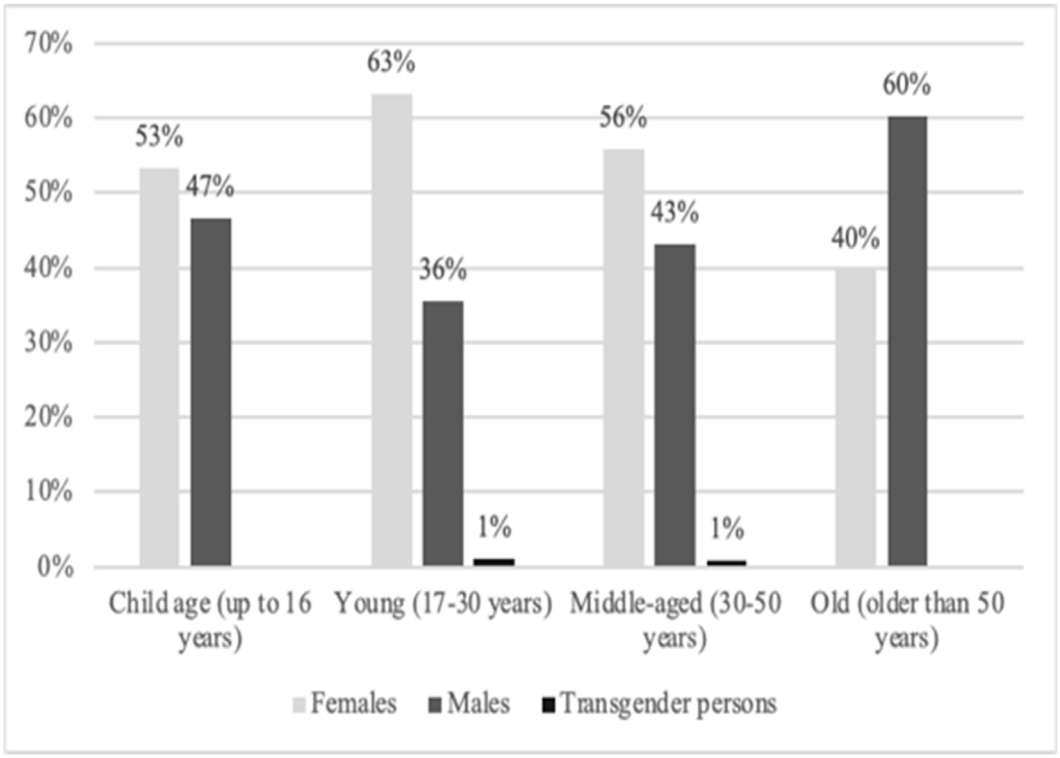
Figure 3. Gender representations and gender stereotypical traits



5.5. Representation: Challenging gender stereotypes in argument, location, and roles

In contrast to the results regarding gender differences in background and age—which may reinforce traditional gender stereotypes—we found that for some categories, gender representations in corporate social media shift away from traditional depictions. We did not find significant gender differences in individuals' arguments (i.e., whether the person(s) in the visuals presented subjective content (e.g., opinions) or factual content). In general, we found that more posts depicted person(s) presenting opinions and nonfactual content (visuals with individual main characters: 69.8%; visuals with groups: 70.1%) than factual content (visuals with individual main characters: 30.2%; visuals with groups: 16.4%; a mix of factual and nonfactual: 13.4%).

Figure 4. Gender representations and age



Moreover, our results did not reveal significant gender differences in the location/context and role depicted for visuals with one or two main characters or with groups. Females and female groups were as likely as males and male groups to be depicted in private or public and work contexts. We also found that most posts (51.0%, n = 249) showed the main actors at work/in a professional or public context and rarely in a private context (with family: 3.5%, n = 17; without family: 9.4%, n = 46), which seems to indicate a difference between advertisements and corporate social media posts. In one-third of the posts, no location could be identified (29.7%, n = 145), and in some posts, locations were mixed (6.4%, n = 31). In addition, the females and males portrayed did not differ in their depicted roles (i.e., autonomous and dependent roles). We also found that, in general, most posts with one or two central figures (78.9%, n = 385) showed these characters in an autonomous role, and only 18.0% (n = 88) of the central characters could be seen in a dependent role, and 3.1% (n = 15) in mixed roles.

Our studied corporate social media posts help challenge gender stereotypes in these regards and contradict prior research that highlighted how females in advertisements were more often associated with dependent roles (e.g., as a mother) and familiar locations (e.g., at home) than men (Furnham & Lay, 2019; Khalil & Dhanesh, 2020). Furthermore, this result implies that gender representations may also significantly differ between advertisements and corporate social media posts that do not primarily focus on product promotion.

5.6. User engagement related to intersectional representations

In addition to the differences in gender representations on corporate social media posts, we were interested in whether there are differences in user engagement depending on the gender portrayed in the posts. Overall, we found no significant differences in the number of likes, shares, and comments depending on whether a cisgender man, a cisgender woman, or a transgender person was depicted. Our results further revealed no significant differences in the valence of comments between posts with women or men as the main actors. These differences also remain insignificant when analyzing companies that tend to receive positive reactions to posts overall and those that tend to receive negative reactions. We also found

a partially significant interaction effect between gender and ethnicity on user engagement but not for gender and age nor the interaction between gender, ethnicity, and age. The interaction effect of gender and ethnicity is significant for the number of likes and comments but not for the valence of comments. Users commented most on visuals with Hispanic males, followed by white transgender people and Black women. The number of likes was similarly highest for Hispanic males, followed by Black women and Black transgender people, showing that user engagement is intersectional and that the gender of the portrayed person does not affect user engagement.

Finally, we explored whether users engaged differently with stereotypical vs. nonstereotypical depictions. We did not find differences in the number of likes, shares, or comments, or the valence of the top comments between visuals showing a male portraying stereotypically feminine issues and visuals depicting women with stereotypically male issues. In addition, results did not reveal significant differences in user engagement between visuals in which women were portrayed as having stereotypically male traits and visuals in which men were portrayed as having stereotypically female traits. A summary of our core results and their implications can be found in Table 1.

6. Theoretical implications

The findings of this study make strong theoretical contributions. First, this study offered much-needed empirical evidence for gender representation on corporate social media that could be compared against advertising research. Gender-stereotypical representations found in advertising that persisted in corporate social media posts included a lack of representation of transgender people (Eisend & Roessner, 2022), gendered topics and traits (Bauer & Carpinella, 2018; Carpinella & Bauer, 2021; Fiske et al., 2002), background (Furnham & Farragher, 2000; Khalil & Dhanesh, 2020), and age (Aramendia-Muneta et al., 2020; Prieler, 2016). However, unlike traditional advertising that stereotypically depicts roles (Furnham & Lay, 2019; Khalil & Dhanesh, 2020; Verhellen et al., 2016), location (Prieler, 2016; Verhellen et al., 2016), and ethnicity (Eisend et al., 2023), corporate social media posts not only depicted females as more salient and visible but also revealed no gendered differences in ethnicity, arguments, and most importantly, depictions of location and roles. Beyond the shackles of the persuasive intent of advertising, companies engage corporate social media to push boundaries in representation and regard social media as a space to authentically communicate their commitment to gender equity. Further, the diversity of social media content likely offered companies a broader palette to engage in equitable gender representation than that of advertising, which tends to repeat. Also, the findings validate our expectation that companies might engage in a fairer and more diverse representation of gender and gender-related attributes on social media because social media is frequented by millennials and hypermodern consumers who expect companies to be more socially responsible. Finally, findings revealed no difference in user engagement across various aspects of representation, except for a partially significant interaction effect between gender and ethnicity on user engagement. This could imply that, unlike advertising that makes attention-grabbing campaigns (e.g., Nike's "Dream Crazier" or Gillette's "The Best Men Can Be"), companies are flying under the radar when it comes to representation on corporate social media, making subtle changes that may not garner much user engagement.

7. Recommendations

In Section 7, based on the findings of this study, we propose various recommendations for practitioners who manage corporate social media communication. Then, in Section 8, we include a list of don'ts that address gendered communication on social media.

7.1. Composition via salience

Companies should continue to portray women prominently when they are the main characters in social media posts or in a group with one main character. This can be achieved via compositional aspects such as size, color contrasts, and tonal contrasts that will make the character stand out and not be a blurry piece of the background (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001).

7.2. Interaction via gaze and distance

Companies should continue to portray all genders equally regarding gaze and distance as a way to interact with viewers. Direct gaze between the subject in the visual and the viewer indicates equal power relations, while close-up shots highlight an individual's personality (Jewitt & Oyama,

Table 1. How gender is represented in corporate visuals on Instagram

Category	Result	Implication
Topical focus	• Visuals mostly cover feminine topics and gender-neutral topics • Feminine topics are depicted mostly by women • Male topics mostly presented with men	• Congruence between topics perceived as gender-stereotypical with the respective gender can reinforce gender stereotypes and gender inequity
	Compositional meaning	
Salience	• Females are more salient than men (i.e., appear more often as central figures than males) • Visuals with groups mostly mixed in the gender composition, followed by female groups • Transgender persons almost absent from visuals	• Agender/nonbinary genders should be more salient to increase gender equity • Focus on females in visuals can help women empowerment and gender equity but diversity and inclusion in the representation of women (e.g., age, ethnicity) must be considered
	Interactive meaning	
Contact with viewer	• Individuals in the visuals mostly look away from the camera (indirect contact with the viewer), which establishes less interaction with the viewer, no differences in gender	• Similar interaction with the viewer helps establish similar power relations with males and females, which contributes to gender equity
Intimate versus distance shot	• Close-up shots in which you can see the head and shoulders are dominant in the visuals • No differences in how the visual brings people of different genders close to the viewer	• Females and males being similarly close to the viewer helps establish gender equity by establishing similar interaction levels
	Representational meaning	
Background	• Women are more likely to be part of the background of female main actors and female groups • Men are more depicted in the background of male main actors or male groups	• When individuals in the foreground are always portrayed with the same gender in the background, diversity is lacking, which can be a gender equity obstacle
Age & ethnicity	• Portrayed women are more than men part of younger age groups and men of older age groups • No differences in depicted ethnicities between men and women	• Gender differences in the depicted age groups is an obstacle to gender equity because it does not offer women and men of all ages opportunities for identification • Diversity in ethnical representations across gender contributes to gender equity across different groups
Argument, location/ context, & role	• The argumentation type (subjective or factual content) does not differ between gender • Females and female groups are as likely as males and male groups to be depicted in private or public and work contexts • Individuals are mostly shown in autonomous roles and no gender differences appear	• A balanced and equal representation of men, women, and other gender groups in different contexts (e.g., public, professional, and private) and in different roles helps to combat gender stereotypes • A gender-equitable representation of objective and opinion-based content presented is important to ensure that professionalism and credibility are not perceived to be gender-specific

(*continued on next page*)

Table 1 (*continued*)

Category	Result	Implication
Gender-stereotypical traits	• Half of the figures were depicted in a gender-neutral manner • Women more likely to be presented with stereotypically feminine traits but men and women equally likely to be depicted with stereotypically masculine traits	• Gender stereotypes are reinforced when specific traits continue to be portrayed with specific genders • Breaking with the distinction between femininity and masculinity is central to gender equity

2001). Although we expected female subjects to employ more indirect gaze and be shown in long shots, that was not the case, and companies should continue this trend.

7.3. Representation via ethnicity, argument, location, and role

Companies should facilitate diverse representations of ethnicities, including Black/African American, Asian, and Latino/Hispanic, and broaden the repertoire to include American Indian, Alaska Native, Middle Eastern/Arab, and others. While we found that user engagement might be highest for gender depictions across Black/African American and Latino/Hispanic ethnicities, it is important to broaden the diversity palette so companies can contribute to the creation of diverse and inclusive workplaces and societies (Eisend et al., 2023; Viglia et al., 2023). Further, on social media, companies should buck the trend in advertising to depict women and men stereotypically when it comes to the argument/viewpoint, location, and role (Furnham & Lay, 2019; Khalil & Dhanesh, 2020) and continue to represent individuals across genders equally by offering nonfactual opinions and expert advice based on factual/scientific knowledge. Companies must continue depicting individuals in diverse locations/contexts without reinforcing outdated stereotypical depictions of women at home and men at work, showing individuals in various roles (e.g., caregiving and providing) irrespective of gender.

8. Don'ts

In Section 8, we include a list of pitfalls to avoid while navigating gendered communication on social media.

8.1. Perpetuating gendered stereotypes

Companies should not associate men and women with stereotypically gendered topics, depicting women dealing with soft issues (e.g., corporate social responsibility, women empowerment, and support of racial minorities) and men with hard issues (e.g., climate change, financials, and technology). The roles of individuals in contemporary US societies have been changing, and companies can realistically reflect these changes by portraying individuals discussing a diverse range of topics irrespective of gender.

Table 2. Recommendations with actions/examples

Recommendations	Actions/Examples
Salience: Continue to portray women prominently in social media posts.	Use visual compositional aspects such as size, color contrasts, and tonal contrasts to make the character stand out in the image/video.
Gaze and distance: Continue to portray no differences in how different genders engage the viewers via their direct gaze and distance from the viewer.	Depict individuals who engage the viewers through gaze and distance depending on the storyline and not the gender. For example, a man thinking aloud might look away from the viewer, while a woman making a point might stare directly at the viewer.
Ethnicity: Continue to portray gender across diverse ethnicities.	Increase representation of various ethnicities in social media posts. Examples can include the increased representation of American Indians, Native Americans, and Muslims/Arabs across genders.
Argument: Continue equally representing individuals across genders by offering nonfactual opinions and expert advice based on factual/scientific knowledge.	Show a range of individuals offering opinions vs. expert advice. Examples can include women offering expert scientific advice on environmentally conscious behavior and men offering personal opinions on recycling.
Location/ Context: Continue with gender-neutral depictions of location/context.	Show individuals in diverse locations/contexts. For example, do gender-neutral depictions of individuals in a diverse range of contexts, including the workplace, home, entertainment locations, and self-care locations such as the gym, spa, etc.
Role: Continue portraying individuals in diverse roles, irrespective of gender.	Do gender-neutral depictions of corporate leaders, sports teams and individual athletes, scientists leading labs, cardiothoracic surgeons, parents, siblings, and friends, irrespective of gender.
Gender stereotypical topics: Don't associate men and women with gender stereotypical topics.	Portray individuals discussing a diverse range of topics irrespective of gender. Examples include women discussing innovative technology use at companies and men discussing a company's engagement in social issues such as women empowerment.
Background: Don't reinforce stereotypical depictions of the main character's gender, matching the gender of those in the background.	Unless the message absolutely requires matching the gender of the main character with the gender of the people in the background, diversify background depictions irrespective of the gender of the main character. Examples can include a transgender individual as the main character with a group of mixed-gender people in the background.
Age: Don't depict young people as women and more mature, older people as men.	Depict all genders across a range of ages. For example, increase depictions of elderly individuals and young people across genders engaging in their day-to-day activities. Examples could include an elderly woman depicted as an employee sharing insights about working at a sustainable or innovative company and a young man volunteering at a community event.
Trait gender stereotypes: Don't associate men almost exclusively with stereotypically masculine traits.	Individuals can be depicted with a wide range of personality traits, regardless of gender. Examples would include warm, caring, strong, and competent individuals. How about a strong, competent woman leader and a warm and supportive colleague?
Gender expression: Don't persist with depictions of gender binaries.	Start exploring portrayals of nonbinary gender identities across the LGBTQIA+ spectrum.

8.2. Representation via background, age, trait, and expression

Companies should not reinforce stereotypical depictions by matching the main character's gender with the gender of those in the background. Unless required by the message (e.g., when depicting a woman-only club or a man-only club), it is important to diversify background depictions irrespective of the gender of the main character. Further, companies should stop depicting young people as women and more mature and older people as men because such portrayals can further reinforce negative attitudes toward older women workers (Durante & Rittweger, 2021; Grau & Zotos, 2016) and young females. They could be perceived as less credible and trustworthy compared to older males, as age predicts the perceived credibility of a communicator (Winter et al., 2010). Companies should avoid this stereotypical trap and depict gender across a range of ages to combat the intersectionality of ageism and sexism. In addition, companies must stop associating men and women exclusively with stereotypically masculine and feminine traits (Fiske et al., 2002; Getchell & Beitelspacher, 2020). Irrespective of gender, individuals can be depicted as competitive, strong, tough, ambitious, competent, caring, sympathetic, compassionate, and empathetic. Finally, companies should not perpetuate the gender binary and start exploring portrayals of nonbinary gender identities across the LGBTQIA+ spectrum to reflect ongoing changes in contemporary US society (Viglia et al., 2023) and create space for a more open, accepting, and inclusive society. See Table 2 for a suggested list of actions and examples for each recommendation.

9. Closing remarks

This study on gender representations in corporate social media posts and their effects on user engagement has augmented nascent research and generated evidence-based recommendations for communication practitioners who manage corporate social media. We found that corporate social media posts seem to conduct more diverse and inclusive gender representations than has historically been the case with advertising. Our recommendations can help companies ensure gender equity in business and society by addressing gender representations on social media. Although companies do not seem to "Dream Crazier" on Instagram with attention-grabbing content as in advertising, they do seem to be making major strides in tackling gendered representations in social media. As whisky brand Johnny Walker's mantra says, "Keep Walking" to create a more gender-equal world.

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