

Not actually bad at math or auto repair? Women fear being stereotyped by male service providers

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Women prefer female service providers in situations where they might fall prey to stereotypes about their math and science abilities, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"One of the most widely held stereotypes in North America is that women's competence and aptitude in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) domains is less than men's," write authors Kyoungmi Lee (Yonsei University, Korea), Hakkyun Kim (Concordia University, Canada), and Kathleen Vohs (University of Minnesota).

In their study, the authors demonstrate that [stereotypes](#) about women's STEM abilities shape women's [consumer behavior](#). In particular, women shun situations in which they fear they will be the brunt of the stereotype, especially those that involve male [service providers](#) in transactions that call for STEM abilities.

For example, when women want advice on investments or on buying a car they may wonder if they will receive unfair treatment or become an easy target for manipulation. The authors demonstrated that female consumers who are reminded of their [gender identity](#) expressed lower intentions to purchase service from firms that advertised themselves with male service providers. This pattern occurred for a tax firm that touted its service with male investment advisors and also in automobile repair and purchases.

"When the threat of being stereotyped is in the air, consumers become anxious when they contemplate transacting with outgroup vs. ingroup service providers if they are reminded of the negative gender stereotype in the STEM domains," the authors write. "A rise in consumer anxiety, in turn, is the very driving force behind women's disinterest in transacting with male service providers or salespersons."

The research also led to an interesting way to reduce the anxiety related to the stereotype: vanilla scent. "In a vanilla-scented environment, the effect of possibly being stereotyped seemingly does not alter female consumers' intentions to transact with firms, even when the firms promoted themselves using male salespersons," the authors write.

More information: Kyoungmi Lee, Hakkyun Kim, and Kathleen Vohs. "Stereotypes Threat in the Marketplace: Consumer Anxiety and Purchase Intentions." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2011. Further information: ejcr.org

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