

# Online shoppers behave differently after chatting with staff of the opposite gender, research shows

June 4 2024, by Yoonseock Son, Angela Aerry Choi, Corey Angst and Kaitlin Wowak

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In a digital world where people are mere pixels on a screen, gender bias can show up in unexpected forms. That's what our research team found in a field experiment published in [the \*Journal of Operations Management\*](#)

When people are online, anonymity and physical detachment embolden them to behave in biased ways, [previous work](#) has shown. As professors who study [business analytics](#), [information systems](#), [operations management](#) and [information technology](#), we wanted to better understand how gender bias works in online environments. So we conducted a seven-month experiment with an [online platform](#) that offers health-related products and services.

The firm, which is based in South Korea and requested its identity not be disclosed, sells weight-management products designed to be consumed over several weeks. It also provides customized dietary advice for users based on age, weight, height, lifestyle and other characteristics, and offers one-on-one consulting services to answer clients' questions.

We zeroed in on the platform's chat feature, which pairs users with paid on-staff advisers who respond to their questions and recommend suitable products. After their exchanges, users can rate the consultants.

We found that revealing a consultant's gender leads clients to leave more reviews and higher ratings, particularly when the consultant is female. What's more, pairing a client and consultant of opposite genders resulted in higher ratings and increased engagement compared with same-gender pairings.

## **Why it matters**

Researchers have extensively studied gender bias among employers, but bias exhibited by customers is more often overlooked. Our study

ventures into this less-traveled territory.

While understanding that gender bias is important for basic principles of equality and fairness, it also matters for business reasons. In the [service sector](#), where employee-customer interactions are key to success, biases can affect [customer satisfaction](#) and, ultimately, the bottom line. The stakes are especially high for online platforms, where matching the right service with the right user is crucial.

When gender influences purchasing decisions, it's not just a social issue—it's a financial one. Companies that successfully mitigate these biases can boost their profits while tapping into the full potential of their customer base. And understanding those biases is the first step toward addressing them.

## **What still isn't known**

Our research suggests that businesses can improve client satisfaction by acknowledging gender biases. To help businesses understand and respond to bias, researchers can pursue several key avenues. For instance, the mechanisms behind gender biases are not fully understood. It's important to explore why clients may respond more favorably to consultants of the opposite [gender](#) and to identify the psychological and social factors at play.

Researchers should also explore racial, cultural and age-related biases, among others. Future studies could investigate how these biases interact with one another and what combined mitigation strategies might be effective.

While the [digital revolution](#) has transformed the way Americans do business, it has also created new challenges. One thing is clear: In the digital era, tackling [bias](#) isn't just a moral imperative. It's a business

necessity.

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