

MINDFULNESS AND STEREOTYPE THREAT IN SOCIAL MEDIA: UNEXPECTED EFFECTS FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP ASPIRATIONS

RESEARCH
THAT HAS
IMPACT
SERIES

The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions has been a point of concern for quite some time. While scholars have shown that stereotype threat—which refers to concerns about confirming or being reduced to a negative stereotype about one's group—negatively impacts leadership aspirations among women, most work on this topic has been confined to examining stereotype threat as elicited by advertisements in print and television.

However, social media has rapidly displaced print and television as people's main source of news, information, and entertainment, with younger users spending an average of 6.63 hours per day on these sites. Recognizing this shift in media consumption, Dr. Erica Carleton and Dr. Amanda Hancock from the Hill and Levene Schools of Business partnered with Drs. Megan Walsh and Kara Arnold to explore whether advertising on social media platforms evokes stereotype threat in a similar manner, and whether mindfulness can help women overcome its negative effects on their confidence in themselves as leaders and their aspirations towards leadership positions.

To do so, they conducted a study wherein 144 women were shown a fictional Facebook newsfeed featuring gender-neutral and feminine-stereotyped advertisements.

The women in the control group were exclusively shown gender-neutral advertisements, while the women in the experimental group were shown a mixture of feminine-stereotyped and neutral ads. Before viewing the newsfeed, participants completed a series of questions designed to gather demographic information and measure their trait levels, including mindfulness. After viewing the newsfeeds, the participants were asked to complete a series of questions assessing their confidence in themselves as leaders and their leadership aspirations.

As expected, the women in the experimental group were less likely to view themselves as competent leaders or aspire to leadership positions. Interestingly, the findings confirmed that mindfulness influenced the relationship between stereotype threat and the participants' confidence in their leadership abilities, however not in the expected way.

Here, the results revealed that high levels of mindfulness actually increased the negative effects of stereotype threat on the participants' confidence in their leadership abilities and, consequently, their desire to be a leader; that is, participants with higher levels of mindfulness reported lower levels of confidence in their leadership abilities when confronted with stereotype threat, which in turn resulted in lower leadership aspirations.

Whereas prior research has focused on explanations such as “leaning out” of one's career to care for their family or simply lower inherent interest in leadership positions, Drs. Carleton, Hancock and their colleagues' findings show that stereotype threat evoked by advertising in social media may be a key factor contributing to lower leadership ambitions among women. This has implications for advertisers, as it should motivate them to consider how their content—particularly gendered imaging—may be affecting the aspirations of young women.

Given the unexpected nature of their findings, the researchers recommend further research into the role of mindfulness in the relationship between stereotype threat and leadership aspirations among women. For instance, it's possible that mindfulness makes women more sensitive to the negative cues produced by stereotype threat, which can in turn undermine their confidence in their leadership abilities and discourage them from seeking leadership positions. If this is the case, then it may be more effective to emphasize approaches at work that are aimed at reducing stereotype threat rather than enhancing mindfulness when developing interventions aimed at fostering leadership aspirations in women. These approaches can be things as simple as ensuring women are not sole members of an all-male team or using more inclusive language.



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