






Psychological Perception of Social Marketing from the Perspective of Women and Men



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Abstract – Social marketing uses marketing principles to promote voluntary behavior for social good, yet campaign effects often vary across audience segments. This paper synthesizes secondary evidence on gender-patterned psychological perception of social marketing, focusing on cognitive appraisal, affective response, and motivational resistance. A structured narrative review combined peer-reviewed syntheses on risk perception, risk-taking, empathy, tailoring, and fear appeals (Ajzen, 1991; Gustafson, 1998; Byrnes et al., 1999; Witte, 1992; Noar et al., 2007) with openly available indicators from the World Health Organization and the European Commission. Public data highlight domains with marked gender gaps in exposure: males are typically about three times more likely to die in road crashes globally (WHO, 2023), and tobacco use in the WHO European Region is projected to remain higher among men than women in 2025 (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2025). Eurobarometer results show that men are more often well informed about climate change, while women are more often uncertain, suggesting different routes from information to intention (European Commission, 2008). Across sources, women tend to report higher perceived risk and stronger care-oriented concern. In contrast, men more often combine higher confidence with greater risk normalization, which can increase resistance to controlling messages (Brehm, 1966). The synthesis suggests that gender-aware social marketing should prioritize mechanism-based segmentation across priority domains, pair threat content with clear, doable efficacy steps, and use autonomy-supportive framing while avoiding stereotypes (iSMA, ESMA & AASM, 2013). Limitations include binary gender reporting and contextual variability; future work should test these mechanisms experimentally and intersectionally.

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Percepção Psicológica do Marketing Social: Diferenças de Gênero

Resumo – O marketing social utiliza princípios de marketing para promover comportamentos voluntários no bem social, mas os efeitos da campanha variam frequentemente entre os segmentos de público. Este artigo sintetiza evidências secundárias sobre a percepção psicológica do marketing social baseada no gênero, concentrando-se na avaliação cognitiva, na resposta afetiva e na resistência motivacional. Uma revisão narrativa estruturada combinou sínteses revisadas por pares sobre percepção de risco, assunção de riscos, empatia, adaptação e apelos ao medo (Ajzen, 1991; Gustafson, 1998; Byrnes et al., 1999; Witte, 1992; Noar et al., 2007) com indicadores abertos da Organização Mundial da Saúde e da Comissão Europeia. Os dados públicos destacam domínios com acentuadas disparidades de gênero na exposição: os homens têm normalmente cerca de três vezes mais probabilidades de morrer em acidentes rodoviários a nível mundial (OMS, 2023), e prevê-se que o consumo de tabaco na Região Europeia da OMS permaneça mais elevado entre os homens do que entre as mulheres em 2025 (Escritório Regional da OMS para a Europa, 2025). Os resultados do Eurobarómetro mostram que os homens estão mais frequentemente bem informados sobre as alterações climáticas, enquanto as mulheres estão mais frequentemente inseguras, sugerindo caminhos distintos entre a informação e a intenção (Comissão Europeia, 2008). Em todas as fontes, as mulheres tendem a relatar maior risco percebido e maior preocupação com os cuidados. Em contraste, os homens combinam mais frequentemente uma maior confiança com uma maior normalização do risco, o que pode aumentar a resistência às mensagens de controlo (Brehm, 1966). A síntese sugere que o marketing social consciente do gênero deve dar prioridade à segmentação baseada em mecanismos em domínios prioritários, combinar o conteúdo da ameaça com passos de eficácia claros e exequíveis e utilizar um enquadramento que apoie a autonomia, evitando, ao mesmo tempo, estereótipos (iSMA, ESMA & AASM, 2013). As limitações incluem relatórios binários de gênero e variabilidade contextual; trabalhos futuros deverão testar esses mecanismos experimentalmente e interseccionalmente.

Palavras-chave: Adaptação de mensagens. Diferenças de gênero. Marketing social. Percepção de risco. Reatância psicológica.

Percepción psicológica del marketing social: diferencias de género

Resumen – El marketing social utiliza principios de marketing para promover comportamientos voluntarios en el bien social, pero los efectos de las campañas varían frecuentemente entre los segmentos de público. Este artículo sintetiza evidencias secundarias sobre la percepción psicológica del marketing social basada en el género, concentrándose en la evaluación cognitiva, la respuesta afectiva y la resistencia motivacional. Una revisión narrativa estructurada combinó síntesis revisadas por pares sobre percepción de riesgo, asunción de riesgos, empatía, adaptación y apelaciones al miedo (Ajzen, 1991; Gustafson, 1998; Byrnes et al., 1999; Witte, 1992; Noar et al., 2007) con indicadores abiertos de la Organización Mundial de la Salud y la Comisión Europea. Los datos públicos destacan dominios con acentuadas disparidades de género en la exposición: los hombres suelen tener aproximadamente tres veces más probabilidades de morir en accidentes de tránsito a

nivel mundial (OMS, 2023), y se prevé que el consumo de tabaco en la Región Europea de la OMS permanezca más elevado entre los hombres que entre las mujeres en 2025 (Oficina Regional de la OMS para Europa, 2025). Los resultados del Eurobarómetro muestran que los hombres suelen estar mejor informados sobre el cambio climático, mientras que las mujeres suelen estar más inseguras, lo que sugiere diferencias en el recorrido desde la información hasta la intención (Comisión Europea, 2008). En todas las fuentes, las mujeres tienden a reportar un mayor riesgo percibido y una mayor preocupación por el cuidado. En contraparte, los hombres suelen asociar una mayor confianza con una mayor normalización del riesgo, lo que puede aumentar la resistencia a los mensajes de control (Brehm, 1966). La síntesis sugiere que el marketing social con conciencia de género debe dar prioridad a la segmentación basada en mecanismos en dominios prioritarios, combinar el contenido de la amenaza con pasos de eficacia claros y ejecutables, y utilizar un marco que apoye la autonomía evitando al mismo tiempo los estereotipos (iSMA, ESMA y AASM, 2013). Las limitaciones incluyen informes binarios de género y de variabilidad contextual; los trabajos futuros deberán probar estos mecanismos de forma experimental e interseccional.

Palabras clave: Diferencias de género. Encuadre de mensajes. Marketing social. Percepción del riesgo. Reactancia psicológica.

Introduction

Social marketing applies marketing concepts to influence voluntary behaviour for social good, not merely to "raise awareness" (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971; Andreasen, 1994). Global practice also emphasises ethics, evidence, and segmentation to design programmes that are effective and equitable (iSMA, ESMA & AASM, 2013). Yet campaigns still assume a "generic public", overlooking how people psychologically interpret social messages through gendered experiences, roles, and norms.

This paper focuses on psychological perception—how audiences notice, appraise, and emotionally respond to social marketing—and asks what differs for women and men. Behaviour models highlight perceived risk, norms and perceived control (Ajzen, 1991), while fear-appeal research shows that perceived threat and efficacy shape whether people act or defensively avoid the message (Witte, 1992). Evidence from risk research suggests systematic gender differences in perceived vulnerability and risk appraisal (Gustafson, 1998), which can translate into distinct reactions to the same campaign stimulus.

In a digital media mix, messages also arrive as short videos, labels, or personalised prompts. Tailoring can outperform one-size-fits-all communication (Noar et al., 2007; Krebs et al., 2010), but only if segmentation reflects real mechanisms rather than stereotypes. Climate-related social marketing is another example: surveys show men tend to rate their climate knowledge higher, while women often report greater concern and more everyday action (European Commission, 2009; EIGE, 2019). This paper aims to synthesise openly available evidence on how women and men perceive social marketing messages psychologically.

Literature review

Social marketing scholarship defines the field by its purpose (social good) and its reliance on research-driven programme design and audience segmentation (Andreasen, 1994; iSMA, ESMA & AASM, 2013). In practice, segmentation often uses demographics as proxies for deeper determinants (values, motives, capabilities).

Gender is relevant because it intersects with social roles, exposure to risks, and norms about "appropriate" emotions and behaviours (Gustafson, 1998).

Many interventions draw on intention-based models. The Theory of Planned Behaviour links behaviour to attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). Risk-communication traditions add that perceptions of severity, vulnerability, and coping efficacy shape whether fear-based messages promote "danger control" (adaptive action) or "fear control" (avoidance, denial) (Rogers, 1975; Witte, 1992). Gender differences in risk appraisal are repeatedly observed, with women more often judging hazards as more likely or more consequential (Gustafson, 1998; Harris et al., 2006; Vartiak, 2017; Brown et al., 2021). Meta-analytic evidence also shows men engage in higher levels of risk-taking across most behavioural domains, including health-related risks (Byrnes et al., 1999).

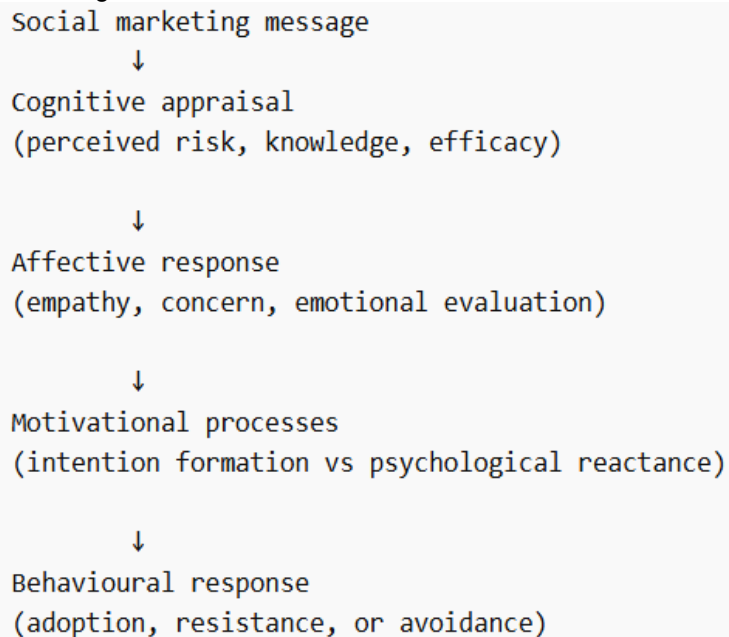
Affective processing is another pathway. Empathy supports prosocial motivation and receptiveness to harm-prevention appeals; a major review reports small but consistent sex/gender differences in empathy-related measures, while also stressing cultural role expectations (Christov-Moore et al., 2014). In environmental psychology, a cross-national synthesis finds women display slightly stronger pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours (Zelezny et al., 2000). Policy evidence likewise reports higher climate concern among women in OECD countries (OECD, 2025). Eurobarometer analyses also suggest that men are more often well informed about climate change, whereas women are slightly more likely to express concern and to engage in everyday pro-environment actions (European Commission, 2009; EIGE, 2019).

Message design research suggests gender can moderate persuasive effects. Studies of gain- versus loss-framing report context-dependent moderation, with different patterns for women and men across health domains (Unger et al., 2020). At the same time, overly controlling or moralising messages can elicit psychological reactance—an anger-and-resistance response to perceived threats to freedom (Sieverding et al., 2019; Jaseckova, Konvit & Vartiak, 2022). Recent meta-analytic evidence further demonstrates that psychological reactance plays a central role in moderating the effectiveness of health communication, particularly when messages are perceived as threatening individual autonomy (Reynolds-Tylus – Quick, 2021). Because masculinity norms can reward autonomy and toughness, some male audiences may be especially sensitive to "don't do X" directives.

Finally, personalisation offers a bridge between theory and delivery. Meta-analyses of tailored health communication show a small but reliable advantage over generic materials (Noar et al., 2007; Krebs et al., 2010). Recent developments in digital health communication reinforce these findings, highlighting the growing importance of personalised and adaptive messaging strategies in influencing behavioural outcomes (Noar & Harrington, 2020). Gender-aware tailoring, however, must avoid essentialism: observed averages do not describe individuals and often depend on context (Gustafson, 1998).

This paper contributes to social marketing theory by integrating gender-differentiated evidence from risk perception, affective processing, and motivational resistance into a unified mechanism-based framework. Rather than treating gender as a purely demographic segmentation variable, the study conceptualizes gender as a psychological moderator operating across cognitive appraisal (perceived risk and efficacy), affective response (empathy and concern), and motivational reactions (intention and reactance). The conceptual relationships between these psychological layers and behavioural outcomes in social marketing are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Mechanism-based framework of gender-differentiated psychological processing in social marketing



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Ajzen (1991), Rogers (1975), Witte (1992), and Brehm (1966).

By linking these layers to established behavioural theories (TPB, Protection Motivation Theory, and Reactance Theory), the paper advances a structured explanation of why identical social marketing messages may generate systematically different pathways to action among women and men. This mechanism-oriented perspective moves beyond descriptive gender differences and provides a theoretically grounded basis for segmentation and message design.

Materials and methods

This study adopts a semi-systematic literature review design, combining structured search procedures with narrative synthesis to integrate interdisciplinary evidence on gender-differentiated psychological perception in social marketing.

Search strategy and data sources

Two complementary streams of data collection were employed.

First, peer-reviewed literature was identified through targeted searches in major academic databases, including PubMed/PMC, Scopus, and Web of Science, as well as publisher repositories (e.g. Elsevier, Springer). The search covered the period 1990–2025, reflecting the development of social marketing and behavioural theories.

Search queries combined key terms such as:

- “social marketing” AND “gender differences”
- “risk perception” AND “sex differences”
- “psychological reactance” AND “health communication”
- “message tailoring” AND “gender”

Second, gender-disaggregated indicators were collected from authoritative institutional sources, including the World Health Organization (WHO) and the European Commission (Eurobarometer surveys and EIGE reports). These sources were selected due to their methodological transparency, comparability across countries, and relevance to key social marketing domains (health, safety, environment).

These domains were selected because they represent major areas of social marketing practice with widely available gender-disaggregated public data and well-documented behavioural risks.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

To ensure analytical consistency, the following inclusion criteria were applied:

- peer-reviewed journal articles or institutional reports
- explicit focus on gender/sex differences
- relevance to psychological mechanisms (risk perception, affect, motivation, or behavioural response)
- publication in English
- availability of full text.

Priority was given to systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and high-impact empirical studies, ensuring theoretical robustness.

Exclusion criteria included:

- purely descriptive studies without psychological interpretation
- studies lacking gender-disaggregated data
- non-academic or non-verifiable sources

Study selection process

Following eligibility assessment, a total of 38 sources were included in the final synthesis, comprising meta-analyses, theoretical frameworks, and institutional datasets.

To enhance transparency and reproducibility, the study selection process followed a structured sequence aligned with PRISMA stages. Initially, 142 records were identified through database and repository searches. After removing duplicates ($n = 27$), 115 records remained for title and abstract screening. Of these, 63 were excluded based on relevance criteria. The remaining 52 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, resulting in the inclusion of 38 sources in the final analysis.

The flow of records across these stages is summarized in Figure 2 (PRISMA diagram).

Data extraction and synthesis

Data were extracted and coded according to three analytical layers:

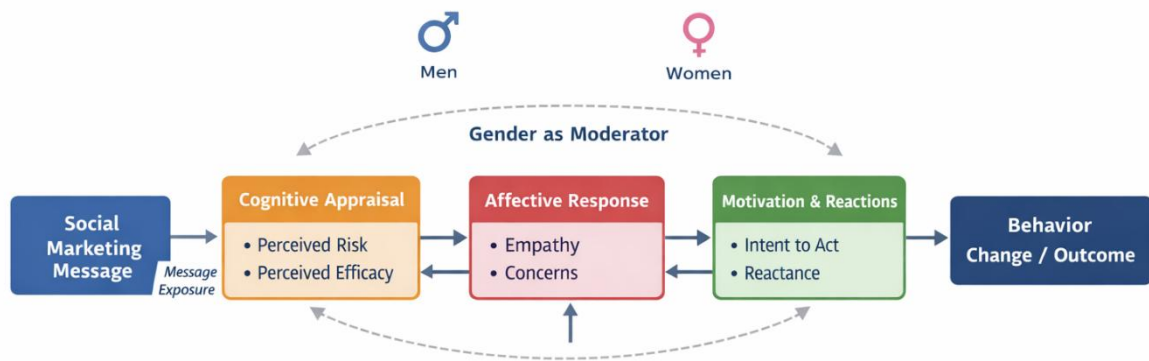
- Cognitive appraisal (knowledge, perceived risk, perceived efficacy)
- Affective response (empathy, concern, emotional engagement)
- Motivational processes (behavioural intention, autonomy, psychological reactance)

A narrative synthesis approach was used to compare findings across studies and domains. Rather than estimating effect sizes, the analysis focused on identifying consistent patterns and mechanisms explaining gender-differentiated responses to social marketing messages.

Limitations of the method

Given the semi-systematic nature of the review, the synthesis is interpretative and does not aim to establish causal relationships. Additionally, many included datasets rely on binary gender classification, limiting intersectional analysis. Variability in study designs and contexts may also affect comparability.

Figure 2 – PRISMA flow diagram of the structured secondary review process.



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Results and discussion

Figure 3 provides visual summaries of gender-disaggregated indicators across key social marketing domains. The secondary synthesis combined public indicators (WHO and Eurobarometer) with meta-analytic evidence to describe gender-patterned psychological processing of social marketing in practice. Three domains provided comparable gender-disaggregated indicators: transport safety, tobacco control, and climate communication.

In road safety, global data indicate that approximately 1.19 million people die annually in road traffic crashes, with males being about three times more likely to be killed than females (WHO, 2023; Kovalova & Vartiak, 2024). These patterns are consistent with broader global health estimates indicating persistent gender differences in mortality and exposure to behavioural risk factors (WHO, 2022). A broader WHO injury profile further shows that nearly three-quarters of all road traffic deaths occur among men (WHO, 2024).

This pronounced gender disparity suggests not only differences in exposure but also in risk-related behavioural patterns and perception mechanisms. While higher male mortality reflects greater engagement in risk-taking activities, it may also indicate a tendency to normalize hazardous behaviour, thereby reducing perceived vulnerability.

This pattern indicates a systematic behavioural mechanism, whereby repeated exposure to risk normalizes hazardous behaviour among male populations, reducing perceived vulnerability and weakening responsiveness to threat-based communication.

From a social marketing perspective, these findings imply that road safety campaigns targeting male audiences should go beyond highlighting statistical risk. Instead, they should emphasize personal relevance, immediate consequences, and actionable behavioural alternatives, while avoiding overly directive messaging that may trigger psychological reactance (Rogers, 1975; Witte, 1992). Recent studies in injury prevention also highlight that gender differences in road safety outcomes are linked to behavioural patterns such as speeding, alcohol consumption, and lower compliance with safety measures among men (WHO, 2023; OECD, 2022).

In tobacco control, WHO data indicate a substantially higher projected prevalence among men (30.6%) compared to women (18.2%) in the European Region, alongside a markedly higher share of tobacco-attributable mortality among men (WHO, 2025). This disparity highlights a critical distinction between objective risk exposure and subjective risk perception. While men face significantly higher health risks, these behaviours may also be more socially normalized, potentially reducing perceived vulnerability and weakening motivation to change.

This interpretation is consistent with broader evidence showing that men, on average, engage in higher levels of risk-taking behaviour across health domains (Byrnes et al., 1999), and may be less responsive to risk-based messaging unless personal susceptibility is clearly emphasized.

From a communication perspective, these findings suggest that tobacco-related social marketing campaigns targeting male audiences should not rely solely on statistical risk information. Instead, they should combine risk communication with clear efficacy cues and actionable steps, as well as framing strategies that reinforce autonomy rather than impose behavioural control, thereby reducing potential psychological reactance (Rogers, 1975; Witte, 1992). Recent research further suggests that gender differences in tobacco use are shaped by both social norms and perceived behavioural control, with male smoking behaviour more strongly associated with risk normalization and identity-related factors (WHO, 2021; West et al., 2020).

Eurobarometer data indicate that men more frequently report being “well informed” about climate change across multiple dimensions, including its causes, consequences, and mitigation strategies (European Commission, 2008). In contrast, women more often express uncertainty, as reflected in higher rates of “don’t know” responses.

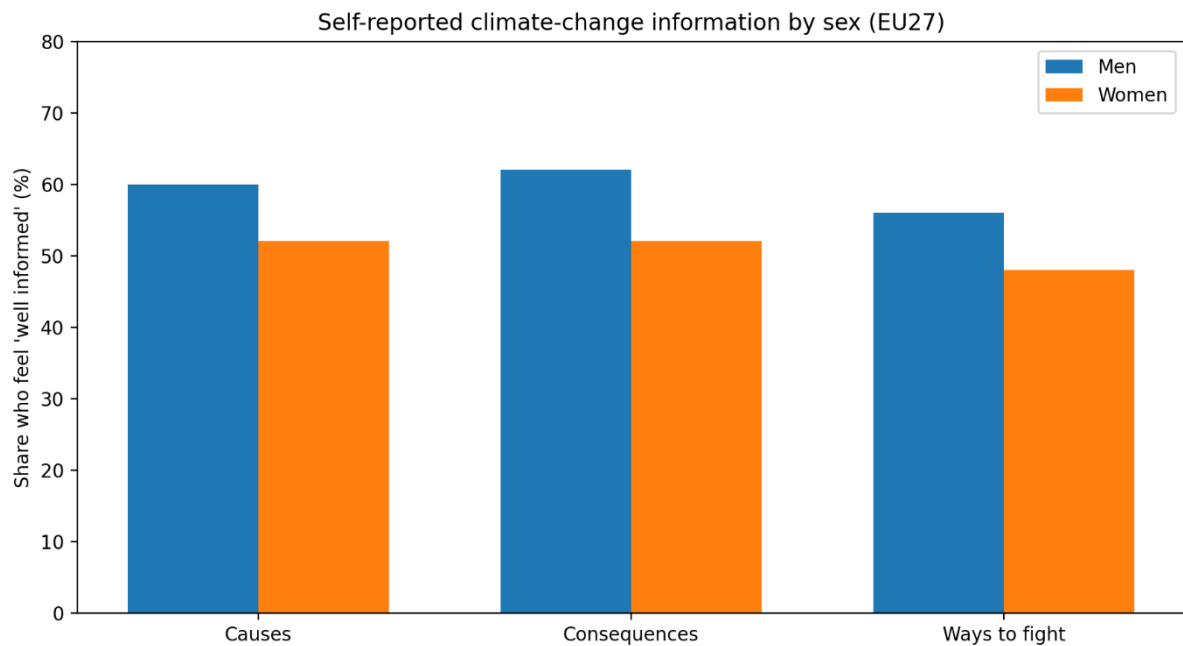
This pattern indicates a divergence between cognitive appraisal and behavioural intention, suggesting that information alone is insufficient to drive engagement without accompanying efficacy and identity-relevant cues.

Indeed, this finding aligns with broader evidence indicating that women tend to express stronger concern and greater willingness to adopt everyday pro-environmental behaviours (Zelezny et al., 2000; OECD, 2025). Taken together, these results point to divergent pathways to action, where men may rely more on perceived knowledge and autonomy, while women’s responses are more closely linked to affective concern and perceived responsibility.

From a social marketing perspective, this implies that purely informational campaigns may increase awareness without necessarily strengthening behavioural intention, particularly among male audiences. Instead, combining information with efficacy cues and identity-compatible framing may be more effective in bridging the gap between knowledge and action (Ajzen, 1991; Witte, 1992). Recent policy-oriented analyses further emphasize the need for gender-sensitive communication strategies in addressing climate change, as behavioural responses are shaped not only by knowledge but also by perceived responsibility and social roles (OECD, 2021b).

Recent empirical studies confirm that gender differences in climate-related attitudes are associated not only with knowledge levels but also with differences in perceived responsibility and behavioural engagement, with women more likely to adopt pro-environmental behaviours despite lower self-reported confidence (Xiao & McCright, 2015; Vicente-Molina et al., 2018; OECD, 2021a).

Figure 3 – Self-reported climate-change information by sex (EU27)



Source: European Commission (2008)

Risk research reviews indicate systematic gender differences in risk perception across hazards (Gustafson, 1998), and a meta-analysis finds men, on average, engage in more risk-taking across most domains (Byrnes et al., 1999). Recent research confirms that these gender differences in risk perception remain stable across multiple domains and have important implications for the design of targeted risk communication strategies (Gustafson – Riley, 2022). Empathy reviews report small but consistent gender effects alongside strong cultural shaping (Christov-Moore et al., 2014). Some male audiences may show reactance to controlling admonitions; experimentally, young men displayed reactance when urged to drink less depending on the messenger (Sieverding et al., 2019). Tailored communication outperforms generic materials in meta-analyses (Noar et al., 2007), supporting gender-aware, mechanism-based tailoring.

Overall, the most robust difference was the route to action: women tended to pair concern with readiness for everyday action, whereas men more often combined confidence with scepticism. Effective social marketing, therefore, pairs any threat with clear, doable steps, uses autonomy-supportive language, and pretests gendered interpretations to avoid stereotypes (Witte, 1992; iSMA, ESMA & AASM, 2013).

It is important to acknowledge that much of the institutional evidence presented here relies on aggregate, population-level indicators, which limit individual-level inference. Observed gender differences in mortality, prevalence, or self-reported knowledge do not necessarily imply uniform psychological mechanisms within each group, raising the possibility of ecological inference bias. Furthermore, many publicly available datasets continue to rely on binary gender classifications, which do not capture non-binary identities or the complexity of gendered experiences across cultural contexts. The magnitude and direction of gender-patterned effects may therefore vary across societies with different normative expectations and institutional structures. These limitations reinforce the need for context-sensitive and intersectional empirical testing.

Conclusion

This study synthesized meta-analytic evidence and institutional data to examine gender differences in the psychological perception of social marketing. Across key domains, the findings indicate that men often face higher objective risks (e.g. road safety and tobacco use), yet may normalize these risks, while women tend to report higher perceived risk and stronger concern.

These patterns suggest distinct psychological pathways to behaviour. Women are more likely to respond through affective concern and perceived vulnerability, whereas men may be more sensitive to autonomy, confidence, and identity-related cues.

From a practical perspective, effective social marketing should therefore prioritize mechanism-based segmentation rather than demographic generalizations. Campaigns should combine risk communication with clear and actionable efficacy cues, while using autonomy-supportive framing to minimize psychological reactance.

Future research should test these mechanisms experimentally and extend the analysis beyond binary gender categories, incorporating intersectional factors such as age, education, and cultural context. These findings also highlight the increasing importance of integrating gender-sensitive approaches into evidence-based policy and communication strategies in contemporary social marketing practice.

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