

RAPP 

Gender Matters

How understanding gender leads
to improved customer experiences

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Executive Summary

At RAPP, we believe in standing up for individuality.

That means we look for what data can tell us about individuals, so that we develop the customer journeys that serve them best and deliver optimum outcomes for brands. It is our responsibility as marketers to ensure every individual gets the customer experience they deserve. So we look for the neglected and underserved audiences within client data to unlock value.

Primary research is an integral part of knowing what to look for and finding innovative solutions. It can help us understand consumer pain points, and reveal countless intersectional identities that can help brands connect more successfully with their consumers.

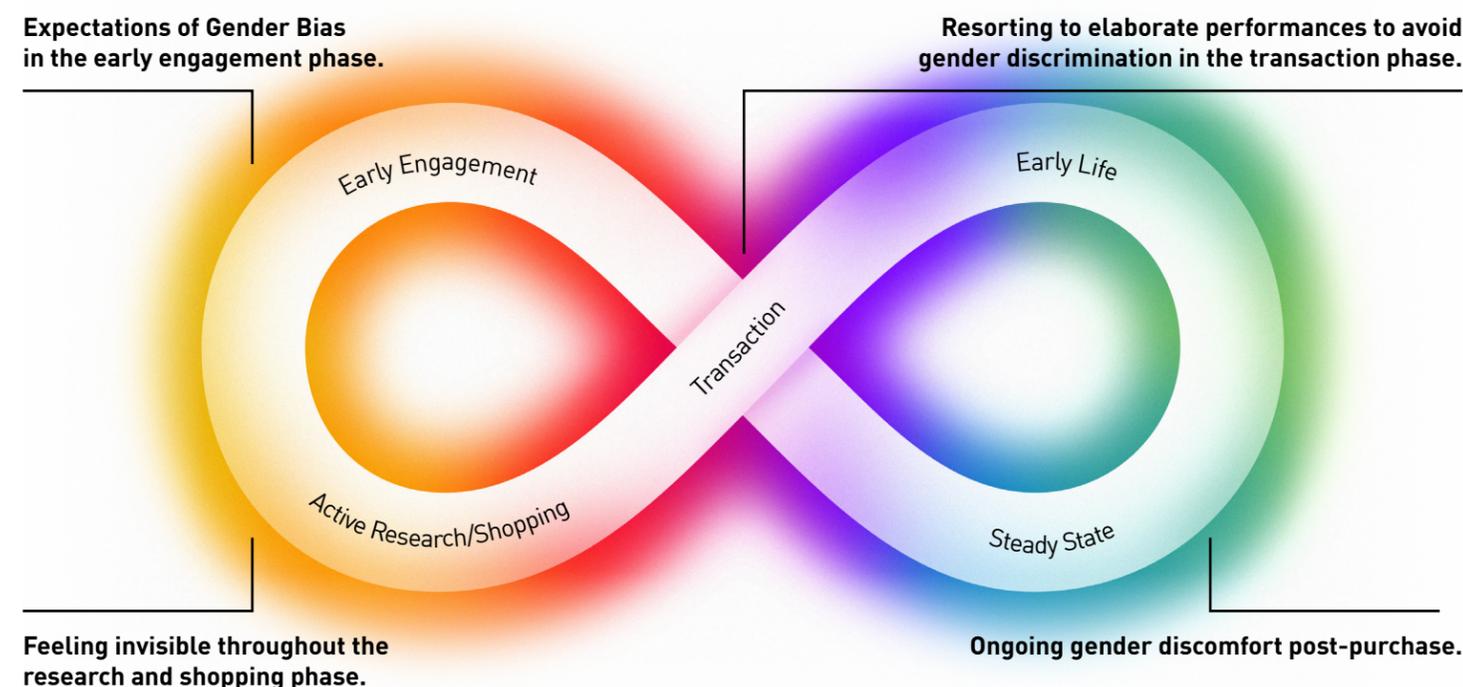
In our latest primary research, we almost overlooked gender as a lens through which to investigate customer dissatisfaction. It seems a bit obvious, doesn't it? Everyone has a gender identity, and the wealth of research and information related to gender in the workplace can make it seem like there is no new ground to mine. Upon further investigation, however, we discovered that gender in marketing and communication is discussed relatively infrequently. This could be, in part, because gender has been politicized in the media and is therefore intimidating for businesses to engage with. But it is important for brands to realize that there are ways to engage with gender identity beyond entering the political discourse, and that doing so actually **presents opportunities for significant marginal gains.**

As we began our research, we were of course aware of many of the historical shortcomings across our industries of focus: **Automotive, Investment Banking and Oncology.** We expected to find dissatisfaction. What we weren't expecting, however, was the extent to which...

_____ **outdated stereotypes and deep-rooted biases** remain prevalent across virtually **every aspect of the customer lifecycle, affecting individuals of all genders.** _____

And sadly, the extent to which consumers have just accepted this as status quo, adjusting their behavior accordingly, and effectively compensating for failure on the part of brands to bridge the gender gaps.

It became painfully clear that in 2023 **most brands are still missing the mark when it comes to understanding the important role that gender plays in the customer experience.** And, while our research was focused on three primary verticals, we believe the findings to be universally applicable to most industries and across four broad phases of the customer journey. It's the combined effect of these issues that we call the "**Gender Experience Gap**".



All these issues can be addressed by brands willing to leave behind one-size-fits-all approaches to marketing in favor of strategies that offer customers greater control, authentic communities, and resources that make it easier to navigate the choices before them. In doing so businesses can help ensure that all genders have access to the same outcomes, opting to be part of the solution while opening up lucrative new possibilities.

Why Brands Need to Understand Gender Today

The details of our research study will reveal the depth and breadth of existing shortcomings when it comes to gender inclusivity in marketing. To start off, we believe it's important to consider why addressing such shortcomings is **absolutely necessary for brands today**.

To do this, we partnered with **sparks & honey** to illuminate the macro and mega cultural trends related to gender and the customer experience as evidenced by their proprietary cultural intelligence platform **Q™**. This analysis revealed several key ways in which broader cultural trends are shifting customer expectations when it comes to brands' approach to gender inclusivity.

As non-conformity has become increasingly normalized, we have seen alternatives to binary gender identities become mainstream, with **56% of Gen Z claiming to know someone who uses a gender-neutral pronoun**. In addition to greater comfort with non-conforming identities there appear to be broadening efforts to learn more about others with differing perspectives. This desire to engage in empathetic self-education goes hand-in-hand with an imperative to take action against racism, sexism and other forms of inequity. The result is an increasingly open-minded customer base that expects brands to engage in ethical work while keeping up with ever-evolving cultural mores.

Part of that cultural evolution is a more nuanced approach to traditional understandings of gender, with a focus on two key Elements of Culture: **"Power Women"** and **"New Masculinity."** Even as ideas surrounding feminism continue to progress, there remains a deep-seated desire to see women in positions of leadership and for brands to be held accountable for gender bias and inequity. At the same time, we are seeing more complex and nuanced understandings of masculinity emerge in cultural conversations. **Consequently, brands can no longer afford to leave their understanding of gender uninterrogated.**

Finally, **our cultural analysis revealed a tendency to move away from broad forms of collective identity towards microcultures**. As disenchantment with large institutions and traditionally popular figures and brands grows, like-minded people are seeking out increasingly niche groups in which they can participate in authentic community. This, more than any other cultural trend, should tell us that **one-size-fits-all approaches to marketing are no longer adequate for the modern consumer**.

Working towards greater gender inclusivity and solving for gender bias in a business context is not about performative wokeness. Rather, these efforts are how businesses will develop deeper loyalty within their existing customer bases and attract new ones. **Brands that do not pursue gender inclusivity in their marketing initiatives will miss out on commercial opportunities.**



Embracing individuality ensures no consumers are left behind and **no money is left on the table.**

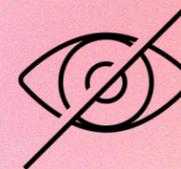
The center of purchasing power is shifting to align with broader cultural trends, with current projections estimating that 66% of consumer wealth will belong to women in the next decade.¹ Four in five (82%) Gen Z investors surveyed in the U.S. say they began investing before they turned 21.² Brands' ability to evolve alongside their existing and ideal target audiences will determine their long-term success, **and with such obvious gaps in existing customer experiences there are astounding potential gains to be had for those brands willing to do the work.**

The Gender Experience Gap

Methodology and Scope of Research:

- > A robust literature and academic review of recent studies, syndicated resources, and expert interviews.
- > In-depth qualitative ethnographies amongst 29 participants, including cisgender men and women, trans men and women, and non-binary individuals.
- > Quantification of findings through RAPP's proprietary customer journey diagnostics online survey methodology, the CXM Study™ (Sample size n=1081).
- > Supplemental validation of findings through external data sources, including behavioral clickstream data from Omnicom's proprietary data platform, Omni, and our AI-enabled content intelligence solution.

Our research revealed **four common areas** of intense dissatisfaction related to gender throughout the customer lifecycle across our three chosen verticals — **automotive, investment banking and oncology**. Given the consistency of these expressions of dissatisfaction we believe these gaps to be universal across industries, a reality we call the “**Gender Experience Gap**.” While these four touchpoints represent significant gaps in the customer journey, they should also be seen as exciting opportunities for brands to pursue innovative solutions aimed at improving the customer experience, which will in turn drive true brand affinity and associated business outcomes.



Expectations of Bias



Self-preservation and performance anxiety characterize early journey stages.



94% of women say they don't trust car dealerships.

Customer's experiences of discrimination begin long before a transaction happens, which means they anticipate unfair treatment from businesses even if they lack firsthand experience with a particular brand. One participant, Mary, thought women's "gender identities" led car dealers to "think they could charge us more," and she wasn't alone — 63% of women think gender will affect their level of service at car dealerships.

When it comes to investing, both men and women have issues with the way their gender impacts their experiences. While 81% of women say they have experienced negative stereotypes around investing, **men feel forced to prepare to negotiate recommendations for aggressive investment vehicles due to a perception that they will take on more risk than their female counterparts.**³ Finally, less than half of both men and women think doctors treat patients equally, revealing deep mistrust of the healthcare system at large.

With such pervasive anxiety appearing across the gender spectrum, it is clear that brands cannot afford to take a passive approach to making their customers feel safe and seen. Brands need to proactively acknowledge and address cultural expectations while committing to being part of the solution in order to give customers a sense of safety, and confidence to engage actively in their customer journey.

We see some pioneers in the financial service space actively doing just this: **SoFi and Ellevest** are two excellent examples of this proactive approach. By increasing active education and financial literacy in their consumer-facing products they are working to impact not only how many women are actively investing, but to influence the collective image of those who are "good with money."

Feeling Invisible

Distrust plagues the research phase as consumers struggle to see themselves.

When they do begin the shopping process, women and non-binary consumers overwhelmingly report feeling invisible, struggling to see themselves in the brands they are considering and unable to find relevant materials from which to make informed decisions.



When asked to illustrate their experience of a customer journey, one participant in our qualitative study actually drew themselves as a ghost.

This lack of representation leads to consumers distrusting the brands they are meant to be building connections with, turning instead to third-party sources for validation and confidence that they are making the right decisions. Women in particular tend to seek advice from friends and family as a part of their research process. This is due in large part to the tendency for research and educational information to be focused on the experiences of cisgender, white men. Women overall were significantly more likely to feel there isn't enough medical research on their gender, while only half of all black men and women feel there is sufficient medical research done on people of their race.



Women are 2x as likely as men to ask friends and family for help comparing different investment account types.

Consequently, brands are losing their status as subject matter experts...

leaving marginalized populations on their own to wade through dubious information. Non-binary and trans respondents were significantly more likely to cite influencers and celebrities as resources for researching second opinions on their cancer diagnoses, and 82% of women said they have issues discerning what is and isn't accurate medical information on the internet. Our clickstream analysis showed women were significantly more likely to engage with social sources, aggregators and other online information alongside a visit to a car manufacturer's website, whereas men seem more content with a single source of information in their automotive browsing journeys. If brands are going to help consumers go from feeling invisible to seeing themselves as part of an authentic community, they must embrace social proof and advocacy in a way that engenders trust. A pioneer in the advocacy space is Irth, who have created a platform to help remove bias from the pregnancy and new motherhood journey for women of color. Using a Yelp-like review system, Irth is offering women of color, who often experience negative health outcomes as a result of gender and racial bias, a platform through which they can be heard as both individuals and as a community.

Elaborate Performances

Consumers resort to desperate measures to avoid disrespect and discrimination.



57% of trans, genderqueer and non-binary customers feel more comfortable purchasing or leasing a car from someone of their own gender.

When it comes to the core transaction phase of the customer journey, we found surprising consistency across genders: effortful overcompensation for the failure of brands to acknowledge them as individuals. We observed consumers undertake complex processes to avoid discrimination, with consumers putting in an extreme amount of energy to conceal their identity in hopes of receiving fair treatment. These elaborate performances were employed by cisgender women, non-binary individuals, and cisgender men alike.

One participant, who identifies as a non-binary, trans-masculine, queer person, explained that, despite offering to put down a cash deposit on a car they wanted to buy, they were forced to ask a friend to “pretend to be [their] assistant” to call and “help [them] put a deposit down” because they felt unable to complete this task without cisgender support because of the way the sales person spoke to them. Another participant, a gay, cisgender man, felt the need to add extra

“gruffness” to his voice over the phone in order to get “straight answers” to his questions. **71% of non-binary, genderqueer, and trans respondents felt more comfortable opening an investment account with someone of their own gender — significantly more than cisgender men and women.** Brands must take responsibility for helping customers avoid the need for pretense by prioritizing inclusivity at the organizational level and through experience design principles.

When brands prioritize inclusivity, they educate their employees while providing consumers with knowledge about the choices available to them. By creating alternative purchase experiences, brands put consumers in control of how and where to engage and when to reveal their identity. Carvana boldly reimaged the car shopping experience, building an online-only, haggle-free alternative to the traditional purchasing process. Given 42% of men and 40% of women reported being uncomfortable negotiating when purchasing or leasing a car in our research that’s a large underserved audience now being served by a disruptor brand. Our clickstream analysis showed women in particular were more likely to navigate to Carvana as part of their automotive purchase journey. Brands willing to acknowledge differences in how consumers want to engage are poised to outpace their competitors and protect themselves from any disruptors.

Ongoing Discomfort

Consumers maintain pretenses with considerable effort as resentment builds toward brands post-purchase.

Due to the pretenses consumers create during the transaction phase of the customer journey, our participants communicated ongoing discomfort in their post-purchase interactions with brands as they were forced to maintain their performances to get the experience they desired.



54% of women feel more confident being treated by a doctor of their same gender.

In discussing her cancer diagnosis, Cy, who has “had cancer before,” details her decision to try “to be sweet” because of her awareness that “difficult patients” receive subpar treatment, and she wanted her doctors “to help [her].” And throughout cancer treatment, men are half as likely as women to feel informed during treatment discussion. They cited the need to maintain a “stiff upper lip” and talked about the pressure to engage in “guy talk” with their doctor rather than meaningful conversation about their condition. Even after purchasing a car, women report difficulty maintaining their vehicles — 58% of women think car mechanics commonly overcharge women. And in financial services, men are three times more likely than women to cite difficulty adjusting investments based on life events given the expectation to maintain aggressive portfolios.

It is vital that brands give consumers permission to be themselves. Authentic engagement is impossible if customers are consistently disguising themselves or avoiding engagement altogether, which means brands must leave behind overly generalized personas in favor of getting to know their customers as individuals. When brands acknowledge, embrace, and celebrate individuality they create a place of belonging for their customers, and start to address the root issues of the Gender Experience Gap.

Going Beyond Representation

Part 01

The most common approach to inclusivity in marketing focuses on representation, and when analyzing a representative library of assets across both automotive and investment banking dating back to 2018, our AI-enabled content intelligence solution, **ContentLab™**, revealed that in both cases assets in market are getting more balanced when it comes to gender representation. The trendline for both industries showed a steady increase in assets containing women, from less than 25% in 2018 to nearly 50% by 2023. However, representation alone is a superficial response to the Gender Experience Gap and doesn't go far enough to truly address the depth of disparity we've surfaced throughout the customer experience. To do that, we must remember that consumers aren't looking to be empowered by brands — **they need to be served by them.**

This opportunity to serve consumers can be summarized by **three main design principles**, allowing individuals to exercise agency in a way that reflects the complexity of their gendered lives.



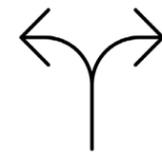
Control

Whether it's allowing customers to choose if and/or when they disclose their gender identity, giving them the option to opt out of in-person interactions, or creating opportunities for real-time feedback, brands should be on the lookout for opportunities to give their customers a greater sense of control.



Community

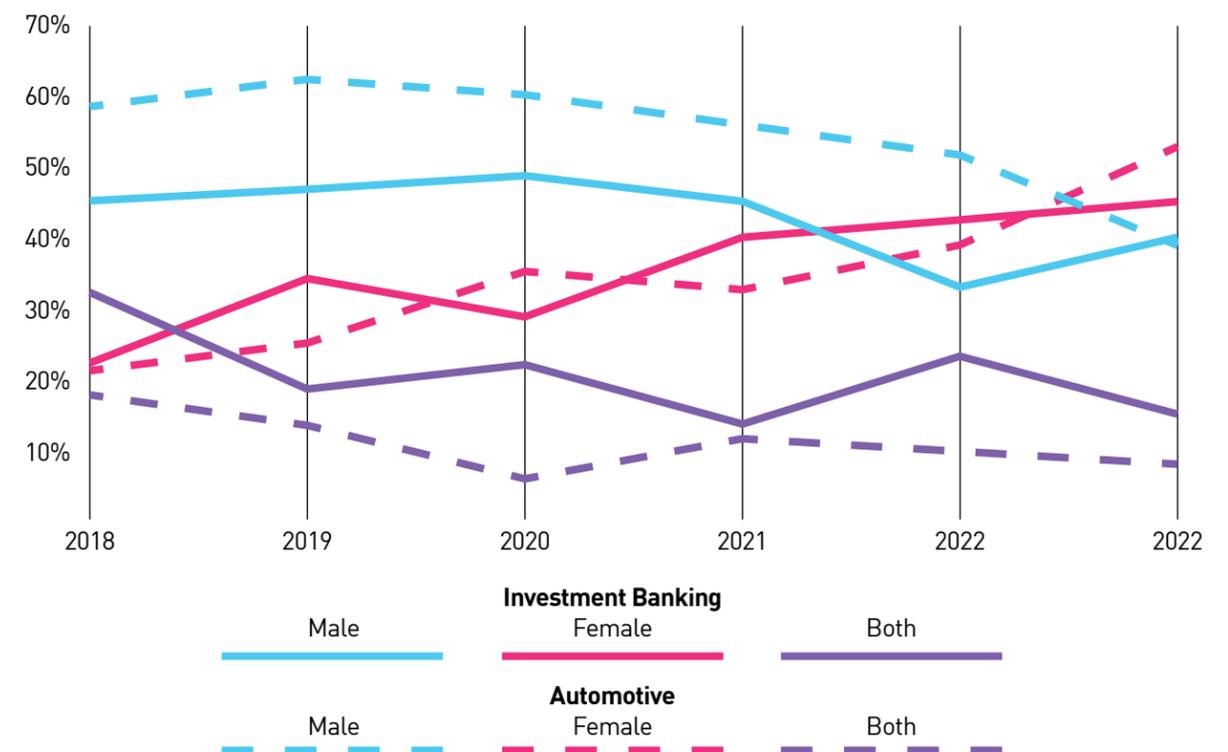
Representation is the first step in creating a sense of community amongst consumers, but it is not an effectual strategy on its own. Encouraging advocacy from a diverse range of customers can go a long way to helping underserved consumers access your brand. Creating change at the organizational level is also key to increasing customer comfort and satisfaction. Diversity must be an intentional practice and not a constantly receding goal.



Choice

Currently, customers are seeking out third-party resources to help inform their decisions. This is no doubt in part because of an underlying mistrust of resources produced by businesses. The more consistent development of valuable educational materials by brands will, over time, serve as a solution on two fronts: building trust with consumers while making it easier for them to navigate the choices before them.

RAPP ContentLab Findings



Going Beyond Representation

Part 02

These value levers provide a framework with which to approach gender inclusivity in marketing, but they are only a starting point. Marketers must also identify how their larger organizations need to change and how accountability will function, serving as the voice of the customer. Gender inclusive marketing initiatives can surface the data-backed insights that can help oil the wheels for the rest of the organization.

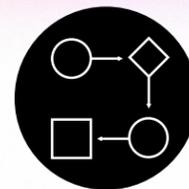
Marketers can't always change in-person experience bias but marketing can surround consumers with positive messages before, during and after every potential negative or effortful interaction. Marketing can engage underserved communities in more authentic ways and change those communities' trust in brands.

Indeed, marketers have a responsibility to consistently advocate for the individual consumer. That means leaving the use of broad-brush fabricated personas behind in favor of digging into individual-level data-driven insights. **There are three connected data activities that are still underused by most organizations today and represent an opportunity for most brands to access incremental marketing impact:**



Progressive Profiling

Create a strategy for ongoing, progressive data capture that will allow for a 360-view of each individual customer — in other words, seeing the customer as they see themselves. The combination of richer first- and better quality third-party data can provide rich insight that can be easily activated against using the martech available already in most businesses today.



Multidimensional Modeling

Brands then need to apply advanced modeling techniques across a range of dimensions that really matter, to create intricate intersectional cohorts that evolve over time and inform all marketing and communication strategies and can have broader business impact.



Content Intelligence

Content engineering, automation and generative AI make it efficient to serve every individual appropriately. The real value comes in ongoing content intelligence — the ability to turn content into data and understand which elements of which communications to which consumers drive business outcomes and to iterate and evolve content accordingly.

Discover Why Gender Matters For Your Business

Our research found significant gender experience gaps in the automotive, investment banking and oncology purchase journeys. These findings can be extrapolated to any industry, and the introduction of techniques offering control, choice navigation and community to improve the consumer value exchange are likewise universally applicable. Similarly, we believe progressive profiling data collection strategies, multidimensional modelling techniques and content intelligence capability development will benefit any brand, regardless of industry.

However, brands may wish to look for bespoke opportunities in their specific customers' journeys in order to be confident in creating appropriate marketing interventions. RAPP can create bespoke research reports and recommendations for your brand with a range of options available (in order of complexity):

- > **Access to our full Gender Experience Gap research report, inclusive of industry deep dives and additional subgroup analysis**
- > **Field supplementary research specific to a vertical, brand or competitive set**
- > **Field supplementary research specific to a vertical, brand or competitive set that includes analysis on additional intersectional identities (e.g., race and gender)**

Contact Us

To deep dive into our research, explore supplementary research options or discuss how your brand can better bridge the Gender Experience Gap, contact our team of specialist researchers and experience strategists.

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