

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Men engage in self-deceptive enhancement, whereas women engage in impression management

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Abstract

Consumer surveys are integral to marketers' understanding of consumers' judgments, preferences, and choices. However, consumers often respond in socially desirable ways, making it difficult to accurately ascertain their true preferences and reactions. In this regard, research has produced conflicting findings on who engages more in socially desirable responding: men or women. Our research is at the intersection of psychology and marketing to understand the effect of gender differences on socially desirable responding. We tested hypotheses regarding the types of socially desirable responding of men versus women and the underlying motivations. Across three studies, we show that men (compared to women) have a greater tendency to engage in self-deceptive enhancement—the tendency to provide inflated and honestly held self-descriptions in response to questions—and a promotion focus mediates this relationship. In contrast, women (compared to men) have a greater tendency to engage in impression management—the tendency to distort responses to present themselves most positively to maintain a favorable image—and a prevention focus mediates this relationship. Consequently, gender differences in promotion versus prevention focus are likely to have important theoretical implications for a gender-based explanation of different behaviors associated with regulatory focus. From a practical standpoint, marketers can utilize priming techniques to temporarily heighten gender identity and influence preferences for products that provide self-enhancement or image-protection benefits.

KEYWORDS

gender, impression management, prevention focus, promotion focus, regulatory focus, self-deceptive enhancement, socially desirable responding

1 | INTRODUCTION

At the intersection of marketing and psychology lies the phenomenon of socially desirable responding—the tendency of responding to self-reported measures in ways that describe themselves in a positive light (Paulhus, 1991). Owing to socially desirable responding, participants often demonstrate significant differences in their answers to survey questions and true beliefs on sensitive topics such as COVID vaccination, climate change, or racial issues. For

example, most respondents indicate that they will purchase a product from a company that assumes greater responsibility for social issues. Companies have responded to this need by engaging in more social activities (Whitler, 2021). However, this does not mean that consumers will behave this way in the real world. This issue is critical for marketers because their strategies are often based on customers' survey responses.

There were differences in socially desirable responding between men and women. For example, consider some survey findings on the

reporting of sexual activity. As reported in *The Times of India*, according to a report by the international nongovernmental organization, Population Council, less than 10% of young Indian women reported having premarital sex, compared to 15%–30% of young Indian men (depending on the subsample; Dhawan and Kurup 2006). Although several explanations have been proposed to explain this apparent discrepancy (Koo & Shavitt, 2010; Ma et al., 2014; Usunier et al., 2005), a widely accepted explanation is that the differences result from socially desirable responding (Paulhus, 1991). Women may underreport their sexual activity because societal norms frown on women's promiscuity, whereas men may overreport their activity to make themselves appear more attractive and powerful. A similar pattern can be observed in a customer survey context. For example, men (women) can overreport the likelihood of buying products that are expensive (not expensive) to appear more attractive (acceptable) in front of others. Marketers can draw more accurate inferences about subsequent actions by understanding and accounting for gender-based socially desirable responding.

From an academic perspective, gender differences in socially desirable responding are important area of research; however, research in this area is limited. Several experimental studies in *Psychology and Marketing* have examined gender differences, such as in the use of color information to make food choices (Meng & Chan, 2022), consumption of ethical products (Pinna, 2020), preference for promotional gifts (Kovacheva et al., 2021), attitudes toward online shopping (Dai et al., 2019), and happiness from consumption of experiences (Brakus et al., 2022). Whereas previous research has focused on the impact of gender on consumers' choices, we examine how gender differences eventuate in the context of socially desirable responding, a critical distinction. Therefore, we utilize traditional gender categorization (men and women) to develop our predictions but we also validate our results using various operationalizations, such as temporarily activated gender identity, chronically measured gender identity, and biological gender.

Although we do not consider the issue regarding the socially desirable responding explanation of gender differences while reporting sexual activity, we suggest that the explanation may be more discreet than simple dissembling. Although both men and women engage in socially desirable responding, their precise type is unclear. There are two distinct types of socially desirable responding: impression management and self-deceptive enhancement (Paulhus, 1991). Impression management refers to the tendency of people to respond in a manner that makes them appear more normatively appropriate and projects a more favorable image. Self-deceptive enhancement refers to the tendency to view oneself in an overly positive light and is driven by the desire to see oneself as competent and self-reliant (Paulhus, 1991; Paulhus & John, 1998).

One possibility for the under- and overreporting of sexual activity for women and men is their engagement in impression management and self-deceptive enhancement, respectively. Some aspects of the findings reported by *The Times of India* support this reasoning. The simple gender differences in reporting sexual activity in the article cannot explain differences in the type of socially

desirable responding. However, it reveals that young Indian men have remarkably unrealistic expectations of sexual encounters soon. It is worth noting that the relationships between gender and socially desirable responding postulated in this research are intermittent in all cases and can vary with situational factors.

Some studies suggest that gender differences in the type of socially desirable responding are similar to our description. However, the findings have not been overly consistent, and the precise nature of the relationship is ambiguous. Moreover, as few studies have systematically investigated these relationships, little is known about their underlying mechanisms. What are the underlying motivations for socially desirable responding? Are they similar for both men and women? These questions are addressed in the current study.

This study is expected to provide significant implications for research and practice on gender and socially desirable responding. Although previous studies have reported gender differences in socially desirable responding (Bernardi, 2006; Bernardi & Guptill, 2008; Chung & Monroe, 2003; Cohen et al., 1998; Schoderbek & Deshpande, 1996), the underlying mechanism of this relationship is unclear. We attempted to fill this gap. Furthermore, we validated the effect using manipulated gender identity, measured gender identity, and biological gender, demonstrating that the effect emerges regardless of whether gender is measured temporally, chronically, or biologically. Moreover, we provide evidence of the causal direction of this relationship by temporarily considering salient masculine versus feminine traits. This study further suggests that response biases rooted in self-reported data should be examined more nuancedly. To increase the validity of self-reported data, researchers should differentiate between the two types of socially desirable responding and control for gender effects. In addition to these theoretical implications, this study provides important marketing implications for interpreting data or communicating with consumers. We elaborate on these implications in the discussion section.

2 | GENDER AND SOCIALLY DESIRABLE RESPONDING

Socially desirable responding is the tendency of individuals to respond to self-reported measures in ways that portray themselves positively (Paulhus, 1991). Current conceptualizations view socially desirable responding as a two-dimensional construct (Bou Malham & Saucier, 2016; Elliot et al., 2018; Lalwani et al., 2006; Paulhus 1991; Shavitt et al. 2006): impression management—the distortion of responses to project a more favorable image—represents a deliberate attempt to deceive (Paulhus, 1991), and self-deceptive enhancement—the tendency to view oneself in an overly positive light—is considered an honestly held but inflated and overconfident self-perception (Lalwani, 2009).

Although research has investigated gender differences in socially desirable responding (Bernardi, 2006; Chung & Monroe, 2003; Cohen et al., 1998; Schoderbek & Deshpande, 1996), the results have been

inconsistent. For example, in a meta-analysis of studies conducted between 1945 and 1995, women displayed higher levels of socially desirable responding than men, although the effect was small ($d = 0.16$; Ones & Viswesvaran, 1998). Chung and Monroe (2003) found that female (vs. male) accountants exhibit greater levels of social desirability bias. Bernardi (2006) found greater levels of socially desirable responding by women (vs. men) with gender as the strongest predictor relative to other variables (individualism and uncertainty avoidance). In contrast, in a recent nine-country study, socially desirable responding scores did not differ between men and women (Bornstein et al., 2015). However, the meta-analysis aggregated numerous measures of socially desirable responding, and the nine-country study assessed socially desirable responding using the Crowne–Marlowe Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960), thus preventing any separate analyses of impression management and self-deceptive enhancement.

The results of studies measuring impression management and self-deceptive enhancement separately are mixed. In a large sample of religious adults, men scored higher on self-deceptive enhancement but lower on impression management than women (Paulhus, 1991). However, Musch et al. (2002; cited in Riketta, 2005) found the same gender differences for self-deceptive enhancement but no gender differences for impression management, whereas Heine and Lehman (1995) reported the opposite pattern.

Although the abovementioned studies directly assessed gender differences in socially desirable responding, some studies have considered an indirect approach to the research question. For example, Alexander and Fisher (2003) provided evidence that although women reported having less sexual experience and fewer sex partners than men, this was particularly the case when women believed a student experimenter might read their responses. However, when women were led to believe that their responses were being measured with a polygraph, the reporting differences between men and women disappeared. These findings suggest that women deliberately distorted their responses. In contrast, men's responses did not depend on whether they thought their responses were anonymous, could be discerned from a lie detector test, or could be seen by a peer. These findings suggest that regardless of whether their answers were accurate, men truly believed in their estimates, a defining characteristic of self-deceptive enhancement (see Table 1 for key literature on gender and socially desirable responding).

The previous review suggests that despite some inconsistent findings, there seem to be gender differences in socially desirable responding. However, the precise nature of these differences requires elucidation. Some studies support the notion that men engage in more self-deceptive enhancement but less impression management than women, whereas others support either. These inconsistencies may be explained by differences in the measures and sample characteristics across different studies. However, there is limited research on systematically investigating these propositions using multiple operationalizations of both genders and types of socially desirable responding and the underlying processes in these

differential relations and boundary conditions of the effects. Specifically, why do men and women approach these self-reports differently? Men and women differ in numerous processes (such as motivational, emotional, and cognitive), with corresponding differential influences on judgments and behaviors (Cross & Madson, 1997; Wood & Eagly, 2002). Consequently, similar to any judgment or behavioral outcome, differences in socially desirable responding may be driven by different motivational processes.

2.1 | Underlying processes: Differences in regulatory focus

Among many possible underlying motivations for gender differences in the types of socially desirable responding, we explore regulatory focus (Higgins, 1997; Higgins, et al., 1994, 2001). Regulatory focus is a theory of self-regulation that delineates how people regulate their behaviors to align with their goals and needs. In a promotion focus, people are driven primarily by advancement and growth concerns, focus on accomplishments, achievements, and the pursuit of ideals, and seek to maximize positive outcomes. In a prevention focus, people are driven primarily by security and safety needs, focus on their obligations, and seek to minimize negative outcomes.

For regulatory focus to account for the relationship between gender and socially desirable responding, it must be related to socially desirable responding and gender. Research in various domains provides indirect support for these propositions. For example, when people aim to achieve desired outcomes (i.e., promotion focus), they are likely to emphasize their positive skills and abilities. Self-deceptively exaggerating one's skills and abilities may make the desired achievements seem more attainable (Paulhus & John, 1998; Taylor & Brown, 1988). In contrast, when people aim to avoid undesired outcomes (i.e., prevention focus), they are likely to focus on pleasing important stakeholders in their society and thus conform to the norms and expectations set up by these stakeholders. Engaging in impression management facilitates these goals.

Thus, the different regulatory focus makes certain types of subjective self-appraisals particularly useful for sustaining motivation in goal pursuits. Under a promotion focus, positive self-perceptions—although inflated and unrealistic—give the perception that the desired outcomes are attainable and thus help to sustain motivation in goal pursuit (Taylor & Brown, 1988). In contrast, under the prevention focus, viewing oneself as having socially approved attributes gives the perception of environmental security. Reportedly, only one study has examined the link between regulatory focus and socially desirable responding. Consistent with this reasoning, promotion focus positively correlates with self-deceptive enhancement (but not with impression management), whereas prevention focus positively correlates with impression management (but not with self-deceptive enhancement; Lalwani et al., 2009).

Given the characteristics of promotion- and prevention-focused orientations, it seems plausible that men and women differ in their chronic levels of promotion and prevention focus. For example, men value achievement, success, and accomplishment more than women

TABLE 1 Key literature on gender and socially desirable responding.

Reference	Independent variable	Dependent variable	Key findings	Self-deceptive enhancement and impression management tested separately?
1. Bernardi (2006)	Gender	The impression management subscale of Paulhus' (1986) balanced inventory of desirable responding	Women (vs. men) were more likely to engage in socially desirable responding.	No
2. Chung and Monroe (2003)	Gender	Two measures of ethical intentions	Female (vs. male) accountants exhibited greater levels of social desirability bias.	No
3. Cohen et al. (1998)	Gender	Multidimensional ethics instrument questionnaire for ethical dilemma vignettes	Women (vs. men) evaluated questionable actions as less ethical and showed a lower intention to engage in those actions.	No
4. Schoderbek and Deshpande (1996)	Gender	10-item of Paulhus (1984)	Female (vs. male) managers were likelier to engage in impression management.	No
5. Ones and Viswesvaran (1998)	Gender	Three overt integrity tests: the Reid Report, Stanton Survey, and London House Personnel Selection Inventory's Honesty Scale	Women (vs. men) displayed a greater level of socially desirable responding.	No
6. Bornstein et al. (2015)	Gender	13-item social desirability scale (SDS-SF Form C)	No difference in socially desirable responding was found between mothers and fathers.	No
7. Paulhus (1991)	Gender	Paulhus' (1988, 1991) balanced inventory of desirable responding	Men scored higher on self-deceptive enhancement but lower on impression management than women.	Yes
8. Musch et al. (2002; cited in Riketta 2005)	Gender	Paulhus' (1988, 1991) balanced inventory of desirable responding	Men (vs. women) demonstrated greater self-deceptive enhancement, but no gender differences were found for impression management.	Yes
9. Heine and Lehman (1995)	Gender	Paulhus' (1988, 1991) balanced inventory of desirable responding	Women (vs. men) demonstrated greater impression management, but no gender differences were found for self-deceptive enhancement.	Yes
10. Alexander and Fisher (2003)	Gender	Cowart Pollack scale of sexual experience (Cowart-Steckler & Pollack, 1988)	Women reported having less sexual experience and fewer sex partners than men; this was particularly the case when women believed their responses might be read by a student experimenter.	No
Current research	Gender	40-item Paulhus Deception Scales (Paulhus, 1991) and scenarios that capture either self-deceptive enhancement or impression management	Men (women) have a greater tendency to engage in self-deceptive enhancement (impression management) due to greater promotion (prevention) focus.	Yes

Abbreviations: SDS-SF, Social Desirability Scale-Short Form.

(Cross & Madson, 1997), suggesting that men are likelier than women to adopt a promotion focus. In contrast, women focus on their obligations to others and on safety and security needs more than men (Geary, 2010; Wood & Eagly, 2002). Furthermore, women tend to be more cautious (Kagan, 1972) and risk-averse (Byrnes et al., 1999) than men, suggesting that women may be more prevention-focused than men.

Men also value agentic/individualistic traits such as competence, self-reliance, and uniqueness more than women, who place a higher value on communal/collectivistic traits such as camaraderie and kinship and are more group-focused than men (Cross & Madson, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Wood & Eagly, 2002). Individualism and collectivism and their individual-level counterparts (independence and interdependence, respectively) are also related to regulatory focus: independence is associated with a promotion focus, and interdependence is associated with a prevention focus (Hamilton & Biehal, 2005; Lalwani et al., 2009). Hence, men may generally be more promotion-oriented than women, whereas women may be more prevention-oriented than men. Furthermore, gender differences in self-deceptive enhancement may be driven by promotion focus, whereas gender differences in impression management may be driven by prevention focus. Basically, we suggest that regulatory focus mediates gender effect on socially desirable responding. Thus, we derive the following hypotheses (see Figure 1 for the conceptual framework).

H1: Men have a greater tendency to engage in self-deceptive enhancement than women, whereas women have a greater tendency to engage in impression management than men.

H2: The relationship between gender and self-deceptive enhancement is mediated by promotion focus, whereas the relationship between gender and impression management is mediated by prevention focus.

2.2 | Overview of studies

Across three studies, we tested the hypotheses that men score higher than women on self-deceptive enhancement, whereas women score

higher than men on impression management. Study 1 tested gender effects on self-deceptive enhancement and impression management. Study 2 tested the mediating role of the regulatory focus. Specifically, we tested the hypothesis that the effect of gender on self-deceptive enhancement (men scored higher than women) is driven by promotion focus (but not prevention focus), whereas the effect of gender on impression management (women scored higher than men) is driven by prevention focus (but not promotion focus). Moreover, study 3 tested the hypothesis that the respective gender effects on self-deceptive enhancement and impression management are driven by differences in regulatory focus. Importantly, study 3 manipulated the promotion and prevention focus, whereas study 2 measured them. We report all measures and manipulations in all three studies.

3 | STUDY 1: PRIMED MASCULINITY/FEMININITY

This study aimed to assess the relationship between gender and socially desirable responding by manipulating masculinity/femininity as a proxy for gender (H1).

3.1 | Method

One hundred seventy-five adults in the United States (98 women, $M_{age} = 35.84$, $SD = 29.17$) were recruited from an online research panel (MTurk) and were paid \$1.00 to participate in the study. The respondents completed the study using a computer from their own locations. The design was a 2 (gender prime: masculine, feminine; between subjects) \times 2 (socially desirable responding: self-deceptive enhancement, impression management; within subjects) mixed factorial design. Measured sex was entered as a covariate. After providing informed consent, the participants completed a series of tasks and measurements on the computer.

The respondents were told that they would participate in a few unrelated psychological studies. Following Bargh et al. (1996, 2001), in what was ostensibly the first study, the participants were instructed to watch the computer screen, where they saw a series of flashes (one per screen), followed by a string of Xs for 4 seconds.

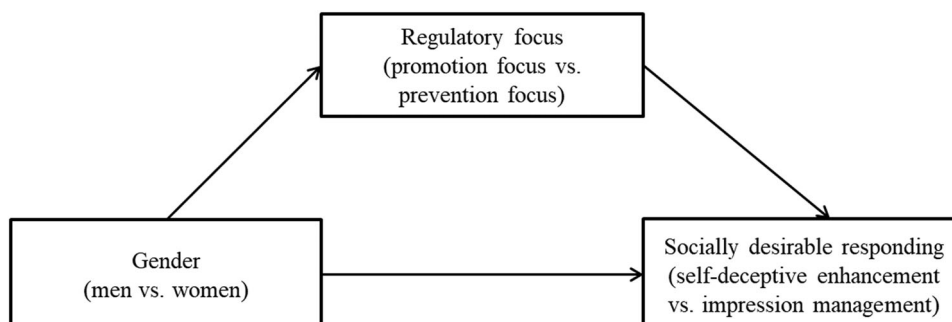


FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework.

Their task was to identify whether a flash appeared on the left-hand or right-hand side of the screen. This portion of the study represents the gender priming task. The flashes were 25 gender-related words that appeared on the screen for 1 second each. Examples of masculine words were uncle, brother, hammer, cigar, and mustache; examples of feminine words were doll, earrings, grandma, pink, and lipstick (see Supporting Information: Web Appendix A-1). The participants were randomly assigned to either masculine or feminine priming conditions.

Following the priming task, participants completed filler tasks. Then, as an ostensibly part of a different study, they were asked to read five behavioral scenarios we constructed to capture either self-deceptive enhancement (two scenarios) or impression management (three scenarios; Supporting Information: Web Appendix A-2). An example of a self-deceptive enhancement scenario is as follows:

All of us are consumers, and need to buy goods and services, often on a daily basis. Ideally, most of us would like to study the pros and cons of different brands carefully before purchase, especially when the product is expensive. However, we do not usually have enough time to carefully research a product before purchase, and so we often need to rely on "first impressions" to choose a brand. How often do you regret your decision when things don't go the way you anticipated? (1 = not often, 9 = very often). (Reverse-scored)

An example of an impression management scenario is:

You are interviewing for an internship at a company called "ABC." The job would involve a lot of teamwork and mutual support. Doing the job well would require depending on a network of co-workers and on your ability to work collectively to set goals and to meet them. Assuming you got to know your team members reasonably well, how likely would you be to gossip about them with others at work? (1 = not at all likely, 9 = very likely). (Reverse-scored)

In the first scenario, we expected that respondents engaging in self-deceptive enhancement would be more likely to present themselves with confidence in their ability to make the right decisions. In the second scenario, we expected that respondents engaging in impression management would be more likely to present themselves as less likely to gossip about their coworkers.

In a pilot study ($N = 66$), a factor analysis with principal component analysis and varimax rotation revealed the two self-deceptive enhancement and three impression management scenarios loaded on distinct factors. Further, the self-deceptive enhancement factor was significantly correlated with Paulhus' self-deceptive enhancement scale (20 items; $r = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$) but not with the impression management scale (20 items; $r = -0.11$, $p = 0.39$), whereas

the impression management factor was significantly correlated with Paulhus' impression management scale ($r = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$) but not with the self-deceptive enhancement scale ($r = -0.12$, $p = 0.34$). Composite measures of self-deceptive enhancement and impression management were created by averaging the respective scenario scores (higher scores indicated a greater tendency to engage in self-deceptive enhancement or impression management).

3.2 | Results and discussion

We expected participants in the masculine prime condition to exhibit more self-deceptive enhancement than those in the feminine prime condition, which in turn would exhibit more impression management than those in the masculine prime condition. A repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that the predicted interaction between gender prime and scenario type was significant ($F(1, 172) = 14.26$, $p < 0.001$). Participants in the masculine prime condition ($M = 5.51$, $SD = 1.50$) scored significantly higher than those in the feminine prime condition ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.49$) in the self-deceptive enhancement scenario ($t(173) = 2.19$, $p = 0.03$). In contrast, those in the feminine prime condition ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.93$) scored significantly higher than those in the masculine prime condition ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.73$) in the impression management scenarios ($t(173) = -3.65$, $p < 0.001$). These results support H1: Table 2 summarizes the key findings of each study.

In our next study, we tested the underlying motivations for impression management and self-deceptive enhancement. We hypothesized that differences in regulatory focus between men and women might account for the relationship between gender and socially desirable responding observed in Study 1.

4 | STUDY 2: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF REGULATORY FOCUS (MEASURED)

The objective of study 2 was to shed light on the underlying mechanisms of gender and socially desirable responding by measuring regulatory focus (H2).

4.1 | Method

The respondents were 110 members of TurkPrime who participated in a monetary remuneration of \$0.50 (54 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 41.20$, $SD = 12.46$). First, the participants completed Schertzer et al. (2008) gender trait index (shortened version of Barak and Stern's (1986) gender trait index). The 16-item questionnaire asked respondents to rate themselves on a series of 7-point semantic differential items (Supporting Information: Web Appendix B-1). Examples of feminine items include "affectionate" and "tender." Examples of masculine items include "have leadership abilities" and "are assertive." Promotion and prevention focus was assessed using the Regulatory Focus

TABLE 2 Key findings in each study.

Study	Independent variable	Dependent variable	Key findings	Hypotheses tested
Study 1	Manipulated gender identity	Five behavioral scenarios	Participants in the masculine (feminine) prime condition scored higher than those in the feminine (masculine) prime condition on self-deceptive enhancement (impression management) scenarios.	H1
Study 2	Measured gender identity	Eight behavioral scenarios	The effect of gender on socially desirable responding was mediated by regulatory focus; specifically, a promotion focus mediated the relationship between masculinity and self-deceptive enhancement, and a prevention focus mediated the relationship between femininity and impression management.	H2
Study 3	Biological gender	Four behavioral scenarios	Men (women) scored higher than women (men) on self-deceptive enhancement (impression management) when a promotion (prevention) focus was primed, but this effect was eliminated when a prevention (promotion) focus was primed.	H2

Questionnaire (an 11-item, 5-point scale; Higgins et al., 2001; see Supporting Information: Web Appendix B-2). Finally, participants responded to eight behavioral scenarios constructed to capture either self-deceptive enhancement or impression management (Supporting Information: Web Appendix B-3). We focused on consumer scenarios that significantly impact diverse consumer behaviors, such as consumer confidence or consumer ethicality.

4.2 | Results and discussion

We first tested the hypotheses that masculinity, but not femininity, is positively related to self-deceptive enhancement, whereas femininity, but not masculinity, is positively related to impression management. The separate repeated-measures analysis of covariance revealed significant interactions between socially desirable responding and masculinity ($F(1, 108) = 4.58, p = 0.035$) and marginally significant interactions between socially desirable responding and femininity ($F(1, 108) = 3.59, p = 0.061$). The results of the correlations further support our hypotheses. Masculinity was positively related to self-deceptive enhancement ($r = 0.37, p < 0.001$) but not femininity ($r = 0.13, p = 0.182$), whereas femininity was positively related to impression management ($r = 0.29, p = 0.002$) but not masculinity ($r = 0.03, p = 0.756$).

We next tested the hypotheses that a promotion focus mediates the relationship between masculinity and self-deceptive enhancement and that a prevention focus mediates the relationship between femininity and impression management (H2). We conducted separate mediation analyses for the two hypothesized paths with Hayes' (2017) PROCESS Model 4 with 5000 bootstrapping samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence estimates. For the first analysis, masculinity was entered as the independent variable, promotion focus as the mediator, and self-deceptive enhancement as the dependent variable. As predicted, the mean indirect effect of masculinity on self-deceptive enhancement through promotion focus was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.08, SE = 0.04, 95\% \text{ confidence interval, CI} = [0.0185, 0.1576]$). However, in a separate mediation analysis, prevention focus did not mediate the effect of masculinity on self-deceptive enhancement ($\beta = -0.02, SE = 0.02, 95\% \text{ confidence interval (CI)} = [-0.0814, 0.0039]$).

In the second mediation analysis, femininity was entered as the independent variable, prevention focus as the mediator, and impression management as the dependent variable. As predicted, the mean indirect effect of femininity on impression management through prevention focus was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.07, SE = 0.04, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.0084, 0.1528]$). However, promotion focus did not mediate the effect of femininity on impression management ($\beta = 0.05, SE = 0.04, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.0094, 0.1316]$).

The findings of study 2 provide evidence of gender differences in socially desirable responding results, at least in part, from different motivations between men and women. Men (masculinity) tend to be more promotion-focused than women; thus, they are more interested in maximizing gains. Self-deceptive enhancement may make those

gains more attainable and thus increase the motivation to seek them. In contrast, women (femininity) tend to be more prevention-focused than men; thus, they are more interested in minimizing losses. Impression management may facilitate this goal by saving face. These results support H2.

Moreover, the findings are significant for the consumer literature since we measured self-deceptive enhancement and impression management using diverse consumer contexts. For example, individuals with greater masculinity are more likely to overestimate their ability to find good products or potential buyers (a proxy for self-deceptive enhancement), and individuals with greater femininity are more likely to overestimate their ethicality as consumers (a proxy for impression management) based on the findings of this study.

In our next study, we tested the role of regulatory focus. Specifically, we used the moderation-of-process method (Spencer et al., 2005), in which we manipulated the mediators to test the underlying process hypotheses. We expected that men would score higher on self-deceptive enhancement than women when primed with a promotion focus, but this effect would be eliminated when primed with a prevention focus. In contrast, we expected that women would score higher than men on impression management when primed with a prevention focus, but this effect would be eliminated when a promotion focus was primed.

5 | STUDY 3: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF REGULATORY FOCUS (MANIPULATED)

We tested H2 using the experimental mediation test in study 3.

5.1 | Method

One hundred and sixty members of the MTurk online panel (109 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 34.97$, $SD = 13.50$) were paid \$1.00 to participate in the study. The respondents completed the study by using a computer from their own locations. The design was a 2 (gender: men, women; between subjects) \times 2 (regulatory focus: promotion, prevention; between subjects) \times 2 (socially desirable responding: self-deceptive enhancement, impression management; within subjects) mixed factorial design. The assignment of the promotion and prevention conditions was random. After providing informed consent, the participants completed a series of measures on the computer. They were informed that they would participate in a few unrelated psychological studies.

To manipulate promotion and prevention focus, we used primes that have been validated in previous research (cf., Kirmani & Zhu, 2007; Pham & Avnet, 2004). In the ostensible first study, the participants were instructed to think for a minute about either their hopes, aspirations, and dreams (i.e., promotion focus prime) or duties, obligations, and responsibilities (i.e., prevention focus prime) and then write about the thoughts that came to mind during that minute. Impression management and self-deceptive enhancement

were measured using scenarios similar to those used in study 1 (see Supporting Information: Web Appendix C). The participants read different scenarios and indicated their likelihood of being honest in an advertisement or survey (impression management; two items) or confident in their decisions (self-deceptive enhancement; two items). Thereafter, we collected demographic information and debriefed the participants.

5.2 | Results and discussion

An ANOVA with self-deceptive enhancement as the dependent variable and gender, regulatory focus, and their interaction as independent variables revealed a predicted interaction ($F(1, 156) = 7.63$, $p < 0.01$). Men scored higher than women on self-deceptive enhancement when a promotion focus was primed ($M_{\text{men}} = 6.67$, $SD = 1.22$ vs. $M_{\text{women}} = 5.70$, $SD = 1.00$; $t(61) = 3.34$, $p = 0.001$), but this effect was eliminated when a prevention focus was primed ($M_{\text{men}} = 5.75$, $SD = 1.37$ vs. $M_{\text{women}} = 5.94$, $SD = 1.26$; $t(95) = -0.69$, $p = 0.49$). These results support our hypothesis that promotion focus mediates the relation between gender and self-deceptive enhancement.

An ANOVA with impression management as the dependent variable and gender, regulatory focus, and their interaction as independent variables again revealed a predicted interaction ($F(1, 156) = 5.04$, $p = 0.03$). Women scored higher than men on impression management when primed with a prevention focus ($M_{\text{men}} = 5.75$, $SD = 1.62$ vs. $M_{\text{women}} = 6.47$, $SD = 1.66$; $t(95) = -1.98$, $p = 0.05$), but this effect was eliminated when a promotion focus was primed ($M_{\text{men}} = 6.31$, $SD = 1.25$ vs. $M_{\text{women}} = 5.82$, $SD = 1.45$; $t(61) = 1.31$, $p = 0.20$). These results support our hypothesis that prevention focus mediates the relation between gender and impression management. Therefore, these results support H2.

Study 3 demonstrated that gender differences in socially desirable responses could, at least in part, be attributed to differing motivations for men and women. Greater self-deceptive enhancement in men was driven by their relatively stronger promotion focus, whereas greater impression management in women was driven by their relatively stronger prevention focus.

6 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our goal in this study was to determine whether and how men and women differ in distinct forms of socially desirable responding. Instead of seeking to explain these influences in terms of the static characteristics of the two genders as much previous research has done, we strived to explicate the basic motivational processes that mediate the dynamic unfolding of differences in socially desirable responding. Some studies have suggested that women are more prone to socially desirable responding than men. Using multiple operationalizations of both gender and socially desirable responding, our research qualifies these findings and shows that both men and

women engage in socially desirable responding, but in different ways. Importantly, although previous research has examined the relationship between regulatory focus and socially desirable responding (Lalwani et al., 2009), no previous study has examined the effect of gender on socially desirable responding or the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions. The system of relations between gender, regulatory focus, and socially desirable responding is thus not well understood, and we address that gap.

Specifically, across the three studies, we found converging evidence that women have a greater tendency to engage in impression management than men, whereas men have a greater tendency to engage in self-deceptive enhancement than women. Moreover, our research shows that these tendencies in socially desirable responding are rooted in psychological concepts of masculinity and femininity, which are the basis of masculine and feminine personalities (Spence & Helmreich, 1978) and thus are likely the result of different motivational processes between men and women. This finding is important because it suggests that the effects of socially desirable responding are gender-related rather than the result of some unmeasured variables. Most importantly, our study demonstrates the underlying mechanisms in terms of regulatory focus. Men (vs. women) have a greater tendency to engage in self-deceptive enhancement because they tend to be promotion-focused, whereas women (vs. men) have a greater tendency to engage in impression management because they tend to be prevention-focused. Gender differences in promotion versus prevention focus have important theoretical implications for a gender-based explanation of many different behaviors associated with regulatory focus (e.g., Jain et al., 2007; Pham & Chang, 2010; Sengupta & Zhou, 2007).

In addition, as many studies use self-reported data (Randall & Gibson, 1990), our findings suggest that such data should be interpreted considering any possible gender effects. Dalton and Ortegren (2011) demonstrated that the relationship between gender and ethical decision-making is driven by social desirability, suggesting that gender effects should be critically considered in ethics research.

6.1 | Implications for practice

Our study has implications for marketing practices. First, our findings have implications for the segmentation and targeting strategies of marketers of products that provide self-enhancing benefits (e.g., a unique product) or image-protection benefits (a trendy product that allows one to be accepted by others); the former should be targeted to men, whereas the latter should be targeted to women. Similarly, marketers could increase the acceptance of products that provide self-enhancing benefits by priming masculinity, and by priming femininity for products that provide image-protection benefits. For products that provide multiple benefits, marketers targeting men (but not women) could emphasize that their products can provide self-enhancing benefits (e.g., "These pair of shoes make you feel great"), and marketers targeting women (but not men) could emphasize that their products can provide image protection benefits (e.g., "Your

friends will respect your taste if you buy these pair of shoes"). However, it is important to avoid enabling responses that are contrary to well-being. Contending stereotypical responses across genders can be both unethical and ineffective.

Further, our findings have implications for minimizing biases that arise due to socially desirable responding when marketers use self-reported format data that may evoke consumers' self-enhancing or impression management tendencies. When concerned about self-deceptive enhancement, marketers could prime femininity, whereas when concerned about impression management, they could prime masculinity. This implication extends to diverse fields in which social desirability affects mental health issues (Nelson & Liebel, 2018), responsible consumption (Prendergast & Tsang, 2019), parenting (Bornstein et al., 2015), and ethical behavior (Dalton & Ortegren, 2011). Further, researchers can minimize the tendency toward impression management among women by priming masculinity (the opposite gender identity), whereas researchers can minimize the tendency toward self-deceptive enhancement among men by priming femininity (the opposite gender identity).

Moreover, our research suggests possible ways to minimize different types of socially desirable responding based on the role of regulatory focus. Based on our findings, practitioners can design methods to temporarily suppress a promotion focus to reduce self-deceptive enhancement tendency or a prevention focus to reduce impression management tendency. Previous research has described numerous ways in which promotion and prevention focus can be altered via contextual cues (e.g., Lockwood et al., 2002). For example, promotion (prevention) focus can be manipulated by asking people to think about their ideal (ought) selves. Moreover, as demonstrated in study 3, it can be manipulated by reminding people about their accomplishments (obligations).

One possibility for reducing socially desirable responding effects relates to self-regulatory resources. Research indicates that impression management requires an expenditure of self-regulatory resources (Vohs et al., 2005). Other studies suggest that mindset switching can deplete self-regulatory resources (Hamilton et al., 2011). If so, researchers concerned about the biasing role of impression management may employ mindset-switching techniques before the main survey to reduce bias in the data. For instance, researchers examining gender differences may employ these techniques to reduce the role of impression management, although this recommendation holds primarily for researchers examining certain female phenomena.

6.2 | Limitations and future directions

One limitation of the current investigation is that we followed the traditional binary gender categorization. Future research should explore how other gender identities can influence socially desirable responding. Furthermore, although we validated the gender effect using various operationalizations (such as biological gender, trait gender, and state gender), we cannot conclude that different gender

operationalizations have similar effects in different contexts. Different operationalizations of gender play a stronger role in different situations, such as food preferences (Kahle & Homer, 1985), fashion attitudes (Gould & Stern, 1989), and ad recall (Gentry & Haley, 1984). Relatedly, we cannot regard gender identity as biological gender (or vice versa) because individuals can be simultaneously masculine, feminine, both (androgynous), or neither (undifferentiated), regardless of their biological gender. Moreover, although we used different types of scenarios to assess self-deceptive enhancement and impression management for generalizability, other factors may confound these scenarios. We did not include confound checks and that is another limitation of the current manuscript. Also, we acknowledge that the scenarios we used for impression management in particular were low in marketing relevance. Moreover, the sample size in study 3 was small. Future research should address these issues.

Our findings provide new paths for research related to downstream behaviors of socially desirable responding, such as intention toward ecofriendly products or conspicuous products from the perspective of gender. For example, women may overestimate their intentions toward behaviors due to impression management (e.g., support for ecofriendly products or any other socially appropriate behaviors). Men may overestimate their intentions toward certain behaviors (e.g., willingness to pay for given products) to show off their ability or success due to their higher self-deceptive enhancement tendency. Future research should examine the various consequences of different types of socially desirable responding depending on gender. Future research should also examine the possible boundary conditions for the identified effects. For instance, examining whether and when women are more promotion-focused while men are more prevention-focused can be a fruitful area of inquiry.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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