

Women in Control? Glass Ceiling Denial Shapes Evaluation of Sexualized Advertising featuring Women

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Cite as:

De Kerviler Gwarlann, Madan Shilpa, Pandelaere Mario (2025), Women in Control? Glass Ceiling Denial Shapes Evaluation of Sexualized Advertising featuring Women. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, (130454)

Paper from the 16th Annual Fall EMAC Conference, Istanbul, Turkey, September 17-19, 2025



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Abstract

Despite the pervasive discourse on gender equality, the sexualization of women persists in the marketplace. This research proposes a novel antecedent that shapes consumers' responses to sexualization of women in advertising—glass ceiling beliefs—or the perception that systemic barriers prevent women from advancing in the corporate hierarchy. Consumers who deny the existence of the glass ceiling are more likely to perceive women in such ads as agentic and in control, leading to favorable evaluations. Four studies using varied operationalizations of glass ceiling beliefs and multiple stimuli present converging evidence for our hypotheses and rule out alternative explanations. This research deepens our understanding of an important marketplace phenomenon, demonstrating how consumers' workplace-related beliefs can influence how they interpret and respond to brand advertising. Importantly, our research offers actionable guidance for marketing managers on portraying women with agency—ensuring that depictions align with the brand's identity while avoiding backlash.

Track: Marketing Communication (including digital) and Branding