

GENDER BRAND EXTENSIONS: EFFECTS OF GENDER OF THE BRAND, GENDER OF CONSUMER, AND PRODUCT TYPE ON EVALUATION OF GENDER EXTENSIONS

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ABSTRACT

Many brands can possess strong gender identity: AXE for masculine images and Lakme for feminine images. Over the years, there has been a growing trend of gender extensions among brands, partly due to the unisex trend in consumer goods. This study examines consumers' evaluations of gender extensions in an attempt to identify conditions for successful gender extensions. The results show that the gender of a brand, gender of consumers, and product type influence the evaluation of gender extensions.

INTRODUCTION

There are many brands in the marketplace that possess gender Identities. They can be stereotyped as either masculine or feminine. Some examples include Axe, Fare n Handsome, Lux, Faire n Lovely

One advantage of these gendered brands is that they leverage on their masculine or feminine associations to attract the male or female consumers respectively. However, this strong association

with a particular gender could be a hindrance for brands trying to extend beyond their traditional market segment. As a result, some companies choose to target the opposite gender segment by using different brand names. For example, 'Mankind' uses the brand name 'Addiction' for targeting men and 'Gatsby' to reach out to women. Similarly, TITAN uses its own brand of watches to target its male customers while a separate brand name, 'Raga', is used to target female customers.

However, a major disadvantage of using this approach is cost. The cost of introducing a new brand in some consumer markets has been estimated to range from \$10 million to more than \$200 million (Kotler and Amstrong 2004). In order to deflect the high cost of launching new products, an extension strategy could be employed. In addition to the advantage of lower costs, using an extension strategy also allows the company to leverage on the current brand associations to build brand equity (Aaker 1991). In 1990, an estimated 81 percent of new products introduced were extensions (Keller 1998). This further testifies to the attractiveness of using an extension strategy of gendered brands.

Extending the same brand name to target the opposite sex (gender extension for short) is not a new phenomenon. There is a history of masculine brands launching an extension to reach out

to women in the domain of traditional masculine products. Examples of gender extensions by masculine brands include Levi's and Gillette in jeans and razors respectively. However, there is a recent trend of companies extending their feminine brands to target men. For example, Nivea initially launched Beauty Cream for ladies with a soft and feminine appeal with Elizabeth Hurley as the celebrity endorser. However, Nivea was later extended into the men's segment directly under the Nivea for Men corporate brand (Marketing Week 2008). This represents an Extension from the traditional branding strategies of Nivea of using Same brand names to target the different gender segments. What is seen here is a growing trend of companies using the same brand name to target the opposite sex segment. In recognition of the vast advantages of using the extension strategy, it is crucial for marketers to know under what conditions a gender extension can be successful. It is the objective of this study to find such conditions.

BACKGROUND

Gender Stereotyping of Brands

According to Wrightsman (1977), a stereotype is "a relatively rigid and oversimplified conception of a group of people in which all individuals in the group are labelled with the so-called group characteristics." Children in every society need to learn their roles and the behaviours that go with them. They need to learn what a child, a student, a brother/sister, son/daughter, man/woman should

do. Thus, sex roles refer to the expectations of what a man and a woman should do by society. Combining the concept of stereotypes and the concept of gender roles, gender stereotypes refer to the rigidly held and oversimplified beliefs that men and women, by virtue of their gender, possess distinct psychological traits and characteristics. Such overgeneralizations tend to be widely shared by a particular society or culture. In the past, both men and women have had certain sex role requirements as well as prohibitions (Alreck 1994). For instance, a man had to be strong, tough minded, and decisive, while a woman was expected to be nurturing, lady-like, and put the family first.

Similar to cultural or country stereotypes, gender stereotypes should influence the perception and judgment of any object, including consumer products and brands (Alreck, Settle and Belch, 1982). Keller (1998) also argues that some brands in the marketplace possess certain gender-specific associations so that consumers associate the individual brand's user as specifically from either sex.

A sample categorization of masculine and feminine brands in various product categories is provided in Table 1. The list is not exhaustive. However, it shows that gendered brands are not restricted to the traditional domain of fashion and beauty products. They are found in other product categories such as tobacco and toys etc.

TABLE 1
 Examples of Gendered Brands

Product Category	Masculine Brands	Feminine Brands
Fragrance	AXE, Addiction, Fogg, Park Avenue	Fa, Gatsby , Yardly London, Pond's
Personal care products	Axe, Gillette, Vaseline For Men, Fare n Handsome	L' oreal, Lakmey, Lux, Dove, Fare n Lovely
Tobacco	Marlboro	Virginia Slims
Fashion	Arrow, Peter England, John	Channel, Laura Ashley, Levi's
Undergarments / Negligee	Lux, Genx, Macromen	Libra, Hanes ,Victoria Secret, Triumph
Toys	Helicopters, Train	Barbie, Teddy Bear
Cycles	Hero Ranger, BSA Hawk, Mac-One	Lady Bird , BSA SLR, Hero Queen
Magazines	Forbs, Auto Cars.	Meri Saheli, Femina, The
Scooters/Bikes	Hero Eterno, Bajaj Super, Pulsar.	Bajaj Sunny, Hero Pleasure, Honda Activa /Deo
Events	Gladrags Mr India	Famina Miss India, Miss World
Health Drinks	Complain , Bornvita	Woman Horlex, Mother Horlex
Multivitamins	Revital; Calcium Sandoz	Revital Woman, Yakult, Calcium Sandoz Woman
Watches	Titan Classic	Titan Raga
Education Courses	Mechanical Engineering, Architectures	HR, Home Sci. Fashion Designing

Perception of Fit in Gender Extension

Past studies in brand extension areas have found that the success of an extension depends on the perception of fit between the parent brand and the extended product category (Aaker and Keller 1990; Boush and Loken 1991; Keller 1998). The greater the perception of fit between the two, the more easily the positive associations of the parent brand are transferred to the extension, thus increasing the chance of success in the extension. Greater fit perception will have a positive impact on consumers' evaluation of the extension (Aaker and Keller 1990) as well as on their attitude towards the parent brand (Loken and John 1993). Although the perception of fit could be formed by various factors, past studies have identified two major bases for more successful fits: product feature similarity and brand image or concept consistency (Park, Milberg, and Lawson 1991; Bhat and Reddy 1998). Park, Milberg, and Lawson (1991) suggested that evaluations of brand extensions depend on the degree of overall perceived fit between the extension product and the brand name. The degree of overall perceived fit is, then, a function of both product-feature similarity perceptions and brand-concept- consistency perceptions. Product feature similarity perceptions are derived by feature correlations or attribute matches from feature level comparisons. Brand concept consistency perceptions are formed by the image fit between the extension product and the brand (i.e., how well the brand concept accommodates the extension product). In gender extensions, the main concern for marketers would be brand image fit. This is because product feature similarity in gender extension is not significantly important since the extension is in

the same product category and shares the same features. The most critical aspect is a brand's perceived masculinity or femininity. For example, when Triumph extends into male swimwear, the key issue is whether men will accept the feminine image of Triumph on their swimwear. In essence, the focus of this study is on assessing brand image fit between gender extensions.

Gender of Brand and Evaluation of Gender Extensions

According to studies in gender stereotyping, masculine traits tend to be regarded higher than traditional feminine traits. Being strong, independent, and willing to take risks are seen more positively than being weak, gullible, and easily influenced. This difference in values may result in a greater desirability for masculine traits in society. Since a brand is used as an expression of one's personality (Aaker 1996), the greater social desirability for masculine traits would be manifested in the choice of products as well as brands by consumers. This line of argument is consistent with the study by Alreck, Settle, and Belch (1982) which suggested that men will almost reject feminine brands while women will most likely accept masculine brands. Stuteville (1971) also suggested that it is easier for a male-oriented product to attract females than the reverse situation. This is because society labels a boy who acts like a girl as a "sissy" boy while a girl who acts like a boy is called as a "tomboy". The latter is much easier for a girl to accept than the former is of a boy. Like products, a brand can also be an avenue to express one's masculinity/femininity (McCracken 1993). Given that it is more difficult for a female-oriented product to attract males, it follows that it is more difficult for a feminine brand to attract males than the reverse situation.

Gender of Consumer and Evaluation of Gender Extensions

Gender stereotyping studies suggest that men and women perceive sex roles differently, with men holding a more unfavourable view towards femininity (Lii and Wong 1982; Smith and Midlarsky 1985; Werner and LaRussa 1985). Based on the concept that consumers use brands as an expression of their personalities, men and women are predicted to react differently when they encounter gender extensions. Alreck, Settle, and Belch (1982) found that men tend to exaggerate the differences in brands more markedly than women. Men are found to perceive a masculine brand to be more masculine and a feminine brand to be more feminine. They also suggested that compared to women, men tend to find their sexual identity in the material goods they buy and use. This implies that, compared to a woman, it would be more difficult for a man to accept an extension from a feminine brand if it contradicts to his masculine gender identity. On the other hand, Lull, Hanson and Marx (1977) found that women were more sensitive and critical of sex-role stereotyping than men. Thus, women tend to be more responsive to gender crossing than men because they prefer to adhere less to the traditional sex role prescriptions. This is opposed to men who have a more rigid definition of their male sex roles.

Product Type and Evaluation of Gender Extensions

Product types may play an important role in consumers' evaluation of brand extensions. Since image fit is more important in gender extensions, the acceptance of gender extensions would be influenced depending on whether the product type is image-oriented or function-oriented. Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis's (1986) conceptualization of functional and symbolic

brand concept is useful in examining product type effect in gender extensions. With symbolic products, the benefits sought are more extrinsic in nature and usually correspond to non-product related attributes, especially user imagery. Symbolic benefits relate to underlying needs for social approval or personal expression and outer-directed self-esteem (Solomon, 1983). Thus, getting the wrong symbolic product could result in high social and psychological risk. In the case of functional products, the benefits sought are more intrinsic in nature and usually correspond to product-related attributes. Functional benefits are often linked to basic motivations such as physiological and safety needs, and often involve a desire to satisfy problem removal or avoidance (Fennell, 1978). Such products have a lower level of social and psychological risks when compared with symbolic products. Since the main concern for gender extensions is the image incongruence between masculinity and femininity, a symbolic product which offers emotional and self-expressive benefits is likely to experience more difficulties than functional products.

DISCUSSION

This study examines consumers' evaluations of gender extensions in an attempt to identify conditions for successful gender extensions. Gender of the brand, gender of consumers, and product type are considered key conditional factors that may influence the success of gender extensions. It is found that all three factors do influence the evaluation of gender extensions. Key findings are summarized as follows.

First, although it is not significant at the multivariate level, a significant main effect of the gender of brand (more specifically the direction of gender extension) is observed on the three dependent variables related to the acceptance of gender extension. The acceptance of a gender extension is higher when an extension is made from a masculine brand to target female consumers than the other way round.

Second, significant main effects of the gender-of-consumer and the product type are also observed in the study. Women are found to be more receptive towards gender extensions than men. The acceptance of gender extensions is lower for the symbolic product category than for the functional product category. It is observed that men's perception of brand image fit of gender extensions is higher when the brand is from the functional product category rather than from the symbolic product category. On the other hand, women's perceptions are not different whether the brand is from the symbolic product category, or from the functional product category. Overall, men's acceptance of a gender extension is found to be lower in the symbolic product category than in the functional product category compared to women. This finding is consistent with the past finding which suggests that men are more likely to find their sexual identity in the material goods they buy and use. Men are also more consistently defining their sexual identity in terms of external possessions. (Alreck, Settle and Belch 1982). In a symbolic product category, the gender image associated with a gendered brand tends to become a salient attribute, thus, men would become more resistant than women to accept gendered brands. On the other hand, the gender image associated with a brand tends to become a less salient attribute compared to other functional attributes in a functional product category. As a result, it may not become as influential as in a symbolic product category.

Third, the pattern of effects on the attitude towards the original brand after the extension mirrors that of the evaluation of the extension, although the effects are weaker. This may suggest that there is a positive correlation between evaluation of an extension and attitude towards the original brand. A possible explanation is that an incongruous extension not only affects the evaluation towards the extension, but it also affects consumers' attitudes towards the brand itself. This explanation is consistent with past research findings (Aaker 1991). The results of this study provide some useful implications to marketers who are considering

gender extensions. Faced with a gender extension from an established gendered brand, marketers may want to know the conditions that could increase a chance of success in the extension. The findings of this study suggest that it would be easier for a masculine brand to extend to target female customers than the other way round. The chance of success would be further increased if the product category is a functional one. This explains why Gillette has successfully extended its shaving product lines to women customers.

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