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Brand Perception and Gender Stereotype Products

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ABSTRACT
Consumers often judge brands and companies using the warmth and competence dimensions. Our study demonstrates that subtle feminine (vs. masculine) primes included into the product’s description increase perceived brand warmth which translates to a higher purchasing likelihood. Interestingly, this effect is especially profound for masculine products.

INTRODUCTION
Consumers pay only 1.73 seconds of attention to print advertisements on average (Pieters and Wedel 2004). Hence, today’s challenge for advertisers is to increase positive brand perception and assure consumers with increasingly low attention spans to buy their product. To achieve their goal, advertisers must find ways to convey the right brand image in a short time and with the restricted mental resources of the consumer. One potential solution is to utilize ‘stereotypes’. Because people activate stereotypes in less than milliseconds; almost automatically (Bargh 1997), implementing stereotypes can ensure that consumers still process the advertising.

Recently, Aaker, Vohs and Mogilner (2010) studied organizational stereotypes and their effect on consumer’s behaviour. They found that consumers stereotype firms on the basis of two fundamental dimensions: warmth and competence. Yet, they found that competence, rather than warmth, influences their purchasing behaviour. At the same time, warmth and competence were shown to be the underlying dimensions for most group stereotypes (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, and Xu 2002) and underlie the content of gender stereotypes in particular. The stereotypical woman is viewed as warm, whereas men are stereotyped as competent (Eagly and Mladinic, 1994; Eagly, Mladinic, and Otto 1994).

This knowledge can be crucial in an attempt to enhance warmth versus competence in a consumer setting. That is because humans can activate gender stereotypical knowledge on the basis of cues associated to gender stereotypes (e.g. occupation, physical appearance, terms like “nurse” etc.; Banaji and Hardin 1996; Deaux and Lewis 1984). Subsequently, those cues could take the form of colours and symbols which are associated to a gender (Fagot, et al. 1997; Leinbach, Hort, and Fagot 1997). Consequently, those cues can be used to trigger the content of gender stereotypes to enhance the brand/product perceptions and, as a result, purchase likelihood.

The goal of this paper is to investigate whether utilizing gender stereotypes in the product description has an effect on the products’ purchase likelihood. In particular, we test whether and how the activation of gender stereotypes influence a consumer’s brand perception via the warmth and competence dimension and how this perception influences purchasing behaviour depending on a product’s gender (Fugate and Phillips, 2010). To archive this goal we first, test the effect of gender primes on purchasing intention for masculine versus feminine typed products. Second, we investigate the role of warmth and competence as the mediator for purchasing likelihood.

Study 1: Consumers automatically and unconsciously assign a gender to most products (e.g. hair spray is considered to be feminine whereas coffee is perceived as masculine; (Fugate and Phillips 2010). In addition, a gender related stereotype can be activated via different cues in the product information description or in the advertising (e.g. Banaji and Hardi 1996). In study 1 we estimate the effect of (in)congruence between the perceived gender of the product category and the gender of the subtle cues in the product’s description on the product’s purchase likelihood.

Study design.
The study had a 2 (Gender typed product: masculine product versus feminine product) x 3 (Gender prime: masculine prime versus feminine prime versus non-prime) between-subjects design throughout 3 different product categories (Electronics, Beverages and Hair products) within-subject. The gender typed products were chosen on the basis of a pre-test. For the electronics product category a mobile phone (feminine) and a camcorder (masculine) were selected. The beverages category contains coffee (masculine) and chocolate drink (feminine) while the hair product category was represented by hair spray (feminine) and hair wax (masculine).

The gender primes were symbols and colours
which are identified as male-typed or as female-typed (Fagot et al. 1997; Leinbach et al. 1997). We used the following sets of gender primes: 1) colours (blue for masculine vs. pink for feminine); 2) animals symbols (bear for masculine vs. butterfly for feminine); 3) geometrical symbols (squares for masculine vs. circle for feminine). The neutral condition had no gender activating primes. The brand names in each product category were brand name root without any gender cues to ensure that the brand names are not associated with any gender (Yorkston and Mello 2005). The price of the corresponding products in each category was identical (e.g. the price of the coffee and the chocolate drink were the same).

The data was collected via online snowball sampling. The final sample had 204 respondents (110 female). Participants were randomly assigned to one of six fictitious advertisements showing the product, its brand name, assorted product information, and the product’s price. Next, participants indicated their likelihood to purchase the product shown in the ad on a 7-point scale (1=not at all likely; 7=very likely). In addition they indicated to what extent they believe XXX-Brand is….?“ warm, kind, generous (warm index; Cronbach’s alpha = .85) competent, effective, efficient (competent index, Cronbach’s alpha = .90; Aaker et al. 2010; Grandey et al., 2005; Judd et al., 2005) on a 7 point scale (1= not at all; 7=very much).

Manipulation check product gender.
Participants indicated how masculine/feminine they perceived the products to be. In each product category the masculine product was rated significantly more masculine than the corresponding feminine equivalent on a 7-point-scale (1=definitely feminine; 7=definitely masculine) (beverages: Chocolate= 2.94; M_coffee= 4.19, t(203) =-12.468, p = .00) (hair product: M_spray = 1.88 M_wax = 4.02, t(203) =-14.738 , p = .00) (electro: M_mobil = 4.09 M_camcorder = 4.73, t(203) = -8.753, p = .00).

RESULTS
We conducted an ANOVA on purchase likelihood with product gender and gender primes as between-subjects factors throughout all product categories. We found a significant positive interaction effect between product gender and gender prime ($F(1,407) = 5.513, p < .02$), suggesting that for masculine products a feminine prime actually enhances purchase likelihood and the same was true for feminine products with a masculine prime. The follow-up planned comparisons revealed for the masculine product that feminine primes lead to a higher purchase likelihood than masculine primes ($t(605) = 2.326, p = .02$) For the feminine products, masculine primes were not significantly higher compared to feminine primes ($t(605) = -1.041, p > .05$). Graph 1 displays the mean values of purchasing likelihood. The main effects of product gender and gender prime were insignificant (both $ps > .10$), indicating, that, overall, respondents were not more likely to purchase feminine than masculine products and that the prime on its own did not have a significant effect on purchase likelihood. Thus, gender primes only increase purchase likelihood if it is incompatible with the product gender.

Graph 1: Means for purchase likelihood
To test the role of perceived warmth and competence of a brand we conducted two separate mediation analyses between gender primes and purchasing likelihood. The result of the mediation analysis (Zhao, Lynch Jr., and Chen 2010) indicates that the effect of gender primes on purchase likelihood is mediated by warmth. Namely, the indirect effect from the conducted bootstrap analysis is negative and significant ($a \times b = -.1415$), with a 95% confidence interval excluding zero (-0.2819 to -0.0104). In the indirect path, the masculine prime decrease warmth by $a = -0.2499$, and holding constant the prime, a unit increases in warmth increases purchasing likelihood by 0.5663 ($b = 0.5663$). We conducted the same analysis for competence as the mediator and found it to be insignificant with a 95% confidence interval including 0 (-0.2549 to 0.0285). Therefore, the results suggest that the feminine primes enhance purchase likelihood via increasing the perceived warmth of the product. Interestingly, we do not find the same effect for the masculine primes. That is, masculine primes do not seem to enhance perceived either perceived warmth or competence.

To understand the influence of warmth and competence more thoroughly, we are currently planning further studies where we manipulate the
brands competence and warmth and add some gender primes.

**DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The results of the study show that feminine primes enhance perceived warmth which promotes a higher likelihood to purchase masculine products. Interestingly, perceived warmth proves to serve as a mediator between prime and purchasing likelihood yet competence does not. Our study makes several contributions to the literature. First, despite the documented effects of both of those dimensions in a social setting (Casciaro and Lobo, 2008; Fiske et al. 2007; Fiske et al. 2002), little attention has been paid to them in consumer settings, a gap that this study aims to fill. Second, we directly address Aaker et al.’s (2010) call to investigate conditions, under which perceived warmth drives purchasing likelihood. Finally, we contribute to the stereotyping literature, by demonstrating that in addition to cues like role behaviours, occupation, and physical appearance (Deaux and Lewis 1984; Banaji and Hardin 1996), symbols and colours which are associated to a gender can trigger gender stereotype knowledge. From a practical viewpoint, our results provide important implications for companies and their marketplace decisions. Thus, companies that sell masculine products are able to utilize female advertising cues to increase their brands perception of warmth, which in turn, translates to a higher purchasing likelihood.

**REFERENCES**


