Brand Gender and Its Dimensions

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ABSTRACT
This paper investigates consumer perception of brand gender and its dimensions. An exploratory study reveals this concept salience and the existence of its six dimensions: 1) the gender of the typical brand user, 2) gendered brand personality traits, 3) gendered attributes of brand communication, 4) the grammatical gender of the brand name, 5) gendered attributes of the logo, and 6) gendered attributes and benefits of the products. Leaning on gender theories in psychology, our results suggest a classification of brand gender in three groups: masculine, feminine, low masculine/feminine, with no brand in the high masculine/feminine brand gender position. (Key words : Brand gender, brand extension, brand personality)

INTRODUCTION
Do Brands, Like Human Beings, Have Gender Identities?
Gender takes into account the social and cultural difference between femininity and masculinity and has also been a key symbolic processing variable in our thinking system since Antiquity (Hérétier 1996). The male/female categorization process is still one of the first classification systems learnt by children (Powlishta et al. 2001) and is continuously used by adults without full awareness they are doing so (Schneider 2004).

Gender is deeply rooted in many languages, with gendered nouns. In French, the “sea” is grammatically feminine, and the “ocean” is masculine. Many languages have two grammatical genders (feminine, masculine) or three (feminine, masculine and neuter).

Is Gillette still perceived as masculine and Lancôme as feminine? These brands used to target men or women only, then started to extend across genders with the launch of Gillette razors “Venus for Women” or “Lancôme for Men” skincare products.

This has been scarcely studied in the literature. Researchers often suggest that brands possess gendered images (Aaker 1997; Fournier 1998; Keller 1993; McCracken 1993) but the concept of brand gender has not been investigated. How can brand gender be defined? Which dimensions constitute brand gender? If gender and masculine/feminine categorization is central to the way we see the world, it may impact our perception of brands. The objective of this study is to explore consumer perception of the brand gender concept and its dimensions.

BACKGROUND
The Central Role of Gender in Civilization
The biological term sex defines men and women by their physical characteristics, their genital organs and their chromosomes. Gender is a social sex, representing the set of characteristics and behaviours that a given society associate and ascribe differently to women and men: it is our notion of femininity and masculinity (Burr 1998). Despite societal moves in the egalitarian direction, gender norms are still alive and well. Childcare continues to be a feminine role with limited intervention from men (Abbot and Wallace 2003). Gendered differentiation in upbringing persists with families encouraging boys to behave in a manly way and girls to behave in a womanly way (Dafflon-Novelle 2006) In experiments, adults tend to give masculine toys to boys, but allow girls to choose neutral or even masculine toys (Wood et al. 2002).

In parallel, anthropologists have shown how gender is a key structuring variable of civilizations. Each culture develops a set of masculine and feminine gender identities, which can differ totally from one tribe to the other (Godelier 1982; Mead 1928). Yet, each one is built upon the allocation of distinct social roles to men and women (Bourdieu 1998; Mead 1928; Lévi-Strauss 1979). Hérétier (1996) reveals how differences between male/female bodies organize thinking processes. Most civilizations structure thoughts on the basis of couples of opposites derived from sexual bodily features. Thanks to their body and hair, women are associated with curved/soft and men with straight/stiff/hard. This was institutionalized long ago in most cultures via myths or legends. Hence gender seems to act as a major symbolic processing variable in perception. Does it impact the perception of products and brands?

Gendered Perception of Products
Studies have shown that consumers have gendered perception of product categories: some were seen as highly masculine, some highly feminine and others moderately masculine and feminine (Allison et al. 1980). Their masculinity/femininity seemed linked to the gender of the stereotyped user of the product category. Allison et al (1980) concluded that products did have a gender, demonstrating the existence of two separate constructs: product masculinity and product femininity. More recent studies suggest that objects generate gendered associations. Products are classified as masculine or feminine according to their shape and colours (Tissier-Desbordes and Kimmel 2002). Small products with light, pastel and soft shades are associated with women, while large dark-coloured items are associated with men (Kirkham 1996). Researchers have shown that round shapes generate ideas like harmony, compromise, and friendship. Conversely, angular shapes lead to masculine attributes: energy, strength, robustness (Berlyne 1976). Both men and women can decide shapes ascribed to their gender: facing four unmarked perfume bottles, men choose those with masculine shapes, and women those with feminine shapes (Schmitt, Leclerc, and Dubé-Rioux 1988).

Gendered Perception of Brands
Consumer perception of brand gender is referred to indirectly in the marketing literature. The phenomenon of humanizing brands is not new: Martineau (1958) and Levy (1959) observed the human dimension of brands fifty years ago. For Levy, brand personality included characteristics such as personality traits, age, and gender. Some researchers have suggested that brands possess feminine/masculine dimensions (Aaker 1997; Alreck et al., 1982; Fournier 1998; Keller 1993; McCracken, 1993). The feminine or masculine image of the brand comes from the gender of the main user associated with that brand (Keller 1993). Moreover, people transfer to a brand the specific personality traits of its stereotyped consumer (Mc Cracken 1986). Recently, Yorkston and De Mello (2005) show that Spanish consumers spontaneously use gendered associations of brand names, then evaluate more favourably brands whose grammatical gender name is in line with the gender of the typical brand user.

Yet little research has been focused directly on the gendered perception of brands. Early studies revealed congruency between the masculine/feminine personality of individuals and their preference for brands with masculine/feminine images (Alreck et al. 1982; Fry...
Brand gender has recently regained attention from researchers analyzing a growing managerial practice: cross-gender brand extension (Grohmann 2009; Jung and Lee 2006; Veg 2008). Grohmann (2009) shows that consumers associate brands with feminine/masculine personalities and successfully develops two scales to measure these two dimensions. However, we have found no conceptual definition of brand gender, nor any description of its components, in the existing literature. Brands can convey masculine or feminine personality traits, as proved by Grohmann (2009) and generate gendered associations through the grammatical gender of the brand name (Yorkston and De Mello 2005). Brand gender is therefore a multidimensional concept that we will strive to define via its dimensions.

**Brand Gender: Towards a Multidimensional Concept**

Brands can be considered as a set of associations held in the memory (Keller 1993). Most authors agree on this conception, although they may differ in their approach to the nature and the number of these associations (Aaker 1991; Keller 1993). Given the central role of gender in our thinking processes, the gender of brands could be made of all the gendered associations of the brand, as perceived and memorized by consumers. In socio-psychology, gender is predominantly considered as a multidimensional concept, encompassing the various categories of attributes, attitudes and behaviours that empirically distinguish men from women in a given culture (Ashmore 1990; Spence 1993). Also, marketing literature has defined brand personality as “the set of human personality traits associated with a brand by consumers” (Aaker 1997). We thus propose to transfer the multidimensional vision of gender to brand gender with the following definition: *brand gender is the set of gendered brand and product characteristics, attributes and personality traits associated with that brand by consumers.*

What are the possible attributes that make up brand gender? Brand perception or brand image is defined by Aaker (1991) as a prism with ten dimensions (Figure 1).

For brand gender, we retain only the dimensions which, based on our literature analysis, could have gendered associations (underlined in Figure 1). This led us to exclude for instance dimensions such as price. Capitalizing on previous research on the gender of brand names (Yorkston and De Mello 2005), we propose to add a dimension consisting of the brand name and logo. Moreover, since brand advertising can also be perceived as masculine or feminine (Alreck et al., 1982; Till and Priluck 2001), via colors or sounds (Wolin 2003) or spokespersons (Debevec and Iyer 1986), we add a further dimension: communication attributes. Finally, we propose a concept of brand gender with seven dimensions (Figure 2).

Exploratory depth interviews were conducted with 35 French individuals to let the respondents openly express all the brand associations that came to mind. Our semi-structured guide was organized by themes, from the general to the specific, beginning with perception of product categories, the overall perception of the brand tested in the interview and the potential dimensions of brand gender. We presented various stimuli to consumers (the brand name, the brand logo, a major product of the brand, brand advertising) to generate richer vocabulary, then asked again about the overall perception, without mentioning our focus on gender. To maximize generalization of results, we selected four product categories (mineral water, coffee, razors, skincare), either utilitarian or symbolic and with different genders according to previous literature: masculine

1Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 3 hours.

2The question was as follows: “What are the impressions, images, words that come to mind about this brand?”
Brand Gender and Its Dimensions

(razors), feminine (skincare), or mixed due to mixed usage (coffee, mineral water). We also chose ten well known brands, potentially possessing a masculine or feminine image.

The respondents consisted of 20 male/15 female users of these product categories, who were familiar with the tested brand and varied in age, social group, occupation, marital status, gender, sexual orientation and place of residence. Each brand was tested by five participants.

The interviews were analyzed in a two-stage methodology. A traditional content analysis was conducted, following Denzin and Lincoln (1994) principles. A lexical analysis was run using the Alceste software, to reveal the classification of textual data without any pre-conception of themes or interpretation by the researcher (Helme-Guizon and Gavard-Perret 2004).

RESEARCH RESULTS

Brand Gender as a Salient Concept and a Categorization Tool for Consumers

Half of our respondents spontaneously referred to gendered brands at the beginning of the interview4 (25 references). Contrex was quoted 10 times (feminine), Taillefine 3 (feminine), Mercedes 3 (masculine), Sveltesse 2 (feminine), then Castorama, Nordauto, Marlboro, Hépar, Surcouf, Peugeot 106, Aston Martin (once each).

Furthermore, our content analysis reveals that brand gender is a salient and relevant concept, emerging from the outset for many brands. From the first associations, brand gender is quoted for five of our brands by all respondents, whatever their sex, age and sexual orientation. For example, one male respondent stated that “Lancôme is sophisticated, feminine, discreet, seductive, French.” Another woman commented: “Lancôme is luxury, feminine, not the modern woman, sophisticated and sensual.” Dior is also perceived feminine from the first associations: “Dior equals prestige, quality, aesthetic, graceful: simply feminine,” or “For me it’s luxury, femininity, Haute Couture, for women only, essentially feminine” from another individual. Contrex appears feminine just the same, illustrated by these two participants: “it’s feminine, about being slim” and “it’s slimness and a mineral water for women, feminine

and light.” Both Gillette and Nickel appear masculine: “Gillette is about perfection for men, the idea of performance, it’s about masculinity, for virile men,” which echoes these words: “Macho advertising, technical and high-performing, very masculine” from a female respondent. And a last quote for Nickel: “a masculine brand, intended for men only, selling masculine products in masculine packs that have automobile connotation.”

Importantly, we can see from these first associations that all consumers mentioned the gender of the typical brand user for these five brands, with the words “for man/masculine” or “for women/feminine.” Other categories of associations emerge, such as product attributes, brand personality traits or communication attributes: some of them are gendered associations that we will further analyse in this paper. Conversely, some of the other brands do not immediately lead to gendered associations (Jacques Vabre, Grand-Mère, Badoit, Bic): respondents concluded that these brands are neutral, without gender, unisex. Biotherm appears with low masculinity and low femininity for three respondents out of five.

Thus, our set of brands can be classified as feminine (high femininity/low masculinity–Contrex, Lancôme, Dior), masculine (high masculinity/low femininity–Gillette, Nickel), and neutral or genderless (low femininity/low masculinity–Badoit, Jacques Vabre, Grand-Mère, Bic, and Biotherm at a lesser extent). These results reflect the gender theories on masculine and feminine traits, classifying people in four groups: 1) masculine, 2) feminine, 3) undifferentiated, and 4) androgynous (masculine+feminine) (Bern 1981; Spence and Helmreich 1980). Drawing on these theories, we arrive at Figure 3. Yet, none of our brands was perceived as both strongly masculine and strongly feminine, duplicating the results of Grohmann (2009) on the gendered dimensions of brand personality.

In parallel, the lexical analysis with Alceste revealed four groups of words, or four universes in the consumers’ discourse on their overall perception of brands: 1) a masculine universe containing textual data on the Gillette, Nickel and Bic brands, 2) a feminine universe associated with the text on skincare brands and Contrex, 3) a theme focussing on coffee and family, and 4) a more minor theme concerning youth and water.

This lexical analysis covered 51% of the “u.c.e”, which is satisfactory, and results in a classification in which a vocabulary class associated with masculinity contrasts with a class on femininity/sophistication. It shows that consumers tend to classify some brands in masculine/feminine categories that extend beyond traditional product categories. Thus, class 1 (masculine universe)


5These are answers to the first question of the interview concerning perception of product categories.

U.c.e are “units of elementary text” in the Alceste software. To be statistically significant, this percentage should exceed 50%.
brand literature (Keller 1993). The gender of these brands appears to be associated with the gender of the typical brand user, independently of the gender of the product category of the brand. For example, a man (P.) perceives the skincare category as feminine and the Nickel brand as masculine, because of its stereotyped user (Table 2). The gender of the typical user associated with the brand can be considered as a main dimension of brand gender. In contrast, the gender of the brand’s product category was never mentioned as a component of the brand gender and thus does not appear as one of its key components.

2. Gendered Personality Traits of the Brand.
From the first associations, a majority of respondents expressed gendered associations qualifying the feminine or masculine personality of the brand. These attributes are for instance "discreet, seductive, sophisticated, soft, tender, cheerful" versus "assertive, forceful, technical, high-performing, competitive, aggressive" (for the Lancôme, Dior, Contrex brands versus Nickel, Gillette). To illustrate, one respondent quotes on Lancôme: “For women, ultra feminine, images of advertising, a sophisticated, soft, refined, tender brand, sensual and graceful.”

The Six Dimensions of Brand Gender
Our content analysis reveals six dimensions of brand gender. The gender of the typical user of the brand. From the first associations for Lancôme, Dior, Contrex, Nickel and Gillette, all consumers mentioned the gender of the typical brand user, as says individual L.: “Dior evokes star system, it’s for women, fashion-addicts and trendy women.” This replicates previous research about the gender of products (Allison et al. 1980) and is in line with the brand literature (Keller 1993). The gender of these brands appears to be associated with the gender of the typical brand user, independently of the gender of the product category of the brand. For example, a man (P.) perceives the skincare category as feminine and the Nickel brand as masculine, because of its stereotyped user (Table 2). The gender of the typical user associated with the brand can be considered as a main dimension of brand gender. In contrast, the gender of the brand’s product category was never mentioned as a component of the brand gender and thus does not appear as one of its key components.

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TABLE 1
Classification of the Textual Data on Brand Perception Using the Alceste Software

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine Universe</th>
<th>Feminine Universe</th>
<th>Coffee Universe</th>
<th>Water Universe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>38% of u.c.e</td>
<td>20% of u.c.e</td>
<td>29% of u.c.e</td>
<td>13% of u.c.e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculine (13/19)*</td>
<td>Sophistication (6/25)</td>
<td>Coffee (23/64)</td>
<td>Water (6/28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He (29/10)</td>
<td>Woman (10/11)</td>
<td>Family (4/10)</td>
<td>Young (9/9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovate (8/9)</td>
<td>Feminine (6/8)</td>
<td>Quality (5/7)</td>
<td>Sparkling (3/21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic (8/3)</td>
<td>Elegant (5/5)</td>
<td>Old (4/4)</td>
<td>Green (5/35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing (3/2)</td>
<td>Soft (3/3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive (3/2)</td>
<td>Discreet (3/3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(n / m): occurrence frequency of the word / associated/ Khi2.

TABLE 2
Gender of Product Categories, Brand Gender and Gender of the Typical Brand User

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand</th>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Gender of the Brand’s Product Categories</th>
<th>Perceived Brand Gender</th>
<th>Gender of the Typical User</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nickel</td>
<td>P. (Man)</td>
<td>“Skincare: more feminine than masculine”</td>
<td>“For men, with an original vision, scientific, masculine”</td>
<td>“Young men”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E. (Woman)</td>
<td>“Skincare: masculine and feminine, was feminine only”</td>
<td>“Masculine brand, thinks about men only”</td>
<td>“Elegant and masculine men”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lancôme</td>
<td>M. (Man)</td>
<td>“Skincare: now mixed”</td>
<td>“Sophisticated, feminine,” discreet, seductive</td>
<td>“Women”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F. (Woman)</td>
<td>“Make-up: feminine market”</td>
<td>“For all women, elegant, fashionable and trendy”</td>
<td>“Women”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrex</td>
<td>K. (Man)</td>
<td>“Mineral water: undifferentiated, no gender”</td>
<td>“Old brand, institution, feminine, helps in slimming”</td>
<td>“Women”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M. (Woman)</td>
<td>“Mineral water: no gender, for everybody”</td>
<td>“Slimness, a mineral water for women, feminine and light”</td>
<td>“Women”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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6Instrumental and expressive traits refer to Parsons and Bales theory (1955), which indicated that men are characterized by instrumental attributes and women by expressive attributes.
sensual, sensitive...”) or the traditional man (“macho, aggressive, performing, competitive, assertive, strong, rough...”). They are also similar to the items on the scales developed by Grohmann (2009) on the masculine/feminine personality of the brand.

3. The Gendered Attributes of Brand Communication. A majority of our respondents expressed gendered associations with brand communication (Table 3) for all our brands. These associations relate mostly to the gender of the advertising spokesperson (Debevec and Iyer 1986), the advertising baseline (Gillette), or a gendered symbol (such as the Lancôme rose). In the end, we presented current advertisements for the brands, eliciting a larger number of gendered associations that can be classified as follows: the gender of the people in the advertisement, their attitudes (“a macho, forceful, sportsmanlike young man” - Gillette; “a romantic, gentle woman” - Contrex), the shades, graphics and images (“pastel shades, it looks feminine, sophisticated” - Dior; “blurred images that convey femininity” - Contrex) or the sounds (“the bomb explosion at the end of the advertising: that’s so masculine” - Gillette). These results are in line with past research on advertising (Alreck et al. 1982; Wolin 2003).

4. The Gender of the Brand Name. The grammatical gender of the brand name emerged in the first associations for the Nickel brand (three respondents out of five). One interviewee stated that “the name makes me think of industrial materials, so it’s a masculine name and a masculine brand”. Another expressed that “Nickel is a chemical element, cold masculine, evokes a masculine brand”. For the other gendered brands (Gillette, Lancôme, Dior and Contrex), only three consumers expressed this kind of association spontaneously. For example, this participant: “With the e at the end, Gillette is rather a feminine name.” Yet when questioned specifically on the brand name,4 all consumers mentioned a gender for the brand name, related to the sonority: “Lancôme, rather voluptuous in resonance, it sounds round, secure, soft, so it is feminine.” This result is consistent with previous work (Yorkston and De Mello 2005). It thus seems appropriate to conceive the gender of the brand name as another component of the perceived gender of the brand in French language. However, our study reveals that brand gender is more related to the gender of the typical brand user and to the gendered personality of the brand, than to the actual brand name.

The names Contrex and Dior have masculine connotations for our French consumers, yet they are perceived globally as feminine. The Gillette name has feminine connotations for French speakers, but the brand is seen as masculine. The gender of the brand name helps to convey masculinity or femininity to the brand, yet other dimensions make greater contributions to the overall perception of the brand gender.

5. The Gendered Attributes of the Logo. Occasionally, a few interviewees mentioned the gender of the brand logo. Its colours, shapes, symbols appear to have masculine or feminine connotations: “The Biotherm logo is red and grey; no special design for the B, just a solid letter: it looks masculine” (F) or “I recall the rose, the flower on the Lancôme logo, it looks feminine” (A), or “Gillette is a neutral and basic logo; I remember Wilkinson looks more masculine, because of the two swords” (J). This is in line with past literature (Kirkham 1996). Yet this dimension appears less contributive to the brand gender than previous dimensions, generating fewer spontaneous associations.

6. The Gendered Attributes and Benefits of Brand Products. For some brands such as Dior or Nickel, gendered associations concerning product attributes are expressed by a majority of consumers. Products are perceived as masculine or feminine due to their colours and shapes, as previously shown in the literature (Kirkham 1996), and due to the materials used or the sophistication and subtlety of the design. Hence this comment on Dior: “Magnificent packagings, such quality in the materials they use, the product textures: a feminine universe.” Or another respondent on Nickel: “I remember the shape looks like a petrol can, so masculine, straight, abrupt shapes.” Product benefits are also referred to as gender-specific: for Contrex, the benefit of being slim is seen as feminine. For the other brands, all consumers express similar comments on gendered product attributes after being shown the brand products at the end of the interview, as shown on Lancôme: “a precious cream jar, looks like a treasure, pearly material at the top of the pack and its curved shape look so feminine.”

DISCUSSION
This research aimed to understand brand gender and its components. Our results show that brand gender is a salient and relevant concept, coming first when we ask consumers to talk about brands. Using a lexical analysis, we found that brand gender is a key factor to categorize brands, which seems to overtake the product categories. Moreover, this study enabled us to define the components of brand gender, which is a multidimensional concept. We identified six dimensions (Figure 4): 1) the gender of the brand’s main users,
the dimension that makes the greatest contribution, 2) gendered personality traits of the brand, 3) gendered attributes of brand communication, 4) the gender of the brand name, 5) gendered attributes of the logo, and 6) gendered attributes and benefits of the products.

If we consider that there are potentially four possible brand genders—1) masculine, 2) feminine, 3) slightly masculine and feminine, 4) strongly masculine and feminine—trying to adapt the theories of gender to brand gender (Bem 1981; Spence and Helmreich 1980), we found brands in all the first three categories but not the last. These results are congruent with the quantitative research by Grohmann (2009) on gendered brand personality, who found a similar mapping pattern for brands according to their degree of masculine or feminine personality, but could not identify a brand with a strongly masculine/feminine (androgynous) personality. The possibility of finding androgynous brands, and how consumers would react to them, could be addressed by future research. This study also provides support for the importance of brand gender as a distinct concept from brand personality concept (Aaker 1997) and from masculine/feminine brand personality by Grohmann (2009).

Finally, our findings have managerial implications for marketers considering extensions to the opposite gender. If a brand has a gender, and if this gender is mainly created by the gender of the typical brand user, how can firms extend a brand with a perceived strong feminine gender to men? Conversely how to extend a perceived strongly masculine brand to women? Understanding the gender of brand and its components could help to avoid marketing mistakes.

However, there are some limitations to this research. We examined ten brands from four product categories, varying in gender and in their symbolic/utilitarian dimension. It would be interesting to analyse the gender of other categories of brands: fashion, distribution, services, high tech brands. For instance, does Apple have a gender? In addition, we identified some dimensions of brand gender for French consumers, but it would be useful to measure more accurately the gender of brands and the influence of each dimension. Another avenue for future research concerns the effect of consumer gender identity on the perception of the brand gender. Is there a link between the consumer’s gender identity or gender ideology and the perceived brand gender? Is it possible to buy a feminine brand if you are strongly masculine? Is perception of brand gender homogeneous, or affected by certain characteristics of the interviewee? Just as age has an effect on an individual’s sex role perceptions, it may also affect perception of brand gender. Specific research could also focus on children and explore their perception of the masculinity and femininity of brands. Finally, further consumer research could be conducted to investigate conditions for successful cross-gender brand extensions, capitalizing on the recent work by Jung & Lee (2006) or Vég (2008).

REFERENCES


## APPENDIX

Description of the Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Soc.</th>
<th>Gp</th>
<th>Residence</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
</tr>
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