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Gender and the Psychological Meaning of Fashion Brands

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The psychological meaning of brands of sneakers is investigated using a free-response stimulus-bound methodology. Gender differences in the meaning of brands are related to thresholds of elaborative processing of advertising messages. Age differences are related to transformational aspects of advertising for fashion products. The implications for strategic brand concept-image management are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Consumer products can be thought of as "psychological things which are symbolic of personal attributes and goals of social patterns and strivings" (Levy 1959) and clothing has symbolic content which functions as a mode of social communication (Holman 1981). The symbolic perspective has more recently been developed into a meaning-based model of consumption by McCracken (1988) who proposes fashion as an exemplar of the system of meaning transfer from culture to the individual. In order for a product to function as a symbol it must have commonality of meaning among consumers, such that those in the reference group must have in common a shared conception of the product's meaning (Hirschman 1981a). Exploratory research has suggested that the proportion of product and brand meaning that is widely shared may be generally as low as 50%, and in clothing as low as 35% (Hirschman 1981b); and nearly identical brands within the same product category, polo shirts, were found to communicate different perceptions of the brand user (Swartz 1983). Although no gender differences in the meaning of brand symbols were found in this study, previous research investigating consumption stereotyping has found that in the case of fashion goods, females are more likely to have shared consumption-based stereotypes than are males (Belk 1978). Conversely in the case of automobiles males are more consistent in their shared attributions than are females (Belk, Mayer and Bahn 1982). Explanations for this difference were related to traditional sex-roles, male roles involving making more choices about automobiles, female roles involving more choices about clothing (Belk, Mayer and Driscoll 1984). There is also growing evidence from studies on the processing of message claims, that under circumstances of low attention females are more sensitive to the particulars of relevant information when forming judgments than are men (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1991), and that this is linked with males being more likely to process information using a strategy driven by associations tied to relevant schema (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991). In the context of the psychological meaning of fashion brands, relevant schema may relate to the strength of consumption symbolism, that is the degree to which consistent inferences are made about the owners of particular brands. In the specific area of clothing, gender differences in product symbolism have been found, in that females were significantly better than men in decoding the communicative language of fashion statements (McCracken and Roth 1989), females were more sensitive to clothing cues than males (Belk, Mayer and Driscoll 1984), and females were more likely to attribute positive characteristics to owners of fashion products (Mayer and Belk 1985). However, in all of these studies the gender differences were much smaller than the effects of age.

Studies of the relationship between age and consumption symbolism have yielded some contradictory findings. In a series of developmental studies, consumption symbolism was found to be more intense with increasing age (Belk, Bahn and Mayer 1982; Belk, Mayer and Driscoll 1984; Mayer and Belk 1985). In contrast, across the age range of seventeen years to fifty-two plus, the ability to decode fashion statements was found to decline consistently with age (McCracken and Roth 1989). The authors explain this decrement as being due to the hypersensitivity to fashion and clothing that is often created by group membership in adolescence. With
increasing age individuals have less need to declare new and changing group membership and therefore pay less attention to the meaning of fashion. However, the best "read"fashion was a heavy metal look, while the least well decoded was a "new romantic" look, and the authors suggest that this may be because the more fashionable a look is the more obscure its meaning, due to its expense and to its marginality. The marginality dimension of fashion items is particularly germane to aspects of youth subcultures, that is when style is "stolen" by subordinate groups and made to carry coded meanings interpretable in full only to members of the subculture (Hebdige 1979). These meanings are constantly in transit, as the display of fashion in turn creates new meanings, and thus may easily be misunderstood (McRobbie 1989). Indeed, it has been argued that "sent message" communication is being replaced by "made message" communication where the signs no longer signify what was originally intended, as youth subcultures actively engage in symbolic work to challenge the assumptions of powerful ideologies and controlling institutions (Willis 1990). In this context, the lack of shared meaning of a clothing code between age groups should perhaps be expected.

Investigations of the relations between consumption objects and the self have suggested that men and women display different patterns of relationships with objects (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). When specifying their favorite possessions males mention objects of action more frequently, whereas women mention objects of contemplation, reflecting instrumental male roles and expressive female roles (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). However, the meanings given for considering an object special differ markedly between men and women, indicating that even identical possessions may be valued for very different reasons (Dittmar 1992). Women's meanings being related to emotions and interpersonal relationships, and men's to instrumental and activity related features.

The evidence suggests then, that not only may the psychological meaning of fashion brands be more idiosyncratic and less widely shared than other symbolic representations, but that the distribution of shared meaning may differ between males and females, and between age groups. This has practical implications for brand concept management (Park, Jaworski and MacInnis 1986) where the normative framework for the planning, implementation and control of a "firm-selected brand meaning" assumes that the concept of meaning is itself unproblematic.

Recent approaches to studying the meaning of products and brands have proposed a variety of dimensions, including attribute and performance (Kleine and Kernan 1988) and tangibility, commonality and emotionality (Fournier 1991); while the meaning of advertising has been explored from a phenomenological perspective focusing on the concepts of life themes and life projects (Mick and Buhl 1992). Meaning has been modelled at the psychological level by Friedman (1986) as being a bundle of tangible, objective attributes and intangible, subjective attributes which vary in their salience, commonality and degree of tangibility. This conception of meaning is based on the work of Szaly and Deese (1978) who defined psychological meaning as "a person's subjective perception...suffused with affectivity". This definition of perception-based meaning has been operationalized as measurement of one-word associations given in free-response format to appropriate stimuli, which in marketing applications are the product or brand (Friedman 1986). These stimulus-bound associations are then reduced by semantic clustering into meaning factors and analyzed for their affinity or shared meaning (Szaly and Deese 1978). This study uses this methodology to investigate the psychological meaning of fashion brands in one particular domain, that of sneakers (in the UK known as trainers). This product category was chosen as representing a fashion product category in which the major brands were not gendered in terms of marketing communications, and after exploratory qualitative research confirmed that these shoes were possessed by the vast majority of the target population (school children and university students, both male and female), that there were a wide range of brands that produced models for both males and females, and that brands differed in their symbolic meaning. However, it also emerged that the status of sneakers as a fashion object was lower among university students than
among school children, but no other fashion product emerged as being of more equal interest to both age groups and both sexes.

METHOD

Sample
The sample consisted of two groups of differing ages, 53 school children attending a High School located in a city in the North-West of England (aged 15 or 16 years, 28 female 25 male), and 82 university students attending a medium-sized campus university in the North-West of England (aged between 19 and 24 years, 43 female 39 male).

Stimuli
The subjects were informed that the research was concerned with what each individual thought about various brands of sneaker. The cue stimuli were the logo's of the six major brands of sneaker in the UK market. Each brand was presented on a single page of a booklet on which the logo was made as obtrusive as possible by having a large representation at the top of the page. Space for nine responses were given below. Subjects were "forced" to consider the stimulus cue before making each response, by preceding each space for a response with the logo as a cue. This repetition was intended to elicit associations with the cue stimulus and to prevent chain-format associations in which the previous response becomes the dominant stimulus cue for the next response (Friedman 1986). The final page of the booklet collected data on age and sex.

Procedure
Subjects were presented with the booklet at the end of a class and asked to write all the single-word free responses that came into their minds for each of the brands. Sixty seconds was allowed for each brand, and then they were asked to move to the next page in the booklet. To control for possible order effects the booklets had been assembled with the order of presentation of brands chosen at random.

RESULTS
The free-response associations were first rank-ordered in terms of frequency and idiosyncratic responses were eliminated to leave only those meanings shared by at least two subjects. The meanings were then semantically clustered to reduce the data to twelve meaning clusters (see Table 1). For example, "trendy", "style", "flashy", "wicked" were all grouped into the semantic cluster of "fashionable". This semantic factoring was performed by two judges whose agreement on categorization reached an acceptable level of 87%, disagreements were then settled through coder conference (Kleine and Kernan 1991).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semantic Cluster</th>
<th>Examples of Meaning Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fashionable</td>
<td>trendy, cool, ace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfashionable</td>
<td>naff, boring, rubbish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>tennis, running, football</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expensive</td>
<td>expensive, rip-off, costly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High quality</td>
<td>quality, hardwearing, durable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low quality</td>
<td>cheap, nasty, poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value-for-money</td>
<td>value, mid-price, reasonable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>comfortable, feeling, soft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncomfortable</td>
<td>uncomfortable, blisters, hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product features</td>
<td>grip, technology, chunky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>air, Jordan, edge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country-of-origin</td>
<td>German, USA, British</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The total number of non-idiosyncratic associations was 1502, which is a mean of eleven responses per person. The three leading brands (Nike, Reebok, Adidas) averaged three shared associations while the remaining three brands averaged only one shared association each. There was no difference between males and females in number of shared associations (714 vs 788), nor between children and students (740 vs 764). The hypothesized lack of shared meaning for fashion brands is not very well supported as not only do just twelve semantic clusters emerge but it could be argued that four of the meanings are bi-polar concepts, "fashionable - unfashionable", "high quality - low quality", "comfortable - uncomfortable", and possibly "expensive - value-for-money", and that the meanings could be reduced to a mere eight. However, as each semantic cluster already contains a variety of responses, to further reduce the information contained in the free responses was not considered advisable in a study which was aimed at an initial exploration of the area. Table 2 shows the number of responses in each semantic cluster for males and females, children (15-16 yrs) and students (19-24 yrs).

DISCUSSION

The most striking difference between the groups in terms of both gender and age relates to associations between the brands and advertising concepts. This semantic cluster contains words from the TV advertising campaigns of Nike and Reebok in the UK, such as "air", "cross", "pump", "Jordan", "edge" are all either part of the brands' advertising copy or relate strongly to visual elements of the commercials. Why this should not be mentioned at all by the younger age group, and by four times as many older women as men is problematic. Neither of the two brands was actually on-air at the time of the fieldwork, and when they were aired, the commercials were placed in prime-time spots which should not differentiate between males and females in exposure. A possible explanation for the age difference may be that younger people in general transformed the advertising messages into enhanced brand associations that were picked up in their responses in the "fashionable" semantic cluster, of which there were twice as many as for the student subjects (150 vs 80). This may be due in part to the high level of fashion consciousness that the children showed in relation to sneakers. They were very extreme in their associations in that if a brand was not fashionable it was very definitely unfashionable with strong emotional valence, words such as "naïf", "boring", "crap" were very dominant and widely shared by both genders. There was little evidence of neutral, non-emotional responses in the "unfashionable" cluster. The children may have elaborated on the advertising messages and added emotional content to the extent that the origin of the fashionable meaning has been obscured, and the advertising has been transformational (Puto and Wells 1984) in that the consumers' personal experience of the brands have been changed and the psychological meaning along with it.

However, the difference between the student males and females may reflect the possibility that females are more sensitive to the particulars of relevant information in advertising than are men, elaborate more on messages, and as a consequence recall message cues better than men (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1991). In particular, this is expected to be the case when the message cues do not cross the male threshold for elaborative processing. In the university student age group sneakers no longer seemed to be such a prime focus of fashion attention, and therefore the females may have processed advertising messages from Nike and Reebok in a deeper, more reflective way and the messages surfaced as meaning associations related to advertising more in females than men. This may also be indicated by the fact that older females made twice as many associations with "product features" many of which may have been learned from advertising, than did older males. But because the product category is not high fashion with this age group the transformational process did not occur (Puto and Hoyer 1991).

Major gender differences between school children were that females made many more associations between brands and "low quality" (nearly 8 times as many) than males, while males made more associations and between brands and "comfort" (nearly 3 times as many). These differences may
possibly reflect differing sources of involvement in the product category (Laurent and Kapferer 1985). While both genders seem concerned with the sign value of the product (as indicated by the frequencies on "fashionable" and "unfashionable") the female school children may be more concerned with the risk and consequences of poor performance while males may be more concerned with the hedonic value. However, as both these differences disappear among the university student group it is too early to draw any conclusions about gender differences in sources of involvement.

This study suggests that the psychological meaning of fashion brands may differ between genders and less surprisingly, between age groups. The methodology of single-word associations has problematic elements in that further research is required to investigate the nuances of meaning at an individual level. For example, the ambiguity of English means that "expensive" may be a positive perception of exclusivity to one person but carry negative perceptions of a "rip-off" to another. Similarly, school children do not necessarily use words in the same way as university students. For example, "bad" perversely has a current meaning of "good" among the 15-16 year age group, yet carries its usual connotations among the older age group. The exploratory work allowed this particular linguistic feature to be recognized but other errors in semantic clustering may have slipped through. Gender differences in linguistic usage also require to be further investigated in relation to the meaning of brands as males and females may use the same word but with very different connotations. For example, "tough" may connote macho aggressiveness to males, but females may use it to refer to a tangible product feature. Males and females have been found to misunderstand the meaning of each other's speech in that they may use different conversational styles, or genderlects (Tannen 1990), and although it has been suggested that rather than there being a difference in basic codes there is a difference in the frequency of use of a shared code (Thorne, Kramerae and Henley 1983), it remains possible that not only do brands mean different things to women and men, but they may interpret linguistic elements of brand communication in very different ways. This poses difficult problems for research into brand meanings as it may well be that language is not an appropriate medium for evoking the non-linear organization of everyday cognition (Bloch 1992) as "language disguises thought" and may make it impossible to infer the underlying nature of cognition (Wittgenstein 1971).

It seems clear that the implicit assumptions of strategic brand concept-image management (Park, Jaworski and MacInnis 1986) that brand meaning is homogeneous among the target segment may require re-assessment, particularly for brands in the domain of fashion. The possibility that the meaning of brands may be gendered should be investigated before planning long-term strategies for the management of meaning, as the strategies themselves may require gendered variants.

REFERENCES


Szaly, Lorand and James Deese (1978), *Subjective Meaning and Culture: An Assessment Through...*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semantic cluster</th>
<th>School Children</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashionable</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfashionable</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expensive</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High quality</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low quality</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value-for-money</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncomfortable</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product features</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country-of-origin</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
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Chi square = 449.37  
Degrees of freedom = 33  
$p = < 0.001$