Gender Differences in Responses to Form and Function

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This paper explored the perceived gender differences in responses to form and function of products. From in-depth interviews, participants were found to perceive that females and males behave differently to form and function of products, depending on the product types, the product’s usage situations, and the consumer’s background and characteristics.

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that for the many consumers that do not have the requisite knowledge, the form of a new product will be a critical determinant of the choices that they make. Specifically, we predict that consumers lacking product expertise (i.e., novices) will be risk averse and tend to select products that have a conventional appearance over those that have an unconventional form.2

FOOTNOTES
1In this paper we define core functionality as the ability of a product to fulfill its fundamental utility (such as transportation for a vehicle, writing for a pencil, picture taking for a digital camera, and information processing for a computer).

2We define form as a combination of attributes related to the appearance of the product (e.g., size, shape and color), which does not affect the product’s core functionality.

We hypothesize that expertise plays a critical role in determining the weight that consumers place on these two general types of products attributes. In addition, we propose two key boundary conditions on the basic effect: 1) experts discount product form only when they have enough time to systematically process functional information; and, 2) novices discount product form when they expect to have experience with the product that compensates for their lack of functional knowledge (e.g., they are able to try using a new camera before committing to buy it). Finally, we predict that differences in the decision weight given to form versus function by novices and experts can be explained by the level of risk that they perceive in different product forms—that is, the perceived risk of adopting a new product mediates the impact of form on preference. We test, and find strong support for, these hypotheses in a series of three laboratory experiments.

In Study 1, we manipulated the form and the core functionality of a new product and measured the participants’ expertise to conduct a 2 (form: same-as-status-quo vs. unconventional) by 2 (core functionality: same-as-status-quo vs. improved) by 2 (consumer expertise: experts vs. novices) experiment. We found that that expertise plays a critical role in determining the weight between form and function.

Study 2 was designed to test the assumption that experts give less weight to form in new product adoption decisions because they are better able to process functional information. Study 2 employed a 2 (expertise: experts vs. novices) by 2 (time pressure: low vs. high) between subjects design and found supportive evidence for the above assumption.

Study 3 was designed to explore the role that risk plays in consumers’ willingness to adopt a new product in an unconventional form. Study 3 employed a 2 (form: conventional vs. unconventional) by 2 (expertise: experts vs. novices) by 2 (type of decision: try vs. switch) between subjects experimental design. Moderated mediation test found supportive evidence that the perceived risk of adopting a new product mediates the impact of form on preference.

In these studies, we ruled out alternative explanations such as Need for Variety (NFV), Need for Uniqueness (NFU), and innovativeness. Variables such as demographic variables (i.e., age, gender, and native language), product involvement, task involvement, and aesthetic evaluation were controlled.

We aim to make four key contributions to the extant literature. First, this paper demonstrates that form can play a critical role in the choices that consumers make between new and existing (i.e., status quo) products. Second, we show that the effect of form on consumer choice is especially strong among novice consumers, but can also affect expert decision making under specific conditions (e.g., time pressure). Third, we show that the potentially negative impact on choice of an unconventional form can be overcome if consumers are given the option to try the product out without committing to purchasing it. Fourth, our results provide insight into the psychological mechanism that underlies the effect of form on consumer choice—specifically, novice consumers tend to avoid products with unconventional forms because they perceive greater risk in the adoption of such products.

References

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Extended Abstract
It has been argued for decades that stereotypically, women are associated with concepts of feeling, imagination, intuition, and subjectivity, while men are associated with concepts of mind, rationality, and objectivity (Korsmeyer 2004). However, it is still not clear whether such a stereotypical perception exists and how it may influence consumers’ decision making. Consumers make purchase decisions based both on what products do (i.e., functionality) and how they appear (i.e., form) (e.g., Bloch 1995; Chitturi, Raghunathan and Mahajan 2007; Veryzer and Hutchinson 1998). Recent research demonstrated that information processing on form may be more superficial and heuristic whereas processing of functional information may be deeper and more rational (Liang and Murray 2009; Townsend and Sood 2010). If males and females have access to the gendered stereotypical perceptions in minds when making purchase decisions, it makes sense that men and women would prioritize different aspects of a product when making purchasing decisions—specifically, men would be more focused on the functional aspects whereas women would be more focused on the superficial aspects.
decisions, they are very likely to exhibit different behavioural patterns, compared with the situation where they do not have access to such perceptions. In other words, males (females) consumers are more likely to make purchase decisions on functionality (form) when they take the stereotypical perceptions between genders into consideration. However, little research in the marketing and consumer research has investigated similar issues. Therefore, this paper attempts to explore whether such stereotypical perceptions of gendered preference on form and function exist in consumers’ mind and under what conditions such perceptions may or may not influence consumers’ decision making.

Methodology. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to explore the perceived gender differences in responses to form and function of products in the consumer literature. We conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-seven college students at a large North American university. The informants’ responses were coded by two research assistants blind to the study hypotheses. Generally accepted criteria (including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability; Hirschman 1986) were used to assess the quality of the data, which were subsequently analyzed.

Major Findings. From the in-depth interviews, participants were found to perceive that gender difference may exist in consumers’ response to form and functionality of products, depending on the product types, the product’s usage situations, and the consumer’s background and characteristics.

In particular, we found that the perceived gender differences may be smaller for highly utilitarian products (e.g., food and medicine) and highly hedonic products (e.g., paintings) than for products that are somewhat in the middle (e.g., highlighters, shoes, bags, wallets, digital cameras, laptops, watches and cars).

We also found that the perceived gender difference may exist when the product is consumed in public. One (female) said: “Men will choose the most comfortable shoes to go out even if they are not the most stylish or brand names. Women will spend a night with blisters just to be more stylish and wear the Steve Madden heels.” Even though some products are consumed in private, they may be shown in public, which could also lead to the gender difference, as one (male) said: “While she (my sister) went for the one (shower) that looked like a waterfall, I choose the one that had a giant face and more pressure. Now anyone who visits her washroom complements her shower and no one has anything to say about my mine. While she was really happy with her shower for that reason, she would often use mine when she wanted to take a quick shower because hers was too slow!” However, it does not mean that the perceived gender difference won’t exist when the product is consumed in private. One (female) said: “A huge gender difference of aesthetics versus functionality would be decorating a room/house. Men want comfort and practical furniture such as a table by their TV chair, where they can put their drink. Women want to put things where they look pretty, even if it is not practical.”

In addition, the perceived gender difference may be larger for products that one gender happens to be more interested in, more knowledgeable about, and use more frequently than the other gender, as one (male) said: “If a person is more familiar with a product they will care about its functions. If they aren’t too familiar with a product they will choose one that looks better”.

But this is not always the case. In the cosmetic category, one (female) said: “women’s perfume is usually in fun-shaped, colourful, pretty-looking bottles, and men’s cologne is usually in a more simply-designed bottle”. Another (male) said: “Women tend to have more facial products even though most of them serve the same function. They overbuy them because of the new scent, or some added ingredients. Men usually wouldn’t mind too much about that as they believe all facial cleansers serve the same function.”

Furthermore, the perceived gender difference may indicate potential conflicts in relationships between females and males in situations where they have to deal with each other’s purchases (e.g., shopping for both genders or gift giving for the other gender): “As we were looking at the cameras, I focused more on the models that come with a variety of colours to choose from. My brother, on the other hand, compared all the different functions among the models. At last, we couldn’t compromise” (female). “Our family decided to buy my sister a camera as her birthday present. We bought a petite and easy handle camera which we all thought it will be suitable for her, but turn out that she rather wants a SLR camera, which is heavier to carry and more complicated to use. We are all surprised” (male).

However, in certain situation, males and females may agree with each other on the importance of form over function, as one (male) said: “When a guy takes a girl out for the first date, the guy would also think of aesthetics as important. He wouldn’t bring her to a fast food chain restaurant for the first date as fast food just serves as an eating function. Instead, he would bring her to a more upscale restaurant for dinner, which serves the eating function as well but with the addition of atmosphere”.

REFERENCES