Brand Perception: Influence of Gender Cues on Dimensions of Warmth and Competence

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

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Brand Perception: Influence of Gender Cues on Dimensions of Warmth and Competence
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Today’s challenge for advertisers is to increase positive brand perception and influence consumers with increasingly low attention spans. 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). Hence, activating stereotype knowledge may influence desired brand perceptions automatically and effectively.

Most stereotypes fall between two robust fundamental dimensions: warmth and competence (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, and Xu 2002; Fiske et al. 2007). Aaker, Vohs and Mogilner (2010) examined these dimensions and found that people perceive non-profit organizations as warmer than for-profit, but as less competent. Furthermore, perceived competence, rather than warmth influences purchasing behavior.

Aaker et al.’s (2010) research shows that the warmth and competence dimensions influence marketplace decision making. Our study therefore aims to find ways to increase warmth/competence of a brand via subtle cues. Towards this we investigate whether utilizing gender stereotypes in the product description influences the warmth/competence perception of a brand. Further, we investigate how the perception of warmth/competence influences purchasing behavior depending on the product’s gender (Fugate and Phillips, 2010).

Specifically, we seek conditions where warmth influences purchasing behavior.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
The stereotypical woman is viewed as warm, whereas men as competent (Eagly and Mladinic 1994; Eagly, Mladinic, and Otto 1994). What’s more, we activate gender stereotypical knowledge on the basis of cues associated to gender stereotypes (e.g. occupation, physical appearance etc.; Banaji and Hardin 1996; Deaux and Lewis 1984). Consequently, those cues could take the form of colors and symbols which are associated with a gender (Fagot, et al. 1997; Leinbach, Hort, and Fagot 1997) and which we believe are triggers for activating gender stereotype knowledge. Therefore, we assume that gender cues incorporated with product descriptions influence brand perceptions along the warmth and competence dimensions. In addition, consumers automatically assign a gender to most products (e.g. hair spray is feminine whereas coffee is masculine; Fugate and Phillips 2010). Hence, in our first study, 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.

METHODOLOGY
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 gender prime and purchasing likelihood.

In an online experiment, 204 participants (110 female) were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions of the 2 (masculine vs. feminine product) x 3 (masculine vs. feminine vs. no prime) between-subjects design throughout 3 different product categories within-subject. The gender typed products were chosen on the basis of a pre-test. The gender primes were symbols and colors which are previously identified as male-typed or as female-typed (Fagot et al. 1997; Leinbach et al. 1997).

Participants evaluated advertisements via seven 7-point scales: purchasing likelihood as well as warmth, kindness, and generosity which comprises the warmth index (Cronbach’s α = .85) and competence, effectiveness and efficiency which comprises the competence index (Cronbach’s α = .90; Aaker et al. 2010; Grandey et al., 2005; Judd et al., 2005).

We conducted a 2 (masculine vs. feminine product) x 2 (masculine vs. feminine prime) between-subjects ANOVA with purchase likelihood as the dependent variable throughout all product categories. The main effects of product gender and gender prime were insignificant (both ps > .10). However, we found a significant positive interaction effect between product gender and gender prime (F(1,407) = 5.513, p < .02), suggesting that gender primes moderate the effect of gender typed products (see figure 1).

Figure 1 - Purchasing Likelihood of Gender Typed Products, Primed with Feminine Cues, Masculine Cues or No Prime

The follow-up planned comparisons reveal for the masculine products 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). Thus, the results indicate that feminine primes increase purchase likelihood significantly when combined with a masculine product.

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

To understand the underlying process of warmth and competence more thoroughly, we are currently conducting further studies, where we manipulate the baseline (warmth/competence) of a brand as well as gender cues.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Our results indicate that feminine primes enhance perceived warmth which increases purchase likelihood for masculine products. Interestingly, perceived warmth serves as a mediator between prime and purchasing likelihood, yet competence does not.

With our study we directly address Aaker et al.’s (2010) call to investigate conditions under which perceived warmth drives purchasing likelihood. Further, we demonstrate that feminine symbols and colors can trigger feminine gender stereotype knowledge which can be utilized to influence brand perception and consumer behavior.

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


