Gender Identity-Related Reactions to Sex-Typed and Unisex Labeled Products

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Two experiments highlight gender identity’s relevance to the gender labeling-purchase intention relationship. Gender schematic consumers are indifferent between sex-typed or unisex labeling. Product’s gender expressiveness and functionality oppositely favor both options. In favor of unisex products, gender aschematics are less sensitive to gender cues, making perceived functionality the relevant mechanism.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

For decades, managers have recognized the importance of gender labeling, which describes a managerial approach that categorizes products on the basis of visible design features such as gendered symbols, names, or phrases according to the gender of the target group (Alreck 1994). Thereby, two approaches of labeling products with respect to gender have been used in daily practice. The first is to target the audience of one specific sex—so called sex-typed labeling (Milner and Fodness 1996). The second approach is integrative labeling, which addresses both sexes in one label—so-called unisex labeling (Markham and Cangelosi 1999).

Conventional wisdom suggests that targeting a specific audience should be more effective than addressing both genders in one label. While a link has been established in previous research between sex-typed labeling and important consumer outcomes, such as product evaluation or purchase intention (Ulrich 2013), no such relationship has been demonstrated for unisex labeling. This widespread belief in targeting a sex-specific audience with sex-typed labeling seems to prevail among practitioners, as indicated by results of a pilot study we conducted with 101 marketing managers. Indeed, 73.3% of the managers were convinced that sex-typed labeling is more effective than unisex labeling.

In two studies (N_{study1} = 91; N_{study2} = 149), we question the wisdom of the popular belief that sex-typed labeling is universally superior and thereby contribute in several ways. First, consumer researchers have recently argued that we are in a post-gender period in which the stark lines that have historically divided men’s and women’s consumption are blurring (Avery 2012). In responding to this suggestion, we introduce gender labeling as another area of marketing in which consumers’ gender identity can explain behavior better than biological sex. The match of gender labeled products with an individual’s biological sex was the basic argumentation in previous research highlighting the effectiveness of sex-typed labeling (e.g., Ulrich 2013), although it is now well understood that many roles, attributes, and attitudinal differences attributed to biological sex are, in fact, manifestations of gender identity (e.g., Costa, Terracciano, and McCrae 2001). Our results indicate that the explanatory power of biological sex for consumers’ response to gender labeled products is negligible when additionally considering the more complex construct of gender identity. In this respect, we provide further evidence that a one-dimensional view on product gender (either masculine or feminine, or simply biological sex) is no longer adequate in studying product gender perceptions (Fugate and Phillips 2010), but a multi-dimensional understanding of gender might better explain the perception of gender cues such as product gender labels. Our results show that unisex labels evoke high perceptions of masculinity and femininity and therefore can be defined as androgynous.

Second, based on self-congruity theory, previous research has long argued for a superiority of sex-typed labeled products to fit the existing self-concepts of schematic consumers (possessing either masculine or feminine gender traits) and thus to stimulate their purchase behavior (Feiereisen, Broderick, and Douglas 2009). We acknowledge that gender congruity is an important mechanism to explain preferences for products, but further introduce the perceived functionality of a product as another highly relevant mechanism. We argue and empirically show that schematics engage in a dual process—evaluating gender expressive and functional aspects of the product and find that their need for gender self-congruity, which is satisfied by sex-typed labeled products, is counterbalanced by higher levels of perceived functionality prevalent in unisex labeled products. Unisex labeled products are associated with a larger repertoire of attributes and behavioral options. Just like people, these products are not limited to gender-appropriate usage, regardless of the nature of situations, but can better adapt to situational characteristics and are more flexible to their environments. Consequently, schematic consumers are indifferent between sex-typed and unisex labeled products.

Finally, we are first to study aschematic consumers’ preferences for gender labeled products. In times of metrosexuality, this large consumer segment has emerged, possessing both a high level of masculine and a high level of feminine gender identity traits—the so-called androgynous consumer. For instance, recent research has consistently found that more than 30% of total participants fit this segment (Martin and Gnoth 2009). We assume and empirically show that gender congruity is less relevant for purchase decision and thus perceived functionality being the only decisive mechanism, which is why higher preference for unisex labeled products should exist. This assumption builds on gender schema theory (Bem 1981), which suggests that gender identity is a criterion that differentiates people with regard to processing gender linked information. Schematics are said to become even more traditional when gender-related roles are made salient, whereas nontraditional aschematics are expected to be less sensitive to gender cues, because they do not hold a strong gender-related internal cognitive structure (Schmitt, Leclerc, and Dubé-Rioux 1988). Instead, only utilitarian aspects, and more specifically perceived functionality, remain of importance for purchase decisions of aschematic consumers. Those individuals have a particular interest of a larger repertoire of behavioral options because they can better adapt to situations, respond more flexibly to their environments, and eventually experience better psychological health (van Tilburg et al. 2015). Consequently, our results show that the behavior of gender aschematic consumers differs significantly from that of gender schematics and gender labeling describes another area of marketing where targeting might backfire (Bhattacherjee, Berger, and Menon 2014).

We acknowledge several limitations that open avenues for future research. First, while our study employs a realistic online shopping scenario, research has shown that gender identity might be expressed differently when shopping online than when shopping offline (Dittmar, Long, and Meek 2004). The latter would imply a social situation and possibly cause social pressure. Second, in both studies, gender identity was measured before the evaluation of the target product, which might have activated the gender schema. Replication studies should consider measuring the variables separately. Finally, the sex-typed labels in our study were shown only to consumers of the respective biological sex. Although this is the most common labeling practice in daily management, it prevents from analyzing cross-gender labeling perceptions.

REFERENCES


