

Men will be Men, Women will be Women: The Case of Cross-Gender Brand Extensions

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the current popularity of cross-gender brand extensions, based on its theoretical foundations in branding and gender differences in information processing strategies. We argue that consumers experience a situation of gender-salience in the case of cross-gender brand extensions, resulting in gender-differential responses towards the practice.

INTRODUCTION

“Definitely male!” said the tagline of Bajaj Pulsar motorcycle in one of their most popular advertisements. Extant literature in marketing has found that many of the brands in the marketplace possess gender identities (Grohmann 2009; Avery 2012). Consumers tend to place brands such as Davidoff, Marlboro, Lego in masculine category and Lancôme, Barbie, Chanel in feminine category (Jung and Lee 2006). At the same time, a recent phenomenon shows certain brands, usually associated with any one particular gender, extending into the opposite gender category using the same brand name. ‘Pond’s’, which has traditionally been perceived as a feminine brand, extending to the men’s segment with ‘Pond’s Men’ is a case in point. This practice, called cross-gender brand extensions, is a clear departure from the conventional branding practices of companies employing two different brands to target the two different gender segments or having a single brand that does not have a clear gender identity. This paper examines the current popularity of cross-gender brand extensions, based on its theoretical foundations in branding and gender differences in information processing strategies. We argue that the gender-differential responses to this practice can be explained by a situation of gender salience, stimulated in the consumer’s self-concept when the original brand gender associations are changed to target the opposite sex. Adding a novel perspective using gender differences in information processing, the paper advances the current understanding of cross-gender brand extensions.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Brand Personality

Extant literature in marketing recognizes brand personality perceptions in consumer psyche, developed by consumers themselves or created as a result of specific strategies employed by brands. Aaker (1997) has given a commonly accepted definition of brand personality as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand.”

Consumers tend to associate brands with human personality characteristics, as a result of the strategies used by advertisers (e.g. Coke projected as cool and all-American). Popular among these advertising strategies include anthropomorphization, personification, and the use of user imagery (Aaker 1997). McCracken (1989) argues that the transfer of personality traits to a brand is directly possible through the people associated with it. Consumers tend to form associations about the brand thinking about the brand’s user imagery, the company’s employees or CEO (e.g.: consumers may perceive the brand Virgin to be different based on the traits of its founder-CEO Richard Branson), or celebrity endorsers. The transfer of human personality traits can also happen in indirect ways such as consumers imbibing them through product-related attributes, forming associations about the particular product category, brand name, advertising style, logo, and other variables in the marketing mix (Batra, Lehm-

ann and Singh 1993). Fournier (1998) argued for the validity of relationships in brand-consumer context and added that consumers see brands as active relationship partners when they can connect with their own self with the brand, thus gender being a major dimension. The final purchase decision is shown to be influenced by this “one-to-one correspondence” between brand personality and the personality of the consumer (Mathews 2015).

Adding on to the personality characteristics, researchers including Levy (1959) suggest the addition of demographic features such as age, gender (“Usually it is hard to evade thinking of inanimate things as male or female”), and class to the symbolic language of different objects. Subsequently, Aaker’s definition (1997) also has encompassed demographic descriptions (i.e. age, gender, and socioeconomic status), human personality traits, and lifestyle characteristics as part of brand personality (Hayes, Alford, and Capella 2008). Taking cue from this stream of arguments, we explore the gender characteristic of a brand as the base for a brand’s gender crossing.

Brand Gender

Companies convey masculine or feminine characteristics to brands in order to differentiate products and to attract gender segments into their customer basket (Fugate and Philips 2010). Strong masculine and feminine brands are considered high on one of the two gender traits (that is, masculinity would be high for masculine brands, but they have low femininity, and vice versa). This intensity of brand gender makes their positioning in the market easily recognizable, contributes to brand equity and helps the consumers to categorize the brands with high degree of certainty into one of the gender segments (Lieven et al 2014).

Till and Priluck (2001) have observed that in many product categories such as jeans, cologne, and cigarettes, brands utilize masculine or feminine images in their advertisements to project their brand as more appealing to the target audience. Thus, marketers use classical conditioning as a mechanism for transferring gender perception in consumers’ minds. A common strategy is making use of celebrities or affixing a celebrity name to the brand (e.g.: Beyoncé’s Heat perfumes or Someday by Justin Bieber, Michael Jordan shoes). McCracken (1986) argued that consumers exercise the appealing meanings out of products to categorize themselves into appropriate gender, age, and social class groups. Based on an individual’s self-perception, gender meaning can be a salient brand attribute that enhances the likelihood of purchase. In addition, the degree of masculinity or femininity influences purchase behaviour and people tend to favour products associated with their own gender (Alreck, Settle, and Belch 1982). Specifically, men prefer brands with masculine positioning and women prefer ones with feminine positioning (Till and Priluck 2001). Hence, a brand with an established gender positioning crossing over to the opposite gender category makes for interesting research.

Consumer Evaluations of Brand Extensions

Investigations about the various factors in consumer evaluations that influence success of brand extensions have figured prominently in extant branding literature (Morein 1975; Chernatony and McDonald 1998; Ahluwalia 2008; Loken, Ahluwalia, and Houston 2010). The extension’s perceived fit with the parent brand is considered to be a crucial factor leading to favourable consumer evaluations (Ahlu-

walia 2008; Kim and Yoon 2013). Generally, fit can be considered as the “extension’s perceived similarity to the parent brand” (Ahluwalia 2008). This is in terms of product category and attributes (e.g., product features, image, benefit, user imagery, usage situations) that can be classified as product or non-product-attribute-related associations (Bridges, Keller, and Sood 2000). Categorisation theories also (e.g. Lee and Sternthal 1999; Cowley and Mitchell 2003) suggest that if consumers observe connection or ‘fit’ between the parent brand and the extension, they tend to transfer the positive affect associated with the brand to the latter (Aaker and Keller 1990). A brand extension is more likely to be accepted when consumers sense commitment, trust, and/or liking for the parent brand or have had experience using the parent brand, when the extension is consistent with the core brand image or brand associations of the parent brand, and when the focus of the information about the brand extension includes favourable relevant information (Loken, Ahluwalia, and Houston 2010).

Several product development strategies, such as increasing brand breadth (Dacin and Smith 1994; Wu and Yen 2007), maintaining quality consistency (Dacin and Smith 1994), and generating brand extension synergies (Shine, Park, and Wyer 2007) also influence consumer perceptions, thereby leading to success or failure of the extension strategy. Research also points to the importance of retail environments in which brand extensions are exposed to consumers. Firms carefully choose retail locations that best reinforce their brand’s image (Joachimsthaler and Aaker 1997; Smith and Burns 2013) and that maintain consistency between a brand’s image and the retailer. In summary, it is clear that the factors in consumer evaluations of a conventional brand extension are generic to any brand extension strategy. However, the inherent nature of disturbing the gender status-quo would result in consumers being influenced by an additional set of factors in the case of cross-gender brand extensions.

Cross-Gender Brand Extensions

Gender stereotyping in consumption

Individuals often attempt to “create, enhance, and accomplish gender identities through consumption and, thus, our possessions function as symbolic gender identity markers” (Avery 2012). Penaloza (1994) argues that existing consumer cultures in a society dictate what is proper (and improper) to acquire or consume for each gender. Extant research in marketing has indicated brands as one of the markers we use to express our gender (Stern 1988; Palan 2001). Consequently, men and women have a preference towards brands, possessions, and practices that goes in tandem with their gender identity. Azar (2015) distinguishes three types of sexual attributions to brands within brand-as-a-person metaphor: brand sex as a demographic characteristic; brand gender as a personality characteristic; and brand sexual orientation as a behavioral characteristic. In this study, we consider brand gender as a personality characteristic, which is also in line with Levy’s argument (1959) that personality includes gender as a characteristic.

Cross-Gender Brand Extensions

Men and women, both, engage in ‘gender-bending consumption’, which is, adopting the consumption practices and products of the opposite sex to partake in redrawing the definitions of gender and give rise to novel ideologies (Avery 2012). Appropriating men’s consumption symbols to stand for gender fairness in the wave of feminism was the starting point of this paradigm shift (McCracken 1988; Hollows 2000). This was characterised by women patronizing cigarette smoking, short haircuts, and masculine fashion styles. On the other side, the metrosexual ideology emerged as an alternative to the prevailing concepts of masculinity and gave men the confidence

to choose products that had traditionally been linked with female or homosexual consumption (Crane 1999). These movements can be seen as attempts to redefine the boundaries of gender-based consumption and questioned the conservatives consciously or unconsciously dictating what is appropriate to consume for each gender category.

However, gender still occupies a prominent position in marketing. Brands usually associated with any one particular gender are often seen to target the opposite gender group by employing altogether different brand names. Philip Morris, which has the brand ‘Marlboro’ for men employs ‘Virginia Slims’ to cater to the women-folk (Alreck et. al 1982). At the same time, certain recent examples indicate gender-bending of brands by marketers, whereby products that had traditionally been focused at one sex are made appealing to the opposite gender without changing the brand name (Jung and Lee 2006; Ulrich 2013). The growing number of examples include Estee Lauder extending their ‘Pleasures’ perfume brand to men’s segment and Gillette targeting women with the same brand name offering. Considering the fact that cross-gender brand extensions are becoming popular even when gender identities of brands are not yet erased, how consumers evaluate and form attitudes about the same would influence the success of the practice.

Consumer Evaluation of Cross-Gender Brand Extensions

Gender studies have observed that in modern societies, masculine traits are likely to be placed higher than traditional feminine traits (Bem 1993; Kramer 2005). Consequently, the superior social appeal for masculine characteristics would be reflected in the consumer behaviour towards products as well as brands by consumers. This view is in line with past research which suggested that men will mostly reject feminine brands while women will most likely accept masculine brands (Alreck et. al 1982; Wolin 2003). According to this school of thought, using feminine brands carries a greater stigma for men than using masculine brands does for women (Borgerson and Schroeder 2004; Rinallo 2007; Avery 2012). Penaloza (1994) argues that the tendency for women crossing into the male domain by altering their dressing styles are viewed rational because of the higher number of men with money and power, when compared to women. Subsequently, for a man to cross into the feminine realm by trying clothes associated with women is to keenly follow its stigma. The phenomenon is referred to as “opposite sex rejection” (Alreck 1994), and is evident in our daily lives. Extant research in cross-gender brand extensions also points towards the impact of biological sex of consumers on the extension’s acceptance. Specifically, women are found to be more receptive when a typically masculine brand crosses over to the feminine category, than men when a feminine brand attempts to cross over to their category (Jung and Lee 2006). This essentially implies that the direction of the cross-gender extension also affects the success of the strategy.

Grohmann (2009) contended that consumers’ sex role identity and their brand personality-self-concept congruence in terms of masculine and feminine brand personality would influence their affective, attitudinal, and behavioral brand-related responses. This essentially recognizes gender as a multifactorial construct and maintains that gender, of the brand and of the consumer, influences the consumer attitude towards cross-gender extensions. The success factors of gender-based brand extensions are in line with the conventional extension literature and in addition, factors arising due to the characteristics associated with extending to the opposite gender category also play a significant role. Jung and Lee (2006) have established that the gender of a brand, gender of consumers, and product type influence the evaluation of cross-gender brand extensions.

Gender differences in information processing strategies

Consumers differ, according to gender, in evaluating products and services, decision processes, information searches, and attitudes towards marketing mix strategies (Gunay and Baker 2011). Men are said to be “selective processors” who depend on heuristics or overall themes for their decisions, whereas women are characterized as “comprehensive processors” who focus on integrating detailed information (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991; Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1991).

In this paper, we propose that a gender-salience situation arises when a gendered brand crosses over to the opposite gender category. Psychologists have recognized situations of gender salience, where human behaviour can be affected by stimulations in gender-related elements of the self-concept (Deaux and Major 1987; Spence 1993). Specifically, they suggest that gender assumes salience when immediate situational cues prompt, such as the proportion of men and women in our environment; through the actions of another person in a specific context (e.g. when a man asks the opinion of a woman about something and she feels important); when the gender-related aspects in the self-concept are frequently stimulated (e.g. materials strongly associated with one gender, such as cooking utensils with women as opposed to mechanical tools); or the individual has the gender component central to his/her self-concept (e.g. school children who came from households where their sex is a minority are likely to mention gender in self-attributes (McGuire, McGuire, and Winton, 1979). The situational cues arising out of a change in the original brand associations due to a cross-gender brand extension may stimulate the gender-related elements of the consumer's self-concept (Ulrich 2013). Extant research in marketing has shown that the congruency between the consumer's gender and the brand gender leads to favourable evaluations for the brand (Grohmann 2009). We argue that a cross-gender brand extension shakes the consumers' original gender perceptions about the brand. This effect, in turn, would reflect in the consumer evaluations of both the parent brand and the extension. Several researchers have observed that significant results tend to be obtained from studies showing men and women differ in decision making and purchase behaviour in situations where gender was salient (e.g.: Ulrich 2013; Palan 2001). Thus, the paper contributes to strengthening the case for considering gender-salience in marketing research.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

In case of a cross-gender brand extension strategy, practitioners may build favourable evaluations for the brand by positive gender associations related to the target consumers. They may also take care not to stimulate situations of negative gender salience. As an illustration, promotional activities featuring a celebrity who has a strong gender identity same as that of the target group may be employed to differentiate the extension from the gender identity of the parent brand. Another practical implication is in choosing the retail environments in which brand extensions are exposed to consumers. For example, a cross-gender extension targeting men may use retail props projecting several heuristics or overall themes to differentiate the brand from its parent brand gender. On the other hand, targeting women for the extension may require retail settings focusing on integrating detailed information about the extension's brand gender.

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