

# A STUDY IN PINK: WHAT DETERMINES THE SUCCESS OF GENDER-SPECIFIC ADVERTISING?

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## ABSTRACT

Gender-specific marketing gains importance as women become more influential as consumers. The study investigated an efficiency of two approaches to gender-specific marketing: designing a stereotypically “feminine” product and priming an interdependent self-construal with an advertising scenario. Female participants (N=160) evaluated four advertisements for a soft drink with feminine/gender-neutral product design and independent/interdependent self-construal. The results demonstrated a significant positive effect of interdependent self-construal on the attitudes towards the ad. The effect of stereotypical product design was non-significant. These results suggest that indirect approach to gender-specific advertising via priming techniques may be more efficient than direct use of gender stereotypes.

**Keywords:** gender-specific marketing; gender stereotypes; self-construal; product design; congruency

NOTE: Not qualified for the best paper award.

## INTRODUCTION

Female consumers play an increasingly important role in today's global market; they influence almost 80% of the household's spending and control \$20 trillion of the annual consumer spending (Nicholas, 2007; Silverstein & Sayre, 2009). Many companies are trying to reach women with gender marketing, which usually implies incorporating gender-related associations and stereotypes in product design, advertising, promotion and distribution (Alreck, 1994). For instance, Heineken introduced a sweet cider Jillz as 'the ideal drink for women'. Product positioning is based on the idea that beer is still considered a men's drink, which women find too bitter. The commercial features handsome, shirtless men, picking apples, who are meant to seduce the target group. This typically female drink has been received well (MarketResponse, 2011). Tomboy Tools offered specially designed ergonomic lightweight tools for women to empower them with regard to home projects. All the tools were designed in fluorescent pink. The company achieved remarkable success (Caliendo, 2012).

However, not all examples of gender marketing are equally successful. For example, in their 'Honda Fit She's' model designed specifically for women Honda used pink colour and a windshield designed to block skin-wrinkling ultraviolet rays. Dell introduced 'Della', a colourful netbook for women that contained tools like a calorie counter and enabled to store favourite recipes. Both products were widely criticised for being insulting and patronizing to women (Eisenstein, 2012; Casserly, 2009).

It appears that in some situations women are frustrated and even insulted by direct use of gender stereotypes in marketing, while in other situations they appreciate gender-specific product design and advertising. What determines the success of gender-specific marketing? Consumer reaction to gender stereotypes may depend on the way in which they are used in marketing communications. The direct use of the most notorious gender stereotypes is likely to be perceived negatively, while a more subtle approach that communicates understanding and respect for specific needs, values and preferences of women may be evaluated positively.

This study aims to better understand the situations in which gender stereotypes in marketing are accepted or rejected. We combined stereotypical and non-stereotypical product designs with gender-neutral and gender-related advertisement scenarios to find out which approach leads to a more favourable attitudes towards the advertisement. Additionally, we tested whether the congruence between the advertising scenario and product design could influence attitudes towards the ad and purchase intentions.

### **Gender Stereotypes in Product Design**

Gender stereotypes can be defined as beliefs about the specific gender characteristics and gender roles that are applied to any individual regardless of the circumstances (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). Gender stereotypes prescribe certain behaviours and categorize certain individual characteristics as good or bad (Howard & Hollander, 2011). Gender stereotypes are often polar opposites: warmth and expressiveness are considered as typical female traits, while dominance and assertiveness are characteristics for men.

The direct approach to gender marketing is primarily based on attempts to give a product a feminine or a masculine image. This can be achieved by incorporating product features that sustain certain gender roles (like a calorie counting tool) or by creating a product design that it is attractive to either men or women. For example, Xue and Yen (2007) have shown that men appreciate products that are compact, minimalist and sleek, while women prefer products that are smooth, unique and slim. The authors suggest that men are more focused on the structure and shape of the product, whereas women appreciate organic forms, details and textures. Zhang, Feick and Price (2006) have shown that angular shapes are often associated with toughness, strength and energy, whereas round shapes are often affiliated with harmony, approachableness and friendliness. Van Rompay and Pruyn (2011) found that congruent product features (for example, masculine script and masculine product shape) positively influenced brand credibility and product evaluation.

These findings suggest that a successful gender-specific product design should combine congruent elements (shape, colour, typeface, texture, etc.) that are associated with women and are evaluated as “feminine”. However, consumer reactions to such design may be moderated by the individual gender role acceptance and self-presentation, also known as self-construal.

### **Gender Stereotypes in Advertisements**

The role-portrayals of men and women in advertising are traditionally based on the assumption that men are inclined to an agentic role and concern for the self, while women prefer a communal role and care for others (Vantomme, Geuens & Dewitte, 2005). Men are thought to be sensitive to independence appeals in advertisements, whereas women are thought to evaluate affiliation appeals more favourably (Hupfer, 2002). With women actively taking part in the labour market, the traditional gender roles are now changing. However, stereotyping of women in advertisements has not changed; they are still portrayed as decorative objects or in the roles of mothers and housewives (Lindner, 2004).

Research into women’s response to advertisements with traditional gender stereotypes yielded inconsistent results (Orth & Holancova, 2004). For example, Zawisza and Cinnirella (2010) reported that women responded more positively to a stereotypical advertisement (featuring a traditional housewife) compared to a non-stereotypical advertisement. However, Jaffe and Berger (1994) found that women preferred an egalitarian advertising (portraying a working woman who shares household responsibilities with her husband) over a traditional or superwoman advertising (portraying a woman managing both her job and household effectively).

An individual’s response to an advertisement is likely to be more favourable when the gender portrayal in the advertisement is in line with an individual’s gender role expectations and beliefs (Petruvu, 2004). For example, respondents with traditional gender-role orientations evaluate the stereotypical advertisement more favourably than the non-stereotypical advertisement (Morrison & Shaffer, 2003). The correspondence between gender portrayals in advertisements and an individual’s gender schema is known as gender congruence (Feiereisen et al., 2009).

## Self-construal

Acceptance or rejection of gender stereotypes may be related to different types of self-construal, which has been defined as the way individuals see the self in relation to others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Cross, Hardin & Gercek-Swing, 2011). Independent self-construal implies that an individual is unique, independent, and egocentric, while interdependent self-construal implies that an individual is fundamentally connected to others and values harmonious relationships more than personal achievements (Gudykunst et al., 1996).

Both independent and interdependent self-construal can co-exist in varying degrees within an individual (Ting-Toomey, Oetzel & Yee-Jung, 2001). Either type of self-construal can be made temporarily available by referencing tasks, situational contexts or priming techniques, such as manipulating advertising elements (text and images) that are focused either on an individual or a family (Aaker & Lee, 2001). Advertisements that refer to a social context and stereotypically feminine roles can activate an interdependent self-construal in women.

Priming self-construal with advertising context can be considered as the indirect approach to gender-related marketing. To test whether the stereotypical product design or interdependent advertising scenario could increase the power of gender-related advertising, we created two soft drink designs, a typically female and a gender-neutral design, and presented them to participants in two advertising contexts that primed either for interdependent or independent self-construal. Based on previous findings, we suggested that congruent combinations of design and advertising context would be preferred to incongruent combinations.

## METHOD

The experimental study used a 2 (self-construal: independent vs. interdependent) x 2 (product design: feminine vs. gender-neutral) between-subject design.

### *Participants*

Participants were recruited among random sample of Dutch women that were approached on intercity trains, at Schiphol airport and in a few primary schools in Enschede. A total of 160 participants filled out the questionnaire. Participants' age ranged between 16 and 72; mean age was 30; 23% of the respondents had a secondary education (MBO), 45% had a professional degree (HBO) and 22% had an academic degree (WO). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. The age and educational level of participants did not significantly differ between the four experimental groups.

### *Stimulus material*

A soft drink has been chosen as the featured product, which was named Splash. Advertising scenarios and product designs were based on an extensive pre-study, in which 28 participants evaluated the design elements (shape, colour and typeface) on a 7-point scale from "not at all feminine" to "very feminine". The product combining shape, colour and a typeface that were assessed as the most feminine is presented in Figure 1 (left). The gender-neutral product is presented in Figure 1 (right). Advertising images and slogans were evaluated according to

independence or interdependence associations they elicited. The scenario that scored highest on independence featured a businesswoman at the airport (Figure 1, upper row). The scenario that scored highest on interdependence featured a woman is in the park playing with her husband and two children (Figure 1, lower row).

### *Measures*

Attitude towards the advertisement (Appiah, 2001) was measured with 11 items (such as “good/bad”, “interesting”/ “boring”, etc.) rated on a 7-point scale (1 = very boring, 7 = very interesting). The reliability of the scale was high ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ). Purchase intention scale (Bower & Landreth, 2001) included six items (for example, “I intend to try this product”), which were rated on a seven-point scale (1 = I strongly disagree, 7= I strongly agree) ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ).

## **RESULTS**

The MANOVA was performed with Self-construal and Product Design as fixed factors and Attitude towards the Ad and Purchase Intention as dependent variables. A significant main effect of Self-construal was found ( $F(2, 155) = 4.0, p < 0.05$ ). The effect of Product design was non-significant ( $F(2, 155) = 1.2, ns$ ). Interaction effect of Self-construal and Product Design was also non-significant ( $F(2, 155) = 2.9, ns$ ). Pairwise comparisons (with Bonferroni adjustment) indicate that the attitude towards the advertisement was rated significantly higher for the interdependent condition ( $M = 4.14$ ) than for the independent condition ( $M = 3.62$ ),  $p < .05$  (see Figure 2). The differences in purchase intentions between the groups were non-significant (all  $p$ 's  $> .05$ ).

## **DISCUSSION**

The results of the study demonstrate that indirect approach to gender-specific marketing (priming interdependent self-construal with an advertising scenario) significantly increased the advertisement liking, while direct approach (designing a stereotypically feminine product) did not affect attitudes towards the ad and purchase intentions. Surprisingly, no interaction effect between product design and self-construal was found, which suggests that product design and advertising context might be processed and evaluated independently.

Advertising featuring a woman at the park with her children can be considered as highly stereotypical, because a family context including the presence of a child is a typical element associated with a traditional female role (Zawisza & Cinnirella, 2010). The pink bottle with organic shape and curved typeface can be seen as a condensed representation of a stereotypically feminine product design. However, the effect of these two marketing tools was different, which may be explained by the different levels at which information about the product and advertising scenario were processed. The pink bottle immediately attracted participants' direct attention and was probably recognized as stereotypically female, which might cause the negative reaction to the advertisement. The advertisement scenarios probably functioned as a subconscious trigger for gender-congruent associations that might increase positive attitudes towards the ad without consumer's full awareness. Recent studies suggest that in the current marketing environment where consumers are overwhelmed with

advertising messages and product information, subtle subliminal influences may work more effectively than a direct approach (Krishna, 2012). More research is needed into the mechanisms of cognitive processing of stereotypical and non-stereotypical ad messages and product designs.

Contrary to our expectations, congruent combinations of stereotypical product design and interdependent advertising scenario was not evaluated more positively than non-stereotypical combinations. It should be noted that commercial examples of successful gender-specific marketing also contain certain incongruence between the presented product and its promotion. Although Jillz is positioned as a stereotypical female drink, the sexy, shirtless men featured in the Jillz commercial are presented in quite a non-stereotypical way, as men are usually portrayed in occupational roles and as successful, tough and powerful (Cohen-Eliya & Hammer, 2004). Conversely, Tomboy Tools is a non-stereotypical concept, while the product design is very stereotypical. Such preference for incongruent messages may be explained by the current cultural and social shift in gender roles and may reflect complicated and often contradictory aspects of gender identity of modern women.

Our results suggest that indirect use of gender stereotypes (such as priming interdependent self-construal with advertising scenarios) may be a more efficient way to target female consumers than using direct approach (such as using stereotypical design). Women seem to react more positively to advertisements depicting family-oriented activity compared to advertisements that emphasise professional activity and independence. However, a product design that specifically focuses on stereotypically feminine product properties (pink colour and organic shape) does not seem to increase product liking and purchase intention. These results may be important to marketers, advertisers and product designers that intend to target their female consumers more effectively.

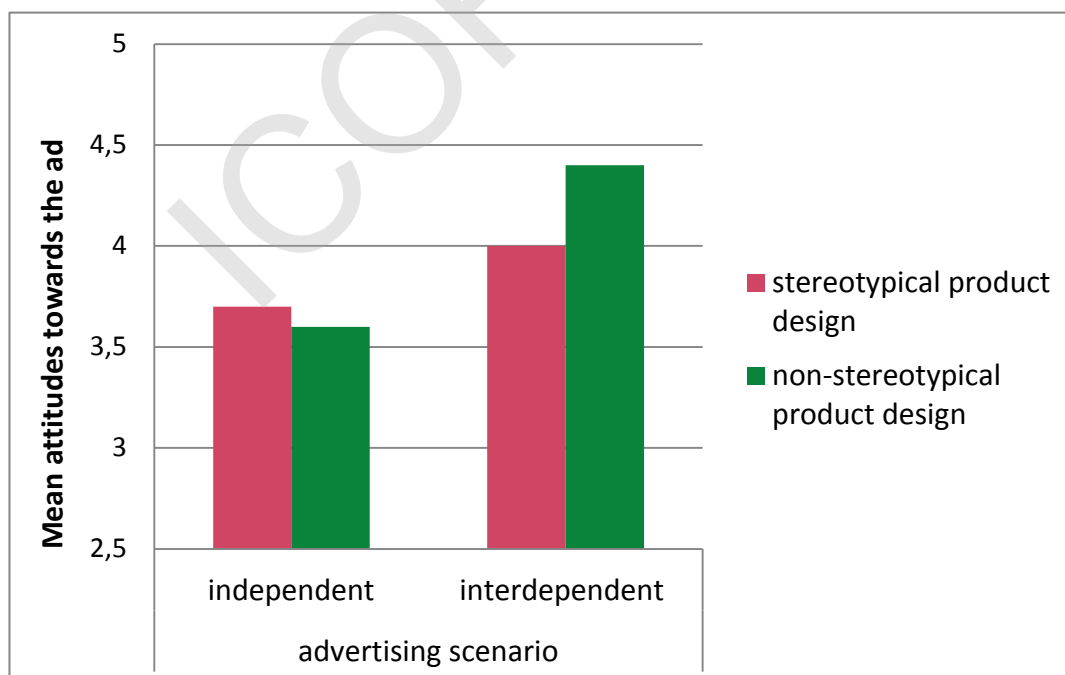
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**Figure 1.** Stimuli used the experiment. Upper left: stereotypical product design and independent advertising scenario; upper right: gender-neutral product design and independent scenario; bottom left: stereotypical product and interdependent scenario; gender-neutral product and interdependent scenario.



**Figure 2.** Mean attitudes towards the advertisements for the four experimental conditions