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Brand Personality and Gender

– How there is a woman inside Evian and a man inside Nike –

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ABSTRACT

- Title:** Brand Personality and Gender – How there is a woman inside Evian and a man inside Nike
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- Keywords:** *Brand Personality, Brand Perception, Brand Gender, Consumer Gender, Self-congruity*
- Thesis purpose:** The thesis purpose is to shed light on the interrelationship of the gender of consumers and brands. The main objective is to research how the correlation between consumer gender and brand gender influences the perception of brand personality.
- Methodology:** The thesis has an iterative approach where existing theory and data are correlated. The data is collected through a questionnaire and qualitative interviews while reflecting back to the existing knowledge.
- Theoretical perspective:** This study is based upon the general branding and gender theories, with focus on brand personality and self-congruency effect.
- Empirical data:** The study is of an explorative nature, investigated quantitatively and qualitatively. An on-line questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to gather the empirical data.
- Conclusion:** Our study provides with the broad overview about the consumer awareness of the gender dimension within brand personalities. The research contributes to branding theory and gender studies and demonstrates that consumer gender influences does not influence the perceived brand personality gender. However, it also shows that consumers prefer brands with a clear gender, but not necessarily the same gendered brands.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A common expression in marketing literature is that brands are like people. Following this analogy, it is implied that brands, similarly to people, not only have an outer appearance and image but also unique personalities. The recent case of The Coca-Cola Company launching Coke Zero as a new brand in all major international markets in 2005/2006 (The Coca-Cola Company 2005) illustrates the significance of brand personality. Taking a closer look at the product itself one finds that it has not been newly invented from scratch but is a modified version of Diet Coke (named “Coke Light” in Europe) which is globally well-established since the 1980’s. In fact the difference in ingredients as stated by the Coca Cola Company itself lie merely within the type of sweetener being used. Coke Zero is “*sweetened with a blend of low-calorie sweeteners, while Diet Coke is sweetened with aspartame.*” (The Coca-Cola Company 2008). From a mere taste experience this can be understood as the same ingredients. So the consumer might question why two highly similar products are now available on the market. Consumers might wonder – but in fact no severe confusion was triggered by this launch. Coke Zero was given a young, male, urban feel and the addressed matching target group was able to recognize itself. As Levy (1959, p. 121) pointed out “*Just as most people usually recognize whether something is addressed to them as a man or a woman, so are they sensitive to symbols of age*” and class. Coke's Zero is thereby primarily targeted towards consumers aged 18-34 with a focus on men. As to this target group the term diet cola implicates the attributes of old and feminine it was substituted with “*calorie-free cola*” (Elliot 2007; The New York Times 2008). Additionally Coke Zero’s taste and color was altered to further resemble the real Coke Classic. At the same time the global communication is playing with strong male ideas and fantasies – even leading to an advertising ban in some countries (e.g. Finland) due to discrimination of women and sexist implications (Helsingin Sanomat 2006).

Through product alterations and the use of the described communication channels Coke Zero is created to have a strongly masculine personality in contrast to the existing personality of Coke Light being perceived as feminine. The difference between both brands is accordingly the gender positioning of the brand personality.

1.1 Background and Problem Discussion

The idea of brand personality has been first addressed through Levy's work about brand symbolism in 1959. It is based on the observation that consumer goods symbolically convey personal and social meanings. Similarly to human beings, brands possess certain traits and characteristics that form a personality and people use these symbols to distinguish themselves. Despite a large number of conducted studies, the concept of brand personality initially suffered from a lack of common consensus about definitions (Aaker 1997). Accordingly, Aaker created her own definition describing brand personality as "*the set of human characteristics associated with a brand*" (1997, p. 1). But Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) point out that this definition is formulated too broadly and is too undifferentiated. Consequently the underlying definition of this thesis will describe brand personality more specifically as "*the unique set of human personality traits both applicable and relevant to brands*" (Azoulay & Kapferer 2003, p. 151).

Brand personality research has found brands to possess a variety of human traits and characteristics as well as basic demographics. According to Batra, Lehmann and Singh (1993, p. 84), "*the demographics of a brand are often its most salient personality characteristics*", which leads to most easily extractable variables such as gender, age and class. Accordingly, Levy (1959, p. 120) described the gender aspect as "*one of the most basic dimensions*" within the symbolic meaning of a brand. The minimum of personality that can be attached to every brand is this demographic dimension. Brand personality is perceived by consumers similarly as they perceive human characteristics and also function in a similar way (Wee 2003). It has even been found by Levy (1959, p. 120) being impossible to "*evade thinking of inanimate things as male or female*". Thus gender plays a central role within the brand personality. Consistently with the above presented definition of brand personality this gender dimension of brand personality will be defined as the set of applicable and relevant human personality traits associated with masculinity and femininity (Grohmann 2008).

Children become conscious of their biological sex by the age of two or three. About the same time they also start gaining awareness of culturally-derived gender norms, for example the negative stereotypes of their own sex. Thus the development of a belief system of gender roles starts at an early age. It is no wonder then that gender is one of the earliest and most central components of the self-concept (Palan 2001). At the same time gender studies (e.g. Fournier 1998) has repeatedly illustrated that behavior between males and females differs both generally as well as in a

consumption context. These common findings of gender studies have not been linked to brand personality previously and one of the under-researched subjects in this field is how brand personality and different gender aspects correlate.

Due to this interdisciplinary relation being under-researched, the object of this thesis is to examine brand personality in the light of gender studies. The main focus is on the relation between brand personality gender and consumer gender. We are especially interested in finding out how a brand's gender influences consumers' brand perception. The interdisciplinary combination of the two academic research fields, gender studies and brand theory, holds the potential to shed more light on to the evolving theory of brand personality. These two research fields together will provide implications on how important gender aspects in brand personality are and how these affect the perceived brand personalities.

1.2 Objective and Research Purpose

The knowledge about brand personality and gender is limited and hence needs a further investigation. The research purpose of this thesis is of exploratory nature, designed to gain more insight and shed light on the interrelationship of the gender of consumers and brands. Our main objective is to research how the correlation between consumer gender and brand gender influences the perception of brand personality. The following model (see figure 1) is designed to build the basis for the research study and visualize the research objective.

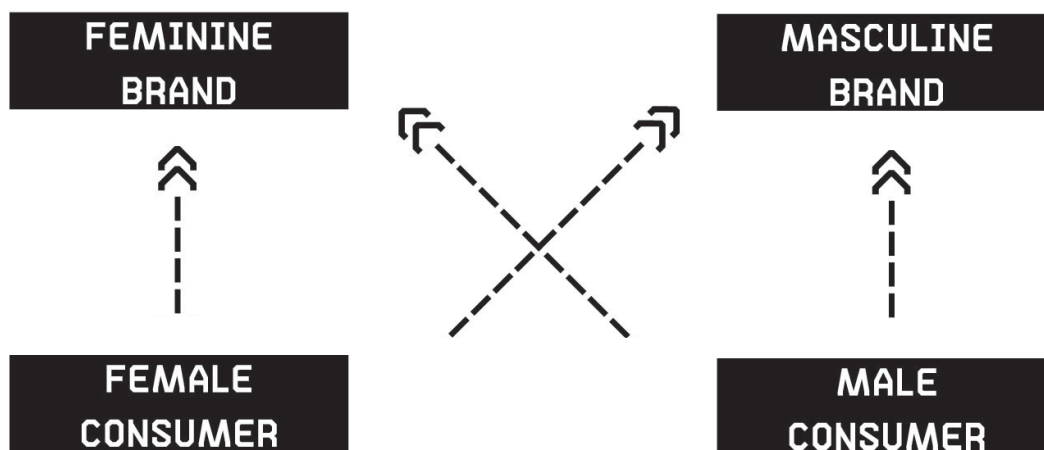


Figure 1: Research objective model, source: own visualization

Consequently, to fulfill this research objective, the following questions will be addressed within the thesis.

RQ1: Do consumers understand the gender within a brand personality? As a foundation the level of consumers' awareness towards the existence of a brand personality's gender has to be detected. A focal point in this research part is to explore how this brand gender is perceived in general, disregarding the difference between male and female persons.

RQ2: How does consumer gender influence the perception of brand personality gender? This question examines from a mere consumer perspective if female and male consumers perceive the gender of brand personalities differently. The focus within that question will be of explorative nature, examining how this difference presents itself and how it is verbalized by the consumers. The angle of this research question will take the consumer gender as the given and stable factor and research its varying influence on the perceived brand personality gender.

RQ3: Do consumers prefer brands from the gender perspective? Consumer behavior studies acknowledge that consumers are tending to choose brands matching their actual-self, social-self or ideal-self (Sirgy 1982). Those studies, however do not analyze consumer attitudes from the own gender and brand correlation perspective. Therefore, RQ3 will focus on this angle by researching whether consumers prefer brands that match with their own gender. Additional discussion will explain the source of such consumer motivation and will broaden up the general understanding of brand-consumer gender preferences.

In order to draw conclusions from the research, some assumptions of the respondents'/consumers' gender have to be made. While the differences between sex and gender are examined in the theory part, in practice the line between those two is more difficult to draw. RQ2 clearly illustrates this assumption and the coherent limitation. Biological sex does not determine a person's gender but as the level of respondents' and consumers' masculinity and femininity is impossible to detect in our research, stereotypes need to be applied. Therefore the stereotyped assumption that males portray masculine characteristics while females portray feminine characteristics is made as a foundation for this research.

1.3 Delimitations

This research looks into brand personality through the example of bottled waters. The focus on a single product category can thereby be considered as the first limitation since the study's quantitative focus is narrowed down to a Fast Moving Consumer Good (FMCG). The reasoning for choosing the category of bottled waters as a primary research object is based on the product's simplicity and attributes. The simplicity of water as a product itself is undeniable; it is transparent and has no distinctive smell, taste or consistency. Hence it allows a greater research accuracy as there are relatively little product related specifics that could affect the analysis process. From the generic utilitarian versus the hedonistic perspective it can thereby still be said that water fulfills both symbolical and utilitarian roles (Aaker 1997). As a highly standardized FMCG, bottled water is internationally sold in standardized serving sizes with similar quality and from an objective perspective highly exchangeable and hence very competitive. Consumers do not spend considerable amounts of time, nor tend to compare brands when purchasing a rather inexpensive product. However, besides going for spring, flavored, still or gas water, consumers have to make choices regarding which particular brand they purchase. Thus, the brand decision in this context is most likely made spontaneously at the point-of-sale and can be considered irrational. We believe, that it is not the price or mere taste, but the specific brand and its non-product related attributes that are the key factors in the decision making process within the bottled water category. We see the perception of a widely standardized "neutral" product and the coherent response behavior as especially worth examining.

The characteristics used in this thesis defined as masculine or feminine are based on a large-scale, cross-cultural study of gender stereotypes. However, our study is limited to a Western European context since our participants as well as the studied brands are from Western European countries. Therefore our participants and their brand gender perceptions are reflecting Western European socio-cultural gender understanding.

A certain brand personality has, similar to the human personality, to be understood as a developing construct over time (Batra, Lehmann & Singh 1993). As a brand's personality changes in time through marketing communications, so might the gender change. Due to the study's time limit we are not able to measure the brand personality's development over time sufficiently. This is another limitation, since the research is performed within a specific timeframe and thus portrays a contemporary status quo. In other words, gender as a part of brand personality might evolve,

however, this thesis provides rather a temporary snapshot and does not take brand personality development into account.

1.4 Thesis Outline

The remainder of the presented thesis is structured in the following way. Chapter two will provide an initial and deeper understanding of the underlying theoretical background and concepts. Both major research areas, namely brand theory and gender studies, are presented. The major concepts from branding, over brand personality and self-concept theories to brand personality demographics are introduced. They are thereby analyzed regarding their linkage in order to be eventually united to one approach and examined for correlation.

Following chapter three presents the methodological approach and the research design, based on our philosophical positioning. Two strategies of data collection, quantitative and qualitative, are applied and explained in their specific usage and the factors of reliability, validity, and generalizability are discussed.

Chapter four is dedicated to the data analysis and empirical discussion. Here, the study's findings will be presented, analyzed and interpreted. Eventually chapter five draws conclusions on the research and gives future implication. The explorative objective of this thesis will be expressed through the presentation of conclusive insight and gained knowledge.

2. THEORETICAL APPROACH

The theory part is meant to introduce the major research concepts and provide a thorough overview of relevant theories and existing empirical findings. It will present the most important marketing and social science theories that were selected in a manner so that illustrates both marketing and social science standpoints. The combination of brand personality and gender aspects is hardly to be found, thus it will demonstrate the unique and rather under-researched relationships.

This section is divided into four parts: foundations of branding, brand personality, gender aspect and in the end brand and gender. Once the generic branding topics are discussed in the foundations of branding, relevant brand personality concepts are presented. Furthermore the vital roles of self-concept and brand demography are explained. The gender aspect in the study is dedicated to deepen the understanding of different consumer perceptions that are caused by the possessed gender. Finally, the brand and gender section strives to demonstrate how the major study objects are linked and can be seen as a single study topic. The approach of looking into brand personality through the glasses of gender, hence, grants our thesis with an interesting perspective.

2.1 Foundations of Branding

Before introducing the brand personality concept, a short description of branding in general shall be given here. This theoretical background illustrates where the concept of brand personality stems from and how it connects with other theories. Therefore, this introduction of branding will contribute to gaining a deeper and thorough understanding of brand personality.

2.1.1 Etymology and Functionality

In order to give a basic definition of the brand concept the following chapter is designed to give an overview of the multitude of existing definitions and approaches. Historically the Greek word “*marka*” with its pendants in the Italian word “*marca*” and the French “*marque*” grew into the English word “*mark*” with the original meaning of “*attribute or sign*”. At the same time within the

North-American language area the term “*brand*” – deriving from the branding of cattle – found its origin (Esch 2004). A more contemporary definition by the American Marketing Association defines a brand as: “*A name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller’s good or service as distinct from those of other sellers. The legal term for brand is trademark. A brand may identify one item, a family of items, or all items of that seller*” (American Marketing Association 2007).

From a customer’s viewpoint the specific design and packaging offers an easy and quick way of identifying the brand. This helps to save the buyer’s valuable time during the purchase process as it is an indicator to activate pre-existing brand knowledge and hence simplifies the buying decision (Meffert, Burmann, & Koers 2005). First and foremost brands promise the buyer a certain constant quality and thereby reduce the risks of purchasing and raise trust. From an owner’s viewpoint the main function and purpose of owning a brand is to distinguish the product from no-name products as well as from competitive offerings. A brand is often considered to be the most valuable, intangible asset of a company since it can assure a price premium based on achieved brand preferences or even brand loyalty (Kotler & Bliemel 1995).

Moving away from these functional definitions, it has to be said, that branding does not merely have significance in the functional sense of revealing a product's origin or identity. Additionally, brands are increasingly being used to communicate meanings, throughout a symbolic function. This symbolic brand function stands for a set of certain attributes and associations which the buyer/user transfers onto him/her, trying to define his/her self-image (Meffert, Burmann, & Koers 2005). Consumers thereby also convey something about themselves to others. This symbolic meaning of brands is becoming more and more important for two different reasons. For once, producers notice that their consumers have increasing difficulties in differentiating the products solely based on their attributes and quality, as they have become too similar throughout the markets. Secondly, consumers find themselves in a market situation where nearly every good is globally accessible and available to the mass markets. In order to individually differentiate oneself, the consumer increasingly tends to base his/her buying decisions on the self-revelation aspects of the brand. Therefore, the symbolic meaning of products increasingly affects consumers’ purchasing decisions and brand preference (Govers & Schoormans 2005) and is of importance. The way a product's symbolic meaning is conceptualized from a managerial perspective and the manner in which its symbolic meaning is eventually perceived differs, and is hence addressed through the distinction between brand identity and brand image.

2.1.2 Brand Image and Brand Identity

Brand image and brand identity are two sides of the same concept, where the brand identity describes the self-conception of a brand from a managerial viewpoint, whereas “*the brand image is on the receiver’s side*” (Kapferer 2004, p. 98). Accordingly from a brand managerial perspective the primary focus lies within defining the brand identity as a first step and then communicating this content and self-image to the consumer. The brand image, on the other hand, refers to the consumers’ perception and their ability to decode the signals “*emanating from the products, services and communication covered by the brand*” (Kapferer 2004, p. 98). Following this customers’ point of view advertising-guru David Ogilvy points out that: “*A brand is the consumer’s idea of a product*” (Ogilvy 1951)

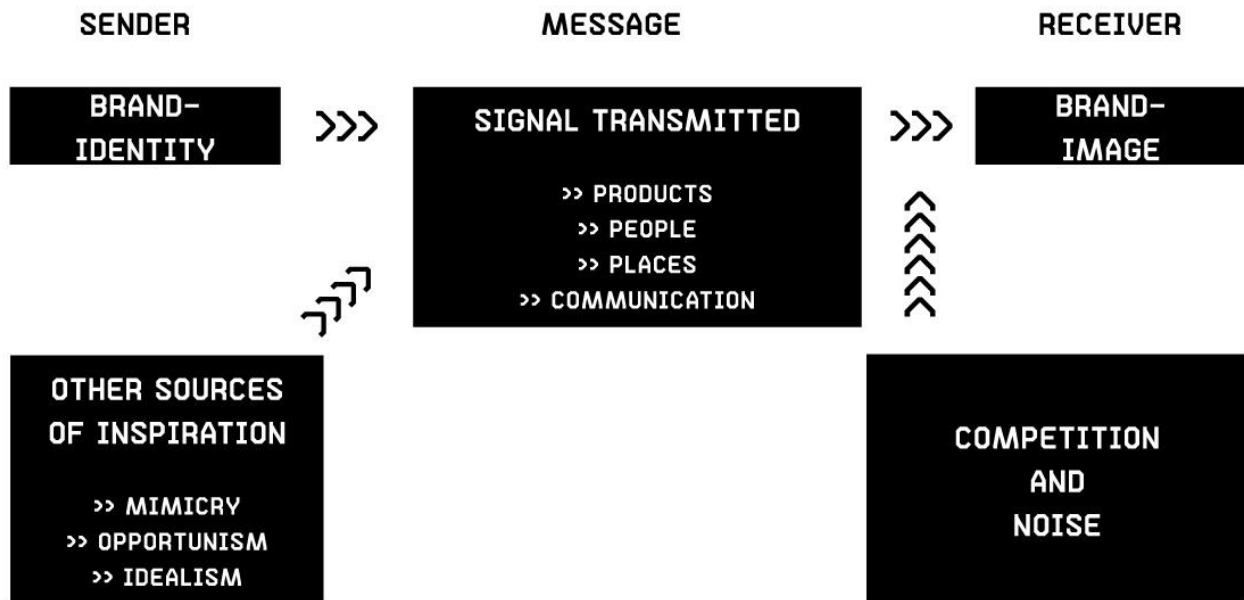


Figure 2: Brand identity and brand image, source: Kapferer (2004)

As illustrated in the figure 2 the receiver perceives additional signals through competition and other sources and it can be taken for granted that the brand image is per definition most unlikely to be consistent with the initially communicated brand identity. Kapferer's graphic thereby illustrates the managerial, competitive and market-based influence towards the brand image. But consistently this symbolic image transfer has to be understood as a bi-directional process. While consumers adapt the transferred meaning and image from the brand to themselves, they as users also convey an image back to the brand. This is known under the term of user image or brand-user image and is one of the influential factors of how a brand is generally perceived (Aaker & Biel 1993). Consequently

the brand image itself cannot be seen as the mere result of managerial decisions and competitive influence, but has to be rather seen as a construct affected by other sub-images. Supporting this idea, Plummer (1985) came up with a model describing the concept of brand image from a consumer perception point as a product of the three components “*product attributes*”, “*consumer benefits*” and “*brand personality*”.



Figure 3: Brand image model, source: Plummer (1985)

Current research emphasizes the importance of this aspect of brand personality and accordingly common ground in marketing literature is the understanding of brand personality being a strong influential aspect within the brand image (e.g. Keller 1998). But some marketing literature even acknowledges brand personality as not being a mere sub-part of brand image but furthermore applies the terms brand image and brand personality on the same level. Caprara, Barbaranelli, and Guido (2001, p. 378) suggested that brand personality can be seen as a "*viable metaphor in understanding brand image*". The concept of brand personality shall as the core concept of this thesis be explained in-depth within the following part.

2.2 Brand Personality

In his work about the symbolic meaning of consumer goods Levy (1959) was the first researcher to point out the changes from a mere functional usage of consumer goods to an extended symbolic mean for distinction. He examined how the specific symbolism of a brand conveys information regarding gender, age and class of the brand user. This information contains personal and social meaning and Levy describes how consumers aim to purchase those symbolic brands in accordance with the picture they would like to direct to their social surrounding. While his work can be

considered the initial foundation for the brand personality concept, Levy himself is not using the term itself, but focuses on the idea of symbolic meaning conveyed by a brand in the demographic aspects of gender, age and class.

This construct of brands symbolizing and possessing human like demographics has over time been further researched and expanded. Today marketers use various strategies to imbue brands with personality traits in order to make them enduring and distinct from other brands. For example, according to Aaker (1997) the personality traits associated with Coca-Cola are cool, all-American, and real while Pepsi is seen as being young, exciting, and hip. The term "*brand personality*" itself has been first taken upon extensively by Plummer (1985; 2000) and has more recently been highly influenced by Aaker's work. Within this extension of the concept the dimension "*personality*" is understood from a human psychology perspective as "*the way individuals react fairly consistently to a variety of environmental situations*" (Plummer 2000, p. 79).

Aaker as one of the major researchers shaping the brand personality theory most recently has focused on how consumers assign human characteristics to different brands and see them according to this not only as either male/female, young/old, but also as fun/serious, emotional/cold etc. This approach is very metaphorical and literally designed to draw an implicit picture of a brand, thus revealing its brand perception from a consumer's point of view. Aaker closed a previously existing definition gap by offering the description of brand personality as "*the set of human characteristics associated with a brand*" (1997, p. 1). In response Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) critique that this definition is formulated too broad and undifferentiated and define brand personality as being "*the unique set of human personality traits both applicable and relevant to brands*" (Azoulay & Kapferer 2003, p. 151). This definition is used as a foundation for the presented thesis. Aaker's work furthermore pioneered within constructing the first valid measurement tool for evaluating brand personalities and has been used as an elemental basis by various researchers ever since. Due to this relevant position of her work, the specifics of the brand personality measurement tool are separately examined in part 2.1.4.

Plummer (1985; 2000) found that there are two different facets of brand personality, these being in their variance similar to how Kapferer argues for a distinction between brand image and brand identity. The two facets of brand personality are described by Plummer as "*input, that is, what we want consumers to think and feel, and out-take, what consumers actually do think and feel*" (Plummer 2000, p. 81). These two distinctive perspectives on brand personality are expressed

through the brand personality statement from a conceptual side and the brand personality profile on the other side. The brand personality statement has thereby a rather strategic character and functions as a guideline for all marketing activities targeted towards the consumer. The brand personality profile is on the other hand representing the consumer perceptions of the brand and should "*identify salient components of the brand's personality. That is, they indicate which dimensions are strong and which dimensions are weak*" (Plummer 2000, p. 81). Having taken a consumer perspective, the research accordingly focuses on this aspect of brand personality profile within the construct of brand personality.



Figure 4: Brand personality components model, source: own visualization

This together with a brand's physical attributes and functional characteristics affect that consumers either see themselves in the brand or not. Accordingly Levy already found in 1959, that brand personality is closely related to consumers' desire to attain self-congruency. The notion of self-concept and self congruency are explained more thoroughly in part 2.1.3.

Brand personality as a multidimensional construct is seen as enabling consumers to express themselves along numerous symbolic dimensions. According to Grohmann (2008) consumers thereby relate to brands as they would to friends because of their use of brands as extensions of themselves. The concept of brand personality has in this context even been extended towards consumer-brand relationships, mainly based on the elemental work of Fournier (1998). Herein the author argues that brand can be seen as an active partner and form relationships together with consumer. Whereas the notion of consumer influence to brands is easily comprehensible it is much harder to imagine the brand as an equally influential factor into the relationship. Marketers thus often personalize brands by granting them humanistic features and by doing so give brands with the 'partner' rights (Fournier 1998). It is know from the previous works of Aaker (1997) and Plummer (1985) that for consumers it is fairly easy to assign personal qualities while thinking about brands in human characteristics. Thus, the following part will describe how brand personality is communicated from a managerial side towards the consumers and how they perceive it.

2.2.1 Brand Personality Communication and Perception

From the marketers perspective a brand personality statement is communicated through the traditional marketing mix 4P's: product, price, place and promotion tools. In this context Batra, Lehmann and Singh (1993) exemplarily point out the influential effects of high or low pricing, the imagery association with the retail store atmosphere/distribution channel as well as all the effects of attributes within product form and packaging. Probably the strongest influence is achieved through the promotional/advertising aspect of the marketing mix. All single aspects of the brand communication towards the consumer convey meaning and contribute to the overall perceived brand personality profile. Namely the chosen medium, the message and tone, the visual elements such as colour, typography, layout, logos, or if applied the music and video on a certain technological level, are key contributors to the brand's personality profile. Thus, as brand perception adjoins a variety of factors, branding has to be seen as an integrated marketing communication process. Batra, Lehmann and Singh (1993) even goes a step further and point out that the extent to which these marketing activities are integrated, the degree of distinctiveness in the conveyed personality and the grade of persistency over time are responsible for the clearness of the brand personality.

From a consumer's perspective, brands are, additionally, perceived though more complex mechanism including previous relationships with the brand, recommendations by others, reviews, interaction with representatives as well as other persons associated with the brand. Batra, Lehmann and Singh (1993) clearly emphasize that while all these factors are undeniably shaping the brand personality and conveying it to the consumer, not many studies have been conducted to examine the influence of a single aspect within these dimensions. The understanding of 'how' the interaction of these factors results in a certain more or less distinctive brand personality profile remains rudimentary and leaves a gap in the research area.

Consumer-brand interactions through the notion of brand personality has as mentioned been extended to the personification of the brand as a partner (Aaker 1997; Fournier 1998). But whereas human personality traits are formed through an individual's behavior, physical characteristics, demographics and attitudes, brand personality is more loosely formed by any direct or indirect contact that a customer has with the brand and its representatives. Thus, the set of human characteristics associated with the typical user of the brand, the company's employees but also the product category itself are shaping factors of the brand's personality. Accordingly, it was found that

brand communication symbolically and in an associative manner conveys not only the social usage context of a brand but also the image of the kind of user the brand is for and the typical user personality (Batra, Lehmann & Singh 1993). This illustrates how the user image plays a central role and is closely connected to the perceived brand personality.

More specifically, the brand personality is thereby considered to reflect the stereotypic image of the typical user of the brand. The match between the perceived stereotypic user image and the self-perception of the consumer is used to evaluate a certain brand. "*This matching process involving the brand-user image with consumers' self-concept is referred to as self-congruity.*" (Kressmann et al. 2006, p. 956) In other words, the stronger the correlation between the typical brand-user image and the way the consumer would like to see himself/herself or to be seen, the more likely it is that consumers acknowledge the use of the brand to be of personal value. The self-concept and concept of self-congruency will be further explained in the next parts.

2.2.2 Self Concept of Consumers and Brand Personality

It has been said by Tuan (1980, p. 472) "*Our fragile sense of self needs support, and this we get by having and possessing things because, to a large degree, we are what we have and possess*". Either intentionally or unintentionally human beings view possessions as parts of themselves. Therefore possessions are an important element of sense of self, or in other words they produce an extended self (Belk 1988). This fundamental idea of self greatly influences consumer behavior and is the driving force of many marketing plans. By associating brands with personality traits and hence building brand personality, marketers provide consumers with self-expressive or symbolic benefits. In other words "*Consumers seek brands with personalities that are congruent with either their own or their [...] ideal personalities*" (Batra, Lehmann and Singh 1993, p. 85).

In order to fully understand how brand personality affects consumer behavior, different self-concept models need to be explained. Self-concept in general is a multidimensional term reflecting the totality of an individual's thoughts and feelings about self and self in a functional form. The self-concept of a person affects in many ways what, where and how goods are purchased. The person will behave in ways that protect and enhance the self-concept as this is seen as being of great value. The purchase, display and use of goods communicate meanings to the individual and to others, and hence the consuming behavior will be directed towards enhancing self-concept (Sirgy 1982).



Figure 5: Self-concept, source: own visualization

Important components of the multidimensional construct of self-concept are actual-self, ideal-self, and social-self. Actual self refers to how an individual perceives himself/herself, ideal-self refers to how an individual would like to perceive himself/herself, and social-self refers to how an individual presents himself/herself to others (Sirgy 1982). Brand image and personality interact with these parts of a consumer's self-concept. These concepts (actual-self, ideal-self, social-self) then affect consumer behavior as consumers purchase goods that express their identity. This is done by attempting to match a brand's personality with the consumer's self-concept. The consumer reaches "*self-congruity*" when a brand's personality and the customer's self-concept are equivalent. This congruity plays an important role in purchase motivation and for example, affects the consumer's brand preference and purchase intention (Sirgy 1985).

2.2.2.1 Self-Congruity

According to Kressmann et al. (2006), "*Self-congruity is guided by self-concept motives such as the need for self-esteem and self-consistency*". The greater the match between the brand personality and the consumer's ideal-self, the more likely it is that the consumer assumes that the use of the brand will boost his/her self-esteem. This is because the actions that people take in order to decrease the differences between their actual- and ideal-self increase self-esteem. Another self-concept motive is the need for self-consistency. This motivates people to behave in ways that are consistent with their actual-self. People have beliefs about their own identities, values, preferences and habits that they wish to protect. This desire to protect their beliefs about themselves is one of the driving forces behind motivating purchase behavior (Kressmann et al. 2006).

It is one of the consumer theory foundations to believe that a consumer's personality can be revealed by the consumption manners (Levy 1959). Products are often chosen as a symbolic source expressing one's stereotypes and characteristics (Sirgy 1982). Self-concept works as an organizing

principle that filters experiences and perceptions of self and others, products, and brands (Palan 2001; Sirgy 1985). Considering that product characteristics interact with a consumer's self-concept (Sirgy 1985), similarly, a parallel regarding brand and consumer relationships can be drawn. On such a premise few brand and consumer congruity levels can be found, as described by Sirgy (1985), a brand can be highly congruent with the self-concept in one consumption situation and not at all congruent with it in another. This leads to four different self-congruity comparisons between a brand and self-concept that will influence consumer behavior differently. Positive self-congruity occurs when a positive product-image perception matches with a positive self-concept belief. If a product-image perception is positive but a self-concept belief is negative the match is positive self-incongruity. Another comparison is negative self-congruity that takes place when both a product-image perception and a self-concept belief are negative. And lastly, if there is a negative product-image perception but a positive self-concept belief, the comparison between them is negative self-incongruity (Sirgy 1982).

The level of congruency between a brand or a product and a consumer has been previously described as having a great influence into product and similarly brand preference (Sirgy 1982; Sirgy 1985; Fournier 1998). From the four comparisons the strongest level of purchase motivation is determined by positive self-congruity followed by positive self-incongruity, negative self-congruity, and negative self-incongruity, respectively. This order can be explained through the previously discussed self-esteem and self-consistency needs. From the self-esteem perspective, a consumer is motivated to purchase a positively valued brand to maintain a positive self-concept (positive self-congruity) or to enhance the self-concept belief by approaching and ideal-self (positive self-incongruity). Additionally, the consumer is motivated to avoid negatively valued brands to prevent self-abasement (negative self-congruity and negative self-incongruity). According to self-consistency view, in contrast to self-esteem perspective, the consumer is motivated to purchase a brand whose image (positive or negative) is congruent with self-concept. This acts to maintain consistency between behavior and self-concept beliefs (positive and negative self-congruity) and to avoid dissonance produced from behavior and self-concept differences (positive and negative self-incongruity). Consequently, the motivation toward purchasing a brand is the net effects of the motivational states arising from self-esteem and self-consistency needs (Sirgy 1982).

Additionally to the general brand and consumer congruency discussion, refined researches show that brand personality affects brand preference, attitude, loyalty and buying intents (Mengxia 2007) and Sirgy (1985) demonstrates that ideal congruity and self-congruity influence purchase

motivation and preference. Grohmann (2008) also points out that as gender is a part of consumers' self-concept, consumers have a need to express masculinity and femininity through brand choice. When using brands for self-expressive purposes, consumers draw on masculine and feminine personality traits associated with brands in order to enhance their own degree of masculinity or femininity. Therefore gender of brand personality is especially relevant to brands possessing symbolic value for consumers that attempt to reinforce their own gender (Grohmann 2008).

Many researchers have come to the conclusion that consumers prefer brands congruent with their self-concept. This is because such brands allow consumers to reinforce their actual or ideal view of themselves and therefore help them to achieve personal goals. But as both brand personality and self-concept consist of multiple dimensions, this important congruency can only be reached when dimensions of brand personality are matched with the most important self-concept dimensions (Grohmann 2008). While this observation is correct, Malhotra (1987) argues, it is unreasonable to think that consumer and brand congruency is the only factor for consumers' choices. The majority of self-concept literature does not deny the influence of other factors but merely neglects them in the research. Our research focuses on a self-congruency perspective but is also aware of other potential influencers.

2.2.3 Brand Personality Measurement and Dimensions

Brand personality communication to consumers is mostly researched from a general marketers perspective and rarely focuses on investigating single specific traits such as gender. The primary interest of this study, though, is to investigate brand personality perception from the consumer's perspective. To investigate how brand personality is perceived, an overview of existing measurement approaches has to be given.

One of the main critiques towards the brand measurement methods has been the lack of valid measuring tools and hence the predominance of research being based on a variety of arbitrarily categorized character traits. These ad hoc generated, unvalidated sets of character traits have been the foundation for all research until in 1997 Aaker applied the human trait concept to branding (Kilian 2004). Prior research in psychology has shown the existence of five human personality dimensions also known as the 'Big Five'. Aaker's study is based on those 'Big Five' character trait measurements (Batra, Lehmann & Singh 1993). This 'Big Five' categorizes adjectives that describe

individuals into the five dimensions of extraversion, agreeableness, emotional stability, openness and conscientiousness (Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Guido 2001).

These five different dimensions have been translated into branding theory by Aaker (1997) who modified the 'Big Five' in order to achieve applicability to the concept of brand personality. Aaker came up with a number of unique traits that later were categorized similarly to the existing Big Five human psychology. The modified 'Big Five' in brand personality are thus sincerity (down-to-earth, honest, wholesome, cheerful), excitement (daring, spirited, imaginative), competence (reliable, intelligent, cheerful), sophistication (upper class, charming), and ruggedness (tough, outdoorsy) (Aaker 1997). This work has been regarded highly influential as it added the missing validity and generalizability to the concept of brand personality and has hence been used as a research foundation by most of the scholars.

While Aaker's (1997) modification of the 'Big Five' enables a more valid categorization of character traits within a brand, the dimension of basic demographic characteristics is neglected in this approach. This dimension, including age, gender and social class, has to be regarded as strongly fundamental for a brand personality and Batra, Lehmann and Singh state accordingly that “...*the demographics of a brand are often its most salient personality characteristics*” (Batra, Lehmann and Singh 1993, p. 84). Thus regarding the objective of this thesis it can be stated that a brand's gender is one of the basic characteristics perceived through brand personality. Batra, Lehmann and Singh point out additionally that while the applied personality dimensions in Aaker's model are of importance and relevance, the demographic dimension has a communicative function that has to be taken into consideration especially from a consumer's point of view. Accordingly consumers might base their purchase decisions on the perceived demographic statement a certain brand will make about themselves regarding age, gender and social class belonging (Batra, Lehmann & Singh 1993). In this thesis, it can be concluded that, when focusing on the specific aspect of brand gender the categorization of brand characteristics by the 'Big Five' model has to be acknowledged but it can be handled secondarily as the focus is instead set on the perceived brand demographics.

It was, therefore, chosen to assess consumers' brand personality perceptions through the approach of Williams, Satterwhite and Best in "Pancultural Gender Stereotypes Revisited" from 1999. In accordance with Aaker's work, Williams, Satterwhite and Best (1999) selected the 'Adjective Check List' for their trait categorization, but set a strong focus on the aspect of gender-specific stereotypes within the categorization of their character traits. The resulting categorization consists of two lists

with twenty-five character traits each for masculine and feminine gender stereotypes (see Appendix 1). For the presented research objective these lists have been narrowed down to the twelve most relevant gender-specific character traits that will be tested for applicability within the brand personality measurement (see figure 6 below).

MASCULINE	FEMININE
Active	Attractive
Adventurous	Emotional
Aggressive	Sensitive
Ambitious	Charming
Dominant	Curious
Energetic	Dreamy
Independent	Mild
Logical	Sexy
Self-Confident	Shy
Strong	Superstitious
Tough	Soft-Hearted
Unemotional	Talkative

Figure 6: Gender stereotypes, source: own visualizations

2.2.4. Critical Look into Brand Personality

The majority of the recent brand personality researches are based on Aaker's (1997) Big Five Model (Azoulay & Kapferer 2003). While this work is treated as fundamental, her model has also faced many critiques. For our specific research purpose the demographic dimension of a brand personality is essential. As mentioned before, this dimension is neglected in her approach since her work merely focuses on the character dimension. Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) disagree with Aaker's Big Five stating that in essence the blend of dimensions of brand identity are being measured and personality itself is a mere part of brand identity.

Caprara, Barbaranelli and Guido (2001) agree that the notion of brand personality is useful but they do not consider the Big Five personality factors a good way to think about brands. In their research the Big Five model was fully replicated only when the respondents described their own personality. When considering brand personalities the five-factor structure was not replicable and merely blends of the Big Five were applicable. It was additionally questioned whether the same factors can be applied to all brands. The same adjectives locate under different factors when comparing human and brand personalities and also when comparing descriptions of different brands' personalities. This shows that the meaning of an adjective differs in different situations and when describing different brands (Caprara, Barbaranelli & Guido 2001).

In practice, researchers have complained that Aaker's (1997) scale does not replicate well in other countries and consumer samples. When the scale is used to measure product category personality and brand personality, it was found that the same dimensions are perceived differently. It also appears that depending on the product category researched, it was more common to pick up functional product category characteristics rather than brand personality ones (Batra, Lenk & Wedel n.d.). Additionally, Rojas-Mendez, Erenchun-Podlech, and Silva-Olave (2004) found in their study that the 'ruggedness' dimension from the Big Five is neither reliable nor valid and thus shows a weak relationship with brand personality. Furthermore, in order to achieve good measurement properties, the other four dimensions (excitement, sincerity, competence and sophistication) needed to be refined so that reliability and validity was achieved (Rojas-Mendez, Erenchun-Podlech & Silva-Olave 2004).

It was also acknowledged that in practice both researchers and marketers had difficulties in brand personality data interpretation and application (Plummer 2000). If scholars misinterpret the data and marketers do not apply it correctly in their marketing strategies, the targeted consumer might not be able to relate to the initially formed brand personality concept. In other words the brand personality statement will not match the perceived brand personality profile.

The presented critics reason our decision to neglect Aaker's (1997) elemental work as a direct foundation for our study. Our approach on the demographic dimension of the brand personality and more specifically the gender aspect is not supported by her research. Moreover, the cross-cultural applicability of her scale has been critiqued and is hence not suitable for our focus on the Western-European context.

2.3 Gender Aspects

Having a female or male sex is a fundamental biological distinction and such classification often constitutes as the basic foundation for the majority of human cultures and societies. Gender on the other hand is a socially produced distinction between female and male and its importance might vary due to different cultural settings (Alvesson & Billing 1997). In contemporary literature, it is being acknowledged that sex and gender can be distinguishable and have implications for the emotional and social human roles, which are studied and explained in the following parts.

2.3.1 Sex versus Gender

Traditionally sex and gender were thought to be inseparable in a way that men were masculine and women were feminine. But within contemporary societies this strictly two-folded classified scheme is not applicable anymore and has been replaced by multi-facets of gender variation. As some men are more feminine than masculine and the same is true for women, this traditional view is not correct (Palan 2001). Traditional gender research has produced particular sets of traits that are categorized into feminine and masculine characteristics however, those vary independently from one's gender belonging. In other words, men can be seen as masculine and reflect masculine traits of competitiveness, activeness, independence but they may as well carry feminine traits such as emotions, sensitiveness, expressiveness (Fischer & Arnold 1994). Nowadays, in the postmodern culture the separation of gender from sex becomes increasingly apparent. Sex merely describes an individual's inborn biological sex while gender refers to psychological, sociological features and behavior stereotypically associated with the male or female biological sex.

Gender derives from cultural norms and beliefs of what it means to be masculine or feminine. According to Lerner (1986 cited in Palan 2001: pp. 3) "*gender is the cultural definition of behavior defined as appropriate to the sexes in a given society at a given time*". Therefore gender is a set of cultural roles that is learned from an early age (Palan 2001). Every society recognizes behaviors that are more suitable to females than males and vice versa. These choices are arbitrary, mediated by cultural norms and traditions. In the majority of societies the distribution of gender roles is the same: men must be concerned with economic and other achievements while women must be concerned with taking care of people and children especially. This traditional division of sex roles stems from biological differences. While growing up the gender role socialization starts in the

family and then continues in peer groups and in school (Hofstede 2001). According to Bem (1993), children are treated differently depending on their sex because of the adults' gender-specific stereotypes. The different treatment then causes girls and boys to become different from one another in the way that the adults' preconceptions determined (Bem 1993). This gender role socialization is then supported and communicated further through media, starting with children's books and intensified by films, television and the press. Women's magazines, for example, obviously reinforce gender roles (Hofstede 2001). Those observations illustrate how gender stereotypes are constantly reproduced in our society. Therefore it can be said that the stereotyped gender roles are either consciously or unconsciously present in the minds of consumers.

2.3.2 Gender-specific dimensions

Although the traditional view of males being masculine and females being feminine does not entirely hold true in the contemporary world, many stereotypes of males and females exist. Some personality traits as mentioned before are seen as being more feminine while others are seen as masculine. The collection of masculine and feminine traits that constitute a gender -specific personality is seen as representing two ways of human functioning. Masculinity is stereotypically associated with a linear orientation towards getting the job done or the problem solved, while femininity is associated with an affective concern for the welfare of others and the harmony of the group. Moreover, masculinity is seen as more individual and associated with a concern for oneself, whereas femininity is seen to be collective and associated with a concern for the relationship between oneself and others (Bem 1993). In addition to personality traits, stereotyping extends to all dimensions of life. According to Bem (1983) people have a tendency to sort information into categories on some particular dimension, despite the existence of other dimensions that would help to sort the information as well. This is demonstrated in gender schema theory by people spontaneously sorting attributes and behaviors into masculine and feminine categories regardless of their differences on a variety of dimensions unrelated to gender. For example, people spontaneously place items like “*tender*” and “*nightingale*” into a feminine category and items like “*assertive*” and “*eagle*” into a masculine category. Gender schema theory argues that cultures are gender polarizing in their discourse and social institutions and therefore children grow to be gender schematic themselves without even realizing it (Bem 1983). Hofstede (2001) has also found that males and females value different things and almost universally men pay more importance to egocentric goals, such as money and career, while women give more importance to social goals such as relationships

and helping others. In addition, Tannen's (1995) work shows that gender differences also affect the way of communicating. Men's primary tendency is to transfer information while women use conversations to exchange feelings and establish relationships. This illustrates that both genders have their own way of thinking, feeling, and acting.

The gendered personality is thereby not a static collection of masculine and feminine traits but a psychological process. This process produces and reproduces the feminine and masculine traits during a lifetime of self-construction (Bem 1993). This self-construction view is based on the understanding that gender roles are shared expectations of men's and women's attributes and social behavior and gender differences result merely from the adoption of gender roles. (Costa, Terracciano & McCrae 2001). Gender differences within the personality traits have in this context been overviewed by Costa, Terracciano and McCrae (2001). They present that both sexes have faced different adaptive problems throughout evolutionary history and therefore differ in these domains. Women, for example, are more invested in relations with children since focusing on the survival of their children has been an evolutionary advantage in the past.

2.3.2.1 Gender stereotype cross-cultural study

Gender stereotypes have been researched by Williams, Satterwhite and Best (1999) in a large-scale, cross-cultural study. In the study, female and male university students from 25 countries around the world judged 300 adjectives as to whether in their culture the adjective was more likely to be associated with masculinity or femininity, or not differentially associated by gender. Within each sample, the responses to each adjective were calculated to be either very masculine, very feminine, or to fall in the middle, thus be neutral. In order to be seen as a stereotype item, an adjective had to be linked to one gender at least twice as often as to the opposing gender. These stereotypic items were then analyzed by different theoretically-based scoring systems: Affective Meanings, Transactional Analysis Ego States, and Psychological Needs. While the study revealed some cultural variations, the degree of similarities in characteristics associated with women and men was highly inter-cultural (Williams, Satterwhite & Best 1999). The resulting 50 most strongly linked adjectives ascribed to femininity and masculinity are illustrated in the Appendix 1. In accordance to existing literature, it can be seen from the figure that the feminine adjectives emphasize nurturance and describe women as being soft, weak, and social; whereas the masculine adjectives emphasize assertiveness and describe men as independent, strong, and aggressive.

2.4 Brand and Gender

The major theoretical concepts of brand personality and gender aspects introduced earlier are in this chapter united to one approach and how they are related is examined.

2.4.1 Brand Personality and Gender Correlation

Not only humans but also brands can be feminine and/or masculine, thus Levy (1959, p. 12) states that brand personality is a subject to gender categorization. Masculinity and femininity are, indeed, salient personality traits. They can be applied to the brand personality and are often exercised in practice by consumers associating human personality traits with the traits brands possess (Grohmann 2008). Brand personality can be compared also to human personality, since similarly to humans, brands also hold a schema of traits. In the context of human personality research Goldberg (1990) suggested the Big Five Human traits of Surgency, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability and Culture. Similarly, the model developed by Aaker (1997) demonstrates a validated framework where brand personality is constructed based on the five dimensions of Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness.

A range of studies (Aaker 1997; Palan 2001; Grohmann 2008; Wee 2003) agree and demonstrates that the brand personality concept is valid in examining consumer-brand relationships. As gender is an important criterion in the minds of consumers, feminine or masculine traits are given amongst other primary demographics (for example age) to brands (Grohmann 2008). There is little reasoning to such a tendency, however, the major one is the consumers' need of expressing their own identity through brand preference (Aaker 1997). In other words, throughout the consumption of brands that carry specific traits, consumers may communicate some aspects of their own personality - the expression of gender among those.

Due to the lack of research focusing on actual brand gender, it is only the tacit assumption that the traits brands and humans carry are subjects to the same gender classification. In other words, there is a lack of literature discussing whether a particular personality dimension can be seen as masculine or feminine for both consumers and brands. "*Scales measuring masculinity and femininity as human personality traits have not been validated in a brand personality context*" (Grohmann 2008, p. 4). Wee (2003) also raised the question of validity whether a human

personality approach can be applied to brand personality. But his findings support that brand personality functions similarly to the human one.

A general assumption in both consumer theory and marketing practice is that gender influences particular consumer behaviors. Gender affects consumer behaviors in quite many crucial decision making stages and influences specific usage patterns of a particular brand, product or service (Fischer & Arnold 1994). Understanding this notion, marketers continuously develop marketing, more specifically branding, strategies that are formulated in acknowledgment of gender based preferences. Similarly, researchers examine the relationships between gender caused behaviors and constructs. Although gender and consumer behavior relationships have been previously researched within the context of branding, significant gender based research results have been rare (Palan 2001). Only few studies demonstrate a correlation between the gender-specific consumer behavior and brands possessing feminine or masculine traits (Fischer & Arnold 1994).

For example, Grohmann's (2008) study about brand personality and gender introduce the masculine and feminine brand personality instrument. This instrument measures the gender dimensions of brand personality on a two-dimensional, 12-item descriptive adjective scale, applicable both to symbolic and utilitarian brands. Grohmann formed the scale by looking into how spokespeople in advertising shape masculine and feminine brand personality, how consumers' self-concept congruency with masculine or feminine brand personality affects consumer responses, and how parent brand personality affects brand extension evaluations. The research found that the congruence between gender dimensions of brand personality and consumers' sex-role-identity influences affective, attitudinal, and behavioral consumer responses positively. This in turn enables consumers to express an important dimension of their self-concept. In addition, Grohmann's scale can be used as a tool to analyze consumers' perceptions of masculine and feminine brand personality (Grohmann 2008).

2.4.2 Product Category and Gender

It has to be acknowledged that product categories might already consist of a gender bias, as for example coffee is seen as stronger and more masculine and tea as weaker and more feminine (Batra, Lenk & Wedel n.d.). In this context waters may not call out for particularly obvious associations. The relationship between product category and brand category genders is generally under-

researched. It is known that both the product categories' gender image and the brand personality's gender image pertain to consumers' perception (Grohmann 2008). However, there is a lack of deeper understanding to what extent does a product category influence consumers' perceptions of the brand gender per se.

One of the few studies in this area is an overview by Govers and Schoormans (2005) that demonstrates the product category influence to consumer behavior through the congruence effect. Although in their study product category is named 'product variant' in essence they research the above mentioned issue of product category influence on consumer. By investigating product category or 'product variant' personality their findings reveal that people indeed tend to choose products categories that match consumer self-image (Govers & Schoormans 2005).

Batra, Lenk and Wedel (n.d.) communicate the idea that the symbolical meaning of the product lays originally within the category itself. They also came to the conclusion that the entire product category, not only the brand, is perceived to possess personality characteristics. It has also been pointed out that the product category influences which dimensions of the brand personality are stronger perceived by consumers (Batra, Lenk & Wedel n.d.). Thus, the associations caused by a particular product category should be taken into account while investigating brand personality perceptions. With such a belief, the choice of bottled water as a product category is less likely to consist of a gender bias (Grohmann 2008). Due to its gender-neutral nature, this category was chosen as a primary study object. Moreover, it was assumed that water category does not carry distinctive gender based meanings, thus product category personality would not crucially affect brand personality dimensions during the evaluations. The linkage between category personality and brand personality has to be acknowledged, particularly when researching such brand personality aspect as gender.

2.5 Summary of Theory

While the majority of the recent brand personality research is based on Aaker's (1997) Big Five model for our gender-focused research purpose this model is not relevant. Instead the brand personality definition of Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) as "*the unique set of human personality traits both applicable and relevant to brands*" and recent theories from Plummer (1985; 2000) formulate our research basis. Our theoretical background of brand personality thus relies on Plummer's (1985)

model describing the concept of brand personality as consisting of two components: the conceptualized "*brand personality statement*" and the perceived "*brand personality profile*". The brand personality theory part is further completed with theories from Batra, Lehmann and Singh (1993) reflecting on brand characteristics and brand demographics. They illustrate that the demographics of a brand (gender, age and class) are frequently the most salient brand personality aspects. Moreover, in order to fully understand the drivers behind consumer's brand personality perception, the theories of self-concept and self-congruity by Sirgy (1982; 1985) are essential in our study. According to him consumers attempt to match their self-concepts with a brand's personality. This affects consumer perception and behavior and for example influences their brand preferences.

Due to the nature of the study to combine brand personality with gender studies, many gender-specific theories are used together with the brand personality theories. The most important model among these is the categorization of character traits into gender-specific stereotypes by Williams and Best (1982; 1990 in Williams, Satterwhite & Best 1999). Their panculturally tested list shows which adjectives are stereotypically perceived as masculine or feminine. This categorization is used throughout the thesis and forms a remarkable part of the empirical research. Additionally the influence of the brand's product category is evaluated from a gender perspective.

The following figure 7 visualizes the most important conceptual objects and their influential interrelationship. Following the above named differentiation between brand personality statement and brand personality profile, we focus on the latter one, taking a consumer perspective. The brand personality profile is directly influenced by the chosen communication strategy, defined in the brand personality statement. A more indirect influence results from the brand user image as well as from stereotypes and the product category. The last two factors are especially influential from a gender perspective. This means that gender stereotypes and product category gender are influencing the brand personality profile. The combination of perceived characteristics and demographics prejudices the perception of the brand gender as either feminine or masculine. From the bottom up perspective self-congruency and/or consumer-brand relationships are potential motivators for consumers' perception and preference. The contact between the perceived brand gender and the consumer gender stays to be researched in the following chapters based on this given theoretical background.

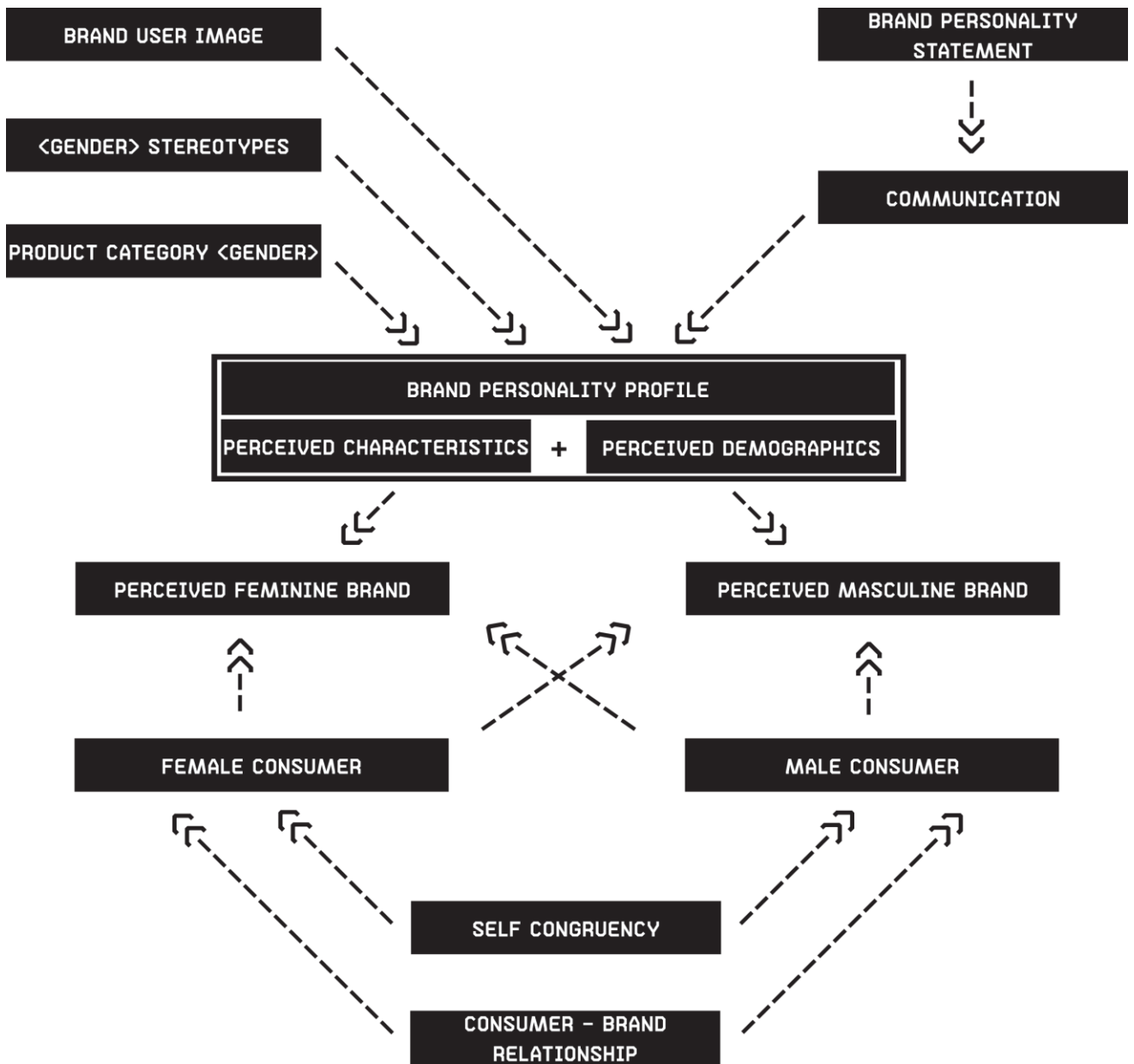


Figure 7: Theoretical overview, source - own visualization

3. METHODOLOGY

The Methodology part is formed to give an overview of how the research was carried out. In order to answer the previously introduced research questions, suitable methodology approaches need to be selected. As the researchers' views and beliefs influence the way the study was conducted and thus will eventually also influence the findings, the philosophical orientations related to this research will firstly be explained. The chosen methods and strategies are then presented and discussed and finally the quality of the study will be examined through validity, reliability, and generalizability.

3.1 The Role of Theory

It has to be pointed out that our theoretical background is highly influenced by Aaker (1997; 1999) and Fournier (1998). However, we are applying a gender focused approach in our research design. Therefore the work and gender-specific dimension model of Williams, Satterwhite and Best (1999) will be applied for the empirical part of the thesis. This gender dimension model was created similarly to Aaker's approach, taking into account the ACL - 'Adjective Check List' like Williams, Satterwhite and Best (1999) but provides a more differentiated view towards gender-specific aspects and stereotyped character dimensions. While forming The Big Five, Aaker (1997) combined the ACL with other scholarly works, while Williams, Satterwhite and Best (1999) limited themselves merely to the 'Adjective Check List' for their trait categorization to pancultural gender stereotypes. Our primarily research focus is on the gender aspect of brand personality. Therefore it is our belief that Williams, Satterwhite and Best trait categorization model, focusing on gender aspects, is of a higher relevance than The Big Five by Aaker (1997) that investigates overall brand personality dimensions.

Theoretical data is projected from a variety of trustworthy scholarly sources with great emphasis towards the brand personality and gender study fields. Scrupulously chosen theories are used to approach the brand personality and gender aspects from the consumer perspective. Implications of the study are further analyzed based on empirical findings, however bearing theoretical findings in

relation and in hand with practical findings that present the reader with the most contemporary understanding of brand personality and gender issues in particular.

3.2. Philosophical Discussion

This paragraph describes the underlying ontological and epistemological theories and the awareness of the researchers' identity. The philosophical views of the researchers outline the fundamental values and assumptions to which the analysis is based upon. These influence the overall structure of the research and especially how the empirical part is produced and later how the findings are analyzed.

3.2.1 Epistemological and Ontological Reflections

The ontological view of this research stems from social constructionism where reality is viewed to be socially constructed, meaning that social phenomena and their meanings are accomplished by social actors (Bryman & Bell 2003). In the social constructionism the focus lays on the truth, in the nature of reality, being dependent on “*who*” established it and “*who*” gives a label to a specific social interaction or incident. In the context of gender studies this has to be understood as the outcome of the research being highly influenced by the existing and perceived gender labeling that stereotypically is being used in the participants' societies. While this view sees all human social creations as given facts, we are inclined to additionally acknowledge that perceiving these facts also depends on the viewpoint, personal beliefs and pre-existing reference frames of the observer, resulting into various possible interpretations based on the same observation context.

As the nature of the study is to combine two different theoretical fields, one epistemological view does not adequately portray all the needed considerations. Therefore the research design has mixed characters from positivism, relativism, and social constructionism views. The positivism view sees that the observer must stay independent from the objects studied and this is our intent. However, this can only fully be done in the quantitative research as interviewers can never be totally independent from the interview process. Additionally, it is recognized from the social constructionism view that we can never be separated from the sense-making process. Following social constructionism, our aim is to increase the understanding of consumers' perceptions, not to demonstrate causality. This is done by both, positivism and social constructionism, methods. From

the positivism side the research is progressed through deductions as we are applying a vast theoretical background to the study. On the other hand, carrying a social constructionism view, our data is gathered quantitatively and qualitatively from which concepts are derived. Additionally, relativist position accepts the value of using multiple sources of data and perspectives, which is highly valued in this research due to the combination of two different research fields. The findings are used in the positivism approach to either verify or falsify the hypothesis, or in our case the research questions. This is used together with a social constructionism view since we are extending our aim to make sense of the interpretations and not just merely answer *yes* or *no* (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe 2004).

Positivist approach aims to discover new findings and uses experiment in research designs. Additionally, the social constructionism approach is appropriate when focusing on people's individual and collective perceptions and their way of communicating when investigating the perception of brand personality through the glasses of gender. The research does not try to explain specific human behavior but from the social constructionism standpoint is trying to understand it (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe 2004). In sum, this research's ontological viewpoint stands in social constructionism while the epistemological considerations mainly stem from the mixture of social constructionism and positivism standpoints.

3.3 Research Approach

Given the nature of the study of combining two different theoretical fields, the research design is iterative as it blends inductive and deductive approaches. Theory is the driver of the thesis and provides us with the relevant background to initiate the quantitative part. However, our quantitative findings are applied to the qualitative research, which in return is designed to produce new knowledge. Therefore our approach is to be considered iterative, going back and forth in between theory and empirical research.

3.3.1 Deductive Elements

The main aim of the study is to combine brand personality theories with gender studies. Thus, theory plays a major part in the research. In-depth knowledge of the existing theories are needed in

order to research the subjects together and to know what exactly needs to be researched. Additionally, new theories of this subject are impossible to generate without knowing the existing ones. When considering the approach to research questions and the nature of this study, there is an underlying assumption that brand personality is seen by consumers. Hence, the research problems of this thesis originate partly from the theoretical background of brand personality, and are then combined with the Williams, Satterwhite and Best's (1999) model found in the gender studies. This choice is grounded in belief that gender aspects influence people's beliefs and actions and therefore also consumers' perceptions and preferences. In sum, the research is rather deductive in nature since it builds upon theories that already exist in their own domains (Bryman & Bell 2003).

3.3.2 Inductive Elements

As discussed previously, the research is aimed at finding the perceptions and attitudes of consumers. The aim is to derive general inferences out of our observations, whereby inherent patterns are more appreciated than preconceived ideas (Bryman & Bell 2003). The actual observations are made through a questionnaire and interviews. The questionnaire gives quantitatively statistical data that demonstrates our respondents' perceptions of brand personality. From this data brand personality characteristics for the specific brands are designed. These predesigned brand profiles are then in the later course of the research used as a foundation to formulate interview questions. The questions in the interviews are therefore based on previously collected data as well as on theory thus ensuring the relevance to the researched subject. The interviews dig deeper into consumers' understanding of brand personality and how these are affected by the gender aspects. A semi-structured interview format is used in order not to narrow down the findings but to reveal the broadest knowledge and concepts of consumers' perceptions possible.

The inductive nature of the research implies identifying and discussing the empirical base and its implications for generating new concepts. The discovered findings from our interviews are coded and unfolded concepts are later grouped into categories. During both processes, coding and categorizing, we returned to the theoretical background in order to detect which of our findings are already reflected in existing research and which are original. All the research findings, as well as the research itself, are approached with an open-mind to derive actually inherent inferences.

3.3.3 Iterative Approach

Due to the background of existing theories this research is deductive in its character, however, an equal emphasis is put on empirical findings to produce new knowledge and concepts, thus having also an inductive approach. Just as deduction entails an element of induction, the inductive process is likely to entail a degree of deduction (Bryman & Bell 2003). Therefore, a compromise between an inductive and deductive approach towards the gathering and production of knowledge is reflected in this thesis. As theory and data are correlated, we are inevitably weaving back and forth between them. Thus, the study's character will be primarily of an iterative approach.

3.4 Research Design

Since the research focuses on a subject that has not been intensively researched before and thus only little knowledge of it exists, the most suitable design is of explorative nature. This is appropriate as the aim is to obtain better knowledge and understanding of a complex area of interest. In order to answer *what* and *how*, both quantitative and qualitative research approaches are employed. The research objective is to combine two different research fields, brand theory and gender studies, in a way that is rare and unique. In order to combine these two fields, the research is started with a vast and thorough theoretical analysis.

Primary data is collected through both quantitative and qualitative methods. A quantitative questionnaire is developed to gain a broad and overall overview of respondents' understanding of the research topic. Moreover, the quantitative findings were taken into consideration while forming qualitative interviews as it provides us with necessary statistical data. The qualitative questions, based on validated quantitative results, allow us to restrain from assumptions and focus on investigating specific brand personality dimensions. The choice of having a design of explorative nature provides us with the opportunity to gain in-depth knowledge of the gender dimension in brand personality.

A grounded theory style of analysis is chosen to capture the complexity of the context studied in our interviews, as it is ideal for an open-ended research strategy. This choice is based on the understanding that "*theory at various levels of generality is indispensable for deeper knowledge of social phenomena*" (Strauss 1987, p. 6). We apply an approach of grounded theory in order to

generate and test theory out of the data we collect in our semi-structured interviews. This is suitable as we are researching in a field that has not been comprehensively explored (Strauss 1987). According to the grounded theory approach, the process of gathering data and analyzing it are closely related, both time- and content wise (Bryman & Bell 2003). Consequently we started analyzing the qualitative data early in the collection stage and went through a continuous analytical process. The mere choice of applying gender studies to branding theory can be perceived as already pre-biased and hence consists of a subjective tendency within this sense-making process of the data, especially when held in mind that all three initiators and authors of the thesis are female. Taking into consideration that the study is approached with a strong focus on gender influences, this possible observer bias has to be considered.

Within this process different conceptual ideas are to emerge from and during the conduction and observation of our interviews. The method we applied in this process is termed coding. It describes the selective examination of the interview observations and transcripts and the use of this data as indicators of evolving thematic concepts. The process, described by Strauss (1987, p. 18) as "*triad of analytical operation*", was thereby practically executed in the following way: we started collecting data from the first interviews and immediately revised, analyzed and transcribed them. This led to our first provisional concepts and was followed by us systematically organizing these findings into potential categories. Those first concepts and categories in return evoked new questions for the qualitative interviews and were hence in the following interviews further examined. The more data we collected, the more concepts emerged from our findings. Accordingly Bryman and Bell find that while coding "*is the starting point for most forms of qualitative data analysis*" (2003, p. 435), an ongoing repetition of data collection, coding and analysis is needed to gain conceptually dense theory.

3.5 Data Collection

In order to fulfill the research purpose both, quantitative and qualitative, data collection methods are used. These particular methods that answer our research questions are a questionnaire and interviews. The quantitative research is conducted first in order to provide the study with a valid consumer perspective. Thereby the brand personalities of the water brands are matched with a brand gender according to consumers' perception. These will in the course of the research build the foundation of brands being defined as feminine or masculine. Moreover, the quantitative results

further stimulate the content of the qualitative interviews and assure relevance to the investigated subject. The interviews are thus formed based on pre-tested data with an additional focus on exploring existing theory. Both methods complement each other in the complex area of combining two research fields and present the study with comprehensive and extensive knowledge. The research questions one and two are answered through both methods while research question three is mainly answered through the qualitative part. This will be further explained in the chapter 'Data Usage in the Research Questions'.

3.5.1 Questionnaire

The quantitative method used in this study was a self-completion questionnaire that was distributed through the internet (see Appendix 2). A questionnaire was chosen to collect data from a wider population in order to draw general conclusions. A questionnaire is also easily distributed in large quantities and is cheap to administer. Taken into account the time and financial limits of this thesis, both of these were clear advantages.

The questionnaire consisted of a set of three questions for eight different brands. Firstly the familiarity with the brand was researched by asking *"Are you familiar with the water brand X?"* Only those who answered "yes" in this question were allowed to proceed with the following questions of the specific brand. Next question was to *"Click on the characteristics that you agree with for the brand X"*. Here the 24 gender based adjectives were presented in a multiple-choice manner and the respondents had the chance of unlimited answers within those given twenty-four characteristics. Lastly the respondents were asked to specify *"If this brand would be a person - would it be a man or a woman?"* Only the choice of man/woman was given but those respondents that left this question unanswered were taken into account as not being able to specify a gender.

The purpose of the on-line questionnaire was three-fold. Fundamentally it was used as a quantitative background in order to draw the brand personality profiles from a consumer's perspective. In addition, information if the brands are seen as feminine or masculine was collected. These illustrate how the brand personality is perceived by consumers and also give implications if the brand gender itself is perceived by consumers at all. Later, after narrowing down the research objects (water brands), the brand profiles were accordingly included in the conception of the qualitative interviews. The on-line questionnaire in addition acted as a filter taking only valid

answers and relevant brand personality profiles into account. The third purpose was the overall intention to apply the collected data and knowledge in order to answer and support the thesis research questions. In accordance with these three purposes the final four brands out of original eight brands were chosen, based on the quantitative results, to be further investigated quantitatively and qualitatively. This choice was based on the need to limit the study's objective to a more expressive and representative size and consistently those brands that had the most distinctive profiles were chosen. Distinctiveness was in this case measured and defined based on the theoretical masculine and feminine characteristic framework in combination with the perceived gender images of the survey respondents. The chosen four profiles possessed the most expressive brand personality profiles based on the overall and combined valuation of the 24 gender adjectives.

3.5.2 Interviews

Interviews are the most commonly employed technique within qualitative studies. This method is also very suitable for the purposes of this research since it allows focusing on the interviewees' point of view (Bryman & Bell 2003). For the purposes of this study, one-to-one in-depth interviews were chosen since we are interested in every interviewee's opinions and want to avoid the risk of having interviewees influencing other interviewees. Also meeting one interviewee at the time makes it easier to create a relaxed atmosphere of confidentiality where interviewees are more likely to reveal themselves and express their individual opinion.

In-depth interviews are appropriate for this study since this method enables to explore deeply and reveal new dimensions of a problem and to ensure accurate accounts based on personal experiences (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe 2004). This way, insights into what the interviewees see as relevant and important (Bryman & Bell 2003), for example a person's perception of feminine brands, can be focused on. These are needed in order to understand issues of brand personality and gender aspects. Additionally, using semi-structured interviews ensured that the same, most important questions were asked in every interview and the interviews were directed to the right direction. Avoidance of too structured interviews leaved room for additional questions and remarks that were needed in order to understand the complex framework of the respondents' personal values and perceptions. This flexible interview process leaves also space for the interviewee to explain issues that he/she sees important (Bryman & Bell 2003).

This qualitative part therefore consisted of semi-structured in-depth interviews (See Appendix 3) through a post-romantic view. The post-romantic interviews take into account actual opinions, but also include respondents' reactions, speaking manners, speed, pausing and other modes. The post-romantic approach of interviews was chosen because the form of speech is as important as the content. It is not merely what is being said but also how it is said. Thus, it is also important to notice what is happening in and through the interview as that is a conversational interaction that contains a lot of implicit information (Wasterfors 2008).

It has to be noted that the interviewees' perceptions cannot be entirely extracted from the interviews. It is possible that brand personality perceptions and brand preference are rather unconscious issues that might be difficult to explain explicitly and verbalize in the interviews. Bem (1993) describes that people sort things to feminine and masculine categories rather spontaneously, thus leaving the possibility that the process is based on unconscious perceptions. This might apply to the examined brand personality perception so the aim is to further raise the interviewees' awareness towards their own inner perception.

Eventually the general difficulty with all qualitative data is how to construct a coherent and reliable picture out of the multiple and various facets represented in the context-based interviews that are comprehensible and logical for the reader. In order to achieve this the process of data analysis and conclusion drawing has to be clearly explained and made understandable for the reader as well as the manner in which the plain collected data is processed towards valuable and relevant concepts and conclusions (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe 2004).

As it is suggested in practice, we began the coding process as early as possible (Bryman & Bell 2003). The interviews were thereby always conducted by two of the authors, one being actively involved in the interviewing part, while the other one was in the background, additionally to the audio-recording, taking notes about the content but first and foremost the behavioral observations of the interviewee. After every interview the two authors would discursively reflect upon the collected data, replaying the spoken word and comparing it with the taken interview notes.

Although the original interview questions were initially developed to contribute to the understanding of the general research objective, they were designed and formulated in an open-ended manner to trigger the interviewees to share as much knowledge and additional insight as possible. Accordingly one initial focus was on gaining understanding towards the generally

researched objective and a second aim was to retrieve more unexpected themes and concepts. Within the process of conducting the interviews and revising as well as comparing the interview transcripts, these additional concepts and patterns started to evolve and were further categorized. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, we were also able to further investigate those evolving themes through extended questioning in some research areas.

Having conducted the full set of eight interviews, we systematically categorized the collected data and concepts by visualizing the findings. This process again led to more themes being detected and put in contextual comparison to previous findings and the theoretical background. Eventually we started dividing all detected concepts into main categories by applying the theories and research objective as a guiding structure. We thereby specifically analyzed all significant concepts. This method can be considered as rather deductive since it applies already existing theories and categories to our evolving concepts. In order to fulfill the explorative nature of our research we do not only exercise this deductive approach but furthermore work in a bi-directional way additionally applying an inductive approach where needed. Working in this manner leaves room for new concepts to evolve from our specific empirical material. These concepts might then be considered as new findings.

3.5.3 Data Usage in Research Questions

RQ1: Do consumers understand the gender within a brand personality? Brand personality profiles are in practice formed by conducting consumer surveys and the results should be written in terms of comparisons (Plummer 2000). This is done in this case through the general comparison of the brand profiles, but more extensively through the comparison of the male versus female respondents' perceptions of each brand personality profile. *"The profiles should identify salient components of the brand's personality. That is, they should indicate which dimensions are strong and which dimensions are weak."* (Plummer 2000, p. 82) In order to not only investigate which components proved to be weak/strong but to further understand the underlying reasoning behind the salient dimensions, this research question was analyzed in both quantitative and qualitative manners. Quantitatively, respondents were asked if they see bottled water brands to have a specific gender. By classifying a brand as 'male' or 'female', respondents could demonstrate their general top-of-mind understanding of a brand having a gender personality per se. To further extend the understanding of this data, *RQ1* was additionally investigated qualitatively.

From the eight water brands that were objects of the quantitative survey, four brands were selected according to the distinctiveness of their brand personality profile and hence chosen to be investigated further. As a first step during the interviews the interviewee was asked to make a choice within the presented water brands based on brand preference. Following this individual choice all interviewees were asked to "*describe and characterize the typical user of this brand with as many adjectives as possible.*" This approach over the brand user image has previously been used by Kressmann et al. (2006) and can be considered valid as a close similarity between the brand user image and the brand personality has been found. It was additionally chosen to let the interviewees first describe how they perceive the stereotypical user of a certain brand, as this association might be triggered easier and allows the interviewees to open their minds for further questions, going deeper into the concept of brand personality itself. The question also reflected if the same adjectives as those in 'Adjective Check List' were voluntarily used by the interviewees, thus investigating whether brand personalities are described in the same or similar gender-specific terms.

Secondly, interviewees were given the 'Adjective Check List' extract with 24 characteristics (figure 6) and following the procedure taken upon by Plummer (2000) were asked to select the ones they think match with the selected brand. The intent was to reveal if interviewees also see particular brand having human characteristics and if so which ones. Afterwards, a few distractive questions were formed so that interviewees would not stick to the narrow water perspective and questions shifted from water related questions to general brand related discussions. Interviewees were asked to state other brands they would characterize coherently with each of their selected 'Adjective Check List' characteristic. This revealed if the 'Adjective Check List' characteristics can be seen as descriptives of brand personality and be applied to other than water brands.

Interviewees were also requested to divide the self-selected 'Adjective Check List' characteristics to feminine and masculine ones. This manner allowed us to find if the interviewees share the masculine and feminine stereotypes found by Williams, Satterwhite and Best (1999), and if there are differences in male and female interviewees' perceptions of these characteristics. The next step was to ask the interviewees to imagine the preferred brand itself as a person and describe it. This way the interviewees were triggered to think about the brand as a person and were later requested to specify if the brand would either be male or female person. Additionally, they were asked to elaborate why they think this way. Such an insight allowed us to analyze the relation between typical user image and brand in terms of a person.

Finally, interviewees were asked to give other examples of feminine and masculine brands in an attempt to illustrate if a person can understand a brand as having a gender. The attempt here was also to broaden our study objective from bottled water brands to all brands in general and see if consumers are able to group and name brands solely on the perceived gender.

Research Question 2: How is the consumer gender influencing the perception of brand personality gender? "Some researchers did find relationships between individual levels of masculinity or femininity and either the masculinity or femininity of their chosen products or brands" (Arnold & Fischer 1994, p. 166). Following the quote, the purpose of this research in essence is to find out if female and male consumers perceive the gender of brand personalities differently. This question is approached quantitatively by drawing four final brand profile figures and later dividing them according to answers from male and female respondents. According to Plummer (2000), brand personality profiles are best to be portrayed as a summary or a graph as it is much easier to comprehend relationships in such a manner rather than seeing numerical data. Hence, through the usage of visualized figures it was expected to find specific repeating characteristics that male and female interviewees ascribed to male and female profiled brands. Thus, discussion was created to accommodate question whether interviewees define a brand personality's gender perception by granting gender-specific characteristics to a brand. This was also tested in comparison with the previously asked question if the interviewees see the previously preferred brand as male or female.

Research Question 3: How do consumers prefer brands from the gender perspective? The last research question was approached from the qualitative perspective and mainly analyzed consumer attitudes from their own gender and brand correlation perspective. It questioned whether consumers prefer brands that are of same gender as them and tried to reveal the source of such consumer choice. Interviewers raised few questions asking to reason why particular water brand was selected as the preferred one. This was done to see if the preference relates to the Sirgy's (1982) notion of consumers' self-concept effects to consumption behavior where Sirgy especially stresses the self-congruity factor in consumer preference matters. Last but not least inquiry was addressed to find out whether an interviewee finds the previously chosen/preferred brand reflecting him/her or can he/she identify with that brand. Answers could thus demonstrate interviewees'/consumers' congruity and consequently discover specific reasonings for agreeing with one or another brand personality gender.

3.5.4 Participants

Having persons with the relevant characteristics of the target group of this study is crucial in the selection of respondents as it indisputably influences the trustworthiness of the results (Bryman & Bell, 2003). It is also vital to have the same characteristics of participants in both parts of the research, in the questionnaire and in the interviews. In both cases the samples were formed from individuals with different Western- European cultural backgrounds. The research was targeted at international students living in Lund, Sweden and whose home country is in Western Europe. This participant group was chosen due to its accessibility and representation of a wide range of Western European cultures. Having a diverse participant pool makes the results more generalizable but it was important to restrict the pool to a geographical and cultural area where cultural clashes of gender-specific stereotypes are minimal. Gender-specific stereotypes are very culturally confined issues and not taking this into account could easily lead to biased results. It was also imperative to have both, male and female participants. Special attention was given to this in the interviews so that an equal amount of males and females were interviewed in order to research both, masculine and feminine, perceptions of brand personality.

Ideal candidate criteria:

- Western-European background
- Living in Lund
- Student

Since one of the questionnaire's main functions was to give basis to the interviews the sample size was larger than in the interviews. In total 786 questionnaires were sent out electronically and received a response rate of 19%, or 150 questionnaires. However, after selecting respondents that matched our ideal candidate criteria, the final sample consisted of 128 questionnaires or 16%. All the respondents were aged between 20 and 32, 52% of them being female, 33% male while 15% did not specify their sex. All together the respondents were from 14 different nationalities. The interviews being of qualitative nature, a smaller sample size was selected so that in-depth interviews could be performed. Although the number of the interviewees was smaller, the sample still consisted of various different European cultures and it was made sure that both, feminine and masculine, perceptions were researched. The interviewees were chosen in a way that they represented the same sample as in the questionnaire but were not the same ones who took part in the quantitative survey. This was done in order to avoid biased answers that could have been caused by

participation in quantitative questionnaire. However, similar profile of respondents in both data collection steps assured that same cultural but more importantly stereotypical ideas could be expressed. The interviewees were of six different nationalities, four of them female and four male, aged from 23 to 31. The objective of the interviews was to analyze the research questions of how brand personality and gender aspects relate in the perception of a brand and therefore, it is highly relevant to have the interviewees from both sexes and of wide cultural content.

3.6 Method Discussion: Assessing the quality of the study

The research process and the choices made are explained to create a sense of the trustworthiness of the study. In order to get credibility to a study, it needs to be as reliable, valid, and generalized as possible. Therefore, the study is in this section examined based on its validity, reliability, and generalizability. It needs to be noted that some difficulties might be posed being a research that has many psychological aspects. Consumers' perceptions and their gender are very individual topics that vary from a customer to customer. And since the research questions of this thesis are of an explorative nature the focus lies on different views and beliefs.

3.6.1 Validity

Validity concerns whether our research is measuring what it claims to measure (Bryman & Bell 2003). More specifically the partly approach of social constructionism in this thesis concerns with whether the study gains access to the experiences of those in the research setting (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe 2004). In other words the validity is measured on how well the study has gained access to consumers' real beliefs and perceptions of brand personality. The multicultural nature of the research might affect this measurement. The questionnaire and the interviews were conducted in English as this was the common language between the authors and the diverse international participants. However, the level of English understandably varies between the respondents. In this context it has to be acknowledged that language acts as a mediator of our participant's perception. Some language issues may exist that make it difficult for the interviewees to express their perception with the exact and specific meanings of the words. These differences are difficult to capture when collecting and examining data.

The applied 'Adjective Check List' has been created and tested by Williams, Satterwhite and Best (1999) in an inter-cultural study and thereby proven valid. Our use of these adjectives thus grants our thesis with further validity. Moreover, the research design uses both quantitative and qualitative methods to measure in-depth perception. This specific combination of those two methods thereby ensures additional validity in measuring the perceptions and experiences of our respondents.

3.6.2 Reliability

Reliability declares from a social constructionism point of view whether there is transparency in how sense was made from the raw data. If the measures would yield the same results on other occasions, is on the other hand the focus within positivism (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe 2004). We partly adapt both views within our different data collection methods and therefore have two different ways of measuring our reliability.

The objective is to stay distant from the material being researched throughout the whole research process. The quantitative part of the research consists of online questionnaires', and its reliability is easily accomplished as contact with the authors is absent. In the second part of the empirical research, needed attention is given to the data sources - the interviews. The same interviewers conducted every interview in similar settings in a manner that limited the influence on interviewees' answers and thoughts. It is, however, important to note that data from the research is subject to the authors' interpretations and hence we can never be totally separated from the sense-making process.

The questions in the quantitative questionnaire were asked in order to reveal an overview of the research topic. The collected data was analyzed statistically and illustrated graphically. The main reason to conduct quantitative research before the qualitative was to construct a valid database reflecting consumers' perceptions. The analysis from the quantitative part was then used as a reliable platform while forming the qualitative interview questions. These questions, moreover, were created iteratively, in consideration of established theories. An approach of grounded theory was then be used to make sense of the raw data by detecting and labelling concepts and organizing them to categories.

The researchers are often the main instrument of the data collection in qualititative studies (Bryman & Bell 2003). Accordingly our qualitative part of the study relies on our ability to gather and

interpret observations and statements of our interviewees. Therefore, the possible discrepancies between what is actually being stated and the researchers' perceived interpretations must be considered. Moreover, it is likely that although being conducted in a relaxed atmosphere, the sheer presence of the interviewers during the interview situation influence the interviewees' answers in some ways. However, the advantages of one-to-one interviews outweigh other methods since it allows us to capture their individual perception with a minimum exterior influence.

Given the explorative nature of the study and the unique set of international respondents, there is the possibility that the same research would give variable results. Though this is a way of measuring reliability from a positivist point of view. Within our qualitative research we take a rather social constructionism stand and achieve reliability through transparency and comprehensibility in the way we interpreted the data.

3.6.3 Generalizability

From the constructionist view a study is generalizable if the concepts and constructs derived from the study are relevant in other settings (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe 2004). The research applies valid pancultural feminine and masculine stereotypes to Western-European respondents. As our participants as well as the studied brands are from Western European countries the study is limited to a Western European context. Our qualitative interviews reflect the perception of several nationalities but are conducted on a local level. Therefore our participants sample and their brand gender perceptions are only reflecting the Western European socio-cultural gender understanding. The generalizability is therefore limited, as gender -specific stereotypes and perceptions vary across cultures.

On the other hand the adjective model used as a basis for our research is valid in a pancultural context. It is therefore a possibility that Western European participants react in the same manner to those gender stereotypes as participants in the pan-cultural study. This would enhance the generalizability of our study to a greater extent. As one of the first studies to combine brand personality and gender aspects, our research might have relevance to other settings in branding theory where the gender stereotypes of consumers have not been taken into account before.

We believe that our qualitative findings are applicable to a broad range of product categories that are likely to convey a symbolic message to one's social surrounding, like cars and fashion. But we cannot look at the qualitative findings without acknowledging that they are based on our quantitative findings. The quantitative results are in this context applicable to a more limited range of brands that have both utilitarian and symbolic functions and relatively little product related specifics. In other words these results are applicable to brands that share a highly similar offer and primarily fulfill a functional role and only secondarily carry symbolical meanings. Therefore we believe that the overall results of our study could be generalized and applied to other brands especially within fast moving consumer goods like food and beverage brands but also to other brands like healthcare/toiletries or cosmetics.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The following part is designed to present and analyze the findings from both qualitative and quantitative research. We thereby analyze the presented data in two steps. Initially an introductory overview is given about the general results, first of the quantitative, then of the qualitative research. In a second step we focus on answering our research questions through applying a blend of qualitative and quantitative results. Thereby research questions one and two are answered through this blend of both methods while research question three is answered mainly through the qualitative results.

4.1 Quantitative Research Overview

The quantitative research consisted of the online questionnaire which had 27 questions in total. 24 questions were designed in order to reveal the unique brand personality profile and each of the eight brands were exposed to the same three standard questions that concerned the brands' characteristics and gender. The rest of the questions concerned the respondents' demographics.

For all the eight brands presented in the questionnaire the brand familiarity was rather high as they were known by 60% of the respondents on an average, ranging from the lowest brand awareness from Nestle Aquarel with 48%, to the highest brand awareness for Evian with 84%. In the characteristic dimension three adjectives Mild, Active, and Energetic clearly stood out as they were repeated in all of the eight brands. It was also found out that a large amount of respondents, on average 45%, did not see the eight brands as having a particular gender.

Based on these quantitative results four brands out of the eight brands in the questionnaire were chosen to be further investigated. This choice was reasoned on the need to limit the study objective to a more expressive and representative size. Consistently those brands that had the most distinctive profiles: Vittel, Nestle Aquarel, Evian and Volvic were chosen. These brands were chosen as they either show a strong linkage between the stereotypical characteristics and the assigned gender or because there is no clear pattern with the characteristics. The chosen brands therefore are the ones with the most interesting profiles. Nevertheless, if comparing the questionnaire data, the results

show that the four selected brands on average are in their results similar and representative for the eight brands. The average statistic overview for the four final brands reveals quite a similar brand awareness, description patterns, and brand understanding. The brand awareness for the final four bottled water brands was on average 61%. Repeating characteristics used were again Active, Energetic, and Mild, but additionally also Adventurous, Dreamy and Sensitive were chosen. A majority of 60% of respondents saw the final four brands having a particular gender, while the average of respondents who could not see this was 40%. The results with graphical illustrations for all the four brands are given next.

Vittel was known by 81% of the respondents. The most popular characteristics used were Active 18%, Energetic 12%, Adventurous 9% while Unemotional and Mild shared 8% each. It is noteworthy, that although almost all (excluding Mild), salient characteristics were according to the 'Adjective Check List' from Williams, Satterwhite and Best (1999) masculine, respondents still saw Vittel bottled water equally as a female (36%) and a male (37%) and 27% saw Vittel neither being a man or a woman.

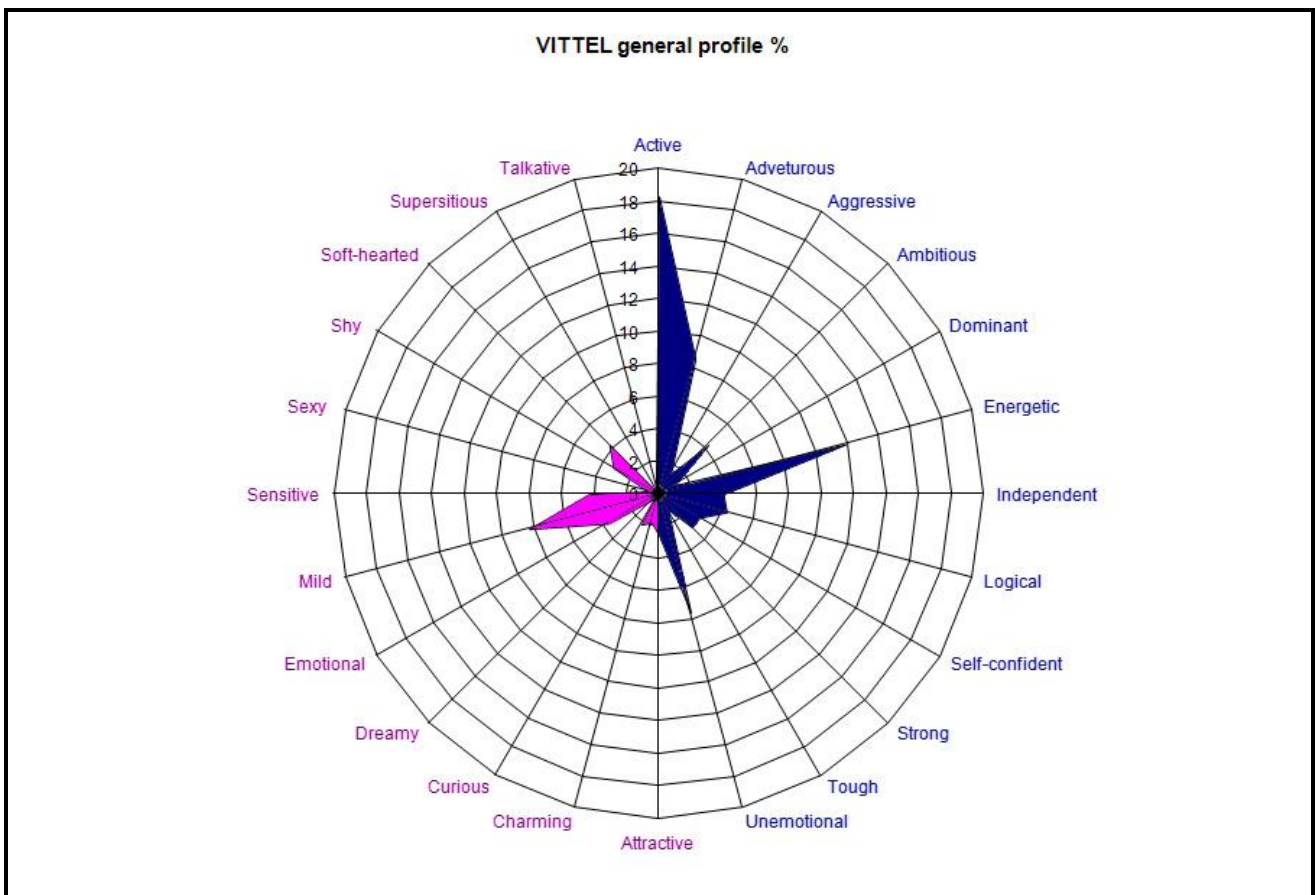


Figure 8: Vittel general profile

The questionnaire showed that 46% of respondents were familiar with the brand Nestle Aquarel. They characterized it as being mostly Active 12%, Energetic 11%, Dreamy 10%, Sensitive and Mild 9%. Female characteristics sum up to 56% leading to the brand profile being perceived as feminine, whereas the masculine characteristics sum up to 44%. Coherently, respondents saw Nestle Aquarel primarily having a female gender (32%) and only 7% pointed it as a male, while the majority of 61% were not able to attribute gender to it.

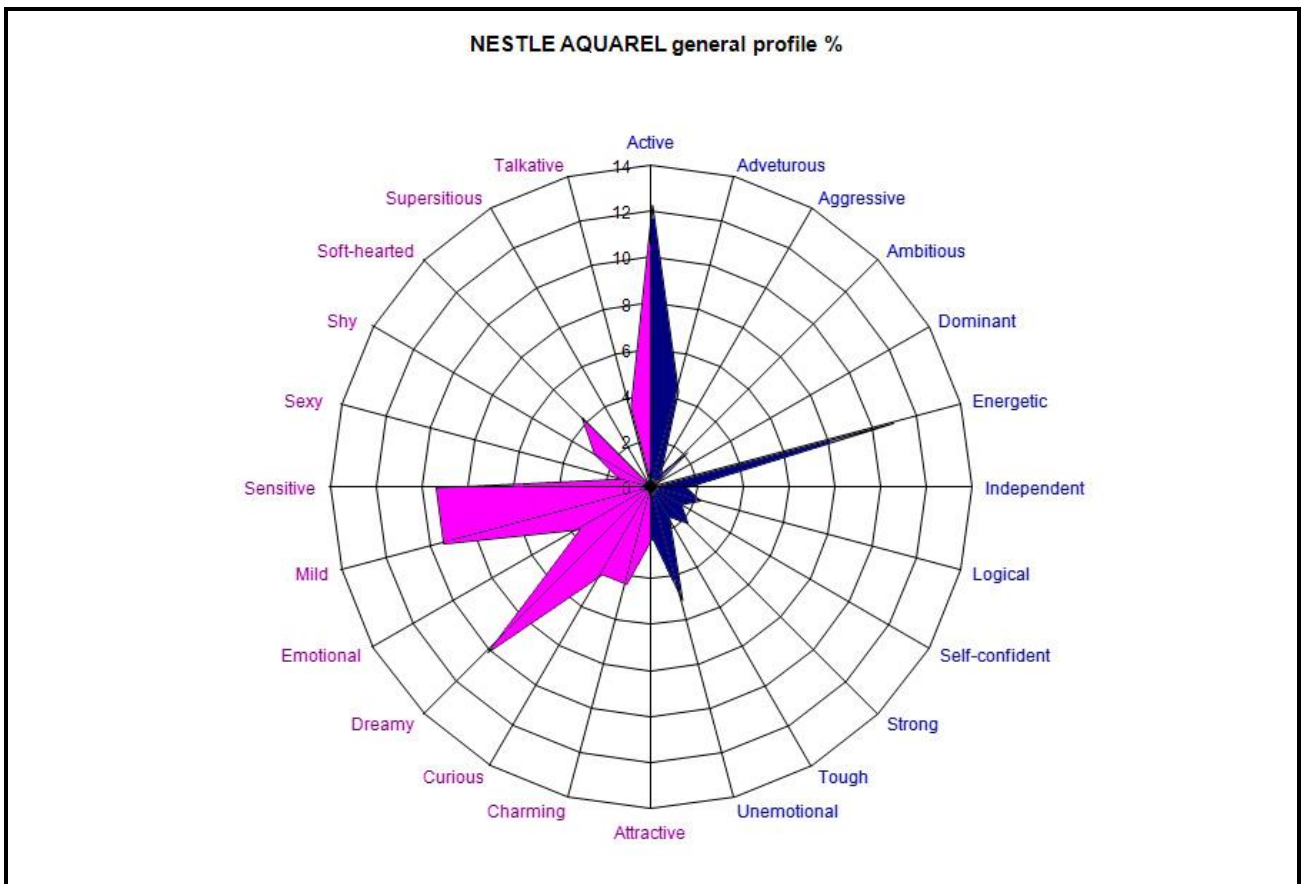


Figure 9: Nestle Aquarel general profile

Evian was most popular in terms of brand awareness and hence achieved at 98%. It was equally seen as 8% of each - Active, Dreamy and Mild, likewise 7% as Attractive and Sensitive. The domination of feminine characteristics goes hand in hand with Evian's brand gender perception as the large majority of 61% saw this bottled water as most likely being a woman and 23% perceived it as being a man. Only 16% could not attribute gender to Evian.

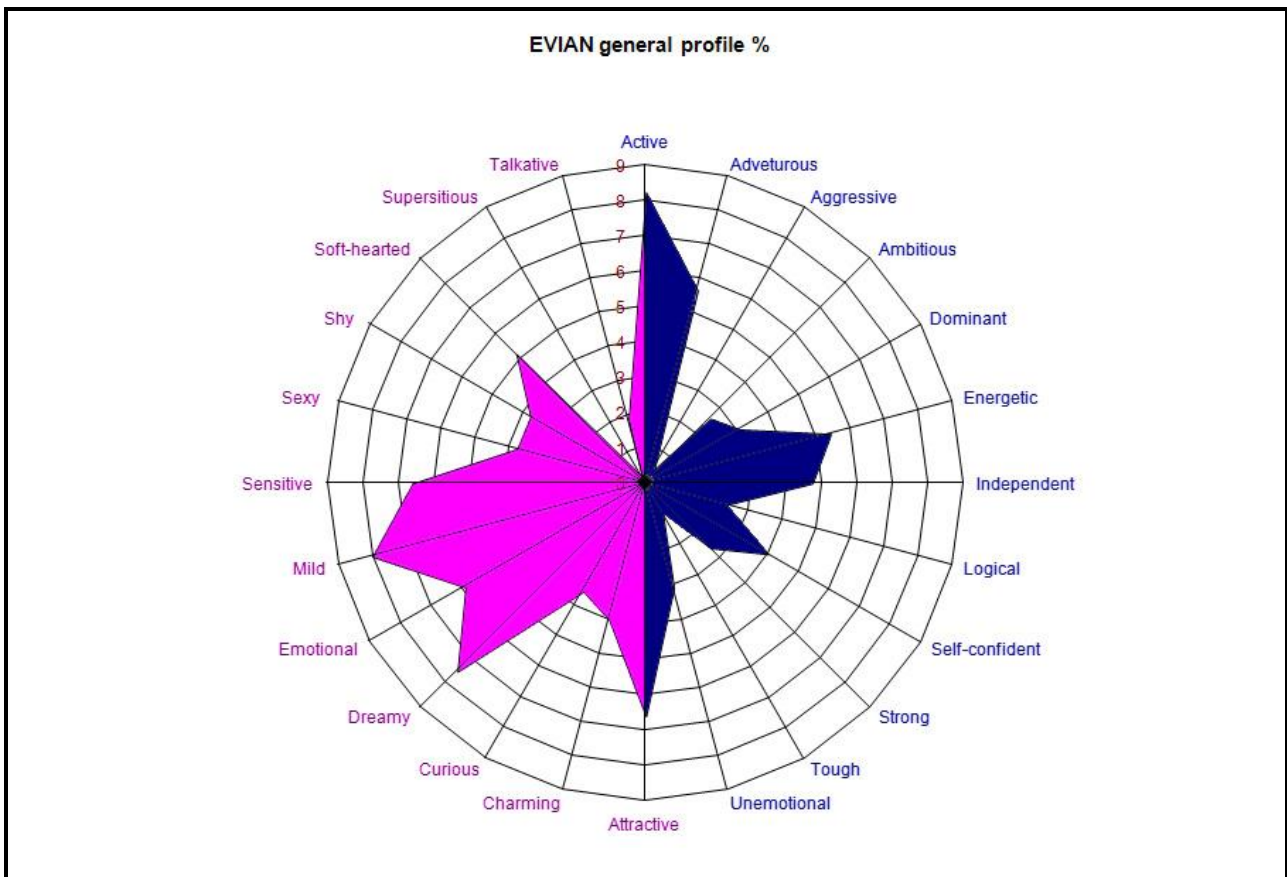


Figure 10: Evian general profile

Volvic was known by 54%, while 46% were not familiar with the brand. Described as Active 12%, Energetic 11% and Adventurous 10%, Volvic was also seen as Independent 7% and Unemotional 7%. Despite absolutely all of the salient characteristics being masculine, more than half (55%) of the respondents had difficulties in perceiving Volvic as either male or female. 30% saw it as a masculine and 15% as a feminine brand.

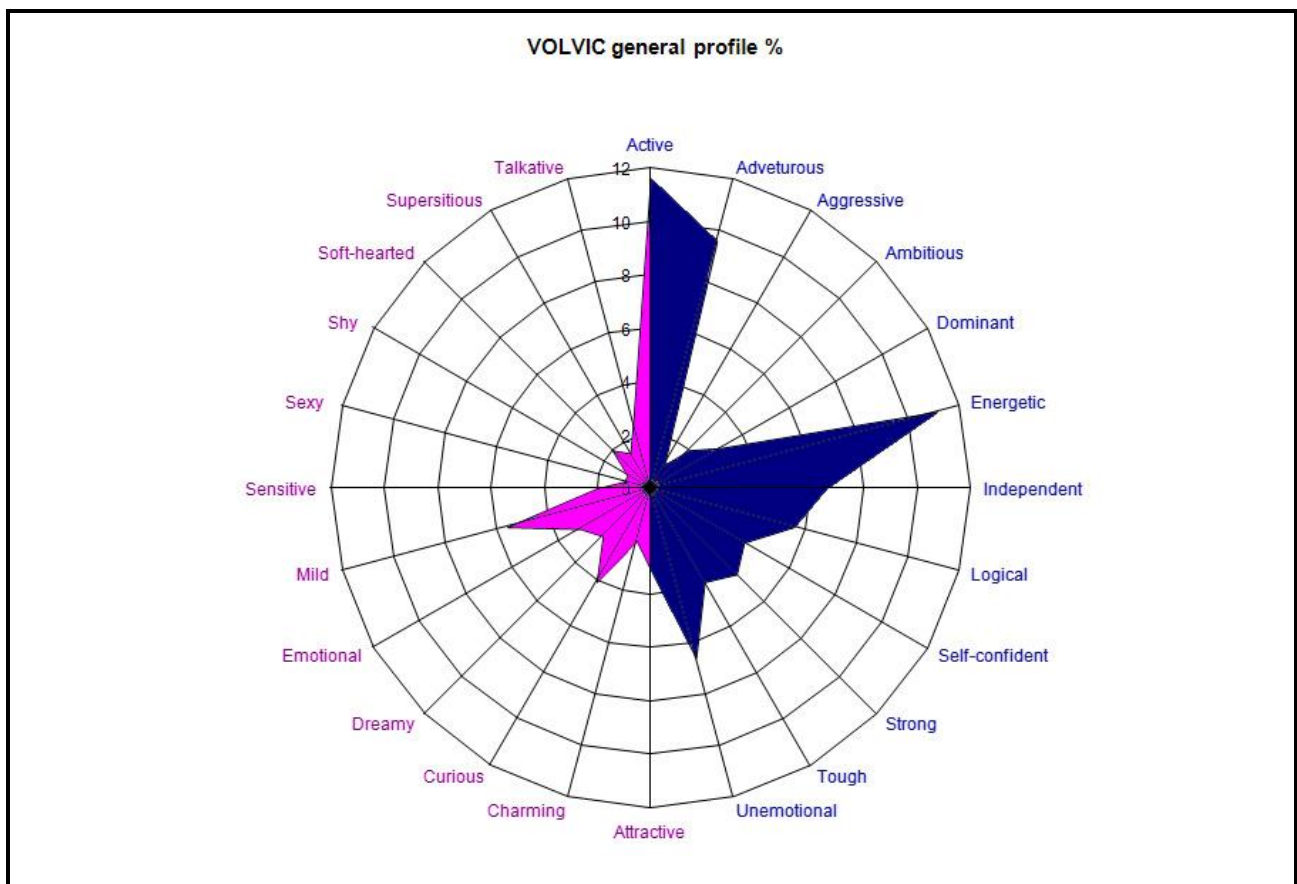


Figure 11: Volvic general profile

4.2 Qualitative Research Overview

Interviews were chosen as the primary qualitative method to investigate brand personality and gender. Whereas the on-line questionnaire was mainly investigating brand and gender correlation based on bottled water, the qualitative interview's major focus was towards the overall brand and gender correlation. The eight interviewees were asked a set of some open-ended questions and based on the answers new questions were generated. The objective of the qualitative research was to examine the level of consumers' understanding of the presence of gender in brand personality and how this understanding evolves. Especially meaningful brand personality and gender related findings were highlighted and repeating information patterns identified. Therefore, the interview

analysis was performed based on the grounded theory and interviews de-coded primarily in concepts where brand and gender correlates. These general findings, further named as concepts, that occurred while processing the interview data, are presented in the figure 12: Empirical Concept table below. The detected concepts are a blend of new concepts originating from our findings and established concepts from existing theory we were able to reconfirm with our research. Furthermore, concepts as practiced in the grounded theory are also classified into major categories, which help to comprehend findings easier. Those categories are thereby matched with our research purpose or more specifically are arranged similar to our research questions.

Category	Concepts	Definitions	Findings and Theory
Research Question One: Do consumers understand the gender within a brand personality?	Brand Gender Comprehension	The level of brand gender awareness varies	<p>" Some brands are pretty obvious. Like Coca-Cola Zero, it's male version of Coca-Cola Light."</p> <p>" It's just at first when you have to think of ... yes one brand that is feminine...it's like hard to look for brands..."</p>
	Gender and Brand Personality Demographics	Gender as a part of demographics is salient brand personality feature	<p>"Oh, probably a 22 to 25 years old sporty chick...or student usually, I would say."</p> <p>Theory: Levy (1959); Batra, Lehmann & Singh (1993)</p>
	Brand User Image and Brand Personality	Typical user and brand personality images are similar	<p>[about typical user] "Ah, active like adventurous and really open...yes. And really energetic, ja."</p> <p>[about brand personality] "A sporty person...ahm...ja in the mid twenties...ahm, well trained...ahmm...also really adventurous and ahhh.... so open-minded..."</p> <p>Theory: Aaker & Biel (1993)</p>
	'Adjective Check List' Applicability	It is easier for consumers to assign presented adjectives to brands than find characteristics in their own words.	<p>"30 year old, wears suit... works in ... bank, married to a healthcare worker, 2 children, 2 cars and golden retriever. "</p> <p>Given adjectives were selected to describe brands. But when describing brands on their own words consumers rarely take those adjectives into account.</p> <p>Theory: Modification of Bem (1983)</p>
	Adjective Perception Level	Consumers understand gender-specific adjectives differently	<p>Adjectives were perceived as clearly applicable, only "a bit" applicable or not applicable at all.</p> <p>"...Not dominant...that's too strong again<...>A bit sensitive, yes..."</p>
	Gender Stimulation	Gender alone does not stimulate brand associations	Brands are hardly named when gender is proposed, but gender is easily ascribed to the given brand.

Category	Concepts	Definitions	Findings and Theory
Research Question One	Stereotyping	Stereotypes are not always a stable factor	<p><i>"Energetic is more masculine, quite a stereotype."</i></p> <p><i>"Energetic for women cause I think women exercise much more than men"</i> [feminine characteristic].</p> <p>Theory: Bem (1993); Hofstede (2001)</p>
	Brand Personality Communication Channels	Communication channels influence brand personality and brand gender perception	<p>Respondents discussed Brand personality mainly through product attributes and advertising examples.</p> <p><i>"It's like this blue, I associate this more to a man than a woman...the shape of the bottle maybe."</i></p> <p><i>"<...> that's [brand gender] pretty obvious when you see the ads for it <...>"</i></p> <p>Theory: Modified Batra, Lehmann & Singh (1993)</p>
Research Question Two: How does consumer gender influence the perception of brand personality gender?	Brand Gender Perception	Male and female consumers see the same brand gender	<p><i>"mhh... oh I would go with Nike probably, because they are all about putting attitude and stuff...less on the emotional side..."</i></p> <p><i>"Nike is a very masculine brand, BMW...and Hewlett Packard."</i></p>
	Brand Gender Evolution	Brand gender perception can change over time	<p>[about gender]"<...> not taking any sides."</p> <p>Respondents tell story of Nike and Sony being seen as a strongly masculine brand, however nowadays it has changed.</p> <p>Theory: Batra, Lehmann & Singh (1993)</p>
	Dominance of Masculinity in Brand Gender	Masculine characteristics are applied more often and to both gender brands	<p><i>"I would say BMW is the most..."</i> [masculine brand]</p> <p>Respondents described brands in rather masculine characteristics. Moreover, masculine brands were much more easily named.</p> <p>Theory: Goldberg (1973)</p>
	Brand and Product Category Adjectives	Same adjectives used for brand and category descriptions	<p>Active and Energetic were repeating characteristics to both categories and brands.</p> <p><i>"...active<...>energetic<...>mild..."</i> [water category]</p>
	Product Category and Gender Associations	Specific categories have strong gender associations	<p><i>"Like I would say car brands in general are much more male."</i></p> <p><i>"Well I think any brand that has to do anything with electronics or cars..."</i> (masculine brand)</p>
	Product Category Influence on Brands	Product category affects brand personality	<p><i>"Of course fashion and cosmetics is very feminine."</i></p> <p><i>"Cars is mostly aggressive and masculine...for me."</i></p> <p>Theory: Govers & Schoorman's (2005)</p>

Category	Concepts	Definitions	Findings and Theory
Research Question Three: Do consumers prefer brands from the gender perspective?	Self-Congruity and Gender	Choosing same gendered brands is not a dominant self-congruency factor	<p>Respondents were not found to reason their brand choices based on a specific correlation between their own and the brand's gender.</p> <p>Theory: Sirgy (1982; 1985); Fournier (1998)</p>
	Self-Congruity and Brand Personality	Brands are acknowledged to convey image to consumer	<p>"<...> that would be the brand that I would buy...I see as a bit more reflection on myself..."</p> <p>Theory: Sirgy (1985); Grohmann (2008)</p>
	Social image and Gender	Brand gender affect perceived social image	<p>"I have that with Lacoste cause that is female... a more female brand for me than a male brand...so if I see guys with Lacoste...I sometimes have that." [That you think?] "Uhhhh."</p> <p>"<...> you buy shampoo L'Oreal for men... I wouldn't go for girlie one.. One has to stick with the attitude!"</p>
	Ideal-Self and Brand Personality	Brand personality helps consumers to communicate ideal-self	<p>"Yeah, it might be that kind of picture you wanna have... but like.... that you wanna associate yourself with..."</p> <p>Theory: Batra, Lehmann & Singh (1993)</p>

Figure 12: Concept table

4.3 Research Question One

Research Question One RQ1: *Do consumers understand the gender within a brand personality?*

Research Question one (RQ1) was initially designed to examine the consumer awareness of the gender dimension within brand personalities. As this thesis approaches the issue of comprehending the brand gender from a consumer's perspective, a focal objective was to investigate if consumers understand the gender within the brand personality per se. Furthermore findings towards the extend of awareness and the manner of perception are being introduced in the following results.

4.3.1 Brand Gender Comprehension

The primary quantitative findings hereby reveal that it is generally rather difficult for consumers to see brands as having a gender. While there is a slight majority of questionnaire respondents who

was able to think of brands as having a certain gender, an average of 45% of all respondents was unable to attach a gender to the presented brands. This could equally be interpreted as a lack of comprehension regarding brand personalities having a gender and was hence further investigated in the qualitative data collection.

The quantitative results narrowed down to the final four brands show slightly smaller difficulties with brand gender comprehension of an average 41% of the respondents being indecisive. Interesting to note is that the highest rated and the most salient brand in terms of gender domination was Evian with 61% of the respondents agreeing that if Evian was a person, it would be a female. The brand Nestle Aquarel turned out to be the least gender sensitive as 61% of the respondents could not relate to it in terms of having a gender. These results indicate a variation in the strength of the perceived brand gender dimension within brands of the same product category. This variation has according to these quantitative findings to be interpreted as highly brand-specific.

Accordingly during the qualitative interviews specific brands were found to have an especially high level of perceived brand gender. In this context Nike and Red Bull were independently mentioned by more than half of the interviewees and being either directly described as masculine or attached to at least one of the masculine adjectives. While we observed a strong brand gender perception within these exemplary brands, other comparably known global brands were named either singularly or not at all. This unequal brand recollection can be interpreted as a lower level of spontaneous brand gender awareness within those unmentioned brands. Accordingly some brands have a very strongly perceived brand gender while the gender of other brands is perceived to a lower degree. We also found that the level of brand gender awareness not only differs within specific brands, but also strongly varies within the individual interview participants. Being asked in the end of the interview, how they felt about it and if they had "previously thought about brands having a gender," the interviewees communicated the most varying degree of pre-existing brand gender awareness and general comprehension which is illustrated in the following quotes:

Finnish man (25): *"Well yeah, well yeah. Some brands are pretty obvious. Like Coca-Cola Zero, it's male version of Coca-Cola Light, that's pretty obvious when you see the ads for it."*

German man (26): *"Not at all – I mean I have a really hard time to think of ... like brands having a character...I mean, if you want me to think about it, ok I can come up with something, but...it's not that obvious in my mind ... if I think about it ok I could say something but, ja it wasn't that obvious to me."*

Irish woman (31): *“Ahmm it’s ja some... if you ask now ... if you have a bit longer to think about it then it gets much ... much more clear and ja sure this brand is more masculine and this is more feminine. It’s just at first when you have to think of ... yes one brand that is feminine...it’s like hard to look for brands...”* This finding of different levels of brand gender perception based on individual comprehension and brand-specifics is easily comprehensible. But due to the generally under-researched combination of brand personality and gender it is not yet part of existing theory.

4.3.2 Gender and Brand Personality Demographics

In general the demographic dimension within the brand personality in accordance with Batra, Lehmann and Singh (1993) has been found to be the most salient and easiest extractable brand personality feature. While interviewees would in some cases rather struggle to characterize a certain brand with adjectives, they could without longer hesitation attach the demographic dimension to a brand, when asked to *“describe the brand personality”*. For example Finnish man (25) described Nestle Aquarel without hesitation to be *“Oh, probably a 22 to 25 years old sporty chick...or student usually, I would say.”* Similarly Danish woman (24) refers to Vittel as *“Well it’s like...ahh ...a working man, going to gym and stuff...ahhm...maybe 25 to 30 or so.... I can also imagine a career man drinking that water.”*

Following the previous discussion, the dimension of demographics consists of age, gender and class (Levy 1959). Consequently our research confirmed the existing concept of brand gender, despite its varying perception level, as one of the most salient aspects of the brand personality. Accordingly the gender information was often the initial starting point of our respondents’ answers. Dutch man (23): *“Uhhh.....I think that would be... probably I would consider female between late 20 uhhh, probably self-conscious of herself fitting in her self image...”* Our observations here can be seen as valid as they can be reasoned through a combination of theoretical findings by Batra, Lehmann and Singh (1993) and Levy (1959).

4.3.3 Brand User Image and Brand Personality

During the qualitative interviews it was initially asked to describe the perceived typical user of the brand and it became clear that the perceived brand user image strongly affected the brand

personality profile. In the further process of the interview, participants were asked to describe the perceived brand personality of their individually preferred water brand. In this context we found that interviewees expressed the same perception about both concepts. This might be additionally based on their general low understanding of the difference between the two concepts. Finnish man (25) for example expressed a similar perception and confusion with the two concepts: *"Well it's kinda same thing that I said in the beginning. Young urban female, that is the same question that you've asked before?"*. Specifically in this concept it was found that the way of ascribing demographics and characteristics to a certain brand held very strong similarities within brand user image and brand personality. This is clearly illustrated in the German man's (26) descriptions of the typical user and the actual brand personality of Nestle Aquarel. Describing the typical user of Nestle Aquarel: *"Probably be a **sporty person**...either man or a woman...ahmm...probably more...I mean I would...I mean ja, associate a **man** buying this product in the store... so ja a **young person maybe twenty to thirty**...ahmm...he is really...or she is really...ah, active like **adventurous and really open**...yes. And really energetic, ja."* Describing the brand personality of Nestle Aquarel: *"A **sporty person**...ahm...ja in the **mid twenties**...ahhm, well trained...ahmm...also really **adventurous and ahhh.... so open-minded**...ahmm - ja...it would be a **man**."* The strong similarities detected within the perception and description of both concepts are in accordance with existing findings from Aaker & Biel (1993), pointing out the strong influence of the brand user image towards the brand personality.

4.3.4 'Adjective Check List' Applicability

We generally detected different responses towards brand gender perception depending on the degree of independence of the interviewee's response. The manner of description differed from cases where the interviewee was entirely free to describe a certain brand in own words, to cases where the gender-specific adjectives were given.

The description of the perceived brand gender was mediated in the quantitative questionnaire through the pre-selected 24 adjectives, reflecting either masculine or feminine characteristics. Due to the restrictive nature of this multiple choice task to select those *"characteristics that you agree with for the brand"* the respondents were only able to choose from these given adjectives. Accordingly they were in the majority able to make descriptive choices applying those gender-specific adjectives. In the course of the qualitative interviews we found coherently that participants

rather seldom apply the gender-specific adjectives spontaneously when describing brands on their own. But similar to the quantitative results, we found that the same adjectives when presented to the participants during the interview were assigned to a certain brand without difficulties. This process of ascribing gender-specific adjectives to a brand is illustrated by Swedish woman (23), who reasons her choices for Evian in the following way: *"Active...like ja, I'd say it's like active, Adventurous...ahh not really I'd say, like neither Ambitious. <...> Sensitive: I'd say yes. Independent...like I...I would say not...no not Independent. Attractive...hmm definitely. Charming...probably also. Curious? ...it's like no...not so much, no...Dreamy I'd say yes and Mild...jaha also mild..."*

When asked on the other hand to freely describe either brand user image or brand personality in their own words it was contrarily found that the interview participants hardly applied the full range of gender-specific characteristics. It was furthermore generally found that while participants were able to generate a vivid and even specific image of brand user and brand personality, they often did not use a wide range of descriptive adjectives in general. Instead, they chose to describe it in more standard, often demographic terms. This observation is coherent with the above presented finding of brand demographics being salient (Batra, Lehmann & Singh 1993), predominantly perceived and easier verbalized by interviewees. Finnish man (28) for example, gave a very detailed description when describing the brand personality of Vittel but still lacked to give any adjectives: *"30 year old, wears suit... works in ... bank, married to a healthcare worker, 2 children, 2 cars and golden retriever. Lives quite a steady life and has routines.... cause routines makes him safe".*

The general ability to spontaneously decide in favor or against a certain gender based adjective for a brand is coherent with existing knowledge from gender studies. As previously presented in the theory part, Bem (1983) found that the majority of people is able to spontaneously assign a certain attribute to a certain gender. This finding was reconfirmed by our observation for example by Finnish man (28): *"Strong - to masculine, because ...well usually the man is physically more stronger than women. <...> Unemotional - chmmm, that has to go to masculine, because I know a lot of unemotional man. <...> Logical - masculine, because I think that a lot of engineers are too logical. And most of my classmates when I was studying for an engineer where men, so that's the reason. <...> And Energetic for women cause I think women exercise much more than men."* Our interviewees were during this process able to quickly provide individual explanations for their classification. In the strong majority of cases those decisions are in accordance with the stereotyped categorization of the 'Adjective Check List'.

For the concept of 'Adjective Check List Applicability' we combined the two above presented observations regarding the classification and applicability of the gender-specific adjectives. As described in the theory part, the 'Adjective Check List' adjectives have been proven valid for gender-specificity by Williams, Satterwhite and Best (1999). They are therefore representative indicators for a specific gender perception. Accordingly a brand perceived as 'sensitive, mild, charming and not adventurous or ambitious' as done above by Swedish woman (23) can hence be classified as feminine. Her above presented activity of spontaneously choosing those characteristics that are perceived suitable for Evian works similar to the Finnish man's attribute-to-gender process. We find the process of adjectives-to-brand and adjectives-to-gender to be based on the same classification system. In more simple terms: if the adjectives represent gender and adjectives can be assigned to brands, then gender can be assigned to brands too. Therefore we found that gender, if mediated through representative gender-specific adjectives, can spontaneously be ascribed to brands. This finding can be seen as a modification and further extension of Bem's (1983) theoretical work of spontaneously assigning attributes to genders.

4.3.5 Adjective Perception Level

To further understand the applicability of our adjectives we used the explorative possibilities of the qualitative interviews and asked the interviewees to comment on their choices throughout the process of classifying adjectives to a brand. Irish woman (31) when being asked to select characteristics that match with Evian, based on the 24 gender-specific adjectives, reasons her choices the following: *“Unemotional... I would not characterize Evian with, so that would be the stack that’s out of question. Strong neither...that...strong is too, too active...so that’s also. Mild... ahhh also because of the taste – because it’s not a very....some waters do have a strong taste within and also more color in this whole package so Evian is more mild... it’s not really logical. Or tough it’s also too strong [as an] adjective. Energetic would be almost in the middle, because it is a bit energy but could be too active already but I would put it now... ja because it is not unenergetic...so. [...] Independent...yes because I think most consumers would describe themselves as independent. Not dominant...that’s too strong again. [...] Not Dreamy either that would be too creative, this is more one way that has been the same... [...] Sensitive? A bit sensitive, yes...also the...ahmm it’s not pastel colors but it’s not too bright and too aggressive colors so that would be more sensitive. Emotional yes... you can be really emotional about waters, I know that. Not charming, it’s not that*

emotional. Not aggressive. [...] Active yes...not over-active but active. Not adventurous...too...ja it's too straight to be adventurous."

This lengthy excerpt illustrates a very significant finding within the applicability of the gender-specific adjectives. In this specific interview, as well as in others, our interviewees expressed a more differentiated understanding of the gender-specific adjectives. This means that most of the adjectives were not only either assigned to the brand or not - but interviewees expressed different levels of agreeableness. Different adjectives would in this context be perceived as clearly applicable, only "a bit" applicable or not applicable at all. The latter was in this case often explained by reasoning that those adjectives were perceived as being "too strong" in their statement. It is worth pointing out that the majority of those "too strong" adjectives that were not chosen by Irish Woman were masculine. Those masculine character traits did not match her perception of the feminine brand Evian because of the too definite statement. In general this differentiated adjective perception leads to the conclusion that consumers indeed have a very specific picture and understanding of the brand characteristics. They not only agree or disagree with a certain character trait but are also able to indicate the degree to which a certain adjective matches the brand. This finding has not been further researched in the context of applying gender-specific adjectives to brand personalities.

4.3.6 Gender Stimulation

In the case of unmediated, direct gender presentation "can you give an example of a brand you perceive as female/male" it was found that gender alone does not extensively stimulate brand associations. The response, of Dutch woman (23) is as follows: " Example of a male brand?.. chm..... let me think...[long pause]. No...I think not." In other words interview participants had difficulties with naming a matching brand when a certain gender was proposed. The reversed process of ascribing a gender to a presented brand was on the other hand absolved without difficulties. The difficulty in naming a brand according to the proposed gender, was especially observed within the female gender brands. Both male and female interviewees showed rather strong difficulties in associating a specific brand of having a feminine gender. German man's (26) statement illustrates this well: "I mean...like...more brands related to like healthcare and things like that, that's more a feminine thing to me...I mean related to ahmm.. females...but I don't know, I cant think of any brand right now." And additionally, Swedish woman (23) said: "Like none any of the

specific ones that I would say are typical women, female [brand]" thus showing that her top of mind brands are not feminine. The top of mind brand gender is under-researched, and no established theory could complement this observation.

When trying to find feminine brands, the interviewees were observed thinking about product categories that are considered very feminine instead. These product categories were mainly related to health care, cosmetics, and fashion. This was later shown for example by the same female interviewee - Swedish woman (23): *"Like there are all the make-up brands of course, and shampoo brands and...woman hygienic brands..."* and German man (26): *"Brands related to like healthcare and things like that, that's more a feminine thing to me...I mean related to ahmm... females...but I don't know, I can't think of any brand right now."* It seems that the difficulty to assign feminine gender with a specific brand is not related to the consumers' gender as both, males and females have difficulties in this. In a quantitative questionnaire, brands of distinctive gender were proposed and easily classified into feminine or masculine. This finding together with the discussion above allows us to finalize the idea that gender alone cannot stimulate brand recollection. This observation also requires deeper investigation as there is a theoretical gap present.

4.3.7 Stereotyping

The application of the gender-specific adjectives and thus the brand gender perception is based on the interviewees' general understanding of gender stereotypes. In general the qualitative results illustrated that participants follow the existing gender stereotypes when being asked to divide the adjectives into masculine and feminine characteristics. Some minor differences that contradicted the gender stereotypes were on the other hand a common finding and mostly based on specific personal experience. Interviewees thereby seemed to be aware of existing stereotypes, and when mentioning them they verbalized this awareness and tended to justify their individually consenting or contradicting choice. Irish woman (31) in this context: *"Mild is feminine, Energetic is more masculine, quite a stereotype, Independent is for me more feminine, Ambitious is more masculine, Talkative definitely feminine, Attractive as well, Superstitious, ahmm I know more women or more feminine persons that are more superstitious than men, Sensitive – feminine, Emotional feminine as well – Sexy and Active"* [putting on feminine stack].

While 'Independent' is stereotypically a male characteristic the interviewee defines it as *"for me more feminine"*. The way she verbalized her personal perception can be interpreted as an underlying understanding of the stereotype and her awareness of contradicting this. The same female participant described talkative as being stereotypically *"definitely feminine"*. When matching the given 24 characteristics to Evian, she established an interesting connection between the feminine adjective 'Talkative' and the stereotypically male characteristics 'Ambitious and Independent': *"Talkative? Jaha probably even talkative as well. I think if you are ambitious and independent you also want to talk about that – which is why then I would put talkative in that stack."* This connection generally illustrates well how interviewees would naturally combine stereotypically contradicting gender adjectives within the same brand, based on own interpretation of the meaning and previous experiences. In the context of observed stereotype awareness, it was also found that in some cases a contradiction is purposely undertaken. This phenomenon was predominantly found within female respondents describing male adjectives as feminine or contradicting the stereotype of feminine adjectives. As Swedish woman (23) said: *"That is why it's even harder cause like...even if I see the word and I... like I automatically think it's a male thing, then I want it like say it differently... [long pause] Now I am basically like hesitating to all the feminine words, cause I don't believe if I really think they're feminine."* Again awareness of the traditional stereotype is illustrated through this statement. Our observation can be seen in connection to existing theory in gender stereotyping from Bem (1993) and Hofstede (2001). It can be concluded that whether or not consumers agree with stereotyped gender roles, they are consciously or unconsciously present in their minds.

4.3.8 Brand Personality Communication Channels

The above findings have already contributed to understanding if consumers understand the brand gender dimension and additionally knowledge about the way of understanding was gained during the qualitative interviews. It was in the theoretical part previously mentioned by Batra, Lehmann and Singh (1993) that brand personality is communicated through a variety of direct marketing communication channels but furthermore perceived by consumers in a more complex manner involving also indirect brand contact. They also emphasized that brands are understood via networks including those indirect contacts like previous relationships with the brand, recommendations by others, reviews, interactions with representatives and others. What evoked attention here was the interviewees' tendency to neglect the so called 'complex' indirect perception

channels. In other words, it seemed that brand personality is very well directly understood through the usage of the traditional marketing mix. Interviewees were able to recollect a few samples of advertising campaigns, mentioned their impressions of these advertisements and repeatedly referred to their perception of the brands' packaging. As done by Finnish man (25) when referring to his understanding of brand gender difference communicated through advertising: *"Some brands are pretty obvious. Like Coca-Cola Zero, it's male version of Coca-Cola Light, that's pretty obvious when you see the ads for it."* Dutch woman (23) adds: *"the commercials I think...everything is based on emotions."*

To validate this notion, our research went to a further extend, aiming to understand which specific dimensions of the traditional marketing mix seem to primarily influence consumers. It was found that the general category of 'packaging' was the most saliently comprehended, since color and shape were often named in the reflection about how the gender of brand personality is understood and why this understanding exists. Dutch man (23) expresses his gender perception of Nestle Aquarel : *"Ahmm... I mean first of all it's the color... it's like this blue, I associate this more to a man than a woman...the shape of the bottle maybe...is more related to man..."* In the same interview he argues for his choice to define cars like BMW and Mercedes as male, while perceiving *"the little ones...Toyota"* as female. In this context he refers again to color as a perceived indicator for gender by saying: *"Because they...they're less ja ... that might sound a bit silly but they're less powerful, less horsepower and smaller cars, when I think of Toyota it is always like a red car or ... like some more friendly colors, when I think about Mercedes or BMW it's more like black or dark blue – it's like a lot about the color, I think."*

Danish woman (24) argues for one masculine brand gender perception in a very similar way by explaining *"I think it's a ... a ...and I think that the shape of the bottle has some kind of alps scene , as far as I remember...and it reminds me of being active and ... well in this particular case I see it as masculine... and then the bottle is sort of square ... which I somehow associate with male too."* These observations consequently increase the understanding of how brand personality is perceived and grant additional volume to the understanding of brand personality communication. This is achieved through our illustration of brand personality gender being consciously perceived though the direct contact with traditional marketing, especially advertising and product packaging. The indirect contacts with the brand might still play a role in the brand gender perception, although interviewees did not mention or were unable to identify these indicators when discussing their perceptions. Our observation here does not contradict the findings from Batra, Lehmann and Singh

(1993), but illustrates that in practice consumers are not aware of the complex indirect communication and base their perception on the more directly perceived marketing communication instead.

4.3.9 Summary of Research Question One:

Research Question One was initially designed to examine if consumers understand gender within the brand personality. It is found that the brand gender understanding is a sensitive concept and consumers may or may not see a brand as having gender. Such varying level of brand gender understanding is greatly dependent on the brand in focus. Brand gender is named as one of the most salient brand demographic features and described in similar terms to the perceived typical brand user image. Consumers mediate brand gender through the usage of representative gender-specific characteristics rather than naming the gender directly. These gender-specific characteristics are subjectively perceived as belonging into either feminine or masculine categories and those gender based stereotypes differ to a small extent within consumers. To sum up, we found the degree of brand gender understanding to vary and that the concept is affected by cultural, marketing and personal factors.

4.4 Research Question Two: How consumer gender influence the perception of brand personality gender?

Research Question two (RQ2) investigates the question how the consumer gender influences the perception of the brand personality gender. In essence it demonstrates if female and male consumers perceive the gender of same brands differently. If so, what differences are those and how do interviewees feel about them. The question about brand gender perception from the consumer gender perspective was answered using both quantitative and qualitative methods, however the quantitative approach did not seek to explain the dimensions of 'how' and 'why'. Thus RQ2 was further discussed during the qualitative interviews by searching for common tendencies, and seeking to answer this research question in the manner of conceptual findings. The results of the on-line questionnaire were sorted and based on the consumer gender in order to reveal the differences among male and female perceptions of the same brands. Hence the characteristics given to the four final bottled water brands were gathered and from the most salient ones, male's and female's

understanding of the water brand personality profiles were formed. All of the four final water brands were exposed to such a classification and resulted in distinctive visual graphs which are illustrated and explained in the following paragraphs.

In terms of outstanding salient Adjective Check List characteristics, female and male respondents thought of Vittel as male, however to a different extent. While female respondents saw Vittel as 21% Active (male characteristic), a much smaller amount of males, 13%, saw Vittel as having this feature. 14% of females also named Vittel as Energetic (male characteristic) while 7% of males agreed to that notion. Similarly, males tend to see Vittel more feminine than females. 12% of male respondents saw Vittel as Mild (female characteristic) and 7% Soft-hearted (female characteristic), while only 5% of females agreed with Mild and 3% with the Soft-hearted characteristics. In a received percentile expression, Vittel was seen as a male brand since males granted it with 59% and females with 74% male characteristic set. Measuring is done and illustrated below based on the characteristic data that demonstrates both males and females seeing Vittel as a masculine brand.

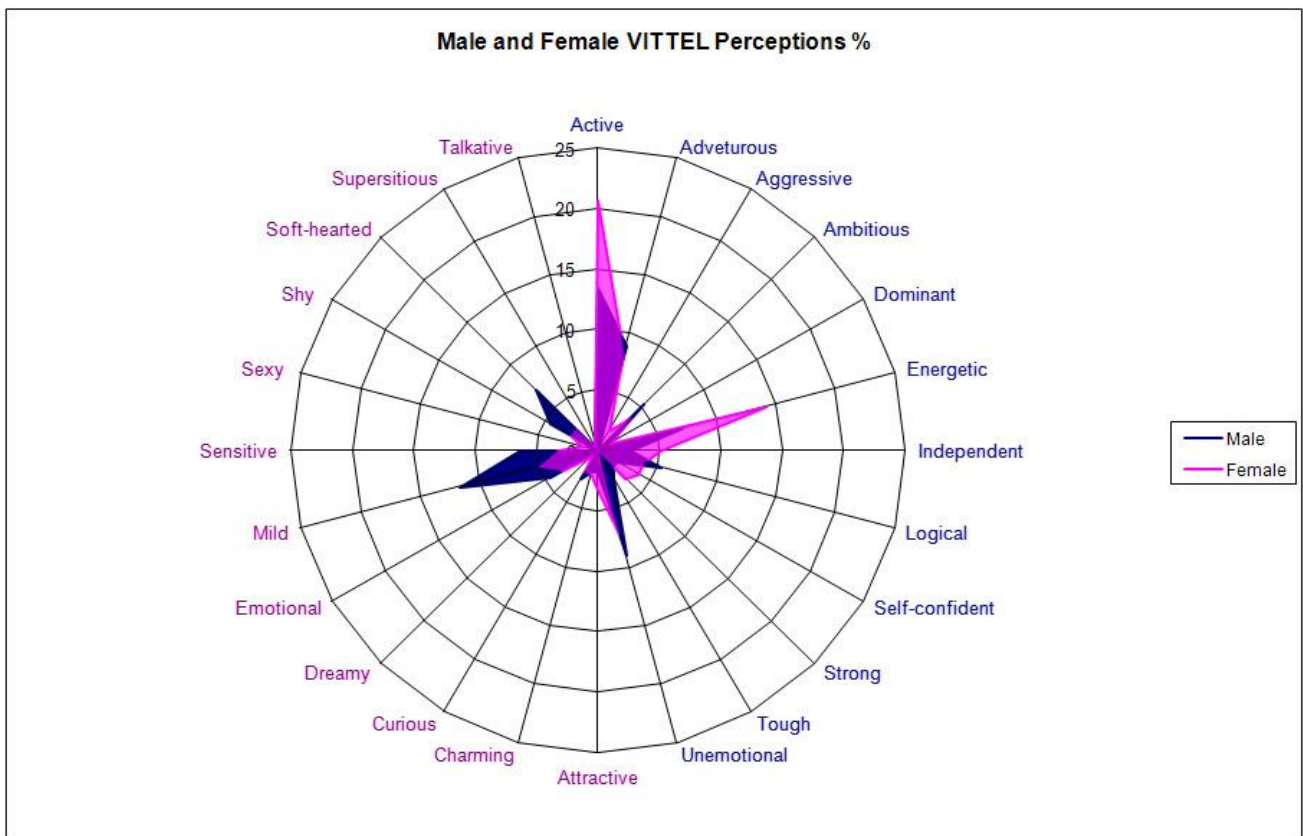


Figure 13: Vittel feminine/ masculine perspective

Based on the female and male respondent data, it was discovered that Nestle Aquarel is perceived similarly - as neutral by masculine audience and slightly more feminine by females. Male respondents saw it equally male and female by characterizing Nestle Aquarel with 50% of female and 50% of male characteristics. Females saw the brand as 41% male and 59% female in terms of characteristics.

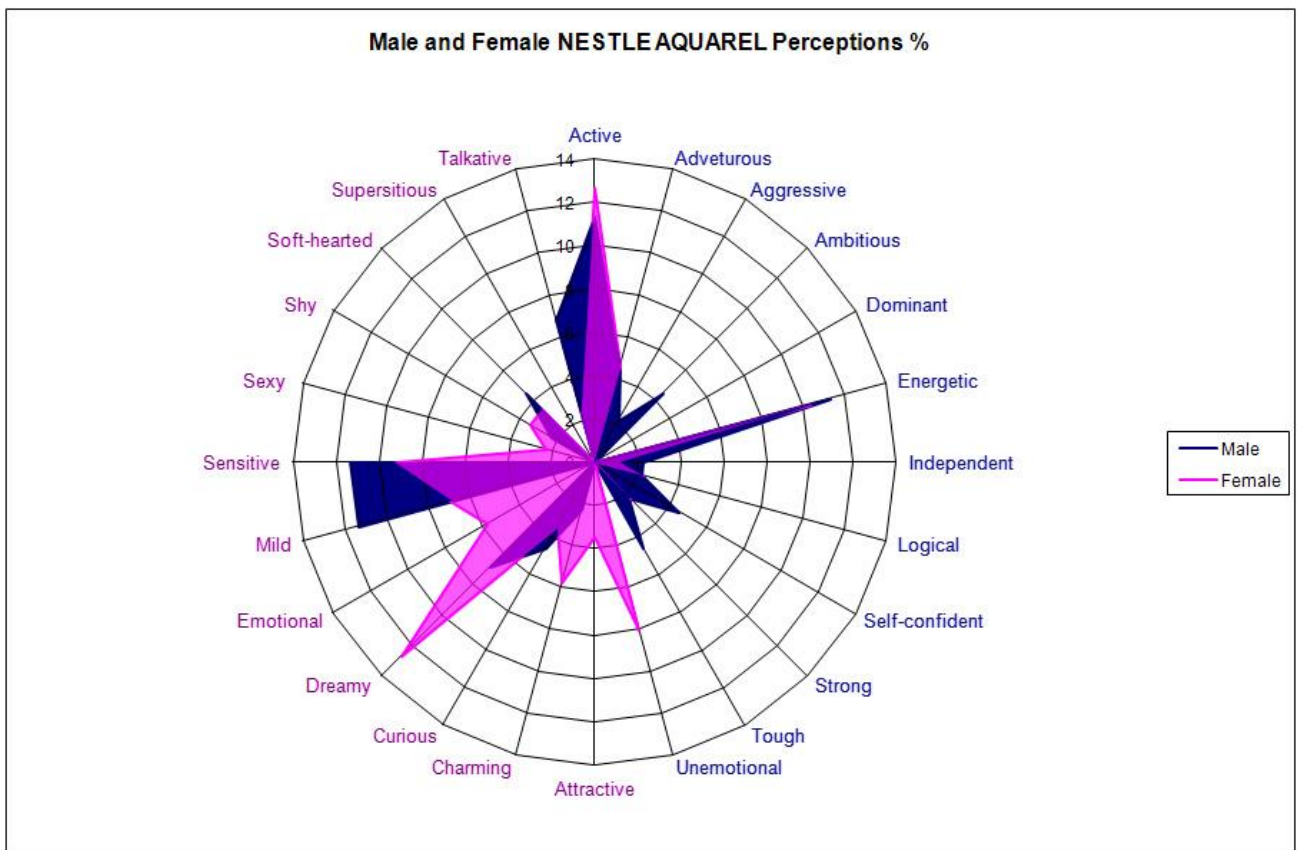


Figure 14: Nestle Aquarel feminine/masculine perspective

Evian as the most known brand received the biggest attention, and although no particular male or female respondent differences were found, it is noteworthy to mention that Evian aroused much more female respondent activity, as there were 252 check-marks given by females in comparison to 163 given by males. That Evian is a feminine brand was agreed with by 55% of male respondents and 59% of female respondents by attaching the most salient feminine characteristics to it.

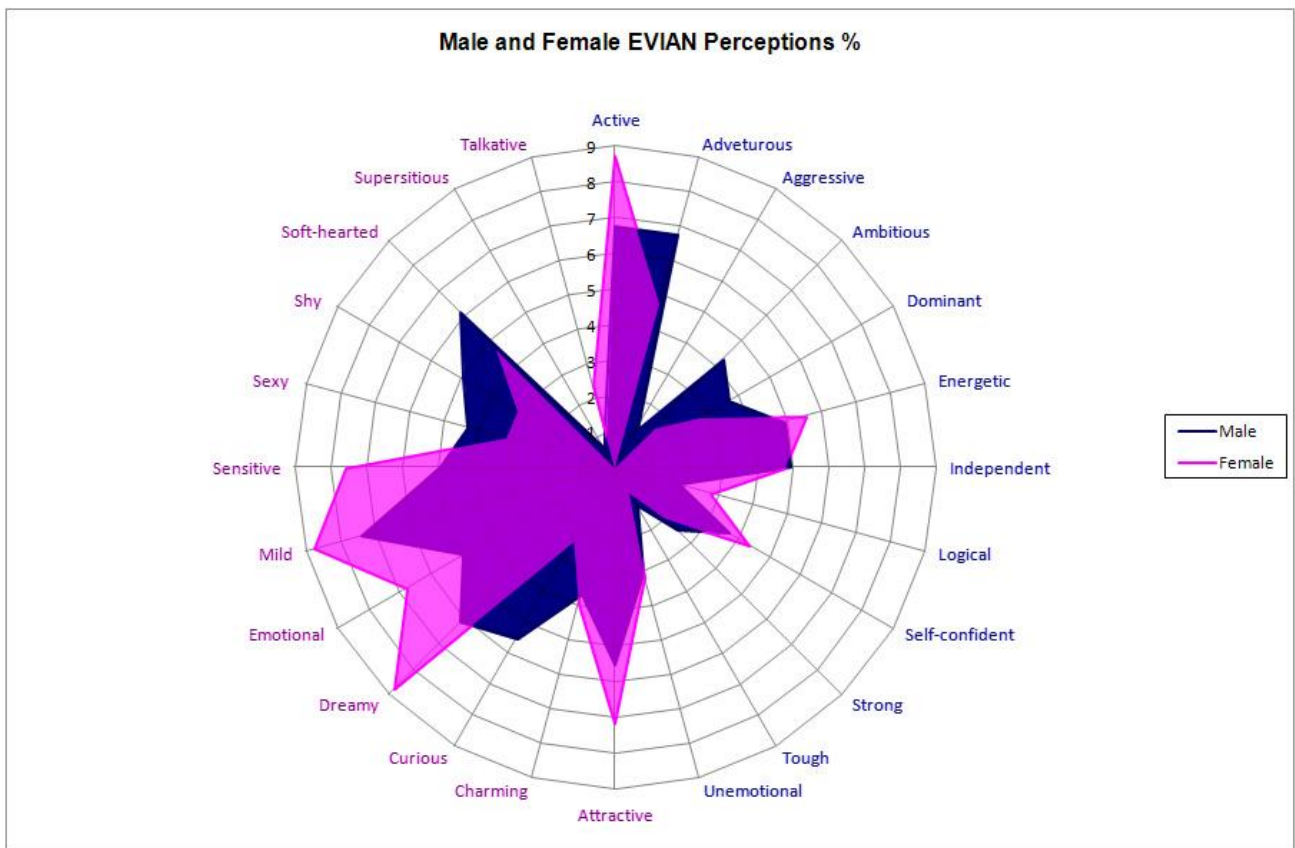


Figure 15: Evian feminine/masculine perspective

Volvic was found to be seen as a masculine brand as it possessed, according to males, 70% and, according to females, 69% of masculine characteristics. The same salient feminine and male characteristics were ascribed to the brand from both male and female respondents and no peculiarities were found.

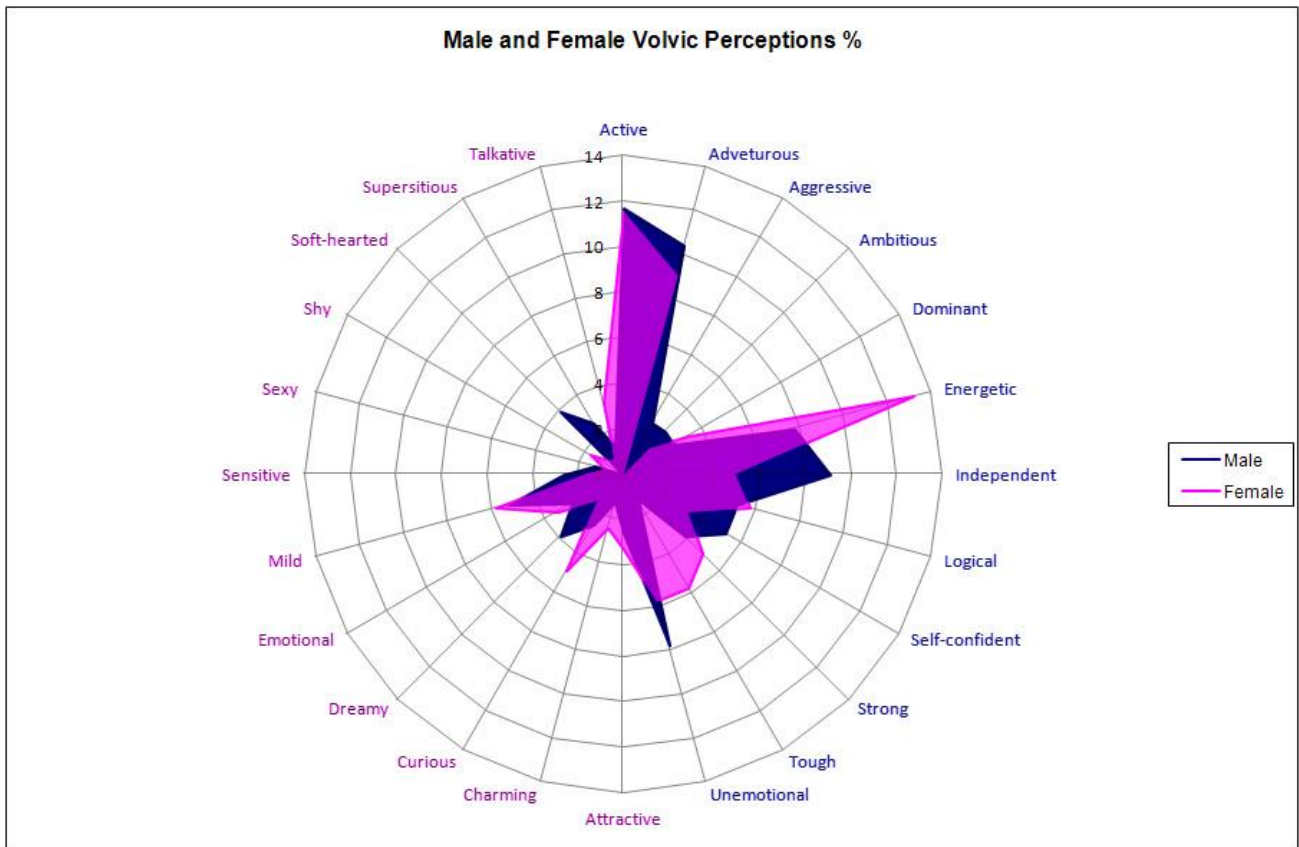


Figure 16: Volvic feminine/masculine perspective

4.4.1 Brand Gender Perception

The quantitative findings revealed that different understanding of the water brands' gender between male and female respondents does not exist. All four brands' genders were similarly perceived by both respondent groups (males and females) and agreeably shared a common set of characteristics. Although some characteristics varied and were seen stronger by one gender than another, the overall brand gender perception correlated for both genders.

The notion of gender being perceived similarly by males and females was explored further qualitatively and expanded to all brands in general. Qualitative findings then revealed that females

and males most often ascribe brands unanimously with the same gender. In this context the sport apparel brand Nike was given as a masculine example by Dutch man (23) *“mhh... oh I would go with Nike probably, because they are all about putting attitude and stuff...less on the emotional side...”* and by Irish woman (31) *“Nike is a very masculine brand, BMW...and Hewlett Packard.”* Thus, it can be stated that although male and female consumers describe brands with various characteristics, they still perceive the same brand gender. What is interesting here is the notion that the consumer gender does not seem to influence the brand gender perception. A brand's gender seems furthermore to be stable and similarly perceived within both female and male consumer groups. This goes along with our finding regarding consumers' conscious and/or unconscious compliance with stereotype characteristics. The notion that the consumer gender does not seem to influence the brand gender perception is interesting and quite unexpected as it goes against the self-congruity theory.

4.4.2 Brand Gender Evolution

The findings support the previously mentioned theory of Batra, Lehmann and Singh (1993) stating that brand personality similarly like a human one evolves over time. This concept of the brand personality evolvement has received considerable attention, however, brand gender growth is somewhat untouched and hence an interesting finding. During the interviews, while talking about brands as having gender, interviewees recalled stories of how the brand gender has changed and evolved in their perception. Dutch man (23) said: *“10 years ago I would say Nike [being masculine], but if you look into it now ... it's completely emotional.” ... “Not taking any sides...”* [referring to brand gender]. Similarly Dutch woman (23) had observed that: *“With Sony, everybody would associate, I think with the... with the masculine brand [referring to the past] the commercials I think... everything is based on emotions [meaning it is feminine].”* These quotes show that a brand's gender is a salient characteristic and changes in it are easily noticed by consumers. An alteration or change in the brand gender can, thus, be interpreted from the consumer perspective to be a noticeable brand personality change.

4.4.3 Dominance of Masculinity in Brand Gender

During the interviews, as previously described in the concept of "*gender stimulation*", it was noticed that interviewees had more troubles naming feminine brands, than they had naming masculine ones. Not only males, but also females were found to be hesitant when asked to name "*brands perceived as feminine*" and it took them a noticeable amount of time to come up with an example they would consider as a feminine brand if any at all were found. In the general interview discussion we found the brands Nike, Microsoft and BMW to be especially popular among both male and female interviewees. Remarkably all those brands are masculine, as agreed on by the participants. Dutch man (23) states in this context: "*Oh I would go with Nike probably, because they are all about putting attitude and stuff... less on the emotional side....*". In the same interview situation Irish woman (31) offers BMW as a masculine brand, describing it as: "*Ahmm aggressive...strong...independent, emotional and adventurous.*" Regarding our research question to evaluate here 'how consumer gender influences the perception of brand personality gender' we found a pre-dominant perception of masculine brands. This notion includes the perception of both, female and male interviewees.

To a further extend, masculinity domination was detected when interviewees were asked to think of other brands that match their selected feminine/masculine characteristics from the 'Adjective Check List'. There was a tendency of granting masculine characteristics equally to female and male brands. However, feminine characteristics were mainly used while describing feminine brands. This particular finding attracted our attention, as these answers came from "young modern" participants that were raised in the Western-European culture, where a patriarchal society is almost absent. It seems that, although participants are representatives of contemporary cultures, they see masculinity as a stronger gender in the context of brand gender.

From a theoretical perspective this could be explained by Goldberg's (1973) 'Inevitability of Patriarchy' where he argues that in society male dominance is inevitable due to the purely biologically caused male sex superiority. He explains that human sex physiological differences affect emotional and behavioral human actions, and thus male dominance is socially expected. "*As with patriarchy, male dominance is universal; no society has ever failed to conform its expectations of men and women <...> that it is the male who 'takes the lead'*" (Goldberg 1973, p. 37). He even takes these stereotyped expectations a step further and describes how every society associates authority and leadership with the male gender (Goldberg 1973). This thinking in the branding

context leads to an interesting idea. It is in the nature of marketing that every brand strives for leadership and superiority within its product category. As the concept of leadership seems to be perceived as masculine, a lead position might be easier achieved by assigning the brand with male characteristic traits. This would lead us to the assumption that the masculinity domination originates from the marketer point of view when strategically building the brand personality statement. Such assumption would need a deeper research, starting from the perspective of marketers instead of consumers. Generally our observation of masculinity dominance can still be understood as valid, since both quantitative and qualitative researches show more masculine traits being given to the brands.

4.4.4 Brand and Product Category Adjectives

It was found during the interviews that interviewees described water category in same characteristics as water brands. This raised the question if those characteristics, namely "*Mild, Active and Energetic*", were more related to the product category of waters than to the actual brands themselves. In this context the quantitative results support the qualitatively observed tendency of the same set of repeating characteristics. Active, Energetic and Mild were also the dominant adjectives in the quantitative research when describing all eight brands. In the quantitative analysis of the final four brands, it was discovered that the characteristic Active was the most popular and the most salient one, as it was selected for describing all four brands at the ratio of 18%,12%,12% and 8%. Energetic was ascribed to three brands with the percentage of 12%, 11% and 11%. Additionally the gender-specific adjectives Mild, Adventurous, Dreamy and Sensitive were each applied by around 10% of the respondents. The domination of the same three adjectives Active, Energetic and Mild throughout the questionnaire was found to be interesting. Hence a presumption of the linkage between brand and product category characteristics was formulated. This was further investigated in-depth in the qualitative interviews to see if the mentioned presumption would hold true when applied to other product categories and brands.

In this context our qualitative findings supported the notion of this originated presumption. Irish woman (31) described the product category of waters in a following way: "*Active would be in general because waters you drink it – also not only when you are doing sports but also it is an action when you are doing something...ahmm energetic cause you get energy from drinking water. Mild in general because... because it, it's not about the strong taste.*" Similarly in a wider non-

water context, the word 'aggressive' has been used while describing car brands and the car category. Dutch man (23): *"I would say BMW is the most <...> aggressive, still some kind of elegance in such a way.... Aggressive yeah elegance..."* Irish woman (31) states: *"cars is mostly aggressive and masculine...for me."* She later uses the same word while describing BMW car brand *"Ahmm aggressive...strong...independent, emotional and adventurous."* The same adjectives were thus used to describe a product category as well as to describe the brands within it. This clearly sums up the findings that the some categories are seen in the same way as the specific brands.

4.4.5 Product Category and Gender Association

In the research product categories and gender were found to be very closely related. When asked to name feminine or masculine brands, many interviewees started to name categories instead of naming actual brand names. Those, who pointed at categories instead of brands, had no difficulties to name categories they would link to the specific gender. It was observed that for example cars and IT related products were perceived as masculine, illustrated in the following quotes:

Finnish man, (28): *"Well I think any brand that has to do anything with electronics or cars..."*

Swedish woman, (23): *"Like I would say car brands in general are much more male."*

In the same way the same product categories came up in almost all of the interviews for highly feminine brands, these being fashion and hygiene or beauty categories. When interviewees considered a strong gendered product category, they were also more easily able to name some brands in that same category. Noteworthy is that while we found some categories having very strong associations to gender, this does not apply to all categories. The category of bottled waters itself for example does not hold a strong gender.

4.4.6 Product Category Influence on Brands

When broadening the subject away from the water brands in the interviews and asking for other brands being perceived as having a strong male or female gender, specific product categories rather than brands were repeatedly named by independent interviewees. Like described in the 'Product Category and Gender Association' concept, once asked to name a feminine or masculine brand, interviewees tend to say categories instead of actual brands. Swedish woman (23) for example said: *"Like there are all the make-up brands of course, and shampoo brands and...woman hygienic*

brands...” another interviewee Irish woman (31) very similarly said: “*Of course fashion and cosmetics is very feminine.<...> Cars is mostly aggressive and masculine...for me*”. These quotations together with other answers allowed us to draw the conclusion that brand and product category in terms of gender is sometimes difficult to differentiate. One respondent (Finnish man 28) even named categories and brands that he perceived to be of a same gender (feminine) within the same sentence: “*Revlon, any make-up products, perfumes, Chanel, shampoos...Lois Vuitton. Versace.*”

These types of answers point out that it might be the perceived product category gender and not the brand gender that influences consumers’ brand gender perception. Further explorative discussions indeed showed a strong congruence between the category gender and the brand gender. These are often confused, and seen as the same unit. From the perspective of consumers, a category and a brand most often share the same gender, thus there is a gender based consistency and collective understanding. While Govers and Schoorman's (2005) study demonstrated that a product category influences consumer behavior, it did not investigate whether consumers see the difference between brand and product categories. Our findings reveal that consumers have difficulties in separating brand gender and category gender. Therefore the assumption that consumers do not see the difference between the actual brand’s gender and its product category’s gender could be drawn. Thus, the research question if consumer gender influences the perception of brand gender has to be denied, as it is revealed that in our research it is the product category not the consumer gender that plays a substantial role in the consumers' brand gender perception.

4.4.7 Summary of Research Question Two

Research Question Two investigates the role of consumer gender in relation to the perceived brand personality gender. The quantitative data demonstrates that both female and male consumers agree on the same perceived gender for the researched water brands. Our qualitative data supports and expands this notion as it illustrates that other non-water brands are to a major degree perceived to posse a similar gender as well. This Research Question is answered through our finding that the consumer gender does not influence the perception of the brand personality gender. Additionally, strong masculinity dominance is detected, which reveals that consumers seem to perceive masculinity as the 'stronger' brand gender. Finally, a crucial research point revealed that consumers have difficulties in separating between brand and product category. We found that it is furthermore

the gender interrelationship between brand and product category, not the relationship between brand gender and consumer gender that matters.

4.5 Research Question Three

Research question three (RQ3) deals with consumers' brand preference influenced by the perceived brand gender. Consumer behavior studies acknowledge that consumers tend to choose brands based on the self-congruency factor in mind. However, most of the studies neglect to investigate consumer attitudes from the own gender and the brand's correlation perspective. Thus considering the self-congruency factor within the gender field, RQ3's main focus is to reveal whether consumers prefer brands whose gender match with the consumers'. Presented qualitative interpretation will explain the extent and source of such consumer motivation and will broaden up the general understanding of brand-consumer gender preferences. The relevant concepts to RQ3 can be found in the 'Self-congruity' category in the figure 13: Empirical Concept table.

4.5.1 Self-Congruity and Gender

During the interviews, interviewees were asked to select their preferred brand. Three out of four females chose the brand Evian as their preferred one while one female chose Vittel. Similarly out of four male interviewees, two chose Nestle Aquarel, one Vittel and one Evian. From the quantitative study the results revealed that by the majority of the respondents Evian was seen as a feminine brand (by 61%), Vittel was seen neutrally (as female by 36% and as male by 37%) and Nestle Aquarel as a feminine brand (32% perceived it to be female and 7% male brand). Therefore the choices from the interviews are summarized as follows:

- Three females chose a feminine brand.
- One female chose a neutral brand.
- Three males chose a feminine brand.
- One male chose a neutral brand.

It is worth noting that both, the majority of females and the majority of males, chose feminine water brands while no one picked a male brand. These findings illustrate different notions. The majority of our female participants chose brands matching their gender, which is in accordance with existing

self-congruency theory from Sirgy (1982; 1985). Coherently Grohmann (2008) pointed out that gender is a part of consumers' self-concept and hence consumers have a need to express masculinity and femininity through brand choice. The fact that the majority of our male interviewees chose a feminine brand could as well be interpreted against this self-congruency gender notion, which states that one tends to choose products and brands that reflect oneself. However, this gender notion has not been extensively investigated in terms of self-congruency, and thus cannot be validated with such a modest approach.

The two remaining male and female participants chose gender-neutral brands. This result neither argues in favor nor against the interrelationship between self-congruency and gender. Those rather incoherent findings of the brand choices gave us an impulse to investigate the subject in-depth. Consequently, we restrained to draw conclusions at this stage and instead decided to research the motives behind the gender based preferences further. This was done by raising additional questions of why the interviewees chose the specific brand and if they think that this specific brand reflects them. The majority of the interviewees did not see themselves reflected in the chosen brand. They furthermore did not reason their brand choices based on a specific relation between their own and the brand's gender. Even when the chosen brand's gender matched with the interviewee's, most of the interviewees could not relate them to the brand in terms of mere gender. This was expressed by Dutch woman (23) when pointing out that her choice of Evian does not reflect herself on a gender level. She thereby argues that the brand is too feminine and has too little male characteristics: "*Chm ...no. It's not...chmm...adventurous enough...it's a bit too soft, the soft side of... of life ...too mild.*" Thus the conclusion can be drawn that choosing same gendered brands is not a dominant self-congruency factor but that other factors play more important roles when selecting a brand. It can be concluded that the overall brand personality might be a stronger factor than merely the gender of the brand. This might be a surprising finding when taking into account that gender (as a part of demographics) was found by Batra, Lehmann and Singh (1993) to be one of the most salient and easiest extractable factors in brand personality.

Especially for the interviewees who chose the gender-neutral brands the brand personality might have a stronger meaning when expressing oneself through a brand. This is in comparison to the perceived meaning of the demographical gender dimension. As Malhotra (1987) stated, self-congruency plays an important part in consumer behavior but it is not the sole factor in determining consumers' choices. In our interviews mere brand awareness played for example an important role

when being presented to the four final brands. While this explanation is rather obvious, other theoretical explanations exist to reason those specific choices in addition.

One of the explanations as explained by Fournier (1998) might be consumers' need to form relationships with brands. By giving humanistic features to brands, marketers personalize them and hence give them 'partner' rights (Fournier 1998). Consumers then purchase and prefer brands that they would like to have relationships with. As gender is a salient part of brand personality, it is possible that consumers choose brands with the opposite gender also in order to have consumer-brand relationship instead of portraying themselves through the brands. This might be a subconscious reasoning within the choices of our male interviewees choosing female brands. As in this context interview participants were unable to sufficiently reason for their opposing brand gender choice.

But as three of the female respondents actually chose a feminine brand, the overall conclusion is highly possible that the choice of brands individually alternates between different aspirations. While some consumers tend to strive for self-congruity, others might emphasize on the relationship aspect between them and their brand.

4.5.2 Self-Congruity and Brand Personality

Our findings show that the mere choice of a same gendered brand is not a dominant factor in self-congruency. Still the aspiration to achieve self-congruity with the overall brand personality, consisting of demographics and characteristics, can have a great influence on brand preference. This finding is in line with the existing literature from Grohmann (2008). Generally consumers acknowledge that the brands they use convey images to them. Swedish woman (23), said: *"That would be the brand that I would buy....I see as a bit more reflection on myself..."* when asked why she chose the brand Evian. This general concept of 'Self-Congruity and Brand Personality' shows that the brand personality of Evian is clearly perceived by the consumer and having that brand transmits an image to the consumer. Therefore it is important to purchase a brand whose personality reflects the consumer's personality and thus is congruent with the consumer's self-concept. It was also found out that like Sirgy (1985) suggested, a brand can be congruent with the self-concept in one situation and not at all in another. Therefore the preference for a brand varies depending on

what aspect of self a person wants to highlight. One example of this is Danish woman (24), explaining what bottled water brands she could relate to:

“I think maybe... maybe it would be depending on the situation, if I would go shopping maybe I would buy the one (Evian) and if I were in some kind of active situation I would buy the other one (Vittel).” “Evian would be the feminine side being more...I don’t know it’s more... calm...and emotional whereas the other one (Vittel) would be energetic...maybe...”

These quotes highlight how the brand choice differs in situations where different personality characteristics are seen as more important. When going shopping she likes to reflect her feminine and more emotional side whereas when doing sports she would choose a brand that matches with her energetic side. In sum it was found that consumers aspire to achieve self-congruency with a brand but the right brand to self-congruity is dependable on the situation.

4.5.3 Social Image and Gender

The concept of ‘Social Image and Gender’ is closely related to the previous ‘Self-Congruity and Brand Personality’ concept as both of them deal with perceived images. As in ‘Self-Congruity and Brand Personality’ it is acknowledged that brands convey images to consumers, in ‘Social image and Gender’ it is additionally acknowledged that a brand’s gender affect the consumer’s social image. It has to be noted that this concept is two-dimensional, affecting the consumer’s own social image as well as consumers acknowledging that the perceived brand gender affects their perceptions of other people’s images. The first part of the concept is clearly illustrated by Finnish man (25), describing brands that he would relate himself to: *“You buy shampoo L’Oreal for men...I wouldn’t go for girlie one....One has to stick with the attitude”*. His concerns for how other people see him thus affect his purchasing behavior and brand selection especially. Additionally, while describing how she perceives men wearing a brand that for her is feminine negatively merely based on the brand gender Irish woman (31), said: *“I have that with Lacoste cause that is female... a more female brand for me than a male brand...so if I see guys with Lacoste...I sometimes have that.”* [That you think?] *“Uhhhh.”* Thus gender plays a big role when both mediating and perceiving social image.

4.5.4 Ideal-Self and Brand Personality

The final concept discussed in RQ3 is the 'Ideal-Self and Brand Personality'. As stated by Batra, Lehmann and Singh (1993) *"Consumers seek brands with personalities that are congruent with either their own or their <...> ideal personalities."* This was also found in our research but more importantly we found that the personality of brands help consumers to communicate their ideal-selves to the world around them thus also influencing their social-selves. As told by Swedish woman (23): *"Yeah, it might be that kind of picture you wanna have... but like.... that you wanna associate yourself with..."* when asked if she would see herself as a typical user of the brand she had previously described. This illustrates how the ideal-self and social-self together affect brand choices. The need to match a brand with her own ideal personality is strong but at the same time she is also concerned about the picture she sends out when choosing this particular brand.

4.5.5 Summary of Research Question Three

Research Question Three investigates if consumers prefer brands that match with their own gender. Results reveal that consumers prefer brands with a clear gender, but not necessarily same gendered brands. Our results additionally show that it is the brand characteristics, not self-congruency factors that play the most important role in brand preference. Consumers have different reasons for brand preference and some consumers strive for self-congruity while others might emphasize on the consumer-brand relationship. This differing notion is dependable on both individual and situational factors. However, brand gender is of a high importance as it allows consumers to express themselves through self-communication or relationship creation with the brand.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this part we will provide an overview of the study, present the reader with our analyzed results and conclude our findings. This final chapter does not solely summarize the most important findings, but also demonstrates which findings emerged as novel ones. Finally, we conclude this thesis and suggest what could be researched in the future.

Nowadays consumers are exposed to a variety of brands, from which they select the ones they will consume and possibly even develop relationships with. There are many reasons why particular brands are chosen by consumers, but in this thesis we chose to investigate it in terms of brand personality. Thus, consumer and brand relationship were considered in terms of brand personality and particularly investigated gender aspects in it. Throughout this thesis consumers' perspectives were consistently reflected.

The object of this thesis was to examine brand personality in the light of gender studies. The primary intent was to find out if consumers comprehend the notion of brand gender per se. Therefore Research Question One 'Do consumers understand the gender within a brand personality?' was formed. Then focus was laid on the explorative approach focusing if and how brand personality gender and consumer gender are related to each other. This was found through Research Question Two 'How does consumer gender influence the perception of brand personality gender?'. Finally, a special interest was given to find out if a consumer's gender influences the brand perception and if there are certain behavioral trends to be detected. This was formulated and addressed in the last Research Question Three 'Do consumers prefer brands from the gender perspective?'

In order to fulfill our research purpose we applied relevant models and theories from both branding and gender studies. Our theoretical background of brand personality mainly relied on theories by Plummer (1985) and Batra, Lehmann and Singh (1993) describing the multiple dimensions of the concept of brand personality. Brand characteristics and demographics are thereby the constituting components, whereas those brand demographics are perceived as the most salient aspect. Thus gender is, next to age and class, defined as one of the distinctive brand demographics. This aspect marks the area of contact within branding and gender studies, which we focused on in this thesis.

Bearing the gender-focus in mind, we have illustrated how consumers attempt to match congruently their self-concepts with a brand's personality. Due to the nature of the study to combine brand personality with gender studies, several gender-specific theories are blended with the brand personality theories. The most important model that was extracted and applied for this thesis was the categorization of character traits into gender-specific stereotypes by Williams and Best (1982 cited in Williams, Satterwhite & Best 1999). Their panculturally tested list with stereotyped feminine and masculine adjectives has been used as a mediator in our research to illustrate gender perception.

In conclusion all three research questions were answered, and additionally some interesting findings appeared. All these, existing and new findings, were ascribed to concepts and classified into categories in accordance to the research questions. The most important and to our knowledge novel concepts such as 'Adjective Check List' Applicability, Gender Stimulation, Brand Gender Perception, and Dominance of Masculinity in Brand Gender were emphasized and are the unique facets of this thesis.

While answering the Research Question One, it was found that the level of brand awareness varies. Some consumers see brand gender more strongly than others and the level of brand awareness is greatly dependent on the specific brand. Another interesting finding showed that consumers easily attach gender-specific adjectives to brands when the adjectives are provided. But when asked to describe a brand personality in their own words, consumers seldom use adjectives but rather demographic dimensions. This implies that the brand personality is perceived by consumers more unconsciously. Moreover, it was found that gender alone does not extensively stimulate brand associations. Consumers are easily able to define if a specific brand is feminine or masculine but gender itself does not stimulate consumers with brand associations. This was especially noticeable within the 'perceived female brands'. It seems that the difficulty to assign feminine gender with a specific brand is not related to the consumer's gender.

The Research Question Two showed that consumers see brands' gender unilateral and their belongingness to a certain gender does not influence the perception of the brand personality gender. This is to say that males and females perceive a brand's gender similarly. For example, BMW and Microsoft were by all of our interviewees seen as very masculine brands. It was also found that masculine brands were more clearly perceived than feminine brands. Most of the interviewees could easily name masculine brands and had difficulties in naming feminine ones. It is worth emphasizing

that this applied to both female and male participants. Also, masculine characteristics were often given to male and female brands, however, there was no tendency detected of granting feminine characteristics to male brands. This dominance of masculinity appeared quite apparently and, thus, can be interpreted that as an unconscious perception of masculinity as the dominant gender in the branding context.

As said by Grohmann (2008), a product category's gender image and a brand personality's gender image affect consumers' perception. However, there is a lack of deeper understanding to what extent does a product category influence the brand gender. Indeed, our findings show the close relation between a brand and a category. In the majority of the cases, it was demonstrated that participants more easily understood the product category's gender than the actual brand's gender. Consequently, due to the difficulties in separating the brand and the category, consumers tend to ascribe a product category's gender to the brands within that category.

In the Research Question Three results revealed that consumers prefer brands they perceive to have a clear gender, but the gender does not necessarily need to match with the consumer's. Thus, the question if consumers prefer same gendered brand has to be denied. It is revealed that in our research it is the product category not the consumer gender that plays a substantial role in the consumers' brand gender perceptions. Research question three was the most challenging one as the findings blended a few notions of how brand preference in terms of the gender could be interpreted. Our finding of females choosing feminine brands could be ascribed to existing self-congruency theory (Sirgy 1982; 1985), as in this case females reinforce their femininity through their brand choice. What is interesting to note is, that in both branding and gender literature it is emphasized (e.g. by Fournier 1998) that females strive for social goals such as establishing relationships with their social surrounding while males in contrast can be understood to focus on the mere transfer of brand information. This social feminine notion was, however, not detected. On the contrary, we found males choosing female brands. This not only contradicts self-congruency theory, but also depicts male consumers as brand relationships creators rather than using brand meaning for symbolic self-expression. This can be further discussed in terms of gender, as according to Tannen (1995) human behavior differs based on the gender one possesses. Whereas females exchange information in order to establish relationships, males simply transfer information. Similarly, we could say that females bond with both feminine and masculine brands in order to create relationships. This is supported by theory from gender studies emphasizing females having rather social goals such as creating relationships with their social surrounding (Hofstede 2001). Males in

contrast can be understood to focus on the mere transfer of brand meaning. However, our findings show contrary results, since we discovered that it is males who especially try to bond with the brands by choosing opposite gender brands.

Some of our below offered future research topics, indicate the need to investigate brand and consumer gender concepts deeper and from a different angle. Another possible approach for this thesis could therefore have been the focus on the marketing perspective. While our study has been designed as a reflection on consumers' perception and has enhanced theoretical knowledge, it would be interesting to study the same subject from a marketer's perspective. This way the combined reflections of marketer and consumer perspectives would provide a versatile and objective insight, thus add a valid volume to brand gender theory.

Nevertheless our study can be an interesting reading for marketing professionals and give valuable insight for practice. At a higher abstraction level, our study demonstrates that brand gender might not always be perceived by consumers consciously. But it is still an important factor as it is indeed more indirectly perceived through gender-specific adjectives, which are interpreted and considered by a consumer. Hence, gender should be taken into account while forming branding strategies, with brand personality in focus. The detected brand gender and consumer gender relationship can be materialized and appropriately applied. Consequently, a brand should be examined for a salient brand gender and accordingly marketers can form marketing communication that is designed to enable the target group to establish a positive self-congruency or brand-consumer relationships. Both, this positive self-congruity as well as the strong relationship between brand and consumer eventually influence the level of purchase motivation (Sirgy 1982). This advanced gender based understanding can be used together with other marketing tools in order to create an outstanding brand personality.

5.1 Future Research

An interesting construct to further research is our finding of masculinity domination. The perceived dominance of masculine brands and the pre-dominant selection of masculine characteristics within both female and male consumers can be seen as a novel and unexplored finding. It is in the nature of marketing that every brand strives for leadership and superiority within its product category. As the concept of leadership seems to be perceived as masculine, a lead position might be easier

achieved by assigning the brand with male characteristic traits. We assumed that this masculinity domination might originate from the strategic building of the brand personality statement. This assumption would need a deeper research, holding a strong marketers' perspective instead of consumers'.

Another potential future research could be performed while blending the previously mentioned self-congruency and brand-consumer relationships. Investigation on the superiority or correlation between them would be an interesting phenomenon to research. It could provide marketers with an understanding whether branding strategies should focus on the brand and the targeted consumer congruency or instead form brands as partners and develop brand-consumer relationships.

In the existing theory it is under-researched how consumers perceive the brand personality more distinctively. Is it the characteristics or the demographic dimension that matters more for the consumer's perception? One of our findings suggested that for consumers the characteristics dimension of the brand personality might have a stronger self-expressive meaning than the demographical dimension. A possible explanation for this might be found within the marketing communication. In cases where the brand personality concept is integrated into the communication strategy this might be done directly on the brand characteristics level. The brand demographics on the other hand might stay on an implicit communication level. In practice this means that the targeted group is most often visually presented in commercials, regarding gender, age and class. This information is perceived by the consumer rather implicitly and subliminal. The characteristics are expressed more directly, visually or acoustically, while displaying certain adjectives. Thus, it is easier for consumers to perceive certain 'highlighted' adjectives than decode demographic information. This consideration might be a stimulus for a possible future study.

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7. APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Male and Female Stereotypes table

MALE STEREOTYPE	FEMALE STEREOTYPE
Active	Affected
Adventurous	Affectionate
Aggressive	Anxious
Ambitious	Attractive
Autocratic	Charming
Coarse	Complaining
Courageous	Curious
Cruel	Dependent
Daring	Dreamy
Dominant	Emotional
Energetic	Fearful
Enterprising	Feminine
Forceful	Fussy
Independent	Meek
Inventive	Mild
Logical	Sensitive
Masculine	Sexy
Progressive	Shy
Robust	Soft-Hearted
Rude	Submissive
Self-Confident	Superstitious
Stern	Talkative
Strong	Timid
Tough	Weak
Unemotional	Whiny

Appendix 2: On-line questionnaire

Hej everyone, we highly appreciate your effort in answering a couple of questions for our research. Please answer them quickly with the first thought that comes to your mind. Thank you very much.

1. Are you familiar with the water brand “Perrier”?

Yes

No



2. Click on the characteristics that you agree with for the brand.

Active	Adventurous	Aggressive	Ambitious
Attractive	Charming	Curious	Dominant
Dreamy	Emotional	Energetic	Independent
Logical	Mild	Self-Confident	Sensitive
Sexy	Shy	Soft -hearted	Strong
Superstitious	Talkative	Tough	Unemotional

3. If this brand would be a person - would it be a man or a woman?

Man

Woman

4. Are you familiar with the water brand “Vittel”?

Yes

No



5. Click on the characteristics that you agree with for the brand.

Active

Adventurous

Aggressive

Ambitious

Attractive

Charming

Curious

Dominant

Dreamy

Emotional

Energetic

Independent

Logical

Mild

Self-Confident

Sensitive

Sexy

Shy

Soft -hearted

Strong

Superstitious

Talkative

Tough

Unemotional

6. If this brand would be a person - would it be a man or a woman?

Man

Woman

7. Are you familiar with the water brand “Nestle Aquarel”?

Yes

No



8. Click on the characteristics that you agree with for the brand.

Active

Adventurous

Aggressive

Ambitious

Attractive

Charming

Curious

Dominant

Dreamy

Emotional

Energetic

Independent

Logical

Mild

Self-Confident

Sensitive

Sexy

Shy

Soft -hearted

Strong

Superstitious

Talkative

Tough

Unemotional

9. If this brand would be a person - would it be a man or a woman?

Man

Woman

10. Are you familiar with the water brand “Ramlösa”?

Yes

No



11. Click on the characteristics that you agree with for the brand.

- | | | | |
|---------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| Active | Adventurous | Aggressive | Ambitious |
| Attractive | Charming | Curious | Dominant |
| Dreamy | Emotional | Energetic | Independent |
| Logical | Mild | Self-Confident | Sensitive |
| Sexy | Shy | Soft-hearted | Strong |
| Superstitious | Talkative | Tough | Unemotional |

12. If this brand would be a person - would it be a man or a woman?

Man

Woman

13. Are you familiar with the water brand “S. Pellegrino”?

Yes

No



14. Click on the characteristics that you agree with for the brand.

Active	Adventurous	Aggressive	Ambitious
Attractive	Charming	Curious	Dominant
Dreamy	Emotional	Energetic	Independent
Logical	Mild	Self-Confident	Sensitive
Sexy	Shy	Soft -hearted	Strong
Superstitious	Talkative	Tough	Unemotional

15. If this brand would be a person - would it be a man or a woman?

Man

Woman

16. Are you familiar with the water brand “Evian”?

Yes

No



17. Click on the characteristics that you agree with for the brand.

Active	Adventurous	Aggressive	Ambitious
Attractive	Charming	Curious	Dominant
Dreamy	Emotional	Energetic	Independent
Logical	Mild	Self-Confident	Sensitive
Sexy	Shy	Soft -hearted	Strong
Superstitious	Talkative	Tough	Unemotional

18. If this brand would be a person - would it be a man or a woman?

Man

Woman

19. Are you familiar with the water brand “Bon Aqua”?

Yes

No



20. Click on the characteristics that you agree with for the brand.

- | | | | |
|---------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| Active | Adventurous | Aggressive | Ambitious |
| Attractive | Charming | Curious | Dominant |
| Dreamy | Emotional | Energetic | Independent |
| Logical | Mild | Self-Confident | Sensitive |
| Sexy | Shy | Soft -hearted | Strong |
| Superstitious | Talkative | Tough | Unemotional |

21. If this brand would be a person - would it be a man or a woman?

Man

Woman

22. Are you familiar with the water brand “Volvic”?

Yes

No



23. Click on the characteristics that you agree with for the brand.

Active	Adventurous	Aggressive	Ambitious
Attractive	Charming	Curious	Dominant
Dreamy	Emotional	Energetic	Independent
Logical	Mild	Self-Confident	Sensitive
Sexy	Shy	Soft -hearted	Strong
Superstitious	Talkative	Tough	Unemotional

24. If this brand would be a person - would it be a man or a woman?

Man

Woman

25. Are you yourself a man or a woman

Man

Woman

26. How old are you?

27. As a last step, which country are you from?

Appendix 3: Interview questions

IQ 1	Which of these brands do you know?
IQ 2	Out of these brands which one do you prefer?
IQ 3	Could you describe and characterize the typical user of this brand with as many adjectives as possible.
IQ 4	Could you divide these cards you with the 24 adjectives into two stacks – the ones you agree with for “preferred brand” and the ones you disagree with.
Brake questions	What was the last thing you bought, that cost more than you could actually afford? If money wasn’t a question which item, would you purchase next?
IQ 5	Can you think of any other brands that you would describe as “...”?
IQ 6	Could you divide the 24 adjectives into feminine or masculine characteristic?
IQ 7	Can you imagine "preferred brand" itself as a person? If so, how would you describe it?
<i>IQ 7.1</i>	<i>If you have a picture of it in you head - would "preferred brand" be a man or a woman?</i>
<i>IQ 7.2</i>	<i>Why do you feel like this?</i>
IQ 8	Can you give us any other examples of feminine brands?
<i>IQ 8.1</i>	<i>How would you describe it?</i>
IQ 9	Can you give us any other examples of masculine brands?
<i>IQ 9.1</i>	<i>How would you describe it?</i>
IQ 10	You chose “preferred brand” as your preference. Why did you make this choice?
IQ 11	Does this brand reflect you? / Can you identify with the brand?