

The Impact of Gendered and Gender-Neutral Communication on Brand Equity: A Study on Children Apparel Industry

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Abstract

This work wants to analyze the impact of communication on Brand Equity, comparing a gendered and an ungendered type of advertising relative to a brand of children apparel. The idea of this work comes from the acknowledgment that, to the current situation, there is little research on the pro/cons of the usage of a type of communication alternative to the traditional one and free of gender stereotypes, and on its objective consequences on brand dimensions. The study was conducted using posttest-only control group design: participants were randomly assigned to two groups, control and intervention, and were presented with two different stimuli (a gendered and a gender-neutral one). Convenience sampling has been adopted for this research and an online close-ended response questionnaire was used for data gathering. A total of 152 responses were ultimately used in the study. The study challenges the argument that gender stereotypes are efficient tools to be used in communication to elicit a positive response and generate clearer brand associations in the viewer. The results showed how a gender-neutral type of communication has an overall positive effect on Brand Equity dimension, and how this result varies according to the age range of respondents.

Keywords: gender, gender-neutral, brand equity, fashion, marketing

Introduction

One of the very first topics addressed by the work is the debate about the term "Gender". Different authors have voluntarily avoided trying to give universal meaning to the term, considering it more as a question, or a starting point for further analysis. Others have tried to define gender more precisely, according to either a

generalist approach, which affirms the presence of common characteristics, conditions and experiences among men and women, which eventually end up in differentiating some individuals as men and some others as women, or to a particularistic perspective, which argues that gender is constructed independently of these “common criteria”. Afterward, the main steps of the so-called sex/gender debate have been discussed in detail: from an early existentialist approach, according to which masculinity and femininity are different by nature, until reaching the “doing gender” perspective of West and Zimmermann (1987), where gender is considered as something socially constructed, which differs across cultures, contexts and periods. The essentialist theories have often been criticized by modern literature for their attempt to establish, through the imposition of a universally accepted narration of the gender, a discriminatory type of society, that is referred as *ordine veterosessuale*. According to the essentialist theory, the division between men and women, therefore the validity of the binary paradigm, derives from the observation of objective reality. Nevertheless, our understanding of the world always goes through the mediation of a culture; a culture, in turn, is constructed through communication, and it is through communication that we know how to split the world into categories and how to interpret reality. In the specific case of gender categories, it happens that the categorization of reality has been always influenced by the strong patriarchal connotation of society. Therefore, the naturalization of the man/woman binomial, which is instead created by society, leads to the acceptance of some characteristics as necessary and immutable, while in reality, they are just functional in maintaining the social order which originated them.

Today it is generally recognized that gender is a fluid concept, something constantly reshaped through social interactions, which concerns the expression of the self. In the same way, it is universally understood how fundamental in its social function, on a communicative level: from politics to business, to embrace, ultimately, the entire collectivity, gender differentiation has represented a fundamental differentiation for efficiently delivering messages that are consistent with the chosen receiver. For this reason, gender has always been inevitably linked to fashion, for its ability to create and modify continuously individuals’ identities, precisely by exploiting gender relations which stand at the base of society, eventually affecting the same notions of masculinity and femininity. For this reason, gender has always been inevitably linked to fashion, for its ability to create and modify continuously individuals’ identities, precisely by exploiting gender relations which stand at the base of society, eventually affecting the same notions of masculinity and femininity. As Crane (2000) highlights, one of the principal messages conveyed by fashion and clothing style is the perception of gender roles by the individual and by society as a whole.

The analysis of gender roles and related behaviors has always been a critical tool for marketers, especially in the fashion industry, who wanted to easily segment their audience. Darley and Smith (1995) identified three main factors for which gender has been always used in marketing segmentation: gender segmentation is easily identifiable and accessible, and each segment comprises on average half of the

population. Gendered advertising continues to constitute a major part of the current panorama, with the previously mentioned binary scheme which still constitutes a useful framework for the construction and delivery of the marketing message. However, many authors highlight how, in the so-called era of post-modern marketing, gender identities have increasingly become a malleable instrument of self-expression, with the very meaning of masculine and feminine deconstructed and reused to create new significances. Smartest brands have started to answer to the consumers' request, in particular from Gen Z and Millennials, to embrace a more gender-fluid style of communication; with the challenge of traditional patterns and the creation of new paradigms, it is crucial for brands to adapt to these changes. The Luxury and Fashion industry has been a vanguard in spreading this revolution, with brands tackling the issues in mainly two ways: some have labeled themselves as unisex, while others have challenged explicitly gender stereotypes.

When it comes to the topic of gender fluidity associated with children, the debate becomes even more heated. As gender is one fundamental part of everyone's identity, the question on whether to raise kids outside of traditional gender boundaries, in order to give them enhanced freedom to express themselves, is still generating lots of different answers, from opposite points of view. Since researches that have been done up to now have provided significant data in support and opposition to an ungendered education pattern, there is no definitive answer to this social discussion. It is undeniable that the whole debate touches also the world of children's clothing, being apparel, as already stated, one of the fundamental means of expression of the gender identity of individuals. This idea of dressing children with a gender-neutral outfit, contrary to common belief, constituted the norm for a long time, as boys and girls used to wear the same clothes, usually made of white cotton, easy to bleach and non-restricting. At the end of the war, marketers started to understand the need to create a code for children's apparel, to appeal to mothers and convince them to buy more merchandise, and that's when the current blue/pink gender code has been set up. Despite this "color shift" could appear as irrelevant, researches have demonstrated that this fact has contributed to increase gender stereotyping in the U.S., making children aware of the importance social distinction of gender, and encouraging them to question themselves on what is "for boys" or "for girls". This gender-colors association, despite being assimilated today as a usual marketing tool, risks to expose gender non-conforming kids to mockery by society, just for the reason that they have a different color preference respect to the mass.

The awareness of such issues is fundamental for those brands which want to stay competitive in a long-term perspective. It is clear how the role of the brand has undergone a substantial change over the years. From being a simple guarantee of quality, a whole new universe has begun to open behind the process of "branding". Today, companies are experiencing growing pressure from their consumer base to get involved in the most relevant socio-political issues, taking a strong stand in the debate. Companies should be aware of the main social issues which are developing around them, in their specific sector or industry, and should be ready to provide convincing responses to critiques and showing and demonstrating an authentic

purpose by keeping a reserve of proactive initiatives on those issues. This additional dimension can be summarized by the word “Purpose”, which far from remaining just a trend, is being more and more considered as a norm to which companies should adapt in order to obtain positive responses from the engagement of their customers. A strong Purpose is capable of increasing customers’ loyalty, as already mentioned, and also of expanding the current customer base, as new consumers would be more willing to try the products. Almost 60% of Gen Z or Millennials worldwide believe in the importance of companies’ social responsibility, particularly related to human rights, race, and LGBT rights, with respect to a smaller 50% of Boomers (Accenture, 2018). This is a fact to be taken into consideration, considering, in particular, the Luxury and Fashion industry, as, by 2025, more than half of the entire L&F market will be constituted by Gen Y and Z (Bain & Company, 2018). The sensibility of fashion customers to certain topics is constantly shaping the way the whole industry is moving and this spirit of inclusion and openness to people could not exclude the gender sphere. The strong voice of the youngest consumers’ generations, combined with their growing volume and weight in the market, is pushing companies to work for the creation of a gender-inclusive work environment and a type of communication that turns away from classical gender stereotypes.

Researchers have always been concordant in affirming the positive consequences, for brands, stemming from the use of gender stereotypes as it has been usually associated with more positive associations generated in the consumer and a clearer brand positioning. On the other side, there is still little research on the effects that a gender-free type of communication, alternative to the traditional one, could have on brand dimensions, such as brand equity.

Literature Review and Research Framework

Research Objective and Formulation of Hypotheses

The objective of this research is precisely to test the differential effect of traditional (gendered) and gender-neutral advertising on brand equity. The research’s literature review has shown how marketing communication has a fundamental role in shaping the brand equity of a brand and how advertising is capable of manipulating brand equity, acting on its components (Krishnan 1990, Cobb-Walgren 1995, Aaker & Biel 2013). Therefore, literature provides a solid foundation to structure this research on a conceptual framework which displays a causality relationship between communication and brand equity. A substantial part of the work has been dedicated to the review of main brand equity models, with a summary of the most used dimensions, used by different authors in order to operationalize the brand equity concept. Among the several variables proposed, brand associations and brand attitudes have been found of particular relevance for the purpose of this research. Based on the literature review, it can be stated with the two brand dimensions are universally recognized as two antecedents of brand equity, which have the capability of affecting it, through both a direct and indirect effect (Aaker 1991, 1992; Chaudhuri, 1995; Faircloth et al., 2001, Chang, 2008; Keller, 2013). For this reason, it has been decided to measure the effects of communication on brand equity through these two variables. Throughout the review of existing academic literature, it has

been explored and confirmed the effect advertising has on these variables. Several studies have analyzed how marketing communications can affect brand equity through the manipulation of brand associations and attitude (Ray, 1982; Krishnan, 1990; Cobb-Walgren, 1995; Orth and Holancova, 2003; Feiereisen et al., 2009; Aaker and Biel, 2013;. Lieven et al., 2014; Huhmann et al., 2016). The effect of advertising on brand equity is also measured through an alternative channel, that is the one passing from consumer affective response to the Ad. Emotional response to advertising has a direct contribution in the construction of brand equity and a mediating role in the relationship between communication and equity (Gardner, 1985; MacKenzie et al., 1986; Edell & Burke, 1987; Stayman & Aaker, 1988; Brown and Stayman, 1992; Bravo et al., 2007; Kim, Ratneshwar and Thorson, 2017). Briefly summing up, these considerations led to the formulation of the following research's hypotheses:

Table 1 - Research Hypotheses

<i>H₁: Gender-Neutral Communication impacts Brand Equity</i>
<i>H₂: Gender-Neutral Communication impacts Brand Associations</i>
<i>H₃: Gender-Neutral Communication impacts Brand Attitudes</i>
<i>H₄: Gender-Neutral Communication impacts Emotional Response to Advertising</i>

Design

The proposed theoretical framework suggested the adoption of a causal type of research design, for this study. Causal research, also called explanatory research, allows to better investigate the nature and the magnitude of relationships which are based on a “cause-and-effect” principle. Since our purpose is to analyze the causal effect of marketing communication on the brand equity dimension, this research methodology appears to be the most suitable one for this scope. The nomothetic causal relationship which wants to be demonstrated through this study has been expressed through the proposed hypotheses. The research of primary data for such type of researches is generally made through experiments, and a questionnaire was set up to answer the research question. The use of the experimental study allows to control for external factors which could incorrectly affect the results of the research. The model chosen for the design and implementation of the questionnaire is the posttest-only control group design. In order to observe the differential effect between gendered advertising and gender-neutral one, it occurred the necessity of setting up two separate groups, one for control and one for intervention. The comparison between two groups is considered as one of the fundamental elements of experimental design.

Despite a quantitative type of research like the one proposed here usually requires a probability sample, for a matter of costs and time, convenience sampling has been considered as the most appropriate sampling strategy to use. Literature demonstrates how convenience sampling, though being a nonprobability sampling strategy, is used in both qualitative and quantitative research (De Carlo, 2018). Participants were divided among the control and the intervention group, thanks to the tools of Qualtrics, which allows the creation of a single questionnaire, with the

only difference in the stimulus provided, and the random division of respondents into two groups.

Procedure

In order to obtain the information needed for this research, a quantitative type of questionnaire with closed-ended responses was prepared. The proposed survey was exactly the same for the control and intervention group, with the only difference lying in the stimulus displayed to the respondents: a gendered one in the first case, and a gender-neutral one for the latter. The two stimuli were meant to be different in the representation of the children in the particular context; children characters are portrayed through gender stereotypes in the first setting, while depicted without this stereotyped frame in the second situation.

Materials

The stimulus provided to the respondent is a visual one. Literature has widely confirmed how the visual medium is particularly effective in the transmission of information, as people tend to recognize and process images faster than what they do with words and with less effort. According to Rashotte (2003), the visual representation of a non-verbal act or behavior is more impacting than its written description. Furthermore, the processing of visuals and emotions happens in the same area of the brain, and that is the reason why these two things are connected and end up generating long-lasting memories and strong impressions. To overcome the difficulty in finding two images which could represent an adequate stimulus for the sake of research, that is to say, capable of respecting the previously mentioned "laboratory conditions" of the experiment, the visual stimuli for the survey have been created *ex-novo* with photo mounting and editing. This allowed to control for external variables which could somehow affect the final result. The first image presents a gender-stereotyped setting, while in the second one the stereotypes are removed, to represent a more gender-neutral situation.

Measurement

The tool used to measure the variables involved in this experiment is the well-known Likert Scale. Likert scale is one of the most used rating scales, used in the measurement of people's attitudes toward a statement, more precisely the degree to which an individual expresses himself as favorable or not to it. For the sake of this study, it has been decided to adopt a 7-points Likert scale for the measurement of the variables involved. With respect to brand associations, the study has been referring to the work of Lassar, Mittal and Sharma and the scale they developed for their research on the measurement of CBBE. For the purpose of the study, greater attention has been placed on the analysis of three particular dimensions, among the five provided in the scale, namely social image, trustworthiness and attachment. Therefore, from an original set of 17 items, we ended up in adopting a scale of 10 items, in order to measure brand associations. For what concerns brand attitudes, the creation of a measurement scale has been again the result of a review of different studies. The proposed scale comes from a meta-analysis of the work from Miller (1971), Flaherty and Pappas (2000), Yoo and Donthu (2001), Chang (2008) and Van

Horen and Pieters (2017), resulting in a combination of the items suggested by the different authors. With regard to affective response to ad, the present research refers to the work of Kim, Ratneshwar and Thorson (2017) and Green and Brock (2000), as reported in the *Marketing Scales Handbook* of Bruner (2019).

Data Analysis and Discussion

Data Summary

Overall, 211 people participated in the study, taking part to the questionnaire. Among these, 152 managed to fully complete the survey (72%), on a total of 211 interactions. Thus, 59 responses were not taken in consideration, because they were incomplete and could generate biases in the data analysis. People were heavenly divided among the 2 groups, resulting in 76 valid responses for the control group, and 76 for the intervention group. Again, the two groups resulted in a balanced composition. The control group was composed for 51.32% of males, and 46.05% of females, while in the intervention group, these percentages were exactly inverted (46.05% males and 51.32% females). Roughly half of both groups was represented by young people between 18-25, who accounted for 51.32% of the control group and 44.74% of the intervention group.

Reliability Analysis

Reliability analysis of the three scales used in the study has been run on SPSS. The objective of this analysis was to test the overall reliability of the scales, and the single contribution of the different items. This methodology allows to test for internal consistency reliability, measured through Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which is expected to be above 0.70 to be acceptable, and equal or greater than 0.80 to demonstrate even stronger reliability. All the scales adopted in the study had been already tested for reliability, with positive outcomes, and used in different studies.

Table 2 - Reliability Analysis Results

Scale Used	Cronbach's alpha value
Brand Associations	$\alpha = 0.950$
Brand Attitudes	$\alpha = 0.960$
Emotional Response to Advertising	$\alpha = 0.954$

ANOVA Testing

The objective of the study was to determine if there could be any significant difference in the mean of the two groups, following the exposition to two different visual stimuli. In order to do that, data gathered with the survey were exported on SPSS and then analyzed through a one-way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance).

In this analysis, a significance level of 0.05 was adopted, meaning a 5% risk of incur in a type I error.

The F-test run on the three dependents verified the equal variances assumption for each of the variables involved. In each case, the test confirmed that the hypothesis that variances of groups are homogenous (homoscedasticity of variances) cannot be rejected. The other two assumptions for ANOVA were met as well, namely the assumption of independent observations (each record is independent) and the one

for normality (one-way ANOVA is considered to be a robust test against the assumption of normality if the size of samples is enough large, namely >25). Once the assumptions have been verified, the analysis has gone further with hypothesis testing.

For all the variables involved, it was registered an increase in score in favor of the intervention group. Even though these numbers have been encouraging, considering the objective of the research, the statistical significance of the results had to be checked using the ANOVA test. The analysis of variances brought to the rejection of two null hypotheses, and the non-rejection of the other two.

Table 3 - ANOVA Testing Outcome

Hypothesis	Outcome
H ₁ : Gender-Neutral Communication → Brand Equity	Null Hypothesis <i>Rejected</i>
H ₂ : Gender-Neutral Communication → Brand Associations	Null Hypothesis <i>Rejected</i>
H ₃ : Gender-Neutral Communication → Brand Attitudes	Null Hypothesis <i>Not Rejected</i>
H ₄ : Gender-Neutral Communication → Emotional Response	Null Hypothesis <i>Not Rejected</i>

The result of the test demonstrated that there is no significant effect of gender-neutral communication on Brand Attitudes and Emotional Response to Advertising, while there is a statistically significant and positive effect on Brand Associations and on overall Brand Equity.

Descriptive Analysis

In parallel to hypothesis testing, the analysis on the responses gathered, divided for age range, has been run to answer our second research question. Firstly, a comparison of the mean scores allowed to make a first distinction between the four different age groups targeted for the survey: two groups, namely Generation Z (18-25yo) and Baby Boomers (>60), have appeared to be contributing to the positive gap in mean score of brand equity, in favor of the group of intervention. On the other side, Millennials (26-40yo) and Generation X (41-60) have registered better scores in the control group. In order to give more statistical relevance to the above-mentioned results, independent t-tests were run on dummy variables which wanted to confront the responses obtained. Using the “recoding” option, a new variable has been created, to do a comparison between members of Gen Z and Millennials. Despite not finding enough evidence to confirm the statistical significance of the mean gap (+0.71532) in the intervention group (p value > .05), the software provided a different result with regard to the control group: the gap in mean score among the two groups (-1.25100), relative to the control set, was found to be statistically significant (p value < .05). At the same time, another T-test investigated the differences registered among the age range of Gen Z and Gen X. The result was the same as the one obtained for the previous group: the effect on the dependent

variable was considered not relevant with regard to the intervention group (+0.70728 ; p value > .05), fact that was not true as well for the parallel analysis on the control group (-1.02613), which ascertained the statistical significance of the assumptions previously made (p value < .05).

Results

The study, despite presenting contrasting results, demonstrated the significant impact generated on brand equity by gender-neutral communication. Contrary to what sustained by a great part of the literature reviewed (see paragraph 2.2.4), which always affirmed the importance of stereotyped representation of masculinity and femininity in generating clear and positive associations in the viewer (Lieven et al., 2014; Fugate & Phillips, 2010), this research demonstrated how a communication stimulus deprived of those stereotypes is capable of building clearer and stronger associations than its gendered counterpart. Surprisingly, despite a similar change of mean, null hypotheses related to Brand Attitudes and Emotional Response to advertising were not rejected. The result is particularly unexpected if we consider that the hugest gap in mean score was registered precisely for Brand Attitudes variable. A lack of evidence for demonstrating significance for both dimensions, could be due, as suggested in the paragraph about "study limitations", to the low suitability of some items to the specific context of research and, most of all, to the stimulus proposed in the survey. It is reasonable to assume that, given only the visual stimulus proposed, for respondents, it was quite difficult to provide a valid score to questions of the scales. The dimension of Emotional Response deserves, in addition, a separate consideration: the use of an image, although respecting the experimental conditions, has been likely to not being enough to stimulate viewers' emotions and allow them to correctly select the scores relative to this variable. Probably the most important result, considering which was our first declared objective of the work, has come from testing the main hypothesis, H_1 , that gender-neutral communication affects overall brand equity. In addition, to confirm a positive effect of the factor on the reference variable, the ANOVA definitively proved the statistical significance of the change in the group subjected to the treatment. This outcome seems in contrast with a large strand of literature which considers gender stereotyping as a pivot point for the elicitation of clear gender positioning in companies' communications, and consequently, as a guarantee for greater brand equity (Lieven et al., 2014). Besides, for what concerns the capability of advertising and communication in general to affect CBBE, it seems, all things considered, that this effect is stronger if conveyed through Brand Associations (Krishnan, 1990), that through Brand Attitudes (Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995; Aaker & Biel, 2013).

What emerged then from the descriptive research, is essentially a substantial and significant gap between Gen Z and Millennials, and Gen Z and Gen X and on the gender issue. Different studies, among which one from Pew Research Center, seem to confirm the fact that Gen Z's perspective on gender non-conformity represents a fundamental divide between this generation and the previous one. The results could be interesting, also if it is considered the importance of Millennials and Generation X

as the consumers responsible for the purchase of the majority of goods reserved to children, thus including also children apparel. An outcome as the one proposed by this study could signify that the actual generation of parents is still not ready for a paradigm change, and still anchored to traditional codes of children's clothing.

Conclusion

The study has made evident how classical stereotyped representations of gender could no more be considered as a useful and efficient tool to be used recursively in communication. As great progresses were made since the time where women were depicted as completely subordinated to the male figure and relegated to determined settings and activities, it is likely to expect that marketers will make further steps in this direction.

Brands themselves should take the role of social institutions, in bringing forward the main social battles for which new generations of consumers care more. Remaining in the middle, without taking a clear stance on major social concerns which, at first sight, could seem to do not affect directly the business, are likely to result in a long-term unsuccessful strategy. The fashion industry has demonstrated to be a vanguard in this sense, as many big players of the industry have affirmed themselves as the promoters of social stances and values.

Particularly important, in this sense, will be the role played by companies in children apparel industry. Breaking the use of this technique is the first step in order to avoid constricting children into that binary paradigm, as well as an opportunity, for brands, to differentiate themselves in a sector where gendered apparel is still prevalent. Further considerations have to be made precisely on these consumers of the future, who have demonstrated to be particularly sensitive to gender-related issues. Gen Z's involvement in social causes related to gender issues is stronger than the one of the past generations.

The results have then highlighted a fundamental gap of literature on the issue; more specifically, decades of academic literature have strongly affirmed the importance of gender stereotyping as a tool capable to enhance brand equity and elicit positive responses from viewers. It is therefore desirable that academic literature on the issue will move toward a paradigm shift, focusing more of its research effort on an alternative and gender-free type of communication.

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