

Impact of brand de-gendering on consumer responses

In the wake of a wider discourse around the need to move towards an egalitarian social set-up, the rationale of gender-based market segmentation is being questioned. Moreover, over time, a segment of consumers more comfortable with carrying a unisex image has emerged. Recognizing this opportunity many marketers are coming up with unisex offerings. For instance, Zara, the apparel retailer, launched its line of unisex clothing named *Ungendered*. Retailers like Target and Selfridges going for gender-neutral shopping zones in their stores are some of the other popular instances. In India, scooters are now being marketed as unisex offerings, such as Honda's *Activa*.

Despite the growing interest of the consumers as well as the marketers around unisex products, there is limited research in the area. How would men and women react to unisex offerings? Would the evaluation vary with the type of product? Is there a way marketers can influence consumers' response to unisex offerings? Also, as unisex product offerings become more commonplace, the focus shifts to brands that come with the unisex extension. Marketers commonly prefer to expand to new offerings under an existing brand name instead of a separate new brand, in order to minimize costs and risks. The question is how would consumers react to unisex extensions of brands that carry a distinct gender image, masculine or feminine? The current literature on brand extension is silent on these issues. Our research strives to address these gaps by drawing from the theories of hegemonic masculinity and social identity.

Hypotheses were developed and tested across six experimental studies. These studies are organized into three essays. The first essay, through a between-subjects experiment, examines the role of

consumer's biological gender, multifactorial gender and the gender of the parent brand in explaining consumers' evaluation of unisex extensions of gendered brands. The findings demonstrate that unisex extension from a parent brand with a masculine image is preferred to one with a feminine image. The multifactorial gender of the consumer turns out to be insignificant in the evaluation of unisex extensions of gendered brands. The effect of the biological gender of the consumer is directional but not significant.

In the second essay, the first round of experiment investigates if the symbolic value of the product under consideration accounts for the difference, if any, in the evaluation of the unisex extension by men and women. Findings suggest the symbolic value (low, medium, high) of the product interacts with the biological gender influencing the evaluation of unisex extension. Specifically, women respond more favourably to the unisex brand extension for products that are higher on symbolic value, whereas men respond less favourably to such an extension. Furthermore, the concept of public collective self-esteem of gender social identity is employed in the next experiment to explain this difference in evaluation between men and women.

The third essay, with the help of three experiments, examines the attitude of men towards the unisex extension of a masculine brand. It employs the theory of gender dichotomization and the masculine overcompensation thesis. The findings demonstrate men's evaluation of the unisex extension is less favorable in comparison to their evaluation of the masculine parent brand. Furthermore, a situation of high perceived gender dichotomy is favourable for the evaluation of unisex extensions of masculine brands by men, more so when the relative status of men and women is not explicit.

Our research aids in improving our understanding of consumer evaluations of unisex offerings;
also outlines the managerial implications of the findings.