

# Product gender perceptions and antecedents of product gender congruence

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to replicate and extend earlier work on product gender perceptions.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The methodology tested six hypotheses, using nearly 500 respondents. The hypotheses were investigated using a survey approach with validated scales. Likert-type data were analyzed using appropriate statistical measures.

**Findings** – Analysis of the data demonstrated that product gendering is still prevalent. In addition, males were more likely than females to purchase gender-congruent products; that individuals with a greater desire for product-self-congruence used products as a form of self-concept; that individuals reared in non-traditional households were less focused on gender congruence; that less traditional individuals were less focused on gender congruence; and that those who sought gender congruence were more likely to seek gender cues in the marketing mix.

**Research limitations/implications** – The product selection was based on a previous study and the sample was non-random. Both of these decisions could be questioned.

**Practical implications** – These research results will allow one to understand whether social change during the past decade has altered product gender perceptions and to explore the degree to which consumers seek congruence between their own gender orientations and perceived product gender. This knowledge could be very important to consumer goods marketers making product design and promotional decisions.

**Originality/value** – The paper examines gender congruence in a maturing Generation Y, a generation second in size only to the Baby Boomers and one of significant market importance. It also provides the first substantive new data on this subject in over a decade.

**Keywords** Gender, Social change

**Paper type** Research paper

An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this article.

## Introduction

The last definitive article on product gender appears to have been published about a decade ago. Milner and Fodness (1996) found that a variety of sex-typed products could effectively be marketed on the basis of having a specific gender, although the consumer appeal of such products could also be broadened to both genders. For products with no sex-typing, they suggested that a gendered identity could be created but perhaps, in the long run, it might be more practical to forego gender differentiation altogether. While their conclusions suggest that a fundamental re-thinking of product gendering and marketing might be appropriate, there seems to be little published research since that time documenting such a shift has occurred. In fact, a widely adopted Consumer Behavior textbook still reports:

Armed with knowledge of the perceived gender of a product or a specific brand, marketers are in a better position to select visuals and text copy for various marketing messages (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2007, p. 135).

In other words, we are still teaching business administration students that product gender is important in the promotional

and possibly product aspects of the marketing mix. This is a somewhat curious position since the past decade has, at least in the USA, been characterized by a greater incidence of cross-gendered social behaviors, broad scale attacks on gender stereotyping, and a gradual softening of traditional gender boundaries; especially as they relate to gay and lesbian behaviors. Intuitive thinking would indicate that the practice of deliberate or at least permissive product gendering may no longer be a popular or productive marketing strategy. But this begs the question of whether or not consumers continue to genderize a subset of their purchases. Before one moves to the new plateau of gender neutrality in the marketplace, further examination of this issue should be conducted. Thus, the purpose of this study is first to reassess the baseline data generated during the 1980s and 1990s. Specifically, this research measures the scope and intensity of current product gender perceptions. Secondly, this research explores likely antecedents of sensitivity to product gender, above marketer-created cues (i.e. spokespersons and voiceovers); that have been studied in the past.

## Theoretical background and hypotheses

Sex is one of the most fundamental of demographic categorizations and can be found in every nearly every area of social and behavioral research. In practice, the terms sex and gender are often used interchangeably to indicate whether a person is biologically a male or a female. On the other hand, masculinity and femininity are not biological traits but personality traits. Culturally sanctioned masculinity is dominating, unemotional and workplace oriented; culturally sanctioned femininity is compliant, nurturing and empathetic; linked more to the home and bedroom (Connell, 1987, pp. 187-9). When one possesses a combination of both

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masculine and feminine traits, they are considered androgynous. For purposes of this paper, the term "gender" is used to represent these dominant views of masculinity or femininity – regardless of the object under consideration.

### **Gendered products**

Utilizing the logic of Bem's (1974) gender schema theory (which is similar to Goffman's framing theory), Iyer and Debevec (1986), Milner *et al.* (1990), Milner and Fodness (1996) and others studied the question: Does a product, like a person, have gender? Consistently, they found that most products had gender, even services (Stern *et al.*, 1993), and they found that most products have sex-typed identities as masculine or feminine – with relatively little ambiguity. This perceptual constant, following Bem, allows consumers to encode and organize product (goods and services) information using the traits of masculinity and femininity as one of their primary organizing dimensions.

Several decades of research in both marketing and psychology (see Woolfolk, 1995) support the notion that consumers develop gender identities for themselves and products; abetted in part by gender images communicated through the mass media. To maintain gender image integrity, consumers largely purchase products that have gender identities congruent with their own; such product gender identities were found by Milner and Fodness (1996) in the USA, Turkey and Greece. Our first goal with this research is to discover, given the changing social climate of this culture in the last decade, whether individuals still assign gender to products. Our first hypothesis, presented in null form is:

*H1. Current measures of product gender will approximate prior measurements.*

### **Individual differences in the importance of gender-congruent products**

As is often the case, marketing phenomena that have been widely investigated are often abandoned for newer, more intriguing questions. As a consequence, original findings are reported for years afterwards without concomitant validation. One triggering mechanism for replication of the earlier product gender studies is the rapid rate of environmental change of the past decade; changes which have occurred across a number of important social and demographic dimensions. In addition to assessing whether gender typing of products is still prevalent among consumers, the authors also investigate whether selected factors may lead some individuals to be more influenced by perceived product gender than others. Given this information, marketers may be able to gauge the importance their target market places on product gender, and thus may be able to use this information to better communicate the appropriate product gender image (or lack thereof) to their potential customers.

#### *Gender identity and self-congruency theory*

Consumption behavior is assumed to be consistent with a person's gender identity. Past research indicates that both men and women are psychologically uncomfortable using products and services which do not seem to be made for them. Both sexes want to know what is culturally "theirs" in some normative sense (Milner and Fodness, 1996, p. 41). This orientation results in a more restricted range of "acceptable" behaviors for boys and men (or girls and women) compared to the behaviors found in their nontraditionally gender-typed counterparts. This behavior

begins quite early in life (see Smith, 1994; Albert and Porter, 1988) with even small children classifying toys and other objects as male or female. Therefore, it is not surprising that "Advertisers often work to create a gender image for a brand by featuring the targeted gender in an advertisement as a 'typical' user of the product" (Debevec and Iyer, 1986, p. 12). Given the fact that both sexes seem to identify with sex roles, and that marketers actively target both men and women with gender cues, we hypothesize that:

*H2. There will be no difference between males and females in the need for product gender congruence in consumption decisions.*

Identity theory (see Blumer, 1969; Stone, 1962; Strauss, 1959) is based on the notion that individuals negotiate their social role identity through interaction with others and one's perceived social location in reference to others. In Connell's (1987, 1990) view, one's gender identity is one's most significant social identity. This identity is embedded in and reinforced through social institutions including the mass media. "The mass media has become the lens of mankind through which men see; the medium by which they interpret and report what they see. It is the semi-organized source of their very identities" (Mills, reported in Horowitz, 1963, p. 406). According to this theory, one's gender identity is largely influenced by exposure to media-borne messages such as advertising and holds true both in role portrayals and in the sex-type of products they advertise (see Fowles, 1996; Fejes, 1992; Craig, 1992).

Self-congruency theory states that individuals use products that are in some way reflective of their own image or identity; individuals purchase products for their symbolic meaning and their reflection of that individual's self-concept rather than just for functional attributes of the product (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967). The desire for self-congruence with products has been demonstrated at both a brand and a product category level (Cowart *et al.*, 2002). Individual differences have emerged in how important congruence between a product and one's self is in consumption decisions (Quester *et al.*, 2000). Given the importance of gender in an individual's identity, we believe that those individuals who place importance on self-congruence of purchased products will be influenced to a greater degree by a product's perceived gender than those who do not place an importance of self-congruence. Specifically:

*H3. The desire for self-congruence in purchasing situations will have a positive relationship with the need for product gender congruence.*

#### *Learning both roles*

Consumption related tasks such acquiring, using, maintaining and disposing of products are often genderized within a household. However, the current "redefining" of the traditional family poses a serious threat to continuation of traditional gender identities. In 2008, some 29.4 million family households were headed by a male or female with no spouse present (military excluded). Average family size in these households was approximately 3.2 persons each; meaning some 94 millions Americans were living in households where maintenance of these households would not be possible unless the primary householder assumed both feminine and masculine role identities. Similarly, there were approximately 32 million persons living alone in 2008 (Bureau of Census, 2009); leading one to reach a similar

conclusion about gender bending at the grocery store, the hardware store, and so on for singles. Collectively, this means that over 125 million Americans are living in households where traditional gender-oriented consumption behavior is not likely and where non-traditional gender-oriented consumption is likely. In fact, one in four members of Generation Y (born between 1978-1994) lived or are living in single-parent households, thus making exposure to parents performing nontraditional roles particularly likely for this age cohort.

In a somewhat related event, the dual worker household has forced many men and women to forgo traditional roles. For example, the husband may provide child care, meal preparation and perform other more expressive tasks while the spouse works. For the husbands who assume this role due to a working spouse, there are websites such as househusbands.com which provide helpful resources. Thus, we suggest that individuals who have lived in households where parents or role models performed extra-role gender behaviors (i.e. women perform typically masculine activities and men perform typically feminine activities) may have less of a need for gender congruence of products they purchase. Formally, we state:

- H4. Exposure to untraditional sex roles of parents/guardians will have a negative relationship with the need for product gender congruence in consumption situations.*

#### *Abandonment/redefinition of traditional roles*

Evidence abounds that gender roles are blurring. Data Monitor (2004) reports that "gender complexity" is one of the megatrends facing consumer care and dieting companies. The phrase "non-transvestite feminization" seems to be an overly politically correct term but also it seems to captures the willingness of men to abandon many conventional masculine norms in order to embrace more conventional feminine norms, e.g. wearing make-up, being fashion conscious, having elective surgery, becoming more sensitive and caring, etc. Large numbers of males have embraced the conspicuous wearing of jewelry (e.g. earrings, necklaces, bracelets, etc.) and fashion items previously associated only with females. "Metromale" and "bromance" are two other terms found in current parlance that suggest traditional gender roles are shifting.

Conversely, women are assuming stronger, more dominant positions with compliant male companions. In more extreme circumstances, men are portrayed in the entertainment media as comedic and unnecessary; if not burdensome members of the household. While such characterizations are oversimplistic, the maturation of the feminist and concurrent movements has removed many of the cultural distinctions between appropriate male and female behavior and has had a profound impact on what it means to be a man or woman in modern American society.

The term "intersexual" has been used to suggest a place where male and female orientations intersect and produce a new gender awareness and set of behaviors.

According to Fowles (1996), popular culture is an increasingly visual culture; one where television images and advertising have become a form of "public art". As "public art," TV talk shows and nighttime TV dramas provide a fundamental reflection of the materialistic and de-genderized nature of capitalism (Schudson, 1986). Young males and female viewers would thus be expected to see fewer gender

role differences and to learn (through modeling) new gender orientations.

Over the past five decades, significant changes have occurred in gender roles and in gender-based divisions of labor. Perhaps the most notable of these changes are the dramatic influx of women into the workforce and the progress women have made at entering professions and filling positions once held almost exclusively by men. This is significant since much of one's self identify derives from occupational identity. Women now hold about half of all management, professional and related occupations; are more likely than men to enroll in college, and have lower unemployment rates than men (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005).

Further eroding job-related gender identity, gender equality in the job market is causing more men to seek employment in what have traditionally been "women's" jobs (Borders, 2006). While there is no formal definition, rule of thumb says that when less than 25 percent of those in a profession are male (female), it is a nontraditional occupation for the opposite sex. Given these shifts in society, we predict that some individuals will have shifting views of appropriate sex roles, and thus may be less constrained by product gender perceptions:

- H5. Modern Sex Role Perceptions will have a negative relationship with the need for Product Gender Congruence in consumption situations.*

#### *Processing of product gender cues*

Finally, we would argue that those individuals who seek product gender congruity will also be more attuned to marketer-created product gender cues. Marketers commonly provide cues in packaging, colors, product shape, logos, graphics, and brand names to suggest product gender (Wolin, 2003). Thus, we expect that those individuals who seek product gender congruency will be more likely to process product cues (packaging shape and colors, product forms brand characters, spokespersons) in order to determine the gender of a product. Therefore:

- H6. Need for product gender congruence in consumption situations will have a positive relationship with receptivity to product gender cues.*

## **Methodology**

### **Study 1**

Study 1 was devised in order to test *H1* by assessing current product gender categorizations. In the earlier gender research projects noted, respondents were asked to indicate the gender (masculinity and femininity) of 41 selected products, e.g. Coffee and hairspray (Milner and Fodness, 1996). Based on their responses, products were grouped by cluster analysis within one of four gender categories: Masculine (high Masculinity, low femininity), Feminine (high femininity, low masculinity), Androgynous (high on Masculinity and Femininity), and Undifferentiated (low on Masculinity and Femininity). This research replicates this four-category framework but uses a subset of the original list of products. The original study did not report individual scores for each of the 41 items, only their cluster identity. In this study, products from each of the original clusters were selected using a panel of two marketing professors. This resulted in a smaller product list (20) representing each of the four clusters

(masculine, feminine, undifferentiated and androgynous) in nearly equal proportions.

Product eliminations from the original study were based on several criteria. One was to reduce product duplication; another was to omit products that are socially less acceptable than in the previous study. Services were also removed from the original list since this research is concerned with tangible representations of gender. [Services will likely be investigated at a later date.] The intent was to make the list more relevant to current consumers and, at least partially; to avoid respondent fatigue during the classification process. However, several product form variations not common a decade ago were added to the list to determine if gender is a generalized construct regardless of physical form of the product, e.g. box wine and bottle wine, instant and regular coffee, cars and SUVs.

Respondents were given the list of the chosen products and instructed to indicate their perception of the masculinity and femininity respectively of each product on separate scales (where 0 = not at all masculine (feminine) and 3 = highly masculine (feminine)). This conceptualization of Masculinity and Femininity as two separate dimensions rather than opposite ends of the same continuum has been used extensively in both product-gender related studies as well as general studies about gender identity (Milner and Fodness, 1996). Independent *t*-tests between each product's masculinity and femininity scores were run. Where significant statistical differences between Masculinity and Femininity ratings existed, the product was judged to be Masculine when the Masculinity mean was statistically higher, and Feminine when the Femininity score was significantly greater. In instances where there was no statistical difference in the product's masculine and feminine means, the means were judged by a cut-off point. If both products had means below 1.5 (the midpoint of the masculinity and femininity ratings scales) then the product was judged to be low on both dimensions, and thus categorized as Undifferentiated. If the product showed no significant mean differences, and both means were greater than 1.5, then the product was categorized as Androgynous, or high on both Masculinity and Femininity dimensions.

#### Sample

Respondents were business students at a medium sized, comprehensive university enrolled in a variety of courses from freshmen level entry courses to senior level marketing courses ( $n = 309$ ). A student convenience sample has disadvantages, but in this instance, it was considered adequate. First, if one wants to measure social change, the respondent group should be those who would most likely reflect the influence of those change agents. Secondly, college students are more likely than non-college students to have been exposed to a wider variety of media sources; earlier identified as one of the primary sources of gender identity formation. Thirdly, gender identification has been, at least historically, a broadly based phenomenon and thus, likely to be registered in most population frames.

#### Study 2

Study 2 was used to test the remaining hypotheses (*H2-H6*) of the study. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model for the study. Respondents were given a questionnaire and asked to rate their agreement with several statements on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. In all but one instance scales were developed to represent the constructs of interest. The self-congruency scale

was adapted from the work of Quester *et al.* (2000). All items and scales were subjected to Confirmatory Factor Analysis in Amos as directed by Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) scale development procedure. The measurement model demonstrated good fit ( $\chi^2 = 71.73$ ,  $df = 53$ ; CFI = 0.949, TLI = 0.952, RMSEA = 0.044,  $p < 0.05$ ). Items and their loadings, construct reliability and average variance extracted, can be found in Table I. Two constructs contained only two items (Modern Sex Role Perceptions and Untraditional Role Models) and thus it was inappropriate to compute construct reliabilities for these constructs. Correlations between the two items in each of these constructs are reported in place of construct reliabilities. Constructs showed evidence of discriminant validity as demonstrated in the method of Fornell and Larcker (1981).

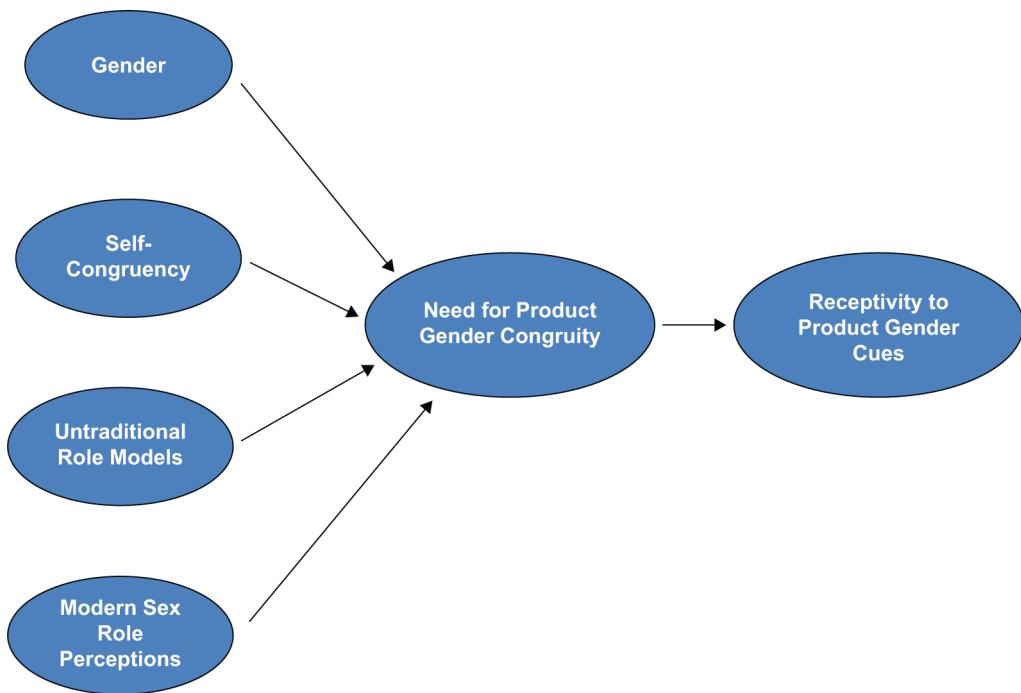
Respondents for Study 2 were business students at a medium sized comprehensive university ( $n = 183$ ). Of the respondents, 56 percent were male. Hypotheses were analyzed using Multiple Regression in SPSS, where predictor variables were all entered into the model at once. For summary results of hypothesis testing, including Regression results, see Table II. A discussion of the results of the data analysis for Study 1 and Study 2 follows.

## Results and discussion

### Study 1

Table III contains a list of all products' *t*-test results, means, and final categorization ruling. Table IV illustrates the findings of this research as compared to the Milner and Fodness (1996) study. *H1* (in null form) stated that current measures of product gender would approximate past measures. We find that nine out of twenty products deviate from their original categorizations; therefore, we do not have support for this hypothesis. Of particular interest is the nature of the gender deviation from the original study. One might assume that products would become less distinguishable by gender over time, given the equalization of sex roles in this culture. However, not one item in this study was rated as "Undifferentiated" (neither masculine nor feminine) which indicates that all of the products included in this study (more than in the original study) were classified as having gender by respondents. Debevec and Iyer (1986) suggest that undifferentiated products may actually represent those products which have not yet developed a common gender identity. If this is the case, this study would suggest that in the last 13 years, all of the undifferentiated products listed in the 1996 study have since developed gender identities among our sample. This argument seems to suggest that consumers are still actively classifying and interpreting product gender information. Additionally, only four out of twenty products were rated as Androgynous, or identifiable as both masculine and feminine. Thus, the majority of products in this study were rated as clearly masculine or feminine. We limit our discussion to product classifications that the authors found particularly salient.

The authors acknowledge that empirical support is required for confidence in the potential causes of categorical shifts in the product gender ratings discussed here. This discussion is intended to be a basis for future research in causal factors influencing product gender-typing which may help marketers better understand the evolution of the gender identity of products and which factors are predictors of product gender shifts.

**Figure 1** Conceptual model for Study 2**Table I** CFA results. Scale origins, construct reliability, AVE, items and item loadings

Construct and scale	Construct reliability/AVE	Items	Loadings
Need for product gender congruity	0.67/0.42	I like products to have the same gender characteristics as myself I am uncomfortable buying items that I know are specifically sold to the opposite gender I do not care about the gender of a product if it satisfies my needs (reverse coded)	0.845 0.501 0.543
Untraditional role models	r = 0.482	My mother often performed traditionally masculine chores in the household My father often performed traditionally feminine chores in the household I grew up in	0.594 0.718
Modern sex role perceptions	r = 0.426	It is acceptable for men to use products that are highly feminine It is acceptable for women to use products that are highly masculine	0.793 0.606
Self-congruency	0.71/0.46	It is important for me to use products that are consistent with how I see myself It is important for me to use products that reflect who I am	0.789 0.767
Receptivity to product gender cues	0.69/0.44	It is important for me to feel that people similar to me use the products I use A product's brand name often indicates whether it is masculine or feminine A product's brand characteristics often indicate whether the product is masculine or feminine A product's form, shape, or packaging often indicates whether it is masculine or feminine	0.418 0.493 0.692 0.767

Notes: Fit indices –  $\chi^2 = 71.73$ ; df = 53; CFI = 0.949; TLI = 0.952; RMSEA = 0.044;  $p < 0.05$

Two products that were initially rated masculine maintained their masculine gender identity in our sample, despite apparent attempts in both industries to target both genders: Athletic shoes and cars remained masculine. In the Athletic Shoe industry, Nike, since 1996, has run many ad campaigns targeted specifically for female athletes, and vocally supports women in sport through product design and media communications (Sandomir, 2007), as well as

through sponsorships of women's sporting events and using well known female athletes as endorsers (i.e. Maria Sharapova) (Beckett, 2006). Car companies too have started advertising to (and with) women who are car enthusiasts. Kate Walsh, a well-known television star, is now a spokesperson for Cadillac CTS, who is targeting women who seek a high performance vehicle (Connelly and Geist, 2008). Volvo, in 2003, designed a concept car specifically

**Table II** Hypothesis testing summary results

Hypothesis	Relationship tested	Supported	Standardized beta
<i>H2.</i>	There will be no difference between males and females on the need for product gender congruence in consumption decisions	No, males showed higher need for product gender congruity	N/A *
<i>H3.</i>	The desire for self-congruence in purchasing situations will have a positive relationship with need for product gender congruence	Yes	0.338 **
<i>H4.</i>	Exposure to untraditional sex roles of parents/guardians will have a negative relationship with the need for product gender congruence in consumption situations	Yes	-0.176 **
<i>H5.</i>	Modern Sex Role Perceptions will have a negative relationship with the need for Product Gender Congruence in consumption situations	Yes	-0.173 **
<i>H6.</i>	Need for product gender congruence in consumption situations will have a positive relationship with receptivity to product gender cues	Yes	0.273 **

Notes: \*Tested in independent samples *t*-test; \*\*significant at  $p < 0.05$

**Table III** Study 1 product categorization results

Product	Femininity score		Masculinity score		Classification
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Athletic shoes *	1.67	0.70	2.62	1.90	Masculine
Bath soap *	2.27	0.89	1.73	0.85	Feminine
Bottle wine *	2.57	0.74	1.35	.73	Feminine
Boxed wine *	1.89	0.94	1.35	0.79	Feminine
Car *	2.04	0.88	2.44	1.86	Masculine
Digital camera *	2.30	0.91	1.55	0.82	Feminine
Beer *	1.17	0.67	2.81	0.56	Masculine
Regular coffee *	1.69	0.86	1.99	0.92	Masculine
Instant coffee *	1.5	0.88	1.74	.96	Masculine
Food processor *	1.87	0.97	1.28	0.83	Feminine
Frozen vegetables *	1.90	0.99	1.19	0.78	Feminine
Hair spray *	2.83	0.58	0.86	0.69	Feminine
Facial tissue *	2.46	0.77	1.09	0.64	Feminine
Lawnmower *	.92	0.68	2.76	0.61	Masculine
Microwave	1.83	0.89	1.86	0.94	Androgynous
Potato chips *	1.42	0.83	2.10	0.93	Masculine
Canned soup	1.56	0.87	1.63	0.92	Androgynous
SUV *	1.80	0.84	2.36	0.84	Masculine
Toothpaste	1.81	1.12	1.77	1.10	Androgynous
Wall paint	1.62	0.94	1.80	0.97	Androgynous

Notes: \*Indicates significant *t*-test at  $p < 0.001$  level

for a female driver using a heavily female design team (Knox, 2003). It seems that these recent and high profile marketing campaigns have not influenced gender perceptions of the product categories to date.

However, toothpaste, which was initially labeled as Masculine, did make the shift to Androgynous in our study. Toothpaste manufacturers have placed a great deal of focus on the cosmetic aspect of their products in recent years. Virtually every player in the industry touts “teeth-whitening” or “smile-brightening” as the number one benefit of the brand. Spokespeople in print and in electronic media campaigns are most often women (with very bright smiles). Since the majority of personal grooming products in this study (and in the original) were labeled as feminine, the repositioning of

toothpaste as a grooming aid over a hygienic one may explain the gender shift to Androgynous in this study.

Interestingly, wine, originally labeled “masculine” was categorized as “feminine” in this research, indicating a 180 degree shift in gender identity for this product. The shift of wine from male to female may be largely attributed to popular media and entertainment rather than advertisers. Women in television and movies projecting sophisticated images are now most often seen with a glass of wine as the drink of choice (see any episode of “Sex and the City” or “Desperate Housewives”). Even so, the wine industry is seemingly working with this trend in popular media (and potentially funding it in specific product placements). As one *New York Times* author noted, “the wine industry’s seduction of the American female consumer has begun” (Brown, 2005, p. 5).

This study also revealed a shift of several undifferentiated items into gendered categories. For example, potato chips were rated as masculine in this study. This may be related to a growing health consciousness among women in our culture (e.g. abandoning fried foods) and the more cavalier eating habits of men (young men in particular) who are the least health conscious demographic (Carter, 2006). However, even younger men are becoming more health conscious, indicating a potential for potato chips’ gender identity to change again, as men join women in their desire for organic and healthy food products (Carter, 2006). Microwaves shifted from undifferentiated to androgynous, perhaps due in part to the increasingly busy lives of both men and women and the need to prepare food quickly, and perhaps due to the nature of this particular sample of college students who use the microwave as their primary (or only) means of preparing their food. Two products previously grouped as Undifferentiated that might, under traditional sex roles, be thought of as primarily female because of their relationship to the kitchen (food processor and frozen vegetables) were in fact rated as feminine in this study. While we have no evidence as such, we speculate that the popularity of “domestic” talk television (Martha Stewart, Rachel Ray, Paula Deen, etc.) is signaling a return to more traditional gender roles regarding food preparation more detailed than microwavable products.

Furthermore, the authors included some deviations in product forms to see whether product form could potentially guide product gender categorization. The multiple product forms included in this study were: car and SUV, bottle wine and box wine, and regular coffee and instant coffee. For the

**Table IV** A comparison of product gender categorizations: 1996 v. 2009

		Low femininity Masculine	High femininity Androgynous	Low femininity Undifferentiated	High femininity Feminine
High masculinity	1996	Beer	Camera		
		Car	Lawnmower		
		Coffee	Wall paint		
		Athletic shoes			
		Toothpaste			
	2009	Wine			
		Beer	Microwave*		
		Car	Toothpaste*		
		SUV	Canned soup*		
		Coffee (regular and instant)	Wall paint		
Low masculinity	1996	Athletic shoes			
		Lawnmower*			
		Potato chips*			
	2009		Food processor	Bath soap	
			Frozen vegetables	Clothes dryer	
			Potato chips	Facial tissue	
			Microwave oven	Hairspray	
			Canned soup	Shampoo	
				Bath soap	
				Wine (bottle and box)*	
				Digital camera*	
				Facial tissue	
				Food processor*	
				Frozen vegetables*	
				Hair spray	

Note: \*Indicates a deviation of current study (2009) from original (Milner and Fodness, 1996)

product forms included here, no differences emerge across different forms in terms of product gender, which indicates other perhaps gender classifications occur at the product category level, and that various product forms do not assume their own gender identities.

## Study 2

A conceptual model of the relationships tested in Study 2 can be found in Figure 1. *H2* suggested that, as a result of the importance of gender in the identity of both sexes, that males and females would be equally concerned with product gender congruence. To test this hypothesis, an Independent *t*-test was run to see if male and female respondents differed in terms of the importance of buying gender-congruent products. Contrary to *H2*, there was a significant difference between the sexes ( $p < .05$ ) in the importance of gender congruence in their consumption decisions. Specifically, males were more focused on buying products that were gender congruent (mean = 3.22) than females (mean = 2.87). Perhaps this finding is rooted in a sort of double-standard in sex-roles in our society. While it may be fine for a woman to do or use any product a man uses, it may not be considered as socially acceptable for a man to use products or brands that are considered more feminine (hairspray). Patton (2004) suggests that this double standard is often discussed in the automotive industry; women will buy a masculine car, but men wouldn't buy a car that is associated with a female target.

*H3* suggested that those individuals who had a greater desire for product-self congruence would be more focused on the importance of product gender congruence in consumption decisions. This hypothesis is supported by the

regression results (see Table II, standardized beta = 0.338,  $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that product gender is salient for individuals who wish to purchase products representative of their self-concept. Past studies have shown the brand personality/buyer congruence does influence product preference and satisfaction (Grover and Shoormans, 2005), and this study suggests that individuals that seek self-congruence to products consider gender congruence as important to their selections.

*H4* stated that individuals who had been brought up in households where parents did not adhere to traditional sex roles would be less influenced by a product's gender congruence in consumption decisions. Given that 1 in 4 members of Generation Y are brought up in single-parent households (Morton, 2002), and given shifting sex roles in society as discussed earlier in this manuscript, it would seem that many individuals in younger generations, more so than older generations, will have lived in households where mothers may perform traditionally masculine roles and fathers perform traditionally feminine roles. In support of *H4*, we do find that the more respondents indicated that their own parents stepped out of traditional sex roles, the less influence gender congruence had on their own consumption decisions (standardized beta = -0.176,  $p < 0.05$ ).

Similarly, *H5* suggested that those individuals who did not subscribe to traditional sex roles and were more accepting of more modern sex roles (where males and females engage in traditionally feminine or masculine behavior respectively) would be less focused on gender congruence as well. This hypothesis is supported (beta = -0.173,  $p < 0.05$ ). These findings for *H5* and *H6* are interesting because they suggest

that although products may hold on to their gender identities regardless of social change, perhaps social change does act to make the importance of those gender cues less important.

*H<sub>6</sub>* looked at a possible consequence of seeking product-gender congruence. Specifically, *H<sub>6</sub>* suggests that those individuals who do seek gender congruence with products will be more attuned to gender cues in marketing mix variables such as packaging/product shape, brand name, brand characters, and so forth. Many brands, such as personal hygiene products, are targeting traditionally feminine product categories (hair products and bath gels) at men. They are attempting to use product cues such as packaging to attract an audience that might otherwise be resistant to the opposite gendered product category. Axe, for example, uses dark masculine colors, boxy product forms (as opposed to products with curves found in many women's liquid bath soaps, for example), and highlights the masculine image of the brand in advertising by repeatedly showing attractive women who are unable to control themselves around the masculine users of the product. We find support for *H<sub>6</sub>* ( $\beta = 0.273$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

## Conclusions

This research suggests that thirteen years of social change is sufficient to produce changes in how product gender is perceived. What is particularly interesting in the findings of this study is that the shift seems to be in the direction of more strongly identifying products as gendered rather than undifferentiated (or asexual). However, we also find that although individuals still may recognize and classify products by gender, buying products that are gender congruent may not be as important to some individuals as it is to others. Taken together, these findings from study 1 and study 2 suggest an area rich for future research; is the gender classification of a product salient when an individual does not seek gender-congruency in consumption decisions? In other words, although individuals still classify products as gendered, does that identity really enter into their consumption decisions in any meaningful way? Does product gender become more descriptive rather than prescriptive in nature?

It seems that discussions of product gender perceptions in the marketing classroom and boardroom are still appropriate. Given the time lapse between product gender studies, this research is also among the very first to look at product gender perceptions among a maturing Generation Y, a generation second only in size to the Baby Boomers. The leading edge of Gen Y is now participating in the marketplace as independent consumers, with the younger portion of the Generation in high school and college and ready to follow. Like their Baby Boomer parents, Gen Y is recognized as an age cohort that will transform the marketplace in every life stage it enters due to its size and spending power (Morton, 2002). Given Generation Y's culturally tolerant values and atypical upbringing, this Generation's views on product gender should be of particular interest to researchers and to practitioners who are targeting this attractive market segment.

## Managerial implications and future research

Our results indicate that re-gendering or de-gendering a product may not be achieved through one marketer's efforts or campaign. Despite several high profile campaigns with specific brands within both the athletic shoe and the car

industry designed to target women, those product categories did not shift gender perception among consumers. However, both toothpaste and wine, also party to major changes in marketer efforts to target women, did make major gender shifts. These findings seem to indicate that gender classifications of product categories may not be swayed by any one campaign for any one brand in the industry; however; when entire industries reposition a product's gender (i.e. positioning toothpaste industry-wide as a cosmetic product for white teeth or wine in general as a woman's drink), then gender shifts do become possible. Future research might investigate what percentage of brands within a product category must make re-gendering a focus in their marketing communications to shift the gender of an entire product category. Future research might also examine the effect of gendering a brand against the product category norm, and the effect of such a strategy on consumer perceptions and liking for a brand.

This research demonstrates that men are more likely to seek gender congruence with products than females. Managers should note that this suggests that where there is a male target audience, gender-typing products as masculine may be more important than where the target is primarily female. In androgynous categories, perhaps masculine cues should dominate as men are more likely to purchase products with masculine images. Thus, a more masculine image may attract men without losing women. With many brands (e.g. Claiborne, Paul Mitchell, or Louis Vuitton) now offering traditionally female-gendered products to males, marketers of these brands may need to pay special attention to shifting gender perceptions of these product categories (or brands within these product categories) to the androgynous category if they are to have long term success in the marketplace. Future research might explore the differences in males and females in gender congruence-seeking further to isolate the underlying factors and extent of this finding (i.e. are there certain age groups, product categories, etc. where males are more concerned than females with product gender congruence?).

Past studies have shown that individuals prefer to buy products whose personalities match their own personalities (Grover and Shoormans, 2005), and this study demonstrated that individuals who seek self-congruence with product personality also seek product gender congruence. This finding is interesting to product marketers because it suggests that some purchases may be more influenced by product gender perceptions than others. For those product categories that are highly public or socially risky, product gender cues may require closer attention from marketers than those products which are not typically used for self-expression. Additionally, since there are individual differences in how likely people are to use products as representative of themselves, thus this may be valuable information for marketers to seek about their target markets in order to understand the importance of the gender identity (and personality characteristics) of their products.

Our findings also suggest that individuals who do not subscribe to traditional sex roles, or were raised by individuals who did not demonstrate traditional sex roles are less likely to seek gender congruence with product purchases. Research on Generation Y indicates a generation very tolerant of other cultures and lifestyles (i.e. gay/lesbian, etc.) as well as a generation of individuals raised in single-parent or nontraditional households (Morton, 2002). Thus, age

cohorts may be an important consideration in whether to stress product gender. Perhaps marketers of brands or industries with older target markets who were raised in more traditional households and who subscribe to more traditional sex roles should concern themselves more with the gendering of their products than marketers with younger targets. It is also possible that younger consumers, who are more change prone, as less likely to see gender differences in different product forms. This means that managers can expect product form variations to remain gender consistent with the original product form.

Finally, the authors discovered that those individuals who seek product gender congruence are likely to look for marketer-provided gender cues in making a decision of which product to purchase. Marketers working with targets with high desire for gender congruence (males, older consumers, in product categories used for self-expression, etc.) may need to be exceptionally obvious in product form and marketing efforts to either underscore the gender image or change the gender image (as the situation requires) for target market acceptance.

Interestingly, the literature offers little agreement on the appropriateness of using gender cues in positioning products. Early research in product gender offered suggestions on how to de-genderize products, while admitting that some products are inherently gendered (Stuteville, 1971). Today, some authors advocate continuing to use gender cues, while others suggest that designing gender neutral products where "one size fits all" may be prudent (Babyak, 2006, p. 5). Our findings would suggest that gender neutrality may not be wise for marketers in many industries, given that some targets still seek product gender congruence, and are likely to evaluate gender through product-design related cues.

Future research might explore the extent to which product cues can override perceptions of categorical product gender, and which product cues are most salient in establishing or overriding gender identity of a product category or a particular brand.

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## Further reading

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## Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of this article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefits of the material present.

Differences between sex and gender are well researched and documented. Although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, sex essentially relates to the biological make-up of men and women. Gender, on the other hand, is perceived as a social and cultural construct reflecting masculine and feminine personality traits. Masculinity is often associated with control, impassiveness and work, whereas compliance, empathy and the home are typical characteristics of femininity.

### Key factors

For several decades, studies have shown that gender is also attributed to products and even services. The tendency has become so widespread that most products have masculine or feminine identities which consumers use as part of their categorization process. But recent developments within countries like the United States has seen traditional gender divides become somewhat blurred and raised questions about whether product gender should remain a feature of the marketing mix. In the present study, Fugate and Phillips consider the social and demographic developments of the last decade to explore the impact of these changes on product gender. The aim is to equip marketers with information needed to decide whether or not to communicate gender images to their target audience.

According to identity theory, individuals construct their social identity through interaction and social positioning in relation to others. Gender identity is considered by some to be the most important social identity dimension. Influenced to a considerable extent by social institutions that include mass media representations, consumers create gender identities for themselves and seek products with gender identities that are most congruent with their own. The classification of toys as being male or female indicates that such behavior begins in early childhood.

Gender roles within the household have been long established. Trends have changed, however, and the growth in such as single-parent families has meant a redefinition of the traditional family unit. One key outcome is parents having to perform additional duties formerly associated with the opposite gender. The related shift in working life has impacted likewise and prompted role reversal in cases where the female goes out to work and the male partner becomes a house husband. Inroads that women have made into various professions formerly considered male territory emphasizes the point further, as does the corresponding rise of men with jobs normally held by women. As 'occupational identity' enjoys a major role in the creation of self identity, particular significance is attached to these developments.

Scholars also point to men's growing willingness to venture into traditionally female domains linked to such as fashion, jewelry and cosmetic surgery as added proof of gender role blurring. Feminist movements that have challenged cultural

assumptions about 'appropriate male and female behavior' such as female compliance are likewise significant in the regard.

The role of marketers in preserving product gender congruity is a factor too. Choice of product shape, packaging, colors, graphics, logos and brand names provides various cues to imply product gender.

### **Research and findings**

Two studies are carried out by the authors in order to explore these issues. The first study replicated research carried out in 1996 inviting participants to classify selected products as masculine, feminine, androgynous or undifferentiated. In order to use products more appropriate to current consumers, the authors removed services, duplicate products and those less socially acceptable than before. The ensuing smaller product list did however include 'product form variations' such as instant and regular coffee and boxed and bottled wine less apparent earlier.

In the second study, respondents indicated their level of agreement with various questionnaire statements. Business studies from a medium-sized university were used for both studies. Student convenience samples were considered appropriate because of this segment's exposure to various media sources and the argument that the respondent group would reflect the influence of social change more than others. The authors also believe that gender identification is prevalent within most population segments.

First study findings showed that almost half the products had changed from their original categorization. That none of the products considered here were undifferentiated was also noteworthy. Such products may represent those yet to develop an accepted gender identity. In the opinion of Fugate and Phillips, it would also suggest that items identified as undifferentiated in the 1996 study have acquired gender identities since. Another significant conclusion is that product gender information remains pertinent to consumers.

An apparent failure by marketers to reposition sports shoes and cars is noted. Both products retained their original masculine status despite efforts in both industries to target women more. On the other hand, toothpaste's shift from masculine to androgynous is attributed to the greater emphasis on the hygiene and cosmetic aspects of the product in recent years. Portrayal of sophisticated women drinking wine in television and movie settings is likewise deemed a key factor in the product moving from masculine to feminine. Among previously undifferentiated items, potato chips are notable. The product's masculine rating in this study could reflect the increasing health consciousness among women and men's 'more cavalier eating habits'. The authors point out growing male tendency to mirror female concerns

about healthier eating and claim that the gender of this product could therefore be subject to further change. Variations of product form like box and bottle were found to be inconsequential.

The second study indicated:

- males to be more focused on buying gender products than females, possibly reflecting various double standards prevalent within society;
- product-gender congruence is more important to those opting for goods most reflecting their self-concept;
- among those growing up within non-traditional families, product-gender congruence was less significant;
- gender congruence was less an issue among those inclined to engage in roles and behaviors normally attributed to the opposite sex; and
- consumers who seek product-gender congruence are likelier to use marketing gender cues found in such as various product packaging elements and brand name.

Fugate and Phillips acknowledge that some products retain their gender identities but propose that social change has weakened the relevance of such cues. It could be that product gender has become more "descriptive than prescriptive".

### **Ideas for marketing**

Marketers are reminded of the sports shoes, cars and toothpaste examples as possible indication that industry-wide action is needed to successful reposition product gender. Further research to identify what percentage of brands within a product category can inspire change could also investigate the impact of opposing the 'product category norm' on consumer perceptions of a specific brand.

It is recommended that an emphasis on product gender is more appropriate to male rather than female target audiences. The authors also advocate using masculine cues for androgynous products to attract men without alienating women. Attention is drawn to the consumption situation and the likelihood that product gender cues may be more relevant for product categories associated with self-expression. Where desire for gender congruence is apparent, marketers should be 'exceptionally obvious' in their efforts to either sustain or change the gender image. Possible differentiation based on age provides another option. For instance, older cohorts raised in traditional families with clear expectations about sex roles differ from Generation Y consumers renowned for their tolerance of different lifestyles.

(*A précis of the article "Product gender perceptions and antecedents of product gender congruence". Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.*)