

**BOYS DON'T CRY:
BRAND GENDER AND THE STEREOTYPING OF EMOTIONS**

ABSTRACT

Building on the literature on brand gender, this research examines how gender-based stereotypes regarding emotional behaviors can influence consumers' response to brand emotions. Three experimental studies demonstrate that consumers hold the same gender-based expectations of brands as they do with human emotions. In particular, individuals stereotype communal emotions (e.g., happiness, sadness and sympathy) as being more consistent with brand femininity and agentic emotions (anger and pride) as being more consistent with brand masculinity. The current research also measures consumers' evaluation of brand emotional expression, such as a tribute to a deceased celebrity on Twitter or a Facebook message of sympathy for victims of a terror attack. It shows that masculine brands can suffer from the stereotype that masculinity is typically associated with emotional control. The emotional expression of a masculine brand will activate persuasion knowledge and negatively impact the perceived sincerity of the brand. Evidence of this effect is provided for both female- (happiness and sadness) and male-stereotyped (anger) emotions.

KEYWORDS: Brand gender, gender-based stereotypes, emotions, brand attributions.

Prior research has indicated that brand emotional strategies, such as emotional branding, i.e., the association with a specific emotion (e.g., happiness with The Coca-Cola Company) (Rossiter & Bellman, 2012), help brands connect with consumers on an affective level and influence attitude formation (Ruth, 2001; Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006). Among these emotional strategies, brands increasingly express a large array of emotions on social media. For instance, after Prince's death, TiVo, among many other brands, expressed sadness on Twitter ("*we are saddened today at the news of Prince's passing*"). Similarly, the fast food restaurant chain Wimpy posted a Facebook message to express happiness over Prince Harry's engagement ("*congrats to Prince Harry and Meghan Markle on their engagement*"), while Total shared its sympathy after the 2016 terror attacks in Nice, France ("*we would like to extend our deepest sympathy to the families and friends of the victims*").

Do consumers evaluate brand emotions as sincere or as commercial mimicry of human behavior? Based on what expectations do consumers judge brand emotions? In particular, individuals hold gender-based stereotypes regarding emotional behaviors: women are believed to experience and express communal emotions (sympathy, sadness, happiness, etc.), while men are stereotyped as experiencing agentic emotions (anger and pride) (Plant, Hyde, Keltner, & Devine, 2000). Do consumers hold the same gender-based stereotypes with brand emotions as they do with human emotions? To provide insights into these questions, this research examines how *brand gender*, i.e., masculinity and femininity traits in brand personality (Grohmann, 2009), affects consumers' response to brand emotions. In particular, it investigates whether gender-based stereotypes can be applied to two types of brand emotional behaviors: *emotional experience*, i.e., the internal emotional feeling, and *emotional expression*, i.e., the external display of an emotion. Prior research has demonstrated that these behaviors can diverge (Hutson-Comeaux & Kelly, 2002): an individual may feel sad (experience) but pretend to be happy (expression). Since this discrepancy between emotional experience and emotional expression cannot entirely be overcome, consumers can use stereotypes to interpret the perceived sincerity of an emotional expression (Neel, Becker, Neuberg, & Kenrick, 2012). Analogously, this article demonstrates how gender-based stereotypes can influence consumers' response to brand emotions through *brand attributions*, i.e., the extent to which consumers perceive the brand as sincere when it expresses emotions (Jain & Posovac, 2004).

In particular, the findings of three experimental studies offer two significant contributions. First, they demonstrate that the *gender consistency of emotions* conforms to human gender-based stereotyping: brand femininity (BF) is more associated with female-stereotyped emotions and brand masculinity (BM) with male-stereotyped emotions. The expression of a gender-inconsistent emotion (e.g., a feminine brand expressing a male-stereotyped emotion) can impact brand gender (consumers will perceive the brand as less feminine and more masculine).

Second, drawing on the persuasion knowledge model (PKM) (Friestad & Wright, 1994), the current research shows that BM negatively affects brand attributions. Because emotional expressivity is typically associated with femininity, BM activates a more critical form of processing the sincerity of brand emotional expression. Therefore, masculine brands suffer from the stereotypes that men are less expressive of their emotions than women. Importantly, this negative impact applies to the expression of both female- and male-stereotyped emotions.

Theoretical background

Gender roles

Emotional behaviors are one of the most studied gender role differences in the psychology literature (Meyers-Levy & Loken, 2015). According to gender role theory, women are stereotyped as being sociable and relationship oriented, while men are stereotyped as being

independent and achievement oriented (Barbee et al., 1993; Jost & Kay, 2005). In their meta-analysis of research on gender differences in emotional expression, Else-Quest, Higgins, Allison, and Morton (2012) concluded that several of these stereotypes (e.g., that women experience more guilt and blame than men) are accurate. Additionally, psychological research has corroborated the idea that women report more intense emotional behaviors than men (Kring & Gordon, 1998). For instance, in a context involving the loss of a marital partner, the gender differences in coping with bereavement conform to traditional expectations of emotional response: widows are more emotional and expressive than widowers (Stroebe, Stroebe, & Schut, 2001).

Individuals are largely aware of gender role stereotypes but endorse them nonetheless (Plant et al., 2000). They associate women with female-stereotyped emotions (sadness, fear, embarrassment, sympathy and happiness) and emotional expressivity and men with male-stereotyped emotions (anger and pride) and emotional control (Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009). Importantly, since they cannot gain access to the actual emotional experience (internal feeling), consumers use gender role stereotypes to interpret the sincerity of emotional expression (external display). Neel et al. (2012) showed that stereotyped expectations influence the perception of others' emotional expression: when subjected to ambiguous facial expressions, individuals perceive men as angrier and women as happier than the opposite gender. By extension, do consumers evaluate the sincerity of brand emotional expression based on the stereotypes they hold for human emotions?

Brand gender

Research on the application of the concept of gender to brands has only recently begun to flourish. This line of research suggests that brand gender is a salient basis for brand categorization (Ulrich, Tissier-Desbordes, & Dubois, 2011) and that masculine and feminine traits can be applied to brands (Grohmann, 2009), independent of product categories (Ulrich et al., 2011). Many factors influence brand gender perceptions, including the brand design, brand name, and type font (Guevremont & Grohmann, 2015; Lieven, Grohmann, Herrmann, Landwehr, & van Tilburg, 2015; Wu, Klink, & Guo, 2013). Gendered brand narratives are an enduring basis for individuals' choices and brand usage: consumers value the gendered identity meanings of brands (Avery, 2012). Brands with a high level of femininity or masculinity positively relate to brand equity (Lieven, Grohmann, Herrmann, Landwehr, & van Tilburg, 2014). Similarly, brand gender positively affects consumer attitudes and behaviors, including brand evaluation, trust, and loyalty, when brand gender is congruent with consumers' gender role identity (Grohmann, 2009).

The present research

Building on both research areas (gender role theory and brand gender), the current research proposes that consumers project gender role stereotypes onto brand emotional behaviors. First, it is argued that the gender consistency of emotions will echo prescriptive gender stereotypes. Individuals will associate BM with male-stereotyped emotions and BF with female-stereotyped emotions. Second, it is also expected that masculine brands will suffer from the stereotypes that emotional control is associated with masculinity while emotional expression is associated with femininity. Prior research on the discrepancy between emotional experience (internal feeling of an emotion) and emotional expression (external display of an emotion) has demonstrated that the perceived validity of an emotional expression is strongest in personal settings and weakest in work-related and goal-oriented events (Hutson-Comeaux & Kelly, 2002). In the latter context, emotional expression is a less valid indicator of a person's underlying emotion, and individuals are more likely to elicit a critical processing style to assess the person's motivations.

Since brand communications undoubtedly fall into this category (goal-oriented situation), brand emotional expression is likely to activate critical information processing.

Prior research on the PKM demonstrated that anything that is unpredicted or unusual in an advertisement may disrupt the elaboration of message content and trigger skepticism (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Thompson & Malaviya, 2013). Consumers are more suspicious and more easily recognize the content as advertising when it does not match their expectations. Since emotional expression is more associated with femininity, the expression of an emotion by a feminine brand is unlikely to be considered unexpected and thus should not activate consumers' cognitive defenses toward the brand's motivations. Conversely, emotional control is more associated with masculinity. Being subjected to a masculine brand's emotional expression may thus raise awareness of its persuasive nature. Consumers may adopt a more evaluative and critical form of processing to resist the persuasion attempt (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2014). Hence, it is predicted that gender-based stereotypes will negatively impact the evaluation of a masculine brand's emotional expression through brand attributions.

Study 1

Method

The primary objective of Study 1 was to provide an initial test of the prediction of a negative impact of BM on emotional expression.

Brand gender priming offers the opportunity to use the same (fictitious) brand across the experimental conditions while controlling for this alternative explanation. A total of 102 individuals (53 female, $M_{age} = 37$) responded to a self-administered questionnaire delivered at the participants' homes in a large Western European city. Half of the participants were randomly allocated into the feminine brand condition, while the other half were exposed to stimuli with masculine brand priming. Priming was operationalized with a short text describing the brand values as either openness, proximity and enthusiasm (feminine brand priming) or hard work, fearless exploration and unwavering originality (masculine brand priming). Pictures of a store accompanied the text.

Questions about brand gender (BM: $\alpha = .91$; BF: $\alpha = .94$) were asked; then, the participants were exposed to a tweet with two pictures of the late singer George Michael and a short text ("We miss you. Your influence on fashion will live on forever."), followed by items measuring the evaluation of the message ($\alpha = .94$) and brand attributions ($\alpha = .88$). The questionnaire ended with demographic questions.

Results

A one-way MANOVA yielded a significant effect of priming on brand gender (Wilk's $\lambda = .35$, $F(2, 99) = 89.66$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .64$). One-way ANOVAs confirmed a significant effect for each dependent variable (BM: $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .49$; BF: $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .51$). Additionally, as expected, BM (BF) in the masculine priming condition was not significantly different from BF (BM) in the feminine priming condition (dominant gender: $M_{MascPriming} = 4.52$, $SD = 1.18$; $M_{FemPriming} = 4.53$, $SD = 1.18$; $F(1, 100) = .001$, $p = .979$; secondary gender: $M_{MascPriming} = 2.18$, $SD = 1.12$; $M_{FemPriming} = 2.49$, $SD = .89$; $F(1, 100) = 2.43$, $p = .122$). These analyses confirmed that brand gender had been successfully primed.

As predicted, the evaluation of the message was less favorable in the masculine brand priming than in the feminine brand priming condition ($M_{MascPriming} = 4.43$, $SD = 1.29$; $M_{FemPriming} = 4.98$, $SD = 1.35$; $F(1, 100) = 4.24$, $p = .042$, $\eta^2 = .04$). PROCESS Model 4 showed that brand attributions mediated the relationship between brand gender and attitude toward the message

($B = -.35$, $SE = .17$, $95\%CI = [-.75; -.05]$); the direct effect was not significant ($B = -.18$, $SE = .21$, $95\%CI = [-.61; .24]$).

Discussion

These findings support the hypothesis that a masculine brand will be perceived as less sincere than a feminine brand when it expresses an emotion, leading to a less favorable evaluation of emotional expression.

Prior work has repeatedly demonstrated that sadness, along with happiness or sympathy, was more associated with femininity (female-stereotyped emotions) and that anger and pride were more associated with masculinity (male-stereotyped emotions) (Else-Quest et al., 2012; Plant et al., 2000). The findings of Studies 1 and 2 could thus be interpreted as the impact of the gender consistency of emotions on consumers' response: consumers will respond more favorably to the expression of a gender-consistent emotion (a feminine brand expressing a female-stereotyped emotion, such as Evian expressing sadness) than to the expression of a gender-inconsistent emotion (a masculine brand expressing a female-stereotyped emotion, such as Pepsi expressing sadness). To rule out this alternative explanation and to provide evidence confirming the proposed process, i.e., masculine brands will suffer from the stereotypes that emotional expression is associated with femininity and emotional control with masculinity, the findings of Study 1 must also be replicated with a male-stereotyped emotion.

The objective of Study 2 was to first confirm that the gender consistency of emotions could be applied to brands. It was postulated that the expression of a gender-inconsistent emotion would impact brand gender: a masculine (*feminine*) brand expressing a female-stereotyped (*male-stereotyped*) emotion would be perceived as less (*more*) masculine and more (*less*) feminine.

Study 2

Method

This experiment used a 2 (brand gender: feminine vs. masculine) \times 3 (emotion gender stereotyping: female-stereotyped vs. male-stereotyped vs. control) design. A total of 277 participants (141 female, $M_{age} = 35$) recruited through Clickworker completed the study. Each participant was randomly exposed to a fictitious Facebook post from either L'Occitane en Provence (feminine brand) or Red Bull (masculine brand) before answering questions measuring brand gender (BM: $\alpha = .89$; BF: $\alpha = .94$). In the control conditions, consumers did not see any stimulus (no emotional expression). The female-stereotyped emotion (happiness) was manipulated through a post congratulating Prince Harry and Meghan Markle on their engagement: "Congratulations to #Prince Harry and Meghan Markle on their engagement. So happy for them!" followed by three happy emojis. The male-stereotyped emotion (pride) was manipulated through a post stating, "We are proud of our recent projects, which are currently set up in selected stores globally. Some concepts have been awarded the 2017 Cannes Lion d'Or or the CeBIT Innovation Award," followed by three proud emojis.

Results

A MANOVA with the masculinity and femininity of both brands as the dependent variables revealed a significant interaction effect between brand gender and emotion gender stereotyping (Wilk's $\lambda = .91$, $F(4, 540) = 6.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$). One-way ANOVAs confirmed a significant interaction effect for each dependent variable (BM: $p = .015$, $\eta^2 = .03$; BF: $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$).

Importantly, brand gender did not significantly differ between no emotional expression and the expression of a gender-consistent emotion (all $ps > .1$); however, brand gender was impacted by the expression of a gender-inconsistent emotion. In particular, the expression of a female-stereotyped emotion decreased the masculinity of Red Bull ($M_{\text{Control}} = 5.02$, $SD = .96$ vs. $M_{\text{FemEmo}} = 4.39$, $SD = 1.47$, $t(100) = 2.57$, $p = .01$) and increased its femininity ($M_{\text{Control}} = 2.01$, $SD = 1.01$, vs. $M_{\text{FemEmo}} = 2.82$, $SD = 1.36$, $t(100) = -3.38$, $p = .001$). Conversely, the expression of a male-stereotyped emotion increased the masculinity of L'Occitane en Provence ($M_{\text{Control}} = 3.34$, $SD = .92$ vs. $M_{\text{MaleEmo}} = 3.95$, $SD = .80$, $t(83) = -3.24$, $p = .002$) and decreased its femininity ($M_{\text{Control}} = 4.64$, $SD = .99$, vs. $M_{\text{MaleEmo}} = 3.50$, $SD = 1.44$, $t(83) = 4.24$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

These findings indicate that the gender consistency of emotions may be applied to brands. BF is associated with female-stereotyped emotions, such as happiness, while BM is associated with male-stereotyped emotions, such as pride. Study 1 established that brand attributions and consumers' evaluation of a female-stereotyped emotion (sadness) were less favorable for a masculine brand. The objective of Study 3 was to test these effects with a male-stereotyped emotion (anger).

Study 3

Method

Ninety individuals (44 female, $M_{\text{age}} = 39$) recruited through Clickworker were exposed to a fictitious Facebook message that expressed anger from either Lynx (also known as Axe; masculine brand condition) or Dove (feminine brand condition) (see Methodological Details Appendix D). A pretest ($N = 80$) that measured BM ($\alpha = .92$) and BF ($\alpha = .91$) led to selecting Lynx and Dove as, respectively, the masculine and feminine brands. Importantly, there were no significant differences between Lynx's masculinity (*femininity*) and Dove's femininity (*masculinity*) (dominant gender: $M_{\text{Lynx}} = 4.36$, $SD = 1.35$; $M_{\text{Dove}} = 4.32$, $SD = 1.41$; $F(1, 78) = .02$, $p = .889$; secondary gender: $M_{\text{Lynx}} = 2.53$, $SD = 1.13$; $M_{\text{Dove}} = 2.70$, $SD = 1.31$; $F(1, 78) = .38$, $p = .538$). The level of familiarity of both brands was similarly high ($M_{\text{Lynx}} = 6.03$, $SD = 1.32$, vs. $M_{\text{Dove}} = 5.57$, $SD = 1.50$, $\Delta = .46$, $t(78) = 1.43$, $p = .154$).

To check for brand gender and the message's perceived emotion, the participants were asked to select an emoji among six (three masculine and three feminine) that would best represent the brand emotional expression (neutral, sad or angry; see Methodological Details Appendix D). Then, they answered questions measuring the message emotion (*this message expresses anger*), evaluation of the message ($\alpha = .93$), and brand attributions ($\alpha = .88$). The questionnaire ended with demographic questions.

Results

A manipulation check showed that the message strongly expressed anger, with no difference between the masculine and feminine brand conditions ($M_{\text{Lynx}} = 6.11$, $SD = .82$; $M_{\text{Dove}} = 6.09$, $SD = 1.09$; $F(1, 88) = .008$, $p = .931$). Chi-square analyses revealed no main effect of brand gender on the emotion expressed by the selected emoji ($M_{\text{LynxAngry}} = 63.0\%$ vs. $M_{\text{DoveAngry}} = 63.6\%$; $\chi^2(2) = .73$, $p = .69$); however, there was a significant effect of brand gender on the emoji gender ($M_{\text{LynxMale}} = 80.4\%$ vs. $M_{\text{DoveMale}} = 40.9\%$; $\chi^2(1) = 14.78$, $p = .001$). These results confirmed that the manipulations of anger expression and brand gender had been successful.

As predicted, the evaluation of the message was less favorable in the masculine than in the feminine brand condition ($M_{\text{Lynx}} = 2.85$, $SD = 1.31$; $M_{\text{Dove}} = 3.47$, $SD = 1.74$; $F(1, 88) = 3.65$, $p = .059$, $\eta^2 = .04$). Mediation analysis showed that brand attributions mediated the relationship

between brand gender and attitude toward the message ($B = -.18$, $SE = .11$, $95\%CI = [-.49; -.02]$); the direct effect was not significant ($B = -.43$, $SE = .33$, $95\%CI = [-1.09; .21]$).

Discussion

Echoing the results of Study 1, Study 3 provided evidence that a masculine brand would be perceived as less sincere than a feminine brand when it expresses an emotion, regardless of the gender consistency of the emotion. These findings are in line with the prediction that BM will raise awareness of the persuasive nature of the expression of both female- and male-stereotyped emotions.

General discussion

The present research demonstrates that gender-based stereotypes can influence consumers' response to brand emotions and makes two main contributions. First, it shows that consumers apply the human gender consistency of emotions to brands. The perception that happiness, sadness and sympathy are female-stereotyped emotions and anger and pride are male-stereotyped emotions can be applied to brand emotions. Individuals perceive male-stereotyped emotions as more consistent with BM and female-stereotyped emotions as more consistent with BF. In particular, the expression of a gender-inconsistent emotion can affect brand gender. A feminine brand expressing a male-stereotyped emotion will appear more masculine and less feminine, whereas a masculine brand expressing a female-stereotyped emotion will be evaluated as more feminine and less masculine.

Second, this research extends the literature on brand gender by showing that BM is associated with negative brand attributions for emotional expression. While BM is consistent with male-stereotyped emotions, consumers may negatively respond to any emotional expression from masculine brands. Therefore, the research findings offer the first identification of a detrimental effect of masculinity on brand attributions and persuasion attempt. Since masculine brands are not expected to express emotions, consumers may perceive an emotional message such as a tribute to a deceased celebrity as manipulative and dishonest. In contrast, feminine brands will conform to gender role expectations when expressing emotions, leading to better brand attributions and message evaluation. Importantly, the research findings show that this negative impact of masculinity on consumers' response to brand emotional expression applies to both female- and male-stereotyped emotions.

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