# Gender narratives decoded in marketing: Selling identity or outdated stereotypes?

Abstract

This exploratory research explores how consumers reflect on depictions of gendered identities in marketing. Debates around gendered representations in marketing have intensified over the last few decades, and more recently have become politicised. This demonstrates that gendered discourse has a number of connotations, and it is often portrayed as adopting polarised perspectives that endorse or reject gender stereotypes. While some marketing campaigns portray diversity of size and colour, this does not represent diversity in gender identities, and follows gendered binaries that are often positioned to appeal to the male gaze. This research investigates the role of gender in marketing and how gendered representations can be considered as informing consumer decision making. Framed within social identity theory and gender schema theory, and set within an interpretivist philosophy, fifty-five participants responded to online open-ended questions. The findings demonstrate that stereotyping genders can be considered as harmful for society and some identity constructs transcend gender.

**Gender narratives decoded in marketing: Selling identity or outdated stereotypes?**

**Introduction**

This exploratory research joins the debate around gendered implications and how this is represented in marketing. Over the last decade, concepts of gendered binaries have been challenged (Boyd et al., 2020), and the role that marketing plays in constructing gendered expectations has been criticised as

depicting gendered stereotypes for over two decades (McCracken, 1990; Steel and Ariston, 1995). As such, marketing has been accused of endorsing the status quo of gendered social discourse (Zawisza, 2018), despite debates around feminism, equality, diversity and inclusivity gaining traction (Swami, 2023). More recently, the chasm of gender representation in wider society has been weaponised in so called politicised 'culture wars' (BBC News, 2021), including expectations of women's appearance (Nölke, 2018), motherhood and body antimony (UNPF, 2021), trans rights (Alston, 2018), and LGBTQIA+ representations (Boyd et al., 2020; Sherman, 2020; Ivory 2019). As gendered identities become more complex and dynamic, how gender is portrayed in marketing is under scrutiny within an increasingly polarised society. Therefore, this exploratory research is timely in making contributions to understanding the role of marketing in addressing gendered connotations, and how this impacts on consumer decision making.

The purpose of this exploratory research is to examine consumer perceptions of how gender identity and representation affect a company's capacity to market products or services inclusively to consumers in the UK. Given the complexities described above, the ability to developing a campaign that is inclusive, yet not divisive, could be considered challenging; therefore, it is essential to understand the concept and formation of gender identity. Historically, marketing has depicted traditional gender stereotypes, which often endorse potentially negative and constricting philosophies of what it means to be male or female, particularly in the recent 21$^{st}$ century where customary gender roles have developed beyond conformist binaries (Grau, 2016). The feminist movement has argued that those stereotypes have hindered women's progression in society (Santoniccolo et al., 2023; Wilbraham and Caldwell, 2018). Therefore, from a marketing perspective, it is vital that businesses are cautious of interpreting gender within their marketing campaigns to circumvent reinforcing negative stereotypes or setting gendered expectations (Harker et al., 2005). However, there are also counter campaigns to maintain the status quo of gendered binaries that are linked to political positioning (Davies and MacRae, 2023). This sits within broader arguments of whether business, and marketers, should adopt a political stance (Jensen, 2004). However, consumers, especially younger consumers, expect business and marketing to adopt an inclusive stance (Puiu, 2016) and will voice their discontent on social media when brands fail to recognise diversity (Dalakas et al., 2023). Consequently, the following research questions were developed to explore consumer perceptions of gender in marketing:

RQ1:  How are gender specific advertising campaigns, employing traditional male and female stereotypes, perceived by consumers?

RQ2:  Do consumers in the UK value inclusivity within advertising and marketing of a good or service, and to what extent does this influence their purchasing process?

RQ3: Does age and gender influence notions of gendered binaries and fluidity presented in marketing?

This paper is structured as follows: firstly, the next section will scope out the background context to outline the role of gender within society, and why this is pertinent for further examination. Secondly, the concept of gender is established to offer an underpinning for the theoretical development. The third section outlines the methodology and is followed by providing an overview of the findings before concluding with tentative recommendations for practice and ideas for further research.

**Background context**

There has been widespread research on gender identification as a whole, especially in today's culture where gender is now at the forefront of societal discourse (Davies and MacRae, 2023). Prior study has, however, been fairly restricted when it comes to how gendered notions of marketing impact on consumer behaviour. This highlights gaps in the literature that become increasingly pressing, as

gendered expectations and representations become politicised and weaponised. Gendered culture polarisation is evident in the recent Barbie film, which was on the one hand lauded as depicting an inclusive and diverse version of femininity (O'Hara, 2023) and is the highest grossing film to be directed by a woman (BBC News 2023). In contrast, a USA politician has publicly burned Barbie dolls in protest of the gendered message being "*anti-man*" (Nolan, 2023). The Barbie doll has long been problematic as endorsing patriarchy and capitalism, something the brand Mattel has attempted to address over the last few decades (Hay, 2023). Yet, the film has captured the Zeitgeist of gender, illuminating upon the importance of portraying the spectrum of gender identities, and contributes to a narrative that marketers require awareness of. To aid knowledge of consumer expectations, this research explores how new gendered constructs impact on consumer decision-making.

**Literature review**

Gender can be considered as a collection of social roles. As a notion of identity, gender is generally deciphered as the psychological sex of an individual, that represents the "*fundamental, existential sense of one's maleness or femaleness*" (Spence, 1984, page 83); however, while some view 'gender' from this perspective, others may feel that this is an antiquated view and that gender encompasses more than just the binary concepts of being male or female (Badaoui et al., 2018). The measurement of gendered personality traits in both men and women is suggested by a number of terms in consumer research, such as "*sex-role orientation*" used by Gentry and Doering (1979), "*sex role identity*" explained by Kahle and Homer (1985), and "*sex role self-concept*" by Stern (1988), all of which represent the same conception in terms of consumer behaviour. As evident in this extant literature, the term "gender" is sometimes utilised interchangeably with the word 'sex' in academic discourse and the public media, which adds to the irregular usage of language, and therefore acted as a limitation in reviewing the literature. However, this may be reflective that gendered expectations are intrinsically bound with attractiveness, contributing to the construction of gendered value (Nölke, 2018). For example, through a patriarchal male gaze, female gender is valued for femininity and sexuality as a means for 'sex appeal'; 'sex sells' has been, and is, applied to ensure marketing is appealing (Boyd et al., 2020).

To summarise previous literature on the specifics of gender as a basis of human life and society, the cultural definition of behaviour that is defined as suitable to the sexes in a particular civilisation at any given moment is, according to Lerner (1986),  gender. One of the early and most essential components of one's self-concept is gender, which serves as the organising framework for all of one's experiences and observations, including those related to choosing and executing a brand's product purchase (Spence, 1985).  Other than intersex people, humans can tell by the age of three whether they are biologically male or female, and children may start to recognise culturally derived gender standards at roughly the same time (Money and Ehrhardt, 1972). Young people pick up on positive preconceptions about their own sex and negative stereotypes about the other (Kuhn et al., 1978), which helps them form beliefs about societal gender norms. This can inform a feeling or connection with marketing as being more favourable and appealing (Boyd et al., 2020; Dotson et al., 2009). Additionally, developing an understanding of how gendered marketing is considered as relative is depends upon deciphering how gender identification affects marketing and consumer decision making.

**Theoretical development**

To examine beyond the basis of gender itself, and investigate how one perceives their personal gender identity, the sets of social personality qualities that are commonly associated with being female, feminine mannerisms, or male, masculine mannerisms, are a critical type of connection that young children learn (Urberg, 1982). Gender identity can be defined as the degree to which a person perceives, or accepts, that they are either male or female (Fischer and Arnold, 1994), or as is

increasing common, preferences to identify as non-binary or cisgender (Badaoui et al., 2018). These categorisations underpin a sense of the 'self', in which a person perceives themselves within a specific context that aligns with social categories. This process is known in literature as "*social categorisation"* (Turner et al., 1987) or "*identification*" (McCall and Simons, 1978). According to Social Identity Theory, an individual's sense of social identity determines how much they are aware that they belong to a particular social group. A social group is defined as a collection of people who share a dominant social identity or who believe they are representatives of the same social association (Hogg, 1988). Furthermore, this theory divides people into an 'in-group' or 'out-group' using a technique of social comparison.

Following from this theory, the Gender Schema theory created by Bem (1981) helps to explain how people come to understand and embrace gender roles and particular stereotypes. Bem (1981) hypothesises that people develop "*gender schemas*"—cognitive frameworks that systematise beliefs and attitudes about gender that frame one's self-identity. When considering the influence of gender identity on purchasing a commodity or service, previous researchers have traditionally focused on two major characteristics of gender identity: how woman are portrayed in marketing and, how consumer behaviour may be predicted by taking gender identification into account (Catarall, 2001). Previous research has argued that marketers should look beyond basic sex differences as indicators of an individual's likely consumption habits, because it is entirely possible for someone of the female gender to demonstrate more masculine personality traits and interests than the stereotypical feminine individualities, and vice versa (Caterall, 2001). For instance, overtly feminine advertising that uses stereotyped colours, fonts, and music may not engage and appeal to women who want to move beyond gendered binaries and embrace gender equality, but may be appealing for men who have more feminine interests and personality traits. Overall, the investigation into prior literature highlighted there is a sizable vacuum in the body of existing research on the subjective views and experiences of UK customers, and this research seeks to illuminate upon consumer perceptions.

**Methodology**

Given the subjectivity of gender postulated within extant literature, an interpretivist investigation was considered as ontologically enabling insights into the role of marketing in gender socialisation and construction (Baker, 2000). Interpretivism offers a research philosophy that emphasises the value of comprehending and interpreting the social environment from the perspective of the people being investigated (Hiller, 2016). Such studies lend support to a subjective research methodology; for instance, gender identity must be seen as an individual experience that is shaped by the individual's background, surroundings, and worldview (Kronk, Tran and Wu, 2019). This subjective approach is particularly useful for researching delicate and complicated topics, like gender identity in marketing, where individual experiences may differ greatly and are hard to quantify (Patzer, 1996).

In order to explore the rich and varied experiences of gender identities, twenty-one questions were disseminated through Google forms to explore the perceptions and individual experiences of gendered representations in marketing (Braun et al., 2021). Ethical consent was granted by the university and participants were informed of their anonymity, freedom to withdraw, and the appropriate disposing of data after the research project ended (Orb et al., 2001). The survey was deployed in March 2023 via social media networks known to the lead researcher, utilising a convenience and snowballing sampling technique (Creswell, 2013). Fifty-five participants competed the survey within one week and thematic data analysis commenced. This involved both authors independently identifying prevalent recurring subjects from these areas of interest, through evaluating the raw data to derive meaningful conclusions. Discussion then took place between the authors to co-create themes. The most important themes from these key areas were further exposed, explored, and reviewed to achieve a meaningful conclusion using the thematic analysis

approach (Clarke, 2013). Those themes will be presented next along with introducing the participants.

**Main study findings**

Two structured questions were asked of the participants to determine gender identification and age range which were used in the thematic analysis. In summary, 61.8% of the fifty-five participants identified as female, 36.4% as male and 1.8% as 'prefer not to say'. No one selected the non-binary option. Additionally, 71.2% participants were in the 18-30 years age bracket, with the other 28.8% in brackets aged 31 years plus. Those demographics influenced the results. Two main themes emerged: harmful stereotypes and product attributes that transcend gender. An overview of each will be provided below.

The participants expressed an imposition of gendered marketing that was unnecessary, for example Participant 21 (female/ age 18-30) stated: *"Products don't need to be gendered.".* This was particularly notable for participants between the ages of 18 and 30 years, who conveyed a more complicated purchase process than older consumers, because they are more sensitive to gender stereotypes and considered the overuse of gendered binaries in marketing as harmful. For example, the two critical quotes below were provided by males in the 18-30 years age category and demonstrate that it is not only females, specifically feminists calling for equality and diversity, that feel constrained by gendered binaries:

> *The traditional roles of gendered stereotypes can be harmful to younger audiences with more impressionable minds. (Participant 18 male/18-30 years)*

> *Reinforcing harmful gender roles or views of masculinity/femininity that can be dangerous. Things being advertised as very "male" [are] the equivalent of "man up" to me. It's phoney. Everyone has feelings. (Participant 29 male/18-30 years)*

These quotes indicate that gender binaries can be strongly rejected amid growing recognition that marketing infiltrates the social environment to shape gendered norms. For example, Participant 28 (male/40-50 years) stated *"Its engrained from youth that men simply don't buy female shampoos and makeup"*. Through this study, certain aspects of the prior literature were supported, particularly from a psychological standpoint, according to which an individual's external environments, the mindset of those who share their "in-group" identity, and the perspective of those who identify differently and are the "out-group" all play a significant role in shaping their gender identity (Turner et al., 1987). Therefore, those who identify differently are viewed as belonging to the "out-group". Some participants also rejected gendered marketing, prioritising other product or service attributes are more relevance within their purchase decision making, demonstrating a more discerning consumer.

> *I usually to buy whatever fits my needs. (Participant 49 male – 18-30 years)*

> *I don't really think about it that often. I will buy whatever has a good reputation and value for money. (Participant 46 female 18-30 years)*

The rejection of marketing as gendering products and services spanned the age categories, despite some comments that gender construct identifications aligned with *"the biblical terms for male and female"* (Participant 16 male/60+ years). This presents an alternative perspective to the gender schema as proposed by Bem (1981), which aligns with the spectrum of gender and identity emerging in society (Boyd et al., 2020). This was made clear within the study findings through the survey responses of those who explicate knowledge and appropriate terminology on the topic of gender binaries and inclusivity, and even those who did not wish to identify with a gender. These respondents, as influenced by their social surroundings and their sense of self, represented highly

inclusive answers and highlighted the demographics that are the most inclined to value gender inclusivity within product marketing and advertising as a key factor within their purchasing process. These respondents typically fell into the age bracket of 18-30 years and therefore, represent the Generation Z consumer which, contextually, attach value and emotionality to aspects of consumption and brand objectives that the older consumer may not notice, such as, CSR policies, product sustainability and gender inclusivity within advertising (Bulut et al., 2017). Hence, as a younger individual's awareness of gender issues becomes greater, with age, gender neutrality will become increasingly pertinent and of higher importance to businesses within their future marketing strategies to ensure consistent brand loyalty, repeat sales and overall future organisational success.

**Conclusion, industry recommendations and further research**

This exploratory research has captured thoughts on stereotypical representations if gender in marketing, which is not reflective of current social discourse on gender identities and binaries. The participants indicate that they reject marketing imposing connections of gender expectations that maintain the status quo rather than embracing equality, diversify and inclusivity. Further, the participants reflect that product (and service) attributes are more important for marketing communications, especially when many products and services are genderless. While historically marketing may have focused on specific genders to create a more targeted campaign, this tactic seems somewhat dated, especially when considered as encouraging stereotypes that are harmful. Given increased concern for mental health and consumer wellbeing, marketers should be aware how subtle messages are interpreted within wider society. While some brands and businesses have addressed new social constructs of sex and gender, such as same sex couples and families, this does not appear to have penetrated gender binaries, and there could be more diversity displayed in marketing. From a managerial or marketing perspective, this study may be used as a foundation for businesses to adjust their marketing to successfully recognise and delight this inclusive consumer throughout their purchase journey. Consequently, more research and insight into the meaning of gender as informing identity construction is required to meaningfully encourage change in the marketing discipline. As many brands are finding, consumers are more discerning and rejecting gender stereotypes, and new conceptualisations of what gender implicates are necessary to modernise business and society.

As this exploratory research is an initial investigation onto how to expand on the impact of gendered marketing in current society, recommendations for further study include expansion of demographics and a diversified sample size will expand on the results and offer more insight into demographic polarisations. Additionally, a closer evaluation of marketing can be elected through focus groups and gendered marketing imagery as a vehicle for discussion. Lastly, a closer focus on consumption contexts, such as fashion, transport, food, etc., will support deeper insight.

**References**

Alston, K. (2018). The transgender arguments dividing society. *BBC News*, 5 March 2018. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43255878

Baker, M.J. (2000). Selecting a research methodology. *The marketing review,* 1(3), 373-397.

Badaoui, K., Lebrun, A. Su, C. and Biuchet, P. (2018). The influence of personal and social identity on the clothing consumption of adolescents. *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences*. 35: 65–78.

BBC News. (2021). Woke: Compliment or criticism, it is now fuelling the culture wars. *BBC News*. 21 August 2021. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-58281576

BBC News, (2023). Barbie film hits $1bn mark at global box office. *BBC News*. 7 August 2023. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-66424359

Bem, S.L. (1981). Gender schema theory: A cognitive account of sex typing. *Psychological review*, 88(4).354.

Boyd, C., Ritch, E.L., Dodd, C.A. and McColl, J. (2020). Inclusive identities: re-imaging the future of the retail brand? *International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management*. 48(12): 1315-1335. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJRDM-12-2019-0392

Braun, V., Clarke, V., Boulton, E., Davey, L., and McEvoy, C. (2021). The online survey as a qualitative research tool. International journal of social research methodology, 24(6), 641-654

Bulut, Z.A., Kökalan Çımrın, F. and Doğan, O. (2017). Gender, generation and sustainable consumption: Exploring the behaviour of consumers from Izmir, Turkey. *International Journal of Consumer Studies,* 41(6), 597-604.

Caterall, M.A. and Maclaran, P.B. (2001). Gender perspectives in consumer behaviour: an overview and future directions. *The Marketing Review*, 2(4), 405-425.

Clarke, V. and Braun, V. (2013). Teaching thematic analysis: Overcoming challenges and developing strategies for effective learning. *The psychologist*, 26(2).

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design*. California: Sage publications.

C. Davies, H. and MacRae, S. E. (2023). An anatomy of the British war on woke. *Race & Class*, 0(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/03063968231164905

Dalakas, V., Melancon, J.P. and Szczytynski, I. (2023), Brands in the eye of the storm: navigating political consumerism and boycott calls on social media, *Qualitative Market Research,* 26(1,) 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1108/QMR-07-2021-0089

Dotson, M.J., Hyatt, E.M. and Thompson, L.P. (2009). Sexual Orientation and Gender Effects to Gay- and Lesbian-Themed Fashion Advertisements. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal* 13(3): 431-447.

Fischer, E. and Arnold, S.J. (1990). More than a labor of love: Gender roles and Christmas gift shopping. *Journal of consumer research*, 17(3), 333-345.

Gentry, J.W., Doering, M. and O'Brien, T.V. (1978). Masculinity and femininity factors in product perception and self image. *ACR North American Advances*.

Grau, S.L. and Zotos, Y.C. (2016). Gender stereotypes in advertising: a review of current research. *International Journal of Advertising*, *35*(5), 761-770

Harker, M., Harker, D. and Svensen, S. (2005). Attitudes towards gender portrayal in advertising: an Australian perspective. *Journal of Marketing Management*, *21*(1-2), 251-264.

Hay, C. (2023). How I learned to stop worrying and love the doll – a feminist philosopher's journey back to Barbie. *The Conversation*. 17 July 2023. https://theconversation.com/how-i-learned-to-stop-worrying-and-love-the-doll-a-feminist-philosophers-journey-back-to-barbie-208730

Hogg, M.A. and Abrams, D. (1988). *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes.* London. Routledge.

Ivory, A.H. (2019). Sexual Orientation as a Peripheral Cue in Advertising: Effects of Model's Sexual Orientation, Argument Strength and Involvement on Responses to Magazine Ads. *Journal of Homosexuality* 66(1), 31-59.

Jenson, H.R. (2004). What does political consumerism mean for marketers? In: (Ed) Boström, M. In: *Political Consumerism: Its Motivations, Power, and Conditions in the Nordic Countries and Elsewhere*: Proceedings from the 2nd International Seminar on Political Consumerism, Oslo August 26-29, 2004.

Kronk, C., Tran, G.Q. and Wu, D.T. (2019). Creating a queer ontology: the gender, sex, and sexual orientation (GSSO) ontology. In MEDINFO 2019: *Health and Wellbeing e-Networks for All* (pp. 208-212). IOS Press.

Kuhn, D., Nash, S.C. and Brucken, L. (1978). Sex role concepts of two-and three-year-olds. *Child Development*, 445-451.

Lerner, G. (1986). The creation of patriarchy (Vol. 1). *Women and History*; V. 1.

Kahle, L.R. and Homer, P. (1985). Androgyny and Midday Mastication: Do Real Men Eat Quiche?, in NA - *Advances in Consumer Research Volume* 12, eds. Elizabeth C. Hirschman and Moris B. Holbrook, Provo, UT : Association for Consumer Research, 242-246.

McCall, G.J. and Simmons. J.L. (1978). *Identities and Interactions.* New York: Free Press.

McCracken, G. (1990). *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Nolan, B. (2023). Conservatives are protesting Greta Gerwig's feminist blockbuster 'Barbie' by setting dolls on fire and calling for boycotts. *Business Insider*. https://www.businessinsider.com/greta-gerwig-barbie-conservatives-burning-dolls-ben-shapiro-2023-7?r=US&IR=T

Nölke, A.I. (2018). Making Diversity Conform? An Intersectional, Longitudinal Analysis of LGBT-Specific Mainstream Media Advertisement. *Journal of Homosexuality* 65(2): 224-255

O'Hara, H. (2023). How conservative America went to war over the Barbie movie. *The Telegraph*, 24 July 2023. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/07/22/republicans-response-greta-gerwig-barbie-movie/

Palan, K.M. (2001). Gender identity in consumer behaviour research: A literature review and research agenda. *Academy of Marketing Science Review*, 10(2001), 1-31.

Patzer, G.L. (1996). *Experiment-research methodology in marketing: types and applications*. Greenwood Publishing Group.

Puiu, S. (2016). Generation Z–a new type of consumers. *Revista tinerilor economişti*, (27), 67-78.

Santoniccolo, F., Trombetta, T., Paradiso, M.N. and Rollè, L. (2023). Gender and Media Representations: A Review of the Literature on Gender Stereotypes, Objectification and Sexualization. *International Journal of Environment Research and Public Health* 2023, 20, 5770. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20105770

Spence, J.T. (1984). Masculinity, Femininity and Gender-Related Traits: A Conceptual Analysis and Critique of Current Research. *Progress in Experimental Personality Research* 13:1-97

Stern, B.B. (1992). Feminist literary theory and advertising research: A new "reading" of the text and the consumer. *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising*, 14(1), 9-21.

Swami, V. (2023).Why the body positivity movement risks turning toxic. *The Conversation* 14 September 2023https://theconversation.com/why-the-body-positivity-movement-risks-turning-toxic-189913

Turner, J.C., Hogg, M.A., Oakes, P.J., Reicher, S.D. and Wetherell, M.S. (1987). *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory*. New York. Basil Blackwell

UNPF. (2021). Nearly half of all women are denied their bodily autonomy, says new UNFPA report, My Body is My Own. 14 April 2021. *United Nations Population Fund*. https://www.unfpa.org/press/nearly-half-all-women-are-denied-their-bodily-autonomy-says-new-unfpa-report-my-body-my-own

Urberg, K.A. (1982). The development of the concepts of masculinity and femininity in young children. *Sex Roles,* 8, 659-668.

Wilbraham, S. and Caldwell, E. (2018). Children's books are adding to science's gender problem. *The Conversation*. https://theconversation.com/childrens-books-are-adding-to-sciences-gender-problem-98522