Real Men Don't Buy "Mrs. Clean": Gender Bias in Gendered Brands

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ABSTRACT Our article examines how products are valued differently depending on if the product has a male or female brand representation and if the consumer is male or female. This research extends previous research that categorizes brands as "gendered" (masculine vs. feminine) using stereotypical gender representations ("soft" vs. "hard") by showing that male and female brand names are evaluated with a bias that favors male brands. Across five studies (online, field), using a mixed-method approach (implicit association test [IAT], experiments, sales data), we examine gender-neutral product categories (champagne, chips, tea, board games) that have male or female brand representations. We find that men devalue brands with female names, whereas women made no such distinctions, which we explain is due to gender bias created by the "precarious manhood" principle. This bias by men can be overcome using agentic brand descriptions. This research has implications for brand management, marketing communications, and public policy.

Léa recently took over the family business from her father, Eric, and would like to refresh the brand name and logo. She wonders if she should keep the brand as is, Eric Humbert, or rebrand as Maison Humbert or, ideally, Léa Humbert. However, would consumers keep buying her products if her brand was clearly identified as feminine?

Although many brands position themselves as targeting women or men (Fischer and Gainer 1994; Avery 2012), research on gendered representations remains limited. Brand name and logo-related decisions are critical to building brand equity (Aaker 1991), and product aesthetics can convey gender (van Tilburg et al. 2015), which has implications for brand evaluations (e.g., brands can be perceived as having feminine/masculine personalities (Grohmann 2009). Little is known, however, about how gendered brand representations influence brand evaluation. Avery (2012) highlights that brands can be gendered via slogans and ad campaigns, yet research is scant exploring explicit gender cues such as pictorial representations (e.g., Aunt Jemima) or semantic cues (e.g., Wilkin & Sons). However, market data suggest that male representations are twice as likely to be used as female representations for brands (PR Newswire 2018).

We examine the impact of male and female brand names on purchasing intentions. We posit that gender bias may exist toward brands with female names or countenances. Gender bias is defined here as "the practice of giving overriding importance to male human beings or to the masculine point of view on the world, its culture and its history (Ruiz-Cantero et al. 2007, ii46)." Gender bias exists in our courts, education systems, politics, healthcare, and virtually every other social structure that impacts our daily lives. It is no wonder that it exists in marketing too. As Oakley (2000, 1) points out: "Breaking with prejudices and reconstructing the object of research requires a different way of seeing, in the light of which common-sense knowledge is reconstructed as a form of bias." Gender bias can be explicit ("you throw like a girl!") or implicit (identical resumés are valued higher when a man's name appears) and are often "at work in many 'neutral' contexts and affect men and women as well" (Origgi and Lipinsky 2016, 12). It is in the neutral context of branding that we explore the gender biases consumers have in their purchasing intentions when male or female brand cues (visual or semantic) are present.

We propose that gender bias transfers to brands, in that women and men evaluate brands differently when male or female semantic and visual cues are present. We argue that men are more likely to experience a strong brand connection

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toward brands with male representations, whereas women will make no such distinctions. We base our theorizing first on social role theory (Eagly 2013), which proposes that men and women are perceived as occupying different roles in society. Men are thought to be agentic, whereas women are primarily communal. In light of this socialization, men and women learn different beliefs and skills that impact their behavior in social settings and influence normative expectations for behavior. Recent longitudinal research shows that while some gender stereotypes have changed in the past 70 years (Eagly et al. 2019), with women being perceived as increasingly more competent, men continue to be perceived as more agentic than women. Indeed, both men and women tend to prefer male leaders (Rubner 1991). Furthermore, individuals systematically underestimate how occupations are segregated and how this contributes to the gender pay-gap (Beyer 2018). We posit that this perception of men as more competent will bleed into overall purchase intentions toward brands with male logos. We argue this occurs because gender bias by men can be described as the "precarious manhood" principle. This perspective leans on the assumptions that manhood is a "socially constructed, fleeting state and, as a result, requires continuous reaffirmation through engagement in stereotypical masculine behaviors" (Parent and Cooper 2020, 282). As such, precarious manhood is defined as an informal demonstration of masculinity with the objective of establishing social proof and obtaining social validation of masculinity (Vandello et al. 2008).

Consequently, our research contributes to the domain of consumer experiences of gendered product representations. First, we deepen understanding of the cognitive processes guiding gendered marketplace cues—an area in need of clarification (Meyers-Levy and Loken 2015). Second, our results contradict previous research suggesting that avoiding female brand identities will help companies avoid negative associations (Neale, Robbie, and Martin 2016). Our results show that men and women focus on gendered representations differently due to differential brand connections. Specifically, men experience a brand connection with brands that contain a masculine representation whereas women do not. Men are shown to experience a stronger brand connection when they have more conservative attitudes toward the role of women in society. Third, instead of concluding that we should ignore gender bias in marketplace contexts (Neale et al. 2016), we present strategies to mitigate the gender bias by males against female brands, so that male and female brands can eventually be valued equally within the marketplace. In doing so, we provide results that provide tools for many twenty-first century organizations who are retreating from tired old narratives about gender and race (Moorman 2020).

CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

Gendered Brands

Understanding the relation between brands and gender can be traced to the mid-1970s, when marketing scholars began exploring masculine and feminine product differentiation strategies employed by companies (Morris and Cundiff 1971; Stuteville 1971). Two research streams emerged from these studies: (1) gendered brand profiles, such as Mrs. Butterworth's (Neale et al. 2016) and (2) sex-typed products, such as Old Spice grooming products (Fugate and Phillips 2010). Alreck, Settle, and Belch (1982) observed that female-typed products like Virginia Slims could never experience sex-crossover appeal, while male-typed products like Marlboro could. Early research on gendered brands kept coming to similar conclusions: women will buy female-typed products, men will not, but women are also willing to buy male-typed products. Other studies introduced the notion of negative sex-role stereotypes in advertising and found, not surprisingly, that women were put off by negative/offensive portrayals of women (Carruthers 1977; Courtney and Whipple 1978); advertisers, apparently ignorant of these findings, continue employing these stereotypes today (WARC 2018).

Recent studies parrot these early findings. Indeed, Avery's work on the introduction of the Porsche Cayenne (2012) highlights the phenomenon of "gender contamination," whereby consumers experience discomfort and engage in backlash when a male brand expands the product line to include female brands, especially when the brand is identity-salient for men. This contamination goes both ways as Coke learned when they attempted to market Diet Coke to men. By renaming it "Coke Zero," the product was immediately stigmatized as being a "girl's drink" (Azar 2013). Additionally, Neale et al. (2016) found that gender identity (vs. the biological construct of sex) and responses to gendered branding followed a pattern seen in research since this intersection was first studied. Their decision to study gender along a continuum, from masculine to feminine using an established scale, extended our understanding of gender and brands while concluding that masculine brand identities should be chosen over feminine to avoid stigma. This

conclusion, however, implies that feminine brands will always be disadvantaged and that this bias will persist.

Precarious Manhood Principle. Gender bias exists in every facet of humans' personal and professional lives. Bias has two facets: explicit and implicit. Explicit gender bias represents normative prescriptions about what men and women "should" do within fixed cultural boundaries and includes the direct derogation of women (typically by men but not confined to them) such as "you throw like a girl," or "a woman can't do a man's job." Research has supported that explicit bias exists within many different private and public contexts about the roles men and women should occupy (Heilman et al. 2004; Heilman and Eagly 2008). Implicit biases are "embedded stereotypes that heavily influence our decision-making, without our conscious knowledge" (Godsil et al. 2014, 3), thereby reinforcing structural barriers to equality in society. Hence, in many corporate and academic settings, implicit bias training sessions are required in order to promote fairness in hiring and evaluation processes because implicit bias plagues women when being interviewed for jobs, fellowships, and grants (Faigman, Nilanjan, and Ridgeway 2007).

This inequality due to structural barriers may provide insight into why marketers continue to get gender wrong (Dobscha 2012) by perpetuating stereotypes, such as portraying women as objects or men as inept parents. Marketers often pursue masculine identities to avoid negative associations (Neale et al. 2016). While brand logos and/or names are consciously evaluated by consumers, their effects on decision making may be subtler (i.e., Pogacar, Shrum, and Lowrey 2018). For example, brand names are shown to convey masculinity versus femininity depending on whether they contain a back versus front vowel respectively (Klink and Athaide 2012). Likewise, dark brand color can cue masculinity (i.e., blue), although lighter colors are not shown to cue femininity (Lieven et al. 2015). Thus, gender bias may be unwillingly cued by marketing/branding initiatives. For example, a new law in the United Kingdom now bans sexist advertising and has pronounced its first two perpetrators (VW and Philadelphia Cream Cheese; *BBC News* 2019). Such bans force companies to reflect on their own biases, explicit or implicit.

We posit that the bias against female brand representations by men (i.e., because the sex-crossover appeal occurs for women but not for men; Alreck et al. 1982) is driven by prescribed beliefs regarding the roles that men and women are expected to have in society (Eagly 2013). As men dominate (economically and politically) and possess higher status than women in all nations (UN Development Program 2013), we would expect brands with male brand representations to be more valued. Furthermore, the "precarious manhood" principle provides us with a strong theoretical explanation for why men prefer male brand names but women are comfortable with both. Men "can perform to bolster their status as 'real' men and lessen their feelings of gender role stress, even if those actions provide only temporary relief" (Parent and Cooper 2020, 283). Research across domains shows consistently that masculinity threats have a powerful effect on men's preferences and behaviors (Vandello and Bosson 2013). Vogel et al. (2003) found that men placed in high- (vs. low-) vulnerability situations were more likely to gender stereotype. However, the opposite effect did not occur for women. While men are often asked to "prove" their manhood, women do not have the same obligations of social proof; as such, they do not have to demonstrate their femininity in either formal or informal ways (Gilmore 1990). And in their study of hypermasculine advertising, Parent and Cooper (2020) found a positive connection between presence of threats to masculinity and interpretation of a hypermasculine ad. Those men who strongly endorsed traditionally masculine norms found hypermasculine ads to be enhancing to their masculinity. We expect that for men, male brands will activate masculine stereotypes about success and power, and this activation will translate into more positive purchase intentions.

Furthermore, social affiliation can lead to interpersonal closeness, which includes increased sentiments of liking toward the other (Rubin 1970). If brands are gendered, they can possess humanlike features that may lead consumers to interpret them as close. Identifying a gender via a brand cue can create social affiliation by anthropomorphizing the brand (Yang, Aggarwal, and McGill 2020). Given the existence of gender bias, it seems likely that such brand gender may impact consumers' brand closeness. If consumers experience interpersonal closeness with brands, they can self-connect to brands (Escalas and Bettman 2005). Thus, men may feel more connected to male versus female brand representations, and this connection will mediate their brand evaluations. Women, however, may not exhibit strong gender differentiation in brand connection as they perceive male- and female-gendered products as similarly valuable (Alreck et al. 1982). Finally, if this gender bias is driven by precarious manhood ideals in men, we would expect men

with more conservative (vs. more liberal) attitudes toward the role of women in society to moderate the effect of brand connection to male brand representations (DiMuccio and Knowles 2020). Formally,

H1: Consumers are more likely to value products with male brand representations versus female brand representations.

H2: A consumer's sex moderates the effect of brand representations on purchase intentions where male (female) consumers report lower (similar) purchase intentions for female brand representations in comparison to male brand representations.

H3: The effect of hypothesis 2 can be explained by connection with the brand, such that brand connection mediates the relation between the interaction of gendered brand representation by consumer sex on purchase intentions for men.

H4: Attitudes toward women's role in society moderates hypothesis 3, in that men with more conservative attitudes toward women are likely to experience a stronger brand connection with male brand representations than men with liberal attitudes toward women.

Mitigating Bias

How can marketers using female brand representations attempt to mitigate the effects of gender bias? One option is to prime male consumers with knowledge regarding the presence of gender bias and encourage objectivity, although this could backfire. Indeed, the more a person self-identifies as objective, the greater the risk is that this person will inadvertently allow bias to influence their decision-making (Logel et al. 2009). Therefore, self-identifying and reminders of beliefs act as barriers to awareness and reduction of bias against the other.

We propose a different mechanism for mitigating gender bias for brands with female representations. If social role theory broadly predicts gender stereotypes based on tendencies for women to be assigned domestic roles and men to have greater involvement in competitive markets (Cuddy et al. 2015), then shifting stereotypes may mitigate the effect. Past research shows that negative stereotypes regarding men as dads were attenuated when the social role of fathers was primed (Park and Banchefsky 2018). Research further shows that gender-related primes can supplement masculinity, complement femininity, and improve the economic performance of women (Bear and Babcock 2017). Thus, we propose that agentic brand descriptions for brands with female representations should mitigate the bias men have against these brands and increase evaluation.

H5: Agentic brand descriptions attenuate the effect of consumer sex on the evaluation of brands with gender representations for men.

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH

In pilot study 1, we show initial evidence for the effect of male brand representations on increased product evaluation by examining the sales of champagne brands in a wine store over the period of one year. We show market evidence that champagnes with male names sell more than champagnes with female names but not gender-neutral names, even when controlling for price and reputation. These results provide initial support for our prediction that male-sounding names are preferred in familiar and experienced brands (hypothesis 1). In pilot study 2 (IAT study), we replicate this effect and show that, for fictitious brand names and logos (through which we control for brand familiarity and experience), participants responded faster to male brand stimuli paired with positive words (also supporting hypothesis 1). See the appendix, available online for complete details of these two studies. Three experiments followed the pilot studies. In experiment 1 we replicate the results of pilot study 1 while also examining the role of a consumer's sex (male or female) and find that men have lower purchase intentions for brands with FEMALE versus MALE representations but that women make no distinction between brand gender representations. Experiment 2 replicates the aforementioned effect and also tests brand connection as the process mechanism explaining men's devaluation of brands with female versus male names. We find this to be the case and even more so for men who have conservative attitudes toward women, thereby confirming a precarious manhood stance in men. Finally, in experiment 3, we show that using agentic brand descriptions attenuates the bias that men hold against brands with female names. Importantly, across our studies we tested actual purchases (study one of wine) as well as purchase intentions. While these two are not equivalent, purchase intention has been demonstrated as indicative of purchase behavior, and we use purchase intention as a way

to contribute to the literature on purchase behavior (Morwitz, Steckel, and Gupta 2007).

EXPERIMENT 1: THE EFFECT OF GENDERED NAMES ON BRAND EVALUATION

Participants, Design, Procedure

Two hundred and twenty-nine American members of the Prolific online panel (43.2% male; $M_{age} = 47.99$, SD = 14.32) participated in return for a nominal fee and were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (Harney Premium Green Tea: $n = 86$; Harney & Sons Premium Green Tea: $n = 73$; Harney & Daughters Premium Green Tea: $n = 70$) in a between-subjects design. We used Prolific, as it has been shown to provide high-quality data (Goodman and Paolacci 2017). Participants were told they were partaking in a food evaluation study. After viewing one of the tea packages, participants completed purchase intentions measures using a two-item nine-point bipolar scale (impossible/quite possible; much less likely/much more likely; $r = .61$, $p < .001$). They also completed the masculine ($a = .89$) and feminine ($a = .89$) gender dimensions of brand personality (Grohmann 2009) using a Likert scale anchored with 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. Product quality (three statements, 6-point bipolar scales: low/high quality; poor/great; worse/better than average, $\alpha = .93$), product attitudes (four statements, Likert scales anchored with 1 = strongly disagree to 9 = strongly agree: The product seemed attractive; I like this product; It looks like a satisfying product; It looks like a good product, $\alpha = .95$), and how much people liked tea (1 = dislike a great deal, 7 = like a great deal) were included to test alternative mechanisms.

Results and Hypothesis Testing

We expected consumers would have higher purchase intentions for brands with male versus female representations. We also expected sex to moderate this effect, in that men would report lower purchase intentions for female brand representations whereas for women, there would be similar evaluations for both male and female representations. To test these hypotheses, a two-way ANOVA with the three gendered conditions (none; & sons; & daughters) and participant sex as factors revealed a marginally significant interaction ($F(2, 223) = 2.49$, $p = .086$). Importantly, planned comparisons revealed a significant difference between the three conditions for men ($F(2, 223) = 4.40, p = .013$). Specifically, men had significantly higher purchase intentions for the male versus female brand representation ($M_{male} = 6.76$, SE = .33; $M_{female} = 5.30$, SE = .38; $p = .004$). There was no significant difference between the male brand representation and nongendered representation ($M_{control} = 6.37$, SE = .30; $p = .39$), and men were significantly more likely to want to purchase the tea with nongendered representation than the tea with a female representation ($p = .026$). For women, there was a marginally significant difference between the three conditions ($F(2, 223) = 2.56$, $p = .080$). Women were marginally significantly more likely to purchase the tea with non-gendered representation ($M_{control} = 7.08$, SE = .28) versus the male representation ($M_{male} = 6.36$, SE = .30; $p = .084$). Women were also significantly more likely to purchase the tea with nongendered representation than the female representation ($M_{female} = 6.23$, SE = .28; $p = .036$), although there was no significant difference between the two gendered conditions ($p = .76$). These results support hypothesis 2; see figure 1.

To test for potential alternative explanations, we examined if the gendered personality dimensions of the brand differed between conditions and the participants to explain purchase intentions. A two-way ANOVA with the masculine dimension of brand personality as the dependent variable and the participant's sex and the conditions as the factors revealed no significant interaction ($F(2, 223) = .016$, $p = .98$). A similar pattern was uncovered for the feminine dimension of brand personality ($F(2, 223) = .055$, $p = .95$). Furthermore, we examined if product quality, product attitudes, and product preference differed between genders

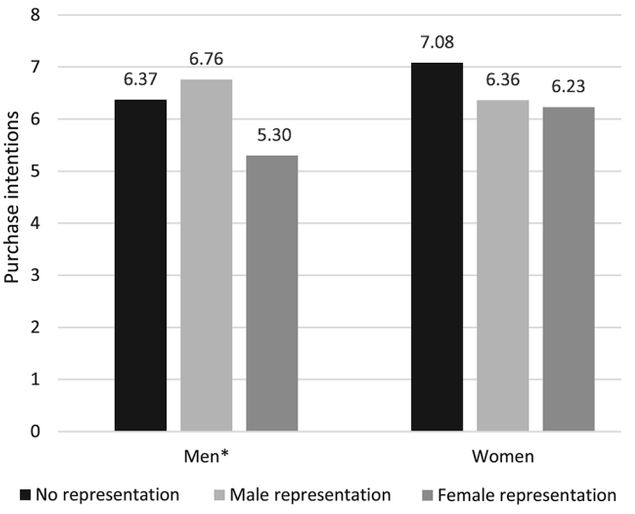

Figure 1. Experiment 1: When testing the hypothesis that brand gender and participants' sex interact, it is uncovered that men (vs. women) significantly devalue female-gendered brands. This effect is not found for male brand representations. *$p < .05$.

and conditions. A two-way ANOVA with the aforementioned variables as the dependent variables and the participants' sex and conditions as the factors revealed no significant interaction for product quality ($F(2, 223) = .621$, $p = .54$), product attitude ($F(2, 223) = 1.97$, $p = .14$), nor for product preference ($F(2, 223) = 1.81$, $p = .17$). Together, these results suggest that gendered personality dimensions, product quality perceptions, product attitudes, and preferences do not explain consumers' differential purchase intentions of brands with gender representations.

Discussion

The results suggest that brands with male or neutral names (versus female names) result in higher purchase intentions. Specifically, there appears to be a bias against brands with female names as they garner the lowest purchase intentions. An examination of gender differences reveals that women have equal evaluations regardless of the gender of the brand name. Alternatively, versus a gender-neutral brand, men significantly devalue a brand with a female representation but they do not find more value in a male brand representation. These results also exclude a pure gender-identity salience explanation (Deaux 1985) as there is no bidirectional congruity between gender and brand preference. These results also exclude the effects of purchase intentions being driven by explicit brand associations (gender personality dimensions) or preferences. Altogether, the results suggest a bias against brands with female names by men.

Experiment 2 tests the premise that a gender-related connection is driving preference by men for male brand representations (hypothesis 3). We also test whether social role bias might influence preference for male brand representations. We posit that men will feel stronger brand connections to a brand with a male (versus female) brand representation, explaining their purchase intentions. Finally, Kahneman (2011) and others find that explicit and implicit biases are often a function of automaticity and past research has also examined how implicit beliefs influence brand perceptions (Lisjak, Lee, and Gardner 2012; Park and John 2018). As gender bias can be both explicit or implicit in nature, we predict that both explicit and implicit bias will impact men's responses to male and female brands, while women will not be as impacted by their bias. Previous research on political ideology predicts that if male consumers are more conservative about gender roles in society, they are more likely to respond automatically to male representations of brands. Thus, we predict that men with more (vs. less) conservative attitudes toward women's social roles will connect more strongly to male brand representations (hypothesis 4).

EXPERIMENT 2: THE INFLUENCE OF PERCEIVED SOCIAL ROLES

Participants, Design, and Procedure

Two hundred and ten American members of the Prolific online panel participated for a nominal fee and were randomly assigned to two conditions (male vs. female brand representation) (56.2% men; $M_{age} = 35.76$, SD = 11.73). We used two versions of the Monopoly board game logo created by Creative Equals. One was the traditional logo with Mr. Rich Uncle Pennybags, the other was redesigned to include a woman. Participants viewed one of the two logos, prefaced with descriptive text (see appendix for visuals and text). A pretest ensured that there were no interactions between these logos and gender on product attitudes, perceived product quality, the masculine and feminine brand dimensions, and brand authenticity (see appendix). Participants then completed a measure of purchase intention (same as in experiment 1: $r = .76$, $p < .001$), and a measure of brand connection (Escalas and Bettman 2005) using a Likert scale anchored by 1 = strongly disagree and 9 = strongly agree; $\alpha = .92$.

To measure perceptions of women's social roles, we used an explicit bias measure and an implicit bias measure. For explicit bias, we created a scale (see Bacon, Scheltema, and Robinson 2001), measuring negative stereotypes of outgroups, with 17 opposing pairs of randomized adjectives about women; each pair was evaluated using a 9-point bipolar scale. Participants selected the point closest to the adjective that best-described their feelings and beliefs toward women ($\alpha = .93$). Low scores correspond to negative stereotypes, high scores correspond to more positive stereotypes (see appendix).

For implicit bias, we used the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS; Spence and Hahn 1997, 18), which provides 15 statements adapted to current society and measures "people's beliefs about the responsibilities, privileges, and behaviors in a variety of spheres that have been traditionally divided among gender lines but could, in principle, be shared equally between men and women" (see the appendix). Participants evaluated scale items on a 7-point Likert scale anchored by 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree ($\alpha = .84$). Low scores of AWS correspond to conservative beliefs, whereas high scores of AWS correspond to liberal beliefs about women's roles. Participants then answered demographic questions.

Results and Hypothesis Testing

An ANOVA with sex and logo as the factors and purchase intentions as the dependent variable revealed a significant interaction effect ($F(1, 206) = 4.13$, $p = .043$). Planned comparisons revealed that men differ in terms of their purchase intentions for brands with male versus female representations ($M_{male} = 5.94$, SD = 1.96; $M_{female} = 4.57$, SD = 2.10; $F(1, 206) = 9.81, p = .002$) whereas women's purchase intentions did not differ, supporting H2 ($M_{male} = 5.99$, SD = 2.00; $M_{female} = 5.81$, SD = 2.30; $F(1, 206) = .224, p = .64$); see figure 2.

An ANOVA analysis with sex and logo as the factors and brand connection revealed a marginally significant interaction effect ($F(1, 206) = 3.35$, $p = .069$). Planned comparisons revealed that men had a significantly higher brand connection with the male logo than the female logo ($M_{male} = 4.00$, SD = 1.98; $M_{female} = 3.21$, SD = 1.79; $F(1, 206) = 4.21$, $p = .041$). In contrast, women had similar levels of brand connection with both logos ($M_{male} = 3.87$, SD = 1.50; $M_{female} = 4.02$, SD = 2.05; $F(1, 206) = .20$, $p = .66$), supporting hypothesis 3.

We tested the indirect effect of brand connection on purchase intentions for each sex using PROCESS model 4 using 5,000 bootstrap samples (Hayes 2015). For men, the male logo led to increased brand connection ($b = .78$, SE = .39; $p = .05$), and brand connection positively influenced purchase intentions ($b = .59$, SE = .09; $p < .001$). The indirect effect was significant ($b = .46$, SE = .26, 95% confidence interval [CI] = .0185, 1.037). The direct effect was also significant ($b = .91$, SE = .36, 95% CI = .1864, 1.6245). For women, the female logo did not significantly influence brand connection ($b = -.15$, SE = .33, $p = .65$) and while brand connection did positively influence purchase intentions ($b = .52$, SE = .10, $p < .001$) neither the indirect effect ($b = -.08$, SE = .18, 95% CI = −.4485, .2712) nor the direct effect ($b = .26$, SE = .36, 95% CI = −.4510, .9720) were significant. These results confirm hypothesis 3. Figure 3 shows the mediation paths for men and women.

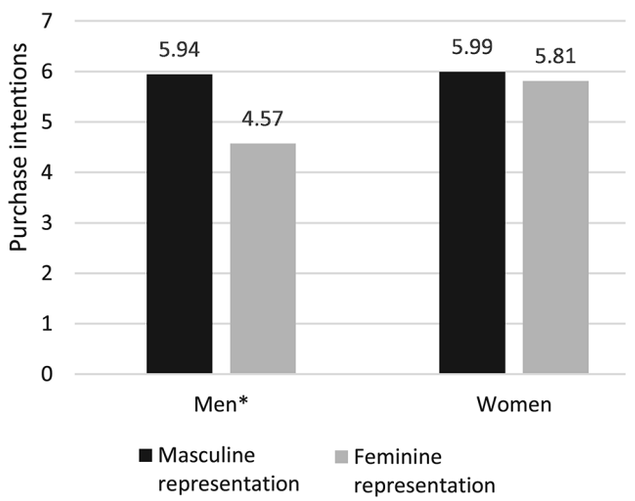

Figure 2. Experiment 2: Women's purchase intentions are not influenced by gendered brands, but men significantly devalue female-gendered brands. *$p < .05$.

To test bias as a driving mechanism, we examined the explicit and implicit bias measures. An ANOVA with logo and sex as the factors and the aggregated explicit bias and AWS as the dependent variables revealed no significant interaction effect ($p < .343$). However, there was a main effect for both variables. An examination of the means showed that women had more positive stereotypes toward women than men ($M_{women} = 6.76$, SD = 1.24, $M_{men} = 6.14$, SD = 1.19; $F(1, 206) = 13.10$, $p < .001$) and they also had more liberal attitudes toward the role of women in society ($M_{women} = 6.18$, SD = .74, $M_{men} = 5.80$, SD = .87; $F(1, 206) = 12.04$, $p = .001$). As well, we tested the potential mediating effect of AWS on purchase intentions and found no evidence of this for either sex (men: $B = .07$, SE = .11, 95% CI = −.0413, .3827; women: $B = .01$, SE = .07, 95% CI = −.0877, .1893).

Next, and as prior research argues an interaction between implicit beliefs and brand connection (Lisjak et al. 2012), we tested the three-way interaction between implicit gender beliefs, gendered logo representation, and brand connection. A moderated mediation model was submitted to Hayes PROCESS model 7 (Hayes 2015; 5,000 bootstrapped samples) using the responses by male participants ($n = 92$). The model included brand gender representation as the independent variable (X), purchase intentions as the dependent variable (Y), brand connection as the mediator (M), and AWS as the moderator (W) of the indirect effect. Brand representation predicted brand connection ($B = 5.88$, SE = 2.71, 95% CI = .4926, 11.2740), such that a brand with a male representation resulted in stronger brand connection by men. Stronger brand connection, in turn, was positively associated with purchase intentions ($B = .62$, SE = .10, 95% CI = .4225, .8191). This indirect effect of male brand representations on purchase intentions through brand connection was marginally moderated by AWS ($B = -.87$, SE = .46, 95% CI = −1.7847, .0481), as predicted. Specifically, the indirect effect of male brand representations on purchase intentions through brand connection was stronger when AWS are lower (i.e., more conservative) ($B = 1.66$, 95% CI = .4864, 2.8428)

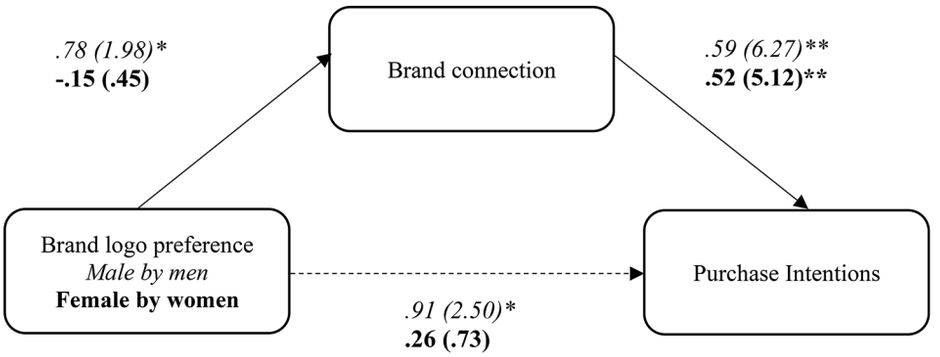

Figure 3. Experiment 2: Men experience brand connection to male brands that explains their purchase intentions. Women do not experience differential brand connection to male vs. female brands. $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .001$.

than when AWS are moderate ($B = .65$, 95% CI $= -.1616$, 1.4509) or when AWS are higher (i.e., more liberal; $B = .15$, 95% CI $= -.9189$, 1.2102). The analysis produced a significant moderated-mediation index ($B = -.54$, SE $= .27$, 95% CI $= -1.0784$, $-.0369$); the positive association between male brand representations and purchase intentions by men was mediated by brand connection and AWS moderated this indirect effect. These results support hypothesis 4.

To test whether explicit stereotypes influence brand connection when men were presented with a male (vs. female) logo, a moderated mediation model was again submitted to Hayes PROCESS model 7 (Hayes 2015; 5,000 bootstrapped samples) using the responses by male participants. The model included brand gender representation as the independent variable (X), purchase intentions as the dependent variable (Y), brand connection as the mediator (M), and explicit bias against women as the moderator (W) of the indirect effect. The analysis produced a non-significant moderated-mediation index ($B = -.13$, SE $= .20$, 95% CI $= -.5577$, .2368); the positive association between male brand representations and purchase intentions by men was mediated by brand connection but explicit stereotypes against women did not moderate this indirect effect.

Discussion

The results of this experiment replicate those of experiment 1 and confirm that men are more likely to devalue brands when they contain a female representation versus when they contain male representations. Women have equal preference, regardless of gender presented. A detailed examination of the effect reveals that men feel stronger brand connections to brands with male representations, explaining their purchase intentions.

Furthermore, men with more conservative attitudes toward the role of women are more likely to experience brand connection with a brand with a male versus a female representation. Holding negative stereotypes toward women does not influence brand connections to male brands. These results suggest that implicit (versus explicit) gender bias drives men's reactions to gendered brands. Thus, female (versus male) brands will appeal less to men, in particular for men with conservative attitudes toward the role of women. However, gendered representations do not influence purchase intentions by women.

EXPERIMENT 3: THE ROLE OF AGENTIC LANGUAGE

Our results demonstrate that men devalue female brands. Experiment 3 examines if female brands benefit from agentic positioning, thereby reducing gender bias. We examine whether positioning a female brand as more agentic makes it more appealing to men. If men hold conservative attitudes toward the social role of women, they should favor brands with agentic descriptions. Per Eagly's (2013) social role theory, people's evaluative prototypes are more congruent with their assumptions about gender roles. Social role theory (Eagly 2013) suggests that men are expected to behave in an agentic manner, whereas women are expected to be more communal. Thus, we would expect agentic descriptions to augment purchase intentions for men, thereby attenuating the implicit gender bias whereas an agentic (vs. no) brand description for a brand with a female representation should result in similar purchase intentions.

Participants, Design, and Procedure

To test our hypothesis, we asked a Prolific online panel to participate in a survey in exchange for a nominal fee.

Two hundred and twenty-eight American male participants were recruited (M_{age} = 32.16, SD = 12.55). The study employed a 2 (logo: female or male) by 3 (no brand description, agentic, or communal brand description) between-subjects design. Participants were told that Pringles had a new logo and were presented with either the male or female version of the logo (the traditional logo with male representation or a female version made by Creative Equals; see the appendix). Participants were then exposed to one of three situations. In one they were asked to examine the logo and then move on to the next page of the survey. In the two other conditions, they saw the logo as well as either an agentic brand statement or an expressive brand statement, as per a pretest (see the appendix). Participants then answered the same two-item purchase intention measure (r = .85, $p < .001$) as in the previous experiments. Participants also answered the following control measures: two 7-point bipolar questions regarding their attitudes toward the brand logo (I do not like at all; I really like it; It is not at all attractive; It is very attractive), a 7-point Likert question regarding their appreciation of Pringles (1 = dislike a great deal: 7 = like a great deal), and how hungry they were on a Likert scale (1 = not at all; 5 = a great deal). Because Pringles is a well-known brand, we sought to account for potential familiarity and preference effects and attempt to isolate the bias effect.

Results and Hypothesis Testing

We expected the following effects: that the gender bias, and therefore lowered purchase intentions, of brands with female representations by men would be attenuated if an agentic brand description was included and that a communal brand description would have no influence on bias, thus purchase intentions. To test this hypothesis, we conducted an ANOVA analysis with logo and text-type as the factors, attitudes toward the logo, attitudes toward the brand, and hunger as covariates, and purchase intentions as the dependent variable.

This analysis revealed a significant two-way interaction effect ($F(2, 219) = 3.73, p = .025$). The main effects of logo type ($F(1, 219) = .032$, $p = .86$) and text ($F(2, 219) = .70$, $p = .50$) were not significant. Attitude toward the brand was a significant covariate ($F(1, 219) = 29.04$, $p < .001$) as was attitude toward the logo ($F(1, 219) = 40.94$, $p < .001$) but hunger was not ($F(1, 219) = .90$, $p = .34$).

Planned comparisons revealed that when no text is given, a male logo results in significantly higher purchase intentions than a female logo ($M_{\text{no text/male}}$ = 6.08, SE = .28, $M_{\text{no text/female}}$ = 5.37, SE = .28; $F(1, 219) = 3.07$, $p = .081$), replicating the results of experiments 1 and 2. Alternatively, when an agentic brand description is given, a female logo results in significantly higher purchase intentions than a male logo ($M_{\text{agentic/male}}$ = 5.39, SE = .28; $M_{\text{agentic/female}}$ = 6.18, SE = .29; $F(1, 219) = 3.63$, $p = .058$), supporting hypothesis 5. When a communal brand description is given, there are no differences between purchase intentions for the brand with a male versus a female logo ($M_{\text{communal/male}}$ = 6.14, SE = .29; $M_{\text{communal/female}}$ = 5.93, SE = .30; $F(1, 219) = .26$, $p = .61$); see figure 4.

Discussion

The results of experiment 3 replicate those from experiments 1 and 2 and also show that decreased purchase intentions by men of brands with female representations can be mitigated by agentic brand descriptions. When an agentic description is used, men are more likely to purchase brands with female representations and to do so with the same intention as brands with male representations.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our research highlights an important marketplace effect when it comes to gendered brands: men are negatively biased against female brands. This revelation differs from previous research that found that men were biased against

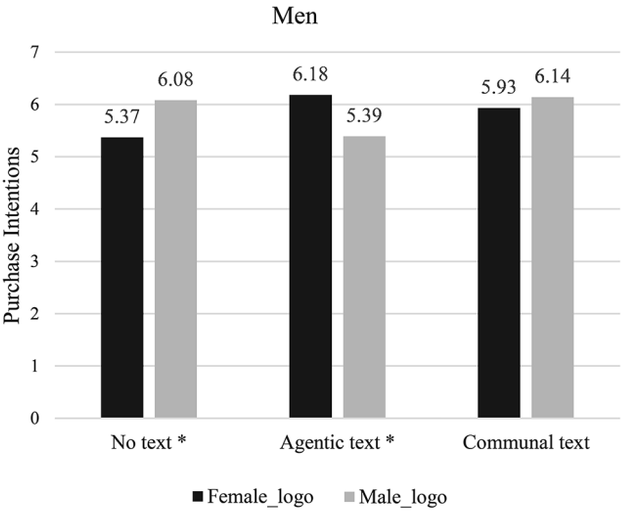

Figure 4. Study 3: For men, when an agentic brand description is included, willingness to purchase brands with female representations is significantly higher than when the brand has a male representation. A communal brand description does not influence purchase intentions. *$p < .05$.

female-typed products. This research finds that even if the product is neutral (potato chips, board games, champagne), if the brand representation is female, men will intend to buy it less than if the brand has a male representation. We show that the mechanism driving this effect is a gender bias, in particular the "precarious manhood" principle, whereby men feel gender role anxiety and will go to extra measures to maintain, preserve, and sustain their sense of masculinity. It should be noted that the gender bias exposed by this research is not explicit but implicit in nature; implicit bias is typically unrecognizable to the person holding it. Furthermore, our research shows that men are more likely to experience a brand connection to a brand with a male representation, and that this effect is strengthened when the men's attitudes toward women are more conservative. Women do not experience differential brand connections to gendered brands. Importantly, the gender bias by men against brands with female representations is attenuated when agentic brand descriptions are used.

Theoretical Implications

Our research breaks down what happens when brand names have male or female representations. Giving a brand a human name is one form of anthropormorphism, which has a long effective legacy in marketing strategy because we know that if a brand is given human qualities (such as a first and/or last name), consumers will form humanlike relationships with them (Yang et al. 2020). One of the strongest human connections is emotional bonds and studies have found that anthropormophism and emotional connection go hand in hand (Aggarwal and McGill 2007). Until now, there has been very little research on how the gendering of a brand name impacts consumer evaluation (Brown and Ponsonby-McCabe 2013). Our results make it clear that male consumers' consumption decisions are impacted by gender bias. By learning gendered social roles (Eagly 2013), men hold on more strongly to these roles than women, and experience masculinity threats in, not just their work and family lives, but in the marketplace as well. Men's precarious masculinity is shown to impact otherwise banal decisions such as what brand of chips to purchase.

Yet, instead of merely capitulating to this gender bias as other researchers have (Neale, etc.), our research found that when introducing an agentic narrative with the female brand name, the bias is nullified. Neale et al. (2016) concluded that masculine brands are more effective for all consumers, which led them to give advice to advertising/marketing managers that perpetuates the patriarchal structures that many organizations are trying to dismantle in other areas of their businesses, namely hiring and recruiting. If companies follow this advice, they run the risk of reinforcing the patriarchy and alienating their consumer base, who likely is made up of either equally or a majority of women (BBB 2019).

Markets often reinforce gender inequities (Ourahmoune, Binninger, and Robert 2014) and our research might help resolve those inequities of biased perceptions of gender-related roles in society. We seek to understand why such bias exists and how to reverse it. Our research extends this perspective by positing that unlike previous researchers' conclusions to choose a masculine brand over a feminine one (Neale et al. 2016), it is time to implement new strategies in marketing in order to reduce the implicit gender bias that female-identified brands experience in the marketplace. Instead of contributing to the dominant discourses of masculinity, we argue it is instead fruitful to try to change it, and we propose a simple and effective strategy: changing the discourse of female-named brands to include more agentic content. We are sure there are other strategies that will also work on the more malleable of the biases and improve the futures of female-named products, brands, and companies.

Practical Implications and Limitations

This research has considerable managerial implications. Marketers should use agentic slogans and/or brand descriptions for female brands to prevent brand devaluation by men. Marketers should also consider political tendencies of targeted consumers, since conservative attitudes toward women's role in society is strongly related to attachment to male brands and attachment to agentic male roles is related to support for the Republican party (Schneider and Bos 2019).

Despite the insightful results, our research does have limitations. First, we used brand logos versus brand packaging. Brands are often evaluated as holistic packages (Orth and Malkewitz 2008). Although we tested brand representations, we did not examine in detail how the brand-product interaction may or may not have been identified as more or less masculine/feminine, which might have influenced the nature of our results. Finally, given that cultures differ in terms of how masculine versus feminine they are, cross-cultural research should investigate these factors further. These sorts of questions warrant future research attention in order to continue efforts to reduce gender bias in the marketplace.

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