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Masculine or Feminine? The Role of Type Fonts After Brand Gender-Bending From the Perspective of Gender Consistency

Yuhao Zhang
Hanyang University, Seoul, Republic of Korea
Euitay Jung
Hanyang University ERICA, Ansan, South Korea

Marketing and design literature suggests that positioning a brand through the gender dimension of brand personality can influence consumers' perceptions of the brand. However, few studies have explored the role of fonts and brand gender consistency after brand gender-bending. Therefore, this study aims to explore whether the original font can continue to play a role in consumers' gender perceptions of the brand after brand gender-bending, and whether there are differences in perception between consumers of different genders. Based on the gender dimension in brand personality, this study uses logos composed of fonts with different gender traits to conduct a survey among two groups of participants for effective comparison. Six studies were conducted to examine the influence of fonts on brand gender perception during the process of brand gender-bending. The findings first demonstrate that the perception of font traits affects consumers' perception of brand gender traits. After brand gender-bending, the original font is perceived to exhibit opposite-gender or neutral traits, resulting in a decrease in the perception of the original brand's gender traits. Additionally, there are differences in how consumers of different genders perceive the font and brand traits after gender-bending.

Keywords: brand gender, type fonts, gender consistency

Introduction

Consumer decision-making is diverse. Before completing the final purchase, consumers often consider complex consumption purposes and multidimensional factors (Howard, 1969; Sheth, 1973; Bettman, 1979; Ajzen, 1991; Erdem, Blackwell, & Valenzuela, 2006; Schmitt, 2010). Engel and colleagues explored the multi-stage process of consumer decision-making, from need recognition to information search and evaluation of alternatives, highlighting the complex dimensions behind consumer decisions (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1990). Aaker (1997) proposed the five dimensions of brand personality, discussing how consumers evaluate brands based on these dimensions and demonstrating how different brand traits influence consumer cognition and emotional responses. As marketing research has advanced, researchers have identified brand gender as a key dimension in exploring consumer decision-making. For example, Grohmann (2009) demonstrated that the gender dimension differs from other human personality traits and further showed that the consistency between brand personality and self-concept positively influences consumer responses.

Yuhao Zhang, Ph.D. student, College of Design, Hanyang University, Seoul, Republic of Korea.
Euitay Jung, Ph.D., professor, College of Design, Hanyang University ERICA, Ansan, South Korea.

These studies collectively construct a broad framework for understanding consumer decision-making, encompassing psychological motivations, information processing, and brand personality evaluation. As mentioned earlier, consumer decision-making is shaped by multiple factors. Therefore, many researchers have sought to identify whether differences and commonalities exist in consumer motivations across various decision-making processes. For example, some researchers have explained differences in consumer motivation through cultural dimensions theory, particularly in terms of individualism versus collectivism and power distance in different political and cultural contexts (Hofstede, 1984; Kagitcibasi, 1997). Nisbett and Masuda (2013) explored differences in information processing between Eastern and Western societies, while Markus and Kitayama (2014) further investigated emotion-driven consumer decision-making.

Regarding commonalities, Maslow's hierarchy of needs reveals universal human needs, from basic physiological needs to self-actualization, which transcend cultural and societal contexts and apply broadly to consumers from different cultural backgrounds (Maslow, 1943). Deci and Ryan's (2013) research employed self-determination theory to explain how intrinsic motivation drives consumer decision-making, emphasizing the pursuit of autonomy, competence, and relatedness across various environments. These studies illustrate the commonalities and differences in consumer motivation, while the field of evolutionary psychology offers an integrated framework for explaining the underlying drivers of these motivations. Evolutionary psychology posits that, regardless of cultural or social context, humans have developed specific behavioral patterns throughout evolution to satisfy the needs of their gender temperament (Buss, 1989; Tooby, 1992). The need for gender temperament, which refers to the consistency and self-identity related to gender behaviors, attitudes, and roles, transcends cultural and societal backgrounds and is one of the core motivations of all human behavior. This unified evolutionary perspective highlights the critical role of gender in shaping consumer preferences and brand identification.

Therefore, exploring whether the alignment between brand gender and consumer gender temperament can positively influence consumer decision-making has become a key dimension worth studying. Many studies have demonstrated that when brand gender and consumer gender identity are consistent, it significantly increases consumers' purchase intentions (Sirgy, 1982; Aaker, 1997; Grohmann, 2009; Fugate & Phillips, 2010). Building on this, researchers have further explored, through interdisciplinary research methods, whether visual elements in branding can effectively evoke a sense of alignment between the brand and the consumer. For example, studies have shown that brand logo design elements can effectively enhance brand identification and personal perception (Henderson & Cote, 1998). Bottomley and Doyle's (2006) research proved that when brand color matches the product type, consumers' recognition and emotional connection with the brand significantly increase. Childers and Jass (2002) explored how the semantic associations of typefaces influence consumers' perception and memory of a brand, showing that the alignment between font style and brand personality enhances consumer identification with the brand, particularly in terms of personalized consumer experiences.

However, an objective phenomenon is that, with the development of egalitarian thought, the gender usage of products is indeed changing. This change is ultimately reflected in the diversification of the gender composition of consumers in certain product categories, which in turn leads to changes in the target consumer groups of brands within those categories. For example, Firat and Venkatesh (1995) proposed early on that the diversification of consumer gender groups has driven brands to redefine their target audiences. Patterson and Elliott (2002) found changes in the use of male grooming products, especially in the men's beauty and personal care sectors, where male consumers gradually broke away from traditional gender role constraints, leading to a more diverse consumer group for these product categories and influencing the target market of the brand.

Thompson and Holt (2004) also explored how male consumers crossed traditional gender boundaries to use products that were once dominated by females, while Schroeder and Zwick (2004) studied how the blurring of gender identities in advertising has prompted women to embrace masculine consumer products, further driving brand repositioning.

If a product or brand is categorized based on its gender dimension, it can be divided into four dimensions: masculine, feminine, androgynous, and gender-natural (Gorhmann, 2009). Grohmann mentioned in her research that no brands were found to belong to the androgynous category, meaning no brand exhibited both highly masculine and highly feminine characteristics simultaneously. Some studies have also indicated that, with the development of social ideologies, there has been a growing tendency towards gender-natural brands rather than androgynous ones. Therefore, considering the changes in product gender usage that we discussed earlier, we can understand it as follows:

When the gender usage of a product changes, a brand that originally belonged to the masculine or feminine category may undergo brand gender-bending to appeal to consumers of other genders and further meet market demand. This involves a shift from its original masculine or feminine dimension towards the opposite dimension, weakening its original high masculinity or high femininity attributes, thereby breaking the established brand gender perception.

Numerous studies have also confirmed the objective existence of another phenomenon: Consumers of different genders indeed exhibit differences in multidimensional preferences (Darley & Smith, 1995; Putrevu, 2001; Melnyk, van Herpen & van Trijp, 2010). Furthermore, researchers have begun to explore which specific elements within these dimensions evoke different gender preferences. For example, Grohmann's (2016) study showed that script fonts are more likely to evoke perceptions of femininity, while display fonts are more likely to evoke perceptions of masculinity. Fonts not only generate gender perceptions during consumers' initial contact with a brand but can also continue to influence brand gender perception even when the brand name and other information are present. Additionally, studies have shown that cultural logos help evoke masculine brand perceptions, while organic logos tend to evoke feminine brand perceptions. On a basic visual element level, dark blue reinforces masculinity, and pink reinforces femininity (César Machado, Fonseca, & Martins, 2021). Therefore, we can hypothesize that if a brand originally targeting a single consumer group discovers through market research that its product category is being accepted by a consumer group of the opposite gender, it is reasonable for the brand to make corresponding adjustments to its visual identity to attract potential consumers and expand market share. This study aims to explore whether the original font in brand design, specifically in terms of typography, can continue to play a positive role in conveying brand traits and maintaining gender consistency after brand gender-bending.

Empirical Research

Constructing Hypotheses

Hypotheses H1 to H6 will be tested through independent statistical methods. H1 and H2 represent the consistency between font gender traits (e.g., masculine or feminine fonts) and brand gender perception (e.g., masculine or feminine brands) before brand gender-bending. These hypotheses suggest that when brand gender traits align with font gender traits, there will be a significant increase in consumers' perception of overall brand gender consistency. H3, H4, H5, and H6 explore how the gender traits conveyed by fonts affect consumers' perception of brand gender consistency after brand gender-bending. Considering that when a brand undergoes

gender-bending, a font originally associated with feminine traits may cause a change in perceived brand gender consistency due to prior knowledge of the brand's gender, and vice versa, these four pathways aim to verify the direct impact of brand gender-bending on font gender traits. H3 and H6 further investigate the effect of font gender consistency on the perception of a "gender-neutral brand". These hypotheses suggest that after brand gender-bending, when font gender traits and the overall brand temperament have low consistency (e.g., masculine fonts in feminine brands or feminine fonts in masculine brands), consumers may perceive the brand not as strictly masculine or feminine but as a "gender-neutral brand". This perception of brand gender includes not only the traditional binary classification of masculinity or femininity but also introduces the category of "gender-neutral brands" to better reflect the diversified perception effects brought about by brand gender-bending.

Experimental Design

First, two different brand logos were created. These logos are presented in the form of font styles, with different fonts but otherwise identical basic shapes. To eliminate the influence of color, black-and-white graphics were used. One font employs Display type fonts, which clearly emphasize masculine traits, while the other font uses Script type fonts, reinforcing feminine traits (Grohmann, 2016). A pre-test was conducted to ensure that the selected fonts can be distinctly categorized as masculine or feminine fonts. Two groups of participants, labeled G1 and G2, were recruited. To ensure the accuracy of variable control, both groups consisted of participants whose physiological and psychological genders aligned, to avoid the confounding effects of gender identity biases. A questionnaire survey was administered to both groups, with differing pre-experimental conditions. The G1 group, assigned the masculine font, was shown a clothing brand logo using Display type fonts and then informed that the brand was developing a sub-brand targeting consumers of the opposite gender, with the logo remaining unchanged. The G2 group, assigned the feminine font, was shown a clothing brand logo using Script type fonts and then informed of a sub-brand development for the opposite gender, also without a logo change. To prevent the brand's product category from being associated with either masculine or feminine preferences, and to avoid dual interpretation effects influenced by brand perception and context, participants were not informed of the brand's specific product content. This design isolates the influence of other brand-related gender traits before and after brand gender-bending. The questionnaire consisted of the following dimensions: demographic information, font consistency and brand gender consistency measurement, and post-gender-bending font and brand temperament consistency measurement. Both groups responded to a combination of demographic information questions and two different five-point Likert scale sets designed to assess participants' perceptions of the target brand logo.

Studies 1 & 2

This study aimed to demonstrate that the different font styles used in the fictional brand logos can convey brand consistency (H1 & H2). Participants in the G1 and G2 groups were shown logos with a Display type font (Benton, 1991) and a Script type font (Benguiat, 1994), respectively. The participants avoided categorizing the brand based on product categories and instead rated the fictional brand names based on the font traits, overall logo traits, and whether the brand exhibited gender trait consistency. All ratings were made using a five-point Likert scale. To ensure that the differences in brand perception between the two groups were mainly caused by font design (font traits) rather than the brand name itself, the fictional brand was named using the letters "AZ". Reliability (Cronbach's α G1 = 0.76, Cronbach's α G2 = 0.92) and validity analyses (G1: KMO G1 = 0.837, χ^2 = 354.312, df = 15, $p < 0.001$; G2: KMO G2 = 0.871, χ^2 = 837.412, df = 15, $p < 0.001$) were conducted on the

questions related to the trait consistency dimension in both groups' questionnaires. Hypotheses were tested using a one-sample t-test. The results indicated that the mean score of the G1 group (N = 144, M = 24.03, SD = 0.62, SE = 0.62) was significantly higher than the theoretical mean (M = 15), while the mean score of the G2 group (N = 176, M = 22.35, SD = 0.98, SE = 0.07) was also significantly higher than the theoretical mean (M = 18). Independent sample t-test results for G1 showed a significant difference in how participants of different genders perceived the masculine font logo's consistency with masculine brand traits ($t(142) = 3.24$, $p < 0.001$). However, independent sample t-test results for G2 indicated no significant effect of gender on the perception of font and brand trait consistency ($t(174) = -0.38$, $p > 0.05$). Study 1 confirmed H1, demonstrating that using a masculine font imparts masculine traits to the brand logo, and the perceived brand's masculine traits remain consistent. Study 2 confirmed H2, showing that using a feminine font imparts feminine traits to the brand logo, with consistent perception of the brand's feminine traits.

Table 1

Single Sample T-Test of Brand Gender Consistency Perception (N_{total} = 320, Male = 45%, Female = 55%)

Dimension	Group	N	MEAN	SD	SE	Cohen's d	Hedges's
Consistency in the perception of gender temperament	G1 (Masculine fonts)	144	24.03	0.62	0.05	0.62	0.62
	G2 (Feminine fonts)	176	22.35	0.98	0.07	0.88	0.88

Studies 3 & 4

This study aimed to test H3 and H4, which hypothesize that a logo with masculine font traits will be perceived as having feminine trait consistency after brand gender-bending and will be considered either a masculine brand (H3) or a gender-neutral brand (H4). Participants in the G1 group were informed that the brand was developing a sub-brand targeting female consumers, while retaining the original logo. A one-sample t-test was conducted to assess G1 participants' perception of feminine traits after brand gender-bending (M = 8.01, SD = 0.50, SE = 0.04, Cohen's d = 0.50, Hedges's g = 0.50, $p < 0.001$), neutral traits perception (M = 8.03, SD = 0.57, SE = 0.04, Cohen's d = 0.57, Hedges's g = 0.57, $p < 0.001$), and masculine traits perception (M = 9.06, SD = 0.51, SE = 0.04, Cohen's d = 0.51, Hedges's g = 0.51, $p < 0.001$). The results showed that G1 participants significantly perceived the logo to have both feminine and neutral traits after gender-bending. In other words, after being informed about the brand's gender-bending, both male and female participants perceived the originally masculine font as conveying more feminine and neutral characteristics.

Table 2

G1 Group Perceived Consistency Test of Feminine Fonts After Brand Gender-Bending (N_{total} = 144, Male = 46%, Female = 54%)

Dimension	Group	Mean	SD	SE	Cohen's d	Hedges's
Feminine temperament perception		8.01	0.50	0.042	0.50	0.50
Gender-natural perception	N = 144	8.03	0.57	0.048	0.57	0.57
Masculine temperament perception		8.92	0.71	0.058	0.70	0.70

Note. In this study due to the use of standardized data in the analysis, the mean values differ from the results of Studies 1 & 2.

Through a paired-sample t-test analysis of the feminine and neutral traits perceived after brand gender-bending, although the effect size was small (Cohen's d = 0.27, Hedges' g = 0.28), there was a significant positive correlation between the two ($r = 0.88$, $p < 0.001$). The standardization of pre-gender-bending masculine

perception and after gender-bending masculine trait perception in G1 was conducted using a paired-sample t-test. The results indicated a significant difference in participants' perception of the masculine font traits before and after gender-bending ($t = -51.17$, Cohen's $d = 0.48$, Hedges' $g = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$), but there was no significant positive correlation between the two ($r = 0.12$, $p > 0.05$).

Table 3

Paired Samples T-Test for Feminine Perception & Gender-Natural Perception After Bending, Perceived Masculinity Before/After Gender-Bending

Dimension	R	Mean	SD	SE	Cohen's d	Hedges's
Feminine perception	0.88	8.00	0.50	0.042	0.27	0.28
Gender-natural perception		8.03	0.57	0.048		
Masculine perception (before)	0.12	8.01	0.46	0.038	0.48	0.48
Masculine perception (after)		5.95	0.21	0.017		

Note. In this study due to the use of standardized data in the analysis, the mean values differ from the results of Studies 1 & 2.

In the masculine trait consistency test after gender-bending, G1 participants' perception of the brand's masculine traits after gender-bending showed significant differences between male and female participants (M male = 9.09, SD male = 0.69, SE male = 0.08, Cohen's $d = 0.69$, Hedges' $g = 0.69$, $p < 0.001$; M female = 8.78, SD female = 0.68, SE female = 0.08, Cohen's $d = 0.69$, Hedges' $g = 0.69$, $p < 0.001$). The data indicated a significant difference in masculine trait perception between male and female participants after they were informed of the brand's gender-bending. An independent sample t-test further revealed that males and females exhibited significant differences in their perceptions of the brand's masculine trait consistency after gender-bending ($t(142) = 2.71$, $p = 0.004$, Cohen's $d = 0.68$, Hedges' $g = 0.69$).

Table 4

Comparison of Gender Perception Scores for Masculine Temperament After Brand Gender-Bending (N_{total} = 144, Male = 46%, Female = 54%)

Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	Cohen's d	Hedges's
$G1_{male}$	68	9.09	0.69	0.084	0.68	0.68
$G1_{female}$	76	8.78	0.68	0.078		

Studies 5 & 6

This study aimed to test H5 and H6, which hypothesize that a logo with masculine font traits will be perceived as having feminine trait consistency after brand gender-bending and will be considered either a feminine brand (H5) or a gender-neutral brand (H6). Unlike the G1 group, participants in the G2 group, after assessing the initial feminine trait consistency of the font, were informed that the brand was developing a sub-brand targeting female consumers while retaining the original logo. A one-sample t-test was conducted to assess G2 participants' perception of masculine traits after gender-bending ($M = 6.72$, $SD = 0.95$, $SE = 0.07$, Cohen's $d = 0.95$, Hedges's $g = 0.95$, $p < 0.001$), neutral traits perception ($M = 6.66$, $SD = 0.87$, $SE = 0.09$, Cohen's $d = 0.87$, Hedges's $g = 0.87$, $p < 0.001$), and feminine traits perception ($M = 9.96$, $SD = 0.83$, $SE = 0.63$, Cohen's $d = 0.83$, Hedges's $g = 0.83$, $p < 0.001$). The results showed that G2 participants significantly perceived both feminine and neutral traits after gender-bending. In other words, after being informed of the brand's gender-bending, both male and female participants perceived the originally masculine font as conveying more feminine and neutral characteristics

Table 5

G2 Group Perceived Consistency Test of Feminine Fonts After Brand Gender-Bending (N_{total} = 176, Male = 51%, Female = 49%)

Dimension	Group	Mean	SD	SE	Cohen's d	Hedges's
Masculine temperament perception		6.72	0.95	0.072	0.95	0.95
Gender-natural perception	N = 177	6.66	0.87	0.066	0.87	0.87
Feminine temperament perception		10.05	0.85	0.064	0.85	0.85

Note. In this study due to the use of standardized data in the analysis, the mean values differ from the results of Studies 1 & 2.

Through a paired-sample t-test analysis of the feminine and neutral traits after gender bending, the effect size was extremely small (Cohen's d = 0.048, Hedges' g = 0.048), and the difference in the perception of masculine and neutral traits was almost negligible, with only a slight positive correlation between the two (r = 0.169, p > 0.02). The standardized processing of feminine perception before gender bending and feminine trait perception after gender bending in G2 was tested using a paired-sample t-test, revealing a significant difference in participants' perception of the feminine font traits after gender bending (t = -2.97, Cohen's d = 0.48, Hedges' g = 0.48, p < 0.01); there was no significant positive correlation between the two (r = 0.07, p > 0.1).

Table 6

Paired Samples T-Test for Masculine Perception & Gender-Natural Perception After Bending, Perceived Feminine Before/After Bending

Dimension	R	Mean	SD	SE	Cohen's d	Hedges's
Masculine perception	0.17	6.72	0.95	0.072	0.05	0.05
Gender-natural perception		6.66	0.87	0.066		
Feminine perception (before)	0.07	7.07	1.60	0.121	0.48	0.48
Feminine perception (after)		6.70	0.56	0.043		

Note. In this study due to the use of standardized data in the analysis, the mean values differ from the results of Studies 1 & 2.

In the test of feminine trait perception before and after gender bending, G2 participants' perception of the brand's feminine traits after gender bending showed the following results: male participants (M male = 10.10, SD male = 0.89, SE male = 0.09, Cohen's d = 0.89, Hedges' g = 0.90, p < 0.001) and female participants (M female = 9.99, SD female = 0.80, SE female = 0.08, Cohen's d = 0.80, Hedges' g = 8.01, p < 0.001). The data indicated that there was no significant difference in feminine trait perception between male and female participants after they were informed of the brand's gender bending. An independent sample t-test further confirmed that there was no significant difference between males and females in their perception of the brand's feminine trait consistency after gender bending (t(174) = 0.88, p = 0.380, Cohen's d = 0.84, Hedges' g = 0.85).

Table 7

Comparison of Gender Perception Scores for Feminine Temperament After Brand Gender-Bending (N_{total} = 176, Male = 51%, Female = 49%)

Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	Cohen's d	Hedges's
$G2_{male}$	89	10.10	0.89	0.095	0.84	0.85
$G2_{female}$	87	9.99	0.80	0.086		

Discussion

Summary of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore whether there are differences in the perception of font traits by consumers of different genders after gender bending. Studies 1 & 2 found that the fonts used in brand logos influence consumers' perceptions of brand gender: Display type fonts enhance the masculine traits of the logo and brand, while Script type fonts enhance the feminine traits of the brand. Studies 3 & 4, which analyzed data from Group 1 participants, showed that after being informed of the brand's gender bending, both male and female participants perceived that the originally masculine font took on more feminine and neutral traits. There was a significant difference in the perception of masculine traits in the brand after gender bending, though it still conveyed masculine traits. Furthermore, despite the small effect size, there was a significant positive correlation between the perceptions of feminine and neutral traits, indicating that there may be a relationship between opposite-gender and neutral traits. This could suggest that consumers may interpret opposite-gender traits as neutral traits, a concept reflected in the data from Studies 5 & 6. In these studies, the analysis of Group 2 participants showed that after gender bending in a feminine brand, participants perceived significant changes in the feminine traits of the font used in the brand's logo. Similarly, Studies 5 & 6 confirmed that after gender bending in a feminine brand, participants perceived that the original feminine font conveyed both neutral and masculine traits, with significant changes in their perception of feminine traits. However, the font still conveyed feminine traits.

In summary, the perception of font gender traits influences the perception of brand gender traits, but the gender traits of the font remain relatively stable and do not completely change due to brand gender bending. Instead, this change can be understood as a neutralization of strongly perceived gender traits, shifting from a high level of single-gender traits to more neutral traits, aligning with the gender dimensions of the brand. The findings of this study also offer insights into brand design. If a brand intends to develop a sub-brand to expand its consumer base, it could consider starting with fonts design to reinforce the gender traits of the sub-brand, achieving consistency in the perception of gender traits by the target consumer group. At the same time, this approach can neutralize the strong single-gender traits of the parent brand, transforming them into more neutral gender traits.

Limitation and Future Research Directions

In terms of participant selection, although the study included participants of different genders, all participants had consistent psychological and physiological genders. Future research could consider including participants with diverse gender identities to further explore the impact of brand gender bending on different gender identity groups. Additionally, future studies should examine the generalizability of these findings across cross-cultural contexts. This study employed a quantitative survey in a controlled laboratory setting, which may not fully capture consumer behavior in real market environments. Future research could use field experiments or longitudinal studies to further validate the effect of font gender traits in actual brand gender bending. Regarding the experimental design, this study strictly controlled the fonts and logos observed by the two groups of participants. However, it did not examine how specific design parameters of the fonts (e.g., thickness, curvature, roundness) influenced participants' perceptions. Future research could incorporate other visual elements to explore the combined effects of various design elements on brand gender perception.

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