

How Does Gendered Design Influence Consumer Behaviour and Brand Perception ?

Qiaolin Sun *

Department, University of Leeds, Leeds, The United Kingdom

* Corresponding Author Email: sd23qs@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract. Gendered design plays an increasingly significant role in product identification, identity construction, and brand communication. By strategically utilizing visual symbols such as color, shape, and typography, it activates identity-based responses, thereby influencing consumers' purchasing decisions and their overall perception of brand personality. However, existing research continues to face several limitations, including a heavy reliance on binary gender frameworks, a Western-centric focus, and an insufficient exploration of gendered visual language within digital and social media contexts. This study aims to examine how gendered design influences consumer behavior and brand perception, with a particular emphasis on the critical roles played by visual communication and cultural context. The theoretical framework draws on Gender Performativity Theory and Brand Personality Theory to explain how brands encode and reproduce social gender norms, and how consumers utilize these symbols for self-identity confirmation and performance. Adopting a qualitative research design, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 participants aged 18 to 25. The data underwent thematic analysis, and the findings indicate that consumers possess a high sensitivity to gendered visual cues when judging product suitability. Notably, Generation Z consumers demonstrate strong critical awareness toward traditional binary designs, favoring brands that embody authentic inclusivity, social responsibility, and consistent values. The significance of this study lies in revealing how design serves as a symbolic practice that shapes cognitive boundaries, providing strategic insights for brands to develop inclusive and culturally resonant visual strategies in an increasingly diverse market.

Keywords: Gendered design, Consumer behavior, Brand perception, Visual communication.

1. Introduction

Today, the factors influencing commodity trade are becoming increasingly diverse, and the distinct designs, through their use of symbols, influence consumers' identity. Beyond the visual design of external elements such as colour or shape, specialised designs targeting specific groups, such as gender-specific designs, are gaining acceptance as a powerful, silent language that shapes daily interactions between the public and the market. Gendered design refers to the strategic use of visual, symbolic, and linguistic elements associated with gender in product design, branding, and marketing communication to activate identity-based responses among consumers [1]. This design strategy often draws on culturally constructed gender meanings, such as associating rounded forms and lighter colours with femininity, and angular shapes or darker tones with masculinity [2]. At the same time, gendered design reflects how brands reproduce, negotiate, or challenge gender norms within specific cultural and social contexts.

Consumer behaviour refers to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural processes through which individuals acquire, use, and evaluate products and services [3]. Consumer behaviour is influenced by product design. Design, as a nonverbal communication method, not only conveys a product's functional attributes but also carries rich socio-cultural connotations, influencing consumers' perceptions of products and their purchasing decisions. Brand perception encompasses consumers' overall evaluations, emotional associations, and symbolic meanings attached to a brand, which significantly influence trust, loyalty, and purchase intention [4]. Visual design elements play a crucial role in shaping brand perception by showcasing brand personality and conveying brand values. Gender-specific design, in particular, can reinforce or weaken a consumer's sense of identity in different contexts. Recent studies demonstrate that gender-congruent design cues can positively affect

brand evaluations and purchase intention by reinforcing consumers' self-concept. For instance, research on packaging design shows that gendered visual elements, such as typography, colour, and imagery, influence perceived product quality and brand personality among male and female consumers [5]. Cross-cultural evidence further suggests that preferences for gendered versus gender-neutral designs vary across markets, with stronger traditional gender cues being more effective in collectivist cultures. Moreover, younger consumers increasingly favour brands whose gender expressions align with their personal values and social identities, particularly in visual branding and digital communication.

Despite growing scholarly attention, several research gaps remain in the study of gendered design and consumer behaviour. First, many studies continue to rely on binary gender frameworks, with limited investigation into non-binary and gender-fluid consumers' responses to design cues. Second, existing literature remains Western-centric, with insufficient exploration of gendered design practices in Asian and emerging markets. Third, while prior research has focused heavily on product packaging, the role of gendered visual language in brand communication and social media contexts remains underexplored. Therefore, this study aims to examine how gendered design influences consumer behaviour and brand perception, with particular emphasis on visual communication and cultural context.

2. Literature review

Gendered design is widely regarded in consumer behaviour research as a socioculturally constructed design and marketing strategy. This design involves using visual elements such as colour, shape, font, and imagery to convey symbolic meanings associated with different genders, thereby influencing consumers' cognitive and behavioural responses. Previous research has indicated that consumers can quickly identify the associations between these elements and different genders and react differently to designs based on their own gender identity. Studies have shown that when a product's visual design aligns with consumers' gender identity, their positive brand evaluations and purchase intentions are significantly enhanced [6]. Previous research indicates that gender-consistent design elements can strengthen consumers' self-concept, thereby increasing brand preference and purchase intention. Similarly, it was found that visual cues associated with gendered design influence consumers' perceptions of product quality and brand personality and increase brand trust [7]. Soft colours and rounded shapes are often used in products associated with women, while masculinity is linked to strength, rationality, and competitiveness; designs tend to feature angular elements and a function-oriented approach. Overall, existing literature emphasises the role of gendered design in activating consumers' gender identity and enhancing self-consistency and highlights its strategic value in brand communication and product design. However, as societal gender perceptions change, this field also faces challenges from the limitations of the binary gender framework and from new issues such as cross-cultural and cross-generational differences.

Beyond its impact on consumer behaviour, existing literature also emphasises its role in shaping brand perception. Gendered design is a key strategy in shaping brand perception. Brand perception is both a consumer's basic judgment of a product's function and quality, and is influenced by the meaning and value conveyed by related symbols. Visual elements and symbolic features associated with the product, as well as the resulting subjective attitudes and emotional responses from the public, are crucial in influencing brand perception. Research shows that consumers quickly form inferences about a brand's gender characteristics and values by decoding visual elements such as packaging and labels [7]. For example, previous research indicated that styles and images in designs for different genders may influence evaluations by male and female consumers [6]. Younger consumers, in particular, tend to choose those brands that align with their personal values and social attitudes. In addition, research on product packaging and label design indicates that the distinction between gendered visual symbols significantly guides consumers' perceptions of brand personality and quality. A study found that strong fonts and dark colours in abstract images can be connected to traits such as

strength or masculinity [8]. Those designs using curved lines and soft colours are more easily perceived as feminine characteristics, showing elegance or refinement of female traits. This gender-based categorisation directly influences consumers' quality assessments and judgments of suitable application scenarios for different brands' products. Recently, gendered designs have been widely used to construct brands, establish self-identity, and build emotional connections with different gender groups. The younger generation, especially Generation Z consumers, pay more attention to the alignment between brand and personal value. In other word, they tend to choose brands whose visual designs can reflect their personal gender beliefs and social identity. Brands that advocate for diversity often use neutral colours and minimalist designs to showcase gender equality values and reinforce a more inclusive and open brand image [9].

To conclude, some studies have further explored gendered design from a cross-cultural perspective, suggesting that cultural context moderates its effectiveness. Comparative research shows that consumers in Western markets tend to prefer gender-neutral designs, whereas consumers in Asian markets are more receptive to designs with traditional gender associations. Despite these contributions, existing literature still presents several limitations. First, many studies rely on binary gender frameworks and lack discussion of non-binary consumers. Second, research has primarily focused on product packaging, while gendered visual language in brand communication and social media contexts remains underexplored.

3. Gender performativity theory

Judith Butler's gender performance theory provides an important theoretical resource for understanding the design practice of gender. The theory claims that gender is not based on a certain biological essence, but is produced through repeated specific behavior, language expression and appearance display in daily social interaction. In other words, gender is the result of the continuous role of social norms, a process of continuous construction, rather than an inherent stable identity. Introducing this perspective into the analysis of gender design will help to reveal how design practice participates in the shaping process of gender identity. Specifically, brands constantly reproduce and strengthen the mainstream gender concept through visual elements such as product packaging, color matching and symbolic symbols. These design choices are not only about aesthetics, but also constitute a kind of social behavior, which implies the normative presupposition of "who is the target user" and "who should use the product", thus virtually affecting consumers' cognition and identification of their own gender roles. From a sociological perspective, consumers gain identity and belonging through the consumption of specific symbols, and the gendered encoding in brand design constitutes this symbolic system of identification. When consumers encounter brand designs consistent with their gender identity, they are more likely to experience psychological resonance in terms of identity congruence and cultural fit [6]. However, for consumer groups that are not included in the mainstream gender paradigm, this design may lead to psychological exclusion or even marginalization.

This study conceptualises gendered design as a system of symbolic encoding through which gender meanings are embedded in visual and communicative elements such as colour, form, typography, and imagery. These symbols are socially constructed and culturally learned, allowing consumers to quickly recognise and interpret gender cues in product design and brand communication. Rather than functioning as purely aesthetic features, gendered design elements operate as meaning-making devices that communicate gender roles, identities, and values. The theoretical framework of this study draws on the assumption that consumers actively interpret design cues in relation to their self-concept and gender identity. When gendered design cues align with consumers' gender identity, they are more likely to elicit positive emotional responses, trust, and purchase intention. Conversely, incongruent or conflicting gender cues may lead to discomfort, rejection, or negative brand evaluations. This perspective positions consumers as active meaning-makers rather than passive recipients of design messages.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research design

In order to deeply understand how consumers interpret the gender design elements in the brand, and how these interpretations affect their purchase behavior and brand impression, this study uses a qualitative research design. The method of qualitative research can deeply explore consumers' subjective interpretation, emotional experience and its significance to gender design, which is highly consistent with the goal of this study. In terms of specific operation methods, the study selected semi-structured interviews as the main data collection tool. This approach can not only maintain a consistent interview framework around the core topics, but also leave enough space for participants to freely narrate in combination with their personal experience and views.

4.2. Participants

The participants of this study consist of consumers aged between 18 and 25, a demographic group that is highly exposed to branding, visual communication, and social media marketing. This age group was selected because young consumers are more likely to engage with brand identity, visual aesthetics, and value-driven consumption, making them particularly sensitive to gendered design cues. A total of 11 participants were recruited for the interviews to ensure sufficient diversity of perspectives while maintaining depth of qualitative analysis. Participants were recruited through online platforms and personal networks, using purposive sampling to ensure that all participants had prior experience with branded products and visual consumption.

4.3. Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews focusing on participants' perceptions of gendered design in brands. Interview topics included participants' understanding of gendered design, their emotional responses to gendered visual elements, and the influence of such designs on brand impression and purchasing decisions. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted either online or in person, depending on participants' availability. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy during transcription and analysis.

4.4. Data analysis

Before the formal analysis, all interview recordings were completely transcribed into text form. This study uses the theme analysis method to analyze the data, aiming to identify the core themes and typical patterns related to gender design, consumer perception and brand evaluation. The whole analysis process follows the standard process, including getting familiar with the data content, carrying out preliminary coding, identifying potential topics, and repeatedly revising and refining the topics. In the process of topic extraction, researchers carefully sorted out the participants' answers, captured the repeated meaning expression and interpretation framework, and summarized the representative core topics accordingly.

4.5. Ethical considerations

This study attaches great importance to the normative requirements of research ethics in the whole implementation process. Before joining the study, all participants were informed of the purpose and basic process of the study, and clearly knew that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any adverse consequences. In order to protect the privacy of participants, the study used pseudonyms to replace their real identities, and desensitized all information that may point to personal identities in the transcripts. All the data collected by the Institute are stored in a safe manner and strictly limited to the scope of this academic research, and will not be used for any other purpose.

5. Result and discussion

This study regards consumer behavior as a dynamic process composed of cognitive assessment, emotional response and purchase decision. Through the analysis of the original interview data, several core themes were extracted: color coding, symbol clues, product applicability judgment and gender based classification intuition. Respondents were generally able to keenly capture the gender based visual elements in product design, such as color tendency (pink and black gray), modeling features (soft curves and strong lines) and font style (round font and bold font) [10]. These visual symbols constitute consumers' initial cognition of the product and have a direct impact on their subsequent purchase behavior. As one interviewee said, "even if the gender is not clearly marked on the package, I can still judge that this is a product designed for men through the color matching of black and gray and bold words in capitals." this phenomenon shows that the visual language in commercial design not only carries the aesthetic function, but also participates in the construction and transmission of gender concepts [11]. This kind of design is not value-neutral, but closely related to the social and cultural cognition of masculinity and femininity. In this context, gender based design has gradually become a social tool for consumers to judge whether products are "suitable for themselves", and has strengthened the logic of gender differentiation in the process of consumption [1].

In terms of brand selection, respondents not only pay attention to the functional attributes of products, but also show a clear perception and preference for brand personality. They tend to choose brands that match their own image, and think that these brands understand themselves better or are more similar to themselves. This is consistent with the view of brand personality theory that brands establish an emotional connection with consumers through personification [12]. As one respondent said, "the brand I choose makes me feel like me. It may not be the cheapest, but it just feels right." This cognitive process is essentially a judgment of identity consistency. Consumers use brand design to confirm their self-identity and express their hope to be understood by others. The gender personification image built by the brand through indirect ways such as vision, language and intonation can evoke the identity resonance of consumers in a subtle way, and then enhance the attractiveness of the brand and user loyalty.

It is worth noting that respondents born in Generation Z (18-25 years old) showed a strong sense of questioning the ethical legitimacy of traditional gender based design. One interviewee who thought he was non binary pointed out: "sexy advertisements made with supermodels like 'Victoria's Secret' made me uncomfortable. They seemed to sell women's bodies as a perfect sample." such critical cognition directly affected their brand preference and prompted them to turn to more inclusive emerging brands, such as thirdlove, which covers a variety of sizes, or tomboyx, which advocates gender neutrality. Some respondents of Generation Z recognized the neutral or gender ambiguous design, believing that such a design not only broke the traditional gender binary division, but also improved the image of the brand in terms of openness and diversity. However, they did not fully accept all forms of "de sexualization" design, but remained alert to the possible pseudo-diversity. For example, one interviewee pointed out that "if a brand never makes a sound at ordinary times and suddenly adds rainbow elements to its packaging, I think it is very insincere." this view echoed the criticism of the academic circles on the strategy of "de sexualized design", indicating that if the "progress" of the brand in design only stays on the surface, but is not really implemented in the organizational culture and practical actions, it may be seen through by young consumers, and even cause adverse effects.

To sum up, the research results show that the respondents are highly sensitive to the gender visual symbols in the product packaging, and can quickly judge the gender attribution through the color, shape, font and other elements. This phenomenon verifies the applicability of the gender visual reproduction theory in the consumption situation [13], and also shows that gender design plays a certain role in the socialization guidance in the process of consumer choice. At the same time, the data also support the explanatory power of brand personality theory at the level of emotional identity: consumers tend to choose brands that can represent or echo their self-image. This identity is not mainly based on product functions, but more on the match between brand personality characteristics

and self-concept. This shows that consumers have regarded brand design as a way of identity expression and self-confirmation. However, different from previous studies, Generation Z consumers show stronger critical thinking, especially in the ethical dimension and inclusive authenticity of gender based design. Some respondents explicitly rejected brands that strengthen female body discipline (such as "Victoria's Secret"), and instead supported brands that advocate gender diversity. This shift reveals the anti-control sentiment caused by the phenomenon of "commercialization authorization" in real consumption - when brands only cover up their internal structural problems with "progress" packaging, it may cause consumers' alarm and disgust. Respondents also hold reservations about brands that only rely on neutral colors or rainbow symbols for surface packaging, believing that such practices lack institutional support and are difficult to truly reflect the inclusive value [14].

The interview data further reveal that the impact of gender design on consumer behavior and brand perception is multidimensional and interactive. Consumers do not passively accept the gender information embedded in the design, but actively interpret and respond to it on the basis of their own social and cultural background, identity and individual experience. Gender based visual language plays an important role in judging product suitability, identifying brand personality and influencing purchase decisions. Whether the gender temperament of the brand matches the self-identity of consumers has become a key variable affecting emotional connection and brand loyalty [15]. At the same time, the interview also reflects that the traditional dual gender design may cause the consumer groups with non-dual gender or gender freedom tendencies to feel alienated and excluded, exposing the lack of inclusiveness of multiple gender identities in the current market environment.

6. Conclusion

This study focuses on the mechanism of gender based design on consumer behavior and brand perception. Based on gender performance theory and brand personality theory, this study explores how gender coding in visual design affects consumers' brand identity, purchase intention and overall attitude. The study points out that gender design is not a neutral way of visual communication, but a symbolic practice rooted in gender stereotypes and cultural norms. Brands shape specific personality characteristics through visual elements such as color, graphics, and text, while consumers use these symbols to judge whether the product conforms to their own identity and value orientation.

The survey results show that most respondents can quickly identify gender cues in the design and make purchase decisions accordingly, while showing a clear emotional tendency towards the personality characteristics of the brand. Especially in the Generation Z group, consumers are more sensitive to gender expression. They not only pay attention to whether the brand presents multiple gender images, but also question the lack of authenticity of communication strategies such as pseudo diversity or superficial equality. This shows that contemporary consumers' judgment of brand authenticity is becoming more and more detailed and complex.

From a theoretical perspective, gender based design not only limits consumers' cognitive framework of products and brands, but also reflects the power logic implied in design practice. At a time when gender concepts are increasingly diverse, the brand's visual strategy of using the traditional dual gender model may cause consumers' alienation or even disgust. In contrast, brand visual expression with cultural insight and inclusive thinking is more likely to gain consumer recognition, thereby enhancing brand competitiveness.

Although Gen Z generally prefers neutral or diversified visual expression, they are highly vigilant against pseudo-inclusive expression, indicating that brands must pay attention to the authenticity and internal consistency of strategies when pursuing diversified communication. Therefore, the discussion of gender based design should not only stay at the level of interpretation of visual symbols, but also be regarded as an important way to respond to consumers' cultural identity and social position.

It should be pointed out that this study has some limitations. First of all, the sample is mainly concentrated on the specific age groups in the urban environment, which fails to fully reflect the

differences in gender cultural cognition between different generations and regions. Secondly, the research focuses on visual elements and has not yet involved the impact of multimodal design, such as voice and intonation, on gender expression. In addition, the adopted theoretical frameworks of brand personality and gender performance are mostly derived from the Western academic context, and their applicability in the context of non-Western culture still needs further discussion.

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