

Chapter 1

The Influence of Gender-Neutral Advertising on Digital Consumers' Advertising Attitudes

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ABSTRACT

Gender-neutral advertising has become an important approach in terms of digital consumers, shifting from traditional stereotyped values towards the inclusiveness of both genders. To examine the influence of gender-neutral advertising on digital consumers, the authors measured the attitude towards gender-neutral and gender-stereotyped advertisements. To this end, a questionnaire and within-study design were employed to gather responses to three advertisements of both types from the prevailing industries. Digital consumers showed a significantly higher advertising attitude score for gender-neutral advertisements. The results have important implications for marketers and researchers since gender-neutral advertising has become the prevailing form of gaining favourable impacts with digital consumers.

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INTRODUCTION

The media industry differs from other industries because of its strong privileged position in communication with society, together with the viewers' perception of it being an industry which has a large influence on public opinions, cultural norms and values. As such, the media industry is dominated strongly by advertising and marketing, not just because advertising achieves large visibility in society, but also because it becomes the main construct of the popular culture, developing society's perceptions and views. It can easily be said that advertising is a branch of the media industry prevalent over all other media industries (Sinclair, 2015). From the need for more effective and prosperous approaches towards targeted consumers, the theory of targeted marketing was developed, gender advertising, among others. Nevertheless, gender stereotypes in advertising can harm the attitude towards advertising (Coward & Wagner, 2021; Huhmann & Limbu, 2016), hence nonstereotyped or gender-neutral portrayals have occurred in advertising (Liljedal et al., 2020).

Gender is a very sensitive topic, being reinvented constantly through social, political and commercial spheres. Traditional approaches to gender stereotypes, causing the development of sexism, have been confronted directly in the last century, resulting in significant changes (Brown & Stone, 2016). Many companies decided to approach the problem directly, using the marketing strategy of rebranding, developing new identities, focusing on expanding the reach of inclusivity, encouraging individuality. There are gender differences in practically all areas of life (Hoffman et al., 2021) and people have different lifestyles, resulting in different consumers' behaviours and attitudes (Hudders & De Jans, 2021). A specific separation of the roles between males and females in a society and the characteristics which are usually related to them help the marketers in shaping a typology of products within gender dimensions, which guarantee the needed product representation (Debevec & Iyer, 1986). Products are designed deliberately, with the goal of a successful communication towards the males or the females whose behaviour fits into the assigned gender roles. By using brand personality and image a personification is generated, which evokes an unconscious consumer's identification with the brand. Media culture is among the largest medium of socialisation, as it is used for learning the norms and values of the society. The development of social constructs can be seen as both including and excluding, defining what is to be viewed as standard, and what is to be viewed as a deviation. Constructs rooted strongly through the media and the popular culture become difficult to separate and define, merging with the society norms (Leavy & Trier-Bieniek, 2014). Noticeably, this results in the growth of gender oversimplification and overgeneralisation, creating gender binary views separated solely by two polar dimensions: Masculine and feminine.

These changes have been influenced strongly by the large consumer group known as the 'millennials' or, more appropriately, 'digital natives', as a generation which has grown up in the developing digital era. These generations of young digital consumers, unlike other older generations, were raised without any media restrictions, discovering the freedom of choosing the wanted information through their digital literacy. This resulted in the growth of their social, cultural and global awareness, far from the boundaries of the traditional media. In the eyes of the millennials, the traditional rules of the society are an overly controlled and predefined set of social norms, which are not progressive in the social sense. The millennials therefore strive towards nonconformity, choosing their own path. Drifting from the traditional norms and values, there is a strong presence of changes in definitions and representations of gender and sexuality, including the expansion and experimentation of boundaries in the traditional gender identi-

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