STEREOTYPES AND GENDER-NEUTRAL ADVERTISING: PERCEPTIONS OF THE GENERATION Z AND Y COHORTS

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Abstract

The advertising industry is well-known for employing commonly used and widely accepted, stereotypical depictions of gender, both in the past, but also today. On the other hand, we are experiencing an ever-increasing number of advertising campaigns and brands which are aimed at questioning dominant stereotypes and ideas around the concepts of what might be understood under the terms 'femininity' and 'masculinity'. This work discusses the research findings relating to the ways in which gender-neutrality is understood through advertising. Specifically, it examines generation Z and generation Y cohort members' perceptions of stereotypes and gender-neutral advertising. Statistical differences between the two generational cohort members regarding stereotypes and gender-neutral advertising are also exploited. The hypotheses were assessed through the use of independent sample t-test analysis. The ensuing discussion is outlined based on outcomes, and advertising tactics are highlighted as part of the communication approaches for brands.

Keywords: Generation Z, Generation Y, Advertising, Gender-Neutral Marketing & Stereotypes.

1. Introduction and Purpose

Changes in advertising are evident with respect to the ways in which masculinity and femininity are perceived, and these changes can be correlated with societal and cultural switches of each specific period (Timke and O'Barr, 2017). Advertising has historically exploited gender stereotypes - a fact which is still evident in the present (Timke and O'Barr, 2017; Ellemers, 2018). At the same time, we are experiencing an ever-growing number of advertising and brands that attempt to call into question the dominant notions and tropes of femininity and masculinity, including aspects of these associated with race, age, and ability (Champlin and Sterbenk, 2018; 2019).

Prior research has demonstrated how stereotypical representations of gender have been employed in advertisements with a view to improving brand-customer relations (Lieven et al., 2014; Ellemers, 2018). Over recent years, though, we have observed certain transformations in terms of gender usage in marketing communications whilst concurrently witnessing related shifts in society (Aramendia-Muneta, 2020). Nevertheless, there is limited research regarding the stereotypic perceptions of generations Z and Y members and, moreover, the research on gender- neutral advertising is sparse (Hickman et al., 2019; Stavrianea et al., 2020).

Therefore, the subsequent research questions (RQ) arose from the related literature and the significance of peoples' behavior towards advertising:

RQ1: What is people's perception of gender stereotypes?

RQ2: What are people's attitudes regarding gender-neutral advertisement?

RQ3: Do people from different age groups express the same level of perception regarding gender stereotypes and attitudes towards gender-neutral advertisement?

This research focuses on Greece as a case study. It draws a sample from the Greek generation Z (born between 1995–2009) and Y cohort (born between 1978-1994), including only adult members of the Greek generation Z cohort.

From the above-stated research questions, the scope of this study is to examine the Greek generation Z (Gen Z'ers) and Y (Gen Y'ers) cohort's perception regarding gender stereotypes and gender-neutral advertisement (answering RQ1 and RQ2). Furthermore, its objective is to explore if Gen Z'ers and Gen Y'ers express the same level of perception regarding gender stereotypes and gender-neutral advertisement (answering RQ3).

This study will contribute to academia twofold. Firstly, it will contribute by adding knowledge to the academic stream of research regarding young consumers' perception of gender stereotypes and gender-neutral advertising. Secondly, by offering valuable insights to marketers who wish to understand better the ways in which their younger customers might desire and expect their favourite brands to interact with them.

2. Literature Review

It is clear that as a person grows, changes, and develops, his/her personal identity also undergoes changes and transformations. As suggested in Steensma et al. (2013) as well as Hickman et al. (2019), identity can incorporate a multiplicity of attributes, including religious or national identity. However, gender identity is not thought to include a multiplicity of dimensions. It is most commonly thought to consist of two opposing poles (Hickman, 2019) and is constructed around the relations of each individual to other persons belonging to the same gender (Steensma et al., 2013). Experts in this area of research accept that gender identity is nuanced and complex (Mishna et al., 2012; Hickman et al., 2019). As discussed by Budgeon (2013) and Vantieghem et al. (2014), there is a wide array of research available that explores the issue of gender identity from the viewpoint of man vs. woman. There is, however, limited research on the subject of gender-fluid identity, in particular as regards its representation through advertisements and marketing materials (Hickman et al., 2019; Stavrianea et al., 2020).

The relationships around which each society is structured also lead to the creation of stereotypes. A stereotype is, in essence, the oversimplification of a more complex concept or image. Stereotypes are views and ideas, greatly simplified, for the benefit of certain individuals and social groups. They are opinions and ideas which create discrimination between social groups (Grau and Zotos, 2016; Ellemers, 2018). According to Augoustinos and Walker (1998), stereotypes - which are collectively and socially constructed - help to simplify social life through the formation of ideas and assumptions.

The creation and shaping of stereotypes is a process driven by social, political, and economic elements that are passed down from generation to generation resulting in the increasing prevalence of stereotypes and their resilience to change. Therefore, as a result of the existing social structures, stereotypes are defined as clear generalizations derived from repetitive habits predicated on expectation and judgment and often do not correspond to reality (Ellemers, 2018). Such generalizations disregard people's individuality and cultural diversity and form the source and basis of prejudices and negative - or even positive attitudes - towards other individuals or groups of individuals. In turn, they lead to discrimination, either in practice

through intervention or on a theoretical level as a result of indifference in areas of coexistence, such as school, work environment, etc. (Taylor and Stern, 1997).

Current literature in advertising recognizes the fact that women are frequently portrayed in such a manner that their appearance and (perceived) beauty are centrally positioned and play a pivotal role in the images presented (Grau and Zotos, 2016). Alternatively, they are presented as occupying important roles within a family setting. Women who occupy professional roles are fewer in advertising. Men, on the other hand, are portrayed as authoritative figures and display their professional roles prominently (Reichert and Carpenter 2004; Grau and Zotos, 2016). The literature on gender stereotyping discusses the implications and influence that particular social movements and specific time periods had on these issues (i.e. the feminist movement and the shifts in the popular perception of women as they gradually began to work outside the home and became employed and employable). Simultaneously, we began to experience changes in the manner, in which men were portrayed in advertisements, too (Grau and Zotos, 2016; Stavrianea et al., 2020).

Gender-neutral marketing and advertising are nowadays important, given the fact that genders are defined in contemporary societies in a more complex way, and therefore, marketing specialists and researchers must explore in more depth and gain insights regarding the latest relevant emerging megatrends (Ratten, 2017). The discussion around gender stereotyping must, therefore, continue and, if anything, be intensified (Digout and Tayeh, 2015; Aramendia-Muneta, 2020). To this purpose, the interactions which are aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of marketing should follow changes in society more closely and become more inclusive if they are to achieve their goal of improving marketing efficiency (Aramendia-Muneta, 2020).

Prior research has shown that millennials, as well as post-Millenials, display lower levels of bias concerning issues relevant to gender identity and this is a pattern that brands ought to recognize and follow (Laughlin, 2016). In fact, taking a stand on issues such as gender inclusiveness as well as other social problems or issues that they care about, is something that millennials look favorably upon when making choices about brands and organizations which they wish to embrace or adopt (Read et al., 2019; Snyder, 2015). Although the research undertaken by Akestam et al. (2017) offered limited scope, it nevertheless clearly indicated the favorable response shown to advertising that incorporates LGBT elements. However, it is clear that more research is required to elucidate the ways in which the contemporary consumer behaves when confronted with advertising, which involves references to members of particular social groups (Eisend et al., 2014; Read et al., 2019).

3. Methodology

The data of this paper was collected in April 2020, from Greece, during the country's lockdown when the government was taking proactive measures for the SARS-COV-2 virus spread and the COVID-19 disease (Kamenidou et al., 2020a). A non-probability sampling method was applied, i.e., criteria and snowball sampling. The main criteria for taking part in the research were to be a member of the Greek generation Y or an adult member of the generation Z cohort. Thus, participants had to be born between 1978-1994 (Williams and Page, 2011) in order to be a member of the generation Y cohort. Also, in order to be an adult member of the generation Z cohort, they had to be born between 1995 -2002, even though the generation Z cohort has a birth range from 1995-2009 (Strauss and Howe, 2020; McCrindle, 2006). An online questionnaire was utilized in order to collect data employing social media platforms (Facebook) and email accounts, following the Kamenidou et al. (2020 b,c) procedure.

Additionally, permission to use the answers provided was requested (the questionnaire's first question) since anonymity was secured. In the one-month period that the link was active, 432 Gen Y'ers and Gen Z'ers participated. For this paper, two issues are analyzed: gender stereotypes

and attitudes towards gender-neutral advertisements. In order to measure gender stereotypes, the old fashion sexism scale was adopted from Swim et al. (1995), as it was considered that these items do report gender stereotypes. In order to avoid confusion, the reversed scored items of the original scale were rephrased into positive statements. Two items measured attitudes towards gender-neutral advertisement: "In order for an ad to be effective it doesn't need to show which gender it is targeting" and "Gender-neutral advertising is just a trend". The reliability of the first scale is α=0.825, and for the two-item scale, it is α= 0.735, which is considered sufficient for both cases (Hair et al., 2019; Spector, 1992). Both questions were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale. Data analysis included descriptive statistics and independent sample t-tests.

4. Sample Profile

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the participants. Regarding the generational cohort, participants were almost equally represented, while female participants were overrepresented, with a small percentage being LGBT. Additionally, in the vast majority, the sample was single, had at least a university degree, was dependent on others or were private employees, resided in an urban area, and had a personal net income per year up to 10000.00€.

Table 1: Sample Profile

Demographic characteristics	N	%
Generational Cohort		
Generation Z	213	49.3
Generation Y	219	50.7
Sex		
Male	116	27.9
Female	300	72.1
LGBT		
Yes	61	4.7
No	355	85.3
Marital Status		
Single	378	90.9
Married	20	4.8
Divorced /widowed	18	4.3
Education		
Secondary (Gymnasium -Lyceum)	141	33.9
Bachelor, Master, PhD	275	66.1
Profession		
Dependent (Student, unemployed)	237	56.9
Private employee	129	31.0
Public employee	24	5.8
Self-employed	26	6.3
Residing area		
Urban	392	94.2
Rural	24	5.8
Personal net income /year		
<4000.00 €	237	57.0
4000.01-10000.00€	88	21.2
10000.01 +	91	21.9

Source: The authors

5. Gender Stereotypes and Gender-Neutral Advertisement

Table 2 presents the gender stereotypes that the generation Y and Z participants hold (answering RQ1 & scope of research). In the first row, the numbers 1-5 are the numbers of the 5-point Likert scale, and MS refers to the mean score, while in the parenthesis, the standard deviation is presented. Specifically, the 5-point Likert scale was assessed as 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neither agree/nor disagree, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree. The results reveal that gender stereotypes do not exist for the Greek generation Y and Z cohort for three statements. In contrast, they show gender-related stereotype perception regarding women as the boss, as well as the rational thinking of women, and, therefore, decisions rationally made by them.

Table 2: Gender stereotypes of generation Y and Z cohort (%)

Statements	1	2	3	4	5	MS
Women are generally as smart as men*	0.0	2.4	8.7	19.0	70.0	4.57 (0.75)
I would be equally comfortable having a woman as a boss as a man	67.1	24.8	4.8	2.9	0.5	1.45 (0.76)
It is important to encourage boys and girls equally to participate in athletics*	0.0	1.7	8.4	18.5	71.4	4.60 (0.71)
Women are just as capable of thinking logically as men	65.9	20.2	7.7	2.4	3.8	1.58 (1.00)
When both parents are employed, and their child gets sick at school, the school should either call the mother or the father*	1.2	6.0	12.5	17.1	63.2	4.40 (0.99)

Source: the authors. Items with an asterisk were reversed

Additionally, the participants attitudes towards gender-neutral advertisement were assessed (answering RQ2 & scope of research) on a 5-point Likert scale, i.e. 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neither agree/nor disagree, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree. (Table 3). Table 3 reveals that Greek Gen Z'ers and Gen Y'ers tend to believe that advertisements should not have to show the gender they target in order to be effective, since more than half of the sample agrees or strongly agree with this statement. Additionally, they do not believe that Gender-neutral advertising is a trend, with more than half of the sample to disagree in this case.

Table 3: Gender-neutral advertisements (%)

Statements	1	2	3	4	5	MS
In order for an ad to be effective, it doesn't need to show which gender it is targeting.	3.8	11.5	27.9	31.7	25.0	3.63 (1.09)
Gender-neutral advertising is just a trend	21,2	30,0	37,5	9,9	1,4	2.41 (0.97)

Source: the authors.

6. Generation Z and Y cohort differences -Hypothesis tests

Generational cohort differences were examined regarding gender stereotypes and attitudes towards gender-neutral advertisement (answering RQ3/Objective N.2). Independent samples t-tests were utilized using the SPSS ver. 25 software (Tables 4 and 5).

Table 4 summarizes the group statistics for generation Z and generation Y cohort regarding gender stereotypes (items 1-5) and attitudes towards gender-neutral advertisement (items 6-7). Among the seven cases tested, the Gen Y'er cohort subjects have higher stereotype perceptions as compared to the Gen Z'er members for three gender stereotypes. Additionally, they have a less positive attitude towards the statements referring to the gender-neutral advertisement.

Table 4: Group statistics of generational cohorts regarding gender stereotypes and gender-neutral advertisement

Stereotype statements and gender-neutral advertisement statements	Generational cohorts	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
1. Women are generally as smart as men*	Gen Z	213	4.662	.68564	.0470
	Gen Y	203	4.631	.80368	.0564
2. I would be equally comfortable having a woman as a boss as a man	Gen Z	213	1.366	.6495	.0445
	Gen Y	203	1.537	.8515	.0598
3. It is important to encourage boys and girls equally to participate in athletics*	Gen Z	213	4.648	.74793	.0513
	Gen Y	203	4.542	.67631	.0475
4. Women are just as capable of thinking logically as men	Gen Z	213	1.563	1.0379	.0711
	Gen Y	203	1.601	.9665	.0678
5. When both parents are employed and their child gets sick at school, the school should call either the mother or the father*	Gen Z	213	4.409	1.0584	.0725
	Gen Y	203	4.291	.9169	.0644
6. In order for an ad to be effective, it doesn't need to show which gender it is targeting	Gen Z	213	3.869	1.042	.0714
	Gen Y	203	3.371	1.093	.0767
7. Gender-neutral advertising is just a trend.	Gen Z	213	2.254	.982	.0673
	Gen Y	203	2.562	.944	.0663

Source: the authors. Items with an asterisk were reversed

Table 5 presents the independent sample t-test for gender stereotypes and gender-neutral advertisement (with even variances being assumed). The t-tests unveiled that for four out of seven cases, gender differences do exist.

Table 5. Independent samples t-test between the generational cohorts regarding gender stereotypes and gender-neutral advertisement (equal variances assumed)

Stereotype statements and gender-neutral advertisement statements	F	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
1. Women are generally as smart as men*	12.194	-2.720	414	.007*
2. I would be equally comfortable having a woman as a boss as a man	17.519	-2.306	414	.022*
3. It is important to encourage boys and girls equally to participate in athletics*	.677	-1.514	414	.131
4. Women are just as capable of thinking logically as men	.003	-.382	414	.703
5. When both parents are employed, and their child gets sick at school, the school should call either the mother or the father*	.611	-1.211	414	.227
6. In order for an ad to be effective, it doesn't need to show which gender it is targeting	1.627	-4.767	414	.000*
7. Gender-neutral advertising is just a trend	.123	-3.260	414	.001*

Source: the authors. Items with an asterisk were reversed

Specifically, no generational cohort differences were detected regarding three statements, referring to the gender stereotypes: "It is important to encourage boys and girls equally to participate in athletics", "Women are just as capable of thinking logically as men," and "When both parents are employed, and their child gets sick at school, the school should call either the mother or the father".

On the other hand, the independent sample t-test showed that there are statistical differences between the Gen Z'ers and Gen Y'ers towards two statements regarding gender stereotype perceptions (F = 12.194, p = 0.007 and F = 17.519, p = 0.022 respectively), for the statements "Women are generally as smart as men" and "I would be equally comfortable having a woman as a boss as a man". Lastly, with respect to gender-neutral advertisement, results also indicate that generational differences occur (F = 1.627, p = 0.000; F = 0.123, p = 0.001 respectively for the 6th and 7th statement from table 6).

7. Discussion and Conclusions

This research makes a valuable contribution to the academic discourse on the subject of gender stereotypes and gender-neutral advertising. Additionally, it provides companies and brands with useful information in terms of designing marketing and advertising campaigns aimed at individuals belonging to the generation Z and Y cohort.

Results revealed that, in general, Greek young adults do not agree with gender stereotypes except from women working in high level positions and being equally rational in thought. Moreover, it is important that members of the Z generation were found to differentiate and believe more strongly that women are as smart as men. Additionally, even though, members of both generational cohorts are skeptical about having a woman as a boss, members of the Gen Y cohort are more open to this possibility, which could be explained by the fact that they have more experience with women in working environments than Gen Z'ers.

Furthermore, both generational cohort members tend to be positive towards gender-neutral advertising, with the younger ones to be even more receptive to it, since they believe that advertisements do not necessarily have to show the gender they target, nor they are just a current trend. The above-mentioned findings are aligned with prior research indicating that

members of the younger generation are less biased concerning gender identity issues than older consumers and that brands ought to recognize and follow this societal change (Laughlin, 2016; Ratten, 2017; Aramendia-Muneta, 2020). Moreover, it has to be pointed out that Gen Y'ers believe more than the Gen- Z'ers that gender-neutral advertising is a trend. This behavior is probably justified by the fact that they have experienced several trends which appeared and disappeared in their lives as they are older. This issue though, could be further investigated in the future.

The outcomes and conclusions that can be drawn from the present research are beneficial to the work of marketers and professionals in advertising given that they offer insights into how to enhance the ways in which individuals respond to advertising, as well as to develop strategies for communication which will help approach and address the specific demographic cohorts.

Of central importance is the awareness of the fact that consumers belonging to the youngest age groups appear to be taking a less rigid approach to the idea of fluidity in society, especially regarding gender identity. Both academics and advertising professionals will be able to make use of this knowledge to effectively target individuals belonging to generations Z and Y, the youngest adult consumers today.

1. Limitations and Directions For Future Research

The study frame, along with certain time and economic constraints, characterize what can be described as the limitations inherent in this study. Primarily, the focus on individuals belonging exclusively to the generation Z and Y demographic clearly restricts the findings to data that only applies to these cohorts. Other generations should be the focus of further studies to be carried out in the future. The non-probability sampling method was used to carry out the research, owing to financial constraints. The findings of this study would doubtless be confirmed by using a random sampling procedure in further work in the future. The present analysis is also limited by the size of the actual sample. Potential work using a sample that is larger would very likely provide validation of the research results. Additionally, women were over-presented in the sample. Further research on the subject could also explore the perceptions towards stereotypes and gender-neutral advertising in a sample consisting only of males. Despite the limitations outlined here, this research is still deemed effective and beneficial because of the concrete perspectives it offers on a subject that has not been researched adequately so far. The outcomes prove particularly useful in terms of comprehending on a much more profound level the ways in which generation Z perceive the world around them, given that these individuals are a demographic that has not yet been sufficiently researched.

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