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Evaluation of Student Reactions to Consumer Products

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in Psychology.

By
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Under the mentorship of Dr. Daniel Webster

ABSTRACT

Based on gender role congruence theory, this research sought to understand how consumer perceptions differ for masculinized and feminized products when they are presented by the opposing gender. Additionally, our research sought to understand what role—if any—political affiliation played in the consumer's perception of the products presented. The results of this study were inconclusive due to a data collection error, however, the study itself serves as a good framework for answering the question of interest and should be rerun to draw meaningful conclusions.

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Introduction

During an initial encounter, much of a first impression is not based upon what the person is saying, but how they are saying it. This is especially true when visual cues are restricted or unavailable in situations such as telecommunication. In circumstances in which visual cues are unavailable, individuals tend to hone in on vocal features and form their initial impressions based on them in place of physical appearance. An experiment by Chebat, Chebat, and Boivin (1999), examined this phenomenon by recording a mock telemarketing message using professional voice actors and manipulating various speech components including: speech rate, intensity, and intonation. Their sample consisted of 108 undergraduate students and yielded the following results. When visual cues are unavailable, individuals are limited to making judgements about an individual's personality strictly on the basis of vocal components.

Similarly, a study done by Weiss and Burkhardt (2010) found that when presenting participants with only auditory stimuli, speakers with deeper voices were preferred over speakers with higher voices, regardless of the gender of the speaker. This may be due in part to the idea that a deeper voice is associated with increased dominance (Puts, 2010). A similar study was done by Laustsen, Petersen, and Klofstad (2015) which examined pitch preferences with relation to political affiliation by manipulating recordings of men's and women's voices, speaking politically neutral statements. Researchers found that conservative Republicans preferred candidates with deeper voices more often than liberal Democrats. This difference suggests that political affiliation serves as a predictor for likability perception on the basis of pitch differences.

Our research seeks to extend the observations from previous studies by filling the gap in literature. To do this, we will be observing a similar phenomenon using audio-only

advertisements and to determine the effect of gender of the speaker and political orientation of the participant on responses to these ads. A study conducted by Morrison and Shaffer in 2003 concluded that advertisements for products that target specifically men or women were more effective when the advertisement depicted corresponding gender stereotypes. They went on to find that “traditional” advertisements were viewed more favorably when they were rated by traditional participants which they defined as feminine women and masculine men. The researchers based their predicted outcomes on the gender-role congruence model for advertising.

Using the same model, researchers Clow, Ricciardelli, and Bartfay, found that when advertisements depicted a male in a stereotypical female occupation, they were viewed as less competent, more deviant, and more negative overall (2014). This research serves as evidence that gender biases are still a prominent issue in today’s society. Since cultural values in a society are heavily influenced by the mass media, our research will focus on consumer perceptions for masculinized and feminized products when they are presented by the opposing gender. To our knowledge, a study which observes consumer reactions to audio advertisements has not been conducted previously. We feel using this approach will provide a more realistic framework for consumer reactions in situations where visual cues are unavailable (e.g. advertisements on the radio or various streaming services).

A similar study was conducted in 2015 which observed consumer reactions to a print advertisement for baby wash. In the advertisement, either a man or a woman was pictured bathing a baby. Researchers found that when participants were exposed to the condition in which a male was bathing the child, they rated it as atypical in relation to gender stereotypes, however, their overall ratings of the product itself remained positive (Baxter, Kulczynski, & Ilicic, 2015).

Our research seeks to further the findings observed in previous studies by observing a similar phenomenon using audio-only advertisements.

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 147 undergraduate students from the Psychology Department at Georgia Southern University, which received course credit in exchange for their participation.

Stimuli

Voice recordings were obtained from undergraduate students in the Communication Arts Department which were then edited using Adobe Audition to represent a realistic audio-only advertisement. The speakers were given a script to read for each recording. Each speaker read both a fictional advertisement for an oral contraceptive called Celine and an erectile dysfunction treatment called Illuminate.

Procedure

We organized the procedure into four conditions. Where condition one consisted of the Celine ad presented by a female speaker and the Illuminate ad presented by a male speaker. Condition two consisted of both the Celine ad and the Illuminate ad being presented by a female speaker. Condition 3 consisted of the Celine ad presented by a male speaker and the Illuminate ad presented by a female speaker. Finally, condition 4 consisted of both the Celine ad and the Illuminate ad being presented by a male speaker. Each condition was placed in the randomizer function in Qualtrics to randomly assign participants to each condition. Participants were instructed to sign up for a slot using SONA. Once they were ready, they were prompted to follow the instructions provided through the SONA system to participate in the study. First, the participants were provided with an informed consent document which they indicated that they

agreed to electronically. Following the collection of informed consent, participants were then asked to provide us with some demographic information including their age and gender.

Following the collection of their demographic information, participants were randomly assigned to a condition and were presented with a version of fictional feminized and masculinized audio-only product ads. Participants listened to the oral contraceptive advertisement presented by either a male or female voice first. Once the participants finished listening to the clip, they returned to the survey where they were to complete a brief Likert-scale style set of questions pertaining to the advertisement and the speaker. Following their responses, they were asked to provide a short answer response regarding their overall evaluation of the advertisement. Following this, participants were asked to listen to the erectile dysfunction advertisement presented by either a male or a female voice. Participants were then asked to answer the same Likert-scale style set of questions and the same short answer response questions regarding their overall evaluation of the advertisement. Following the collection of responses for both ads, participants were asked to complete a political affiliation Likert scale measurement. Following this, participants were provided with a debriefing form, thanked for their participation, and provided with proof of participation.

Discussion

This study was designed to extend the existing bodies of literature which sought to find which vocal qualities are most effective in the marketing of consumer products. The two main influential factors which our research sought to discover whether a correlation existed between gender of the speaker and political affiliation of the consumer. By discovering if a link existed between the two when advertising consumer products, we would contribute to the growing body of knowledge regarding marketing and advertising. Contributing to this body of knowledge

would then allow marketers enhanced insight regarding not only the consumer's preferences, but also, how certain product presentation factors that may influence a product's success on the market.

Limitations and Future Research

Unfortunately, after the data was collected and exported for analysis, there was a technical issue which prevented any meaningful results from being extracted. This unfortunate occurrence halted the progress of our study and prevented it from reaching its fullest potential. For this reason, our study was not successful in contributing to the current body of literature. However, this shortcoming can be easily remedied by conducting the study again.

Based on the existing literature surrounding our research interest, we made predictions regarding the results our study would yield. We expected to find that when participants were presented with a gender incongruent advertisement for a product that was aimed at their gender, they would see the speaker as unqualified and less knowledgeable about the product. Similarly, we expected to find that participants that scored as more conservative, would express more concern regarding credibility of the speaker, speaker product knowledge, and efficacy of the product in incongruent gendered advertisements.

In the future, this study could be run again after working out some of the technical issues which were observed in the study's first trial. Assuming our predictions were correct, once the initial study has been run, a future direction for this line of research could involve a more in-depth analysis of consumer preferences as they relate to gender and political affiliation. One possible direction that the following study could progress to, is looking at how gender influences consumer behavior as it pertains to gender neutral products. Based on the results yielded from

the study conducted by Weiss and Burkhardt in 2010, I would predict that male voices would be preferred due to general preference for deeper voices in audio-only advertisements.

Conclusion

While the study did not fulfill its full potential due to technical errors that arose during data analysis, the research question still remains. How do consumer attitudes toward gendered products change as a result of the gender of the speaker, and is this change based on the gender of the consumer? Additionally, how does political affiliation influence the perception of credibility, product knowledge, and efficacy of the product when the gendered product and gender of the speaker are incongruent? In order to find answers to these questions, the study must be rerun and the data must be re-analyzed. Ideally, going forward with the second trial of the study, a much larger sample size with a more equal distribution of male and female participants would be required. A larger sample size would allow for greater generalizability which would lead the results to be more applicable to marketers. The development of this study and the future research that it may inspire could not only contribute to the general body of marketing knowledge, but also, alter the way in which marketing strategies are developed, leading to maximized sales and profits, and a strengthened economy overall.

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