LUISS

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The Differential Impact of Gendered and Gender-neutral Communication on Brand Equity

A Study on Children Apparel Industry

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PREVIEW AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this work is the analysis of the impact of communication on brand equity, comparing a gendered and an ungendered type of advertising relative to a brand of children apparel. The research project aims to answer two main questions:

- Can a shift to a gender-neutral type of communication affect brand equity?
- How can this result change with the age range of the consumer's groups?

The idea of this work comes from the acknowledgement that, to the current situation, there is little research on the pro/cons of the usage of a type of communication alternative to the traditional one and free of gender stereotypes, and on its objective consequences on brand dimensions. Moreover, there is almost no conceptualization of the phenomenon in the context of a specific industry and sector.

The choice of focusing on the fashion industry, particularly on children apparel, comes from the recognition of fashion as a mean of self-expression, and as one of the industries which is highly influenced by the socio-political environment, which often acted as an echo chamber for the discussion of gender equality and gender neutrality. In addition, it is interesting to see how gender stereotyping applies to the representation of children in advertising, and how this affects consumers' perception of the brand.

A discussion on how different age groups could be affected in a different way could be interesting to investigate, considering in particular the growing importance of Generation Z in the market and its increasing sensibility to social issues and inclusivity.

The study was conducted using posttest-only control group design: participants were randomly assigned to two groups, control and intervention, and were presented with two different stimuli (a gendered and a gender-neutral one). After that they were asked to complete a questionnaire to measure the effect of the brand communication on the brand equity.

The thesis is articulated in four chapters. In the first chapter, the main concepts covered in this work are generally presented and discussed. Chapter two covers a more detailed literature review of the brand dimensions presented, gendered and nontraditional advertising, gender stereotypes and the link between brand communication and brand equity. The third chapter is about the set-up of the actual experiment. Finally, the fourth chapter covers the analysis of the results and the consequent discussion.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 WHAT IS GENDER?

1.1.1 Origin of the term

The omnipresence of a strong debate about the term “Gender”, on an international level, requires a clarification on the meanings of this word, which can be undoubtedly included among the most discussed terms of recent times. As highlighted by Eva De Clercq (2018)[1] the word Gender goes right among those concepts which the philosopher Walter Bryce Gallie defined as “Essentially Contested”[2]. According to Gallie, these concepts are exposed to continuous debates around their correct use, without having the possibility to universally agree on a common accepted meaning. Again, Eva De Clercq points out how the concept is made up by different components related to nature, power, sexuality, culture and race, being for that reason a complex term which has given rise to totally different conceptions of it.

One possible way to avoid trying to give the word a universal definition, which could mean the exclusion of certain interpretations of it, may be the one proposed by Scott and Buttler: the “gender” word should be considered as a question, as a starting point for further analysis[3]. A little history digression could be important in order to better understand the origins of this word. The first publicly known mention of the expression “gender” is attributed to the sexologist John Money, in the late sixties, which used it to indicate those social behavioural aspects related to masculinity or femininity. Money believed that genetic sex was an irrelevant component for the development of a specific gender identity, which he believed, instead, a result of socialization and education patterns during the earliest years of life[4]. Robert Stoller reuses the term in 1968, to define the equilibrium of masculinity and femininity around of an individual, as he was concerned about the erosion of traditional gender roles[5]. More in particular, he utilises “gender” to clarify transsexuality concept and show how, in a transsexual individual, gender and sex do not match[6]. Going through the sixties, the expression generates interest also into the feminist universe, with Oakley and Rubin who use it to harshly criticize society underlying patriarchy, guilty of transforming, according to them, a biological data (sex) into a series of codified social roles, precisely defined with “gender”[7]. Lastly, the

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[1] E. De Clercq, *Etica del Gender*, Editrice Morcelliana, 23-29, 2018
[2] W.B Gallie, *Essentially Contested Concepts*, in “*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series*” 56, pp. 167-198, 1956
[3] P. Di Cori, *Genere e/o Gender?* Unanswered Questions in American Historical Review 113, 2008
[4] J. Money, J.G. Hampson, *Hermaphroditism: recommendations concerning assignment of sex and psychological management* in “Bulletin of the Jonh Hopkins Hospital” 97, pp. 284-300, 1955
[5] J. Meyerowitz, *A History of “Gender”,* The American Historical Review, Vol. 113 No. 5, 2008
[6] G.C. Bonotto, S. Memoli, *Sesso / Gender, biologia – antropologia – etica,* Elmi’s World, p.58, 2018
[7] J. Meyerowitz, *A History of “Gender”,* The American Historical Review, Vol. 113 No. 5, 2008

historian Joan Wallach Scott, considers the term as representative of all the knowledge which allows people to establish which meaning to attribute to physical differences. The history of the different interpretations of the expression is retraced by the philosopher Linda Nicholson in her essay *Signs* (1994), where she first defines the term as the social construction of a biological data, to enlarge then the definition to all those social constructions which separate males and females. From this last interpretation, it is clear how the way in which we interpret body, is highly dependent on the interpretative dynamics of the society we live in. As Kaiser suggests, the concept is still under construction, and it has not arrived still to an end[8].
Generally speaking, two strands of thinking have emerged through the years, for what concerns the debate on the term. The first is the metaphysic-generalist strand, also referred as *Gender Realism,* according to which the social practices defining gender are attributable to social learning (Millet, 1970)[9] or to parents' educational pattern (Chodorow, 1978)[10]. Always remaining inside this current of thought, Catharine McKinnon proposes a different explanation for the social value attributed to biological sex, that is gender. According to her, gender-related social practices have their origin in the consideration of women as sexual objects, and by the consequent role of subordination in which women are placed respect to men[11]. In synthesis, the generalist approach affirms the presence of common characteristics, conditions and experiences among men and women, which eventually end up in differentiating some individuals as men and some others as women. On the other side there is the "particularistic" perspective, which criticises this way of thinking, arguing that gender is constructed independently of those common criteria of race, nationality, social class or religion, that were at the base of the generalist theory. In this optic, Elizabeth Spelman highlights the different conditions to which men and women are subjected in their different socio-cultural dimensions[12], while Judith Butler, in line with her, points out how gender realism does not consider the bundle of cultural, social and political intersections through which individuals are shaped into men and women[13]. According to Butler, every individual has its particular gender, therefore there are as many different gender types as individuals. Today, current literature seems more in line with the particularistic strand which, despite still considering gender in a binary way, does not consider it as uniform, recognising the presence of a variegated bundle of individuals in it.

1.1.2 The sex/gender question and some important distinctions

A wide terminology has arisen around the gender topic, and for clarity sake it is important to know the main differences existing through the different terms. It is important to stress the distinction made between gender

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[8] Kaiser S., *Fashion and cultural studies*, Bloomsbury, 2011
[9] K. Millet, *Sexual Politics*, Doubleday and Co., 1970
[10] N. Chodorow, *The reproduction of mothering: psychoanalysis and the sociology of Gender*, University of California Press, 1978
[11] C.A. Mckinnon, *Toward a feminist theory of the state*, Harvard University Press, 1989
[12] E. Spelman, *Inessential Women*, Beacon Press, 1988
[13] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge 1990

and sex, as gender is not something biologically embedded into human beings, but it is more easily defined by a bundle of personality traits derived from social interactions, leading to the creation of values and behaviours that are more or less accepted depending on the specific culture in which individuals are located. Despite general belief, the two terms are not interchangeable, as gender includes some social and behavioural characteristics which fall outside the definition of biological sex, which is instead defined as "the belonging, from a biological point of view, to male or female sex, as it is defined by sexual chromosomes, by hormones, by internal and external genitals, and by the consequent overall formation of the body"[14]. Historically, the sex/gender debate was faced through a so-called "existentialist approach", according to which masculinity and femininity are different by nature, as they are two separate physiological essences. This implied that roles and identity adopted during life are considered as obvious results of biological differences between men and women. The contribution of research, challenged the original idea of gender as something naturally given, in favour of a shift to a "doing gender" approach (West and Zimmerman, 1987)[15]: gender is something that is constructed according to social conceptions related to men and women which are different across cultures, context and time periods. In this optic, gender would consist for people in the management of their own behaviour, in order to ensure that it appears as coherent with the sexual identity they are displaying. People reproduce an appearance of masculinity or femininity by the adoption of a specific set of behaviours. This concept introduces a possibly ground-breaking idea, implying the possibility of deconstructing gender, challenging the actual construction through social interactions[16]. A hybrid approach agrees with the fact that biological sex unequivocally defines us as males and females but admits a variability of identity expression which is depending on the particular socio-cultural context. If we accept the fact that femininity and masculinity have taken different meanings along different times and inside different cultures, we cannot but identify them as evolving and relative ideas, which are therefore "constructed" by a specific culture, under specific circumstances.

The social interactions above mentioned eventually turn into societal expectations allocated to men and women, which we define as gender roles; being a result of society, gender roles are not fixed but vary with time and context. They differ thus from gender identity then, is defined again by APA as "a component of gender that describes a person's psychological sense of their gender". It is subjective feeling that concerns everyone, including gender-conforming and gender-nonconforming individuals. Therefore, gender identity should not be confused with sexual orientation, which relates to the "sexual and emotional attraction" and the resulting "behaviour and/or social affiliation"[17]. Whenever gender identity and biological sex characteristics are not congruent, the individual may include himself within the so-called transgender

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[14] F. Ferrari, E.M. Ragaglia, P.Rigliano, *Il genere, una guida orientativa*, 5-66, 2015

[15] West, C., Zimmerman, D.H.: *Doing gender*. Gender Soc. 1(2), 125–151, 1987

[16] Deutsch, F.M.: *Undoing gender*. Gender Soc. 21(1), 106–127, 2007

[17] https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/sexual-orientation

spectrum. Transgender is used as an umbrella term, which concerns a wider range of gender identities, and even as a verb, with *transgendering* indicated as the act of living "beyond gender" (Ekins and King, 2006)[18]. Despite the similarity with the transsexual term, many transgender people don't define themselves as transsexual, or even find the word as stigmatizing, because of its incorrect use occurred in the past in the fields of medicine and psychology, here it was used to label transgender people as mentally ad sexually deviant[19]. The word transgender is generally considered to be more inclusive than "transsexual", as it acknowledges how medical alterations of the body (hormones treatments, surgery, exc.) are not necessary for everyone who identifies himself with a gender that is different from his biological sex.

1.1.3 The Binary Paradigm

As seen in the previous paragraph, we have demonstrated how the essence of the difference between men and women is essentially a constructed idea, that is directly linked with a specific culture. The essentialist theories have often been criticized by modern literature for their attempt to establish, through the imposition of a universally accepted narration of the gender, a discriminatory type of society, that is referred as *ordine veterosessuale*[20]. According to the essentialist theory, the division between men and women, therefore the validity of the binary paradigm, derives from the observation of an objective reality. Nevertheless, our understanding of the world always goes through the mediation of a culture; a culture, in turn, is constructed through communication, and it is through communication that we know how to split the world into categories and how to interpret reality. In the specific case of gender categories, it happens that the categorization of reality has been always influenced by the strong patriarchal connotation of society. As Butler highlights, it is not possible to separate wisdom from power, as the possibility of influencing or shaping the "truth" is one of the forms of greatest power[21]. Therefore, the naturalization of the man/woman binomial, which is instead created by society, leads to the acceptance of some characteristics as necessary and immutable, while in reality they are just functional in maintaining the societal order which originated them.

The next step should be the understanding of how this gender narration is passed on by people and transmitted, to eventually become universally accepted. Previous periods have been characterized by different socialization models, which an integrationist approach which ruled the scene until the end of the sixties, then followed by the so called conflictualist perspectives. These models consider families, universities and mass media as "socialization agencies" which serve either the social order or the dominant culture, with individuals being passive receivers of communication[22]. Recently, a new model has been

[18] Ekins, R., King, D.: The Transgender Phenomenon. SAGE Publications, London, 2006
[19] https://www.healthline.com/health/transgender/difference-between-transgender-and-transsexual#transsexual-defined
[20] N. Poidimani, *Oltre le monoculture di genere,* Mimesis Edizioni, 7-8, 2006
[21] J. Butler, *Undoing gender*, New York: Routledge, 2004
[22] I. Crespi, *Processi di socializzazione e identità di genere. Teorie e modelli a confronto,* Franco Angeli, 2008

largely recognized and applied by researchers in the field, that is interactionist-communicative model. Individuals, for the first time, become active subjects of socialization, deciding independently if to adopt, refuse or re-elaborate the information received, to put then back into the communication pattern. The single person becomes capable, in this new optic, of even creating new contents autonomously, as Claudio Baraldi notices[23]. That's why, following the adoption of this model, we don't have no more of gender roles who are passively received and assimilated, but instead gender identities, generated autonomously by each individual in his particular context.

Three of the fundamentals of the above mentioned *ordine veterosessuale* are thus the sexual and the gender dichotomy, and the one-to-one relationship among the two. As Giovanni Carlo Bonotto and Stefania Memoli highlight in their book, both the sexual and gender rigid demarcation have been challenged respectively by intersex and transgender individuals[24].

The idea of sexual dichotomy implies the existence in nature of two body configurations only, to distinguish males from females. In reality, intersex people come into life with physical characteristics which are not totally attributable to one sex or another. Despite having failed to have their existence and rights fully recognized, according to a Carpenter research they represent between the 0.5% and 1.7% of all live births[25]. The idea that intersex people were something falling outside "natural order" was widespread across centuries. After being labeled as "monsters" by XVI Century Puritans, they started to be considered as deceivers, along 19th Century, if they were found be living outside their "original" gender, because it was thought they were spontaneously choosing to go against their natural assignment[26]. The idea intersex people had to be surgically normalized became commonly accepted inside the scientific community, after the proposal of John Money to use surgical techniques on infants immediately after birth[27]. Intersex people still have to fight for the right to decide on their own for what concerns their own body.

The sexual dichotomy is, in its turn, the fundamental premise for the gender binary. The gender binary paradigm entails the existence of two gender identities only, and the one-to-one relationship with sexual dichotomy affirms the association of the female sex to the woman gender, and the male sex to the gender man. In substance, as Judith Butler points out, it is not possible to separate the biological and the socio-cultural components of the question, as again, we cannot know the first without the mediation of a culture[28]. The binary paradigm is nowadays attacked from different sides. First of all, it is the transgender phenomenon that strongly challenges this conception. Transgender people often recognize themselves as

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[23] C. Baraldi, *La comunicazione della società globale,* Carocci, 35-36, 2012
[24] G.C. Bonotto, S. Memoli, *Sesso / Gender, biologia – antropologia – etica,* Elmi's World, 66-68, 2018
[25] M. Carpenter, *The human rights of intersex people: addressing harmful practices and rhetoric of change,* Reproductive Health Matters, 24(47), 74–84, 2016
[26] S.Meier, *Two sides of every coin,* University of Nebraska-Omaha, 2019
[27] C. Muehlenhard, Z Peterson, *Distinguishing Between Sex and Gender: History, Current Conceptualizations, and Implications* 791–803, 2011
[28] J. Butler, *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of "sex",* New York: Routledge, 1993

neither men or women, but as a mix of the two genres or, on the contrary, as something that does not fall inside neither of the two categories. They may recognize inside themselves some masculine or feminine characteristics, but not to the extent where they manage to identify themselves with a particular gender. In a 2016 research, it was found that between 1.1% of males and 0.8% of females experienced a gender identity that was incongruent with their sex. In the same study, it was found that 4.6% of males and 3.2% of females identify equally with both genders[29]. If some years ago, with the surgical re-definition of biological sex, transgender people themselves reiterated gender binarity, today with the intake of the gender-fluid approach they put themselves openly against the binary paradigm[30]. As well as intersex people, transgender individuals had to suffer from denigration and isolation, as they were often labelled as mentally ill and degenerate, and therefore considered to be medically treated in order to be healed[31]. Transgendering was inserted in American Psychiatric Association list of disorders in 1984, to be removed only in 2013[32]. In addition to the transgender phenomenon, it is sufficient to see how femininity and masculinity concepts change together with the cultural context, and how cultures which are different from the Western one offer to people more possibilities of expressing their own gender identities, outside the binary boundaries.

1.1.4 Genderqueer, Non-binary and Androgynous

As already mentioned, the terminology of sector has often represented an issue for those people who perceive their identities as outside the binary conception, but struggle to find an appropriate term to identify themselves with. Lately, it seems the word "Genderqueer" has managed to settle the argument, as it represented an umbrella term for those individuals who felt themselves outside male and female categorization. The term refers to "someone who feels its gender does not with socially constructed norms for their biological sex"[33] and, according to Laura A. Jacobs, psychotherapist specialized in LGBT and gender-neutral issues, it really embeds the "queer", the unusual side of gender, which plays with it in a provocative way, in order to unveil its stereotypes[34].

This quest for an all-inclusive term was started during 1980s, with the first activist movements of people challenging the binary system. While before, during 70s, the term "Transgender" was the most common one among people who did not recognize themselves with sex assigned at birth, after the 1992 *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come,* by Leslie Feinberg, the term gained a wider and definitely

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[29] Richards, C., Bouman, W. P., Seal, L., Barker, M. J., Nieder, T. O., & T, S. G., *Non-binary or* genderqueer *genders*, International Review of Psychiatry, 28(1), 95–102, 2016
[30] G.C. Bonotto, S. Memoli, *Sesso / Gender, biologia – antropologia – etica,* Elmi's World, 66-68, 2018
[31] S. Stryker, *Transgender history: The roots of today's revolution*, Berkeley: Seal Press, 2017
[32] https://www.glaad.org/blog/apa-removes-gender-identity-disorder-updated-mental-health-guide
[33] R. C. Savin-Williams, (Jul 29, 2018), A guide to Genderqueer, Non-binary and Genderfluid Identity, *Psychology Today,* from https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sex-sexuality-and-romance/201807/guide-genderqueer-non-binary-and-genderfluid-identity
[34] M. Retta, (Sep 13, 2019), What's the Difference Between Non-binary, Genderqueer, and Gender-Nonconforming?, *Vice*, from https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/wjwx8m/whats-the-difference-between-non-binary-genderqueer-and-gender-nonconforming

most political meaning[35]. So, Genderqueer slowly started to become, along 90s, the new term who incorporated transgender individuals into a broader movement, and firstly appeared in print in 1995, on the *In Your Face* newsletter by activist Riki Anne Wilchins[36]. Spread around by the internet, the term started gain relevance and authority, thanks also to the involvement of several celebrities who defined themselves as falling under the genderqueer spectrum, among which Miley Cyrus or actor Ruby Rose, who came out defining herself as gender-fluid in a 2017 interview[37]. Nowadays the term has a consolidated use, including in itself other words and concepts as, for instance, non-binary.

The notions of genderqueer and non-binarism are inevitably related to the concept of androgyny, which refers to the capability of men and women to exhibit both masculine and feminine traits in their appearance[38]. The roots of the androgynous phenomenon in the context of fashion are to be found in the early 20s, when Chanel introduced a jumper which could be worn by both men and women, and gave women the precious gift of pants, for the very first time[39]. The advent of the 60s brought fashion to an entire new dimension, from an elitist phenomenon, to an expression of the pop culture, and the *Peacock Revolution* in particular, brought a dramatic change in Menswear, introducing apparel elements borrowed from the gay fashion; homosexuality started to be officially decriminalized in many countries and the sexual revolution was at the door. The advent of the 21st Century, defined as the Postmodern Area, with its embedded polymorphism and individuals' possibility to reconstruct a more complete image of themselves, facilitated the expression of androgynous ways of behaving. All of that brought us to the actual situation, where androgynous fashion is a consolidated and ever-growing reality, with an increasing number of exclusively androgynous brands or to unisex collections brought by big players of the industry.

1.2 GENDER AND FASHION

1.2.1 Fashion as a mean of gender expression

For centuries, Fashion has been relegated to appear as a frivolous matter, in the shade of major arts, being content of being treated with superficiality. It is only with the second half of the 19th Century that the fashion world has the possibility to exit this world of anonymity, in particular thanks to the personality of Charles Frederick Worth, the first representant of that group of *maîtres et créateurs* which have been able to give

[35] J. Tobia, (Nov 7, 2018), InQueery: The History of the Word "Genderqueer" As We Know It, *Them.*, from https://www.them.us/story/inqueery-genderqueer
[36] R. Wilkins, *A Note From Your Editrix,* In Your Face, No. 1, 1995
[37] B. McNamara, (Feb 6, 2017), Ruby Rose Talks About Coming Out, Being Gender Fluid, *TeenVogue*, from https://www.teenvogue.com/story/ruby-rose-talks-about-coming-out-being-gender-fluid
[38]Androgyny, *Psychology,* from http://psychology.iresearchnet.com/social-psychology/personality/androgyny/
[39] F. Fabbri, *La moda contemporanea: arte e stile da Worth agli anni Cinquanta,* Giulio Einaudi Editore, 2019

dignity and respect to this discipline[40]. Despite this breaking point with the past, still today fashion is considered inferior to other forms of self-expression as writing or painting, and people often question its legitimacy of being considered inside the artistic panorama. An explanation for that is the fact that fashion is often associated with consumerism and mass market, forgetting it is first of all a mean of expression, a way of re-inventing the self. Fashion can be a language as another to communicate the way people feel about themselves and their identity; misquoting what Virginia Woolf wrote in her *Orlando*[41]:

> "Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than to merely keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us."

In the mid-19th Century, along with the professional figure of the maître as we know it today, there is the emergence of the idea of clothing as a second skin, idea that is brought on, again, by Charles Frederick Worth. A dress is seen as something which allows an expansion of the range of movements and expression capabilities that were allowed by a naked body only[42].

This concept applies to gender expression as well. Fashion and gender are inevitably linked together, as the first is able to create and modify continuously individuals' identities, exploiting those gender relations which stand at the base of society and that we have analyzed in the previous chapter. The notions of masculine and feminine themselves are due to men's style of clothing adopted by women or vice versa. As Crane highlights, one of the principal messages conveyed by fashion and clothing style is the perception of gender roles by the individual and by society as a whole[43]. Following the same line, Fritz Allhoff writes[44]:

> "Of course, fashion is not always about or even primarily about individuality. As Yim points out it is also a powerful means of communicating group membership and social roles. Clothes we wear, along with hairstyle and other items of adornment, can and often do, whether we are aware of it or not, communicate our social and professional roles and status—think power dressing, fitness freak, ladies who launch it. They may also communicate our gender, our sexuality, our political commitments, our religious and moral beliefs, and our aesthetic judgments."

He then continues, stressing again the fact that fashion is something that does not follow criteria of comfortability and convenience, but instead it is a powerful language to express moods, styles, preferences. Despite the question includes both genders, it is clearly visible how the fashion discourse has interested particularly women in modern times. Historically, women have been associated with fashion itself, while

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[40] F. Fabbri, *La moda contemporanea: arte e stile da Worth agli anni Cinquanta,* Giulio Einaudi Editore 3-4, 2019

[41] V. Woolf, *Orlando: A biography*, London: Published by Leonard & Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press, 1933

[42] F. Fabbri, *La moda contemporanea: arte e stile da Worth agli anni Cinquanta,* Giulio Einaudi Editore 24-31, 2019

[43] D. Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 2000

[44] F. Allhoff, J. Kennett, J. Baumgardner, *Fashion - Philosophy for Everyone: Thinking with Style*, Blackwell Publishing ltd, Sussex, 2011

men have received less attention in this sense. Jennifer Craik accomplished to find the cause underlying the common understanding of women as the core of fashion, finding the roots of the phenomenon in the Victorian. According to her, the rigid notions of etiquette present at the time, among the aristocratic classes of the Victorian time, determined a strong division between genders and an attribution of specific roles; in the specific case, women were brought to take on the role of the fashionable gender[45]. With fashion starting to transform into a profitable industry, women were entitled as well with the professional roles of the sector, in its initial phase of growth. As Li points out, many women follow this as a career path in the first half of the 19th Century[46].

1.2.2 The deconstruction of the binary paradigm through fashion

On the merits of gender studies, researchers have been asking themselves if a change in society which would eventually lead to a less rigid binary perspective, would somehow modify the will of people to modify their body, in order to fit "correctly" into the man/woman binarism. If some experts in the sector, among which Judith Lorber, believe that this will is directly depending on the binarism embedded in our culture[47], other scholar, such as Marjorie Garber, suggest that this desire is stemming from the individual's subjectivity, and not from an external culture[48]. Independently on which opinion one decides to follow, the desirability of a deconstruction of the binarism which characterize the gender culture, in order to allow those transsexual and transgender people who identify themselves in a "third way" to freely self-determine themselves, is unquestionable.

The deconstructive potential of transsexual people was openly shown for the first time when Harold Garfinkel decided to publish its essay *Agnese* in 1967. Agnese is a transsexual girl which decided to adopt a feminine identity, and had to comprehend and assimilate, for that purpose, those feminine characteristics embedded in women who are appointed as female since their birth. The path of learning a "feminine" behaviour proved to be harder than imaginable, as it involved a social interaction and confrontation. This episode showed evidences on how gender was something to be learned and then exhibited in front of society. This further consideration caused researchers and scholars to focus their attention on the deconstructing capabilities of the so-called *crossdressing*. According to Lorber, crossdressing phenomenon was showing exactly how individual basically learn how to be men and women, as it demonstrates how "being men and women" consists in "dressing as men and women", bringing down the theorical assumption by which masculinity and femininity would originate naturally from the bodies of respectively males and females[49].

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[45] J. Craik, *The Face Of Fashion: Cultural Studies In Fashion*, Routledge, London, 196-197, 1993
[46] S. Li, *Fashionable People, Fashionable Society: Fashion, Gender, and Print Culture in England*, UMI Dissertation Publisher, Michigan, p. 194, 2011
[47] J. Lorber, *Paradoxes of gender*, Yale University Press, 1994
[48] M. Garber, Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety, Taylor & Francis Ltd., 1997
[49] J. Lorber, *Paradoxes of gender*, Yale University Press, 1994

While Lorber believed in the deconstructing capability of crossdressing, but not of its effect on the gender binary paradigm, as crossdressers limit themselves to a change of gender which lies inside the two traditional opposites poles male/female, Garber took a different view. In Marjorie Garber opinion, crossdressing takes on a different value, becoming a tool not just able to unveil the gender construction, but also to destabilize the entire binary gender construction. Garber considers crossdressing as a phenomenon capable of generating a "third position" with respect to the male/female pole, thus carrier of a significative subversive potential[50].

We have reached thus a point where the primary and secondary sexual characteristics are not sufficient anymore to convey gender identity to others. On the contrary, individuals need to use a series of symbols which, applied to self-appearance and behavior, allow people who use them to be understandable in the eyes of society, as men and women. In that way, crossdressing has highlighted how gender image depends upon a complex "system of signs". The *drag* performances contributed to reinforce this idea, as they offer a stereotyped and artistic representation of masculine and feminine stereotypes. Despite the gender crossing, typical of the drag representations, is limited to the entertainment purpose, it is clear for scholars its destabilization potential. According to Donatella Lanzarotta, this potential is expressed through two separate actions, that is firstly to demonstrate the arbitrariness and the cultural origin of the laws regulating gender binarism, and secondly to play with these laws, creating representations which cannot be categorized neither as masculine nor feminine[51]. This idea of gender as a performative system finds a theoretical definition in the work of Judith Butler, which brings on this conception in contrast with the view of gender as a natural expression of sexual characteristics: male and female gender do exist as long as they are "acted" as such[52].

1.3 GENDER AND COMMUNICATION

1.3.1 Gender influence over communication

As already highlighted in previous paragraphs, the importance of gender roles in shaping today's reality is clear to everyone. That is why the analysis of these roles and of related behaviours has always been a critical tool for marketers who wanted to easily segment their audience. Darley and Smith (1995) identified three main factors for which gender has been always used in marketing segmentation: gender segmentation is easily identifiable and accessible, and each segment comprises on average half of the population[53]. With society being "gendered" in almost every aspect, consumption did not constitute an exception to that.

[50] M. Garber, Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety, Taylor & Francis Ltd., 1997
[51] D. Lanzarotta, *Corpi ad arte. La drag queen e l'illusoria consistenza del genere*, Verona, Ombre Corte, 2014
[52] J. Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Routledge, 1990
[53] W.K. Darley, R.E. Smith, *Gender differences in information processing strategies: an empirical test of the selectivity model in advertising response*, Journal of Advertising 24(1), 41-59, 1995

Beginning with the 19th Century, gender started to have a crucial role in advertisers' strategy, with women constituting the "ideal target" for marketing[54]. The ideal woman was first considered as a good mother and wife, whose traditional roles were taking care of the house and the family, and whose personality was stereotyped through some simple traits, such as sweetness, sensibility, resignation[55]. With the rise of modern advertising, visual media have taken on increasing importance as a cultural authority, universally recognized, capable of defining the concept of masculinity and femininity[56]. Visual images, being approached by consumers with more trust and security than words, as observed by McLuhan[57], have a significant influence in shaping our idea of gender identity.

1.3.2 The rise of non-gendered communication

With a society in continuous change, the communication strategy of brands should be reactive and adaptable to current context. Gendered advertising continues to constitute a major part of current panorama, with the previously mentioned binary scheme which still constitutes a useful framework for the construction and delivery of the marketing message. However, many authors highlight how, in the so-called era of post-modern marketing, gender identities have increasingly become a malleable instrument of self-expression, with the very meaning of masculine and feminine deconstructed and reused to create new significances. Women are emancipating themselves from their social constructed role of housekeepers, and men are moving away from the stereotype of the strong and bold cowboy, willing to take challenges and inclined to risk. Male identity, in particular, is being increasingly questioned, and the traditional idea of masculinity is already in crisis, as highlighted by Lins (2011) in her research[58].

Smartest brands have started to answer to the consumers' request, in particular from Generation Z and Millennials, to embrace a more gender-fluid style of communication; brands' advertising strategy should now revolve around lifestyle and personalities, instead of gender[59]. With the challenge of the of traditional patterns and the creation of new paradigms, it is crucial for brands to adapt to these changes. Brands should be aware, on one side, of this request for inclusion, self-expression and gradual removal of stereotypes, and on the other, of the conservative reaction to the debate, which has the support of the most conservative areas of politics and religion. The negation of this reality and a politics of silence and "staying in the middle" cannot be considered beneficial for brands, which would risk, in that way, to generate rejection from

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[54] R. Bocock, *Consumption*, Routledge, London, 1993
[55] P.C. Giuliani, *Os movimentos de trabalhadoras e a sociedade brasileira*, in D.P. Mary, P.B. Carla: *História das mulheres no Brasil (9th ed.),* São Paulo, 2010
[56] E. McCracken, Decoding Women's Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms., Macmillan, London, 1993
[57] M. McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*, Vanguard Press, New York, 1951
[58] R.N. Lins, *A Cama na Varanda (The Bed on the Porch)*, Rio de Janeiro: Best Seller, 2011 op. cit. by R. Siqueira, J. Tigre, M. Berutti, *The new post-gendered world – Emerging gender codes in brands' communication*, PMKT, 2016
[59] L. Friedman, (Nov 28, 2017), Millennials and Gender Fluidity – What Smart Brands Are Doing And Why, *Forbes*, retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/laurenfriedman/2017/11/28/millennials-and-gender-fluidity-what-smart-brands-are-doing-and-why/#7e51ddf75436

customers and lose the emotional bond with them. The work of R. de Oliveira Siqueira (2016) proposes a 3-stage approach, to set a communication strategy capable of comply with these new requirements: the recognition of the values' shift, the distinction of the different threads which make up the whole network, and finally the adoption of an integration and diversity oriented policy in all the processes related to brand's communication[60].

The Luxury and Fashion industry has been a vanguard in spreading this revolution, with brands tackling the issues in mainly two ways: some have labelled themselves as unisex, while others have challenged explicitly gender stereotypes. In the first group, we find brands entirely dedicated to the issue, lacking gender labels on products and particularly focused on self-expression (*Zara, American Apparel, Gucci)*, while those belonging to the second group can be considered more as brands with gender non-conforming lines, which refuse to adopt traditional gender stereotypes. The infamous 2016 Louis Vuitton campaign which featured Jaden Smith wearing a skirt[61], has been the trigger which revealed to the general public that gender-bending movement which had been existing far before that moment. This unisex approach, instead of trying to emasculate women and feminize men, aims at the progressive disruption of these labels, through a gradual distortion of the traditional stereotypes, as it happened for instance with Gucci, with its colorful collection of men suits, able to break the gendering power of colours[62]. Other than the apparel industry, cosmetics and beauty world are following suit, with *Kenzo* and *Gucci* unisex fragrances, just to provide an example, or even the rise of new gender-fluid based brands, such as *Non-Gender Specific*, which encapsulates its entire essence in its name[63].

1.3.3 Gender fluidity and children

When it comes to the topic of gender fluidity associated to children, the debate becomes even more heated. As gender being one fundamental part of everyone's identity, the question on whether to raise kids outside of traditional gender boundaries, in order to give them enhanced freedom of express themselves, is still generating lots of different answers, from opposite points of view. Since researches which have been done up to now have provided significant data in support and in opposition to an ungendered education pattern, there is no definitive answer to this social discussion[64]. According to Lins studies, the construction of gender

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[60] R. Siqueira, J. Tigre, M. Berutti, *The new post-gendered world – Emerging gender codes in brands' communication*, PMKT, 2016

[61] K. Pepall, (Jan 15, 2016), JadenSmith & Louis Vuitton bend gender norms, *The Queen's University Journal*, retrieved from https://www.queensjournal.ca/story/2016-01-14/lifestyle/jaden-smith-and-louis-vuitton-bend-gender-norms/

[62] D. Hilario, (Dec 14, 2019), How Gender Fluidity Affected the Fashion World Today, *Medium*, retrieved from https://medium.com/gbc-college-english-lemonade/how-gender-fluidity-affected-the-fashion-world-today-b02ff2772e0d

[63] M. Maccari, (Sep 28, 2018), No-Gender Beauty. Perché gli uomini hanno iniziato a utilizzare prodotti femminili?, *D.Repubblica*, retrieved from https://d.repubblica.it/beauty/2018/09/28/news/tendenza_beauty_no_gender_prodotti_di_bellezza_unisex_viso_e_corpo-4130097/

[64] G. Beresin, S. Schlozman, (Aug 10, 2018), Gender Identity: Should We Raise Our Children Gender-Neutral?, *CommonHealth*, https://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2018/08/10/should-we-raise-children-gender-neutral

identity starts in the earliest years of life, fact that resulted evident from the descriptions which parents made of their babies: even if similar in size and with still almost no contact with parents, they were given highly gender-related attributes, with boys being described as “big”, and girls as “pretty and calm”[65]. It is undeniable that the whole debate touches also the world of children clothing, being apparel, as already stated, one of the fundamental means of expression of the gender identity of individuals. We are talking of a market that in the U.S. alone, in 2019 has registered a market value of 27 Billion $[66]. Most forward-looking brands are pushing the idea that, since boys’ and girls’ bodies remain very similar until 11 years old, they also share the same needs for comfy clothes who fit their shape, as sustained by the head of Swedish brand *Polarn O. Pyret*[67].

This idea of dressing children with a gender-neutral outfit, contrary to common belief, constituted the norm for a long period of time, as boys and girls used to wear the same clothes, usually made of white cotton, easy to bleach and non-restricting[68]. Boys and girls used to wear the same long dresses, during 1600, at least until the boys would have aged 7[69]. The colours which today are themselves constituting the gender-symbolism, pink and blue, until the end of World War II were used interchangeably and were even codified oppositely as today, with pink associated to boys, as a recall to the colour of the planet Mars, and blue instead related to Venus and femininity[70]. At the end of the war, marketers started to understand the need to create a code for children’s apparel, in order to appeal mothers and convince them to buy more merchandise, and that’s when the current blue/pink gender code has been set up. With the development of pre-natal testing at the start of the 1980s, and the consequent possibility for parents to immediately know the gender of their baby, parents could shop in advance gender-specific products in the stores[71]. Despite this “colour shift” could appear as irrelevant, researches have demonstrated that this fact has contributed to increase gender stereotyping in U.S., making children aware of the importance social distinction of gender, and encouraging them to question themselves on what is “for boys” or “for girls”[72]. This gender-colours association, despite being assimilated today as a usual marketing tool, risks to expose gender non-conforming kids to mockery by society, just for the reason that they have a different colour preference respect to the mass.

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[65] R.N. Lins, *A Cama na Varanda (The Bed on the Porch)*, Rio de Janeiro: Best Seller, 2011 op. cit. by R. Siqueira, J. Tigre, M. Berutti, *The new post-gendered world – Emerging gender codes in brands’ communication*, PMKT, 2016

[66] Value of the baby and young children’s apparel market n the United States from 2014 to 2019, *Statista*, retrieved from https://www.statista.com/statistics/963206/baby-and-young-children-s-apparel-market-value/

[67] B. Nieves, (Aug 12, 2016), These Gender-Neutral Kids’ Clothing Lines Are Changing The Game, *Refinery29*, retrieved from https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2016/08/119906/gender-neutral-childrens-clothing

[68] Gender Identity and the Future of Fashion, *Rampages*, retrieved from https://rampages.us/nervevergeurge/neutral-beauty-essay/

[69] A. Vänskä, *Fashionable Childhood: Children in Advertising*, Bloomsbury Academic, p. 22, 2017

[70] C.R. Callahan, (Oct 20, 2014), History of Children’s Clothing, *Love To Know*, retrieved from https://fashion-history.lovetoknow.com/fashion-history-eras/history-childrens-clothing

[71] J. Maglaty, (Apr 7, 2011), When Did Girls Start Wearing Pink?, *ASK Smithsonian*, retrieved from https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/when-did-girls-start-wearing-pink-1370097/?no-ist=&page=2

[72] C. Fine, (Oct 21, 2014), Why Are Toys So Gendered?, *Slate Magazine,* The State Group

Analyzing the role of gender identity on behaviour, Cohn & Zeickner have found how the social adherence to gender stereotypes has the capacity to influence aggressive behaviour[73]. In addition, the Nigerian activist Chimamanda highlights in her work how, a gendered and traditional type of education, where children are told how to behave according to their gender, could be damaging for their future[74]. Further, Paechter points out how children should be allowed to try different things and understand by themselves what they may like, and how it is a responsibility of the educators to break the gender-based barriers which impair them to do so[75].

1.4 THE EVOLUTION OF BRAND ROLE AND A NEW GENERATION OF CONSUMERS

1.4.1 Transforming the concept of brand

Despite branding, in contemporary economy, is recognized as one of the core competences which drives the decision of firms and their related stakeholders, the concept of brand is not easily explicable through a common definition. While brand, as a theoretical concept, have existed for a long time, the modern idea of brand can find its origins in the 19th Century, where we first observe the introduction of trademarks and a specific differentiation of packaging, in order to attract customers[76]. One of the first definition of the word is provided by the American Marketing Association (AMA) in 1960, which describes it as:

> "A name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of the competitors"[77]

This definition, despite providing a first concrete explanation of this concept, is clearly missing all those intangible assets that today we are including into "brand theory". An updated statement by the same institution, dating back to 2007, call into question the previous definition, and stating that brand is "a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies the seller's good or services as distinct from those of other sellers" [78]. This last definition, common accepted by the major part of modern literature, makes clear what brands are at the basic level, that is information tools offered to consumers, which allow them to navigate more easily across the numerous offerings they are exposed to.

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[73] A. Cohn, A. Zeichner, *Effects of masculine identity and gender role stress on aggression in men*, Psychology of Men and Masculinity, 7, 179-190, 2006
[74] N.A. Chimamanda, *We should all be feminists*, Anchor Books, New York, 2015
[75] C.F. Paechter, *Being boys, being girls: Learning masculinities and femininities*, Open University Press, 2007
[76] A. McCrum, *Brand names today compared to those 100 years ago*, Journal of Brand Management, 8 (2), 111-21, 2000
[77] L. Wood, *Brands and brand equity: definition and management*, Management Decision, 38 (9), 662-69, 2000
[78] https://www.ama.org/the-definition-of-marketing-what-is-marketing/

From a more in-depth analysis, it results equally clear the importance of brands in modern society, from a point of view which goes behind the definition just provided. A wealth of literature which has undergone a substantial growth over the years, has deeply investigated the idea according to which modern brands can be understood as institutions, capable of influencing and shaping the context they are into. This belief of an underlying relation between the cultural, social and economic dimension, is made explicit by the work of Gertler and Wolfe, according to which any occurring economic activity has to be considered inside an institutional context[79]. Edquist and Johnson provide a definition of institutions as:

> "Sets of common habits, routines, established practices, rules or laws that regulate the relations and interactions between the individual and groups"

Thinking about brands in these terms help us to better consider the importance of non-economic players in market dynamics. Early theories on firm-consumer relationship was proposing a fixed manipulator-victim dichotomy, where consumers were seen as passive receivers of the marketing message delivered by companies[80]. Considering a brand as an economic institution as well, means identifying it as something which arises by a continuous negotiation between economic and non-economic actors, and not something fixed, given by marketers.

1.4.2 The importance of branding in Luxury and Fashion industry

Despite playing a fundamental role in the industry dynamics, branding in fashion and luxury can be considered as a substantially recent phenomenon. The introduction of the "brand" on the clothing pieces is historically attributed to Charles Frederick Worth[81], nonetheless the industry has always been characterized by a craft-oriented approach. That is true until the 1960s, where the discovery of new techniques of production allows to switch to the mass production[82]. Companies, pushed by the increasing levels of standardization and by the huge volumes, felt the urgent need to differentiate their product from competition. The main players in the luxury and fashion sector at the time started to borrow the branding and labelling tools used by other mass market industries, as for example the food-processing one[83]. Fashion started to be interconnected with the pop-culture, factor which eventually led to a rapid diversification of the sector and of the offer. Different areas inside the pop-culture began to incorporate specific aspects of fashion brands,

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[79] M. Gertler, D. Wolfe, *Innovation and Social Learning: Institutional Adaptation in an Era of Technological Change,* New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002

[80] A, Quart, *Branded: the buying and selling of teenagers*. Cambridge, MA, Perseus Pub, 2003

[81] F. Fabbri, *La moda contemporanea: arte e stile da Worth agli anni Cinquanta*, Giulio Einaudi Editore, 2019

[82] L. Crewe, E. Davenport, *The Puppet Show - Changing Buyer-Supplier Relationships within Clothing Retailing*, Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 17(2): 183-197, 1992

[83] W. Olins, *On brand*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2003

thus strengthening the interrelation between the industry and the cultural context[84]. The 1980's constituted a turning point for the consideration of branding as a core asset for companies. A huge numbers of fashion entrepreneurs among which Giorgio Armani and Gianni Versace adopted a more holistic approach to "branding" and carried on a successful strategy of mergers and acquisitions, which projected their companies in a completely new context of interlinked and connected corporate relations. Being fashion traditionally depicted as something unpredictable and ever changing[85], they tried to position themselves as stable points, which could be able to resist the changing of trends. Moreover, a series of events which were independent by the will of designers and companies' CEOs, contributed to render branding role even more central. First of all, several fashion brands which were experiencing liquidity issues, began licensing their brand on a vast scale, to manufacturers and producers in different sectors. In this way, brand started to constitute one of the most important sources of income for fashion companies, as it is still today. Secondly, the blurring of the separation between traditional fashion and sportswear, allows main fashion players to borrow the positioning and logos placing that were typical of sportswear firms[86]. This renewed importance of branding, that after 1990s became integrated in every aspect of companies' strategy, even contributed to change the concept of product: rather than focusing on individual characteristics of the offer, companies started to see their products as a way to broaden their brand and make is stronger.

1.4.3 Firms as socially proactive players: the importance of purpose-driven brands

As pointed out in the first paragraph of this chapter, it is clear how the role of brand has undergone a substantial change over the years. From being a simple guarantee of quality, a whole new universe has begun to open behind the process of "branding". Thanks to their ability of making simple and easily understandable some abstract concept, and also given their economic relevance worldwide (half of the most important economies in the world are firms, not national countries)[87], companies have elevated themselves to powerful symbols in the political and social debate. Today, companies are experiencing a growing pressure from their consumer base to get involved in the most relevant socio-political issues, taking a strong stand in the debate. Cone/Porter Novelli study of 2018 highlighted how consumers connect emotionally to those brands which take a clear position, with regard to issues which affect customers first-hand. In particular, 71% of Americans expected companies to be passionately involved and support them with regard to several social issues; among these, there was also the question of LGBT rights, considered as important by the 63% of respondents[88]. Companies should be aware of the main social issues which are developing

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[84] C. Breward, *Fashion*, Oxford University Press, 2003
[85] L. Crewe, *The besieged body: geographies of retailing and consumption*, Progress in Human Geography 25(4): 629-640 2001
[86] T. Agins, *The End of Fashion; How Marketing Changed the Clothing Business Forever*, New York, HarperCollins Publishers Inc. 1999
[87] https://lisamerriam.com/expanding-brand-dimensions/
[88] Cone/Porter Novelli, *2018 Cone/Porter Novelli Purpose Study: How to Build Deeper Bonds, Amplify Your Message and Expand Your Consumer Base*, p.11, 2018

around them, in their specific sector or industry, and should be ready to provide convincing responses to critiques and showing and demonstrating an authentic purpose by keeping a reserve of proactive initiatives on those issues. Being quiet, or taking a position in the middle, seems not to be anymore a rewarding strategy for companies, as further highlighted by Edelman study of 2018. The report, significantly titled "Brands take a stand", showed how 56% of the respondents lost their trust in those firms who remained silent on specific social issues. Moreover, the study has underlined how there is a substantial gap in trust between businesses and government, with the consequence that 64% of respondent are expecting CEO's to be the promoters of a change, rather than lawmakers[89].

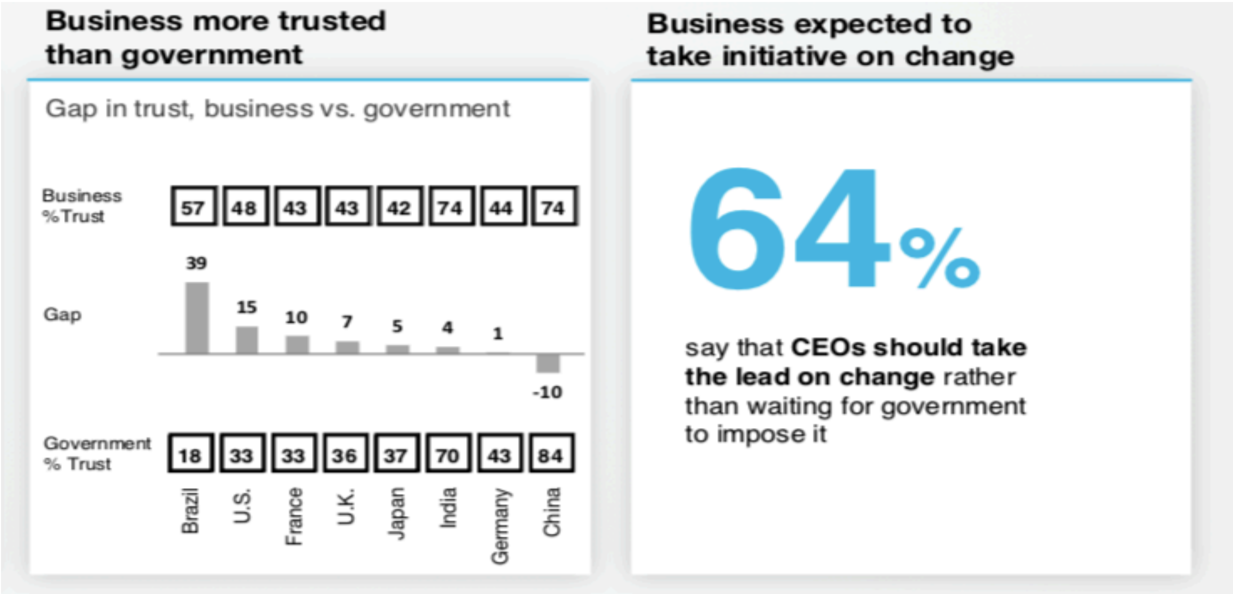

Figure 1 - Edelman Trust Barometer for Countries

Major companies should be able to understand how their role has radically changed, including a larger set of responsibilities which go far beyond the product performance and the shareholders' return. This additional dimension can be summarized by the word "Purpose", which far from remaining just a trend, it is being more and more considered as a norm to which companies should adapt in order to obtain positive responses from the engagement of their customers. The multi-dimensional network of relationship the companies could manage to establish with their consumer base through a purpose-driven strategy, should allow brands to achieve new levels of loyalty from its consumers. The Cone/Porter Novelli paper again suggest how a purpose-based company should lead to the generation of a virtuous circle, to the benefit of the company's profit. A strong Purpose is capable of increasing customers' loyalty, as already mentioned, and also of expanding the current customer base, as new consumers would be more willing to try the products. A loyal consumer, in its turn, can be exploited by the company to amplify the message they want to convey and

[89] Edelman, *Edelman Earned Brand*, 2018

broaden the brand culture to new audiences. In the end, a strategy like that would end in a contribution to risk-sharing, as 67% of responders said they would defend a purpose-led company from critiques due to a mistakes or other reasons[90]. Despite price and product or service quality remain important attributes for the purchase decision of the consumer, they have become almost taken for granted, meaning they are expected, but not specially awarded; in this sense, purpose could be that differentiation tool capable of constituting a turning point for the whole game.

Companies should understand how to relate to a new reality, which, thanks also to increasing millennials' predominance on the market, is constituted for the majority by those who are defined as Belief-Driven buyers. Younger customers expect even more a commitment by firms, taking part in conversation surrounding hottest issues. The Edelman report showed a 64% of people evaluated as belief-driven buyers, confirming how the phenomenon has become a mainstream type of buying worldwide.

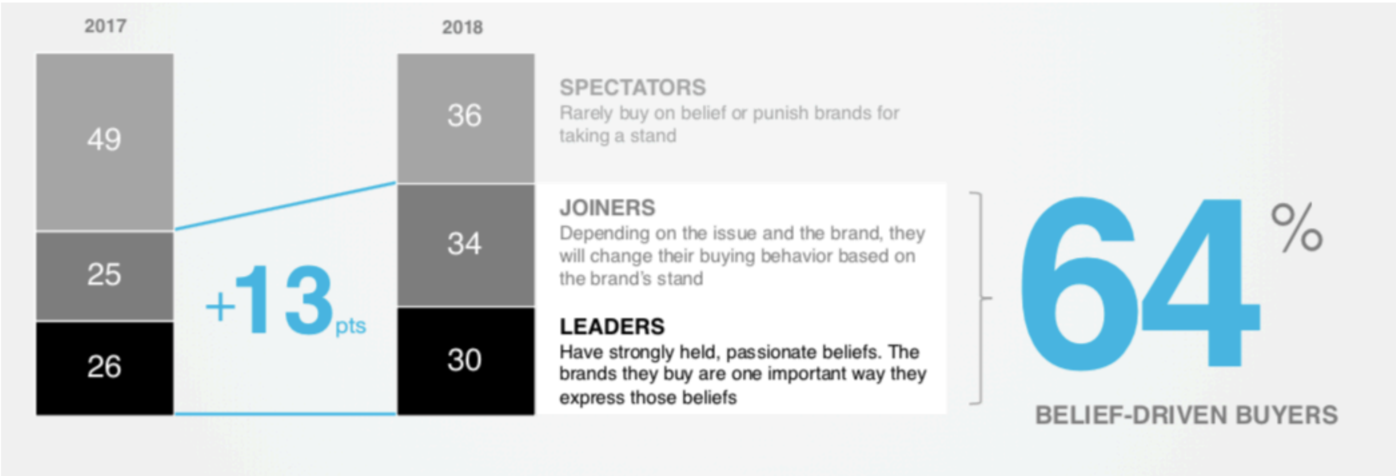

Figure 2 - Edelman Belief-Driven Segments

Brands are increasingly believed to be powerful forces able to represent their consumers in solving societal issues and problems. This idea takes the name of Brand Democracy, and is defined by Ladler-Kylander and Stenzel as:

> "…the extent to which an organization engages its board, staff, members, participants, volunteers, supporters, and other stakeholders in both defining and communicating the brand identity"[91].

As again shown by research, 46% of people think brands have better ideas for solving country's problems, while 53% think they can even do more than government for social purpose.

[90] Cone/Porter Novelli, *2018 Cone/Porter Novelli Purpose Study: How to Build Deeper Bonds, Amplify Your Message and Expand Your Consumer Base*, p.4, 2018

[91] N. Ladler-Kylander, J.S. Stenzel, *The Brand IDEA: Managing Nonprofit Brands with Integrity, Democracy and Affinity*, Jossey-Bass, 2013

In this optic, a 2018 study by Accenture raises an interesting question on who do brands belong to today. While before the trivial answer could be the company, which invested in the growing of the brand, today the question is far less easy than it seems. As stated in the report, companies can be considered, nowadays, as "community property", meaning that also customers own a stake of it, as they represent the fundamental starting point for the continuous improvement and consolidation of a brand[92]. Consumers have become active players of the economical ecosystem in which companies lie within, as they are now able to influence others' decision to buy or not, participate in the product development and providing useful insights that could benefit companies' competitive position. Moreover, this new generation of consumers is aware, for the very first time, of its palpability to impact the business through social pressure and participation on social media.

Among the factors, identified in the research paper, which influence the way companies build their purpose, and how it eventually affects their competitiveness, some result particularly significant, if we take into consideration the luxury and fashion industry. First of all, the research suggests how brands producing utilities care less about the purpose respect to brands which are able to engage directly consumers, offering them an experience inserted in a brand's ecosystem of activities and connections[93]. This fact assumes a great significance if we think at the importance of the experience in the context of the luxury industry, a sector that is far away from producing basic and essential mass market utilities, and that relies precisely on consumer's engagement in order to make profit and should be, according to Accenture finding, particularly concerned about being purpose-driven. The ability of providing an engaging experience goes in tandem with the capacity of showing a convincing purpose, as both dimensions should be characterized by being unique and differentiated by competition; a consumer-centric perspective should become the norm for luxury companies, as it should allow a better engagement of the consumer base, together with a deeper knowledge of the major social issues affecting them, and which they want the brands to relate to[94]. Secondly, consumers' demographics plays a decisive role in the issue, as almost 60% of Gen Z or Millennials worldwide believe in the importance of companies' social responsibility, particularly related to human rights, race, and LGBT rights, respect to a smaller 50% of Boomers[95]. This again is a fact to be taken in consideration, as by 2025, more than half of the entire luxury and fashion market will be constituted by Gen Y and Z[96].

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[92] R. Barton, M. Ishikawa, K. Quiring, B. Theofilou, *To Affinity and Beyond: From Me to We, The Rise of the Purpose-led Brand*, 14th annual Global Consumer Pulse Research, AccentureStrategy, 2018

[93] Accenture, *Brands Still Matter: Uncovering the Relevance of Brands in US Food and Beverage*, Accenture Strategy, 2018

[94] D. Langer, (Jan 13, 2020), *Luxury 2030: The Rise of the Personal Luxury Experience*, retrieved from https://jingdaily.com/luxury-2030-the-rise-of-the-personal-luxury-experiences/

[95] Accenture, *Brands Still Matter: Uncovering the Relevance of Brands in US Food and Beverage*, Accenture Strategy, (2018)

[96] Bain & Company, *Luxury Goods Worldwide Market Study*, 2018

1.4.4 Millennials and Gen Z increased sensitivity to diversity

As it has been already stated before, it is clear how fashion mirrors society, and so fashion brands' actions are driven by consumers. The sensibility of fashion customers to certain topics, is constantly shaping the way the whole industry is moving. While boomers today represent a still rich segment of the luxury and fashion industry, by 2025, according to Bain's report, 55% of the market will be represented by generations Y and Z, who will constitute the core of the industry's growth, offsetting a decline in spending by older generations[97]. Despite not having commonly agreed age range to define these groups precisely, Bencsik et al. (2016) provide a generations' timeline, adapted from Zemke et. al (2000), which considers as "Millennials" those born among 1980 and 1995, and members of Generation Z those who are born instead from 1995 to 2010[98]. As members of these groups are expected to be the leaders of the market in the near future, it is fundamental for firms to keep up with their needs, among which the one for inclusivity occupies a position of great relevance.

Table 1 - Generations' Time-line, adapted from Bencsik et al. (2016)

1946-1960	Baby Boomers
1960-1980	Generation X
1980-1995	Generation Y / Millennials
1995-2010	Generation Z
2010+	Generation Alfa

This spirit of inclusion and openness to people could not exclude the gender sphere. The 2017 *Accelerating Acceptance* report from GLAAD, showed how people belonging to younger generations are increasingly more likely to identify themselves as LGBT, than their older peers, specifically twice as likely than the Boomers and two thirds more likely than Generation X[99]. Furthermore, a 2018 study from the journal Pediatrics, highlights how 2.7% of interviewed kids (students in 9th and 11th grade) define themselves as transgender, gender non-conforming or non-binary[100]. These data are particularly interesting, if compared with an earlier UCLA study from 2016, in order to understand the expansion of gender identity topic among younger generations. In the 2016 study, only 0.7% of teens were identifying themselves as non-binary: these findings support the presence of a trend, rapidly expanding, which sees the social commitment of teenager toward gender fluidity in continuous growth.[101] Millennials have defined themselves as a demanding group

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[97] See Above
[98] A Bencsik., G.C. Horváth, T. Juhász, *Y and Z Generations at Workplaces. Journal of Competitiveness*, 8 (3), 90-106, 2016
[99] GLAAD, *Acceleranting Acceptance 2017*, Harrispoll, 2017
[100] G.N. Rider, B.J. McMorris, A.L. Gower, E. Coleman, M.E. Eisenberg, *Health and Care Utilization of Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Youth: A Population-Based Study,* Pediatrics, 141, 2018
[101] A.R. Flores, J.L. Herman, G.J. Gates, T.N.T. Brown, *How Many Adults Identify as Transgender in the United States?*, Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute, 2016

of customers, as they require brands to match their values and connect to them personally and emotionally[102]. Their strong voice, combined with their growing volume and weight in the market, is pushing companies to work for the creation of gender-inclusive work environment and a type of communication which turns away from classical gender stereotypes.

The same point holds when it comes to deal with Gen Z. Deloitte report *Welcome to Generation Z* further stresses the fact that inclusion and diversity are a central value which characterize this social group, adding that is no more limited to gender and race, but also to identity and orientation[103]. Additional studies confirmed the fact, specifying that 10% of Gen Zers think to equality and inclusivity as something related to gender[104]. While Millennials were the first who tried to subvert the existing gender paradigm, Gen Z want to reject them completely. Members of Gen Z believe that gender is no more a defining feature for an individual as it was in the past, and, even in the use of the language, they express greater openness and inclusiveness toward different gender identities[105].

[102] C. Barton, L. Koslow, C. Beauchamp, (Jan 15, 2014), How Millennials Are Changing the Face of Marketing Forever, *BCG*, retrieved from https://www.bcg.com/publications/2014/marketing-center-consumer-customer-insight-how-millennials-changing-marketing-forever.aspx

[103] Deloitte, Welcome to Generation Z, Network of Executive Women, retrieved from https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/consumer-business/welcome-to-gen-z.pdf

[104] Rainmaker Thinking, What Equality and Inclusivity means for Gen Z, RainamkerThinking, retrieved from https://rainmakerthinking.com/white-paper/the-voice-of-generation-z-what-post-millennials-are-saying-about-work/

[105] J. Myers, (Jul 25, 2017), Welcoming Gen-Z, Be Inclusive or You'll be Irrelevant, *MediaVillage*, retrieved from https://www.mediavillage.com/article/welcoming-gen-z-be-inclusive-or-youll-be-irrelevant/2/

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 BRAND EQUITY

2.1.1 The Brand

In order to fully understand brand equity and its related concepts, it is important to start our review from the meaning of the brand itself.

Brand and "branding", that is the endowment of a product with the power of the brand[106], arise as a differentiation tool for distinguishing one product from another, starting from the first rudimental examples of branding found in ancient Egypt or in the Indus Valley[107]. Brands started to evolve through centuries, expressing on one side the creator's perspective of the product, and representing on the other the sum of consumers' individual experiences[108]. Going further in time, with the 19th Century, the association of the brand name with the product is used to enhance its value, and marketers begin to question themselves on how is it possible to create and sustain on a long-term perspective a strong brand, capable of allowing business to grow[109]. This eventually led to our modern conception of brand, which sees it as an instrument useful both for the consumer, since it simplifies the buying process and the evaluation of different options, and for the firm, as a strong brand name is a guarantee of better performance and higher returns[110].

The traditional definition of American Marketing Association (AMA) of brand, that here is reported once more, stems precisely from this concept of brand, as a:

> "A name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of the competitors"[111].

Over the years, other authors have provided different definitions for this term, which have been summarized in the table below.

Table 2 - A literature review of definitions of Brand

Author	Definition
Gardner and Levy, 1955	"A brand label is more than the label employed to differentiate among the manufacturers of a product; it is a complex symbol that represents a variety of ideas and attributes"[112]

[106] P. Kotler, K.L. Keller, A. Koshy, M. Jha, *Marketing Management – A South Asian Perspective*, Pearson Prentice Hall, Delhi, 2009

[107] K. Moore, S. Reid, *The Birth of Brand: 4000 Years of Branding History*, McGill University, 2008

[108] P. Berthon et al., *Brand Words – From Articulation to Integration*, Journal of Advertising Research, 2011

[109] H.P. Farquhar, *Managing brand equity*, Marketing Research, September, Vol. 1 Issue 3, pg. 24-33, 1989

[110] D.A. Aaker, *The Value of Brand Equity*, Journal of Business Strategy, Vol. 13 No. 4, 1992

[111] L. Wood, *Brands and brand equity: definition and management*, Management Decision, 38 (9), 662-69, 2000

[112] B.B. Gardner, *S.J. Levy, The product and the brand, Harvard Business Review. 33 (March–April), pp. 33–39,* 1955

Pitcher, 1985	"A brand is a consumer's idea of the product"[113]
Broadbent and Cooper, 1987	"(a brand is) a mark to designate the ownership"[114]
Bennett, 1988	"A brand is a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers"[115]
Farquhar, 1989	"a name, symbol, design, or mark that enhances the value of a product behind its functional purpose"[116]
Aaker, 1992	"a brand thus signals to the customer the source of the product, and protects both the customer and the producer from competitors who would attempt to provide products that appear to be identical"[117]
Kapferer, 1992	"a strong idea that is supported by a profitable economic equation"[118]
Gordon, 1992	"a brand name is nothing more or less than the sum of all the mental connections people have around it"[119]
Aaker, 1996	"The set of human characteristics associated to a brand"[120]
Jones, 1998	"a product that provides functional benefits, plus added values that some consumers value enough to buy"[121]
Kotler, 2000	"the name, associated with one or more items in the product line, that is used to identify the source of character of the item(s)"[122]
Doyle, 2001	"(brands) simplify the choice process by confirming the functional or emotional associations with the brand"[123]
Keller, 2003	"a product, but one that adds other dimensions that differentiate it in some way from other products designed to satisfy the same need"[124]

As we see from the table, there is no definitive conclusion on what a brand is or not, as different authors have provided a definition of the term by analyzing one of its numerous aspects and facets. Brand has been so far classified as a logo, name, symbol or design (Bennett, 1988; Farquhar, 1989; Kotler, 2000), as a legal instrument (Broadbent and Cooper, 1987), as a shorthand for referring to something (Brown, 1992), as an

[113] A.E. Pitcher, *The role of branding in International advertising*, International Journal of Advertising, 4, pp. 241-246, 1985
[114] B. Kay, P. Cooper, *Research is Good for You*, Marketing Intelligence and Planning, 5(1), pp. 3-9, 1987
[115] P.D. Bennett, *Dictionary of Marketing Terms*, The American Marketing Association, Chicago, IL, p. 18, 1988
[116] H.P. Farquhar, *Managing brand equity*, Marketing Research, September, Vol. 1 Issue 3, 1989
[117] D.A. Aaker, *The Value of Brand* Equity, Journal of Business Strategy, Vol. 13 No. 4, 1992
[118] J.N. Kapferer, The New Strategic Brand Management, New Delhi: Kogan Page, 2004
[119] G. Brown, *People, Brands and Advertising*, Warwick UK. Millward Brown International, 1992
[120] D.A. Aaker, *Building strong brands*, Free Press, 1996
[121] J.P. Jones, *What's in a Brand?,* Tata McGraw-Hill Publishing Company Limited, New Delhi, 1998
[122] P. Kotler, *Marketing Management*, The Millennium Edition, Upper Saddle River, Prentice Hall, 2000
[123] P. Doyle, *Building value-based brand strategies*, Journal of Strategic Marketing, September 2001
[124] K.L. Keller, *Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring and Managing Brand Equity*, 2nd ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003

identity system (Gardner and Levy, 1955), as a set of association in consumer's mind (Pitcher, 1985), as a personality (Aaker, 1997), as a product (Jones, 1998; Keller, 2003).

2.1.2 Brand Equity

Marketers have always been concerned in finding a measure capable of establishing the value of intangible assets of a company, as they represent a more sustainable source of competitive advantage respect to the physical ones[125]. Traditional financial indicators as sales and profits were unable to provide insights on the impact of key asset, as the brand, on the overall value of the company. That is why, the concept of brand equity, since its birth in the 1980's, has aroused the curiosity and interests of the entire market.
Despite starting to be used during 1980's, especially by advertising practitioners of the time[126], one of the very first recognized formulation of the concept is provided by the Marketing Science Institute in 1988, which defines brand equity as "the set of associations and behavior on the part of a brand's customers channel members, and parent corporation that permits the brand to earn greater volume or greater margins than it could without the brand name"[127]. One year later, Farquhar (1989), provides one of the most used definition of the term, which is "the added value with which a given brand endows a product"[128]. An important academic contribution is provided, during 1990's, by Aaker (1992) and Srivastava and Schoker (1991), with the former defining it as "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or a service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers"[129]. This definition clearly links the value of brand equity to the name and symbol of the brand, which is now recognized as capable of affecting a change in value of related assets and liabilities. Similarly, brand equity is then defined by Srivastava and Schocker as "a set of associations and behaviors on the part of brand's consumers, channel members and parent corporation that enables a brand to earn greater volume or greater margins that it could without the brand name and, in addition, provides a strong, sustainable and differential advantage"[130]. More recently, Kotler (2009) has defined it as "the value endowed on products and services" which "can be reflected in the way consumers think, feel, and act with respect to the brand"[131]. Given the complexity of the concept, as we have seen happening for the term "brand" as well,

[125] S.D. Hunt, R.M. Morgan, *The Comparative Advantage Theory of Competition*, Journal of Marketing, 59, 2, pp. 1-15, 1995
[126] P. Barwise, *Brand equity: Snark or Boojum?*, International Journal of Marketing Research, 10(March): 93-104, 1993
[127] L.A. Leuthesser, *Defining, measuring and managing brand equity: A conference summary*, Marketing Science Institute Report No 88-104. Cambridge, MA, 1988
[128] H.P. Farquhar, *Managing Brand Equity*, Marketing Research, 1 (September), p. 24, 1989
[129] D.A. Aaker, *The Value of Brand Equity*, Journal of Business Strategy, Vol. 13 No. 4, 1992
[130] K.S. Srivastava, A.D. Schoker, *Brand Equity: A perspective on its meaning and measurement*, Cambridge, Mass. : Marketing Science Institute, no. 91-124, 1991
[131] P. Kotler, K.L. Keller, A. Koshy, M. Jha, *Marketing Management – A South Asian Perspective*, Pearson Prentice Hall, Delhi, 2009

there is no common accepted definition which universally resolves the meaning of brand equity. The following table tries to sum up the diverse main existing definitions of brand equity.

Table 3 - A literature review of definitions of Brand Equity

Author	Definition
Leuthesser, 1988	"the set of associations and behavior on the part of a brand's customers channel members, and parent corporation that permits the brand to earn greater volume or greater margins than it could without the brand name"
Farquhar, 1989	"the added value with which a given brand endows a product"
Aaker, 1991	"a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or a service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers"
Srivastava and Schoker, 1991	"a set of associations and behaviors on the part of brand's consumers, channel members and parent corporation that enables a brand to earn greater volume or greater margins that it could without the brand name and, in addition, provides a strong, sustainable and differential advantage"
Swait et al., 1993	"the consumer's implicit valuation of the brand in a market with differentiated brands relative to a market with no brand differentiation"[132]
Keller, 1993	"the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand. Brand knowledge is the full set of brand associations linked to the brand in long-term consumer memory"[133]

[132] J. Swait, T. Erdem, J. Louviere, C. Dubelaar, *The equalization price: A measure of consumer-perceived brand equity*, International Journal of Research in Marketing, 10: 23-45, 1993
[133] K.L. Keller, *Conceptualizing, measuring, and managing customer-based brand equity*, Journal of Marketing 57(1): 1-22, 1993

Lassar et al., 1995	“the consumers’ perception of the overall superiority of a product carrying that brand name when compared to other brands”[134]
Kotler, 2009	“the value endowed on products and services … (which) can be reflected in the way consumers think, feel, and act with respect to the brand”

Despite the fragmented views on the effective meaning of the term, there is at least a shared consensus in recognizing that brand equity denotes the added value that comes with the brand, endowed to the product/service offered by the firm.

The brand equity construct has been analyzed by literature from two main perspective. The first one is a firm-based perspective (or financial), which precisely takes into consideration the financial value brand equity brings to the overall business. The second one instead is the customer-based perspective, which, based on market’s perceptions, takes into account the effects of brand equity on increasing market share and profitability. The former conception sees the brand as a separate asset, whose value can be calculated using financial techniques; in this optic, Simon and Sullivan (1993) defines brand equity as “the incremental cash flows which accrue to branded products over and above the cash flows which would result from the sale of unbranded products”[135]. On the other side, the conceptualization of consumer-based brand equity (CBBE), takes its roots on academic fields aside from pure economics and marketing, as for instance cognitive psychology. Keller (1993) introduces the CBBE model, starting exactly from the consumer psychology perspective, defining it as “the differential effect that brand knowledge has on consumer response to the marketing of the brand”[136]. According to this construct, brand equity can be summarized as the added value a brand generates, through the associations and the emotional bond that have been generated inside the consumer’s mind[137].

For the sake of our analysis, we will put our focus precisely on the CBBE. The customer-based approach is generally preferred by academic literature and researchers, as a brand which has no meaning for the customer, ends in being useless from a financial point of view[138]. It has been demonstrated that a positive CBBE implies some important long-term benefits for the firm, as the possibility to charge premium prices, an increase effectiveness of communication, long-term revenues and customers’ willingness to look out for

[134] W. Lassar, B. Mittal, A. Sharma, *Measuring Customer-Based Brand Equity. Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 12(4): 11-19, 1995

[135] C.J. Simon, M.W. Sullivan, *The Measurement and Determinants of Brand Equity: a Financial Approach*, Marketing Science, 12 (Winter), 28-52, 1993

[136] K.L. Keller, *Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Managing Customer-Based Brand Equity*, Journal of Marketing, 57 (January), p. 60, 1993

[137] M. Shariq, *Brand Equity Dimensions – A literature review*, ICFAI Business School (IBS) Gurgaon, 2018

[138] C.J. Cobb-Walgren, C.A. Ruble, N. Donthu, *Brand equity, brand preference, and purchase intent*, Journal of Advertising, 24(3), 25-4, 1995

new distribution channels[139]. Moreover, CBBE has been referred as a fundamental diagnostical tool for managers, in order to better understand the ideas that customers have about the brand[140]. Over time, different attempts have been made in order to make this variable operational and useful for management's implementation of corporate strategy. The different approaches to management have been divided categorized as direct, whenever researchers have tried to measure CBBE by focusing on consumers' utilities, and indirect, whose approach to the measurement of brand equity is mediated through its manifestations. Several authors have suggested multiple methodologies and measures to estimate the value of brand equity, leading to the creation of different models of evaluation. One of the most complete and widely accepted models, still today, has been provided by Aaker (1992), which considers 5 main assets as sources of brand equity value: brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand quality, brand associations and other proprietary brand assets[141]. Together with Aaker, one of the most referred models in literature is the one given by Keller (1993), the so-called customer-based brand equity pyramid[142]. Keller identifies 6 elements, starting with brand salience, and going on through subsequent stages with brand performance, brand imagery, brand feelings, brand judgements and brand relationships.

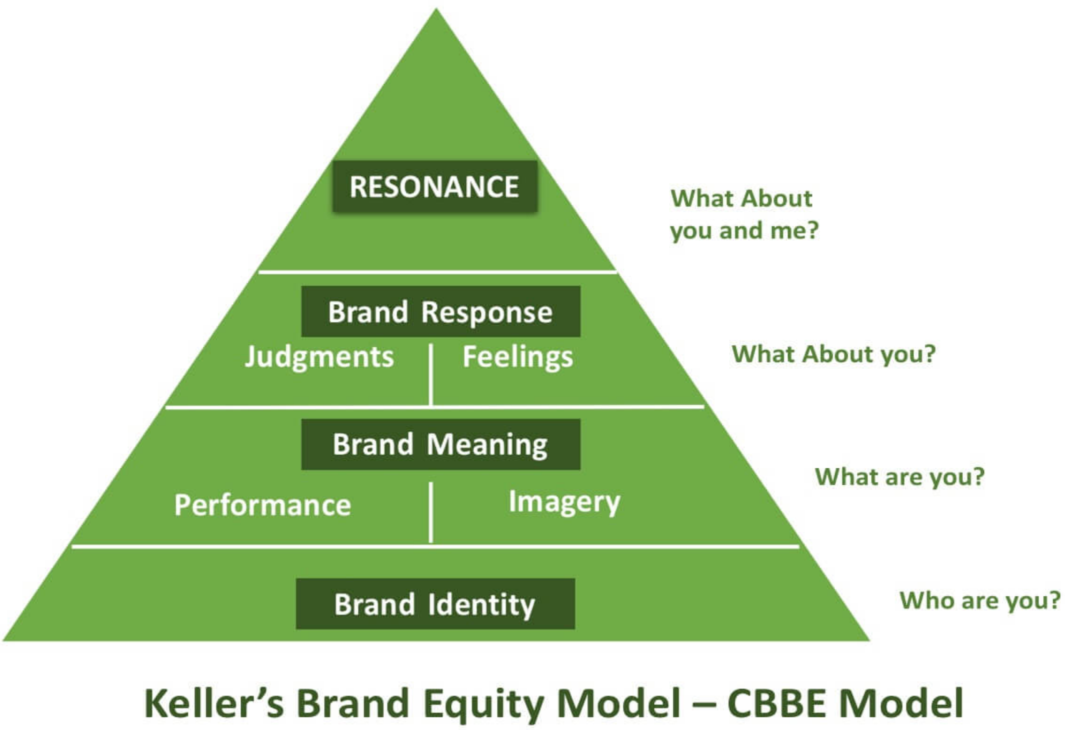

Figure 3 - Keller's CBBE Model, retrieved from Qualtrics.com

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[139] K.L. Keller, *Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring and Managing Brand Equity*, 2nd ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003
[140] A. Szőcs, *The MIMIC model of the consumer-based brand equity*, Ph. Dissertation, Corvinus University of Budapest, 2012
[141] D.A. Aaker, *The Value of Brand Equity*, Journal of Business Strategy, Vol. 13 No. 4, 1992
[142] K.L. Keller, *Conceptualizing, measuring, and managing customer-based brand equity*, Journal of Marketing 57(1), 1993

At the beginning of the new Century, Yoo et al. (2000) structure a new model, consisting in 3 main components: traditional marketing mix elements (4Ps), several brand equity dimensions (perceived quality, brand loyalty, brand awareness / associations) and overall brand equity[143]. Marketing actions, according to their framework, can be divided only as "brand-building" or "brand-harming" activities. Wang and Finn (2013), more recently, managed to define a model which appears to be quite different respect to prior research. In fact, their model wants to separate brand equity dimensions between the formative ones (the causes of CBBE) and the reflective ones (the effects of CBBE), also adding to the former group a measure which had not appeared in previous research, that is brand emotions. This addition has a particularly important meaning, if we consider it as a shift to a framework capable of including also a non-cognitive dimension of brand equity, and measure in this way the spontaneous emotional feedback of the consumer[144].

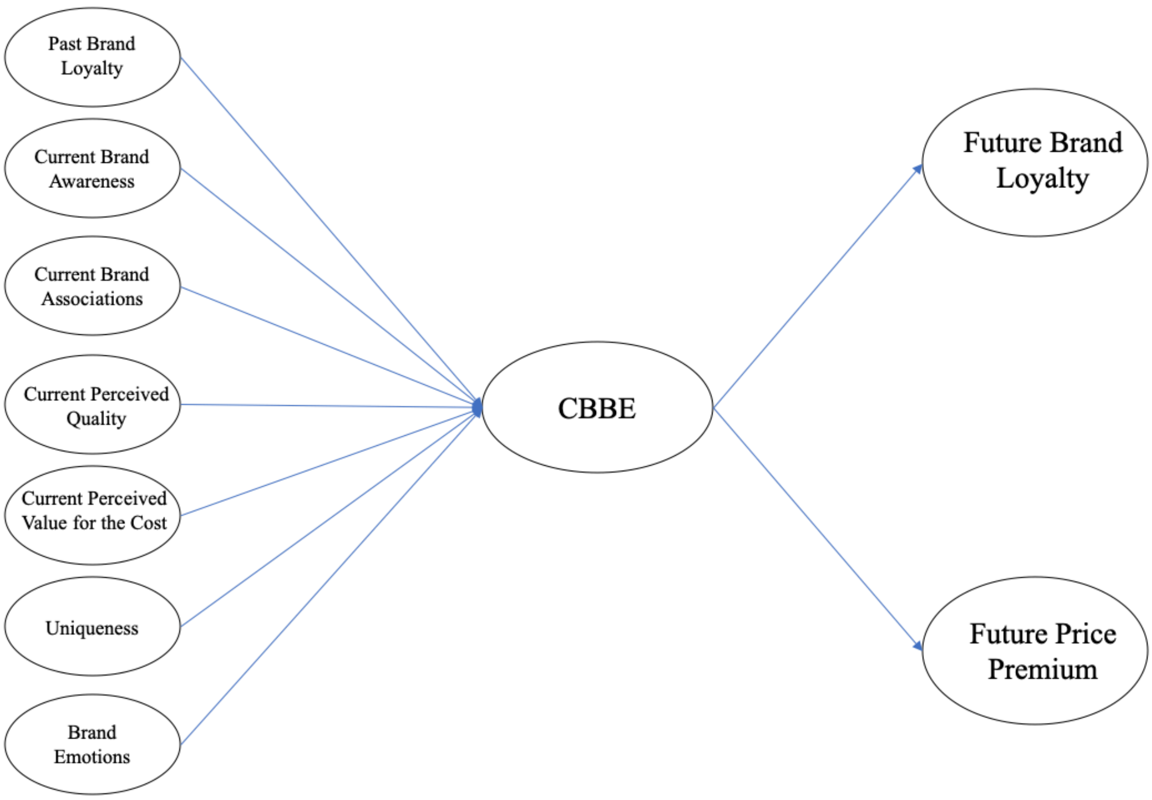

Figure 4 - Wang & Finn CBBE Model, readapted from L. Wang, A. Finn (2013)

It is evident that the common effort of literature has been the attempt to deconstruct brand equity into different pieces, to understand the effective sources of CBBE and find mediating variables which could be easily measured, to then determine their overall effect on CBBE value. Taleghani and Almasi (2011) provide

[143] B. Yoo, N. Donthu, S. Lee, *An Examination of Selected Marketing Mix Elements and Brand Equity*, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 28 (2), 195-211, 2000
[144] L. Wang, A. Finn, Heterogeneous sources of customer-based brand equity within a product category, Marketing Intelligence and Planning, Vol. 31 Issue 6 pp. 674 – 696, 2013

a useful resume of the main studies about brand equity, with a summary of the brand equity dimensions adopted by different authors[145]:

Table 4 - Brand Equity studies and Dimensions, readapted from Taleghani and Almasi (2011)

Author	Brand Equity Dimensions
Keller, 1993	Brand Awareness, Brand Image
Park and Srinivasan, 1994	Brand Associations
Lane and Jacobson, 1995	Brand Attitude, Brand Name Familiarity
Cobb-Walgren, Ruble and Donthu, 1995	Perceived Quality, Brand Awareness, Brand Associations, Advertising Awareness
Aaker, 1996	Brand Loyalty, Perceived Quality, Brand Awareness, Brand Associations
Yoo, Donthu and Lee, 2000	Brand Loyalty, Perceived Quality, Brand Awareness / Associations
Berry, 2000	Brand Awareness, Brand Meaning
Yoo and Donthu, 2001	Brand Loyalty, Perceived Quality, Brand Awareness / Associations
Gil, 2007	Brand Loyalty, Perceived Quality, Brand Awareness, Brand Associations
Atilgan, 2009	Brand Loyalty, Perceived Quality, Brand Awareness, Brand Associations, Brand Trust
Mishra and Datta, 2011	Brand Name, Brand Communication, Brand Association, Brand Personality, Brand Awareness, Brand Image, Perceived Brand Quality, Brand Loyalty

2.1.3 Brand Associations

Among the above-mentioned brand dimensions, brand associations are widely recognized as one of the most important component of brand equity (Aaker, 1992). According to Kotler and Keller (2006), associations comprehend all brand-related thoughts, beliefs, feelings and perceptions, that is to say anything in the consumer's memory that is linked to the brand[146]. They are formed as a consequence of the consumer's belief and the marketing action or the experience of consumer with the product / service and can be influenced by previous existing thoughts. Associations can be tangible product attributes, customer benefits,

[145] M. Talegani, M. Almasi, *Evaluate the Factors Affecting Brand Equity from the Perspective of Customers Using Aaker's Model*, Kuwait Chapter of Arabian Journal of Business and Management Review, Vol. 1, No. 4, 2011

[146] P. Kotler, K.L. Keller, *Marketing Management*, 12th edition, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006

celebrities, lifestyles, competitors (Aaker, 1991)[147]. The combination of both tangible and intangible components ends up in defining a “brand identity”, a set of unique associations that brand managers strive to maintain and that are crucial to grant the uniqueness of the brand. As already shown in the previous paragraphs, where the main models for the conceptualization of CBBE have been briefly reviewed, brand associations are universally considered as an imperative antecedent of brand equity, as sustained also by Keller (2013), which affirms that high levels of brand equity are connected with strong and favourable associations held in mind by consumers[148]. Brand associations are comparable to informational nodes, which bring with them the meaning which the brand has for the customer, through which brand image is manifested. This perception of the brand, therefore, is crucial in the overall contribution to the final value of CBBE.

Overall, academic literature seems to agree on the fact that brand associations are generally produced through visual stimuli, as they represent the majority of the inputs which get to the brain on a daily basis. This consideration is important, if we think that humans do not elaborate cognitively everything they see, but just a small fraction of it. Supphellen (2000) recognizes that just a small part of what we observe in reality has then a cognitive elaboration and a verbal description[149]. This would mean that only a fraction of the information by which we are bombarded every day enters into conscience, and also that associations may originate from our subconscious, out of our cognitive dimension. Despite the importance of this consideration, the non-cognitive dimension of brand associations is not addressed so accurately in traditional marketing literature relative to brand equity and brand dimensions. Furthermore, following the studies of Fiske & Taylor (1995) exploring the relation between associations and emotions[150], Supphellen continues on this line of reasoning, stating that “only a minor proportion of the impressions that reach the brain is subjective to deliberate reasoning”, introducing the category of “emotional associations”. Aaker’s model of brand associations as well, being considered a point of reference with Keller, is not exempt from critics or observations. In an article of 2015, Thellefsen points out how Aaker’s above-mentioned definition of the brand dimension as “anything linked in memory to a brand”, only accrues to the past, without allowing to consider hopes, expectations, desires[151]. This concept is further stressed by Pierce, which affirms how is not the brand itself which generates associations, but instead it is all part of a meaning-creation process which involves the three dimensions of time, past, present and future. Brand associations are the result of an external stimulus which triggers an internal image inside the mind, through the mediation of the subject’s prior knowledge.

[147] D.A. Aaker, *Managing Brand Equity*, New York, NY, The Free Press, 1991
[148] K.L. Keller, *Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring and Managing Brand Equity*, 2nd ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003
[149] M. Supphellen, *Understanding Core Brand Equity: Guidelines for In-depth Elicitation of Brand Associations*, International Journal of Market Research, 2000
[150] T.S. Fiske, S.E. Taylor, *Social Cognition*, New York, NY, McGraw Hill, 1995
[151] T. Thellefsen, B. Sørensen, *What Brand Associations Are*, Sign System Studies, November, 2015

2.1.4 Brand Attitude

Generally speaking, attitudes are defined as mental structures which defines a response of an individual to an external stimulus[152]. Kotler and Armstrong (1996) define an attitude as "a person's favorable or unfavorable evaluation, feelings and tendencies toward an object or an idea"[153]. This dimension expresses then the consumer's individual evaluation of the brand, manifested through his preferences. The most renowned conceptualization of brand attitude is the one which sees it as tricomponent structure, which gathers cognitive, affective and conative components. The cognitive one is relative to information about an object or an idea, the affective to the relative sensations and emotional reactions and finally the conative one, refers to different manners of behaving, consequent to the emotions felt[154]. More recently, Grimm proposes a simpler framework, characterized by unidimensional construct with positive/negative affect[155]. Park (2010), proposes a two-factor model, based on brand self-connection and prominence. According to his framework, the degree of positivity or negativity of brand attitude is weighted by the confidence which the customer has while holding it[156]. Consumer's buying behaviour and willingness to pay a price premium are influenced by the attitude toward the brand, as further demonstrated by Norberg study of 2011[157]. Previous research has corroborated the importance of brand attitude dimension, as it is proved capable to predict consumers' interest to firms, buying behavior and brand consideration[158]. In their research on the difference among brand attitude and attachment, Park et al. specific how the concept of brand attitude is not time dependent, meaning the elaboration of attitudes can be processed in a short period of time, without requiring a prolonged exposure to the brand over time, as for example brand attachment does[159]. While other brand dimensions are strictly related to product attributes, brand attitudes can be related to non-product related and symbolic benefits[160].

Its importance in the building of brand equity has been widely recognized by academic literature, as it has been included by several authors into their conceptual models of CBBE. One of the first important work which took in examination the link between brand attitude and equity has been made by Chaudhuri (1995),

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[152] J. G. Udell, *Can attitude measurement predict consumer behavior?*, Journal of Marketing ,29(4), 46-50, 1965

[153] P. Kotler, G. Armstrong, *Principles of Marketing*, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1996

[154] L.E. Boone, D.L. Kurtz, *Contemporary Marketing*, Harcourt College, Texas, 2002

[155] P.E. Grimm, A_b components'impact on brand preference, Journal of Business Research, 58(4), 508-517, 2003

[156] C.W. Park, D.J. MacInnis, J. Priester, *Beyond Attitudes: Attachment and Consumer Behavior,* Seoul Journal of Business, Volume 12, Number 2, December, 2006

[157]H.M. Norberg, N. Maehle, T. Korneliussen, *From commodity to brand: antecedents and outcomes of consumers' label perception*, Journal of Product & Brand Management, 20/5, 368–378, 2011

[158] R.H. Fazio, *Attitudes as Object-Evaluation Associa- tions: Determinants, Consequences, and Correlates of Attitude Accessibility* in R.E. Petty, J.A. Krosnick, *Attitude Strength: Antecedents and Consequences*, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 247–82, 1995

[159] C.W. Park, D.J. MacInnis, J. Prieste, A. Eisingerich, D. Iacobucci, Brand Attachement and Brand Attitude Strenght: Conceptual and Empirical Differentiation of Two Critical Brand Equity Drivers, Journal of Marketing, Vol. 74, (6), 1-17, 2010

[160] J.R. Rossiter, L. Percy, *Advertising and Promotion Management,* New York, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1987

which suggest two ways in which attitude could affect final equity outcomes: a direct effect and an indirect one, mediated through the dimension of brand loyalty[161]. The results of the research supported the idea that brand attitude is useful to explain the nature of brand equity. A similar approach was adopted by Faircloth et al. (2001), who investigated the again a direct relationship between attitude and equity, and an indirect bond which passes through brand image. While the latter was confirmed, the first relation was not confirmed by data[162]. However, in an article on the *Asia Pacific Management Review,* Chang (2008) confirmed the fact that brand attitude can be considered at all effects an antecedent of brand equity and, more importantly, finds a direct correlation between the two dimensions, confirming the findings of Chaudhuri and disagreeing, instead, with the work of Faircloth et al.[163].

2.2 ADVERTISING

2.2.1 The role and effects of Advertising

Advertising, as written by Patrick, Maggie & Van Den (2010), is defined as an activity, sponsored by firm's stakeholders, with the aim of reminding the target customers that the brand is on the market[164]. The main scope of advertising is to influence people attitudes and emotions toward a brand[165]. Although existing since the time of Ancient Egypt, the proliferation of what we know as modern advertising takes place particularly in late 19th and 20th Centuries. Since that time, advertising evolved and proliferated over the years, becoming the main marketing instrument for every type of organization around the world[166].

As advertising has increasingly constitute a huge share of firms' budget, one of the toughest challenge of marketers and advertisers has been to evaluate the effect of advertising on viewers[167]. Usually, sales have been the most used indicator of the success and effectiveness of an advertising campaign, being an objective and easily measurable marker. The problem related to the use of sales as an indicator is that measurable effects of advertising can be analyzed only in the short-term. In fact, the common conception of advertising, well expressed by Fletcher (1990), is that advertising must produce quick results, since without immediate response in the present, there would be no possible effect in the future[168].

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[161] A. Chaudhuri, *Brand equity or double jeopardy?*, Journal of Project and Brand Management, 4(1), 26-32, 1995

[162] J.B. Faircloth, L.M. Cappella, B.L. Alford, *The effect of brand attitude and brand image on brand equity*, Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice, 9(3), 61-75, 2001

[163] H.H. Chang, *The antecedents and Consequences of Brand Equity in Service Markets*, Asia Pacific Management Review, January, 2008

[164] D.P. Patrick, G. Maggie, J. Van den Bergh, *Marketing Communications*, Prentice Hall, Pearson Education Limited, 2010

[165] G.E. Belch, M.A. Belch, *Advertising and Promotion: An Integrated Marketing Communications Perspective*, New York: McGraw-Hill/Irwin, 2003

[166] S. Patricia, D. Adam, *The Case for Print Media Advertising in the Internet Age*, Printing Industry Center, Ritpatrick, 2007

[167] M. De Ros, *A Content Analysis of Television Ads: Does Current Practice Maximize Cognitive Processing?,* Indiana University, 2008

[168] K. Fletcher, C. Wheeler, J. Wright, *The Role and Status of UK Database Marketing*, Quarterly Review of Marketing, 16

Brand equity can be helpful in providing a measure with a more long-term perspective than sales. As Cobb-Walgren highlighted in his study (1995), advertising is able to manipulate brand equity in a number of different ways. In addition to an increase in awareness and long-term profitability of the brand, the researcher pointed out how advertising is capable of making positive brand attitudes easily accessible to consumer's memory[169]. This demonstrates the importance of advertising in the building-up of brand equity, as brand attitudes are able to significantly shape consumers' behaviour and ultimately contribute to the additional value provided by the label. Other authors point out how advertising response can be considered as a function of brand attitudes[170]. A research from Bruner and Hensel (1996), reports different measurement models of brand attitudes, showing how this variable is usually used in research on product line extensions and advertising[171]. Lastly, Aaker & Biel (2013) explain once more how advertising is able to affect CBBE by both affecting the individual's memory structure, and by influencing brand attitude[172].

Among the brand dimensions analyzed by literature in relation to advertising, the work of Krishnan & Chakravarti (1990) is of particular relevance for what concerns the link between advertising effects and brand associations. According to the research, marketing communication can influence brand associations, translating them, when successfully stored in memory, into non-conscious behaviours[173].

2.2.2 Advertising, Gender and Stereotypes

In addition to analyze the economic effects of advertising, researchers from several disciplines have always been concerned in studying social and cultural implications of this phenomenon. The use of gender roles in advertising campaigns has been a recurrence since 1960s, whit the representation of men and women used to promote products and services[174]. This fact caused different scholars to worry about the possible consequences of that, namely the strengthening of existing gender stereotypes, especially those ones related to the social role of women. It is evident that stereotyping is not something negative *per se,* as it is a useful tool for orientating in daily life, but it becomes an issue when it may restrict opportunities for a determined category of people. Authors following this line of thought, assumed that advertising uses a stereotyped image of men and women[175], criticize the fact that people are influenced by what they see in the media, to the point that their social behaviour is manipulated by marketing messages. A parallel group of scholars, on

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(1), 7–13, 1990

169 C.J. Cobb-Walgren, C.A. Ruble, N. Donthu, *Brand Equity, Brand Preference and Purchase Intent*, Journal of Advertising, 24, 3, 25-40, 1995

170 M.L. Ray, *Advertising and Communication Management*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1982

171 G.C. Bruner, P.J. Hensel, *Marketing Scales Handbook*, American Marketing Association, Chicago, 1996

172 D.A. Aaker, A.L. Biel, *Brand Equity and Advertising: Advertising's Role in Building Strong Brands*, Psychology Press, 2013

173 H.S. Krishnan, D. Chakravarti, *Humour in Advertising: testing Effects on Brand Name and Message Claim Memory*, AMA, Educator's Conference Proceedings, 1990

174 D.I. Hawkins, K.A. Coney, *Advertising and differentiated sex roles in contemporary American society*, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 4, 418–428, 1976

175 A. Furnham, T. Mak, L. Tanidjojo, *An Asian perspective on the portrayal of men and women in television advertisements: studies from Hong Kong and Indonesian television*, Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 30, 2341–2364, 2000

the other side, pose the question of whether advertising shapes social values, or it is simply a reflection of them[176]. The issue is commonly known as “Mirror vs Mold” argument, with the former denying the impact that advertisement could have on shaping society and describing it as just a mirror which reproduces an already existing reality, and the latter, instead, strongly affirming the molding power of advertising toward societal values. A study from 2010, suggests how gender stereotyping in advertising is influenced by developments of societal gender issues, rather than the opposite relation[177]. On the other side, a substantial strand of past literature has proposed inequality as a cause for increased sexism and creation of distorted body image representations[178,179].

Whatever way we may look at it, it is clear that the use of stereotypes is a recurring advertising technique, and a fundamental step in order to understand why it is so, should be the comprehension of the role of stereotypes in communication. As already stated, far from being something intrinsically negative, a stereotype is a set of assumptions which assign specific characteristics and behaviours to a group of people. Stereotypes are thus used by marketers to create commercial messages capable of aligning themselves with society’s cultural norms[180]. This technique is still widely used in modern advertising, even if it involves the use of outdated and potentially offensive gender stereotypes[181]. In his work, Erving Goffman (1987) provides a useful insight into the most used gender stereotypes in advertising, deeply analyzing how gender differences are expressed in commercials, especially through non-verbal body expressions[182]. He highlights particularly how the social dominance of male is expressed visually through “relative size”, that is to say representing men who are higher than women, and also depicting male individuals in performing the executive role, with women relegated to an auxiliary function, the so-called “function ranking”. It is interesting to notice how, according to Goffmann, function ranking is used also in advertising involving children. Females, on the other side, have been traditionally represented while touching an object with their hands or even self-touching, as an expression of their ritualistic “feminine touch”. The “hyper-ritualization” suggested by the author, can be found also in the different positions of men and women, with the former usually located higher, symbolizing such a higher social position. The meta-analysis by Eisend (2010) is particularly focused in reviewing women-related stereotypes, pointing out that women are more likely to be

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[176] M.B. Holbrook, *Mirror, mirror, on the wall, what’s unfair in the reflections on advertising?*, Journal of Marketing, 51, 95–103, 1987
[177] M. Eisend, *A Meta-Analysis of Gender Roles in Advertising*, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, vol. 38, no. 4, pp.418–440, 2010
[178] M. Lazar, *Discover the power of femininity! Analyzing global ‘power femininity’ in local advertising*, Feminist Media Studies, 2006
[179] E. Plakoyiannaki, Y. Zotos, *Female role stereotypes in print advertising: Identifying associations with magazine and product categories*, European Journal of Marketing 43, no. 1112, 2009
[180] G. McCracken, *Culture and consumption: A theoretical account of the structure and movement of the cultural meaning of consumer goods*, Journal of Consumer Research, 13 June, 71, 1986
[181] M. Eisend, J. Plagemann, J. Sollwedel, *Gender roles and humor in advertising: The occurrence of stereotyping in humorous and nonhumorous adver.tising and its consequences for advertising effectiveness*, Journal of Advertising 43, no. 3, 2014
[182] E. Goffmann, *Gender Advertisements*, Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., New York, NY, 28-43,1987

depicted as dependent, passive and younger than men, and are usually located in a domestic environment[183].Also for what concerns sexual orientation, research has suggested that heterosexuality is over-represented in commercials, as non-heterosexual individuals rarely appear in mainstream advertising[184]. Last years have seen interesting developments in academic research on the topic. The work from Eisend, highlights how gender stereotyping is still prevalent in different countries worldwide, particularly for what concerns women. The same research found out, quite surprisingly, a decrease of the degree of stereotyping, thanks to social improvements, especially in highly masculinized societies like Japan. Knoll et al. (2011) discovered interesting differences in the adoption of stereotyping on TV, between public and private channels (analyzing German context). Variables such as social role and occupation were more stereotyped in on public channels, while on private ones there were more stereotypes related to physical characteristics and behaviour[185]. Further research from 2014 highlighted how male stereotypes are more frequent in humorous-based ads, while female ones are used more in non-humorous advertising[186].

2.2.3 Stereotyped Representation of Children in Advertising

Given what has been said so far, it is easy to imagine how the use of stereotyping has been adopted also in marketing communication involving children. Literature has demonstrated how the impact of gender stereotypes is even stronger, when addressed to a public of children. Different scholars have deeply analyzed the issue, among which Kolbe and Muheling (1995), which found out how children's perceptions of what was "appropriate" for a specific gender was strongly impacted by the stereotyped models proposed by commercials[187]. As it is true for general advertising addressed to adults, recurring patterns of gender stereotypes are identifiable in child-targeted commercials, or in commercials involving children. Davis (2002) and Smith (1994), show how boys are more likely to be depicted in active roles and in the act of practicing sporting activities, with girls being relegated to a more passive role and to a domestic setting[188, 189]. Furthermore, girls are often displayed in a cooperative action, such as playing with other kids, a situation which does not seem to be replicated in boys-dominant advertisings[190]. Boys, on the contrary, are generally

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[183] M. Eisend, *A Meta-Analysis of Gender Roles in Advertising*, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, vol. 38, no. 4, 2010
[184] G.K. Oakenfull, M.S. McCarthy, T.B Greenlee, *Targeting a minority without alienating the majority: advertising to gays and lesbians in mainstream media*, Journal of Advertising Research, Vol. 48 No. 2, pp. 191-198, 2008
[185] S. Knoll, M. Eisend, J. Steinhagen, *Gender roles in advertising: Measuring and compar- ing gender stereotyping on public and private TV channels in Germany,* International Journal of Advertising 30, no. 5, 2011
[186] M. Eisend, J. Plagemann, J. Sollwedel, *Gender roles and humor in advertising: The occurrence of stereotyping in humorous and nonhumorous adver.tising and its consequences for advertising effectiveness*, Journal of Advertising 43, no. 3, 2014
[187] R.H. Kolbe, D. Muehling, *Gender roles and children's television advertising*, Journal of Current Issues in Advertising, 17(1), 49-64, 1995
[188] S.N. Davis*, Sex stereotypes in commercials targeted toward children: A content analysis*, Sociological Spectrum, 23(4), 407-424, 2002
[189] L.J. Smith, *A Content Analysis of Gender Differences in Children's Advertising*, Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, Vol. 38, 3, 323-337, 1994
[190] M.M. Hein, S.G Kahlenberg, *Progression on Nickelodeon? Gender-role stereotypes in toy commercials,* Sex Roles, 62(11/12), 830- 847, 2009

characterized as competitive between them (Anuradha, 2012)[191], and are depicted as more aggressive, as confirmed by Klinger, Hamilton and Cantrell (2001)[192], Browne (1998)[193] and Smith (1994). In his work, Browne (1998) has also pointed out that children advertising feature much more boys than girls, more male voice-overs, as well as more male-targeted products. Johnson and Young (2002), analyzing the variety of elements displayed in commercials, show how the ones addressed to a male target emphasize more aspects such as action, control and competition, while the female-targeted counterparts stress behaviours related to the expression of feelings and to nurturing[194]. When exposed to these stereotypes, children are likely to accept them and identify with their social role promoted by advertising. Research has demonstrated that the realization by children of the "gender" of a product, affect their interaction with the opposite gender[195]. With regard specifically to children apparel advertising, it is evident how gender stereotypes play a fundamental role as well. A 2017 study from Meredith Ford specifically analyzed how children clothing changes according to the specific context, that is to say if we are dealing with a male-targeted or female-targeted advertising. For example, the study suggested that boys' characters utilized in female-targeted commercials are depicted as less "masculine", with respect to advertising dedicated to a male public, as they wear less sport accessories and colours. On the other side, the same study confirmed the fact that girls are subject to gender stereotypes (e.g. pink dresses, skirts), in both female and male dedicated advertising[196]. As already mentioned in the introduction (paragraph 1.3.3), the gender-colour associations has always be one of the main gender discriminatory tools, despite seeming apparently something innocuous. The association of masculinity and femininity to blue and pink tones is a mechanism which operates since the 50's of the 19th Century[197]. According to Annamari Vänskä book, Fashionable Childhood: Children in Advertising, the rise of mass-market production of clothing and fabrics has constituted a fundamental turning point for the separation of boys' and girl's wardrobe[198]. According to Philippe Perrot, this overall modernization in the techniques of producing pieces of clothing generated a switch in the conception of men's clothing: with men working in factories, their clothes became darker in colours, simpler and more practical, as they were not supposed to display any sort of decorative element. That is exactly what led to consider "being fashionable" an exclusive feminine characteristic[199]. The environments in which children are raised are so full of colour-

[191] M. Anuradha, *Gender stereotyping in television commercials aimed at children in India*, Media Asia, 39(4), 209-215, 2012
[192] L.J. Klinger, J.A. Hamilton, P.J. Cantrell, *Children's perceptions of aggressive and gender-specific content in toy commercials*, Social Behavior and Personality, 29(1), 11-20, 2001
[193] B. Browne, *Gender stereotypes in advertising on children's television in the 1990s: A cross- national analysis,* Journal of Advertising, 27(1), 83-96, 1998
[194] F. Johnson, K. Young, *Gendered voices in children's television advertising*, Critical Studies in Media Communication, Vol. 19, Issue 4, 2002.
[195] R. Hains, (Feb 27, 2015), The problem with separate toys for girls and boys, *The Boston Globe*
[196] M. Ford, *Gendered Advertising to Children: An Analysis of Differences in Male- and Female-Targeted Television Commercials*, Northwestern University, 2017
[197] P. Frassanito, B. Pettorini, *Pink and blue: The colour of gender*, Child's Nervous System, 24, 881–882, 2008
[198] A. Vänskä, *Fashionable Childhood: Children in Advertising*, Bloomsbury Academic, p. 53, 2017
[199] P. Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeois: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century*, Princeton University Press, 1994

based stereotyped products and cues, that some research has suggested that colour could be assimilated, by children, as one of the defining characteristics of sex, even before knowing the existence of male/female biological traits[200]. Research from Cunningae and Mcrae (2010) corroborates these speculations, as it confirms the fact that children's clothing is dominated by blue and pink colours, demonstrating how colour stereotypes still cover a central role in today's society[201]. The same study further demonstrated how these colour cues are able to influence children's behaviour and preferences, as well as representing a foundation for the storage and later application of these stereotyped models in the adult age. Vänskä, further supports this stance, pointing out how girls' clothes are usually coloured in light pastel tones, with boys wearing more primary colours, or tones tending to blue or brown[202]. Mitra and Lewin-Jones (2012) found quite surprisingly that the rejection of wearing pink clothes by boys, was stronger than the positive feedback expressed by girls[203]. Frith and Mueller (2012) noted how colour schemes apply also to the environment in which children are represented, with boys usually represented outside, in dark clothes, against a background made of primary colours, whit girls instead displayed in a home environment, dressed in lighter colours, against a pink or white background[204]. Apart from this gender-colour association (blue vs pink), there are other substantial differences in the way boys and girls are displayed by marketers. One of the most important marketing tools used in children clothing advertising are related to the advertised products themselves. A first difference has to be found on the wording on the clothes, which often incorporate some stereotyped concepts of what a boy or a girl should be suited to do.

Figure 5 - Example of Gender Stereotyping in Clothes' Slogans, retrieved from the web

[200] M.L. Picariello, D.N. Greenberg, D.B. Pillemer, *Children's sex-related stereotyping of Colours*, Child Development, 61, 1453–1460, 1990
[201] S.J Cunningham, C.N. Mcrae, The colour of gender stereotyping, University of Aberdeen UK, British Journal of Psychology, 102, 598-614, 2010
[202] A. Vänskä, *Fashionable Childhood: Children in Advertising*, Bloomsbury Academic, p. 18, 2017
[203] K. Ross, *The handbook of gender, sex, and media*, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012
[204] K.T. Frith, B. Mueller, *Advertising and Societies: Global Issues*, New York, 2012

Other than communicating a pre-established social role, clothes can define also children's interests, through the images depicted on them and even through the garments themselves. While boys' clothes are often full of mechanical objects or sport images, girls' t-shirts are more likely to exhibit pets or objects related to housekeeping. Furthermore, girls' clothes are usually made of less functional fabrics than the ones used for boys, such as glitter or tulle, promoting such the idea that "being pretty" should be more important than feeling comfortable[205]. Despite many brands are keeping up with consumer's requests for a more gender-neutral approach to children clothing, big retailers are often struggling to do that, ending up being harshly criticized by public. That has been the case for *Boden*, accused of sexism because of its children apparel catalogue, or *Clarks,* criticized for the names given to some shoes' models[206]. According to the book of Annamari Vänskä, children gender codes would follow the ones of the adult world. The understanding of today's social reality, according to the writer, is continuingly expressed through clothing, which constitutes a reminder of the importance of affirming children's gender. For example, girls' clothes, in their enhanced and evident femininity, are the base for building a girl's future sexiness, considered as a fundamental attribute of adult women[207]. The same book provides a useful example to comprehend how the gender binary paradigm is present in the major part of advertising, analyzing an advertising from 2010 by *Dolce & Gabbana*, displaying two babies. The two babies displayed are differentiated by specific but subtle gender signals, such as the haircut, the actual clothing (a dress for the girl and shorts fort the boy), the face expressions and the colours of their apparel (where red is juxtaposed to blue in the classical dichotomy)[208]. The author highlights how, even if the interpretation of the gender signals is up to the viewer (the advertising was meant to promote gender neutrality), a western consumer is able to recognize the gender division still in act, through the gender cues present inside. The fact that haircut represents a strong gender identifier is further confirmed by papers and articles on the topic, which highlight the growth as well of "gender neutral haircut" style (Lemish, 2017[209]; Turner, 2020[210]).

Despite the absence of a substantial amount of studies on the topic, the meta-analysis provided in this paragraph aimed to shed some light on the most used and recurrent gender stereotypes applied to the representation of children and children apparel, on how these stereotypes are somehow inherited by the adult

[205] P. Agustoni, (Jan 12, 2018), Gender stereotypes in children's clothing, *Raffia*, retrieved from https://raffia-magazine.com/2018/01/12/gender-stereotypes-in-childrens-clothing/

[206] A. Cassidy, (Nov 5, 2019), "You are your looks": the message some retailers are still telling little girls, *Image,* retrieved from https://www.image.ie/life/gender-neutral-clothing-for-children-gender-stereotyping-162224

[207] A. Vänskä, *Fashionable Childhood: Children in Advertising*, Bloomsbury Academic, 53-56, 2017

[208] See Above

[209] D. Lemish, *Innovations in Gender Representation in Children's Television. The Prix Jeunesse 2016 Gender Prize Competition*, p. 21-32 in D. Lemish & M. Götz (eds.), *Beyond the Stereotypes? Images of Boys and Girls, and their Consequences*. Göteborg: Nordicom, 2017

[210] E. Turner, (Jan 31, 2020), The gender-neutral haircut is officially the most popular haircut right now, *Glamour*, retrieved from https://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/article/gender-neutral-hair

world, and how easy can escape our attention, since they are profoundly embedded in our culture. A resume of what has been covered so far, can be found in the following table.

Table 5 - Resume of Main Gender Stereotypes Used in the Representation of Children in Advertising

Source	Stereotype	Area
Davis, 2002; Smith, 1994	Boys displayed actively, engaged in sport/outside activities. Girls displayed in a more passive way.	Behaviour and Setting
Hein & Kahlenberg, 2009; Anuradha, 2012; Klinger, Hamilton, Cantrell, 2001; Browne, 1998; Smith, 1994	Girls represented in cooperative actions. Boys depicted as more competitive and aggressive.	Behaviour
Browne, 1998	Children-targeted advertising featuring more boys than girls, more male voice-overs and more male-targeted products.	Representation
Young, 2002	Male-targeted commercials stressing the representation of action and competition, female-targeted ones highlight the expression of feelings and nurturing.	Behaviour
Meredith Ford Study, 2017	Boys displayed with less "masculine" clothes in female-targeted commercials. Women usually subjected to gender stereotypes in both male- and female-targeted commercials.	Clothing
Cunningae & McRae, 2010; Vänskä, 2017; Ross, 2012; Frassanito & Pettorini, 2008	Gendered colour dichotomy: blue vs pink, darker tones vs lighter pastel tones.	Clothing
Agustoni, 2018	Wording and images on clothes communicating an expected social role or defining children interests. Garments used to reinforce the stereotype of importance of	Clothing

	appearance for girls, respect to more comfortable boys' clothes.	
Vänskä, 2017	Girls usually dressed in skirts and dresses; boys often wearing shorts, jeans or t-shirts.	Clothing
Frith & Mueller, 2012	Boys displayed in dark-toned clothes, against a background of primary colours, usually outside. Girls represented in lighter tones, in pink/white environment, usually inside home.	Clothing and Setting
Vänskä, 2017; Lemish, 2017	Boys are usually represented with a shorter haircut than girls	Physical Appearance

2.2.4 Gendered Communication and Brand Equity

Past literature has corroborated the conception that brands which can rely on clear gender positioning and associations, are awarded, in the end, with a stronger brand equity. The work Lieven et al. (2014) demonstrated that clear "masculine" or "feminine" brands enjoy a stronger brand equity with respect to both undifferentiated brands and androgynous brands[211]. The study explained how it is easier for consumers to categorize highly gendered stimuli, compared to inputs which are weakly linked to masculinity and femininity (undifferentiated brands) or to a mix of feminine and masculine elements (androgynous brands). Consequently, marketing communication has been structured in order to represent those masculine and feminine stereotypes to which consumers can relate, as research has demonstrated how people tend to prefer brands and products which gender identities match their own[212]. Moreover, again according to Lieven et al. paper, the use of determined gender elements is helpful in "generating more positive associations and greater choice share", with respect to brands that are less clearly positioned on a gender perspective[213]. The use of gender stereotypes, as already mentioned before, is not seen as something completely negative, as it may be helpful in simplifying communication and process advertising messages as quickly as possible[214]. Gender stereotypes could represent both a way to convey images clearly[215] and also an element of humor, capable of

[211] T. Lieven, B. Grohman, A, Herrmann, J.R. Herrmann, *The effect of brand gender on brand equity*, Psychology and Marketing, Vol 31, Issue 5, 371-385, 2014
[212] D.L. Fugate, J. Phillips, *Product Gender Perceptions and Antecedents of Product Gender Congruence*, Journal of Consumer Marketing, Vol. 27, no. 3, 251– 261, 2010
[213] T. Lieven, B. Grohman, A, Herrmann, J.R. Herrmann, *The effect of brand gender on brand equity*, Psychology and Marketing, Vol 31, Issue 5, 371-385, 2014
[214] G.D. Johnson, S.A. Grier, *What about the Intended Consequences?*, Journal of Advertising, 41 (3), 91-106, 2012
[215] A.E. Courtney, T.W. Whipple, *Sex stereotyping in advertising*, Lexington: Lexington Books, 1983

positively influencing consumer response to brand. Observations made on non-stereotyped portrayals of sexual orientation in commercials have shown that consumers who don't feel represented respond negatively to the marketing message, corroborating the idea that is not profitable to adopt non-stereotyped images of sexual orientation in mainstream commercials[216].

A major part of literature strongly believes that the effectiveness of gendered advertising is strictly related to the particular consumer's context. While some studies have underlined how highly gendered advertising generates lower brand attitude and intention to purchase than non-gendered ones[217,218], others have seen how consumers with stronger gender-related prejudices have a more favorable attitude toward clearly gendered commercials[219]. Moreover, academic research suggests that non-traditional (advertising portraying homosexuality, gender and ethnic minorities) generates favorable responses from people who identify with that minority but obtain neutral or even negative feedbacks from consumers which fall outside that group[220]. For this exact same reason, homosexual imagery is not often adopted by mainstream advertising, as marketers fear that heterosexual consumers, which constitute the majority of the receivers, would feel themselves left apart[221]. A series of experiments conducted at the end of 1990's confirmed the fact that homosexual representation inside commercials generates negative reactions among heterosexual viewers[222]. Furthermore, Angelini and Bradley (2010) found out how portrayals of homosexual individuals are capable of generating more negative feedbacks in viewers, with respect to heterosexual ones[223]. Self-identity and social identity theory formulated by Tajfel and Turner (1979) could be useful in explaining this phenomenon: indeed, the theory affirms how affiliation to a social group generates in the individual an increase in self-esteem, which derives by a comparison and a distancing from people who do not belong to that social cluster[224]. Therefore, if the majority of society is composed by heterosexual individuals, this means they will be likely to react unfavourably to marketing messages which involve a communication which is incongruent with their values and beliefs. Um (2014) confirmed a negative response by heterosexual consumers to non-traditional type of advertising, while pointing out how high degree of tolerance toward homosexuality in consumers coincide result in a positive attitude toward the brand

[216] S. Puntoni, J.E. Schroeder, M. Ritson, *Meaning matters*, Journal of Advertising, 39 (2), 51-64, 2010
[217] S. Feiereisen, A.J. Broderick, S.P. Douglas, *The effect and moderation of gender identity congruity: Utilizing 'real women' advertising images*, Psychology and Marketing 26, no. 9: 813–43, 2009
[218] B.A. Huhmann, Y.B. Limbu*, Influence of gender stereotypes on advertising offensiveness and attitude toward advertising in general*, International Journal of Advertising 35, no. 5: 846–63, 2016
[219] U.R. Orth, D. Holancova, *Consumer response to sex role portrayals in advertisements: Effects of incongruity and prejudices on emotions and attitudes*, Journal of Advertising, 32(4), 77-89, 2003
[220] S. Puntoni, J. Vanhamme, R. Visscher, *Two birds and one stone*, Journal of Advertising, Vol. 40 No. 1, pp. 25-42, 2011
[221] J.R. Angelini, S.D. Bradley, *Homosexual Imagery in Print Advertisements: Attended, Remembered, But Disliked*, Journal of Homosexuality, vol. 57, no. 4, pp.485– 502, 2010
[222] S. Bhat, T.W. Leigh, D.L. Wardlow, *The Effect of Consumer Prejudices on Ad Processing: Heterosexual Consumers' Responses to Homosexual Imagery in Ads*, Journal of Advertising, vol. 27, no. 4, pp.9–28, 1998
[223] J.R. Angelini, S.D. Bradley, *Homosexual Imagery in Print Advertisements: Attended, Remembered, But Disliked*, Journal of Homosexuality, vol. 57, no. 4, pp.485– 502, 2010
[224] H. Tajfel, J. Turner, *An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict*, in W.G. Austin, S.Worchel (eds), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, Monterey, Brooks/Cole Pub. Co, pp.33–47, 1979

displaying non-traditional commercials[225]. In this sense, women have been found to be more tolerant than men, on average, for what concerns gender roles[226].

From what has been covered so far, available academic literature supports the fact that traditional advertising, through the use of gender stereotypes, generates clearer associations and more favourable attitude to brands in consumers' minds, leading eventually to higher brand equity. However, as it has been stated in previous paragraphs, brands have started to challenge the traditional model of advertising, switching to a more gender-neutral approach to marketing. This approach has been adopted particularly by those brands targeting Millennials and Gen Z, with the aim of creating new brand identities and communicate more easily with their target customers[227]. The adoption of a gender-neutral marketing strategy seems to be in contrast with the clear evidence provided by literature. The answer to this could be found in a substantial lack of literature which carefully analyzes the impact of a non-gendered type of communication on consumers, respect to the traditional one.

2.2.5 Emotional Response to Advertising

The emotional or affective response to advertising can be defined as the "extent to which a viewer feels emotionally involved in an ad"[228]. Among scholars there is the shared belief that marketing communication should generate an emotional response in the viewer, in order to be really effective[229]. The study from Kim, Ratneshwar and Thorson (2017), demonstrated through data how emotive response is able to mediate the positive effects of communication on attitude toward advertising, and consequently on brand attitude. Similar results were previously obtained by Stayman & Aaker (1988)[230] and Edell & Burke (1987)[231], who highlighted the direct impact that emotional involvement and response to advertising have on both attitude toward advertising and brand attitudes. It is interesting to note how the development of an attitude toward advertisement, generated by an emotional response, could happen without any participation of the individual consciousness[232].

Attitude toward advertising plays a fundamental mediating role in the building of brand equity. Academic research has widely recognized its importance in directly enhancing CBBE[233] and its capability of affecting

[225] N.H. Um, *Does Gay-Themed Advertising Haunt Your Brand?,* International Journal of Advertising, vol. 33, no. 4, pp.811–832, 2014

[226] L. LaMar, M. Kite, *Sex Differences in Attitudes toward Gay Men and Lesbians: A Multidimensional Perspective*, Journal of Sex Research, vol. 35, no. 2, pp.189–196, 1998

[227] R. Sassatelli, *Consumer Culture: History, Theory and Politics*, SAGE Publications, 2007

[228] E. Kim, S. Ratneshwar, E. Thorson, Why Narrative Ads Work: An Integrated Process Explanation, Journal of Advertising, 46 (2), 283-296, 2017

[229] A. Mehta, S. Purvis, *Reconsidering Recall and Emotion in Advertising*, Journal of Advertising Research, March, 49-56, 2006

[230] D.A. Aaker, D.M. Stayman, R. Vezìna, Identifying feelings elicited by advertising, Psychology and Marketing, 1988

[231] J. Edell, M.C. Burke, *The Power of Feelings in Understanding Advertising Effects*, Journal of Consumer Research, 14(3):421-33, 1987

[232] T.A. Shimp, *Attitude toward the ad as a mediator of consumer brand choice*, Journal of Advertising, 10(2), 9-48, 1981

[233] R. Bravo, E. Fraj, E. Martinez, *Family as a source of consumer-based brand equity*, The Journal of Product and Brand Management, 16(3), 188–199, 2007

different components of CBBE, among which brand associations[234]. But maybe, its most important contribution to brand equity is given through its effect on brand attitude, as it has been already mentioned above. The above stated results have been corroborated by different studies, among which the one from Mackenzie, Lutz & Belch (1986), who have proposed both a direct and indirect causation between attitude toward advertisement and brand attitude[235]. Further corroboration of this correlation is given by Gardner (1985)[236]. Brown and Stayman (1992) found out how this correlation grows in strength whenever the brand in the advertising is less familiar and relative unknown for the viewer[237].

234 M.S. Nikabadi, H. Agheshlouei, *Role of Advertising and Promotion in Brand Equity Creation*, Journal of Promotion Management, 2015

235 S.B. MacKenzie, R.J. Lutz, G.E. Belch, *The role of attitude toward the ad as a mediator of advertising effectiveness: A test of competing explanations*, Journal of Marketing Research, 23(2), 130-43, 1986

236 M.P. Gardner, Does Attitude Toward the Ad Affect Brand Attitude under a Brand Evaluation set?, Journal of Marketing Research, Vol. 22, No. 2, 192-198, 1985

237 S.P. Brown, D.M. Stayman, *Antecedents and consequences of attitude toward the ad: A meta-analysis,* Journal of Consumer Research, 19(1), 34-50, 1992

3. RESEARCH

3.1 RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

3.1.1 Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

The objective of this research is to test the differential effect of traditional (gendered) and gender-neutral advertising on brand equity. The previous sections of literature review (2.2.1; 2.2.3) have shown how marketing communication has a fundamental role in shaping the brand equity of a brand. Previously reviewed research (Lieven et al. 2014, Fugate and Phillips 2010, Courtney and Whipple 1983) has corroborated the fact that the use of gendered elements in brand communication is helpful in generating positive response from the customer. Work from Cobb-Walgren (1995) clearly states that advertising is capable of manipulating brand equity, acting on its components. According to the study, brands with highest advertising budget generated higher levels of brand equity. Therefore, literature provides a solid foundation to structure this research on a conceptual framework which displays a causality relationship between communication and brand equity.

H_1: Gender-Neutral Communication impacts Brand Equity

In the previous chapter, a substantial part of the work has been dedicated to the review of main brand equity models (see Table 3), with a summary of the most used dimensions, used by different authors in order to operationalize the brand equity concept. Among the several variables proposed, brand associations and brand attitudes have been found of particular relevance for the purpose of this research. Based on the literature review in paragraphs 2.1.3 and 2.1.4, it can be stated with the two brand dimensions are universally recognized as two antecedents of brand equity, which have the capability of affecting it, through both a direct and indirect effect (Aaker 1991, 1992; Chaudhuri, 1995; Faircloth et al., 2001, Chang, 2008; Keller, 2013). For this reason, it has been decided to measure effects of communication on brand equity through these two variables.

As it has been shown (2.1.3), brand associations are generally considered as one of the fundamental components of brand equity (Aaker, 1992). Since this work aims to measure the effects of a different type of communication on brand equity, there was the need for a variable capable of measuring the emotional response of the consumer, and his considerations and mental connections related to the brand. Brand associations, in this sense, can be considered as a particularly suitable solution, as they represent a quantitative measure of all the customers' feelings and perceptions about a brand (Kotler and Keller, 2006).

As the reaction to an advertising is something that has to be captured in a very short period of time, it is likely that a part of the individual response lies outside the cognitive boundaries. Through the research of Supphellen (2000), it has been suggested that brand associations could be a useful tool for the study of this non-cognitive component of consumer's response.

On the other side, despite not being so widely used as brand associations in CBBE models, brand attitudes cover an important role as well in evaluating consumer's perceptions of a brand. Brand attitude dimension is capable of expressing consumer's individual evaluation of the brand through its feelings and perceptions (Kotler and Armstrong, 1996). Its notable importance lies in the fact that through this variable is possible to predict consumer's buying behavior and overall consideration of the brand (Fazio, 1995, Norberg 2011). The work from Bruner and Hensel (1996) has further highlighted how this variable has been traditionally used in research on advertising effects on consumers. Differently from other variables, brand attitude is not time dependent, meaning that the elaboration of feelings and perception that make up this brand dimension can be processed quickly (Park et al., 2010), a fact that is fundamental for the approach of this research, as explained above.

Briefly summing up, the adoption of these two dimensions for measuring the effects of communication on brand equity, is due to their greater adaptability to the specific research context. Both dimensions do not require an exposition to the product and can be detached from the evaluation of product-related attributes and do not require an exposition and a trial of the product /service, (Rossiter and Percy, 1987), while this is not true for several other brand equity antecedents such as brand quality. Both dimensions appear as the most suitable for the measurement of emotional and sudden reaction to a communication stimulus; as already specified for what concerns brand attitudes, they do not depend on time, a requirement that is mandatory for other dimensions such as brand loyalty. Throughout paragraph 2.2.1 and 2.2.3 it has been explored and confirmed the effect advertising has on these variables. Several studies have analyzed how marketing communications is able to affect brand equity through the manipulation of brand associations and attitudes (Ray, 1982; Krishnan and Chakravarti, 1990; Cobb-Walgren, 1995; Orth and Holancova, 2003; Feiereisen et al., 2009; Aaker and Biel, 2013;. Lieven et al., 2014; Huhmann et al., 2016).

The effect of advertising on brand equity is also measured through an alternative channel, that is the one passing from consumer affective response to the Ad. Emotional response to advertising has a direct contribution in the construction of brand equity and a mediating role on the relationship between communication and equity, that has been analyzed in detail in paragraph 2.2.4 (Gardner, 1985; MacKenzie et al., 1986; Edell & Burke, 1987; Stayman & Aaker, 1988; Brown and Stayman, 1992; Bravo et al., 2007; Kim, Ratneshwar and Thorson, 2017). Again, this variable was considered particularly relevant for the analysis of consumer immediate response to the ad, being also in mind that, as it was true for brand associations, this metric allows to capture that part of consumer's reaction belonging to the sphere of unconsciousness.

H_2: Gender-Neutral Communication impacts Brand Associations

H_3: Gender-Neutral Communication impacts Brand Attitudes

H_4: Gender-Neutral Communication impacts Emotional Response to Advertising

Based on the above stated considerations, it has been decided to include this variable in our study, proposing the following conceptual and theoretical frameworks of research.

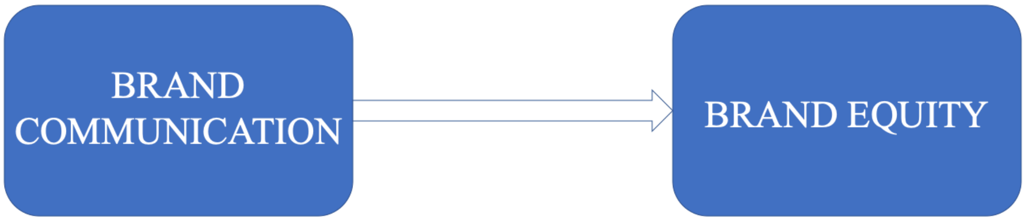

Figure 6 - Conceptual Framework of Research

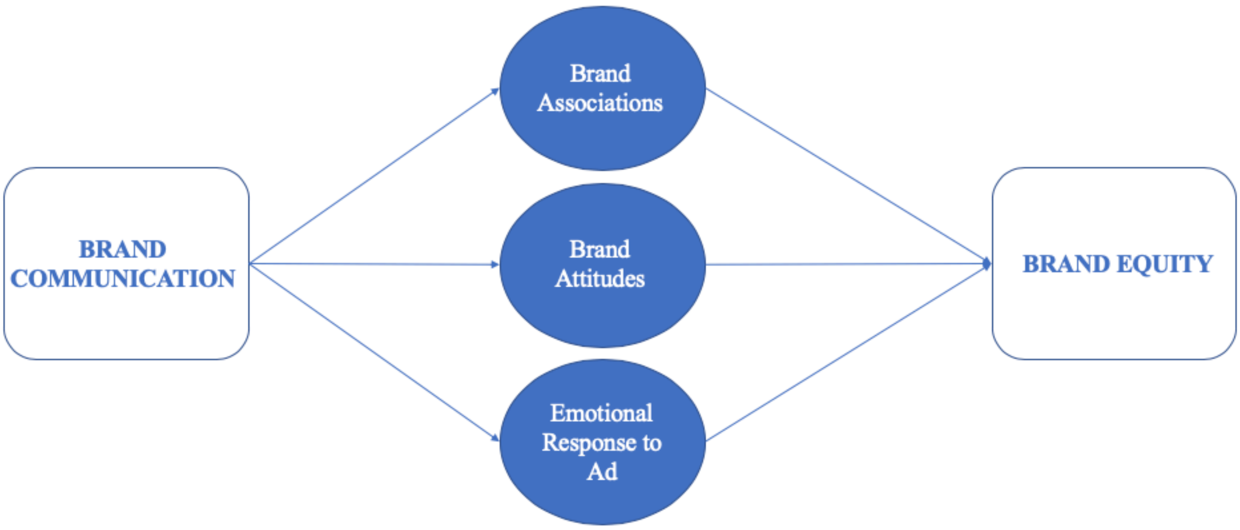

Figure 7 - Theoretical Framework of Research

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

3.2.1 Formulation of the Experimental Study

The proposed theoretical framework suggested the adoption of a causal type of research design, for this study. Causal research, also called explanatory research, allows to better investigate the nature and the magnitude of relationships which are based on a "cause-and-effect" principle[238]. In order to understand causality, researchers tend to rely on the so-called positivist paradigm, which believes in objectivity and tries to explain a cause-effect relationship, generalizing the conclusions for a large population[239]. When there is the attempt to explain a link of causality on the base of a positivist paradigm, we are in the domain of the nomothetic causal explanation. This kind of relationship, aims at generalizing a phenomenon by reducing it to mathematical and universal language, establishing a link between and independent and a dependent variable, that in our case are constituted by brand communication (independent) and brand equity (dependent)[240]. Since our purpose is to analyze the causal effect of marketing communication on the brand equity dimension, this research methodology appears to be the most suitable one for this scope. The nomothetic causal relationship which wants to be demonstrated through this study has been expressed through the proposed hypotheses.

The research of primary data for such type of researches is generally made through experiments, and a questionnaire was set up to answer the research question. The use of the experimental study allows to control external factors which could incorrectly affect the results of the research. The controlled "laboratory conditions" should prevent spurious variables, that are the variables which are not the objective of the study but could be present in the context, to affect the final outcome. The rigor and precision applied to the construction of the experiment ensures thus the internal validity of the research[241]. The model chosen for the design and implementation of the questionnaire is the posttest-only control group design. This type of experimental design still falls under the "classical approach", with the only difference that the part of pre-testing is eliminated. This fact allows to create a smoother survey and to eliminate the testing effects: since people are actively trying to understand what the survey is about, a pre-testing phase could generate a bias in their answers[242]. In order to observe the differential effect between a gendered advertising and a gender-neutral one, it occurred the necessity of setting up two separate groups, one for control and one for intervention. The comparison between two groups is considered as one of the fundamental elements of experimental design[243]. The questionnaire containing the traditional gendered stimulus was addressed to the

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[238] Causal Research (Explanatory Research), *Research Methodology*, retrieved from https://research-methodology.net/causal-research/

[239] M. De Carlo, Scientific Inquiry In Social Work, Open Social Work Education, Roanoke VA, p. 168, 2018

[240] See above, p. 168-171

[241] See above, p. 342-343

[242] See above, p. 333

[243] See above, p. 331

control group, while the second one was asked to fill in the second survey, the one with the gender-neutral stimulus.

3.2.2 Sample Design

The process of sampling consists in the selection of the subset of the population which will be used in the study. Despite a quantitative type of research like the one proposed here usually requires a probability sample, for a matter of costs and time, convenience sampling has been considered as the most appropriate sampling strategy to use. Literature demonstrates how convenience sampling, though being a nonprobability sampling strategy, is used in both qualitative and quantitative research[244].

The only inclusion criteria which has been set in order to skim participants is age. One of the declared objectives of the research is the analysis of the potential different response to an advertising stimulus between millennials and generation Z, supposed to be more sensitive to gender inclusivity topic, and previous generations, namely Generation X. That is why, by relying on the previously mentioned timeline by Bencsik et al. (2016), it has been considered acceptable any answer coming from people between 1960 and 2002 (60yo–18yo). Considering again the difficulty of finding a common agreement for the categorizations of the different groups in precise time intervals, this interval is considered to be useful for the purpose of our research, as it allows to include all the consumer groups, we are interested in comparing. Moreover, there were accepted answers from individuals of legal age only. A wider age range is likely to allow to obtain a greater number of responses, such enhancing the reliability of the study. The use of a considerably large age interval is intended to obtain different results which will eventually be filtered according to the age group of participants, and then commented through a descriptive analysis aimed at discovering the main differences in the provided answers and at finding possible patterns which could be related to the age range.

Participants were divided among the control and the intervention group, thanks to the tools of Qualtrics, which allows the creation of a single questionnaire, with the only difference in the stimulus provided, and the random division of respondents in two groups.

3.2.3 Questionnaire Design

In order to obtain the information needed for this research, a quantitative type of questionnaire with closed-ended responses was prepared. In order to obtain a sufficient number of responses, while guaranteeing the quality and reliability of the same, the questionnaire was built to be fluid and not particularly time demanding. The proposed survey was exactly the same for the control and intervention group, with the only difference lying in the stimulus displayed to the respondents: a gendered one in the first case, and a gender-

[244] M. De Carlo, Scientific Inquiry In Social Work, Open Social Work Education, Roanoke VA, p. 275, 2018

neutral one for the latter. The two stimuli were meant to be different in the representation of the children in the particular context; children characters are portrayed through gender stereotypes in the first setting, while depicted without this stereotyped frame in the second situation.
The survey starts with a small introduction on what will be the topic of the research, in order to provide a contextualization to the viewer. There will be the provision of few details about the objective of the study and the overall duration of the questionnaire.
The second step will be the display of the stimulus. Respondents will be asked to carefully watch an image presented to them, displaying a possible advertising of children apparel. After showing the stimuli, participants are asked to respond some questions about their perception of what they have seen. These questions will allow to measure the operational variables that are used to measure brand equity, namely brand associations and attitudes, and to have also an objective score of the individual emotional response to the ad, which represents the mediator between the effect of brand communication and brand equity.
After having provided their answers, for the last part, the respondents are asked to give their general demographic characteristics, that is to say, age, gender, nationality, occupational status. With respect to age, which is the only criterion for the inclusion in the experiment sample (accepted if between 18 and 60 years old), the possible answers will be limited to certain age ranges, namely "*<18", "18-25", "26-40", "41-60"*. This segmentation will be used at the end of the data gathering, for a qualitative analysis on the response differential among different age groups.

3.2.4 The Stimulus

The stimulus provided to the respondent is a visual one. Literature has widely confirmed how the visual medium is particularly effective in the transmission of information, as people tend to recognize and process images faster than what they do with words and with less effort[245]. The union of text and images has been demonstrated to be a useful tool to enhance the capacity of viewers to understand the content of the experiment[246]. A mix of communication which exploits both graphics and text is well suited to the mechanisms of our brain: the verbal and the visual are strictly linked in our mind[247]. According to Rashotte (2003), the visual representation of a non-verbal act or behaviour is more impacting than its written description[248]. Furthermore, the processing of visuals and emotions happens in the same area of the brain,

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[245] P. Dewan, *Words versus Pictures: Leveraging the Research on Visual Communication*, The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research, vol. 10, no. 1, 2015
[246] W. Levie, R. Lentz, *Effects of Text Illustrations: A Review of the Research,* ECTJ 30.4, 195-232, 1982
[247] J. Seppäanen, *The Power of the Gaze: An Introduction to Visual Literacy*, Trans. Aijaleena and Kris Clarke. New York: Peter Lang, 2006
[248] L.S. Rashotte*, Written versus visual stimuli in the study of impression formation*, Social Science Research, 32, 278-293, 2003

and that is the reason why these two things are connected and end up in generating long-lasting memories and strong impressions[249].

To overcome the difficulty in finding two images which could represent an adequate stimulus for the sake of research, that is to say capable of respecting the previously mentioned "laboratory conditions" of the experiment, the visual stimuli for the survey have been created *ex-novo* with photo mounting and editing. This allowed to control for external variables which could somehow affect the final result. The first image presents a gender-stereotyped setting, while in the second one the stereotypes are removed, in order to represent a more gender-neutral situation. The image is meant to be introduced by a really short written description. In order to create a relevant stimulus, gender stereotypes have been chosen among the ones summarized in table 4. More in detail, gender stereotyping related to hairstyle (Vänskä, 2017; Lemish; 2017), clothes' colour (Cunningae & McRae, 2010; Vänskä, 2017; Ross, 2012; Frassanito & Pettorini, 2008), type of clothes worn (Vänskä, 2017) and wording and images present on clothes (Agustoni, 2018).

Figure 8 - Stimuli used in the survey

[249] D. Jandhyala, (Dec 8, 2017), Visual Learning: 6 Reasons Why Visuals Are The Most Powerful Aspects of eLearning, *eLearning Industry*, retrieved from https://elearningindustry.com/visual-learning-6-reasons-visuals-powerful-aspect-elearning

3.2.5 Measurement

The tool used to measure the variables involved in this experiment is the well-known Likert Scale. Likert scale is one of the most used rating scales, used in the measurement of people attitudes toward a statement, more precisely the degree to which an individual expresses himself as favourable or not to it[250]. The original scale, created in 1932 by the psychologist Rensis Likert, was developed as a more valid alternative to the dichotomous yes/no scale, to measure individuals' opinion toward items[251]. The first scale was made of 5 points, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree", even though some authors have contributed to the enlargement of it to a 7-points scale. According to some, a larger interval would allow respondents to pick they prefer the most, rather than a nearby alternative[252]. Objective reality of participants can be more easily met with a wider variety of options, resulting in an overall better performance of the survey[253]. Others point out how a 7-points scale may eliminate the problem of having to choose between two undesirable options provided by a 5-points scale[254]. Because of all the above-mentioned considerations, it has been decided to adopt a 7-points Likert scale for the measurement of the variables involved.

For the sake of reliability of the study results, in order to operationalize our variables, there have been used measurement scales from previous studies. As it has already been explained, brand associations and brand attitudes have been used in order to measure effects on brand equity. With respect to brand associations, the study has been referring to the work of Lassar, Mittal and Sharma and the scale they developed for their research on the measurement of CBBE. With customer-based brand equity considered as constituted by two parts, respectively brand strength and brand value, according to Srivastava and Shocker model (1991)[255], their focus was on the former[256]. The measurement model considered brand equity components (Performance, Social Image, Value, Trustworthiness, Attachment), with CBBE representing "associations that consumers hold". Thus, the scale aims at measuring brand associations, and is suitable for our survey. Adapting the original scale to the particular context of this research has required some changes. For the purpose of the study, greater attention has been placed on the analysis of three particular dimensions, among

[250] S. McLeod, 2019, Likert Scale Definition, Examples and Analysis, *SimplyPsychology*, retrieved from https://www.simplypsychology.org/likert-scale.html

[251] Z. Johnson, Rensis Likert and the Likert Scale, *QuestionPro*, retrieved from https://www.questionpro.com/blog/rensis-likert-and-the-likert-scale/#:~:text=The%20history%20of%20the%20Likert,agreement%20scale%20as%20a%20result.&text=The%20individual%20ratings%20are%20Likert%20items.

[252] J. Dawes, *Do Data characteristics change according to the number of scale points used? An experiment using 5-point, 7-point and10-point scales*, International Journal of Market Research, 50(1):61-77, 2008

[253] L. Chang, *A psychometric evaluation of 4-point and 6-point Likert-type scale in relation to reliability and validity*, Applied Psychological Measurement, 18:205- 25. 215, 1994

[254] K. Finstad, *Response interpolation and scale sensitivity: Evidence against 5-point scales*, Journal of Usability Studies, 5(3):104-110, 2010

[255] A.D. Shocker, R.K. Srivastava, R.W. Rueckert, *Challenges and opportunities facing brand management: an introduction to the special issue*, Journal of Marketing Research, Vol. 31, May, pp. 149-58, 1994

[256] W. Lassar, B. Mittal, A. Sharma, (1995), *Measuring customer-based brand equity*, Journal of Consumer Marketing, Vol. 12 Iss 4, 11–19, 1995

the five provided in the scale, namely social image, trustworthiness and attachment. This research aimed thus to investigate the dimensions of brand associations related to imagery and to emotional / symbolic attributes, rather than the ones more linked with performance (the respondent has not to be a user of the brand) or value (no price information is delivered in the survey's stimulus). For this reason, the statements referring to benefits attached to the product were discarded. At the same time, the items belonging to the "Value" section were not considered. Therefore, from an original set of 17 items, we ended up in adopting a scale of 10 items, in order to measure brand associations.

Figure 9 - Original CBBE Measurement Scale from Lassar, Mittal and Sharma (1995)

Performance
P1 From this brand of television, I can expect superior performance
P2 During use, this brand of television is highly unlikely to be defective
P3 This brand of television is made so as to work trouble free
P4 This brand will work very well

Social image
I1 This brand of television fits my personality
I2 I would be proud to own a television of this brand
I3 This brand of television will be well regarded by my friends
I4 In its status and style, this brand matches my personality

Value
V1 This brand is well priced
V2 Considering what I would pay for this brand of television, I will get much more than my money's worth
V3 I consider this brand of television to be a bargain because of the benefits I receive

Trustworthiness
T1 I consider the company and people who stand behind these televisions to be very trustworthy
T2 In regard to consumer interests, this company seems to be very caring
T3 I believe that this company does not take advantage of consumers

Attachment
A1 After watching this brand of television, I am very likely to grow fond of it
A2 For this brand of television, I have positive personal feelings
A3 With time, I will develop a warm feeling toward this brand of television

Table 6 - Proposed Brand Associations Measurement Scale, adapted from Lassar, Mittal and Sharma (1995)

Dimension	**Statements**
Social Image	*This brand fits my personality*
	I would be proud to own a product from this brand
	This brand will be well regarded by my friends
	In its status and style, this brand matches my personality
Trustworthiness	*I consider the company and people who stand behind the brand to be very trustworthy*
	In regard to consumer interests, this company seems to be very caring

	I believe that this company does not take advantage of consumers
Attachment	*After watching this brand, I am very likely to grow fond of it*
	For this brand, I have positive personal feelings
	With time, I will develop a warm feeling toward this brand

For what concerns brand attitudes, the creation of a measurement scale has been again the result of a review of different studies. The proposed scale comes from a meta-analysis of the work from Miller (1971), Flaherty and Pappas (2000), Yoo and Donthu (2001), Chang (2008) and Van Horen and Pieters (2017), resulting in a combination of the items suggested by the different authors.

Table 7 - Meta-Analysis of existing Brand Attitudes scale in literature

Author	**Items used**
Miller, 1971[257]	7-points Likert scales on specific characteristics: *like-dislike*
Flaherty and Pappas, 2000[258]	Four 7-points Likert scales: *like-dislike, favourable-unfavourable, positive-negative, good-bad*
Yoo and Donthu, 2001[259]	Five 5-points Likert scales: *good-bad, nice-awful, attractive-unattractive, desirable-undesirable, likable-unlikable*
Chang, 2008[260] (*adopted by Keller, 1998 and Yoo et al., 2001*)	Six semantic differential scales: *favourable-unfavourable, like-dislike, ability to satisfy needs, positive-negative, good-bad, repeated use*
Van Horen and Pieters, 2017[261]	Four 7-points Likert scales: *negative-positive, bad-good, uninteresting-interesting, unattractive-attractive*

[257] S.J. Miller, M.B. Mazis, P.L. Wright, *The Influence of Brand Ambiguity on Brand Attitude Development*, Journal of Marketing Research, Vol.8, No. 4, 455-459, 1971
[258] K.E. Flaherty, J.M. Pappas*, Implicit Personality Theory In Evaluation of Brand Extensions*, Psychological Reports, 86, 807-818, 2000
[259] B. Yoo, N. Donthu, *Developing and validating a multi-dimensional customer-based brand equity scale*, Journal of Business Research, 52, 1-14, 2001
[260] H. Chang, The antecedents and Consequences of Brand Equity in Service Markets, Asia Pacific Management Review, 2008
[261] F. Van Horen, R. Pieters, Out-of-category Brand Imitation: Product Categorization Determines Copycat Evaluation, Journal of Consumer Research, 44 (4), 816-832, 2017

The scale proposed by this study wants to incorporate the most recurrent items in previous researches, and those which appear to be most suitable for the purpose of this analysis.

Table 8 - Proposed Brand Attitudes Measurement Scale

Dimension	Statements
Brand Attitude	*I am favourable to the brand*
	I like the brand
	I have a positive opinion toward the brand
	I think the offer of the brand is good
	I am attracted by the brand

With regard to affective response to ad, the present research refers to the work of Kim, Ratneshwar and Thorson (2017) and Green and Brock (2000), as reported in the *Marketing Scales Handbook* of Bruner (2019). The following scale was successfully used in the measurement of emotional response of consumers to an ad, with its validity eventually confirmed by the same study. The only variation applied to the original measurement system was the use of a 7-point Likert scale, instead of the 5-point or 9-point scales.

Table 9 - Proposed Affective Response to the Ad Measurement Scale

Dimension	Statements
Affective Response to the Ad	*I felt emotionally involved in the Ad*
	I found the Ad moving
	The Ad affected me emotionally
	I was able to connect to the Ad emotionally
	This Ad hooked me in terms of my feelings

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 SUMMARY OF RESULTS

4.1.1 Summary of data gathered

Overall, 211 people participated in the study, taking part to the questionnaire. Among these, 152 managed to fully complete the survey (72%). Thus, 59 responses were not taken in consideration, because they were incomplete and could generate biases in the data analysis.

The majority of respondents were between 18-25 years old (48%): following, there were people between 26-40yo (22.4%), >60 (15.8%) and between 41-60yo (13.8%). For what concerns gender, respondents were precisely split in two halves, with male and female respectively accounting for a 48.7% of the total, and a remaining 2.6% which did prefer not to answer the question. Thus, we could say the questionnaire was adequately balanced and variegated, with respect to age and gender. The majority of participants were Italian, and 31.8% affirmed to have one or more kids.

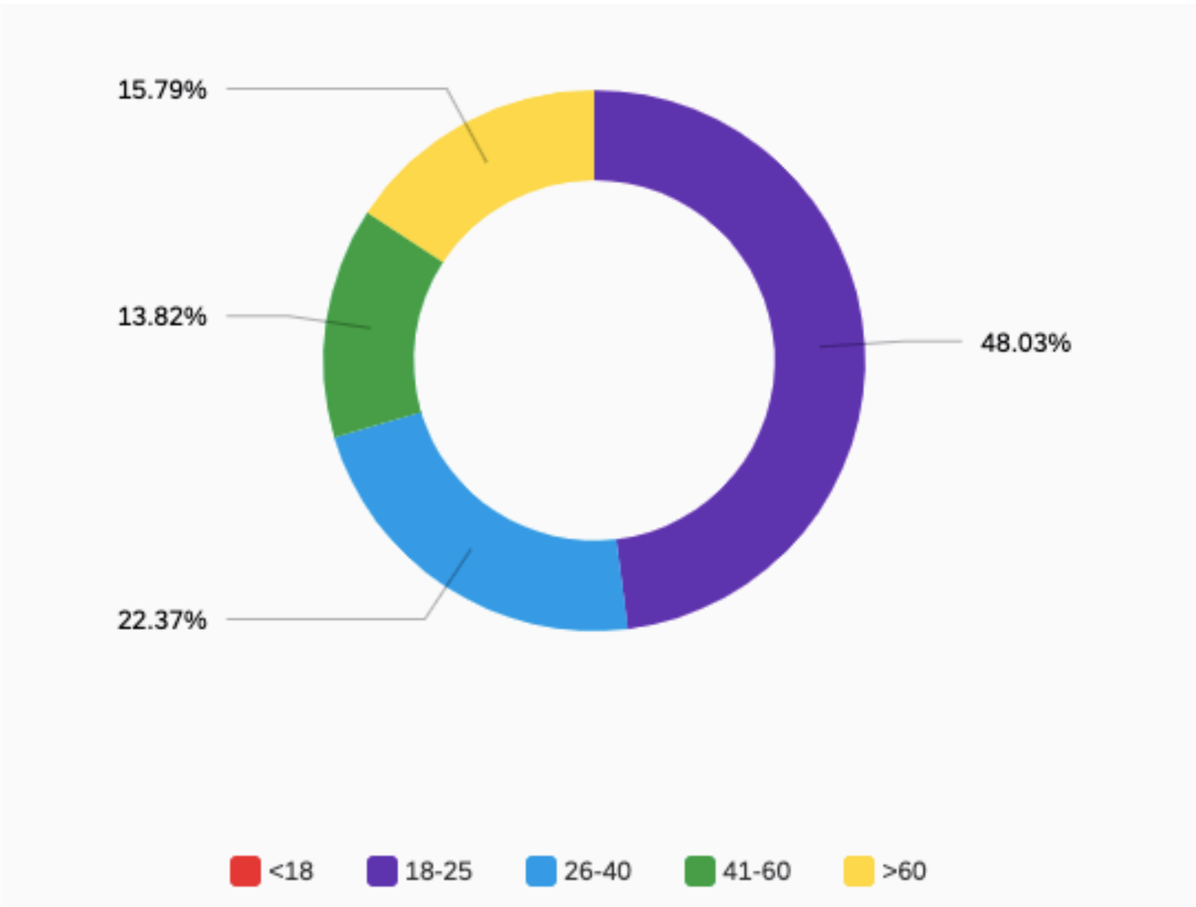
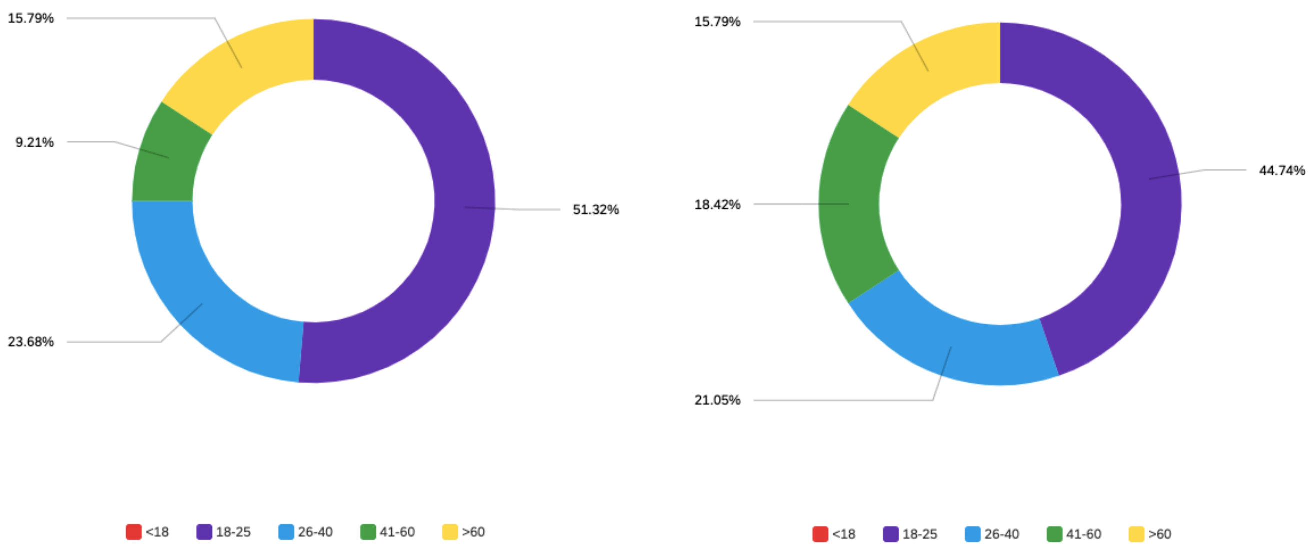


Figure 10 - Age Distribution of Respondents

As already mentioned, participants were randomly divided in two groups at the start of the questionnaire. People were heavenly divided among the 2 groups, resulting in 76 valid responses for the control group, and 76 for the intervention group. Again, the two groups resulted in a balanced composition. The control group was composed for a 51.32% of males, and a 46.05% of females, while in the intervention group, these percentage were exactly inverted (46.05% males and 51.32% females). Roughly half of both groups was represented by young people between 18-25, who accounted for 51.32% of the control group and 44.74% of the intervention group. The only substantial difference was found in the percentage of people who declared to have a child: in the control group, only 26.67% of respondents declared themselves as parents, with respect to the corresponding 36.84% of the intervention group.

Figure 11 - Age Composition of Control Group and Intervention Group



4.1.2 Scales' Reliability

A reliability analysis of the three scales used in the study has been run on SPSS. The objective of this analysis was to test the overall reliability of the scales, and the single contribute of the different items. This methodology allows to test for internal consistency reliability, measured through Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which is expected to be above 0.70 to be acceptable, and equal or greater than 0.80 to demonstrate even stronger reliability[262]. All the scales adopted in the study had been already tested for reliability, with positive outcomes, and used in different studies.

[262] J.M. Cortina, *What is coefficient alpha? An examination of theory and applications*, Journal of applied psychology, 78(1), 98, 1993

The scale of Brand Associations, although being rearranged ex-ante for the purpose of the study, exhibited satisfying internal reliability, with α = 0.950. All the items of the scale showed good validity as well. The only item which, if erased, would have increase overall scale α, turned out to be "*in regard to consumer interests, this company seems to be very caring*". However, since the possible α increase was estimated to be only +0.001, the item was kept in the scale.
Brand Attitudes' scale exhibited the highest Cronbach's alpha among all the three scales, with α = 0.960. No item, if deleted, would have brought any significant increase to scale's overall α.
The same result has been obtained for what concerns Emotional Response scale: the α = 0.954 demonstrated the good internal reliability of the scale, and any single items as well was shown to be fundamental for the scale's composition.
In conclusion, as shown by the table below, all the scales used in the study, have exhibited high Cronbach's α values, demonstrating a high degree of internal reliability.

Table 10 - Scales and Corresponding Cronbach's Alpha

Scale Used	Cronbach's alpha value
Brand Associations	α = 0.950
Brand Attitudes	α = 0.960
Emotional Response to Advertising	α = 0.954

4.2 DATA ANALYSIS

4.2.1 One-way ANOVA and Hypothesis Testing

The objective of the study was to determine if there could be any significant difference in the mean of the two groups, following the exposition to two different visual stimuli. In order to do that, data gathered with the survey were exported on SPSS, and then analyzed through a one-way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance). The ANOVA test, in order to determine the possible mean differences, existing between two groups, analyzes the sample variances. Since this study involves a single independent factor, namely gender-neutral communication, there has been used the one-way type of ANOVA.
In this analysis, a significance level of 0.05 was adopted, meaning a 5% risk of incur in a type I error. In other words, it was accepted a 5% of probability of rejecting the null hypothesis H_0, when this hypothesis is true.
One of the assumptions of ANOVA, that is that the groups' variances are approximately equal, has been tested as well through a test of homogeneity of variances (or F-test). The F-test measures the likely-hood of the equality of groups' variances, through a ratio between the variance between groups and the variance

within groups: if the second one is significantly larger, there is good probability that the assumption of equal variances is verified. The F-test run on the three dependents verified the equal variances assumption for each of the variable involved. In each case, the test confirmed that the hypothesis that variances of groups are homogenous (homoscedasticity of variances) cannot be rejected.

Table 11 - Results of F-test

Variable	F / Levene Statistic	p value
Brand Associations	0.006	0.938
Brand Attitudes	0.204	0.652
Emotional Response	0.328	0.568

The other two assumptions for ANOVA were met as well, namely the assumption of independent observations (each record is independent) and the one for normality (one-way ANOVA is considered to be a robust test against the assumption of normality, if the size of samples is enough large, namely >25).
Once the ANOVA assumptions have been verified, the analysis can go further.

Firstly, we want to test the hypothesis related to the single variables of the research, and then investigate the overall effect on brand equity, as a result of their combined effects. Thus, the first hypothesis to be tested, is H_2.

H_2: Gender-Neutral Communication impacts Brand Associations

Effects of gender-neutral communication on brand associations were measured through the adoption of a modified version of the Brand Associations scale proposed by Lassar, Mittal and Sharma (1995). The Likert scale included a total of 10 items. The one-way ANOVA demonstrated there was a significant effect of gender-neutral communication on Brand Associations. The results suggested that there was a remarkable difference in means among the control and intervention group (+0.5763), and that this result was statistically significant ($F(1,150) = 6.098$, p value $< .05$).

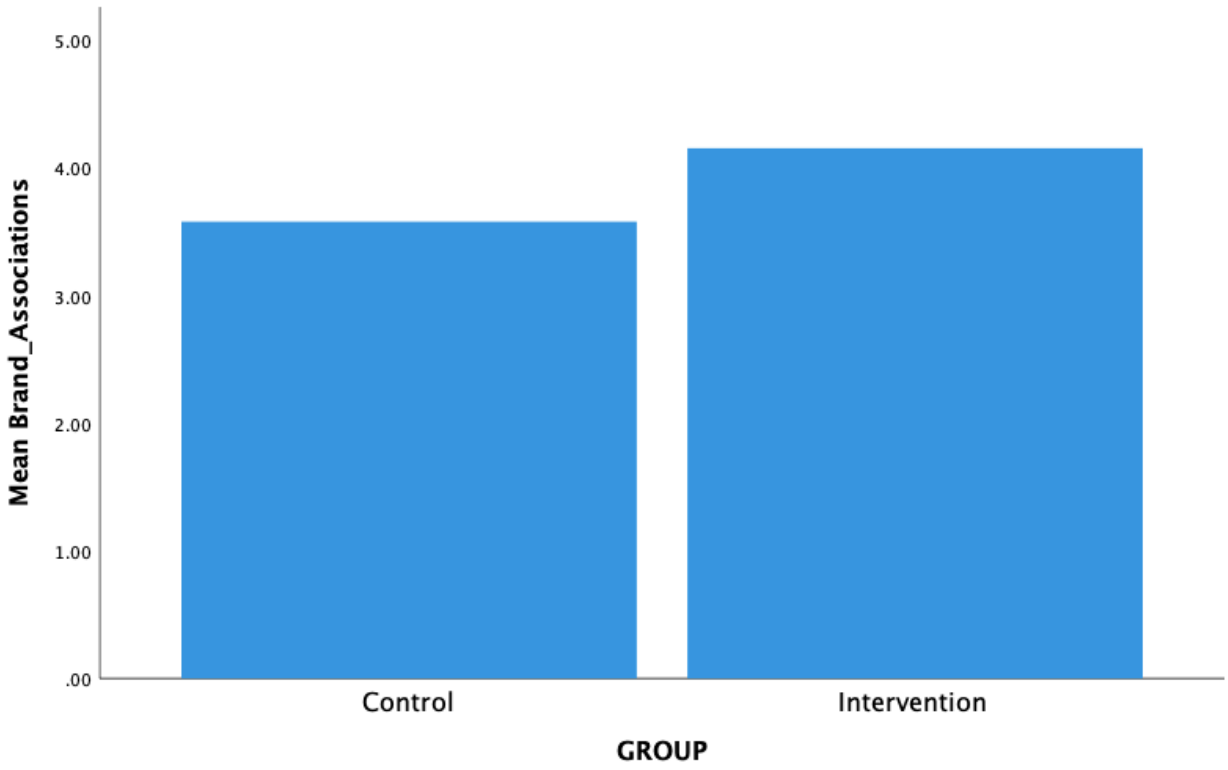


Figure 12 - Difference in mean score for Brand Associations

Hence, the null hypothesis has been rejected:

*H_2: The null hypothesis that Gender-Neutral Communication does not have any impact on Brand Associations, is **rejected**.*

Moving further, we want to test our next hypothesis, relative to Brand Attitudes.

H_3: Gender-Neutral Communication impacts Brand Attitudes

The dimensions of Brand Attitudes were analyzed through a Likert scale of 5 points. Despite a substantial difference in the mean score among the two groups (+0.4711), the one-way test did not manage to prove that this outcome was statistically significant ($F(1,150) = 3.096$, p value $> .05$).

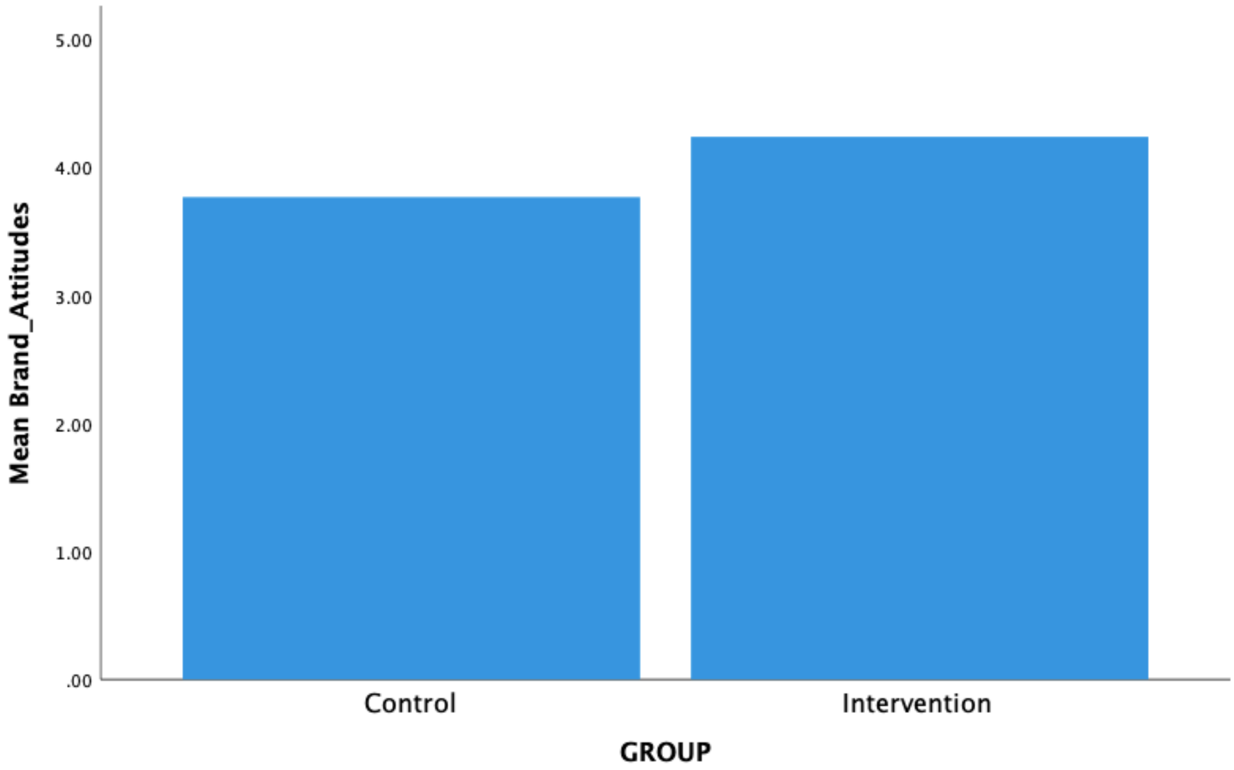


Figure 13 - Difference in mean score for Brand Attitudes

Hence, the null hypothesis was not rejected:

*H_3: The null hypothesis that Gender-Neutral Communication does not have any impact on Brand Attitudes, is **not rejected**.*

The last variable remained to be analyzed, is then Emotional Response to Advertising.

H_4: Gender-Neutral Communication impacts Emotional Response to Advertising

As well as it happened for the two previous variables, data highlighted a positive change of mean score in favour of the gender-neutral stimulus (+0.4448), but further ANOVA does not find enough evidence to consider this gap statistically significant (F (1,150) = 2.889, p value > .05).

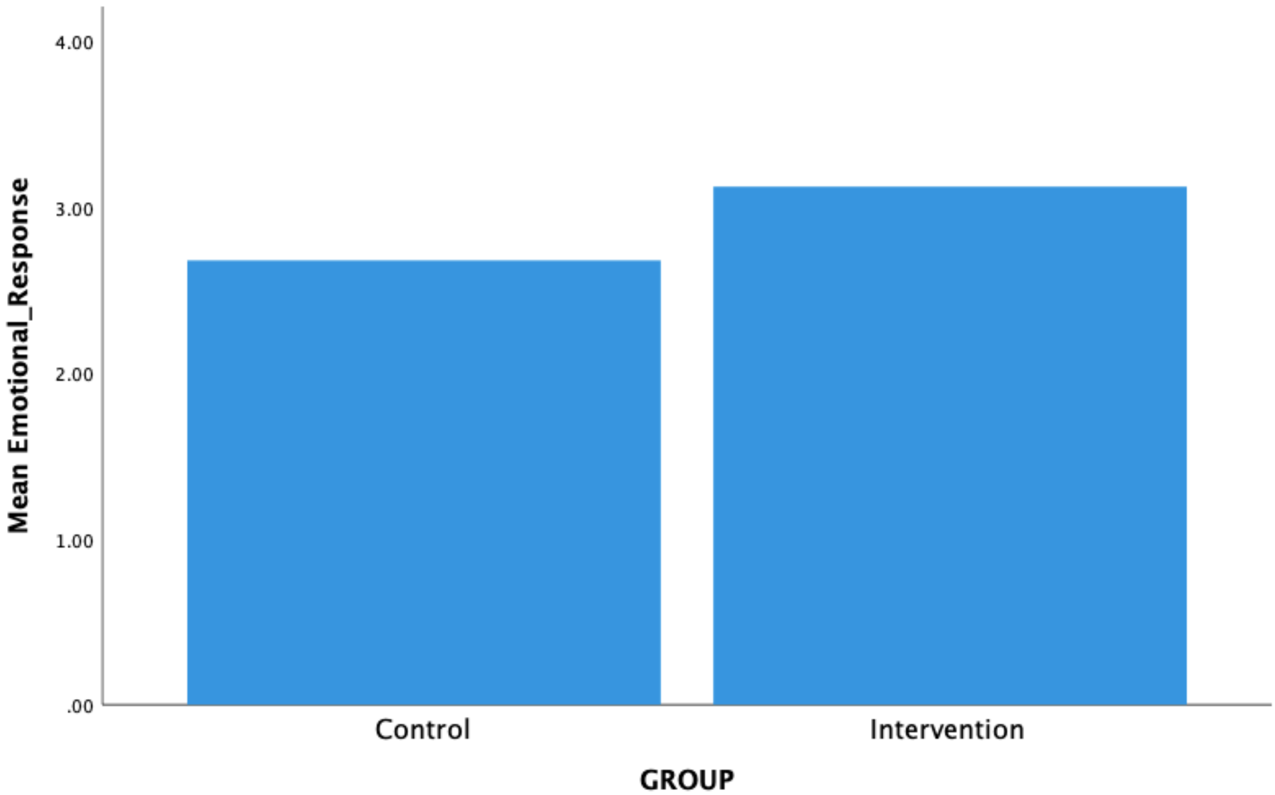


Figure 14 - Difference in mean score for Emotional Response to Advertising

Again, the null hypothesis was not rejected:

*H_4: The null hypothesis that Gender-Neutral Communication does not have any impact on Emotional Response to Advertising, is **not rejected**.*

The main hypothesis of the study was relative to the impact that a type of communication deprived of gender stereotypes could have on Brand Equity.

H_1: Gender-Neutral Communication impacts Brand Equity

In order to test the hypothesis, first of all it has been necessary to create a new index, comprising of all three single dimensions. Therefore, through SPSS, a new variable defining Brand Equity has been computed, using the "mean" function. Once created this new element, one-way ANOVA was once again used to decide whether to reject or not the null hypothesis. The descriptive analysis run on the variable had previously shown a substantial variation in the mean between groups (+0.4974), and the ANOVA test contributed to validate this result, from a statistic point of view. The one-way analysis confirmed that Brand Equity had been significantly affected by gender-neutral communication (F (1,150) = 4.475, p value < .05).

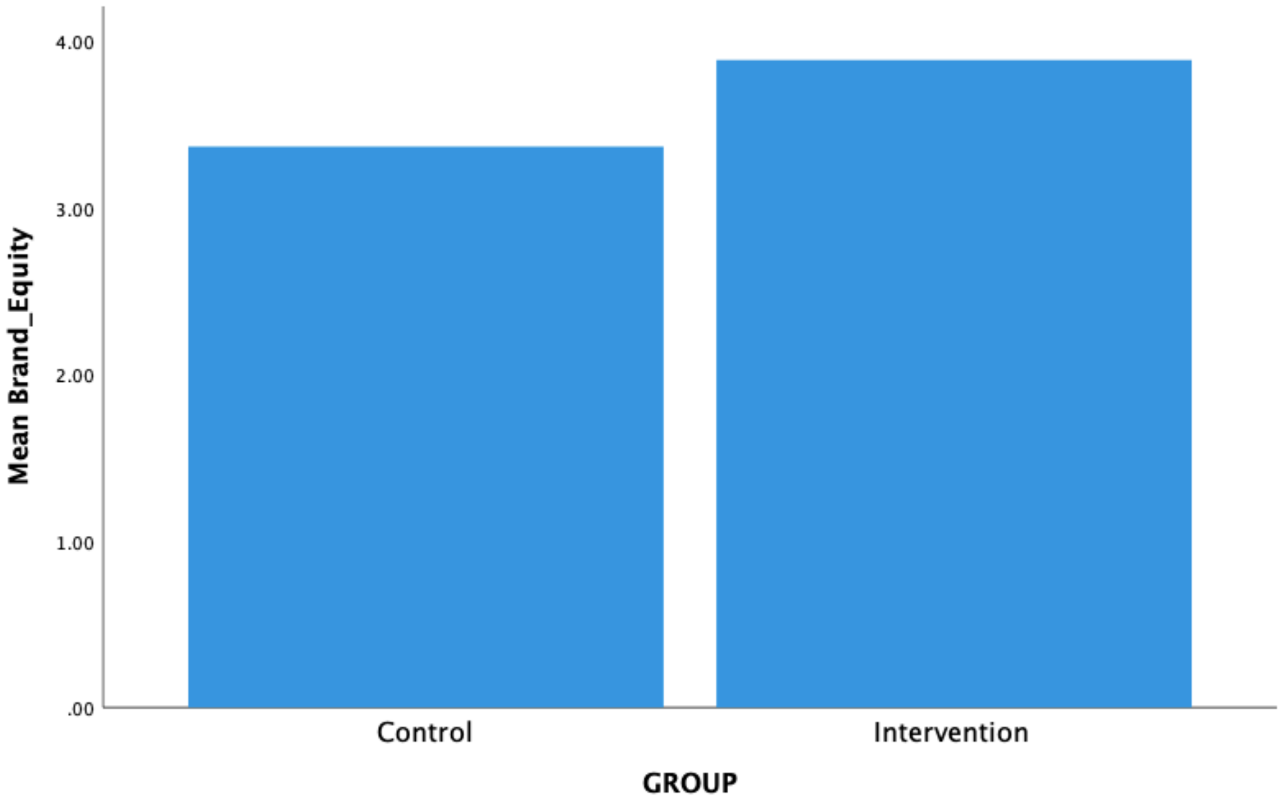


Figure 15 - Difference in mean score for Brand Equity

Hence, null hypothesis was rejected:

H_4: The null hypothesis that Gender-Neutral Communication does not have any impact on Brand Equity, is ***rejected***.

For the sake of a comprehensive analysis, it should be pointed out that all the null hypothesis would have been rejected if, for the data analysis, it had been considered a significance level of 0.10. However, the significance level that was used for the study, namely 0.05, was considered capable of providing more accurate results, considering the type of research conducted.

4.3 DISCUSSION

4.3.1 Review of the findings

The research provided some interesting results, that are going to be analyzed in detail in this paragraph.

First of all, for all the variables involved, it was registered an increase in score in favour of the intervention group.

Table 12 - Mean Score Gap for Variable

Variable	Mean Score Gap
Brand Association	+0.49737
Brand Attitudes	+0.57632
Emotional Response	+0.47105
Brand Equity	+0.44474

Even though these numbers have been encouraging, considering the objective of the research, statistical significance of the results had to be checked using the ANOVA test. The analysis of variances brought to the rejection of two null hypothesis, and the non-rejection of the other two.

Table 13 - Outcomes of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Outcome
H_1: Gender-Neutral Communication → Brand Associations	Null Hypothesis *Rejected*
H_2: Gender-Neutral Communication → Brand Attitudes	Null Hypothesis *Not Rejected*
H_3: Gender-Neutral Communication → Emotional Response	Null Hypothesis *Not Rejected*
H_4: Gender-Neutral Communication → Brand Equity	Null Hypothesis *Rejected*

The result of the research demonstrates that there is no significant effect of gender-neutral communication on Brand Attitudes and Emotional Response to Advertising, while there is a statistically significant and positive effect on Brand Associations and on overall Brand Equity.

4.3.2 Observations and Discussion

The study, despite presenting contrasting results, demonstrated the significant impact generated on brand equity by gender-neutral communication.

According to the results, this impact has been exclusively conveyed through the dimension of brand associations. This fact underlined the importance of brand associations as a fundamental requirement for acquiring high brand equity. Contrary to what sustained by great part of the literature reviewed (see paragraph 2.2.4), which always affirmed the importance of stereotyped representation of masculinity and femininity in generating clear and positive associations in the viewer (Lieven et al., 2014; Fugate & Phillips, 2010), this research demonstrated how a communication stimulus deprived of those stereotypes is capable of building clearer and stronger associations than its gendered counterpart. This result appears to be particularly important in the light of what general literature sustains: while academic papers have argued so far that consumers are more willing to relate to stereotyped and given representations of male and female, the findings of the study have exhibited an opposite view, whit viewers that, for the most part, have rejected this simplified representation of masculinity and femininity, in favour of a more neutral type of message. Surprisingly, despite a similar change of mean, null hypothesis related to Brand Attitudes and Emotional Response to advertising were not rejected. The result is particularly unexpected, if we consider that the hugest gap in mean score was registered precisely for Brand Attitudes variable. A lack of evidence for demonstrating significance for both dimensions, could be due, as suggested in the paragraph about "study limitations", to low suitability of some items to the specific context of research and, most of all, to the stimulus proposed in the survey. It is reasonable to assume that, given only the visual stimulus proposed, for respondents it was quite difficult to provide a valid score to questions of the scales. Thus, a failure in the rejection of the null hypothesis could be identified, partially, in a lack of enough information, on the side of respondent, needed to answer some of the proposed questions.

The dimension of Emotional Response deserves, in addition, a separate consideration. As further mentioned in the limitations' section, from the analysis of data and from the feedbacks of some participants, it has been possible to identify a potential bias in the stimulus proposed. The use of an image, although respecting the experimental conditions, has been likely to not being enough to stimulate viewers' emotions and allow them to correctly select scores relative to the Emotional Response scale. Consequently, this fact may have had an influence over the gap in mean score for the variable among control and intervention group, resulting in this gap to be not statistically significant, and leading to not reject the null hypothesis for H_4.

Probably the most important result, considering which was our first declared objective of the work, has come from testing the main hypothesis, H_1, that gender-neutral communication has an effect on overall brand equity. In addition to confirm a positive effect of the factor on the reference variable, the ANOVA definitively proved the statistical significance of the change in the group subjected to the treatment. Thus, despite the "not rejection" of two of the hypotheses related to the single components of the final variable for brand equity, the overall final effect was considered relevant enough to reject the null hypothesis of H_1. This result, again, is of considerable importance, as it appears to challenge current available literature. This outcome seems in contrast with a large strand of literature which considers gender stereotyping as a pivot point for the elicitation of clear gender positioning in companies' communications, and consequently, as a guarantee for greater brand equity (Lieven et al., 2014). Marketing messages conveyed through stereotyped representations have generally being considered as an ascertained way to obtain a positive feedbacks by viewers (Courtney and Whipple, 1983), and avoid to incur in the risk of generating negative reactions in the customers, with the use of a non-traditional type of advertising (Um, 2014). The study has exhibited diametrically opposed results: registered mean scores for the group subjected to treatment were greater than the ones collected for the control group. In addition, for what concerns the capability of advertising and communication in general to affect CBBE, about which it has been talked more extensively in paragraph 2.2.1, it seems, all things considered, that this effect is stronger if conveyed through Brand Associations (Chakravarti, 1990), that through Brand Attitudes (Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995; Aaker & Biel, 2013).

4.3.3 Descriptive Analysis by Age Range

In parallel to hypothesis testing, an analysis on the responses gathered, divided for age range, has been run in order to answer our second research question: does the observed result for brand equity change with the age of participants, and how? Firstly, a comparison of the mean scores allowed to make a first distinction between the four different age groups targeted for the survey: two groups, namely the one of Generation Z (18-25yo) and the one of Baby Boomers (>60) have appeared to be contributing to the positive gap in mean score of brand equity, in favour of the group of intervention. On the other side, Millennials (26-40yo) and Generation X (41-60) have registered better scores in the control group. In order to give more statistical relevance to the above-mentioned results, independent t-tests were run on dummy variables which wanted to confront the responses obtained. Let's analyze the results more in detail.

As previously discussed in paragraph 1.4.4, academic literature points out the important which is attributed to inclusivity and diversity by Millennials and Generation Z in particular. Data gathered with the survey were expected to confirm this trend, proposed by academics and researchers. However, at first sight, results obtained seemed to support only partially what explained previously. Responses were sorted by age, and then a mean comparison between control and intervention group was run on SPSS. Overall scores for Brand Associations, Brand Attitudes and Emotional Response ton Advertising were compared. Age ranges were defined in advance according to Bencsik et al. (2016) generational timeline, diversifying among Baby Boomers (>60), Generation X (41-60), Generation Y or Millennials (26-40) and Generation Z (18-25). Thus, comparison was made between four separated age groups.

The hugest gap between the mean scores of the control and intervention group, in favour of the second one, was registered among members of Generation Z (+1.4061 for Brand Associations, +1.3382 for Brand Attitudes, + 1.0785 for Emotional Response). This result seems to corroborate the fact that consumers belonging to Generation Z place a lot of value on inclusivity matters and, as it is the case here, on gender-related issues. Attention to inclusivity and LGBTQ rights, as well as to brands' authentic messages of acceptance and respect, has proven to be a non-negotiable point for the newest generation of today's consumers[263].

A much surprising data is the one related to the 26-40 age range, a group which, according to the timeline considered, should be representing of the consumers' group of Millennials (or Generation Y). From the reviewed literature background, it was reasonable to expect a result similar to the previous one, with a

[263] Barnes & Noble College, *Getting to Know Gen Z,* Report, 2019

substantial scores' gap in favour of the gender-neutral stimulus. Instead, what came out from the analysis of data, has been an overall preference toward the gendered stimulus, with a relevant gap in mean's score particularly evident in brand associations and attitudes (-0.7355, -0.9458).
A result similar to the one of Millennials was obtained with the Generation X (41-60yo) group where, however, the gap between the control and intervention group was lower, despite being always in favour of the stimulus with gendered elements.
Lastly, another surprisingly outcome was the one relative to Baby Boomers, that is people over 60 years old. The respondents assigned to the intervention group gave on average higher scores than their counterparts of the control group, in all three the dimensions investigated. Despite being for sure an interesting result, this data could be assessed as not enough relevant, given the small sample of individuals belonging to this age range which participated in the survey (15.79% of both Control and Intervention group).
Looking at the overall scores of the variable for Brand Equity, created ex-post as a combination of the three single measures, as expected, data obtained through SPSS descriptive analysis confirmed what reported above. As it can be seen in the figure below, the positive contribution to the statistically significant gap between the two groups, was given mainly by people belonging to the 18-25 age range, supported then by the over 60.

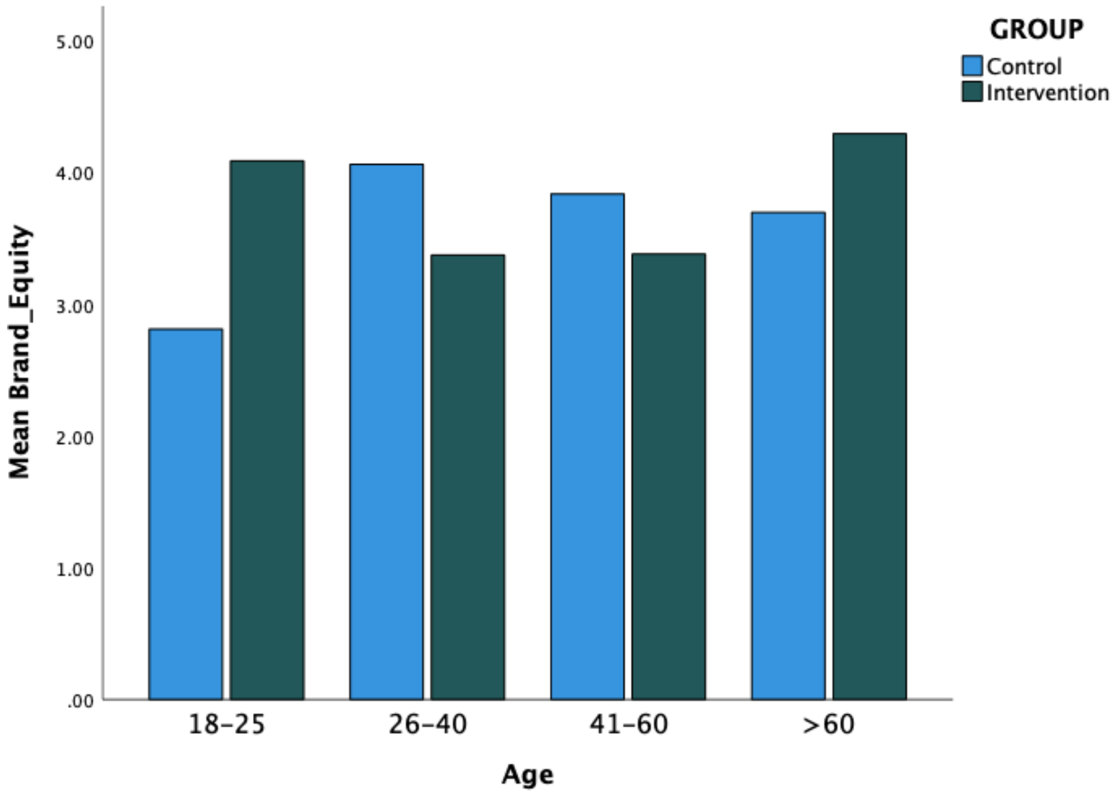


Figure 16 - Mean scores for Brand Equity, segmented for Age

As the most striking result was a such important gap between the Gen Z and the Millennials' groups, independent T-tests were run in order to further investigate the phenomenon and the possible relevance of

the outcomes highlighted by the data. The objective was to see if the difference registered among the different age ranges in the dependent variable of Brand Equity could be somehow significant. Using "recoding" option, a new variable has been created, to do a comparison between members of Gen Z and Millennials. Despite not finding enough evidence to confirm the statistical significance of the mean gap (+0.71532) in the intervention group (p value > .05), the software provided a different result with regard to the control group: the gap in mean score among the two groups (-1.25100), relative to the control set, was found to be statistically significant (p value < .05).
At the same time, another T-test investigated the differences registered among the age range of Gen Z and Gen X. The result was the same as the one obtained for the previous group. In detail, the effect on the dependent variable was considered not relevant with regard to the intervention group (+0.70728 ; p value > .05), fact that was not true as well for the parallel analysis on the control group (-1.02613), which ascertained the statistical significance of the assumptions previously made (p value < .05).
Thus, what emerged from our descriptive research, is essentially a substantial and significant gap between Gen Z and Millennials, and Gen Z and Gen X and on the gender issue. While the latter discovery finds wide confirmation in literature, the second one, again, is more surprising.
To some extent, our conclusions corroborated a part of the literature reviewed (*RainmakerThinking* Report; Myers, 2017), which illustrated how, for large part of Gen Z members, equality's issues often tends to concern problematics about gender. The gender issue could be one of the focal points which separate these two similar, but at the same time, deeply different generations. Different studies, among which one from Pew Research Center[264], seem to confirm the fact that Gen Z's perspective on gender non-conformity represents a fundamental divide between this generation and the previous one. The fact that this "post-Millennials" generation is among the most ethnically and racially diverse ever[265], could be one of the reasons why Gen Z's stances for gender equality and sensitivity to gender fluidity are far more progressive than the ones of their older peers. But still, obtaining a negative score for that specific age range, overall considered as a progressive generation remained an unexpected event.
The results could be interesting, also if it is considered the importance of Millennials and Generation X as the consumers responsible for the purchase of the majority of goods reserved to children, thus including also children apparel. An outcome as the one proposed by this study could signify that the actual generation of parents is still not ready for a paradigm change, and still anchored to traditional codes of children's clothing. For the completeness of the analysis, it must be acknowledged, on the other side, that the generational timeline which allows to distinguish between different ranges of consumers, has no fixed and well-defined age borders, fact that makes it difficult to run any significative analysis based on age. Just changing the

[264] Pew Research Center, *Generation Z Looks a Lot Like Millennials on Key Social and Political Issues*, 2019
[265] Pew Research Center, *Early Benchmarks Show 'Post-Millennials on Track to Be Most Diverse, Best-Educated Generation Yet*, 2018

reference year which represents the generational watershed between Millennials and Generation Z, could have resulted in different data, and thus, different considerations. Other models, as the one used by Pew Research Center[266], allows to identify "younger" Millennials (those among 24 and 39 years, in this case), and could lead to different interpretations of the responses gathered through the survey.

4.3.4 Managerial Implications

In the light of the purposes of research, main findings of the study are here reviewed, complemented with possible hints and suggestions related to the managerial side and to the brands of the sector.

The main objectives of the study were the investigation of the effect of non-stereotyped communication on brand equity, and the understanding of the relevance of age for the differential of the responses provided. The research ascertained that gender-neutral communication has a positive (and statistically significant) effect on brand equity, highlighting further how members of Gen Z have resulted in being the major contributors to the result, and allowing to draw some final consideration on the entire issue.

Firstly, the study has made evident how classical stereotyped representations of gender could no more be considered as a useful and efficient tool to be used recursively in communication. As great progresses were made since the time where women were depicted as completely subordinated to the male figure and relegated to determined setting and activities, it is likely to expect that marketers will make further steps in this direction. This historical pattern, which is seeing classical gender stereotypes to gradually fade, in the future may see their complete overturning. In this optic, institutions will have a crucial role in setting precise boundaries for what can or not be represented in advertising, re-considering gender stereotypes: from being a consolidated and widely assimilated practice in our society, gender-stereotyping should be increasingly seen as an outdated and obsolete technique which is far from what future generations of consumers expect to see. In the same way, brands should be able to abandon the existing categorizations of products and messages "for males and females", no more considering gender among the major criteria for segmentation of consumers and creation of separated communication contents.

Brands themselves should take the role of social institutions, in bringing forward the main social battles for which new generations of consumers care more. Remaining in the middle, without taking clear stance on major social concerns which, at first sight, could seem to do not affect directly the business, are likely to result in a long-term unsuccessful strategy, that could lead to lose costumers and reputation. Brands should be able to represent the interest of their consumers and become spokespersons of their social demands. The fashion industry has demonstrated to be a vanguard in this sense, as many big players of the industry have affirmed themselves as the promoters of social stances and values. Brands like *Gucci*, mostly thanks to its

[266] M. Dimock, (Jan 17, 2019), Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins, *Pew Research Center*, retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2a019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/

visionary art director Alessandro Michele, have started to reshape their image, incorporating in the company's culture the values of inclusivity and acceptance of diversity and, moreover, making them pivotal points of the company's culture. It is likely that brands outside the fashion world could follow the model proposed by major fashion brands, in their new approach to communication and in their shift of focus toward new and different values, which will be the ones in which Gen Zers and future consumers will want to be identified.

Particularly important, in this sense, will be the role played by companies in children apparel industry. As explained throughout the research, the stereotypes used for adult advertising are more or less an evolution of the ones which have been seen as present in advertising representing children. Breaking the use of this technique is a first step in order to avoid constricting children into that binary paradigm, which is the origin of gender stereotyping. At the same time, as demonstrated by our results, brands will have a unique opportunity to differentiate themselves now, in a market where gendered apparel is still prevalent, and secure long-term benefits with regard to brand equity and consumer involvement.

A third consideration has to be made precisely on these consumers of the future, who have demonstrated to be particularly sensitive to gender-related issues. As shown by results, this research seems to corroborate the fact that markets are going to face a new generation of consumers, far more progressive and less permissive than Millennials on specific social issues, such as those related to race and gender inclusivity. Managers of the future should be able to respond to the requests of representing themselves for what they truly are, and not by falling inside pre-determined standards proposed by the market. Gen Z could be considered as the most concerned generation with the theme of identity and self-expression, and also for that reason their involvement in social causes related to gender issues is stronger than the one of past generations. Gen Zers are opened to diversity and change, and strongly believe that this change should come from a dialogue and a constant interaction with companies. Managers should be able to provide a transparent communication, being careful to capture the main social issues and consequently respond to them appropriately.

The results have then highlighted a fundamental gap of literature on the issue, more specifically, decades of academic literature have strongly affirmed the importance of gender stereotyping as a tool capable to enhance brand equity and elicit positive responses from viewers. Since the beginnings of what is considered as our contemporary advertising, companies have looked for simple and immediate ways of representing an idealized image of males and females, that could be eventually stored in the mind of the consumer, to create clear and strong associations. The majority of literature seems to be stuck on a classical paradigm which is unlikely to work with next generation of consumers, and most of all with Gen Z. Literature should focus more on the values of inclusivity and neutrality of gender in communication, providing academic research which investigates what many marketers are already doing right now.

4.3.5 Study Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of the paper should be considered in the light of the following limitations.

The first and probably main area of concern regards a typology of errors which is commonly referred as sample errors or selection bias. This kind of problems emerge when the sample of the study fail to accurately represent the reference population. A possible downfall of the paper could stem precisely from the use of a convenience sample, respect to a probability one, overall considered more suitable for a quantitative type of research. The adoption of the above-mentioned sampling technique was mainly due to time and budgeting constraints. Another fact to be considered, is that the use of web-based surveys restricts the set of possible respondents to the ones who actively use the social media through which the survey has been shared. These two facts, combined, could have hindered the possibility of generalizing the study's outcome for the entire population. However, in order to moderate this downfall, a sufficient large sample was organized, making possible to collect a sufficient amount of answers. Future experimentations on the issue, not limited in budget and time, could allow to organize a most statistically significant sample, or maybe set up a more qualitative type of research through face-to-face interviews, in order to deepen and further improve the findings of this study.

Secondly, being the phenomenon investigated, namely gender-neutrality in the fashion industry, relatively recent, there is still a huge gap of literature on the field. That is why, available previous research on the topic have been quite limited, partly influencing the ability to accurately review the topic in a comprehensive way. A collective effort by academic authors to further investigate the issue, both from a general perspective and in the particular contexts, would be useful in the optics of future research. The possibility of conducting further experimentation on the issue, contextualizing it in a specific industry or sector, given the few available materials on it, is huge. The reaction of consumers, as well as the possibility of application of an alternative model of communication, are likely to change accordingly to the specific sector of reference. Moving beyond, it could be of particular interest also the analysis of the effects generated in a viewer by a type of communication which does not only eliminate existing gender stereotypes, but even subvert them, providing an overturned image of what is considered as the "acceptable" representation of males and females.

Another important reflection has to be made on the stimulus used in the survey, and the setup of the questionnaire. In order to respect the controlled experimental conditions and avoid other variables to influence the final outcome, a collaboration with a professional designer was needed to create a visual stimulus suitable for the research. Despite the considerable economic effort required in the process, probably there was still a significant gap between the information gathered by respondents with the stimulus' display, and those needed to fully answers all the questions presented in the scales. In other words, such a typology of visual graphic was not sufficient to form an opinion about the "offer of the brand" or the "trustworthiness of brand's employees", just to state some items in the measurement scales used. Moreover, such a type of stimulus could have not be sufficient in triggering particular emotions in the viewer, thereby distorting the measurement performed with the emotional response scale. Again, if not constraint by budget requirements, the option of creating a video stimulus, more able to touch viewers' emotions and elicit more conscious responses, could have been a "game changer" for the setup of this kind of work.

For what concerns data gathering, it has been noted that a substantial percentage of respondents did not provide valid answers (28%), as they left the questionnaire before the end, leaving several questions unanswered. Even if estimated response time was considered acceptable, different feedbacks highlighted how some repetitive or similar questions of the 7-point Likert scales had generated a drop in respondents' focus. The use of apparently repetitive questions was somehow forced, by the need to replicate as much as possible the original measurement scales provided by the reference authors, excluding some small adjustments due to the specific context of the research. Again, timing constraints mainly, restricted the possibility to search for scales which could be more suitable to the context. Alternatively, as the scheme of the research and the set-up of the statistical analysis appear to be easily replicable, future researchers could take into consideration to change the variable of interests, to investigate other dimensions of the same issue.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this work is the analysis of the impact of communication on brand equity, comparing a gendered and an ungendered type of advertising relative to a brand of children apparel. The research project aims to answer to two main questions:

- Can a shift to a gender-neutral type of communication affect brand equity?
- How can this result change with the age range of the consumer's groups?

The idea of this work comes from the acknowledgement that, to the current situation, there is little research on the pro/cons of the usage of a type of communication alternative to the traditional one and free of gender stereotypes, and on its objective consequences on brand dimensions. Moreover, there is almost no conceptualization of the phenomenon in the context of a specific industry and sector.
The choice of focusing on the fashion industry, particularly on children apparel, comes from the recognition of fashion as a mean of self-expression, and as one of the industries which is highly influenced by the socio-political environment, which often acted as an echo chamber for the discussion of gender equality and gender neutrality. In addition, it is interesting to see how gender stereotyping applies to the representation of children in advertising, and how this affects consumers' perception of the brand.
A discussion on how different age groups could be affected in a different way could be interesting to investigate, considering in particular the growing importance of Generation Z in the market and its increasing sensibility to social issues and inclusivity.

The study was conducted using posttest-only control group design: participants were randomly assigned to two groups, control and intervention, and were presented with two different stimuli (a gendered and a gender-neutral one). After that they were asked to complete a questionnaire to measure the effect of the brand communication on the brand equity.

The thesis is articulated in four chapters. In the first chapter, the main concepts covered in this work are generally presented and discussed. Chapter two covers a more detailed literature review of the brand dimensions presented, gendered and nontraditional advertising, gender stereotypes and the link between brand communication and brand equity. The third chapter is about the set-up of the actual experiment. Finally, the fourth chapter covers the analysis of the results and the consequent discussion.

INTRODUCTION

One of the very first topic addressed by the work, is the debate about the term "Gender". Different authors have voluntarily avoided to try to give a universal meaning to the term, considering it more as a question, or a starting point for a further analysis. Others have tried to define gender more precisely, according to either a generalist approach, which affirms the presence of common characteristics, conditions and experiences among men and women, which eventually end up in differentiating some individuals as men and some others as women, or to a particularistic perspective, which argues that gender is constructed independently of these "common criteria". Afterwards, the main steps of the so-called sex/gender debate have been discussed in detail: from an early existentialist approach, according to which masculinity and femininity are different by nature, until reaching the "doing gender" perspective of West and Zimmermann (1987), where gender is considered as something socially constructed, which differs across cultures, contexts and time periods. The essentialist theories have often been criticized by modern literature for their attempt to establish, through the imposition of a universally accepted narration of the gender, a discriminatory type of society, that is referred as *ordine veterosessuale.* According to the essentialist theory, the division between men and women, therefore the validity of the binary paradigm, derives from the observation of an objective reality. Nevertheless, our understanding of the world always goes through the mediation of a culture; a culture, in turn, is constructed through communication, and it is through communication that we know how to split the world into categories and how to interpret reality. In the specific case of gender categories, it happens that the categorization of reality has been always influenced by the strong patriarchal connotation of society. Therefore, the naturalization of the man/woman binomial, which is instead created by society, leads to the acceptance of some characteristics as necessary and immutable, while in reality they are just functional in maintaining the societal order which originated them.

Today it is generally 92ecognized that gender it is a fluid concept, something constantly reshaped through social interactions, which concerns the expression of the self. In the same way, it is universally understood how fundamental in its social function, on a communicative level: from politics to business, to embrace, ultimately, the entire collectivity, gender differentiation has represented a fundamental differentiation for efficiently delivering messages that are consistent with the chosen receiver. For this reason, gender has always been inevitably linked to fashion, for its ability to create and modify continuously individuals' identities, precisely by exploiting gender relations which stand at the base of society, eventually affecting the same notions of masculinity and femininity. For this reason, gender has always been inevitably linked to fashion, for its ability to create and modify continuously individuals' identities, precisely by exploiting gender relations which stand at the base of society, eventually affecting the same notions of masculinity and

femininity. As Crane (2000) highlights, one of the principal messages conveyed by fashion and clothing style is the perception of gender roles by the individual and by society as a whole.
The analysis of gender roles and of related behaviours has always been a critical tool for marketers, especially in the fashion industry, who wanted to easily segment their audience. Darley and Smith (1995) identified three main factors for which gender has been always used in marketing segmentation: gender segmentation is easily identifiable and accessible, and each segment comprises on average half of the population. Gendered advertising continues to constitute a major part of current panorama, with the previously mentioned binary scheme which still constitutes a useful framework for the construction and delivery of the marketing message. However, many authors highlight how, in the so-called era of post-modern marketing, gender identities have increasingly become a malleable instrument of self-expression, with the very meaning of masculine and feminine deconstructed and reused to create new significances. Smartest brands have started to answer to the consumers' request, in particular from Gen Z and Millennials, to embrace a more gender-fluid style of communication; with the challenge of the of traditional patterns and the creation of new paradigms, it is crucial for brands to adapt to these changes. The Luxury and Fashion industry has been a vanguard in spreading this revolution, with brands tackling the issues in mainly two ways: some have labelled themselves as unisex, while others have challenged explicitly gender stereotypes. When it comes to the topic of gender fluidity associated to children, the debate becomes even more heated. As gender being one fundamental part of everyone's identity, the question on whether to raise kids outside of traditional gender boundaries, in order to give them enhanced freedom of express themselves, is still generating lots of different answers, from opposite points of view. Since researches which have been done up to now have provided significant data in support and in opposition to an ungendered education pattern, there is no definitive answer to this social discussion. It is undeniable that the whole debate touches also the world of children clothing, being apparel, as already stated, one of the fundamental means of expression of the gender identity of individuals. This idea of dressing children with a gender-neutral outfit, contrary to common belief, constituted the norm for a long period of time, as boys and girls used to wear the same clothes, usually made of white cotton, easy to bleach and non-restricting. At the end of the war, marketers started to understand the need to create a code for children's apparel, in order to appeal mothers and convince them to buy more merchandise, and that's when the current blue/pink gender code has been set up. Despite this "colour shift" could appear as irrelevant, researches have demonstrated that this fact has contributed to increase gender stereotyping in U.S., making children aware of the importance social distinction of gender, and encouraging them to question themselves on what is "for boys" or "for girls". This gender-colours association, despite being assimilated today as a usual marketing tool, risks to expose gender non-conforming kids to mockery by society, just for the reason that they have a different colour preference respect to the mass.

The awareness of such issues is fundamental for those brands which want to stay competitive in a long-term perspective. It is clear how the role of brand has undergone a substantial change over the years. From being a simple guarantee of quality, a whole new universe has begun to open behind the process of "branding". Today, companies are experiencing a growing pressure from their consumer base to get involved in the most relevant socio-political issues, taking a strong stand in the debate. Companies should be aware of the main social issues which are developing around them, in their specific sector or industry, and should be ready to provide convincing responses to critiques and showing and demonstrating an authentic purpose by keeping a reserve of proactive initiatives on those issues. This additional dimension can be summarized by the word "Purpose", which far from remaining just a trend, it is being more and more considered as a norm to which companies should adapt in order to obtain positive responses from the engagement of their customers. A strong Purpose is capable of increasing customers' loyalty, as already mentioned, and also of expanding the current customer base, as new consumers would be more willing to try the products. Almost 60% of Gen Z or Millennials worldwide believe in the importance of companies' social responsibility, particularly related to human rights, race, and LGBT rights, respect to a smaller 50% of Boomers. This s a fact to be taken in consideration, considering in particular the Luxury and Fashion industry, as by 2025, more than half of the entire L&F market will be constituted by Gen Y and Z. The sensibility of fashion customers to certain topics, is constantly shaping the way the whole industry is moving and this spirit of inclusion and openness to people could not exclude the gender sphere. The strong voice of youngest consumers' generations, combined with their growing volume and weight in the market, is pushing companies to work for the creation of gender-inclusive work environment and a type of communication which turns away from classical gender stereotypes.

Researchers have always been concordant in affirming the positive consequences, for brands, stemming from the use of gender stereotypes as it has been usually associated to more positive associations generated in the consumer and a clearer brand positioning. On the other side, there is still little research on the effects that a gender-free type of communication, alternative to the traditional one, could have on brand dimensions, such as brand equity.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The objective of this research is precisely to test the differential effect of traditional (gendered) and gender-neutral advertising on brand equity. The research's literature review has shown how marketing communication has a fundamental role in shaping the brand equity of a brand and how advertising is capable of manipulating brand equity, acting on its components. Therefore, literature provides a solid foundation to structure this research on a conceptual framework which displays a causality relationship between communication and brand equity. A substantial part of the work has been dedicated to the review of main brand equity models, with a summary of the most used dimensions, used by different authors in order to operationalize the brand equity concept. Among the several variables proposed, brand associations and brand attitudes have been found of particular relevance for the purpose of this research. Based on the literature review, it can be stated with the two brand dimensions are universally recognized as two antecedents of brand equity, which have the capability of affecting it, through both a direct and indirect effect. For this reason, it has been decided to measure effects of communication on brand equity through these two variables. Throughout the review of existing academic literature, it has been explored and confirmed the effect advertising has on these variables. Several studies have analyzed how marketing communications is able to affect brand equity through the manipulation of brand associations and attitude. The effect of advertising on brand equity is also measured through an alternative channel, that is the one passing from consumer affective response to the Ad. Emotional response to advertising has a direct contribution in the construction of brand equity and a mediating role on the relationship between communication and equity. Briefly summing up, these considerations led to the formulation of the following research's hypothesis:

***H_1**: Gender-Neutral Communication impacts Brand Equity*
***H_2**: Gender-Neutral Communication impacts Brand Associations*
***H_3**: Gender-Neutral Communication impacts Brand Attitudes*
***H_4**: Gender-Neutral Communication impacts Emotional Response to Advertising*

The proposed theoretical framework suggested the adoption of a causal type of research design, for this study. Causal research, also called explanatory research, allows to better investigate the nature and the magnitude of relationships which are based on a "cause-and-effect" principle. Since our purpose is to analyze the causal effect of marketing communication on the brand equity dimension, this research methodology appears to be the most suitable one for this scope. The nomothetic causal relationship which wants to be demonstrated through this study has been expressed through the proposed hypotheses. The research of primary data for such type of researches is generally made through experiments, and a questionnaire was set up to answer the research question. The use of the experimental study allows to control external factors which could incorrectly affect the results of the research. The model chosen for the design and implementation of the questionnaire is the posttest-only control group design. In order to observe the differential effect between a gendered advertising and a gender-neutral one, it occurred the necessity of setting up two separate groups, one for control and one for intervention. The comparison between two groups is considered as one of the fundamental elements of experimental design.

Despite a quantitative type of research like the one proposed here usually requires a probability sample, for a matter of costs and time, convenience sampling has been considered as the most appropriate sampling strategy to use. Literature demonstrates how convenience sampling, though being a nonprobability sampling strategy, is used in both qualitative and quantitative research. Participants were divided among the control and the intervention group, thanks to the tools of Qualtrics, which allows the creation of a single questionnaire, with the only difference in the stimulus provided, and the random division of respondents in two groups.

In order to obtain the information needed for this research, a quantitative type of questionnaire with closed-ended responses was prepared. The proposed survey was exactly the same for the control and intervention group, with the only difference lying in the stimulus displayed to the respondents: a gendered one in the first case, and a gender-neutral one for the latter. The two stimuli were meant to be different in the representation of the children in the particular context; children characters are portrayed through gender stereotypes in the first setting, while depicted without this stereotyped frame in the second situation.

The stimulus provided to the respondent is a visual one. Literature has widely confirmed how the visual medium is particularly effective in the transmission of information, as people tend to recognize and process images faster than what they do with words and with less effort. According to Rashotte (2003), the visual representation of a non-verbal act or behaviour is more impacting than its written description. Furthermore, the processing of visuals and emotions happens in the same area of the brain, and that is the reason why these two things are connected and end up in generating long-lasting memories and strong impressions. To overcome the difficulty in finding two images which could represent an adequate stimulus for the sake of research, that is to say capable of respecting the previously mentioned "laboratory conditions" of the experiment, the visual stimuli for the survey have been created *ex-novo* with photo mounting and editing. This allowed to control for external variables which could somehow affect the final result. The first image presents a gender-stereotyped setting, while in the second one the stereotypes are removed, in order to represent a more gender-neutral situation.

The tool used to measure the variables involved in this experiment is the well-known Likert Scale. Likert scale is one of the most used rating scales, used in the measurement of people attitudes toward a statement, more precisely the degree to which an individual expresses himself as favourable or not to it. For the sake of this study, it has been decided to adopt a 7-points Likert scale for the measurement of the variables involved. With respect to brand associations, the study has been referring to the work of Lassar, Mittal and Sharma and the scale they developed for their research on the measurement of CBBE. For the purpose of the study, greater attention has been placed on the analysis of three particular dimensions, among the five provided in the scale, namely social image, trustworthiness and attachment. Therefore, from an original set of 17 items, we ended up in adopting a scale of 10 items, in order to measure brand associations. For what concerns brand attitudes, the creation of a measurement scale has been again the result of a review of different studies. The proposed scale comes from a meta-analysis of the work from Miller (1971), Flaherty and Pappas (2000), Yoo and Donthu (2001), Chang (2008) and Van Horen and Pieters (2017), resulting in a combination of the items suggested by the different authors. With regard to affective response to ad, the present research refers to the work of Kim, Ratneshwar and Thorson (2017) and Green and Brock (2000), as reported in the *Marketing Scales Handbook* of Bruner (2019).

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Overall, 211 people participated in the study, taking part to the questionnaire. Among these, 152 managed to fully complete the survey (72%), on a total of 211 interactions. Thus, 59 responses were not taken in consideration, because they were incomplete and could generate biases in the data analysis. People were heavenly divided among the 2 groups, resulting in 76 valid responses for the control group, and 76 for the intervention group. Again, the two groups resulted in a balanced composition. The control group was composed for a 51.32% of males, and a 46.05% of females, while in the intervention group, these percentage were exactly inverted (46.05% males and 51.32% females). Roughly half of both groups was represented by young people between 18-25, who accounted for 51.32% of the control group and 44.74% of the intervention group.

A reliability analysis of the three scales used in the study has been run on SPSS. The objective of this analysis was to test the overall reliability of the scales, and the single contribute of the different items. This methodology allows to test for internal consistency reliability, measured through Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which is expected to be above 0.70 to be acceptable, and equal or greater than 0.80 to demonstrate even stronger reliability. All the scales adopted in the study had been already tested for reliability, with positive outcomes, and used in different studies.

Scale Used	Cronbach's alpha value
Brand Associations	$\alpha = 0.950$
Brand Attitudes	$\alpha = 0.960$
Emotional Response to Advertising	$\alpha = 0.954$

The objective of the study was to determine if there could be any significant difference in the mean of the two groups, following the exposition to two different visual stimuli. In order to do that, data gathered with the survey were exported on SPSS, and then analyzed through a one-way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance). In this analysis, a significance level of 0.05 was adopted, meaning a 5% risk of incur in a type I error.

The F-test run on the three dependents verified the equal variances assumption for each of the variable involved. In each case, the test confirmed that the hypothesis that variances of groups are homogenous (homoscedasticity of variances) cannot be rejected. The other two assumptions for ANOVA were met as well, namely the assumption of independent observations (each record is independent) and the one for normality (one-way ANOVA is considered to be a robust test against the assumption of normality, if the size of samples is enough large, namely >25). Once the assumptions have been verified, the analysis has gone further with hypothesis testing.

For all the variables involved, it was registered an increase in score in favour of the intervention group. Even though these numbers have been encouraging, considering the objective of the research, statistical significance of the results had to be checked using the ANOVA test. The analysis of variances brought to the rejection of two null hypothesis, and the non-rejection of the other two.

Hypothesis	Outcome
H_1: Gender-Neutral Communication → Brand Associations	Null Hypothesis *Rejected*
H_2: Gender-Neutral Communication → Brand Attitudes	Null Hypothesis *Not Rejected*
H_3: Gender-Neutral Communication → Emotional Response	Null Hypothesis *Not Rejected*
H_4: Gender-Neutral Communication → Brand Equity	Null Hypothesis *Rejected*

The result of the research demonstrates that there is no significant effect of gender-neutral communication on Brand Attitudes and Emotional Response to Advertising, while there is a statistically significant and positive effect on Brand Associations and on overall Brand Equity.

The study, despite presenting contrasting results, demonstrated the significant impact generated on brand equity by gender-neutral communication. Contrary to what sustained by great part of the literature reviewed (see paragraph 2.2.4), which always affirmed the importance of stereotyped representation of masculinity and femininity in generating clear and positive associations in the viewer (Lieven et al., 2014; Fugate & Phillips, 2010), this research demonstrated how a communication stimulus deprived of those stereotypes is capable of building clearer and stronger associations than its gendered counterpart. Surprisingly, despite a similar change of mean, null hypothesis related to Brand Attitudes and Emotional Response to advertising were not rejected. The result is particularly unexpected, if we consider that the hugest gap in mean score was registered precisely for Brand Attitudes variable. A lack of evidence for demonstrating significance for both dimensions, could be due, as suggested in the paragraph about "study limitations", to low suitability of some items to the specific context of research and, most of all, to the stimulus proposed in the survey. It is reasonable to assume that, given only the visual stimulus proposed, for respondents it was quite difficult to provide a valid score to questions of the scales. The dimension of Emotional Response deserves, in addition, a separate consideration: the use of an image, although respecting the experimental conditions, has been likely to not being enough to stimulate viewers' emotions and allow them to correctly select the scores relative to this variable. Probably the most important result, considering which was our first declared objective of the work, has come from testing the main hypothesis, H_1, that gender-neutral communication has an effect on overall brand equity. In addition to confirm a positive effect of the factor on the reference variable, the ANOVA definitively proved the statistical significance of the change in the group subjected to the treatment. This outcome seems in contrast with a large strand of literature which considers gender stereotyping as a pivot point for the elicitation of clear gender positioning in companies' communications, and consequently, as a guarantee for greater brand equity (Lieven et al., 2014). In addition, for what concerns the capability of advertising and communication in general to affect CBBE, it seems, all things considered, that this effect is stronger if conveyed through Brand Associations (Chakravarti, 1990), that through Brand Attitudes (Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995; Aaker & Biel, 2013).

In parallel to hypothesis testing, an analysis on the responses gathered, divided for age range, has been run in order to answer our second research question. Firstly, a comparison of the mean scores allowed to make a first distinction between the four different age groups targeted for the survey: two groups, namely the one of Generation Z (18-25yo) and the one of Baby Boomers (>60) have appeared to be contributing to the positive gap in mean score of brand equity, in favour of the group of intervention. On the other side, Millennials (26-40yo) and Generation X (41-60) have registered better scores in the control group. In order to give more statistical relevance to the above-mentioned results, independent t-tests were run on dummy variables which wanted to confront the responses obtained. Using "recoding" option, a new variable has been created, to do a comparison between members of Gen Z and Millennials. Despite not finding enough evidence to confirm the statistical significance of the mean gap (+0.71532) in the intervention group (p value > .05), the software provided a different result with regard to the control group: the gap in mean score among the two groups (-1.25100), relative to the control set, was found to be statistically significant (p value < .05). At the same time, another T-test investigated the differences registered among the age range of Gen Z and Gen X. The result was the same as the one obtained for the previous group: the effect on the dependent variable was considered not relevant with regard to the intervention group (+0.70728 ; p value > .05), fact that was not true as well for the parallel analysis on the control group (-1.02613), which ascertained the statistical significance of the assumptions previously made (p value < .05).

Thus, what emerged from our descriptive research, is essentially a substantial and significant gap between Gen Z and Millennials, and Gen Z and Gen X and on the gender issue. Different studies, among which one from Pew Research Center, seem to confirm the fact that Gen Z's perspective on gender non-conformity represents a fundamental divide between this generation and the previous one. The results could be interesting, also if it is considered the importance of Millennials and Generation X as the consumers responsible for the purchase of the majority of goods reserved to children, thus including also children apparel. An outcome as the one proposed by this study could signify that the actual generation of parents is still not ready for a paradigm change, and still anchored to traditional codes of children's clothing.

In the light of the purposes of research, main findings of the study are here reviewed, complemented with possible hints and suggestions related to the managerial side and to the brands of the sector.
Firstly, the study has made evident how classical stereotyped representations of gender could no more be considered as a useful and efficient tool to be used recursively in communication. As great progresses were made since the time where women were depicted as completely subordinated to the male figure and relegated to determined setting and activities, it is likely to expect that marketers will make further steps in this direction. Brands should be able to abandon the existing categorizations of products and messages "for males and females", no more considering gender among the major criteria for segmentation of consumers and creation of separated communication contents.
Brands themselves should take the role of social institutions, in bringing forward the main social battles for which new generations of consumers care more. Remaining in the middle, without taking clear stance on major social concerns which, at first sight, could seem to do not affect directly the business, are likely to result in a long-term unsuccessful strategy. The fashion industry has demonstrated to be a vanguard in this sense, as many big players of the industry have affirmed themselves as the promoters of social stances and values. It is likely that brands outside the fashion world could follow the model proposed by major fashion brands, in their new approach to communication and in their shift of focus toward new and different values, which will be the ones in which Gen Zers and future consumers will want to be identified.
Particularly important, in this sense, will be the role played by companies in children apparel industry. Breaking the use of this technique is a first step in order to avoid constricting children into that binary paradigm; at the same time, as demonstrated by our results, brands will have a unique opportunity to differentiate themselves now, in a market where gendered apparel is still prevalent, and secure long-term benefits with regard to brand equity and consumer involvement. A third consideration has to be made precisely on these consumers of the future, who have demonstrated to be particularly sensitive to gender-related issues. As shown by results, this research seems to corroborate the fact that markets are going to face a new generation of consumers, far more progressive and less permissive than Millennials on specific social issues, such as those related to race and gender inclusivity. Managers of the future should be able to respond to the requests of representing themselves for what they truly are, and not by falling inside pre-determined standards proposed by the market.
The results have then highlighted a fundamental gap of literature on the issue, more specifically, decades of academic literature have strongly affirmed the importance of gender stereotyping as a tool capable to enhance brand equity and elicit positive responses from viewers.