Customers' choice of a salesperson during the initial sales encounter

Theo Lieven [1]

University of St. Gallen, Institute for Customer Insight, Bahnhofstr. 8, CH-9000 St. Gallen, Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

In retailing, the initial encounter of a customer with a salesperson (SP) is crucial. Easily accessible cues, such as physical, task, or social attractiveness, may help in the choice process of an SP. Another cue is SP gender. Enhancing the current literature about brand gender, this research analyzes a possible match between brand and SP gender including aspects of physical, task, and social attractiveness characteristics, as well as the customers' requirements of rather core or relational aspects for the specific brand. Androgynous brands that attracted attention in recent publications are included in the analyses as well.
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1. Introduction

Many sales processes include a sales encounter. Both the sales encounter and the relationships resulting from it have been analyzed in numerous studies (Babin et al., 1999; Bäckström and Johansson, 2006; Bitner, 1990; Darian et al., 2005; Jamal and Adelowore, 2008; Piercy et al., 2001). The literature considers the relationship between a salesperson (SP) and a customer to be one of reciprocal communication, a so-called dyad (Evans, 1963; Williams and Spiro, 1985). Researchers have discussed the moderating role of customer gender (Darley et al., 2008), and, among other aspects, the role of SP gender (Gable and Reed, 1987; Mohr and Henson, 1996; Swan et al., 1984). These studies have yielded ambiguous results. Although it is clear that an employee's gender matters to customers, the effects of gender preference appear to be masked by complex interactions (Mohr and Henson, 1996).

This study attempts to shed more light on these masked interactions during the very first encounter between a customer and an SP along several dimensions, such as attractiveness characteristics, as well as differing requirements of core or rather relational aspects, of the SP and customer gender, and of brand and product gender. Since the publication of Grohmann's (2009) "Gender dimensions of brand personality", a handful of articles have been published analyzing the effect of brand and product gender on brand equity (Lieven et al., 2014), brand preference (Lieven et al., 2015), brand-alliance fit and purchase intentions (van Tilburg et al., 2015a), and product aesthetics and evaluation (van Tilburg et al., 2015b). To implement brand gender in a gendered process of

the SP choice is a logical extension in the framework of behavioral branding, where employees fit the brands through on-brand behavior (de Chernatony and Cottam, 2009).

This research analyzes the crucial moment when the customer encounters the SP for the first time. This impression persists throughout subsequent encounters, and "… the first impression is a pervasive one" (Solomon et al., 1985). Consequently, the first encounter claims substantial attention in the retail process. The present research has incorporated brand and product-related properties, such as brand gender, as part of brand personality (Grohmann, 2009), as well as interpersonal aspects such as physical, task, and social attractiveness. Additionally, customers' expectations regarding SPs with core or mainly relational capabilities are included.

After reviewing the theoretical backgrounds and formulating hypotheses, two empirical studies will be presented. Several of the interactions that mask the effects of gender preference (Mohr and Henson, 1996) can be revealed. The research method and the results contribute to the literature of brand gender and adequate brand sales encounters.

2. Theory and hypotheses

Regarding the creation of customer experiences (Verhoef et al., 2009), brands themselves have acquired a more prominent role in the sales process. Employee behavior is now oriented not only toward the outcome of the sales encounter, but also toward the brand itself via the brand's personality. The personalities of the people representing the brands, which is known as "humanics" (Berry and Lampo, 2004), has increasingly moved to the forefront of marketing considerations (King and Grace, 2005). In the framework of behavioral branding, the personality of the sales staff is

E-mail address: theo.lieven@unisg.ch
[1] Theo Lieven received his doctoral degree at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland and is currently a senior research fellow at the Institute for Custer Insight at the same university.

related to the personality of the brand. Employees' consistent on-brand behavior (de Chernatony and Cottam, 2009) positively influences brand loyalty and a willingness to recommend the product to others, which benefits the brand beyond the actual sales encounter. This article employs an approach in which gender is the most salient and accessible personality trait (Dion et al., 1972), and examines the potential effect of a fit between brand and SP gender. Brands have been shown to possess gender (Grohmann, 2009). Similar to the impact of self-image congruence on brand preferences and loyalty (Kressmann et al., 2006), consumers can be expected to strive for a congruence between SP and the brand, particularly regarding gender.

H1. Consumers asking advice for feminine/masculine brands tend to choose a female/male SP.

Gender was initially defined as either feminine or masculine. In recent decades, however, a more differentiated view described gender in four categories based on quadrants in a feminine/masculine coordinate diagram. Brands high on both masculinity and femininity are referred to as androgynous; those high/low on femininity but low/high on masculinity as feminine/masculine; and those low on both as undifferentiated (Bem, 1974, 1977; Spence et al., 1975). According to Bem, androgynous personalities react more flexibly to requirements, have a wider range of possible behaviors, and adapt better to situations. Androgynous people "define a more human standard of psychological health" (Bem, 1974, p. 162). Jackson (1983) demonstrated that androgynous persons were more likeable compared to masculine and feminine persons. Thus, it can be expected that in the matching process between brands and SPs, the choice regarding androgynous brands will tend toward SPs with high physical attractiveness.

H2. For androgynous brands, customers prefer SPs with high physical attractiveness.

Some authors have claimed that women's strong work ethic, service orientation, and sustainable, humanistic, and ethical-moral attitudes predestine them for sales careers (Skolnik, 1985). Male sales force members were most responsive to a transactional style (Comer et al., 1995). Based on their better listening ability, female SPs are significantly more often found in service-based businesses (Lane and Crane, 2002). Thus, we expect:

H3. For service brands, female SPs are more often chosen than for product brands.

A large portion of the previous literature is based on general discussions of gender roles. Various studies have analyzed different gender-typed information processing (Dube and Morgan, 1996). Differing capabilities might play an important role in the expectations of a sales encounter regarding the core vs. the relational outcomes of a transaction.[2] There are two characteristics that act as the main drivers of these outcomes: competence, which tends to be associated with men (Deaux, 1984), and warm-expressiveness and sensitivity to the concerns of others (Meyers-Levy, 1988), which are associated with women. SPs' core and relational abilities reveal themselves through task or social attractiveness (McCroskey et al., 2006). Regarding specific brands or products, when core competence is required, male SPs should be chosen due to their task- and goal-oriented attitude. When customers require mainly relational aspects, female SPs with their

higher social attractiveness are preferred.

H4a. Chosen SPs with high task and low social attractiveness are usually male; chosen SPs with low task and high social attractiveness are usually females.

H4b. Customers' core vs. relational requirement moderates the claims of H4a in a way that requirements for core aspects increase the probability of choosing a male SP, and requirements for relational aspects increase the probability of choosing a female SP.

Attractiveness has been found a positive moderator in the retail context leading to higher customer service ratings (Kulesza et al., 2014). A gender mismatch between customer and SP resulted in higher customer satisfaction for a facial attractive SP (McColl and Truong, 2013). Here, the important question of how physical, task, and social attractiveness compete against each other and whether this differs between male and female customers can be investigated with an interaction where the gender moderates the SP choice process. Men are said to tend to come into contact with physically attractive women because of men's orientation toward short-term mating (Schmitt et al., 2001). We hypothesize that male, but not female, customers who choose a physically attractive female SP are willing to accept a lower task and social competence.

H5a. Female customers' choice of SPs are balanced across physical, task, and social attractiveness.

H5b. Male customers prefer female SPs with high physical attractiveness, even if task or social attractiveness is low. If physical attractiveness is low, male customers prefer male SPs, and this is even more so when task or social attractiveness is high.

Hypothesis 1 will be tested in Study 1 and H2–H5 in Study 2.

3. Empirical studies

3.1. Study 1: Preferred choice of female or male SP regarding 140 brands

3.1.1. Procedure, stimuli, and participants

The 140 brands used in Lieven et al. (2014) were selected. There, the respective brand genders had been assessed by the Grohmann (2009) model with brand masculinity (MBP: adventurous, aggressive, brave, daring, dominant, sturdy; $\alpha = 0.80$) and brand femininity (FBP: expresses tender feelings, fragile, graceful, sensitive, sweet, and tender; $\alpha = 0.94$). It might be argued that it is not the brand but the product category that determines the gender. However, Grohmann (2009) and Lieven et al. (2014) found brand genders within specific product categories significantly different. To analyze a possible confounding of brand and product category, product genders were included in the analysis (Masculine Product Personality, MPP; Feminine Product Personality, FPP). The respective genders had been assessed in Lieven et al. (2015) with masculine product gender (MPG; $\alpha = .88$) and feminine product gender (FPG; $\alpha = .92$). Brands were presented to survey participants in random groups of 16 logos. Using a continuous semantic differential from 1 = female SP to 20 = male SP, the relative preference for one or the other was specified.

The survey was conducted online in Germany by a well-established global provider of data solutions for survey research with 30 offices in 21 countries. The provider collected completed questionnaires from participants according to the countries' demographics to provide a representation as close as possible to the population. In total, 1043 respondents participated (43.2% females, $M_{Age} = 42.6$ years, $SD_{Age} = 12.4$ years) yielding a total of 15,801 SP choices.

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[2] Several terms for the core aspects exist: expertise, (technical) competence, task-oriented, agentic (Meyers-Levy, 1988), or task- and goal-oriented (Iacobucci and Ostrom, 1993). Other terms for the relational aspects are: process, communal (Meyers-Levy, 1988), interpersonal, or socially-oriented. In this article, the terms within each group are used interchangeably.