



Packaging for All

Gendered packaging and visual design of a gender-inclusive package

Iskra Stambej

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ABSTRACT

Tampereen ammattikorkeakoulu
Tampere University of Applied Sciences
Media and Arts
Interactive Media

ISKRA STAMBEJ:

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An increasing amount of people are identifying outside of the gender binary and people are becoming more aware of these gender identities that have always existed but are still not always recognised. The way clothing and cosmetic stores place their products in stores is one example of the division to binary genders. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the visual and linguistic elements that are used to communicate which gender a product is intended for, as well as their connection to gender roles.

Previous literature and a semiotic analysis of gender-neutral brands are used to guide the visual design process of a gender-neutral razor brand. A preliminary survey was conducted to understand consumers' attitudes towards gendered and gender-neutral products. Five moodboards were designed, one using AI as a design tool. Their inclusivity was evaluated with a feedback survey using the brand gender personality scale developed by Bianca Grohmann.

It was found that the perception of a brand's gender is based in gender stereotypes. Where packaging with lighter colours and slim, curvy shapes is perceived as feminine, dark colours and angular, bold shapes are seen as masculine. It was also found that while many gender-neutral brands use a simple visual style with neutral colours, an inclusive style can also be achieved by combining masculine and feminine colours and graphics together.

It was concluded that there is demand for non-stereotyped and inclusive marketing. While a binary gender system is still prevalent, inclusive products can act as examples of non-binary brand personalities, providing a more diverse representation of gender.

Key words: visual design, packaging, gender, gender-neutral, branding

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ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
Androgynous	Having male and female or masculine and feminine characteristics
Binary gender	A societal belief that recognises only two genders, man and woman
Cisgender	Someone who's gender identity matches their assigned sex at birth
Gender-neutral	Intended for everyone regardless of gender
Gender-inclusive	see: Gender-neutral
LGBTQ+	An acronym that refers to people that are part of a sexual or gender minority. Lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer and more
Non-binary	Someone who's gender identity is outside of the binary genders i.e. not a man or woman
Transgender	An umbrella term for people whose gender identity does not match their assigned sex at birth
Unisex	Something intended for all sexes. Originally used to refer to clothing

1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of gender is becoming more fluid and less binary (Schudson et al. 2019). An increasing amount of people around the world are identifying as transgender and LGBTQ+ identities are gaining visibility (Jones 2021; Ipsos 2023). Especially younger generations are becoming more accepting of non-traditional gender identities and don't define people only based on their gender (Rivas 2015; Laughlin 2016). These changes in understanding gender have also produced a more conscious consumer group. Consumers in Generation Z (born 1997-2012) and the Millennial generation (born 1981-1996) are in support of neutral packaging and brand communication and dislike stereotyped marketing (Sultana and Shahriar 2017; Criticos 2021; Burclaff n.d.).

The majority of existing research about gendered marketing only considers the binary genders. The goal of this thesis is to add to the literature on gendered branding and consumer preferences while considering all gender identities and focusing on inclusivity in design. This is done by exploring where the connections between visual elements and gender come from and how those connections are used to categorize products and brands. A literature review is conducted examining packaging elements, gender identity and stereotypes, and gender cues used in marketing.

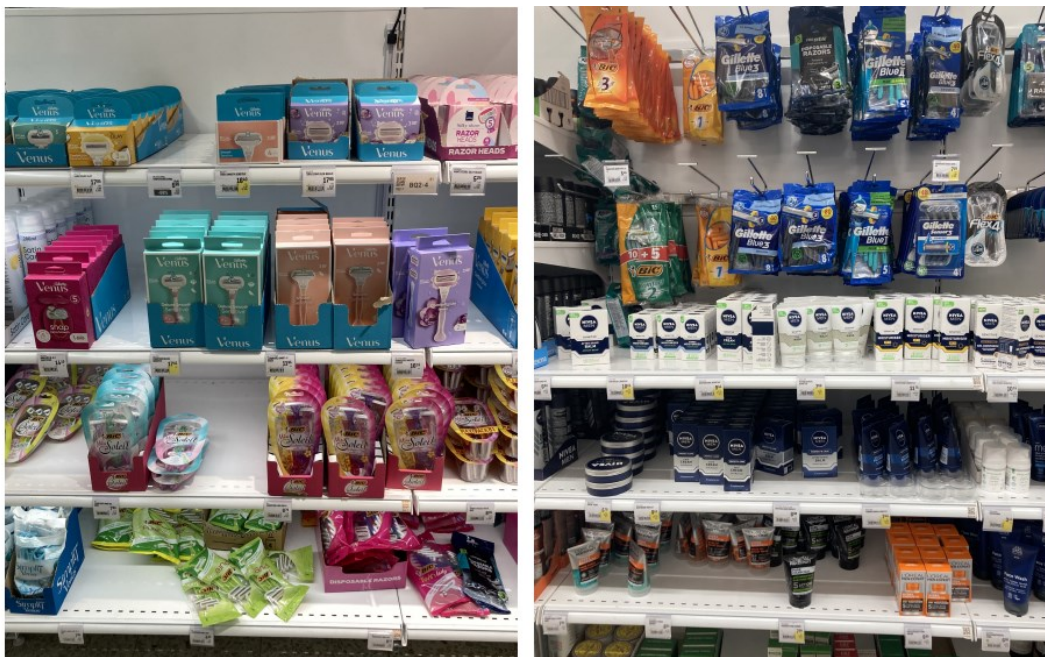
The previous research on masculine, feminine, and neutral visual cues is applied in the design process of a gender-inclusive razor package. A preliminary survey is used to better understand attitudes towards gendered branding. Five moodboards are designed with one of them using an artificial intelligence generated visual style as a guide. A second survey is executed to determine which visual style is most inclusive. The characteristics of a brand's gender personality by Grohmann (2009) are used to determine if the examples are masculine, feminine, or gender-neutral. The feedback received is then going to be utilised in the development of the final design, which is demonstrated on a packaging mockup.

The terminology used when discussing gender in this thesis is not always consistent due to previous literature having been written in various years and with different objectives. Some pieces of research use the words "female" and "male"

interchangeably with “woman” and “man”, while others differentiate between sex and gender identity. The author acknowledges the difference between sex and gender and the existence of various identities outside of the gender binary. However, the terms are used as stated in the source material in order to report results as truthfully as possible.

2 DESIGN FOR GENDER

When walking into a store selling clothes or cosmetics, it is common to be met with separate sections for men and women (Picture 1). Products are commonly targeted at a specific gender and different elements are used to convey who is the intended user for that product. The reasons for this stem from customs in marketing and ideas about gender. To thoroughly understand gendered design, the details of packaging, gender identity, and their connection in targeted branding are going to be explored in this chapter.



PICTURE 1. Women's and Men's razor section at a Finnish supermarket (Stambej 2024).

2.1 Elements of Package Design

A package is a container that protects the product inside. It communicates the image of the brand as well as provides information about the product. The elements of a package can be divided into two groups; visual, and verbal or informational elements. (Silayoi and Speece 2007; Agariya et al. 2012) Silayoi and Speece (2007) define graphics, colour, size, and shape as visual elements and product information and technology image as informational elements. Agariya et al. (2012) similarly split the elements into groups of visual and verbal but determine graphics, colour, size, form, and material as visual and product information,

producer, country-of-origin, and brand as verbal elements. Visual and informational elements have different significance for low and high involvement products (Silayoi and Speece 2004). Products with a low involvement level are usually bought somewhat spontaneously without research about options, while buying high involvement products includes consideration and comparison between products (Zaichkowsky 1985).

The visuals of packaging can help grab the attention of a consumer and often play a big role in product attractiveness and choice (Underwood et al. 2001; Silayoi and Speece 2004; Agariya et al. 2012; Purwaningsih et al. 2019). Visual elements are even more important when choosing a low involvement product. For high involvement purchases, the verbal elements are more important because they provide the information for consideration and comparison. (Silayoi and Speece 2004; Agariya et al. 2012.)

2.1.1 Colour and Graphics

Graphics and colour are major visual components of the package. Colour is often one of the first things noticed and it can affect brand associations (Vila and Ampuero 2007; Labrecque and Milne 2012). For example, Taft (1997), Madden et al. (2000), and Won and Westland (2017) have carried out studies to link colours to a specific meaning but colour associations are influenced by different cultures and context (Madden et al. 2000; Won and Westland 2017). Garber, Burke and Jones (2000) identify three main roles of packaging colour: identifying the brand, communicating information about the product, and standing out from similar products.

The layout, typography, images, and combinations of colours form the graphics of the package. Like the colour, the graphics can also capture the consumer's attention when positioned well. It is a tool for indirect communication and helps the consumer categorise the product based on visuals that are typical for its product group (Agariya et al. 2012; Celhay and Trinquencoste 2015). Rettie and Brewer (2000) suggest that consumers' recall is better when verbal elements are placed on the right side and non-verbal elements, such as pictures, are on the left side of the package.

2.1.2 Shape and Size

The size and shape of the packaging also communicate things about the product. One important aspect that is perceived through both qualities is the volume of the product. Often geometrically simple and taller shapes are seen as bigger than complex forms while complex and short packages are perceived to be smaller. (Garber et al. 2000; Silayoi and Speece 2007.) However, according to Folkes and Matta (2004) irregularly shaped packages that draw more attention can also increase the perceived product volume.

Impressions about quality can be achieved through the shape and size of a product as well. Yan, Sengupta and Wyer (2014) found that smaller packages are thought to be better quality due to them being associated with a higher price, while according to Chen et al. (2020) tall and slim packaging is linked to higher status and short and wide packaging to low status. This is shown to be the result of similar associations in people's body shapes, where tall and thin individuals are more probably a part of a high social class than short, larger people (Chen et al. 2020). Product preference in general seems to be affected by anthropomorphism, which is the interpretation of non-human things as having human-like qualities (Merriam-Webster Dictionary n.d.). Product packaging that represents an ideal body type, hourglass or V-shaped, is preferred by female and male consumers. In gender-specific products the shape that represents the ideal body of the specific consumer is preferred. (De Bondt et al. 2018) The definition of an ideal body type in this case is based on studies by Singh (1993) and Singh and Singh (2011).

2.1.3 Product Information and Technology

One purpose of packaging is to provide information about the product inside. Product information can be for example a nutritional value label or an ingredient list. A significant challenge in providing information is the balance between quantity and readability. Trying to maximise information often requires text that is small and dense, which is more difficult to read and understand. A clear layout and

readable text are important to help consumers make the right purchase decision that corresponds to the buyers' needs. (Silayoi and Speece 2007.)

Packaging technology refers to a special or innovative feature of the product that sets it apart from competitors. It could be a product that has a longer shelf life or is packaged for convenient dispensing. An innovative product or packaging can result in consumers being willing to spend more on the product, which is why it is important to communicate it on the package. New technology often reflects consumer trends. For example, the trend towards a more environmentally conscious lifestyle advances innovation in packaging with minimal material or made with recycled materials. (Silayoi and Speece 2007, 2004.)

The package has an important part in the buying decision. It's even suggested as being the most important means of brand communication due to its presence in the moment of a buying decision and the considerable reach of customers in the target group (Peters 1994; Rettie and Brewer 2000). Based on the literature, it can be said that visual elements have a bigger significance in capturing consumers' attention and even determining product choice in low involvement purchases, while informational elements help the buyer choose an appropriate product in high involvement situations.

2.2 Sex and Gender Identity

The understanding of sex and gender identity has gone through changes throughout history. Variance in gender has always existed but only more recently, during the 19th and 20th centuries, has it been categorised and named in the modern manner. (Jourian 2015.) Definitions of gender have become more fluid (Schudson et al. 2019) and based on a poll in the USA by Gallup, an increasing number of people (0.9% in 2023) are identifying as transgender (Jones 2024). A person's gender consists of three interrelated but independent factors: sex, gender identity, and gender expression (Jourian 2015).

Sex is a term that describes a person's physical attributes, such as chromosomes, hormones, or anatomy (World Health Organization n.d.). Most commonly,

people are assigned as being either male or female. However, it leaves out inter-sex people whose physical traits don't completely fit into the definition of either. (Jourian 2015.)

Gender identity describes the inner experience of one's gender that can, but does not always, match the assigned sex at birth (World Health Organization n.d.). There are many terms that describe gender identity, for example woman, man, nonbinary, agender, polygender, genderqueer, and many more (Becker et al. 2023). Gender expression refers to the ways a person performs their gender with for example clothes or behaviour. As stated previously, gender identity and gender expression are separate components, for example, a person might identify as a man but express themselves in a feminine way or vice versa. (Jourian 2015.)

Binary gender perception is the understanding that there are only two genders, and it is widely exhibited in the western world (Morgenroth et al. 2021). In many indigenous cultures gender has always been viewed as more fluid and many of them recognise genders outside the binary, such as māhū in traditional Hawaiian culture, nadleehe of the Navajo people in North America, and fa'fafine in Samoan culture. The binary gender system that exists today is a product of colonialism in some parts of the world. (Jourian 2015.) Many modern day trans or non-heterosexual indigenous people use the term two-spirited, which has varying definitions between different native groups (Cameron 2005). Based on a global survey with 30 countries by Ipsos (2023) 2% of the adult population identifies as something else than male or female. Moreover, people from Generation Z and Millennials are 4.5 times more likely to identify as transgender or outside the binary than Generation X or Baby Boomers (Ipsos 2023) (Figure 1).

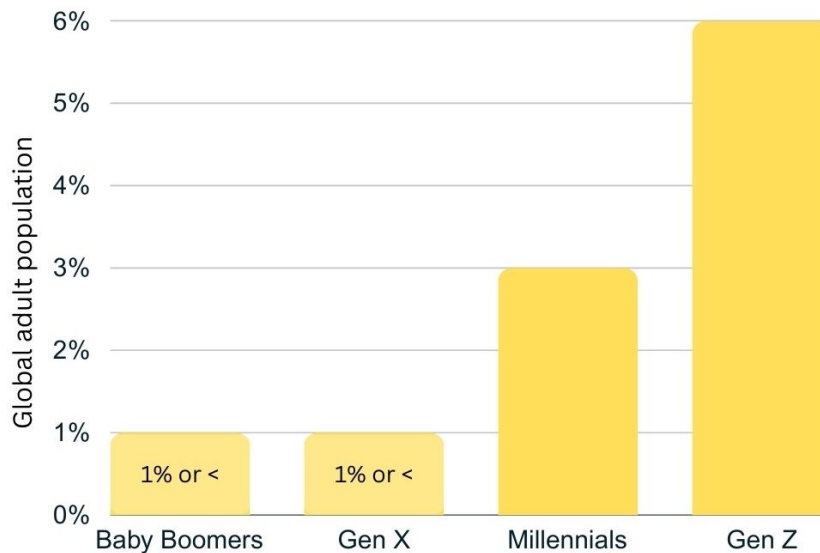


FIGURE 1. People identifying outside the gender binary by generation.

2.2.1 Gender stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are preconceptions about the qualities, appearance, or behaviour of a person of a specific gender (United Nations n.d.). Within cultures with a binary understanding of gender, females are usually expected to behave femininely and males masculinely (Jourian 2015). Many stereotypes can be categorised into “communal” for feminine and “agentic” for masculine stereotypes. Communal meaning characteristics that are important in building relationships and agentic meaning traits that are related to individual development. (Wood and Eagly 2015; Hentschel et al. 2019.) Traits that are associated with femininity are for example communicativeness, understanding, warmth, and loyalty while effectiveness, assertiveness, dominance, and independence are perceived as masculine (Bem 1974; Hentschel et al. 2019). Even stereotypes that may seem harmless can be destructive because they promote inequalities between genders and can cause limitations in developing one’s career or personal capabilities (Hyde 2005; United Nations n.d.).

A backlash effect happens when a person behaves or presents themselves contrary to the stereotype attached to their gender. For example, if women are perceived as too agentic they might be considered more capable but unlikable as a personality and as a threat to the gender hierarchy (Rudman 1998; Brescoll et al.

2018). In theory, being exposed to non-stereotypical behaviour weakens stereotypes, but the backlash effect can cause a cycle that confirms them instead. When counter-stereotypically presenting people are in situations where that behaviour is not accepted and met with backlash, they tend to hide their differences, which in turn reaffirms stereotypes. (Rudman and Fairchild 2004.)

According to Hyde's (2005) Gender Similarities Hypothesis, men and women are psychologically considerably more similar than different. She examined a vast collection of meta-analyses that compared gender differences in 124 traits and abilities. The results show that 78% of them only had a close to zero or small difference. She also discusses the importance of context when it comes to certain gender differences. In some behaviours and abilities, gender differences decreased or increased depending on the social situation and whether the subjects knew they were being observed. This suggests that some of the differences could be explained by societal expectations to behave a certain way instead of innate attributes. (Hyde 2005.)

2.3 Gender and Marketing

Based on Aaker's (1997) dimensions of brand personality, brands are also considered to have a personality like humans. Adding to the original five traits (sincerity, sophistication, competence, excitement, and ruggedness), Grohmann (2009) defined a feminine and a masculine brand personality. Gendering a brand or product can be a part of target marketing where the goal is to reach so many people inside the target segment that it compensates for potential lost customers outside of the segment (Alreck 1994).

Traditional gendering of products has some research-based reasons. It has been shown that a brand or product that corresponds with the consumer's sex is usually preferred (Lieven et al. 2015). Moreover, strongly gendered brands increase brand loyalty (especially masculine brands) and brand equity (Lieven et al. 2015; Vacas De Carvalho et al. 2020). Alreck (1994) argues that venturing out of "basic psychological connotations of gender", masculine strength and feminine gentleness, or "the most basic gender concerns", masculine freedom and feminine attachment, will result in rejection and distaste from consumers.

Other studies suggest that gendering to not only one gender but having both strong masculinity and femininity results in the most positive responses and higher brand equity (Tilburg et al. 2015; Lieven and Hildebrand 2016). Especially younger generations, Millennials and Generation Z, prefer brands that embrace neutrality both in advertising and product or package design. Brands that are socially conscious are preferred, which includes abandoning gender stereotyped communication. (Sultana and Shahriar 2017; Criticos 2021.) Additionally, based on Drake and Radford's (2018) interviews with Canadian consumers, purchasing behaviour cannot be assumed only based on their sex or gender identity. They define four practices in consumer behaviour when it comes to gendered products: doing, undoing, muting as a daily choice, and muting as an incidental option. This means that while some consumers buy products to affirm their gender identity, others contradict stereotypes and expectations on purpose. (Drake and Radford 2018.)

Studies show that men are most likely to prefer and purchase products that reflect their gender and reject gender bending attempts of masculine brands (Alreck 1994; Fugate and Phillips 2010; Avery 2012; Sandhu 2017). If men strongly identify with a brand or use it to affirm their gender they might try to defend it from efforts to include other genders instead of abandoning it (Avery 2012). This phenomenon is presumed to be an effect of gender politics; men, being the dominant gender group, defend their position at the top of the power structure. Women, however, might welcome gender bending since it reduces differences and acts as an equaliser between genders. (Avery 2012; Sandhu 2017.)

3 ELEMENTS OF GENDERED PACKAGING

To achieve a package or brand that is clearly intended for a specific gender, different visual and linguistic cues are used. Based on Grohmann's (2009) brand gender scale brands with a male brand personality are described as aggressive, dominant, and sturdy, while brands with a female brand personality represent sensitivity, gracefulness, and tenderness. When compared to gender stereotypes (Bem 1974; Hentschel et al. 2019) it can be noticed that the brand gender personality scale is largely based on them. The specific elements that are used to produce a gendered package are discussed in this chapter.

3.1 Colours

The difference in gender associations between pink and blue seems to be the most prevalent, as well as the most studied, when it comes to colours. The notion that pink is feminine and blue is masculine is strong in modern society (Cunningham and Macrae 2011; Wong and Hines 2015; César Machado et al. 2021; Nash and Sidhu 2023). Some studies suggest this colour connection to have roots in evolution. For example, Alexander (2003) proposed that since females used to forage for fruit and berries and care for infants, this might have resulted in an evolutionary advantage in noticing warmer colours, specifically red and pink. However, gender associations for colours have varied in history as well as between cultures (Paoletti 1987; Madden et al. 2000) which indicates a cultural rather than evolutionary cause (Cunningham and Macrae 2011).

Pink and blue for gendering products are especially prominent for products aimed at children. A review of a children's catalogue for clothing and toys by Cunningham and Macrae (2011) found that over half of the unicoloured clothing was pink or blue. In the toy catalogue 23.2% of toys offered for boys were blue, and 54.1% of girls' toys were pink. Another experiment in the same study found that children are significantly more likely to link blue furniture and toys to boys and even more likely to link pink ones to girls. (Cunningham and Macrae 2011.)

Even if "blue for boys, pink for girls" seems like a traditional concept, it has only been around for about a hundred years. The colours started to be more widely

used in their modern meaning in the 1920s, and then even more heavily after WWII. (Paoletti 1987; Del Giudice 2012.) Before this, all children were most commonly dressed in white and all pastel colours were used for girls' and boys' clothing as well as furniture in the nursery (Paoletti 1987, 2012, 88).

Colour and gender connections are also relevant for adults. When a name or item with a gender connotation is presented with a colour that corresponds with it (i.e. a bra on a pink background), it is categorised faster, while a presentation with a colour that contradicts the gender connection (i.e. "Jane" in a blue font), hinders the categorization. In addition, people wearing a blue or pink shirt are more likely to be matched with a corresponding stereotypical trait or behaviour regardless of their perceived sex (e.g. "a male with a pink shirt more probably likes romantic films"). (Cunningham and Macrae 2011.)

Outside of pink and blue, other colours also have gender associations, although not as strong. According to an interview with German and American designers by Tilburg et. al (2015) women's products are usually coloured with lighter and pastel colours, while men's products use darker and stronger colours. This concurs with Madden et al. (2000) who found that brown and black are considered masculine in some countries. In a survey of British university students Won and Westland (2017) also found black, blue, and green to be perceived as more masculine, and beige, red, and yellow perceived as more feminine. (Picture 2.)

When it comes to colour preference, there are fewer differences between sexes. In a study conducted in Canada and the United States by Ellis and Ficek (2001), they found that while males were significantly more likely to choose blue as their favourite colour, as opposed to other colours, females also chose blue and green more than other colours. Female participants were also more likely to prefer pink than men, although only 5.3% of them chose it as their favourite (Ellis and Ficek 2001).

3.2 Shapes

Many studies have found similar effects of shapes on brand gender personality. In the interview of designers by Tilburg et al. (2015) they described feminine products as usually being slim and curved, with softer lines. Angular, bulky, and having stronger straight lines were used to describe masculine products (Tilburg et al. 2015; Picture 2.). Similar cues are used in logo design. Logos that are angular and bold are seen as masculine, while delicate and smooth logos are perceived as feminine. Angularity versus softness seems to have a stronger effect on gender perception, with slim but angular logos being seen as masculine, and curved, bold logos as feminine. (Lieven et al. 2015; Picture 2.)

The subject of logo imagery influences perceived brand gender as well. Logos with a cultural subject (something man-made like a building or car) increase masculine brand personality while organic or natural (elements from nature like animals and plants) themed logos increase feminine brand personality (César Machado et al. 2021). Orth and Malkewitz (2008) found similar results: labels with a natural design were seen as feminine. A connection could be made to the other studies about shape, since natural subjects tend to be more curved compared to cultural ones.



PICTURE 2. Examples of feminine and masculine packaging (Procter & Gamble 2024).

3.3 Typefaces

Feminine and masculine fonts follow a similar pattern to shapes in general. Where bold and straight shapes communicate masculinity and lighter, softer shapes communicate femininity, the same can be observed with typefaces. More specifically, bold and angular display fonts are perceived as masculine and curvy script fonts are perceived as feminine. Moreover, the script font increases femininity more than display fonts affect masculinity. (Lieven et al. 2015; Grohmann 2016.)

The gendering effect a typeface has also been studied with other variables. The perceived gender cues of fonts seem to overpower the effect of a masculine or feminine name, with masculine names in a feminine font still being seen as feminine and vice versa. Even when the product's category and name contradict the masculinity or femininity of the font, the font's effect can sometimes outweigh those factors. (Lieven et al. 2015; Grohmann 2016.)

3.4 Language

In addition to visual cues of gendering, different kinds of language are often used in women's and men's packaging. One of the trends identified in perfume packaging by McIntyre (2011) was that masculinity is communicated with function and femininity with luxury. She suggests that marketing strategies make femininity desire-focused and masculinity need-focused. Cheong and Kaur (2015) found similar results in their cosmetics package analysis. On a cleanser package for men, words that describe functionality and activeness, rather than passiveness, were used. It also borrows vocabulary from science, a field that's seen as masculine. The women's cleanser used terms that communicate gentleness and softness. They argue that men's packaging is designed this way to make men comfortable with grooming, an activity that's traditionally seen as feminine. (Cheong and Kaur 2015.)

Not only words but also sounds and specific letters can create an image of a brand's gender personality, especially when it comes to the name of the brand. Two studies (Klink and Athaide 2012; Guevremont and Grohmann 2015) have

measured the effect of letters on femininity and masculinity with fictitious brand names in multiple product categories. Brand names that contain front vowels (i and e) and fricative consonants (f, s, v, and z) are perceived as more feminine. Names with back vowels (o and u) and stop consonants (b, d, g, p, t, and k, or a hard c) are perceived as more masculine. (Klink and Athaide 2012; Guevremont and Grohmann 2015.)

4 GENDER-NEUTRAL VISUAL DESIGN

4.1 Terminology

There are a few terms that are commonly used to describe things that are intended for any gender. “Gender-neutral”, “gender-inclusive”, “unisex,”, and “androgynous” all refer to things that are not gender-specific or can be used by any gender. They can be used interchangeably in most cases. (Dictionary.com n.d.; Merriam-Webster Dictionary n.d.) The term “unisex” was first used to describe fashion in an article by Life magazine in 1968 (Garner 2016).

In most research papers that study masculinity and femininity, the term “androgynous” is used to describe people or brands that have both high femininity and masculinity (Bem 1974; Grohmann 2009; Fugate and Phillips 2010; Kliamenakis 2011; Tilburg et al. 2015). The term comes from the combination of the Greek words “anér” meaning man or husband, and “gyné” meaning woman (Merriam-Webster Dictionary n.d.). Brands that score low on femininity and masculinity are categorised as “undifferentiated” (Grohmann 2009).

4.2 Rise of Gender Awareness

As previously discussed, fluidity in gender is not a new phenomenon, although people are now becoming more aware of it in the western world. Already in 2015, half of American Millennials thought that gender is a spectrum and should include more than just male and female (Rivas 2015). Moreover, in 2016 78% of Generation Z and 74% of Millennials in the U.S. believed that “gender doesn’t define a person as much as it used to”. The majority of both generations also agreed that they had become more accepting of nontraditional identities in the previous year. (Laughlin 2016.)

Based on this development, it could be assumed that people are interested in more gender aware marketing as well. A Google consumer survey found that young Millennials are more likely to support brands with equality-themed advertising (Snyder 2015) and over half of consumers in Generation Z shop for clothes outside of their gender section (Laughlin 2016). Sultana and Shahriar (2017) and

Criticos (2021) also found that both generations react more positively to neutral than stereotypically gendered marketing. These findings suggest that it would be beneficial for brands to be inclusive in their communication and avoid heavily gendered marketing when trying to appeal to these generations.

4.3 Non-gendered Elements

Dimaandal and Espineda (2023) collected different elements used for gender-neutral design. According to their study, most colours are considered neutral, with only shades of red and purple being feminine. Blue is used to communicate masculinity however, it can also be a neutral colour. Where dark colours are defined as masculine and muted colours as feminine, bright colours are neutral. (Dimaandal and Espineda 2023.)

In shapes and typefaces, minimalistic, smooth, and classic shapes are used for all genders. Both serif and sans serif fonts are used, while avoiding too angular or curvy and decorative fonts. (Dimaandal and Espineda 2023.)

4.3.1 Semiotic Analysis of Gender-Neutral Brands

Due to limited literature on neutral design elements, a semiotic analysis of ten gender-neutral brands and their visual styles was conducted. They include personal care, beauty, clothing, and home decoration brands. To avoid assuming the brand's target group based on visuals alone, all the brands reviewed specifically mention that they are gender neutral or categorise products with neutral terminology. The overall visual style, colours, shapes, and fonts of each brand were analysed, and the instances of each feature were counted (Table 1.). Packaging elements were observed where they were available, and for clothing brands, the visuals of the website were analysed. The full list of brands and their visual features can be seen in Appendix 1.

TABLE 1. Semiotic analysis results.

VISUAL STYLE		SHAPES	
simple	5	straight	10
minimalist	4	rounded	4
text-based	2	curvy	2
decorative	1	round	1

COLOURS		FONTS	
white	8	sans-serif	10
black	6	basic	7
pastels	3	semi-serif	2
colourful	2	bold	3
neutral colours	2	light	2
beige	2	serif	1
dark blue	2		
green	2		
brown	1		
peach	1		
silver	1		
gold	1		
dark green	1		
pink	1		
red	1		
teal	1		

In visual styles, simple or minimalist styles were most common. Minimalism meaning an appearance where anything unnecessary is stripped away (Merriam-Webster Dictionary n.d.). Simplicity was also common in colours, with black and white being the most used. Many brands also used pastels, neutral colours, beige, green, and dark blue. (Figure 2.) Straight, basic shapes were popular in graphics, packaging, and fonts. Shapes with rounded corners were also fairly common. Every brand used a sans-serif font at least as one of their fonts.



FIGURE 2. Colour chart of colours used by neutral brands.

Based on the analysis, it could be presumed that many gender-neutral brands choose a neutral and simple style. In colours, both feminine (pastels) and masculine (black, dark blue) are used and combined with non-gendered colours like white. With shapes and fonts, more masculine (straight and not curvy) elements are preferred, although some brands soften their visual image with rounded corners.

The brands examined varied in price point but most were on the expensive side and described their products as high quality, sustainable, clean, or luxurious. Two of three underwear brands offer tailored and hand-sewn products which also affect the price. The price point is an aspect of the brand that might affect the visual style outside of the target gender.

4.3.2 Neutral Language

Research about the language used by gender-neutral brands was also done simultaneously with the semiotic analysis. A neutral description of the function of the product was sometimes used, while some brands had minimal information on the package. In the product description many brands had a detailed explanation of the scent. Clothing brands had descriptions referring to body shapes or body parts without mentioning gender. For example, canticLA describes panties in their genderfluid line as having more room in the crotch to “accommodate any of your bits and baubles”.

Most product descriptions didn't refer to gender in any way. However, most of these brands had mentions somewhere on their website that their products were “for all genders”, “agender”, “unisex”, “genderless”, “gender-neutral” or “one size fits all”. According to Dimandaal and Espineda (2023), on children's toys an age recommendation should be used instead of claiming the toy is for girls or boys.

5 VISUAL DESIGN OF A GENDER-INCLUSIVE PACKAGE

The motivation to develop a product that isn't marketed towards only men or women comes from the desire to provide more choices outside of rigid gender expectations, not only for non-binary individuals but for everyone else as well. Heavily dividing products based on a binary gender system can also be seen as a form of genderism, according to the Genderism and Transphobia Scale developed by Hill and Willoughby (2005). Genderism stems from the belief that everyone is either a woman/girl or man/boy and that gender is based on a person's sex. It also punishes those who do not fit the binary system and provides privileges to those who do. (Jourian 2015.)

However, studies show that stereotypes can be unlearned or weakened in various ways, like diversity education, exposure to counter stereotypical role models or, when it comes to children, exposure to counter stereotypical stories (Rudman et al. 2001; Rudman and Fairchild 2004; Block et al. 2022). The purpose of gender-neutral products is to add diversity in product choice as well as act as an example of non-stereotypical gender expression on the shelves of stores.

5.1 Preliminary Survey

The goal of the preliminary survey was to understand the participants' attitudes towards gendered and neutral products. It was also done to guide the choice of product for the final design. Due to limited resources and time, a combination of convenience and snowball sampling was used to find participants. (Vogt et al. 2012, 16, 126.) It was shared on r/transnord on reddit.com, which is a forum for trans people in Northern Europe. It was also sent to non-binary people I had contact with, who were encouraged to share it with other non-binary individuals. Due to the channels that were used to distribute the survey, a younger demographic was expected and thus all participants aged over 50 were joined into one group. The survey received 104 responses. For the complete survey, see Appendix 2.

The goal was to get a significant amount of non-binary people to answer the survey. Most of the literature on the topic only observed differences between men and women, and some of them acknowledged that more research should be done

taking non-binary people into account. It was successful, with most of the respondents identifying as non-binary or gender nonconforming (Figure 3.) One participant stated in the last question field: “I [couldn’t] answer the gender question correctly because I [don’t] consider myself to have a gender identity. My sex is female.”

How do you identify?

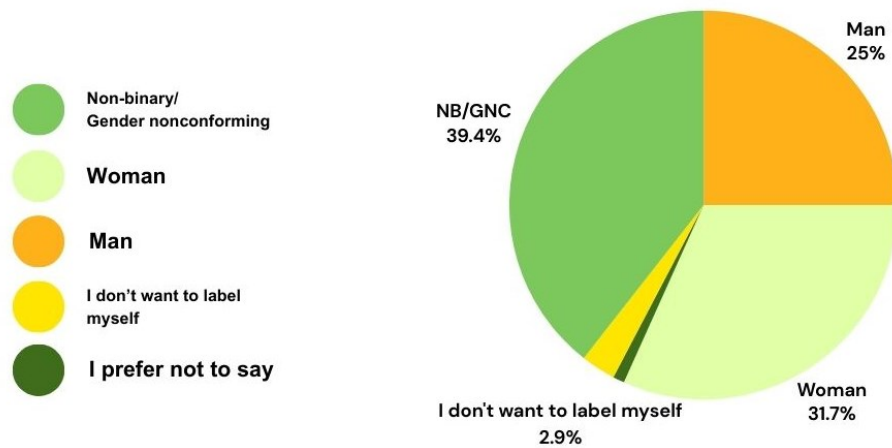


FIGURE 3. Gender identity of survey participants.

The participants were asked whether they wished for more gender-neutral or gender-inclusive products in general. The answer options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The majority agreed with the statement, with 83 respondents choosing options 4 or 5 (Figure 4).

I wish there were more gender-neutral/gender-inclusive product options in general.

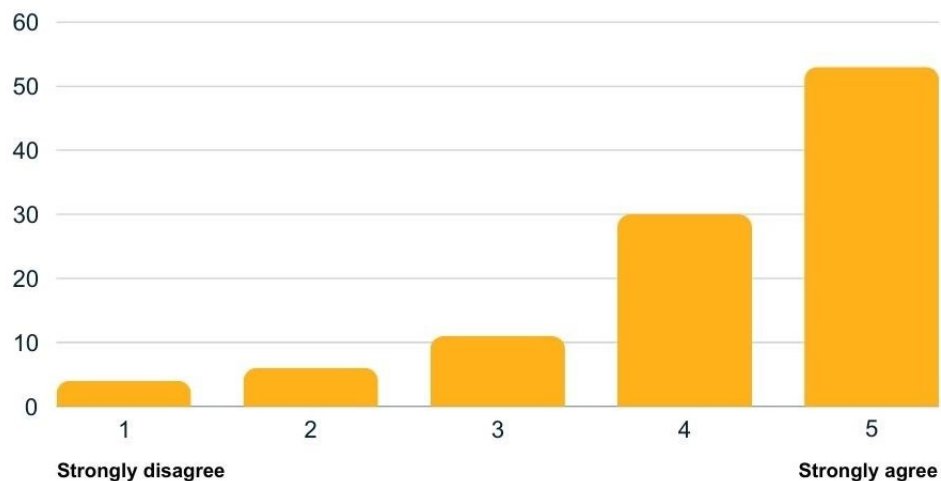


FIGURE 4. Participants’ opinion on neutral product variety.

The purpose of the fourth question was to help choose a product for which the packaging would be designed. Categories that commonly have gendered options were added as predetermined answers and a free form option was provided as well. The most popular option was fashion products with 65 participants choosing it. Other popular options were toys and games, hair removal products, fragrance, and deodorant. In the free form field, menstrual products were mentioned six times, medical products twice and footwear for work once. (Figure 5.)

Which product group or product do you think especially should have more neutral/inclusive options?

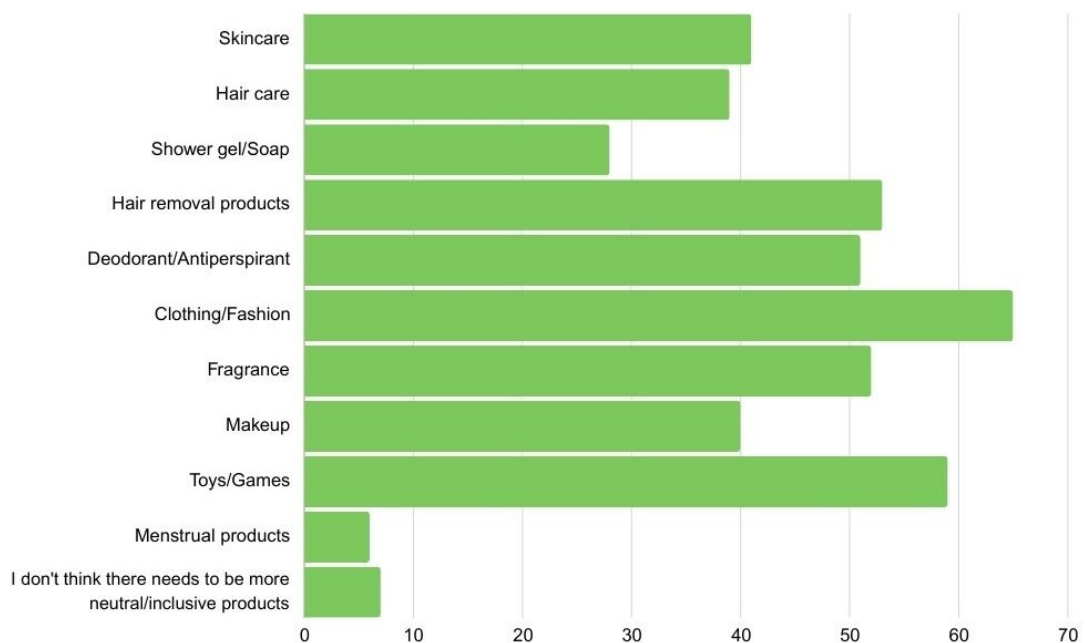


FIGURE 5. Participants' wishes of gender-neutral products per category.

The last question in the survey was a free-form field to add anything the participants would like about the topic. A few people discussed that the problem might not be in options or packaging but rather an issue of a mindset in society that a certain package or product is not for certain genders. Many also said that even though they wish for more neutral options, there is still a need for gendered options as well. As one participant wrote “– – it can feel nice to buy a product where the packaging matches your gender, especially when the average product in that category might be directed towards the other gender, even if [a] "neutral" option would be available.” and another “– – for example I imagine a binary trans woman might find purchasing "mega girl soap" quite gender-affirming.”

Some also said they wanted to get rid of the price difference, or the “pink-tax”, referring to the phenomenon of women’s products being more expensive on average than men’s (Guittar et al. 2022).

It must be acknowledged that the choice of platform for the survey influences the results. Since the transnord subreddit is for trans people, some of the participants in the survey that identify with a binary gender might be more aware of gender issues than most cisgender people.

5.1.1 Implications of Results

According to the survey participants, fashion products need neutral and inclusive option the most. Clothing has similar effects as other products when it comes to gender. While a gender might be attached to an item by labels or culture, a piece of clothing is genderless. It is also dependent on culture, which clothes are perceived as appropriate for a specific gender. (Bardey et al. 2020.) A study by Bardey et al. (2020) found that males are less likely to wear items that are seen as feminine. They perceive traditionally feminine clothing as less feminine if it is labelled as unisex, while females’ perceptions aren’t affected by labelling (Bardey et al. 2020). This supports the notion that men are more likely to reject femininity than women masculinity.

While clothing is gendered by using specific kinds of designs, labels, and sections in stores, it isn’t usually packaged. Because this thesis is focusing on visual design and packaging, and due to my own interests and area of knowledge, a hair removal product, and more specifically a razor was chosen as the product the packaging will be designed for.

5.2 Moodboards

Four moodboards were designed based on the results of previous studies (Picture 3.; Picture 4.; Picture 5.; Picture 6.). The goal was to combine different masculine and feminine perceived, as well as neutral, elements to create a gender-inclusive result.

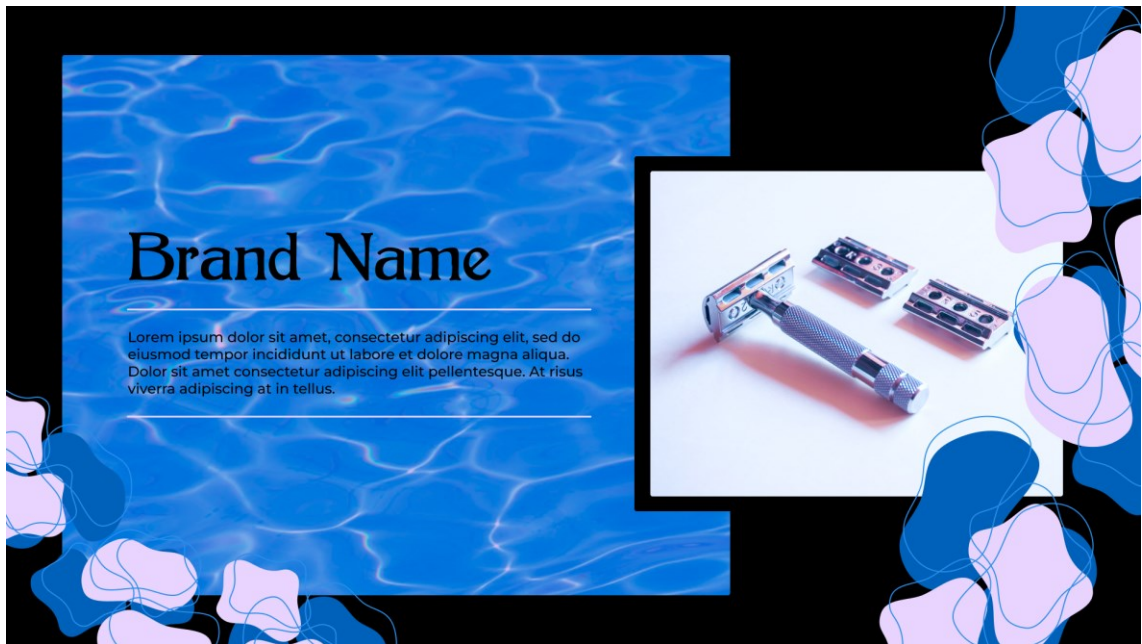
Three styles combine gendered red or pink and blue (Cunningham and Macrae 2011; Won and Westland 2017) and one uses more neutral colours: green, brown and orange. Rounded, curvy, and straight shapes were used together and to balance the masculinity or femininity of colours. For example, in Picture 6, delicate and curvy shapes were combined with the masculine dark blue colour.



PICTURE 3. Moodboard 1



PICTURE 4. Moodboard 2



PICTURE 5. Moodboard 3



PICTURE 6. Moodboard 4

5.2.1 AI as a Design Tool

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been gaining visibility especially in the last few years as a tool for generating a variety of content like pictures, text, voice, moving image, and music. While AI has a great potential to change industries and our everyday lives, it also raises questions about how it can be used ethically. For example, AI could pose a threat to people's privacy and has been shown to have ethnic

and gender bias (United Nations 2021). It challenges people's trust in media as well, when pictures and videos can be more easily fabricated (Vaahterakumpu and Terävä 2023).

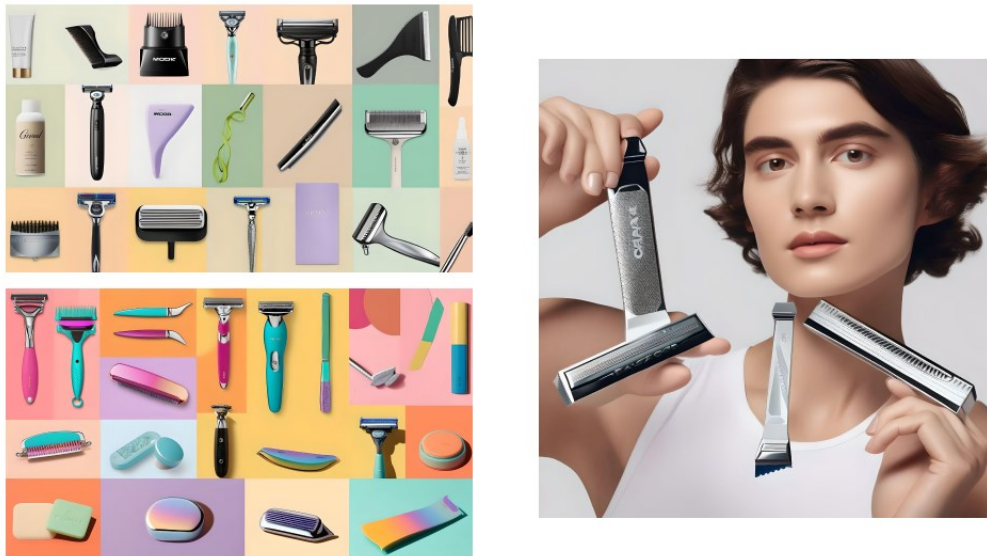
Several lawsuits have been filed against different AI companies. In 2023, a law firm filed a lawsuit against OpenAI for misusing personal data scraped from the Internet (Thorbecke 2023). Stability AI has been sued by a stock photo company as well as several artists for claims of violating copyright laws (Hill 2023; Korn 2023). The Electronic Privacy Information Center also outlined the effect on intellectual property rights and economic loss as well as harm to reputation as potential negative consequences of AI ("Generating Harms" 2023). This could be considered one of the most relevant risks when it comes to design.

There are some tools that have been developed against the non-consenting use of copyrighted artwork or photographs for AI training. Glaze and Nightshade are examples of this kind of software, and they were both developed by a group of computer science students at the University of Chicago (Heikkilä 2023; Hill 2023). Both prevent the AI model from processing the image accurately. Glaze protects artists from AI stealing their style, while Nightshade poisons the data pool and makes the AI model produce non-accurate results. (Shan et al. 2023, 2024.)

The United Nations as well as the European Union have both defined guidelines for ethical use of AI. The UN adopted an agreement in 2021 that urges the member states to develop AI in an environmentally sustainable way while promoting human rights and protecting their citizens' data (United Nations 2021). The EU agreed on a bill for the Artificial Intelligence Act in 2023 that aims to protect against high-risk AI while promoting innovation, human rights, and sustainability (European Parliament 2023).

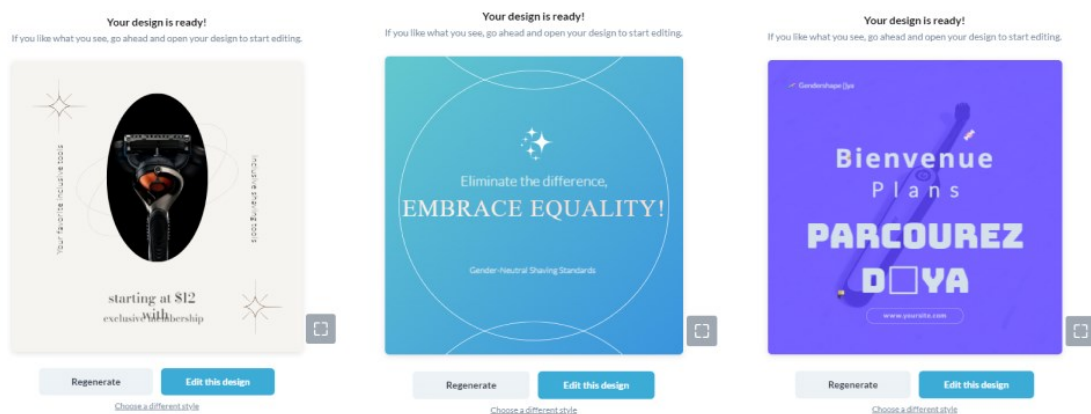
Despite its risks, AI is an important emerging tool for any industry, including design. Therefore, one of the moodboards for the second survey was produced with an AI generated example as a reference. Three online tools for AI design were used to compare results and choose the most appropriate one. Those tools were Fotor, Visme AI Designer Chatbot, and Microsoft Designer.

The first tool used was Fotor. A few experimental prompts were used to better understand what kind of results are generated from them. Simpler prompts had poorer results with odd combinations of items. The images seen on Picture 7, from left to right and top to bottom, are the results of the prompts: “Gender-neutral razor brand moodboard”, “Colourful gender-neutral razor brand moodboard with shapes” and “Gender-neutral razor package”.



PICTURE 7. Generated results from AI tool Fotor.

The second tool was Visme’s AI Designer Chatbot. After telling it what to create it asked if the user wants to use specific graphics or colours for the design. After inputting the prompt, the tool gave multiple options to choose from that could be edited by the user. The results are options for the prompt: “I want to make an Instagram post with graphics for a gender-neutral razor brand” (Picture 8.)



PICTURE 8. AI generated results from Visme.

The last AI tool that was used was Microsoft Designer. Like Visme, it also gave multiple options that could be edited by the user. After writing the first request, a suggestion to improve the prompt appeared next to the input field. It recommended to be more specific with the request. The results as seen on Picture 9. were created with prompts: “A moodboard for a gender-neutral razor brand” and an edited version of the given suggestion, “Create a package design for a gender-neutral razor brand. Use wavy lines and a colour scheme of blue, yellow, and green.”



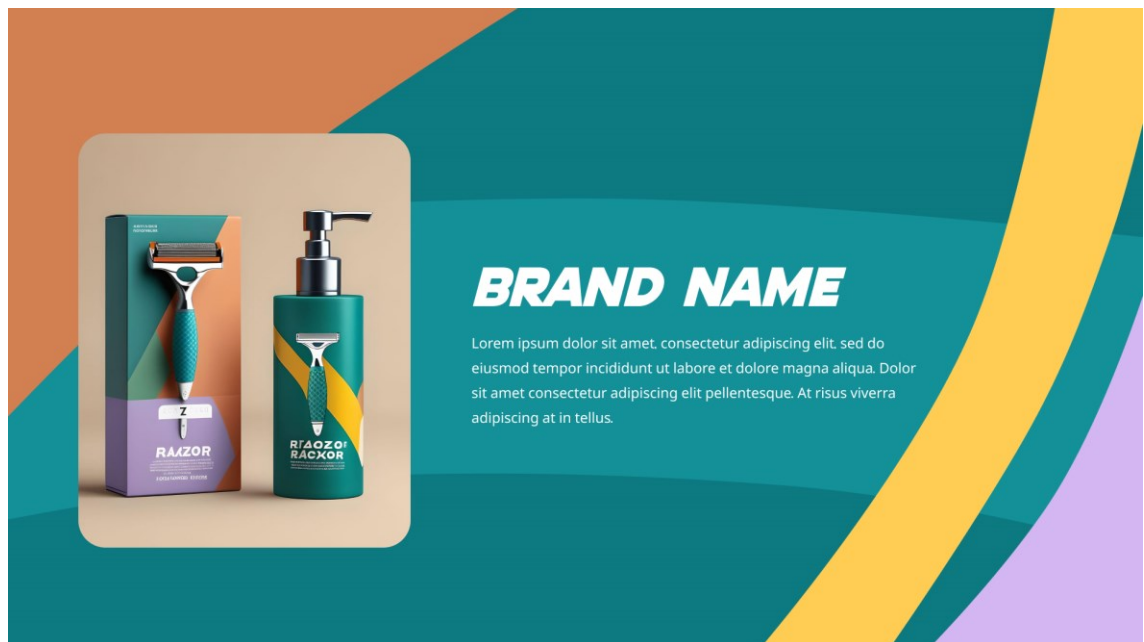
PICTURE 9. Results from Microsoft Designer.

The most noticeable difference between these three tools was that while Fotor generates images, Visme and Microsoft Designer generate combinations of graphics, which gives the user the freedom to edit them. Despite this, I considered Fotor to give the most readily usable and non-dated results. It was used to generate two similar mockups that were used as a guide for the fifth moodboard (Picture 11.). These mockups were generated with the prompts: “Razor package mockup. Use gender-neutral colours and shapes.” and “A razor package and aftershave package mockup from the same brand. Use gender-neutral colours and shapes.” (Picture 10.)

The mockups use mostly straight shapes and a bold sans-serif font, which could both be considered more masculine. The main colours are teal, orange, yellow, and lilac all of which are quite neutral except for the feminine light lilac. However, it balances the masculine shapes and font. Therefore, it can be said that in these examples, the AI had a good sense of which elements create a neutral package.



PICTURE 10. AI generated mockups used for final moodboard.



PICTURE 11. Moodboard 5 that used AI generated mockups as a guide.

5.3 Feedback Survey

The objective for the second survey was to determine which visual style is the most gender-inclusive. The survey was again shared on the transnord subreddit and directly with a few non-binary people. It was also shared on my own Instagram story for followers who live in or are from Finland or other Nordic countries. The survey received 56 responses. See Appendix 3. for the complete survey.

The feedback survey received fewer responses than the first and the portion of non-binary or gender nonconforming participants was lower. Out of all 56 respondents, 27 identified as women, 22 as men, and 7 as non-binary or gender nonconforming (Figure 6.).

How do you identify?

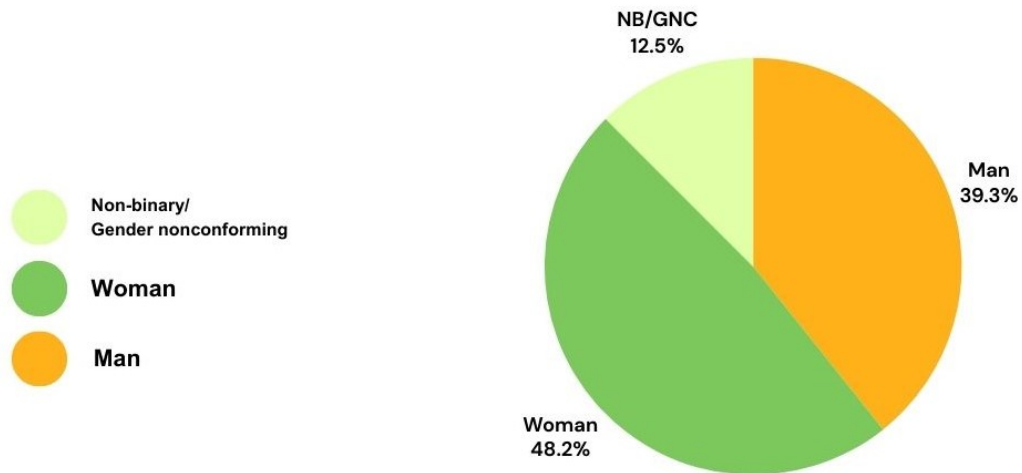


FIGURE 6. Gender identity of participants in the feedback survey

To help evaluate the masculinity and femininity of the moodboards, the masculine/feminine brand personality (MBP/FBP) scale developed by Grohmann (2009). The characteristics of a MBP are “adventurous”, “aggressive”, “brave”, “daring”, “dominant” and “sturdy”. The FBP characteristics are “expresses tender feelings”, “fragile”, “graceful”, “sensitive”, “sweet” and “tender”. (Grohmann, 2009.) The options “feminine”, “masculine” and “gender-neutral” were added to the survey as well.

Moodboards 1-3 were evaluated as more feminine by the survey participants. Although for both 1 and 3, the option “gender-neutral” was the most popular one. Moodboard 5 was rated mostly masculine. Moodboard 4 was perceived as slightly more masculine, but it received the most balanced evaluation. (Figure 7.) The average score of masculine and feminine items for each moodboard was calculated to determine the most inclusive one. Moodboard 4 received the most even scores for both categories and was thus chosen as the visual style for the final product.

Mood board evaluation

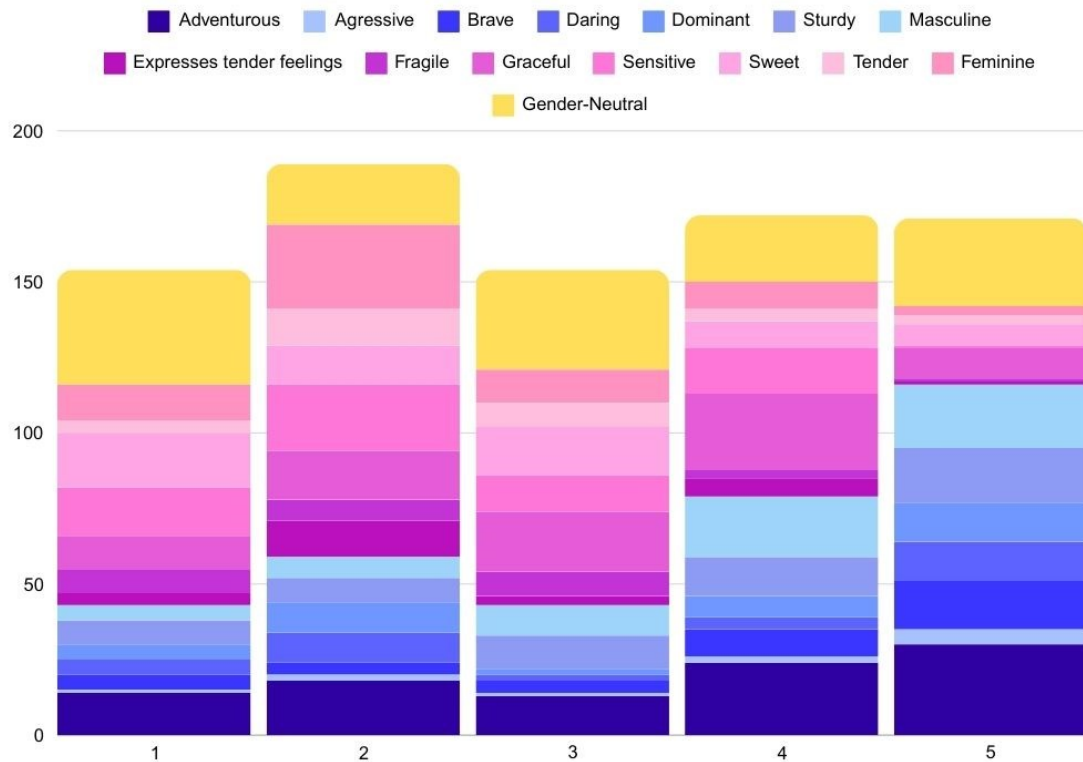
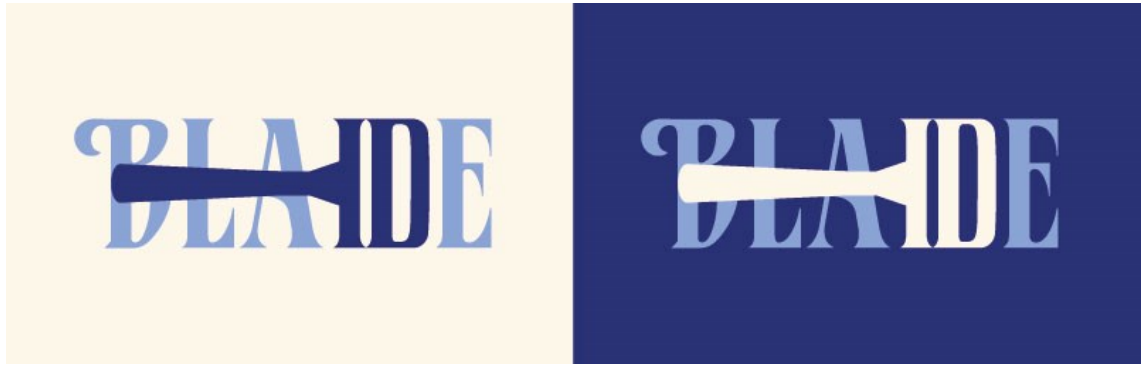


FIGURE 7. MBP/FBP evaluation of moodboards.

5.3.1 Name and Logo

The studies by Klink and Athaide (2012) and Guevremont and Grohmann (2015) acted as a guide in the naming process. According to them, using front vowels and fricative consonants creates a feminine name, while back vowels and stop consonants make a name more masculine. (Klink and Athaide 2012; Guevremont and Grohmann 2015.) The name Blaide was chosen for the brand because it combines masculine stop consonants b and d with feminine front vowels i and e. It is also connected to the product with its meaning.

The title font from the moodboard, Verve, acted as a base for the logo design. It combines masculine bold and straight lines with feminine curvy decorations (Lieven et al. 2015; Grohmann 2016). The shape of letters i and d next to each other was edited slightly and used as the razor's blade. Together they also form the abbreviation ID which can be connected to gender identity. A lighter blue was added together with the original dark navy from the moodboard to give the razor more contrast. (Picture 12.)



PICTURE 12. Logo of Blaide

5.4 Final Product

The final package design was made using moodboard 4 as a guideline. Two versions were made for both colour variations of the product. I wanted to give a colour option so there's more chance for people to find one they like. Feminine curvy shapes were used to contrast the boldness of the masculine navy blue. Small pops of light pink were used to soften the overall look as well. A neutral sans-serif font was used on the front. (Picture 13.; Picture 14.)

Not many informational elements were used on the front of the package. It only tells the consumer what the product inside is and who it is for. The intention was to not mention gender on the packaging but based on Bardey et. al (2020) men perceive clothes as less feminine if they are labelled unisex. I decided to apply this to the packaging by stating it is "for you" to avoid anyone second guessing if they are looking at a product that is not intended for them. The back side also says the product is for everyone and includes neutral instructions for the use of the product as well as disposal of the packaging.



PICTURE 13. Blade packaging and razor mockup.



PICTURE 14. Blade packaging mockup.

6 DISCUSSION

When examining gender stereotypes and gender cues used in design, it becomes evident that they are heavily intertwined. Women, who are expected to be graceful and gentle, are assumed to prefer similar visuals with slim, curvy shapes, light colours, and decorative fonts. Men, however, are thought to want dark colours and bold, straight shapes as they are expected to be brave and dominant. (Appendix 4.) The strong binary perception of gender leaves out people who don't identify with it but also offers little room for anyone to differ from those expectations.

Younger generations are already turning away from stereotyped marketing and welcome more gender fluidity, which suggests a growing trend in defying traditional gender expectations. With this growing consumer group, brands should aim to shift to more inclusive communication and offer more inclusive options to appeal to them. However, as brought up by a few participants in the preliminary survey, there might be a need for a collective change in mindset. To reject stereotypes, people might want to move away from the assumption that some products are for only a specific gender, as products in their essence don't have a gender, and everyone should feel free to choose any packaging that appeals to them.

Since gender roles are still prominent in modern society, providing options with inclusive designs for all genders could act as an example of non-binary brand personalities. Gender-neutral designs are often produced with simple or minimalist visuals paired with neutral colours and inclusive language. In this thesis, an inclusive design was achieved by combining both feminine and masculine elements that balance each other. It was also noticed during the design process that simply using neutral elements or combining an even amount of feminine and masculine elements doesn't necessarily result in a gender-inclusive style. It is recommendable to get some form of feedback from a range of people to determine if a visual style is perceived as inclusive.

According to previous studies, men are more likely to reject femininity while women welcome masculine elements (Alreck 1994; Fugate and Phillips 2010;

Avery 2012; Sandhu 2017), which would suggest that masculine designs are considered more neutral than feminine. However, in the feedback survey, moodboards that were otherwise evaluated as more feminine, based on Grohmann's (2009) brand gender personality scale, also received the most responses in the "gender-neutral" option. This may be an indication of more open-minded participants who don't agree with stereotyped descriptions of femininity and masculinity. It may also be an effect of the specific men participating in the survey being more open to femininity.

As there was limited time and resources available for gathering participants for the surveys, there's an opportunity to study gender-neutral design further with a better sample. With more and more young people identifying as non-binary, there might be interest to study their consumption preferences, as existing studies predominantly focus on the binary genders or sexes. It would also be interesting to see how the perception of masculinity and femininity in visual elements changes in society over a longer period of time.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Gender-neutral brand semiotic analysis data

Gender-neutral brands' visual style semiotic analysis

Brand name	Product Category	Visual style	Colours	Shapes	Fonts
Aesop	skincare, haircare, home products, fragrance	simple, text-based	neutral colours, pastels, black, white, brown, green, peach	straight, rounded	basic sans-serif
Byredo	fragrance, makeup, bodycare, home products, accessories	minimalist	white, black, silver, gold, green	straight, curvy, rounded	basic sans-serif
cantiqLA	underwear		pastels, dark green, dark blue	straight	semi-serif and basic sans-serif
EQLC	razors	minimalist	pastels, white, black, beige	straight, rounded	sans-serif, basic serif
Malin+Goetz	skincare, haircare, home products, fragrance	simple, text-based	colourful, neutral colours, white, dark blue	straight	basic sans-serif
Noto	skincare, makeup	minimalist	white, black	straight	bold sans-serif
One Size	makeup	simple	pink, red, white	straight, rounded	basic sans-serif
Origami Customs	underwear	simple	white, black, teal	straight	bold and light sans-serif
Pleasing	fragrance, skincare, nail polish, clothing	simple, decorative	colourful	straight, curvy, round	basic sans-serif, semi-serif
Urbody	underwear	minimalist	white, black, beige	straight	bold and light sans-serif

Appendix 2. Preliminary survey form

1(2)

Thoughts on Gendered Packaging

Hi! My name is Iskra and the purpose of this survey is to help with the development of a project in my bachelor's thesis. I'm studying in the media and arts study programme in Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK). Answering takes about 2-5 minutes.

The results of this survey are anonymous and are only used in the development of a thesis project. *

- I understand and wish to continue.
- I don't want to participate.

How do you identify? *

- Non-binary/Gender nonconforming
- Woman
- Man
- I don't want to label myself
- I prefer not to say

What is your age? *

- Under 20
- 20-30
- 30-40
- 40-50
- Over 50

(continues)

2(2)

I wish there were more genderneutral/genderinclusive product options in general. *

1 2 3 4 5

strongly disagree strongly agree

Which product group or product do you think especially should have more neutral/inclusive options? *

- Skincare (creams, lotions, serums, cleansers etc.)
- Hair care (shampoos, conditioners, hairspray, hair gel etc.)
- Shower gel/Soap
- Hair removal products (razors, waxing/sugaring products, aftershave etc.)
- Deodorant/Antiperspirant
- Clothing/Fashion (clothes and accessories)
- Fragrance (perfumes, body mists etc.)
- Makeup (foundations, eyeshadow, mascara, lipstick etc.)
- Toys/Games
- I don't think there needs to be more neutral/inclusive products.
- Muu...

If you chose "other" in the above question, which product(s) or product group?

(This can be anything, from any product group, not only from the groups mentioned above)

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.....

Is there anything else you want to say about the topic?

Pitkä vastausteksti

.....

Appendix 3. Feedback survey form

1(7)

Visual Identity of Gender-Inclusive Brand

Hi! My name is Iskra and the purpose of this survey is to help with the development of a project in my bachelor's thesis. I'm studying in the media and arts study programme in Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK). Answering takes about 5-10 minutes.

The results of this survey are anonymous and are only used in the development of a thesis project. *

- I understand and wish to continue.
- I don't want to participate.

How do you identify? *

- Non-binary/Gender nonconforming
- Woman
- Man
- I don't want to label myself
- I prefer not to say

What is your age? *

- Under 20
- 20-30
- 30-40
- 40-50
- Over 50

(continues)

2(7)

Moodboards

In the next section you are going to be presented with 5 moodboards that represent the visual style of a razor brand. The visual style can be applied to any representations of a brand like a website, packaging, social media page etc. The text on the moodboards are placeholders.

Please choose the words that best describe the moodboard in your opinion.

Which words best describe this visual style? Choose as many as you want. (Moodboard 1) *

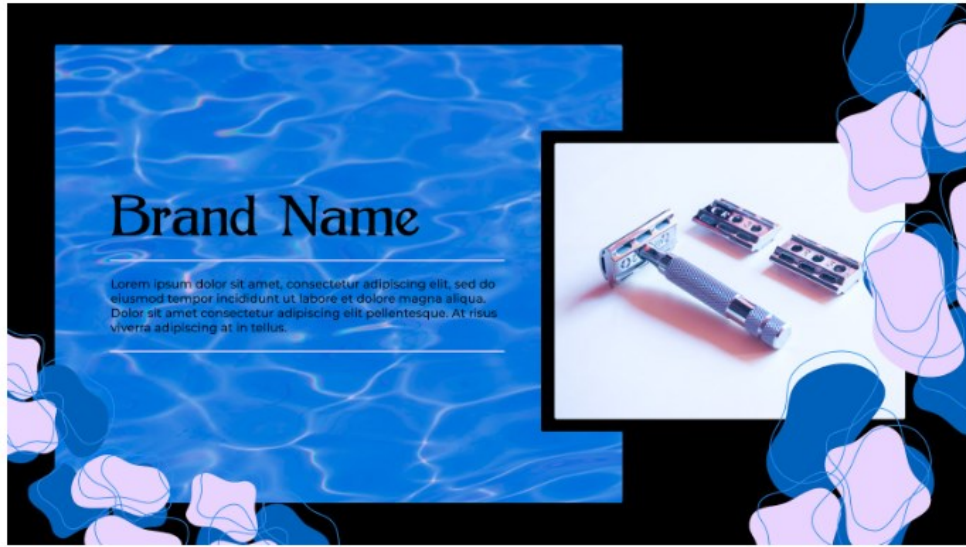


- Adventurous
- Expresses tender feelings
- Agressive
- Fragile
- Brave
- Graceful
- Daring
- Sensitive
- Dominant
- Sweet
- Sturdy
- Tender
- Masculine
- Feminine
- Gender-Neutral
- Muu...

(continues)

3(7)

Which words best describe this visual style? Choose as many as you want. (Moodboard 2) *



- Adventurous
- Expresses tender feelings
- Agressive
- Fragile
- Brave
- Graceful
- Daring
- Sensitive
- Dominant
- Sweet
- Sturdy
- Tender
- Masculine
- Feminine
- Gender-Neutral
- Muu...

(continues)

4(7)

Which words best describe this visual style? Choose as many as you want. (Moodboard 3) *



- Adventurous
- Expresses tender feelings
- Agressive
- Fragile
- Brave
- Graceful
- Daring
- Sensitive
- Dominant
- Sweet
- Sturdy
- Tender
- Masculine
- Feminine
- Gender-Neutral
- Muu...

(continues)

5(7)

Which words best describe this visual style? Choose as many as you want. (Moodboard 4) *

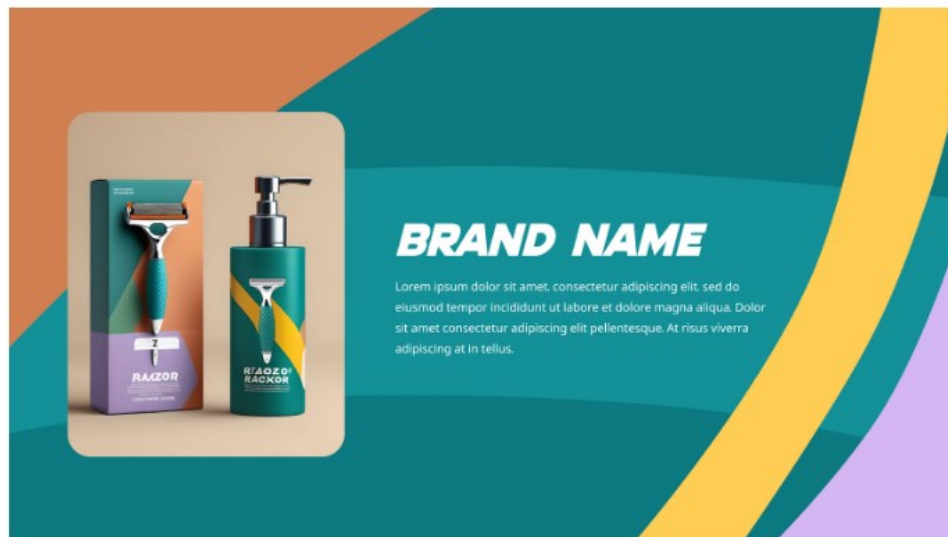


- Adventurous
- Expresses tender feelings
- Agressive
- Fragile
- Brave
- Graceful
- Daring
- Sensitive
- Dominant
- Sweet
- Sturdy
- Tender
- Masculine
- Feminine
- Gender-Neutral
- Muu...

(continues)

6(7)

Which words best describe this visual style? Choose as many as you want. (Moodboard 5) *



(The picture in this moodboard was generated with an artificial intelligence tool)

- Adventurous
- Expresses tender feelings
- Agressive
- Fragile
- Brave
- Graceful
- Daring
- Sensitive
- Dominant
- Sweet
- Sturdy
- Tender
- Masculine
- Feminine
- Gender-Neutral
- Muu...

(continues)

7(7)

Out of these moodboards which ones did you like most? *

- Moodboard 1
- Moodboard 2
- Moodboard 3
- Moodboard 4
- Moodboard 5

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Pitkä vastausteksti

Appendix 4. Visual representation of gendered and neutral cues and their corresponding descriptions.

	FEMININE	NEUTRAL	MASCULINE
COLOURS			
SHAPES			
FONTS	<i>Font</i> <i>Font</i>	<i>Font</i> FONT	Font Font FONT
BRAND GENDER IDENTITY CHARACTERISTICS	 <i>Name</i>	 Name	 NAME
GENDER STEREOTYPES	Expresses tender feelings Fragile Graceful Sensitive Sweet Tender	Compassionate Emotional Gentle Sympathetic Tender Understanding	Adventurous Aggressive Brave Daring Dominant Sturdy Aggressive Ambitious Assertive Competitive Dominant Independent