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The Effect of Brand Gender Similarity on Brand-Alliance Fit and Purchase Intention

By Miriam van Tilburg, Andreas Herrmann, Bianca Grohmann and Theo Lieven

A brand alliance, particularly by co-branding, wherein a brand seeks to reinforce its brand image, expand into new markets and gain new customer segments by utilizing the brand image of a second, external brand, is a strategic alternative to a brand extension. A brand alliance is only successful if the brand fit between the two constituent brands is high. Recent literature suggests the brand personality as a possible basis for brand fit. On this basis, brand gender is a relevant criterion for determining the success of a brand alliance, although this criterion has not been considered in previous studies. In this article, which relies on congruency theory, two experiments conducted to explore the role of brand gender as a driver of both positive consumer response and consumer behaviour towards an alliance are presented. The first experiment demonstrates that, if a consumer is asked to match an initial brand to a second brand from a set of brand options, the consumer will pair brands with the same brand gender. The second experiment reveals that brand gender similarity in a brand alliance results in greater perceived fit, visual appeal and perceived unity for the alliance in question, as well as an increase in purchase intention. This positive response to gender similarity was independent of the sexes and ages of the study participants. Managerial implications for successful brand alliances may be drawn from these findings.

1. Introduction

Several examples, such as the alliance between Apple and Nike and between Nescafé and DeLonghi, suggest that brand alliances linking two or more brands (*Voss/Gammoh* 2004) are useful tools for strengthening a brand's image (*Rao/Qu/Rueckert* 1999; *Washburn/Till/Priluck* 2000). These alliances also offer an alternative to brand extensions (*Venkatesh/Mahajan/Muller* 2000) and a lucrative strategy for entering new markets *(Voss/Tansuhaj* 1999). The literature demonstrates that brand alliances are evaluated more positively if a greater perceived fit exists between the constituent brands and/or their product categories (*Simonin/Ruth* 1998). Although brand personality in general is considered as a basis for brand fit (*Simonin/Ruth* 1998), brand gender, which is defined as the masculine or feminine traits of a brand (*Grohmann* 2009), has thus far been neglected as a possible basis of brand fit.

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Brand personality is specified as 'the set of human characteristics associated with a brand' (*Aaker* 1997, p. 347). In social perception theory, an individual's gender is regarded by others as the individual's most salient and accessible human characteristic (*Dion/Berscheid/Walster* 1972). Consumers also transfer social perception principles to brands (*Aaker* 1997) and perceive gender as a salient characteristic of brands (*Grohmann* 2009); thus, brand gender may serve as a potential basis for brand-fit perception.

The current investigation seeks to accomplish two goals: 1) to close the research gap with respect to brand gender fit by proposing that gender-congruent brands are perceived as more harmonious and are processed more fluently than brands whose genders differ, and 2) to suggest that brand fit is enhanced if two allying brands have the same gender. To accomplish these goals, this investigation relies on congruence theory, which implies that humans prefer harmony among objects (*Eagly/Chaiken* 1993), as well as fluency theory, which states that fluently processed objects produce more positive impressions (*Reber/Schwarz/Winkielmann* 2004).

The research consists of two studies to test the proposed relationship. The first study demonstrates that individuals choose gender-congruent brands if they are asked to identify the brand that best fits with a given brand. The second study reveals that greater perceived brand-alliance fit, brand fit, perceived unity, visual unity and purchase intention regarding a brand alliance are observed if the allying brands are more similar in brand gender.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

2.1. Brand Fit

Co-branding offers a useful basis for studying brand fit. Co-branding is the systematic long-term branding of one product (the co-brand) with at least two brands that are perceived by third parties to be (legally) independent (*Park/Jun/Shocker* 1996). The essential goal of co-branding is to achieve a positive image transfer between the constituent brands in the form of co-brand and spill-over effects (*Washburn/Till/Priluck* 2000). Image transfer is more likely if there is a better perceived fit between the constituent brands. Fit is defined as a subjective judgment concerning the match between two constituent brands (*Uggla* 2004). Brand fit between two brands is established if the consumer perceives a comprehensive connection between the brands and can integrate the concepts related to them. Within the literature, brand fit is a pivotal factor in the success of brand alliances (*Bucklin/Sengupta* 1993; *Levin/Levin* 2000; *Park/Jun/Shocker* 1996; *Simonin/Ruth* 1998). Studies have analysed the fit between two brands in the context of co-branding and have obtained inconsistent results regarding the basis of brand fit. Some of these studies have indicated that high similarity between the personalities of the two constituent brands is required (*Simonin/Ruth* 1998), others have emphasised the importance of combining brands with salient characteristics to achieve co-branding success, and still others have shown that complementarity between the two brand images (*Park/Jun/Shocker* 1996) is a dominant factor in the outcome of co-branding initiatives. All of these findings address the compatibility of the two constituent brand personalities.

2.2. Brand Gender

Recent theories of brand personality have suggested that brand masculinity and femininity are two distinct sub-dimensions consisting of masculine and feminine brand personality traits respectively (*Grohmann* 2009), which complement Aaker's model of brand personality (*Aaker* 1997). Thus, it appears that gender is a salient, universal personality dimension of brands (*Grohmann* 2009). In accordance with this notion, research has demonstrated that brand gender perceptions arise from the use of single or multiple brand design elements, such as brand names, fonts, colours and brand logos (*Lieven et al.* in press). Consequently, gendered brands can be created through the use of only a few brand design elements, although the literature also highlights that additional factors such as product category or brand communication through advertising (*Maehle/Otnes/Supphellen* 2011) shape consumers' brand personality perceptions. Studies have also indicated that consumers perceive brand gender as a continuum of masculine and feminine traits, resulting in brand gender profiles that may be highly masculine, masculine, androgynous/undifferentiated, feminine or highly feminine (*Lieven et al.* 2014). In addition, previous research has supported the assumption that strongly gendered brands positively influence the attitude towards these brands, which increases brand equity (*Grohmann* 2009; *Lieven* 2014, *Lieven et al.* 2014, *Lieven et al.* in press). In this study, fictitious brands will be employed in order to isolate the effects of interest and preclude familiarity or experience effects that might arise for existing brands. Based on the prior literature (*Lieven et al.* in press), these fictitious brands were associated with brand gender by varying the brand name and type font. Because earlier research (*Grohmann* 2009) suggests that brand gender is a brand characteristic that is very salient to consumers, brand gender perceptions likely arise from use of few design cues, such as brand name and type font. The current research thus extends previous findings by *Lieven et al.* (in press) in that it demonstrates that these cues are sufficient to generate brand gender perceptions. To examine the validity of this reasoning, this research initially replicates *Lieven et al.'s* findings of a link between brand gender and brand liking, using fewer cues to brand gender accessible to consumers in their brand evaluations.

H1: The greater extent to which consumers perceive a brand (represented by its brand name written in a specific type font) as strongly feminine or masculine, the more the brand will be liked.

2.3. Congruence Theory

Cognitive consistency theory may be utilized to explain the brand gender-fit perceptions. Cognitive consistency theory claims that individuals seek to reduce disharmonious conditions among objects (*Eagly/Chaiken* 1993). Congruency theory, a major facet of cognitive consistency theory, provides useful insight on the brand-fit perceptions of consumers. Positive consumer responses regarding brand choice, brand impressions and perceived value result from the congruence of meanings that have been articulated across or within elements of a product's marketing mix (e.g., *Erdem/Swait* 2004; *Van Rompay/Pruyn* 2011). A congruence of meanings in a brand alliance and co-branding context can arise on the basis of the product categories or brands involved. For example, the high level of complementarity of brands associated with the same product category (e.g., the coffee brand Nescafé and the coffee maker brand DeLonghi) precludes the development of dissonance in consumers' mind (*Bigné Currás-Pérez/Aldás-Manzano* 2012). The current research examines the creation of brand fit not on the basis of congruence arising from product-level associations, but focuses on brand fit arising from brand gender related meanings conveyed by the brands engaging in a co-branding strategy.

The concept of processing fluency gives more insight into this context (*Reber/Schwarz/Winkielmann* 2004; *Winkielmann/Cacioppo* 2001). Easily processed stimuli are evaluated in positive terms and provoke favourable attitudes, including perceptions that the item in question is aesthetically attractive, beautiful and pleasant to the senses (*Lee/Labroo* 2004; *Reber/Schwarz/Winkielmann* 2004). These positive consumer responses occur because processing fluency is hedonic (i.e., fluent processing is experienced in a positive way; *Reber/Schwarz/Winkielmann* 2004). Therefore, individuals evaluate stimuli more positively if these stimuli are processed in a more fluent manner. *Lieven et al.* (2014) show that the number of positive associations with highly feminine or masculine portraits exceeded that for less feminine and masculine representations. The fact that these associations were more positive supports the assumption of a positive effect of ease of processing on positive perceptions and liking.

Co-branding requires a consumer to form an opinion or make a purchase decision based on the integration of two brand symbols. Studies of brand fit and congruency theory suggest that consumers perceive better brand gender fit for brands with congruent genders rather than for brands with dissimilar genders. Since the notion of gender as part of brand personality is based on the literature on human personality, it could be argued that masculine and feminine brands would appear more attractive to consumers of the opposite gender. However, the literature on brand gender strongly suggests that – in the context of brands – consumers categorize cues associated with brand gender (e.g., brand names, type fonts, colors) based on congruence rather than opposites and also evaluate matching brand gender cues more positively (*Lieven et al.* in press). This holds similarly for marketing, sponsorship and brand alliances where "birds of a feather flock together" (*Fleck/Quester* 2007). Therefore, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H2: Consumers with the freedom to choose a brand that matches a given brand will choose matching brands of the same brand gender and brand gender magnitude.

H3: Greater similarity in brand gender between two brands will be associated with greater (a) perceived alliance brand fit and brand fit; (b) perceived visual unity and visual appeal; and (c) purchase intention.

3. Pretests

Several pretests were conducted to identify focal study stimulus material on brands associated with different genders. To avoid confounding effects that might be associated with familiar brands, such as brand preference or popularity, ten artificial brands were created for the purpose of this research. These brands included two highly masculine, two masculine, two neutral, two feminine and two highly feminine brands.

3.1. Pretest 1

The first pretest included 30 brand names that were associated with different genders. The names were manipulated through the use of front and back vowels. Sound symbolism theory suggests that there is a relationship between brand gender perceptions and vowel and consonant sounds (*Klink* 2000, 2003; *Yorkston/Menon* 2004). Front vowels (e.g., *i* or *e*) and fricatives (e.g., *f*, *s*, *v* or *z)* strengthen associations with femininity, whereas back vowels (e.g., *o* or *u*) and stops (e.g., *p*, *t*, *b* or *k)* enhance perceptions of masculinity (*Klink* 2000). Feminine (masculine) brand names were formed using front vowels and fricatives (back vowels and stops), whereas highly feminine (masculine) names were formed using a higher number of front vowels and fricatives (back vowels and stops). Neutral brand names were configured to contain the same nonzero numbers of masculine or feminine vowels or consonants, or none of these. The initial brand names were presented in Arial font, which is considered neutral (*Shaikh/Chaparro/Fox* 2006). The following brand names were employed: the highly feminine names Avora, Meiva, Adela, Esera, Erisa and Adane; the feminine names Edara, Ipola, Irisu, Yilda, Edana and Garena; the neutral names Alero, Edelo, Idano, Aloro, Orilo and Emoro; the masculine names Odano, Blotan, Breton, Yodor, Belg and Arton; and the highly masculine names Odelo, Turt, Burt, Delmos, Jerod and Byton.

Email communications were used to invite 40 participants (65 % female, M_{Age} = 27, SD_{Age} = 4) to complete an

online survey. Each participant was randomly assigned to 1 of 2 brand name groups. In each group, respondents were asked to rate 15 brands on a 7-point masculinity scale and a 7-point femininity scale (ranging from 1 = 'not at all masculine (feminine)' to 7 = 'very masculine (feminine)'). To obtain mean brand gender (M_{BG}) scores, the differences between the means of the masculine brand gender (MBG) and feminine brand gender (FBG) scores (M_{MBG} -M_{FBG}) were calculated. This finding yielded gender scores ranging from 6.00 (indicating maximal masculinity) to -6.00 (indicating maximal femininity).

Based on the mean gender scores, the following ten brand names representing the different gender categories were selected for additional pretesting: the highly feminine names Edana (M_{BG} = -5.17), Erisa (M_{BG} = -4.94) and Adela (M_{BG} = -4.77); the neutral name Irisu (M_{BG} = -0.46); the masculine names Odelo (M_{BG} = 2.39), Aloro (M_{BG} = 2.18) and Idano (M_{BG} = 2.28); and the highly masculine names Jerod (M_{BG} = 4.33), Arton (M_{BG} = 4.68) and Burt (M_{BG} = 4.82).

3.2. Pretest 2

A second pretest involving 16 neutral and 16 feminine brand names, which were also invented in accordance with the guidelines used for pretest 1, was conducted to identify additional neutral and feminine brand names.

In this pretest, five doctoral students in marketing (60 % female, M_{Age} = 25, SD_{Age} = 0) were asked to rate the masculinity and femininity of these brand names.

Based on brand gender (i.e., difference scores) and the fits of the tested brand names within the aforementioned categories of brand gender magnitude, the three feminine brand names Inany (M_{BG} = -2.60), Irisu (M_{BG} = -2.40) and Belisi (M_{BG} = -3.00), and the two neutral brand names Yeren (M_{BG} = 0.20) and Ceras (M_{BG} = 0.60), were identified in this pretest.

3.3. Pretest 3

A third pretest was conducted online to test the brand names Inany, Irisu, Belisi, Yeren and Ceras in neutral fonts and to test 17 other brand names presented in different fonts. In particular, most of these 17 brand names had been used in pretest 1 but were now presented in different fonts, which made it possible to determine the participants' preliminary gender perceptions. Certain new brand names were added to this pretest to obtain alternatives to the previously examined choices. The brands were randomly split into three groups (two groups with 11 brands and one group with ten brands).

The 41 participants who were invited by email (n = 40 because one individual did not respond; 42.50 % female, M_{Age} = 32.24, SD_{Age} = 5.68) were randomly assigned to 1 of the 3 brand groups and were asked to rate the masculinity and femininity of these brands.

The brand name results confirmed the findings of pretest 2, as the same gender categories were obtained for the brand names Inany (M_{BG} = -2.86), Irisu (M_{BG} = -2.07), Belisi (M_{BG} = -1.71), Yeren (M_{BG} = -0.07) and Ceras (M_{BG} = 0.79). The other names examined in this pretest were not used in subsequent experiments.

3.4. Pretest 4

A fourth pretest was conducted online. In this pretest, 28 brand names (obtained from the previous pretests) displayed in different fonts were tested to generate the final ten brands. Research has demonstrated that brand gender associations are influenced by the use of different fonts (*Lieven et al.* in press). The font selection for this pretest was based on the findings of *Shaikh/Chaparro/Fox* (2006) regarding gender perceptions of fonts; more specifically, fonts were assigned to brand names so that the gender associations of the font and brand name were consistent. The following font selections were employed: three highly feminine brand names (Edana, Erisa and Adela) were presented in the feminine fonts Monotype Corsiva and Rage Italic; three feminine brand names (Inany, Irisu and Belisi) were presented in the feminine fonts Gigi and Kristen ITC; two neutral brand names (Yeren and Ceras) were presented in the neutral fonts Courier and Arial; three masculine brand names (Aloro, Idano and Odelo) were presented in the masculine fonts Agency FB and Courier New; and three highly masculine brand names (Jerod, Arton and Burt) were presented in the masculine fonts Rockwell Extra Bold and Impact.

Email communications were used to invite 48 individuals (62.5 % female, M_{Age} = 29.38, SD_{Age} = 7.61) to participate in this pretest. Each participant was asked to rate 14 brands on measures of femininity and masculinity and based on the liking scale devised by *Schmitt* et al. (1994) (which involved 7-point scales to assess the following items: 'like/dislike', 'positive/negative', 'good/bad', 'agreeable/disagreeable', 'pleasant/unpleasant', 'not at all acceptable/very acceptable' and 'unsatisfying/satisfying', α = 0.98).

The following brand names/font combinations most clearly reflected the gender categories. Highly feminine combinations included Adela (M_{BG} = -4.93, $M_{Liking(L)}$ = 4.42, SD_L = 1.25) and Erisa (M_{BG} = -4.77, M_L = 4.59, SD_L = 1.39), with no significant difference between the positive responses to these brands ($t(13)$ = 0.52, $p > 0.05$). Feminine combinations included Belisi (M_{BG} = -2.68, M_L = 4.13, SD_L = 1.69) and Inany (M_{BG} = -2.19, M_L = 3.86, SD_L = 1.67), with no significant difference between the positive responses to these brands ($t(12)$ = 0.85, $p >$ 0.05). Neutral combinations included Ceras (M_{BG} = 1.15, M_L = 3.65, SD_L = 1.27) and Yeren (M_{BG} = 0.54, M_L = 3.99, SD_L = 0.93), with no significant difference between the positive responses to these brands ($t(13)$ = -0.92, $p >$ 0.05). Masculine combinations included Idano (M_{BG} = 2.96, M_L = 3.74, SD_L = 1.29) and Aloro (M_{BG} = 2.50, M_L = 4.17, SD_L = 1.66), with no significant difference between the positive responses to these brands ($t(5)$ = 0.58, $p >$ 0.05). Highly masculine combinations included Arton

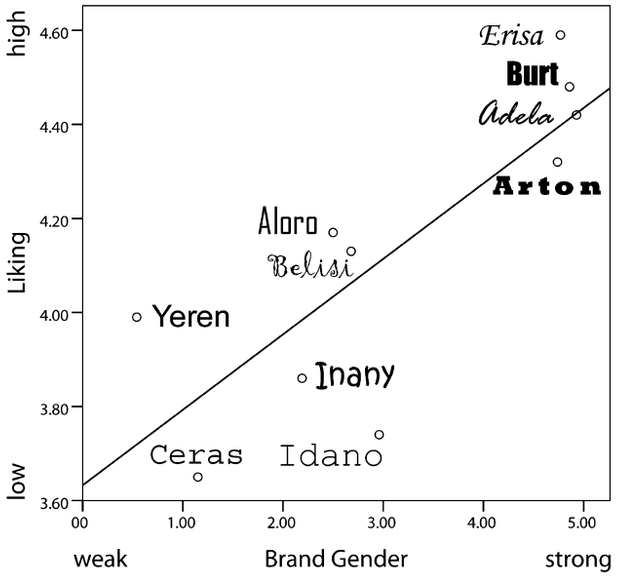


Fig. 1: Positive relation between brand gender and brand liking

(M_{BG} = 4.74, M_L = 4.32, SD_L = 1.48) and Burt (M_{BG} = 4.86, M_{Liking} = 4.48, SD_L = 2.10), with no significant difference between the positive responses to the brands ($t(8) = -0.39$, $p > 0.05$). These brand names were used in studies 1 and 2.

A linear regression, with the liking scores as dependent variable (DV) and the absolute brand gender terms as measures of how strong the brand genders were perceived as independent variables (IV), resulted in a significant coefficient of $\beta = 0.809$ ($R^2 = 0.654$, $F(1,8) = 15.149$; $p < 0.01$). The regression is depicted in *Fig 1*. Strongly gendered brands were more appreciated and H1 could not be rejected. Findings from previous research was thus replicated (*Grohmann* 2009; *Lieven* 2014; *Lieven et al.* 2014; *Lieven et al.* in press).

4. Study 1: Brand Gender Matching

4.1. Study Design, Stimuli and Procedures

The purpose of study 1 was to test H2. An online consumer panel of 87 participants took part in this study (49.4 % female, M_{age} = 39.2, SD_{age} = 11.9; two respondents did not reveal genders and ages). The participants entered an online survey in which they were told to imagine that they were brand managers given the task of matching the brands that appeared to fit best with one another. To avoid product-related gender effects, the study gave the participants no information regarding the products associated with each brand. The participants were then successively presented with five initial brands, including one brand from each brand gender category (*Tab. 1*, first column). The brand from each category that exhibited the most pronounced brand gender in the pretest was chosen as the initial brand. The five brands that participants were able to match with each of the presented brands are listed in the first row of *Tab. 1*. The order in which the five initial brands and the matching options were displayed was randomized.

4.2. Results

The response frequencies for this matching task are presented in *Tab. 1*. The independent variable was the initial brand presented to the participants, which was manipulated in terms of brand gender, based on the results of pretest 4. The dependent variable was the matching brand chosen by the participants, with available selections that differed on the brand gender scale, based on the results of pretest 4. The selection of a brand was indicative of the selection of the brand's gender score. The distribution of the matching selections was significant ($\chi^2(16) = 176.385$, $p < 0.001$). The brand gender means revealed that consumers tended to match brands with similar genders. The highly feminine brand was typically matched with another feminine brand ($M_{highly\ feminine}$ = -1.00). Consumers perceived the feminine brand as the best match for the feminine brand ($M_{feminine}$ = -0.81). Similarly, the participants most frequently matched the neutral brand with a neutral brand ($M_{neutral}$ = -0.46), selected the masculine brand as the best match for a masculine brand ($M_{masculine}$ = 0.28) and chose a highly masculine brand to match with a highly masculine brand ($M_{highly\ masculine}$ = 2.57). As the results indicate, the gender-matching effect was stronger for masculine brands than for feminine brands. *Fig. 2* presents the results.

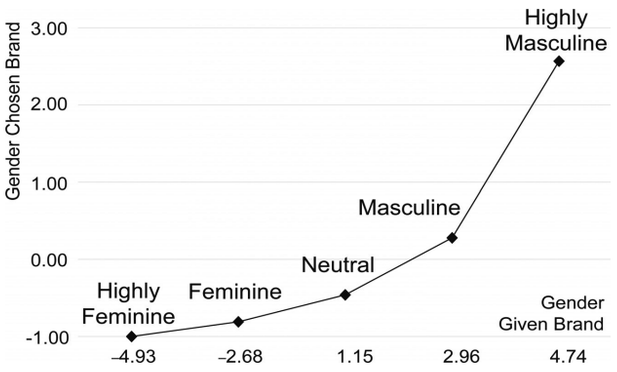
To test the relationship between the initial and the chosen brands, a repeated-measures analysis of variance was conducted. Mauchly's test showed that the assumption of sphericity had been violated (χ^2 (9) = 18.24, $p < 0.05$), therefore the degrees of freedom were corrected using Greenhouse-Geisser estimates of sphericity (**?** = 0.90).

Given Brand ↓		**Chosen Brand**						Average Gender per Row
	M_{BG}	*Erisa* –4.77	*Inany* –2.19	Yeren 0.54	Aloro 2.50	**Burt** 4.86	Total	
Adela	–4.93	23	28	8	24	4	87	-1.00
Belisi	–2.68	29	18	7	24	9	87	-0.81
Ceras	1.15	20	15	31	13	8	87	-0.46
Idano	2.96	12	20	11	40	4	87	0.28
Arton	4.74	8	6	11	14	48	87	2.56

Note: M_{BG} = Mean Brand Gender (-6.00 feminine, 6.00 masculine)

Note: M_{BG} = Mean Brand Gender (-6.00 feminine, 6.00 masculine)

Tab. 1: Frequency of brand matches



Note: low value = feminine gender, high value = masculine gender

Fig. 2: Brand matching choices

The results demonstrated that the initial brand had a significant main effect ($F(3.60, 309.20) = 17.40$, $p < 0.001$) on the choice of the second brand, supporting the validity of H2.

5. Study 2: The Influence of Brand Gender Similarity

5.1. Study Design, Stimuli and Procedures

The second study tested the effects of brand gender on the perceived alliance fit, brand fit, visual appeal and perceived unity of a brand alliance, as well as purchase intention regarding the brand alliance (H3). The brand alliances were created to allow the measurement of fit perception and purchase intention. To obtain brand alliances involving different brand genders, the ten brands identified in pretest 4 (*Tab. 1*) were crossed. These brands were divided into two groups, with each group containing a highly feminine, feminine, neutral, masculine and highly masculine brand. The brands were grouped randomly. Thus, the groups were not the same as the groups of the initial and chosen brands used in study 1. The initial brands in study 1 all exhibited stronger gender scores than the brands in the corresponding gender categories in the pool of chosen brands. Thus, to avoid consistently listing brands with stronger gender scores first in any potential brand alliance, different brand groupings were employed for study 2. Crossing the two brand groups that were generated for this study produced 25 brand alliances with different gender combinations.

An online consumer panel of 440 participants was included in the online study (n = 401, 50.6 % female, M_{Age} = 39.44, SD_{Age} = 12.42; 39 participants did not provide genders or ages). Each participant was asked to rate five randomly selected brand alliances out of the 25 on various 7-point scales. In particular, three items were used to measure brand-alliance fit ('good/bad', 'positive/negative' and 'favourable/unfavourable'; *Osgood/Suci/Tannenbaum* 1957; α = 0.97). To measure brand fit, the participants were asked whether the brands 'complemented each other' and whether they were 'consistent' (*Aaker/Keller* 1990; α = 0.92). The study measured visual appeal by asking the participants to rate the optical fit between the allied brands ('bad/good', 'pleasant/unpleasant', 'likable/not likable', 'flattering/unflattering', 'unattractive/attractive' and 'stylish/not stylish'; *Cox/Cox* 1998; α = 0.98). The study measured visual unity by asking the participants to rate the fit between the brand images of the allied brands ('low in unity/high in unity', 'poorly coordinated/well-coordinated', 'inconsistent/consistent'; *Bell/Holbrook/Solomon* 1991; α = 0.97). The study measured purchase intention regarding the brand alliance by asking the participants to use a 5-point scale to respond to the following three items: 1) 'Would you purchase a product by this brand alliance?'; 2) 'I'm likely to make a purchase/I'm unlikely to make a purchase'; and 3) 'I would like to receive more information/I would not like to receive more information' (*Rodgers* 2004; α = 0.91). Since the product category itself is an additional driver of gender perceptions (*Lieven et al.* in press), these questions were asked with no regard to specific products.

5.2. Results

A linear mixed model was used to explore how the similarity of the brand gender in a brand alliance related to alliance fit, brand fit, visual appeal, unity and purchase intention, with a random intercept included to account for the intercorrelation produced by repeated measures, as each participant rated 5 out of the 25 brand alliances. For each of the 25 possible brand alliances, the respective brand dissimilarity as the independent variable was calculated by the real distance between the respective two brand genders as the absolute value of their numerical difference ($|\text{Gender}_{\text{Brand 1}} - \text{Gender}_{\text{Brand 2}}|$) (*Tab. 2*). A value close to 0 indicated high similarity between the brand genders of the constituent brands, whereas a value close to ten indicated low similarity.

Brands		Adela	Inany	Yeren	Idano	Arton
	M_{BG}	-4.93	-2.19	0.54	2.96	4.74
Erisa	-4.77	0.16	2.59	5.31	7.73	9.64
Belisi	-2.68	2.25	0.50	3.22	5.64	7.42
Ceras	1.15	6.06	3.34	0.61	1.81	3.59
Aloro	2.50	7.43	4.69	1.96	0.46	2.24
Burt	4.86	9.79	7.05	4.32	1.90	0.12

Tab. 2: Absolute dissimilarity values for brand alliances ($|M_{BG1} - M_{BG2}|$)

The regression of these brand dissimilarities on alliance fit indicated that dissimilarity negatively affected alliance fit (b = -0.02, t = -2.59, p = 0.01), and the regression of brand dissimilarity on brand fit revealed that brand dissimilarity had negative effects on brand fit (b = -0.03, t = -3.07, p = 0.002). Therefore, H3a was supported.

The regression of brand dissimilarity on visual appeal demonstrated that brand dissimilarity negatively affected visual appeal (b = -0.04, t = -4.26, $p < 0.001$). Regression analysis also indicated that brand dissimilarity negatively affected perceived unity (b = -0.05, t = -5.92, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, the results of this study also supported H3b.

In accordance with H3c, regression analysis revealed that brand dissimilarity negatively influenced purchase intention (b = -0.01, t = -2.11, p = 0.035).

Additional analyses demonstrated that neither the sexes (all p values > 0.05, $Fs < 1.88$) nor the ages (p values > 0.05, $Fs < 0.676$) of the participants significantly affected their ratings for alliance fit, brand fit, visual unity, visual appeal or purchase intention. These findings supported H3.

6. Discussion

This investigation examined the role of brand gender in predicting the perceived brand fit, alliance fit, visual unity, visual appeal and purchase intention associated with co-brands. The results of the two studies indicate that co-brands with similar brand genders are perceived to fit better in an alliance than are co-brands with dissimilar brand genders. The results of the first study indicate that, if consumers are asked to match two brands in terms of fit, they will select brands with congruent brand genders. This result demonstrates that consumers perceive brand alliances between brands of the same gender as congruent combinations with high levels of perceived fit. This effect was stronger for masculine than for feminine brands, which suggests that consumers have more fluent responses to masculine brands than to feminine brands, interpreting masculine brands more quickly and easily. Consumers might regard matches between masculine brands as inherently more congruent than matches between feminine brands, and congruence may be enhanced if alliances involve brands with not only the same brand genders but also the same brand gender magnitudes. Future research could more comprehensively analyse this effect. The second study in this investigation demonstrates that, relative to brands with dissimilar genders, brands with similar genders form more successful co-brands that not only evoke positive consumer reactions with respect to perceived alliance fit, brand fit, visual appeal and visual unity, but also activate positive consumer behaviour by increasing purchase intention. These findings hold for both male and female consumers and are independent of consumer age.

Based on these findings, managers should include the gender of a potential partner brand in their evaluation criteria for prospective brand alliances. A high level of brand gender similarity is an important success factor for a brand alliance, although this factor appears to be more applicable to masculine than to feminine brands.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings from this investigation contribute to the brand-alliance literature and help to close the knowledge gap concerning brand gender fit perception. The use of congruency and fluency theories to explain how brand gender similarity affects fit perception expands the boundaries of the theories utilized in the co-branding literature. This investigation is the first attempt to examine brand gender fit as a basis for successful brand alliances. As indicated by the research results, brand gender is a salient characteristic for consumers and a sufficient fit criterion for brand alliances, even in the absence of additional brand personality information.

During the selection of appropriate stimuli, fictitious brand names that were represented in several type fonts were evaluated. Because of the extensive number of stimuli, a full factorial design was not used and this could lead to concerns that gender perceptions arising from brand names and type fonts are confounded. Prior research (*Lieven et al.* in press) using a full factorial design involving two brand names and four type fonts demonstrated, however, that a brand with a feminine (masculine) name is perceived as more feminine (masculine) written in each type font than a brand with a masculine (feminine) name using that same type font. Furthermore, brands written in a more feminine (masculine) type font were perceived as more feminine (masculine) for each of the two brand names than brands written in a less feminine (masculine) type font using that same name. Consequently, the existing evidence that brand name and type font act independent drivers of gender perceptions is relatively strong and can alleviate this concern. In Study 2, participants were first asked about fit characteristics for several pairs of brands. Thereafter, they stated their purchase intent. There could be a concern that the common source led to biased purchase intent ratings (*Podsakoff et al*. 2003). However, it is not far from reality that consumers who appreciate the alliance fit, have positive visual appeal and perceive unity also show higher purchase intentions. A Harman single factor test (*Harman* 1976) revealed that a one-factor solution explains more than 50 % of the variance which is an indication for a common source bias. The Varimax-rotated solution, however, showed two clear distinct groups, one with the three purchase intent items and one with alliance fit, visual appeal and perceived unity items. This suggests that it was appropriate to assess all constructs in one survey. Nevertheless, with real brands, the purchase intensions should be analysed in a separate survey.

The use of artificial brands and the focus on brand gender alone are limitations of this investigation. Surveys were conducted in Germany. Because both English and German are historically highly similar (*Bolinger* 1989) it

is reasonable to assume that sound symbolic effects such that front vowels represent feminine and back vowels represent masculine associations extend to the German language as well. Further research could employ real brands and analyse the importance of brand gender relative to other personality characteristics also in different countries and cultures. Although gender is a universally known category, its perception among consumers is influenced by social dynamics, belief systems and political views that assign stereotypes and culturally encoded expectations to each gender (*Maccoby* 1988). These influences might produce divergent cultural responses to gender-related co-branding characteristics in different nations. Future studies could conduct cross-cultural examinations to investigate cultural differences in perceptions of brand gender fit. In addition, subsequent research should incorporate product gender into the analysis, as product fit also plays a role in perceptions of brand-alliance fit (*Simonin/Ruth* 1998).

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