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On the difficulty of marketing food and drink products to men and/or women

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WORD COUNT: 4,400 WORDS

DATE: October 30th, 2018

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, food and drink marketers have become increasingly interested in the question of whether there are any meaningful sex/gender differences in the world of taste/flavour perception. However, it turns out that while there are a large number of individual differences in the experience of food/drink, few, if any, fall neatly along sex/gender lines. As such, the marketers of food and drink need to tread very carefully when it comes to marketing food or beverage products specifically at men, or more usually, women. All too often, the brands entering this space soon find their attempts branded crass and/or sexist. Adopting a stealthy or implicit gender-based product development strategy is therefore perhaps more likely to succeed than the explicit targeting of food/beverage-related products in what is undoubtedly a highly-politicized area. That said, the one area where the public appear willing to accept products that are explicitly targeted at men or women is in the case of nutritional foods/supplements.

KEYWORDS: FOOD MARKETING; SEX/GENDER; PERSONALIZATION; CUSTOMIZATION; NUTRITION.

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Introduction

According to the title of John Gray's bestselling book (Gray, 1992), men are from Mars and women from Venus. If one believes such a claim, then one surely has to question whether men and women should be given the same food and beverage products to consume, the same dishes to eat at restaurants, and/or the same drinks to imbibe. After all, people seem reasonably happy to accept that the two sexes/genders wear different clothes, shoes, and jewellery, use different home and personal care products, not to mention mostly choose different fragrances (e.g., Lindqvist, 2013). That said, when it comes to the world of food and drink, *unisex* offerings are the norm, and seemingly always have been. This lost opportunity to customize food and drink offerings might seem anachronistic, given the growing interest in food personalization/customization (see Dan, 2015; Spence, 2017; York, 2011).

Perhaps, though, the sexes really are not so different when it comes to the chemical senses. In fact, men and women might actually live in more or less similar taste worlds. In a recent review, Spence (submitted) provided a detailed summary of the many individual differences in taste/flavour perception that have been identified to date by researchers. As highlighted there, however, few of the individual differences identified over the last century fall neatly along sex/gender lines. Hence, while men and women clearly do differ (e.g., in terms of their average nutritional needs), it is not so clear that they actually live in different taste worlds. As such, food and drink companies need to think very carefully about the reason why their products need to be different for men and women. Often, as we will see below, the justifications that have been put forward have tended to irritate rather than convince the consumer. Indeed one of the problems is that the consumer may well suspect that the marketers/brands are simply trying to extract a price premium by appealing to a non-existent sex difference. This is the so-called 'pink-tax' – the name given to the observation that near-identical products (e.g., razors) tend to be more expensive for women (Carey, 2015; Malone, 2018).

In this review, I take a look at the largely negative response that various food, drink, and glassware manufacturers have run into recently when trying to customize their products for one or other sex/gender. Differences between men and women in terms of glassware, and product packaging, are also discussed briefly. At the outset, though, it should be acknowledged that talking about sex/gender¹ differences is controversial territory. Indeed, those launching new

¹ Note that sex and gender represent distinct constructs, with the former representing a biological construct while the latter represents a psycho-social-cultural construct (Rubin, 2009). However, as Chao et al (2017) noted recently, it is a particularly challenging issue to separate the biological versus social causes of any differences

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products specifically targeted at females have often run into trouble pretty quickly. For instance, just take the much-publicized backlash, both online and in the press, against Lady Doritos (Bruner, 2018), pink BrewDog IPA's 'beer for girls' (Sweney, 2018), Jane Walker whisky by Diageo (Paskin, 2018a), not to mention the female-friendly whisky glass (Paskin, 2018b). Such developments, all taken from 2018, are all too easily branded as sexist.²

While there is little evidence for meaningful sex/gender differences in the chemical senses (see Spence, submitted), it is certainly true that sex/gender differences in colour preferences have often been reported (e.g., see Hurlbert & Ling, 2007). That said, it is important to note that many of the sex-based colour conventions, such as pink for girls and blue for boys in clothing say (Alexander, 2003), while firmly entrenched in a number of cultures today, were often quite different in the not so distant past (e.g., see Grisard, 2017, for a review). One company who played, unsuccessfully, with gendered colour stereotypes in their product packaging earlier this year was *BrewDog*. They launched a new *BrewDog IPA* with a pink bottle label for women, contrasting with the brand's regular blue label. The company claimed that it would sell the pink labelled 'beer for girls' at a discount to anyone identifying as female, to highlight issues around gender pay inequality in the workplace. However, this (to some, crass) use of colour-sex/gender stereotypes didn't go down too well (e.g., see Sweney, 2018).³

Sex/gender-specific advertising

The heavily sexist advertising of decades gone by feels totally unacceptable in today's day-and-age, where the move (if not always fully realized) is toward gender equality. Indeed, looking back it is certainly hard to imagine the typical *Flake* chocolate advert, shown in the UK since the 1960s, succeeding today. This line of adverts was stopped by *Kraft* when they took over *Cadbury* back in 2010. In the iconic ads, there was often an attractive lady often luxuriating in a warm bath sensuously enjoying her chocolate treat. Note that the advert has often been criticized for its oral/phallic undertones (Edwards, 2010; though see also Cozens,

between men and women. Hence, the use of the term sex/gender here is intended to reflect this overlap (Fausto-Sterling, 2008).

² They also stand in marked contrast to the ironically-sexist advertising associated with the *Yorkie* chocolate bar from *Nestlé* (Heilpern, 2016).

³ It is also worth noting, in passing, that this kind of approach also runs the danger of setting the wrong expectations regarding the likely flavour of the product itself, if the consumer takes the colour cue to refer to product qualities (see Spence & Velasco, 2018, on the well-established impact of packaging colour on taste/flavour expectations, and thereafter, product perception).

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2001). It is pretty much inconceivable to imagine a man in the model's role. By contrast, the advertising of *Nestlé's Yorkie* chocolate went to the other extreme, with advertising slogans such as "It's not for girls"; "Don't feed the birds"; "Not available in pink"; & "King size not queen size" (Heilpern, 2016). In the latter case, the adverts typically showed a hungry (not to mention hairy) trucker gaining sustenance from the energy-giving chocolate bar, by biting off a 'manly' chunk. In both cases, there was only one unisex chocolate product, but in one the marketing positioned the product as an indulgent sensuous treat (*Flake*) whereas in the other, it was an on-the-go snack for a hungry worker (*Yorkie*).⁴ The implication being that the former would appeal to women while the latter would appeal more to the working man. See also Redfern (2002) on the female positioning of the *Echo (Fox's)* chocolate bar.

Problematic product launches explicitly targeting female consumers

Given what we have seen so far, it should come as little surprise to discover that it has proved especially difficult for food or beverage companies to launch new products targeted specifically at women. We have already come across the controversy associated with *BrewDog IPA's* pink-labelled 'beer for girls' (Sweney, 2018). In this section, I want to look at three other controversial product launches from the last year and the problems that the companies concerned have run into. This may provide a salutary lesson for others who may be thinking of entering this space.

Whisky for women

First, I will take a look at the launch of the *Jane Walker* brand. *Diageo's Johnnie Walker* has been distinguished by a man striding purposefully across the label of its whisky bottles for more than a century now.⁵ The brand recently came out with the *Jane Walker* brand, supposedly helping to support causes linked to female empowerment (see Paskin, 2018a).⁶ However, the move soon led to controversy when Stephanie Jacoby, vice president of the *Johnnie Walker* brand in the US was quoted as saying that the launch provided a means of appealing to a female

⁴ Though, despite its positioning, it turns out that a surprisingly large proportion of these chocolate bars were purchased/consumed by women.

⁵ Though the direction in which he strides was reversed in 1999 (<https://www.diageo.com/en/news-and-media/features/diageo-in-1999-johnnie-walker-launch-keep-walking-campaign/>).

⁶ Relevant here, KFC just announced its first female Colonel Sanders (Carr, 2018).

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audience because: “*Scotch as a category is seen as particularly intimidating by women... It’s a really exciting opportunity to invite women into the brand.*” (quoted by Bloomberg News). However, given the controversy that such comments understandably elicited amongst the press, Jacoby was soon forced to backtrack, saying that: ‘*This was not about creating a whisky for women; it was about taking our iconic Black Label and repackaging it in a way that celebrates women’s progress.*’ (quoted in Paskin, 2018a). Just take the following exchange:

“Do you really believe women are intimidated by whisky?”

‘I was of course quoted as saying that, but a better way to have put it is that the wonderful thing about whisky is that there is so much to learn. It is a category that at first can appear complex to anyone, much like when you’re learning about wine for the first time. There are so many layers, there’s so much to know, there’s a huge array to choose from. But it’s one of those things where once you take the first step it’s incredibly rewarding.’

So you believe whisky is difficult to understand regardless of gender?

‘Tastebuds have no gender, so there is absolutely no difference between a man’s and a woman’s palate, so that’s why at the heart of Jane Walker is Black Label, because we would never make a whisky for a woman’s palate, because that notion doesn’t really exist in my mind.’ (quoted in Paskin, 2018a)

Men and women are, though, widely held to have somewhat different preferences as far as alcoholic drinks are concerned. Furthermore, the latest sensory science research has highlighted differences between men and women in the case of wine-tasting (see Mora, Urdenata, & Chaya, 2018). These findings were soon picked-up by the press as showing that women make for better wine-tasters than men (e.g., see McGinn, 2018). Here, it is perhaps interesting to ask why Mora et al.’s suggestion that men and women taste wine differently hasn’t itself given rise to controversy. One possibility here is that it may seem more legitimate, and apparently uncontroversial, for sensory scientists to report on such sex/gender differences (as long as they are careful about what they attribute those differences to – genes or environment), it is another

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matter for a drinks brand, or glassware manufacturer to explicitly market a new product based on such apparent differences. Alternatively, however, it may as much be that explicit claims suggesting that women are ‘better’ tasters appears more acceptable to the general public than the implicit suggestion that ‘men’ are in some way better, or else are the ones who are currently catered for in a pre-existing product variant.

Gendered glassware

A second example of a problematic product launch concerns the ‘elegant and stylish’ whisky glassware from *Luxor Crystal*, based in Austria that was supposedly targeted specifically at women (Paskin, 2018b). The glass has rounded dimples on the lower part of the outer surface rather than the angular cut glass than one finds on many a traditional whisky glass (e.g., just think about the traditional Glencairn glass). Furthermore, the glass (which, apparently, is still at the concept stage) is also a little smaller than the traditional glass. For according to Luxor Crystal co-owner Caro Reindl: “*We wanted to create a new shape especially for women to enjoy their whisky with ice, or mixed or whatever. I think the normal whisky tumblers are often a little bit too big for the women’s hands*”. Note that, on average, men presumably have a slightly larger grip aperture than women, and will feel happier lifting somewhat heavier food or beverage packaging. There have been occasional anecdotal reports, for instance, of some women finding the cutlery at one London restaurant (in)famous for its weighty silverware too heavy (see Spence & Piqueras-Fizman, 2014).

However, almost as soon as they were announced, some commentators suggested that the new whisky glasses were ridiculous. Just take the following: “*Geraldine Murphy, founder of the Pot Still Whisky Girls club, said a glass designed specifically for women is ‘pretty ridiculous’. ‘The same as there is no such thing as a “woman’s whisky”, we do not need our own special glass.*” (quoted in Paskin, 2018a). The problem here is not that the glass may not make whisky more ‘approachable’ (or at least change how it is experienced by the drinker) but rather the implicit claim that women may need ‘help’ when it comes to enjoying whisky. So, to the extent that the glass really does have such an impact on the multisensory tasting experience, it might be better positioned at the whisk(e)y novice rather than specifically targeting the female drinker, given the numerous female whisky experts out there (e.g., see McCormack, 2017).

There is certainly evidence to suggest that the pointy angular, cut-glass indentations that one finds on a traditional whisky glass may do something different to the taste than the newly-

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designed glasses that have smooth sides covered with small round dimples. Indeed, given the literature on shape symbolism, feeling angularity (e.g., on the outer surface of a whisky glass) is likely to accentuate the harsh notes in the drink (see Deroy, Crisinel, & Spence, 2013, for a review). Furthermore, the latest research shows that drinking from a receptacle with a rounded outer texture can make a drink taste sweeter (Van Rompay, Finger, Saakes, & Fenko, 2017; though see also Machiels, 2018; and see Spence & Van Doorn, 2017, for a review), and giving a drink a sweeter-taste often helps initial acceptance of something that people initially find hard to palate.⁷

According to the results of consumer research, men and women prefer somewhat different shape of glassware. Some British women, for example, apparently did not like drinking beer from pint glasses, because it required them to reveal their neck to all and sundry, thus making them feel vulnerable (Spence & Wan, 2016). Having spotted a gap in the market, several brands have already started to design/introduce glassware especially for the female drinker who doesn't want to reveal too much (of her neck) (Black, 2010; Hook, 2009). In this case, however, the glassware was launched without any explicit mention that this glass was targeted at women. Indeed, given what we have seen so far in this article, implicitly targeting one's product at a certain section of the market (i.e., either men or women) is, then, perhaps more likely to work as a strategy than explicit gender stereotyping.

Lady Doritos

The third problematic product launch comes from *Frito Lay* with their *Lady Doritos*. According to *PepsiCo* CEO Indra Nooyi women: “*don't like to crunch too loudly in public. And they don't lick their fingers generously and they don't like to pour the little broken pieces and the flavor into their mouth.*” (Bruner, 2018). Nooyi continued: “*The brand has been working on developing chips that are “low-crunch” with the same “taste profile,” but with less of the flavour sticking to fingers. “And how can you put it in a purse?” Nooyi mused; apparently the current chip bags aren't cutting it for the handbag wielders of the world. “Because,” she said, “women love to carry a snack in their purse.*” However, following online criticism, the company were again forced to clarify their position. According to Paskin (2018a): “*The*

⁷ Note here, in passing, that many years ago, Louis Cheskin worked on a project with Fleishmann's Gin in North America in which the corners of the label were rounded specifically because he argued that the change would be more appealing to women (who, at the time this change was made, accounted for almost 40% of shoppers at the liquor store; see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Cheskin).

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reporting on a specific Doritos product for female consumers is inaccurate,” a spokeswoman told PEOPLE. “We already have Doritos for women — they’re called Doritos, and they’re enjoyed by millions of people every day. At the same time, we know needs and preferences continue to evolve and we’re always looking for new ways to engage and delight our consumers.”

Physical & nutritional differences

While I am not aware of any successful launches of food or beverage products targeted specifically at women, it is worth noting that the one area where gendered products have proved acceptable is in the area of nutritional supplements (e.g., see <https://www.vitabiotics.com/wellman>; <https://www.vitabiotics.com/wellwoman>; see also the Seven Seas Perfect 7 nutritional supplements for men and women). What is more, no one seems to have any problem with the idea that nutritional supplements should be targeted specifically at men and women (Malone, 2018). For instance, many women will obviously need more iron than men, because they lose iron when menstruating. Furthermore, given that men are larger than women, on average, there are recognized differences in terms of the recommended daily intake of calories.

However, it is worth stressing the fact that these recommendations are usually more about the quantity rather than the quality or taste/flavour of that which is being offered for sale. As the Harvard Medical School put it when considering calorie intake: “Men and women are 98.5% identical in their DNA, and their nutritional needs are more similar than different. That’s certainly true of calories; in this case, at least, men act just like big women.” (Anonymous, 2006). So, for example, a moderately active 125-pound woman needs 2000 calories a day compared to 2,800 calories for a similarly-active 175-pound man (Anonymous, 2006). In terms of the recommended daily allowance of vitamins and essential macro- and micro-nutrients, there are also sex differences but often they are small. Intriguingly, one area where clear sex differences in recommended allowance do emerge is in relation to cancer-causing ingredients/foods such as alcohol for women (associated with an increased risk of breast cancer, and hence have a recommended allowance half that of men). For men, the concern is with dietary fat (specifically alpha-linolenic acid, ALA) and calcium (both associated with an increased risk of prostate cancer). However, it would seem unlikely that any marketer would

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want to enter into a discussion with the consumer about which product (or product size) was associated with a lower-risk of cancer (see Anonymous, 2006).

As these various examples (both successful and unsuccessful) have hopefully made clear, any company hoping to launch a new product specifically for one sex needs to think carefully about, and may need to make a commitment to, the kind of sex difference that their product is targeting, and its cause(s) – i.e., is it a genetically-determined sensory difference, a psychological difference resulting from disparities in socialization between the sexes, or a physical, and/or nutritional difference.

Conclusions

As we have seen in this review, one of the problems with trying to market separate food and beverage products explicitly to male and female consumers is that it runs counter to the everyday intuition of consumers that men and women actually live in the same taste world, and that sensory receptors simply are not gendered. To the extent that this claim is true (see Spence, submitted), one can perhaps understand why it is that women become suspicious/offended when the food marketers try to offer them a product that has been ‘specially’ formulated just for them. One of the problems relates to concerns about a ‘pink-tax’, the name given to the observation that near-identical products are more expensive for women (Carey, 2015; Malone, 2018).

A second potential concern here is that when one formulates/creates a new version of an already-existing product especially for one sex (normally women), then it can be taken to imply that the original (unisex) product was, in some sense, designed for the other sex. Given that the majority of sex/gender-specific product launches in the food and beverage space (or at least those that generate controversy) are designed ‘especially for women’, the implicit suggestion is that a food or beverage product has in some sense been developed to satisfy men’s taste buds that many customers/commentators find undesirable. One obvious solution here would simply be to come out with product variants targeted at both sexes/genders, and by so doing try to bypass concerns about the current state of the market. The final problem that has been mentioned at several points in the text is that by targeting a product at one sex/gender, based on psychological differences between men and women, one may be seen as supporting the

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inequality that can all too easily look dated, and undoubtedly fails to fit with the current gender equality *zeitgeist*.

Taken together, therefore, there is little evidence to suggest that explicitly targeting a new product launch at one or other sex/gender will be a successful strategy. There are simply too many reasons why such an approach will fail, this despite the clear evidence for the increasing popularity of personalization/customization in the marketplace for food and drink products/experiences (see Spence, 2017).

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