

The interest in gender-neutral marketing among Generation Z

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Bachelor's thesis

December 2019

Business and Administration

Degree Programme in Business Administration

Author(s) Nykänen, Hanne	Type of publication Bachelor's thesis	Date December 2019 Language of publication: English
	Number of pages 64	Permission for web publication: x
Title of publication The interest in gender-neutral marketing among Generation Z		
Degree programme Business Administration		
Supervisor(s) Välimäki Nina		
Assigned by -		
Abstract <p>The purpose of the thesis was to examine how interested Generation Z was in gender-neutral marketing. The goal was to study and explain what gender-neutral marketing is, and how and why companies should consider making their marketing communications gender neutral. Another goal was to determine what Generation Z was like and how and why marketers should target them.</p> <p>A quantitative research method was used to conduct the research. The goal of the research was to discover how important gender neutrality in marketing communications was for the Finnish Generation Z members. The research was carried out by using an online survey and it was shared to Finnish Generation Z members on different social media channels. The theoretical basis covered the necessary terms for understanding the thesis and explain the current state of gender neutrality in marketing and how genders have traditionally been used in marketing communications. It was also explained what Generation Z was like as a consumer group, what were their special characteristics and views on gender equality and the fluidity of genders, and how companies should market to this group.</p> <p>97 respondents took part in the survey. The results indicated that gender neutral marketing was important among Generation Z and many saw it as a tool to improve equality. Moreover, it implied that Generation Z considered categorizing products based on gender unnecessary and stereotypes mostly harmful. The results led to a conclusion that the companies trying to target this generation should make their marketing gender neutral.</p>		
Keywords/tags (subjects) gender neutrality, marketing, generation Z, marketing communications		

Tekijä(t) Nykänen Hanne	Julkaisun laji Opinnäytetyö, AMK	Päivämäärä joulukuu 2019
	Sivumäärä 64	Julkaisun kieli englanti
		Verkkojulkaisulupa myönnetty: x
Työn nimi The interest in gender-neutral marketing among Generation Z		
Tutkinto-ohjelma Liiketalouden tutkinto-ohjelma		
Työn ohjaaja(t) Nina Välimäki		
Toimeksiantaja(t) -		
<p>Tiivistelmä</p> <p>Opinnäytetyön tarkoituksena oli selvittää Z-sukupolven kiinnostus sukupuolineutraaliin markkinointiviestintään. Opinnäytetyön tavoitteena oli selvittää ja selittää, mitä sukupuoli-neutraali markkinointi tarkoittaa ja miksi ja miten yritysten kannattaisi tehdä markkinointiviestinnästään sukupuolineutraalia. Tämän lisäksi tavoitteena oli selvittää, millainen on Z-sukupolvi ja miten ja miksi yritysten kannattaa markkinoida heille.</p> <p>Tutkimustapana käytettiin kvantitatiivista tutkimusta. Tutkimus toteutettiin verkkokyselyn avulla. Tutkimuksen kohderyhmä oli Z-sukupolveen kuuluvat suomalaiset ja tutkimusta jaettiin sosiaalisen median kanavissa. Opinnäytetyön teoriaosuudessa selitettiin sukupuoli-neutraali markkinointi terminä ja selvitettiin, millainen on sen käytön tämänhetkinen tilanne ja miten sukupuoliä on tavanomaisesti käytetty markkinoinnissa. Teoriaosuudessa käytiin läpi myös Z-sukupolvi kuluttajaryhmänä sekä Z-sukupolven erityispiirteet ja heidän suhtautumisensa sukupuolen moninaisuuteen ja eri sukupuoli-identiteetteihin. Teoriaosuudessa selitettiin myös, miten tälle sukupolvelle kannattaa markkinoida.</p> <p>Verkkokyselyyn vastasi 97 suomalaista Z-sukupolven jäsentä. Tulokset osoittivat, että sukupuoli-neutraali markkinointiviestintä on tärkeää Z-sukupolven keskuudessa ja monet kokevat sen tasa-arvoa edistävänä asiana. Tulosten perusteella Z-sukupolvi pitää stereotyyppisiä harmillisina ja pitävät tuotteiden sukupuolittamista suurilta osin turhana. Tulokset johtivat johtopäätökseen, että Z-sukupolvelle markkinoivien yritysten kannattaa tehdä markkinointiviestinnästään sukupuoli-neutraalia.</p>		
Avainsanat (asiasanat) sukupuolineutraali, markkinointi, markkinointiviestintä, Z-sukupolvi		

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1 Introduction

Armstrong and Kotler (2010, 29) define marketing as *“a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating and exchanging products and value with others”*.

A company must choose who they target with their marketing. For diverse markets, market segmentation is the best approach. Ferrel and Pride (2014, 20) define marketing segmentation as *“the process of dividing a total market into groups, or segments, that consist of people or organizations with relatively similar product needs*. Market segmentation means dividing markets into smaller segments that can be reached more effectively by offering products designed for their unique needs (Kotler & Armstrong 2010, 216).

Market segmentation leads to groups – market segments – in which the members react to the marketing stimuli in a similar way than the other members of that group, but in a different way compared to other segments. If there is no difference between reactions of two groups, there is no reason to distinguish them. Thus, for instance, women and men being physiologically different is not a sufficient reason for segmenting – there needs to be differences in the way they react to the marketing stimuli. It is essential to understand the buying motives and behavior of one’s target group (Bergh, Geuens & Pelsmacker 2018).

The company must choose which segmentation criterion to use. Segmentation criterion means the nature of the information that’s used for market segmentation. The most typical segmentation criteria are geographic, socio-demographic, psychographic, and behavioral. Socio-demographic segmentation criteria include factors such as age, gender, income and education. (Dolnicar, Grün & Leisch 2018, 41–43.) One way for a company to segment their target market is to segment them based on their age groups. Dividing the market by their generational cohort is known as generational marketing. (Knowles 2017.)

Generation Z – people born in 1996 or later – has already emerged in the consuming market and is said to be the largest consumer group by 2020. They are already said to influence 93 % of household purchases. (Jörg 2017.) Hence, they are an important consumer group, and a segment that companies should consider. Generation Z has its unique characteristics compared to previous generations, so marketers need to learn about them in order to effectively target them.

According to Shahriar and Sultana (2017), the consuming culture has been gendered all through history. Brands have marketed their products to certain groups of people depending on their gender – for instance, fashion for girls and sports items for boys (Miller 2017). Gender stereotyping has been common for all types of products for decades (Gilliland 2017).

During the recent years, gender identity and gender roles have been dominating the conversation (Friedman 2017). Gender role means how people are expected to act, speak and dress based upon their assigned sex. Every society has gender role expectations, but they differ from group to group. (What are gender roles and stereotypes? N.d.) However, traditional expectations of femininity and masculinity are changing, and the conversation about gender equality and diversity is increasing (Lord 2019). Especially members of Generation Z are rejecting traditional stereotypes (Claveria 2019). A stereotype is *“a fixed, over generalized belief about a particular group or class of people”* (McLeod 2015).

Gender neutrality means avoiding gender bias (Malta: The Way Forward: Gender Neutrality and Gender Inclusion 2019). Gender neutrality is the absence and detachment of the gender spectrum. It aims at rejecting the gender constructs of society, and breaking gender boundaries and gender roles. (Gross 2017.) Gender-neutrality in marketing means leaving the stereotypes behind (Gender Neutral Marketing: What It Is and Why You Should Do It 2018).

The topic was chosen because it interested the author due to its importance both from a marketing and gender equality perspective. It is a topic that is new but increasingly important while the gender conversation goes on and the youngest

members of Generation Z, the next significant consumer group, mature. Marketing communications use a great deal of gendered products and gender stereotypes, which should be questioned since they might be harmful or discriminatory.

There is some research and literature done on Generation Z, which are used as sources in this thesis, and which provide a little insight into Generation Z's opinion on gender neutrality. Gender neutral marketing, however, is a relatively new and unfamiliar concept, so there is little literature covering that topic. The freshness of the topic, however, is also one of the reasons for it being chosen to be the topic of this thesis.

The goal of this thesis was to provide better understanding of gender neutrality and how and why to use it in marketing communications, and to introduce Generation Z as a consumer group. The aim was to study the existing secondary material to build up a conceptual framework, and then, based on that, conduct a quantitative study to determine how important gender neutrality in marketing communications was among Generation Z members. The quantitative study focused on Finnish Generation Z members.

2 Research Design

2.1 The research question

After choosing a research topic, the next step is to formulate a research problem. Each research should have a research problem to which an answer is searched by using research materials and methodologies. (Kananen 2015, 46). The research problem of this paper was "The interest in gender-neutral marketing among Generation Z".

The research problem is converted into a research question to make the work easier. The research problem can be solved with the right questions. It is possible to have one or several research questions. (Kananen 2015, 46–48.)

The research question for this study was:

- How interested is Generation Z in gender-neutral marketing?

Other research questions supporting the main question were

- What is gender-neutral marketing and why should companies use it in their marketing communications?
- What is Generation Z like?
- Why and how should companies market to Generation Z?

2.2 Research approach

Research approaches are divided into two: qualitative and quantitative approaches. Qualitative research aims to find an explanation or understanding to a phenomenon, whereas in quantitative research, a theory exists, and it is applied to the phenomenon. (Kananen 2015, 58.) A quantitative approach was chosen for this research for several reasons.

Quantitative research asks questions, such as “how”, “why”, “how many/much/of-ten”, “to what extent” or “what is the cause of a particular effect” (Benzo, Fourali & Mohsen 2017). Quantitative research provides objective results because the researcher does not affect the results. Quantitative research studies variables, which can be, for example, one’s gender, age or an opinion. (Vilkka 2007, 13-14.)

The population in this study consisted of Finnish members of Generation Z. The purpose of quantitative research is to collect data from a group of people and then generalize the results to a larger group of people to explain a phenomenon (Bhatia 2018). In this research, the data was collected from a group of Finnish Generation Z members in order to generalize the results to the Finnish Generation Z at large. Thus, the aim of quantitative research fitted the goal of the present study.

Another reason for choosing a quantitative method for this research was that with a quantitative method it is possible to collect data from a large sample, which allows for better accuracy when generalizing based on a group of people. The quantitative

approach makes it easier to combine and measure the results. (Regoli n.d.) A recommendable number of respondents for quantitative research is at least 100. The larger the sample, the better it represents the population. (Vilkkä 2007, 17.)

2.3 Data collection and analysis method

Data collection means the procedure of collecting, measuring and analyzing data for one's research. In most cases, it is the most crucial step of a research process. (Bhat n.d.)

The types of primary quantitative research can be divided into four distinctive methods. These methods are survey research, correlational research, causal-comparative research and experimental research. Survey research is the most essential tool for quantitative research studies, and can be, for instance, online polls, online surveys or paper questionnaires. (Surendran n.d.).

The chosen collection method for this research was an Internet questionnaire consisting of open and closed questions. One reason for choosing this method was that Generation Z spends plenty of time online and is said to be eager to share their opinions there. An online survey was also less time-consuming, more affordable, and allowed the author to reach more people. With them, large amounts of data can be collected in a short period of time. Online surveys are user-friendly because the respondents can do them at home at a convenient time for them, and they can be offered the option to pause the survey and continue later, which allows the respondents to think about their answers for a longer period of time. Thus, in the end, their answer might be more elaborate and accurate. (Six Key Advantages of Online Surveys 2012.)

First, the results of the survey are converted into statistics and charts by using the reporting tool of Webropol. Then, cross tabulation is used to analyze the results of the closed questions. Cross tabulation is usually used in statistical analyses – especially in market research or survey responses which makes it suitable for this research as well. Cross tabulation divides data into groups to understand the correlation and

relationships between different variables. With cross tabulation, better insights can be gained. (Aprameya 2016.)

Cross tabulation can be evaluated by using the Chi-Square (χ^2) test. The test determines whether different variables are independent of each other and if there's a statistical relationship between them. χ^2 -test yields a p-value as a result. If the p-value is less than .05, there is a statistical relationship between the variables. (Using Chi-Square Statistic in Research n.d.)

The results of open questions are analyzed by using thematic analysis. In thematic analysis, patterns and repeating themes that are relevant to the research question are searched in the data. Hereinafter, the topics that are relevant to the research problem are sorted out from the rest of the data. Quotations are used as examples of the data. (Hiltunen n.d.)

2.4 Reliability and validity

Reliability means the stability of results. If a study was done again and the results would stay the same, it would mean the research was reliable. Validity of the research means measuring the right factors by using the right measuring tool and that the conclusions are consistent with the material and results. If a study is valid, the practice supports the results; thus, the phenomenon occurs as it is supposed to according to the theory. Validity is ensured by using a research method that is right for the given research and measuring the right factors to answer the research questions. (Kananen 2014, 262.)

External validity refers to the generalizability of the results. The generalizability of the results is good if the sample represents the population or if the results also hold true in a comparable situation. (Kananen 2014, 263.) In this research, the goal was to reach at least 100 or more Finnish Generation Z members and ask them to participate in the survey to ensure the validity and generalizability of the results.

Content validity means the connection between the measurement methods and theory (Kananen 2014, 263). In this research, terms, such as gender-neutral marketing communications are explained first and then used in the research context. Moreover, the term Generation Z is defined since that was the generation that was researched.

External validity is difficult to measure in web surveys because the population is often unknown. It is not always possible to measure how many people visited the web page. Full generalizability of the results would require that those, who took part in the survey, represent all those of the target group who visited the web page where the survey was shared. (Kananen 2014, 264.) In this research, this might also be a problem. The survey was shared online, so that it was not possible to know the exact response rate.

Measuring reliability could be done by rerunning the survey. However, that is not always possible nor recommended. In addition, using different meters for measuring the same factor in one survey would test reliability, but it is also not recommended since it might confuse the respondents. (Kananen 2014, 259–261.) This was not done in this study either for the reasons mentioned above, and due to the lack of time.

An online survey eliminates the interviewer error. The interviewer error refers to the way in which the interview can influence the respondent through factors, such as their tone of voice. Without the possibility of the interview error, the accuracy of the results is better. (Six Key Advantages of Online Surveys 2012.) Online survey was used in this research so the accuracy and thus, reliability, would be better due to the lack of the interview error.

Validity has to do with planning the research, the research problem and analyzing the causal connections accurately. On the other hand, reliability is mainly about carrying out the survey and the constancy of the results. (Kananen 2014, 260.)

3 Gender neutrality in marketing

Marketing is often thought only as selling and advertising even though it should be understood in the sense of satisfying customer needs. Marketing starts before a company has a product and continues all through the product's life. The goal of marketing is said to be to make selling unnecessary: it aims at understanding the customer so well that the product sells itself. (Kotler & Armstrong 2010, 29.)

3.1 Genders in marketing

For centuries, the society has linked gender to one's biological sex while making stereotypes and norms about how the genders are expected to behave and look (Miller 2017). Men and women have been presented to be the opposite of each other in advertising. There has hardly been a representation of the fluid way a person could be both masculine and feminine. (Trends 2016: Gender Neutral Marketing 2016.)

Gender has enabled companies to segment their offerings into distinct groups which are considered to have similar wants and needs. Using gender as a framework has been relevant when binary genders were dominant in society. (Shahriar & Sultana 2017.) However, now, everything from politics to products, advertising and pop culture is shifting towards a more equal, more open-minded attitude concerning gender (Trends 2016: Gender Neutral Marketing 2016).

Gender and different genders

The terms *sex* and *gender* have traditionally been used interchangeably despite not being equivalent (Understanding Gender n.d.). However, their uses are becoming more distinct (Newman 2018) now that understanding of gender is evolving (Understanding Gender n.d.).

The term *sex* refers to the biological differences between men and women (Newman 2018). A newborn's sex is assigned at birth based on the genitals of the baby – thus, generally, a female or a male (Understanding Gender n.d.). In some cases, the baby is born with a mix between female and male genitalia. These individuals are referred to

with the term intersex. (Newman 2018.) Once the baby's sex is assigned, their gender is presumed to match it (Understanding Gender n.d.).

Gender is a more complex term. The World Health Organization defines gender as *"the socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men"*. They add that it *"varies from society to society"*. (Gender, Equity and Human Rights n.d.) GLAAD – the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation – defines gender as *"one's internal, personal sense of being a man or woman"* (Newman 2018). It is no longer seen solely as a biological term (Collins 2018).

A gender identity means one's internal sense of their gender (Brabaw 2019). Occasionally, the sex a person got assigned at birth does not match with their gender identity. These people are generally called transgender, non-binary or gender non-conforming. (Newman 2018.) Cisgender is a term used to describe the people whose gender identity matches their birth sex (Brabaw 2019). Agender people identify with no gender (Collins 2018).

Gender is not limited to male or female (Collins 2018). Albeit the majority identify as man or woman, not everyone's gender identity matches one of those (Newman 2018). A poll conducted in 2015 discovered that most of the adults between ages 18–34 see gender as a spectrum rather than a woman/man binary (Understanding Gender n.d.). Several indigenous cultures had a concept of three or more genders which means the gender binary is a relatively new concept (McGuire 2018).

Gender fluidity and neutrality

Gender fluidity describes fluctuating between more than one gender, or between having a gender and not having one. Gender fluid people typically feel like a mix of female and male. On some days they tend to feel more feminine, other days more masculine. (Collins 2018.)

Gender fluidity can be displayed in how one dresses, expresses and describes themselves (Booker 2016). This can be called gender expression, which GLAAD describes as “*external manifestations of gender, expressed through one's name, pronouns, clothing, haircut, behavior, voice, or body characteristics*” (Newman 2018). Notably young people have become more comfortable with expressing their gender as a result of information and experiences shared on the Internet as well as the emergence of gender-fluid celebrities (Booker 2016).

There are proven benefits to embracing gender fluidity. Studies have discovered that stiff gender roles can be toxic and cause issues such as unequal pay and the common disbelief of the male victims of sexual assault. (McGuire 2018.) Gender fluidity is a concept that is being championed specifically by young people. Nonetheless, it can be challenging to be precise about the topic because it is still evolving. (Collins 2018.)

It is essential to know the difference between gender-neutral and terms such as non-binary, nonconforming, and genderfluid. The latter terms signify identification outside the binary division, whereas gender-neutral is more about a way of being than an identity. (9 Ways to Be More Gender-Neutral Every Day 2018.)

What is changing?

The internet has made the conversation global (Beyond Binary: The lives and choices of Generation Z 2018) and it is a significant factor in the self-discovery process today. Particularly young people have access to a substantial amount of information and the means to contact people all over the world to build communities and talk about their experiences. Not being the only one makes it easier to break down traditional stereotypes. (Tsjeng 2016.) People have been starting to demand for more tolerance (Dua 2016), and they insist to know where brands, celebrities and politicians stand on gender rights and equality (Beyond Binary: The lives and choices of Generation Z 2018).

In general, media portrayals have a considerable effect on how people view non-binary people. In 2015, Caitlyn Jenner – previously known as Bruce Jenner – came out as transgender on the cover of Vanity Fair, which added to the gender conversation.

(Branson-Potts 2015.) Other celebrities that have sparked the discussion are, for instance, a transgendered actress Laverne Cox and a gender-fluid singer Miley Cyrus (Dua 2016). This has made people feel like they personally know a transgender person, which might in turn result in them having a greater understanding of the concept (Branson-Potts 2015).

3.2 Why and how to make marketing gender neutral

Making marketing gender-neutral means being gender-inclusive, showing femininity and masculinity as fluid, and eliminating all the gender assignments (Trends 2016: Gender Neutral Marketing 2016).

Since 2015, the market research company Mintel has been predicting that gender-neutral products will be a major international trend. In their Global Beauty Trends Report for 2018, they note that consumers are moving away from traditional stereotypes and expectations concerning gender. (Davis 2018.) People are exploring their gender more than ever before (Is gender-neutral branding the future? 2017) and the society is becoming increasingly tolerant and accepting (Davis 2018).

Companies are starting to blur gender lines in one of the two ways: they are either starting to make and label brands as unisex or challenging traditional gender stereotypes (Shahriar & Sultana 2017). Having traditional demographics redefined can be challenging, but people do not want to be boxed in anymore and are calling an end to products being marketed specifically towards men or women (Johnstone n.d.). Especially Generation Z reacts more positively to brands that have a gender-fluid approach (Collins 2018).

Brands need to know who their customers are and reflect their values in their brand positioning (Is gender-neutral branding the future? 2017). Brand positioning means *“arranging for a market offering to occupy a clear, distinctive and desirable place relative to competing products in the minds of target consumers”* (Kotler & Armstrong 2010, 216). Consumers want brands to focus on authenticity, and gender stereotypes have no place in that (Is gender-neutral branding the future? 2017).

To embrace gender ambiguity, companies first need to understand their target market (Claveria 2019). According to Davis (2018), shopping in a world, where products and advertisements indicate that differing from the binary gender rules is unacceptable, can be challenging for nonbinary people. That is another reason why a gender-inclusive approach is needed. Companies need to focus on individual interests and passions instead of gender (Shahriar & Sultana 2017) since purchases are driven by attributes (Friedman 2017).

In some cases, it might not be possible or desirable for a brand to be gender-neutral (Is gender-neutral branding the future? 2017), but first and foremost, gender-neutrality is a trend that the brands should jump on to stay relevant to their target market (Trends 2016: Gender Neutral Marketing 2016). The most significant aspect is to focus on a consumer's personality and lifestyle, not their gender (Collins 2018). By promoting a gender-neutral image, brands redefine their market (Gilliland 2017), and open themselves to a new group of consumers (Grek 2019).

3.3 Gender neutrality in marketing – current situation

According to Davis (2018), sales and marketing trends are starting to show a major change. For the past years, there has been a growing trend towards gender-neutral marketing (Trends 2016: Gender Neutral Marketing 2016).

Brands are abandoning traditional stereotypes and opting for more gender-progressive marketing campaigns (Trends 2016: Gender Neutral Marketing 2016). In 2015, Coke and 7-Eleven launched a successful campaign against gender stereotypes in the US (Miller 2017). Coca-Cola created special cans for 7-Eleven for the "Dude or Diva" campaign. With the cans, teenagers were able to share both sides of their personality – the dude side and the diva side. (Dua 2016.) The concept was designed as young people want to have fun with their identity by different means of self-expression (Claveria 2019).

A few brands have suffered backlash for using gender stereotyping. For instance, a shoe manufacturer Clarks received negative attention for putting out two shoe

ranges, which were called “Dolly Babe” for girls and “Leaders” for boys. The girls’ shoes were not as sturdy as the boys’ ones nor as suitable for sports. They were forced to pull the ranges out of their stores. Another example is Gap, who was criticized for their new clothing range advertisement in which the girls were called “social butterflies” and the boys “little scholars”. (Is gender-neutral branding the future? 2017.)

More brands and stores than ever before are embracing gender-neutral fashion (Lieber 2018). In addition, an increasing number of makeup brands are offering products for all genders, including brands such as Fenty Beauty, Panacea and ASOS (6 Of the Best Gender-Neutral Beauty Brands n.d.). These are not the only industries defying traditional gender roles – industries such as toys, tools, and sports are doing the same (Shahriar & Sultana 2017).

However, not everyone nor every brand is in favor of gender-neutral marketing and branding. When it comes to online shopping, it can be easier to have products categorized by gender. (Is gender-neutral branding the future? 2017.) Gendered products have been said to speed up the buying decisions (Shahriar & Sultana 2017). Nonetheless, according to a study conducted by the market research firm Canadean, the traditional gender roles will play less and less prominent role in the consumers’ lives over the next 10 years (Dua 2016).

4 Marketing to Generation Z

4.1 Generation Z

A generation refers to a group of people who are born around the same time. People who belong to the same generation tend to share similar characteristics, values, and preferences. Currently, the society is constructed of five generations, which are presented on Table 1. (Generational Breakdown: Info About All of the Generations n.d.) A new generation forms approximately every 15 to 20 years and is shaped by world events and cultural trends occurring at that moment (Grabinger & Sladek 2018).

Table 1. Different generations

The name of the generation	The birth years of the generation's members
Silent Generation	–1945
Baby Boomers	1946-1964
Generation X	1965-1976
Millennials (Generation Y)	1977-1995
Generation Z	1996–?

There is no consensus on the exact years of birth of the Generation Z (Desjardins 2019), but it is often considered to mean people born in 1996 or later (Earls 2017). It is estimated that during 2019, Generation Z will comprise 32 % of the global population. The second largest group, the Millennials, will fall behind with 31,5 %. (Miller & Lu 2018.)

Generation Z represents the youngest generation with the biggest lifetime value (What Makes Gen Z Fall in Love with a Brand? N.d.). They are said to have a combined buying power of approximately 43 billion dollars and additional 600 billion dollars' influence on the spending of their families (Schawbel 2014). By 2020, they are estimated to make up 40 % of the consumers in the U.S., Europe and the BRIC states (Jörg 2017).

4.2 Characteristics and values of Generation Z

As reported by Segran (2016), it is impossible to have definitive conclusions about this generation's lifestyles and world views yet, as numerous Gen Z members have not even started school. Nevertheless, Segran (2016) adds that a few trends have emerged within the older Generation Z members' behavior.

Generation Z is the first generation to grow up with the digital world (Bawden-Davis 2018). They are the so-called true digital natives. Since they were born, they have been exposed to modern technology, Internet, mobile systems, and social networks

(Francis & Hoefel 2018). To them, technology is not a tool but a part of who they are (Grabinger & Sladek 2018). Generation Z spends approximately six to nine hours a day consuming media, and 92 % of them go online daily (Earls 2017).

Gen Zers approach their finances with careful planning. Furthermore, 76 % of them are already earning money through part-time work, and nearly a half are planning to become entrepreneurs. (Wolinsky 2018.) Generation Z wants to feel passionate about the work they do. For them, the purpose of their work matters more than a high salary. (Gumbs 2017.)

Generation Z is said to become the most well-educated generation yet (Graf, Igielnik & Parker 2019). They have nearly an unlimited source of information within their reach, which allows them to gain a great deal of knowledge as well as exposure to different topics and issues in the world. As a result of this, they want instant gratification. (Clark 2019.)

60 % of Generation Z want to make a positive difference in the world (Martin n.d.). The most valued topics for Generation Z are equality, diversity, human rights and animal welfare (A Generation Without Borders n.d.). In addition, they are a significantly tolerant generation: they were born in a more diverse world compared to the previous generations (7 Unique Characteristics of Generation Z 2018). 50 % of Gen Zers think that society is not sufficiently tolerant of non-binary people (Graf, Igielnik & Parker 2019). Gen Zers find it meaningful to defend causes that are related to identity (Francis & Hoefel 2018) – for example, transgender rights (Earls 2017). According to the Cassandra Gender Report, 60 % of the surveyed participants, who were ages 14–34-years old, say the gender lines have been blurred, and that women and men have no need to follow traditional gender roles (Follows 2017).

Generation Z values individuality and avoids labels. They do not define themselves through stereotypes. They want to experiment with different ways of being themselves, and thus, shape their identities over time. (Francis & Hoefel 2018.) They want to be defined by who they are, meaning their personalities, passions and values, not by what they are (Gen Z refuses to have its gender put in a box 2019).

4.3 How to market to Generation Z

It is necessary to understand Generation Z to earn their trust. Already in 2017, 77 % of Generation Z members were earning their own money. This means the percentage of Generation Z earning and using money is approximately the same as that of Millennials. If a company's marketing is still focused on Millennials, they might be replaced in the marketplace. (Bawden-Davis 2018.)

Generation Z is less trusting of brands compared to the older generations (Segran 2016) - only 22 % of this generation say that they somewhat or completely trust the posts that companies or brands publish online (Schawbel 2014). Generation Z is less brand-conscious and less motivated by loyalty programs so keeping them as customers requires additional work (Law 2019).

Marketing to Generation Z must rely on technology (12 Ways to Market to Generation Z). They do not tolerate inefficient technology. If a website or an app is too slow, they will not make purchases there. (Bawden-Davis 2018.) 75 % of Generation Z say their most used device is a mobile phone or a smart phone, which is also their most regularly used device for making online purchases (Law 2019). Therefore, the content and the website need to be optimized for mobile (McBride 2019).

Generation Z dislikes pop-ups and advertisements that cannot be skipped. On average, Gen Zers skip a skippable video after 9.5 seconds. Consequently, it is recommendable to use a short format when targeting them with video advertising. 71 % of teenagers aged 13–17 spend over three hours daily watching online videos on their mobile devices, so video marketing is recommendable. (Law 2019.) It is essential that marketers stay on board with the major digital trends and keep their social media strategy up to date (12 Ways to Market to Generation Z).

Generation Z demands companies to contribute to the society (Law 2019). They insist the companies apply social responsibility across the whole business and are honest about it. Generation Z can tell the difference between companies, that support causes merely to improve their image, and those, who genuinely work for

a better future. (Martin n.d.) The core value of Generation Z is authenticity and brands need to appeal to that (McBride 2019).

Influence plays a great role in the lives of Gen Zers. Considerable influences for Generation Z are mobile apps, celebrities' and friends' social media pages, and bloggers. They are the most likely generation to follow retailers and brands on social media, and to write online reviews. Thus, they influence others by these interactions. (A Generation Without Borders n.d.). Working with influencers is a potential way to appeal to Generation Z consumers (12 Ways to Market to Generation Z) since they are more receptive to products that are promoted by the influencers they follow and respect (Bawden-Davis 2018).

With today's fast pace of information, the importance of consistency in marketing is growing. It is vital to show up daily and be where the target group is.

(McBride 2019.) To keep Generation Z loyal, brands must meaningfully interact with them in any way they can (Law 2019).

4.4 Generation Z and gender-neutral marketing communications

The marketer has several tools to use for marketing their products, and these tools are called the instruments of the marketing mix. These instruments are typically divided into four categories which are known as the 4 Ps of the marketing mix. These 4 Ps are product, price, place and promotion. These instruments can also be called 4 Cs when thinking in terms of one's customers' interests. The 4 Cs are customer need, cost to the customer, convenience and communication. (Bergh, Geuens & Pelsmacker 2018.)

Marketing communications is the most visible part of the marketing mix. It includes all the means a company uses to communicate with the target group in order to promote its products or services. These tools include advertising, online communication and direct marketing. Marketing communications can be defined as *"a process through which organizations and audiences engage with one another"*. They aim at

informing and persuading the audiences and to differentiate the offering from that of the competitors. (Bergh, Geuens & Pelsmacker 2018.)

The process of planning the marketing communications starts with a situation analysis. During this phase, the current and future marketing conditions are analyzed. Another crucial part of planning the marketing communications is identifying market segments. After analyzing the attractiveness of different segment groups, the company selects the groups to focus on. This is called targeting, and further communications strategies will be aimed at these groups. (Bergh, Geuens & Pelsmacker 2018.)

The company must have a unique position for its products in the minds of the target group members. Positioning is defined as *“the way a product is perceived by the target group on important attributes, the ‘place in the mind’ a product occupies relative to its competitors”*. It is a core element of the marketing communications. (Bergh, Geuens & Pelsmacker 2018.)

Young people have long played a role of an influencer in a society by creating and interpreting trends, and they affect the way people of all ages consume and relate to the brands (Francis & Hoefel 2018). The popularity of the gender-neutral marketing and the blurring of the traditional gender roles are reflections of the attitudes of Generation Z (Claveria 2019). According to a study conducted by VICE, 41 % of Gen Zers in the western countries identify in the middle of the masculine/feminine scale (Gen Z refuses to have its gender put in a box 2019).

Generation Z is less likely to want to buy gendered products, whether they are clothes, sports equipment, shoes, skincare or any other product category (Beyond Binary: The lives and choices of Generation Z 2018). According to a survey conducted by JWT Intelligence, Generation Z prefers gender neutrality over binary messaging (Is gender-neutral branding the future? 2017). For Generation Z, consumption is an expression of the individual identity – consequently, their individual gender identity as well. 48 % of Generation Z say they value brands that do not classify their products based on gender. (Francis & Hoefel 2018.) Less than a half of Gen Zers solely purchases products that are geared towards their own gender (Laughlin 2016).

Generation Z does not only demand quality from brands, but they also want integrity. They will only buy from companies that share their values. (12 Ways to Market to Generation Z.) Gender equality is one of the most meaningful values for them. According to Claveria (2019), over 80 % of Generation Z members say they are passionate about it.

Generation Z is significantly gender-neutral in everything from their clothing to their values and conversations (What Makes Gen Z Fall in Love with a Brand? N.d.), and marketing must adapt to that. When Generation Z grows up and joins the work life and politics, gender fluidity and neutrality will become even more mainstream. (Gen Z refuses to have its gender put in a box 2019.)

5 Research: Finnish Generation Z members' interest in gender neutral marketing

The survey was conducted using the Webropol survey tool and the survey was open from the 3th of October until the 15th of October 2019. The survey consisted of closed and open questions. There were altogether 12 questions. The survey was conducted in Finnish since the goal of the study was to discover Finnish Generation Z members' interest and opinions on gender neutral marketing communications. Hence, the studied population is Finnish people born in 1996 or later. All in all, 110 respondents took part in the survey. 97 of the respondents were members of the target group.

The survey was shared on the author's personal accounts on multiple social media channels. These channels were Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr and LinkedIn. Moreover, the survey was forwarded to the author's contacts on WhatsApp, who were asked to forward it to their connections, too.

5.1 Background variables

The background variables in the survey were age and gender. The first question was the respondent's birth year. The question was open, but it was mandatory to apply

four numbers. If the number was lower than 1996 and thus meant the person did not belong to Generation Z, the respondent was redirected to the final page and was not allowed to take part in the survey. This was done in order to obtain responses merely from the target group. 110 respondents took part in the survey but after this filter, 97 were allowed to move further. Hence, there were 97 valid participants.

Table 2. Age structure of the respondents

The year of birth	n	%
1996	22	23 %
1997	6	6 %
1998	14	14 %
1999	24	25 %
2000	16	16 %
2001	3	3 %
2002	4	4 %
2003	5	5 %
2004	2	2 %
2005	1	1 %
Total	97	100 %

The age structure of the respondents can be seen on Table 2. The largest age groups were people born in 1999 with 24 participants, followed by people born in 1996 with 22 participants.

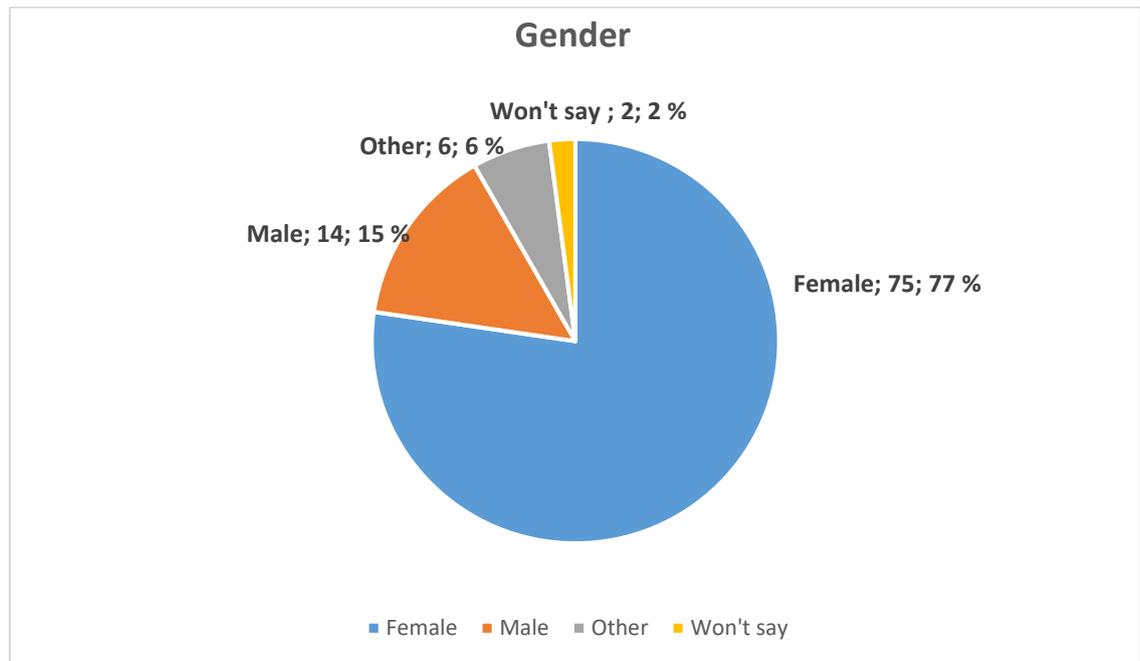


Figure 1. Gender distribution of the respondents

The gender distribution of the respondents can be seen on Figure 1. As can be observed, 77 % (n = 75) identified as female. 15 % (n= 14) identified as male, 6 % (n= 6) as other, and 2 % did (n= 2) not reveal their gender. Of the participants who identified as “Other”, one identified as demigirl and one as agender. One specified they did not know their gender, and one said they did not know their gender yet.

5.2 The results of the closed questions

The second survey page started with a mention: “When answering the questions of this page, think about products that are traditionally divided into women’s and men’s products – for instance, skin care, cosmetics, clothes..”. The purpose of this was to clarify the next questions and take the focus off from products that are gender neutral already, such as food products.

Question 3

The third question was a closed question with three options. The question was: “Do you buy products that are targeted at another gender than that of your own?” and the options were “Yes”, “No”, and “Not sure”.

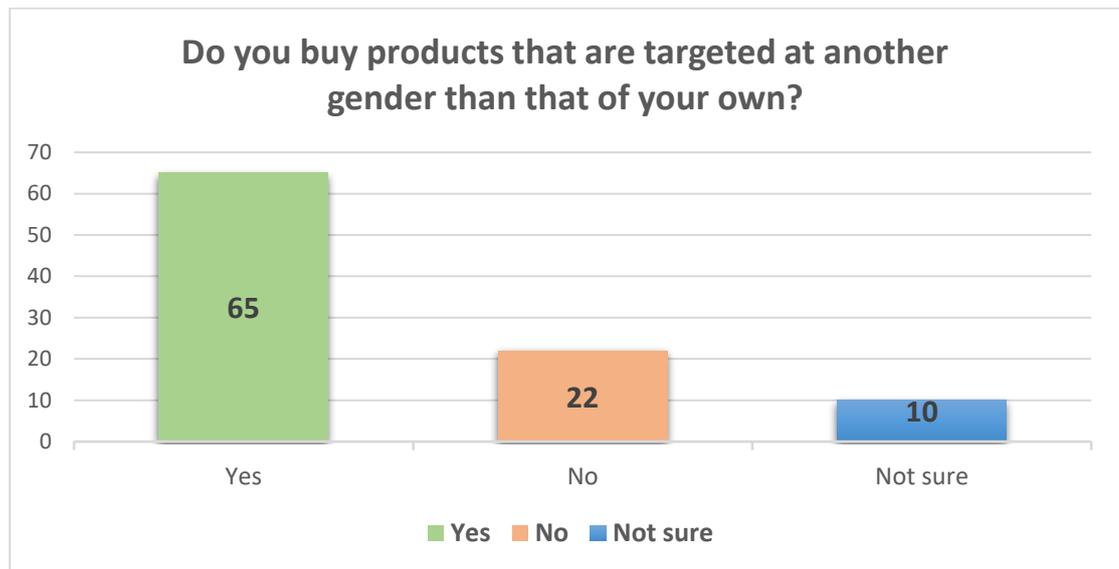


Figure 2. Results of the 3rd survey question

As illustrated in Figure 2, 67 % (n= 65) of the respondents buy products that are targeted at another gender than that of their own. 23 % (n= 22) do not buy them and 10 % (n= 10) are not sure whether they do or not

Table 3. Comparison of purchasing behavior between men and women

	Women	Men	Total (n)
Yes	71 % (n = 53)	28 % (n= 4)	57
No	22 % (n = 17)	36 % (n= 5)	22
Not sure	7 % (n = 5)	36 % (n= 5)	10
Total	100 %	100 %	

Total (n)	75	14	89
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Table 3 compares the results of the third question between female and male respondents using cross tabbing. 100 % of those, who reported being non-binary or did not want to tell their gender, buy products that are assigned to another gender than their own. This is probably due to the fact that most products on the market are assigned to either male or female consumers. Thus, solely the answers of male and female respondents are comparable with each other. The results reveal that 71 % (n= 53) of women buy products that are targeted at another gender compared to 28 % (n= 4) of men. 22 % (n= 17) of the female respondents and 36 % (n= 5) of the male respondents do not buy products that are targeted at another gender, while 7 % (n= 5) of women and 36 % (n= 4) of men replied not being sure.

Chi square (χ^2) test was applied to the data to see if the relationship between the gender of the respondent and whether they buy products, that are targeted at another gender, is statistically significant. The chi-square statistic is 41.6 and the p-value 0.00001 which means the results are statistically significant.

Question 4

The fourth question was “How important is it to you that the product is targeted at your gender and not at another gender?” The options were “very important”, “somewhat important”, “neutral”, “not very important”, and “not important at all”.

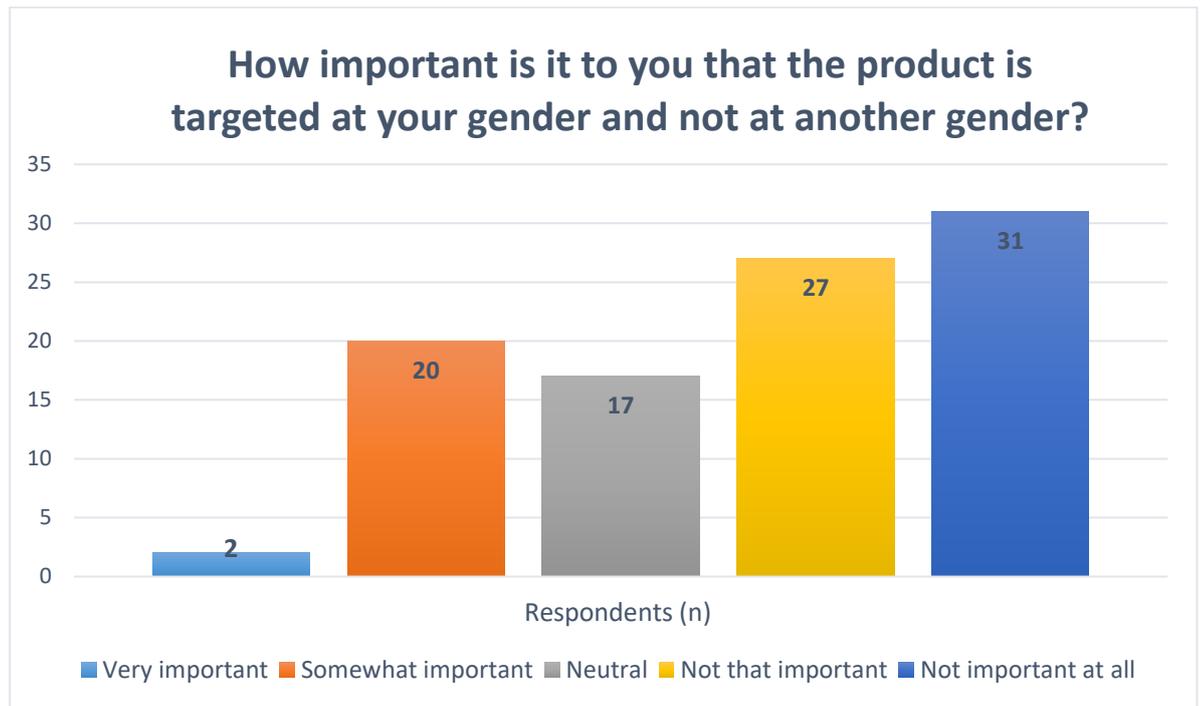


Figure 3. Results of the 4th survey question

As can be observed in Figure 3, 60 % (n=58) of the respondents think it is either not very important or not important at all to have a product targeted at their own gender. Only 2 % (n=2) of the participants considered it very important, 21 % (n=20) somewhat important and 17 % (n= 17) felt neutral about it.

In the following Table (Table 4), the results of the different gender groups are compared by cross tabulation to see if there is a statistically significant relationship between the gender of the respondent and the perceived importance of the product being targeted at their own gender.

Table 4. Comparison of the results of respondents of different genders on the 4th survey question

How important is it to you that the product is targeted at your gender and not at another gender?				
	Female	Male	Other	Total (n)
Very important	2 % (n= 2)	0 % (n= 0)	0 % (n= 0)	2
Somewhat important	23 % (n= 17)	22 % (n= 3)	0 % (n= 0)	20
Neutral	16 % (n= 12)	36 % (n= 5)	0% (n= 0)	17
Not that imporant	28 % (n= 21)	36 % (n= 5)	17 % (n= 1)	27
Not important at all	31 % (n= 23)	7 % (n= 1)	83 % (n= 5)	29
Total	100 % (n = 75)	100 % (n= 14)	100 % (n= 6)	95

Having a product targeted at their own gender was not important at all for 31 % (n= 23) of the female respondents, 7 % of the male respondents (n= 1) and 83 % (n= 5) of the respondents of the other genders. It must again be noted that few products exist exclusively for the non-binary, so their results are not completely comparable with those of the male and female respondents, but will be mentioned nonetheless. 28 % (n= 21) of the women, 36 % (n= 5) of the men, and 17 % (n = 1) of the respondents of the other genders state it is not that important for them. 36 % (n= 5) of the female respondents and 16 % (n= 12) of the male respondents felt neutral. For 23 % (n= 17) of the female respondents and 22 % (n= 3) of the male respondents having a product targeted at their gender was somewhat important, and for 2 % (n= 2) of the women it was very important.

The results were analyzed again by using the χ^2 test. The p -value was 0 so the relationship between the variables is statistically significant. The χ^2 test was also applied to the data of only the female and the male respondents. This was done

because, as mentioned, their results are not completely comparable with the results of the non-binary group. The p-value was less than 0.05 again, so the relationship between the gender and the perceived importance of the product being targeted at one's own gender is statistically significant.

Question 5

The fifth question was: "Do you think companies should stop marketing products to a specific gender only?" The answer options were "yes", "sometimes, depending on the product category", "no", and "not sure".

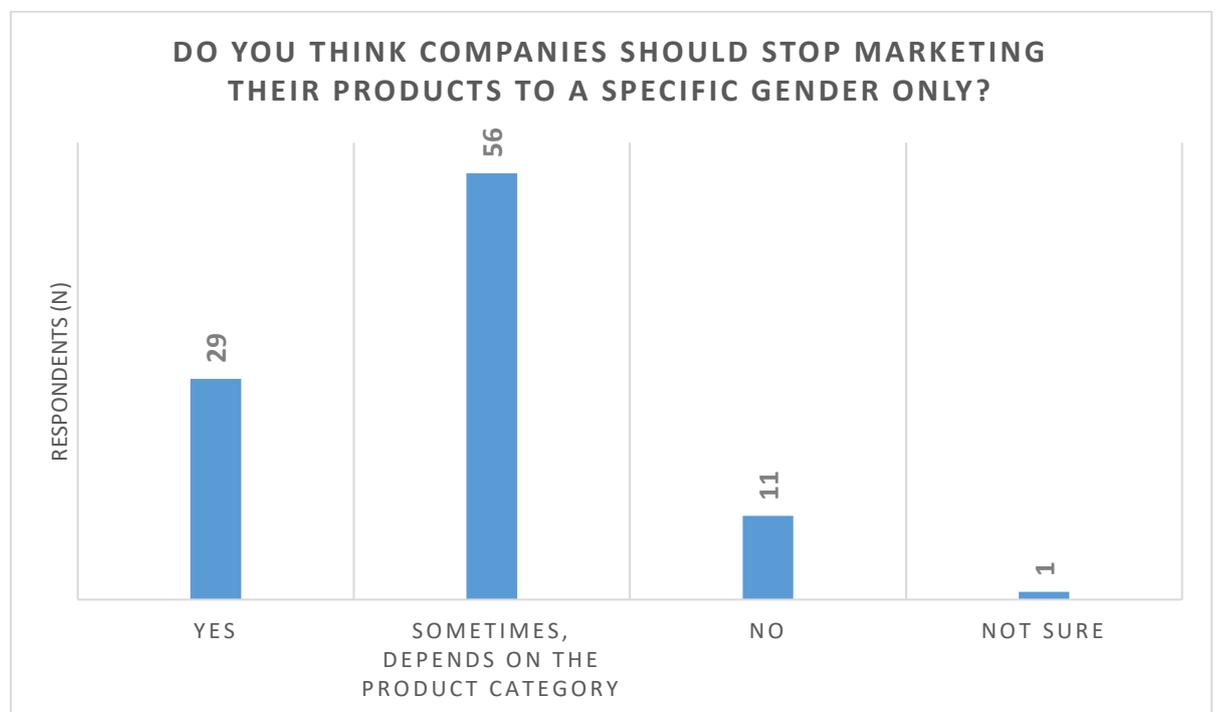


Figure 4. Results of the 5th survey question

As seen on Figure 4, 30 % (n=29) of the respondents think companies should stop marketing to a specific gender only whereas 11% (n=11) of the respondents think they should not stop. The majority, 58 % (n= 56), of the respondents thinks it depends on the product category. 1 % (n=1) of the respondents reported not being sure.

Question 6

The sixth question was a multiple-choice question: “Choose in which product categories should marketing NOT use traditional stereotypes”, which had an additional note: “For example, women like pink, men like sports” to clarify which type of stereotypes the question was about. The response options were “clothing”, “cosmetics”, “hair products”, “sports equipment”, “toys and games”, “electronics” and “Other, what?” after which the respondent could specify a product category that was not mentioned. There was no limit on how many of these options could be chosen. Besides these options, there were options “Stereotypes should not be used in advertising”, “Stereotypes are acceptable in advertising” and “Not sure” – if the respondent chose one of these, they would not be allowed to choose another option.

The results are divided in two figures. First one presents both ends of the scale: those, who found stereotypes acceptable in marketing, and those, who considered stereotypes not acceptable in any marketing. The results of different product categories will be demonstrated in a separate figure.

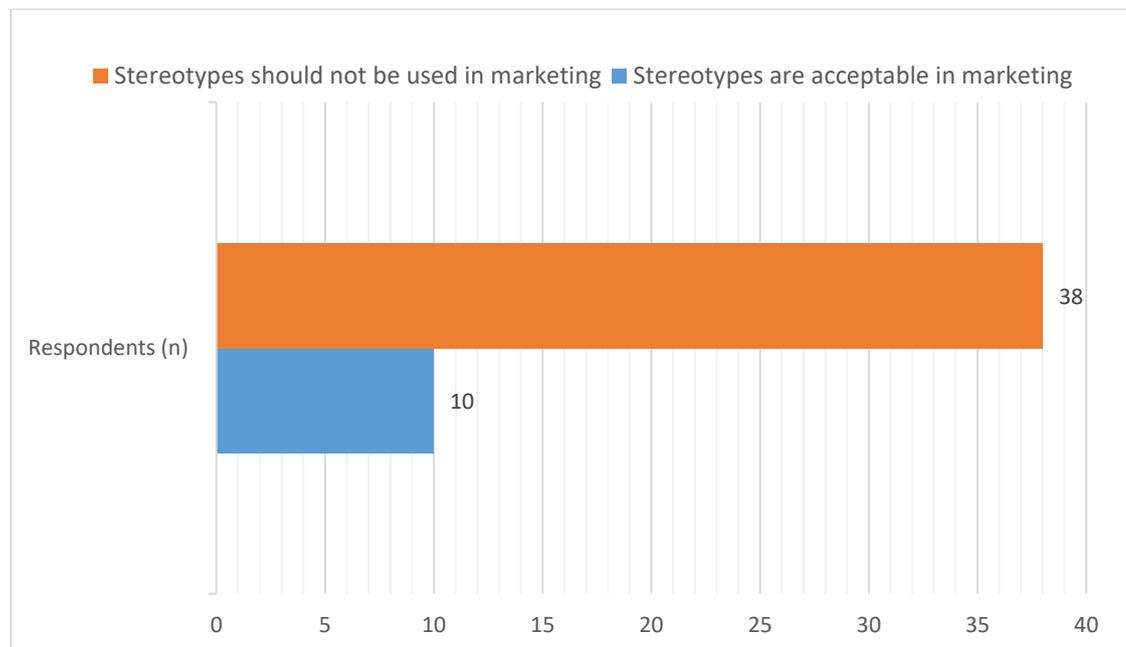


Figure 5. Results of the 6th survey question, part 1

As illustrated in Figure 5, 38 of respondents – hence, 39 % – thought stereotypes should not be used in any marketing, whereas 10 (10 %) thought stereotypes are acceptable. This leaves 49 (50 %) respondents who chose one or more different product categories or responded “not sure”. Thus, it can be thought that for them, stereotyping is more acceptable in some categories than others.

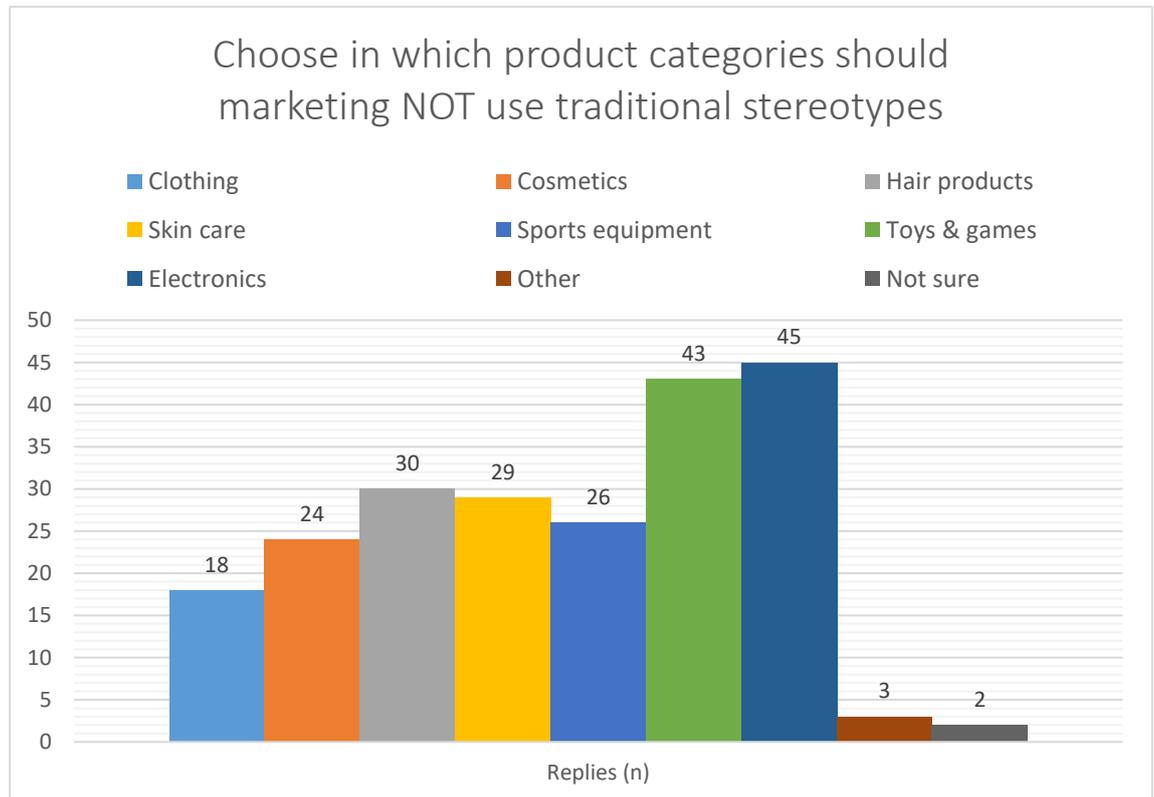


Figure 6. Results of the 6th survey question, part 2

Figure 6 illustrates the replies of the 49 respondents, who chose one or more product categories or the option “not sure”. The most common answers for when stereotypes should not be used were electronics with 45 answers and toys and games with 43 answers. The least votes of the categories got clothing with only 18 of the respondents choosing it. Cosmetics got 24 votes, hair products 30, skin care 29 and sports equipment 26. Three people chose “Other” and added food, sweets and tools when asked to specify. Two replied not being sure.

Question 7

The seventh question was “Is the term ‘gender neutral marketing’ familiar to you?” with response options “yes”, “no”, and “not sure”. If the option “yes” was chosen, the survey would continue straight to question 8. If one of the other two was chosen, the definition of the term would be shown to the respondent first.

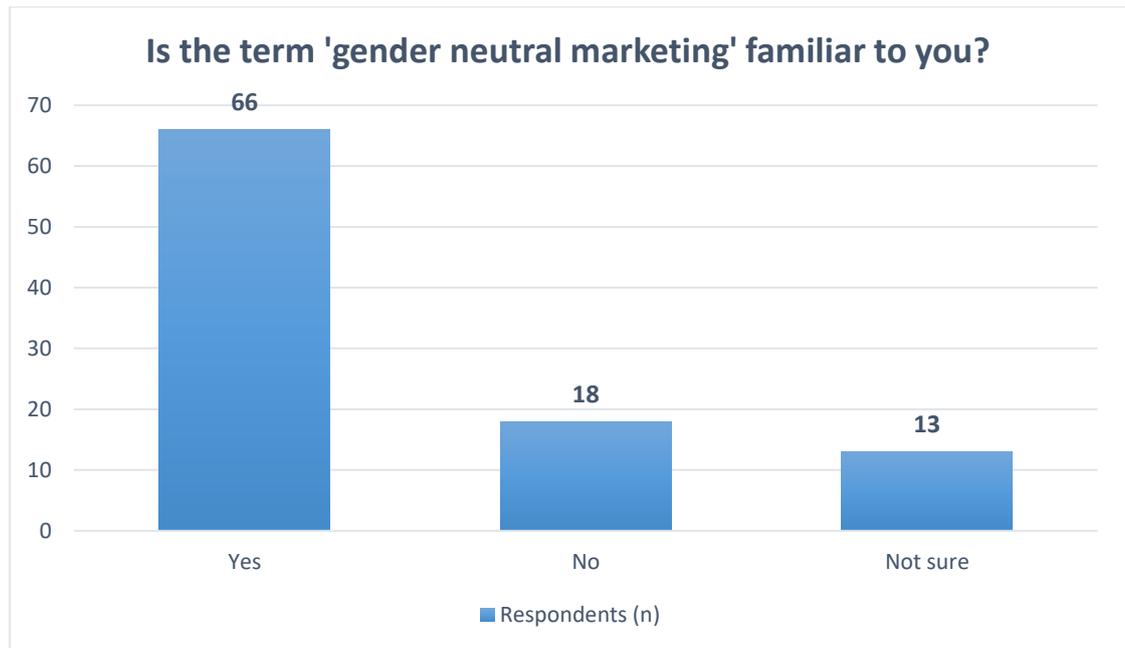


Figure 7. Results of the 7th survey question

As presented in Figure 7, 68 % (n=66) of the participants were familiar with the term, 19 % (n=18) were not, and 13 % (n=13) were not sure whether they knew it or not. After answering ‘no’ or ‘not sure’, the respondent would see the following definition:

Gender neutral marketing communications means marketing without using traditional, gender-based stereotypes. Gender neutral marketing does not categorize people based on gender, and it portrays gender as fluid.

In gender neutral marketing, the products are not targeted based on gender which means that the traditional male/female-classification is not used. This type of marketing is also targeted at non-binary people.

Question 8

Question 8 was a question on a scale. The question was “How important do you think gender neutral marketing is?” and the scale could be moved between 1 and 5. 1 meant “not important at all”, 2 “not very important”, 3 “neutral”, 4 “somewhat important” and 5 “very important”. These values and their definitions were explained to the participant alongside the question.

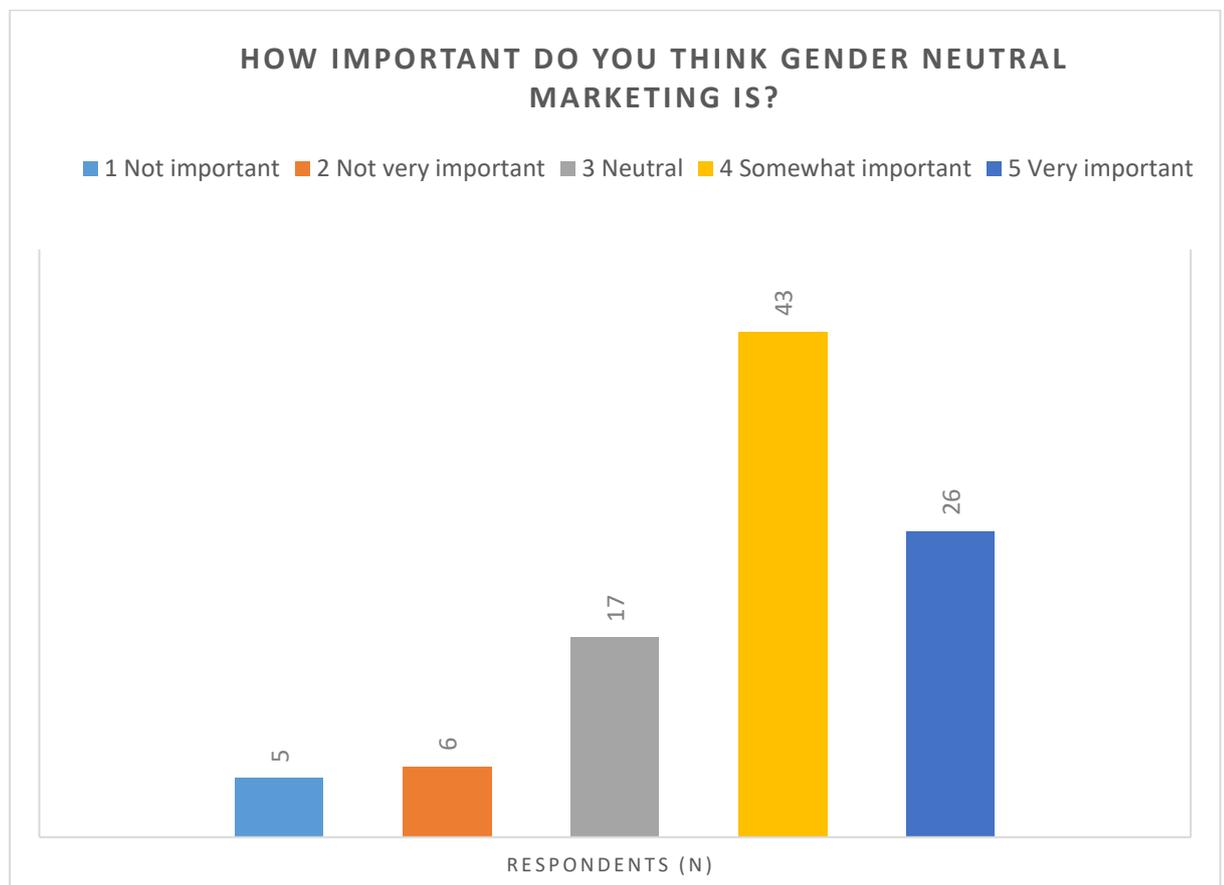


Figure 8. Results of the 8th survey question

As can be observed in Figure 8, 71 % (n= 69) of the respondents stated gender neutral marketing is either somewhat or very important. 18 % (n= 17) of the respondents thought it was neither important nor unimportant. 6 % (n= 6) of the respondents reported it is not very important, and 5 % (n= 5) of the respondents did not think it is important at all. The average answer on the scale was 3,81 so it leans more towards important than unimportant.

The perceived importance of gender-neutral marketing was compared between those, who buy products that are targeted at another gender, and those who do not. The group who buys them is referred on Figure 9 as Group 1, and the group who does not buy these products is called Group 2.

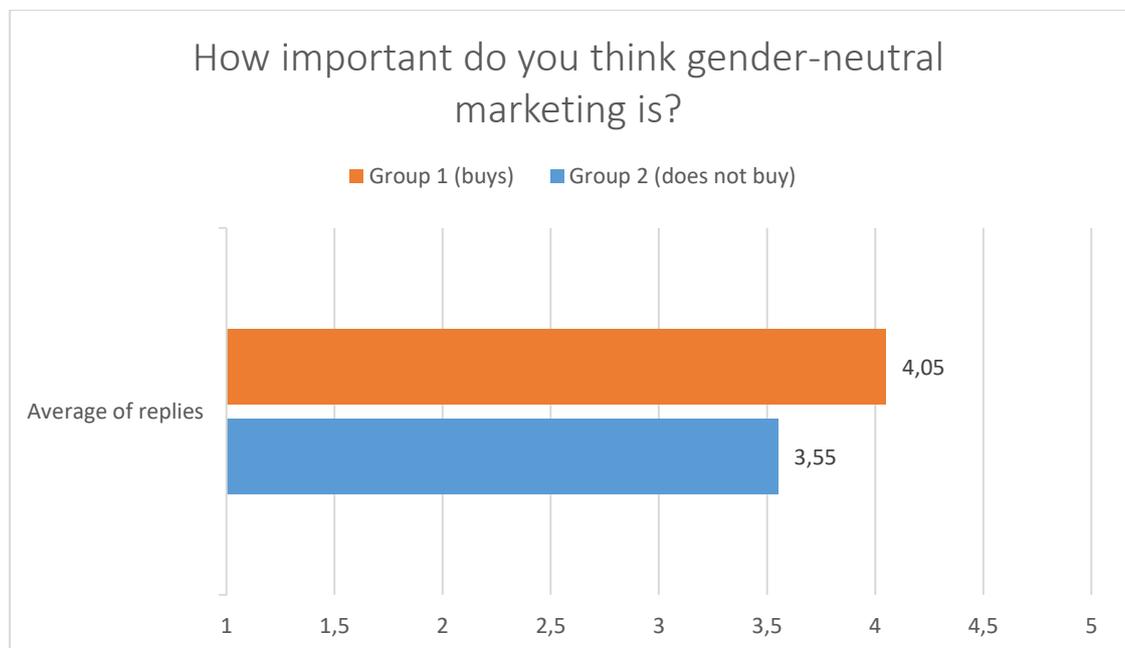


Figure 9. The participants' purchasing preferences and the perceived importance of gender-neutral marketing

As can be observed in Figure 9, the average of the replies of Group 1 was 4,05 while the average of Group 2 was 3,55. Consequently, gender-neutrality in marketing was slightly more important for those, who buy products that are targeted at another gender, than for those who do not.

In addition, the perceived importance of gender-neutral marketing was compared between those, who were familiar with the term already, and those who were not.

On Figure 10, the group, who had been familiar with the term, is referred to as “Familiar”. The group, who had not been familiar with it, is referred to as “Unfamiliar”, while the group who was not sure whether they were familiar with the term, is referred to as “Not sure”. The group “Familiar” consisted of 66 respondents, the group “Unfamiliar” of 18, and “Unsure” of 13. It must be noted that between the question about familiarity and the question about importance, even those, who did not know the term before, would see a definition of it. Hence, by the time they reached the question about the importance of gender-neutral marketing, they would be at least slightly familiar with it.

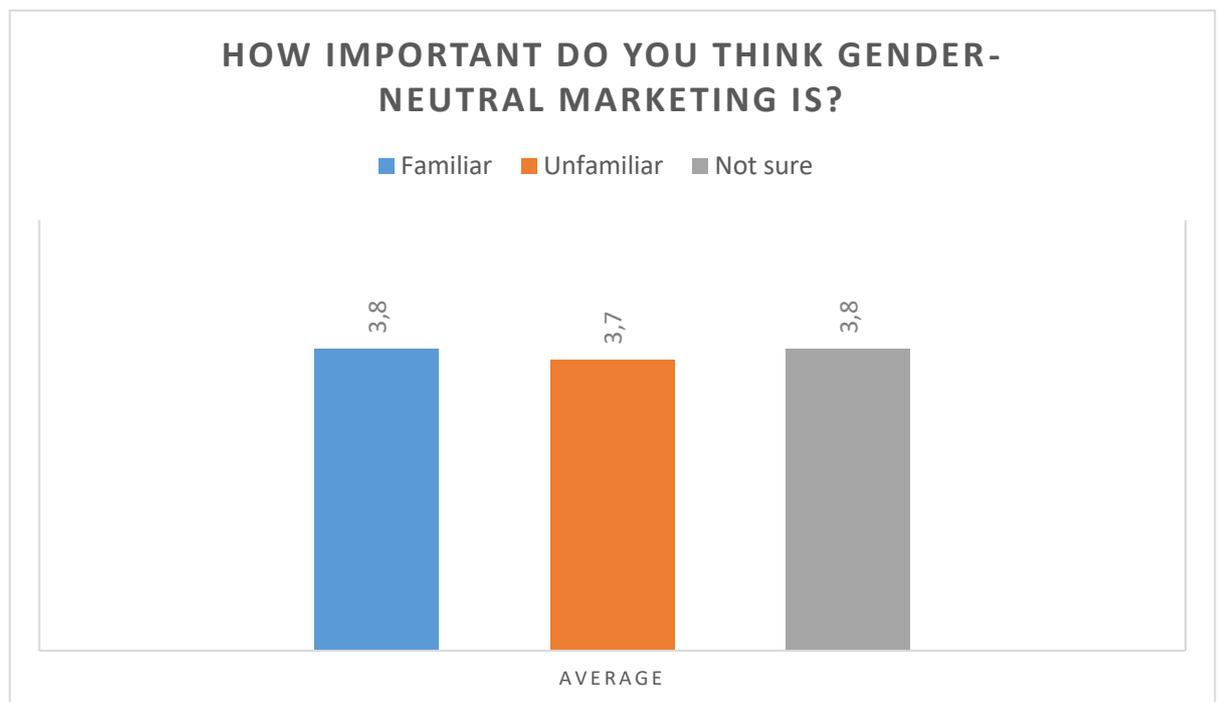


Figure 10. Familiarity with the term and the perceived importance of gender-neutral marketing

The Familiar had an average of 3,8 on the scale of the perceived importance of gender-neutral marketing, whereas the average for the Unfamiliar group was 3,7. The Unsure group had an average of 3,8.

On the following table (Table 5), two variables are evaluated using cross tabulation. These variables are the perceived importance of gender-neutral marketing, and opinion on stereotypes in marketing. The groups are created based on how important the respondents considered gender-neutral marketing. The first group is called "Important" and consists of those, who chose 4 or 5 on the scale in question 8; neutral, which consists of those who chose 3 on the scale; and unimportant, which refers to those who chose 1 or 2 on the scale. The other variable, the opinion on stereotypes in marketing, is based on the respondent's response in the sixth question. "Acceptable in some product categories" was not an option per se in the sixth question, but this refers to all of those respondents who chose one or more different product categories.

Table 5. Cross tabulation of the variables of the questions 6 and 8

Using traditional stereotypes in marketing				
	Important	Neutral	Unimportant	Total (n)
Stereotypes are acceptable	4 % (n= 3)	12 % (n= 2)	45 % (n= 5)	10
Stereotypes should not be used	49 % (n= 34)	12 % (n= 2)	18 % (n= 2)	38
Acceptable in some product categories	44 % (n= 30)	76 % (n= 13)	36 % (n= 4)	47
Not sure	3 % (n = 2)	0 % (n= 0)	0 % (n= 0)	2

Total (n)	69	17	11	97
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Almost half of the group, 49 % (n= 34), who considered gender-neutral marketing important thought stereotypes shouldn't be used in any marketing. 44 % (n= 30) of them thought it depends on a product category, and 4 % (n= 3) considered stereotypes acceptable. 3 % (n= 2) were not sure. The majority of the neutral group, 76 % (n= 13), thought using stereotypes is acceptable in some product categories. 12 % (n= 2) of this group considered stereotypes acceptable in general while 12 % (n= 2) of them did not find stereotypes acceptable in any marketing. Of those, who considered gender-neutral marketing unimportant, 45 % (n= 5) thought stereotypes are acceptable in any marketing. 18 % (n= 2) of them thought stereotypes should not be used in marketing, while for 18 % (n= 2) of this group they were acceptable in some product categories. χ^2 -test was applied to these results. The test gave a p-value of 0. Thus, there is a statistical relationship between the variables.

After question 8, there were three open questions which will be discussed in the next chapter. First, the results of the last closed question will be shared.

Question 12

The twelfth question was both the last closed question of the survey and the last question in general. The question 12 was "Would you rather buy from a company whose marketing was gender neutral?". The results can be observed in Figure 11.

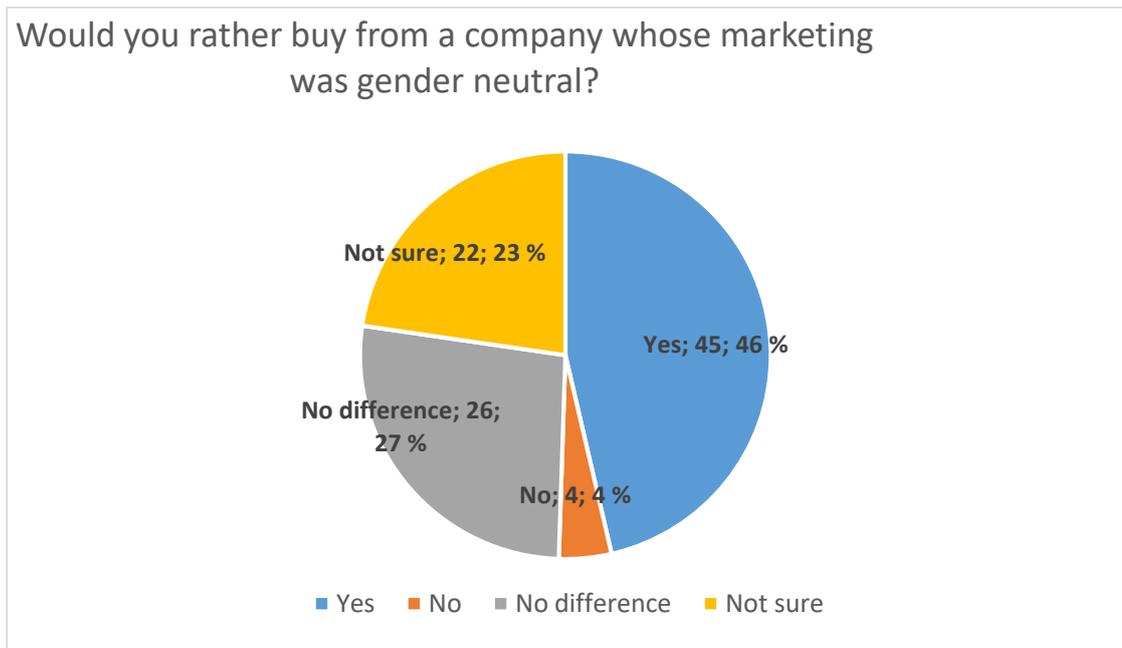


Figure 11. Results of the 12th survey question

As revealed in Figure 11, 46 % (= 45) of the respondents would rather buy from a company whose marketing was gender neutral. 4 % (n= 4) would not prefer a company with a gender-neutral marketing, while 27 % (n= 26) felt it would not make a difference to them whether the company's marketing was gender neutral or not. 23 % (n= 22) were not sure whether they would prefer it or not.

In Table 6, the results of the 12th question are compared between two groups based on their perceived importance of gender neutral marketing. This is done by using cross tabulation. The group, who found it important and thus chose 4 or 5 on the scale in question 8, are referred to as Group A. Those, who did not find it important and thus chose 1 or 2 on the scale, are called Group B. Group A consists of 69 members, group B of 11. This is done to see whether there is a statistical relationship between these variables.

Table 6. Cross tabulation of the variables of the questions 8 and 12

Would you rather buy from a company whose marketing was gender neutral?			
	Group A	Group B	Total (n)
Yes	59 % (n= 41)	27 % (n= 3)	44
No	2 % (n= 1)	27 % (n= 3)	4
No difference	19 % (n= 13)	45 % (n= 5)	18
Not sure	20 % (n= 14)	0% (n= 0)	14
Total	100 % (n= 69)	100 % (n= 11)	80

59 % (n = 41) of Group A would prefer buying from a company whose marketing was gender neutral as well as 27 % (n= 3) of Group B. 2 % (n= 1) of Group A and 27 % (n= 3) of Group B would not prefer this a company with this approach. 19 % (n= 13) of Group A felt indifferent as well as 45 % (n= 5) of Group B. 20 % (n= 14) of Group A were not sure if they would prefer it or not. None of the Group B chose this option. χ^2 test was applied to the results. P-value was zero so the relationship between the variables is statistically significant.

In the following Table (Table 7), three groups are formed based on their response on question 4, "How important is it to you that the product is targeted at your gender and not at another gender?". The first group means those, who considered having a product targeted at their own gender somewhat or very important; the second group those, who regarded it not that important or not important at all; and the third of those, who felt neutral about it. The groups are called Group A, Group B, and Group C to make reporting clearer. These groups' results are compared with the results of the question 12 to see if there is a relationship between these variables.

Table 7. Cross tabulation of the variables of the questions 4 and 12

Would you rather buy from a company whose marketing was gender-neutral?				
	Group A: Targeting important	Group B: Targeting unimportant	Group C: Neutral	Total (n)
Yes	32 % (n= 7)	59 % (n= 34)	24 % (n= 4)	45
No	14 % (n= 3)	2 % (n= 1)	0 % (n= 0)	4
No difference	41 % (n= 9)	17 % (n= 10)	41 % (n= 7)	26
Not sure	14 % (n= 3)	22 % (n= 13)	35 % (n= 6)	22
Total	22	58	17	97

As illustrated in Table 7, 32 % (n= 7) of Group A – those for whom it was important to have the product targeted at their gender – would rather buy from a company whose marketing was gender neutral. 59 % (n= 34) of Group B – those, who did not find it important to have a product targeted at their own gender – would prefer this type of a company, too, as well as 24 % (n= 4) of Group C. 14 % (n= 3) of Group A, 2 % (n= 1) of Group B, and none of Group C would not prefer a company who used gender-neutral marketing. 41 % (n= 9) of Group A stated it would not affect their purchasing whether a company used gender-neutral marketing or not. 17 % (n= 10) of Group B and 41 % (n= 7) of Group C stated the same. χ^2 -test was done – the outcome was a chi square of 60.162 and p-value of zero, so the relationship between these variables is statistically significant.

5.3 The results of the open questions

The survey had three open, non-mandatory questions. The first open question, question number 9, was: "Why do you think/do not you think gender-neutral marketing is important?" This question was answered by 61 respondents out of 97, so the response rate was 63 %.

Among the replies of those, who found it important, the most occurring themes were stereotypes and equality. Gender neutrality in marketing was seen to demolish gender stereotypes and roles, which were considered harmful. Respondents pointed out that without the pressure of those, people would have more freedom in choosing a product and they would be encouraged to express themselves more freely. Besides, gender-neutral marketing was considered essential due to its ability to provide visibility for the non-binary community: hence, making a topic, that is often a taboo, more mundane.

Advertising is also a part of our everyday life and has plenty of influence on attitudes so gender neutrality would certainly advance equality.

The current society calls for transparency, riddance of prejudice, and the means to give each individual a possibility to be themselves.

A few respondents admitted not having personal interest nor experience in the topic, but they agreed it is meaningful to some people and essential for advancing equality. Those with personal experience said gender neutralizing marketing would make their life easier.

The importance was thought to depend on a product category by quite a many respondent. It was found unnecessary when marketing games and toys, skincare or hygiene products. The product attributes based on gender received negative feedback, too: respondents pointed out how they disliked that the products targeted at men were often more durable and cheaper than the equivalent ones for women. Gender-neutral marketing was seen as an essential tool for making these attributes more equal and eliminate gender pricing.

A few respondents thought about gender-neutral marketing from the marketers' point of view: they considered it important as it would widen the company's target groups. It was mentioned that companies should consider it because it seems that the attitudes and conceptions of gender are changing both in Finnish society and worldwide.

Several respondents, who had deemed gender-neutral marketing unimportant, noted there were physical differences between genders, so the products' functionality could suffer from gender-neutralizing. Furthermore, separate departments and product categories in stores for different genders was claimed to be easier for the customer. A few of the respondents admitted they did not find it important due to lack of personal experience and, thus, interest.

The question number 10 was: "Which benefits gender neutral marketing has in your opinion?" 69 % (n= 67) of the respondents answered this question. The replies included two "no benefits" replies. Due to the similar nature of the questions 9 and 10, several same themes appeared in the answers of both.

Equality and stereotypes were again the most common topics. The perceived benefits were gender-neutral marketing decreasing gender stereotypes, promoting gender equality and improving the visibility and normalization of non-binary genders. Respondents considered gender-neutral marketing to be inclusive – meaning it does not make anyone feel like an outsider and allows everyone to feel accepted the way they are.

As in the question number 9, several respondents pointed out that gender neutrality in marketing could lower the bar for the consumers to buy products that are targeted at another gender and allow them to have more courage to express themselves and choose the products they want without fear or shame.

It would give validation for those who the traditional media ignores.

Less pressure to buy a certain product because an alternative would be targeted at another gender instead of just buying what one likes regardless of who it's targeted at.

Several respondents regarded gendered marketing simply unnecessary in general or in specific product categories. Toys were mentioned as an example for categories where this division was seen irrelevant. However, a few of the respondents reflected the benefits from the marketer's point of view: gender neutral marketing was envisioned potentially bringing the company more revenue by widening their target group. The product attributes were mentioned again, too.

Gendered products and colors are invented by people – they are nothing natural.

Removing gendering makes it easier to compare equivalent products on their quality. For example, when it comes to shaving products, the razors designed for men are usually of higher quality and relatively cheaper than those marketed to women.

The last open question, question number 11, asked the respondents to tell whether they thought gender-neutral marketing had any disadvantages. 47 (48 %) answered this question. Quite a prevalent response was that there are no disadvantages in using gender neutral marketing.

A commonly stated disadvantage was that there is plenty of people who might not like it, and that gender-neutrality in marketing might receive quite strong objections. Other people might react less strongly but still be confused or feel uncomfortable by it.

The older generation might become upset by this type of marketing since they are stuck in their own perceptions of gender. It might cause this group to think or act negatively towards those who gender neutral marketing would target especially.

Another disadvantage was considered to be – as in question 9, too – purchasing becoming more complicated, products becoming more problematic to find and

comparing alternatives taking more time without the aid of gender categorizations. Gendering was said to help create associations about the content of the product. The respondents thought gender neutral marketing would have negative effects by removing the product attributes designed for these physical differences between genders. They added that the products might not be so appealing to the consumers or they might not understand to want the product. Thus, the company might suffer financially.

Economical losses might occur if the advertising does not affect men or women as strongly now that the stereotypes are not there to pressure the customer to buy the product.

Gender neutrality should not be presented in the sense of everyone needing to be similar but preferably (presented) in the form of 'gender sensitivity' so that not only the diversity but also both ends of binarity (thus, "manly" man and "feminine" woman) are included.

If someone wants products especially targeted at women or men, that should not be a problem either.

6 Conclusions

The purpose of the thesis was to determine how interested Generation Z is in gender-neutral marketing. The aim was to provide answers to how important is gender-neutrality in marketing communications for Generation Z, and why they found it important or unimportant. The research problem was the interest in gender-neutral marketing among Generation Z. The study revealed that the majority of Generation Z consider gender-neutral marketing at least somewhat important.

Gender-neutrality is not new to Generation Z. The members of Generation Z buy products that are not targeted at their own gender and consider having a product targeted at their own gender unimportant in general. This implies that for Generation Z members, the product itself and its features matter more than who it is targeted at. It indicates they are not so strict about the gender labels of products.

Besides, most respondents reported being familiar with the term 'gender-neutral marketing' before taking part in the survey.

However, plenty of the respondents agreed that those, who do not fit into the traditional gender roles, experience shame and fear when shopping. For Generation Z, gender-neutrality is essential as it offers validation even for those who usually do not receive it. Moreover, it provides everyone the freedom to express themselves, which, according to the results of the open questions, is a significantly meaningful theme for Generation Z.

Generation Z buys from companies that share their values (12 Ways to Market to Generation Z). Companies should consider making their marketing more progressive since Generation Z cares deeply for equality and tolerance and believe gender-neutral marketing can advance these issues. Moreover, if marketers want to have Generation Z's support, they must eliminate gender stereotypes in their advertising and products. The results suggest that the Finnish members of Generation Z think negatively of traditional stereotypes and gender roles.

The perceived advantages and disadvantages of gender-neutral marketing depend on the product category in Generation Z's minds. In other product categories, gender-neutrality is more important to Generation Z than in others. On the other hand, gender-neutrality is also seen more problematic in some categories than others.

Several Generation Z members state that making products gender-neutral would be harmful since certain products have features designed for the physical differences of the genders, and demolishing genders in marketing might harm the functionality of these products. As a result, Generation Z regard gendering more acceptable in clothing, skin care and hair products than in the product categories in which products do not pay attention to genders' physical differences.

Few regarded gendering acceptable in the category of toys and games as well as in electronics. In general, almost half of the studied Generation Z think stereotypes

should not be used in marketing and almost a third agrees that companies should completely stop marketing to specific genders only.

Even those, who regarded gender-neutral marketing unimportant, agree that stereotypes must not be used in several product categories, for instance in toys and games. A few even stated that stereotypes should not be used in any marketing. This suggests that while Generation Z occasionally tolerates stereotypes and gendering, ultimately it is still possible for a company to lose the trust of Generation Z by ignoring the gender-progressive values of this generation. Even if a company would not go for a completely gender-neutral marketing, demolishing stereotypes is a necessary start.

Gender-neutrality, however, was considered making shopping potentially more difficult. Several respondents stated that separate categories and different departments in stores make comparing alternatives easier and faster and that gendering the product offers indications about its content. Thus, if a company chooses a gender-progressive approach, they must carefully think about it from this perspective as well. Companies need to consider how to make products gender-progressive while making the purchasing easy and smooth for the consumer. Generation Z demands instant gratification (Clark 2019) for which reason the ease of the shopping experience is essential for them.

A common suspicion concerning marketing being more gender-neutral are the reactions it might receive. Generation Z points out gender-neutrality might cause a strong resistance among some people which might lead to financial losses for the company, failure of marketing campaigns, or discrimination against those who the gender-neutral marketing is especially targeted at. These types of reactions are considered to occur primarily among members of older generations. Most of the Generation Z members, who mentioned these reactions, see it more as the people being close-minded and intolerant, not as a flaw in gender-neutral marketing per se. Generation Z regards these reactions more as a harmful side product of marketing becoming more tolerant and inclusive.

As explained, most of the respondents buy clothes that are not designed for their own gender. However, when asked about the perceived importance of gender-neutral marketing, there is almost no difference between the perceived importance by those who buy products targeted at another gender and those who do not. As can be observed here, and in the results of open questions as well, Generation Z regards gender-neutral marketing important even if they have no personal experience or need for it.

Likewise – in addition to those who reported considering gender-neutral in marketing important – a fourth of the group who regarded gender-neutral marketing unimportant, would still prefer buying from a company whose marketing approach was gender-neutral. Furthermore, almost one third of the respondents who claim it is important for them to have a product targeted at their own gender, would prefer purchasing from a company like this as well. This implies that a gender-progressive approach is in favor of Generation Z whether they have different buying habits or opinions on gender-neutral marketing in general. Hence, one way or another, Generation Z values gender-neutrality in marketing, whether it be demolishing stereotypes, advancing equality, or solely feeling like it would simply not harm anyone.

To conclude, there is interest and demand for more gender-progressive marketing among the studied group. Gender-neutral marketing supports their values and advances topics that they find important. It is essential for Generation Z that companies share their values, and these values need to be applied to the whole business – including marketing. Ultimately, companies should apply these new attitudes concerning gender to their products and marketing communications to gain Generation Z's loyalty.

7 Reflections

The topic of the thesis turned out to be challenging in terms of finding reliable sources. However, it also turned out to be undoubtedly interesting and gave the author a great deal of new information and new perspective on marketing.

The goal of the thesis was to discover how interested Generation Z is in gender-neutral marketing. First, secondary data was collected to create a theoretical framework on which to base the research study. The purpose of the theoretical framework was to provide a better insight into what means gender-neutrality in marketing and why marketers should consider a gender-neutral approach. Another goal concerning the theoretical basis was to provide information on Generation Z, their characteristics and values, and to identify what is important when marketing to this generation.

Collecting secondary information proved to be more complex than estimated. There was little literature about Generation Z, and even less about gender-neutral marketing. Finding professional sources was challenging and, consequently, the author had to rely mainly on various web articles.

Originally, the plan was to combine quantitative and qualitative research approaches by doing both an online survey and a theme interview. In that case, the results would have been more versatile. Combining these methods, both numerical data and deeper insights into Generation Z's opinions and attitudes would have been obtained. In addition, the validity of the research would have been better. Ultimately, only a quantitative method was chosen due to the author's tight schedule. Three open questions were added in the survey to reach a deeper understanding of the respondents' opinions and attitudes.

The aim of the quantitative survey was to obtain a better insight into Generation Z and their attitudes concerning genders in products and marketing. The desired outcome was a better understanding of their interest in gender-neutrality in marketing, and the ability to generalize the results to the Finnish Generation Z at large.

Altogether 97 Finnish Generation Z members took part in the survey. The data was sufficient to draw indicative conclusions and provide a little insight into the research question, but not sufficient to generalize the results to the Finnish Generation Z members at large.

The quantitative results were analyzed by using cross tabulation. The cross tabulations were evaluated by using a χ^2 -test. The χ^2 -test was conducted by using an online program in which the data was entered and automatically computed by the program. Cross tabulation was used to group the data to understand relationships between different variables (Aprameya 2016). The χ^2 -test was conducted to determine if the relationships were statistically significant (Using Chi-Square Statistic in Research n.d.). In addition, this was done to gain a deeper insight to the data and improve the validity of the research.

The trustworthiness of the research can be measured through its validity and reliability. Validity concerns the research plan, the research problem, and correct analyzing methods whereas reliability is about the stability of the results. (Kananen 2014, 260.) According to Kananen (2014, 262), the reliability of the research study could be tested by rerunning the survey. However, rerunning the survey was not favorable in this case due to lack of time.

The validity of the survey was ensured by using suitable measurement methods for studying the research problem. The questions of the survey were planned based on the theoretical framework in order to answer the research questions. The questions in the survey were designed to be as unambiguous and clear as possible to ensure that the respondents have no difficulties when answering them. Before the survey was published, it was tested by a potential respondent to verify that the questions were coherent and that the answering process was smooth. The respondents were informed about the anonymity of the survey participants in order to encourage them to be honest in their responses.

The validity was ensured by asking the right questions using the right methods, and reporting them accurately and explicitly. The relevant variables were chosen for the

comparisons and cross tabulations. For instance, the ages of the respondents were not used in the cross tabulations as it was irrelevant since the goal was to study the whole of Generation Z. Therefore, it was not crucial to compare the responses of Generation Z members of different ages. The results were presented visually as well as in written in order for them to be displayed as informative and comprehensible as possible. Both the numerical values and percentages were presented.

The response rate could not be measured which makes the research less valid. The external validity is complex to measure in web surveys since the population is unknown (Kananen 2016, 264). The survey was publicly shared on various social media channels, so it was not possible to know how many had access to it. Altogether 97 Generation Z members answered the survey. The target was 100, because according to Vilkkä (2007, 17), that is a recommended minimum amount.

Despite not having reached the desired number of participants, the author was contented with the responses. The respondents had understood the questions correctly and a great deal of them had provided vast replies for the open questions despite them being non-mandatory. The results provided indicative information on the attitudes of the Finnish Generation Z, which could be used as a basis for planning a broader, more in-depth study about the topic.

Generation Z is said to be less likely to want to buy gendered products (Beyond Binary: The lives and choices of Generation Z 2018). In fact, according to Laughlin (2016), less than a half of this generation merely buys products that are targeted at their gender. This applied to the results of the survey as well since only 23 % of the respondents said they do not buy products that are designed for another gender instead of theirs. According to Collins (2018), companies should focus on consumers' personality, not gender, and the research implies this to be legitimate.

Generation Z prefers gender neutral communications over binary messaging (Is gender-neutral branding the future? 2017). According to Collins (2018), Generation Z reacts better to brands with a gender-progressive approach, and Francis and Hoefel (2018) specifies that 48 % of the generation value brands that do not gender their

offerings. The results supported these claims: almost half of the participants stated they would prefer purchasing from a company with a gender-neutral marketing approach. The author was surprised that plenty of those respondents, who deemed gender-neutral marketing unimportant or solely bought products targeted at their own gender, also stated they would prefer a company, whose approach was gender-neutral.

The represented Finnish Generation Z declared that they consider gender-neutral marketing meaningful in terms of advancing tolerance and gender equality in the society and normalizing the non-binary community. As Claveria (2019) stated, Generation Z is passionate about gender equality. Similarly, Francis & Hoefel reported that Generation Z wants to defend identity-related causes. The research findings corroborate these claims. Additionally, these findings underline that Generation Z shows interest in gender-neutral marketing.

In addition, the results of the study confirm the dislike and rejection of traditional stereotypes among Generation Z which were discussed in the theoretical basis of the research. The participants regarded gender-neutrality in marketing essential as it could demolish traditional stereotypes. They stated that stereotypes create pressure and force people to act or look a certain way solely based on their gender which was deemed harmful. As Follows (2017) suggested, most young people disapprove of traditional gender roles, which the results corroborate. Accurately, Claveria (2019) claimed that Generation Z rejects traditional stereotypes.

Gender-neutrality in marketing was also considered a crucial tool in giving people more freedom to express themselves, and for Generation Z, consumption is an expression of individual identity (Francis & Hoefel 2018), so marketing plays a significant role in it as well. The results of the open questions highlight that it is crucial for Generation Z that everyone is allowed to be themselves and express themselves freely, which is why they demand for more gender-neutrality in marketing communications.

Ultimately, the research problem was partially solved. While the obtained data was not adequate to generalize the results to Finnish Generation Z at large, they did, however, provided indicative insights into the generation's interest in gender-neutrality in marketing communications. The outcome of the study revealed that there is interest in gender-neutral marketing among most of the Finnish Generation Z members. The reasons for the perceived importance vary. For others, it is an essential tool for the improvement of the equality in the society; for others, it solely means fewer old-fashioned stereotypes. There is a minority who deem it unimportant or even a disturbance in their purchasing process, but even several of these participants agree it might be of importance to a certain group of people.

The thesis process at large, from the author's perspective, was quite stressful but equally rewarding. Several stages could have gone better, and several aspects could be improved, but all in all, the author is satisfied with the outcome.

The most successful part of the thesis was the theoretical basis which turned out better than expected in the beginning. The challenges of finding reliable sources were overcome and the theoretical basis became informative and versatile. The author believes that in a few years, there will be more information available on these topics and these sources would not be sufficient. In the current situation, however, these sources were adequate. And, after all, the strength and uniqueness of this research lies in the novelty of the chosen topics: the study provided new insights and information that were not yet available or widely known.

The writing process itself was rather smooth but sticking to the schedule was surprisingly difficult. Hence, the thesis process was started in time, but in the middle, the author should have been more focused on the schedule. The research plan and the survey should have been done earlier in order for the survey to be available for potential participants for a longer period of time. Sticking to the schedule all through the process would have helped to avoid the rush and stress when the deadline was coming closer. Regardless, the author caught up with the schedule in the end. The thesis was planned to be finished on 11th of November, which it was not. However, this was due to reasons that were independent of the author.

To conclude, the outcome of the process is successful. In addition, the gained insight into Generation Z and gender-neutrality in marketing will be relevant for the author in the future – especially if working in the field of marketing. This research process gave essential insights into what the newest generation values, and why the traditional parts of marketing might have to be questioned every now and then to get better results.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. The online survey

Sukupuolineutraali markkinointi

Hei!

Opiskelen liiketaloutta Jyväskylän ammattikorkeakoulussa ja teen opinnäytetyötä liittyen Z-sukupolveen ja sukupuolineutraaliin markkinointiviestintään. Kysely on tarkoitettu vuonna 1996 tai myöhemmin syntyneille.

Kyselyn tarkoituksena on kartoittaa Z-sukupolven jäsenten kiinnostusta ja mielipiteitä sukupuolineutraaliin markkinointiviestintään liittyen.

Kyselyyn vastaaminen vie noin 2-3 minuuttia. Kyselyyn vastataan anonyymisti eikä vastaajia voida tunnistaa vastauksien perusteella. Jos jotain kysyttävää tulee mieleen, voit ottaa minuun yhteyttä sähköpostitse.

Kiitos paljon!

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1. Syntymävuosi *

2. Mikä on sukupuolesi? *

Nainen

Mies

Muu, mikä?

En halua kertoa

Mieti tällä sivulla vastatessa tuotteita, jotka ovat perinteisesti jaoteltu naisten ja miesten tuotteisiin - esim. ihonhoito, kosmetiikka, vaatteet..

3. Ostatko tuotteita, joita on suunnattu muulle kuin omalle sukupuolellesi? *

Kyllä

En

En osaa sanoa

4. Kuinka tärkeää sinulle on, että tuote on suunnattu juuri omalle sukupuolellesi eikä jollekin toiselle sukupuolelle? *

- Erittäin tärkeää
- Jonkin verran tärkeää
- Neutraali
- Ei kovin tärkeää
- Ei lainkaan tärkeää

5. Pitäisikö yritysten mielestäsi lakata markkinoimasta tuotteitaan vain tietyille sukupuolelle? *

- Kyllä
- Joskus, riippuu tuotekategoriasta
- Ei
- En osaa sanoa

6. Valitse ne tuotekategoriat, joiden mainonnassa EI pitäisi mielestäsi käyttää perinteisiä stereotyyppiä. *

Esim. naiset pitävät vaaleanpunaisesta, miehet ovat urheilullisia...

- Pukeutuminen
- Kosmetiikka
- Hiustenhoitotuotteet
- Ihonhoitotuotteet
- Urheiluvarusteet
- Lelut ja pelit
- Elektroniikka
- Muu, mikä?
- Missään mainonnassa ei pitäisi käyttää stereotyyppiä.
- Mielestäni stereotyyppiä ovat hyväksyttävää mainonnassa.
- En osaa sanoa

7. Onko termi "sukupuolineutraali markkinointi" sinulle tuttu? *

- Kyllä
 Ei
 En osaa sanoa

Sukupuolineutraali markkinointiviestintä tarkoittaa markkinointia ilman perinteisiä sukupuoleen perustuvia stereotyyppiä. Sukupuolineutraalissa mainonnassa ei käytetä luokittelua sukupuoleen perustuen ja siinä sukupuoli esitetään liukuvana (fluid).

Sukupuolineutraalissa mainonnassa tuotteet ovat suunnattu kaikille sukupuolesta riippumatta eli ei käytetä perinteistä miehille/naisille-kategorisointia. Tällainen markkinointi kohdistuu siis myös muunsukupuolisille.

8. Kuinka tärkeänä pidät sukupuolineutraalia markkinointia? *

1 = En lainkaan tärkeänä, 2 = en kovin tärkeänä, 3 = neutraali, 4 = jonkin verran tärkeänä, 5 = todella tärkeänä

1

9. Miksi pidät/et pidä sitä tärkeänä?

10. Mitä hyötyjä sukupuolineutraalista markkinoinnista mielestäsi on?

9. Miksi pidät/et pidä sitä tärkeänä?

10. Mitä hyötyjä sukupuolineutraalista markkinoinnista mielestäsi on?

11. Entä haittoja?

--

12. Ostaisitko mieluummin yritykseltä, jonka markkinointi olisi sukupuolineutraalia? *

Verrattuna yritykseen, joka käyttää mies/nainen-luokittelua huomioimatta sukupuolen liukuvuutta.

- Kyllä
- En
- Ei ole merkitystä
- En osaa sanoa