"Pink is for girls, blue is for boys"
Exploring brand gender identity in children's clothing, a post-evaluation of British retailer John Lewis

Abstract

"I think if my girl knew it was gender-neutral, she wouldn't want it, because she would say 'well that's for boys Mum' and she wants girls' stuff, just girls' stuff like all the other little girls"

Brand gender identity has been widely explored within academia and is integral to the way brands engage with their respective gendered target audiences. A brand can be seen to adopt a masculine or feminine personality through a myriad of symbolic and functional representations which play a crucial role in conveying a brand gender identity. Prior research suggests that brands with a strong gender identity (either masculine or feminine) will encourage formidable consumer-based brand equity (CBBE). But what if those gender identities are transforming and those typical personality traits are no longer clear? We are in the midst of a gender revolution a shifting landscape of gender identity which is equally challenging existing brand gender theory and brand management practice.

Since the societal shifts in definitions of gender identities there has been a rapid rise in the adoption of gender-neutral brands in the apparel industry. Despite this rise in popularity this field has been relatively un-explored in academia and even-less so within the developing category of children's clothing.

Existing literature has expressed concerns over the impinging factors that impact gender-neutral brands, specifically marketing complexity and confusing consumer proposition. Furthermore, it is not clear within existing literature how gender-neutral brands combine the masculine and feminine functional attributes in the formation of brand gender identity, or how gender identity and gender stereotypes impact parents' perceptions of gender-neutral childrenswear in the retail environment. Therefore, this explorative research is exceptionally beneficial to practitioners and brand academics based on the growing rise of gender-neutral brands being adopted by the industry.

In this paper, we explore brand gender identity in children's clothing, specifically parent consumer perceptions of gender-neutral brands with the adoption of a specific single study on British retailer John Lewis. This paper is significant because it is valuable to clothing brand strategists planning to adopt gender neutral approaches, equally this is essential reading for brand management academics as the paper proposes to develop academic thinking on brand gender identity.

Qualitative research methods were deployed and the findings support the impact of the cognitive antecedents in the top-down processing of the participants' formation of perceptions. Moreover, the findings revealed the existing themes of social acceptance, including perceived homosexuality and social in/out-group culture and the role of parents on gender-neutrality for their children which found to have a direct impact on the formation of the negative perceptions.

The study proposes a conceptual framework based on the findings which incorporate the negative perceptions of gender-neutral brands, specifically correlating with the existing research on brand gender conformity and non-conformity in symbolic consumption.

Key words: brand gender identity, masculinity, femininity, child gender identity, symbolic consumption, John Lewis, clothing, childrenswear, childrens clothing, consumer perceptions

Introduction and Rationale

Gender identity has been historically defined as the existential state of one's maleness or femaleness (Spence 1984). The term 'brand gender' has been adopted from gender identity theory and has been widely researched with the notion that brands take on specific genders that appeal to the respective male or female consumer (Allison et al. 1980; Alreck et al. 1982; McCracken 1993). Furthermore, a strong identifiable brand gender has been suggested as a relevant source of consumer-based brand equity (CBBE), which is a vital ingredient for brands to grow their consumer relationship and consumer love (Machado et al. 2019).

Some examples of stereotypical gendered brands include Hugo Boss and Chanel, of whom adopt masculine and feminine brand personalities to correspond with their gendered target audience (Jung 2006). Due to this, consumers are said to have higher brand equity with brands that correspond with their respective gender (Belk 1998; Till and Priluck 2001; Lieven et al. 2015; Vacas de Carvalho 2020). Additionally, existing literature supports the notion that a strong brand positioning as either exclusively masculine or as exclusively feminine can have positive implications for consumer attitudes and purchase intentions (Grohmann 2009; Lieven et al. 2014; van Tilburg et al. 2015).

Nevertheless, as the evolving and shifting landscape of the gender revolution (Goldberg 2017) is now upon us, the human gender is not so easily defined by set standard masculine or feminine traits, this has an important impact on how brands then gender themselves. Recently, there has been a notable rise of gender-neutral brands, (or androgynous brands) who have combined propositions of both masculine and feminine traits (Kliamenakis 2011), particularly those brands that are symbolic in nature (Jung 2006), such as fashion brands. Yet, very few studies have been conducted in which gender-neutral brands have received acknowledgement (Bem 1974; Jung 2006; Grohmann 2009) and due to these limitations in studies, exploration of consumer perceptions is entirely inconclusive.

Very early research on this topic Grohmann (2009) suggested that the limited focus was due to researchers and marketers not viewing androgynous (or gender-neutral) brands as viable, as they are arguably more complex to manage and sustain in terms of consumer expectations. Moreover, studies have found that men are more likely to stigmatize with contamination to women, with the notion of 'anti-femininity' present in both the construction of brand gender identity and child gender identity (Alreck et al. 1982; Kimmel 1996; Carrigan et al. 1985; Tuncay and Otnes 2008). Despite the stigmatization, clothing retailers have been diversifying and gender-neutral clothing has been gaining heightened popularity in recent years. Mintel (2021) highlights how consumers are moving away from gender stereotypes and whilst only 10% of shoppers cite gender-neutral as an important factor when shopping for childrenswear, the idea is gaining traction.

As gender-neutral branding is becoming increasingly commonplace, especially in children's clothing, it is essential to revisit the literature on brand gender identity in terms of symbolic consumption, to explore and understand consumer perceptions and those impinging factors which relate to gender to advance our understanding. Practically, this study could also assist those brands in terms of helping them to understand the value of gendered labels.

It is also understood from the brand literature that symbolic brands are of higher social currency than functional brands, so therefore these are utilised by consumers to form user imagery and gain social approval and in this way, are of higher risk of brand failure if the incorrect symbolic

item is chosen (Solomon 1983; Park et al. 1986; Jung 2006). Symbolic brands such as fashion are relevant here, so the context of the study is selected by the perceived level of risk, therefore, John Lewis, the UK's first major retailer to abandon gendered labels helps us to provide the context and the case in this relatively un-explored area of academia. John Lewis' brand prominence especially as a perceived 'family brand' will also allow the authors to explore how this brand has been impacted in the eyes of the parent consumer, based on the impinging factors outlined within literature (Grohmann 2009, Jung 2006, Kliamenakis 2011).

Finally, the over-arching aim is to contribute to the literature on gender identity theory and to help develop upon the early findings surrounding gendered consumption with relation to the construction of child gender identity in light of the gender-neutral concept in industry and society (Stuteville 1971; Kimmel 1996; Kane 2006). The gap in literature surrounding gender-neutral symbolic brands are specifically of interest and relevance, particularly given the wider significance of gender and the roles that parents influence play on their children's preferences related to their gender.

Literature Review

Gender Identity Theory

Gender identity has been defined as the existential state of one's maleness or femaleness (Spence 1984). It must be understood that despite the biological sex of an individual, gender identity is a social construct which outlines how an individual categorizes themselves, not necessarily congruent with one's psychological gender (Cameron 1998). Gender schema theory (Bem 1981) outlines the social construct of individuals being 'gendered' in society and how the sex-linked characteristics of each gender continue to be translated to other members of society. Furthermore, gender schema theory (Martin and Halverson 1981) proposed that once children have acquired gender identity, they begin to actively seek out gender-related information from their environment and assimilate the information to their gender schema, which then guides their behavior on what is appropriate or inappropriate for their gender (Fagot and Leinbach 1989; Martin and Ruble 2004; Martin et al. 2002)

Butler's performative gender model outlines that gender is an 'act', which is constructing the social fiction of an individual's psychological being (Butler 1990). Therefore, the acts of individuals can be used to escape the restrictions of society's version of gender and create their own social performance to critique such restrictions. Lorber (1994) has a similar understanding, denoting that gender is a form of 'display', which is achieved through the use of props. These props are in the form of consumption, of which we obtain symbolic possessions that enhance and develop our desired gender identity. Symbolic possessions, such as clothing, are traditionally used by society to shape the visual differences between men and women and to enforce the differences in gender roles (Crane 2000).

Most of the gender stereotypes and issues segregating men and women is due to socially cultural constructs (Bandura 1986). Gender stereotypes reflect the general stereotypes that are expected respectively of men and women, often these are highly segregated and are over-generalised to reflect the entire gender (Oakes et al. 1994). It is in this way, that gender stereotypes are more prescriptive than other forms of stereotypes (Fiske and Stevens 1993). Men are often portrayed in society as occupying directive roles and possessing high ambition.

Whereas females are often portrayed as adopting more submissive roles, both in society as well as in the workplace, deemed unambitious and emotional. Thus, denoting a stratification system that rates men above women due to favoured qualities and behaviours (Condry and Condry 1976; Bussey and Bundara 1999; Berscheid 1994). These gender stereotypes are extremely significant to the understanding of basis of brand gender, as it's through such stereotypes that perceptions are formed for brands and products (Jung 2006).

As a child's cognitive schema begins to develop, children begin the transformation into cultural natives within the patriarchal world (Bem 1993). Children are provided with symbolic items to categorise their sex, with male children being provided with toy vehicles and construction toys and female children being provided with toys consistent with nurturing, specifically dolls (Pomerleau et al. 1990). Adults act as their gatekeepers and multiple studies illustrate the strong role parents play in providing toys for their children and encouraging play with certain toys over others (Boe and Woods 2017; Kollmayer et al. 2018; Weisgram and Bruun 2018) thus reinforcing gender identity and gender behaviour from an early age.

Butler (1990) recognises the impact family relations have on the development of these associations, stating that gender norms are enforced through varied modes of reward and punishment. Thus, outlining this process as the positive and avoidant affirmations approach, in response to atypical-gender behaviour (Thompson 1975; Carter and Levvy 1988; Bussey and Bundara 1999). Alreck et al. (1982) found that fathers place more importance on imposing gender boundaries on their children than mothers do, with differential treatment between their sons and daughters (Bradley and Gobbart 1989; Coltrane and Adams 1997; Maccoby 1998). Thus, the prominent role of the parent in the construction of child's identity through selective symbolic consumption can be inferred.

There is a large body of work on parent perceptions for various industries, including schools (Ball et al. 2017), and collaborative shopping (Darian 1998). However, parent perceptions on gender-bending behaviour remains limited within academic work. Notable academic work on the subject area is by Kane (2006), who explored child gender non-conformity from parents' perspective. Her findings indicate that parents have positive perceptions of gender non-conformity in daughters, with parents in some cases actively encouraging the role of a 'tomboy'. Interestingly, in sons, all parents expressed negative perceptions surrounding gender non-conformity, with active determent of symbolic items i.e. pink skirts and Barbie dolls. Such negative perceptions included markers of femininity and concern for potential homosexuality. Thus, the author recognises the relationship between the gender identity theory and the top-down processing theory, into parent negative perceptions which is the basis of exploration within this study.

Brand Gender Identity

In recent years, the relevance of brand gender for the success of a brand has been well documented in branding literature. Research has shown that the positioning of a brand as either masculine or feminine can lead to critical consumer–brand-related responses (Machado et al. 2019) and has also been suggested as a relevant source of consumer-based brand equity (CBBE). Vacas de Carvalho (2020) also notes that brand gender is an essential construct within brand management literature and a pivotal way of gaining distinct competitive advantages. As a brand can be seen as an extension of consumer personality (Aaker 1991) it is understood that consumers form relationships with brands as an extension of their own gender identity and brands are able to successfully engage and resonate with the respective male and female consumers, example such as Chanel (feminine brand) and Hugo Boss (masculine brand), (Jung 2006).

Academic work on cross-gender brand extensions (new product offerings under the same brand name for customers of the opposite sex) is a recent development. It was noted that to cross-gender could dilute the gender personality of the parent brand or deemed as 'gender contamination'. The study by Yuen et al (2021) warns that if the original brand gender positioning is crucial to the value of a parent brand then a brand needs to consider whether cross-gender brand extensions will harm this.

The concept of brand gender or gender stereotyping of brands is defined as a set of human personality traits associated with masculinity or femininity applicable and relevant to brands leading itself to the 'brand-as-a-person' metaphor (Grohmann 2009). Bourdieu (2001) identifies that brands must access the set of characteristics and behaviours that are categorically labelled within society as either expected of men or women however, Marcangeli (2015) develops on this notion, outlining that male gender stereotypical traits commonly being independent, strong and rebellious, with traditional female gender-stereotypical traits being described as emotional, passive and sensitive.

The gender of the spokespeople (influencers) within advertising of the brand influences the consumer perception on the masculine brand personality (MBP) or feminine brand personality (FBP) (Aaker 1996; Grohmann 2009; Keller 2013). Therefore, it is evident that advertising and marketing material of a brand plays a crucial role in conveying the symbolic attributes of a brand's gender identity.

A brand can also be seen to adopt a masculine or feminine personality through its functional attributes. Lieven et al.'s study (2015) identified the effect of brand design on brand gender perceptions and found a positive correspondence. It was found that masculine shapes were depicted through angularity and muscularity, vs. feminine shapes that are more rounded/slenderer in appearance. Iyer and Debevec (2015) develop on this further stating the shapes of products and their packaging has a direct impact on a brands gender, suggesting that curves depict FBP and angular shapes depict MBP, which is widely believed by researchers to also represent the physical shape of the male and female human anatomy (Schmitt and Simonson 1997; Furnham and Radely 1989).

A corresponding result was found with colour – darker colours (such as blues and greens) representing masculinity and lighter colours (such as pinks and reds) de picting femininity (Iyer and Debevec 1989; Kirkham 1996; Tissier-Desbordes and Kimmel 2002). Interestingly both adults and children show gender differences for pink and blue, with females preferring pink and males preferring blue and these gender differences in colour are reflected in every day choices from an early age (Wong and Hines 2015). Furthermore, the effect of colour on masculinity and femininity is widely understood to involve brightness (Jablonski and Chaplin 2000) as well as hue (Buss and Schmitt 1993). These elements are utilised by consumers to reinforce their own degree of masculinity and femininity, for example by drawing on associations such as bold versus pastel packaging colour (Grohmann 2009).

Brand Androgyny & Gender-Neutral Brands

Gender neutrality (which is also termed as brand androgyny) is not just a fashionable trend it is said to be a fashion revolution (Parmer 2022). In simple terms, gender-neutral clothing or androgynous clothing can be classified as unisex clothing (Parmer 2022). Gender neutrality is a move towards a world that doesn't distinguish between genders through societal forms like language, colours or clothing.

An androgynous brand has been defined as having both high levels of masculine and feminine brand traits. For example, a brand could be 'sweet, sensitive and tender', as well as also being 'brave, daring and dominant' (Kliamenakis 2011). Due to the level of social currency associated with acquiring the right symbolic item, it is therefore understood that an androgynous brand will increase the risk of this being jeopardized. This is due to functional product categories not being utilised by consumers for salient attributes, unlike symbolic product categories (Jung 2006). Thus, the risk-factor associated with gender-neutral functional brands is lower than with symbolic brands, of which represent high sign value among social groups (Belk 1988).

Brand gender identity literature has evolved significantly over the past decade due to gender identities shifting, specifically traditional masculine and feminine divides which are no longer so easily identifiable. Given that gender is a socially constructed phenomenon it is possible for males to identify with feminine traits and females to identify with masculine traits (Neale et al. 2015). Traditionally, Western societies strongly discouraged men and women from partaking in activities regarded as more appropriate for the opposite sex (Alreck, 1994). Those who rejected traditional sex roles were often regarded as social deviates and were subjected to public ridicule, social rejection and ostracizing (Stets & Burke 1996). However, in recent decades there has been a significant relaxation of prohibitions against crossing over (Settle & Alreck, 1987).

High scores for both gender dimensions of masculinity and femininity, indicating androgynous brands, lead to a reduced overall brand equity (Lieven et al. 2015). This is due to the consequent confusing consumer proposition of a combined gendered identity. Therefore, more research must be conducted in this area in order for brands to understand how to effectively articulate a gender-neutral brand and the myriad of consumer perceptions which come along with it. If not considered both from an academic and industry perspective, implementation of this type of brand personality could be extremely destructive (Kliamenakis 2011).

The research supported by Cooke et al. 2022 emphasize the importance of knowing the psychological gender identity of the target market. The research suggested that while brand gender congruence is enduring for consumers who possess typically "binary" gendered personality traits and equally it is important to androgynous consumers. As the psychological prevalence of androgyny continues to grow in modern culture, this is an important consideration for marketers, particularly for brands with a diverse target market comprised of varying gender identities. For example, an analysis of the masculine and feminine behaviours of Disney princes and princesses identified a change after 2000 where princesses were more androgynous in their behavior compared to earlier films (Hine et al., 2018). This change represents a progressive commercial response to altered gender roles in society.

Clothing as Symbolic Consumption & Gender Identity

The role of symbolic consumption in aiding the individual's portrayal of their desired gender identity through purchasing the correct items associated with their gender, reinforces and symbolises their own self-concept (Levy 1959; Prakash and Flores 1985; Fischer and Arnold 1994). Gender as a social construct and gender identity has long been associated with fashion, as garments have been frequently considered as a marker of gender and an expression of the gender binary and gender roles (Crane 2000). According to fashion scholar Enwistle (2015), garments add a cultural layer to one's body, since there is a defined relation between female bodies and femininity and male bodies and masculinity. As gender as a social construct, one's gender is said to be displayed through clothing garments which act as aids to construct these identities.

In recent years, clothing retailers have seen to be diversifying their childrenswear, as consumers demand more choice as well as more trend-led options. Mintel (2018) report that 24% of shoppers are wanting a more diverse selection of apparel for their children. Childrenswear is an extremely opportunistic playground for fashion retailers and a trend that is currently infiltrating the childrenswear segment is gender-neutrality. Gender-neutral clothing has been gaining heightened popularity in recent years, Mintel (2021) highlights how consumers are moving away from gender stereotypes and whilst only 10% of shoppers cite gender-neutral as an important factor when shopping for childrenswear, the idea is gaining traction. John Lewis (one of the UK's largest retailers) consistently remains top in terms of ranking of consumer perceptions. This is based on both brand quality and reputation, as the retailer has been able to stay innovative whilst staying true to its brand heritage (The Independent 2017).

John Lewis has been one of the first major UK retailers to scrap gender labels in its childrenswear ranges from ages 0-14 years (British Vogue 2017) and has implemented combined merchandised areas for both genders. The implementation of gender-neutral labelling by John Lewis has had mixed consumer perceptions, in the media with some parents declaring their loyalty to the retailer based on this decision as a 'real step forward', with others ridiculing the move as 'politically incorrect.' Thus, using this retailer as the context for the study will not just be beneficial to exploring the subject area, but will also be the first published post-evaluation of the initiative.

So, this explorative research has been developed based on the case of a single brand (John Lewis) connected with the aforementioned gender identity and self-representation gender theory, since clothing garments are intrinsic to matters of identity and gender (Entwistle 2005).
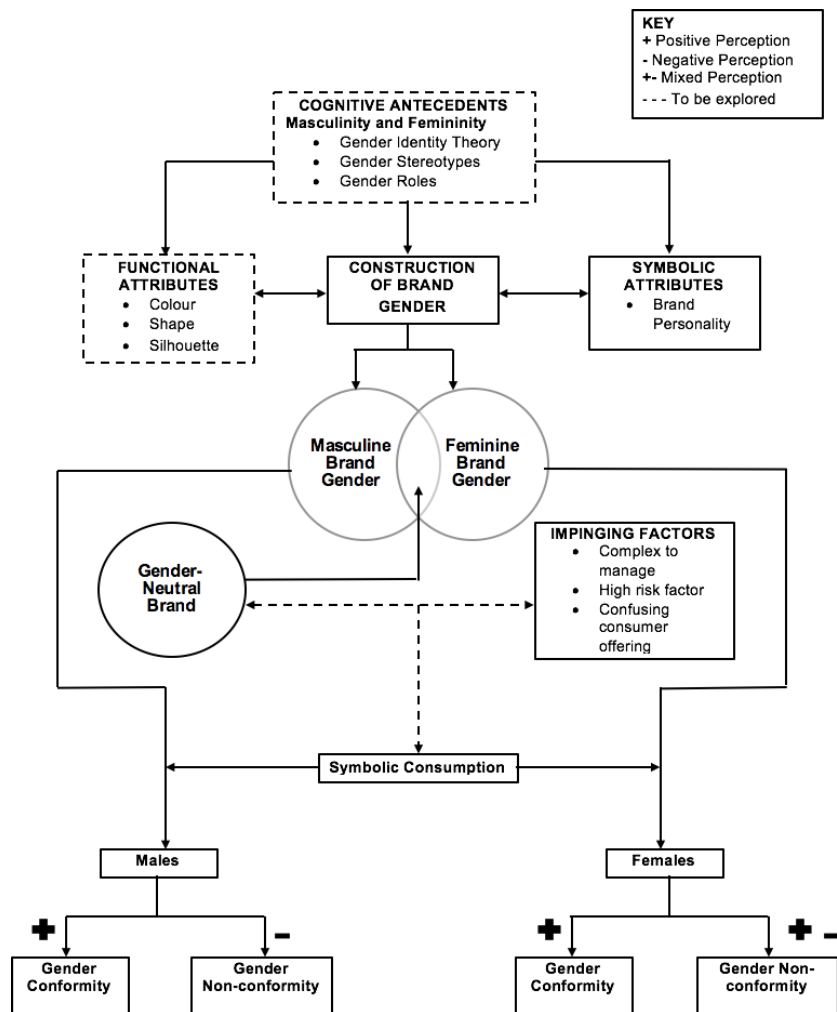
Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework has been developed to illustrate the relationships from the aforementioned literature and to demonstrate the proposed connected themes of study on Brand Gender Identity, Symbolic Consumption and Perceptions.

The basis of the authors conceptual idea (see Figure 1) has been formed through the integration of gender identity theory as cognitive antecedents, which precede the construction of brand gender identity and how this informs the top-down processing of consumer perception (Gregory 1997). Kane (2006) who explored child gender non-conformity from a parent's perspective indicated that parents have positive perceptions of gender non-conformity in females (refer to the + and – key) and negative perceptions surrounding gender non-conformity in males (refer to the – key). As identified in the literature review, this is due to the wider acceptability of 'tomboys' (Stuteville 1971) and the enforcement of anti-femininity on males, in fear of perceived homosexuality (Kimmel 1996; Cameron 1998). Thus, this theory will be used to help to explore how participants' form perceptions of gender-neutral brands within childrenswear.

Based on the findings from existing literature, it is evident that individuals use symbolic consumption as a form of gender display and as part of their social construction of gender (Butler 1990; Bem 1993; Lorber 1994; Crane 2000), however it is not clear how the varying forms of gender affect symbolic consumption in clothing nor specifically how gender-neutral brands combine the masculine and feminine functional attributes in the formation of brand gender identity. So, within the conceptual framework, functional attributes, such as colour, shape & silhouette are included for exploration.

Additionally, the impinging factors on gender-neutral brands, (Grohmann 2009; Jung 2006; Kliamenakis 2011), specifically confusing consumer offering is outlined in the conceptual framework as an item so these will be explored and reflected upon within the study in terms of parent's perception of the overall brand John Lewis. Overall, this study hopes to broaden our understanding of brand gender identity and symbolic consumption within the context of childrenswear and to deepen and provide a new perspective within brand management literature and gender research.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework: Brand Gender Identity, Symbolic Consumption and Perception

KEY
+ Positive Perception
- Negative Perception
+- Mixed Perception
- - - To be explored

COGNITIVE ANTECEDENTS
Masculinity and Femininity
- Gender Identity Theory
- Gender Stereotypes
- Gender Roles

FUNCTIONAL ATTRIBUTES
- Colour
- Shape
- Silhouette

CONSTRUCTION OF BRAND GENDER

SYMBOLIC ATTRIBUTES
- Brand Personality

Masculine Brand Gender

Feminine Brand Gender

Gender-Neutral Brand

IMPINGING FACTORS
- Complex to manage
- High risk factor
- Confusing consumer offering

Symbolic Consumption

Males

Females

+ −
Gender Conformity   Gender Non-conformity

+ + −
Gender Conformity   Gender Non-conformity

1

Research Aim and Objectives

Based upon the gaps identified within the literature and steered by the conceptual framework (figure 1), the following research objectives have been determined:

Research Objectives

1. To explore how gender identity and gender stereotypes impact the parents' perceptions of the gender-neutral childrenswear and the in-store environment.
2. To gain a deeper understanding of how the functional attributes that define masculine and feminine brand gender is perceived by parents in a gender-neutral context.
3. To gain insight into how parents' perceptions of the John Lewis childrens clothing brand have shifted based on the introduction of the gender-neutral childrenswear.

Methodology

Daymon and Holloway (2011) recognise the importance of acknowledging philosophical concepts to strengthen the research design and strategy. This study, has been influenced by interpretivism, which allowed the researcher to gauge and understand the participants' views from their perspective (Wilson 2010; Denzin and Lincoln 2005). This philosophy allowed the researcher to interpret the individual meanings behind participants' perceptions, rather than to hypothesize, as per the positivist approach (Neuman 2000).

The researcher recognised the requirement for an abductive approach to research in order to build theory within this particular area (Hyde 2000) and to allow for greater creativity and intuition to inform the theoretical evolution. This also allowed the researcher to gain an effective understanding of the meanings and associations that the participants felt towards the brand-gender neutrality, through the use of open-ended discussion and probing to uncover the thoughts and feelings of participants. Additionally, it also allowed the researcher to use and reflect upon the relevant literature as per the adapted conceptual framework (figure 1).

Research Strategy & Method

The study will follow an exploratory research strategy while drawing on insights gained from existing literature from related academia. Bryman and Bell (2011) outline that exploratory studies are particularly useful at creating open-ended discussions. Therefore, adopting exploratory research was deemed the most effective way to uncover the consumer perceptions. Based on the decision to adopt an interpretivist and exploratory approach to the research, qualitative methods were deemed the most appropriate approach.

To allow for the aforementioned rich, detailed insights into perceptions of gender-neutral branding with relation to child gender identity (Rowley 2002), the context of a single case of John Lewis' was applied to the research design. The research design allowed for an in-depth exploration into the contemporary phenomenon of gender-neutrality in clothing in a real-life context (Yin 2003). The authors recognised that, single case designs limit the transferability of findings, but the single case also allows for a deep exploration into the issues of gender-neutrality and child gender identity, of which may have been blurred by the inclusion of various other cases.

Focus Groups

It has been recognised that focus groups allow for a diverse range of thoughts and feelings to be extracted due to the group environment and are particularly effective at gauging consumer perceptions and attitudes on brands (Hennink et al. 2011; Saunders et al. 2012; Ritchie et al. 2013).

A focus group discussion guide was developed based on the tasks outlined by Colucci (2008), which included personification, listing and ranking activities in order to elicit conversation and promote discussion to meet the three research objectives outlined. The guide also included the presentation of the stimuli which was comprised of photographs of the John Lewis childrenswear range, allowing participants to experience the objects' colour, form and style.

This was significant to the study in order to gauge any negative perceptions experienced by the participants and is generally considered the most beneficial way in which to gather perceptions on products and brands (Jansson-Boyd 2010). To minimize influence of group dynamic the authors regularly asked participants to write down their responses to questions as this helped to reduce respondents from being influenced by each other about concepts.

The sessions began with rapport-building conversation, encouraging a relaxed atmosphere and to help with any group discomfort. Typical of abductive, interpretivist ontology, sample sizes are small in order to provide rich insights, so small sample sizes of 5-7 participants in each focus group were selected in order to extract such insights whilst also ensuring a wide range of opinion.

In order for the focus group participants to feel comfortable and to increase the likelihood of insightful data being extracted (Berg, 2009; Daymon and Holloway 2002) the focus groups took place in the researcher's home which was local to all the participants that attended. Rapport was easily built with the participants, which the researcher believes was made possible through the location.

Population & Sampling

Parents with children aged between 0-14 years of various demographic and socio-economic groups were invited to participate, it was not an inclusion criteria or requirement for these to be parents with children who identified as gender neutral. Therefore, the sample included all genders and a varied range of ages in order to be broader in terms of general representation. A sample of 5-7 participants per focus group, totaling 23 participants. A snowball sampling strategy was selected for this research study, as being best method to access the difficult-to-reach populations in this case parents of children aged 0-14 years. This non-probability method of sampling was implemented as this particular group of participants proved difficult for the researcher to gain access to, as participants of convenience were not known to the researcher (Daymon and Holloway 2002). Initially, participants were contacted through convenience with the understanding that they fit the desired criteria. However, these few participants did not make a substantial sample size beneficial for focus groups. Therefore, snowball sampling allowed these participants to be interviewed, of whom possessed the necessary participant requirements for the study, which led to the chain-referral of other participants who were also parents of children aged 0-14 years (Berg 2009). Daymon and

Holloway (2011) outline that a potential limitation of this sampling approach is the potential for the initial participants to provide other like-minded participants, with similar thoughts and opinions. However, this risk was lowered with the requirement for the initial participants to provide several contacts each, with 4 focus groups in total.

Data Collection & Pilot Focus Group

To reduce researcher bias that can be present during focus groups, a pilot focus group was conducted initially. This was a useful environment in order to test the intended focus group discussion guide, in order to highlight any issues with the proposed activities and accompanying questions and improve data collection (Patton 2002, Baker 2007). It was found that hypothetical-interaction questions were effective at extracting meaningful data from the participants (Spradley 1980). However, the researcher often found themselves asking too many leading questions, rather than probing ones. Thus, the researcher amended their conversationalist style. Moreover, it was found that the ranking and personification tasks were effective at generating authentic discussion and recording opinions.

Data Analysis

All focus groups were transcribed and analysed using content analysis. In order to measure the negative perceptions of the participants, the material was analysed for the collection of adjectives used to describe items or to respond to probing questions. Additionally, facial expressions were analysed to uncover how the participants were feeling, even if their speech wasn't alone indicative of negative perception (Kanouse 1984). As well as this, the consistency of verbal and facial responses to the probing questions within all the focus group sessions were examined to identify such patterns and themes of thought (Neuendorf 2002; Berg 2007). Subsequently, the transcriptions were thematically coded (See appendix 1. Coding guide) in order to outline the ideas and themes, as well as anomalies, that appeared across the 4 focus groups (Morse and Richards 2002). Participants were referred to as Participant 1-23. Direct quotes have been inputted to support the evaluation.

Authenticity & Trustworthiness

To ensure authenticity was applied within the research study, natural probing techniques were implemented with flexible discussion based around the focus group discussion guide after the pilot focus group, to prevent restricting participant conversation whilst encouraging the authenticity of participant responses within the conversation, as well as limiting researcher bias.

Credibility of research is evaluated with participant information being transcribed and evaluated accurately and is representative of the meanings behind their discussion. All content was intensely analysed to ensure accuracy of the participants' verbal and facial responses (Denscombe 2010).

Due to the unfamiliar nature of the group setting and the sensitive subject topic, the researcher acknowledges that participants may have relinquished their views in order to avoid conflict from the other participants within the group. The researcher attempted to extract their responses in both verbal and written forms to ensure that group bias and conformity was less likely.

Research and Discussion

RO1: To explore how gender identity and gender stereotypes impact the parents' perceptions of the gender-neutral childrenswear and the in-store environment.

The literature was clear in that gender identity and stereotypes heavily impact individuals' relationships with respective gendered brands and in the construction of child gender identity, parents were found to utilise clear symbolic gender-markers to promote their child's biological sex in rejection of aforementioned gender non-conformity (Lorber 1994; Maccoby 1998; Kane 2006). The findings of this study have been deduced and classified into four key areas: Social Acceptance, Role of Parents, Relevance of Gender-Neutrality for Children and the in-store environment.

Social Acceptance

Researchers denote that gender is a social construct and is extremely prescriptive in its expectations of the way men and women behave correspondingly to their sex thus, as found by Avery (2012), there is a high degree of associated stigma in gender-bending associations with symbolic brands or products impacting social acceptance in social group environments. Participants in this study acknowledged this when probed on their thoughts and feelings regarding the stimuli, displaying their concern for their child's social acceptance within the in-group:

"We're getting into the world of clothes… we're talking a phone, like that's a generic, gender--neutral thing, and everyone's got a phone. Like if you've got an out of date one, then there are repercussions for that. Let alone if a kid wanted to wear something like that, that wasn't meant for them." (Participant 18, male)

Consequently, these findings support the studies by Cameron (1998) and Avery (2012), which recognised the formation of an in-group / out-group culture on non-conforming activities by an individual. Moreover, the findings support the notion within literature of 'perceived homosexuality' (Caldera et al. 1989; Kane 2006; Cameron 1998) despite the gender-neutral label:

"At my son's age, the word gay flies around like the word hello and if I brought that home to him he'd flat out tell me "mum, I'm not wearing that I'll look gay." And that's because that's what boys are like." (Participant 13, female)

However, when probed on how a girl would be perceived wearing the more masculine items, many of the participants stated that none of their daughters would want to dress in perceived boys' clothes. Mothers of daughters contrasted with the findings from Kane (2006), where the research suggested that parents actively encouraged girls gender non-conformity. Despite this, less negative attention was given during discussion on daughters, thus supporting the previously mentioned literature (Stuteville 1971) that tomboys are more generally accepted in society.

Role of Parents

Feinman (1992) outlines that parents will take on a 'thoughts and action' approach when managing the gender of their children, by providing positive and avoidant affirmations in their response to gender non-conforming behaviour. Some of the findings develop on this notion, highlighting the active thoughts and action approach some of the parents adopt for their child's social groups, as proposed by Butler (1990) and Kane (2006), with relation to the stimuli:

"It depends on the circumstance, if they were really biting your ear off about it and they really wanted it, sure you'd let them wear it at home but if you were going to a family party then you wouldn't, at least I wouldn't" [about boys wearing girls' clothes]." (Participant 8, female)

Therefore, this pattern of thought supports the notion of anti-femininity for sons (Kimmel 1996). However, not all of the fathers drew on this notion and were reflective of the mothers in their negative perception for both sexes equally, contrasting with the findings from Kane (2006). This demonstrates an interesting emerging area of future research on the role of fathers in terms of equality treatment for both sexes on non-conforming behaviours.

Relevance of Gender-Neutrality for Children

This specific theme is new to published literature with no existing works outlining the relevance of gender-neutrality in childrenswear. Upon probing, all participants concluded that gender-neutral products or labels were not necessary for children due to the extensive availability and variety of clothing. Moreover, it was discussed that the term 'gender-neutral' was too sophisticated for their age:

"I just don't think it's necessary for kids, either you want to be boy and wear boys' clothes or the other way around, but you do not need a whole section for it because it's not needed. They are also far too young to be thinking about that term at all." (Participant 14, female)

Participant 12 developed on this, explaining her daughter never wanted to go near boys clothing without being told to by her parents. This particular pattern of thought supports Messner's theory (2000) that parents determine gender choices between boys and girls in terms of their preferences. The findings were indicative that relevance of gender-neutrality amongst parents is low, however, it is recommended that the research study is replicated in order to solidify these findings, as well as to increase validation for industry professionals considering the initiative.

In-store Environment

As per the research design, the stimuli presented to participants also included images of John Lewis' in-store environment, which depicts combined 'Boys & Girls' signage with removal of segregated gendered areas. Participants scrutinized John Lewis' execution of gender-neutral clothing in-store, stating that it was still clearly visible which areas were 'for boys' or 'for girls' a 'tokenistic' approach:

"Taking down signs will literally make no difference in freedom of choice whatsoever, because it's still laid out as it would be minus the signs. If they wanted to take it that step further, they would need to mix up all the boys' and girls' stuff." (Participant 18, male)

However, participants also displayed concern for the overload of choice they would feel as a consumer, as well as the confusion this would cause during their shopping experience, if the clothing were to be more combined and 'mixed-up.' Overall, the general findings on in-store gender neutral environment were negative perceptions. Therefore, the author highlights this as another key area for future research to identify clearer recommendations in order to gauge more detailed, congruent findings on the gender-neutral store space.

RO2: To gain a deeper understanding of how the functional elements that define masculine and feminine brand gender in a gender-neutral context are perceived by parents.

Research has found that functional attributes of a product or brand greatly contributes to the creation of its subsequent gendered identity (Lieven et al. 2015), with high sign-value elements including colour, style and silhouettes (Connor et al. 1975; Mayer and Belk 1985; Solomon and Douglas 1987; Marcangeli 2015). Therefore, exploring the functional attributes was extremely beneficial in gaining deeper insight into consumer perceptions of symbolic gender-neutral brands (refer to figure 1). The data was found to replicate the functional attributes in literature, with three coded themes emerging across all focus groups: Colours, Style/Shape and Silhoutte.

Colours

Pink and blue still act as gender markers. When discussing the stimuli within the focus group sessions all of the participants acknowledged the heavy presence of the colours pink and blue within the range, with many of the participants disclaiming that they don't believe pink or blue are gender-neutral colours.

"It's so engrained in people's mind, pink for girls and pink for boys that even if it had gender-neutral sign, it makes no bloody difference." (Participant 6, female)

To support these views, one pattern which was found across all focus groups was the active selection of gendered coloured items for their respective sons and daughters during the ranking task. Such rankings from the participants correspond with the associations formed by participants in Lieven et al.'s (2015) study, in which participants responded positively to the correct gender colours that correlated with their sex.

The specific theme of gender-neutral colours has no existing works outlining consumer or academic views. Given the abductive nature of this study, exploring consumer perceptions of appropriate gender-neutral colours was vital. The general consensus among all the participants was that the term gender-neutral, did not translate effectively with solid pink and blue colours:

"If they're trying to be gender-neutral then why is it not pastel colours or lighter colours rather than solid blue or solid pink?" (Participant 8, female)

The elusion to brightness by the participants builds on the research of Jablonski and Chaplin (2000), which highlights the importance of brightness in the creation of brand gender identity. Interestingly, lighter colours communicate the term gender-neutral to consumers more effectively than that of darker brightness. These perceptions were equally and consistently translated across all the focus groups, with participants also adding that red, black, white or purple could be deemed gender-neutral. Thus, it can be inferred that a mixture of hues can be appropriate alongside brightness in order to improve perceptions (Alexander 2003).

One final finding was parents suggested that the gender-neutral positioning or dis-labelling of girl/boy of a product range does not alter existing perceptions of colour, which is consistent with the findings from Kane (2006), presumably as the gender perception of colour is so engrained within culture.

Style & Shapes

The style and shapes of motifs has been found to heavily influence children during their early human development. It was found that the perceptions of an item's perceived masculinity or femininity were heavily impacted by the motifs that were used in conjunction with the use of colour, as per identified within the literature:

"I really struggle to find anything with my Little Pony on for my son, he loves it but there's just nothing out there for boys with all of that stuff on it, because its' for girls obviously." (Participant 14, female)

Upon probing, interestingly, participants were able to pinpoint and understand the impact of such motifs on their child's development, in terms of gendered likes and dislikes, hobbies and interests:

"My daughter watches Peppa Pig religiously and that will have a psychological impact on her, because she sees George, knows he's a boy, sees he carries round his dinosaur all the time, and then knows it's not for girls." (Participant 9, male)

Therefore, it is evident that such style of motifs has a substantial influence on the associations of gender to accompany biological sex, of which to not confirm, has gender-bending properties on their social currency with their biological gender group (Maccoby 1998; Kane 2006; Avery 2012). Moreover, participants' felt that plainer motifs and slogans were more suited for a gender-neutral range. Alternatively, colours and styles must be 'mixed up' to include both masculine and feminine colours and softer shapes in order to blur the rigid gendered metaphors.

Silhouette

The silhouette of an item has been acknowledged by researchers to contribute substantially in the creation of masculine and feminine perceptions of an item or brand, as items can take on the angular or curved shapes that represent the male and female human form (Marcangeli 2015; Lieven et al. 2015). The findings support that participants are able to differentiate items within the range that were 'for boys' or 'for girls', despite being under the gender-neutral label, due to the silhouette or fit:

"I would go as far as to say it's the necklines, like you can tell with the lower neckline on that t-shirt that it's for girls and that's for boys because it's higher up because it's a boy collar." (Participant 17, male)

Moreover, participants stated that inputting a gender-neutral label into the clothing of the John Lewis range is not enough to encompass an effective gender-neutral range and would not alter the existing purchasing habits of parents – concluding that a gender-neutral range must incorporate size and fit accordingly. Thus, it is evident that brands must acknowledge the design and silhouette in order to effectively tailor to both sexes.

RO3: To gain insight how parents' perceptions of the John Lewis brand have shifted based on the introduction of the gender-neutral childrenswear

Pre-Task Perceptions

It was important for this study to first establish a foundation of consumer perceptions on the John Lewis brand, positive or negative, in order for the post-task perceptions to be effectively measured for a shift in overall perception. Thus, the supposed risk-factor associated with androgynous brands acknowledged within literature was explored (Jung 2006; Grohmann 2009; Lieven et al. 2015). During the first stage of the personification task, participants appeared to be congruent in their overall brand perception of John Lewis:

"If you were going to describe them you'd definitely say they were like an old man, or old person, just because they are so traditional." (Participant 21, female)

"Patriarch of the family, banker, sensible, reliable, grown-up." (Participant 15, male)

Participants were synonymous in their 'traditional' perception of John Lewis, with responses acknowledging that the brand was better suited for 'the older person.' Overall, perceptual attention on the task was minimal, with responses being one-worded accompanied with neutral facial expressions and open body language. Therefore, indicating that the perceptions weren't exclusively influenced by negativity at this stage of the session.

Post-Task Perceptions

Following on from the review and discussion of the stimuli that was presented to the participants, the sessions concluded with a second stage re-visit of the personification task, that was completed prior to the stimuli reveal. In stark contrast to the first stage of the task, participants gave convincingly negative responses to the John Lewis' strategy and the overall brand.

"Trying to be trendy and politically correct." (Participant 9, female)

"Opening up a can of worms for a small minority of people." (Participant 14, female)

Moreover, participants were adamant that the initiative from John Lewis was a 'poor fit' for the John Lewis brand overall, which could cause confusion and controversy with their existing customer base. This being due to participants suggesting the existing customer base at John Lewis match the brand's traditional nature:

"As I said they're just quite traditional it just doesn't fit with their values… it's too far, too much." (Participant 18, male)

Interestingly, participants 5, 9 and 20 brought up the notion 'why fix something that's not broken' when probed on their re-visited perceptions of John Lewis. Moreover, multiple participants stated it was 'stupid' and 'ridiculous' for John Lewis to implement it. Thus, damaging their perception of the brand:

"Has 100% damaged their brand." (Participant 6, female)

"It's totally not synonymous with John Lewis, totally wrong." (Participant 7, female)

"I'm never going in there again." (Participant 20, female)

Participants appeared visibly more agitated in their speech, noted through the shaking of heads and raised tone of voice. Additionally, there was increased attention given to the post-task re-visit, whilst negative responses were given about John Lewis. Thus, the findings suggestively support existing research which recognises the negative impinging factors (such as brand confusion) arising from brand gender neutrality.

Conclusion

This study has contributed to closing the gap in brand gender literature which explores parent consumer perceptions towards gender-neutral branding in childrenswear which previously have not been given foci in research. The study explored the formation of parents' top-down processing of gender perceptions on gender-neutral brands and in-store environment in relation to gender identity theory. Consequently, it was found that negative perceptions were formed by participants on the parent brand John Lewis. The themes according to the research objectives are summarized below.

Objective one explored the impact society's conception of gender identity and accompanying stereotypes had on the formulation of participants' perceptions of the gender-neutral brand. Findings revealed that, as per existing findings in literature on gender non-conformity in symbolic consumption, perceptions were negative. Existing themes of social acceptance, including perceived homosexuality and in-group / out-group culture, as well as their role as parents to take on a rewards and punishment approach, as per Butler (1990). However, despite this similarity, not all participants in the study agreed with the avoidant action to deter children from wearing gender non-conforming items, as per the stimuli, despite their negative perceptions – contrasting with the findings from Kane (2006). An emergent theme was the relevance of gender-neutrality for children and the relevance of the gender-neutral in-store environment, which also contributed to the participants' negative perceptions of the brand.

Objective two presented that the notion of "pink is for girls, blue is for boys" remaining relevant, as strong gender-marking stereotypes that indicate a child's sex from birth (Alexander 2003). Indeed, implementation by John Lewis in the range for both sexes contributed to negative perceptions. Additionally, findings developed on the research by Jablonski and Chaplin (2000) denoting that lighter, pastel colours were more fitting for 'gender-neutral', which are typically deemed feminine in existing literature. Moreover, the findings develop on the work on shapes/style by Jule (2011), translating the segregation of 'boy' and 'girl' visual style based on gender stereotypes. Furthermore, the participants suggested motifs and colours that are typically 'boy' and 'girl' should be mixed up in order to develop a range that was authentically gender-neutral.
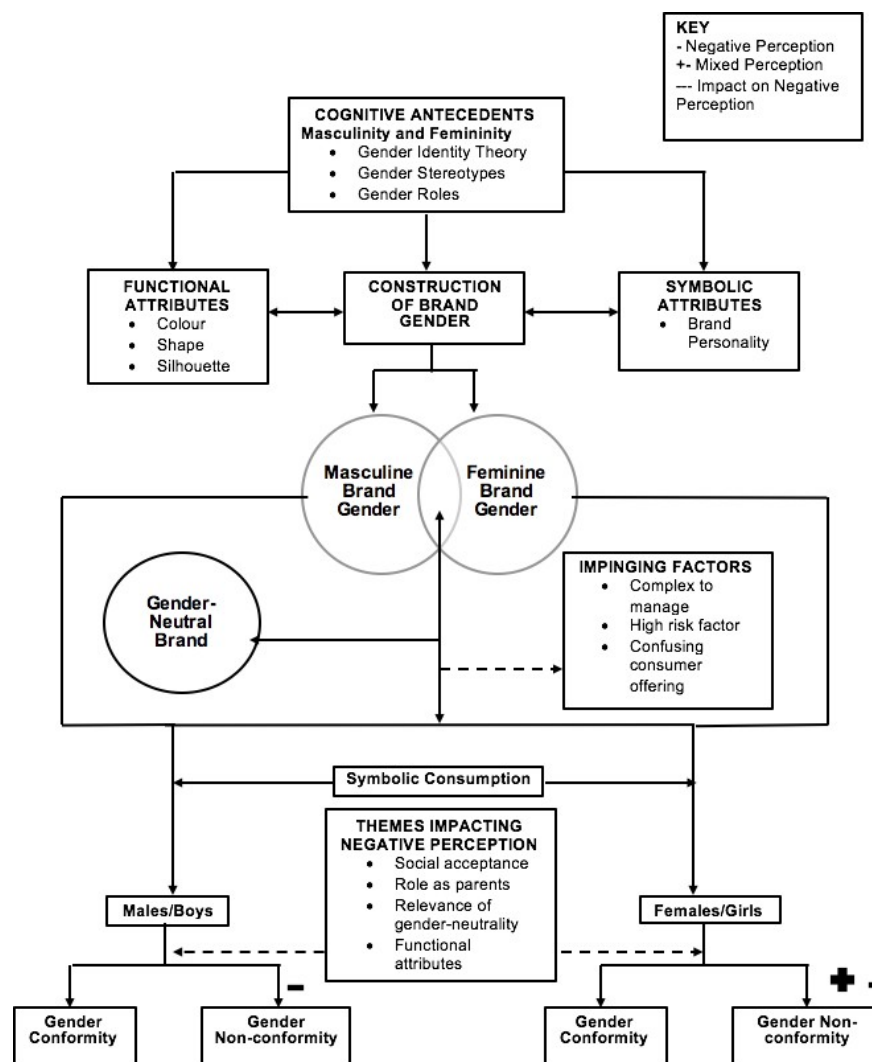
The findings from objective 3 indicated that there was a negative shift in perception from participants as they did not feel as though the gender-neutral initiative was a band fit to 'traditional' John Lewis parent brand. Therefore, participants found the strategy damaging to the parent brand, with some participants denoting they would not shop in the retailer again - confirming the risk-factor associated with gender-neutral brands in literature. This was consistent with the literature presented by Yuen et al (2021) who warned that the original brand gender positioning is crucial to the value of a parent brand and cross-gender brand extensions may harm the parent brand.

Revised Conceptual Framework

Based on the findings above, the conceptual framework developed earlier has been affirmed and also revised (see Figure 2). The findings supported the structure and flow of the conceptual framework, with the emerging themes social acceptance, role as parents and relevance of gender-neutrality proving to derive from the cognitive antecedents, during the formation of participant perceptions. As this study's aim was to measure the perceptions of participants, the positive perceptions in the original conceptual framework (see Figure 1) have been removed.

Equally the existing literature, perceptions on the gender-neutral range were negative. Thus, these perceptions remain illustrated in the revised conceptual framework and the relationship between the gender--neutral brand and perceptions during symbolic consumption have been finalised. The mixed perceptions of females/girls have remained mixed, based on the findings from this study and from existing literature. Moreover, to represent the emergent themes that have been found to have a direct impact on the perception formation of participants have been included. Though not emergent within brand gender literature, they are emergent within the sub-topic of gender-neutral brands, thus important to recognise within the conceptual framework. 'Functional attributes' has been replicated within this addition as per the findings from Research Objective 2. These are in correlation with the positive and avoidant affirmations process of parents that exists within existing literature (Feinman 1992, Kane 2006). This study proposes the revised conceptual framework in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Revised Conceptual Framework on Brand Gender Identity, Symbolic Consumption and Perception

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Implications, limitations and further research

This paper has accentuated key areas of literature as highlighted in the revised conceptual framework and has been able to develop on the limited work on gender-neutral symbolic brands within the context of childrenswear. Moreover, this study was able to support the findings of key studies on gender conformity and non-conformity and the subsequent parent consumer perceptions. The findings generally supported that when in gender-neutral context, themes of social acceptance, in-group/out-group culture, perceived homosexuality and the role of parents in a positive or avoidant affirmations approach remains evident in perception formation. An interesting implication of the research was that participants were critical of the relevance of gender-neutral children's clothing and gender-neutral branding and indicated that if there was a gender-neutral brand necessity then it should be truly gender-neutral rather tokenistic removal of gendered signage. Furthermore, despite the apparent gender revolution over the past decade and burring of distinct gender identities it is an interesting implication that gender choices are not translating across into the symbolic consumption of childrenswear where parents are still traditional in the prescribed male/female gendered consumer choices for their children.

Whilst the findings of the study gave theoretical contributions it also provides recommendations for industry. As per the findings from RO3, there was an indicative negative shift in the perception of the parent brand John Lewis based on the introduction of the gender-neutral childrenswear. The personification task findings support the impinging factors on gender-neutral brands and the parent brand harm that exists in literature (Grohmann 2009; Kliamenakis 2011; Yuen et al. 2021). Additionally, it was found that there was a general consensus of critique to the relevance of gender-neutral clothing for children due to the wide availability of 'boys' and 'girls' clothing in retail as well as the sophistication of the term gender-neutral. Therefore, brand practitioners for children's clothing should carefully consider the benefits of using gender-neutrality against confusing the consumer causing a loss in consumer brand loyalty and brand love.

Like any research, this study had limitations. In respect to the limitations of qualitative research and the interpretivist philosophy the findings are not able to be generalized. However as per the explorative nature the study is intended to uncover the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of parents to provide insight rather than generalizable results. A relevant limitation was linked with the sampling procedure. We used a snowball sampling technique (McDaniel & Gates 2006) and the sample profile was limited. The sample profile could be considered a limitation, as the data was only collected and consisted of mainly parents of children who were assumed to be traditionally gendered. Although this population is expected to be representative of the majority of parent consumers, this research could be replicated among parent consumers with children of non-binary or non-gendered identities to get a sense of understanding on their perceptions of gender-neutral clothing brands.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Coding Guide

Theme	Bullying
Theme	Social acceptance (I.e. In--group / out--group, acceptance from other people)
Theme	Responsibility as parents
Theme	Children's confusion
Theme	Sexuality (perceived homosexuality)
Theme	Societal social norms
Theme	Differences between boys and girls
Theme	Gender-neutral not necessary
Theme	Complexity/Confusion
Theme	Segregation separate for girls/boys
Theme	More choice
Theme	Pinks and blues gender markers
Theme	Gender neutral colours

Theme	Fit / style
Theme	Motifs/images
Theme	Materials
Theme	Improvements to 'gender neutral'
Theme	Political Correctness
Theme	Damaging
Theme	No difference
Theme	Unfit for John Lewis brand
Theme	Consumers interested to go in store
Theme	Consumer put off going into store
Theme	Consumer perceptions of brand

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