

# GENDER BENDER BRAND HIJACKS AND CONSUMER REVOLT

## The Porsche Cayenne Story

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**Gender-bending**—taking a brand that has historically been targeted to one gender and re-targeting it to the other gender. . .

This article discusses the opportunities and challenges of gender-branding and gender-bending.

### Brands as Identity Markers

Throughout history, marketers have created gendered brands, creating their brands and the stories they crafted about them in their advertising to appeal either to men or to women.

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One central part of who we are is our gender identity—our sense of ourselves as women or men.

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Brand managers fill their brands with imagery, stories, and personality to appeal to either men or women, infusing them with gendered identity meanings. Being a brand manager of a gendered brand requires understanding and respecting the identity meanings that consumers use, and protecting them so that the identity message the brand sends when a consumer uses it supports the identity needs of the brand's consumers.

**Marlboro vs. Virginia Slims**

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**Diet Coke vs. Coke Zero**

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These tech gadgets are increasingly becoming gendered, shedding their androgynous designs for masculine or feminine elements. The new HP Mini Vivienne Tam Edition is an example. Touted as “The World’s First Digital Clutch,” this new, ultrathin and ultralight notebook computer is sleeved in a gorgeous design featuring peony flowers designed by fashion designer, Vivienne Tam.

Gendered brands deliver value to consumers, and therefore, deliver value to marketers. ...

However, creating a gendered brand also has its downsides.

**Boys and Their Toys**

So, what happens when brands traditionally used by men are targeted towards women? Let’s take a look at a recent example from an online netnographic study I conducted among Porsche owners during the launch of the first non-sports car in the brand’s history.<sup>5</sup>

### Tradition of Gendered Objects

In virtually all cultures throughout history, there have been certain objects that have been kept for the exclusive use of men. Women were forbidden to touch, or sometimes even look at, these objects, which generally included items or spaces deemed sacred for religious or cultural reasons or which gave men power, for fear that they would contaminate them.<sup>1</sup> For example, Tahitian women were forbidden to touch men’s fishing or hunting tools.<sup>2</sup> In contemporary times, these traditions still exist. Sociologists have shown that men at The Citadel, a military college for men which recently went co-ed, believed that women could contaminate the ring given to men upon their graduation just by touching it.<sup>3</sup> Consumer researchers have confirmed that men are especially leery of purchasing products and brands traditionally associated with women.<sup>4</sup>

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### The Porsche Cayenne Story

In 2003, in an effort to expand their market share, the parent company of Porsche launched the Porsche Cayenne SUV, the brand’s first vehicle that was not a sports car. Although the company claimed it was targeting men who owned Porsche sports cars who also needed an SUV to transport their growing families, Porsche owners believed that the Cayenne was targeted towards women. Their collective howl of disbelief echoed around the world. *The New York Times* captured the spirit of their response: “There may be no vision more heretical to a testosterone-poisoned 911 owner than that of a suburban mother loading groceries into the back of her Porsche after dropping her children off at soccer practice.”

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SOURCE: Excerpted from *Consumer Behavior: Human Pursuit of Happiness in the World of Goods* (Jill Avery, Sharon Beatty, Morris Holbrook, Robert Kozinets, Banwari Mittal, Priya Raghubir, and Arch Woodside, (Open Mentis 2010).

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