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# Twitter Storms

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Divergent Emotional Consumer  
Responses surrounding the Removal of  
'Boys' and 'Girls' Gender Labels



**Kholoud El Jazouli**

*S1007685*

*Supervisors: Dr. Nina Belei / Niels Sprong*

*2<sup>nd</sup> Examiner: Dr. Bas Hillebrand*

## **ABSTRACT**

What happens when a widely taken-for-granted practice by consumers changes? How do consumers react when they wake up in the morning and read a headline announcing the removal of gender labels and the introduction of gender non-specific pieces of clothing by their favorite brands? Lately, some organizations joined the gender neutral movement and communicated their efforts in trying to conceal gender differences by removing gender labels and introducing gender neutral product lines. These brands are catering to young consumers and niche markets in an aim to differentiate themselves from competitors and stand out of the crowd. The change announcements have not gone unnoticed and faced a huge public backlash on social networks. While some consumers described the change as being progressive and expressed their contentment towards it, others experienced a mixture of unpleasant and bitter emotions and threatened to boycott the brands adopting the change. Exploring this burst of conflicting consumer reactions and emotions is at the heart of this study. The author investigates consumers' emotional responses to gender neutral labeling announcements and uses Twitter as main source for data collection. Sentiment analysis of the tweets is carried out to reveal the recurrent emotional responses. Further, the managerial implications provide managers with strategies on how to help prevent consumer fallout and ensure endorsement.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 'Genderless Labeling' as a Change in Organizational Behavior

On September 2017, John Lewis, a chain of high-end department stores operating throughout the UK, announced its decision to remove gender-specific labels from its children's clothing as well as in the separate sections in stores (Hosie, 2017). The giant retailer no longer uses "boys" and "girls" labels but rather re-labelled its children wear offerings "Girls & Boys" and "Boys & Girls" as figure 1 shows.

This decision was taken as a result of John Lewis's aim to overcome gender stereotypes as Caroline Bettis, head of children's wear at John Lewis, asserted in a statement: *"We do not want to reinforce gender stereotypes within our John Lewis collections and instead want to provide greater choice and variety to our customers, so that the parent or child can choose what they would like to wear"* (Hosie, 2017). John Lewis is not the only retailer to adopt this change. Back in March 2016, Zara launched a gender-neutral clothing line called "Ungendered" and H&M incorporated a unisex denim collection called "Denim United" spreading the following promotional message: *"With this collection, his and hers clothing are one and the same, blurring borders and challenging norms"* (Harris, 2017). Sold on the official brands' websites, the promotional images for both Zara and H&M's collections feature both male and female models wearing the same clothing and showcasing the practicality of gender neutral fashion (figure 1).

This change in organizational behavior resulted in a Twitter Storm - a sudden explosive hype, wave, or burst of attention for the topic of gender neutral labeling on social networking and microblogging service Twitter (Van Attevelde, Ruigrok, Welbers, & Jacobi, 2018). Indeed, consumers' responses to these brands change announcements were mixed. While some customers praised the move and appreciated brands' recognition of gender complexities, an army of furious Twitter users voiced their opposition on Twitter and their intention to boycott the stores after feeling threatened and horrified by this change. *'Big social media backlash against John Lewis! Boycott!'* a father wrote on Twitter. *'Why are we so anti allowing girls to be girls and boys to be boys?'* another user tweeted. *"John Lewis's introduction of 'gender neutral' kids clothes is a worrying sign of the times. Expect mental health issues to rocket,"* claimed another (Petter, 2017; Allen, 2017).

In this study, consumers' responses to the change in labeling practices in the retail and fashion industries is studied as major brands carry on breaking the binary labeling status quo and provoking public controversy. Consumers' responses in this research refer to how

consumers *behave* and *react* to the removal of ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ labels and how they *feel* or *evaluate* such change announcements – derived from Twitter as a main social sharing platform used in this study. Particularly, we look at the consequences of change in organizational behavior through the eyes of the consumer as main agent affected by the change in an aim to understand the divergence in consumers’ reactions and the resulting public backlash.

**Figure 1**

*Gender Neutral Marketing in Action: Defying Gender Differences*



NOTE. — Left, John Lewis’ gender neutral labelling (Eccles, 2017). Right, H&M’s Denim United unisex collection (Harris, 2017)

## 1.2 Antecedents of Gender Neutral Labeling & the Divergence in Consumers’ Responses

Gender neutral labeling is considered an example of a change in organizational behavior as it involves breaking the barriers of gender conformity. Retail and fashion industries are evolving from marketing binary products to marketing non-binary ones. Most brands claim adopting this change as a result of listening to consumers’ voices in social media. It is those young, liberated, and trend-conscious customers who are asking for gender unity and less fashion and products rigidity (Hugh, 2015). Giant retailer Target published in its online Magazine: “*We know that shopping preferences and needs change and, as guests have pointed out, in some departments*

*like Toys, Home or Entertainment, suggesting products by gender is unnecessary. We heard you, and we agree* (Target, 2015).” Moreover, Abercrombie & Fitch removed the binary labels in its Kids section and launched in 2018 its first gender-neutral collection, the “Everybody Collection”, as a result of listening to some consumers’ feedback of no longer wanting to be restricted by some styles or colors (Stump, 2018).

There are several reasons that can explain consumers’ need to modify institutional practices. First, consumers might elicit change as a result of their quest for a greater market inclusion and belonging (Scaraboto & Fisher, 2013). Second, change elicitation might be driven by the emergence of a new collective identity among a market segment (Scaraboto & Fisher, 2013). This could be illustrated in the formation of the gender fluid target segment in which the lines between men and women are blurred. This market segment decided to cope with the market status quo of differentiating between genders in selling diverse items and triggered the change. Third, customers might form ‘parallel taste structures’ throughout time as Sandikci and Ger (2010) assert “consumption practices and fashion in particular can have an important role in the construction of a new, parallel taste structure. Fashion can be both a key medium and a marker of a new habitus.” Consumers with a parallel taste structure struggle with marketers to not have their preferences marginalized and to obtain more product choices (Sandikci & Ger, 2010). The three reasons are related in the sense that they reflect the growing presence of a consumer segment in society that drives the gender neutral shift.

Interestingly, listening to this consumer segment’s needs and making the change happen resulted in a sudden backward reaction from a large part of the consumer market. This highlights the divergence in consumers’ responses which takes the form of utterances of support or resistance in Twitter. On the one hand, supporters of the change embody gender as a fluid construct that does not define the customer’s identity and aim to showcase modern society’s relaxed perceptions about gender. Their positive consumer responses seem to center on the argument that gender neutral labeling comes amid promoting gender equality and the freedom of self-expression in general. *“Finally finally Finally! Someone has taken the step forward. Why shouldn't girls like cars and boys like Unicorns! Keep going,”* said one consumer as a response to the change (Petter, 2017). On the other hand, opponents to gender neutral labeling seem to describe the change as ‘political correctness gone far’. *“You have let us all down John Lewis, if only people stopped pandering to the PC brigade. There are only two sexes, male or female,”* wrote one irritated consumer on Twitter (Petter, 2017). These cited examples provide an illustration for our definition of a ‘Twitter Storm’. A better understanding of these Twitter Storms and why consumers have a positive or negative response after an announcement of a

change in organizational behavior is required, a finding that should lead to improved change announcement and change implementation.

### **1.3 Background in Academic Literature**

In this study, I analyze the organizational field of fashion as it is a field characterized by ongoing changes (Dolbec & Fisher, 2015), providing researchers with the opportunity to investigate the participation of consumers in defusing or repelling against new practices. In fact, social media usage by consumers including tweeting and blogging has tremendously impacted diverse aspects of the fashion and retail industry. Prior researchers describe the fashion internet community as “a global digital agora tweeting passions and opinions” (Dolbec & Fisher, 2015). Nowadays, consumers make use of the popular social sharing platforms such as Twitter to join the online fashion arena and discuss all kind of industry trends and fashion practices. The focal practice in this study is the change from binary to non-binary labeling.

In the fashion industry, gender neutral labels announcements might be conceptualized as an example of marketplace dynamics – the creation of a new market or a significant change to an existing one, which results in consumers’ support or opposition on Twitter (Dolbec & Fisher, 2015). Prior consumer research has shown a significant interest in understanding how markets change as a result of actions taken by consumers, marketers, or both (Humphreys, 2010; Giesler, 2008; Sandikci & Ger 2010; Scaraboto & Fischer 2013; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli 2007). These prior studies have contributed to an increasingly rich base for understanding institutional theory and the new social movement theory, two particularly relevant theories to this research. Scholars made use of these theories in examining organizational fields and understanding how individual firms maintain or gain legitimacy (Humphreys, 2010; Handelman & Arnold 1999). The concept of legitimacy, which refers to “the extent to which an action or entity is characterized by cultural alignment, normative support, or consonance with relevant rules or laws” has long been of great help in understanding how marketers try to alter markets and gain consumer acceptance (Dolbec & Fisher, 2015). Drawing on institutional theory, legitimacy could be applied to conceptualize the notion of gender fluid labeling and understand the types of consumer responses to change announcements. In addition to legitimacy, institutional logics and institutional entrepreneurship which are two other important elements of institutional theory (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), will be used in an attempt to understand why certain marketers are trying to change the future of fashion and how consumers can be lead to accept these changes without any outrage.

While these studies might expand our knowledge greatly about the efforts initiated by marketers, consumers, or both in bringing into existence a new product market, translated into gender fluid products in our context, they stop short of shedding light on our focal phenomenon: the types of consumer responses to marketplace dynamics and change in organizational behavior. It is important to address this research gap because doing so will help explain why change in certain marketing practices causes controversy. This will also help in providing guidelines for managers to prevent consumers' negative responses that might result from a message about a change in organizational behavior. Identifying the types of consumer responses to gender neutral labeling is particularly important because each consumer response represents a significant self-made critic that obligates organizations in the industry to re-think their current and future offerings and the way they frame their communication messages (Dolbec & Fisher, 2015).

## **1.4 Research Question and Objectives**

### **1.4.1 Research Question**

The main focus of this research is to identify consumers' positive and negative responses to controversial changes in organizational behavior using the fashion industry as main context. The types of consumer responses in this context are predicted to be emotional in nature as they are generated by consumers who did not foresee the change. Most consumers are staggered and their responses to gender neutral labeling announcements range from gratification to enagement (Hardy, 2017). As mentioned above, much is written about institutional dynamics in markets, the emergence of new collective consumer identities, and specific cases wherein customers whose needs are unmet interconnect with brands and participate in the creation of a new taste structure. However, no prior research has paid attention to the specific context of brands going gender neutral and the types of emotional consumer responses that result from this change in organizational behavior. Hence, this thesis is aimed at answering the following research question:

***What are the types of emotional consumer responses to gender neutral labeling announcements?***

### **1.4.2 Research Objectives**

This research aims at shedding light on a case in which a long and well-established practice, namely marketing clothes to a binary gender, is changed by major brands causing a massive social debate on Twitter. Blending gender labels and combining men and women collections sure has its implications on customers. One major reason why, is that this move challenges the norms of outfits and denies gender differences. This research, therefore, aims to explore three key sub-questions: What are the mechanisms behind the Twitter Storms resulting from changes in organizational behavior? Why do consumers show support or resistance after an announcement about a change in organizational behavior is made? How can marketers potentially prevent negative emotional responses and enhance positive emotional responses?

### **1.4.3 Research Outline**

The first chapter of this thesis introduced the topic of gender neutral labeling and the fierce polemic that this change is triggering. It also defined this research's main problem statement and research objectives. In the section that follows, relevant prior literature on social movement theory, institutional marketplace dynamics and institutional theory as well as the aspects of unisex fashion markets will be reviewed as a second chapter. Relevant theories with regard to the identified problem will be discussed as well. In the third chapter, I will indicate the methodology to answer the research question including structured data collection through text mining, data preprocessing of the collected tweets, and sentiment analysis as analytic procedure. Subsequently, in the fourth chapter, I present the results and findings and discuss and synthesize them afterwards in chapter five. Chapter 6 elaborates on the practical implications of the study in an aim to help managers convey legitimacy in their actions. It also presents the study's limitations and suggestions for future research. Last but not least, chapter seven concludes the research and summarizes the answer to the research question.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF KEY THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

### 2.1 Change in Organizational Behavior

Over the past years, the study of institutional change has become a fundamental research area for organizational behavior. An institutional change in organizational behavior refers to the process by which organizations create new or transform existing institutions (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009). More recent studies have focused on actors, namely “institutional entrepreneurs”, and the complex process by which they make change happen (Hardy & Maguire, 2008; Battilana et al., 2009). Institutional entrepreneurs are defined as individual social actors or groups who leverage resources to intervene and potentially influence field-level logics (Cloutier & Langley, 2013, Battilana et al., 2009).

Battilana et al. (2009) differentiate between two kinds of changes: non-divergent and divergent changes. The first kind is defined as changes that align with field institutions whereas the second type relates to changes that break with them. These authors argue that change actors qualify as institutional entrepreneurs only if the kind of change adopted is a divergent one and only if they actively participate in the implementation of this change (Battilana et al., 2009). In this regards, the change from binary to non-binary labels illustrates what is meant by initiating, and actively participating in the implementation of a divergent change in organizational behavior by institutional entrepreneurs such as John Lewis and Target. This change takes the form of a shift in a dominant institutionalized logic in the field of fashion. According to this logic, clothes are labelled by gender and marketed accordingly. In this context, a firm that removes “boys” and “girls” labels and initiate this change in labeling practices can be qualified as an institutional entrepreneur because the change diverges from the dominant institutionalized logic of binary gender labeling.

### ***2.2 Consequences of Change in Organizational Behavior - Emotional Consumer Responses***

Jasper (1998) argues that emotions permeate social life as a whole and that the most ordinary daily routines if interrupted can cause violent emotional responses. He adds that undertaking unusual actions perhaps involves even more entangled and complex feelings. In accordance with Jasper (1998), a divergent change in organizational behavior is expected to trigger complex emotions in the concerned individuals as it takes the form of a shift in institutional logics, defined by Thornton and Ocasio (2008) as “socially constructed, historical patterns of material

practices, assumptions, values, beliefs and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality”. Drawing on these ideas, our dependent variable in this study is consumers’ emotional responses. Emotions refer to natural sensations and feelings triggered beyond the control of the people experiencing them. They constitute our deepest desires and satisfactions and pervade our ideas and interests. Emotions are not only part of individuals’ responses to events but they also shape their intentions, actions and behaviors (Jasper, 1998). Therefore, consumers’ emotional responses in this research not only include how consumers feel about the change but also how they react upon their feelings.

In examining reactions to a change in organizational behavior, emotions have been considered as important consumer responses that help understand not only the possible triggers of the change but also its implications (Voronov, 2014). Previous persuasion research studies have identified diverse categories of emotional consumer responses to brands promotional messages and announcements. Batra and Ray (1986) introduced a combination of 13 categories of emotional consumer responses based on a study of 8 previous typologies (See Table 1). These categorizations will help identify the types of consumer responses resulting from a divergent and controversial change in organizational behavior. In what follows, the term “affect” will be used to incorporate all emotions, moods, and feelings that will serve as this research’s affective consumer responses conceptualization. Consumer emotional responses will be analyzed and associated with the 13 emotions.

**Table 1**

*Potential Affective Responses to Gender Neutral Labeling Announcements*

<b>Consumers’ Affective Responses</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
Interest/Expectancy/ Anticipation	A feeling of being fascinated, engaged, curious, and wanting to investigate more
Surprise	A pleasant feeling of uncertainty that occurs as a result of any unexpected or sudden event
Disgust/Scorn	A feeling of disapproval, hostility, superiority, contempt, and revulsion
Skepticism	A feeling of doubt or distrust induced by unrealistic and exaggerated stimuli

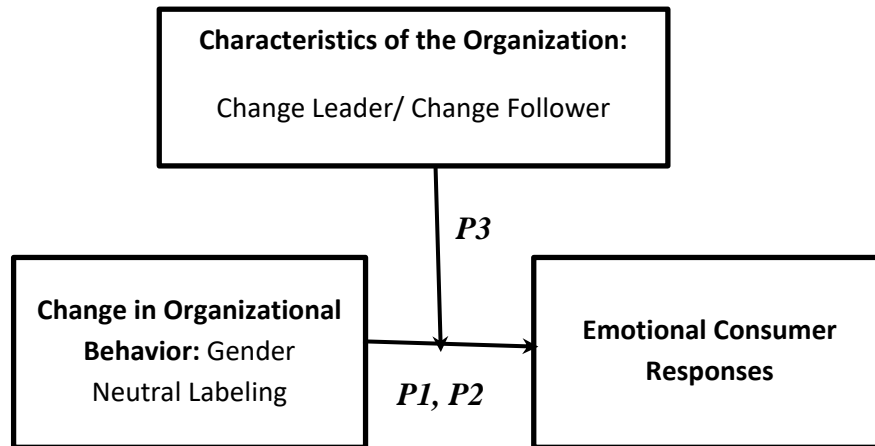
Anger	An irritating feeling of being deprived from what one strongly desires to do. In this state, the muscles become tense, the blood boils, and the face becomes hot
Fear/Anxiety	A state of insecurity, chronic fear, and perceived danger evoked by internal or external events
Shame	A state in which the self is felt as the object of scorn and contempt resulting from ineffectiveness, inadequacy, and incompetence.
Guilt	A feeling of not being right and of being in the wrong
Sadness	A feeling of downheartedness, loneliness, discouragement, and helplessness
Surgency, Elation, Vigor/Activation	The combination of surgency (playfulness and wittiness), elation (overjoyment), and vigor/activation (energy and liveliness) result in a response that is both arousing and pleasant
Deactivation	a self-indulgent peaceful state measured by tenderness, serenity, calmness, and tranquility
Social Affection	a feeling of being loved and accepted by the surrounding world as well as having a sense of meaningfulness and confidence
Drives	Other motivational feelings not included above

### 2.3 Propositions 1 and 2: Main Effects of Change in Organizational Behavior

The propositions of this research help identify the types of emotional consumer responses to gender neutral labeling announcements. The two first propositions focus on the main effect of the change in the labeling practice on consumers' emotional responses in general. The third proposition considers how this effect might vary depending on whether the organization undertaking the change is a leader in its geographical market or a follower. The conceptual framework in figure 2 depicts consumers' emotional responses to the controversial change in organizational behavior.

**Figure 2**

*Consumers' Emotional Responses to Gender Neutral Labeling Announcements*



***Effect on Consumers' Emotional Responses***

In their social movement research, McCarthy and Zald (1977) contrasted a social movement to a countermovement. As such, a social movement is defined by the authors as a set of beliefs and opinions which denote preferences for altering some elements of the social structure in a population (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). This relates to supporters of gender neutral labeling and could be a potential explanation to their favorable consumer responses to organizational gender fluidity announcements directed towards social change. A countermovement, however, is defined by the authors as an opposition to a social movement supported by conflicting opinions and beliefs (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). As such, consumers' unfavorable responses to organizations' gender neutral labeling announcement is a form of countermovement characterized by a strong resistance to change. Thus, two general classes of emotional consumers' responses on Twitter can be considered in this research as a result to controversial changes in organizational behavior: (1) positive evaluation of change resulting in identification with the company, and (2) negative evaluation of change resulting in boycotting the company and its products offerings in some instances.

The first category relates to supporters of the change, and it includes enthusiasts' positive feelings and opinions about the change in labeling. These consumers are tired of fashion stereotypes and the narrow definitions of gender that society has advocated for decades. They believe in the freedom of wearing whatever color one wish to wear and that dresses are not only for women but also for men. As a result, it can be maintained that they will not only express their content and gratefulness to the brands which remove binary labels and introduce gender neutral product lines but they will also identify with these companies, shopping more and more from their stores. The second category relates to change opponents. These consumers'

affective responses are expected to circle around rejection and unacceptance of the change. One main reason why is that this change goes against their strong beliefs of the existence of a binary gender and the shopping practicality they have been used to for years.

A particular important theory that would help in the identification of consumers' emotional responses to gender neutral labeling announcements is institutional theory. According to institutional theory, a market is an organizational field incorporating a set of institutions governed by institutional logics (Dolbec & Fischer, 2013). Within the retail and fashion industries, gender neutral labeling can be perceived as a shift in institutional logics as it goes against the historical, religious, and social beliefs and values of the vast majority. While some consumers might believe that this change will conceal gender differences and promote equality, it is expected that this change will cause a huge confusion among the majority of consumers who believe there exist only two biological sexes based on the laws of nature and biology and that clothes should be marketed accordingly (Peter, 2017). Moreover, consumers are used to shopping from two different sections defined by gender, which facilitate item selection. Blending both might puzzle and upset the consumer leading to an unpleasant shopping experience. Thus, gender neutral labeling appears as an institutional action aimed at disrupting long established practices. Arguably, it is conceptualized as being illegitimate as it does not conform to the dominant logics within the fashion industry, and it lacks cultural alignment and consonance with the relevant laws of nature (Peter, 2017).

Arvanitidou and Gasouka (2013) argue that “the androgynous style seeks to unite the male and the female body in one, leading to a return to a primordial cosmic unity”. In fact, the gender fluid style of dressing requires a youthful and thin body with a boyish figure and masculine frame, which is problematic as it excludes the majority of men and women from it (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013). This suggests that change adopters will struggle in designing and providing a wide range of gender neutral clothes that will include a large umbrella of consumers resulting in a feeling of exclusion and offense to many consumers. This key problem is illustrated in the current gender-neutral lines in the market and that include generally only jeans, basic hoodies, joggers and t-shirts sold in basic colors. These clothes have always been acceptable for both men and women to wear anyway (McCann, 2018). The absence of more clothes options and colors only perpetuates the myth that gender neutral clothes are more masculine in nature. Although some consumers would not mind the change, the lack of product choice when it comes to both size and style will result in revulsion and shopping preference from competitors who still separate clothes by gender.

Overall, numerous emotions can be evoked in audiences in reaction to actions that deviate from institutional logics. Such gender neutral announcements are expected to evoke anger, fear, and disgust in their respective audiences since they are perceived by some target audiences as a contradiction to their norms and beliefs. Building up on Batra & Ray (1986) conceptualization of affective consumer responses in table 1, anger in this context will refer to an irritating feeling of being deprived from what consumers strongly desires to do, that is shopping for gender labelled clothes and the shopping practicality of having two separate gender clothing sections. Moreover, fear will be reflected by their state of insecurity and perceived danger evoked by the change since it defies the laws of nature when it comes to the existence of only two sexes “male” and “female”. Finally, disgust relates to consumers’ disapproval, hostility, and revulsion towards ditching gender labels. Drawing on the previously cited arguments, the following proposition is advanced:

***Proposition 1:*** *The removal of “boys” and “girls” gender labels will mostly result in consumers’ affective responses that express feelings of anger, fear, and disgust.*

As mentioned before, emotions shape consumers’ intentions, actions and behaviors. Recalling proposition 1, gender neutral labeling announcements are more likely to result in triggering negative emotions in the majority of consumers as they believe that brands who adopted the change engaged in a strikingly wrong conduct that has negative consequences on them and the society as a whole. Therefore, they are more likely to resort to complaining behavior and engage in taking collective actions such as boycotts to express their disapproval and change resistance.

A consumer boycott is defined by Friedman (1985) as "an attempt by one or more parties to achieve certain objectives by urging individual consumers to refrain from making selected purchases in the marketplace." In studying the motivations behind boycotts, researchers argue that a powerful predictor to boycott participation relates to the perceived egregiousness of a firm’s actions. An egregious act is defined by the past literature as an initial trigger event that results in negative arousal (Klein, Smith, & John, 2004; John & Klein 2003). The trigger event in our context is the change from binary labels to non-binary labels. However, the perceived egregiousness of this action differs across consumers, and this is more likely to impact their boycotting decision (Klein et al., 2004). Accordingly, the second proposition is proposed:

*Proposition 2: The more egregious a consumer perceives the act of removing gender labels, the more likely the consumer will engage in boycotting it by withholding purchase of genderless products.*

## **2.4 Characteristics of the Organization: Leader or Follower**

The distribution of preferences among segments of a population when it comes to firms gender fluid labeling practice translates into divergent collective actions manifested on Twitter, defined previously as ‘Twitter Storms’. This distribution might be moderated by the characteristics of the organization leading the change. In fact, many studies that attempt to explain how organizations implement change argue that actors’ characteristics is one of the most important enabling condition for change implementation (Battilana et al., 2009). A change leader is defined as the first mover to initiate the organizational change in its geographic market and to announce going gender neutral and ditching binary gender labels. A change follower or a late mover, however, is any early or late brand that follows the gender fluid movement afterwards in the same geographic market by introducing gender neutral labels and clothes.

## **2.5 Proposition 3: Potential Moderating Effect of the Characteristics of the Organization**

Implementing any kind of change requires time to legitimize the new practices. Research on social movements and institutional entrepreneurship long discussed the notion of time in mobilizing change resistant agents (Battilana et al., 2009). In this regard, a characteristic of the organization that must be analyzed is whether the firm adopting the change is a change leader or a change follower. A fundamental consideration is how to identify the change leader. To be considered as a change leader, a firm should be the first entrant with gender neutral products to reach a competitive scale of commercialization. For instance, this includes achieving national distribution or national advertising. If a brand does not reach competitive scale, it should be classified as a brand that failed in its attempt to enter the gender neutral market (Robinson, Kalyanaram, & Urban, 1994). Golder and Tellis (1993) identify first movers based on historical analysis. Similarly to this approach, this research will identify the change leader by relying on objective information from various online sources at the time the gender neutral market originated in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Depending on whether an organization is a change leader or a change follower, consumer affective responses might differ. Prior findings generally highlight first mover

advantages such as consumer satisfaction and brand loyalty, and support their revenue gains (Robinson et al., 1994; Robinson, 1988). A first-mover advantage is defined as a “firm’s ability to be better off than its competitors as a result of being first to market in a new product category” (Suarez & Lanzolla, 2005). In our context, the new product category is illustrated by the new gender neutral lines. Nevertheless, there also exist a large number of academic studies providing that first mover advantages do not exist in some cases. They argue that late followers might outsell first movers (Golder & Tellis, 1993).

Given the nature of the new product category in this research and the fact that it responds to a minority of consumers’ needs and goes against the majority’s institutional logics, it might be maintained that first movers’ advantages would not exist in this case as a result of the removal of gender labels and the introduction of the gender fluid products. This entails consumers’ emotional responses to gender neutral labeling will be much aggressive to change leaders compared to change followers. The aggressiveness of this response refers to the hostile force by which consumers react to the change. At first, consumers would not only feel threatened by the change but might also switch to competitors subsequently. Late movers can observe consumers’ initial responses to gender neutral labeling announcements and outsell change leaders later on through innovation in either product category or marketing strategy.

Gathering consumer insights and analyzing consumers’ responses will help provide a better understanding of consumer preferences (Urban, Carter, & Mucha, 1986; Berndt, Bui, Reiley, & Urban, 1995; Yip, 1982). In fact, change followers can learn from change leaders’ efforts in implementing the change. They might observe the types of change announcements made by change leaders and figure out how to improve the marketing claims. With time passing by, change followers acquire a full understanding of the process of change implementation and the diverse resources that play an important role in a successful change implementation. These resources are used to bypass consumers’ inertia and ensure consumer acceptance which leads to less aggressive responses throughout time. More formally, I present my third proposition:

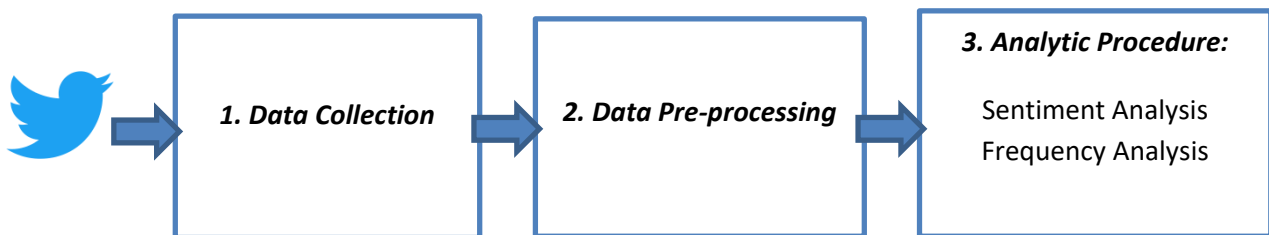
***Proposition 3:*** *Consumers affective responses to the removal of “boys” and “girls” labels will be more aggressive toward change leaders compared to change followers.*

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This research is an attempt to understand the opinions and emotions of consumers through an analysis of their reactions to a controversial change in organizational behavior illustrated in the introduction of gender neutral labeling. A mixed-method approach between qualitative and quantitative analysis called text mining will be used to answer the research question. Text mining is a recent technological development. It is a process in which software tools are used to analyze textual information to actively engage in the discovery of structure and meanings hidden within texts. It uses diverse techniques such as machine learning and data mining to solve information management problems (Ordenes, Theodoulidis, Burton, Gruber, & Zaki 2014). Many tasks could be performed in text mining. This research will focus on sentiment analysis and lexical analysis to answer propositions 1-3. Following is a figure that summarizes the steps of the text mining process used in this research. Detailed information regarding each step will be discussed afterwards.

**Figure 3**

*Text Mining Process*



#### 3.1 Data Collection

The micro-blogging service Twitter has emerged as the most dominant social reporting tool to discuss and spread information regarding any kind of social crisis. Its online community has been recognized as the first to react and deal with breaking events through the posting of status messages called tweets (Oh, Agrawal, & Rao, 2013). The data sets used in this paper were collected from Twitter given that the platform is a recurrent choice for scholars interested to conduct a comparable research as the one at hand.

Gender neutral labeling was chosen as a major focus for the study and as an example of change in organization behavior. An organization was required to have made an announcement about removing binary labels to be considered for this study. Four organizations which fulfilled this condition were considered for the analysis: (1) Target, (2) Abercrombie & Fitch, (3) John Lewis and (4) River Island. These organizations' characteristics are represented in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
*Organizations' Characteristics*

<b>Market</b>	<b>Brand</b>	<b>Change Initiation</b>	<b>Type of Announcement / Advertising Claim</b>
<b>United States</b>	Target	Change Leader	“We know that shopping preferences and needs change and, as guests have pointed out, in some departments like Toys, Home or Entertainment, suggesting products by gender is unnecessary. We heard you, and we agree (Target, 2015).”
	Abercrombie & Fitch	Change Follower	- "Parents and their kids don't want to be confined to specific colors and styles, depending on whether shopping for a boy or a girl," Stacia Andersen, Brand President of Abercrombie & Fitch, said in the release. "Our Everybody Collection is one assortment, in one size run, that covers the trends we are seeing in both color and style" (Sanicola, 2018). - <i>The Everybody Collection Campaign</i> : “For Every Kind of Kid & Every Kind of Adventure (Barr, 2018)”
<b>United Kingdom</b>	John Lewis	Change Leader	“We do not want to reinforce gender stereotypes within our John Lewis collections and instead want to provide greater choice and variety to our customers, so that the parent or child can choose what they would like to wear (Marston, 2017)”
	River Island	Change Follower	- <i>Campaign Tagline</i> : “Kids just Want to Be Kids.” - <i>Anti-Bullying Campaign</i> : “Labels are for Clothes.”

			- “We want River Island to be a place where you can shop to express your own style identity and to cater to a lot of different types of people and see unisex products as a means of helping us do that (Jensen, 2017).”
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For the purpose of collecting historical data, Twitter’s advanced search tool (<https://twitter.com/search-advanced>) was used to collect three data sets of tweets related to consumers’ reactions after each of the chosen organizations made the announcement to remove gender labels from their products. In fact, prior studies dealing with harvesting historical tweets have often adopted this approach for collecting Twitter data since it oversteps some of the limitations raised by Twitter API (Oh et al., 2013; Takayasu M, Sato, Sano, Yamada, Miura, & Takayasu H, 2015).

This study was confined to tweets posted only in English. I queried Twitter’s advanced search tool using the commonly used words, phrases, and hashtags related to the chosen brands’ removal of gender labels. Those latest were identified through a preliminary investigation (reading through a number of tweets) of what people mostly used to express or share their opinions regarding the four companies’ gender neutrality news. The most relevant keywords and hashtags are summarized in Table 3. I also searched for tweets directed to the official twitter accounts of Target, John Lewis, Abercrombie, and River Island.

The Twitter tool also provides the possibility to filter tweets by dates. In our case, the starting date represents the first day in which each organization announced the change. The tweets were collected for a period of two months for each company starting the date of the change announcement. In the case of target, the announcement date was retrieved from “What’s in Store: Moving Away from Gender-based Signs”, an article posted on Target’s news website (Target, 2015). When it comes to John Lewis, the announcement date was identified through the first news release related to the topic from the British media company DailyMail: “John Lewis ditches 'boys' and 'girls' labels from its children's clothes to avoid 'reinforcing gender stereotypes’ (Eccles, 2017). In the case of Abercrombie and Fitch, the announcement date was retrieved from their official news release: “Abercrombie Kids launches Everybody Collection (Abercrombie & Fitch, 2017).” Last but not least, the announcement date for River Island was retrieved from an article from The Independent, a British online newspaper (Ritschel, 2017).

The table below summarizes the data collection query used through the advanced search facility of Twitter.

**Table 3**

*Twitter Advanced Search Tool: Data Collection Process*

<b>Organizations</b>	<b>Starting Date</b>	<b>Ending Date</b>	<b>Tweets to these Accounts</b>	<b>Tweets with these Key Words</b>	<b>Tweets with these Hashtags</b>
<i>Target</i>	07/08/2015	07/10/2015	@Target @AskTarget @TargetNews	“Gender Labels” “Target Gender Neutral” “boys and girls” “Gender Stereotypes” “Dinosaur & Dress”	#lettoysbetoys #GenderNeutral #TeamTarget #LetKidsBeKids #BoycotTarget #OffTarget #WakeUpAmerica #TCOT #TargetBoycott #PJNET
<i>John Lewis</i>	01/09/2017	01/11/2017	@johnlewisretail	“John Lewis Boys and Girls” “Gender Labels” “JL” “Political Correctness” “Gender equality”	#boysandgirls #genderlabeling #letclothesbeclothes #boycottjohnlewis #johnlewis #genderneutral #genderstereotypes
<i>Abercrombie &amp; Fitch</i>	17/01/2018	17/03/2018	@Abercrombie @AbercrombieKids	“Everybody Collection”, “Gender Neutral”	#BoycottAbercrombie #LetKidsBeKids #EverybodyCollection #GenderNeutral
<i>River Island</i>	11/12/2017	11/02/2018	@RiverIsland @DitchTheLabel	“River Island Gender Neutral” “Gender Free”	#LabelsAreForClothes #RiverIsland #GenderNeutral #DitchTheLabel

## 3.2 Data Preprocessing

The data collection process described above helped collect a total of 2711 tweets for the four brands, after eliminating irrelevant tweets as well as thousands of “RTs” (re-tweets) that do not include a personal comment or an added opinion. Compared with prior studies which used manual data collection for tweets, the volume of the tweets is relatively reasonable and is expected to allow an interesting analysis (Huang and Yeo, 2018; Oh et al., 2013). The 2711 remaining tweets will be assigned unique identification numbers after separating metadata from tweet content to ensure anonymity and abide by the ethical considerations of internet research (Zimmer & Proferes, 2014).

An analysis of tweets is usually a delicate task due to the existence of misspellings, slang words, and diverse emoticons in tweets. As a result, a number of preprocessing steps are followed to clean the data:

- A. *Removing URLs and correcting misspellings.*
- B. *Replacing Slang Words:* slang words cannot be removed since they widely contribute to the emotion of a tweet. Thus, an online slang dictionary is used to change slang words used in tweets with their associated meanings.
- C. *Identifying Uppercases:* powerful emotions are sometimes expressed in a micro-blogging platform using capital letters (e.g NO WAY). This practice is referred to as e-shouting, and it might be considered as a great indicator of surprise, excitement, or anger among other strong emotions. Capitalized words or expressions in the tweets are identified. A function will be used afterwards to make sure they are preserved and not transformed into lower case.
- D. *Identifying Emoticons:* All the emoticons will be identified and changed by their respective meanings since they represent an easy and straightforward way to express emotion for many users. While tweeting, they can be strong indicators for emotion.

## 3.3 Analytic Procedure

The data analysis will be conducted using R software. As a first step, tweets will be loaded into R with each element representing a single tweet. The tweets will be numbered from 1 to 2711 in the software to allow identification and maintain anonymity as mentioned before.

### 3.3.1 Sentiment Analysis

Now that our data is clean and structured, sentiment analysis can be performed. This approach helps stratify a person’s point of view given in a text. It is based on the concept of polarity of opinions. In other words, it categorizes opinions into positive, negative or neutral (Qazi, Raj, Hardaker, & Standing, 2017). R software is characterized by a variety of dictionaries that can be used in the evaluation of the opinion or emotion in text.

In this study, sentiment analysis was performed using the “tidytext” package which incorporates three sentiment lexicons all based on unigrams (single words). I chose the “NRC” lexicon because unlike the others, it not only categorizes words into positive or negative, but it also assigns emotions like fear, anger, sadness, and joy to the diverse words. To perform the sentiment analysis, the tweets need to be transformed into single words and all punctuation should be removed. As mentioned before, capitalization matters in our study since it is a good indicator of intense emotion. Thus, the function “to\_lower=False” is used to keep the words in capital letters.

The “NRC” sentiment data is used to analyze the diverse emotions communicated in the tweets. This not only gives an idea of the positivity or negativity of sentiments but also provides insights about the most frequent emotions in the tweets. These could be associated with Batra and Ray (1986) categories of emotions to determine the diverse consumer responses to these organizations’ gender neutrality announcements and assess the diverse propositions (see Table 4).

**Table 4**

*Methodology Summarized*

<b>Proposition</b>	<b>Sentiment Analysis Procedure</b>
<b>1</b>	- Sentiment Score & Rank - Sentiment Analysis using “NRC Emotion Lexicon”
<b>2</b>	- Lexical & Words Frequency Analysis - Identification of words with ‘Boycott’ connotation if any
<b>3</b>	- Comparing responses between change leaders and change followers in each geographic market

### **3.3.2 Frequency Distribution**

Given that the analysis provided by the “NRC” lexicon gives a lot of information, it is hard to read through it all and come up to conclusions right away. Thus, a frequency analysis might be conducted to study the frequency of the most used words and their associative emotions. This step is about assessing the most common words used in the tweets by using the function “count”. In fact, it is expected that most of the common words (“and”, “of”, “the” etc.) would not be informative. These words are called “stop words” and R offers a function to remove them. As I’m more interested in words that showcase opinion and emotion, I chose to delete the stop words by using the function “anti\_join”.

## 4. RESULTS

With the involvement of hundreds of Twitter users in the US and the UK, a provocative organizational change adopted by four brands in these countries was debated in Twitter. From the date of change announcement, Twitter was used as a platform for sharing opinions and expressing feelings about the shift from the binary gender labels to gender neutral labeling. A total of 2711 tweets were collected for the four brands with John Lewis having the most collected tweets (1317) and River Island the fewest (87).

The first proposition intended to inspect the overall sentiment of consumers toward the four brands' adoption of change. It aimed to identify the recurrent affective consumer responses to gender neutral labeling. The sentiment analysis scores over the two months of data collection for each brand are presented in table 5. They were computed by matching the positive and negative words to a lexicon-based sentiment analysis technique in R software and then subtracting the number of negative words from the number of positive ones. In general, negative sentiments outweigh the positive ones given that all brands had negative sentiment scores except from River Island that shows a positive sentiment score (+44). Target had the lowest negative score (-151) followed by John Lewis (-83) and Abercrombie (-28). This shows that the change in organizational behavior resulted mostly in unfavorable consumer responses. In fact, consumers are generally reluctant towards ditching the binary gender labels.

**Table 5**  
*Sentiment Analysis Scores & Ranks*

<b>Brands</b>	<b>Change Leader/Follower</b>	<b>Tweet Volume</b>	<b>Sentiment Score</b>	<b>Sentiment Rank</b>
<i>River Island</i>	UK Follower	87	44	1
<i>Abercrombie</i>	US Follower	398	-28	2
<i>John Lewis</i>	UK Leader	1317	-83	3
<i>Target</i>	US Leader	909	-151	4

While the average scores reveal that consumers are disappointed by the change in general and their sentiments are mostly negative, a close examination of the tweets was conducted in order to get more insights about the nature of their responses. The 'NRC Emotion Lexicon' in the software R was used to identify the exact emotions that were expressed by consumers in the tweets regarding the studied change in organizational behavior. The lexicon was developed by

Saif Mohammad and Peter Turney, and it incorporates a list of English words associated with eight important emotions: surprise, trust, joy, anticipation, fear, sadness, anger, and disgust (Mohammad & Turney, 2013). In the analysis, there were some words in the samples that the 'NRC' lexicon categorizes as positive or negative while they have a neutral connotation in our context. Examples of these words are: 'boy', 'girl', 'mother', 'shopping', 'youth', store etc. These words were removed before the analysis was conducted. Table 6 shows the results of the analysis and reports the four most prevailing affective responses to gender neutral labeling announcements for each brand as well as tweet examples associated with these reactions.

The analysis shows that the removal of "boys" and "girls" gender labels from Target, John Lewis, and Abercrombie's stores resulted in consumers' affective responses that express feelings of anger, fear, and disgust. Such tweets typically contained terms as "disgusting", "mad", "angry", "pathetic", and "ridiculous". Consumers were outraged and claimed that the change is completely unnecessary and unacceptable as (1) it appeals only to a minority of the society, (2) it contradicts the existence of only two biological genders based on biology or religion, and (3) it is an exaggeration of political correctness.

River Island makes the exception as the results show that consumers reacted favorably to the change announcement and expressed mostly a feeling of joy. The joyful tweets contained words such as "happy", "fabulous", "fantastic" and "glad". They were expressed by consumers as an encouragement for gender diversity, freedom of choice, and anti-bullying. Joy also appears among the top four dominant affective responses to Abercrombie and John Lewis change announcements. This explains the fact that their sentiment score is higher than Target, in which the top four affective responses are all negative, expressing not only feelings of disgust, fear, and anger but also sadness.

Although joy appears as one of the top four affective responses to some brands' change announcement, negative emotional responses such as disgust, fear, and anger remain more dominant among the whole sample size (See Table 7). Overall, the removal of "boys" and "girls" gender labels mostly generates anger, disgust, and fear in a large share of the consumer market and results in consumers' affective responses that are in accordance with our first proposition.

**Table 6***Prevailing Affective Responses to Gender Neutral Labeling Announcements for Each Brand*

<b>Brand</b>	<b>Prevailing Affective Responses</b>	<b>Number of Words</b>	<b>Tweet Examples</b>
<i>River Island</i>	Joy	65	“So proud to support @riverisland #LabelsAreForClothes campaign celebrating love, diversity and clothing for EVERYONE! I’m 100% #Fearless Happy 30th birthday #RiverIsland and here's to your most sartorially empowering year yet! #DitchTheLabel #EverydayEquality”
	Anticipation	50	“River Island have got the most cutest summer clothes out this year for Nellie, I can’t wait”
	Trust	49	“Loving River Island’s #labelsareforclothes campaign with @DitchtheLabel, helping fund our vital anti-bullying support, what an amazing start to the week.”
	Fear	28	“How about River Island advert telling kids at 7.30am it’s cool to pick what gender you are like a pair of jeans? Does no one else see what they are doing here? But you can’t have ring girls? When will people start saying enough of this! Its madness. PC lunacy doing more harm than good. ”
<i>Abercrombie</i>	Disgust	112	“We will never buy this clothing again & push hard for others not to buy, this is disgusting.”
	Anger	109	“Don’t you realize you’re about to go out of business for gender-neutral clothing? Whoever made that decision should be fired Immediately! I will never shop there again. #BoycottAbercrombie”
	Joy	103	“Absolutely fantastic! Thank you for helping kids to explore their gender expression and to simply be themselves -- especially those that are trans, non-binary or gender non-conforming! ”

	Fear	101	“It's a worrying trend.”
<i>John Lewis</i>	Disgust	815	“Disgusting, I would not buy any of these clothes for my children/grandchildren.”
	Joy	458	“Thank you for leading the way, can't express how happy this makes me, can't wait to tell my children!”
	Fear	399	“The death of the human race - gender confusion. No natural disaster or nuclear war required #unbelievable #johnlewis”
	Anger	374	“Following suit and putting the minority first. Extremely mad and angry #britaingonemad”
<i>Target</i>	Anger	251	“I hear Target is going "gender neutral" in parts of the children's dept. It saddens and angers me. It may be time to boycott! ”
	Fear	237	“Target is pathetic, embarrassing & unsafe... I am #OffTarget”
	Disgust	217	“I am disgusted with Target! If they are so anxious to please LGBT, they can forget the rest of us (95%) #BoycottTarget”
	Sadness	215	“Will no longer be shopping at Target thank you at Franklin Graham for pointing this out!! #offtarget It's sad what's happening in the world!”

**Table 7**

*Prevailing Affective Responses to Gender Neutral Labeling Announcements for the Whole Sample Size*

<b>Number of Tweets</b>	<b>Prevailing Affective Responses</b>	<b>Number of Words</b>
2711	Disgust	1144
	Fear	765
	Anger	707
	Joy	626

The second proposition builds upon the first one and maintains that consumers' negative emotions towards the change will shape their actions and behaviors regarding the brands adopting it. In this regards, it was proposed that the perceived egregiousness of the act of removing gender labels will impact consumers' decision to boycott the brands. The Word Frequency Analysis revealed that words with the boycott connotation ranked among the top 10 most frequently used words for all brands except from River Island.

For Target and John Lewis, 'Boycott' was the first most frequent used word after the brands' names and other words with neutral meanings such as 'boys', 'girls', 'gender', 'clothes', and 'label'. Moreover, the hashtags #OffTarget and #BoycottJohnLewis were two of the most frequently used hashtags by consumers. When it comes to Abercrombie & Fitch, the word 'Boycott' and the hashtag #BoycottAbercrombie were moderately used. Last but not least, 'Boycott' was used only three times as a response to River Island's change announcement which shows very few consumer boycotting intentions to the brand and which also aligns with the overall positive sentiment score obtained for River Island (See Table 5). Table 8 reports the Word Frequency Analysis for the four brands. The results reveal that among both the British and American markets, there exist a number of consumers that perceive the act of removing gender labels as flagrant and egregious the reason why they not only expressed negative emotions towards the change but also decided to boycott the brands' offerings and shop from competitors.

A lexical analysis of the tweets revealed that these consumers attribute the flagrancy of the change announcement to diverse reasons. For instance, one consumer from Target said: "I'm happy to boycott target since they do not want my values in their stores." In this case, the change appears to go against the values and beliefs of the consumer which makes it completely unacceptable. Another consumer from John Lewis asserted: "#boycottjohnlewis - of course, we will. This is PC gone mad. The person looking at this needs firing! We will not be back!" As many others, this consumer also perceives the act of removing gender labels as egregious and describes it as "political correctness gone mad" which explain the consumer's boycotting decision. A third reason that highlights the atrocity of the act of removing gender labels relates to its contradiction to the norms as one consumer expressed: "boycott this liberal brainwashing crap. They're trying to normalize the abnormal. Men are not women and women are not men". These results support our third proposition and highlight the existence of boycotts as coercive marketplace tactics to resist the change in organizational behavior. The underlying causes might differ for the diverse consumers but they all point to the high egregiousness of the decision made by the brands.

**Table 8***Word Frequency Analysis*

<b>Brands</b>	<b>Words with ‘Boycott’ Annotation</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<i>River Island</i>	Boycott	3
<i>Abercrombie</i>	Boycott	17
	#BoycottAbercrombie	3
<i>John Lewis</i>	Boycott	54
	#BoycottJohnLewis	27
<i>Target</i>	#OffTarget	107
	Boycott	48
	Boycotting	7
	Walmart	14
	#NoMoreTarget	1

Our third proposition tackles the issue of time and marketing strategies adaptations in normalizing the change. In this regards, it was proposed that consumers’ affective responses to the removal of “boys” and “girls” labels will be more aggressive toward change leaders compared to change followers. This can clearly be seen through Table 5 in which change followers in both the British and American markets have higher sentiment scores than change leaders. In the United States, Abercrombie scored 68 points higher than Target, and in the United Kingdom, River Island scored 72 points higher than John Lewis.

Table 6 also supports these findings as we can notice more positive affective consumer responses as a reaction to change followers’ announcement than change leaders. In fact, joy was the third prevailing affective response for Abercrombie while for target the top four dominant affective responses were all negative. Moreover, the UK market witnesses’ way less aggressive affective responses towards River Island compared to John Lewis.

Target and John Lewis appear to have more consumer resistance to change to the point that they are losing around hundreds of consumers each according to the analysis in Table 8 if not more, counting the ones who did not express their boycotting intentions on Twitter. It can also be noticed that less and less consumers think of boycotting the brands after change followers announce the change adoption as well. The reason behind the drop in the degree of consumer responses aggressiveness could be attributed to the type of announcement and

marketing strategies implemented by the brands adopting the change (See Table 2). Unlike change leaders, both change followers in both geographical markets not only made an announcement about the removal of 'boys' and 'girls' labels, but also made sure to launch big promotional campaigns advertising for the new gender neutral clothing lines. They came up with meaningful promotional taglines. In particular, River Island's positive sentiment score relates to its Anti-Bullying Gender Neutral campaign with the collaboration of Ditch the Label, one of the largest charities in the world. They transformed the change in their labeling practice into a global social cause which helped the consumer focus more on spreading gender equality and fighting gender stereotypes than the nature of the change itself.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Numerous marketing studies have researched institutional theory in order to document how organizations exist within large institutional environments and the possibility of these markets to change as a result of actions taken by different institutional actors (Humphreys, 2010; Giesler, 2008; Sandikci & Ger 2010; Scaraboto & Fischer 2013; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli 2007). This study complements the previous studies in asserting that there exist a number of taken-for-granted cultural, social, and symbolic practices that define consumers' social reality. One major theoretical implication of this study that goes hand in hand with prior literature emphasizes that institutional logics constrain implementing change and makes it difficult for organizations to act outside the logics' circle and boundaries. If changed, the shift in logics could result in conflicting views to stakeholders in each market. Moreover, this study goes beyond focusing only on understanding marketplace dynamics but rather captures the complexity of institutional change and dives deep into the types of consumer responses to shifts in logics. It also offers insights about how brands can address conflicting consumer preferences and create a coherent brand identity that all or at least the majority of target segments can associate with. It studies a case in which there are apparent tensions between consumers and brands in the field of retail and fashion as a result of a change in organizational behavior.

To shed light on these issues, the study at hand makes use of the social network Twitter to explore in-depth what consumers express regarding the change from marketing clothes to 'boys' and 'girls' to non-binary genders. In the fashion market, the dominant logic of binary labeling entails marketing clothes to both men and women in separate sections and offering different product offerings to the two genders. The arising gender neutral labeling logic emphasizes the notion of blending both genders and doing away with the two separate gender sections. With 280 character brevity, Twitter makes it easier for consumers to express their opinions in a straightforward way and for researchers to assess the content of the postings and gauge the emotions of users. The current study employed sentiment analysis and frequency analysis on 2711 tweets that were posted by consumers in reaction to the change adoption by four brands in two geographical markets: Target, Abercrombie & Fitch in the United States and John Lewis and River Island in the United Kingdom. The aim was to identify the types of emotional consumer reactions to gender neutral labeling announcements.

Consumers were found to be most active in posting their reactions in the two first months following change announcement, the reason why the data collection efforts were focused mainly on that period. Change announcements resulted in a huge spike in twitter activity and a sudden burst of attention for the topic of genderless labeling causing what was described before as a “Twitter Storm”. In fact, this study reflects how Twitter can be resourceful in assessing the emotions of consumers in response to a change in organizational behavior and beneficial in investigating the dynamics of Twitter hypes and news waves. The focus of is on depicting consumers’ emotional reactions to change announcements which include not only consumers’ sentiments, thoughts, opinions, and judgements but also their attitudes and behaviors.

In order to reveal consumer emotional reactions and attain useful insights, sentiment analysis is carried out over the four samples of tweets for the different brands. As a first step, the concept of polarity of opinions (negative, positive, neutral) was used to specify whether the general sentiment towards the change is positive or negative. Moreover, the ‘NRC Lexicon’ and a frequency analysis were used to further explore the nature of the emotion expressed and the prevailing consumer reactions. The analysis revealed that negative reactions and emotions were driven by a strong sense of social norms guided by religious beliefs, personal values, and cultural historical patterns of how practices are ought to be. On the other hand, we can observe that positive reactions and emotions were driven by liberalism pleading against gender stereotypes and challenging the status quo. Negative sentiments outweighed the positive ones mainly because the large majority of the society is directed by embedded institutional logics from which the change diverges to a huge extent.

Examples from this study reveal that numerous consumers were incredibly insulted by the change claiming that brands are giving in to a minority’s needs, preferences, and beliefs, ignoring the majority’s which includes lots of loyal consumers who have been shopping in these stores for years. This undertaken decision by brands adopting the change resulted mainly in a burst of anger, fear, and disgust by consumers in Twitter. Some of these consumers, mainly conservatives, did not stop in only expressing their discontent but also decided to act upon it and boycott the concerned brands as they perceived the act of ‘ditching’ gender labels as completely egregious. Their tweets expressed their greater willingness to refrain from buying products offered by these brands and encouraged others to do the same. Their boycotting action takes the form of a protest against the perceived atrocity of the change and the shift of the institutional logics.

In this regards, the study reveals that it is of a high significance to consider how the change is implemented from a marketing perspective to not offend or mislead the consumer and to ease consumer inertia. In fact, the main challenging aspect of implementing a divergent change in organizational behavior, one that goes against the majority's institutional logics, is to pay careful attention to choosing the right communication tools. To the best of my knowledge, the marketing strategies used to implement the change play a crucial role in affecting consumers' emotional reactions positively or negatively, yet this finding still requires extra attention and research. Nonetheless, while comparing the reactions of consumers to change leaders versus change followers' announcements, reactions were found to be less aggressive as more brands carry on adopting the change. This highlights the notion of time in implementing the change and in legitimizing the new practices.

One main distinction between change leaders and change followers in both the US and the UK markets is that change followers not only announced the change in a press release or to the media but also came up with a new promotional campaign to advertise for the new offerings. It is important to note that these new campaigns not only include an advertisement of the gender neutral product lines modeled by different kids but also well framed taglines such as "the everybody collection". These taglines highlight the aim of the change, which is the inclusion of all consumers regardless of gender stereotypes. This differs from change leaders' announcements that claimed adopting the change in response to a minority of consumers who were unhappy with the current practices, an announcement that ended up upsetting the majority as they felt excluded.

Just as Abercrombie & Fitch, River Island also launched a promotional campaign advertising for the new gender neutral clothes. However unlike Abercrombie, River Island went a step further and co-operated with one of the largest charities in the world in launching a second campaign. This time, it took the form of an empowering anti-bullying campaign that showcases the social responsibility aspect of the change and its beneficial impact on the society. The campaign encourages consumers to express themselves without any definitions by convention. It spreads the message "Labels Are For Clothes" featuring twelve spokespeople who have all suffered from social stereotypes. In conjunction with the social responsibility campaign, River Island removed the binary gender labels and started selling a range of gender neutral t-shirts and sweatshirts labeling them "Labels Are for Clothes" to propel the empowering message of the campaign. From each sale, £3 was donated to the charity to provide support for those impacted by bullying (Young, 2018).

Unlike the rest of the brands, River Island was the only brand characterized by an overall positive sentiment and a prevailing emotion of joy as a response to the announcement. While Abercrombie did not succeed in triggering an overall positive sentiment, consumer emotional responses were still less destructive to Abercrombie compared to those of target, the change leader. Change leaders in the context of this study failed to make use of the first mover advantages, and change followers learnt from their efforts in announcing and implementing the change. Change followers seem to be more creative, careful and delicate in their change announcement strategies. They made use of emotion to appeal to consumers and reduce from their reluctance to the change, which explain the fact that consumers' emotional responses to change followers were less aggressive than their responses to change leaders.

## 6. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

### 6.1 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Our study shows that managers' decision to implement a divergent change in organizational behavior may result in adverse consequences on both the consumer and the brand itself. Given its nature and complexity, change usually faces strong power of inertia and lead to serious dissatisfaction from the customer side. However, our results also indicate that if implemented well, change can be legitimized and might receive more consumer acceptance. This raises the question of how can organizations contribute to changing institutional logics despite the continuous pressures towards stasis. The managerial implications that can be drawn from our research are based on the documentation of existing strategies that are used to pacify consumer attitudes towards change.

The initial challenge for managers is to develop marketing strategies that avoid the notion of customers as over-socialized individuals who are dedicated to the reproduction of habits (Powell & Colyvas, 2008). Managers should convey legitimacy of their actions, and they can achieve this through diverse marketing activities that seek to develop a vision, mobilize people behind it, and motivate them to accomplish and sustain it. These activities include launching promotional campaigns that idealize, embellish, and clarify the vision behind the change. For instance, this vision can be illustrated in the inclusion of all societal members beyond gender stereotypes in our context. They can also use celebrity endorsements and collaborations with diverse NGOs that fight gender stereotypes to highlight that the aim behind the change is indeed related to social responsibility rather than a pursuit of higher revenues and earnings. Hence, before implementing change, managers must attain a higher-level mastery of the previously stated activities and should also possess sufficient social skills in order to be able to secure consumers' cooperation and communicate visions that all consumers will be inclined to endorse (Battilana at al., 2009).

Another important managerial implication is that while implementing change, managers should stay lucid and implement changes with the quality or condition of being rational in order to succeed in justifying divergence from well and long established practices and help consumers accept the unfamiliarity associated with the new proposed practices. Despite removing gender labels, marketers should not fail in recognizing men and women biological body differences. For instance, if they aim to remove 'boys' and 'girls' gender labels, they should offer clothes with the same design and colors yet with a wide range of sizes as well. Although unisex, these

product offerings would still fit both a man and a woman which will ensure endorsement from the majority of consumers.

In discussing the social movements (NSM) theory, McCarthy and Zald (1977) suggest that consumers' discontent might be manipulated by organizations and issue entrepreneurs who strive to mobilize supporters and transform or neutralize the mass into sympathizers in an aim to achieve the change. Accordingly, Battilana et al., (2009) introduce three forms of change framings that help mobilize people and fight customers' pressures towards stasis, namely, diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing. First, diagnostic framing strives to highlight the issues related to the current institutionalized practices and introduce change as a superior solution. Second, prognostic framing is defined as presenting change in a way that matches the values, interests, and problems of potential opponents in order to avert reactions of fear and irrelevance. It involves de-legitimizing existing practices supported by potential change allies. Last but not least, motivational framing involves providing persuasive reasons to support the change being promoted (Misangyi, Weaver, & Elms, 2008). Managers should seek to use or combine these framings and design the appropriate frame. For example, they can use promotional messages and taglines that emphasize the failure of the current practices and institutionalized arrangements and indicate that the adoption of the proposed vision will benefit all target segments (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002).

This raises the dilemma of the appropriate tools needed to articulate the new vision and convince customers about the need for change. In fact, convincing customers who are against the change in organizational behavior necessitates particular skills in communication. Battilana et al., (2009) suggest diverse strategies that can be used to help mobilize change allies. They insist on the importance of storytelling in legitimizing change and attracting a variety of potential adopters. Storytelling is the practice of telling captivating stories to the consumer. It takes on diverse narrative styles, some of which are broadly diffused including romanticism, tragedy, and comedy and humor. Managers can provide consumers with emotionally engaging experiences in the change implementation process and focus more on a narrative style rather than a persuasive one in announcing the change. Moreover, managers can develop storylines that appeal to consumers and create emotional connections between the brand and the consumer as revealed by River Island in this research. This latest showed that telling a story that embodies gender stereotypes' challenges including bullying can create an understanding of the change that resonates with customers.

Finally, given that a change in organizational behavior causes a lot of tension between the brand and the consumer, humor can also be used as one of the storytelling narrative styles

in announcing change. In fact, humor can be a good relaxation and distraction tool, resulting in less change resistance and less counter-argumentation. Many studies have found that humor reduces consumers' defenses. They argue that humorous announcements and appeals are more persuasive than non-humorous ones (Mendleson, Golen, & Adams, 1986). Hence, laughter could be considered a good coping skill that can be used by managers to reduce the anxieties and the anger and disgust caused by the gender neutral labeling announcements or other changes in organizational behavior. Humorous announcement might enhance positive affect and purchase intention thereby reducing consumers' protests and boycotting intentions.

In summary, our findings disclose that managers and institutional entrepreneurs need to stay rational in their change implementation efforts and make sure to choose the right narrative style in their marketing campaigns that will resonate the most with the consumer. The adequacy of the form of the storytelling might vary depending on the nature of the change implemented. Managers should use these strategies carefully and consciously to increase the chances of change acceptance and enhance positive consumer responsiveness with respect to change announcements.

## **6.2 LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

Although Twitter analysis provides researchers with the opportunity to gain insights about consumers' opinions regarding diverse topics, this approach does not come without limitations which offer promising avenues for future studies.

One major limitation relates to the social desirability bias. In fact, we only have access in this research to responses that consumers chose to make publicly available. This implies that there might be a selectivity in disclosure of information. Moreover, we do not have any data related to the demographics of the consumers which tweets have been collected which might imply that our study is underrepresenting a certain group of the society. Second, sentiment analysis was carried out using the NRC Lexicon offered by Mohammed and Turney (2013) to shed light on the recurrent emotions in the different samples. Future research can investigate if there are recent and up-to-date lexicons to analyze tweet sentiments. A third major limitation relates to the manual method of twitter data collection. While using the manual data collection, the researcher might miss on some tweets that did not include neither the key terms nor the hashtags used in the manual research. Nevertheless, this method bypasses the limitation of Twitter API tool which allows only for data collection over the last past week. Last but not least, twitter mining and sentiment analysis tools still fall short in depicting sarcasm, irony, and exaggerations. It also always classifies negative words as negative although the overall

sentiment of the whole sentence might be positive. Future work might have a rigorous approach to take into account the context and use tools for detecting irony in an aim to get better results. Researchers should also focus their efforts on improving negative sentiment detection by using more than one lexicon to improve validity and reliability.

When analyzing the potential moderating effect of the change leader versus change follower, this research considered only two markets and four brands. Future studies could investigate these moderating effects in more markets to validate the results. The study can further be extended to dive deep in evaluating the power of humor and affect in easing consumer inertia to changes in organizational behavior. Experimental studies can frame diverse announcements based on the three forms of change framings provided by Battilana et al., (2009) and test diverse storytelling narrative style to explore the extent to which these strategies result in more positive emotional consumer responses. More intensive studies based on manipulating change announcements and studying consumers' responses accordingly can add a sturdier knowledge to the managerial implications of this study.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

Just as many fields, the fashion and retail industries are characterized by continuous evolvement and very dynamic marketplaces. Our findings suggest that divergent changes at the level of organizational fields are very complex in nature as they are more likely to cause turmoil for the vast majority of consumers as well as institutional conflict. Despite its limitations, the present study offers a good understanding of the types of emotional consumer responses to changes in organizational behavior. This report will be valuable to researchers, marketers and managers as it highlights the difficulty of change implementation. Managers need to be particularly cautious about the way they announce the change and not take for granted consumers' embedded norms, beliefs, values and cultural practices that define the consumer's social reality. Managers could also benefit from the insights provided in this research and which highlight that changing what is deemed appropriate, proper, and desirable by the majority of consumers entails eloquent and subtle marketing strategies and prodigious storytelling as well as social communication skills.

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