

# Research on the Causes of “Pink Tax” from the Perspective of Brand Design: A Case Study of L'Oréal Paris

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**Abstract:** The “pink tax” refers to the phenomenon in which female consumers are required to pay higher prices than male consumers when purchasing certain goods or services. This form of gender-based pricing discrimination not only intensifies gender divisions within the consumer sphere but also substantially infringes upon the legitimate rights and interests of female consumers, reflecting the significant gap that still exists in achieving gender equality in today’s market. Although some studies have examined the causes and manifestations of the pink tax from economic and sociological perspectives, research on the role of brand design in this process remains relatively scarce. To address this gap, the present study adopts a brand design perspective to investigate how branding practices—such as product image construction and communication strategy formulation—subtly reinforce gendered pricing mechanisms and contribute to the emergence and entrenchment of the pink tax. Using L’Oréal Paris, a representative mass-market brand, as the primary case study, this research conducts a systematic analysis across three dimensions: brand strategy planning, brand identity system, and brand marketing strategy. The findings reveal that brand design promotes the pink tax through three key pathways: gender opposition and product line extension, symbolic design and visual smoke screens, and narrative induction alongside diversified marketing strategies. This paper further uncovers the underlying connection between brand design logic and gender-based pricing, offering a novel academic perspective for understanding pricing inequality in consumer markets, while also providing theoretical guidance and practical insights for fostering more inclusive and equitable branding strategies.

**Keywords:** Pink Tax, Brand Design, L’Oréal

## Paris, Female Consumers

### 1. Introduction

As consumer awareness of rights continues to grow, the “Pink Tax” phenomenon in the consumer market has garnered increasing attention. Existing research on the Pink Tax, both domestically and internationally, has primarily approached the issue from economic and psychological perspectives, while the role of brand design in the formation of this phenomenon remains underexplored [1]. This article therefore seeks to investigate the intrinsic relationship between brand design and the Pink Tax, aiming to shed light on gender-based pricing practices in the marketplace from a new perspective. The study also aims to provide insights for developing more inclusive and balanced branding strategies, thereby contributing to the healthy development of the industry.

L’Oréal Paris, a mass-market brand with a mature and diversified brand design system, is selected as the case study. Its representative nature allows for a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the complex interplay between brand design and the Pink Tax.

### 2. Causes and Impacts of the Pink Tax

The “pink tax” is not a tax in the traditional sense, but rather a pricing strategy based on gender differences. For similar products or identical goods, merchants set differentiated prices according to gender, with women's products often priced higher—sometimes even twice as much as comparable men's products. As a result, women end up bearing additional costs imposed solely based on gender [2]. The main causes behind this phenomenon include the following: First, commercial strategies over the past century have shaped women's consumption tendencies. After World War II, American corporations established gendered color norms through advertising, cementing pink as an

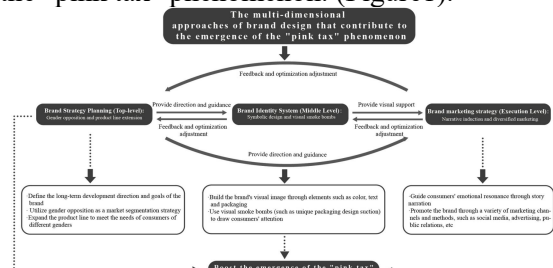
exclusive symbol of femininity. Women's cultivated preference for pink prompted enterprises to launch products with “feminine traits” and market them at a premium [2]. Additionally, contemporary female consumers place greater emphasis on brand cultural connotations and consumption experiences, tending to assert their identity and self-recognition through purchasing “feminine” products—this provides space for price premiums. Furthermore, the lack of consumer awareness and inadequate market regulation have also contributed to the persistence of the “pink tax”.

The long-standing existence of the “pink tax” phenomenon has brought about multiple negative impacts. Firstly, it exacerbates gender inequality in consumption. On average, men's salaries are generally higher than women's, yet women have to pay more for similar products, which further widens the gap between the two genders in terms of purchasing power and disposable income [3]. Secondly, it impairs the healthy development of industries and reduces the market competitiveness of relevant brands. Some enterprises rely on price increases instead of research and development, which damages their brand image. Thirdly, it restricts women's consumption choices. Many female consumers are unaware of this phenomenon, making them prone to buying women's products at high prices that have the same functions as men's ones, or having to choose inferior substitutes. Therefore, exploring the role of brand design in the “pink tax” and seeking solutions is crucial for building a fair consumption environment.

### 3. Multidimensional Mechanisms through Which Brand Design Facilitates the Emergence of the “Pink Tax”

Brand design is an important means for enterprises to build a unique brand identity and convey core values. It generally covers multiple dimensions such as brand strategic planning, brand identity system, and brand marketing strategies. As a key link in shaping product image and conveying brand value, brand design can be divided into broad and narrow concepts. In the broad sense, it includes strategic design, product design, image design, and CI design. In the narrow sense, it refers to the design of visual systems such as brand names, trademarks, and packaging. Among them, brand strategic planning clarifies the brand's positioning and

goals; the brand identity system externalizes the brand's philosophy into visual language; brand marketing strategies convey brand value through scenarios such as advertising and sales channels, thereby guiding consumers' purchasing behavior. The synergy of these three aspects has, to a certain extent, contributed to the emergence of the “pink tax” phenomenon. (Figure1).



**Figure 1. The Systematic Approach of Brand Design to the Emergence of the "Pink Tax" Phenomenon (Self-Drawn by the Author)**

#### 3.1 Strategic Brand Planning: Gender Segmentation and Product-Line Extension

In a market environment where multiculturalism and individual expression are increasingly important, how brands can accurately reach their target users has become a key aspect of strategic planning. As a crucial dimension of brand market positioning, gender-based segmentation and differentiation can help enterprises more precisely identify target customers, gain in-depth understanding of the value demands of different groups, and thus better develop new products [4]. However, its specific practices have, to a certain extent, contributed to the emergence of the “pink tax” phenomenon, as detailed below.



(I) The strategic deployment of product-level gender segmentation

Under the pervasive influence of sociocultural enculturation, women are socialized from an early age to perceive an intrinsic correspondence between their gendered selfhood and particular chromatic codes, aesthetic forms, and attendant commodity categories. This gendered aesthetic discipline inscribes a set of normative preferences that channel female consumers toward pink-coded goods as symbolic instruments for constructing and affirming identity. Capitalizing on this psychocultural disposition, L'Oréal Paris deploys a rigidly binary market-segmentation schema, explicitly bifurcating its product portfolio into male and female lines. Such deliberate partitioning not only reifies gender difference but also materially intensifies price discrimination along gender

lines. (Table 1) For instance, products marketed to women frequently enlist celebrity endorsements and limited-edition releases, and embed slogans such as “beauty” and “grace,” thereby echoing female consumers’ aspirational pursuit of refined sophistication. These symbolic investments elevate perceived brand stature and create room for premium pricing. By contrast, functionally equivalent items targeted at men are framed almost exclusively around efficacy and

utility, projecting a rational, science-based brand image; their price points are correspondingly lower. This deliberately gendered segmentation strategy manufactures a distinctive value proposition for women’s products, leading female consumers to accept—and even expect—higher outlays for items equivalent to those offered to men. In doing so, they incur an implicit surcharge, materially fueling the emergence of the pink tax.

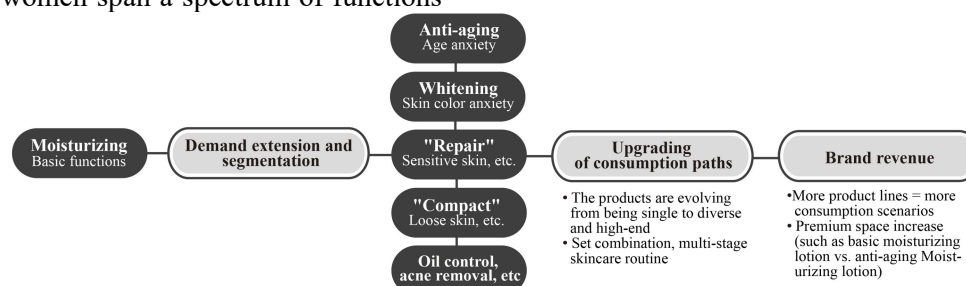
**Table 1. Analysis Table of Gender Opposition Strategies for L 'Oreal Paris Products (Self-Drawn by the Author)**

Gender	Women's product series	Male product series
Market positioning	Exquisite and high-end, emphasizing beauty and elegance	Scientific, rigorous and practical
Product image building	It is highly correlated with the self-identity of female consumers (refined and elegant)	Pay attention to the practicality of the products and the image of rational consumption
Pricing strategy	Relatively high, emphasizing added value and uniqueness	Relatively low, mainly focusing on functional value
Product case diagram	 L 'Oreal Ladies' Facial Cleanser ¥0.87/1ml	 L 'Oreal Men's Facial Cleanser ¥0.38/1ml
Price differences of similar products	It is usually higher than the same product for men	It is usually lower than the same products for women

## (II) Product-line extension strategy





Confronted with intensifying market competition, firms frequently adopt product-line extension strategies to accommodate heterogeneous consumer demands and capture additional market share. Product-line extension denotes the process by which a company leverages the equity of an existing brand to spin off a portfolio of single-function variants from an original flagship product [5]. In the domain of women’s skincare, for instance, brands initially anchored in basic hydration have progressively extended their offerings into anti-aging, brightening, and other specialized dimensions. This proliferation of finely segmented products not only propels an upward trajectory in female consumers’ purchasing behavior but also expands the brand’s latitude for premium pricing. (Figure 2) For instance, L’Oréal Paris’s facial-cleanser lines for women span a spectrum of functions—

hydration, anti-aging, skin-renewal—whose unit prices vary with the declared efficacy. By contrast, the corresponding men’s range is positioned primarily around hydration and oil control and is marketed at a uniform price point. (Table 2) Furthermore, the brand has expanded its female skincare regimen into a six-step routine “cleanser → toner → eye cream → serum → emulsion → cream” where each category is priced separately and frequently bundled and sold at a premium. In contrast, the male line is truncated to a three-step sequence of “cleanser → toner → emulsion”, offering fewer SKUs and markedly lower prices. Although, on the surface, this elongation of the female product line appears to broaden choice, it simultaneously embeds gender-based asymmetries in pricing and merchandising strategies, thereby institutionalizing the so-called “pink tax.”



**Figure 2. Product Extension Strategy Decision Path Map (Self-Drawn by the Author)**

**Table 2. L 'Oreal Paris Men's and Women's Skincare Product Lines (Self-Drawn by the Author)**

Gender	Women's skin care products	Male skin care products
Product types	 Fine classification: Facial cleanser, toner, eye cream, essence, lotion, face cream	 Simple Trilogy: Facial cleanser, toner, Lotion
Skincare routine	Facial cleanser → toner → eye cream → essence → lotion → face cream	Cleansing → toner → lotion
Product case diagram	 ¥0.6/1ml ¥0.87/1ml ¥1.17/1ml ¥1.19/1ml	 ¥0.38/1ml ¥0.38/1ml ¥0.38/1ml
Overall consumption cost	Higher	lower

### 3.2 Brand Identity System: Semiotic Design and the Visual Smokescreen

Brand visual design encodes a firm's culture, ethos, and values; it is therefore a pivotal vehicle for crafting a distinctive corporate image and disseminating core values. When executed effectively, such design not only captivates consumers visually but also elicits emotional resonance and identification [6]. In brand communication, marketers routinely deploy visual signifiers to differentiate male and female product lines, conferring upon the latter a premium symbolic aura that underpins systematically higher price points. This symbolic surcharge is accomplished through three primary semiotic strategies.

(I) A semiotic re-coding of product colour, typography and packaging

The visual identity system constitutes the outward-facing visual persona through which a brand projects itself during communication; by deploying a coherent set of visual elements it manufactures distinction and functions as a potent instrument in differentiated competition [7]. With respect to chromatic strategy, women's SKUs predominantly mobilize high-saturation hues—pink and gold in particular—thereby catering to a cultural expectation of softness and sweetness, whereas men's SKUs gravitate toward low-saturation blacks and blues that connote minimalism and muscular restraint. Empirical research indicates that the specular shimmer of gold and silver amplifies the perceived femininity of a product. In typographic terms, women's lines favor rounded, attenuated typefaces that semiotically communicate gentleness, while men's variants employ bold, heavy sans-serifs that index rugged masculinity. At the level of packaging morphology, women's products are elongated

and refined—resonating with the slender ideal culturally imposed on female bodies—whereas men's containers are thick-set and rectilinear, projecting solidity and gravitas. A paradigmatic illustration is provided by L'Oréal Paris's serum offerings: the women's "Revitalift" line is articulated in silver-red chromatics, slender typography, and curvilinear flacons, whereas the men's "Men Expert White Activ" line is rendered in black-white, bold lettering, and sharply angular casings. Despite near-identical active ingredients, the semiotic surcharge embedded in these visual differentials enables the women's SKU to command a markedly higher price. (Figure 3) By strategically deploying visual signifiers to hyper-feminize the product, the brand satisfies the psychosocial needs of female consumers, eliciting their acceptance of a price premium and thus operationalizing the "pink tax."



**Figure 3. Comparison Chart of L 'Oreal Paris Men's and Women's Series Essence Products**  
(II) Product-information inflation and the packaging smokescreen

"Information exaggeration" refers to the behavior of enterprises that create differentiation through false or exaggerated means in their products or services, thereby misleading consumers. This behavior usually takes advantage of consumers' limited understanding

of product information, and by exaggerating the functions and information of women's products, makes consumers mistakenly believe that such products have higher value or uniqueness [8]. For example, L'Oreal Paris has adopted such a strategy for its women's facial cleanser "L'Oreal Paris Age Perfect Cell Renewal Rosy Tone" and men's facial cleanser "L'Oreal Paris Men Expert Vita Lift Anti-Wrinkle Cleanser". Although the skincare efficacy of the women's product is not superior to that of the men's product, and it even contains three fewer ingredients than the men's product, the price of the women's product is about twice as high as that of the men's product. (Figure 4) The women's facial cleanser features pink packaging with exquisitely depicted beautiful peony patterns. Meanwhile, it emphasizes the promotion of the added peony ingredients. By creating romantic and soft visual elements, it enhances the product's aesthetic appeal and attractiveness, thereby justifying the higher price of the women's product. (Figure 5) It can thus be seen that the approach of exaggerating product information combined with packaging smokescreens has also become one of the important ways to fuel the phenomenon of "pink tax".



### Figure 4. A Comparison Chart of Ingredients for Men's and Women's Facial Cleansers



### Figure 5. Visual Design Comparison Chart of L 'Oreal Paris's Men's and Women's Facial Cleansers

(III) Endowing more emotional factors to conduct emotional persuasion

Emotional added value refers to the emotional satisfaction that consumers gain through commodities beyond meeting their basic functional needs, thereby enhancing their sense of identity and loyalty to the brand. Such added value can be created through visual design, where enterprises, based on consumers' psychological needs, integrate emotional elements into the visual expression of products to create an emotional atmosphere. Taking L'Oreal Paris moisturizing cream as an example, there is a sharp contrast in the visual design between men's and women's products. Although both take 'nature and the environment' as the theme, their presentation methods are completely different. The women's version adopts pink gradient packaging, paired with soft elements such as ribbons and flowers, emphasizing a sense of nutrition and delicacy, and focusing on emotional and aesthetic expression. The men's version, on the other hand, combines black and blue tones with images such as the deep sea and flowing water, highlighting technologies like oil control and moisturizing, and emphasizing scientificity and objectivity. (Figure 6) Such a differentiated design strategy reflects the brand's precise grasp of the psychological needs of consumers of different genders. The packaging and promotion of women's products focus on creating a romantic atmosphere, endowing the products with more emotional factors to guide them to pay for "emotional value"; while men's products highlight performance parameters and reduce emotional rendering. It can be seen from the above that endowing women's products with more emotional factors and strengthening emotional expression is also one of the important means to promote the phenomenon of "pink tax".



**Figure 6. L 'Oreal Paris Men's and Women's Moisturizing Cream**

### 3.3 Brand Marketing Strategies: Narrative Inducement and Diversified Marketing

Brand marketing strategies serve as a critical hub for translating a brand's design concepts into tangible value realization. Enterprises, centering on consumers' emotional needs, build emotional bonds through emotional marketing and advertising strategies. This subtly strengthens consumers' brand awareness and establishes a favorable brand image in their minds [9], thereby making them willing to pay for premium products and creating room for the formation of the "pink tax". Specifically, it promotes the "pink tax" phenomenon mainly through the following two approaches.

#### (I) Targeted induction in advertising narratives

As China's market enters the era of brand economy, female consumers are gradually shifting from pursuing product functions to valuing the expression of brand values. Brand positioning has become a crucial factor in their consumption decisions. For instance, international brands such as Mercedes-Benz, Rolex, and Louis Vuitton, with their unique social symbolic values, satisfy the social identity needs of female consumers [10]. Many brands reinforce gender differences through symbolic design and specific promotional rhetoric, continuously conveying to women the idea that "more complex products are needed to meet social expectations." A case in point is L'Oréal Paris, which adopts drastically different strategies in promoting skincare products for men and women. For female products, it often uses rhetoric such as "girlish skin," "replenishing complexion," and "anti-aging" to tie in with women's age anxiety, implying that women need high-value products to maintain social recognition. This marketing strategy encourages women to pay a premium for "problem-solving," driving up the pricing of women's products. In contrast, male products focus more on practical rhetoric such as "pore vacuum cleaner" and "oil-control master," emphasizing functionality with less irrational guidance. It is evident that targeted induction of female consumers in advertising narratives is one of the important means contributing to the phenomenon of "pink tax."

#### (II) Carrying out premium marketing through diversified approaches

In the new media era, discussions about female beauty on social platforms have

become an important basis for skincare brands to understand user needs and formulate marketing strategies. With the help of big data analysis, brand advertisements can reach female users more accurately, enabling premium marketing. For example, L'Oréal Paris has collaborated with well-known beauty bloggers on platforms such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu to release "immersive skincare" videos. Through 6-9 complex skincare steps, these videos imply that skincare needs to be refined, guiding women to pay for more complex product lines. In addition, the brand invited actress Gong Li to endorse its Revitalift anti-wrinkle facial cleanser series. By leveraging her "ageless" image, it conveys the idea that women need to achieve "beauty self-rescue" through related products, thereby inducing women to accept high pricing. In contrast, similar male products mostly invite athletes as endorsers, focusing on promoting the "real functions" of the products and avoiding emotional marketing. L'Oréal Paris has also shaped a progressive brand image by supporting women's empowerment movements, transforming feminist discourse into a tool of consumerism and laying the groundwork for justifying the premium on women's products. All these promotional and marketing methods have created ample space for the emergence of the "pink tax" phenomenon.

### 4. Conclusion

From the above analysis, it can be concluded that the emergence of the "pink tax" phenomenon is primarily driven by three approaches in brand design: gender-based segmentation and product line extension, symbolic design with visual smokescreens, and narrative induction combined with diversified marketing. These practices reinforce gender stereotypes and result in unequal pricing treatment for women. To build a more equitable and inclusive consumption environment, brand design should abandon gender-label-oriented approaches and focus on individuals' real needs and product functions. In terms of design language, it is essential to advocate "gender-neutral design," dilute gender implications in colors, fonts, and packaging, and shape diverse brand images. In terms of communication strategies, brands should enhance transparency, safeguard consumers' right to information and

participation, and strengthen their understanding and recognition of product pricing logic. This paper reveals the internal logic behind the "pink tax" phenomenon from the perspective of brand design, providing a new research angle for addressing gender-based pricing inequality. Given that the research samples are mainly concentrated on L'Oréal Paris skincare products, future studies could expand to more brands and categories to enhance the comprehensiveness and applicability of the research.

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