

Challenging gender stereotypes:

The application of attribution theory for boys and girls when performing a strategic design task



There seems to be a shift in gender stereotypes in general. Concerning school subjects, there are also gender role stereotypes for boys and girls. Boys seem to be more interested in mathematics and natural sciences whereas girls seem to be more motivated for language, arts and writing (Jacobs, 2002). According to the attribution theory (Heider, 1958), the performance of an individual can be attributed to the person themselves (internal) or to the situation in which they are in (external). There might be a link between these existing stereotypes in school subjects and level of self-confidence of boys and girls.

Strategic design tasks entail aspects of business, engineering and design. Therefore, it entails aspects of both stereotypical boys (mathematics, natural sciences) and girls (language, arts, writing) school subjects. It would thus be worth knowing whether there are also gender differences in attribution when dealing with a

strategic design task. The goal of this research is to find out how the attribution theory applies for boys and girls when performing a strategic design task. The main research question is:

How does attribution theory apply for boys and girls when performing a strategic design task? In order to answer the main research question, thirteen sub research questions with corresponding hypotheses were formulated. The research consisted of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. A sample of 46 third year high school students was used. The participants were divided in gender equal teams of three. The participants performed a strategic design task as a team. Three questionnaires were conducted among the participants; one before, one after and finally, one after grading the strategic design task. At the end of the research interviews were held to give the quantitative data more body. The data analysis

mainly consisted of statistically analysing the effects of independent variables on dependent variables. The dependent variables of this research, in general, are type of attribution, self-confidence and interest (and performance). The independent variable is gender. The moderators are the strategic design task and grading. To create more overview, the results are documented in six variable themes. The results of this research suggest that stereotypes do not exist within this group of participants. Interest and performance in school subjects contradicted the existing gender stereotypes. Furthermore, no differences in interest in the strategic design task were found. Boys and girls both scored high on self-confidence in each measurement, no significant differences were found here. In line with this high self-confidence, both boys and girls attributed success to internal factors and were highly self-confident about performing a strategic design task in the future.

