Racial Stereotypes in Consumer Judgment: the Effect of the Presence of Others

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We examine how social context affects the influence of racial stereotypes in evaluations of services. Findings reveal opposing effects depending on individual differences in self-monitoring. The first study shows that high self-monitors evaluated a financial service provided by an African-American more favorably in public than in private but this pattern was reversed for the low self-monitors. The second study shows that there were no differences in the activation level of the stereotype for the high and low self-monitors, suggesting that the result are driven by differences in participants’ ability and motivation to control the activated stereotype when evaluating the service.

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service delivered by the leader’s subordinates. Both studies manipulated ambiguity of information about the leader’s competence. Previous research led us to expect that perceivers would be more favorable toward a female in a stereotypically male role when she performs in an unambiguously competent manner than when competence is ambiguous (Heilman and Haynes 2005; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs and Tamkins 2004). We reasoned that Matta and Folkes’ (2005) findings reflected the unambiguously excellent performance of the woman. Matta and Folkes’ findings should not extend to a leader if competence is ambiguous.

To enhance ecological validity, all studies presented participants with information about an actual organization and the organization’s leader. Participants read information about the leader in a male dominated occupation who was described to half the participants using her actual name and to the other half using a masculine name. Results showed that characteristics of the male leader in a male dominated profession were similar to subordinates, suggesting generalization from leader to follower. When the male leader’s performance was unambiguously competent, the service delivered by subordinates was rated more positively when his performance was ambiguous. Further, inferences about his sex-typed characteristics (e.g., the extent to which he had agentic or communal traits) were similar to inferences about his firm’s service providers’ sex-typed characteristics.

Characteristics of the female leader were less likely to be generalized to her subordinates. As with the male leaders, less ambiguity about a woman leader’s performance led to more positive evaluations of her compared to when her performance was more ambiguous. Unlike the male leaders, the unambiguously excellent woman was considered more competent than her subordinates, whereas the ambiguously performing leader was considered less competent than her subordinates. Further, respondents were more likely to perceptually isolate the ambiguously performing leader from others in her firm, and to assume that her sex-typed traits were not generalizable to her subordinates.

Study 2 investigated effects of ambiguity and the leader’s gender on perceptions of subordinates as well as on product perceptions. Respondents had actual product experience and then evaluated the product. Respondents’ evaluations of the organization’s output reflected characteristics of the leader rather than characteristics of the subordinates. Hence, inferences that a woman leader had more feminine characteristics than did a male leader affected perceptions of product attributes, with respondents describing products as having more feminine characteristics when the leader was a woman than when a man. The results of these studies indicate that consumers’ gender stereotypes about an organization’s leader can influence evaluations of an organization’s products and services.

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Stereotypes have been shown to play an important role in consumer judgments (e.g., Maheswaran 1994; Gurhan-Calni & Maheswaran 2000). In the present research, we examine the role of racial stereotypes in the evaluation of services and, in particular, how the social context of the judgment—in the presence of others or alone—may affect the influence of stereotypes.

Intuition might suggest that racial stereotypes would play less of a role in the evaluation of services in a more public context because buyers would want to avoid any appearance of prejudice. This intuition is consistent with recent consumer research that has highlighted how the presence of others may trigger processes of impression management (e.g., Ariely & Levav 2000; Fisher & Dube 2005; Ratner & Kahn 2002; Argo, Dahl & Manchanda 2005). In this view, consumers may downplay the role of race in their judgments or even provide “politically correct” judgments in which services provided by African-Americans are judged more favorably in public than in private. However, public contexts may cause other effects than those dictated by impression management concerns. Specifically, research on stereotypes has shown that control of stereotypical judgment requires cognitive resources that the presence of others may diminish (Gilbert & Hixon 1991). Therefore we might observe situations in which the presence of others would actually result in more stereotypical judgments (e.g. Lambert et al. 2003).

The present research examines these opposing predictions and relies on individual differences in self-monitoring to predict the direction of the effect that the presence of others would have on evaluations of services provided by minority groups (Snyder, 1974; Snyder & Smith, 1986). Self-monitoring shows particular promise in exploring opposing effects of social presence because it captures differences in sensitivity both to social cues to providing socially appropriate responses and to the distractions caused by the presence of others. Specifically, we predict that for high self-monitors, consistent with prior research on impression management, the presence of others will result in more favorable evaluations of services provided by an African-American (Fiske & Von Hendy 1992; Olivier, Snyder & Livingstone 2004). By contrast, low self-monitors tend to be more anxious in social circumstances and generally to look inward, rather than outward, for cues to behavior. This unease and inward focus might result in more stereotypical judgments in the presence of others, that is, less favorable evaluation of the service.

The first study examined these predictions in the context of an investment decision to be made based on a recommendation by an African-American (versus White) financial advisor. Participants were asked to allocate a sum of money to a stock recommended by the financial advisor and they made their judgments alone or in the presence of a white confederate. The confederate was merely-present in the room and was unable to see participants’ responses (Zajonc, 1965). Results revealed the predicted three-way interaction of social presence, race, and self-monitoring. High self-monitors invested more for Black advisor in public versus alone and, further, invested more for the Black advisor than the White advisor in public. This pattern of results reversed for the low self-monitors. Investment levels were lower for the Black advisor in public versus alone, and, further, lower for the Black than for the White advisor in public.

The results of the first study are in line with the account that high self-monitors were better able to control an activated stereotype in public than low self-monitors. The second study was designed to explore an alternative process by which self-monitoring may influence judgments. Specifically, high self-monitors may be so attuned to the demands of the social environment that these individuals may not even activate the stereotype. To test this account, participants in the second study completed the same investment task but also took part in a word completion task that was aimed at measuring activation of racial stereotypes (Gilbert & Hixon 1991). Results indicated that high self-monitors were not less likely to activate the stereotype. Further, the pattern of results from the first study was replicated, but only for those people who activated the stereotype, consistent with the view that results are driven by differences in ability of high and low self-monitors to control the stereotype when evaluating the service.
Results of these two studies demonstrate the opposing effects that public presence can have on the prevalence of racial stereotypes in the evaluation of services. Findings show that public presence can result in more or less politically correct evaluations, depending on individual differences in the sensitivity to social desirability concerns (self-monitoring). We expect that this pattern of results would extend beyond the context of service evaluations, to contexts such as judgments of foreign products or advertising messages involving minority members. The studies presented here reflect the multifaceted influence that public presence can have on consumers’ judgments.

“Beyond Demographics and Stereotypes: Effects of Urban Identification on Responses to Actor Race in Advertising”

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Consumer behavior researchers have identified many criteria by which to segment consumers to explain and predict their behavior (Zaichowsky 1985; Bettman 1979). While marketers have historically viewed the marketplace in terms of demographics such as race, consumers are increasingly identifying themselves on lifestyle rather than demographic terms. Marketing research has also historically focused on segmentation based upon ethnicity to understand and predict consumer behavior, including specific measures of degree of ethnic identification, examining subcultures such as blacks (Whittler 1991, Williams & Qualls 1989, etc.), Hispanics (Webster 1994) and Jews (Hirschman 1981). In recent years, researchers have begun to follow marketers’ shift from the use of demographic data as the primary basis for understanding and categorizing consumers and predicting their behavior, to segmentation variables with more explanatory power such as subculture and lifestyle. One particular lifestyle segment that crosses racial, ethnic, age and geographic boundaries in an unprecedented fashion is the urban subculture. Despite the great deal of attention that the urban segment has received from marketing and advertising practitioners in recent years, there is currently little understanding of its effects on consumer behavior and effectiveness of marketing communications. The urban segment generally takes multiculturalism for granted and sees things less in terms of black and white than cool or un-cool, making demographic and ethnicity-based segmentation less insightful for newer generations of consumers and behavioral research. Identification with this segment and its characteristic ethnic diversity also creates some confusion about which cultural cues are now seen as stereotypically representative of a particular ethnic group.

Marketers have only recently identified and acknowledged the urban population as a lucrative consumer lifestyle and sociopolitical segment in and of itself, as well as a powerful mechanism for reaching and influencing broader audiences of consumers. The pervasiveness of this segment along with over $890 billion per year in buying power in the U.S. alone (Stavraka 2001) makes it a highly sought-after one for marketers. The current research seeks to examine the effects of urban identification on evaluations of advertising and shows that urban identification mitigates previous findings regarding similarity effects in advertisements.

Existing research in advertising has examined subjects’ responses to ads featuring same- and other-race actors. While studies consistently show that minority (i.e. black) subjects respond more positively to ads featuring same-race actors and related race cues (Appiah 2001), results for the larger majority population are inconclusive, with researchers assuming that there is no significant effect of actor race or race cues on non-black populations. The current study examines the effects of urban identification on majority populations’ responses to ads and finds that within a non-black population, non-urban identifiers prefer ads featuring white actors; however, non-black urban identifiers prefer ads featuring black actors with preference measured in terms of ad liking, similarity of ad to self, identifying with the actor, perceiving a similar style, personality, culture and style of actor’s dress and liking for the actor.

Study results call into question current advertising industry belief and practice, which focuses on demographics–specifically race–as the basis for market segmentation. It also challenges existing notions of stereotypes and effectiveness of in-group and out-group categorizations and cues by showing that particular psychographic and lifestyle variables–urban identification in this instance–mediate the effects of racial stereotypes on consumers’ responses to advertising.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, Lend Me Your Attitudes…Implicit Attitude Formation As a Result of Group Membership and Consumption Stereotypes”

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Previous research has established that individuals’ cognitions and attitudes may form as a result of membership in a group to which that the individual belongs. This minimal group effect (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy and Flament 1971) suggested that the mere assignment of an individual to a randomly selected group resulted in discrimination against other competing groups. Recent research suggest that implicit partisanship may be unconscious in nature, in that individuals automatically self-associate with groups, leading to feelings of in-group bias and out-group discrimination (Greenwald et al 2002, Pinter and Greenwald 2004). Pinter and Greenwald found this robust effect across numerous experimental settings suggesting that implicit partisanship is a category level effect, such that a meaningful group membership is created automatically, with the potential to influence behavior. The current research extends these findings by exploring the formation of attitudes toward target objects that have been randomly associated with a novel group and consumption stereotypes tied to that group.

Two experiments were conducted to explore the potential for attitude formation toward novel objects (experiment 1) and fictitious brand names (experiment 2). Participants were initially told that they would be participating in a campus-wide scavenger hunt, and would be randomly assigned to one of two groups, designated as either team Triangle or Circle. Following random assignment to one of the groups, participants were instructed to complete a simple categorization task that prompted them to first examine a list of ten names of the other students who were members of the two five-member competing groups. Within the group that the participant was assigned, one of the names was replaced with “yourself”, an indication that the participant was a member of that group. Following a thirty second exposure to the list of fictitious student names, participants then completed a trivial categorization task that compelled them to separate the two groups of names using two behavioral responses, in this case, pressing either the ‘d’ key or the ‘k’ key on a computer keyboard. Thus, a participant who was assigned to the Circle team might be required to press the ‘d’ key whenever the name of his team was presented on the screen (as well as the word “yourself”), and press ‘k’ whenever the names of the other team members were presented on the screen. Following this task, participants were then instructed that they would be looking for the scavenger hunt targets: either analog or digital clocks described as present on campus (experiment 1) or fictitious automobile brands...