How Stereotype Targets Perceive Positive Stereotypes

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It is well established that the portrayal of negative stereotypes in the media is frowned upon, but it is less clear how positive stereotypes are viewed, particularly by stereotype targets. We find that an individuals’ level of identification with the group influences how they perceive positive stereotyping of their ingroup. High identifiers, who are more sensitive to threats to their group, interpret the portrayal of positive stereotypes more negatively than low identifiers, and we find that this interpretation leads to more negative evaluations of advertisements that promote these positive stereotypes.

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SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY
The Role of Stereotypes in Changing Consumers’ Attitudes and Behaviors
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SESSION OVERVIEW
Given their broad applicability and rich content, it is important to understand how stereotypes influence consumer’s attitudes. Because individuals use stereotypes to understand their social environment, stereotypes can be activated through a wide range of cues, and this can lead to attitudes and behaviors congruent with the stereotyped group. For example, the presence of an African American individual in a record store could increase preferences for rap music or the presence of an overweight individual in a restaurant could possibly prime consumers to order and eat more food. Individuals themselves are also often targets of stereotypes and must deal with being judged based on group membership. Though depicting stereotypes in the media is generally avoided, stereotypes, particularly positive ones, can be inadvertently portrayed. For example, the use of an African American athlete can be construed as stereotyping by African American consumers and lead to detrimental consequences for the advertised product.

This collection of research seeks to understand the various ways stereotypes can shape consumer’s attitudes and also identify important factors that moderate these effects. Wheeler et al. and Campbell and Mohr’s papers examine how stereotypes prime attitudes and behaviors consistent with the stereotype. Wheeler et al.’s paper focuses on how individuals view themselves on traits related to a stereotype affect their susceptibility to priming. They find that individuals with consistent self-concepts on stereotype relevant traits are the most resistant to priming and demonstrate the least amount of stereotype consistent attitudes. Campbell and Mohr’s paper demonstrates that priming individuals with overweight people can lead to the stereotype consistent behavior of overeating. However, this effect can be attenuated by reminding individuals of their health goals and also by reminding them that overeating leads to weight gain. Yang et al. research takes the perspective of the stereotype target and focuses on how they view depictions of positive stereotypes in the media. They find that group identification moderates whether individuals respond negatively or positively to an advertisement portraying a positive stereotype. These papers also emphasize the importance of individual level factors (i.e. self-concept consistency and personal goals) in understanding the effect of stereotypes on behavior.

Despite their power to shape attitudes and behavior, stereotypes have received little attention in the consumer behavior literature. This special session seeks to highlight the importance of understanding their role in shaping consumer behavior and should appeal to a wide audience. These papers demonstrate the various perspectives one can take in examining stereotypes and how they may relate to important marketing variables such as preferences, eating behavior, and persuasion.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS
“Self-concept Consistency Fosters Resistance to Prime-induced Attitude Shifts”
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Research on stereotype priming has shown that it can have a wide array of effects on behavior and judgment. One effect of particular interest to marketers is that stereotype primes can lead to attitude shifts among prime recipients, both when they are targeted by the stereotype (Steele and Ambady 2006) and when they are not (Kawakami, Dovidio, and Dijksterhuis 2003). Specifically, following the activation of stereotypes, people report more stereotypical attitudes (e.g., racist attitudes following a skinhead stereotype prime).

There has been a great deal of recent research on the mechanism by which these types of effects occur. According to one account, the Active-Self account (Wheeler, DeMarree, & Petty, 2007), primes can have such effects via their effects on the active self-concept. A rapidly growing body of research shows that primed constructs can affect the active self-concept and lead to congruent subsequent behavior (see Wheeler, et al., 2007, for a review).

If primes affect behavior via the self-concept, factors that affect the resistance of the self-concept to change should lead to smaller priming effects. One factor associated with resistance is self-concept consistency. Paralleling research on attitude consistency, research on self-concept consistency has shown that those with consistent self-concept representations are more resistant to prime-induced self-concept shifts than are those with inconsistent self-concept representations (DeMarree, Morrison, Wheeler, and Petty 2009). We therefore predicted that people would be more resistant to priming effects on their attitude reports when there was consistency between prime-relevant aspects of their self-concepts.

In our first study, White participants were primed with either the African-American stereotype or no stereotype using a sentence unscrambling task. After the priming manipulation, participants indicated their level of agreement with four attitudinal statements that a pretest indicated were associated with the African American stereotype (e.g., “Policies aimed to reduce racial inequalities, such as affirmative action, are important to our society”). These items assessed attitudes toward affirmative action, welfare, rap music, and playing basketball and football. To minimize suspicion, these statements were interspersed with several others that were unrelated to the African American stereotype (e.g., “I like to eat apples and other fruit”).

At the end of the session, all participants completed six questions designed to assess self-concept consistency along three stereotype-relevant dimensions (e.g., lazy/athletic), and we computed self-concept consistency using a formula paralleling that used to compute attitude ambivalence. In this formula, conflict within the self-concept is higher to the extent that people simultaneously strongly endorse opposing traits.

Analyses revealed the predicted prime x stereotype trait inconsistency interaction. Participants with high levels of trait inconsistency assimilated to the prime (i.e., reported more stereotypic attitudes following the stereotype prime), whereas those with low levels of trait inconsistency showed no effect of the prime.

In our second study, we replicated these effects with a different stereotype and a different measure of self-concept consistency. Research on the self has suggested that people have multiple self-representations, including representations of themselves as they actually are and representations of themselves as they desire to be (Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Actual and desired self-representations can differ in the extent to which they lead to the same overall evaluation or belief, and as such, they represent...
another possible measure of structural consistency. We predicted that, parallel to study 1, participants with large actual-desired self-discrepancies would exhibit larger priming effects on their attitudes.

In this study, participants first completed our actual-desired self-discrepancy measure. They indicated the extent to which each of three elderly stereotype traits—traditional, stubborn, and forgetful—characterized their actual, ideal, and ought selves. Later in the session, we primed college students with the elderly stereotype by asking them to write an essay about either an elderly woman or a young woman. Participants then indicated their level of agreement with three statements that reflected social conservatism, a component of the elderly stereotype (e.g., “There is too much violence in the media”). To minimize suspicion, these statements were interspersed with six others that were unrelated to the elderly stereotype (e.g., “I like to wear a watch”).

Analyses revealed the predicted two-way condition x stereotype discrepancy interaction, whereby participants with large discrepancies assimilated to the prime (i.e., reported more conservative attitudes following the elderly prime), whereas participants with small discrepancies were not influenced by the prime.

These studies advance our understanding of both the priming literature and the attitude change literature. These findings show that structurally consistent self-concept representations foster resistance to priming effects and provide additional support for the Active-Self account of priming to behavior effects. They also lend additional insight into how attitudes can be shifted by even very subtle factors such as the accessibility of social stereotypes.

References


“Effects of Priming on Instrumental Behaviors”
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Recent research proposes that there are person-to-person influences on weight gain such that the weight of others in individuals’ social networks influences the probability of gaining weight (Christakis and Fowler 2007). While this research indicates that social factors influence weight gain, the nature of the data set precludes examination of how this influence might occur. We draw from the literature on social stereotype priming to explain how exposure to an overweight person can give rise to an increase in food consumption. We propose that social factors can influence instrumental behavior, that is, behavior such as eating that is considered to be causally linked to weight gain. We develop the idea of how instrumental behaviors are influenced by stereotype activation and explore when the effect of stereotype activation on instrumental behavior is likely to be attenuated.

Stereotypes are traits, attributes and behavioral tendencies that are associated with the members of a social category (Fiske and Taylor 1991; Hilton and Von Hippel 1996; Kunda 1999; Stangor and Lange 1994). Research shows that activation of social stereotypes can affect people’s behavior, increasing behavior that is consistent with stereotypical traits, attributes and behavioral tendencies even when the behavior is somewhat negative (for reviews, see Dijksterhuis and Bargh 2001; Wheeler and Petty 2001). However, existing research in this stream has not examined instrumental behaviors. For example, whereas walking slowly is associated with the elderly, the act of walking slowly does not cause a college student to become old. In contrast, however, eating more food is associated with overweight (Barker, Tandy, and Stookey 1999) and eating is causally related to becoming overweight. What implications does instrumentality have for the effects of social stereotype primes on behavior?

We propose that the stereotype of an overweight person can lead to an increase in behavior associated with overweight people (i.e., eating more “indulgent” food), even though people are motivated to avoid membership in the “overweight” group, as evidenced by the staggering number of consumers who are trying to lose weight, and believe that eating indulgent food increases the chance of becoming overweight. We explore the process by which the instrumental behavior is increased by the stereotype. Our research assesses one mechanism by which a person may succumb to, or overcome, these behavioral priming effects. In particular, we theorize that in order for the stereotype prime to give rise to an increase in the instrumental behavior, it must first decrease motivation for the underlying, competing goal. Moreover, we propose that by making salient this underlying goal and the causal link between eating and weight gain (i.e., the instrumentality of the behavior) the priming effects can be attenuated.

We present four studies that investigate the effect of overweight primes on eating behavior and the role that the salience of competing goals and behavior instrumentality play. Study 1 establishes the prime to behavior link, showing that when people are exposed to a picture of an overweight person, they eat significantly more than people who are exposed to a picture of a healthy weight person or a neutral image (the two controls in this experiment). Study 2 further examines this relationship by testing the mediating role of health motivation. Our findings show that exposure to a picture of someone overweight led to lower ratings of health motivation and that health motivation mediated the prime-to-behavior relationship.

Together, the findings from study 1 and study 2 provide additional theoretical insight into the prime-to-behavior process. In particular, we show that an instrumental behavior associated with an active social stereotype can lead people to assimilate in behavior, but the process is mediated by an important motivational variable. To lend further support to our theory that consumer motivations are important in this process we conducted two additional studies to test the moderating role of consumer health goals and instrumentality salience.

Study 3 tests our theory that if consumers have underlying goals that are in conflict with behaviors that are associated with a stereotype and are perceived as instrumental to group membership, then making those goals salient should lead to a decrease in priming effects (i.e., food consumption). The results from study 3 reveal a significant interaction such that exposure to an overweight person led to an increase in food consumption, but that asking study participants to reflect on their health goals attenuated these effects.
We likewise theorize that increasing the salience of the instrumentality of the behavior can also attenuate the impact of a stereotype prime on an instrumental behavior. The findings from Study 4 support this hypothesis. We find that manipulating the salience of the instrumentality significantly impacts the effect of the overweight prime. Specifically, whereas participants eat more cookies in a taste test following exposure to a picture of someone overweight than someone healthy weight, this effect does not occur when the salience of the instrumentality of the behavior is increased (by seeing the overweight person eating).

Overall, this set of studies contributes to the literature on stereotype priming. This highlights the idea that some behaviors are instrumental to group membership and that motivation can play an important role in stereotype prime effects for instrumental behaviors. This research may also provide some useful insight into how social network effects may arise.

References

“How How Stereotype Targets Perceive Positive Stereotypes”
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The majority of the stereotypes literature has focused on the detrimental consequences of being negatively stereotyped, but little research has focused on how stereotype targets are affected by positive stereotypes. Given the frequent portrayal of positive stereotypes (i.e. the African American athlete or the Asian math genius), it is important to understand how individuals are affected by these depictions as well as consequences for consumer behavior. Our research examines the role group identification plays in how individuals will interpret portrayals of positive stereotypes in the media.

Prior research has demonstrated that group identification determines the extent to which an individual’s group membership affects a wide range of experiences and behavior (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje 1999 for review). Most relevant to our research is the finding that those who identify highly with their group are more sensitive to threats toward their ingroup. Because highly identified individuals are more sensitive to intergroup inequalities, they are more willing to label negative incidents as threatening to their group (Sellers & Shelton 2003). For example, Operario and Fiske (2001) found that ethnic minorities highly identified with their ethnic group were more likely to interpret the ambiguous behaviors of a White confederate as discriminatory than their less identified counterparts.

Even if a stereotype is positive and endorsed with the best intentions, it can be disconcerting to the stereotype target because it is still restrictive and based solely on group membership rather than how individuals are affected when the positive stereotype is endorsed by any individual. African Americans and White participants viewed images of African Americans engaged in either singing or running (domains in which African Americans typically excel). We found that African American participants high in group identification interpreted these images as more positive toward their group than those who were low in group identification. Since these images were irrelevant to their group, White participants did not demonstrate any differences in prejudice ratings with regard to group identification.

If high identifiers were responding to the potential for threat to their group in Study 1, then we should find that they will be less likely to be affected when the positive stereotype is endorsed by any ingroup member because the threat to the group is minimized. In Study 2, we examined this hypothesis and also focus on how perceived prejudice influenced persuasion and product evaluations when positive stereotypes were portrayed in advertisements. African American and White participants viewed a print advertisement for a book called “The Ultimate Running Guide.” The advertisement claimed that the book would help readers “run faster and further with training methods of the best marathon runners.” In addition, either an African American or White male spokesperson was pictured running in a race with a quote endorsing the book.

Replicating Study 1, we found that African American participants high in group identification evaluated the advertisement more negatively than those low in group identification. However, we only found this effect when the spokesperson was an outgroup member. When the spokesperson was an ingroup member (i.e. African American) these effects were diminished presumably because threat to the group was not apparent when a positive stereotype was endorsed by an ingroup member. Because the stereotypes portrayed were irrelevant to stereotypes regarding White participants, we did not find any differences in their evaluations regarding group identification and advertisement spokesperson.

This line of research demonstrates that the portrayal of positive stereotypes in advertisements can have detrimental effects on the products portrayed, particularly with regard to those highly identified with the stereotyped group. Because this negative reaction to positive stereotypes is rooted in the perceived threat to one’s ingroup, specifying the source of the positive stereotype as an
ingroup member can reduce the perceived threat and minimize the negative impact on evaluations of the advertisement and product.

References


