The Costly Influence of Human-Like Products and Stereotype Endorsement on Consumer Spending

Marisabel Romero, University of South Florida
Adam Craig, University of Kentucky, USA

Can exposure to a curvy, wide-shaped product lead to similar behavioral outcomes as seeing an overweight person in the environment? Three studies demonstrate that seeing shapes resembling overweight (vs. thin) human body types can prime stereotypical knowledge related to the concept of control and influence subsequent spending decisions.

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EXPECTED ABSTRACT

Could seeing the shape of a Coca-Cola bottle impact your subsequent purchase decisions, and if so, how? We approach these questions by highlighting the role that human shapes plays in activating incidental semantic information and in influencing subsequent behavior. Western society continuously promotes a ubiquitous message that relates being thin to virtues and being overweight with vices, which is widespread in a number of different life spheres (Puhl and Brownell 2001; Lewis, Cash, and Bubb-Lewis 1997). Given these broad stereotypical associations, we argue that seeing a human-like wide-shaped (vs. thin) product has the capacity to influence not only eating behavior but also a wider scope of actions that require exercising restraint, such as spending impulses. Furthermore, we propose that the effect of seeing a human-like shape on behavior depends on how much the perceiver believes weight is related to exercising control.

Our theorizing contends that in the presence of an overweight prime (compared to a thin), strong endorsement of the control-weight stereotype should lead to higher activation of negative attributes, making individuals susceptible to engaging in stereotype-consistent behavior, even when they perceive the stereotype and the associated behavior negatively (Wheeler and Petty 2001). Therefore, we expect that individuals who hold a strong belief that weight is associated with control will spend more after exposure to a wide-shaped package than after exposure to a thin-shaped package. In contrast, studies in the stereotype literature have shown that those individuals who do not explicitly endorse stereotypical beliefs actually tend to focus on positive evaluations of the stereotyped group (Lepore and Brown 2002). Therefore, for a person who does not endorse the control-weight stereotype, seeing stimuli that resembles the overweight social group should lead to lower spending compared to seeing a product that resembles the thin form.

Across three studies, we find that seeing products that structurally resemble the human form activate stereotypical knowledge related to being overweight (vs. thin) and influence spending in systematic ways, depending on the level of explicit endorsement to the stereotypical belief that weight and control are related. In Study 1, we exposed participants to a thin or wide products in the context of a matching task (Kay et al. 2004). Subsequently, they participated in a word completion task involving indulgent (e.g., splurge), control (e.g., save), or neutral words (e.g., boat). Our results revealed that when stereotype endorsement is high, the concept of control relative to indulgence becomes less accessible after the presence of a wide (vs. a thin) product shape ($β = -1.21, \text{SE} = .57, p < .05$). In contrast, for those that do not endorse the control-weight link, control becomes more accessible in the presence of a wide-shaped (vs. thin-shaped) product ($β = .64, \text{SE} = .32, p < .05$). Thus, Study 1 evidences that shapes that are structurally similar to a thin or overweight body-type can activate group-specific semantic knowledge depending on the level of stereotype endorsement.

In Study 2, we demonstrate that consumers who strongly endorse the control-weight stereotype are willing to spend more after seeing wide products than thin products. However, those who do not endorse the stereotype spend less after seeing wide products (compared to thin). Specifically, we found that higher endorsement of the control-weight stereotypical belief results in exercising less control after seeing wide-shaped products compared to thin ($β = 39.04, \text{SE} = 19.80, p = .05$). However, those participants that weakly endorse the control-weight link spend less after exposure to wide versus thin products ($β = -28.64, \text{SE} = 14.52, p = .05$).

Study 3 manipulates the degree to which the shape of the products resembles the human form. We demonstrate that structural similarity with the human form is required in order for our proposed effects to take place. In particular, the results of this study confirmed that only wide curved-products (i.e., resemble the human form), and not sharp-angled products, led to changes in consumer spending behaviors. This study also provides evidence that it is the structural similarity to the human form, and not simply the width of the products, which activates semantic information and influences behavior.

We contribute to the existing literature on how the weight of others influences behavior in several important ways. First, our research evidences that the mere presence of an object that merely resembles the silhouette of a person from that social group can influence control-related behavior. Second, our research also contributes to this literature by examining the association of being overweight to a broader concept of control; this connection affects behaviors beyond eating. Third, we demonstrate that the level of endorsement to control-weight relationship is an important determinant of how an individual will adjust behavior after seeing thin or overweight primes.

In addition to contributing to the theoretical literature on the effects of stereotype priming, our results are highly relevant to the practical domain of weight management and stereotypes. Obesity has become an important health issue in the United States. The increasing trend in obesity rates is also accompanied by increasing negative attitudes toward those perceived as being overweight. A primary focal point for negative attitudes towards overweight consumers is the belief that being overweight is blameworthy (i.e., individual is unable to control him or herself). Given that our results show that perpetuating the control-weight stereotype can be detrimental for consumers not only in their eating behaviors but also in other behaviors that require self-control, it seems that consumer advocates should be wary of reinforcing the link between weight and self-control.

REFERENCES


