“Self-Fulfilling Prophecies” – the Impact of Age Stereotypes and Patronizing Speech on Consumers’ Cognitive Performance

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Expectations generated by stereotypes can be self-fulfilling prophecies. Gerontologists have found that elderly exposed to positive age stereotypes perform significantly better than those exposed to negative age stereotypes on cognitive measures. Two experiments show that age stereotypes can also have an impact on cognitive performance in typical consumer decision-making contexts.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
“Age stereotypes” refer to people’s ideas (conscious or unconscious), judgments and images of aging and especially the elderly. As personalized or generalized (i.e. stigmatypical) expectations, these images can exert an influence on both how elderly people perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. In particular, expectations can be influenced by the physical changes or limitations associated with the process of aging. “External stereotypes” of aging can be individual or collective in nature, manifesting themselves in personal interactions with older people, institutional regulations concerning the elderly, and the way older consumers are treated with regard to advertising, product policy or services. “Self-stereotypes” of aging can also influence how the elderly themselves perceive these offers.

Stereotypes have significant power, particularly if they are self-relevant, and they can operate (without people being aware of them) and influence physical and cognitive outcomes. The literature discusses different hypotheses on the relationship between self-perception and external perception that are independently of each other, but each found empirical support (Rothermund and Brandstätter 2003): The “externalization hypothesis” argues that one's own experiences with growing older influence both self-perception and external perception. If these experiences are positive in nature the external age stereotypes also improve as a result, which in turn can reinforce consumers’ skills, thus again having an impact on self-perception. In contrast, the “contamination hypothesis” argues that people who develop a strongly negative external perception of aging run the risk of precisely this fate befalling them later in life. Driving this self-fulfilling prophecy is the individual’s belief that life is not really worth living after a certain age. This fatalism leads to low self-esteem or prevents the individual from taking appropriate preventive action early on. Contamination also means that negative external stereotypes significantly influence the cognitive and functional well-being of older people, as people affected by this fatalistic idea have no confidence in their performance or feel discomfort with their decisions. Prior research by Levy and colleagues demonstrates that priming with positive (vs. negative) age stereotypes improves (reduces) cognitive performance with respect to handwriting, walking, memory and numeracy.

The first experiment deals with the questions whether positive stereotypes lead older adults to activate their capacities, and whether these processes occur also in typical consumer decision-making situations.

A group of elderly subjects (n = 122, Mage = 67.82) evaluated the value for money of different rental apartments as described in offers. All the apartments were priced the same, but from their descriptions they could be clearly ranked in terms of quality. We controlled for prior experience considering offers for rental apartments (as covariate). Before conducting the task, one group of participants was primed with a positive age stereotype, the other with a negative age stereotype. We found support for the hypothesis that the effect of a positive (vs. negative) age stereotype on cognitive performance (quality of consumers’ decision-making) is mediated by self-efficacy. Self-efficacy triggered by a positive age stereotype also has an impact on self-perception of age. In summary, our research reveals that positive age stereotypes (compared to negatives ones) enhance self-efficacy, self-perceptions of age and in turn the performance of elderly people.

Prior research in gerontology revealed that older adults are more impaired by time pressure than younger consumers, indicating that time pressure is an important factor to explain performance of elderly. In experiment 1, we extended this research, used perceived time pressure (yes or no) as moderator and found that when older consumers do not perceive any time pressure the impact of a positive age stereotype on self-efficacy and in turn on cognitive performance is intensified (significant interaction, p<.05).

In study 2 (n=168), we were interested in contamination effects of negative age stereotypes. Negative age stereotypes can play an important role in sales conversations. Sales staff may consciously and/or unconsciously effect elderly people’s self-assessment and abilities, as well as their attitudes toward companies and brands, by speaking to them in a patronizing manner. Patronizing communication usually involves an unconscious talking down to the other person, reflected in the vocabulary, grammar and topics of conversation chosen as well as the verbal and non-verbal characteristics of the communication. In experiment 2, we analyzed the impact of patronizing communication on consumers’ cognitive performance. We used vignettes to simulate sales conversations in the context of buying a vehicle. By altering the text of the vignette, the independent variable (type of communication employed by the salesperson) was systematically varied as patronizing (Vignette A) vs. non-patronizing communication (Vignette B). However, this “talking down” may not only affect older but also younger consumers who may feel they are not respected at all in sales talks. In our study, we thus analyze the reaction of old and young consumers to patronizing speech but hypothesize that cognitive performance of older consumers is more impaired.

The results show that the communication style does indeed have contamination effects. Consumers, irrespective of whether they were old or young, needed around ten seconds (p<.01) more to solve the task correctly when they had been confronted with patronizing communication beforehand. We also found that consumers in the patronizing condition were significantly less able to remember the correct price of the vehicle and the name of the customer. Negative stereotypes, here embedded in a sales conversation, can worsen cognitive performance. We found no significant interaction effect between age group and conversation type on cognitive performance. However, we also analyzed some additional variables (consumer’s satisfaction with the sales conversation, the perceived competence of the salesperson, and intention to buy the product). Here, we found significant interaction effects, indicating that the negative impact of patronizing communication on the evaluation of the conversation was significantly stronger for older adults.

Our experiments extend the work done in former studies on the effects of age stereotypes. The results demonstrate the relevance of the externalization and the contamination hypothesis in the consumer behavior context. Companies should be aware of unintended but powerful implicit discrimination of elderly.