How Group Identification and Stereotype Content Determine the Effectiveness of Ads Portraying Positive Stereotypes

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How consumers respond to positive stereotypes in advertising depends on their identification with the stereotyped group and the content of the positive stereotype. For ads portraying warmth-related stereotypes, high identifiers evaluate promoted products more favorably than low identifiers. However, for ads depicting competence-related stereotypes, we find the opposite effect.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While prior consumer behavior research on stereotypes has largely focused on negative stereotypes (e.g., Lee, Kim and VoHs 2011), this research examines how positive stereotypes portrayed in advertising influence the effectiveness of these ads for consumers belonging to the stereotyped group. We propose that how consumers respond depends on their identification with the stereotyped group and the content of the positive stereotype (warmth vs. competence). We suggest that for high identifiers, positive stereotypes in advertising elicit a communal orientation and an increased valuation of warmth information, whereas for low identifiers, these stereotypes cue an agentic orientation and an increased valuation of competence information.

We propose that the effectiveness and persuasiveness of an ad portraying positive stereotypes lies in how much consumers value the ad’s arguments, which are often closely tied to the portrayed stereotype (i.e., warmth vs. competence). When a positive stereotype is portrayed in advertising, the brand and promoted product becomes linked to characteristics tied to the stereotype. Consequently, we predict that high identifiers will respond more favorably than low identifiers to ads that stereotype their group as warm because high identifiers are more likely to have a communal orientation and therefore be more persuaded by warmth-related arguments. In contrast, low identifiers will respond more favorably than high identifiers to ads stereotyping their group as competent because low identifiers are more likely to adopt an agentic orientation and find competence-related arguments more useful and informative.

In Study 1, we first focus on American Southerners to test the hypothesis that ads portraying positive stereotypes related to warmth will be more effective for those who identify highly with the stereotyped group. We also tested whether an increased communal orientation for high relative to low identifiers drives more favorable evaluations of the promoted restaurant.

Undergraduate students self-identified as Southerners completed Leach et al.’s (2008) measure of group identification one week in advance. In the main study, participants viewed either a stereotypical ad featuring Southerners promoting a restaurant that provided warm and welcoming service or a control ad which was identical except for the ad’s arguments, which are often closely tied to the portrayed stereotype. When a positive stereotype is portrayed in advertising, the brand and promoted product becomes linked to characteristics tied to the stereotype. Consequently, we predict that high identifiers will respond more favorably than low identifiers to ads that stereotype their group as warm because high identifiers are more likely to have a communal orientation and therefore be more persuaded by warmth-related arguments. In contrast, low identifiers will respond more favorably than high identifiers to ads stereotyping their group as competent because low identifiers are more likely to adopt an agentic orientation and find competence-related arguments more useful and informative.

In Study 2, we examine ads that positively stereotype Asian Americans as being intelligent and quantitatively skilled (Lin et al., 2005) to test the prediction that low relative to high identifiers will respond more favorably to ads portraying competence-related stereotypes.

An online panel of Asian Americans completed two ostensibly unrelated questionnaires. In the first questionnaire, we manipulated group identification by having participants respond to three open-ended questions regarding their feelings about being Asian adapted from Leach et al. (2008). Then participants rated an ad for “Sherwood Test Prep,” a company that specialized in helping students improve their quantitative skills. While the stereotypical ad featured an Asian American spokesperson, the control ad featured a non-Asian American spokesperson. In addition to the same evaluation items used in the Study 1, participants provided product ratings (usefulness, value, effectiveness, purchase interest; α=96).

An ANOVA on product evaluations revealed a two-way ad type by group identification prime interaction (F(3, 68)=3.72, p=.05), showing that those primed with high relative to low identification provided less favorable product evaluations, but only after viewing the Asian stereotype and not the control ad.

In Study 3, we examine the responses of Asian American women who are unique in that they can be positively stereotyped as women along the warmth dimension or as Asian along the competence dimension (Shih et al., 1999). We test the prediction that high (vs. low) identifying Asian American women will respond more favorably to an ad that positively stereotypes women as empathetic and cooperative but less favorably to an ad that positively stereotypes Asians as intelligent and quantitatively skilled.

An online panel of Asian American women completed both gender and ethnicity versions of Leach et al.’s (2008) scale in random order one week prior. For the main study, participants viewed an ad featuring an Asian American woman promoting a company called “The Negotiation Institute” that positively stereotyped either women or Asian Americans and rated the company (good, favorable; r=.65, p<.0001).

To test our predictions, we used two regression models to examine product evaluations. For the ad type x female group identification model, analysis revealed a significant two-way interaction (t(71)=2.20, p<.05). Those high relative to low in female group identification indicated more favorable evaluations after viewing the female stereotype ad but not after viewing the Asian stereotype ad. For the ad type x Asian American identification model, we also found a significant two-way interaction (t(71)=3.14, p<.01). For the Asian stereotype ad, those low relative to high in Asian American identification provided more favorable evaluations. For the female stereotype ad, those low versus high in Asian American identification actually evaluated the company less favorably.

In conclusion, as the marketplace becomes more diverse, it is increasingly important to understand how consumers respond to portrayals of their social group. Given their complimentary nature, positive stereotypes are frequently and oftentimes inadvertently portrayed in the media, highlighting the need for more research on topics in this area. We hope the current research is useful for several different audiences, including marketers appealing to diverse markets, stereotyped consumers sorting through their own responses, and researchers exploring the psychological processes elicited by positive stereotypes in the marketplace.
REFERENCES