Fight Fire With Fire: Using One Consumer Stereotype to Overcome Another Via Conceptual-Contingency Learning

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Whether counter-stereotypical diversity campaigns (e.g., ads for STEM programs with female spokespersons) are helpful or harmful depends on whether or not the campaign facilitates a positive link between the stereotyped domain and a second-order concept that is stereotypically associated with the group (e.g., science = beautiful, beauty = female, thus science = female).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Although progress has been made toward eliminating inequities caused by prejudice and discrimination, underrepresentation is still an important issue in many fields such as Science, Technology, Engineering, Math, and Business ( Hoyt & Murphy, 2016; Nosek, et al., 2009; Ong, Wright, Espinosa, & Orfield, 2011). While marketing research supports the intuition that campaigns targeting underrepresented groups have positive effects in general (e.g., a diet soda advertisement featuring an ethnic minority as a spokesperson; Aaker, Brumbaugh, & Grier, 2000; Luna, Ringberg, & Peracchio, 2008; Stayman & Deshpande, 1989), scant research exists that explores diversity marketing in stereotyped domains specifically, where the marketing campaigns are by definition counter-stereotypical (e.g., an ad for a STEM program with a female spokesperson). The present research addresses this gap, regarding counter-stereotypical marketing, by deriving competing predictions and building a novel theoretical model to reconcile them.

Almost two decades of research on exposure to role models (see Stout, Dasgupta, Hunsinger, & McManus, 2011 for a review) suggests that counter-stereotypical advertisements may help by weakening implicit stereotypes (Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004) or by inoculating consumers against the stereotype via a strengthened self-concept (Dasgupta, 2011; Hoyt & Simon, 2011; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997, 1999; Marx & Roman, 2002), both of which suggest a positive effect of counter-stereotypical marketing. Over two decades of research on stereotype threat (for reviews see Pennington, Heim, Levy, & Larkin, 2016; and Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016), however, suggests an alternate view: counter-stereotypical advertisements may act as cues that activate stereotype-consistent cognitions (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Jamieson & Harkins, 2012; Lee, Kim, & Vohs, 2011; J. R. Steele & Ambady, 2006), leading to stereotype-consistent behavior and thus suggesting a negative effect of counter-stereotypical marketing.

Drawing on research from information processing including cognitive consistency and categorical learning (e.g., Greenwald, et al., 2002; Nosofsky, Palmeri, & Mckinley, 1994), we build a theoretical model that accounts for both positive and negative effects of counter-stereotypical marketing via conceptual-contingency learning. Consumers may be unable to successfully process counter-stereotypical information because it is inherently cognitively inconsistent with the consumer’s prevailing stereotype knowledge (Greenwald, et al., 2002; Heider, 1946). Thus, seeing counter-stereotypical information would only activate the prevailing knowledge structure (e.g., the stereotype; Allen, Sherman, Conrey, & Stroessner, 2009; Cunha, Janiszewski, & Laran, 2008), leading to stereotype-consistent behavior. However, stereotypical social groups are also stereotypically linked to a number of other concepts (e.g., "handsome = male" and "beauty = female"). If consumers are able to successfully link such a second-order concept to the domain (e.g., science is beautiful), this may allow successful incorporation of the counter-stereotypical information by creating a contingency (i.e., exception) rule in the knowledge structure (Nosofsky, et al., 1994). Specifically, the new knowledge structure may be such that the stereotyped group is generally negatively associated with the domain, except in the presence of the second-order concept that serves as the conceptual-contingency cue. Further, we argue that the process is reliant on the stereotypically positive link between the group and the concept to create the consistent, balanced cognitions necessary for conceptual-contingency learning; simply linking any second concept to the domain (e.g., science is fun) is insufficient. As such, one stereotype (i.e., a group-attribute association) is being utilized to overcome another. The ability of consumers to integrate cognitively inconsistent information in a single exposure via conceptual-contingency learning is inexplicable using current models of associative or categorical learning.

In sum, the present work addresses the research gap surrounding counter-stereotypical marketing. We contribute to theory by deriving predicted positive and negative effects from role models and stereotype-threat literatures respectively, and by reconciling the competing predictions with a novel theoretical model of conceptual-contingency learning. The model uniquely identifies conceptual-contingency cues as a moderator of whether counter-stereotypical information helps or hurts. The integration of these alternative theoretical stances has important implications not only for theory on stereotypes and learning, but also for managers and policy makers concerned with diversity.

Empirical Evidence

Three studies across multiple stereotypes provide converging evidence for the impact of conceptual-contingency learning on the processing of counter-stereotypical information. All studies recruit participants from Amazon MTurk in exchange for compensation (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Study 1 (n = 125) shows that a stereotype-inconsistent (vs. -neutral) ad for an engineering program containing a quote from a female (vs. unidentified) spokesperson has a positive (null) effect on evaluations when the quote contains a conceptual-contingency (neutral) cue: “I found the beauty [fun] in engineering”; F(1, 121) = 4.27, p = .041. This supports the contention that a counter-stereotypical ad only has a positive effect in the presence of a cue that positively links the group to the domain. In the context of the ethnicity-academics stereotype (C. M. Steele, 1997), study 2 (n = 121) extends these findings by showing that the effect reverses as the link between the conceptual-contingency cue (street smarts) and the domain (higher education) is perceived to be more negative, as captured by an individual difference measure; B = -.526; t(121) = -3.36, p = .001. In the context of the gender-business stereotype (Powell & Butterfield, 1994), study 3 (n = 138) directly manipulates the positivity of the cue-domain link with pre-tested ostensibly “research articles” stating that social skills may have positive (vs. negative) effects in business. Results show that both positive and negative effects of the cue-domain link occur, but only when the cue is also positively linked to the group (social skills-women); F(1, 134) = 5.09, p = .026. This provides further evidence for the proposed cognitive-consistency/balance process.

Taken together, the findings show that counter-stereotypical ads can lead to positive evaluations when they contain a conceptual-contingency cue that positively links the stereotyped group to the domain (e.g., beauty in engineering). Lacking such a cue, results show that counter-stereotypical ads may lead to negative evaluations. These results demonstrate the importance of conceptual-contingency learning in the processing of stereotype-inconsistent stimuli, supporting our
theoretical model and providing important implications for researchers, managers, and policy makers concerned with diversity.

REFERENCES


