

December 2013

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### Recommended Citation

Handlin, Amy H. (2013) "Revisiting Stereotype Research and Its Marketing Implications," *Atlantic Marketing Journal*: Vol. 2 : No. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/amj/vol2/iss2/5>

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# Revisiting Stereotype Research and Its Marketing Implications

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**Abstract** – The purpose of this paper is to revisit what scholars understand about the impact of stereotypes on consumer perceptions. There are many current examples of negative brand or company images based on stereotypes, but researchers have generally lost touch with a vintage body of literature (primarily 1980s) that still holds important clues to understanding this phenomenon. While most of these findings come out of other disciplines such as psychology and social cognition, those emphasized here have strong marketing implications.

**Keywords** – Stereotypes, Brand image, Schemas

**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners** – The paper proposes five hypotheses for future research that can help scholars and practitioners assess various tools available to address a problematic image. These include consistent, moderately inconsistent, and inconsistent information; affect-laden attributes; and communication contexts.

## Introduction

Three years after Toyota recalled some of its 2009/2010 vehicles amid reports of unintended acceleration, the company still felt the effects of a damaged reputation. Despite strong efforts to reassure drivers and disprove allegations of wrongdoing, its US sales remained flat at a time when almost all its rivals enjoyed significant gains. Likewise, Domino's Pizza had to fight its way back from millions of dollars in losses after two employees posted a YouTube video of themselves adulterating the food – despite the absence of any other evidence of unsanitary conditions at the chain's outlets.

JC Penney has struggled to overcome its image as a dowdy bargain basement, even after radically reshaping its advertising messages and store layouts. BP remained in disfavor with American consumers long after the Gulf of Mexico oil spill.

Such situations – when a problematic image hardens into a stereotype in consumers' minds, and becomes resistant to change – are no less challenging to marketers today than decades ago. Yet researchers may have lost touch with a vintage body of literature that still holds important clues to understanding this phenomenon. Specifically, this stream of work examined (1) how information is used to create, reinforce, or weaken the perceptual device we know as a stereotype, and (2) what situation-specific circumstances (e.g. the nature of the perceptual task, the content of new information) may influence the impact of this information.

The purpose of this paper is to revisit what scholars understand about these topics. Since most of the research comes out of other disciplines (primarily psychology and social cognition), the emphasis is on findings that invite marketing applications.

## **The Nature of Stereotypes: A Historical Overview**

Walter Lippmann introduced the term "stereotype" to socio-psychological analysis in his groundbreaking 1922 book *Public Opinion*. Remarkably, his analysis foreshadowed all three of the research orientations that later emerged (Hamilton 1981), perhaps because, writing as a journalist and not as a social scientist, Lippmann was comfortable simply throwing out as many ideas as he considered interesting.

The psychodynamic orientation, popular in the work of psychologists with a general interest in intergroup relations at least through the 1960s, characterizes stereotypes as serving the needs of the ego and projecting inner drives. In his comment that "A pattern of stereotypes...is the guarantee of our self-respect; it is the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position, and our own rights" (Lippmann 1922, 96), Lippmann anticipated the analysis of such researchers as Bettelheim and Janowitz (1950) and Adorno and Sanford (1950). Their focus on the links between personality psychology and prejudice (particularly in the latter's famous book *The Authoritarian Personality*) gave rise to a body of literature more concerned with discriminatory bias than with stereotypes per se, and largely known for introducing the concept of "Stereotypes, in the form of negative attributions...[as] displacement of aggression or projection" (Miller 1986, 27).

The sociocultural orientation seeks its explanations about stereotypes not in characteristics of the individual, but in the cultural norms and socialization process of society. It is assumed that stereotypes consist of stable, shared intergroup perceptions which are accepted and perpetuated in much the same way as are role definitions and behavior expectations -- that is, from parent to child, friend to friend, and through the dictates of societal institutions (church, school, etc.). As in the psychodynamic orientation, stereotypes are, for the most part, depicted as negative; from this perspective, Lippmann comments on the

function of stereotypes in society as follows: "And since my moral system rests on my accepted version of the facts, he who denies either my moral judgments or my version of the facts is to me perverse, alien, dangerous. How shall I account for him? The opponent has always to be explained..." (Lippmann 1922, 126).

From this orientation arose a methodological paradigm that produced the first critical insights into the content of stereotypes. In 1933, Katz and Braly developed a list of 84 positive and negative trait adjectives, which they exposed to 100 college students who were asked to select those that seemed most typical of a series of ethnic groups. They found a considerable degree of consensus across groups, even when it was clear that the subjects had little or no direct experience with a particular group, such as Turks (Katz and Braly 1933). This paradigm was replicated innumerable times by scholars in various disciplines seeking specific trait-based descriptors of ethnic character; in the field of consumer behavior, for example, one researcher found that American Jews are represented as "strongly competitive, eclectic, rational, innovative, cognitively complex, individualistic, information-seeking, and achievement-oriented" (Hirschman 1985, 149).

The continued popularity of elements of the sociocultural orientation reflects its adaptability to evolving societal concerns. While "Racial conflict in the United States and the Nazi holocaust were unquestionably the most influential 'events' in directing the attention of social scientists to these concerns..." (Miller 1986, 16), later years saw the focus change to sex stereotypes and a wider array of global stereotypes (Berndt and Heller 1986, Eagly and Kite 1987, Skrypnek and Snyder 1982). Though more recently combined with a cognitive perspective, the sociocultural orientation long provided a useful conceptual bridge between academic inquiry and popular culture.

The third major orientation in the field is also the one that dominates more recent investigations. This is the cognitive orientation, which differs from the others in a critical way: it does not view stereotypes as bad by definition. In this approach, stereotypes are instances of normal social cognition processes that facilitate, for better or for worse, people's categorization of and responses toward one another.

Again, Lippmann foreshadowed this perspective: "We do not so much see this man and that sunset; rather we notice that the thing is man or sunset and then see chiefly what our mind is already full of on those subjects" (Lippmann 1922, 87). This general line of thinking was first pursued by the psychologist Allport, who linked social categorization to prejudice while pointing out that stereotyping results from the normal process of trying to simplify a complex social environment (Allport 1954). His work spawned many later investigations designed to show the everyday outcomes of this simplification; for example, Taylor (1980) argued that categorizing people into ingroups and outgroups inevitably leads to favoritism and discrimination.

Tajfel (1959) extended Allport's concept of stereotyping as an outgrowth of basic cognitive processes by demonstrating that simple cues, such as the letters A or B, when associated with certain conceptual categories will bias subjects' judgments toward those categories. In his research, the letter A was correlated with short lines and B with long lines. Subjects then systematically underestimated the length of any line labelled A, and vice-versa. A body of literature eventually developed not only around the use of cues in information processing, but more generally aimed at understanding judgment simplification strategies as they relate to stereotypes. A summary of this literature concluded that "...cognitive limitations make humans susceptible to systematic biases in processing information about people and events, and these biases contribute significantly to the formation and maintenance of stereotypes regarding social groups" (Hamilton 1981, 29).

As mentioned above, later research was dominated by the cognitive orientation. But there was never a generally settled consensus on theoretical sub-issues that remain relevant to marketing.

## **The Nature of Stereotypes: Later Perspectives**

In attempting to come to grips with the rich but sometimes contradictory empirical findings generated over thirty years, most researchers in the field narrowed their focus to one of four areas: (1) stereotypes as subjective base-rate probabilities; (2) stereotypes as judgmental heuristics; and (3) stereotypes as culturally-inculcated expectancies; and (4) stereotypes as schemas.

Those who adopted the first perspective follow an early definition of stereotypes as "instances of a general class of cognitive events, namely, prior probabilities (Locksley et.al. 1982, 24). This Bayesian-type theory asserts that people form beliefs about the supposed incidence of certain traits or propensities among population subgroups, and base upon these beliefs a stable set of expectations concerning the groups' behavior. Importantly, in keeping with other instances of the use of probability estimation in cognition, these researchers repeatedly demonstrated that stereotypes will be underutilized or ignored in judgment situations where subjects are given individuating case information (as an example, see Regner et.al. 2002).

However, base-rate advocates failed to explain a number of contradictory or inconclusive findings (Chun and Kruglanski 2006). For example, one study found that availability of stereotype-consistent information could cause stereotype-inconsistent, individuating information to be abandoned -- the exact opposite of the theory's prediction (Bodenhausen and Wyer 1985; Koehler 1996).

Proponents of the judgmental heuristics concept believed that stereotypes play the constructive role of helping people manage a complex informational environment. These researchers generally found that stereotypes-as-heuristics are strongest when information processing demands are high. In a classic study,

subjects asked to determine the guilt or innocence of a defendant in an assault trial on the basis of ambiguous evidence (a difficult judgment) tended to activate an ethnic stereotype; while subjects asked simply to comment on the defendant's level of aggressiveness did not activate the stereotype (Bodenhausen and Lichtenstein 1987).

Those interested in stereotypes as culturally-inculcated expectancies essentially followed in the footsteps and extended the work of earlier writers of the sociocultural orientation. Their research focused on the effects of role assignment, norms, and gender expectations on intergroup interactions, and thus had limited relevance to marketing.

The base-rate probability and heuristic approaches help to explain how stereotypes affect attention and direction of processing resources. Either stereotypes activate an encoding bias, which results in selective attention to stereotype-consistent information; or an attributional bias, which causes extra processing of inconsistent information as the subject tries to reconcile it with the preexisting stereotype (Miller and Turnbull 1986; von Hippel et.al. 1995). However, only schema theory, the fourth perspective on stereotypes, can account for the activation of affect upon encounter with stereotype-consistent information -- a critical dimension when considering the impact of stereotypes on consumer perceptions.

## **Stereotypes as Schemas**

A schema is broadly defined as an "abstract, general structure that establishes relations between specific events or entities" (Landman and Manis 1983, 77). More specifically, a schema stores knowledge about past experiences, helps people organize this information around socially-constructed expectancies, and produces a guide to comprehension and action -- in a sense, a script to be followed in future similar situations (Stangor 2000).

While not synonymous with schemas, stereotypes may be viewed as a subclass of schemas characterized by a particularly high degree of affective and/or motivational involvement. Importantly, this perspective offers parsimony -- as well as a theory of cognitive process that suggests ways to alter stereotypical judgments.

The schema concept is parsimonious because it connects certain processes common across a range of social knowledge such as roles, expectations, beliefs, and impressions. It also illustrates the similarities in how people process information across social and nonsocial domains. Moreover, this characteristic of schemas bridges the gap between person-focused stereotypes and object-focused stereotypes. It suggests that prior experience, stored as a set of abstractions in a readily-accessible network of knowledge, has a similar cognitive impact regardless of whether the experience was with Jews or with toothpaste (Lynch and Schuler 1994).

People seem to strive for structure in cognitive input, and the incorporation of new stimuli into an existing schema provides such structure. In turn, schematic structuring appears to improve recall of what might otherwise have been a cognitively burdensome number and/or variety of pieces of information (Taylor and Crocker 1980; Biernat and Dovidio 2000).

There is some disagreement on the question of whether schema-relevant or schema-irrelevant material is better recalled, as both conclusions have been reached in various studies. Explanations rest primarily on the notion that schema-consistent information is readily assimilated into preexisting knowledge structures, while schema-inconsistent data is subjected to a more intense degree of processing as the receiver attempts to reconcile it with the schema, thus rendering it more distinctive and memorable. It is possible that "Stereotypes and other schema resist disconfirmation [because] the effect of presenting evidence against their accuracy is to strengthen the beliefs of which they rest and to enhance memory for evidence supporting their validity" (O'Sullivan and Dorso 1984, 67).

More intriguing is another finding, stimulated by continuing investigations into the recall issue, that moderately inconsistent information may be better recalled than schema-consistent information. For example, one classic study showed that when subjects are given both a list of traits describing an individual, and a list of adjectives congruent with the original descriptions, they tend to recall moderately congruent adjectives better than highly congruent or incongruent adjectives (Hastie and Kumar 1979; Mandler 1982; Taylor and Crocker 1980). This may occur because moderately inconsistent information generates unexpected or idiosyncratic associations, without being so inconsistent as to cause out-of-hand rejection. Additionally, it is possible that inconsistent information gets the perceiver's attention more readily than information he already knows. Both possibilities have interesting marketing implications, in that the presentation (through advertising and/or other promotional media) of new information moderately incongruent with the existing image of a product or brand may be an effective method to (1) capture the consumer's attention and (2) begin to alter what would otherwise be a totally schema/stereotype-driven judgment.

Finally, schema theory provides an explanation for the triggering of affect that typically accompanies activation of a stereotype (Kashima 2000). The importance of affect is obvious in that a simple positive or negative "sense" about a person, object, or entity may be enough to tip the judgment of a cognitively overburdened individual; moreover, as one scholar commented: "Affect is the very reason stereotypes matter. Pigeonholing a person to fit one's oversimplified beliefs is certainly an issue, but prejudice is another, more serious issue (Fiske 1982, 1).

Proponents of schematic structuring suggest that an overall affect is stored within a schema as a summary of all of its positive or negative affective components. This makes for both efficiency and predictability when the person calls upon the schema as a guide to action. However, they also suggest that isolated items of information may have affective impact, by continually modifying the cumulative impression. This creates another bridge to consumer research: Schematic structuring eliminates the cognitive necessity to re-compute positives and negatives across all component attributes each time a new one is introduced, thereby reducing the risk that one longstanding bad association with a product or brand will hopelessly overwhelm any future good one.

To summarize, at three three marketing implications arise from the stereotype-as-schema perspective:

(1) Schema theory bridges the gap between social and nonsocial domains, providing a framework within which findings about person perception/social cognition can be applied to object perception/category cognition

(2) Research suggests that moderately inconsistent information may be effective at stimulating recall and influencing stereotype-driven judgment, and

(3) Schema theory expresses the role of affect as a fluid and modifiable one, subject to change as new attributes are introduced over time.

## **Marketing Implications of Selected Research on Stereotypes in Light of Schematic Structure Assumptions**

While the marketing implications discussed above relate to certain basic findings and debates in the primary field of schema research, other work by social psychologists more interested in stereotypes per se may also be reinterpreted in this light.

A common theme in stereotype studies is the suggestion that the impact of stereotypes is strongest when a subject's judgment task is most demanding; in other words, that stereotypes function as judgmental heuristics primarily under circumstances of cognitive complexity (von Hippel et.al 1995). This concept could help explain, for example, the marketing of presidential candidates. Regardless of the complexity of position papers posted on the Obama and Romney websites during the 2012 campaigns, both candidates tended to repeat a few catchy phrases over and over instead of engaging with thought leaders or media analysts. While untested in light of schema theory, it is possible that people are more likely to modify the cultural stereotype of politician-as-bad-guy if they are presented with moderately inconsistent information in the context of very simple judgment tasks. Certainly it was easier for an average voter to decide whether Obama or Romney seemed friendlier than to choose the better plan to cut the federal deficit.



Another interesting stream of research concerns the way in which subjects combine the attributes of individuals to form impressions of the group comprised of those individuals (Madon 1997). In one of a series of experiments, two groups of subjects were presented with slides depicting the heights of 50 men. In both cases, the mean height was 5 feet 10 inches, and 20% of the men were over 6 feet tall. However, in the "extreme condition" group, two stimulus persons were included whose heights were greatly over 6 feet; in the "mild condition" group, the two stimulus persons were just slightly over 6 feet. Results showed that subjects in the extreme group gave significantly higher estimates of the number of stimulus persons over 6 feet tall. Additionally, the researchers observed that recency, dramatic intensity, or novelty could magnify recall of particular factors. Together with other confirming data, their findings led the researchers to conclude that "Individuals with extreme characteristics are more memorable and, because of their availability in memory, are estimated as more frequent than corresponding numbers of 'mild' individuals. More generally, these experiments indicate that our impressions of groups will be disproportionately influenced by the characteristics of their most memorable constituents" (Rothbart et.al.1978). Later work extended these findings to explain impressions of other groups, such as gay men (Madon 1997), and also suggested that the news media's focus on extreme forms of behavior by individuals skews the image of groups to which they belong. Assuming that similar mechanisms function in the development of product perceptions, this perspective may help to explain why brands can suffer significant damage from even a short-lived, one-time mistake or faux pas, as in the Domino's Pizza case. Such phenomena may demonstrate that enormous affective potential lies in the introduction of only a few extreme but memorable new attributes into an existing set of knowledge and beliefs.

However, some research on stereotypes in person perception sounds a cautionary note regarding the applicability of all of these findings to marketing situations. In setting out to investigate differences between person perception based on stereotypes, and person perception based on simple trait categories, Anderson and Klatzky (1987) found that the latter called up associations significantly less informative, evocative, and distinctive than the former. Specifically, in experiments where subjects rated the strength of association between lists of attributes and either a trait label or a social stereotype label, the researchers found that stereotypes were strongly linked both to greater numbers of attributes and to more unique attributes than were the trait-based categories. They concluded that simple trait links may act more slowly in social perception and generate fewer predictive guidelines than full-blown stereotypes.

The implication for marketers is that it may be easy to overestimate the richness and complexity of the average consumer's knowledge set about a product or brand. In other words, marketers may assume the presence of a schema-based knowledge structure where in fact there exists only the

association of a few descriptive terms. This is clearly problematic for any research designed to test the influence of such knowledge structures.

## **Proposed Hypotheses for Marketing Research**

This review suggests hypotheses for research in four areas:

1) Investigation of the relative influence of moderately inconsistent, consistent, and extremely inconsistent information on stereotype-driven judgments has far-reaching implications for advertising and other forms of marketing communication. For example, such research could help guide BP as it seeks to recover from the continuing fallout of the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill: What type of messages would be most likely to modify its current (negative) brand image?

H1: Moderate schema-based brand image incongruity will lead to better recall of positive information about the brand than either schema congruity or extreme incongruity.

H2: Moderate schema-based brand image incongruity will lead to a more positive overall evaluation of the brand than either schema congruity or extreme incongruity.

In the BP example, a range of stakeholders -- including customers, employees, and Gulf community representatives -- could be involved in pretests to operationalize degrees of congruence of new information.

2) Schema theory suggests that the cumulative affective impression of an entity may be altered, that the positives associated with a newly-communicated attribute will not be diluted by "averaging" them across all earlier attributes. Research to test this notion in a marketing context could, for example, show images of cigarettes to nonsmokers, then test whether it is possible to alter subjects' affective impressions of a given brand by associating that brand with a strong positive attribute.

H3: Overall negative affect linked to a schema-based brand image may be at least partially reversed by exposing subjects to a strong positive attribute.

The positive attribute, in the cigarette example, could be a testimonial that this particular brand has very low smoke emissions that are virtually undetectable to nonsmokers. Subjects could be asked for before-and-after adjective associations which would indicate the degree of impact achieved through exposure to the positive attribute.

(Note that an attempt must be made to identify an affect-laden attribute which is not overly schema-incongruent. Otherwise, there is a risk of confounding any test of affect alteration with a test of the impact of schema-incongruent

information. In the example, the positive dimension of the experimental attribute is not designed to convince nonsmokers to smoke, but simply to alter their affective impression of this brand in a positive direction.)

3) The mediating effect of cognitive task difficulty is relevant because marketers often must influence both judgment (relatively simple) and choice (more difficult and involving) in order to boost sales.

H4: A schema-based brand image will strongly influence choice tasks, but will play little or no role in simple judgment tasks.

One possible research design in this area could be a variant of a standard new product purchase intent testing protocol. After being given a product that is described as "new" but is actually a slightly modified version of a stereotype-laden existing one, subjects could be asked to read a product description and then to (1) judge the product's safety, reliability, or value; or (2) spend money on a forced choice between the "new" product and an alternative.

4) The effect of certain communication contexts could be tested by exposing different subject groups to the same information, while varying its dramatic intensity. For example, one group could get a straightforward, dry list of "new" facts about the lifesaving properties of aspirin, while another group saw a filmed "testimonial" by an actor describing how aspirin actually saved her life. Assuming that aspirin has a long-established, schema-based image as a simple home remedy without strong positive or negative associations, the goal of the experiment would be to test the following hypothesis:

H5: The effect of new information on a schema-based product image will be significantly stronger when this information is presented in a dramatic or novel context than when it is not.

## **Future Direction**

This paper has revisited major findings about the structure and influence of stereotypes (and more broadly, schema-based brand images) primarily from the past thirty years, and linked these findings to ongoing issues in marketing. In addition to tests of the suggested hypotheses, future studies are needed to compare the content and affective nature of object stereotypes to the person and group stereotypes that have dominated research in the past.

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