Research Report

Activating stereotypes with brand imagery:
The role of viewer political identity ☆

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Abstract

The use of ethnic imagery in visual identities of brands, such as those used by professional sports franchises, has long been a contentious issue in American society. This research investigates the oft-voiced argument that ethnic brand imagery perpetuates negative stereotypes (a claim that has been subject to very little empirical scrutiny) and identifies conditions under which encountering such brand imagery strengthens both positive and negative implicit stereotypes. Within the context of American Indian brand imagery, two laboratory experiments (Studies 1 and 2) and a quasi-experimental field study (Study 3) revealed that the effects of ethnic brand imagery on stereotypes depend on the viewer's political identity. Exposure to ethnic brand imagery strengthened implicit stereotypes only among more liberal individuals, consistent with the idea that liberals tend to hold more malleable views. These findings demonstrate measurable negative effects of ethnic brand imagery on implicit stereotypes and support the view that the use of such imagery can carry detrimental societal consequences.
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Keywords: Ethnic brand imagery; Implicit social cognition; Stereotypes; Political identity

Characters like Ronald McDonald and the Pillsbury Doughboy are frequently used to bring brands to life, imbuing them with personality and desired associations. Although the value of characters and associated imagery in brand development is well understood, significantly less research has considered their broader effects on consumer behaviors and beliefs. Of particular importance is the use of ethnic caricatures (e.g., Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben) and their potential role in stereotype activation and adoption.

Though the use of ethnic imagery in sports branding has received extensive media attention, little research has investigated its effects. The research that does exist has focused largely on the effects of ethnic imagery use on members of the caricaturized ethnic population (Clark & Witko, 2006; Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman, & Stone, 2008; Staurowsky, 1999) with minimal attention to its effects on the attitudes of the broader population. These potential secondary effects are important given the current widespread use of ethnic imagery despite compelling arguments for its cessation (e.g., APA, 2005; Chamberlin, 1999).

To inform this issue, this research measures the effect of ethnic brand imagery exposure on consumer stereotype activation in both field and laboratory settings. We propose that ethnic brand imagery activates stereotypes consistent

with the specific ethnic depiction and that this activation is moderated by consumer political identity. Specifically, individuals on the liberal end of the liberal–conservative spectrum will be more prone to stereotype activation due to their greater tendency for attitude malleability. This proposition builds from past research demonstrating that conservative ideologies often increase resistance to change (Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008) and thereby make one's stereotype beliefs less malleable (Tausch & Hewstone, 2010) and often more extreme (Ho et al., 2012; Nosek et al., 2007). As a result, exposure to ethnic imagery has greater potential to influence more liberal individuals regardless of the implied stereotype's valence. To more accurately assess such stereotype activation, we examine potential change in *implicit* stereotypes since individuals are loathe to self-report attitudes, stereotypes, or beliefs that are inconsistent with social norms (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). To date, very little research has examined implicit stereotype change.

Ethnic imagery and stereotype activation

Supporting our contention that brand imagery may activate stereotypes, past research has shown that brand exposure non-consciously triggers brand-consistent behaviors (Fitzsimons, Chartrand, & Fitzsimons, 2008) on both positive and negative dimensions (Brasel & Gips, 2011). Moreover, such influence is especially strong for anthropomorphized brands (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012), similar to those featuring ethnic imagery (e.g., Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben). Lastly, research has found that incidental brand encounters can drive consumer behavior (Ferraro, Bettman, & Chartrand, 2009), especially relevant here as millions of consumers routinely encounter ethnic brand imagery.

Our work advances these findings by directly assessing the effect of ethnic brand imagery exposure on implicit ethnic stereotype activation, an effect consistent with past group perception research. For example, listening to violent rap music heightens negative stereotypical evaluations of Black targets (Johnson, Trawalter, & Dovidio, 2000) and similar effects have been found for gender stereotypical advertisements (Hurtz & Durkin, 2004; Johar, Moreau, & Schwarz, 2003). Importantly, such activation can occur non-consciously after incidental exposure to stereotypes (Banaji, Hardin, & Rothman, 1993), category exemplars (Bargh, 1999; Lepore & Brown, 1997) and symbolic content (Devine, 1989; Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park, 2001; Mai & Hoffmann, 2014).

To date, only two empirical investigations have assessed the role of ethnic brand imagery on stereotype activation. The first revealed that American Indian brand imagery can lead to stereotyping of *different* (i.e., non-American Indian) ethnic groups (Kim-Prieto, Goldstein, Okazaki, & Kirschner, 2010). The second offered preliminary evidence that exposure to the Cleveland Indians' Chief Wahoo logo activated negative implicit American Indian stereotypes as detected by a lexical decision task (Freng & Willis-Esqueda, 2011). Building on these findings, we examine the moderating role of political identity in stereotype activation and investigate whether the stereotype's valence influences response.

Stereotype malleability and political identity

Although implicit stereotypes were once assumed immutable (e.g. Bargh, 1999), current research suggests their malleability (Blair, 2002; Dasgupta, 2009; Rudman, Ashmore, & Gary, 2001). Much of this work has focused on situational or contextual variables that promote stereotype malleability (Dasgupta, 2013; Blair, 2002). For example, Blair, Ma, and Lenton (2001) manipulated gender stereotypes using imagined stereotype-consistent and inconsistent exemplars. Noticeably missing, however, are dispositional characteristics of the perceiver that could influence stereotype malleability. Exploring this possibility, Tausch and Hewstone (2010) found that ideological traits—specifically, social dominance orientation—can moderate response to counterstereotypic information. We build on this possible link between ideology and stereotype malleability, proposing that individual differences in political identity moderate stereotype malleability.

Research on the fundamental differences between liberals and conservatives identifies mental rigidity and resistance to change as hallmarks of conservatism, while liberalism is characterized by more malleable worldviews (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003a, 2003b; Jost et al., 2008). Furthermore, liberals generally score higher in openness-to-new-experience (Jost et al., 2003a), suggesting a potential susceptibility to the influence of novel information such as stereotypic brand imagery. Should these dichotomies extend to stereotypes, we expect exposure to stereotypic ethnic brand imagery to more strongly influence liberals, for whom stereotypic associations are less calcified. Although past research has observed a positive relationship between conservatism and stereotype strength (Nosek et al., 2007), we predict that conservatism reduces the influence of stereotypic brand imagery on both positive and negative implicit stereotypes.

Stereotype valence

Although positive stereotypes can carry negative consequences for target group members (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000), a common defense of ethnic brand imagery is that it promotes positive stereotypes such as bravery and nobility in the case of American Indian imagery (Freng & Willis-Esqueda, 2011; Tierney, 2013). This assertion, however, has yet to be empirically tested. Therefore, we explore the potential moderating effect of experimentally manipulated (Study 2) and naturally occurring (Study 3) differences in the stereotype valence of ethnic brand imagery.

Two lab experiments and a multi-city field study tested the prediction that conservatism attenuates the effects of ethnic brand imagery exposure on positive and negative implicit stereotypes. In all three studies, American Indian sports logos were used to operationalize ethnic brand imagery. Study 1 explored the interaction of brand imagery exposure and