
Stereotypes about service jobs and their impact on interpersonal relationships

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Abstract:

In every interaction, individuals unconsciously activate stereotypes about people that belong to a different social group. This also applies to B2C relationships between frontline employees and consumers. This study aims to identify the content, the antecedents and the effects of stereotypes on customers' relationships with frontline people for eight selected services. It also investigates the differences in the effects of stereotypes depending on the direct recipient of the service, the nature of the service act and the intensity of contact.

Keywords: stereotypes, services, B2C relationships

1. Introduction

Stereotypes are shared beliefs about the characteristics and behaviours of a group of people (Bédard, Déziel et Lamarche, 2006). Literature shows that stereotypes may impact interpersonal relationships (Yzerbyt et Schadron, 1996), namely in the field of relationships' development between consumers and frontline employees. Since relationships are influenced by stereotypes and since stereotypes are automatically activated during the first meeting (Fiske, 2004), we may assume that the development of a B2C service relationship will be influenced by consumers' stereotypes about frontline employees. This research explores such stereotypes in eight selected service categories and tries to identify their antecedents and effects on service relationship. To achieve this goal, a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews has been realized.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Stereotypes and relationships

Stereotypes are shared beliefs within an "in-group" about the personal characteristics (traits or behaviors) of a group of people referred to as the "out-group" (Yzerbyt, Schadron, 1996). Stereotypes affect relationships because they modify the way people think and the way they perceive incoming information about their social environment. In a service context, the social environment is namely composed of frontline employees. The perception of these employees may be affected by new information. Most of the time, this incoming information will be perceived in accordance with previous beliefs, which enhances existing stereotypes (Yzerbyt, Schadron, 1996). When the matching between stereotypes and incoming information about people (anchoring process) is not possible, most of the time this information will be considered as an exception (adjustment process) or will be discarded (Yzerbyt, Schadron, 1996). So generally, people who use stereotypes will believe that the incoming information they perceive confirms their expectations.

2.2. Stereotypes in marketing

Stereotypes have been studied in the field of marketing. However, most often, the studied stereotypes were coming from a review of literature and not from an empirical study: "there is little rigorous empirical research available which explores the exact content of these stereotypes, and their effects" (Lee & al., 2007, p.2). A few studies have examined gender stereotypes, but only one really brings conclusive results: "these stereotypes negatively influence the ability of men nurses to develop comfortable and trusting relationships with their patients" (Evans, 2002, p. 442).

Ethnic stereotypes have also already been studied. Harrison-Walker (1995) found that ethnic stereotypes have an effect on the selection of a service provider. When the name of the service provider is the only available information, American names are preferred to “foreign” names. Since other studies about stereotypes’ effects in the field of marketing are not conclusive, there is a need for a new study designed to identify consumers’ stereotypes and their influence on relationship development.

2.3. Relationship development

The development of a relationship based on the social exchange theory includes five steps according to B2B literature (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh, 1987): awareness, exploration, expansion, commitment and dissolution. As suggested by Kennedy, Ferrell and LeClair (2001), the development of relationships in B2C contexts follows about the same steps. In the awareness stage, frontline employees recognize consumers as potential consumers. In the exploration phase, each party evaluates the costs and benefits of the exchange relationship. In the expansion phase, each party takes more risks in the relationship as far as the trust and satisfaction initiated in the exploration phase increase. In the commitment phase, consumers are explicitly or implicitly committed to the relationship with the salesperson. The end phase refers to the possible dissolution by consumers of the relationship with salespeople. Of course, dissolution may arise at every phase of the buyer-seller relationship. In this study, we will try to identify the different stages affected by consumers’ stereotypes about frontline employees.

3. Methodology

This qualitative research aims (1) to identify the prevailing stereotypes about a series of jobs involving services and (2) to explore these stereotypes’ antecedents and effects on service relationships. Furthermore, we try to explore the differences that may exist in stereotypes depending on the nature of the service act, the direct recipient and the contact intensity of the service.

Eight services were studied. The selection of these jobs was based on the nature of the service act (tangible vs. intangible actions), on the direct recipient of the service (people vs. things) and on the contact intensity (high vs. low) of the service relationship (Lovelock et al., 2008). Two services were selected in each cell of Table 1, one high contact service (H.C.) and one low contact service (L.C.).

	Who or what is the direct recipient of the service ?	
What is the nature of the service act?	People	Things
Tangible actions	<i>1 : Services directed at people bodies. H.C.: aesthetician L.C.: train controller</i>	<i>2 : Services directed at goods and other physical possessions. H.C.: gardener L.C.: express delivery man</i>
Intangible actions	<i>3 : Services directed at people's minds. H.C.: psychotherapist L.C.: singer</i>	<i>4 : Services directed at intangible assets. H.C.: insurance broker L.C.: phone banking counsellor</i>

Table 1 : Understanding the nature of the service act (Lovelock et al. 2008)

We developed a convenience sample with the most varied profiles as to informants' socio-demographics (age and gender) and experience with the selected service. Experience is a potentially important variable because experienced and non-experienced people are expected to generate different stereotypes when submitted to similar stimuli (Ingarao, 2006). We managed to have at least one person for each combination of age, gender and experience. No informant had the same job than the studied jobs. For each selected job, six experienced people (who at least had one contact with a frontline employee of the selected service in the last 12 months) and six non-experienced people were interviewed. Most of the informants were interviewed about two jobs randomly chosen from Table 1 and a few were interviewed about only one job. These interviews were semi-structured. In these interviews, people were asked to spontaneously describe their beliefs associated with the selected jobs. They were also invited to tell about the antecedents and possible effects of these stereotypes on service relationships. These interviews took up to 45 minutes and were realized at informants' home or workplace between September and November 2010.

All the interviews were fully transcribed, and all of these interviews were carefully scanned before the analysis. A thematic analysis was then performed based on the methodology proposed by Jolibert and Jourdan (2004). We coded (manually) all interviews systematically in an emerging way. We then investigated the connections and groupings between these codes in order to bring the main themes up.

4. Emerging results

Almost every informant used a series of stereotypes in order to describe the studied services. The most frequent stereotypes are summarized in table 2 for each of the eight services.

	Who or what is the direct recipient of the service ?	
What is the nature of the service act?	People	Things
Tangible actions	<i>Aestheticians: women with a strong interest in beauty. Train controllers : authoritarian unpleasant men wearing a uniform.</i>	<i>Gardeners: people between 25 and 50 years in good shape. Express delivery men: Men in good shape wearing a uniform.</i>
Intangible actions	<i>Psychotherapists: people of more than 40 years who are able to listen and help others without judging them. Singers: people having musical and animation skills.</i>	<i>Insurance brokers: people of more than 30 years who have some interest in their clothing appearance. Benevolent, they want to maximize their profit. Phone banking counsellors: Dutch speaking men of less than 30 years. They are also competent and kind.</i>

Table 2: Stereotypes' content

During the analysis, we observed that for tangible service acts, informants' stereotypes are mainly based on visual information, whereas for intangible service acts, stereotypes are mainly based on intelligible information. Moreover informants mentioned more stereotypes about high contact services than low contact services. A few differences in stereotypes' content also emerged between groups of informants. Some of these differences stem from their level of experience and others from the place of residence. These differences seem to be based on the antecedents of stereotypes. Our results show that people's beliefs are based on their experience with frontline employees. Marie highlights this point: "*when I speak about grumbling train controller, I am thinking about my bad memories.*" Antecedents are also based on the inference people realise. Guericc illustrates this process and bases his stereotypes about insurance broker on his perception of bankers: "*I see him with a suite and dressed like a banker.*" We further observed that antecedents are based on informants' social interactions and social environment. Media (books) represent another source of stereotypes: "*It's a stereotype, it's really a typical picture that we see in comics*" (Olivier). We also observed for every selected service that stereotypes have some effects on service relationships. Seven main effects were revealed, i.e.: stereotypes can create positive and negative apprehensions, they may have an effect on interpersonal trust, on satisfaction, on consumers' fear, comfort and on relationship development. Stereotypes mainly alter the first two steps of relationship development

(awareness and exploration) but in some cases, they also alter the other steps. All stereotypes do not have an effect on interpersonal relationships: some stereotypes have some effects and are frequently cited, some stereotypes have some effects even if there are not frequently cited and some stereotypes have no effect. In addition, we found some effects due to the nature of the selected service. Indeed, stereotypes' effects seem to be higher with high contact services than with low contact services. The nature of the service act also seems to influence informants. They seem to rely more on visual information when the service act is tangible and to rely on intelligible information when the nature of the service act is intangible. In contrast, the direct recipient of the service does not seem to have an effect.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The fact that all informants had some stereotypes about each service confirms social psychology theory (Labiouse and French, 2001). Our results about the variable importance and the variable frequency of stereotypes seems to confirm Vidal's (2003) hypothesis concerning central and peripheral stereotypes and should be investigated in future research. In our study, informants described various stereotypes' effects. The process they used to think about these effects seems to be based on an anchoring or an adjustment processes. However, due to the qualitative approach of this study, this need to be confirmed by future research. The observed differences between high and low contact services as well as the observed differences based on the nature of the service act need also to be confirmed by future research. The results about stereotypes' antecedents are in line with Labiouse and French (2001) and Bédard, Déziel and Lamarche (2006). However, most informants were thinking about only one antecedent at a time and we do not pretend we discovered the entire set of antecedents for each informant, because such antecedents may be unconscious (Bédard, Déziel and Lamarche, 2006).

From a theoretical point of view, our study confirms Evans' (2002) and Harrison-Walker's (1995) study. It also extends Campbell, Davis and Skinner's (2006) study and the management of frontline employee literature (Lovelock et al. 2008). Our study is one of the first in the marketing literature to explore the content before the effects of stereotypes. The other contribution of the paper is to highlight a series of effects stereotypes may have on relationship development. From a managerial point of view, this study may help frontline employees and managers by providing them ideas about their customers' stereotypes as well as key elements to improve interpersonal relationships in B2C contexts.

Of course, our study presents a few limitations. Indeed, stereotypes' content and effects are inherent to a culture (Mc Carty, Yzerbyt and Spears, 2002). Second, the qualitative nature of our study does not allow to generalize our results. Finally, (part of) our results may have been influenced by the eight services that have been selected.

6. References

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