
Stereotypes about service jobs. What about their valence and centrality?

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Abstract:

In every interaction, individuals automatically activate stereotypes about people belonging to a different social group. This also applies to B2C relationships between frontline employees and consumers. This study aims to confirm the content and the centrality of stereotypes coming from a qualitative study (Bienfait and Decrop, 2012). It will also investigate their valence, which had not been done in the previous qualitative study.

Keywords: stereotypes, services, B2C relationships

1. Introduction

A former qualitative study on consumers' stereotypes about services jobs (Bienfait and Decrop, 2012) revealed the content and some effects of these stereotypes on B2C relationship development. However, this qualitative study did not reveal stereotypes valence and centrality. On the basis of the social categorization theory, we believe that these two variables may influence the social judgment process and that we will not be able to proof the effects of consumers' stereotypes about service jobs on relationship quality if we do not know stereotypes valence and centrality. For this reason, we ran a questionnaire survey to reveal the valence and confirm the centrality of consumers' stereotypes about the selected service jobs.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Stereotypes and categorization

Stereotypes are shared beliefs held 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.

Indeed, during the perception process, people use different strategies to sort a stimulus in an existing category (Salès-Wuillemain, 2006). This category is described by people's stereotypes and prejudice. Prejudice can be defined as emotional reactions about a member of an out group or of an in group based on general feelings about his group (Fiske, 2004, Salès-Wuillemain, 2006). The first strategy that can be used in the categorization process is a strategy based on a comparison to a prototype. To assign a stimulus to a category, people compare this stimulus to the prototype of a category and decide to assign the stimulus to this category if the incoming element has enough common features with the prototype or if it differs sufficiently from the other stored categories (Salès-Wuillemain, 2006). The second strategy that can be used is the nearest neighbour search. There are some differences with the first strategy; people will not compare incoming information with a prototype but with previously met members of a category, they will assign incoming stimulus to a category if it sufficiently fits with previously met exemplars (Salès-Wuillemain, 2006). The third strategy is a strategy that takes into account the frequency of characteristics. To assign an element to a category, people compare stimulus characteristics with memorised categories characteristics and will select the category that fits the best (Salès-Wuillemain, 2006). The last strategy that can be used to categorize an element is the strategy of calculating the mean distance. People will compare stimuli with members of a category, will compute a similarity coefficient for

each category and will assign stimuli to the category that has the highest score (Salès-Wuillemin, 2006).

Each of these strategies can be used to categorize an incoming stimulus. However, following Reed (1972), people mainly use the prototype strategy. To a lesser extent, the strategy that uses the characteristics frequency is also employed. There are only few people using the last two strategies (Reed, 1972).

During an interaction with frontline employees, consumers receive information about employees. They will use one of the four-categorization strategies to categorize frontline employees. So, if consumers already have some stereotypes about some frontline employees and if they are confirmed by incoming stimuli, the literature tells us that those employees will be categorized and perceived as typical employees of the category they belong to (Lambert and Wyer, 1990). It is called the perception bias in the literature (Tajfel, 1972). However, if stereotypes are unconfirmed by incoming information (frontline employee perception), employees will not be perceived as typical employees (Lambert and Wyer, 1990). We use the typicality concept because this concept is able to: “position all the elements of the category with respect to each other according to their ability to represent the category” (Ladwein, 1995).

One consequence of the categorization process is the social judgment of targets. Based on the social judgment theory (Schadron and Yzerbyt, 1993), target judgments are based on stereotypes if people think they received information about category membership of targets (Salès-Wuillemin, 2006). Social judgment valence depends on the general orientation of stereotypes (positive or negative): people with positive and negative stereotypes about a target will negatively judge this target if he has more negative than positive stereotypes about the target (Lepore and Brown, 1997). This general orientation of stereotypes depends on consumers’ prejudices about the targeted category (Salès-Wuillemin, 2006). On the other side, social judgments of atypical targets will not be based on stereotypes (Schadron, Yzerbyt, Leyens and Rocher, 1994). People will use incoming information to judge the target and not stereotypes. This effect is called the dilution effect of the stereotype (Salès-Wuillemin, 2006). Based on Vidal’s hypothesis (2003) about the centrality of stereotypes, we believe that this will be the case when central stereotypes won’t be confirmed. So it seems that stereotypes valence and centrality have a great influence on social judgement process, for this reason we will study these variables. The selection of service jobs will be based on a qualitative research about stereotypes (Bienfait and Decrop, 2012).

Based on the categorization literature and on the results of a qualitative study (Bienfait and Decrop, 2012), we propose the figure one that represents the categorization process. This model is inspired by the Babin and Babin model (2001)

and shows that categorization process can have cognitive, affective and behavioural effects as the literature (Fiske, 2004) and the qualitative study show.

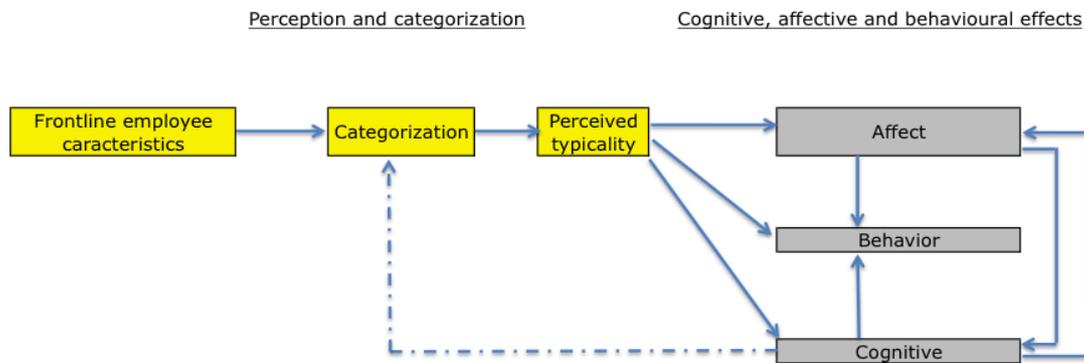


Figure 1 : Categorization process and effects

2.2. Stereotypes in marketing

Stereotypes have already 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 whereas psychosocial literature shows that stereotypes affect interpersonal relationships, there is a need for new studies designed to identify consumers’ stereotypes and their influence on relationship development.

This study will concentrate on consumers’ stereotype content about frontline employees in the service field. It will discuss stereotypes valence and centrality to get a better understanding of social judgement process during B2C relationships.

3. Methodology

This quantitative research is based on a former qualitative study about the effects of stereotypes on interpersonal service relationships. Its aims are to discover the valence and the centrality of consumers' stereotypes about the frontline employees already studied in the previous qualitative study (Bienfait and Decrop, 2012).

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 of 52 people (25 women, 27 men) aged between 19 and 64 years old. These people had to respond on an online or off line questionnaire. These respondents had to fill in 5 positives characteristics and 5 negatives characteristics about the selected professions. They had to do so for each profession.

Then we computed the frequency for each characteristic to reveal the degree of centrality as Lo Monaco and Lheureux (2007) suggested. A comparison between those results and the qualitative results was then performed to merge the results about centrality and to reveal the valence of the stereotypes found in the qualitative study.

4. Results

In this section, we will compare stereotypes coming from the qualitative study (Bienfait and Decrop, 2012) and stereotypes coming from the questionnaire. Results are presented by profession.

Aesthetician

Gender stereotype is indirectly confirmed given that all respondents used the feminine way to describe aestheticians whereas the questionnaire asked about male and female aestheticians. The neat appearance identified in the qualitative study was confirmed as a positive and central stereotype. Sympathy, sweetness, smiling attitude, beauty, superficial attitude and stupidity were also confirmed but the degree of centrality (high centrality in the questionnaire) is different from the degree of centrality identified in the qualitative study. Both study agree on tanning and vulgar attitude and show that they are peripheral stereotypes.

Some features coming from the qualitative study were not confirmed (age and clothing) and some characteristics only appeared in the questionnaire (help to feel good, discreet, indiscreet).

Job	Positive	Frequency	Negative	Frequency
Aesthetician	Sympathetic	20	Superficial attitude	26
	Neat appearance	18	Stupid girl	17
	Beautiful person	18	Vulgar attitude	3
	Sweetness	15		
	Smiling attitude	14		
	Tanned girl	5		

Table 2 : Confirmed stereotypes about aesthetician

Train controller

Train controllers are seen as unsympathetic persons (central stereotype) and authoritarian (peripheral stereotype) in both qualitative and quantitative study. Aggressiveness and sympathy of train controllers are more central in the questionnaire than in the qualitative study.

Many characteristics revealed in the qualitative study were not confirmed by the questionnaire (clothing, gender, shoulders, alcoholic and repressive behaviours). On the other side, the questionnaire revealed some features that were not mentioned in the qualitative study (polite, bilingual, competent, impolite, incompetent). However, these results were biased by the construction of the questionnaire. Indeed, respondents used antonyms to fill in the questionnaire so for those characteristics (polite, competent, impolite, incompetent), it is not possible to discover people's stereotypes.

Job Train controller	Positive	<i>Frequency</i>	Negative	<i>Frequency</i>
	Helpful	16	Unsympathetic	20
Smiling	15	Aggressive	12	
		Authoritarian	8	

Table 3 : Confirmed stereotypes about train controller

Gardener

Gender stereotype is indirectly confirmed given that all respondents used the masculine way to describe gardeners whereas the questionnaire asked about male and female gardeners. Gardeners are seen as people in good shape, passionate and creative. Those positive and central stereotypes are confirmed by the qualitative and the quantitative study. The dirtiness, central stereotype in the questionnaire, seems to echo the gardener clothing identified in the qualitative study. Indeed, some informants in the qualitative study were speaking about dirt on gardeners' clothes.

Honesty and sympathy are confirmed as positive and peripheral stereotypes. It is not the case for gardener competence, indeed, this characteristic appear to be central in the questionnaire while it was peripheral in the qualitative study.

Some features of the qualitative study were not confirmed in the questionnaire (age, neat appearance, bravery, pride and good taste) and some characteristics were only revealed in the questionnaire (generous, punctual, stupid, womanizer, messy, incompetent, lazy, boorish, not serious, poor).

Job	Positive	Frequency	Negative	Frequency
Gardener	Competent	21	Dirty	16
	Passionate	16		
	Good shape	15		
	Creative	13		
	Sympathetic	9		
	Honest	4		

Table 4 : Confirmed stereotypes about gardener

Express delivery man

These persons are seen as smiling, sympathetic and hurried persons. Promptness is also cited, but it is a central stereotype in the questionnaire and not a peripheral one as in the qualitative study.

Some characteristics coming from the qualitative study were not confirmed in the questionnaire (gender, clothing, age, ethnicity, shoulders, appearance and perkiness) and some features were only revealed in the questionnaire (good driver, bad driver, good sense of direction, polite, punctual, late, awkward, unpleasant). However, these results were biased by the construction of the questionnaire. Indeed, respondents used antonyms to fill in the questionnaire so for some characteristics (good driver, bad driver) it is not possible to people's stereotypes.

Job	Positive	Frequency	Negative	Frequency
Express delivery man	Prompt	17	Hurried	20
	Smiling	14		
	Sympathetic	13		

Table 5 : Confirmed stereotypes about express delivery man

Psychotherapist

Listening, empathy and calmness are central positive stereotypes in the questionnaire (this confirmed the centrality degree found in the qualitative study for the first two characteristics). They are also seen as charlatans confirming the qualitative study (central negative stereotype). For the peripheral stereotypes, psychotherapists are seen as open minded persons.

Many features coming from the qualitative study were not confirmed in this questionnaire (age, clothing, hairdressing, appearance, authority, experience, help, disorder) and many characteristics were only coming from the questionnaire (intelligent, welcoming, trust, quick wit, haughty, expansive, too theoretical, unpredictable, has some psychological troubles and crazy).

Job	Positive	Frequency	Negative	Frequency
Psychotherapist	Tuned	20	Charlatan	13
	Empathic	16		
	Calm	16		
	Open mind	10		

Table 6 : Confirmed stereotypes about psychotherapist

Singer

Singers are people with musical and stage skills (central and positive stereotypes); this confirms the qualitative study results. They are also seen as pretentious and sociable person; frequencies in the questionnaire indicate a high degree of centrality unlike qualitative results.

The belief about the beauty of singer is not mentioned in the questionnaire and some beliefs only appeared in the questionnaire (drugged, superficial, stubborn).

Job	Positive	Frequency	Negative	Frequency
Singer	Charismatic	19	Pretentious	20
	Sociable	16		
	Nice voice	15		
	Smiling	13		
	Creative	10		
	Dynamic	9		

Table 7: Confirmed stereotypes about singers

Insurance broker

Insurance broker are seen as well dressed persons (central positive stereotype) who try to sell a maximum of products (central negative valence). The peripheral stereotypes identified here and in the qualitative study are the following: serious, hurried and resistant to stress persons. The availability appears as a central stereotype here while it appears as a peripheral one in the qualitative study.

Many characteristics coming from the qualitative study were not confirmed here (age, banking activities, benevolence, smiling and boring person) and the questionnaire mentioned some features that were not revealed in the qualitative study (smoothie, persuasive, organised, good diction, quietness, not credible, ugly, secretive, nosy, depressed and stubborn).

Job	Positive	Frequency	Negative	Frequency
Insurance Broker	Available	15	Hustler	23
	Well dressed	12	Manipulator	16
	Resistant to stress	4	Liar	12
	Serious	3	Hypocrite	9
			Hurried	3

Table 8 : Confirmed stereotypes about insurance broker

Phone banking counsellor

Phone banking counsellors are seen as polite, competent and unpleasant people. Results about centrality are divergent from the qualitative study. Indeed, here competence is seen as a peripheral stereotype and the other characteristics as central stereotypes while it is the opposite in the qualitative study.

Many features from the qualitative study were not mentioned here (age, appearance, clothing, Dutch accent) and some beliefs were only identified here (patient, available, pleasant voice, hurried, think about money, talkative, dishonest).

Job	Positive	Frequency	Negative	Frequency
Phone banking counsellor	Polite	13	Unpleasant	10
	Competent	8		

Table 9 : Confirmed stereotypes about phone banking counsellor

5. Discussion

Our results seem to confirm Vidal's hypothesis (2003) about stereotypes centrality. Indeed, we found evidences about this hypothesis in the comparison of the previous qualitative study and the questionnaire: some beliefs were found in both studies with high frequencies (central stereotypes) and some of them appear in both studies with low frequencies (peripheral stereotypes). This study also confirms the psychosocial literature about stereotypes valence (Salès-Wuillemain, 2006); from our comparison we see that people have positive and negative beliefs about out-group members and that these beliefs can have positive or negative orientation. So, the comparison of the questionnaire and the qualitative results gives us a clearer idea of consumers' stereotypes about the selected jobs. Secondly, this comparison also clarifies the degree of centrality of stereotypes and thirdly the questionnaire results indicate stereotypes valence that was not given by the previous qualitative study. This analysis provides us a better understanding of the social judgment process consumers use during interpersonal relationships. This will allow us to go further in our studies about consumers' stereotypes and will allow us to develop experimentation about consumers' stereotypes effects on relationship quality. This development was impossible without knowing stereotypes content, valence and centrality.

However, this quantitative study presents some limits. Indeed, contrary to the qualitative study, only a few socio demographic ideas were revealed. This is certainly the consequence of the methodology, respondents had to fill in 5 positive characteristics and 5 negative characteristics, and the valence of socio demographic stereotypes may be neutral for most socio demographic beliefs. Another limit is also coming from the methodology: people had to fill in 5 positive characteristics and 5 negative one and sometime they used antonyms (discrete/intrusive for aesthetician). This certainly affects some results especially train controller results. This job is negatively described in the qualitative study while this description is more nuanced here. Finally, sample construction may have influenced some results, however, since main results are based on the comparison of the questionnaire and the qualitative study, we believe that this effect is minimal.

This study is a base for future research: it will allow us to go further in the understanding of consumers stereotypes about frontline employee and will allow us to test the influence of those stereotypes on interpersonal relationship in the field of service. So this study is an important step in our research project about consumers' stereotypes in the service field.

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