

Researcher discovers stereotypes can deter consumer purchases

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The perception of negative stereotyping, particularly in the areas of financial services and automobile sales and service, can cause consumers to fear being duped and forgo their purchases, according to new research by University of Minnesota associate professor Kathleen D. Vohs.

Vohs, the Land O'Lakes Professor for Excellence in Marketing at the university's Carlson School of Management, and co-authors Hakkyun Kim (Concordia University, Canada) and Kyoungmi Lee (Yonsei University, Korea) found that a potential buyer, aware of [negative associations](#) held about a group to which he or she belongs, may experience apprehension when transacting with someone from outside this group. This nervousness detrimentally impacts purchasing decisions.

"People naturally withdraw from situations where they anticipate being stereotyped," says Vohs. "They fear being duped or inadvertently reinforcing the negative association."

In "[Stereotype Threat in the Marketplace: Consumer Anxiety and Purchase Intentions](#)," which will appear in a forthcoming issue of the [Journal of Consumer Research](#), the researchers conducted three experiments.

The first focused on women's feelings when interacting with potential financial advisors. When predisposed to conditions meant to remind participants of the stereotype that women are less competent at math than men, women reported feeling more anxious about interacting with a

male financial advisor and less inclined to procure financial services.

The second experiment tested these findings in an automobile repair context. When asked to report their gender before seeking a car repair, women were more likely to feel anxiety when contemplating a transaction with a male technician.

"Consumers don't have to believe the stereotype; they just have to be aware that the stereotype exists to experience the threat" Vohs adds. "The actual behavior of the [salesperson](#) may have little effect."

This research provides some of the first evidence that the presence of negative stereotypes plays an important role in consumer judgments. These findings have practical implications for marketers, who may take care to avoid using advertising content that might trigger thoughts or associations of a negative stereotype in potential customers.

While marketers cannot completely control for which perceived stereotypes may cause anxiety in potential buyers in all cases at all times, Vohs and colleagues found they may be able to mitigate the stereotype threat by introducing a sense of calmness into the transaction environment.

In the study's third experiment, the researchers found that introducing the scent of vanilla into the decision-making process helped participants feel calmer and more assured of their transaction.

"Vanilla scent has been used for centuries to calm and pacify people who have anxiety," says Vohs. "While we used scent, any tactics firms can employ that would calm consumers could help the transaction take place as the marketer would intend."

More information: The paper and more information on Vohs can be

found at: www.carlsonschoool.umn.edu/marketinginstitute/kvohs

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