

Exposure to American Indian mascots activates stereotypes

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Ethnic brand imagery, including American Indian mascots, can strengthen stereotypes, causing detrimental societal consequences, according to a newly published study conducted by a University of Montana researcher.

UM Assistant Professor Justin Angle, in partnership with researchers Sokiente Dagogo-Jack and Mark Forehand at the University of Washington and Andrew Perkins at Washington State University, found measurable negative effects of ethnic brand imagery. The researchers also found that a person's political identity may predict how susceptible they are to adopting stereotypes associated with branding, logos and sports mascots.

Angle said the study is one of the first empirical demonstrations of the influence of ethnic brand imagery on both positive and negative stereotypes in the broader population. "Activating Stereotypes with Brand Imagery: The Role of Viewer Political Identity" was published in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* on April 11.

The researchers used American Indian sports mascots in two lab experiments and a field study in multiple cities.

"We set out to study whether or not the use of American Indian brand imagery increases stereotype beliefs in the broader population, a claim that has been made many times but never empirically tested," Angle said.

The first study assessed whether exposure to American Indian brand imagery increased the association of American Indian with "warlike." Liberal participants exposed to such logos showed a stronger association of American Indians with "warlike." More conservative participants did not exhibit a strengthened stereotype.

"This finding, while counterintuitive on the surface, is actually consistent with past research showing that liberals tend to have more malleable world views and are therefore sometimes more sensitive to contextual cues," Angle said.

The researchers also investigated whether American Indian brand imagery could similarly affect positive stereotypes, specifically the association of American Indians with "noble." They exposed participants to an American Indian mascot either with or without a "noble" slogan.

When no slogan was present, the association of American Indians with "noble" weakened for liberals, but not for conservatives, conceptually replicating the pattern observed in the first experiment. However, when a positive stereotypical slogan ("We are Noble, We are Peaceful, We Compete with Honor!") accompanied the logo, liberal participants showed strengthened association of American Indians with "noble."

"These results fail to support the common argument that exposure to ethnic brand imagery automatically improves response to the ethnic group," the authors of the study conclude. "Although such an effect is possible with sufficient verbal promotion of the positive stereotype, ethnic logos presented in isolation failed to increase positive ethnic associations among conservatives and actually decreased positive associations among liberals."

To test whether these effects generalize outside the laboratory, the researchers sampled residents in sports markets that use American

Indian-themed mascots. Based on a pretest survey assessing the offensiveness of nine different professional sports team logos, they chose the Cleveland Indians, which rated most offensive, and the Atlanta Braves, which rated least offensive. They also sampled residents in two roughly parallel media markets with animal-themed franchises (Detroit Tigers and Florida Marlins).

Exposure to the "more negative ethnic logo" (i.e., residing in Cleveland vs. Detroit) significantly strengthened negative stereotypes among more liberal individuals whereas exposure to the "less negative logo" (i.e., residing in Atlanta vs. Miami) did not significantly influence negative stereotypes at any level of political identity.

This effect persisted when testing potential pre-existing differences among the four media markets when considering gender, race, familiarity with and exposure to American Indians, and fandom of the American Indian branded team. Each category produced similar results.

"This result is perhaps the first demonstration of the adverse effects of exposure to ethnic brand imagery - specifically American Indian sports mascots - in the broader population," Angle said.

More information: *Journal of Consumer Psychology*,
www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../ii/S1057740816300237

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