

STEREOTYPES OF SALESPEOPLE IN TAIWAN: AN EMPIRICAL EXAMINATION AND RESEARCH AGENDA

Nick Lee, John Rudd

Aston Business School
Aston University
Birmingham B4 7ET, United Kingdom
Tel: 44 121 359 3011
E-mail: n.j.lee@aston.ac.uk

Amanda Beatson

School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations
Queensland University of Technology
GPO Box 2434
Brisbane 4001, Australia
Tel: 61 7 3864 2471
Fax: 61 7 3864 1811
E-mail: a.beatson@qut.edu.au

John Cadogan

Business School
Loughborough University
Leicestershire, LE11 3TU, United Kingdom
Tel: 44 1509 223111
E-mail: j.w.cadogan@lboro.ac.uk

Anne Souchon

Business School
Loughborough University
Leicestershire, LE11 3TU, United Kingdom
Tel: 44 1509 223111
E-mail: a.l.souchon@lboro.ac.uk

Yuh-Jiin Lin

(at the time of this research, Yuh-Jiin Lin was an MSc. Student at Aston University)

For information please contact:

Nick Lee
E-mail: n.j.lee@aston.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT

Stereotypes of salespeople are common currency in US media outlets, and research suggests that these stereotypes are uniformly negative. However there is no reason to expect that stereotypes will be consistent across cultures. The present paper provides the first empirical examination of salesperson stereotypes in an Asian country, specifically Taiwan. Using accepted psychological methods, Taiwanese salesperson stereotypes are found to be twofold, with a negative stereotype being quite congruent with existing US stereotypes, but also a positive stereotype, which may be related to the specific culture of Taiwan.

Keywords: Salespeople, stereotypes, international marketing

INTRODUCTION

Salespeople of various descriptions have proven to be of considerable inspiration to novelists, playwrights, screenwriters, and other creative artists over the last century (Falvey, 1995), with characters such as 'Blake' (Glengarry Glen Ross), 'Willy Loman' (Death of a Salesman), and 'Delboy Trotter' (Only Fools and Horses) assuming prominent places in the cultural landscape of both the US and UK, and other Western cultures. Perhaps these compelling representations of salespeople are partly to blame for the overwhelmingly negative stereotype which appears to be associated with salespeople in Western culture (e.g. Singhapakdi and Vittell 1992; Wotruba 1990). Such negative stereotypes are likely to be harmful to the performance of salespeople themselves, and the selling function in general. For example, research has found that stereotypes can influence the behaviour of customers in selling encounters (e.g. Babin, Boles and Darden, 1995). Furthermore, negative stereotypes appear to reduce business students' likelihood of taking up selling as a career (DelVecchio and Honeycutt 2002). Even more insidiously, negative stereotypes may actually influence the psychological and physical health of salespeople, with prior research finding that negative stereotypes of a population group can influence health-related outcomes such as memory loss among the elderly (Levy and Langer, 1994). As a result of this, salesperson stereotypes are an important topic of investigation, with the potential to influence both organisational performance and employee well-being in the workplace. Unsurprisingly then, stereotypes have proven popular as a topic within the sales practitioner literature (e.g. Butler 1996; Cassavoy 1999; Trumfio 1994; Young 2003; Zurier 1991).

However, in the academic literature the situation is almost reversed. In fact, while negative stereotypes of salespeople have received some attention, there is little empirical examination of the actual *content* of these stereotypes. Instead, stereotypes are generally assumed to be 'negative', based on pop-cultural references and anecdotal evidence from the practitioner world. Few studies are available which utilise well-accepted psychological methods to explicate the content of salesperson stereotypes, and thus there is a danger of inconsistency in how salesperson stereotypes are modelled, and a commensurate lack of comparability between studies (e.g. Babin, Boles and Darden 1995; Stafford, Leigh and Martin 1995). Furthermore, even the few studies that do give attention to the actual content of salesperson stereotypes do so from a US-centric perspective (e.g. Babin, Boles and Darden, 1995).

Yet it is demonstrably not the case that stereotypes held in one culture are the same as those held in others (McGarty, Yzerbyt and Spears, 2002). The cultural environment is likely to have a major impact on the development and reinforcement of stereotypes (Yoon et al., 2000). This can be through such things as differing media representations, cultural heroes, and historical events. For example in some cultures merchants are held in high regard, while in others they are among the lowest rungs of the social strata. Even an example as simple as this shows that stereotypes of salespeople may be considerably different in different cultures. In particular, there appears to be no concrete information on how salespeople are viewed outside what can broadly be considered as 'Western' culture at all. With global marketing becoming more and more important for companies and national economies, it is no longer sufficient to assume that knowledge regarding salesperson stereotypes in the US is adequate to ensure success in other markets.

The present paper reports on an empirical study of stereotypes of salespeople in Taiwan, in an attempt to contribute towards addressing the aforementioned gaps in knowledge. Taiwan is an important and interesting culture to investigate in this context for a number of reasons. Firstly, as part of China, it is part of one of the fastest growing and most important economies in the world (Chow and Li, 2002), making understanding of sales-related issues imperative to the success of global firms. Furthermore, the underlying cultural frameworks which are prevalent in Taiwan are likely to be very different to those in the US, leaving previous work on stereotypes (which are highly culture-bound) of little value. As well as this, personal selling activities are likely to be very important in a culture such as Taiwan, where the value of personal relationships is very high (cf. Luk et al., 1999). The paper begins with a discussion of stereotypes themselves, as well as the role of culture in their formation. Subsequently we detail our method, which was based on accepted psychological methods (e.g. Anderson and Klatzky, 1987), as used in prior sales research in the US (Babin, Boles and Darden, 1995). Following this, the results are discussed and an agenda for future research in sales stereotypes is presented. Finally, the limitations are presented along with conclusions.

STEREOTYPES AND THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN THEIR FORMATION

Interestingly, stereotypes in a psychological sense are almost by definition negative. In fact, stereotypes have been defined as the cognitive component of prejudice – meaning that they are mental representations of negative attitudes towards members of groups (Aronson, Wilson and Akert, 2004). However, stereotypes are also considered in a less pejorative manner to be schemas about groups, or mental structures that help an individual to interact socially, by providing quick access to information (Best, 1989). Nevertheless, this information does not necessarily have to be accurate, and in many ways stereotypes can be seen as a trade-off between accuracy of information and the necessary speed of access to that information in social situations. Without mental schemas such as stereotypes, we would be unable to interact successfully in many social situations, even though the information provided by our stereotypes is sometimes inaccurate and biased. Thus although stereotypes have generally been considered in a negative light, they are unavoidably part of our understanding of the complex social world (Fiske, 2004). What is not in question is that stereotypes relate to 'out-groups', i.e. any group that an individual does not belong to.

Stereotypes aid individuals in social situations since they define for an individual what should be expected from the other party in an interaction, where no other information is available. In a sales context, stereotypes of salespeople will be of use to potential customers since they will generally have little knowledge of what to expect from a salesperson, particularly if they have no prior experience with the individual, or of salespeople in general. All members of society have knowledge of culturally transmitted stereotypes, and this knowledge is generally considered to reduce energy expended on information processing by providing simple ways of categorising people (Fiske and Taylor 1991). If people had to build completely new impressions of each individual they encountered this process would be arduous and highly time and energy inefficient. By contrast, when stereotypical images are triggered people respond to others more rapidly (Fazio and Olsen 2003). While stereotypes are generally considered to aid information processing, they may also lead to bias and inaccuracy since stereotypes may often be erroneous, and individual characteristics may not conform to stereotyped expectations. Furthermore, problems can arise when individual behaviour is wrongly ascribed to entire outgroup populations. In the sales context, this can occur for example when highly unethical selling activities by one salesperson are then considered by a customer to be representative of all salespeople.

Attribution bias is also factor in the reinforcement of negative stereotypes (Pettigrew, 1979). Thus, negative behaviours by outgroup members, such as the unethical salesperson above, tend to be ascribed to the character of the stereotyped individual, leading to reinforcement of a negative stereotype. By contrast, any positive behaviour by a stereotyped outgroup member will tend to be ascribed to situational factors rather than their character, thus not have any impact on reducing the negativity of a stereotype. Stereotypes are also reinforced by the remembrance of different types of behaviour. More specifically, information which is congruent with stereotyped expectations (e.g. unethical selling) is more likely to be remembered than information which contradicts those expectations (e.g. customer orientation of salespeople). Information which does not conform to the stereotype is more likely to be dismissed as an exception, and in this way negative stereotypes are reinforced and are thus very resistant to change (Aronson et al., 2004).

Stereotypes also assist individuals in the social milieu since they promote inter-group differences, which in turn strengthen intra-group cohesion (Fiske, 2004). Culturally-shared stereotypes assist individuals in building a group identity by acting as shared shorthand in conversation, and providing easy to understand definitions of out-groups. Thus, individuals are able to gain a better sense of control over the social world, since they have culturally-shared expectations of the behaviour of other parties in that world, formed through their stereotypes. This leads to smoother social interactions if both parties behave according to their stereotyped roles. However, this is only the case if both parties endorse and behave according to the same stereotype. This is clearly a problem since stereotypes are generalisations which are not necessarily accurate. Thus, stereotypes can lead to poor assumptions and flawed information processing as a result of the biases they promote (e.g. DelVecchio and Honeycutt 2002). Furthermore, stereotyped individuals can experience stereotype threat, where they feel intense pressure to conform to expectations, or to disprove them (Aronson et al., 2004).

Stereotypes are a feature of human social interaction in general, however they vary in both content and relevance across different cultures and time periods. As well as this, stereotypes change as the interrelationships between subcultural groups also evolve. This means that simply assuming salespeople's stereotypes to be generally 'negative' or 'pushy' is not enough, empirical research is needed to ascertain the content of stereotypes. Furthermore, stereotypes in one culture are unlikely to be shared in another. For example, it is generally accepted that a major part of stereotype formation occurs in childhood, and some suggest that children even form stereotypes about groups prior to coming into contact with them (e.g. Tajfel, 1982). One of the key factors in primary stereotype formation is the stereotypes which are held by parents, although these stereotypes may not be held into adulthood in many cases (Rohan and Zanna, 1996). Thus, it can be seen that cultural values, which are transmitted by parents and others in a child's small social circle, will have a considerable bearing on stereotype formation.

Furthermore, it was mentioned above that stereotypes play an important role in intra-group socialisation processes. In other words, as young people gradually become socialised into their culture, they must learn the ideas and values which are required to communicate within that culture. Many of these in-group cultural norms and ideas are contained within various stereotypes of other, out-groups. Thus, stereotypes are shared amongst members of a particular culture, and allow members to understand the world in a similar way, and communicate with each other (Aronson et al., 2004). In this way, stereotypes are culture bound, so much so in fact that Pettigrew (1958) suggested that prejudices – of which stereotypes are a major part as mentioned earlier – actually change when individuals move to different locations.

There are many other ways in which stereotypes are bound up with, and reinforced with, culture. For example, stereotypes are commonly reinforced through media representations (Hogg and Vaughan, 2002). Since popular media and culture relies on using commonly-understood ideas and representations to communicate with its audience, stereotypes are common fodder. Media representation thus tends to strengthen stereotypes by using them to develop popular and easily-understood characters and representations. Historical activity and representations are also likely to have considerable impact on the formation of stereotypes. For example, different cultures have different 'cultural heroes', who are often the subject of children's stories and the like (e.g. Hofstede, 1997). For example, if warriors are held in high regard in a culture, then the stereotype of the soldier is likely to be more positive than in a culture where warriors are not, and the situation is likely to be similar for merchants – which may have some impact on stereotypes of salespeople. Differing business values are also likely to have an impact on salesperson stereotypes across cultures. For example if the model of personal selling in one country is consultative and relationship-focussed, this may lead to a different stereotype of salespeople than a more aggressive, selling-oriented sales model.

While it could be considered that there may be some overlap between US and say, UK stereotypes of salespeople due to some common cultural values, media sources, or business values, the same is highly unlikely between US and Asian stereotypes. Even at the most simplistic level, Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan are considered to be 'Confucian' (e.g. Hofstede, 1997), which is generally accepted to differ considerably from cultural values which are prevalent in the US for example.

Unlike what has become characterised as ‘Western’ culture, which emphasizes individualism and competition, the Confucian framework stresses balance and harmony (Gong, 2003). Furthermore, individuals in the Confucian culture are considered as interconnected through ties of reciprocity, sentiment, and kinship (Joy, 2001). There is also great importance placed on the concept of ‘face’ within this system, or in other words the importance of social consequences of any interaction – how one appears to others in one’s reference groups (Hsu, 1985).

The values of the Confucian system seem likely to influence a somewhat different stereotype of salespeople from that which has been discovered in the US. For example, we could expect that the values of balance, harmony, and reciprocity, could influence a more positive, consultative, stereotype of salespeople in Taiwan. This is in contrast to the typical ‘pushy’ or aggressive US stereotype (e.g. Babin, Boles and Darden, 1995). The long-term perspective implied by Confucian values of reciprocity and balance could mean that salespeople are seen as ‘partners’ in Taiwan, rather than adversaries or competitors as they appear to be in the US.

Hofstede and Bond (1988) considered Confucian countries such as Taiwan to be high on power distance and collectivism, which is also likely to be influential in terms of stereotypes. For example, high power distance cultures tend to rely heavily on personal sources of information rather than past experiences (Doran, 2002). In such a situation, consumers may tend to rely heavily on personal contact with salespeople, who may be seen as having superior product knowledge. Thus, customers expect they can gain some benefit from salespeople, which may result in more positive, respectful, stereotypes towards salespeople who may be seen as having privileged product knowledge. Again, this relates to the ‘partnership’ concept, between salespeople and customers, with salespeople actually being seen as having something to offer the relationship here. In terms of collectivism, previous research has argued that consumers in such cultures expect sellers to communicate frequently, and also to reward loyalty, even to demonstrate a caring attitude (Nakata and Sivakumar, 2001). In this sense, again positive stereotypes of salespeople may be prevalent, since this would link with cultural expectations of their role.

Thus, it can be seen that there is little reason to expect knowledge of US stereotypes (e.g. Babin, Boles and Darden, 1995; Stafford, Leigh and Martin 1995) to be transferable to Taiwan, or other non-Western cultures in fact. Since stereotypes are an important aspect of consumer information processing, and have been found to influence behaviour and attitudes in sales encounters (Babin, Boles and Darden, 1995), the examination of national stereotypes of salespeople is an area of some importance to both researchers and practitioners in the sales area. The balance of the present paper reports the results of a two-stage study designed to examine stereotypes of salespeople in Taiwan.

STUDY 1 METHODOLOGY

The first stage of the study used a projective word association technique. This technique has been used to investigate stereotypes in the past by psychological and sales researchers (e.g. Andersen and Klatzky, 1987; Babin, Boles and Darden, 1995). The technique is aimed at developing a set of ‘most associated characteristics’ (MACs) of salespeople. Each respondent was asked to write down the words which first came to mind in association with the word ‘salesperson’. Respondents were

instructed to write only the words that first came to mind, since previous research has suggested that these immediate, 'top-of-mind' recalls are most representative of subjects' actual opinions (e.g. Stafford and Stafford 2003). Nevertheless, in order to avoid self-censorship, respondents were told that they should not restrict themselves in terms of the number of terms they wrote down. Respondents were asked to write down words relating to three categories; the physical appearance of salespeople, general characteristics of salespeople, and emotions which come to mind in relation to salespeople

The sample consisted of 55 respondents, who were solicited by an intercept methodology, by a single researcher who visited multiple department stores in Taiwan. No particular quotas were followed regarding the makeup of the sample, apart from an attempt to get a generally even split between males and females. However, a screening question was asked regarding the ethnic origin of the respondents, due to the primacy of culture in our theory. All respondents were Taiwanese, and over 20. 21 males and 34 females responded. While previous research in this field has used student samples (e.g. Babin, Boles and Darden, 1995), the present study has the advantage of having a less homogenous sample, which should provide access to a wider range of information regarding cultural stereotypes. The latter goal is important for the projective stage, where we are attempting to tap as wide a range of cultural values as possible.

STUDY 1 RESULTS

Since the respondents were not asked to edit their responses, it was necessary to control for potential redundancy in the terms given. Specifically, the same particular stereotype characteristic or feature may be expressed in a number of different ways, and subjects often 'chain' these responses together when expressing them (Cantor and Mischel, 1979). In the present case this was particularly relevant due to the language of the respondents. In fact, a single Chinese idiom may include several meanings at the same time. In order to deal with this, the responses were translated into English, resulting in 98 potential MACs, considerably more than previous research (e.g. Babin, Boles and Darden, 1995).

The procedure for redundancy control was as follows. Firstly, one English-speaking academic reviewer was given a list of all 98 potential MACs, and asked to sort terms which he thought referred to the same characteristic into single groups, naming each group. A second academic expert was then given a list of the 'redundant' MACs and the group names suggested by the first reviewer. The second reviewer was asked to relocate the redundant MACs into the groups suggested by the first reviewer, without knowledge of which MACs the first reviewer had put into the groups (see Anderson and Klatzky, 1987). The list of MACs resulting from this 2-stage redundancy analysis was reduced significantly from 98 to 47, and this list is shown in Table 1.

As can be seen, there appears some interesting variation in the descriptors that are used here, particularly in light of existing 'Western' stereotypes which are generally seen as overwhelmingly negative. However, it must be noted that there was some variety across the sample in terms of the responses, although it was interesting that many respondents provided a mix of positive and negative statements. This suggests that Taiwanese stereotypes may consistently have both positive and negative aspects, rather than different people having either wholly positive or negative opinions –

TABLE 1: MOST ASSOCIATED CHARACTERISTICS (MACs)

Traits	
<i>Negative</i>	<i>Positive</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Talkative• Aggressive• Annoying• Lack of product knowledge• Persistent• Obsequious• Forceful• Fast-talking• Self-serving• False• Judgemental• Pushy• Persuasive• Snobbish	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clever• Outgoing• Enthusiastic• Patient• Straightforward• Customer-oriented• Open-minded• Professional• Smiley• Sincere• Perceptive• Friendly• Polite• Kind• Confident• Trustworthy
Physical Characteristics	
<i>Negative</i>	<i>Positive</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Over-dressed• Unfashionable	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Good looking• Elegant• Clean and Tidy• Smartly dressed
Emotions	
<i>Negative</i>	<i>Positive</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Helpless• Timid• Annoyed• Impatient• Powerless• Embarrassed• Stressed• Sympathetic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Satisfied• Happy

which would suggest that individual experiences may have been more important in their opinion formation rather than commonly-held stereotypes. It is particularly interesting to see the amount of positive descriptors for salespeople which were given by the Taiwanese respondents – this is in strong contrast to Babin, Boles and Darden’s (1995) US-based research, which generally found overwhelmingly negative stereotypes for salespeople. These results here would suggest that Taiwanese individuals may have a certain respect for salespeople, and even some trust in them. Interestingly, in high power-distance cultures, consumers do tend to have longer-term relationships with salespeople, which could influence these stereotypes. Furthermore, emotions of embarrassment and sympathy were mentioned, this could indicate that consumers in Taiwan may consider selling to be a hard job, and also one in which the interpersonal situation is somewhat awkward, i.e. persuading those in close relationships (implied by the Confucian culture) to purchase products.

STUDY 2 METHODOLOGY

The MACs presented in Table 1 are the raw material which can be used to examine the content of Taiwanese stereotypes. However, following identification of the MACs, it is necessary to discover which ones are most closely associated with the Taiwanese stereotype of salespeople. This is particularly relevant given the variety of descriptors which have been returned in Study 1. In order to do this, the 47 MACs were operationalised in a questionnaire, and respondents were asked to rate the applicability of each characteristic to their opinion of salespeople (e.g. Anderson and Klatzky, 1987). Each MAC was contained in a separate statement such as ‘the salesperson would look elegant’, and respondents used a 5-point Likert-type scale to rate the applicability of each statement, with anchors of the scale ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’ (Babin, Boles and Darden 1995). The statements were randomly ordered to avoid possible bias (cf. Andersen and Klatzky 1987). The questionnaires were originally written in English, and then translated into Chinese, then back translated by another person. While this process is not perfect, it stands the best chance of minimising potential errors (Craig and Douglas, 2001).

Questionnaires were distributed via the Internet. Specifically, the questionnaire was posted on several websites which were exclusively for Taiwanese respondents (although a screening question was also asked at the beginning of the questionnaire). Thus, in technical terms this is a convenience sample rather than a probability sample. However, it does have the advantage of being reasonably heterogeneous compared to the student samples used in previous work on stereotypes (e.g. Andersen and Klatzky 1987; Babin, Boles and Darden 1995; Stafford, Leigh and Martin 1995). Furthermore, Calder, Philips and Tybout (1981) argue that, for purposes of general theoretical testing rather than generalising effects to a specific context, any respondent group can provide data. Since the objectives of the present study are to provide a general examination of stereotypes, there do not appear any *a priori* issues with the sample itself. Nevertheless, the Internet methodology does make it considerably more difficult to calculate the response rate, and there is a possibility that older respondents are less likely to fill in the questionnaire. Examining the demographic characteristics does seem to bear this out (see Table 2) with less than 10% of respondents over 51. However, there appears to be a reasonably even split between males and females, and also a very good number of respondents (188), which does give some confidence in the generality of these results.

STUDY 2 RESULTS

A one-sample t-test was used to select which of the MACs was most representative of Taiwanese salesperson stereotypes. All MACs which returned results significantly above the mid-point of the scale (3) were considered as potential content of the ‘typical salesperson’ stereotype. The significant MACs are presented in Table 2.

It is interesting to note that there is a large number of undeniably positive MACs rated highly by the respondents as indicative of a stereotypical salesperson. This is in contrast to anecdotal perceptions of US sales stereotypes, and also the stereotype content found empirically in the US (Babin, Boles and Darden, 1995). In particular, Taiwanese stereotypes seem to contain higher perceptions of appearance than US ones, as well as a greater expectation of friendliness and general pleasantness, as well as intelligence. What is perhaps most interesting is that there was a distinct perception of trustworthiness found here as well, in stark contrast to existing stereotypes of sales

TABLE 2: T-TEST RESULTS FOR MACs

<i>Most Associated Characteristic</i>	<i>T-value</i>	<i>Significance (1-tailed)¹</i>	<i>Mean Difference</i>
Good looking	10.28	.00	.65
Over-dressed	2.46	.01	.18
Clean and tidy	17.47	.00	1.06
Dressed smartly	14.33	.00	.90
Clever	5.67	.00	.35
Talkative	10.81	.00	.75
Outgoing	13.88	.00	.85
Enthusiastic	3.24	.05	.24
Sales-oriented	8.01	.00	.62
Aggressive	11.21	.00	.77
Annoying	2.34	.01	.15
Persistent	2.85	.03	.21
Smiley	7.37	.00	.49
Sincere	4.24	.00	.30
Obsequious	2.65	.01	.21
Perceptive	5.56	.00	.41
Forceful	2.64	.01	.20
Friendly	3.8	.00	.24
Fast-talking	3.53	.00	.26
Polite	5.67	.00	.38
Self-serving	6.52	.00	.46
False	5.6	.00	.40
Kind	5.86	.00	.39
Confident	7.31	.00	.44
Persuasive	17.1	.00	.92
Snobbish	3.6	.00	.25
Feel satisfied	1.88	.03	.11
Feel stressed	10.97	.00	.81
Feel sympathetic	2.123	.01	.18

¹1-tailed significance used since we expected agreement rather than disagreement.

in the West. However, it also seems clear that there are some considerable negative stereotypes in Taiwan about salespeople, which are generally similar to those which have been found in the US previously. For example, Taiwanese consumers also expected stereotypical salespeople to be aggressive, persistent, self-serving, and annoying, which would be recognised as stereotypical salesperson behaviour by most US consumers as well. Only three of the emotions returned means significantly above the midpoint, and it was interesting to note that one of these was ‘satisfied’, which is another indication that Taiwanese salesperson stereotypes are more positive than existing Western ones. However, consumers were also adamant that they would be stressed as well in an interaction. This could relate to the importance of ‘face’ in the Confucian culture prevalent in Taiwan. With interpersonal relationships assuming prominence here, the sales interaction is one in which many mistakes and misunderstandings can occur, and ‘face’ is easy to lose. Finally, individuals also feel somewhat sympathetic, which may be because of the recognition that selling is a difficult job.

DISCUSSION

It can be seen then, that stereotypes of salespeople in Taiwan appear quite different from the anecdotal and empirical representations of US stereotypes (e.g. Babin, Boles and Darden, 1995). While there appears to be a stereotype of salespeople which are aggressive and annoying (similar to US representations), there is a significant amount

of positivity evident in the Taiwanese results. In appearance, Taiwanese stereotypes show that salespeople are expected to be good looking and well dressed, similar to US stereotypes, although there was also a perception that they could be a little overdressed. It is difficult to reconcile the considerable contrast between negative and positive responses, and this could therefore indicate the existence of *two* primary stereotypes of salespeople existing in Taiwan. More specifically, one stereotype seems to be the ‘classic’ anecdotal representation of the aggressive, flattering, self-serving salesperson. Conversely, it seems clear that there also exists a stereotype of the friendly, clever, polite, sincere salesperson in Taiwan – which simply does not appear to exist in the US.

The discovery of this ‘positive’ salesperson stereotype provides evidence to support the assertion that salesperson stereotypes are culture-bound, and strongly influenced by cultural values of the Taiwanese environment. For instance, the existence of characteristics such as ‘kind’, ‘friendly’ and ‘sincere’ seems likely to be related to the prevalence of longer-term relationships, and higher need for personal sources of information, in high power-distance cultures such as Taiwan between salespeople and customers. This is likely to relate to more favourable perceptions of salespeople as intelligent and pleasant. The positive stereotype of salespeople could also be related to the inherent interconnectedness of individuals within the Confucian social structure, which could influence more positive perceptions of salespeople as ‘partners’ rather than adversaries.

In fact, one could consider that the presence of the negative stereotype is actually more unexpected than the positive one, in light of the characteristics of Taiwanese culture. The presence of negative perceptions of salespeople could in fact relate to the increasing presence of US business models and practices in Taiwan and other Asian countries, which has been commented on by a number of authors (e.g. Harvey 1999). Furthermore, as communications and media become more globalised, it could be expected that Taiwanese consumers may be more likely to be exposed to US-centric media, which could also influence a more negative stereotype.

TABLE 3: EXAMPLE STEREOTYPE DESCRIPTORS

	<i>Stereotype</i>		
	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Atypical¹</i>
<i>Characteristics of stereotypical salesperson</i>	Smartly dressed	Overdressed	Well-dressed
	Good-looking	Good-looking	Average-looking
	Sincere	Obsequious	Seems honest
	Talkative	Fast-talking	At an average speed
	Smiley	Aggressive	Slightly shy
	Friendly	Snobbish	Down-to-earth
	Kind	Annoying	Pleasant
	Enthusiastic	Forceful	Passive
	Clever	Self-serving	Customer-focussed

¹Note, for the purposes of illustration we have developed the atypical stereotype related to the ‘negative’ typical stereotype – other research purposes may need different or additional atypical stereotypes. Further, we have chosen a subset of characteristics for parsimony reasons, again, other research tasks may use others.

One could use the stereotype descriptions uncovered herein in a variety of ways, although it is most common to see them operationalised in scenarios (e.g. Babin,

Boles and Darden 1995; Stafford, Leigh and Martin 1995). Table 3 presents three different stereotypical descriptions which could be used for comparative research, the 'positive typical salesperson', the 'negative typical salesperson', and the 'atypical salesperson'. However, there are a variety of ways which stereotype descriptions could be constructed, depending on the research goals. The use of consistent, robustly-developed stereotypes allows a clearer picture to emerge regarding the influence of stereotypes on key outcomes, as well as the concurrent influence of other characteristics such as gender.

CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The results presented here have some important implications for marketing practitioners and researchers. Firstly, it is clear that perceptions of salespeople are by no means uniform across multiple cultures. It is heartening to know that in some cultures salespeople are not uniformly held in low regard by the population, and may even be thought of in a positive light. Sales managers operating in Taiwan should take care that their salespeople conform more strongly to the positive stereotype than the negative one. This is of particular relevance since behaving in congruence with stereotyped expectations has a positive influence on the social interaction process, and can help put customers at ease. Taiwanese salespeople have a chance to do this in a positive manner, in contrast to US salespeople who have to contend with an almost wholly-negative stereotype. That said, it is concerning that there exists some highly negative perceptions of salespeople in Taiwan, which would not appear to concur with many aspects of the Taiwanese culture. While one can only speculate, it is possible that this is a result of the influence of Western business models on Taiwanese business culture. Managers should be aware of the potential for harm that poor selling behaviour can do to perceptions of salespeople, and stress the importance of conforming to relationship and customer-oriented selling techniques in cultures such as Taiwan. Researchers can also draw heavily from this work. In particular we provide strong evidence that stereotypes differ across cultures, and that it is insufficient merely to apply existing US-centric methods to problems in different cultures. Secondly, the information provided here should enable future work to carry out further and more detailed work on stereotypes and their influence in Taiwan, building from a consistent foundation.

Future work should proceed on two main paths. Firstly, it would seem important to examine stereotypes of salespeople in other cultures, since there is clearly no reason to expect them to be consistent with those which have been found in the US. Secondly, work should proceed in Taiwan on explicating the consequences of these stereotypes. For example, do students perceive the negative or positive aspects more strongly, and will this influence their likelihood of taking up a selling career as has been found in the US? Also, how do salespeople perceive themselves? Does conforming to either of the two main stereotypes have different influences on key consumer outcomes? In conclusion, this paper has provided important information on the content of salesperson stereotypes outside the US, and appears to be the first to empirically examine stereotypes of salespeople in an Asian country. Future research should build on this foundation in order to further explore salesperson stereotypes and their influence in environments outside the US.

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