

Science against stereotyping | News | Unilever global company website

- The UCL study was conducted as a clinical trial with a control sample and strict adherence to UCL and global academic protocols
- In New York, London and Rotterdam, over 60 advertising and marketing professionals across Unilever and its lead agency partners - who work across 12 of Unilever's brands - took part
- All participants opted in to provide a DNA sample and each took part in pre-assessment to measure the extent of their stereotypical thinking prior to receiving their DNA results
- The assumption was that DNA testing would prime and challenge the marketers to explore their own sense of identity and broaden the way they see themselves prior to an immersive workshop
- The workshop with the UCL professors focused on a deeper understanding of how and when stereotypes are learnt; the brain mechanisms that govern them; and how we can unlearn stereotypical thought patterns to increase creative and inclusive thinking
- Finally, the scientists retested the participants (and the control sample) post-workshop. Significant reductions were reported in their likelihood to stereotype people

Dr. Lasana Harris, Associate Professor in Experimental Psychology and Dr. Gorkan Ahmetoglu, Assistant Professor in Business Psychology at UCL, were challenged by global consumer goods company Unilever, makers of over 400 brands including Omo, Knorr and Rexona, to help them go deeper to produce even more progressive, inclusive and unстереotypical creative work. Although just 6% of the company's global advertising is deemed outdated by consumers when the ads are pre-tested before being aired, 45% of the company's pre-tested ads globally are seen as strongly progressive, which is why Aline Santos, Unilever's EVP of Global Marketing and Chief Diversity & Inclusion Officer is spearheading efforts that go even further.

She said: "We are constantly innovating to find new ways to accelerate Unstereotype across our workforce and in our advertising. Becoming conscious of our blind spots and the biases that are holding us back is fundamental, but unconscious bias training has its limitations. We've piloted this experimental approach and measured its impact because disruptive techniques and scientific methods will help us all to drive the action needed to be more progressive in our creative work."

Dr Harris said: "While there are huge genetic similarities common to human beings, what is undeniable is that every single one of us has our own genetic profile. Taking people on a journey through their own DNA profile created a moment of reappraisal and, in many cases, that realisation of their ancestry proved to be a great surprise to them. Coupled with training on how the brains forms stereotypes, we challenged their perceptions of themselves and, in turn, that of others."

This more human approach not only seeks to make more diverse, inclusive advertising but crucially more creative and engaging content. The project evolved from studies which suggest that the part of the brain associated with the cognitive process of stereotyping influences cognitive processes necessary for creativity. What's more, independent data³ shows that Unilever progressive advertising is more effective, creating 37% more branded impact.

Aline Santos said: "In today's marketing we are blessed with a wealth of data and technology that can drive efficiency. But that efficiency should never be at the cost of empathy. If we aren't in the business of understanding humans, we aren't in business at all. The business case for Unstereotype is only getting stronger, proving the need for us all to come to work as people first and marketers second."

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