The Processual Nature of the Obesity Stigma: From Blindness to Hopelessness

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One defining antecedent of marginal consumer groups is their status as being stigmatised or separated from society in some way. Although much research has investigated the perceptions of onlookers of a stigmatised person or group, no research has been conducted regarding the stigmatised person themselves and what impact the stigma has on his or her behaviour. This paper investigates the impact that the obesity stigma has on consumers’ perceptions of themselves and their ability to internalise and act upon social marketing interventions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Although the rise of obesity has been targeted as a critical issue by many public policy makers and national governments in the Asia Pacific region, very little empirical research has been undertaken to understand how obese and overweight consumers behave due to their obese status. This paper focuses on the negative associations that obesity has in society and what impact that stigmatised state has on consumers’ behaviors and ability to internalise and act upon relevant social marketing interventions encouraging weight loss.

The extant literature from sociology, psychology and marketing focuses heavily on the perceptions of onlookers of a stigmatised consumer; however, there appears to be no research investigating how consumers themselves change their behavior or perceptions of themselves due to the stigmatised status. Drawing on theories such as Tajfel’s (1979) Social Identity Theory (SIT) and the Allport’s (1954) work in prejudicial behavior a basis was provided for understanding how Asia Pacific consumers act and react towards being obese.

Qualitative research methods were employed to provide rich data to aid in the elucidation of this under investigated area. Four focus groups and eight depth interviews were conducted within three distinct community groups; Indo-Fijian, Fijian and New Zealanders. The data forms the foundation for the emerging theory explaining how obesity stigma can be internalised and what impact this has on future consumer behavior.

The findings provide a basis for understanding how an obese individual can progress from a state of blindness about his or her size to a state of total hopelessness. The process of moving from a state of blindness to that of hopelessness does appear to be an iterative one, developed over time over a number of intervening situations. The more negative interventions, the greater the likelihood of decreased self efficacy and decreased motivation regarding a consumer’s ability to lose weight.

The premise therefore exists that one off ad hoc campaigns are unlikely to provide any significant impact on the consumer’s sense of personal efficacy. That is, when ongoing negative interventions surround the consumer there needs to be adequate positive interventions to ensure that the consumer does not continue to spiral into a deeper feeling of hopelessness. This is not to say that obese consumers are praised for their size, rather that they are encouraged and motivated by their in-group to maximise their feelings of personal self efficacy. Ideally any intervention would be targeted early on when the consumer has been fraught with only a few negative interventions and he or she still feels the ability to make significant changes to his or her weight.

Further research is needed in the role that negative stigmas have on marginalised consumers’ perceptions of themselves and their sense of self efficacy. By empirically identifying specific motivating antecedents that may increase self efficacy, motivation to lose weight and locus of control a more effective social marketing campaign can be developed and implemented.

REFERENCES


New Zealand Ministry of Health (2001), "DHB Toolkit: Obesity—To Reduce the Rate of Obesity". INCOMPLETE CITATION.


