From Individual Coping to Collective Action: Stigma Management in Online Communities

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Current perspectives on stigma define it as a persistent predicament that can only be understood by multilevel approaches addressing individual and structural discrimination. Researchers have extensively investigated how consumers cope with stigma and the consequences of stigmatization. However, active, collective responses have yet to be considered. We propose that because they tend to challenge the legitimacy of existing status situations and involve the production and reappropriation of meaning, collectives fighting stigma are similar to new social movements. Through a qualitative investigation of the “Fat Acceptance Movement,” we examine how these collectives interact with marketers to promote social change and acceptance.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Goffman (1963) describes stigma as the possession of an attribute that has a negative connotation, and that deviates from what is considered normal in a specific category of people. Whether a particular attribute is considered a stigma varies depending largely on environmental and situational factors. Furthermore, what may be regarded as a stigma in one situation may be considered normal in another. Nevertheless, people cope with perceived stigmas in a variety of ways. Stigma management consists of the strategies employed by the stigmatized consumer or some other person on his or her behalf to cope with the stigma (Goffman 1963). Stigma is a well-researched phenomenon in sociology and psychology. Scholars have examined stigma management strategies such as resignation, confrontation, concealment, and enclave withdrawal (Miller and Kaiser 2001). Researchers have also explored the psychological effects of stigmatization, which include despondency and helplessness (Abramson et al. 1989). However, some stigmatized individuals view their stigmas as “blessings in disguise,” which can reap positive effects such as increased self-esteem (Ainlay et al. 1986).

Stigma and stigma management have emerged as important constructs within consumer research. Stigma has been examined in relation to senior citizen discounts (Tepper 1994), subcultures (Kozinets 2001), low-literate consumers (Adkins and Ozanne 2005, Viswanathan, Rosa, and Harris 2005), and coupon redemption (Argo and Main 2008). Unfortunately, however, these constructs are often regulated to the background as other constructs take center stage or are context-specific. Yet stigma and stigma management deserve study in their own right, because of their implications for consumer behavior and consumer welfare. This special session places the study of stigma front and center, by exploring the complex relationships among stigma, stigma management, and consumption. Elizabeth Crosby and Cele C. Otnes (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) explore how consumers use consumption to manage stigma in a wide variety of contexts. Bige Saaticigolu (HEC Paris) and Julie Ozanne (Virginia Tech) examine stigma within the context of poverty. Daiane Scaraboto (York University) and Eileen Fischer (York University) examine how groups of stigmatized consumers collectively manage their stigma online. Madhu Viswanathan (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) compares the stigmas and coping strategies for low-literate and poor consumers across two different cultures.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Consumption as a Strategy for Stigma Management”

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In his seminal book on stigma and stigma management, Goffman (1963) argues that consumers can be stigmatized because of their social class. A stigma “refers to an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (Goffman 1963, 3). There are many different sources of stigmas in society, from age to a physical handicap. A consumer’s stigma “makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind” (Goffman 1963, 3). Stigmatization affects not only how people perceive themselves, but also how they feel others perceive them (or will perceive them if others know about their stigmatized attribute) (Crocker, Major, and Steele 1998). Research finds that stigmatization can result in positive and negative psychological effects. Stigmatized individuals may also suffer from low self worth and depression (Abramson et al. 1989) while others may experience increased self-esteem (Ainlay et al. 1986). Much of the psychological effects of stigma depend on how the individual manages the stigmatization (Ainlay et al. 1986). As such, it is important to understand how individuals cope with stigma. Numerous studies have looked at how individuals cope with a particular stigma, such as social class (Granfield 1991), racially stigmatized individuals (Crandall, Tsang, Harvey, and Britt 2000), and HIV stigmatized consumers (Emlet 2007). Furthermore, consumer researchers also have explored the concept of stigma in particular contexts including senior citizen discounts (Tepper 1994), subcultures (Kozinets 2001), low-literate consumers (Adkins and Ozanne 2005, Viswanathan, Rosa, and Harris 2005), and coupon redemption (Arbo and Main 2008).

This study explores how individuals use consumption to manage stigma across contexts. For this study, I collected 102 consumer narratives from young adult informants who detailed their experiences with being stigmatized. The narratives describe many different stigmas based on such characteristics as gender, race, religion, and social class. In analyzing the text, I sought out emergent themes while also engaging in dialectical tacking (Strauss and Corbin 1998). I read all narratives multiple times to identify salient and emergent themes (McCracken 1988).

The preliminary analysis reveals that informants employ four consumption-related strategies to manage stigma: (1) concealment, (2) reduction, (3) redirection, and (4) disclosure. With Concealment, individuals consume certain products that will hide their stigma. Consumers deliberately choose products that conceal their stigma. For example, one informant, William, felt stigmatized by his social class, and bought clothing accessories that he believed would conceal his lower social class. Consumers may feel pressured to make these consumption choices, fearing if they do not, their stigma will be revealed. This strategy has consumer welfare implications, because consumers may be pressured to spend beyond their means or consume products that are harmful to their health.

With Reducing, people attempt to decrease their stigma by limiting the consumption of products that might exacerbate their stigma. Informant Molly is often stigmatized because of her multiple tattoos. Others have told her that “tattoos make you look like a criminal.” Even though she would like to have more, Molly has limited her tattoos to four so that the effects of her stigmatization are within certain boundaries.

With Redirection, consumers manage their stigma by shifting attention away from it. They consume products that highlight some other attribute they have to make their stigma less noticeable. Consumers thus shift others’ attention away from the stigmatized attribute to some other attribute that better represents how they want others to view them. Another informant Mark was stigmatized for not being an athlete. In order to combat this characterization, he carried his drumsticks “prominently” on the outside of his back-
Finally, with Disclosure, individuals can also manage their stigma by making consumption choices that intentionally draw attention to it. In doing this, consumers make the statement that they are not ashamed of whatever attribute for which they are stigmatized. Furthermore, consumers may also seek out consumption opportunities where they can meet with other individuals who are stigmatized by the same attribute (Kozinets 2001, Muniz and Schau 2005). Informant Michael notes that he enjoyed skateboarding, but felt that others stigmatized him for it, considering him to be a juvenile delinquent because it. He dealt with the stigma by immersing himself more fully in the activity. Michael started spending considerable time at the skate park with other skateboarders. He also changed his style of dress to match the other skateboarders, so that he could easily be identified as a skateboarder. This paper will fully unpack each of these strategies, as well as their implications for consumer welfare and consumer research.

"The Voices of Trailer Park Residents: Towards a Multidimensional Understanding of Stigma"
Bige Saatcioglu, HEC Paris, France
Julie L. Ozanne, Virginia Tech, USA

Since Goffman’s (1963) seminal work on stigma theory, a profusion of research has explored the sources, nature, and consequences of stigma. However, much consumer research on stigma focuses on stigma management strategies from a psychological perspective investigating micro-level interactions within marketplace encounters (see, for exceptions, Hill 2001; Hill and Gaines 2007). Fewer studies take into account the deeply embedded socio-cultural stigmas that permeate particular contexts. Thus, a need exists for more research involving socio-cultural contexts that explore the development of stigmas through not only marketplace behaviors but also consumers’ dialectical relationships with the macro social structure (Link and Phelan 2001). Furthermore, the relationships between stigma and its related components (e.g., different forms of deprivation and exclusion) need to be taken into account in order to arrive at a richer understanding of the social construction of stigma.

Poverty is one such state through which multiple co-existing social, cultural, motivational, and material dynamics emerge. Poverty is not only about economic and material shortage but it also involves a lack of socio culturally perceived necessities (Sen 2000) and social exclusion from meaningful interactions and exchanges (Bauman 2000). However, traditionally, poverty is treated as merely an economic problem; the poor suffer from material deprivation. Implicit in this approach known as the ‘absolute poverty’ is a one-dimensional deprivation in which individuals lack economic capital to meet their primary material and physical needs (Lister 2004). Consistent with this tradition, much consumer research on poverty focuses on the economic aspects of resource-constrained consumers’ lives while overlooking social, cultural, and motivational dynamics (see, for exceptions, Hill and Stamey 1990; Chakravarti 2006). Alternatively, a more multidimensional perspective takes into consideration different types of deprivations and stigmatizations experienced by poor consumers. Here, poverty is not merely economic and material shortage of resources; rather, it is a multidimensional, relational, dynamic, and complex phenomenon that encompasses many different realities of the poor. It is the lack of “consumer adequacy,” defined as “the continuous availability of a bundle of goods and services that are necessary for survival as well as the attainment of basic human dignity and self-determination” (Hill 2002, p. 20).

The present research builds on these nuanced relationships that exist between the impoverished consumers and multiple social constituents. We demonstrate five distinct social constructions of poverty deriving from five fragmented social identities adopted by the poor to manage and cope with multiple social stigmas. Our research shows that, even within the same bounded geographical setting, there exist various meanings and flavors of stigma. For example, within the institutionalized and cultural norms, poor people are assigned multiple labels and, as consumers, they are categorized as “flawed, blemished, and defective consumer manquées” (Bauman 2005, p. 38). Poverty is also seen as a “manifestation of moral defect”; that is, a blemish of the individual character since it is assumed that the poor are generally responsible for their socio-economic status (Lewis 1970). Moreover, poor people are stigmatized as groups or communities, indicating a tribal-like social stigma as advanced by Goffman (1963). Taking an ethnographic approach within the context of a mobile home park, we investigate how the poor negotiate their social identity and manage multiple stigmas in everyday life. Consistent with a multidimensional approach to poverty, we first untangle different types of stigmatizations experienced by mobile home residents. We then explore a wide range of stigma management strategies they employ.

Mobile homes, once a low-cost opportunity for blue-collar workers to realize the middle-class American dream of home ownership and upward social mobility, have turned into degraded forms of housing since the 1960s. Their unusual appearance and potential mobility represent a threat to conventional American housing ideals and norms. Moreover, the negative social stereotyping of mobile home residents as dirty, lazy, and criminal-minded individuals further contributes to the stigmatization of mobile homes as “white trash icons” (Bérubé and Bérubé 1997). Consequently, our findings suggest that mobile home residents are stigmatized on various dimensions and experience different forms of social devaluation. Within such proliferation of co-existing stigmas, our informants employ a variety of stigma management strategies to either manage or transform those cultural representations and practices that stigmatize. For example, many informants fight back against the stigma of ‘trailer park trash’ by expressing their pride in their homes through artistic and creative home projects. Others take a consumption-oriented approach to poverty management and reject the label of poor and inadequate consumers through middle-class consumption aspirations. Those park residents with a stronger sense of belonging and affiliation to the mobile home park engage in collective community revitalization projects. At times, this active civic engagement extends beyond the confines of the trailer park and includes wider social settings such as the town council and religious communities. Such participation into meaningful social interactions and civic activities help park residents cope with feelings of isolation, exclusion, and alienation from mainstream consumer society. In contrast with these active stigma managers, some mobile home residents take a more subtle approach to stigma management. They emotionally distance themselves from similar others, engage in downward social comparison, and become outsiders within the “ghetto of similarly deficient consumers” (Bauman 2005, p. 41). Finally, other poor consumers who actually own the stigma of poverty reconstruct the meaning of stigmatization through horizontal social comparison and bonding capital (Putnam 2003).

Thus, this research approaches social stigma of poverty as a relational, multi-faceted, and dynamic process whereby individuals with different levels of agency and aspirations and multiple social constituents interact in an intertwined web of power relations (Waxman 1983). Combining individual-psychological and macro-
social research traditions on stigma and exploring multiple coexisting social stigmas within a mobile home park community, this research extends our understanding of stigma creation and management.

“From Individual Coping to Collective Action: Stigma Management in Online Communities”
Daiane Scaraboto, York University, Canada
Eileen Fischer, York University, Canada

Current perspectives on stigma define it as a persistent predicament with widespread consequences for stigmatized individuals (Henry and Caldwell 2006). This conception of stigma implies that to promote effective change, a multifaceted and multilevel approach is necessary. To combat stigma, it is necessary to address issues related to the many mechanisms that can emerge in the context of disadvantaged outcomes. Consumer researchers have mainly focused on understanding the consequences of stigmatization for consumers and on identifying individual passive strategies of stigma coping, as opposed to active strategies to change stigma. Similarly, other social science research has paid limited attention to active responses to stigma (Miller 2006). Despite a recent move towards a more contextualized, less pathological view of stigmatization (Dovidio, Major, and Crocker 2000, Miller and Major 2000), active responses to stigma have received limited consideration. In particular, collective responses have yet to be considered.

We propose that because they tend to challenge the legitimacy of an existing status situation and involve the elaboration of alternative meanings for individual and collective behavior while fighting the economic and social aspects that underlie the stigma, collectives fighting a stigma can be studied as a form of social movement. On the macro level, the focus is on the role of culture in giving rise to challenges to entrenched features of social structures, such as those that support particular stigma. On the micro level, the focus is on how individual identities and behaviors lead them to challenge specific features of such structures (Pichardo 1997). The new social movement perspective and consumer culture literature lend support to our investigation of a collective of stigmatized consumers. We are interested in identifying and explaining how collectives attempt to deal with marketing practices that they view as reinforcing aspects of a particular stigma. We are also interested in how these collectives attempt to influence marketers to mitigate stigma in society more broadly. Our research is conducted in an online context by a qualitative investigation of the FAM movement and fighting stigma.

This choice of context also contributes to extend our understanding of the phenomenon, we employ “netnography” (Kozinets 2002) to orient data collection and analysis. The study also involves interviewing individuals associated with the FAM movement and includes participant observation in offline settings. This methodological approach takes us closer to the meanings attributed by members to their actions, and provides an understanding of issues related to intersectionality (Gopaldas et al. 2008) and representativeness within the community.

A primary contribution of this investigation will be to explore how the actions of collectives fighting a stigma impact on cultural and marketplace practices, and, conversely, will illuminate the evaluation of market practices’ impact on stigma-related issues. In addition, this study will shift significantly our theoretical understanding of stigma management from an individual, passive, to a collective, active perspective. This study will also have significant implications for social scientists engaged in stigma related research by addressing the stigma associated with fat, an important source of debate and concern to public policy makers and to legions of consumers who struggle with the embodied experience of being fat in a society that reveres thinness. Our preliminary findings indicate that, as a consequence of taking part in collective advocacy against their stigma, these individuals become more critical of the social scene, and highly conscious of human relations. In this sense, they are more inclined to notice and discuss market practices that represent their group in a positive or biased way. Furthermore, we find support to prior research (e.g. Henry and Caldwell 2006, 1035) suggesting that “in contrast to withdrawing into an enclave, the stigmatized individual may respond by challenging the stigma label by attempting to participate in the mainstream domains.” Our study offers empirical evidence that endorses this assumption and also identifies how a collective of stigmatized individuals interact with the market to develop workable ways to fight the stigma and achieve mainstream insertion.

“Understanding Stigma and Coping Strategies across Resource and Literacy Barriers: A Cross-Cultural Comparison”
Madhu Viswanathan, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

This presentation will examine stigma and stigma management among low-literate, low-income consumers in the US and subsistence consumers and entrepreneurs in South India. Our research has focused on understanding marketplace behaviors of individuals living across literacy and resource barriers in the US and in South India. We draw from 15 shopping observations and 35 in-depth interviews of students at adult education centers in the US and from 75 in-depth interviews of low-income, low to moderately literate buyers and sellers in South India.

Research on low-literate consumers in the US has highlighted stigma and related coping strategies (Adkins and Ozanne 2005, Viswanathan, Rosa, and Harris 2005). Adkins and Ozanne (2005) employ dimensions of identity management strategies and acceptance or rejection of stigma arising from low literacy to identify types of low-literate consumers. Researchers have noted that seemingly straightforward events such as having insufficient money at the checkout counter can be cause for despair for low-literacy consumers, attributed to not something as mundane as forgetfulness but to the state of low literacy and the stigma attached to it (Gau and Viswanathan 2008). Viswanathan et al. (2005) report a number of coping strategies including avoidance, dependence on others, and weight-based discrimination (Rabin 2008). It constitutes a site of documented interactions that can provide insight into key aspects of how a community manages the stigma. Consistent with the nature of the phenomenon, we employ “netnography” (Kozinets 2002) to orient data collection and analysis. The study also involves interviewing individuals associated with the FAM movement and includes participant observation in offline settings. This methodological approach takes us closer to the meanings attributed by members to their actions, and provides an understanding of issues related to intersectionality (Gopaldas et al. 2008) and representativeness within the community.
social deception. The contrast with even poor but literate consumers who are not stigmatized by their literacy level is striking, in terms of the willingness of such consumers to complain and seek redress in the marketplace when compared to the relatively passive reactions of low-literate consumers (Gau and Viswanathan 2008).

On the other hand, the nature of stigma associated with being poor in an advanced country needs to be disentangled from the stigma associated with low literacy. The social stigma of being barely literate may heavily influence purchase decision-making, such as giving up on functional attributes to avoid embarrassment. In shopping contexts in the US where a certain level of literacy is assumed, the presentation will examine the nature of stigma attached to low literacy and low income as well as associated coping strategies. Large retail settings, with advanced technology for computation and symbolic package information assume certain levels of literacy. Low-literate consumers negotiate shopping encounters apprehensive about being “caught” or “exposed” for their lack of literacy. A sharp contrast is provided by a different setting across the world where poverty and low literacy are both more widespread. Our research on subsistence consumers and entrepreneurs in South India provides comparative insights on stigma and its management. This intensely relational marketplace is characterized by 1-1 interactions and oral communications, with consumers sharing adversity with small entrepreneurs. Much of the marketplace for the large population of poor, low-literate consumers is relatively distinct from those for the middle and upper strata of society. Subsistence consumers and entrepreneurs learn to evaluate generic products, bargain, count money, and develop related marketplace skills despite their lack of literacy and low income. As a result, we have described these marketplaces as being resource-poor but network rich (Viswanathan 2007), and a stepping stone for developing consumer skills.

With widespread poverty and low literacy, there is almost camaraderie in an otherwise extremely harsh world among the poor and social networks that provide support. The nature of stigma in these settings may be quite different, arising to a lesser extent from poverty or low literacy, but nevertheless existing at more extreme levels of these dimensions. For example, with extreme poverty, households have no choice but to renge on family traditions and associated expenses relating to weddings, birth or death, often leading to stigmatization and being ostracized from family circles. Similarly, public humiliation, the method through which non-collateral loans of astronomic interest are enforced, works by stigmatizing the family for being unable to pay back money they owe. Thus, the very same rich social networks that play a facilitating role can also amplify stigma and the need for its management. Compared to poverty, low literacy leads appears to lead to distinctly different and arguably more acute stigma, an issue that will be explored in the presentation. Despite subsistence marketplaces that do not rely on or assume a high level of literacy, low-literate individuals view themselves as possessing an attribute with a negative connotation, i.e., as a stigma, often an explanation for their being in the state of poverty. Low literacy can lead to fear of conversation and enquiry in s shopping context, feelings of futility even when cheated, and an acceptance of conditions as they are—often justified by the stigma of low literacy. Significant events such as learning a specific trade can act to lessen the stigma of lacking formal education. In summary, this presentation will take a cross-cultural journey toward understanding the nature of stigma in strikingly different marketplaces with distinctly different levels of poverty and low literacy, while emphasizing the interplay between low income and low literacy.

References available from the authors.