Stigmas of feminists have long been used as methods to control discourses and undermine social movements. This study examines and compares two online conversations evoking various tenets of feminism, one a socio-political event and the other a brand-related conversation to examine access to and legitimization of feminist discourses.

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Access In Transition: Understanding Evolving Marketplace Access for Stigmatized Consumers

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Paper #2: Problem or Opportunity: Marketplace Access and Legitimacy for the Multiracial Consumer
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Paper #4: Ban the Word Feminist? Control and Subversion of Stigma in Social Movements and Consumer Culture
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SESSION OVERVIEW:
The papers in this session explore the issue of marketplace access for stigmatized consumers. More specifically, they examine access in transition. Capturing moments of access is consequential, as these instances represent the attainment of more equal terms in society often following prolonged histories of exclusion and devaluation. Stigmatized consumers, or those possessing a discrediting attribute that taints or discounts (Goffman 1963), often face marketplace neglect, or even explicit rejection (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013; Adkins and Ozanne 2005, Sandikci and Ger 2010). Our session spans the experiences of transgender individuals, multiracial families, same-sex couples, and feminists who face various levels of exclusion from the marketplace. As the works in this session demonstrate, however, marketplace access is often evolving and at times even increasing for marginalized consumers. Focusing attention toward these situations of increased access enables exploration into the processes and players that shape these transitions as well as consumers’ diverse responses to marketplace evolution.

Situating stigmatized consumers within their institutional environment, these works join others to explore how shifting social systems composed of rules (regulatory), morals (normative), and understandings (cultural-cognitive) impact legitimacy (Arnold, Kozinets, and Handelman 2001; Handelman and Arnold 1999; Humphrey 2010a, 2010b, Sandikci and Ger 2010; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013). Efforts to acquire legitimacy—“a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate” within a particular context (Suchman 1995, 574)—can (but do not always) result in increasing marketplace access, which raises important questions: 1) How does the institutional environment (influence consumer legitimacy and shape marketplace access for stigmatized groups? To what extent do the different forms of legitimacy – regulatory, normative, cultural-cognitive – impact evolving access? 2) Does greater legitimacy necessarily result in greater marketplace access? What factors complicate this relationship? Taken together, the papers address these questions by looking at the relationship between access and legitimacy. Paper 1 (Velagaleti and Epp) studies the recent unprecedented shifts in public opinion and regulatory gains around same-sex marriage, the subsequent increased attention from the marketplace, and same-sex couples’ responses to this increased access. In contrast, Paper 2 (Harrison, Thomas, and Cross) examines how multiracial families with long-established regulatory gains can still face such limited marketplace access, owing to slow progress in achieving cultural validation as a family form. Paper 3 (Crosby, McKeage, and Rittenburg) investigates how transgender individuals with limited legitimacy in all forms and almost non-existent marketplace representation still find moments of temporal reprieve, when their social transgression is condoned or even celebrated. Lastly, Paper 4 (Coleman and Tuncay Zayer) looks at discursive access, tracing how stigmatizing associations have called into question the legitimacy of feminism, resulting in constrained accessibility to feminist discourse in the marketplace.

In the spirit of the conference theme, “advancing connections” these papers promote an intersectional approach to understanding marginality in society, by considering various aspects of identity across papers – gender, sexuality, and race. Similarly, our discussion will focus on looking across papers to think more broadly about how forms of legitimacy and stigmatized identity shape marketplace access.

Pursuing Marriage Equality in the Marketplace: Stigmatized Consumers’ Responses to Mainstream Marketplace Access

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Stigmatized consumers, or those possessing a discrediting attribute that taints or discounts (Goffman 1963), often lack access to the mainstream marketplace. Examples include limited plus-sized clothing options (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013) and scarce childcare accessories for at-home fathers (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013). As “a social process implicated within relations of power” (Sandikci and Ger 2010, 17), however, stigma’s status or impact can change with a shift in the beliefs of powerful groups or by altering power dynamics that allow these groups “to make their cognitions the dominant one” (Link and Phelan 2001, 381). The marketplace – as a domain where power is reproduced and contested – is not immune to these changes (Sandikci and Ger 2010, 17). More specifically, a stigmatized population or practice, once restricted from the mainstream marketplace, can gain increasing access.

An example can be found in the context of same-sex couples’ pursuit of marriage. Although those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) have faced prolonged stigmatization, a cultural shift has occurred in the past decade, reflected in part by increased public support for the legalization of same-sex marriage as well as legislative action to secure it (Freedom to Marry; McCarthy 2014; Pew Research). Public backing and regulatory victories alter the power dynamics and lessen the ability and desire of dominant parties to enforce stigma through institutional channels, including the marketplace. One implication of these power shifts is increased

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marketplace access for same-sex couples as marketers respond to a commercial opportunity around marriage.

This study explores shifting access through two central questions. First, how do stigmatized consumers interpret and respond to newfound access? Specifically, what diversity exists within their perceptions and actions? Second, how might the heterogeneity within a stigmatized group contribute to variation in responses to access? In terms of capital or resources, while LGBT consumers as a whole arguably still lack its symbolic form (e.g. social recognition, status), other varieties (cultural, social, and economic) exist, though differentially distributed among its members. Bourdieuan applications in consumer research explore how differences in distributions of capital within marginalized communities impact their marketplace experiences and coping mechanisms (Adkins and Ozanne 2005; Coskun-Balli and Thompson 2013; Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013). We extend this work by exploring the impact of resource heterogeneity in contexts of mainstream access. In line with this focus on heterogeneity, we also incorporate stigma theory and its mechanisms – such as discrimination – to ensure recognition of how same-sex couples generate intragroup diversity in the understanding, experience, and impact of a stigmatized identity.

Using in-depth interviews with 30 same-sex couples with varying responses to access (e.g. receptive, ambivalent, or resistant) and ethnographic observation at wedding expos, we developed a theoretical framework that demonstrates how within-group heterogeneity generates diversity in responses to increased marketplace access. More specifically, it details how heterogeneity in individual experiences with tensions, stigma identity, and social capital impact consumers’ responses. The framework conceptualizes increasing access as a continuum, with earlier periods being typified by inconsistency. Marketplace visibility is constrained to socially legitimized aspects of the community. Service provision is restricted, as it is often unclear which vendors are willing to serve stigmatized consumers and rejection is common. Product and service offerings remain dominated-group-centric, and updates to marketplace infrastructure (e.g. forms) and prior logics (e.g. heteronormative and gender-normative assumptions) are neither automatic nor uniform.

Responses to access include consumers’ approaches to the marketplace and reactions to constraint. Consumers describe engagement with the marketplace as a constant “coming out” to vendors, and vigilance is exerted to minimize experiences with discrimination or rejection. For instance, consumers avoid unfamiliar retailers, choose not to disclose their stigma status, assess a retailer’s position before disclosing, or simply prepare for rejection. Another aspect of approach is the types of resources utilized. Despite being seen as marginalizing, mainstream resources are heavily leveraged to normalize same-sex couples’ performance of marriage. In contrast, “alternative” (not limited to LGBT-specific) resources are utilized by those in search of non-traditional ideas and are presumed to be more accepting. Variation also exists in consumers’ reactions to constraint, including strategies such as correcting vendors through education, affording marketers the opportunity to “recalibrate,” discontinuing use, accepting limitations as a product of early-stage access, ignoring constraint, or compensating for resource deficiencies.

Diversity in responses to access is, in part, the result of heterogeneity in individual experiences of tensions, stigma identity, and social capital. For instance, tensions – including liberation from tradition versus desire to normalize (Tension 1) and celebrating visibility versus apprehension in disclosure (Tension 2) – shape which resources are used as well as a consumer’s approach to their use (e.g. decisions to disclose stigma status or correct). In addition, how one experiences a stigma identity – the result of an individual’s unique history of discrimination along with his/her interpretations of the label (e.g. liability) - shapes expectations of marketplace treatment and the degree of caution exercised. Lastly, social capital protects, facilitates, and legitimizes in the context of increased marketplace access. It protects through identifying inclusive vendors. It facilitates by securing resources not readily available in the marketplace. Lastly, it legitimizes through others’ recognition and collaboration. Social capital also connects to stigma identification, with support combatting fears of rejection, while its absence reinforces them. Social capital can also motivate tensions around normalization, encouraging inclusion of traditional practices or objects in order to create a “relatable” ceremony. Within-group variability in response to access has consequences. More assertive approaches generate visibility for consumers as well as the privilege to provide marketplace instruction on how to cater to stigmatized entrants. This finding reflects Bourdieu’s (1986) idea of the logic of representation, as more assertive consumers shape the marketplace’s perception of the greater “LGBT consumer.” It also suggests what Goffman (1963) terms codes or “certain standard manners” that define the “desirable pattern of revealing and concealing” (109) – in this case, how consumers and marketers can “appropriately” handle marketplace access.

Problem or Opportunity: Marketplace Access and Legitimacy for the Multiracial Consumer

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

“Loving [vs. Virginia case] marks the moment when our families, families that transgress law and the color line, became legitimated, permissible, cognizable dimensions of our national landscape. Loving said something powerful and new about our parents and the choices they had made about whom to love and with whom to make a family.” (Professor Martha S. Jones, University of Michigan, Michigan Law’s Martin Luther King Jr. Day lecture, 01/19/2015)

The struggle to legitimize multiracial identity has been long and arduous. However, in recent years we have witnessed several gains towards legitimation. In 1967, anti-miscegenation laws in the U.S. were overturned by the Supreme Court ruling in the landmark Loving vs. Virginia case, which declared that all US couples could marry regardless of their racial backgrounds. This case provided regulative legitimacy to multiracial couples (Scott 1995). In 2000, regulative legitimacy was extended to the offspring of multiracial couples when the U.S. Census expanded its racial categorization system to include a multiracial option. Since the Census change, the Selig Center for Economic Growth, which tracks the buying power of several U.S. consumer segments, has also begun to do so for multiracial Americans. Recent Selig Center data states that there are more than nine million multiracial Americans that hold a combined buying power of $161 billion. The tracking and reporting of such data provides multiracial individuals with newfound cultural-cognitive legitimacy, as they are collectively represented as a viable consumer segment.

Even with these achievements, it is debatable whether members of multiracial families have achieved full marketplace access and legitimacy as consumers. According to Professor Martha Jones (2015) co-director of the Program in Race, Law and History at the University of Michigan, who grew up in a multi-racial household: “There will be more anecdotes and ways to think about how courts, legal culture, and our culture at large think about and grapple with the fact, the possibility, the problem that mixed-race people represent.” The virulent online comments against the 2013 Cheerios commercial featuring a Caucasian mother, African-American father, and their biracial daughter raised concerns that many in society still deny full legitimacy to multiracial individuals and their families. Over the
past decade and increasingly in the last few years, when attempts are made to recognize this consumer segment, there is still considerable consumer backlash. Thus, it is clear that while multiracial individuals have made significant strides in attaining regulative legitimacy, they continue to struggle to gain normative and cognitive/cultural legitimacy in the marketplace and society at large.

Full legitimation of multiracial groups may bring with it a range of public policy and marketplace issues. For instance, adoption of multiracial as a legitimate racial category by government entities (e.g. US Census) has impacted how governmental funds and resources are distributed, particularly among racial/ethnic minority populations (Williams 2006). Additionally, representation of multiracial consumers in commercial media can be problematic. Due to the ubiquitous nature of marketing communication, if marketers utilize a narrow range of phenotypic characteristics and body types when representing multiracial populations, a myopic and essentialized understanding of who is (and is not) multiracial can result. Such a situation could not only negatively impact the development of multiracial individuals who reside outside the narrowly constructed boundaries of “multiracialness,” but may also affect their consumption behavior and overall retail experience in adverse ways. Thus, from a broader societal perspective, multiracial individuals’ socialization experiences as consumers and members of society may differ markedly from the experiences of their mono-racial counterparts. It is therefore even more important that we understand how multiracial consumers learn and, by their very presence, define the expectations of marketers, retailers, and public policy administrators.

This paper explores the experiences of multiracial consumers in this paradoxical environment. We ask the following key research questions: 1) What are multiracial consumers’ perceptions of current marketplace practices? 2) What is the experience of multiracial consumers and their family units as legal recognition transfers to marketplace legitimacy and societal acceptance? We focus on adult female offspring of multiracial unions. We employ a phenomenological approach emphasizing their lived experience both individually and within their family units, by studying “the totality of human-being-in-world” (Thompson et al. 1989, 135). We conducted interviews with 21 mixed-race women between the ages of 19-25. “Mixed race” was defined as having both a black and a white U.S.- born parent. Socio-historically, this racial combination maintains the highest level of social juxtaposition and therefore offered the greatest opportunity to investigate the dynamics of multiracial identity development (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008). Interviews spanned 60-75 minutes, were audiotaped and transcribed, and were analyzed following phenomenological procedures (Moustakas 1994).

Findings reveal that in spite of legal and census policy changes which have attempted to remove societal and marketplace barriers, longstanding views make such emancipatory policies particularly complex for the multiracial consumer. While multiracial consumers may be members of the U.S. multicultural marketplace, their lived experiences, socialization processes and perception by society make them different from others who share the same multicultural classification. The process of constantly moving between two disparate worlds, not fully accepted by either, may cause some individuals to focus their efforts on one world or the other. In an attempt to successfully navigate between their heritage backgrounds, multiracial individuals consume (or eschew) the symbolic value of marketplace commodities, using brands and marketplace access to enhance (or suppress) association with specific aspects of their racial backgrounds. For example, identity markers, such as uniquely textured hair, which we coin “the mighty ringlets,” emerge as a key visual representation of multiracial identity for the vast majority of informants. For this particular identity marker, hair products and self-help hair care books, specifically marketed to and for multiracial women, legitimize their liminal racial space.

Marginalization, Resistance, and Stealth Shopping: Subalternity in the Gendered Marketplace

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The concept of gender is socially constructed and pervasive (West and Zimmerman 1987). Gendered products and services include clothing, hairstyles, cosmetics, bags (totes, purses, etc.), colors, toys, and books. Within the dominant social discourse, individuals are expected to conform to the gender norms that are associated with their biological sex. People that violate this norm often experience stigmatization (Gagné and Tewksbury 1998, Kosenko et al. 2013). They are devalued and face social exclusion in many aspects of their lives, including the marketplace. In this research, we explore transgender consumers’ experiences in the market by addressing the following research questions: (1) How does the market marginalize transgender consumers? (2) How do these individuals cope with this marginalization?

Transgender is “an umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from . . . the sex they were assigned at birth” (GLAAD 2013, 1). We conducted 24 depth interviews with informants having a wide range of gender identities. For the purposes of this research, we focus on those who identify as the opposite gender from what they were assigned at birth. Respondents also constructed collages depicting their gender identity. The interviews generated more than 775 pages of text along with 24 collages. In analyzing the data, we searched for emergent themes while engaging in dialectical tacking (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Our findings concerning how the market marginalizes transgender consumers echo Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg (2005) who argue that consumers can experience powerlessness in multiple marketing contexts. Many of our informants perceived the market as unfriendly, and reported four major areas of marginalization: (1) products, (2) service, (3) retail space, and (4) advertising. In the product area, informants discuss having limited options. For example, transgender consumers often have difficulty finding clothing and shoes in appropriate sizes. Clothing is a significant factor in communicating gender, so limited product options can stifle consumers’ ability to express their identity. Service providers also play a key role in market experiences. Informants report that service providers have treated them poorly in the marketplace after realizing that they are transgender. For example, a store employee insisted that one informant try on clothing in a back room rather than the store’s dressing room. Others report salespeople making fun of them and in some cases calling them derogatory names. Informants also discuss how the retail space itself is uninviting and in some cases hostile, with accessing the correct gendered spaces safely (such as bathrooms and dressing rooms) being a constant struggle.

Lastly, media and advertising can marginalize transgender consumers. Advertising significantly contributes to the social construction of gender (Pollay 1986). Informants point out that these stereotypes are difficult to meet, making it even harder for them to be accepted as their true gender. The need to conform in order to have one’s gender read correctly has implications for discrimination, harassment, and personal safety. Therefore, some of these consumers can be extremely susceptible to marketing promises of fitting in and looking “right.”

Marketplace marginalization can leave transgender consumers feeling powerless and as if they do not belong. Informants often dis-
cuss being devalued and discriminated against. Related to Baker et al.’s (2005) regulating emotions, some informants report trying to use marginalizing episodes as teaching opportunities, especially with service providers. However, having to constantly do this is exhausting for many who do not want to have to always defend themselves. Often due to the marginalization, transgender consumers withdraw from the market. In some cases, this can be seen as a form of resistance. Similar to other findings, these consumers actively work to escape the restrictive and in some instances oppressive marketplace (e.g., Murray and Ozanne 1991, Firtat and Venkatesh 1995, Koiznets 2002). They may band together to fulfill their consumption needs within the gender nonconforming community. It is important to note that these individuals are not just resisting the market because they find it exploitative or restricting in general; they are resisting at least in part because of the significant marginalizing practices.

Informants also use other adaptive strategies to cope with the marginalization. Some transgender consumers engage in stealth shopping. For example, several informants discuss shopping for clothing around Halloween when an individual perceived as male can buy women’s clothing (or vice versa) without fear of stigmatization as it could be a costume. What is generally seen as a gender transgression becomes legitimated by society. Informants discuss the immense relief to be able to purchase items without the cloud of stigmatization over them during this temporary window of time. Many also make purchases online for access to a wider range of sizes and to limit market interaction where they are constantly misgendered. While the Internet may provide a safe place, it also further isolates these consumers from the bricks and mortar marketplace and increases feelings of disenfranchisement and dissatisfaction. These negative feelings and responses to the marketplace can also increase feelings of marginalization.

Transgender consumers’ negative responses seem especially regrettable given that in many cases the issues that these consumers encounter in the market do not have to be there. They are, rather, a result of relatively unthinking and unquestioned habits and assumptions. Currently, the market is starting to manifest shifts toward gender-free spaces and products that respond in a more thoughtful manner. Ultimately, transgender consumers ask marketers to think, question, and change the marketplace in ways that are more inclusive and will benefit all consumers.

Ban the Word Feminist? Control and Subversion of Stigma in Social Movements and Consumer Culture

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The feminist label, with its contested meanings (Bennett 2014; McRobbie 2008), has long carried a stigma that is deployed to discredit (Goffman 1963) those identified as feminists and the underlining tenets of feminist movements (Lind and Salo 2002; Jaworska and Krishnamurthy 2012). In a 2014 poll, Time magazine proposed a ban on the word “feminist,” arguing it had become a celebrity buzzword. With help from online anti-feminist campaigns, “feminist” was winning (Merlan 2014). This example evokes enduring discourses surrounding the “feminist” stigma. For years, high-profile women from entertainers Madonna, Beyonce, and Taylor Swift to Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, despite supporting gender equality, would not “cop to the F-bomb” (McDonough 2013). Yet some of these same women—Beyonce and Taylor Swift to name two—have recently labeled themselves feminist (Bennett 2014; Thomas 2014), a move some have argued legitimizes feminism for the masses (Bennett 2014). These discourses are further reflected in consumer culture and marketing. A recent Ad Age article argues social media has facilitated change, and marketers “now subject to the social media jury” are “challenging cultural norms and notions about how we talk about—and to—women” (Zmuda and Diaz 2014). Yet despite recent attention to empowerment marketing, go-girl marketing, and femvertising (Davidson 2015), “marketers are being careful not to label themselves or their marketing messages as feminist” (Zmuda and Diaz 2014). In this way, possibilities have opened up for conversations about feminism, yet “feminism” as a label may be restricted in discourses and representations in marketing.

Drawing from Kozinets’s (2010, p. 39) argument that “online communities change the way that people seek to change their world,” we examine transition in discourses on feminism through communicative acts that consumers perform online. In the context of social media, which has been touted as a democratizing force, and stigmatization, which involves power and dis/empowerment (Sandikci and Ger 2010; Koiznets 2001), we examine stigmatization and subversion in communicative acts surrounding discourses of feminism. We ask: To what extent do different forms of legitimacy influence evolving access to feminist discourses and representations online? What is the nature of discourses and representations evident in these communicative acts?

Following Kozinets’s (2010) recommendations on netnographic analysis, we examine two sets of online conversations, both emerging feminist discourses. One is in the context of American socio-political events and the other in the context of a brand. The Twitter movement #YesAllWomen initially sought to bring attention to violence against women in response to the May 23, 2014 killing spree by a young man near the University of California Santa Barbara campus. Before killing himself, the shooter posted a YouTube video discussing his hatred towards women who rejected him, among other things. #YesAllWomen morphed into a larger movement seeking to highlight the ubiquitous sexism that all women face in their daily lives and in part to counter #NotAllMen (“not all men are like that”). Within five days, there were one million tweets using #YesAllWomen. We collected over 750 tweets using the hashtags #YesAllWomen and #NotAllMen in the days following the California shootings, which feminist voices such as Rebecca Solnit (2014), activist and contributing editor at Harper’s Magazine, called a “watershed moment in the history of feminism.”

In June 2014, the brand Always launched their Like a Girl campaign. The brand sought to tackle negative connotations surrounding the phrase “like a girl” (e.g., throwing like a girl), while also utilizing the hashtag #likeagirl. Their agency Leo Burnett later placed the ad during Super Bowl 2015, where it garnered significant media attention. We collected more than 2,300 tweets during the first five days of the launch of the original campaign and immediately following Super Bowl spot. Additionally, we collected more than 800 tweets using the hashtag #likeaboy. #likeaboy emerged online shortly after the Super Bowl and was reported to be a response by some men who found #likeagirl to be “exclusionary and sexist” (Chittal 2014), reminiscent of arguments stigmatizing feminists as “man-haters” (Cavanagh 2014).

Our initial analysis of both sets of data reveals the emergence of online voices who employ stigmas as a way to control and divert the conversation, a tacit others claim (e.g., Zimmerman 2014) that is a common response to feminist arguments. With regard to institutional forces, while substantial legal measures regulate various levels of marketplace participation for women in some areas of the world (e.g., Coleman 2012), cultural-cognitive and normative forces are utilized to regulate feminist dialogue in both the socio-political events surrounding #YesAllWomen and Always’s branding campaign with #likeagirl. Yet we find that attempts to participate, and
to some extent control, discourse go both ways. Where #likeaboy was used to control the conversation of cultural gender norms, the #YesAllWomen movement was in part a response to the #NotAll-Men discourses that position sexism as an individual issue, rather than a structural and institutional one. It is, in part, a collective effort (Scaraboto and Fischer 2010) in an emergent online conversation to subvert stigma. Our analysis of #likeagirl/#likeaboy considers previous critiques that the prevailing message of consumer culture is anti-feminist (McRobbie 2009), taking feminism “into account,” while simultaneously dismissing it” (Myers 2013, p. 198). Thus, feminist language is given attention and simultaneously marginalized. Understanding stigmatization of and subversion through feminist discourses in the two online environments in this study is important for several reasons. Scholars note that media help fashion gender role norms (Jhally 1987). Moreover, emergence of social media has altered the manner in which people seek to change the world and how they serve as social agents of change (Kozinets 2010, p. 39). Exploring stigmatization and legitimization of feminist discourse merits attention, particularly for consumer researchers as feminism has received renewed attention (Shirk 2014) from the market and brands are embracing female empowerment discourses for the 21st century. Research should examine whether online social movements and brand discourses evoking variations of feminist themes (e.g. girl marketing, femvertising) affect substantial social change as individuals engage with them on social media.

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