How Do Brands’ Destigmatizing Messages Travel Through Social Media? Like a Girl

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Some brands seek to destigmatize race, gender, and medical conditions -- activity traditionally undertaken by grassroots social movements. This research contrasts the way destigmatizing initiatives spread through social media by comparing the Twitter network of a brand-driven destigmatizing initiative (#LikeAGirl) with that of a grassroots destigmatizing initiative (#BlackLivesMatter).

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felt by religious followers as generally not costs but rather deliberate choices pursued to create “tension with the dominant culture” as a means of creating a “distinctive identity” (Kurtz, 2012, 18; Iannaccone, 1988). Alternatively, other research reveals that consumers may mask their religious identity in an effort to minimize differences with others and avoid potential stigmatization (Weinberger, 2015). This study advances our understanding of what happens when consumers unwillingly experience stigma in light of their association and practice of a specific religion.

The paper is based on a three-year ethnographic study on the consumption of the religious pilgrimage experience to Lourdes in France. The Lourdes pilgrimage was ignited in 1858 by a series of apparitions between fourteen-year-old Bernadette Soubirous and a woman, who was authenticated by the Catholic Church in 1862 as the Mother of Jesus Christ. A consumption experience that continues to grow after 150 years, with over six million pilgrims journeying there annually in search of physical, spiritual and personal renewal. In keeping with standard ethnographic practice, multiple methods of data collection were employed. Fieldwork was based on participant observation, which at times incorporated volunteering with teams. Fieldwork data resulted in over 200 pages of double spaced fieldnotes, approximately 3000 visuals (photographs and videos), and many informal and serendipitous interviews with pilgrims on site at Lourdes, which were audio-recorded when possible. Depth interviews were conducted with twenty-three respondents lasting from thirty minutes to four hours in length enabling the understanding of personal life histories. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, tallying over 1000 double spaced pages of transcription.

Findings reveal that religious conversation and expression is becoming less tolerated and as such is silenced or “backgrounded” (Weinberger, 2015) within respondents’ home environments. Respondents agree that practicing Catholicism results in them being labelled and stereotyped as part of “The God Squad” or as “Crazy Catholics”. We find such existential silencing to be detrimental to Catholic consumers, creating feelings of stigmatization and causing many to feel continuously liminal in everyday life. Turner (1969, p. 103) suggests that submissiveness and silence are characteristics associated with liminal entities. The liminal state has been viewed as a “negative, ambiguous phase” during which liminaries suffer a “suspension of their identity” and experience a “vague or blurred” sense of self (Cody and Lawlor, 2011, 211). However, rather than overtly or publically transgressing against normative society, respondents turn to the marketplace. By consuming the Lourdes experience, such religious repression is temporarily freed and consumers are able to temporarily shed their existential liminal state.

The Lourdes pilgrimage consumption experience encapsulates a familiarity that is expressed as being a “home away from home,” that is “comfortable”, “homely”, and “welcoming”. Consequently, many align their pilgrimage consumption experience to being encapsulated within what is colloquially termed the “Lourdes Bubble” with the Lourdes pilgrimage affording them a time and place where they feel “safe”, “secure”, and “protected”, more so than they do at home:

“On the way home everyone is tired, but happy. I can hardly wait to get home, but by this I mean that I can hardly wait to go home to Lourdes next year because that is how I feel about going to Lourdes every year – I am going home!”(Patricia, 93).

Therefore, while emically respondents speak of Lourdes as a home away from home, etically our findings reveal that Lourdes can in fact be more homely than home because of the perceived safety, security and religious freedom that is missing from daily life.

Previous consumer research has found that consumers embrace the stigma associated with their religious fervour (Sandikci and Ger, 2010). In contrast, we find that the religious setting is not consumed to signify religious virtue but rather to temporarily escape “stigmatic boundaries” and provide a “form of sanctuary and acceptance” (Kozinets, 2001, 72) where consumers are free to express and practice their religiosity. Thus while consumers may suffer a tearing of the self (Jafari and Goulding, 2008) in their everyday lives, the Lourdes marketplace offers a repair; a balm that enables consumers to temporarily shed their existential liminal state and experience a temporal cohesive, accepted, holistic sense of self. Van Gennep (1909/ 1960, 46) distinguished between the physical return versus the social return from rites of passage, a distinction that has yet to be incorporated into consumer research. This study demonstrates that whilst consumption experiences may be physically located within a peripheral, liminal landscape, the social experience can provide consumers with a holistic sense of self, unachievable in their mundane, everyday lives. The peripheral physical location of the Sanctuary of Lourdes, in the Pyrenees region of France, denotes liminality. However, the social experiences of Lourdes consumers signals not a “betwixt and between” but rather a stable, holistic state. Thus, through Van Gennep’s distinctions, we advance Schouten’s (1991, 421-422) understanding of “prolonged” and “continued” liminality demonstrating that consumers can be simultaneously physically liminal and socially whole.

**How Do Brands’ Destigmatization Messages Travel Through Social Media? ‘Like a Girl!’**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Stigma’s presence in the marketplace has been uncovered in product stigmatization (Ellen and Bone 2008), the experience of stigmatized groups in customer service encounters (Adkins and Ozanne 2005; Crockett, Grier, and Williams 2003), coping through consumption (Ho and O’Donohoe 2014; Nguyen, Chen, and Mukherjee 2014), and the effects of stereotyping on consumer behavior (Campbell and Mohr 2011; Matta and Folkes 2005; Yeh, Jewell, and Hu 2013). Yet little research has explored ways brands destigmatize (for an exception, see Mirabito et al 2016). This is surprising in light of the influence brands can have on individual’s identity formation and values.

Several brands have begun destigmatization initiatives. Dove’s campaign for real beauty seeks to normalize ordinary features, Dori-to’s Rainbow promotion sought to normalize sexual orientation, and Always’ Like a Girl campaign aims to destigmatize gender roles. Gender stigmas begin to appear at early ages. Children as young as two categorize clothing, colors, toys, activities, and occupations by gender (Levy, Sadovsky, and Troseth 2000; Liben, Bigler, and Krogh 2001). Metheny’s (1965) studies of gender stereotypes found that sports considered to be female sports were aesthetically pleasing and lacked face-to-face competition or overt aggression, while male sports tended to be more aggressive and competitive, with high levels of bodily contact. According to Riener and Visio (2003), sports such as gymnastics and aerobics are considered to be feminine, while football and wrestling tend to be viewed as masculine. In in-depth interviews with children ages 8-10, Schmalz and Kerstetter (2006) found most children followed the gender sports stereotypes, but did not have solid answers as to why. Always’ Like a Girl campaign challenges gender stereotypes by exploring the meaning of running “like a girl.”

Social movement organizations (SMOs) also spread destigmatizing messages. Social movements are created as individuals band together for a common cause. Social media, including Twitter conversations, have been embraced by firms and grassroots organizations as a way of recruiting allies and spreading messages. How do
stigma-challenging messages created by brands differ from social change efforts wrought by SMOs? Extant research in social movement formation prior to the advent of social media (cf., Passy and Giuggini 2001) concludes that movements are built on dense networks; friends recruit friends. This research explores whether brands’ social media networks have a similar shape and structure as those of SMOs.

Methods
Social media networks are created organically as Twitter users share information and viewpoints. Users tweet original messages, reply-to, and mention one another’s posts. Popular topics attract the interest of a large number of users who connect in a network structure. Twitter data can be analyzed to uncover the shape of these network, summarize the content and valence of their discussion, and identify the people playing central roles in extending the messages.

We used NodeXL Pro (Social Media Research Foundation 2016) to download and analyze publicly available Twitter messages incorporating the phrase #LikeAGirl. We captured from the Twitter Search service usernames, hyperlinks and hashtags, and information about each writer’s connection to other Twitter users. We created visual maps of the social networks, evaluated network characteristics including group density and clustering and identified central players who transmitted messages to other groups of friends. To gain insight into the ways brand-supported destigmatizing campaigns compare with grassroots destigmatizing campaigns, we compare the structure of the #LikeAGirl network with that of #BlackLivesMatter, a grassroots social movement aimed at destigmatizing race. We downloaded both networks in February 2016; following Smith et al (2015) practice in comparing different sized campaigns, we analyzed a similar numbers of messages from each network (approximately 2400).

Preliminary Findings
We observe several differences between the two networks. First, the #BLM network is substantially denser. Density is calculated as the ratio of the total edges to the maximum number of possible edges; the #LAG network is just 60% as dense as the #BLM. The implication is that the #BLM tweeters are conversing with each other, whereas the #LAG tweeters broadcast their message to friends who do not necessarily Reply on that topic. Second, and relatedly, the #LAG features relatively more tweets and fewer replies/mentions than #BLM, with 32% of #LAG activity in tweets to 11% of #BLM. #LAG consists of several small groups, loosely connected, whereas #BLM has more connections between groups. Third, the largest #LAG group, includes just 5% of #LAG users. The group, marked with dark blue disks in the upper left of the map, is anchored by @gridironbeautie, a women’s gridiron football enthusiast, who uses #LAG as an endorsement for women’s athleticism writes posts such as “Say Hello to spring football #likeagirl #WFAfootball @IWFL @WWCFL @MWFLfootball @MyLFL @SSFLfootball https://t.co/tKpWRq7asH.” In contrast, 49% of #BLM tweeters are connected to a news commentator, @blackvoices. An illustrative tweet, “Trayvon Martin was killed on this day four years ago. His death forever changed America. #BlackLivesMatter https://t.co/tqFqomMLQA.”

More broadly, the #LAG group resembles the Twitter network associated with a brand, breaking news, or big event (Smith et al. 2015). Many users are likely to mention the topic without having connections to one another. Even the brand itself, @Always is connected to just 3% of users. In contrast, #BLM represents a clustered community featuring many hubs, each with a separate crowd of friends. Within #BLM, the hub and spoke nature of the large group anchored by @blackvoices is typical for media outlets or celebrity networks.

Discussion
While brands have added their voices to efforts to eradicate social stigmas, little is known about how brands’ social messages are transmitted. Do the brands become central figures in their campaigns, broadcasting their message and build a tight network of adherents to the cause? This exploratory study suggests not. Instead, the #LAG network includes some small clusters of conversationists; but most #LAG tweeters appear to use the message to further separate agendas. In contrast, #BLM network is dense, with tightly connected groups and with strong connections between groups, suggesting an ongoing conversation about the topic.

Delusion or Deception: Examining Racialized Stigma and Colorblind Politics in the Marketplace

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction
A peculiar phenomenon is afoot in the marketplace. As marketers make an exerted effort to assuage race-based marketplace discrimination and the racialized stigma that accompanies it by implementing race-neutral/colorblind policies and practices, the experience of racialized stigma does not appear to be lessening for non-white consumers. For instance, enacting nondiscriminatory policies on the basis of race is a customary practice in the marketplace which is typically further supported by federal mandate, yet previous research has demonstrated that the way in which a consumer is racialized bears significantly on the quality of service provided (Ainsworth and Motley, 2000), the assortment of available goods and services (D’Rozario and Williams, 2005), and the pricing of offered products (Talukdar, 2008). In each instance, researchers have found that non-white consumers are adversely impacted, receiving poorer quality service, fewer product options, and higher pricing than consumers from other racial groups. Why does race-based stigmatization continue to exist under the politics of colorblindness, which professes to destigmatize by providing equal treatment and opportunity to all regardless of racial background?

The purpose of this study is to deconstruct this peculiarity by investigating how colorblindness is practiced by marketers and experienced by consumers. We begin with an investigation of race from a socio-historical perspective. This is followed by an exploration of the tenets of colorblindness and the process by which race is reconceptualized through the politics of colorblindness. Utilizing a multifaceted methodological approach that includes a critical discourse analysis of historical and present-day marketing communications and depth interviews with 20 consumers in the U.S., we propose a framework for a colorblind/post-racial aesthetic used by marketers that underpins and potentially exacerbates race-based stigmatizing practices.

Race Historicized
From a socio-historical perspective the concept of race as it is currently experienced can be understood as a configuration of discourse and materiality supported by an historical context (Hall, 1997; Mills, 2014; Smedley, 1998). As a discursive construct race acts as a floating signifier, its meaning shifting with context and ideology (Hall, 1997). Race also serves as a historical construct. Race is a relatively new invention in the history of humanity. Its development coincided with the vast expansion of colonial and imperial projects by European powers. Race served to justify these projects. The construction of race enabled colonial/imperial subjects to be positioned as inferior bodies that required the stewardship of superior beings – in essence, race was