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The End of Stigma? Understanding the Dynamics of Legitimation in the Context of Tv Series Consumption

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This research contributes to prior work on stigmatisation by looking at stigmatisation and legitimation as social processes in the context of TV series consumption. Using in-depth interviews, we show that the dynamics of legitimation are complex and accompanied by the reproduction of existing stigmas and creation of new stigmas.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the consumption practices and meanings associated with television series. Specifically, we investigate the tensions in consumer narratives arising from traditionally negatively-laden television consumption and the positive evaluations of current television series viewing, gained from increasing legitimisation and normalisation processes. We show that these tensions generate complex dynamics through which legitimisation is accompanied by the reproduction of existing stigmas and the creation of new stigmas.

Television as a medium has been stigmatized for a long time. Collins (1993) reports that television has traditionally been regarded by scholars as the least legitimate form of popular culture, judged as a “bad object” despite increasingly sophisticated textual analyses and equally sophisticated audience research. Lodziak’s assertion (1986) that heavy TV consumers cannot afford to do anything else is illustrative of this stigma. These early findings are echoed in Mitu (2011)’s recent work which shows that television is still regarded as a low-quality medium nowadays. However, while television remains stigmatized, TV series are widely popular. In 2011, fiction was rated the top genre worldwide (41% of the best performing programmes), and among fiction, TV series were the best performing format, accounting for 69% of the fiction entries (Cassi, 2012). Some TV series like *Madmen* have even acquired the status of cultural object in highly educated spheres (Glevarrec, 2012). This suggests that perceptions towards television, or at least towards certain TV programs, are gradually shifting.

Goffman (1963) argues that a stigma “refers to an attribute that is deeply discrediting”. According to Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998), stigmatization affects how individuals perceive themselves, but also how they feel others perceive them. Despite its relevance, consumer research on stigma remains limited and focuses mainly on stigma management (e.g., Adkins and Ozanne, 2005; Tepper, 1994; Viswanathan, Rosa, and Harris, 2005; see Sandikci and Ger, 2010 for an exception). Particularly noteworthy is that stigmatisation does not affect all TV series in the same manner, as certain series are stigmatised while others are highly respected. For instance, to define “quality television” Thompson (1996) referred to *Hill Street Blues* or *Moonlighting*, while *Knight Ryder* and *McGyver* were classified as “regular television”.

We interviewed 16 demographically diverse TV series watchers. The authors asked a mix of grand tour questions and floating prompts (McCracken 1988). Following a general discussion, participants were asked to discuss the meanings they associate with series, their watching practices and whether they believe watching TV series is associated with social stigma. Interviews lasted from 25 minutes to 1h05 minutes, were audio recorded and transcribed. An initial identification of themes was developed, and theoretical categories were elaborated on during open and axial coding procedures. We then began a process of dialectical tacking, moving back and forward between our findings and the relevant literature to deepen our understanding of the practices and meanings associated with TV series consumption.

Five key narratives were identified. First, the role of new practices in the legitimisation process of TV series consumption emerged:

Consumers watch TV series less on television than using streaming, downloads or DVD box sets. These practices allow watchers to engage in TV series consumption while distancing themselves from the negative connotations associated with television as a medium. Thus, consumer narratives replicate the cultural stigmatisation discourses around television conveyed by the media and scholars, but at the same time, watching TV series is part of an on-going normalisation process. Second, this process is facilitated by a shift from consumers’ bond to TV channels’ schedule and agenda, to consumers’ perceived control of their viewing time, accessing series online or using DVD boxed sets. Third, a process of ‘reverse stigmatisation’ was identified: Whereas TV series viewers used to be stigmatised, those who do not watch any TV series would now be stigmatised as outside the norm. Fourth, the normalisation process does not apply to all TV series and is contingent on the low social status of the perceived audience. A recurring example of genre that remains stigmatised is soap operas. Non-soap-viewers distance themselves from soap-viewers, while soap-viewers’ narratives echo confession-like acknowledgment of their viewing practice, and engage in a strategy of concealment (Miller and Kaiser, 2001). Fifth, new stigmas are appearing as new practices develop. A key example of such practices is binge-watching i.e. watching several episodes of the same TV series in a row. Binge-watchers are stigmatised by non-binge-watchers, the latter considering the former as antisocial. Interestingly, stigmatisation occurs among binge-watchers themselves. Tensions are particularly evident between those binge-watching socially versus individually. The social ones use an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ discourse to legitimise their own behaviour. They present their binge-watching as a group activity, shared with friends or with their partner, which is considered as normalised whereas binge-watching alone is regarded as asocial and deviant.

We contribute to prior work on stigmatisation (Kozinets, 2001; Sandikci and Ger, 2011) by looking at the dynamics of stigmatisation and normalisation as social processes in the context of TV series. TV series seem to undergo a legitimisation process followed by other popular genres in the past e.g., jazz; graphic novels; thrillers (Glevarrec, 2012). This evolution is facilitated by the Internet which has profoundly reshaped the patterns of TV series consumption. However, we show that far from operating in a linear manner, the dynamics of legitimisation are complex and accompanied by the reproduction of existing stigmas, i.e. soap operas, and by the creation of new stigmas, i.e. reverse stigmatisation and binge-watching practices. Our informants’ narratives evince a degree of cognitive reflexivity that underscores their awareness of the complexities associated with the legitimisation process. Consider Stefan’s comment: “For TV series it’s different because TV in a way is sort of stigmatised right now [...]. I think for TV series it’s much more of a cultural thing. The fact that you don’t watch strictly on TV but you watch on a laptop, it’s different from watching on TV. And you find a lot of friends who feel cool when they watch TV series, but they don’t feel cool when they watch TV. That’s my thought”.

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