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Stigmatized-Identity Cues and Consumer Applications Revisited

Diana T. Sanchez , Kimberly E. Chaney , and Melanie R. Maimon
Rutgers University

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This article responds to thoughtful commentaries provided by Lamberton (2019—this issue) and Wooten & Rank-Christman (2019—this issue) on Chaney, Sanchez, & Maimon (2019—this issue), an article in which we discussed the implications of social psychological research on stigmatized-identity safety cues for consumer behavior. In Chaney, et al. (2019—this issue), we contend that stigmatized-identity cues can signal belonging to marginalized groups via the ideological assumptions made about companies. In this article, we first clarify our definition of stigmatized identities beyond the limitation assumed by Wooten & Rank-Christman (2019—this issue). In addition, we join the conversation regarding when cues lead to divergent responses in social groups. We also consider how using identity cues can “backfire” and the importance of using marketing goals to assess the extent to which strategies using such cues succeeded. Lastly, we integrate Lamberton’s (2019—this issue) framework of dignity architecture and related empirical findings to discuss some of the challenges of research on stigmatized-identity cues.

Keywords Social stigma; Stigma transfer; Identity threat; Diversity

The commentaries by Lamberton (2019—this issue) and Wooten and Rank-Christman (2019—this issue) provide a stimulating dialogue around stigmatized-identity cues and how they operate in consumer spaces. We are grateful to hear their perspectives on this research as it reveals the broad applicability of research on stigmatized-identity cues to consumer attitudes and behavior. These commentaries also reaffirm the utility of applying this framework for companies considering the use of stigmatized-identity cues to attract new, diverse consumer bases. At the same time, these articles point out several opportunities for clarification and expansion to facilitate new directions for research on stigmatized-identity cues. Our goals for this response piece are to, (a) address misconceptions regarding the definition of stigmatized-identity cues and therefore the scope of this framework, (b) participate in the conversation about when stigmatized-

identity cues “backfire”, (c) discuss the empirical and political challenges associated with stigma research.

Clarifying Stigmatized-identity Cues

In our review of stigmatized-identity cues research, we did not mean to imply that this framework was limited to cues pertaining to only traditional demographic groups, that is, women, racial/ethnic minorities, and LGBT+ groups. We used the term “demographic” loosely to refer to segments of the population (i.e., social groups) who hold historically stigmatized identities. This includes those who experience weight bias as well as individuals who possess other devalued identities including, but not limited to, mental illness, physical disabilities, lower socioeconomic status, and devalued religious identities. Thus, we agree with Wooten and Rank-Christman (2019—this issue) that the literature that we

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Diana T. Sanchez, Psychology Department, Rutgers University, 53 Avenue E, Piscataway, New Jersey 08854-8040, USA. Electronic mail may be sent to disanche@psych.rutgers.edu.

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discussed has wide-ranging implications for other groups who are typically the targets of discrimination and mistreatment (including those who face weight stigma).

Our ongoing research is primarily focused on demonstrating how stigmatized-identity cues (of safety and threat) for one social group signal ideological viewpoints of a company that then have implications for how other stigmatized groups respond to the company (Chaney & Sanchez, 2018; Chaney, Sanchez, & Remedios, 2016; Sanchez, Chaney, Manuel, & Remedios, 2018; Sanchez, Chaney, Manuel, Wilton, & Remedios, 2017). In this work, we argue that the type of threat (e.g., Revolve's slogan, "BEING FAT IS NOT BEAUTIFUL; IT'S AN EXCUSE") may determine the ideological inferences drawn from the cue. For example, in this Revolve case, the company communicates that they believe weight is controllable and being overweight is disgusting, a specific affective response that villainizes those who are overweight. Some stigmatized groups may be more likely than others to fear eliciting the disgust response in others because the prejudice that they face contains this element. For example, Cottrell and Neuberg's (2005) framework implies that sexual minorities and overweight people may be more likely to elicit disgust responses in others as both sexual minorities and overweight individuals are perceived as tainting group values.

A recent study conducted in our laboratory supports the link between cues-evoking weight bias and inferences of sexual prejudice. In this unpublished study, participants who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer were invited to form impressions of an airline company who either implemented a new seating policy that would force obese passengers to pay an additional fee (i.e., weight bias cue) or a new baggage policy that would penalize passengers with additional baggage fees (i.e., control condition). LGBQ participants who were assigned to the weight bias condition viewed the companies as more weight intolerant, LGBQ intolerant, and less trustworthy compared to the control condition. In addition, LGBQ participants perceived the company that penalized the overweight customers to be more likely to treat LGBQ customers unfairly compared to the company described in the control condition, suggesting that weight intolerance is perceived to signal LGBQ intolerance (Maimon & Sanchez, in prep).

This newer work also suggests that those with hidden identities (Goffman, 1963), also known as *concealable stigmas*, respond similarly to stigmatized outgroup cues compared to those with conspicuous

stigmas in that they show evidence of stigma transfer (i.e., anticipated negative treatment when encountering cues of outgroup prejudice). Wooten and Rank-Christman (2019—this issue) argue that consumers who have hidden stigmas may be more likely to respond privately (rather than publicly) to stigma cues, presumably as a method to preserve the concealment of their identity. It is possible that stigmatized identity cues could make consumers who are vigilantly concealing their identities feel a greater sense of identity acceptance yet simultaneously lead to consumer avoidance behavior. Thus, we agree that the link between identity safety cues and positive consumption behavior (e.g., brand loyalty) would depend on consumers' identification and overall comfort with being associated with their stigmatized group. Future work should explore moderators of the behavioral consequences of identity safety cues that include identification with one's stigmatized identity as well as whether the stigmatized identity is concealable and/or known.

In addition, our ongoing research examines other concealable stigmas including how historically stigmatized religious groups respond to outgroup prejudice cues. Given the shared historical persecution of both Jews and African Americans, we have found that anti-Semitism and anti-African American threats transfer, such that, for example, White Jewish Americans who learn that an organization is facing a discrimination lawsuit from an African American former employee anticipate that the company would similarly treat them negatively due to their religious beliefs (Chaney & Sanchez, in prep). This is consistent with past research demonstrating that highlighting the similarities in the historical fights for the legalization of interracial marriages and same-sex marriages promotes stigma solidarity among African and LGB Americans (Cortland et al., 2017). Thus, we are actively engaged in examining stigma solidarity and stigmatized-identity cue transfers beyond the traditional demographic groups.

Signaling Exclusivity and Inclusivity

In line with the perspective of Wooten and Rank-Christman (2019—this issue), we believe that the ideological inferences drawn about a company will depend on which group(s) are attacked or welcomed and, in some cases, safety cues towards one social group may serve as identity threats to a separate group of consumers. For example, Wooten and Rank-Christman (2019—this issue) discussed research suggesting that White Americans perceive companies

that adopt multicultural philosophies as less inclusive than those adopting colorblind ideologies while minorities feel more included by companies who adopt multicultural philosophies than colorblind perspectives (Plaut, Garnett, Buffardi, & Sanchez-Burks, 2010). It is important to note that White Americans who associated themselves with multiculturalism were attracted to organizations with multicultural approaches (Plaut et al., 2010). In addition, when multiculturalism is framed in terms that define diversity as including both Whites and minorities, multicultural cues serve as inclusivity cues for both groups (Jansen, Otten, & van der Zee, 2015; Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). Thus, understanding when cues communicate divergent meanings to different social groups is an important research priority, as well as continuing to identify methods by which stigmatized identity cues can be framed to simultaneously communicate inclusivity to lower status, stigmatized group members and to higher status groups.

Focusing on Stigmatized Identity Cues

Chaney, Sanchez, and Maimon (2019—this issue) focused on *stigmatized*-identity cues, and the relevant research pertaining to groups that have been historically devalued and denigrated in society, in order to help understand how to provide more inviting consumer spaces for underrepresented groups. Lamberton (2019—this issue) applauds this focus, suggesting that the marketplace should participate more in providing stigmatized-identity safety cues to stigmatized groups and setting norms that “dignify” consumers. Lamberton also argued that we need to revisit stigmatization and provided empirical evidence exploring the extent to which different racial and gender groups report feeling devalued. In order to compare the stigma experiences of those from different social groups, Lamberton asked a small sample of participants from diverse backgrounds whether they had experienced environments or contexts that made them feel as though their social identities were devalued. This work departs some from traditional measures of discrimination and stigma which typically assess the extent to which groups believe their identities are devalued by society or the frequency with which individuals encounter specific discrimination events (e.g., hearing racist jokes, being treated in a disrespectful manner).

Although challenging to capture stigma and discrimination accurately with self-report measures utilizing small sample sizes, Lamberton’s survey

provides some evidence that White men are indeed less likely to indicate they have experienced stigmatized-identity threat and less likely to report feeling generally devalued based on their identities compared to members of other social groups. Many scholars have shied away from the debate regarding who is more stigmatized because competitive victimhood may polarize minority groups, preventing intraminority coalitions (Young & Sullivan, 2016). Further, such comparisons often fail to capture the unique shape of prejudice against some minority groups (e.g., benevolent sexism; Glick & Fiske, 1996; invisibility stigma; Remedios & Snyder, 2018) or the distinct experiences at the multiple intersections of social categories (age, race, gender, religion, sexual orientation). On a related point, we would like to clarify Lamberton’s assumption that Chaney et al. (2019—this issue) characterize White men as “un-stigmatized.” Quite the contrary, consistent with intersectional approaches and evidenced by our ongoing work on weight stigma, sexual prejudice, and anti-Semitism, we recognize that White men may possess stigmatized identities.

When Stigmatized-Identity Cues Backfire

Wooten and Rank-Christman (2019—this issue) provide several examples of stigmatized identity cues “backfiring” by alienating the customers they were attempting to attract, or by unexpectedly alienating loyal customers who felt excluded or threatened. For example, Wooten and Rank-Christman shared the example of Toyota placing an advertisement in *Jet* magazine, with a largely African American readership, that included the following message about their vehicles, “unlike your last boyfriend, it goes to work in the morning.” This cue failed to communicate inclusive ideologies and instead reinforced hierarchical beliefs by affirming stereotypes that negatively portrayed African American men as unemployed and uncommitted relationship partners. At the very least, stigmatized identity safety cues should represent the stigmatized groups they attempt to attract in a positive light. Before employing identity safety cues, companies should seek to fully understand the negative stereotypes and discrimination these groups encounter in order to effectively create accepting consumer spaces.

At the same time, we must be careful to characterize the success or failure of identity safety cues by the marketing goals that inspired them. For example, the Porsche Cayenne was created to appeal

to a new customer base of women. Although Porsche received some pushback for this new model, mostly from men, they doubled their sales to women in the two years after the introduction of the Cayenne. Indeed, Porsche credited the introduction of this new line, in part, for the revitalization of their brand and the record sales that followed (McCarthy, 2013). Similarly, although the Colin Kaepernick Nike commercial led some to destroy their Nike apparel, the company saw a sales surge after the advertisement aired (Pengelly, 2018). If companies meet their goals (e.g., new customer base, communicating inclusive ideologies, sales) by utilizing stigmatized-identity safety cues, it is hard to characterize these efforts as failing or backfiring.

Summary

We greatly appreciate the insightful feedback by Lamberton (2019—this issue) and Wooten and Rank-Christman (2019—this issue). It has allowed us to clarify and extend the original framework of stigmatized-identity cues in consumer spaces as presented in Chaney et al. (2019—this issue). Specifically, we contend that consumers make ideological inferences about companies based on their use of stigmatized-identity cues in advertisements and consumer spaces, and that such ideological inferences may have important implications for consumers' attitudes and behaviors. Notably, this article emphasizes that the identity cues framework is not limited to traditional demographic groups but can be applied to individuals with other devalued identities, including individuals experiencing weight-stigma or stigma based on their religious beliefs. Indeed, our recent research has integrated other social psychological research on stigma-solidarity and the nuances of prejudice to examine novel stigmatized-identity safety cue transfers. Moreover, the commentaries reveal a need to further extend this model to individuals who, for example, have concealable stigmas to better understand the full range of consumer behaviors that may result from identity safety cues. In addition, we discuss some of challenges in stigma research including the importance of recognizing intersectionality and minimizing contexts that give rise to competitive victimhood. In closing, we would like to once again express our gratitude for the thoughtful commentaries and expansions of the stigmatized identity cues framework provided by Lamberton, Wooten, and Rank-Christman.

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