

Whips, Chains and Books on Campus: How Emergent Organizations with Core Stigma Gain Official Recognition

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Abstract

This paper explores how emergent organizations with core stigma manage stigma and work towards official recognition. The qualitative research design used organizational constitutions, listserv communications and interviews to examine officially-approved student organizations focused on kinky sexuality in U.S. universities. Our findings indicate: (1) due process and impersonal evaluations enable official approval of emergent organizations, particularly if this focuses on operational concerns; (2) emergent organizations leverage credible social discourses, such as individual rights, to emphasize issues pertinent to approval bodies and mainstream throughout society; (3) organizations can strategically embrace stigma, entailing complex decisions about balancing revelation and concealment; (4) organizational tactics shift depending on the maturity of the stigmatized issue, important since organizational stigma can be resilient and persistent despite legitimacy. The paper contributes to research on organizational management of stigma by examining how emergent organizations with core stigma manage stigma while moving from informal to official status.

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INTRODUCTION

Stigmatized practices and domains provide fertile ground to examine challenges to organizational identities, activities, product offerings and acceptance. Many organizations have dealt with public disapproval and perceived moral taint in order to operate, even with everyday products deemed uncontroversial today, including life insurance (Zelizer, 1978), affordable mass tourism (Hampel & Tracey, 2017) and mixed martial arts (Helms & Patterson, 2014). In contrast are organizations in industries with enduring stigma (Vergne, 2012) or organizations that acquire new stigmas, because of either media attention (Durand & Vergne, 2015) or new programs and products (Tracey & Phillips, 2016). Organizations may be associated with activities deemed illegal, such as prostitution (Kulik, Bainbridge & Cregan, 2008), or may otherwise have a “core stigma” at the heart of an organization’s purpose (Hudson, 2008). These include organizations with strong social purpose in providing acceptance to stigmatized issue areas, including gay marriage (Creed, Scully & Austin, 2002) or African-American studies (Rojas, 2006).

These intriguing lines of research direct us to question how organizations manage core stigma with different social audiences (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009). One useful strategy for organizations operating in a stigmatized domain would be to seek official recognition by an overarching body, such as a government regulator, standards agency or industry group (Hsu, Koçak & Kovács, 2018; Lee, Hiatt & Lounsbury, 2017). This would be especially beneficial if official recognition allowed them to operate in the same way as organizations without stigmatized associations. These “dispassionate” approval bodies, which can confer official recognition, are an important part of life for some stigmatized organizations, making it significant to examine how these organizations gain official approval despite stigmatization from other key social audiences. While scholars have wrestled with precise definitions of this kind of

official recognition, for example, examining how it might bestow regulatory or pragmatic legitimacy (Scott, 1995; Suchman, 1995), we take this to represent a form of acceptance by a powerful audience that can grant stigmatized organizations license to operate and provide access to resources. Official recognition from such bodies can be part of the legitimation process without requiring an organization to abandon the core stigmatized activities that the organization espouses. As organizational stigma can be both resilient and persistent despite legitimacy; this may also present a way to manage stigma despite disapproval from other audiences. Official recognition, for example, may provide a platform from which to build legitimacy to important audiences, with direct and indirect benefits (Suddaby, Bitektine & Haack, 2017).

To this end, we use an understanding common to social movements research, viewing legitimacy as a process (Suddaby et al., 2017), where change agents seek to construct legitimacy around an issue over time, at least for particular audiences. Taking legitimacy as a social process, rather than a discrete property, allows better examination of the different strategies and stigma management tools used to construct and maintain legitimacy over time, as these may differ depending on the maturity of the stigmatized issue area in which the organization operates.

Both before and after official recognition, organizations might draw upon a repertoire of strategies to deflect organizational stigma (Durand & Vergne, 2015; Reinmoeller & Ansari, 2016). Organizations confronting stigmatization often discursively reframe practices to deflect stigma (e.g. Rojas, 2010), as observed with men's bathhouses (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009), global arms companies (Vergne, 2012), medical marijuana dispensaries (Hsu et al., 2018) and legal brothels (Wolfe & Blithe, 2015). Increased promotion of the stigmatized identity or practice can also help to build support (Helms & Patterson, 2014; Tracey & Phillips, 2016).

However, prior research tends to focus on strategies used by established organizations to manage their core stigma (Vergne, 2012; Wolfe & Blithe, 2015) or deals with new stigmatization challenges (Durand & Vergne, 2015; Tracey & Phillips, 2016). Far less is known about how emergent organizations with core stigma develop enough acceptance to become officially recognized in the first place. Along with provocative research on organizations that confront stigma to reduce or eradicate it (Helms & Patterson, 2014; Tracey & Phillips, 2016), we question the evolving strategies used by emergent organizations with core stigma as they negotiate gaining acceptance from desired audiences. Organizations' choice of strategies may depend on local contexts (Hsu et al., 2018), and likely vary with the nature of the stigmatized activities. That said, in this study, we seek to identify organizational discourses enabling formal recognition and see if these change over time in contexts where overarching approval bodies regulate activities. This approach enhances understanding of the evolution of stigma management with the development of the stigmatized issue area.

When it comes to emergent organizations and their search for approval, the university campus provides an environment with elements of regulation, avenues for official recognition and wide representation of issues. This is particularly true in the United States, where numerous student organizations exist in a typical university setting. Ranging from television production to ethnic affiliations to sexuality, official student organizations provide a useful context to explore the work done by organizations to incorporate, form a purpose and seek official recognition of their goals. Emergent student organizations are often required to have student officers, roles, and formal events, not only to pass muster for initial university approval, but also to create a foundation for long-term organizational stability, echoing issues of emergent organizations beyond the university setting. Official student organizations emphasize the individual rights and

empowerment interests of twenty-first century college students, while working at the bleeding edge of social change and activism (Rojas, 2006). Student organizations devoted to topics deemed taboo in wider society provide an ideal context to study core stigma and its management with different audiences, while sharpening our sensitivity to under-examined factors and processes using unconventional research contexts (Bamberger & Pratt, 2010).

We chose student organizations focused on kink as emergent organizations with core stigma, with examples at a number of universities, including Harvard, Stanford and Chicago. Kink is defined as any unconventional sensual, erotic and sexual behavior and can include BDSM-related behaviors such as bondage, domination, sadism, masochism, pain, humiliation, arousal from observation by others, sensory deprivation, and voyeuristic or fetishistic behaviors (Nichols, 2006; Rehor, 2015). While kink represents consensual sexual activities, we chose kink because it is historically recognized as taboo, or unconventional at best (Tomassilli, Golub, Bimbi & Parsons, 2009; Weiss, 2006). Moreover, student organizations create organizational documents, a useful focus because they can reveal key organizational discourses and justifications for official recognition, discourses that can help to stabilize different practices (Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Maguire & Hardy, 2013). Within this context, we addressed the following research question: How do emergent organizations centered around stigmatized practices (with “core stigma”) become recognized as valid organizations? Specific to our research context, how do emergent student organizations focused on kink gain recognition by university approval bodies to become official student organizations in the same category as student organizations without taboo associations? While student organizations focused on kink have faced roadblocks in attempting to gain official university recognition, we include successful examples, including groups that succeeded following initial rejection decisions, allowing us to

examine the discursive strategies of organizations with core stigma during the approval process. This technique provides important insight into how organizations can use stigma management activities as a method for achieving official recognition. Moreover, formal recognition might also serve as one indicator of the legitimation process.

After reviewing research on organizational stigma management and legitimacy as a process, we introduce the research context of stigmatized student organizations and how organizational documents show discourses important to different stakeholders. In the findings, we examine organizational discourses in the constitutions of kink-focused student organizations submitted to and approved by universities, supplemented with interviews. We make four contributions. First, we show how procedures and processes assist emergent organizations with core stigma in their purposeful efforts to gain official recognition. Official recognition provides an important formalization step for emergent organizations, underscoring the role of due process allowing recognition through bureaucratic conformity. Approval bodies thus provide a platform and resources from which organizations can further manage core stigma, as groups both work toward moral legitimation with some audiences, while perhaps maintaining edginess to tap into non-mainstream audiences. Second, we advance research on how organizations discursively emphasize social issues that are pertinent to approval bodies and/or mainstream society when seeking official recognition. Third, we highlight the challenges of balancing revelation and concealment, both as organizations adapt in time and space, and for elected club officers, who are often required to take visible public roles. Finally, we note that organizational tactics shift based on the maturity of the relevant issue area, referring to shifting levels of stigmatization over time as issues become better known by outside audiences.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING STIGMA

Eradicating Organizational Stigma

A growing body of research has explored how organizations attempt to shift from a stigmatized state to one without discrediting social evaluations, a pursuit variously referred to as stigma removal (Helms & Patterson, 2014), organizational destigmatization (Hampel & Tracey, 2017) or ridding of stigma (Mishina & Devers, 2012). Destigmatization allows organizations to eradicate or greatly reduce stigma. This is important because organizational stigma, defined as a “deep-seated flaw that deindividuates and discredits the organization,” presents a risk to the vitality of the stigmatized organization (Devers, Dewett, Mishina & Belsito, 2009, p. 155). Some research presents stigmatization as an independent factor that can threaten organizational legitimacy, including Carberry and King’s (2012) stigmatization model, where multiple stakeholders labelling organizational actions as fundamentally flawed may result in total loss of certain forms of legitimacy. Other research illustrates that an organization can eradicate or greatly reduce its stigma, sometimes leading former stigmatizers to become advocates for the organization. For example, the historical case of Thomas Cook’s travel agency shows a two-step process for eradicating stigma, first by engaging in stigma reduction work to convey limited risk to outside actors, and second, by pursuing stigma elimination work to gain support by highlighting the value the organization provides to society (Hampel & Tracey, 2017).

Further, a diverse body of research has explored how organizations actively work to reduce or eradicate stigma by using reframing discourses, particularly in sociology, work that can often be categorized under a framing of legitimacy as a process (Suddaby et al., 2017). For example, in the history of life insurance, firms reframed the meaning of life insurance away from immoral “gambling” with the life of the insured to the protection of widows and children who would otherwise be left destitute (Quinn, 2008; Zelizer, 1983). Similarly, a wide range of

research on sexuality has demonstrated how birth control, condoms, BDSM practices (bondage, domination, sadism and masochism) and sex work change agents reduced stigma through a medical and disease-prevention framework—a health and safety exception to morality that reframes and normalizes formerly taboo practices and topics (Gamson, 1990; Lindemann, 2013). For example, the medicalization of erectile dysfunction reframes the topic away from embarrassing “failure” or difficult-to-face psychological issues, into a common physiological situation that also justifies a prescription drugs market. Similarly, sex work has been repositioned around values of free choice and tolerance (Bernstein, 2001; Brents, 2016; Prasad, 1999) and broader discourses of individual rights and protection from discrimination (Richardson, 2000). Narratives such as these are deployed to combat negative social evaluations and give meaning to different actions and interests (Brown, 1998). Reframing can also be a normalizing technique at the individual level, for example, difficult work-related emotions or meanings, such as “dirty work” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, 2002). As with prior examples, these shifts seek to eradicate stigma by showing how practices and organizations provide positive value in society.

Rendering Stigma Opaque

A second organizational strategy for managing stigma seeks to render organizational stigma opaque, or less visible to key audiences, rather than eliminating it. This strategy remains a viable option for individuals and organizations fearing the consequences of stigma disclosure (Ragins, 2008), as well as those with core stigma (Hudson, 2008). This can mean emphasizing desired narratives. For example, men’s bathhouses have used credible discourses, positioning themselves as vehicles for sexual safety, to downplay more salacious aspects of this business (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009). Related strategies have been adopted to manage event-based stigma and media attacks, for example, divesting assets to reduce associations with attacked

industries (Durand & Vergne, 2015), or “category straddling,” where organizations span multiple legitimate categories in order to dilute stigmatized associations (Vergne, 2012).

Interwoven with discursive strategies are the organizational challenges of how and when to render a stigma opaque, and to which audiences (Reinmoller & Ansari, 2016; Vergne, 2012). Key strategies include “internalizing” stigmatized practices and identities (Creed, Dejordy & Lok, 2010), akin to individual-level “passing” (Clair, Beatty & Maclean, 2005), and decoupling to maintain a legitimate organizational identity (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992). Strategies can involve deception, seen in the use of pseudonyms by jazz record companies to “inflate catalogues with fictitious but legitimacy-enhancing products,” when the tastes of the profitable mass market diverged from the tastes of sanctifying cultural elites (Phillips & Kim, 2009, p. 482). While organizations are likely to pursue multiple strategies, a key distinction between *rendering stigma opaque* and *eradicating organizational stigma* is that products and services remain stigmatized, both by mainstream audiences and sometimes by stigmatized organizations themselves; managing stigma can mean retaining a taboo edge to stay marketable to certain audiences (Helms & Patterson, 2014; Wolfe & Blithe, 2015).

We believe that for emergent organizations with core stigma, efforts to render stigma opaque are initially more feasible than the previous destigmatization strategies; even if widespread acceptance is a stated organizational goal. We suspect concealing stigma to be particularly important when emergent organizations need to retain their marginalized audience, yet seek approval from a more mainstream approval body, where reduced visibility of the core stigma and emulation of established organizations might increase the chance of gaining approval (Suchman, 1995). Hence, engaging key discourses, objects and imaginaries is an important tool for managing stigma (Cornelissen & Clarke, 2010; Patriotta, Gond & Schultz, 2011; Vaara &

Tienari, 2008). Importantly, approval by voters and other “emotive” audiences (Tienari, Vaara & Björkman, 2003) is different from approval by a “dispassionate regulator” such as a government body or industry group. Yet in contexts with multiple audiences, official approval may be both directly and indirectly beneficial (Suddaby et al., 2017).

Official Recognition and Strategically Embracing Stigma

A third organizational strategy for managing stigma is to embrace it. Unlike attempts to eradicate stigma or render it opaque, organizations that strategically embrace stigmatization openly display it. For example, in contrast to attempting to “pass as normal,” Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) organizations intentionally targeted audiences that would embrace MMA (Helms & Patterson, 2014), one strategy for firms entering stigmatized markets (Slade Shantz et al.). Moreover, by displaying their stigmatization, organizations may persuade others to re-evaluate negative perceptions. This strategy can be observed in the image crisis of Keystone, a British social enterprise facing stigmatization due to local community programs for immigrants. Keystone chose to deepen its association with migrant populations, marking how organizations can embrace stigma to build acceptance among desired audiences, in this case, “social justice for all” (Tracey & Phillips, 2016, p. 753).

One clear audience includes regulatory, industry and other bodies who can grant or deny official license to operate, comprising an important part of the life of stigmatized organizations (Helms & Patterson, 2014; Hsu et al., 2018). Yet, as seen with abortion service providers, official recognition can happen despite public disapproval (Hudson, 2008). Moreover, official recognition comes with both rights and responsibilities. Legal brothels and marijuana dispensaries must undergo regular inspections and licensing, with a focus on harm reduction (Breits & Hausbeck, 2005; Hsu et al., 2018; Wolfe & Blithe, 2015). But this also grants resource

access, from police investigation of robberies to the ability to lobby politicians. This makes approval bodies an important, yet often overlooked, part of life for stigmatized organizations.

Organizations can also reveal stigma publicly in strategic ways. Wolfe and Blithe (2015) theorize tension between opacity and exposure as a “revelation-concealment dialectic,” finding that Nevada’s brothels are officially recognized by state and county governments, while simultaneously protecting stakeholder privacy and managing external pressures to remain hidden. Similar tensions can be observed at the individual level: lesbian, gay or transgender employees strategically reveal information in the workplace as activists of social change (Creed & Scully, 2000). Just as individual decisions may be influenced by workplace norms and social support in a particular context (Clair et al., 2005; Petriglieri, 2011), we find organizations choose the level and type of disclosure that resonates with local approval. For example, in American states with legal recreational marijuana, dispensaries focus more on medical versus recreational marketing to align with the receptiveness of local audiences (Hsu et al., 2018). These efforts may also need to balance the demands of early and later members (Lee et al., 2017).

Organizational decisions to publicly embrace stigma, however, can prove risky due to the possibility of stigma transfer, where stigmatization of one individual or organization transfers to another because of their association (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009; Pontikes, Negro & Rao, 2010). This would seem especially problematic for emergent organizations, as endorsing stigmatized organizations might transfer stigma to the approval body. Moreover, little is known about how key individuals in stigmatized organizations choose to disclose their associations after the organizations gain official recognition. Official recognition generally requires publicly identifiable applicants and roles, in contrast to the potential anonymity of protests.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Context

Research on organizational stigma within higher education is limited. We take an extreme case of emergent organizations with core stigma and examine how student organizations focused on kink framed their constitutions to attain official university approval. It is important to note that not all proposed kink organizations gain approval (Murtaugh, 2012). A number of applications have been rejected by universities, with justifications for denial typically including risk and violence concerns, as well as broader public perceptions of endorsing a taboo issue. Consequently, higher education is an appropriate context for exploring how emergent organizations with core stigma gain official recognition from an approval body because some efforts to incorporate were blocked, indicating that existing official organizations were able to overcome approval bodies' perceptions of moral taint and other concerns.

Category-wise, kink can be viewed as a practice and a community (Rehor, 2015), as practitioners of kinky sexuality are often considered part of the "kink community" (Newmahr, 2010). Kink can also be viewed as a sexual identity. As such, kink fits within a general legitimization of sexual diversity (Weeks, 2007), occasionally joining categories such as "gay," "lesbian," "bisexual" and "trans" (Jones & Ward, 2010). We find burgeoning academic inquiry into kink, BDSM, sadomasochism and risk (Lindemann, 2010; Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2011).

Provocative student organizations are not without precedent. Existing work notes how freedoms of speech and association buttress the institution of higher education (Gibbs, 1978), representing key discourses supporting student organization expansion. Universities have viewed the mere existence of student organizations as indicators of a diversity-friendly campus climate, regardless of whether it actually reflects an accepting culture (Kane, 2013). Meyer (2004, p. 508) described student organizations as empowering to students, functioning as vehicles to interact

with “others like me.” Today, few university campuses are without one or more student organizations serving queer-identified groups, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and increasingly transgender, intersex and nonbinary gender groups. Prior to the acceptance of these groups on university campuses, sexual diversity was highly stigmatized, and hence kept hidden or closeted. Lesbian and gay identities and sexuality were initially viewed as diseases to be cured, with strong stigma-by-association implications, meaning few student organizations were endorsed, as officials feared the public response (Anteby & Anderson, 2014; Reichard, 2010). Student groups fought back. Many won lawsuits charging that universities violated their free speech rights (Gibbs, 1978). A growing acceptance of *coming out* moves this previously hidden stigma into public view as something that could be flaunted (Yoshino, 2006). But organizational activism requires coordination, for which we focus on organizational documents.

Formal Organizational Documents Used to Define Purpose and Process

A growing number of organizations use formal documents, including by-laws, handbooks and constitutions, to define their boundaries and sovereignty (Bromley & Orchard, 2015; Bromley & Sharkey, 2015). Such documents formalize behavioral expectations and operational procedures for various audiences (Treviño, Butterfield & McCabe, 1998), shaping legal and moral justifications associated with organizational actions. Similarly, student organizations on university campuses must prepare documents that set out the purpose, goals and operational procedures of the organization to be considered for official university recognition, most commonly through a constitution. Most universities standardize this process and the specific parts of the constitution through guidelines and boilerplates. Universities also identify these constitutions as documents intended to address “fundamental principles,” with required organizational by-laws detailing procedures to uphold order, mirroring the perceived importance

of organizational mission statements (Collins & Porras, 1996). Standardization enables consistency across applications of prospective organizations, facilitating the ability to officially recognize or reject student organizations through administrative procedures. Constitutions thus tell us about the process of all established student organizations, including those with core stigma. At the same time, given that renewal is much easier, often with a pro-forma approach, constitutions likely offer a snapshot of the conditions and affordances at the time of founding, rather than the current context.

Methods

We examined the Association of American Universities (AAU), a group of 62 research university members in the US and Canada, to find schools with official student organizations relating to sexual kink. Though a limited sample of universities, use of the AAU list allowed us to be systematic in data collection with a clearly-defined set of organizations, representing over 1.2 million undergraduate students (Association of American Universities, 2015). We conducted Google searches for each AAU member university by listing the university name AND each of the following search terms: (1) kink, (2) BDSM, (3) dominance and submission, (4) risk-aware consensual kink, (5) safe, sane and consensual, and (6) sexual fetishism. For example, University of Chicago AND kink. Then, University of Chicago AND BDSM. For each search, we scanned the first two results pages for references to relevant student organizations. If a reference was found, “records found” was entered into database notes, otherwise, “no records found.” Roughly 9,000 pages were scanned.² We also completed a search of each AAU university website (e.g. Harvard.edu, Chicago.edu) using the same search term combinations. Google and institutional searches were also conducted on lists of existing student clubs and organizations at each

² Google search results pages include 12 results x first 2 pages = 24 results. Six search term combinations were executed for the 62 AAU member universities, equating to 8,928 pages.

university. If student organizations interested in kinky sexuality were listed, the following information was compiled: (1) organization name, (2) number of members, (3) formation date, (4) website URL, (5) organizational contact information, (6) officer names and contact information, and (7) constitution and by-laws. Our search indicated that 18 out of 62 AAU universities had recognized student organizations focused on kink. We obtained constitutions for 17 organizations officially approved by universities (Table 1). The constitutions served as our key data source to understand how these student organizations discursively portrayed themselves in the approval process.

----- Insert Table 1 about here-----

We supplemented the constitutions with (1) information on informal student groups, (2) interviews with relevant actors, including student founders and organization leaders, (3) student organization listserv communications (email lists), and (4) meeting minutes. To obtain information on the presence of informal groups, we used the prior search procedure to identify relevant student organizations on FetLife.com, “the Social Network for the BDSM, Fetish & Kinky Community,” which was founded in 2008. At last count, 49 out of 62 AAU universities were represented by informal groups on FetLife (79%), indicating wide coverage, which has grown since we started this project. While many official student groups used FetLife as an organizing tool, most groups were from schools without an official student organization, prompting us to question the processes, challenges and rationale for moving from an informal group to an officially approved student organization. We also conducted four semi-structured interviews. Interviews allowed us to discuss the content of constitutions and process of gaining official approval with student organization leaders who had navigated the approval process. This included narratives of why the organizations pursued official approval in the first place and

stories detailing the strategies used following initial rejection. Similar to other studies exploring organizational stigma (e.g. Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009), we found collecting interview data to be exceptionally challenging, in part due to individual privacy concerns. Some of the interviewees underscored the importance of having an approved “safe space” on campus to support the kink community, referencing previous non-consensual sexual interactions as valuable justification. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Finally, listserv communications and meeting minutes served as archival documents to better understand meeting content and event activities. Our sample of listserv communications included 366 unique listserv messages. These data allowed additional insight into organizational operation once official, including discussions about concealment decisions for members volunteering to be listed on public websites.

Our analysis used open coding and initial axial coding of the constitutions with an overarching interest in stigma, official approval and organizational legitimacy. Seeking to identify key discourses, coding in NVivo focused on the justifications for organizational existence and common items of concern for student organizers (e.g. consent), using an iterative approach; emergent techniques meant revisiting prior constitutions when we encountered new justifications and concerns. We aggregated these codes into broader discourses, including (1) Safety, (2) Tolerance, (3) Community Building, (4) Privacy, and (5) Definitions of Kink, and Links to Other Organizations (Table 2). We also examined the structure of constitutions, as well as the frequency of codes and discourses across all constitutions, which indicated safety as an overriding concern. It is important to note that clubs possessed multiple goals, for example, to meet like-minded people and advocate for further acceptance among desired groups, even in the wider community, as should be clear in the findings. While many of these student organizations, much like other queer identity organizations, faced roadblocks gaining official university

recognition, our analysis focuses on the strategies used by organizations that successfully gained official university approval, along with the benefits and costs of official status.

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FINDINGS

Coming Out — From Informal to Formal

Our findings uncovered much overlap between informal and formal organizations. Informal groups, where students came together around the shared practice of kink, operated without official university approval, most often using social media platforms such as FetLife.com to organize. This tended to precede officially approved student organizations, but often continued as a convenient platform for communication and outreach. One kink club President spoke about the differences between the informal group and official student organization:

...there's a bit of a distinction I want to make here. When we say 'organization,' there are kind of two ideas of what that means. The first one being, we had an informal student group that wasn't sanctioned by the university. It was just a gathering of students, nominally called [organization name]. That was before I came to campus. I wasn't involved in that first meeting of students. I was involved in the official founding of the club (president interview).

Informal groups generally operated with fewer rules and less formalization, and were described as feeling exceptionally taboo.

There was no documentation. There was just the word of mouth rule that everything is anonymous, and that we should respect each other's anonymity. A lot of people used scene names [an online name or alias in the kink community or "scene"]... A lot of people just kind of engaged with each other pretty secretively... *It felt pretty taboo* (interview, emphasis added).

As this informal group grew in size, student leaders recognized that gaining official university approval would sustain the group's growth and would provide assistance with resources. With

official recognition by the university, emergent organizations could embrace their core stigma and gain access to outside resources.

[We] decided that it was a lot of hassle, and a lot of work to try to coordinate all these people without any sort of resources, because it was all coming out of [the organizer]'s own pocket, for food and money or like transportation costs. We were figuring that we might as well try to get official university recognition (founder interview).

Becoming officially approved also allows groups to build a community of likeminded students, and a legitimate platform for kink on campus; Stony Brook's constitution claims "To provide a way for students at Stony Brook University to advocate for the right to promote living a BDSM, M/s [Master/servant], fetish, leather or any other alternate lifestyle freely without being discriminated against..." Student-authored constitutions were the principal component of the university approval process, described as the key "part of the deal." Gaining official approval also enabled newly formalized student organizations to be "less secretive."

[Before] we were meeting in a student dorm. It was pretty hard to get in. You had to go through two sets of doors, and someone had to let you in, and it was a huge hassle. Now we just rent out a pretty big space on campus and anyone walking by can look in and see what we're doing and we're pretty fine with it (interview).

Once approved, there appeared to be both internalization and decoupling by some groups, as we might expect from infrequently updated organizational mission documents. However, the policies and procedures detailed in organizations' constitutions were less relevant to some current members, simply continuing past policies and rules, as noted in interviews:

I mean, we don't follow it [the constitution], per se. We might follow it, but not intentionally. We have our own rules for the club that are kind of passed on through presidents, so it's like an oral tradition maybe... I haven't read the constitution myself and since I wasn't one of the founders of the club, I haven't seen it. Although I should, actually. I should probably read that (president interview).

The founding documents might include boilerplate items irrelevant to student members in everyday practice, but as we see in the constitution and interview data in the following sections, they also evidenced key discourses at the heart of these organizations.

Reveal or Conceal — Stated Purpose and Strategic Links

We next explore the discourses within the constitutions, starting with the degree to which the constitutions revealed stigmatized practices and identities. University-provided boilerplates for constitutions specified a structure and sections. Constitutions typically began with purpose and membership statements, then spelled out officer roles, plus election and meeting procedures. However, student organizations had discretion in how much detail they provided in each section.

First, student kink clubs connected themselves to existing organizations in their constitutions, primarily other sexuality groups on campus. For example, the Brandeis Queer Resource Center included kink in a larger organization promoting sexualities on campus: “QRC Staffers receive training in supporting and counseling people of all identities including but not limited to Trans* (the Transgender umbrella), Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Asexual, Queer, Intersex, BDSM, Kink, Polyamory, and Allies.” In addition to natural affinities with other groups, interview participants believed locating themselves within a broader lesbian, gay or other queer-identified group was strategic, relating to the organization’s continued existence:

[Student organization] would be pretty hard to shut down. [Student organization] is part of [queer group] at [university]. Since we’re essentially a recognized sexual orientation, and rightfully so, it would be pretty difficult for the school to shut us down if they decided to because it would be seen as an attack on the GLBTQI community at large, rather than the school shutting down some BDSM club (president interview).

This technique might render the stigma of kink opaque by subsuming it under groups possessing both official approval and perhaps legitimacy with outside audiences. But other organizations contrasted their mission with established queer-identified groups, carving out a separate niche for kink, sometimes due to university requirements to identify the uniqueness of a proposed student organization. For example, Harvard College Munch emphasized their uniqueness in an interview: “Though there are campus groups dedicated to queer sexualities and

orientations, as well as groups dedicated to abstinence and other sexual perspectives, no other group exists as a forum for students with kinky sexualities and their interests.”

Organizational discourses also indicated a “revelation-concealment dialectic” (Wolfe & Blithe, 2015). Organizations can strategically choose between opacity and “internalization” or, conversely, embracing stigma. We found wide variation in the explicitness of constitutions. This often varied by the year they were approved. Early organizations typically featured statements of purpose with little mention of specific practices. For example, Iowa State University’s Cuffs group mentions “alternative sexuality” in their statement of purpose, and describes a safe and supportive environment to discuss “safe, consensual, and non-exploitative forms of alternate human sexuality.” In contrast, more recent statements of purpose tended to identify specific practices such as “bondage, domination, submission [and] sadomasochistic play” as core to the organization’s purpose. Three of the four organizations approved by 2006 excluded the terms kink and BDSM from their statements of purpose, whereas all 14 student organizations approved between 2007 and 2015 included the term kink or BDSM in the statement of purpose, indicating increasing transparency over time. Interestingly, reanalysis of the data showed that while the average level of explicitness in statements of purpose stayed constant, the most explicit organization founded each year became progressively more explicit. This indicated increasing explicitness in “leading organizations,” whereas those not at the forefront made different decisions, perhaps motivated by factors such as the specific university context. The following two statements of purpose exemplify contrasts between organizational constitutions without the terms kink or BDSM, versus those with detailed explanations.

The purpose of the SSC is to provide a safe place for students to discuss sex and sexuality and get information about consent and safer sex practices (MIT Student Sex-Positive Club).

This brief statement from a club founded in 2006 contrasts with the following organizational purpose of one founded in 2012:

- A. To organize, facilitate and educate students at Stony Brook University who are interested or think they might be interested in the *BDSM, M/s, fetish, leather*, or any other *kink lifestyle*;
- B. To create a visible campus community of open-minded students at Stony Brook University who want to learn more and get feedback on topics concerning *kink*;
- C. To provide a venue for students at Stony Brook University to discuss and share their experiences in the *BDSM (or other kink)* community that is free of social pressure and judgment based on sexual orientation/interest... (Stony Brook University, SBU TNG, emphasis added).

Organizational names also became more explicit over time, and many names of later included “kink” or “fetish.” One organization even chose to rename their official group to better reflect their emphasis on kink. Founded in 2007, the University of Chicago’s “Safe, Sane and Consensual” was renamed to “Risk-Aware Consensual Kink” in 2012, perhaps signaling a further push toward identity-formation. The name change also demonstrates how an organization might choose to suppress stigmatization at the point of founding, while later embracing their core stigma as an established organization.

Interviews with student founders revealed that framings of kink reflected attempts to balance desired student identities with a definition that would be amenable to university administrators. Indeed, some students felt the university initially rejected their proposals because of the way they framed kink practices. One student group thought administrators rejected them because kink was generally too risky to approve:

We submitted it to the [approval body] out of [the university]. They are in charge of approving student groups. They said no. There were a couple concerns that were valid, but one of the concerns that we got really frustrated at is they rejected our group on the basis of perceived risk. They said that our student group was a liability for the university (founder interview).

This particular organization chose to go to the press and conduct a photo shoot near an important campus monument to publicly portray kink, exemplifying the strategy of enthusiastically embracing stigma. The organization later gained official university approval by rewriting their constitution to mirror others that had previously gained approval, a strategy one interviewee referred to as “respectability politics,” in copying the constitution of “another student group that had passed the muster,” and had gained administrative approval. The organization was also required to add a staff advisor. While these are required of all student organizations in some universities, in this case it was a “restriction” imposed by the university in the resubmission process, to address a perceived risk that was “not a mandatory requirement of [other] student groups.” The precedent for requiring a staff advisor was previously reserved for groups “perceived as high-risk,” such as those that deal with “explosives and rockets... I guess that’s how dangerous they perceived us to be. It was pretty telling.” On the other hand, another interviewee’s description of an initial kink encounter turning into a non-consensual experience highlights some of the potential risks these organizations explicitly seek to reduce.

Physical Safety and Consent

Not surprisingly, physical safety and consent were major concerns for these organizations and their members, as for kink communities generally. First, physical safety is a key normalizing discourse used by organizations whose core stigma stems from their links with nontraditional sexual practices, as seen with Nevada’s brothels (Brents & Hausbeck, 2005) and men’s bathhouses (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009). Physical safety has traditionally been how kink communities distinguish kink practices from actual violence or nonconsensual abuse, frequently using the frame “safe, sane and consensual” (Weinberg, 1987). Practices such as erotic asphyxiation, referring to the act of intentionally limiting a person’s oxygen supply, and

hematolagnia, referring to the use of blood in sexual play, unmistakably present safety concerns. Just as men's bathhouses used safe-sex messages to dull stigmatized perceptions (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009), student organizations leveraged discourses in their constitutions to emphasize safety, especially relating to educating members about how to perform various practices:

We are also committed to including safety as a topic in every educational event we hold, since safety concerns can vary widely from activity to activity and should be taught in conjunction with the activities to which they apply (University of Chicago, Risk-Aware Consensual Kink, emphasis added).

[Article II – Purpose] To educate about and explore the world of kink, promoting acceptance of sexuality and helping peers to navigate the world of kink, safely and consensually (University of California - Berkeley, Kink Club).

Interviewees strongly emphasized a commitment to safety, as kink student organizations can lead to “intimacy that’s hands-on.”

Physical safety included teaching student members how to practice kink safely as part of their sexual and personal development. Our reading of listserv communications and meeting minutes revealed that meetings commonly included outside presenters demonstrating safe practices relating to “rope bondage,” “dynamic spanking,” “caning,” and “needle play,” to name a few. With genuine risks in BDSM practices, such physical safety concerns motivated discussion in most of the constitutions of what would be allowed at official events:

...BDSM play will not be a part of, nor will be permitted at, any CV meetings or events. Limited demonstrations, however, will be permitted provided that they educate members on safe BDSM practices (Columbia University, *Conversio Virium*).

Consent was similarly important. Some student founders indicated that addressing safety and consent concerns proved challenging to manage during the approval process. University administrators initially rejected one group, worried that a kink-focused student group might function as a pathway for “the increased potential of sexual assault.” Student founders addressed these safety concerns by meeting face-to-face with university administrators, arguing that

viewing kink as a “liability” is “coming from the wrong place, because it’s perceiving kink as a thing that’s inherently dangerous or non-consensual.” One student asserted that consent practices throughout the kink community are “more consensual than most of the interactions that I’ve seen on campus.” Constitutions and other organizational discourses reinforced this. For example, in a student paper feature on Iowa State University’s Cuffs, the president noted that “the purpose of the club is to promote safety and consent, squash stereotypes and bond (pardon the pun) with students that have similar interests” (Murtaugh, 2012, p. 16).

Tolerance and a “Safe Space” for Kink

A related emergent theme, tolerance and safe spaces, aligns with Goffman’s (1963) distinction of stigmatized identities: insiders, those that are socially accepted, and outsiders, those that are socially taboo. The term “safe space” echoes the way queer-identified groups on high school and college campuses manage homophobia. Using tolerance and safe space discourses in constitutions fits into universities’ concerns with maintaining a tolerant and welcoming campus climate (Kane, 2013). While this may work against the potential of building acceptance by clearly displaying core stigma, it may also be joined by “internalization” of more extreme practices. Using the language of safety, creating a “safe space” affirmed kink identity by eliminating the taboo of kink within internal environments. Student organizations aimed to build safe havens for kink to be explored without judgment or danger.

Organizations varied in how they defined the meaning of kink, yet constructs of tolerance and safe spaces remained core. For example, some organizations emphasized issues of responsibility, while defining kink as synonymous with BDSM:

Conversio Virium is dedicated to the full exploration of BDSM, both in its sexual and spiritual aspects... BDSM is herein defined as safe and consensual bondage, domination and submission, and/or sadomasochistic play between responsible adults (Columbia

University, Conversio Virium).

Other groups opted for inclusivity, allowing members to define kink for themselves, but within the boundaries of acceptance and a safe space:

Kink Harvard College Munch does not seek to define kink for its members. It recognizes that in the popular imagination, “kink” is synonymous with BDSM, but it rejects that notion. While respecting the BDSM interests of many of its members, it seeks to provide a space that is open, accepting, and useful for students with any kinky interest, regardless of what it may be (Harvard University, Harvard College Munch, emphasis added).

At the same time, Washington University’s Alternative Lifestyle Association was one of the few organizations to define kink practices as a sexual right, emphasizing “complete tolerance of all who practice BDSM as a right and not a privilege.” While these definitions relate to strategic revelation of stigma, they also show different modalities for self-expressed identity.

A majority of the constitutions framed safe spaces or tolerance as an organizational purpose, aiding discussion of sexuality and wider personal safety issues, including abuse and assault:

Furthermore, [the club] creates a space where students may discuss problems in their own relationships, up to and including abuse and assault, which they might not feel comfortable discussing in other spaces (Harvard University, Harvard College Munch).

This included support services for students dealing with or fearful of sexual assault and violence, another role of these student organizations as spaces seeking to protect the safety of members and the community at large:

We also provide services surrounding intersectionality, privilege and oppression, domestic violence, sexual assault, suicide prevention, self-harm, and sexual health. We are committed to making Brandeis a *safe space* for students of all genders, sexualities, and identities through confidential peer counseling, educational outreach programs, resources and referrals (Brandeis Queer Resource Center, emphasis added).

Tolerance was interrelated with a “safe space” for discussion, one that would be free of judgment or harassment that might challenge the validity of BDSM identities:

The Alternative Lifestyle Association and its related meetings and activities are *safe spaces for all who practice BDSM*; one of the major functions of the organization is to act as a peer support group. People with concerns about the impact of their own BDSM related feelings are encouraged to explore them with us. To this end, we wish to engage in dialogue which is supportive, candid, and respectful of others' rights to have differing opinions and limits. However, all those who attend our meetings must refrain from challenging the validity of BDSM in general or others' lifestyles and identities, except when non-consent or safety becomes an issue (Washington University, St. Louis, Alternative Lifestyle Association, emphasis added).

Student leaders also detailed existing processes used to “onboard” (initiate) new members in an effort to maintain the integrity of a safe space. New members:

go through a process... you have to go through really simple consent training and you have to agree to always use good consent practices whenever you're doing anything. Then you also have to agree to keep the identities of other club members anonymous (interview).

Community Building vs. Privacy Tensions

Another overarching theme in the constitutions was community building as a key organizational purpose, beginning with club formation in the first place, followed by ongoing fellowship, where members could share similar interests. Community building also served an important function in the movement towards gay liberation in the 1960s and 1970s on university campuses (Reichard, 2010), affirming the group's collective identity and positioning individuals as deserving of equal rights and freedoms (Taylor & Whittier, 1992). Community building on the student organization level showed an external function, compared to the inward-looking safe spaces, attempting both to build collective identity and to demonstrate, like lesbian and gay organizations before them, their worthiness as sovereign organizations.

Community referred to embracing all kink-interested students, as well as the larger established kink community:

[Purpose] To organize and provide seminars and demonstrations to educated [sic] the community and promote safety and awareness of related topics; To... promote stronger bonds in the community... To organize social events to promote bonding with other

members (University of California, Santa Barbara, KUFF).

We will be a social group, offering events, community building, parties, and the option of an arts circle where members share their art and writing relating to BDSM topics (University of Chicago, Risk-Aware Consensual Kink).

A few of these university organizations emphasized that their events were open to the wider university, or sometimes even the public, unlike informal groups on FetLife.com which tended to be more private. While discussions of community-building events signal to others the value of student organizations for a given campus or region, these events also provided pathways for student members to build broader acceptance towards kink, at least for certain audiences.

Constitutions designated organizational leadership responsible for managing the community building role. One student president emphasized the importance of continuing to ask herself how she could build a stronger community:

How can we create a kinky community that is respectful and positive for all people, even people that have been historically excluded and marginalized from kink and society? (president interview).

At the same time, we found privacy concerns featuring strongly in the constitutions. Given the difficulties surrounding “coming out” in the gay community, constitutions addressed the decision of when, how or if one should come out as a matter of individual choice, rather than a choice for others to decide.

We respect people's privacy, so we don't out people, not at all, neither explicitly, nor indirectly. We respect people's comfort, and we respect consent, both in theory and in practice (Harvard University, Harvard College Munch).

One's sexuality is considered by many to be a private matter. By attending our meetings and events, one agrees not to divulge to anyone outside the group the names, statements, or actions of anyone else who attends without their explicit permission (Washington University, St. Louis, Alternative Lifestyle Association).

In many organizations, “outings” were deemed a bannable offense, allowing people to be barred from events or their membership revoked. “Grounds for revocation include making another

member feel uncomfortable or threatened, or compromising the privacy of another member” (MIT, Student Sex Positive Club). Privacy issues spilled into issues of physical safety, given the potential for harassment, as increased sexual transparency, or *coming out*, can lead to increased harassment and discrimination on college campuses (Sausa, 2002; Waldo, 1998).

Student members—and particularly officers—thus had to actively manage the tension between activism and privacy. While privacy was possible with informal groups, one cost of official recognition was to strip away a degree of privacy (for officers at least) in exchange for official status. Universities often required presidents’ names to be listed in the university directory of student organizations. This created a tension between the organization serving as a vehicle “to reduce stigma on campus” and affordances to maintain individual privacy. For instance, listserv communications coming from official club email addresses were almost always signed with pseudonyms, or “scene names.” Additionally, one president detailed how they became a “puppet president” to fulfill the university requirement of a directory listing.

The members of the club who had status in the club and, therefore, would have been the best suited for leadership, didn’t want to be out. A requirement for being a student group is you must post your leadership people online in a publicly accessible kind of site. *Leadership was worried that they would be exposed there, that they would have their job prospects ruined.* They were pretty hampered by the fact that they could not be leadership officially because they were not out. In that kind of environment, they were like, ‘We need somebody to be a *puppet president* who wants to be out. We can keep leading the club from behind.’ I was like, ‘Okay, that sounds fine....’ It was really scary (interview, emphasis added).

Ambivalence about individual privacy extended to student resumes. Students normally showcase organization leadership experience and extracurricular activity involvement, but leadership roles in kink clubs were perceived as a risk for future employment.

I have two separate resumes. Most people do. They have nothing in common, literally. Not even my name is the same on either... I was also President of [pre-professional technology club] on campus. *Interviewer: Okay. That’s listed on your resume?* Not on my sex one. On my real one, yeah (interview).

DISCUSSION

We have explored how emergent organizations with core stigma gain official approval, allowing them to be considered in the same category as organizations without taboo associations. Dispassionate approval processes help organizations with core stigma gain official recognition, but this is facilitated by the use of credible social discourses for specific audiences. While organizations might gain official recognition from an approval body, they may remain stigmatized by other audiences. But as noted in the final section, not only does official approval have costs and benefits, organizational strategies can change with the development of the stigmatized issue area.

Due Process and Standardization as a Vehicle for Official Approval

Our first insight is that bureaucratic procedures and processes in universities assist emergent organizations with core stigma to gain official recognition from the university, despite continued stigmatization by other audiences.³ This contrasts with research where established organizations rely on their own management of stigma instead of seeking outside approval (e.g. Hampel & Tracey, 2017). Much like other taboo contexts, official approval grants additional rights and resources (space, mailing lists, campus police) that can be used to manage stigmatization, along with different presentation strategies. For example, marijuana legalization in various states in the U.S. gives dispensaries legal status, but they still face core stigma by certain audiences, and thus present themselves differently from county to county (Hsu et al., 2018). In both cases, official recognition grants access to resources and provides certain rights, such as better ability to request an investigation of a robbery, which might be taken less seriously

³ For theoretical clarity, we assume here that specific audiences will not hold both judgements at the same time. But we suspect that at an individual level, some university administrators could still disapprove, despite formal approval through due process procedures. Further examination of the group vs. individual approval disconnect represents an interesting area for future research.

without official status. This adds to understanding of the direct and indirect benefits of official approval (Suddaby et al., 2017). Consequently, approval bodies, including regulatory groups and industry bodies, often an overlooked part of life for stigmatized organizations, can provide great value to emergent organizations.

Our findings complement research on official recognition by other types of audiences, such as emotive audiences (Tienari et al., 2003), because official decisions to recognize organizations generally emphasize *sameness*, which allows stigmatized organizations to join in the same processes of official recognition as those without stigma. Our dispassionate approval bodies focus on organizational structure and operational procedures, differing from normative or moral assessments. Outside of student clubs, this can be seen in a wide variety of formally approved and regulated areas, from organic farms to official protests, which are checked for compliance and safety rather than purpose. For example, Nevada's legal brothels are allowed to operate so long as they abide by Nevada law and the restrictions of state regulators, yet brothels continue to face other forms of stigma (Wolfe & Blithe, 2015). Here, due process enabled university administrators, a particular type of audience, to recognize well-managed student organizations, as might be seen in other contexts of official recognition, such as the creation of new standards (Lee et al., 2017).

Moreover, in the context of higher education, the learning process is part and parcel of the university ecosystem, enabling multiple attempts to resubmit rejected proposals. This is also common for government and industry oversight. Resubmission in this context can result in approval, although the findings showed how resubmission required further work, such as "mirroring" established organizations (Suchman, 1995), or other strategies to turn disapproval into support (Hampel & Tracey, 2017; Helms & Patterson, 2014). Reapplication may manifest

differently for organizations in contexts where failing to manage stigma during initial approval efforts results in lasting negative consequences for the organization. This factor may vary with the audience, for example with the media, or other emotive audiences (Tienari et al., 2003; Vaara & Tienari, 2008), versus a dispassionate regulator bound by due process, perhaps requiring different strategies in each case (Durand & Vergne, 2015; Reinmoeller & Ansari, 2016; Vergne, 2012). However, as seen with rejection decisions made by university administrators due to the perceived risks of kink on campus, due process does grant approvers some discretion to reject proposed organizations, perhaps motivated by the threat of transferring stigma to the university.

With this research, the university should be added to the list of audiences capable of influencing legitimacy. In recognizing that it is possible to gain official recognition despite continuing stigma from other audiences, we posit that gaining legitimacy is best seen here as a process rather than a property (Suddaby et al., 2017); official recognition is one step, as expected in social movements. We thus document the beginnings of a possible legitimizing process, where core stigmatized organizations sought official recognition to manage stigma in various ways, but also as a tool to use toward broader social goals of eventual moral legitimacy with other audiences (Scott, 1995; Suchman, 1995). By viewing official recognition as part of a broader process, we also add nuance to discussions regarding the interplay of organizational stigma and legitimacy (Ashforth, 2018; Helms, Patterson & Hudson, 2018).

Credibility and Social Discourses

Our second insight is that organizations facing stigma may draw upon social discourses that are pertinent to approval bodies and mainstream throughout society (Gibbs, 1978; Reichard, 2010), such as a rights discourse (Bromley & Meyer, 2015), referring to postwar cultural shifts that expanded civil protections, emphasizing individualism, empowerment and the rights and

values of new organizations. Justification can be built for initiatives when they are positioned as localized examples of acceptable social and cultural norms (Creed et al., 2002; Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009). We extend prior research in showing that by emphasizing safety, tolerance, and privacy, students successfully aligned the mission and values of their proposed organizations with focal issues actively being addressed by universities. Credibility also stemmed from students themselves as the authors of the constitutions, given aims of cultural pluralism on campus (Jackson & Terrell, 2007), and a student body that embraces differences.

Similarly, “consent” was an important discourse both on campus and more broadly, aligning with U.S. discourses focused on individual empowerment and progressive sexual rights (Bretners, 2016; Duggan, 2012). This is also part of a general discursive shift from framing specific sexual practices as moral and medical deviance problems, to legitimating these under discourses of health and safety, and eventually sexual liberation as an individual choice (Brandt, 1987; Gamson, 1990; Hawkes, 1996). This extends work on the emphasis of broader social concerns in an organization’s discourse, providing additional layers to what Hudson (2008) referred to as normalizing behaviors. But if an emphasis on consent appeases approval bodies and reinforces kink as a sexual identity, it also empowers the organization to maintain its edginess to encourage sexual exploration that would otherwise be viewed as harmful. Topics presented at student organization meetings, including “rope bondage,” and “needle play,” or kink practices like erotic asphyxiation, are still seen by most audiences as taboo. As with MMA (Helms & Patterson, 2014), this edge can attract new, non-mainstream members.

These discourses also motivate university administrations. Universities are under pressure to demonstrate diversity and tolerance on campuses. By presenting themselves as curators of

safety, these student organizations effectively plugged into “larger interests” shared with administrators (Suchman, 1995), here, tolerance of sexual diversity and individual rights.

Problematizing Privacy, Exposure and Official Status

Our third insight is that for emergent organizations, the maturity of the stigmatized issue area in which the organization operates matters for stigma management practices. Prior research notes two overarching strategies: (1) rendering an organization’s stigma opaque through the use of social discourses (e.g. Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009; Vergne, 2012), and (2) embracing stigma and building support (Helms & Patterson, 2014), e.g. aligning social needs with the organizational mission (Tracey & Phillips, 2016). Bridging these two patterns, Phillips & Kim (2009) found that firms founded early in the development of an issue area were more likely to distance themselves compared to those who came later, suggesting an evolution of how organizations presented themselves given changing audience awareness. This links to the pattern of strategic revelation to particular audiences, especially official approvers (e.g. Hsu et al., 2018; Wolfe & Blithe, 2015). Our work adds to the strategic embracing of stigma by highlighting how organizational tactics can shift along with the maturity of a stigmatized area. But in our case, as awareness of kink grew through the popularity of the sadomasochistic romance *Fifty Shades of Grey* in book (2011) and movie form (2015), plus sequels, *some* new student organizations deployed different tactics and branded themselves to capitalize on the visibility of the stigmatized area. Other organizations were circumspect, perhaps driven by the need to present themselves as appropriate to the local context, i.e. openness of the university or wider community to these topics. Put in general terms, some organizations enthusiastically embraced their stigmatized identity, while others were much less transparent, even those founded around the same time. This shows how emergent organizations with core stigma focus on stigma

opacity, while strategic revelation or destigmatization might come later. This adds nuance to the challenge of balancing conflicting audience demands (Helms & Patterson, 2014), as is also seen with self-presentation of legal marijuana dispensaries (Hsu et al., 2018). Thus, we posit that tactics used by organizations vary over time and space: both fitting the local context and evolving with the maturity of the stigmatized issue area.

Our findings also revealed that officially approved organizations were not only vehicles to gain access to resources, but also platforms for collective activism, deemphasizing individual leaders, if creating individual challenges in “coming out,” given the continued stigma of kink in wider society. Official status required leaders to personally consider the “revelation-concealment dialectic” (Wolfe & Blithe, 2015), given the openness requirements of university approval, including student leaders being named on public websites, versus protecting future job prospects for the same students. This drove various strategies, such as listing a “puppet president,” someone willing to “be out,” ensuring privacy for students leading the organization on a daily basis, due to individual concerns about harassment, discrimination and future employment. This adds to our knowledge of how the administrative structure of formal organizational recognition also requires consideration of individual stigma, building on the significance of individuals making sense of their roles and identities within stigmatized contexts (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), which can entail hiding stigma or passing at times (Clair et al., 2005; Petriglieri, 2011).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This initial foray into student organizations provides insight into how emergent organizations with core stigma become recognized by overarching approval bodies in ways similar to those without taboo associations, an initial step in managing stigma, perhaps creating a platform for further legitimacy efforts. Their formal recognition speaks to the shifting agency of

organizations in utilizing discourses that are both prevalent and mainstream in society, the role of standardized approval processes and strategic decisions about explicit organizational purpose and officers. Reflecting on the uniqueness of official emergent organizations within organizational stigma research, we offer the following summary.

(1) *Seek Official Recognition from an Approval Body.* Gaining recognition from an approval body is an important first step for emergent organizations to become established. Official recognition represents one strategy for gaining approval that does not require eradicating organizational stigma, a step often not possible for organizations with core stigma. Once recognized, organizations with core stigma will likely remain stigmatized to specific audiences.

(2) *Choose a Context with Due Process.* Approval decisions made within contexts emphasizing due process imply a confidence that these organizations can operate in a manner akin to non-stigmatized counterparts. Choosing an arena with due process can be strategic to gaining initial approval, in contrast to emotive audiences, e.g. the media.

(3) *Align Organizational Goals with Approval Body Goals.* Formal documents required in an approval process allow emergent organizations to clearly align organizational goals with those pursued by the approval body. Alignment can enable the approval body to view the emergent organization as contributing to broader initiatives. Goal alignment should be honest and justified.

(4) *Stigma Management Tactics Relate to the Maturity of the Stigmatized Area.* Immature stigmatized areas may require caution in the names and descriptions of organizations seeking official recognition, as well as in disclosing the names of officers. Mature, understandable stigmatized areas may allow emergent organizations to be more explicit in organizational goals, practices and names, where core stigma can be openly embraced to build support.

(5) *Leverage the Approval Process to Access Resources.* Gaining official recognition can provide access to resources, financial and otherwise. Once approved, organizations with access to financial resources, physical space, and formal communications can gain greater credibility.

(6) *Shelter the Organization During and After Approval Decisions.* Emergent organizations should consider how to distinguish themselves or conform during the approval process and after, given risk management considerations. Emergent organizations can position themselves within a broader umbrella group, meaning initial rejection or later cancellation represents an attack on the broader umbrella group, and hence unattractive to approval bodies.

(7) *Target the Unique Expectations of Particular Audiences.* Emergent organizations can gain official recognition from approval bodies while still maintaining their edginess with core audiences. This underscores the importance of considering how multiple audiences might inform organizational discourse and behaviors, and that stigmatized organizations need to balance the unique expectations of each audience. Multiple audiences may require variable strategies, such as managing stigma with some audiences while maintaining originality with others.

(8) *Be Cognizant of Group and Individual Disclosure Concerns Among Targeted Audiences.* Organizations with core stigma must be aware of the complex dynamic between pursuing social change and “outing” involved individuals due to official recognition requirements. Being attentive to the local context and diverse audiences is important.

In taking a first step to explore how emergent organizations with core stigma become recognized and established, we highlighted how approval bodies can provide great value to emergent organizations, using a legitimacy as a process lens (Suddaby et al., 2017). Future research should explore emergent organizations with core stigma further, especially in contexts subject to credentialing or approval. Examination of changing revelation strategies offers new

ground for organizational stigma research, for example, asking which of the noted methods (destigmatize, conceal, reveal) would be most appropriate at a given stage in a legitimacy process. This might include explanatory mechanisms for variations in explicitness, such as the local community. A focus on the maturity of a stigmatized issue area could also prove fruitful for explaining how stigmatized organizations should engage with specific audiences, such as emotive audiences like the media (Tienari et al., 2003; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Future research could contrast dispassionate and emotive audiences, as well as examine their interplay, or highlight variations among e.g. regulators, industry bodies and other dispassionate regulators. Another question relates to the role of status, as prominent universities were strongly represented in our sample. A final issue to note for research using student organizations is that constitutions typically reflect conditions at the time of founding, suggesting the utility of qualitative research for later evolution.

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Table 1. Historical Emergence of Official Student Kink Organizations

Year Founded	University	Organization Name
1998	University of Wisconsin	Sex Out Loud
2000	Iowa State University	CUFFS
2004	Washington University St. Louis	The Alternative Lifestyle Association (ALA)
2006	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	MIT Student Sex-Positive Club
2007	Columbia University	Conversio Virium
	University of Chicago	Safe, Sane, and Consensual (later renamed Risk-Aware Consensual Kink)
2011	University of California-Santa Barbara	Kink University: A Fetish Fellowship (KUFF)
2012	Brandeis University	Brandeis Queer Resource Center
	Harvard University	Harvard College Munch
	Stony Brook University	SBU TNG (The Next Generation)
2013	Penn State University	Kink Positive
	University of Minnesota	Queer Student Cultural Center
2014	Cornell University	Cornell Crunch
	Stanford University	Kardinal Kink
2015	Case Western University	Case Undergraduate Fetish Foundation (CUFF)
	Northwestern University	Northwestern University Kink Education Society (NUKES)
	University of California-Berkeley	The Kink Club
	University of Southern California	Trojan Munch Club

Table 2. Data Exemplars for Coded Discourses

Discourse	Exemplars from the Data
Safety	1. The purposes of KUFF are...to provide a safe and open environment to discuss alternative lifestyles and practices... To organize and provide seminars and demonstrations to educated [sic] the community and promote safety and awareness of related topics (University of California, Santa Barbara, KUFF).
	2. The purpose of Kink Positive is to help educate the PSU community on alternative sexuality issues, to create a safe environment for people to meet and share ideas about alternate sexuality (i.e. the kink, poly, and swing communities), and to provide information on health and safety to our members and the PSU community (Penn State University, Kink Positive).
Tolerance	1. People with concerns about the impact of their own BDSM related feelings are encouraged to explore them with us. To this end, we wish to engage in dialogue which is supportive, candid, and respectful to others' rights to have differing opinions and limits. However, all those who attend our meetings must refrain from challenging the validity of BDSM in general or others' lifestyles and identities, except when non-consent or safety becomes an issue (Washington University St. Louis, Alternative Lifestyle Association).
Community Building	1. To provide support, community, and safe space for individuals who are interested/involved/supportive of non-normative sexuality and to provide information about the related communities (Case Western University, CUFFS).
	2. The purpose of the Organization shall be: ... B. To create a visible campus community of open-minded students at Stony Brook University who want to learn more and get feedback on topics concerning kink; C. To provide a venue for students at Stony Brook University to discuss and share their experiences in the BDSM (or other kink) community that is free of social pressure and judgment based on sexual orientation/interest... (Stony Brook University, SBU TNG).
Privacy	1. BDSM is considered by many to be a private matter. In addition, misconceptions about BDSM remain widespread and may be damaging. By attending our meetings and events, one agrees not to divulge to anyone outside the group the names, statements, or actions of anyone else who attends without their explicit permission (Columbia University, Conversio Virium).
	2. No list of members will be published or available to anyone other than the current officers of the SSC (MIT, Student Sex-Positive Club).
Definitions of kink	1. The word "kink" here is used as an umbrella term which includes, but is not limited to: BDSM (bondage, discipline, Domination/submission, sadism/masochism), fetishes, and many other practices between consenting humans that are considered paraphilic [abnormal psychiatric conditions] by the medical and social establishment (Cornell University, Crunch).

APPENDIX

Appendix A. Graphical Representation of Nodes Coded





Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:

Coslor, E; Crawford, B; Brents, BG

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Whips, Chains and Books on Campus: How Emergent Organizations with Core Stigma Gain Official Recognition

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