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A historical account of the stigmatisation of sweat and smell and the legitimization of the anti-perspirant and deodorant industry

Competitive Short Paper for a Workshop at the Academy of Marketing Conference 2023

Workshop: Using Historical Archives in Marketing Research and Teaching

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Summary Statement

This project is an empirical example of using historical advertising archives to investigate how today's anti-perspirant and deodorant industry gained legitimacy by stigmatising those who are 'smelly'. By connecting the processes of (de)legitimation with (de)stigmatisation of sweat and smell, the authors argue that stigmatisation and legitimacy are gendered, given differing norms and expectations for women and men regarding propriety, impacting the inclusion of women in society as equals.

Keywords: stigma, advertising, legitimacy

The Competitive Paper

This project is an empirical example of using historical advertising archives to investigate how today's anti-perspirant and deodorant industry gained legitimacy by stigmatising those who are 'smelly'. Odors are invested with cultural values that shape social interaction, such that smells are used to classify people (Reinarz, 2014, 1). Being stigmatised, through sweat and smell, means being excluded and devalued, while maintaining the social order that works in the favour of some and not others.

Arguably, we have limited understanding of the advertising industry's role in creating, amplifying, and attenuating stigma in advertising executions (Mirabito et al., 2016), or of how such stigmatisation can be used for market creation or legitimation. Our study thus expands research on stigma and responds to calls for further research regarding the mechanisms of legitimation (Humphreys, 2010; Humphreys & Latour, 2013) and delegitimation (Huff et al., 2021; Humphreys, 2010). Specifically, we focus on the process of persuasive legitimation (Suddaby, Bitektine & Haack, 2017), by means of framing (Benford & Snow, 2000). Culturally speaking, we furthermore place persuasive legitimation at the intersection with normative and/or cognitive legitimacy (Scott, 1995), or what is being valued and taken for granted as socially acceptable through advertisements.

Accessing archives from the History of Advertising Trust (Moir, Read & Towne, 2017), we worked with an initial dataset of 301 print deodorant advertisements throughout the ages, starting with the brand that stood at the birth of the anti-perspirant and deodorant industry: Olorono. Methodologically, given the lack of understanding of how processes of legitimation and stigmatisation develop in tandem, we rely upon grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss,

1967) to inductively analyse our data and expect to continue data collection. Preliminary results from the data point towards the following.

Our archival data revealed an early focus of the advertisements on sweat and stains, rather than on smell and odours, as the pioneering brand Odorono is an anti-perspirant, despite its name (Odor? Oh no!). 'Fastidious' women were the early target audience for Odorono, and were being persuaded to use it, to avoid social embarrassment in the context of 'dancing, tennis, riding', or at 'the climax of an evening', wooing men. It was the excess of sweat *in women* that was stigmatising, because it marked the loss of 'daintiness' and 'loveliness'. Interestingly, this was happening at a time when woman's role in the society was expanding with the promise of the so-called 'New Woman' (Freedman, 1974), poised to participate in society and politics, as an equal to men. The anti-perspirant advertising, however, was undermining and delegitimising equality for women by trying to maintain their status quo. The legitimacy of the use of anti-perspirant thus hinges on whether or not women indeed should remain dainty, for fear of becoming stigmatised, and keep their place. Connecting processes of (de)legitimation with (de)stigmatisation of sweat and smell through the use of Odorono, we preliminarily suggest that stigmatisation and legitimacy are gendered, given differing norms and expectations for women and men regarding propriety, impacting the inclusion of women in society as equals.

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