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Bad Apples and Sour Grapes: How Fruit and vegetable Wholesalers' Fantasy mediates Experienced Stigma

Sophie Michel, EM Strasbourg Business School, France

Russ Vince, University of Bath and University of St Andrews, UK

Abstract

How do organizations that belong to a stigmatised industry manage negative perceptions? In this paper, we contribute to answering this question by highlighting how organisational members turn external negative evaluations into positive self-idealizations. Our research offers a unique perspective on how stigmatised actors navigate their tarnished image, as well as how they remain attached to a group and its attributes despite its stigmatisation. The study reports findings from two French fruit and vegetable wholesalers, who are commonly perceived as thieves, bandits and unwanted intermediaries. We explain how organisational members were able to neutralise negative perceptions by mobilising and maintaining an idealised perception of their centrality. This structuring fantasy formed a powerful defense against stigmatised perceptions, transforming the stigma into self-idealisation that supported organizational stability. The organizations studied developed idealisation strategies based on members' attachment to or distancing from nostalgic fantasies of the past. We suggest that awareness of the idealised construct that underpins a particular attachment to a stigmatised attribute may help organisations and their members free themselves from stigma.

Keywords: organisational stigma, fantasy, affective attachment, internal dynamics, intermediaries.

Introduction

There's this connotation of the wholesaler that's often disparaged and little accepted. Our profession is not well regarded. It's not rewarding to be seen as a potato seller. (Fruit and vegetable wholesaler CEOs)

Wholesaling as a business-to-business (B2B) intermediary and trading activity bears an enduring stain that prevents full social acceptance. Wholesalers are not only seen as anachronistic (Mackeown, 2007) but also as ‘bandits’ or ‘thieves’ who inflate prices and impose themselves as unwanted intermediaries (Dugot, 2000). Due to this negative perception, as well as restrictive regulations, they have faced consistent hostility and attacks of disintermediation by other economic actors (mainly producers and retailers) over many years (Gadde, 2012). Surprisingly, while adapting their activities to new norms, wholesalers have not challenged their stigmatised attributes but on the contrary, have embraced the intermediary role despite its stigmatisation. This makes them an interesting organisational context for the study of experienced stigma, especially for understanding how and why such organisations remain in a stigmatised industry.

Defining stigma as a negative social evaluation that creates the perception of a deep-seated flaw (Devers et al., 2009), the literature has provided insights into how stigmatised organisations survive despite their stigmatisation (Tracey and Phillips, 2016) and how they deploy strategies to contain the stigma without removing it (Hampel and Tracey, 2017). In fact, stigmatised organisations often embrace the stigmatised attributes, more or less consciously, contributing to the persistent nature of stigma (Devers et al., 2009; Hudson, 2008). Previous research linked this phenomenon to the internalisation of stigmatised attributes into the organisational identification (e.g., Piazza and Perretti, 2015). Yet, few scholars have taken the analysis further to consider how stigma is experienced from the inside (e.g., Frandsen and Morsing, 2022; Tracey and Phillips, 2016). *Experienced stigma* allows us to focus on the internal dynamics of stigmatised organisations rather than stigmatisers (Hudson et al., 2022) in order to explore the persistence of stigmatised organisations that do not attempt to challenge the stigma (Aranda et al., 2023).

When it is almost impossible to change stigmatisers’ perceptions (Tracey and Phillips, 2016) and too difficult to leave a stigmatised group (a profession, an organisation) (Gonzales and Pérez-Floriano, 2015), people deploy strategies to protect themselves (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Gonzales and Pérez-Floriano, 2015; Frandsen and Morsing, 2022). Previous scholars have drawn our attention to people’s protection of their self-esteem by reframing their identity and viewing themselves and their group in a more positive light (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Roulet, 2020). In line with this research interest, we aim to further the understanding of internal dynamics in the face of persistent stigma based on positive identification and collective self-protection.

For this purpose we use the conceptual frame of *fantasy*, which is an established concept in organisation studies (Butler, 2018; Kenny et al., 2020b). Foroughi (2020, p. 1348), defines fantasy as ‘emotionally significant (unconscious) wishes for fulfilment or gratification (Brown, 1997, p. 646) [,] (that) can set up an illusion, sustaining the idea of an imaginary self (Fotaki, 2010) or an idealised scenario promising an imaginary fullness or wholeness (Glynos, 2008, p. 10).’ Fantasy helps us, both individually and collectively, to enact ways of feeling within or about an organisation when reality is too painful or difficult.

In the face of stigma and a need for self-preservation, fantasy can help organisational members to cope with negative feelings like anxiety (Roulet, 2020; Shantz and Booth, 2014) and mediate negative self-perception in the way stigma is experienced (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). The concept of fantasy can explain how people become and remain attached to particular ('fantasmic') 'frames' (Voronov and Vince, 2012, p. 65) and how such attachments lead to the persistence of norms and practices despite clear inconsistencies (Kenny et al., 2020b). This 'structuring effect' of fantasy (Vince, 2019, p. 962) contributes to resistance to change (Glynos, 2008) and explains the persistent nature of stigma as people remain attached to a stigmatised group without challenging the stigma. Thus, we use fantasy as an analytical lens to further explore internal dynamics and ask: How does structuring fantasy mediate the way stigma is experienced internally?

To explore this question, we followed a qualitative approach based on the stigma experienced by two fruit and vegetable (F&V) wholesalers in France after the disintermediation attack by retailers during the 1990s. This event stemmed from the negative perceptions mentioned above - as a parasite (Bouée, 1944*; Michel and Pardo, 2012) or 'eater of margins' (Dugot, 2000) - and has led to the marginalisation of their role within the distribution system. The numerous attempts of both farmers and retailers to bypass wholesalers and internalise their activities are supported by media coverage highlighting wholesalers' responsibility for over-inflated prices, and by governments implementing restrictive regulations to defend farmers. Yet, in contrast with retailers and farmers' efforts to marginalise wholesalers, French F&V wholesalers have managed to internally create and maintain an idealised image of their role as 'vital intermediaries' in the F&V field. Our research suggests that they have achieved this through a structuring fantasy (Vince, 2019) of their own importance within the distribution system.

The first part of the findings reveals how this sense of their own importance is a fantasy that bridges the reality of a marginalised position with an idealised self-image of wholesaling business as vital. The fantasy of wholesalers' supposed centrality in the distribution system is refined over time, even as they modify their practices to adapt to new norms. The two organisations we compare in this study walk contrasting paths with regards to the affective attachment to the fantasy. They differ in the way organisational members are attached to or distance themselves from the past to reinforce a positive self-image and deny their vilification.

Thus, our empirical study contributes to the research on stigma by connecting the persistent nature of stigma with the internal dynamics. Our study provides insights, first, into the way organisational members turn external negative evaluations into positive self-idealisation through their collective attachment and extension of structuring fantasy. Second, our study contributes to the analysis of idealisation strategy (Frandsen and Morsing, 2022) regarding organisational members' attachment or distancing to nostalgic fantasies of the past (Glynos, 2008). Third, our findings highlight in particular the importance of passion and other positive feelings to explain experience in the face of stigma (Roulet, 2020) and contribute to the relational approach of stigma. Yet, affective attachment to a stigmatised group can also slow down the process of identifying new meanings and ways out. Our practical purpose is to demonstrate that an awareness of the idealised construct that underpins a particular attachment to a stigmatised attribute may help organisations and their members free themselves from stigma.

Key concepts: Experienced stigma and structuring fantasy

This section summarises the conceptual framework based on experienced stigma and structuring fantasy. First, we discuss the persistent nature of stigma and why some organisations can remain ‘passive targets’ of stigma due to their internal dynamics. Second, we introduce the concept of fantasy as an analytical lens to bring out contradictions and determine how members remain attached to a group despite their awareness of its stigmatisation. Wholesalers self-protect to cope with negative labels without explicitly fighting against them. We believe that reflections on the structuring effect of fantasy can provide a better understanding of internal dynamics based on self-preservation from stigma and idealised constructs.

Internal dynamics and the persistent nature of experienced stigma

Organisational stigma is a negative social evaluation that creates the perception of a deep-seated flaw that discredits an organisation (Devers et al., 2009). As stigma is tied to attributes (Aranda et al., 2023), organisational stigma is a label shared by organisations with a similar negative attribute (Lashley and Pollock, 2020; Vergne, 2012). It is also an enduring stain that can persist despite organisations’ efforts to conform to norms (Devers et al., 2009). For example, Vergne (2012) described how the global arms industry attempts to reduce its negative social perception without challenging the stigmatisation itself. Reducing stigma is even more difficult when the stigmatised attribute is an integral part of the *raison d’être* of such organisations (Hudson, 2008). For example, Piazza and Perretti (2015), in their study of nuclear power organisations, show how the organisation's degree of identification with the stigmatised industry makes it less likely to disengage from that industry despite the stigma. In fact, organisations often embrace the stigmatised group and deploy strategies such as denying, avoiding or modifying a stigmatised attribute to survive without removing it (Hampel and Tracey, 2017).

Tracey and Phillips (2016) explored the internal dynamics of organisational survival despite stigmatisation with a particular focus on identity work. They show how organisations can reframe the meaning that organisational members attach to the stigmatised attribute instead of changing their image in the eyes of stigmatisers. This kind of organisation can be perceived as ‘passive targets’ (Aranda et al., 2023), as they do not challenge stigmatised attributes. Exploring the internal dynamics and how stigma is *experienced* inside these organisations (Hudson et al., 2022) can provide new insights on organisational members’ experience in the face of stigma (Roulet, 2020). Frandsen and Morsing (2022) explored the emotional reactions of organisational members in interaction with their professional and personal spheres after their company was involved in a money laundering scandal. Their study discusses several strategies that enable the preservation of their identity as a self-protection in response to the threat posed by the scandal.

Self-protection is an important reaction that helps people to protect themselves against stigma and maintain a positive image of their group (a profession, an organisation, an industry) (Roulet, 2020). Previous studies about stigmatised professions highlight a positive identification of individuals to the group linked to shared ideology and solidarity (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). When individuals find it difficult to distance themselves from stigma, they tend to embrace it to maintain their self-esteem (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Goffman, 1963). The results of Gonzales and Pérez-Floriano (2015)’s study about Mexican police officers emphasised in particular the importance of stigma consciousness – as awareness and

sensitivity to a stereotyped status (p. 670) –to cope with negative perception (e.g., corruption, violence) and reinforce positive identification. A study by Slay and Smith (2011) on African American reporters demonstrated that stigma can be part of professional identity construction and become an enduring stain. Thus, instead of fighting against stigmatisers, self-protection has become part of how actors consciously and unconsciously embrace the stigma (Roulet, 2020).

We believe that further exploring these contradictions in how organisational members can be both conscious of the stigma but also embrace a stigmatised group can offer new insights into stigmatised organisations and their internal dispositions to counterbalance stigmatisation. Complementing Frandsen and Morsing's (2022) study about experienced stigma, we aim to further the understanding of an aspect that has not been well developed – the internal dynamics of stigmatised organisations and collective self-protection in the face of persistent stigma. Next, we discuss the conceptual frame of fantasy, on which our study relies.

Fantasy: From idealised construct to structuring effects

In the introduction, we mentioned the importance of fantasy as a construct associated with an ideal that promises an imaginary fullness (Foroughi, 2020), protecting people from their unsatisfied desires (Glynos, 2008). As stigma can be a source of anxiety, fantasy helps to protect the stigmatised targets and create a positive illusion, sustaining an imaginary self (Fotaki, 2010) that is positive and mediates negative attributes. Drawing on previous studies, we understand fantasy in two interconnected ways.

First, fantasy is an imaginative response that produces attachment to an ideal and helps us cope with difficult situations and acquire an illusory sense of stability (Kenny et al., 2020b; Foroughi, 2020). Fantasy originates in the impossibility of filling a 'lack' (Ekman, 2013; Stavrakakis, 2008) and manifests itself in the symbolic order through language and discourse (Fotaki and Foroughi, 2022). Fantasy has a narrative structure, but these narratives are fuelled by unsatisfied desires (Glynos, 2008) and affective attachment (Stavrakakis, 2008; Voronov and Vince, 2012). Affect is a powerful force that connects people to fantasy. For example, in their study about social entrepreneurs and their fantasised scenarios about pro-social work, Kenny and colleagues (2020b) depict how social entrepreneurs' attachment to these ideals is linked to the affective nature of their identification, in particular their passion. Due to this attachment, these entrepreneurs can retain their faith in social entrepreneurship despite the organisational tensions and anxieties inherent in this field. People's attachment to fantasy enables them to enjoy (Glynos, 2008; Stavrakakis, 2008) and reassure themselves (Kenny et al., 2020). Yet, the greater the fantasmic attachment is, 'the stronger the ideological grip' (Glynos, 2008, p. 289) will be, thereby limiting the potential for changes.

Second, fantasy ties together the inner world of individuals with the social and political dynamics generated in organisations (Glynos, 2008; Vince, 2019; Voronov and Vince, 2012). Organisations develop preferred images that, over time, become taken-for-granted aspects of the prevailing order. Thus, fantasy has *structuring effects* (Vince, 2019) that reinforce implicit limitations on the behaviour and actions of organisational members. For example, Fotaki and Foroughi (2022) show that the more we seek to use the notion of a leaderless organisation to imagine alternative organisations, the more we undermine embedded power relations. In being strongly attached to this fantasy of power-less, decentralised organisations, organisational members come to fear that acknowledging power relations will generate conflict, which will unsettle effective and democratic processes.

Leaderlessness helps them to avoid the imagined conflicts that may arise by noticing power. The fantasy becomes a representational image (Driver, 2009). It helps organisational members to ignore the complexities of the organisational relations associated with their work and implement an imaginary state as a dominant vision. Such structuring fantasies are not necessarily deliberate acts of self-limitation or control, as they can be unconscious (Driver, 2009; Voronov and Vince, 2012), but they limit and constrain our responses and ability to change (Glynos, 2008).

Thus, structuring fantasy provides organisation scholars with an important analytic lens (Butler, 2018; Kenny et al., 2020b; Voronov and Vince, 2012), because it connects people's lived experiences with the social and political structures by which these experiences are both contained and constrained (Stavrakakis, 2008). We believe that reflections on structuring fantasy (Vince, 2019) linked to the stigmatised attributes can provide a better understanding of the collective attachment of organisational members in the face of persistent stigma.

Moreover, the two concepts of fantasy and stigma are related to the way difficult situations and negative evaluations can be mitigated by self-preservation. Indeed, fantasy can help us further investigate members' desires for self-esteem (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999) in the face of stigma, and understand how attachments to stigma become idealised constructs. Idealisation is a complementary lens to comprehend members' attachment to a group despite its stigmatisation (see Frandsen and Morsing, 2022) and the role of positive identification to neutralise negative connotations (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). Such idealising logic provides the mechanism through which fantasmic images of 'fulfilment' are maintained or created to compensate for a lack (Ekman, 2013; Stavrakakis, 2008). Using imaginary identifications, people create illusory images of themselves based on how they would like to be or be seen by others (Driver, 2009; Kenny et al., 2020b), thus protecting themselves from external negative evaluations.

Research context: Wholesalers as passive targets of stigmatisation

This section details the rationale for choosing F&V wholesalers as the organisational context for the study of stigma, especially in terms of the persistent nature of stigma and the experience of passive targets. The *deep-seated flaw* (Devers et al., 2009) that discredits wholesalers in the eyes of the public is linked to their two main attributes, namely wholesalers as B2B intermediaries and their trading activity. Indeed, several studies recounting the history of wholesalers show how their trading activity has always been viewed with 'suspicion' (Beckman and Engle, 1951*; Sédillot, 1964*). Despite wholesalers' positive evaluation as 'noble bourgeois' during the Renaissance (Michel and Pardo, 2012), wholesalers have become vilified as an unwanted element in B2B relationships since the industrialisation (Gadde, 2012). As early as 1944, French economist Bouée (1944, p. 307*) voiced the view that 'public opinion is convinced that intermediaries are parasites who take excessive margins without working'. The notion of intermediaries as 'parasites' was later taken up by other studies (e.g., Mackeown, 2007) and has become an enduring stain for wholesalers. Wholesalers themselves perceive this negative social evaluation and describe it through other labels like 'bandits' or 'thieves':

Because a trader always has a rather negative image. He's the guy who makes a profit on your back. Whereas a service provider who charges for a service has a less negative

image. It must be deep in the human subconscious, but our profession is seen as a profession for bandits... (CEO, POMA)

The difficulty is that it's hard to improve the image of wholesale trade. For example, a parliamentary committee on agriculture came to [the national wholesale food market] three or four years ago. But these guys, mainly deputies, had never realised that things happen between the tree on which apples grow and the children's plate in the canteen (...) The problem is that when you bring it back to the production price, they immediately say: 'Oh boy! Such thieves! The product for which €0.60 was paid to the farmer ends up at €1.50 because of wholesalers', so they say: 'It's more than twice the price, so these people [wholesalers] are gorging themselves, it's disgusting'. (Branch Manager, ORCHADE)

While stigma can be latent during a period and then raise its head again with a particular event or context (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Hudson et al., 2022; Vergne, 2012), negative perceptions of wholesalers have persisted (Dugot, 2000; Mackeown, 2007) in France and tend to escalate during periods of economic crisis and price inflation. For instance, in the face of peak inflation in 2022, the media reported the speculation of wholesalers, as well as accusations from politicians, retailers, and producers. A newspaper article entitled 'Fruit and vegetables: What role do intermediaries play in price hikes?' (Ibriz, 2023*) reports: 'Questioned by the press on Friday February 3, 2023 about the rise in food prices, the Minister of Agriculture attributed this phenomenon to intermediate speculation in addition to the cold snap'. In a national French radio interviewing a local grocery store about inflated prices, the latter condemned wholesalers: 'Prices went up a lot in January! It was freezing everywhere, so wholesalers raised their prices' (Bocconi, 2017*). As reported by the French institute INSEE (Berry, 2003*), since the prices of F&V fluctuate, price increases receive significant media coverage centred on intermediaries' excessive profit margins.

The condemnation of wholesalers is more severe in agricultural sectors like fresh F&V, as France has a strong agricultural tradition and producers tend to be defended against distributors in public opinion and by the government. A professional report about the F&V sector emphasised the support of farmers by the French government with restrictive regulations (Géode, 2005*).¹ According to this report, as prices play an essential role in the F&V sector – with a high degree of variability - wholesalers are more likely to be pointed out as the cause for higher prices by farmers.

Because of such perceptions, wholesalers have been under threat and their disappearance has been predicted several times (Gadde, 2012), such as during the 'disintermediation' attack in the 1990s in France, which was designed to exclude F&V wholesalers from the distribution system. During this period, the price war between retailing groups highlighted once again the negative effects of intermediaries with excessive margins. Retailers blamed intermediaries for high prices to draw attention away from their control over commercial agreements with farmers, and an increasing number of regulations constrained wholesalers' activities and encouraged the creation of cooperatives on the producers' side (Géode, 2005*). Then, allying themselves with cooperatives of producers and gaining support from regional authorities, retailers set up central purchasing groups to bypass wholesalers.

¹ For instance, two laws, one in 1996 (*Loi Galland*) and one in 2006 (*Circulaires Jacob-Dutreuil 2006-2007*) aimed to reduce wholesaler margins and the WTO regulation 1200/96 encourages the creation of commercial producer organisations to sell their products, thus integrating the activities of intermediaries.

Retailers depicted wholesalers as useless profiteers (Michel and Pardo, 2012) to legitimate their own central purchasing, while F&V wholesalers were already considered as ‘dead meat’ in public reports and the media (e.g. Déniel, 2005*) and by the F&V wholesalers’ federation itself (Adrien/UNCGFL, 1998*).

Despite being vilified and marginalised, F&V wholesalers have managed to maintain a positive image of themselves as vital intermediaries in the F&V sector. In line with Tracey and Phillips’s (2016) study, our research focuses on wholesalers’ internal dynamics and self-protection instead of strategic efforts to improve their image in the eyes of stigmatisers. Because ‘it is hard to improve the image of wholesale trade’ (Branch Manager, ORCHADE), as quoted above, wholesalers remained passive targets (Aranda et al., 2023), adapting their activity to new expectations without, at least explicitly, changing their image of ‘bandits’, ‘thieves’ or ‘parasites’.

Although some wholesalers have rejected the intermediary position and left the wholesaling business, we were interested in those who could not distance themselves from the role of the intermediary despite the stigmatisation. To this end, we compare two wholesaling businesses, namely ORCHADE and POMA. The two organisations share similar histories in the F&V distribution business. Both organisations have persisted in the wholesaling F&V industry by connecting it to an illusory image of themselves as central actors, thus protecting themselves from the parasite label. The two cases provide different insights into the internal dynamics used to survive. ORCHADE built a model that challenges traditional practices and relies on members’ disengagement from the initial (fantasmic) frames. Conversely, POMA’s approach relies on the maintenance of traditional practices and their initial attachment to wholesaling. Our study investigates organisational members’ idealised constructs around wholesaling in both organisations.

Methods: Data collection and analysis

Our study was qualitative and interpretive. We examined organisational members’ attachment to their organisation as a wholesaler. The data were collected and analysed simultaneously to strengthen the analysis as it progressed (Corley and Gioia, 2004). Seventy in-depth interviews were conducted, digitally recorded and transcribed:² 36 in ORCHADE and 34 in POMA. Twelve additional interviews were conducted with specialists and actors from the F&V field, and secondary data was gathered to generate information about similarities among F&V wholesalers and depict their stigmatisation. The first representative sample of respondents from each company was extended using purposive sampling (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) based on the identification of key respondents and our first interpretations. For instance, we started to look at affective attachment while engaging in an iterative process between the data collection and theoretical reflection, as we observed nostalgia and idealisation about the past when members talked about their job. We also observed recurring discourses about members’ ‘passion’ for this job. Thus, we decided to further investigate this phenomenon, conducting additional interviews with the CEOs of each company to obtain further information on shared desires and affective attachment to their profession. These additional interviews allowed us to further comprehend similarities in their idealised construct of wholesaling, as well as contrasting dynamics of attachment.

² Interviews were conducted between 2012-2014 and transcribed in French before being translated into English.

N-Vivo qualitative research software was used for the data analysis to manage the initial coding. We conducted a first round of primary coding, using thematic analysis to capture how members reacted to the disintermediation and stigmatisation by retailers. We identified two reactions in two different phases. During the first phase, right after the disintermediation event during the 1990s, wholesalers had a similar reaction: They denied the change and maintained an idealised view of their relationship with retailers despite negative feelings. During the second phase, between 2000s-2010s, the two cases depicted contrasting internal approaches: ORCHADE members' idealised vision of themselves as a vital partner was extended to new dimensions, while it did not change significantly for POMA members. Yet, in both cases, members maintained a sense of an ideal about the wholesaling activity despite their marginal role in the distribution system.

Inspired by studies that draw on fantasy, we looked at contradictions and tensions rather than downplaying them (Fotaki and Foroughi, 2022; Kenny et al., 2020b) and identified 'centrality' as a shared fantasy. ORCHADE and POMA shared the desire to maintain their central role as intermediary in the distribution system, even as they were becoming marginal actors according to retailers and faced other disintermediation threats. According to our 12 additional interviews, this also applied to other wholesalers. Further exploring their shared desires and attachment to idealised constructs, we were intrigued by informants' passion and their idealised image of the work as a 'tough job'. Yet, we also identified contrasting narratives around this image between the two cases, helping us to identify alternative ways in which members maintained their attachment. Indeed, we concluded that both case studies illustrate efforts to uphold the structuring fantasy of centrality through different collective attachment to wholesaling and experience of the stigmatisation. As depicted in Figure 1, we aggregated the themes into 'nostalgic fantasy' (Glynos, 2008) and 'extended fantasy' as two different dynamics of 'collective attachment' to achieve an 'idealised self-image' mediating the experienced stigma.

Findings

Structuring fantasy in the face of retailing stigmatisation

Our work is belittled. We are poorly regarded and criticised. The fruit and vegetable wholesaler has always been criticised by everybody, including public authorities. That is why within the [wholesaling] federation, people are saying: 'we are treated with contempt'. (CEO, ORCHADE)

As mentioned above, wholesalers themselves recognised the stigmatisation. Yet, they struggled to face the disintermediation attack by retailers during the 1990s, as they had built an idealised image of their importance to the F&V system through their partnership with retailers. Indeed, they were the main partners of large-scale retailers for 30 years, helping them to develop super/hypermarkets since the 1960s. Since over 70-80% of F&V were consumed through super/hypermarkets (F&V Professional Association*), wholesalers felt indispensable and justified this vital role on the basis of their expertise of F&V assimilated to 'fresh and complex products' (e.g., buyer, ORCHADE; CEO, POMA). Thus, wholesalers 'were scared to death about facing reality' (CEO, ORCHADE) when the disintermediation by retailers occurred and they created an idealised image of their indispensable relationship with retailers, even in the face of evidence that such relationships were more imagined than real:

Because of their beliefs about their close relationships with supermarkets (...) they thought they were essential. I remember a wholesaler who worked at 50% with the retailer [L], and he told me, 'I know the boss of each supermarket of [L] very well and they will never use central purchasing'. (CEO, ORCHADE)

Yet, their centrality became a mirage, as wholesalers were no longer the main partners of retailers. As reported by a newspaper article in 1997, 'Excluded from these negotiations [between farmer cooperatives and retailing groups], wholesalers have become nothing more than logistical relays between the producer, the head office and the stores' (LSA, 1997*). This article also noted the snub from authorities which implemented a new commercial agreement between producers and large-scale retailers without including wholesalers. Worse than the exclusion and neglect was that wholesalers' stigmatisation escalated during that period through retailing groups' attempt to legitimise their central purchasing by denigrating the role of wholesalers, as shown here:

In the 90s, large-scale retailers tried to get out of the way when small farmers started to denounce prices. They said: *But it's not us! It's the wholesalers*. It was a handy way to argue that they weren't the bad guys, especially with their central purchasing. And the farmers who had been working with the wholesalers for years also criticised them when they started to work with central purchasing. (CEO, ORCHADE)

Indeed, central purchasing managers attempted to convince their partners, both store managers and farmers, about the lack of professionalism of wholesalers. As illustrated in this quotation, central purchasing managers disseminated anecdotes that discredit wholesalers:

Last time I told them [my partners] we dismantled a whole network of wholesalers who were reselling 'shit' refused by the approver in certain stores. There's a problem of professionalism among wholesalers. (Central purchasing manager, Retailer)

Wholesalers' practices were being discredited by retailing groups who pointed out outdated and questionable methods due to a lack of transparency. The stores internalised this contempt and perceived wholesalers' activity with suspicion:

You have to constantly keep a close eye on them (Store manager 2, Retailer).

Some stores directly contributed to the stigmatisation of wholesalers by denigrating other store managers who still worked with them:

Those who work with wholesalers are [store] managers who have shortcomings in sourcing, they are bad. (Store manager 1, Retailer)

In the face of this intensification of negative evaluation, we identified two phases of reaction. During the first phase, from 1990 to the 2000s, the two F&V wholesalers' survival depended on a powerful and enduring notion concerning their importance for the F&V sector and for retailers. It was difficult for members to face the reality and acknowledge that their intermediary function was being discredited by large-scale retailers. Described as 'a terrible blow' (CEO, ORCHADE) and 'a big trauma' (Financial Director, POMA), this event provoked strong negative feelings:

It was a terrible experience, everybody felt very badly, from employees all the way to the top (...) It was emotionally very difficult, and we were all feeling really down. (Purchasing Manager, ORCHADE)

In reaction to these negative feelings, the desire to recover a central and vital position became even more intense. Attacks on their role as intermediaries did not undermine them but rather reinforced their desire for centrality. They clung to their desire to carry out a distinctive activity by convincing themselves that the disintermediation attack that had taken place in other sectors would not happen in F&V:

People believe that their [F&V] activity was particular and then, that they would never have the same issues that others [wholesalers] had before. And thus, everybody [F&V wholesalers] was clinging to that dream [CEO, ORCHADE]

Indeed, in both cases, members' first reaction was to reinforce their belief that only wholesalers could provide expertise in 'F&V specificities'. The CEO of POMA, for example, did not wish to diversify into frozen F&V products because he believed in a 'culture of fresh produce, of perishable products in the F&V market and not of dead products' (CEO, POMA). Similarly, during this first period, ORCHADE's board could not envisage diversifying beyond fresh F&V, which is why they diversified into the ripening and distribution of fresh bananas in order to reinforce their importance in the F&V distribution system. In both cases, members were guided by their historical passion for F&V:

What had existed historically was a fruit and vegetable reasoning that led to a fruit and vegetable passion. They were devoted to it' (CEO, ORCHADE).

Within the two case studies, the first reaction to disintermediation was thus to rediscover their role as main partners of retailers based on vital expertise in F&V. Their efforts led them to deny the contempt and negative evaluation from retailing groups and instead, to direct their negative feelings toward other clients, mainly catering ones:

We discovered a clientele [catering actors] that we despised. (CEO, ORCHADE)
Yes. Clearly. We despised them. (CEO, POMA)

One buyer working for ORCHADE described these negative feelings associated to a perceived failure of having to work with catering actors instead of recovering their centrality to retailers:

I think it was very difficult to live through for some of us who felt denigrated by working with catering clients. They [colleagues] denigrated themselves, and I would say that there are still scars... (Buyer 1, ORCHADE)

These negative feelings towards catering clients showed their inability to question their privileged relationship with store managers. Despite the initial trauma experienced with retailers, members remained devoted to the stores while denigrating and limiting their business with catering clients.

However, wholesalers' idealised construct of their importance to retailers had a limited shelf life. Wholesalers could no longer ignore the fact that many retailers were not going to return as partners, nor their accusations of a non-transparent and suspicious activity. During the second phase, in the 2000s, the two wholesalers acknowledged this questioning of their practices and lack of transparency. They responded by extending their fantasy of

centrality to include the role of *quality guarantor* in the distribution system. Wholesaling was still idealised as a ‘tough activity’ (e.g., Branch Manager, POMA), but the focus shifted beyond F&V specificities to include new dimensions and extend their role as vital partner to other clients. The two wholesale companies successfully made this shift thanks to their new partnerships with catering actors and their role in providing these actors with consistent quality in a sector that was growing fast but was also under increasing pressure to conform to security and hygiene procedures.

Beyond the rationalisation of these changes in the economic development of the catering sector and the new pressures in terms of hygiene and security, this modification of the intermediary role entailed important adjustments to initial idealised constructs and attachments. Wholesalers’ ‘close’ relationships with retailers for instance were extended to catering actors. According to one member of ORCHADE, ‘relationships are still important’; caterers are no longer despised by ORCHADE and POMA members:

We have a friendly relationship with catering actors. (CEO, POMA)

We have friendly relationships with catering clients, some of them become real friends. We still have a job with important and convivial relationships. (Sales Department 4, ORCHADE)

Interestingly, however, the extension of centrality through a focus on catering clients and quality did not take place across the board. While ORCHADE members appeared willing to make this change, POMA members remained strongly attached to initial frames and idealised constructs linked to retailing. A deeper analysis of the internal dynamics in both companies illustrates contrasting ways in which they attempted to maintain a positive self-image around centrality and their claim to be doing a ‘tough job’.

The nature of prolonged fantasy and contrasting experiences of stigma

By delving deeper into the internal experience of stigma over an extended period, our study explains the significance of structuring fantasy. Illusory positivity becomes refined over time as organizational members modify their practices to adapt to new norms. Furthermore, we illuminate two contrasting ways in which the organizations studied remained attached to their centrality and neutralised negative perceptions. Through contrasting affective attachments, our two case studies offer insights into idealised constructs associated with nostalgic and extended fantasy. POMA members reinforce stories about their initial role and past centrality with retailers through nostalgic fantasy, aiming to maintain a positive self-image. In contrast, ORCHADE members have shifted their attachment towards new dimensions through extended fantasy, allowing them to uphold a positive self-image despite persistent negative perceptions. Below, we delineate how each attachment to nostalgic and extended fantasy mediates the experience of stigma.

Experiencing stigma through nostalgic fantasy - More than 20 years after the disintermediation event, in 2012, retailers remained POMA’s focus, despite the company now working with catering clients (the percentage of catering clients increased from 10% to 50% between 1989 and 2012) and developing improved services linked to quality. POMA’s CEO still believed in the vital role of wholesalers’ F&V expertise and in retailers gradually reopening their doors to wholesalers:

Retailing is important for us. If we are going to stay alive, it will be because retail stores need us. We have a role to play... I think, one day, [C/large-retailer] will give more autonomy to its franchised network. (CEO, POMA)

Clinging to the past and the way wholesalers were key players for decades, the CEO claimed they still have the potential to remain vital to the F&V sector. He remained attached to an ideal of wholesalers' previous role in the F&V channel, driving their present desire to remain central for the F&V channel.

We used to say that there is always a watchdog of the F&V channel. During the last 15 years, it has been the large-scale retailers. They are supposed to give rhythm to the supply chain and take care of it, but they do not. Before, when we played this role of watchdog, it was different... But we still have a real interest in the F&V channel. It is our job to stand up for the F&V industry's interests (CEO, POMA)

The nostalgic feeling of the CEO played an important role in the way POMA maintained a positive self-image based on their initial frames of centrality. The CEO had always been immersed in this sector and had experienced F&V wholesale success with large-scale retailing developments from the 1970s to the 1990s. His brother Bertrand used to be the main buyer and was considered a hero by POMA members. Buyers were heroes, because historically, the wholesaling activity depended on them. As the main experts of F&V complexity and specificities, they were also in charge of selling contracts with the main retailing clients. The notion of 'buyers as heroes' came from members themselves, including this member, who recalled when buyers were 'terrific':

[Before] Bertrand was our buyer. He had a sixth sense for good deals. I saw him play a masterstroke in the Netherlands, (...) doing terrific and brilliant things. At this point, we applauded him. He reminded us of heroes. (Logistics department 5, POMA)

Several salesmen and buyers interviewed smiled when they brought up the 'good old days' (Buyer, POMA) when they were the exclusive partners of retailers (Field Notes, December 2011). Other members from the logistics department also expressed enthusiasm and joy when they remembered the 'tons of fruit and vegetables' (logistics manager, POMA) they loaded into their trucks for retailers. Both commercial and logistics teams described a positive atmosphere full of excitement and joy despite the 'tough activity' they carried out, as one of them joked: 'It was intense, there was never a dull moment!' (Field Notes, December 2011).

This idealisation of the past allowed members to maintain their affective attachments to initial frames that existed only as narratives in their organisation. The following quotation illustrates how the passion for F&V remained and how it allowed them to maintain their idealised construct of F&V expertise:

This activity requires passion, because it is a product like no other. It is really specific, with seasonality. Fruits and vegetables are complex. That is why buyers need to love their products and protect them. For that, there is [the main buyer]. You should listen to him talk about his products. It is really impressive. (Administrative department 3, POMA)

This quote also illustrates how members' love and passion for the F&V sector drove their idealised construct of 'buyers as heroes' and justified their central role as intermediaries. This

view of their job persisted as they reinforced their stories about buyers as heroes. Indeed, several members of POMA narrated the same anecdote about the main buyer, Gérard, who achieved the exceptional feat of restoring partnerships with 12 regional stores of a famous discount retailer. POMA members maintained their admiration for buyers like Gérard, who was described as ‘a man who knows better than anyone how to do his job’ (Administrative department 2, POMA). The CEO of POMA emphasised his ‘prominent reputation across the F&V world’ and his ‘outstanding expertise’. In the CEO’s view, the role of buyers remained central and connected to a passionate attachment:

When [Gérard] retires, he will be replaced by a young director who is also passionate about products. They have to be passionate. It is important. I think it is specific to fruits and vegetables. This is alive. (CEO, POMA)

Beyond his new focus on quality, the CEO ‘puts buyers and sellers on a pedestal’ (Finance director, POMA) at the expense of new positions like quality managers. He promoted only the best buyers to local branch managers, based on their ‘central expertise’ (CEO, POMA). Although he denied he idealised buyers – ‘There are no buyers as heroes’ (CEO, POMA) – he still refused to challenge their supremacy in the organisation. He remained attached to their historical retailing partnerships and F&V products to emphasise their role, despite his knowledge that the sector was evolving towards catering clients and quality norms.

Experiencing stigma through extended fantasy with ORCHADE - In contrast, ORCHADE evolved towards an exclusive focus on service quality for catering clients. Between 2002-2006, the company disinvested in resources and activities related to their retailing and F&V expertise (e.g., ending the ripening activity for retailers) and developed new wholesaling activities (frozen, grocery and pastry products) for catering clients. While the CEO of POMA believed in the impossible dream of once again being the main partner of retailers, the CEO of ORCHADE had the opposite idea, pointing to professional reports predicting the strengthening of central purchasing by retailers. He insisted on the importance of catering actors and their expertise in B2B instead of F&V. The narrative of wholesaling as a vital role and a tough job remained, but it became detached from products and buyers:

We talk less about the product per se. Today, our purpose as buyers is to better understand consumers’ expectations. You do not have to be a rocket scientist [in F&V] to be a good buyer; you have to be attentive to customers. (Purchasing Manager, ORCHADE)

Instead, their positive self-image as being engaged in a tough activity was extended to other dimensions and positions, like those of quality managers and sellers:

Today, selling is tougher, you need better experts because customers are more demanding. Before, the relationship with our supplier was important to get good opportunities, but now, it is more important to be the best at selling. (Sales Department 5, ORCHADE)

This renewal of their sense of their own importance as guardians of both quality and customer needs has been led by the CEO of ORCHADE who, in contrast to the CEO of POMA, exhibited low affective attachment to initial frames. As he had never been ‘immersed

in the F&V world' (CEO, ORCHADE) before joining ORCHADE,³ the CEO of ORCHADE attempted to understand the F&V sector without being attached to the historical role of and assumptions about F&V wholesaling. For example, he was able to both describe and keep some distance from the contempt towards F&V wholesalers:

I am less affected than these other guys, such as Patrick [POMA CEO]. He often talks to me about it. We can see that fruit and vegetable wholesalers have been marked by this sort of ostracism. (CEO, ORCHADE)

His emotional detachment did not imply a lack of cognitive engagement with the rules of the sector. Quite the opposite, he spontaneously told us about 'a buyer mythos, in which they were seen [by ORCHADE members] as heroic buyers', but he also emphasised the resistance of such an ideal to change:

The heroic buyer was limiting our development in the catering sector. Because this heroic buyer was making huge volumes, he had to sell to big clients like large-scale retailers, whilst catering actors represent limited quantities and delicacy. Thus, heroic buyers probably disregarded the catering sector. (CEO, ORCHADE)

His dispassionate knowledge of traditions was necessary to create alternatives and convince organisational members to modify their attachments to traditions. The radical shift from F&V to B2B expertise required efforts to minimise the historical and affective attachment. For example, in ORCHADE, the cessation of upstream activities was emotionally difficult for many staff:

Harry [the former Chairman] was against [the withdrawal from ripening activity] for sentimental reasons and not rational ones. He has always lived in it. (CEO, ORCHADE)

The CEO persuaded local managers to let go of their passion for F&V traditions and attachments to retailers by pointing out contradictions with their traditional practices (e.g., the lack of efficiency in their commercial activities with retailers). He emphasised 'industrial methods', 'customer priority' and 'homogeneous quality' as the new focus of their wholesaling role, articulating a new positive identification for the company as B2B expert. Unlike POMA, ORCHADE members agreed to implement new practices (e.g., recruiting a new culinary chief as consultant, developing salespersons' culinary knowledge to enable them to select quality products, promoting the role of quality managers, etc.) and distanced themselves from the past and the historical admiration of buyers:

Today, the rules are different and members who have got this nostalgia have left the group. And perhaps others will leave the group, because they are nostalgic about the job before and they do not accept this evolution. (Buyer 3, ORCHADE)

Historically, we focused on purchasing, but now we try to balance and increase the value of selling. (Sales Department 5, ORCHADE)

Drawing on the CEO's argument, ORCHADE members rationalised their past affective attachment and saw it in a negative light. For example, the F&V director of ORCHADE

³ He joined the group as Director of the frozen food wholesaling branch in 1992, which was a marginal business, after a career in the food-processing industry.

explained how their previous affection towards retailers had led to a commercial activity that was more about pleasing store managers than being commercially efficient:

Before, many things were done on the basis of affection; there was sometimes a big part of this that was irrational (Branch director, ORCHADE).

Yet, 'passion' continued to be integral to their wholesaler role. Now, however, it has a broader meaning, including cooking produce and gastronomy:

The passion nowadays is one of wholesaling in a broader sense (...) I do not think we can work in a wholesaling company for a while without a particular sensitivity. It is unusual to get managers who do not like eating or cooking, or who don't care for product quality. (CEO, ORCHADE)

Finally, we found contrasting internal dynamics in the way these two wholesalers remained attached to their centrality and expressed an idealised image associated to F&V (POMA) or B2B expertise (ORCHADE). The structuring fantasy of centrality provided the basis for maintaining their own self-image as being fundamental intermediaries, despite its stigmatisation. Our findings show how this idealised self-image was extended to include broader values of quality and customer service in the case of ORCHADE and extended fantasy, and how it remained anchored in the past and nostalgic fantasy in the case of POMA. We also think that there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between the structuring effects of fantasy (building and reinforcing fantasy in the system) and the internal dynamics that strengthen the illusion of centrality (the idealised self-image –in believing their positive identification as intermediaries). We have represented this recursive relationship over time in Figure 1 by connecting idealised self-image back to structuring fantasy. Fantasy provides a resilient context for idealisation, and idealisation also continues to strengthen the fantasy of centrality.

The value of approaching these findings in relation to structuring fantasies is that we can also see how members' centrality remained an impossible dream. Indeed, in direct contrast to their idealised construct as vital partners, short distribution channels have become an important trend supported by local and national authorities (e.g., with Food Policy Councils), which reinforces direct distribution without intermediaries. Overall, F&V wholesalers remain marginalised in the B2B distribution system (Levet, Report CITFL, 2021*) and are still incriminated during difficult times, as in the price hikes of 2022 (see Research context section). However, our data suggest that these developments will not stop F&V wholesalers from continuing to believe in their own importance and defending their positive identification as intermediaries.

Discussion

Despite persistent stigmatisation over many years, F&V wholesalers have established an idealised vision of their role as vital intermediaries in the F&V sector. Our research suggests that they achieved this by means of a structuring fantasy (Vince, 2019): their supposed centrality in the distribution system. Centrality can be understood as an idealised construct that provides narratives around a tough job in the face of consistent hostility. However, their centrality is not acknowledged by others, only by themselves. In line with recent calls (Aranda et al., 2023; Hudson et al., 2022; Roulet, 2020), our research contributes to comprehending the relation of the stigmatised to their own taint and internal experience in the face of an enduring stain through the lens of experienced stigma. We encountered contrasting

internal dynamics in how wholesalers embrace their stigmatised activity. POMA members reinforced their affective attachment to the initial ‘fantasmic frames’ (Voronov and Vince, 2012), while ORCHADE members shifted away from traditional wholesaler practices by detaching themselves from the initial attachments.

Both organizations remained attached to the desire for centrality through extended affective attachment towards new frames of centrality. Their self-idealised image evolved into a perception of themselves as experts in B2B distribution, yet it remains an idealised construct that feeds back into the structuring fantasy of centrality. As illustrated in Figure 1, the structuring fantasy drives their affective attachment to internally pursue an idealised self-image of their activities and mediate (Foroughi, 2020) negative evaluations. Conversely, the idealised self-image helps maintain and develop the structuring fantasy. Figure 1 depicts this recursive dynamic between structuring fantasy and idealised self-image, through which stigma is neutralised via two internal pathways related to nostalgic fantasy and extended fantasy.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Three contributions emerged from our findings. First, we saw how structuring fantasy can be extended to create new versions of itself. This helps to understand the ideological grip and persistent nature of stigma. Second, our lens on nostalgic fantasy contributes to understanding organisational members’ idealisation through attachment and reconstruction of the past. Third, we open new inquiries about experienced stigma and affect, and provide support for a relational perspective on stigma.

Persistent stigma and an extended structuring fantasy

The literature on organisational stigma describes the persistent nature of stigma (Devers et al., 2009; Piazza & Perretti, 2015) when stigma is connected to the fundamental characteristics of an organisation. Previous studies on strategic organisational responses to stigmatisation have investigated this phenomenon. Most of these strategies, such as circumventing negative attention (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009) or straddling multiple categories (Vergne, 2012), enable an organisation to survive and conform to normative expectations while remaining part of a stigmatised industry (Devers et al., 2009).

The concept of structuring fantasy provides additional insights into less strategic ways to manage stigma and a better understanding of why organisations might stay in a stigmatised industry. A structuring fantasy is not built consciously (Vince, 2019). Rather, in our context, centrality became an idealised image when their marginalised position by retailers once again highlighted pejorative connotations of parasitic intermediaries. Gradually but persistently, the F&V wholesalers created a fantasy of centrality to transform their stigmatised attributes as intermediaries into a positive self-image. This fantasmatic attachment (Kenny et al., 2020b) created dynamics within the system that made it possible for organisational members to celebrate the positive aspects of wholesaling and ignore how and why they became vilified, creating an enduring organisational disposition for stigma persistence. This helps explain resistance to change (for example, resistance towards moving in to another industry) and in particular, how and why actors embrace a group despite their awareness of its stigma (Gonzalez and Pérez-Floriano, 2015).

Indeed, our study provides additional insights into the complex interplay between stigma awareness (Shantz and Booth, 2014) and unconscious idealised constructs. The members of the two organisations were well aware of the stereotypes about them, and they embraced the stigmatised industry to establish a positive self-image. Alongside studies on the transformation of external negative evaluations into an internal positive self-image when it becomes too difficult to detach oneself from stigmatised attributes (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Gonzales and Pérez-Floriano, 2015), our focus on structuring fantasy sheds light on the ideological grip of a stigmatised group (see Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). The structuring effect of fantasy (Vince, 2019) further explains instances in which fantasies appear to sustain practices and attachment to a group in an ideologically complicit way (Glynos, 2008). The attachment to initial frames, like the passion for F&V, or to extended ones, like the new passionate attachment to gastronomy in ORCHADE, contributes to enhancing their supposed centrality and the idea of being engaged in a ‘tough job’ instead of facing hostility and marginalisation in the distribution system. Considering that ideology consists of ‘the non-recognition of the precarious character of any positivity’ (Glynos, 2008, p. 286), fantasy helps us to understand the role of illusory positivity in mediating experienced stigma.

Our findings show how ideological grip was sustained over time through an *extended* structuring fantasy of centrality. The initial fantasmatic framing (Voronov and Vince, 2012) did not succeed in countering the threats to wholesalers’ centrality, because it did not account for actual changes and new expectations in the F&V sector. This elicited an extension of their idealised self-image as vital partner and the ‘tough’ nature of the job. In connection with the evolution of the sector, this suggests that, once a positive self-image has become established, it results in a closed system (Vince, 2019). We noticed that a structuring fantasy can be modified, but only to create new versions of itself. For example, in the case of ORCHADE, as the buyers’ heroic role was challenged, the idealisation was extended to include broader values, such as quality and customer service, perpetuating the fantasy of centrality. Our focus on internal dynamics and an idealised construct also helps to address how experienced stigma is mediated by an idealisation of the past.

Implications for the study of fantasy and the idealisation of the past

While structuring fantasy provides insight into the collective attachment of members in response to persistent stigma, nostalgic fantasy further delineates this attachment by idealising the past. Nostalgic fantasy about the past (Glynos, 2008) can be understood as fantasmatic scenarios anchored in an idealised vision about the past that become a source of fulfilment. Foroughi (2020) recently showed how organisational members recall stories about the past in a specific way, reconstructing the past in a way that projects these fantasies and thereby creating the impression that the realisation of these fantasies is at least potentially possible. Alongside studies on nostalgia (Strangleman, 1999), our study illustrates how the past can be highly idealised, helping people to face discontent about the present and create positive illusions about the future. Instead of facing their marginalisation by retailers, POMA members maintained the desire to recover a central position with retailers in the future, based on positive memories about buyers as heroes. Focusing on a fantasised scenario behind nostalgia helps people to bridge the reality of the present with idealised constructs about the past and to project their dreams and desires for the future (Foroughi, 2020). Fantasy is not an escape from reality but an ‘imagined stability’ (Vince, 2002). Nostalgic fantasy maintains this stability by recalling the ‘good old days’, in contrast to the trauma and negative feelings of the present in the face of new stigma events. Our research contributes to understanding the reactions of denial about the stigma at the organisational level (Hampel and Tracey, 2017) and emphasises

the importance of *idealisation* for organisational members to cope with stigmatised organisation (Frandsen and Morsing, 2022).

Moreover, the contrasting approaches of ORCHADE and POMA illuminated the distinction between nostalgia and nostophobia (Do et al., 2019). The reconstruction of new frames became possible at ORCHADE with the recognition of, and critical view towards, their nostalgia about the past. Tracey and Philipps (2016) have previously emphasised managers' efforts to reframe meanings of past events to alter organisational members' attachment to stigmatised attributes. Our study provides a further exploration of affective attachment to the past with contrasting cases. Nostophobic tendencies (Do et al., 2019, p. 10) in ORCHADE helped members to detach themselves from past frames, while the reinforcement of the idea of the 'good old days' in POMA is linked to affective and passion-driven attachment to past frames.

Implications for the study of affective attachment and a relational approach to stigma

Affect is crucial in comprehending both stigma and fantasy. Affect functions as a powerful force of fantasy that connects people to the symbolic order (Kenny et al., 2020b), and stigma is 'an affective label' (Goffman, 1963) that triggers people's negative moral emotions, such as fear, disgust and shame (Pollock et al., 2019). Previous scholars have emphasised tactics that trigger negative collective emotions towards stigmatised groups (e.g., Helms and Patterson, 2014; Roulet, 2015). However, few studies have explored how stigmatised organisations use their own negative emotions to cope with stigma (e.g., Ruling et al., 2018; Frandsen and Morsing, 2022). As an exception, Ruling et al. (2018) showed how animal rights organisations managed their own emotions to avoid being stigmatised as fanatical and irrational. Frandsen and Morsing (2022) identified a plurality of strategies for organisational members to manage their emotions in the face of an event stigma. Rather than focusing on the way stigmatised groups manage their emotions, our study discusses the self-limiting organisational dynamics of *positive* affective energy towards stigma.

Our results show that organisational members' passion, admiration and affective attachments are reinforced by and subsequently reinforce the fantasy of centrality in response to stigmatisation. The first part of the findings illustrates the importance of strong 'desire-driven affective attachments' to others (Kenny et al., 2020a, p. 327) to cope with difficult times and to construct idealisation around centrality. The second part of the findings further refines the importance of passionate attachment (Ekman, 2013; Kenny, 2010; Kenny et al., 2020a) to maintain wholesalers' idealised construct and positive identification with the stigmatised group over time. Negative feelings were also present, such as wholesalers' contempt for catering actors. In this way, wholesalers were able to transfer their negative emotional reaction to the threat towards other actors and thus maintain their initial attachment to and affection for retailers. Alongside studies emphasising how fantasmatic attachments are fuelled by the affect they generate for people (e.g., Glynos, 2008; Kenny, 2010; Kenny et al., 2020b; Voronov and Vince, 2012), our study calls attention to the importance of emotions and passion in the way people relate to their stigmatised group (Aranda et al., 2023).

In line with a few scholars who have considered the interplay between cognition and emotion in the context of stigma (Gonzales & Pérez-Floriano, 2015; Roulet, 2015), we found that the construction of idealised scenarios not only impacts actors' strategic thinking, but also the affective attachments that underpin their motivations for action (Stavrakakis, 2008). Therefore, we contribute to a better understanding of the interdependence between emotion

and cognition (Voronov and Vince, 2012) in two ways. First, we highlight affect embedded in strategic thinking. For example, the two CEOs had similar cognitive investments in centrality but very different emotional connections to their interpretations of what this centrality meant in practice. Second, we identified the cognitive efforts embedded in the process of affective withdrawal in ORCHADE (see Figure 1). As stated by Stavrakakis (2008, p. 1052), change involves the capacity to withdraw desires shaped by fantasy. We suggest that cognitive and emotional dispositions act in a codependent manner, in which one cannot be understood without the other (Carr, 2001). Although this pairing has been identified as important (Gonzales & Pérez-Floriano, 2015; Voronov & Vince, 2012), our study shows that organisations can become locked into self-limiting desires that make change unlikely.

Our exploration of fantasy provides insights into collective affective investment or disinvestment (Glynos, 2008) and contributes to the relational approach of stigma (Aranda et al., 2023). While the concept of affective attachment arose inductively from the findings, we encourage future studies on collective emotions to draw on fantasies to comprehend affective attachment to work and practices in relation to idealised constructs and the way it structures shared desires and actions (Vince, 2019). Our research leads to the assumption that, for example, passion (in Kenny et al. 2020a, a passion for their profession; here, a passion for the F&V sector) can be understood not only in terms of shared connections but as an integral element of the implicit structures (Vince, 2019) in which affective attachments are both mobilised to mediate stigma and constrain new frames.

Concluding remarks

This paper contributes to our understanding of the internal effects of stigmatisation. We show how stigmatised actors navigate their tarnished image, as well as how they remain attached to a group and its attributes despite its stigmatisation. Our analysis of POMA and ORCHADE explains how organisational members cling to an idealised image of the role of wholesalers and construct a fantasy around their centrality within the distribution system. In both organisations, although in different ways, stigma was transformed into a positive self-image that helped to maintain stability. We highlight the significance of affective attachment in the perpetuation of initial frames and the denial of stigma. Our research has shed light on how negative social evaluations are transformed into illusory positivity through members' attachments to a structuring fantasy (Vince, 2019).

We believe that there are practical consequences to be drawn from our theoretical insights into stigma. Generally, these insights can enhance managers' and employees' self-view (Shantz and Booth, 2014) regarding their attachment to an organisation and its stigmatised industry. We highlight tensions that are integral to functioning within a stigmatised industry and suggest that awareness of the idealised construct that underpins a particular attachment to a stigmatised attribute may help organisations and their members free themselves from stigma. Our findings show that the (impossible) desire for centrality becomes problematic in practice when members strive for positive feelings and purposeful actions without acknowledgement of the damage caused by an over-emphasis on positivity (Vince, 2019). Acknowledging tensions as part of the everyday management of stigma can help managers to cope with contradictory aspects of their activities and current or impending threats. We would encourage managers and employees to invest their efforts to fully consider the entire range of affective attachment and desires influencing their relation to the stigma within which their work roles and relations are accomplished. This involves taking the risk of confronting a less optimistic projection of themselves and their industry. The concept of

extended fantasy helps to explain how such idealisation can persist despite organisational change, while the concept of nostalgic fantasy raises awareness about idealising, hindering members from confronting present negative evaluations. Consequently, we anticipate that this research may help members to free themselves from stigma.

There are limitations to how far we have been able to develop our ideas, which leads us to speculate on the focus of future research. We think that further inquiry into the internal dynamics of stigma can enhance the analysis of affective-relational functioning behind experienced stigma, particularly if seen through a psychoanalytic lens or through a focus on the role of collective memories. From a psychoanalytic or systems psychodynamic perspective (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2020), it will be useful to delve deeper into how emotional and social defence mechanisms help persons to distance themselves from stigma. Studying organisations from this perspective can enable an understanding of unconscious dynamics and contradictions influencing individuals' (and collective) affective attachment to the past (Fotaki & Foroughi, 2022). This approach would help in refining analysis at the individual and collective levels, shedding light on the contradiction between desire, enjoyment, affective energy and denial, anxiety and frustration (Stavrakakis, 2008). Given the persistent nature of stigma, that it is deeply embedded in the core attributes of the organisation (Hudson, 2008), it would also be productive to investigate how memories are revisited to shape present identification (Decker et al. 2021). Studies on organisational memory, particularly those drawing on retrospective organisational memory (Decker et al. 2021) and interpretative perspectives to organisational memories studies (Foroughi et al. 2020) offer valuable insights into persons' lived experience of memory. They provide a nuanced understanding of the complexity and multiple interpretations of the past, unveiling the importance of appealing emotions and emotive memories (Foroughi et al. 2020). We think that such studies can significantly contribute to refining the analysis of core-stigmatisation and nostalgic fantasy from the perspective of collective emotive memories.

Stigma is understood as a negative social evaluation that creates the perception of a deep-seated flaw. However, this research has shown that this is not necessarily how stigma is experienced by people in organisations, who often internalise and embrace stigmatised attributes into organisational identification. We have developed this analysis to consider both internal dynamics and peoples' experiences of persistent stigma. We identify the structuring effects of fantasy as an explanation for organisational members' continuing attached to a stigmatised group. We found that wholesalers' idealised centrality in the distribution system is refined over time and that practices are modified to adapt to new norms. Organizational members collectively transform negative evaluations into positive self-idealizations through their attachment to and extension of structuring fantasy. This highlights the complex interplay between collective attachment, fantasy, and the management of stigma within organizations. It underscores the significance of understanding these dynamics, and both the importance but also the risk of an illusory sense of positivity and stability.

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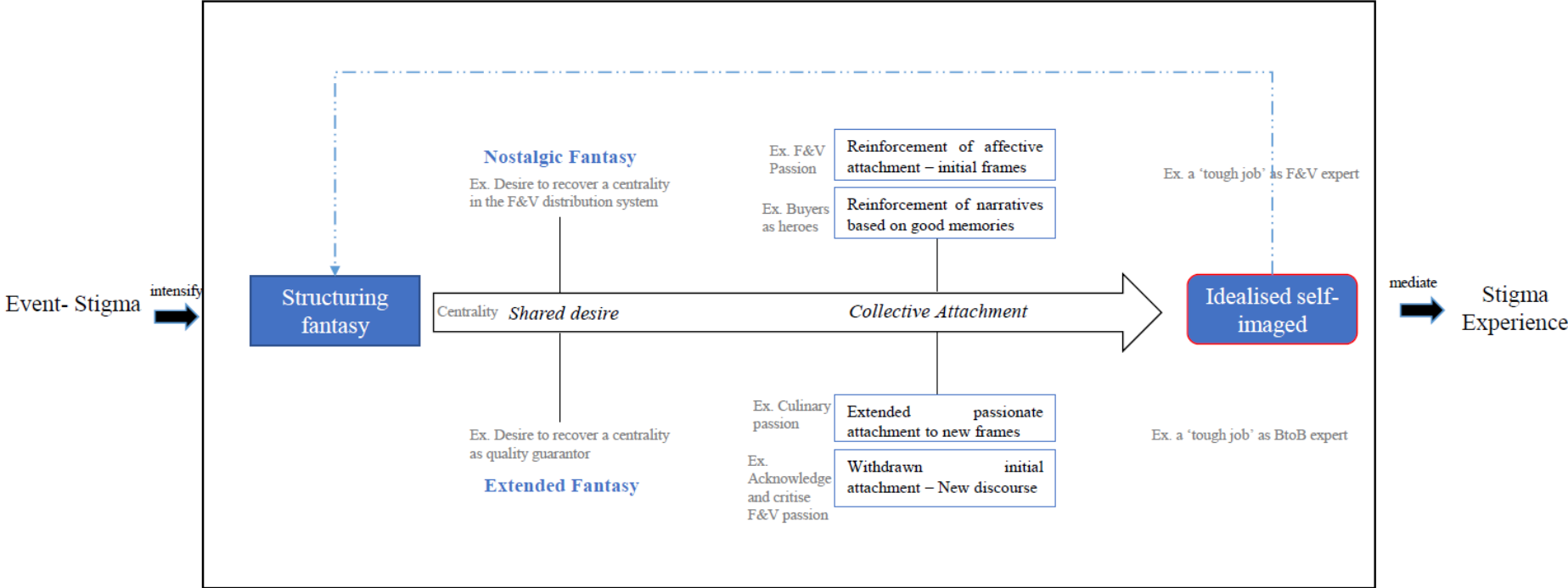
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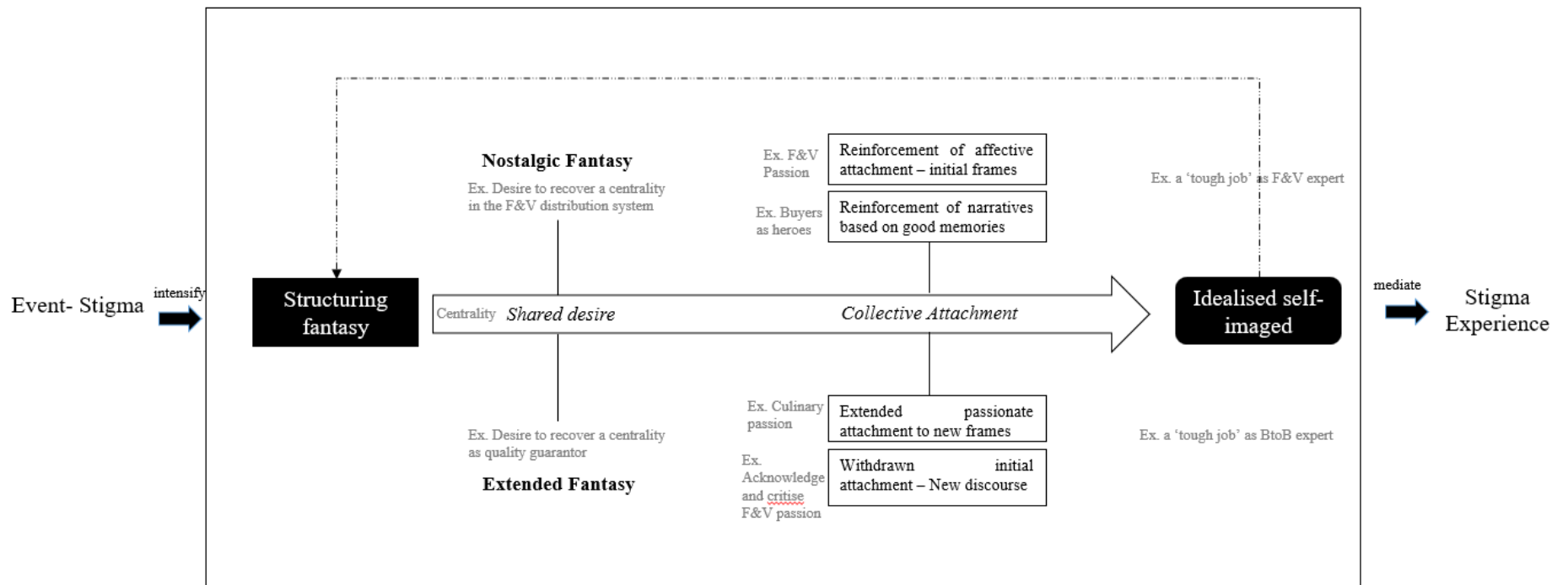
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Figure 1: Mediate experienced stigma with structuring fantasy- illustration with the case of F&V wholesalers





Appendix 1: Illustrative data

CATEGORIES	CODES	ILLUSTRATIVE VERBATIM
<p>Self-positive image of a tough job Different narratives around a tough job and vital partner</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense of their vital expertise and proximity with buyers as heroes • Tough job regarding all jobs not only buyers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Again, fruit and vegetable are atypical and our job is too. With products like yogurt, a service provider is enough but for fruit and vegetable is different. It is a special field. First, because it is a live product and then, there is a specific relationship built with the client' (Branch Manager, POMA); • The buying activity was prestigious. Most of my regional directors are former buyers. (...) Before you had to be buyers, it was vital. But today the job is more complex, it requires more skills in management, organisation, anticipation, etc. (Branch Director, ORCHADE)
<p>Structuring Fantasy – Centrality Different desires of centrality- extended or anchored in the past</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared desire of being unique, a particular activity • Initial idealisation of their partnership with retailers regarding a retailing tropism • Desire to be the F&V watchdog regarding the specific character of F&V as fresh and complex • Desire of centrality extended to catering actors and becoming a quality guarantor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The main issue is that we [wholesalers] believe we are particular and vital. Thus, it requires a lot to change and at that time they were too afraid of it. (Jean, 2012, ORCHADE) • We have a retailing “tropism” because it represents 70% of the quantity of F&V [in the F&V channel]. (Representative of the F&V professional association, 2012) • The human dimension is very important because you have the fruit and vegetable specificities and it requires a lot of intimate relationship. We have done everything to keep it that way (Former branch director, ORCHADE) • That I believe in our specificity based on proximity, I think we are vital for this. But Proximity in the meaning of understand you client, of the relationship quality with your client. (Alexandre, ORCHADE)
<p>Attachment to their profession Different affective attachment – reinforced or extended</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nostalgic feeling about their job as it was before with the amount of F&V and intimate relationship with retailers • Maintain the passion for f&V • Withdrawing emotions towards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think that this passion led them, POMA and others, to deny changes. They refused to see what happened during the 90s-2000S because they are nostalgic of the good old days [CEO (n°4), ORHADE] • I would not say I work under emotional logic but actually I partially do (...) there is emotional relationship, we still have friendship with some [F&V Department Manager, Retailer].” [Sales department 1, POMA].

	<p>initial frames –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Efforts to rationalise their fear and detached from the past • Extended feelings of pride and passions towards catering and gastronomy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The job of wholesaler has changed those last years. We became professional of fruit and vegetable. That means that the passion about fruit and vegetable no longer exist. Before we were more and maybe too much meticulous. Today the product sensitivity no longer exist. (Logistic 3, ORCHADE) • I told them: ‘Guys, you are telling me that we are heading straight for disaster.’ [They answered:] ‘Yes, it is true but we are not giving up everything’. It was a sort of fear and, at the same time, they described all their problems, present and future. The conclusion should be obvious but nobody wanted to see the truth. I had to convince them. [CEO, ORCHADE] • I think that relationship with catering actors is important. The chef is more easy-going and it still a product lover. So yes, we have friendly relationship. (Sales department 4, ORCHADE)
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