IE UNIVERSIDAD

TESIS DOCTORAL / DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

ENSAYOS SOBRE EL ESTIGMA EN EL CONTEXTO DE LAS ORGANIZACIONES /

ESSAYS ON STIGMA IN THE CONTEXT OF ORGANIZATIONS

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SEGOVIA, 2019

IE UNIVERSIDAD

TESIS DOCTORAL / DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Ensayos Sobre el Estigma en el Contexto de las Organizaciones /

Essays on Stigma in the Context of Organizations

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To Marta and Francisco

May your dreams always be greater than your memories

ABSTRACT

Stigma is an important social evaluation that can significantly influence how organizations survive and compete. The core of this dissertation consists of three essays that seek to contribute to our understanding of stigma in the context of organizations, from its antecedents to how it can be strategically managed. The first essay offers a micro-level model of stigma emergence, as well as an integrative framework of extant perspectives of stigma in the context of organizations. It highlights the importance of individual perception, social construction, and organizational agency in shaping stigma. The second essay empirically investigates the factors that lead to variation in the degree of stigma affecting categories in the same industry. It emphasizes the complexity of the behavioral decision-making mechanisms involved in individual-level processes of stigmatization, as well as the relationships between categories mapping a focal industry, as key determinants of the degree of categorical stigma. The third essay examines the effectiveness of different types of impression management tactics in the context of categories exhibiting different degrees of stigma, as a function of the risk of perceived manipulation by stakeholders. It contributes to the research debates on impression management in contested settings and stigma management strategies. In the aggregate, the conceptual contributions and empirical findings of this dissertation extend current work on stigma in the context of organizations and open up a number of additional research avenues, which are discussed in the concluding chapter.

RESUMEN

El estigma es una evaluación social importante que puede influir significativamente en cómo las organizaciones sobreviven y compiten. Esta tesis está compuesta por tres ensayos que buscan contribuir a nuestra comprensión del estigma en el contexto de las organizaciones, desde sus antecedentes hasta cómo se puede gestionar estratégicamente. El primer ensayo ofrece un modelo de emergencia del estigma a nivel micro, así como un marco integrador de perspectivas existentes con respecto al estigma en el contexto de las organizaciones. Destaca cómo las percepciones individuales, la construcción social y la agencia organizativa influyen en el estigma. El segundo ensayo investiga empíricamente los factores que conducen a los distintos grados de estigma que definen a las categorías dentro de una misma industria. Enfatiza la complejidad de los mecanismos de toma de decisiones conductuales involucrados en los procesos de estigmatización a nivel individual, así como las relaciones entre las categorías de una industria, como determinantes clave del grado de estigma categórico. El tercer ensayo examina la efectividad de diferentes tipos de tácticas de gestión de impresiones en el contexto de categorías que exhiben diferentes grados de estigma. De este modo, este ensayo contribuye al debate de investigación sobre la gestión de impresiones en entornos controvertidos y a las estrategias de manejo del estigma. En conjunto, las contribuciones conceptuales y los hallazgos empíricos de esta tesis doctoral amplían nuestro conocimiento académico sobre el estigma en el contexto de las organizaciones y abren una serie de vías de investigación adicionales, que se discutirán en el capítulo final.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Along these last few years I have been immensely fortunate to be surrounded by a wonderful group of people without whom my doctoral studies would not have seen the light of day. It is to them that I would like to express my gratitude.

Martina Montauti and Luis Diestre head that group. In addition to being inspirational and exemplary scholars, they gave me their unreserved support in all walks of the PhD life. From taking me as their student after a forced 'sabbatical' year, to providing support for funding, and helping me to obtain much needed data, they did it all. They challenged my drafts as if they deserved a proper review. They treated me as a peer. They saw the best in me. They held my hand when several events coalesced into a veritable storm in my life. While the ground I had to cover to complete this PhD should have been a winding old country road, they both transformed it into a newly built highway, three lanes, no tolls. Frankly, Martina and Luis, I could go on writing a full chapter just dedicated to you. I am forever grateful and indebted.

I also owe true appreciation to my committee members, professors Julio de Castro, Rodolphe Durand, Juan Santaló, and Filippo Wezel. They provided invaluable comments to my research, helping me to take it to an entirely different level. Professors Julio de Castro (also in his quality as the PhD program chair at IE) and Juan Santaló offered punctilious advice and benevolent support in many ways that extended well beyond the content of the dissertation.

Others played different but nonetheless vital roles in my doctoral path. My 'Madrid friends', in no particular order – Su, Matti, Inma, and Nandia – were there at all times, rain or shine, no questions asked. Their unlimited generosity and good spirits, not to mention freshly baked croissants for breakfast, were a much welcome tonic to navigate the fluctuations of PhD life. Hopefully geographical distance will not be an obstacle to a lifelong friendship.

Last, but certainly not least, my father and sister put in countless hours of my twins' babysitting that were duly converted into research time. Without their unconditional support and backup, I would not have had the time nor the mental stamina for this endeavor. This dissertation is theirs too.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

There has been immense interest in the study of social evaluations and how they affect organizations (George, Dahlander, Graffin, & Sim, 2016; Pollock, Lashley, Rindova, & Han, 2019). Status, reputation, and legitimacy (Bitektine, 2011), in particular, have garnered attention from scholars and practitioners as key determinants of important organizational outcomes, notably performance and survival (Lange, Lee, & Dai, 2011; Piazza & Castellucci, 2014; Suddaby, Bitektine, & Haack, 2017). However, research on the 'dark side' of social evaluations has received comparatively much less scholarly attention than its 'bright side' sister (Devers, Dewett, Mishina, & Belsito, 2009).

Specifically, research on stigma in organizational settings is still nascent (Devers & Mishina, 2019; Paetzold, Dipboye, & Elsbach, 2008). Yet stigma is an important social evaluation that can significantly influence how organizations survive and compete (Hudson, 2008; Sutton & Callahan, 1987), as it constrains the set of resources and opportunities that organizations have access to. As such, the topic of stigma in the context of organizations is theoretically and practically relevant, both to organization theory and strategic management.

Some notable contributions in recent years have defined organizational stigma (Devers et al., 2009; Hudson, 2008), theorized about the process of stigmatization (Devers et al., 2009), the consequences of stigma (Hampel & Tracey, 2018; Pozner, 2008; Tracey & Phillips, 2016; Wiesenfeld, Wurthmann, & Hambrick, 2008) and the variety of responses that organizations may undertake to minimize damage arising from stigma or to eradicate it altogether (Durand &

Vergne, 2015; Hampel & Tracey, 2018; Helms & Patterson, 2014; Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009; Tracey & Phillips, 2016). Notwithstanding the immense value of these contributions, there remain vast opportunities to further improve our knowledge of stigma in the context of organizations. The main purpose of this dissertation is therefore to contribute to the stigma literature as it pertains to organizations and help build a systematic agenda for future stigma studies in such a context.

Chapter 2 proposes a conceptual micro-level model of stigma emergence, as well as an integrative framework of extant perspectives of stigma in the context of organizations. The model outlines how individuals, in their role as decision-makers, eventually form a stigmatizing judgment. By highlighting how cognitive limitations, norms, and expectations jointly influence the affective, behavioral and cognitive components of stigma, it explains variance in audiences' reactions to the same objective conditions exhibited by evaluation targets. This variance, in turn, is a key premise to the malleability of stigma, which has important implications for organizational theory and strategy. Overall, the chapter highlights the importance of individual perceptions, social construction, and organizational agency in shaping stigma.

Chapter 3 builds on the theory developed in the previous chapter and empirically examines the mechanisms that lead to variation in the degree of stigma affecting categories in the same industry. It argues that individual audience members are not fully rational in performing judgments about a category's deviant attributes. Rather, the decision to stigmatize a focal category through purposeful vilification is determined by the level of deviant attributes exhibited by other categories that are easily retrievable from memory and used as reference points for each particular evaluation. The empirical analysis examines the attachment of the 'junk food' vilifying label to the categories mapping the US food retail market between 2006 and 2015. Results show that categories that display higher levels of unhealthy nutrients relative to their most "easily available" benchmark are more extensively stigmatized by the media, through the attachment of the 'junk food' label. Moreover, findings also indicate that this relationship is positively moderated by the ease with which such a comparison is susceptible of being made. These results highlight the complexity of the decision-making mechanisms that lead relevant social audiences to stigmatize a focal category.

Chapter 4 considers how stigma can be managed through impression management. This essay proposes a contingency model showing the effectiveness of two types of impression management tactics, when implemented in market categories with differing degrees of stigma. Specifically, it investigates ego-centric tactics (those that center on member-specific information) and alter centric tactics (those that use information about others), and explores the mechanisms – related to the risk of perceived manipulation – that determine their effectiveness under environments characterized by different levels of stigma. Using a large dataset covering the US food retail industry between 2006 and 2015, findings of a difference-in-difference specification show that ego-centric tactics are more effective when implemented by members of categories that exhibit low rather than high levels of stigma. Conversely, alter-centric tactics seem to be more effective for members of highly stigmatized categories, as opposed to members of categories displaying low levels of stigma. This study ultimately highlights the strategic role of impression management in aiding category members to instrumentally position themselves in the competitive space and contributes to the research debates on impression management in contested settings and stigma management strategies.

Chapter 5 concludes the dissertation by summarizing the key findings and theoretical contributions of its three studies. It then highlights a number of challenges and directions for future research on stigma in the context of organizations.

CAPÍTULO 1: INTRODUCCIÓN

Ha habido un gran interés académico en el estudio de las evaluaciones sociales y cómo éstas afectan a las organizaciones (George, Dahlander, Graffin y Sim, 2016; Pollock, Lashley, Rindova y Han, 2019). El status, la reputación y la legitimidad (Bitektine, 2011), en particular, han atraído la atención de académicos y profesionales como determinantes clave de resultados organizacionales importantes, especialmente el desempeño y la supervivencia (Lange, Lee y Dai, 2011; Piazza y Castellucci, 2014; Suddaby, Bitektine y Haack, 2017). Sin embargo, el "lado oscuro" de las evaluaciones sociales ha recibido relativamente menos atención académica que su "lado positivo" (Devers, Dewett, Mishina y Belsito, 2009).

A pesar de que la investigación sobre el estigma en entornos organizacionales es aún incipiente (Devers y Mishina, 2019; Paetzold, Dipboye y Elsbach, 2008), el estigma es una evaluación social importante que puede influir significativamente en cómo las organizaciones sobreviven y compiten (Hudson, 2008; Sutton y Callahan, 1987), ya que limita el conjunto de recursos y oportunidades a las que las organizaciones tienen acceso. En este sentido, el estudio del estigma en el contexto de las organizaciones es crucial desde un punto de vista tanto teórico como práctico para la teoría de las organizaciones y la gestión estratégica.

Contribuciones notables en los últimos años han definido el estigma organizacional (Devers et al., 2009; Hudson, 2008), teorizado sobre el proceso de estigmatización (Devers et al., 2009), las consecuencias del estigma (Hampel

& Tracey, 2018; Pozner , 2008; Tracey y Phillips, 2016; Wiesenfeld, Wurthmann y Hambrick, 2008) y la variedad de respuestas que las organizaciones pueden llevar a cabo para minimizar el daño derivado del estigma o erradicarlo por completo (Durand y Vergne, 2015; Hampel y Tracey, 2016 ; Helms y Patterson, 2014; Hudson y Okhuysen, 2009; Tracey y Phillips, 2016). A pesar del inmenso valor de estas contribuciones, quedan muchas oportunidades para mejorar nuestro conocimiento del estigma en el contexto de las organizaciones. Por lo tanto, el objetivo principal de esta tesis doctoral es contribuir a la literatura sobre el estigma en lo que respecta a las organizaciones y ayudar a construir una agenda sistemática para futuros estudios del estigma en dicho contexto.

El Capítulo 2 propone un modelo conceptual a nivel micro del surgimiento del estigma y un marco integrador de perspectivas existentes del estigma en el contexto de las organizaciones. El modelo describe cómo los individuos, en su papel de tomadores de decisiones, forman un juicio estigmatizante. Al examinar cómo las limitaciones cognitivas y las normas y expectativas influyen conjuntamente en los componentes afectivos, conductuales y cognitivos del estigma, se pueden explicar las distintas reacciones ante las mismas condiciones objetivas exhibidas por los sujetos evaluados. Esta variación, a su vez, es una premisa clave para la maleabilidad del estigma, lo que tiene implicaciones importantes para la teoría y la estrategia organizacional. En conjunto, el capítulo destaca la importancia de las percepciones individuales, la construcción social y la agencia organizativa en la configuración del estigma.

El Capítulo 3 se basa en la teoría desarrollada en el capítulo anterior y examina empíricamente los mecanismos que conducen a la variación en el grado de estigma que afecta a las categorías en la misma industria. Este ensayo argumenta que las percepciones de los individuos sobre los atributos incongruentes con una categoría se establecen *en relación con* los atributos incongruentes exhibidos por un conjunto limitado de categorías que son *fácilmente accesibles* en la memoria y que constituyen puntos de referencia para la evaluación. En consecuencia, formula la predicción de que cuanto mayor sea el nivel de atributos incongruentes de una categoría focal, en relación con su conjunto de referencia "fácilmente accesible", mayor será el grado de estigma que afecta a la categoría. Esta predicción se testea analizando el apego de la etiqueta de 'comida chatarra' a las categorías del mercado minorista de alimentos de EEUU entre 2006 y 2015. Los resultados sugieren que las categorías que muestran niveles más altos de atributos incongruentes *en relación* con referentes más "fácilmente accesibles" parecen estar más estigmatizadas. Además, los resultados indican que esta relación se modera positivamente por la facilidad con la que tal comparación es susceptible de hacerse. Estos resultados respaldan el argumento teórico principal del ensayo y destacan la complejidad de los mecanismos de toma de decisiones que llevan a las audiencias sociales relevantes a estigmatizar una categoría focal.

El Capítulo 4 considera cómo el estigma se puede gestionar mediante la gestión de impresiones. Este ensayo propone un modelo de contingencia que muestra la efectividad de dos tipos de tácticas de gestión de impresiones cuando se implementan en categorías de mercado con diferentes grados de estigma. Específicamente, investiga las tácticas centradas en el ego (aquellas que se centran en la información específica del miembro de la categoría focal) y las tácticas centradas en el álter (las que usan información sobre los álters) y explora los mecanismos que promueven o limitan su efectividad en entornos caracterizados por diferentes niveles de estigma. Utilizando una gran base de datos que cubre la industria minorista de alimentos de EEUU entre 2006 y 2015, los hallazgos de una especificación de diferencia en diferencia muestran que las tácticas centradas en el ego son más efectivas cuando son implementadas por miembros de categorías que exhiben niveles de estigma bajos en lugar de altos. Por el contrario, las tácticas centradas en el álter parecen ser más efectivas para los miembros de categorías altamente estigmatizadas, en contraste con los miembros de categorías que muestran bajos niveles de estigma. En última instancia, este estudio destaca el papel estratégico de la gestión de impresiones para ayudar a los miembros de la categoría a posicionarse instrumentalmente en el espacio competitivo y contribuye a los debates de investigación sobre la gestión de impresiones en entornos controvertidos y a las estrategias de gestión del estigma.

El Capítulo 5 concluye la tesis doctoral resumiendo los hallazgos clave y las contribuciones teóricas de sus tres estudios. Sobre la base de esta discusión, destaca tanto los desafíos como las direcciones para futuras investigaciones sobre el estigma en el contexto de las organizaciones.

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CHAPTER 2: A MICRO-LEVEL MODEL AND AN INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORK OF STIGMA IN THE CONTEXT OF ORGANIZATIONS

In 1990, the British luxury department store Harrods decided to close down its fur salon, further to a 40% drop in sales over a period of only four years. Opposition to fur trade had begun in the 1980s, led by animal rights movements and endorsed by numerous celebrities. Over time, the fur industry became so stigmatized that in the year 2000 the UK parliament prohibited all fur farming activity in England and Wales[1]. Despite being generally perceived as a high-status product, natural fur has recently been excluded from the fashion collections of many luxury brands, such as Armani and Hugo Boss, who wish to be dissociated from the stigma that fur trade carries in modern western society. As this anecdotal evidence illustrates, a single stigma (against natural fur garments) can materially affect organizations in different industries (farming, garment production and retail). Understanding stigma is of both theoretical import for researchers concerned with negative social evaluations (Mishina & Devers, 2012), and practical significance for managers, because stigma affects individuals as well as organizations (Hudson, 2008; Sutton & Callahan, 1987), imposing social and economic costs such as disapproval (Vergne, 2012), loss of exchange relationships, inaccessibility to key resources (Hampel & Tracey, 2017; Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009), and identity crises (Tracey & Phillips, 2016).

[1] Fur farming was also prohibited in Scotland two years later. Similar processes occurred in other countries, including Austria, Croatia and Switzerland.

The extant research on stigma in the context of organizations has primarily focused on perspectives of *stigma-as-property*[2]– a label or enduring mark that some organizations or categories are charged with (Devers, Dewett, Mishina, & Belsito, 2009; Vergne, 2012) – and *stigma-as-process* – the outcome of an ongoing negotiation between macro-level social audiences and the targets of stigma (e.g., Hampel & Tracey, 2017; Helms & Patterson, 2014; Lashley & Pollock, 2019). Yet, scant attention has been paid to the perspective of *stigma-as-perception* – a social evaluation that constitutes the outcome of individual judgment processes, which eventually interact and aggregate to produce social effects.

The underdevelopment of such a perspective is unfortunate for two main reasons. First, further comprehension of the micro-level dynamics (Tost, 2011) that underlie a stigmatizing judgment can reveal important implications for organization theory and strategy. Approaching audience members as indistinguishable within pre-established macro-level partitions has prevented scholars from fully considering relevant contingencies that lead to variance in individual reactions to the same objective conditions exhibited by stigma targets. This variance, in turn, is a key premise to the malleability of stigma (Blair, 2002) and allows for a comprehension of different ways in which organizations can exercise agency in dealing with stigma. Second, because comparatively less effort has been put into theorizing a perspective of *stigma-as-perception* in the

[2] I borrow the framework suggested by Suddaby, Bitektine, and Haack (2017).

context of organizations, we lack a clear understanding of how the other two perspectives can be integrated into a holistic explanation of the phenomenon.

In this paper, I seek to address these two shortcomings. First, I propose a micro-level model of stigma emergence, which outlines how individuals, in their role as decision-makers, eventually form a stigmatizing judgment. The proposed model shows how cognitive limitations (Simon, 1990), contextually formed expectations (Burgoon, 1993), and the adaptive application of norms (Bicchieri, 2006) all play important parts in the formation of antagonistic attitudes, above and beyond values instilled by institutionalized norms. It then discusses the content of such attitudes attending to each of the classic components (Fazio & Olson, 2003): cognition, affect, and behavior. Finally, the model explains how an individual's antagonistic attitude may or may not materialize into stigma, through a decision to purposefully and overtly enforce a vilifying label upon the judgment target. In proposing such a model, I integrate key insights from the social psychology literature, which has been most concerned with questions related to stereotyping, prejudice and stigma (Dovidio, Major, & Crocker, 2000). It is, however, important to underscore that my aim is not to psychologize the emergence of stigma in the context of organizations, but rather to emphasize micro-level cognition and behavior as essential elements of a more encompassing phenomenon.

As such, I additionally propose an integrative framework of the three perspectives on stigma in the context of organizations. I show that the property, process, and perception perspectives are interconnected through cognitive, normative and material flows, which simultaneously constitute outputs of the dynamics occurring within one given perspective, as well as inputs for dynamics taking place under other perspectives. The framework ultimately highlights how individual perception, social construction, and organizational agency are intertwined and may be combined to explain the stigma phenomenon. Put differently, even though each perspective is concerned with answering specific research questions that are pertinent to certain dynamics and actors, stigma can only be fully understood when articulating their interplay.

In bringing forward a perspective of stigma-as-perception, this paper contributes to the literature in two important ways. First, it integrates the social psychology and management literatures to offer a view of stigma in the context of organizations that is complementary to those that have been explored in extant work, and which helps to reconcile knowledge on this topic into a comprehensive framework. Second, it underscores the importance of different factors that interfere with individual-level cognitive mechanisms leading to stigma. Salience and accessibility of stimuli are important because they determine which among many possible stimuli become valid cues for the formation of antagonistic attitudes (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). The locus of cognition is equally important because perceptions are mostly formed within specific contexts, rather than generalized ones (Blair, 2002). The implication is that stigma's malleability can be explored by interventions aimed at manipulating the salience and accessibility of stimuli, as well as the locus of cognition. These may represent viable strategies that organizations have at their disposal to influence the extent to which stigma affects them.

DEFINING STIGMA IN THE CONTEXT OF ORGANIZATIONS

Stigma-as-Property

From the perspective of stigma-as-property, *a stigma is a label* that social actors possess (Devers et al., 2009; Goffman, 1963; Vergne, 2012), owing to a particular attribute that indicates deviance from institutionalized norms and values, or to an association with others who carry the deviant attribute. Labels are parsimonious classification tools that readily give meaning to objects or social actors, and that tend to become reified (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1997). They have important effects on their bearers, notably the loss of individuality (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1997; Devers et al., 2009; Devers & Mishina, 2019). Those who are labeled as deviant are deprived from their individuality because the label becomes the defining characteristic of their identity (Link & Phelan, 2001). For example, an organization does not *commercialize* weapons, it *is* a “merchant of death”. Labels can be pejorative to different extents, yet those labels that carry a stigma are markedly vilifying (Devers et al., 2009). Roulet (2015), for instance, shows that after the subprime crisis, the media labeled investment bankers as “hyenas” who play with investors’ money on the “Russian roulette”.

Organizations are sanctioned insofar as their membership in a deviant and negatively labelled category is established (Link & Phelan, 2001; Vergne, 2012). Thus, studies grounded in this perspective take the presence of categorical stigma as a starting point and proceed to develop explanations of a) the economic and social sanctions that result from stigma, and b) the strategies that organizations employ to deal with those sanctions. Vergne (2012), for instance, shows that organizations in the arms industry are able to dilute stigma and thus reduce levels of stakeholder disapproval by investing in other non-stigmatized categories. In another study on the arms industry, Durand and Vergne (2015) show that organizations divest from stigmatized categories in response to media attacks. Hudson and Okhuysen (2009) explore boundary management strategies that men's bathhouses employ to survive despite the widespread stigma that their category faces. Although these studies consider the role of external audiences, in particular their ability to impose sanctions, the focal actor in this area of research is the organization that is affected by stigma, as a function of its category membership.

Stigma-as-Process

From the point of view of stigma-as-process, stigma is better construed as stigmatization, that is, an ongoing *process of negotiation* between macro-level social audiences and stigmatized groups. Under this perspective, (de)stigmatization is typically cast as a struggle between the opposing parties over competing institutional logics (Galvin, Ventresca, & Hudson, 2004; Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011; Hills, Voronov, & Hinings, 2013). Depending on the temporal trajectory along which stigma unfolds, the two parties may switch roles with respect to the defense of prevailing moral, social, cultural, and regulatory norms. Where a stigma is already widely held in society, social control agents attempt to maintain the status quo, mainly through norm enforcement and rhetoric (Galvin et al., 2004), while groups of stigma-affected peers seek to reduce or eliminate it by influencing key audiences and garnering their support. Stigma reduction and elimination efforts include the creation of a moral public image (Lashley & Pollock, 2019), the co-optation of labels (Helms & Patterson, 2014), allegiance to other groups, and even attacks on the stigmatizing stakeholder group (Hampel & Tracey, 2017). Where a stigma has not yet been widely diffused across society, institutional entrepreneurs are the ones who attempt to operate changes in belief systems and institutional logics by eroding support to the practices they contest (Zelizer, 2011). These changes might be brought about through discursive means, for instance, boundary and practice work (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010), rhetoric (Roulet, 2015) and problematization (Maguire & Hardy, 2009), that influence socio-cognitive interpretations of the contested practices. But they may also involve rather more muscular approaches, such as protests and boycotts (King & Soule, 2007; McDonnell & Werner, 2016). In contrast, to preempt the diffusion of a nascent stigma, threatened groups defend the status quo, for example, by evoking scientific evidence that supports the acceptability of existing practices (Galvin et al., 2004; Maguire & Hardy, 2009). In sum, (de)stigmatization develops as an ongoing and interactive macro-level process, where actions from one side influence beliefs and determine counteractions from the other.

Studies grounded in the stigma-as-process perspective thus aim to explain the dynamics of stigma's social diffusion (or contraction), fundamentally as a sequence of advances and retreats in social construction. The key actors under this perspective are macro-level social audiences: on one side comprised by movement organizations, social networks, the media, professions, markets, and regulatory authorities (Andrews & Biggs, 2006; Strang & Meyer, 1993; Strang & Soule, 1998), and on the other side by stigma-affected groups. Although prominent individual actors may play important roles at particular stages of the process, the interest of this perspective predominantly lies in the collective-level processes that explain stigma trajectories.

Stigma-as-Perception

From the standpoint of stigma-as-perception, *a stigma is an evaluation* (Hudson, 2008) that is grounded in negative affective reactions to certain attributes and relationships (Goffman, 1963) of the judgment target, which in turn materialize through the attachment of a vilifying label to the target. From this perspective, stigma emerges as individually held judgments interact and coalesce to form a social evaluation (Tost, 2011).

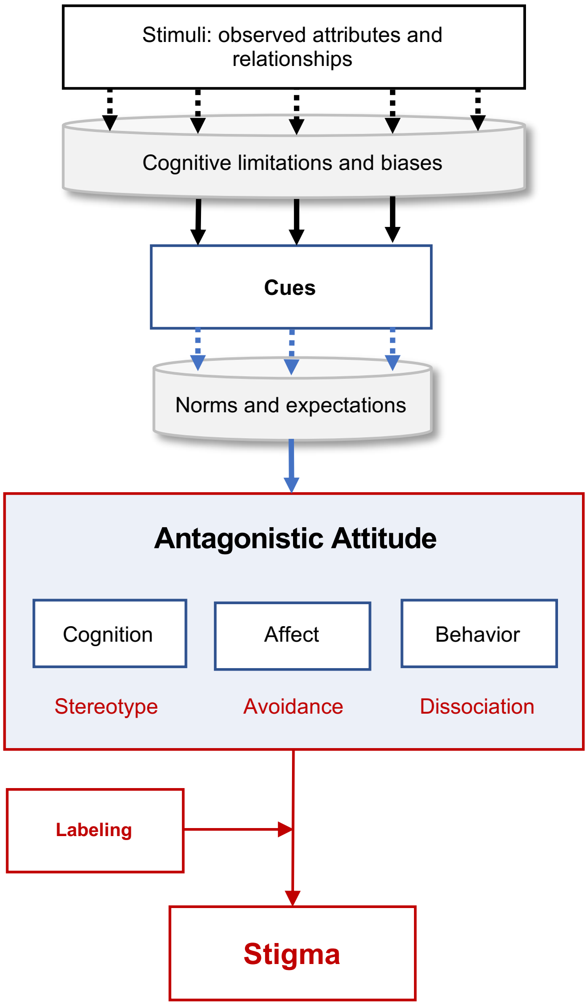
Under this view, stigma is fundamentally a *category-level* construct (Lashley & Pollock, 2019; Vergne, 2012), as it reflects a perceived relationship between an attribute and a stereotype (Goffman, 1963). Even though references may be made to someone or some organization as stigmatized, it is the deviant group that harbors the stigma. In fact, stigmatizing audiences do not attack individual actors, but rather attack the features or discredit the underlying logics of the category (Galvin et al., 2004; Roulet, 2015). Second, stigma involves *negative affective reactions* (Devers et al., 2009; Goffman, 1963) from the individual evaluator. These reactions are often spontaneous or impulsive, but sometimes deliberative as well (Pryor, Reeder, & Monroe, 2012), and provide the basis for dissociating from the stigmatized (Devers & Mishina, 2019). For example, disgust and repugnance are frequent reactions to organizations dedicated to "dirty work" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007). Third, evaluators who stigmatize have the need to *dissociate* from stigmatized category members because they perceive them as being fundamentally flawed (Devers et al., 2009) and hence unworthy of interaction (Durand & Vergne, 2015; Vergne, 2012). Thus, a key feature of stigmatized categories is distancing between category insiders and outsiders (Durand & Vergne, 2015). The need for dissociation results not only from negative affective reactions with respect to the category, but also importantly, from the fear of stigma by association (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009), even if the social connection to the stigmatized is merely incidental (Pontikes, Negro, & Rao, 2010; Pryor et al., 2012). Finally, the act of stigmatizing requires the imposition of an enduring mark on the perceived deviant group through the attachment of a vilifying *label* (Devers et al., 2009; Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). In this respect, the labeling feature of stigma mirrors the definition of stigma-as-property, yet in this instance from the point of view of the stigmatizing agent, rather than that of the stigmatized actor.

The key question that the stigma-as-perception perspective aims to answer is how individual audience members come to form stigmatizing judgments. As such, the focal actor in the stigma-as-perception perspective is the individual evaluator, as cognitive and behavioral processes take center stage in explaining stigma. Naturally, social influences, in particular those that stem from collective judgments and the institutional environment, are not ignored in this perspective, but are primarily considered as elements that influence individual cognition and behavior. To summarize, under the stigma-as-perception perspective, stigma is an evaluation that is grounded in negative affective reactions to a given category, and which materializes through overt labeling of targets. I employ this perspective as a foundation to develop a micro-level model of stigma emergence in the next section.

A MICRO-LEVEL MODEL OF STIGMA EMERGENCE

The model proposed in this section explains how individuals eventually reach the decision to attach a vilifying label to a category. I begin by noting that not all stimuli are equally attended to. Instead, cognitive limitations and biases impede audience members from fully incorporating the entire set of available information into their judgments. As a result, only some stimuli are used as cues to perform the judgment task that leads to stigma. These cues are juxtaposed with each individual's expectations, rather than simply assessed against broad normative standards. Individual expectations are in turn contingent on understandings of a category's code, as well as its immediate context, which introduce variance into the perceived degree of expectation breach. A further source of variance is that individuals tend to interpret institutionalized norms adaptively rather than inflexibly. Perceived transgressions with respect to expectations ultimately translate into an antagonistic attitude, along each of its classical three components: cognition, affect, and behavior. Finally, since the act of stigmatizing requires a visible expression of the antagonistic attitude, the individual must make a decision to overtly attach a vilifying label to the category. Figure 1 depicts the proposed model, which I proceed to explain in greater detail.

Figure 1. A Micro level Model of Stigma Emergence



Attention to Stimuli

Goffman's (1963) treatise on stigma at the individual level is the central foundation on which research, in both the social psychology and management traditions, has theorized and empirically examined stigma. He proposed that people stigmatize others as a response to stimuli of a dual nature: *attributes* and *relationships*[3]. In the context of organizations, the stimuli at the origin of stigma

[3] Goffman further broke down individual attributes susceptible of originating stigma into three kinds, namely abominations of the body (physical imperfections or mental disorders), blemishes of individual character (behavioral flaws), and tribal stigma (affiliations to socially depreciated groups). In addition, he called stigma emanating from relationships "courtesy

are likely to be either functional features of the objects of exchange, characteristics of the target's customers, or a combination thereof (Slade Shantz, Fischer, Liu, & Lévesque, 2018).

Not *all* stimuli are acknowledged by the individual, though, because cognitive limitations and biases act as sieves that only allow *some* stimuli to become valid cues for the judgment process leading to stigma. First, limited attention constrains the ability of individuals to notice the full spectrum of available information (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Simon, 1947). As a result, only the most salient and accessible (Fiske & Taylor, 2013) information will become eligible for forming the basis of a stigma. Salience is a property of the stimulus itself and speaks to the degree to which it stands out amongst other stimuli. The more salient a potentially stigmatizing attribute or relationship, the more likely the individual evaluator is to pay attention to it, and thus to incorporate it in the judgment task. Consider the example of POLE DANCING, which is manifested in many ways, from erotic shows performed in strip clubs to a form of art combined with exercise that has applied for recognition from the International Olympic Committee. Diametrically different perceptions may be generated depending on whether the physical nudity attribute is made salient, or alternatively the strength, resistance and elasticity required to perform on the pole are made salient. Accessibility, on the other hand, is a property of the individual's knowledge that might be applicable to a particular stimulus, helping to make sense of it. Accessible information is that which is easily retrieved from memory as a context

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stigma", i.e., stigma that does not result from particular attributes, but rather from associations with the original bearer of the stigma.

for interpreting stimuli (Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). For example, knowing that in several countries dance studios are offering POLE DANCING classes for men may help to contextualize a practice that has traditionally been more associated with female sex workers.

Second, confirmatory biases restrict the appraisal and acceptance of information that disconfirms prior beliefs (Anderson & Nichols, 2007). This can cause individual audience members to give the benefit of the doubt to organizations that they otherwise see positively (Greve, Palmer, & Pozner, 2010; Jonsson, Greve, & Fujiwara-Greve, 2009), thereby refraining from attending to potentially stigmatizing attributes or relationships that they may exhibit. Conversely, individuals may hold prior negative beliefs that disable them from accounting for positive stimuli, or that cause them to exacerbate the importance or salience of a particularly negative stimulus.

Interpretation of Norms and Expectations

The idea that stigmatization hinges on social audiences' more or less conscious comparison of observed cues against deeply institutionalized norms and expectations is a cornerstone of extant theory (Devers et al., 2009; Goffman, 1963; Hudson, 2008). Accordingly, stigmatized categories are often associated with physical danger (Helms & Patterson, 2014), severe illness, death (Durand & Vergne, 2015; Piazza & Perretti, 2015; Vergne, 2012), the disruption of an established social order (Hampel & Tracey, 2017), or the infringement of morality (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009). Grounded in neo-institutional theory, this reasoning implies that the broader social and institutional context constitutes the normative framework for setting expectations about behavior. Serious breaches of those expectations will then determine the likelihood of stigma emergence.

I propose that not only the macro-level context comprised by cultural, social, and institutional norms, but also meso- and micro-level contexts are relevant to forming the standard for expectations and ensuing reactions to breaches thereof. At the meso-level, individuals' perceptions of each category's code and its immediate context in a category system are crucial to explain variation in stigmatizing attitudes. At the micro-level, the tendency of evaluators to adaptively rather than unwaveringly apply normative standards, leaves room for further variation in individual audience members' reactions to the same objective conditions exhibited by the evaluation target.

Categorical Code and Context as Determinants of Expectations. Institutionalized norms are informal rules that define the boundaries of rightness and wrongness at the social macro-level. Even though norms are an indisputable determinant of expectations, norms and expectations are conceptually distinct, and bear distinct empirical implications (Levine et al., 2000). While examples of discrepancies between norms and expectations abound (Bicchieri, 2006), these concepts are regularly confounded because in most situations the default expectation for behavior is normative conformity. To understand stigma emergence, though, it is important to distinguish between them. A key point of distinction is that norms establish expectations about what *ought to be* observed, while a targets' characteristics and situational context determine expectations about what *will be* observed (Burgoon, 1993; Burgoon & Hale, 1988; Graffin, Haleblian, & Kiley, 2016). Violations of either type of expectations affect processes of interpretation and evaluation of a given target because they generate emotional reactions in the direction of the violation, of an intensity that is commensurate with the magnitude of the violation (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). Taken together, these arguments suggest that a stigma is likely to emerge as a function of a significantly negative violation of expectations, such that a strongly negative emotional reaction is triggered. Applying these predictions to stigma as a categorical construct implies that expectations with respect to a given category are determined not only by institutionalized norms, but also by each category's code (Durand, Rao, & Monin, 2007; Pólos, Hannan, & Carroll, 2002), as well as cues provided by other categories that constitute the immediate context for comparison (Blair, 2002).

On the one hand, categories comprise codes (Pólos et al., 2002) that describe consensual member characteristics, thus allowing different audiences to interact about expected combinations of attributes (Jensen, 2010). A category's code, or external identity (McKendrick, Jaffee, Carroll, & Khessina, 2003; Vergne & Wry, 2014), is both a set of signals and a set of rules (Durand et al., 2007; Pólos et al., 2002), which provide default assumptions and establish expectations for categorical attributes. Expectations about a category are therefore violated when audiences perceive that the category does not abide by the expected combination of attributes (Barlow, Verhaal, & Hoskins, 2018). For instance, FORMULA MILK came under serious attack in the 1970s, after consumers were made aware that, contrary to expectations, it was not equivalent to breastfeeding.

On the other hand, categories represent the basic elements of complex structures (Paolella & Durand, 2016) that confer meaning on them (Bowker & Star, 1999; Glynn & Navis, 2013). Other categories in a system perform a critical function with respect to a focal category: they act as reference points, enabling meaningful comparisons that inform evaluations by audience members (Smith & Chae, 2017; Zuckerman, 1999). In this sense, individuals' expectations about a focal category, and consequently their perceptions and reactions, are influenced to a large extent by how they interpret cues provided by categories that constitute meaningful referents in the structure. For example, expectations about CANNABIS will vary depending on whether one compares it to other MEDICAL DRUGS or to RECREATIONAL DRUGS (Lashley & Pollock, 2019). The social psychology literature offers ample evidence that responses to category cues depend on the surrounding context (Blair, 2002). This reasoning highlights the crucial dependence of perceived deviance on an invoked system of reference (Goffman, 1963): the same objective conditions may be interpreted in diverse ways depending on the chosen system of reference.

Adaptive Application of Norms. Since stigma is the product of an interaction between target and audience (Mikolon, Kreiner, & Wieseke, 2016; Paetzold, Dipboye, & Elsbach, 2008), not only features of the target and its context, but also traits of the stigmatizer can influence how a stigma emerges. A host of individual-level factors have been suggested in the social psychology literature as potentially interfering with stigmatizing attitudes (for a review, see Fiske, 2000). Personality, individual and family history, as well as motivation can notably influence how *different individuals* interpret a given set of objective conditions (Bitektine, 2011; Crandall & Cohen, 1994; Fiske, 1998). For example, someone with a family history of lung cancer is likely to feel more strongly against the tobacco industry than someone who has not had that first-hand experience. My point here is not to delve into a description of the factors that can influence stigmatizing attitudes, but simply to underscore that these micro-level factors may cause different evaluators to apply deeply institutionalized norms to different extents, which introduces further variation in individual-level reactions to the features exhibited by an evaluation target.

Perhaps more importantly, I note that the *same individual* may have a tendency to adaptively apply institutionalized norms. For example, someone who believes that restaurants should not serve expired food, may equally believe that this is an acceptable practice for restaurants dedicated to serving the homeless. Thus, the very same normative standard may be adaptively applied by the very same person, conditional on personality, situational factors, and the environment (Bicchieri, 2006). Again, such adaptive application of norms may introduce additional variation in audience reactions to targets. Just as stimuli are filtered by cognitive limitations and biases to become valid cues for assessment, so too cues are filtered by each individual's expectations and characteristics before they come to form a coherent attitude with respect to the target of evaluation.

Attitude Formation

In this section I describe how perceived breaches of expectations are manifested in the antagonistic attitude that forms the basis of stigma. For clarity of exposition, I separately account for the processes related to each of the classic attitudinal elements – cognitive, affective and behavioral (Fazio & Olson, 2003).

However, it is important to note that “stigma reflects a blend of these processes and their interactions” (Dovidio et al., 2000: 13), and that the role played by each process in producing stigma may be present to a greater or lesser degree, contingent on the type of stigma, the environment, and individuals’ idiosyncrasies.

Cognition. A *stereotype* is a cognitive schema that represents overgeneralized beliefs about the features and behaviors of group members (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996). Stereotyping is at the heart of stigma (Devers & Mishina, 2019; Dovidio et al., 2000; Mikolon et al., 2016). When a fundamental breach of expectations is perceived, the individual evaluator will associate the attribute or relationship at the origin of the transgression to a negative stereotype, which will subsequently guide perception (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000). Hence, stereotyping is intimately connected with the categorical nature of the stigma construct (Lashley & Pollock, 2019), as it involves abstracting stimuli into an oversimplified cognitive representation. For example, INVESTMENT BANKING firms have been stereotyped as ruthless organizations that seek profit at the expense of naïve customers (Roulet, 2015), regardless of the distinctive characteristics that each investment bank may exhibit (e.g., risk management policies, customer service, market coverage). Similarly, AMERICAN LAGER has been stereotyped as inferior beer (Barlow et al., 2018), irrespective of its actual taste, production techniques, or types of producers (craft breweries vs. macrobreweries).

Affect. As discussed under the definition of stigma-as-perception, a key property of the construct is that it involves a variety of negative affective reactions, such as fear, repugnance, or contempt, which may be present in isolation or combination. For ease of illustration in the model (see Figure 1), I simplify by encapsulating negative affective reactions under the concept of *avoidance* (Pryor, Reeder, Yeadon, & Hesson-McInnis, 2004). Negative affective reactions may be present at the onset of attitude formation, or they may ensue from attribution guided by cognitive responses (Dovidio et al., 2000). I argue that the former is more likely to occur in the case of morality-based stigmas, such as those held towards GAY BATHHOUSES (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009) or LEGAL BROTHELS (Wolfe & Blithe, 2015). In these instances, evaluator-focused emotions – "I do not like this", "It disgusts me" – are more likely to take precedence over cognition. Conversely, in the case of stigmas predominantly based on physical harm (Helms & Patterson, 2014) or social disruption (Tracey & Phillips, 2016), the antagonistic attitude is more likely to unfold from cognitive attribution. Target-focused reasoning – "This is a harmful sport"; "This is not an acceptable practice" – provides the basis for subsequent affective reactions.

Behavior. From a behavioral standpoint, social disapproval (Helms & Patterson, 2014; Vergne, 2012) is perhaps the most evident manifestation of stigma. Disapproval consists of expressions of criticism or condemnation (Vergne, 2012), which indicate an organization's practices and/or values fall outside a particular audience's acceptance spectrum. Media disapproval, in particular, can be especially damaging for organizations, since the media occupy a privileged social position to influence other stakeholders (Andrews & Caren, 2010; Greve et al., 2010). Disidentification (Devers et al., 2009; Tracey & Phillips, 2016) and defection from existing relationships (Bruyaka, Philippe, & Castañer, 2018; Jensen, 2006; Semadeni, Cannella, Fraser, & Lee, 2008) are also common behavioral responses to stigma, elicited by negative affective reactions.

In addition, the fear of stigma by association may lead stakeholders to refrain from establishing relationships with stigma-affected organizations, or to abandon already existing relationships. For example, Tracey and Phillips (2016), describe how some members eventually exited a social organization, as they found it impossible to reconcile their identification as part of a community and their courtesy-stigmatized employer. Executives who face labor market penalties in the form of ex-post settling up (Pozner, 2008), may defect stigma-stricken organizations in anticipation of stigma by association (Semadeni et al., 2008). Similar processes are at play with respect to potential relationships that never come to materialize. Suppliers sometimes refuse to commercially engage with stigma-affected organizations (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009), and norm-constrained investors such as pension funds do not consider them as feasible investment options (Hong & Kacperczyk, 2009). Overall, the behavioral component of stigma translates into a diverse range of actions (e.g., disapproval, disidentification, defection, distancing) that ultimately seek to achieve the same goal: to establish a clear *dissociation* between the perceiver and the stigmatized.

Labeling

In order for a stigma to emerge, it does not suffice that the evaluator has formed an antagonistic attitude. Rather, audience members must overtly express their attitude through the attachment of a vilifying label that brings discredit upon the target. By devoting specific attention to the labeling component of stigma, I do not mean to imply that it is disconnected from each of the three attitudinal components considered above. To the contrary, labeling can be, and usually is, interwoven with all of them (Link & Phelan, 2001). Rather, I emphasize that socially *overt* labeling is indispensable to the act of stigmatizing, and that while it may be present in the private sphere of the individual evaluator's mind, it can only materialize into stigma once it is openly expressed.

The decision to overtly express a stigma through labeling is not a trivial one, though, and it may be affected by a number of factors. In addition to self-interest, opportunity and ability, which have been suggested to guide the agendas of social control agents (Greve et al., 2010), the need for social conformity also constrains the expression of privately held judgments. Since deviant judgments are often punished with social sanctions (Bitektine & Haack, 2015), individuals systematically scan the environment to infer collective perceptions (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), which will allow them to derive the appropriateness of their own judgment (Haack & Sieweke, 2019). These second-order judgments, which reflect not how one judges the target (first-order judgment), but rather how one thinks that *others* judge the target, have been found to better predict actual behavior under some circumstances (Haack & Sieweke, 2019). In this sense, social isomorphic pressures may nullify the motivation, opportunity and ability to stigmatize, thus accounting for an individual's antagonistic attitude to remain undisclosed, or even (apparently) reverted to acceptance.

Summary

In summary, the micro-level stigma emergence model is grounded in the definition of stigma-as-perception and emphasizes that stigma is in the mind of the individual evaluator. The model develops along four stages, which are condensed and illustrated in Figure 1. In the first stage individuals are presented with a set of stimuli that constitute the basis of the judgment process. However, because individuals have computational limitations, any judgment task requires a tool to filter stimuli, such that reality can be simplified to a manageable load. Accordingly, the behavioral and cognitive mechanisms that underlie the path from stimuli to stigma impose a filtering function, such that not every "raw" attribute or relationship can become a valid cue that the individual evaluator assesses and weights to perform the judgment task at hand. Second, cues are interpreted against the backdrop of each individual's expectations. Expectations are determined by factors at three different levels: at the macro-level by institutionalized norms, at the meso-level by a category's code and immediate context, and at the micro-level by the individual's personal traits and experiences. Third, the interpretation of expectation breaches leads to the formation of an antagonistic attitude that is revealed in cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses. The cognitive response involves stereotyping, the affective response involves feelings of avoidance, and the behavioral response involves dissociation from the target of judgment. Fourth, the individual evaluator must make a decision to actively vilify the target by imposing a pejorative label upon it. This decision is influenced not only by each individual's motivation, opportunity and ability, but also by isomorphic pressures stemming from second-order judgments inferred from social context.

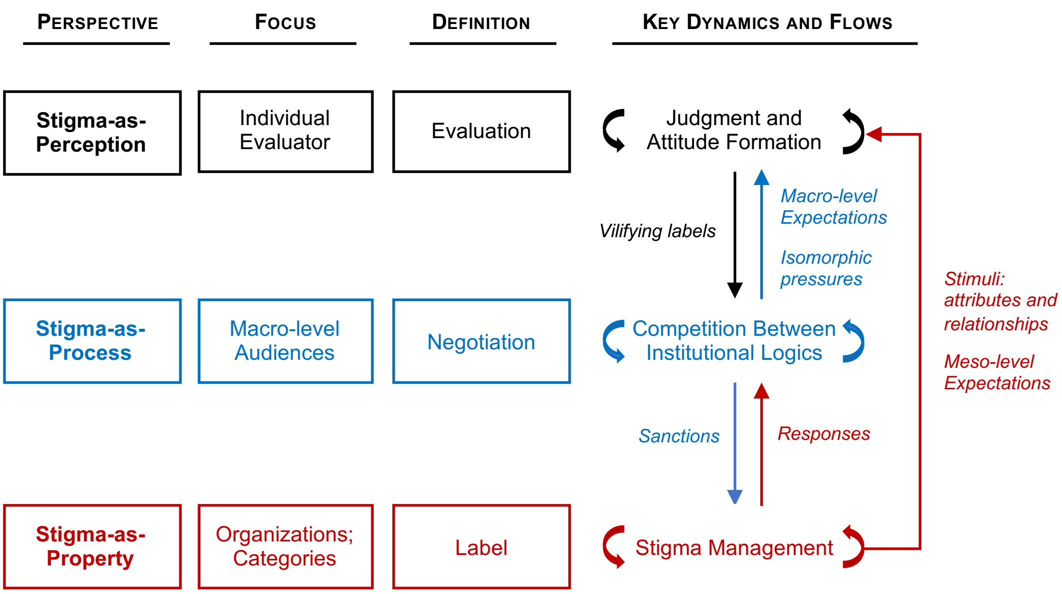
The proposed model might seem static in the sense that it ultimately arrives at a decision, with no further iterations being evidenced. That is clearly not the case, as stigmatizing judgments are fundamentally path-dependent (Mishina, Block, & Mannor, 2012) and subject to change and revision. However, to understand the dynamics of micro-level stigmatizing judgments, we need to integrate the stigma-as-perception perspective with its two complementary perspectives: stigma-as-property and stigma-as-process. In the interest of clarity and parsimony, I have intentionally partitioned the micro-level model from its integration within a broader framework of the stigma phenomenon, which I present in the following section.

INTEGRATING THREE COMPLEMENTARY PERSPECTIVES ON STIGMA

Figure 2 depicts the integrative framework of the three perspectives on stigma in the context of organizations. It identifies the key dynamics under each perspective (curved arrows), as well as the cognitive, normative and material flows (straight arrows) that interlink them. The order in which the framework is presented has been chosen for clarity of exposition, yet theoretically the starting point for connecting the three perspectives is arbitrary, as the dynamics and flows that sustain it are nonlinear, iterative and coexistent. Therefore, the framework I propose here can be regarded as a digestible simplification of a complex and recursive process that takes place across social levels and across layers of norms, expectations, cognitive interpretations, behaviors, and actions.

As discussed in the micro-level model, from the perspective of stigma-as-perception, individual evaluators take center stage as key actors, by ultimately arriving at the decision to stigmatize a focal category through the attachment of a vilifying label. Also as discussed, the individual evaluation process is influenced by a number of external factors that provide the individual with inputs for judgment, attitude formation, and action (in the form of overt labeling). Social norms generate *macro-level expectations* (Bicchieri, 2006) that reflect the broader institutional environment. Collective behaviors and outcomes of negotiations between macro-level audiences create *isomorphic pressures* that influence both individual judgment and individual behavior (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Haack & Sieweke, 2019; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). A category's code and context offer *meso-level expectations* with respect to the category under scrutiny (Blair, 2002; Pólos et al., 2002); and the *attributes and relationships* exhibited by categories and organizations, including stigma itself, represent stimuli that feed into the individual evaluation task. Indeed, viewed as a property of the stigmatized actor, stigma is an attribute (Paetzold et al., 2008), and crucially a very salient one, that individual evaluators will weigh in their decision-making process.

Figure 2. An Integrative Framework of Stigma in The Context of Organizations



The *vilifying labels* that emerge from each individual's evaluation become symbols that are subject to interpretation, exploration and manipulation (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1997) by diverse social audiences, which may espouse conflicting beliefs and ideals (Greenwood et al., 2011). Thus, the social construction of stigma takes place across institutional orders, according to which different audiences will engage in negotiation. Over time, the cumulative outcomes of such negotiations define the stigma trajectory. Some stigmas subside (Hampel & Tracey, 2017; Lashley & Pollock, 2019), while others diffuse and intensify (Galvin et al., 2004; Maguire & Hardy, 2009). During the periods in which a stigma is widely held within powerful segments of society (Link & Phelan, 2001), *sanctions* are imposed upon its targets.

Organizations that claim membership in stigmatized categories, as well as category representatives will engage in a variety of strategies to deal with these sanctions. In doing so, they produce symbolic and material *responses* that will reintegrate the dynamics of competing institutional logics. For example, in a study on the reduction of stigma in the cannabis industry, Lashley and Pollock (2019) show how responses from cannabis entrepreneurs were separated in phases across time, such that key audiences could be afforded to revise their understanding of cannabis categories, hence enabling new responses from entrepreneurs in a subsequent phase. Organizational responses can also be designed to influence the salience and accessibility of *stimuli* and to adjust *meso-level expectations*, which feed into each individual evaluator's judgment process, bringing the framework full circle. Yet this possibility has been less explored in the extant literature, as I discuss next.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

I have argued in this paper that studying the individual decision to stigmatize a given target can contribute significantly to our understanding of stigma in the context of organizations. I have presented a micro-level model of stigma emergence that highlights sources of variance in audiences' perceptions and responses to the same objective attributes exhibited by organization and product categories. In this respect, the stigma-as-perception perspective offers a conceptual map to integrate previously disconnected arguments that urge scholars to pay closer attention to the audience-specific nature of stigma (Hudson, 2008), to investigate "industries as embedded sets of categories conveying stigmas to various extents" (Vergne, 2012:1048), and to attend to the evolution of stigma in phases throughout time (Lashley & Pollock, 2019). Put differently, the perspective offered in this paper combines these directions to suggest that scholars should investigate stigma as an evaluation that *some audiences* hold with respect to *some categories* at *some points in time*.

Paying closer attention to this perspective also allows for an improved distinction of the stigma construct vis-à-vis other social evaluations. Although much work has been done to flesh out such distinctions (Devers et al., 2009; Mishina & Devers, 2012; Pollock, Lashley, Rindova, & Han, 2019), this perspective identifies the features that define stigma as a unique social evaluation. Stigma-as-perception is a *categorical* evaluation based on stereotypes, it involves *negative affective reactions* and *dissociative* behaviors, as well as the imposition of vilifying *labels*. These features can be used to systematically compare and contrast stigma against other negative social evaluations, such as (il)legitimacy, bad reputation, and infamy, thus helping to define the boundaries of each of these concepts (cf. Pollock et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the stigma-as-perception perspective has implications for organization theory and strategy. Absent an external shock (Tost, 2011), sociological accounts of stigma point to its considerable inflexibility and stickiness (Devers et al., 2009). Thus, the management literature has emphasized two main ways in which organizations can attempt to deal with stigma. One is to engage in a long-term social negotiation process, with a view to reducing or eliminating stigma (Hampel & Tracey, 2017; Lashley & Pollock, 2019). A second way is to take stigma as a given and instead adapt the organization, for example by rebalancing its business portfolio (Durand & Vergne, 2015; Vergne, 2012), or by managing organizational boundaries (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009). I build on the stigma-as-perception perspective to suggest additional avenues that organizations may have at their disposal to deal with stigma, namely strategies that are designed to shape individual evaluators' perceptions through the manipulation of stimuli salience and accessibility, as well as manipulation of the locus of cognition.

Salience and accessibility of stimuli

Since not all stimuli are equally attended to, strategies aimed at manipulating the salience and accessibility of stimuli will presumably have a material impact in the production of stigma. Some authors have explored this logic under the *stigma-as-property* perspective. Vergne (2012), for example, shows how straddling categories reduces attention across multiple stimuli, resulting in lower disapproval for members of stigmatized categories. However, the importance of stimuli salience and accessibility in the production of stigmatizing judgments from a *stigma-as-perception* perspective underscores the possibility that organizations may strategically create stimuli of differing salience for different stakeholder groups, in order to manage stigma. We do not, however, have a clear understanding of how this strategic manipulation may play out. Amongst the many, equally valid, approaches to this research question, I suggest that scholars might enquire into the *ordering* of stimuli as a means to strike the right balance of salience and accessibility across different audiences (Bo Kyung & Jensen, 2011). Another approach would be to investigate the role of impression management strategies (Elsbach, Sutton, & Principe, 1998; Lamertz, Heugens, & Calmet, 2005). Impression management is theoretically relevant because it critically emphasizes organizational agency in strategically shaping perceptions of key audiences, such that certain responses may be either averted or dealt with (Elsbach, 2003; Elsbach et al., 1998; Graffin, Carpenter, & Boivie, 2011; Graffin et al., 2016). A better understanding of how organizations might manipulate stimuli salience and accessibility to manage stigma can also provide grounds for an integration of the stigma literature with the body of work that investigates how organizations respond to conflicting stakeholder demands (Crilly, Zollo, & Hansen, 2012; Durand, Hawn, & Ioannou, 2017; Greenwood et al., 2011), for example through decoupling (Bromley & Powell, 2012), through the projection of multiple images (Price, Gioia, & Corley, 2008), or through the establishment of meta-organizational arrangements (Gulati, Puranam, & Tushman, 2012).

Locus of cognition

I have argued above that stigma emerges as a function of perceived transgressions with respect to expectations, and that expectations in turn are partly dependent on how individuals perceive the category, as situated in a particular context (Blair, 2002). This reasoning implies that strategies aimed at adjusting audiences' locus of cognition will plausibly bear an effect on stigma. Some recent contributions have begun to uncover dynamics related to such strategies. Lashley and Pollock (2019), for example, show that actors in the cannabis industry were collectively able to reduce stigma by differentiating medical cannabis from the black market, thus shifting the locus of cognition from recreational drugs to medical drugs. This work calls our attention to both processes of *assimilation* that are brought about by shifting the locus of cognition to *higher* standard referents (medical drugs), as well as processes of *contrast* proceeding from shifts of the locus of cognition to *lower* standard referents (black market) (Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Mussweiler, 2003). However, further effort is needed to understand how category referents are chosen in the first place, as variance in individual cognition leads to the plausible presumption that the evoked referent set will vary across stakeholders. Although the processes of referent choice at the level of the individual (Kulik & Ambrose, 1992; Wood, 1989) and the organization (Bowers, 2015; Smith & Chae, 2017) have received considerable attention in extant work, how individual evaluators come to establish the reference set for a focal category is not clearly understood. In this respect, a consideration of the mechanisms leading to the choice of referents that contextualize a particular category's evaluation can be fruitfully integrated with theories of category strategy (Pontikes, 2018), namely with the literature that investigates how category members may be able to shape categories to their advantage (Durand & Thornton, 2018; Hsu & Grodal, 2015; Pontikes, 2018).

Conclusion

The lack of a stigma-as-perception perspective in the management literature has obscured important implications to our understanding of stigma. In this paper, I contribute to addressing this limitation by bringing in such a perspective of stigma in the context of organizations. Specifically, I examine how each individual evaluator arrives at the decision to stigmatize, by actively attaching a vilifying label to a category. I then integrate the stigma-as-perception perspective with the stigma-as-property and stigma-as-process views and identify implications for organization theory and strategy.

In attempting to keep the paper tractable, I inevitably leave important questions outside its scope. First, examining stigma through a decision-making lens implies the recognition that there must be consequences – psychological, social, and/or economic – to the act of stigmatizing. However, research to date has primarily focused on the consequences of stigma for its target and not for its originator. I propose that stigma research might greatly benefit from a more careful investigation of the nature and characteristics of those consequences, both positive and negative, and how they are weighted in the decision-making process. Relatedly, because such consequences may cause a stigma to be held but not expressed (Bitektine & Haack, 2015), further effort is needed to develop a systematic framework for understanding what triggers the decision to actively express a stigma, or to refrain from doing so, and how this process unfolds.

Second, we know very little about the strategies that stigmatizing agents employ to both *inflict* stigma and *manage* its consequences. The field has much to gain from an understanding of the types and motivations underlying these strategies. Scholars could examine, for example, the extent to which stigmatizing agents adopt differentially aggressive strategies and how the stigmatizing agents' choice of strategy in turn affects stigma-stricken organizations' responses. It is plausible to presume that the idiosyncratic characteristics of these strategies will determine their relative effectiveness, and that any given social control agent will employ different types of strategies throughout time, but these are questions that remain understudied and that have the potential to advance our understanding of stigma in the context of organizations.

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CAPÍTULO 2: UN MODELO A NIVEL MICRO Y UN MARCO INTEGRATIVO DEL ESTIGMA EN EL CONTEXTO DE LAS ORGANIZACIONES

En 1990, los grandes almacenes británicos de lujo Harrods decidieron cerrar su departamento de pieles, tras una caída del 40% en las ventas en un período de tan solo cuatro años. La oposición al comercio de pieles comenzó en la década de 1980, liderada por movimientos en pro de los derechos de los animales y respaldada por numerosas celebridades. Con el tiempo, la industria de la piel fue tan estigmatizada que en el año 2000 el parlamento del Reino Unido prohibió toda actividad agrícola en torno a la producción de pieles en Inglaterra y Gales . A pesar de ser generalmente percibida como un producto de lujo, la piel natural ha sido recientemente excluida de las colecciones de moda de muchas marcas de lujo, incluyendo Armani y Hugo Boss, que desean disociarse del estigma que conlleva el comercio de pieles en la sociedad occidental moderna. Lo que ilustra esta evidencia anecdótica es que un solo estigma (contra las prendas de piel natural) puede afectar materialmente a las organizaciones en diferentes industrias (agricultura, producción de prendas de vestir y venta minorista). Comprender el estigma tiene tanto importancia teórica para los investigadores interesados en evaluaciones sociales negativas (Mishina y Devers, 2012), como importancia práctica para individuos y organizaciones (Hudson, 2008; Sutton y Callahan, 1987), ya que impone costos económicos tales como la desaprobación (Vergne, 2012), la pérdida de relaciones de intercambio, inaccesibilidad a recursos clave (Hampel y Tracey, 2017; Hudson y Okhuysen, 2009) y crisis de identidad (Tracey y Phillips, 2016).

La investigación existente sobre el estigma en el contexto de las organizaciones se ha centrado principalmente en las perspectivas del estigma como propiedad , una etiqueta o marca duradera que cargan algunas organizaciones o categorías (Devers, Dewett, Mishina y Belsito, 2009; Vergne, 2012), y el estigma como proceso, el resultado de una negociación en curso entre audiencias sociales a nivel macro y las organizaciones o categorías estigmatizads (por ejemplo, Hampel y Tracey, 2017; Helms y Patterson, 2014; Lashley y Pollock, 2019). Sin embargo, se ha prestado poca atención a la perspectiva del estigma como percepción, una evaluación social que constituye el resultado de procesos de juicio individuales, que eventualmente interactúan y se agregan para producir efectos sociales.

La falta de desarrollo de tal perspectiva es desafortunada por dos razones principales. Primero, una mayor comprensión de las dinámicas a nivel micro (Tost, 2011) que subyacen bajo un juicio estigmatizante puede revelar implicaciones importantes para la teoría y la estrategia de las organizaciones. Tratar a los miembros de la audiencia como indistinguibles dentro de las teorías de nivel macro preestablecidas ha impedido que los académicos presten atención a contingencias relevantes que afectan las distintas reacciones individuales frente a las mismas condiciones objetivas exhibidas por los sujetos estigmatizados. Esta variación, a su vez, es una premisa clave para la maleabilidad del estigma (Blair, 2002), y permite comprender las diferentes formas en que las organizaciones pueden activamente lidiar con el estigma. Segundo, porque relativamente menos esfuerzo se ha puesto en teorizar una perspectiva de estigma como percepción en el contexto de las organizaciones, carecemos de una comprensión clara de cómo se pueden integrar las otras dos perspectivas en una explicación holística del fenómeno.

En este ensayo, trato de abordar estas dos deficiencias. Primero, propongo un modelo a nivel micro del surgimiento del estigma, que describe cómo los individuos, en su papel de tomadores de decisiones, eventualmente forman un juicio estigmatizador. El modelo propuesto muestra cómo las limitaciones cognitivas (Simon, 1990), las expectativas formadas contextualmente (Burgoon, 1993) y la aplicación adaptativa de las normas (Bicchieri, 2006) juegan un papel importante en la formación de actitudes antagónicas, más allá de los valores inculcados por normas institucionalizadas. Se analiza el contenido de tales actitudes atendiendo a cada uno de sus componentes clásicos (Fazio y Olson, 2003): cognición, afecto y comportamiento. Finalmente, el modelo explica cómo la actitud antagónica de un individuo puede materializarse o no en estigma, a través de una decisión intencional y abierta de etiquetar como vilipendioso el sujeto estigmatizado. Al proponer dicho modelo, integro ideas clave de la literatura de psicología social, centrada en cuestiones relacionadas con los estereotipos, los prejuicios y el estigma (Dovidio, Major y Crocker, 2000). Sin embargo, es importante subrayar que mi objetivo no es dar una explicación psicológica a la aparición del estigma en el contexto de las organizaciones, sino enfatizar la cognición y el comportamiento a nivel micro como elementos esenciales de un fenómeno más amplio.

Como tal, también propongo un marco integrador de las tres perspectivas sobre el estigma en el contexto de las organizaciones. Muestro que las perspectivas de propiedad, proceso y percepción están interconectadas a través de flujos cognitivos, normativos y materiales, que simultáneamente resultan de dinámicas que ocurren dentro de una perspectiva dada e imputan en dinámicas que tienen lugar bajo otras perspectivas. Finalmente, el marco resalta cómo la percepción individual, la construcción social y la agencia organizacional están entrelazadas y pueden combinarse para explicar el fenómeno del estigma. Dicho de otra manera, aunque cada perspectiva trata de responder preguntas de investigación específicas sobre ciertas dinámicas y actores, el estigma solo puede entenderse completamente al articular su interacción.

Al presentar una perspectiva del estigma como percepción, este ensayo contribuye a la literatura de dos maneras importantes. Primero, integra la literatura de psicología social y la administración para ofrecer una visión del estigma en el contexto de las organizaciones que es complementaria a las que se han explorado en la literatura existente, y que ayuda a conciliar el conocimiento sobre este tema en un marco integrador. En segundo lugar, subraya la importancia de diferentes factores que interfieren con los mecanismos cognitivos individuales que conducen al estigma. La importancia y la accesibilidad de los estímulos son relevantes porque determinan cuáles de los muchos estímulos posibles se convierten en señales válidas para la formación de actitudes antagónicas (Fiske y Taylor, 2013). El locus de la cognición es igualmente importante porque las percepciones se forman principalmente en contextos específicos, en lugar de generalizados (Blair, 2002). La implicación es que la maleabilidad del estigma se puede explorar a través de intervenciones destinadas a manipular la prominencia y la accesibilidad de los estímulos, así como el locus de la cognición. Estas intervenciones pueden convertirse en estrategias viables que las organizaciones tienen a su disposición para influir en la medida en que el estigma les afecta.

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CHAPTER 3: ALL THE RIGHT JUNK IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES: THE INCIDENCE OF STIGMA IN THE FOOD RETAIL MARKET, 2006-2015

The concept of categorical stigma has recently captured the attention of management scholars (Barlow, Verhaal, & Hoskins, 2018; Lashley & Pollock, 2019; Vergne, 2012). Because members of stigmatized categories face significant social and economic sanctions, extant research has tended to focus on the stigmatized actors' perspective, and in particular on how to mitigate the consequences of categorical stigma (Helms & Patterson, 2014; Lashley & Pollock, 2019). Yet, understanding why certain categories are more stigmatized than others is an important question that remains to be fully addressed in this literature. From the mirror perspective of the stigmatizing agent, stigma amounts to the imposition of an enduring mark on a deviant category through the attachment of a vilifying label (Devers, Dewett, Mishina, & Belsito, 2009; Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). According to current theory, it is the presence of attributes that are incongruent with audiences' deeply institutionalized norms and values that motivates the attachment of a vilifying label (Devers et al., 2009). Hence, this logic suggests that those categories that exhibit higher levels of deviant attributes[1] should be more extensively vilified and therefore experience stigma to a greater degree.

Anecdotal evidence, however, seems to call this rationale into question. Consider, for instance, different categories of vehicles (e.g. TWO SEATERS, LARGE

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[1] We use the expression 'deviant attributes' to encapsulate those attributes capable of inducing stigma. Other attributes such as a product's design may be perceived negatively, but typically do not conflict with widely held values and norms and are therefore excluded from the meaning we intend to convey with this phrase.

CARS, SUVs, etc.). Current theoretical accounts would predict that categories with worse smog ratings, which measure emissions of major pollutants such as carbon monoxide, formaldehyde, and oxides of nitrogen, would be more extensively vilified by relevant audiences that perceive such emissions to clash with environmental values (e.g. activists, scientists, prominent media). Yet, while SUVs' smog ratings are better than those of TWO SEATERS[2], SUVs tend to be stigmatized to a much greater extent (Pralle, 2006). Similarly, the extant theory would suggest that food categories with higher levels of salt, sugar, and fat face a greater extent of vilification by audiences who consider such nutrients to collide with health values (Schlosser, 2001). Yet, this expectation also seems to be unfulfilled in numerous instances. FRUIT DRINKS, for example, typically contain higher levels of harmful nutrients than PRETZELS, yet the media more extensively stigmatize PRETZELS through the attachment of the 'junk food' label than they do with respect to FRUIT DRINKS[3]. Overall, an abundance of examples challenges current theoretical underpinnings and motivates a more comprehensive investigation of the mechanisms that explain why relevant audiences inflict higher degrees of stigma upon certain categories, by more frequently attaching a vilifying label to them.

In this paper, we attempt to provide an explanation for the apparent disconnect between stigma theory and anecdotal evidence. Specifically, the prediction that higher levels of deviant attributes lead to a greater degree of stigma requires at least one of three implicit assumptions to hold when

[2] Source: EPA Fuel Economy Guide, 2019, https://www.fueleconomy.gov/feg/download.shtml accessed February 2019.
[3] In our research on the food retail industry, we measure the number of times that leading newspapers' articles associate each food with the 'junk food' label. Over the 10-year period under analysis, this indicator was three times larger for PRETZELS than for FRUIT DRINKS.

considering the individual decision to stigmatize a given category: either 1) individuals make decisions in absolute terms, that is, they evaluate each focal category in isolation considering the *absolute* level of deviant attributes that the category displays, or 2) individuals make decisions in relative terms and are able to mentally compare *all* existing categories in a given structure based on the observed level of deviant attributes, or 3) individuals elect some common standard against which to compare each category and employ that same standard for judging every category in a given structure. These assumptions seem to evoke abilities consistent with a fully rational view of decision-making, namely a flawless ability to 1) evaluate elements without being influenced by context, 2) mentally process vast amounts of information, or 3) consistently refer to the same logic when performing different evaluations. Yet, considering the accumulated body of knowledge that demonstrates how individuals are boundedly rational in their decision-making (Kahneman, 2003; Simon, 1955), it is highly questionable that any of these three assumptions will hold, and therefore unlikely that individuals' judgements are produced in this fashion.

We draw from the decision-making literature, building on the alternative view that individuals are boundedly rational (Simon, 1947), to develop a model of how audience members decide whether to stigmatize a certain category through purposeful vilification. Specifically, we build on the following three assumptions that parallel those in the fully rational view implicit in current theory. First, human beings evaluate stimuli with respect to reference points, rather than independently from context (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). This implies that stigma would be better conceptualized as a relative rather than absolute phenomenon, in the sense that perceived deviance depends on each individual's adopted "system of reference" (Goffman, 1963). Second, according to the well-known principle of cognitive economy, individuals attempt to maximize the quality of their judgments while minimizing the expenditure of cognitive resources (Bitektine, 2011; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Rosch, 1978). This implies that audience members will not evaluate a given category against *all* other existing categories but against a *benchmark* or *reference* category (Schwarz, 1995; Simon, 1955). Third, the use of heuristics in decision-making is pervasive and adaptive (Bazerman & Moore, 2009; Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011; Kahneman, Slovic, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982) and gives rise to a vast number of biases. The "availability bias" is one of the most heavily documented and determines that individuals rely only on information that is easily available in memory to perform each judgment task (Kahneman, 2003; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). This implies that rather than being immutable, the benchmark category used for comparison will vary for each category (Kahneman & Miller, 1986), depending on which benchmark easily "comes to mind" and therefore effortlessly provides meaningful grounds for comparison with the category that is being judged.

In sum, in this paper we claim that whether audience members perceive a focal category to exhibit a disproportionate level of deviant attributes, and therefore decide that it deserves a vilifying label, crucially depends on the level of deviant attributes displayed by the benchmark category that is retrieved from memory to compare with the focal category. Against this backdrop, we advance that the category that plausibly becomes the benchmark for the judgment of deviance is that which, in response to a given stimulus, is invoked from each individual's cognitive map, i.e., that occurs to the individual's mind, as fulfilling the same function as the focal category. This reasoning could help explain the mixed evidence we reported above. For example, the appreciation of SUVs' emissions could be informed by comparison to other passenger vehicles such as LARGE CARS (which have better smog ratings than SUVs), leading to a greater degree of stigma than TWO SEATERS, which could be compared to vehicles such as MINICOMPACT CARS (which have worse smog ratings). Similarly, FRUIT DRINKS might exhibit lower stigma because they are compared against CARBONATED BEVERAGES, which contain higher levels of unhealthy nutrients. On the other hand, PRETZELS might be targeted with a greater degree of stigma because they tend to be compared to alternatives such as BREAD, which contains lower levels of unhealthy nutrients.

We test our theory in the US food retail market and examine the incidence of the 'junk food' vilifying label in 35 food categories structuring that market between 2006 and 2015. We find that food categories that display higher levels of unhealthy nutrients, *relative* to *the most easily available* benchmark category (i.e., the category that is the most similar in terms of the function it fulfills), are more extensively stigmatized. In addition, we show that ease of comparison, that is, the ability to directly establish comparisons based on the same attributes, positively moderates this relationship. In contrast, our robustness tests show that the *absolute* level of unhealthy nutrients displayed by a focal food category does not predict categorical stigma. Similarly, we find that neither measures concerning *all categories* in the market, nor measures of *common standards* employed across the structure, are able to explain the degree of categorical stigma. Taken together, our results lend support to the argument that stigma emerges as the result of a boundedly rather than perfectly rational decision-making process.

Our contributions to the stigma literature are both theoretical and empirical. First, we propose a boundedly rational (Kahneman, 2003; Simon, 1955, 1990) model of the individual decision to stigmatize a given category, which calls into question prevailing views of stigma incidence. We do so by underscoring the essential role that context, in the form of easily available referents (Bowers, 2015; Schwarz, 1995; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973), plays in the judgment processes that lead to stigma, and by offering theoretical grounding and empirical evidence that helps to refute a fully rational view of the individual decision-making process leading to stigma. Second, we advance a theoretical account of stigma taking place in the context of markets as socially and cognitively embedded structures (Cattani, Porac, & Thomas, 2017; Rosa, Porac, Runser-Spanjol, & Saxon, 1999). Our study advances an argument that has been underexplored in extant stigma studies: that the *relationships* that categories exhibit in a market (e.g., Negro, Koçak, & Hsu, 2010b) are relevant determinants of stigma, over and above their objective *attributes*. In this respect, we also contribute to the literature that investigates the interplay between the degree of social construction and objective constraints in social evaluations (Zuckerman, 2012). Finally, we answer calls for research on whole category systems (Paolella & Durand, 2016) and we explore how stigma emerges from processes taking place at the level of market categories, rather than at the broad industry level or the narrow organizational level (Vergne, 2012).

THE 'JUNK FOOD' LABEL IN THE US FOOD RETAIL MARKET

The 'junk food' label is generally associated with foods that contain exceedingly high levels of fat, sugar, and salt. Both scientific and anecdotal evidence have attested to the harmful effects of junk food consumption: poor dietary habits are accountable for more than half a million deaths every year in the US (U.S. Burden of Disease Collaborators, 2018), and the current generation of children faces a shorter life expectancy than that of their parents (Olshansky et al., 2005) because of the obesity epidemic. Prior research shows that an industry becomes stigmatized when sharp contradictions between industry and societal logics emerge (Galvin, Ventresca, & Hudson, 2004; Roulet, 2015). Following this mutual dissent, key social audiences may engage in overt actions to condemn or denigrate the industry's very essence (Durand & Vergne, 2015; Roulet, 2015), thereby influencing other stakeholders. This process can trigger disengagement and even outright opposition from both market and non-market stakeholders (McDonnell & Werner, 2016). As it happened, social elites (e.g., Michelle Obama and Michael Bloomberg) became actively involved in curbing and penalizing junk food consumption. Disengagement and opposition from other stakeholders materialized in key events led by market stakeholders (e.g., Disney ended its licensing contract with McDonald's), regulatory authorities (e.g., the United States Department of Agriculture enforced stricter legislation on the composition of school menus) and governmental bodies (e.g., several city councils imposed taxes on sugary beverages). As a result, the belief that junk food may have as detrimental effects as other widely stigmatized products, like tobacco, alcohol or even drugs, is nowadays firmly and widely held by social control agents at large. The following quote is illustrative of this parallel:

> "For many public health advocates, soda has become the new tobacco – a toxic product to be banned, taxed and stigmatized." (Sanger-Katz, 2015)

Our choice of empirical setting reflects four main considerations. First, it encompasses the components of labeling, vilifying and expressing negative affective reactions that are key to the concept of stigma (Devers et al., 2009). Our clear identification of the vilifying label under study is particularly crucial to conceptually discriminate stigma from other social evaluations (Devers & Mishina, 2019; Mishina & Devers, 2012).

Second, our setting allows us to focus on a single audience, namely the media. The media in general, and newspapers in particular, are powerful gatekeepers (Andrews & Caren, 2010; Greve, Palmer, & Pozner, 2010) that selectively influence other social audiences by reporting on credible sources. It is however important to clarify that we focus on the media not by virtue of their ability to influence others through greater expertise and power, but because such characteristics should make this audience *less* biased in the decision to stigmatize a category and, thus, provide us with a conservative way to test our arguments.

Third, the 'junk food' stigma cuts across categories within the vast food retail industry, which allows us to examine the heterogeneity of categorical stigma within one comprehensive market. In doing so, we also address recent calls for research considering the complexity of whole market systems where categories are not mutually exclusive (Paolella & Durand, 2016).

Finally, this is an empirically rich context in which it is possible to operationalize key constructs quantitatively, notably those involving deviant attributes. We advance that unhealthy nutrients are the deviant attributes that dominate evaluative frameworks in this context, and we anchor this argument on two main reasons[4]. On the one hand, there is ample scientific evidence that the social construction of food categories is related to their nutritional content (Ross & Murphy, 1999). On the other hand, nutrients are the basic units upon which products are labeled and presented to audience members. Both labeling requirements by the U.S. Food & Drug Administration and Recommended Daily Intakes (RDI) are expressed in these units, creating a pervasive nutrients-based language that plays a fundamental role in the social construction of reality (Ferraro, Pfeffer, & Sutton, 2005) in the food retail market.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Extant theory acknowledges that stigma is in the eye of the beholder (Hudson, 2008) and "results from an interaction between the target of stigmatization and the audience of perceivers that produce the stigmatization" (Paetzold, Dipboye, & Elsbach, 2008:186). Yet we seem to know little about how each individual, in their role as a decision-maker, decides to stigmatize a given category through the attachment of a vilifying label. Accordingly, we propose that an examination of the micro-level processes that explain stigma as a function of

[4] Recent research has suggested that salient attributes at the origin of categorical stigma are likely to be either functional features of the objects of exchange, characteristics of the customers the category serves, or a combination thereof (Slade Shantz, Fischer, Liu, & Lévesque, 2018). Because food addresses a universal human need, that of energy intake and nourishment, in our theoretical context customers cannot constitute salient attributes for attaching a vilifying label (all human beings consume food), and thus it is reasonable to assert that salient categorical attributes are circumscribed to the products themselves.

perceived deviance (Devers et al., 2009; Goffman, 1963; Lashley & Pollock, 2019) is required to more comprehensively understand the incidence of categorical stigma. While the acceptance of a vilifying label by a critical mass of adopters (Devers et al., 2009) is no doubt indispensable to the social production of stigma, a better understanding of the individual judgement process that underlies social diffusion is also of the essence, given that it is individual judgements that interact and aggregate to eventually form collective-level phenomena (Tost, 2011).

Our study therefore unpacks the decision-making process of individual audience members and advances a theoretical account of the mechanisms that lead to the decision to stigmatize a given category by means of purposeful vilification. To do so, we build on the assumption of bounded rationality (Simon, 1947). We propose that the evaluation of a focal category's perceived deviance is qualified by individuals' *relative* perceptions of other categories that form a reference set for comparison, in particular, *one* reference category that is *easily retrievable* from memory. This premise constitutes the core of our theoretical argument, and we explore it in detail next.

Stigma as a Relative Social Evaluation

Prior studies have mainly focused on public forms of stigma (Pescosolido & Martin, 2015), i.e., stigma that is generally held towards whole industries such as pornography (Jensen, 2010), nuclear power (Piazza & Perretti, 2015), or "dirty work" (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007). In this study, we take a different approach and contextualize stigma as taking place in a market structure segmented into categories that convey stigma to different extents (Vergne, 2012).

We therefore suggest that stigma should be conceptually approached as a relative rather than absolute evaluation. To illustrate, alcohol is consensually viewed as a stigmatized or 'sin' industry (Helms & Patterson, 2014; Hong & Kacperczyk, 2009). However, this absolute perspective on the alcohol industry cannot explain why FINE WINEMAKING (Hills, Voronov, & Hinings, 2013) or CRAFT BEER (Barlow et al., 2018) not only escape stigma, but seem to enjoy high levels of social approval. A relative approach to stigma, however, would explain that (at least in the US) CRAFT BEER can only be fully understood when contrasted against AMERICAN LAGER, which has become stigmatized by knowledgeable consumers for its perceived lack of flavor and authenticity *relative to* CRAFT BEER (Barlow et al., 2018).

The conceptualization of stigma as a relative evaluation is consistent with the more encompassing thesis that people evaluate stimuli with respect to reference points, rather than independently from context (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Presuming that individuals can perform judgment tasks in absolute terms, rather than relative to context, would require the existence of stable internal scales that represent value, duration, appropriateness, or any other magnitude (Stewart, Chater, & Brown, 2006). However, research in behavioral decision-making indisputably shows that individuals do not consistently hold these scales. Instead, they require benchmarks to make sense of complex environments, and therefore engage in comparison processes that determine perceptions and reactions to the original stimuli (Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Kulik & Ambrose, 1992). Comparison to reference points has thus been proven essential in a vast number of cognitive and behavioral domains, including evaluation (Smith & Chae, 2017; Zuckerman, 1999), belief formation (Ho & Levesque, 2005), judgment (Elsbach & Kramer, 2003) and decision-making (Shinkle, 2012).

In line with this long research tradition, we expect higher degrees of stigma to emerge for categories that display relatively higher levels of deviant attributes than their referent set. Numerous studies show that evaluation outcomes are deteriorated when a given object is considered jointly with a better referent, relative to when both objects are considered separately (Bowers, 2015; Grether & Plott, 1979; Hsee, 1996). For example, people are willing to pay more for a dictionary when evaluated in isolation than they are when comparing the same dictionary against an alternative with twice as many entries (Hsee, 1996). Not only is the monetary value attached to the dictionary reduced, but the order of preference between dictionaries is also reversed from separate to joint evaluation. These findings are consistent even in marketplace settings where the subjects performing the evaluation are experts (List, 2002)[5].

Once adopting a relative perspective on stigma, discerning how individuals decide to attach a vilifying label to a focal category implies understanding how the reference set for the judgment task is chosen. We address this question next by arguing that referents will be represented by 1) a single *benchmark* rather than all existing categories, and 2) a category that is the most *easily available* to perform the judgment task.

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[5] A spatial illustration of the reversal effect is that a given object is commonly perceived as larger than it really is when surrounded by identically shaped but smaller objects. Conversely, the very same object is perceived as smaller than it is when in proximity to larger objects of the same shape (Ariely, 2010).

Comparison Against a Benchmark

Any given category can only be fully assessed by audience members when compared against other categories in the same structure. As integral components of more complex systems (Bowker & Star, 1999; Cattani et al., 2017; Durand & Paolella, 2013; Paolella & Durand, 2016), categories are cognitive delimitation artifacts that only exist in relational opposition to other categories (Glynn & Navis, 2013), such that the resulting classification system acquires consistency as a whole. Thus the meaning of a particular category is equally determined by its own feature values and those of the contradistinctive categories that form the system (Bowker & Star, 1999; Cattani et al., 2017).

In this respect, presuming that the evaluation of a focal category encompasses the *entire set* of categories belonging to the same system implies that the concerned audience is able to make mental comparisons across all such categories and compare or rank them based on the levels they display for each attribute. However, research on bounded rationality (Kahneman, 2003; Simon, 1947, 1955) and on the principle of cognitive economy (Bitektine, 2011; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Rosch, 1978) suggest that this mechanism is highly unlikely, for two main reasons. First, finite cognitive capacity implies that the amount of information that can be attended to at any point in time is limited (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Simon, 1947). In conjunction with each individual's limited cognitive capabilities, their particular motivations, and crucially, the complexity of the environment, also determine that individuals are simply unable to entirely discern vast amounts of available information (Barnett, 2014; March & Olsen, 1975; Simon, 1990).

Second, inter-category comparisons have a greater level of complexity and thus imply more cognitive effort than inter-object comparisons, given that categories already constitute abstract representations of highly similar, but also marginally different objects (Negro et al., 2010b). As a result, the referent set used to form judgements of categories typically involves only *one* other category that serves as a benchmark (Bruckmüller & Abele, 2010) or norm (Kahneman & Miller, 1986). This other category becomes the focus of the comparison process, and constitutes an implicit and localized standard for the judgment of deviance (Bruckmüller & Abele, 2010). Research on social comparison of stigmatized individuals also supports this assertion. For example, learning-disabled children compare themselves against "normal" children, but *not* against mentally-impaired children (Wood, 1989). In sum, we argue that the referent set used to form stigmatizing judgements of categories will comprise not all categories in a system, but rather only *one* element, that is, one benchmark category.

Comparison Against an Easily Available Benchmark

The foregoing arguments with respect to individuals not comparing all categories in a structure and using only one pertinent benchmark for evaluation, still do not rule out a fully rational view of decision-making if a final assumption holds: that individuals elect some normative benchmark, or common standard, and consistently apply it as an immutable reference point in their judgment across categories. This possibility amounts to a choice based on perfect logic, that is, immune to emotion, impulse, distance, prior experience, or any situational factor (Strack & Deutsch, 2004). The reliance on one fixed benchmark would therefore be consistent with either a) the use of an "exemplary" category (Delmestri &

Greenwood, 2016) to compare against, that is, a category that epitomizes some ideal of what the level of negative attributes should be, or b) the use of a dominant category in the system that would represent a shared standard across categories.

Yet, the bounded rationality view also brings this argument into question. Substantial research lends support to the idea that rather than being compared to a fixed standard, "each event brings its own frame of reference into being" (Kahneman & Miller, 1986:136). Put differently, *meaningful reference points vary with each focal category*. Such variation is justified by individual evaluators' tendency to use benchmarks that "come to mind" (Gennaioli & Shleifer, 2010) when performing each particular judgment task. This mechanism is known as the availability bias and reflects the persistent use of restricted information that is *easily retrievable* from memory and, thus, effortlessly accessible to make a decision (Kahneman, 2003; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). We argue that easy availability manifests itself when categories more obviously perform identical functions in the eyes of audience members (Barsalou, 1983; Ratneshwar, Barsalou, Pechmann, & Moore, 2008), since what "comes to mind" for comparison purposes is highly dependent upon the momentary context that the evaluator considers (Kahneman & Miller, 1986).

For instance, FRUIT JUICE is easily available as a benchmark for SODA because both drinks can perform very similar "refreshment" functions at particular times (e.g., drinks to have on a hot day) and in numerous situations (e.g., drinks to have when watching a movie) (Ratneshwar et al., 2008; Ross & Murphy, 1999). Similarly, PORK RINDS can be easily retrieved as the alternative for POTATO CHIPS because both are susceptible of performing the "snack food" function. Our research also reveals that newspaper reporters recurrently make connections with foods that could have been consumed *instead of* the focal food, in order to sustain their arguments with respect to the 'junk food' label. Since the media need to engage the common reader and consumer, they primarily refer to foods that are portrayed as substitutes in the same consumption context. This suggests that *functionally similar* categories are the ones that most easily come to the mind of reporters, as the following quote illustrates:

> "[…] elementary and middle school students have said farewell to most ice cream snacks. Instead, they get frozen yogurt […]." (Mui, 2005)

In light of the foregoing argument, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: The higher the level of a focal food category's unhealthy nutrients, relative to the level of unhealthy nutrients of its most functionally similar benchmark, the greater the degree of stigma that the focal category suffers from.

Ease of Comparison

Our argument so far has made the case that the decision to stigmatize a focal category through the attachment of a vilifying label depends on the comparison of its deviant attributes against those of its most easily available benchmark. We now turn to a critical aspect of the comparison process itself: the ease with which a comparison can be obtained. We argue that greater ease of comparison – between the focal category and its easily available benchmark – will account for a simpler, less effortful, and clearer evaluation of relative deviance, which will in turn more easily trigger a stigmatizing judgment. Indeed, research shows that the ease with which a decision is reached critically influences confidence in judgment (Kelley & Lindsay, 1993). Conversely, difficult comparisons require time and cognitive effort to conduct, and may even be impossible for individuals to carry out, which will leave them lacking confidence to exercise judgment (Robinson, Johnson, & Herndon, 1997; Zakay & Tuvia, 1998). Hence difficult comparisons are less likely to give the individual evaluator the necessary confidence to purposefully vilify a category through the attachment of a vilifying label.

While it could be argued that greater functional similarity would always imply greater ease of comparison, this is not necessarily the case. For example, while PORK RINDS and POTATO CHIPS are close substitutes for the "snack food" function, these alternatives are difficult to compare with respect to unhealthiness, as they differ fundamentally on deviant attributes – PORK RINDS typically exhibit excessive levels of salt, while POTATO CHIPS show excessive levels of fat[6]. Conversely, FRUIT JUICE and SODA both contain excessive levels of the same deviant attribute, in this case sugar, and are thus easier to compare.

Comparisons are essentially made easier when they involve alignable attributes (Nowlis & Simonson, 1997) rather than non-alignable ones. Two mechanisms explain this assertion. First, alignable attributes draw more attention during the comparison process (McGill, 2002), and second they are more easily evaluated (Hsee, 1996) than non-alignable attributes. Indeed, comparison of non-alignable attributes creates a challenge for the individual evaluator, who must effortfully find a means to establish their relative value in commensurable terms (Slovic & MacPhillamy, 1974). These mechanisms explain, for example, why internet channels offer rankings and standardized reviews to consumers (Wang, Wezel, & Forgues, 2016). By engaging in prior commensuration – the

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[6] United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Composition Database.

transformation of different qualities into a common metric (Espeland & Stevens, 1998) – these channels are giving consumers perfectly alignable attributes to facilitate the consumers' comparison task.

In light of this argument, we expect that individual audience members will more readily attach a vilifying label to a focal category that exhibits excessive levels of the *same type* of deviant attributes as its most easily available benchmark (easy to compare), than to a focal category that exhibits excessive levels of deviant attributes that are of a *different type* from those of its most easily available benchmark (difficult to compare). Therefore:

> *Hypothesis 2: The greater the ease of comparison between the focal category and its most functionally similar benchmark, the stronger the effect proposed in Hypothesis 1.*

DATA AND METHODS

Data Sources and Sample

To support our empirical endeavor, we collected and combined data from four different sources. For market structure and category relationships, we used data from the Economic Research Service at the USDA (Okrent & Alston, 2012), which considers the food retail market as structured into 39 broad categories, such as BREAKFAST CEREALS or CARBONATED BEVERAGES. In our theoretical development, we argue that in the context of a market structure, categorical stigma is influenced by a relational structure of categories, namely those that can fulfill similar functions. Whilst we acknowledge that these relationships are largely perceptual in nature, we sustain that in dynamic, highly competitive and densely populated markets such as food retail, audience perceptions are mirrored by transactions with economic substantiation, as consumers and producers enact the market (Rosa et al., 1999). To determine the structure of inter-category relationships in our setting, we therefore relied on the information conveyed by cross-price elasticities (Okrent & Alston, 2012) to create a matrix of pairwise relationships that establishes whether a given pair of food categories are functionally similar (economic substitutes).

Second, for data on sales and category membership we used the Nielsen Retail Scanner Data available from the James M. Kilts Center for Marketing at the Chicago Booth School of Business. The Nielsen sales data consists of weekly purchase and pricing information at the Universal Product Code (UPC) [7] level, generated from participating retail store point-of-sale systems in all US markets, from 2006 to 2015. We excluded products for which Nielsen reports any reservations with regard to the integrity of the data. Furthermore, we excluded the category of alcoholic beverages, first to avoid any confounding effects due to alcohol consumption possibly being stigmatized in its own right, and second because alcohol sales through retail channels are restricted in seventeen states across the US, making the data subject to bias. Finally, we excluded baby food products because they are orthogonal to the products in other categories (e.g., meat, soups, yogurt), thus making its nutritional comparison inadequate, per the methodology described below. We then mapped the Nielsen data onto the structure provided by the Economic Research Service at the USDA, to obtain their direct correspondence.

[7] An item's UPC is a numerical code that corresponds to the barcode and which uniquely identifies the product for scanning purposes.

Third, for nutritional attributes, we used the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Composition Database for 'Branded Foods'[8]. This database provides nutritional data for over 175 thousand items, identified by their UPC. Information includes nutritional values for dozens of nutrients (e.g., protein, lipids, sugars, etc.) on a per 100g or 100ml basis, as applicable, and also on a per serving basis. Manufacturers freely report their product data to the USDA, but when doing so, they must adhere to the USDA's predefined rules. We excluded products that: i) do not represent food items susceptible of being consumed as such (e.g., yeast, food coloring); ii) that stand for the unhealthy nutrients themselves, i.e., sugar, fat and salt; or iii) are too generic to be confidently assigned to a given category. Our final sample aggregates 54,080 food items into 35 food categories according to the USDA structure.

Finally, to capture the extent to which the media stigmatize food categories through the attachment of the 'junk food' label, we followed prior work (Piazza & Perretti, 2015; Vergne, 2012) and searched for newspaper articles with the exact label that is the focus of our study. Even though there is a strong association of the concept of 'junk food' with other terms such as 'fast food', 'comfort food' or 'fun food', we chose to restrict our sample to the exact vilifying label that signals stigma in our context, because we wanted to conduct a conservative test of our hypotheses and avoid any conceptual vagueness. We ran this search on the Factiva news database for the period 2006-2015 in both the online and physical formats of the following newspapers: The Chicago Tribune, The Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and The Washington Post.

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[8] https://ndb.nal.usda.gov/, accessed between May and June 2017.

The reasons for our selection of media sources are twofold. First, these are all national publications, the combination of which results in a good geographical coverage of the US. Second, we chose media outlets that are known for their editorial independence, differently from industry publications where market actors may sponsor articles' publication. We excluded articles where the 'junk food' label is used out of context, as well as duplicated articles that appear, for example in both the printed and online versions of the same newspaper. This procedure resulted in a set of 992 articles, which we then proceeded to analyze and code for our stigma variable.

Dependent Variable

We performed a two-stage content analysis of our sample articles to obtain a measure for the dependent variable capturing the extent to which a focal category is stigmatized through the attachment of the 'junk food' vilifying label. First, we established a coding protocol to create a three-dimensional structure reflecting the underlying tone of the text[9]. According to this protocol, we hand-coded all mentions to food items (e.g., "fruit", "ice cream", "hot dog", "cereal") and assigned a 'negative', 'positive' or 'unclear' classification to these mentions. Specifically, a 'negative' code was assigned only when a given food item was directly associated with the 'junk food' label, and a 'positive' code was assigned only when a given food item was portrayed in direct opposition to 'junk food'. Because the coding process is based on an objective protocol, concerns regarding inter-coder agreement are less relevant than those that arise in qualitative research where subjective meanings are interpreted by coders and

[9] For the sake of parsimony, the full coding protocol is not replicated here, but it is available from the authors upon request.

framed by their own mental schemata (Lee, 2009). In order to test for the reliability of our coding, we repeated the process for all the articles in the database four months after the first coding instance, thus ensuring that enough time had passed to avoid any recall bias. The Cohen's kappa coefficient between the two coding instances is 99%, indicating perfect agreement. We then matched the initial food item coding to the USDA category structure using the categories' descriptions as our reference. To be conservative, we did not code instances where classification was dubious. Our resulting dependent variable counts the number of articles per year that attach the 'junk food' label to a given category.

Independent Variables

Relative unhealthy nutrients. As described above, we obtained the nutritional content of food items from the USDA Food Composition Database for Branded Foods. To create our main independent variable, *relative unhealthy nutrients*, we took the following steps. First, we identified the amount of each of the five unhealthy nutrients attached to the "junk food" label in for each UPC, i.e. sugar, salt, fat, saturated fat and cholesterol. Second, we aggregated these amounts to create a measure of unhealthy nutrients at the UPC level. The greatest challenge in this step is how to aggregate amounts of different nutrients, since for example, 10 grams of sugar may not be equivalent to 10 grams of fat, or 10 grams of salt, in terms of unhealthiness. To "standardize" the amounts of each nutrient so that they might be aggregated into an overall score for each UPC, we relied on the FDA's Code of Federal Regulations Title 21. In this code, the FDA provides prescribed levels of unhealthy nutrients according to different types of foods (meals, main dishes, other foods). Therefore, these prescribed levels (summarized in Table 1) provide a way to harmonize amounts of different nutrients according to their unhealthiness.

Table 1. FDA Prescribed Levels

	Meal Products		Main Dishes		Other Foods			
Nutrient limits	RACC* >= 283.5 g		283.5>RACC*>=170g		RACC* > 30g or RACC* > 2tbsp		RACC* <= 30g or RACC* <= 2tbsp	
Fat	26 g	per serving	19.5 g	per serving	13 g	per serving	13 g	per 50 g
Saturated Fat	8 g	per serving	6 g	per serving	4 g	per serving	4 g	per 50 g
Cholesterol	120 mg	per serving	90 mg	per serving	60 mg	per serving	60 mg	per 50 g
Sodium (Salt)	960 mg	per serving	720 mg	per serving	480 mg	per serving	480 mg	per 50 g

* Reference Amounts Customarily Consumed

The FDA prescribed levels do not consider sugar content levels, even though recent recommendations by both the FDA and the USDA point to a maximum daily intake of 50g of sugar. To address this shortcoming in light of the conceptualization of the 'junk food' label, we took that amount as the prescribed level to standardize amounts of sugar, employing the same proportional rules as those established by the FDA for other nutrients. We conservatively assumed that a healthy person has at least 2 meals per day, making up for the maximum 50g allowance (25g in each meal). Based on this 25g limit, we computed the proportional limits for sugar following the ratios for main dishes and other foods. Accordingly, we created a measure of unhealthy nutrients for each UPC using the following harmonizing equation, where *j* is the nutrient under scrutiny:

$$\textit{UPC Unhealthy Nutrients} = \sum_{j=1}^{5} \frac{content_j}{prescribed\ level_j}$$

Next, to create an absolute measure of nutritional unhealthiness at the category level we calculated the average score of all the category's members, as follows, where *i* is each UPC and *n* is the total number of UPCs in the category:

$$\textit{Category Unhealthy Nutrients} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n} \textit{UPC Unhealthy Nutrients}}{n}$$

Finally, to create our measure of relative unhealthy nutrients, we considered how a focal category's absolute score compares to that of its benchmark, by employing the following formula:

$$\textit{Relative Unhealthy Nutrients} = \frac{\textit{Focal Unhealthy Nutrients} - \textit{Benchmark Unhealthy Nutrients}}{\textit{Benchmark Unhealthy Nutrients}}$$

For example, if a focal category scores 10 on the unhealthy nutrients measure and its benchmark scores 5, then our ratio would reveal that the focal category is twice as unhealthy as its benchmark, i.e., a *relative unhealthy nutrients* score of 100%. As explained in our theory, we propose that the benchmark category will be the one that is the most functionally similar. To identify such a category, we inspected the cross-price elasticities data across all categories (Okrent & Alston, 2012) and selected as the benchmark the category that has the highest cross-price elasticity with the focal category, i.e., the closest substitute.

Ease of comparison. To assess whether a given focal-benchmark category dyad is easy or difficult to compare, we began by determining which of the unhealthy nutrients exceeded the FDA prescribed thresholds in each of the categories. We then created a dummy variable that establishes whether the excessive nutrients are the same (1) or different (0) between both categories.

Control Variables

To rule out alternative explanations for the outcome of interest, we include a number of controls. First, categories that display high levels of unhealthy nutrients may also exhibit high levels of healthy nutrients, as category members may attempt to counterbalance their deviance by adding positive attributes to their products (e.g., "*calcium fortified* chocolate milk"). We therefore control for the beneficial side of the categories' nutritional content (i.e. *focal category's healthy nutrients*). We compute this measure using a similar method to that described for the focal category's unhealthy nutrients, with the following adaptations. First, a group of eight nutrients, for which the nutritional literature predicates that consumption should be encouraged (Drewnowski, 2005; Monsivais, McLain, & Drewnowski, 2010), is included in the computation: Protein, Fiber, Calcium, Iron, Magnesium, Potassium, Vitamin A, and Vitamin C[10]. Second, the harmonizing referential against which audiences establish their evaluations of food categories is assumed to be the FDA's Recommended Daily Intake (RDI). RDIs establish appropriate consumption levels for the overwhelming majority of healthy individuals and are used to infer the daily values that product nutrition facts labels exhibit. The measure of healthy nutrients is thus calculated as the average deviance against the RDIs thresholds of all the category's UPCs, as follows, where *i* is each food item, *j* is the nutrient under scrutiny, and *n* is the total number of items in the category:

$$\textit{Category Healthy Nutrients} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n}\sum_{j=1}^{8}\frac{content_{ij}}{RDI_j}}{n}$$

Furthermore, we make provision for the possibility that more prominent or populated categories may be targeted with greater levels of social scrutiny, which may be a source of stigma in its own right (Hoffman & Ocasio, 2001). We thus control for *category size*, which we operationalize using category-year sales

[10] The consumption of Vitamin E is also encouraged, yet due to data limitations our variable does not include this nutrient.

(logged) in USD, as well as for *category density* using the number of UPCs (logged). We also account for the possibility that market categories clustering more salient members may draw the necessary attention for stigma to prevail. Hence, we control for *category concentration*, using the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index at the brand level. In addition, considering that "consensus about the application and meaning of a label is more likely when objects being labeled and classified are highly similar" (Negro, Hannan, & Rao, 2010a), it follows that increasing sharpness of categorical boundaries or *category contrast* (Negro, Hannan, & Fassiotto, 2015) could enable audiences to more immediately attach a label to the category or to dismiss its application. We define categorical members as the set of brands that operate in a given category, and we compute categorical contrast as the average grade of membership of brands in the category-year.

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics and pairwise correlations across the variables in our models. Some of our variables exhibit high correlations (e.g. *category density* and *category size*). We inspected the variance inflation factors and found that the maximum is 10.6, which suggests that multicollinearity should not be a concern (Belsey, Kuh, & Welsch, 1980). We also ran our models without the highly correlated controls and the results remain fully consistent with those of our main analyses (available upon request).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Pairwise Correlations

	Obs.	Mean	SD	Min	Max	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Stigma	333	8.56	9.53	0	44							
2. Relative unhealthy nutrients	323	0.05	0.99	-0.86	4.89	0.09						
3. Ease of comparison	333	0.22	0.41	0	1	0.01	-0.11					
4. Focal category's healthy nutrients	333	0.37	0.25	0.01	1.98	-0.24	-0.10	-0.06				
5. Category size	333	21.34	1.24	18.10	22.96	0.50	-0.19	-0.08	-0.38			
6. Category density	333	8.36	1.38	4.97	10.44	0.48	0.01	-0.16	-0.45	0.92		
7. Category concentration	333	0.09	0.12	0.01	0.74	-0.41	0.45	-0.05	0.32	-0.70	-0.67	
8. Category contrast	333	0.66	0.13	0.45	1.00	0.28	-0.08	0.18	-0.26	0.49	0.47	-0.29

Estimation Procedure

We test our predictions through a series of OLS regressions. Since there might exist time invariant category-level characteristics that simultaneously affect stigma and are correlated with nutritional levels, we include fixed effects at the category level. Additionally, we include year fixed effects to rule out temporal sources of endogeneity. Moreover, since the assumption of independent observations may not hold within the same food category, we employ standard errors clustered at the food category level in each of our estimations (Greene, 2011). We also considered alternative estimations which we describe in our robustness tests.

RESULTS

Table 3 reports the first set of estimates of OLS regressions, capturing the degree of stigma incidence upon each category in our sample, through the frequency of attachment of the vilifying 'junk food' label. Model 1 includes the control variables only. A higher level of the *focal category's healthy nutrients* appears to be positively related to stigma, suggesting that indeed members of stigmatized categories may attempt to offset negative perceptions of the category by adding positive nutrients to their products. Model 2 displays estimates for the degree of categorical stigma including our main independent variable, *relative unhealthy nutrients*. The results from this model show a positive and significant effect of *relative unhealthy nutrients* on *stigma* ($\beta=1.313$, $p<0.05$), in line with our theoretical argument leading to Hypothesis 1. They suggest that the higher the level of a focal food category's unhealthy nutrients, relative to its most *functionally* *similar benchmark*, the higher the degree of categorical stigma that the category suffers from. Specifically, we find that going from one standard deviation below the mean value of *relative unhealthy nutrients* up to one standard deviation above the mean, leads to an increase of about 31% in *stigma*.

Model 3 on the other hand, tests the interaction between our measure of *relative unhealthy nutrients* and the *ease of comparison* with its most *functionally similar benchmark*. As predicted by Hypothesis 2, the interaction shows a positive and significant coefficient ($\beta=9.507$, $p<0.05$) suggesting that, all else equal, greater *ease of comparison* exacerbates judgements emerging from the relative assessment of the two categories. These results show that, going from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean value of *relative unhealthy nutrients* leads to a 25% increase in *stigma* when the focal and benchmark categories have different unhealthy nutrients (low *ease of comparison*), but to a 221% increase in *stigma* when both categories have the same unhealthy nutrients (high *ease of comparison*). We interpret these results as providing strong support for Hypothesis 2.

Table 3. Estimates from OLS Models

Focal Category's Degree of Stigma
Evaluation Made by Boundedly Rational Decision-Maker

	Model 1 *Controls*	**Model 2** *H1*	**Model 3** *H2*
Relative unhealthy nutrients		1.313*	1.105
		(0.610)	(0.695)
Ease of comparison			-5.805*
			(2.379)
Relative unhealthy nutrients x Ease of comparison			9.507*
			(3.849)
Focal category's healthy nutrients	2.003**	2.010**	1.887**
	(0.674)	(0.675)	(0.658)
Category size	0.474	0.237	0.163
	(1.934)	(1.997)	(2.023)
Category density	-1.747	-1.831	-1.615
	(2.855)	(2.922)	(3.042)
Category concentration	2.963	2.715	3.006
	(3.354)	(3.400)	(3.581)
Category contrast	-3.605	-4.736	-1.934
	(16.697)	(17.626)	(17.562)
Constant	15.980	22.459	21.972
	(36.576)	(37.428)	(38.633)
Category Fixed effects	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.
Year Dummies	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.
Observations	333	323	323
R-squared	0.327	0.334	0.338
Number of categories	35	34	34
Log-likelihood	-852.7	-828.9	-828.1

Clustered standard errors (at category level) in parentheses
** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<0.1

Robustness Tests – Fully Rational Decision-Making

Our theoretical argument sustains that, in order to perform the judgment task leading to the attachment of a vilifying label, audience members compare each focal category only against its most easily available benchmark. To test the counterfactual to this argument, we employ three types of models, each of which questions one of the assumptions in the purely rational view of decision-making, and which we would expect to be poor predictors of categorical stigma.

Decision-making in absolute terms. The first type of model addresses the assumption that individuals assess each focal category in isolation, i.e., considering its *absolute* level of deviant attributes. Model 4 in Table 4 shows estimates for the degree of categorical stigma as predicted by an absolute perspective of stigma, that is, it tests for the prevailing argument that the greater the absolute level of a *focal category's unhealthy nutrients*, the greater the degree of stigma. We find, however, that this is a poor predictor of the degree of categorical stigma ($\beta=0.355$, n.s.). In Model 5 we test this measure in conjunction with our main explanatory variable, *relative unhealthy nutrients*. The coefficient for the relative level of unhealthy nutrients ($\beta=1.295$, $p<0.05$) remains consistent with our main findings, while the absolute level of the focal category's unhealthy nutrients still does not predict stigma ($\beta=0.119$, n.s.). We interpret these results as evidence that audience members favor relative over absolute evaluations in performing judgment tasks leading to stigma.

Table 4. Robustness Tests – Alternative Measures

Focal Category's Degree of Stigma – Evaluation Made by Perfectly Rational Decision-Maker

	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10	Model 11	Model 12	Model 13
Decision-making assumption:	*in absolute terms*		*comparison across all categories*				*comparison to fixed standard across categories*			
Relative unhealthy nutrients (with respect to ***most functionally similar benchmark***)		1.295*		1.340*		1.434*		1.339*		1.324*
		(0.635)		(0.586)		(0.651)		(0.595)		(0.593)
Focal category's unhealthy nutrients (***absolute*** level)	0.355	0.119								
	(1.236)	(1.280)								
Relative unhealthy nutrients (with respect to ***all categories***)			-0.308	-0.377						
			(0.694)	(0.691)						
Rank of unhealthy nutrients					-0.097	-0.128				
					(0.162)	(0.168)				
Relative unhealthy nutrients (with respect to ***exemplary benchmark***)							-0.113	-0.267		
							(1.044)	(1.032)		
Relative unhealthy nutrients (with respect to ***dominant benchmark***)									-1.177	-1.241
									(1.008)	(0.989)
Focal category's healthy nutrients	1.988**	2.006**	2.025**	2.038**	2.055**	2.077**	2.011**	2.031**	2.115**	2.132**
	(0.672)	(0.677)	(0.678)	(0.680)	(0.683)	(0.691)	(0.685)	(0.689)	(0.676)	(0.680)
Category size	0.393	0.214	0.435	0.194	0.646	0.436	0.478	0.243	0.350	0.132
	(1.971)	(2.016)	(1.904)	(1.959)	(1.951)	(2.007)	(1.920)	(1.970)	(1.874)	(1.931)
Category density	-1.820	-1.856	-1.246	-1.202	-1.747	-1.827	-1.655	-1.607	-0.766	-0.783
	(2.829)	(2.877)	(3.013)	(3.079)	(2.847)	(2.910)	(2.922)	(2.984)	(2.960)	(3.032)
Category concentration	2.921	2.703	2.933	2.653	2.605	2.233	2.961	2.700	2.820	2.507
	(3.340)	(3.372)	(3.374)	(3.420)	(3.401)	(3.431)	(3.362)	(3.410)	(3.361)	(3.389)
Category contrast	-2.724	-4.418	-3.948	-5.166	-6.877	-9.112	-3.776	-5.164	-4.058	-5.149
	(16.999)	(18.189)	(16.816)	(17.748)	(18.089)	(19.298)	(16.810)	(17.795)	(16.863)	(17.760)
Constant	16.933	22.677	13.413	19.123	16.229	23.457	15.381	21.072	10.917	16.461
	(36.385)	(37.141)	(34.896)	(35.403)	(35.958)	(36.779)	(35.486)	(35.948)	(34.118)	(34.625)
Category Fixed effects	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.
Year Dummies	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.
Observations	333	323	333	323	333	323	333	323	333	323
R-squared	0.327	0.334	0.328	0.334	0.328	0.335	0.327	0.334	0.329	0.336
Number of categories	35	34	35	34	35	34	35	34	35	34
Log-likelihood	-852.6	-828.9	-852.6	-828.8	-852.5	-828.7	-852.7	-828.9	-852.3	-828.5

Clustered standard errors (at category level) in parentheses; ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<0.1

Comparison across all categories. The second type of model addresses the assumption that individuals are able and motivated to compare all categories in a system and evaluate them on the basis of that comparison. To test this assumption, we created a measure of relative unhealthy nutrients that is similar to the one we constructed for our main explanatory variable (*relative unhealthy nutrients*), but which uses *all* categories as the benchmark. We calculated this measure by first computing the relative unhealthy nutrients of each focal category with respect to each of the other categories, and then taking the average across all comparisons. Models 6 and 7 in Table 4 report estimates for the degree of categorical stigma as predicted by this measure, in isolation and in conjunction with our main explanatory variable, respectively. The negative and non-significant coefficient (β=-0.308, n.s., Model 6; β=-0.377, n.s., Model 7) lends support to the argument that, for reasons of cognitive economy, individual audience members do not make such comprehensive and far-reaching comparisons. Instead, it is the relative comparison between a focal category and its most functionally similar benchmark that seems to predict categorical stigma (β=1.340, $p<0.05$, Model 7).

In Models 8 and 9 we test for the same assumption in the fully rational decision-making view, using a different measure: a focal category's rank in terms of its unhealthy nutrients (*rank of unhealthy nutrients*). In this measure, the category showing the lowest level of unhealthy nutrients in a given year will exhibit a rank of 1, while the category with the highest level of unhealthy nutrients will display a rank of 35. The results for these models are again fully consistent with the previous ones. While the rank measure does not seem to be a good predictor of categorical stigma (β=-0.097, n.s., Model 8; β=-0.128, n.s., Model 9), our relative measure does (β=1.434, $p<0.05$, Model 9).

Comparison to a fixed standard used across categories. The final assumption sustaining a fully rational view of decision-making is that individuals elect a benchmark and employ that same benchmark to compare each and every category in the system. We test this argument in two different ways, also reported in Table 4. First, we consider the possibility that there is some exemplary, praiseworthy category, that performs the benchmark function. We use the “Other Fresh Vegetables” category as the ideal of a category that is *not* junk food (across the 10-year period there is no association of this category with the junk food label). Thus, we created our measure of *relative unhealthy nutrients* using this exemplary category as the benchmark. Models 10 and 11 test for this possibility and their results (β=-0.113, n.s., Model 10; β=-0.267, n.s., Model 11) indicate that such a benchmark is not used to infer if a category deserves to be stigmatized through the attachment of the junk food label.

Second, we test the possibility that the fixed benchmark may instead be the most dominant or visible category across the entire market structure. We used the category with the highest sales to capture this construct, presuming that such a category would be more easily accessible across all necessary comparisons. Therefore, we created a measure of *relative unhealthy nutrients* using the category with the highest sales as the benchmark. Models 12 and 13 report the estimates for the degree of categorical stigma using this benchmark, which also seems to be a poor predictor of our dependent variable (β=-1.177, n.s., Model 12; β=-1.241, n.s., Model 13). Instead, our measure of relative comparison between the focal category and its most functionally similar benchmark remains a good predictor of categorical stigma (β=1.339, $p<0.05$, Model 11; β=1.324, $p<0.05$, Model 13).

Robustness Tests – Media Coverage vs. Stigma

We sought to rule out the possibility that our dependent variable may not be capturing stigma but simply greater media coverage. If so, using the same coding protocol, we would also observe a positive relationship between our main explanatory variable and *positive* media coverage. We therefore created a measure of categorical praise, by counting the number of media articles that make positive associations with a given category. We then ran our main models, with the same fixed effects specification and standard errors clustered at the category level, yet using category *praise* rather than category *stigma* as the dependent variable. The results presented in Model 14 in Table 5 show that our measure of *relative unhealthy nutrients* has a negative and significant effect on *praise* (β=-2.729, $p<0.1$), meaning that the greater the relative unhealthy nutrients measure, the less praise the category receives. These results lend support to the validity of our category stigma measurement, in that high (low) vilification seems to coexist with low (high) praise. Interestingly, such findings provide an indication that individuals may perform positive judgements in the same fashion as negative ones: by resorting to one benchmark against which they assess a focal category in relative terms. These findings could motivate further research to investigate the role of relative comparison dynamics in producing other social evaluations, namely those located on the positive spectrum.

Table 5. Robustness Tests – Media Coverage vs. Stigma

Focal Category's Degree of Praise
Evaluation Made by Boundedly Rational Decision-Maker

	Model 14
Relative unhealthy nutrients	-2.729†
	(1.383)
Focal category's healthy nutrients	1.222
	(1.748)
Category size	-0.622
	(3.177)
Category density	4.933
	(4.188)
Category concentration	-3.310
	(9.855)
Category contrast	-13.510
	(15.799)
Constant	-10.637
	(68.439)
Category Fixed effects	Incl.
Year Dummies	Incl.
Observations	323
R-squared	34
Number of categories	0.312
Log-likelihood	-823.9

Clustered standard errors (at category level) in parentheses
** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<0.1

Robustness Tests – Model specification

Since our dependent variable involves the number of articles that associate a given food category with the 'junk food' vilifying label, a negative binomial specification could also be a valid alternative to test the prediction of absolute levels of categorical stigma. However, this specification does not allow for the same conservative tests we performed in our main analysis, because fixed effects are not recommended with negative binomial models (Greene, 2011). Notwithstanding this important limitation, we test and report the results of such a specification in Table 6. Model 15 provides strong support for Hypothesis 1, as the coefficient of *relative unhealthy nutrients* is still positive and significant (β=0.752, p<0.01). Model 16 moderately supports the prediction contained in Hypothesis 2 as well, showing a positive and marginally significant coefficient for the interaction term (β=2.348, p<0.10). Taken together, we interpret these results as further evidence consistent with our main argument that individual audience members resort to comparisons of a focal category's deviant attributes against those of it most easily available benchmark to perform judgments that lead to stigma.

Table 6. Robustness Tests – Estimates from Negative Binomial Models

Focal Category's Degree of Stigma
Evaluation Made by Boundedly Rational Decision-Maker

	Model 15	**Model 16**
Relative unhealthy nutrients	0.752** (0.244)	0.731** (0.201)
Ease of comparison		0.839 (0.549)
Relative unhealthy nutrients x Ease of comparison		2.348† (1.391)
Focal category's healthy nutrients	-0.456 (0.769)	-0.773 (0.698)
Category size	0.741* (0.336)	0.993** (0.369)
Category density	-0.738* (0.342)	-0.791* (0.357)
Category concentration	-13.538** (2.562)	-13.974** (2.825)
Category contrast	-0.158 (1.166)	-0.402 (1.832)
Constant	-6.223 (4.501)	-11.048* (5.275)
Year Dummies	Incl.	Incl.
Observations	323	323
Log-likelihood	-904.3	-888.8

Clustered standard errors (at category level) in parentheses
** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<0.1

DISCUSSION

Prior research suggests that the greater the distance between relevant audiences' values and the deviant attributes displayed by a focal category, the more extensively the category will be stigmatized through the attachment of a vilifying label (Devers et al., 2009; Hudson, 2008). Yet this relationship seems to fall short of explaining empirical evidence in a number of different domains. Our motivation for this study was to contribute to a deeper understanding of why some categories are highly stigmatized while others that display equivalent or even higher levels of deviant attributes seem to somehow elude stigma. To this end, we chose to study the process by which a relevant audience – the media – stigmatizes different categories in the US food retail market by associating them with the 'junk food' vilifying label.

We argued that the process through which audience members perform judgment tasks of a focal category, eventually leading them to the attachment of a vilifying label, rests on comparison mechanisms whereby a category's deviant attributes are evaluated *relative* to the deviant attributes of other "*easily available*" categories, i.e., meaningful categories that can be easily retrieved from memory. We proposed that meaningful categories are those that may fulfill the same function as the focal category. We further advanced that comparisons are made against the most easily available category in the market structure, and that the easier the comparison, the stronger the reactions that emerge from that comparison. Our results strongly support this argument and allow us to carve important contributions to theory and practice, which we discuss next.

Contributions

We most directly contribute to the stigma literature by proposing a theoretical account of the mechanisms that lead individuals, in their role as decision-makers, to form a stigmatizing judgment. While prior stigma literature implicitly assumes that audiences are fully rational in their decision to attach a stigmatizing label to a focal category, we contend that this reasoning oversimplifies the underlying cognitive and behavioral decision-making mechanisms that lead to such a decision. In particular, it neglects the notion that audiences require "benchmarks against which to sort, classify and assign meaning" (Glynn & Navis, 2013:1126) to categories, which is supportive of a relative rather absolute perspective of the stigma phenomenon. It also overlooks questions related to the principle of cognitive economy (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Rosch, 1978), which renders vast amounts of information cognitively unmanageable and explains the intuitive and pervasive use of myriad heuristics in decision-making. Moreover, it does not account for the adaptive nature of individuals' evaluations. We apply these insights in conjunction with a socio-cognitive perspective of markets (Rosa et al., 1999) to propose a boundedly rational model of how individual audience members stigmatize a category through purposeful vilification. We contribute to the literature by providing theoretical grounding and empirical evidence that audience members employ *an easily available* (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973) benchmark in forming their judgment of a focal category, and that categorical stigma emerges as the result of a comparison between these two categories.

We also contribute to the stigma literature by addressing several calls for research on its antecedents (Devers et al., 2009; Link & Phelan, 2001; Mishina & Devers, 2012). Previous research has linked categorical stigma to social perceptions that negative consequences, such as death, illness or physical harm (Durand & Vergne, 2015; Helms & Patterson, 2014), or the disruption of moral and social order (Hampel & Tracey, 2017; Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009), arise from core attributes of market categories. What has been missing is a consideration of how stigma might affect market categories as a result of their interdependent relationships and not only as a function of their intrinsic attributes. We suggest that this is partly because research foci have been at either the narrow organizational- or the broad industry-level of analysis, while the richness of the intermediate categorical level that mirrors intra-industry heterogeneity has been rather overlooked (Barlow et al., 2018). Indeed, scholars have investigated industries such as arms (Durand & Vergne, 2015; Vergne, 2012), pornography (Jensen, 2010), nuclear power (Piazza & Perretti, 2015), or "dirty work" (Ashforth et al., 2007), where stigma is taken-for-granted, and examined how it affects organizations that belong to those industries as a function of the business they conduct. Yet, a scant account of intra-industry heterogeneity has led scholars to overlook the socially constructed relationships between categories mapping a focal industry as an important determinant of stigma. In this respect, we also contribute to a vast stream of literature that seeks to understand the interplay between the degree of social construction and objective constraints in social evaluations (Zuckerman, 2012). We extend this literature to the study of stigma as a social evaluation.

Last, we make two relevant empirical contributions. On the one hand, we define and measure the level of categorical deviant attributes. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to quantify deviant attributes leading to stigma. We thus contribute to advancing stigma research along its maturity stage (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). On the other hand, our careful choice of empirical setting allowed us to heed the intricate web of inter-category relationships that constitute the substrata of market structures, thereby addressing recent calls for research that investigates whole market category systems (Paolella & Durand, 2016).

Managerial Implications

We believe that the results of our study are also relevant to managers and practitioners. Studies of stigma at the industry level have mostly considered markets that exist as a result of moral, economic and social choices that are largely subject to elimination or substitution. For instance, we can imagine a perfectly functioning world without mixed martial arts (Helms & Patterson, 2014) or men's bathhouses (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009), because society can either eliminate them or devise substitutes that are more aligned with institutionalized norms. This state of affairs presents a specific set of challenges for organizations that operate in these industries. From a strategic standpoint, recent research has shown that in order to counter the difficulties generated by categorical stigma, organizations can undertake a variety of responses, such as diversifying (Vergne, 2012), divesting from stigmatized categories (Durand & Vergne, 2015), or abandoning key investment projects (Piazza & Perretti, 2015).

We would, however, have greater difficulty in imagining a world without a financial system (Roulet, 2015), and certainly little hope of one without a food industry (this study). What distinguishes these examples from the ones above is that threats of both extinction and competition in the food market come mainly from within the market itself, as consumers make different sets of choices regarding the products they consume. Potential alternatives are found within the industry, in the interplay across market categories, rather than in other industries. This presents a different set of challenges for organizations in this type of industries, as divestment or abandonment might not necessarily be the most effective strategies to deal with stigma. Although our study is not devoted to understanding how organizations react to or manage categorical stigma, our empirical results indicate that when confronted with the challenge of responding to stigma, managers would benefit from juxtaposing the characteristics of the market structure in which their organization is embedded against the available choice set of stigma management strategies.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The complexity involved in implementing an empirical answer to our research question inevitably imposed some limitations on our study, which we acknowledge here. First, we recognize that stigma is a matter of audiences (Hudson, 2008), in the sense that what may be vilified by some may simultaneously be accepted by others. In this study, we justified the existence of a cognitive schema that is used by the media to evaluate food categories, namely one that is based on nutritional profiles. It might be the case, however, that some audiences look instead at other dimensions such as artificial vs. natural, or organic vs. hyper-processed. We also argued that the media develop their cognitive models in terms of categories (e.g., Beef Jerky). While there is ample qualitative evidence that supports our argument, we acknowledge that this might be a boundary condition of our argument, which is developed for one specific audience. Indeed, other audiences may instead reason at other levels of abstraction, namely in terms of brands (e.g., Slim Jim) or even products. We believe that future research might fruitfully extend our work and investigate myriad possibilities implied by audience heterogeneity. In doing so, such research might uncover more fine-grained knowledge about the antecedents of stigma.

Second, data limitations did not allow us to consider how other social evaluations might affect the incidence of stigma. For example, it might be the case that categories enjoying higher status are able to elude stigma despite their own intrinsic attributes and those of their referent set. Foods like caviar (high status) might not be stigmatized regardless of their nutritional content, whereas foods such as white bread (low status) might receive a greater share of vilification than would be merited as a function of their attributes. We join others in suggesting that future studies might productively investigate the complex interplay between different types of social evaluations (Pollock, Lashley, Rindova, & Han, 2019) such as status and stigma.

Potential contributions may also arise from other extensions to our work. For instance, our study took into consideration the labeling component ('junk') that is determinant of stigmatization processes (Devers et al., 2009; Link & Phelan, 2001), and which we believe has been somewhat missing from other work on stigma. Rather than focusing on industries that are stigmatized as a whole, we hope that our study motivates other researchers to identify commonly applied pejorative labels and understand how and why they come to materialize in stigma across categories and markets.

Finally, we believe our boundedly rational model of the decision to stigmatize a category furthers our understanding of the mechanisms that shape the construction of stigma as a social evaluation. We hope that future research finds inspiration in our study to explore how bounded rationality may influence the mechanisms underlying other social evaluations, in particular those that are located on the “bright side” of the assessment spectrum.

CAPÍTULO 3: LA BASURA CORRECTA EN LOS LUGARES EQUIVOCADOS: LA INCIDENCIA DEL ESTIGMA EN EL MERCADO ALIMENTICIO, 2006-2015

El concepto de estigma categórico ha captado recientemente la atención de los académicos de administración (Barlow, Verhaal y Hoskins, 2018; Lashley y Pollock, 2019; Vergne, 2012). Como los miembros de categorías estigmatizadas se enfrentan a sanciones sociales y económicas significativas, la investigación existente ha tendido a centrarse en la perspectiva de los actores estigmatizados y, en particular, en cómo mitigar las consecuencias del estigma categórico (Helms y Patterson, 2014; Lashley y Pollock, 2019) . Sin embargo, comprender por qué ciertas categorías están más estigmatizadas que otras es una pregunta importante que queda por abordar en esta literatura. Desde la perspectiva del agente estigmatizador, el estigma equivale a la imposición de una marca duradera en una categoría desviada a través de la fijación de una etiqueta vilipendiosa (Devers, Dewett, Mishina y Belsito, 2009; Goffman, 1963; Link y Phelan, 2001). Según la teoría actual, es la presencia de atributos que son incongruentes con las normas y valores profundamente institucionalizados del público lo que motiva la creación de una etiqueta vilipendiosa (Devers et al., 2009). Por lo tanto, esta lógica sugiere que aquellas categorías que exhiben niveles más altos de atributos desviados[1] deberían ser más vilipendiados y, por lo tanto, experimentar estigma en mayor grado.

[1] Usamos la expresión "atributos desviados" para encapsular aquellos atributos capaces de inducir estigma. Otros atributos, como el diseño de un producto, pueden percibirse negativamente, pero por lo general no entran en conflicto con valores y normas ampliamente extendidos y, por lo tanto, están excluidos del significado que pretendemos transmitir con esta frase.

Sin embargo, la evidencia anecdótica parece cuestionar esta lógica. Por ejemplo, diferentes categorías de vehículos (DOS ASIENTOS, COCHES GRANDES, SUV, etc.). Las teorías actuales predecirían que las categorías con peores clasificaciones de smog, que miden las emisiones de contaminantes importantes como el monóxido de carbono, el formaldehído y los óxidos de nitrógeno, deberían ser más vilipendiadas por audiencias relevantes que perciben que tales emisiones chocan con los valores ambientales (por ejemplo, activistas, científicos, medios prominentes). Sin embargo, si bien las calificaciones de smog de los SUV son mejores que las de DOS ASIENTOS [2], los SUV tienden a estigmatizarse en mayor medida (Pralle, 2006). Del mismo modo, la teoría existente sugeriría que las categorías de alimentos con niveles más altos de sal, azúcar y grasa poseen un mayor grado de estigma por parte del público que considera que tales nutrientes chocan con los valores de salud (Schlosser, 2001). Sin embargo, esta expectativa también parece no cumplirse en numerosos casos. Las BEBIDAS DE FRUTA, por ejemplo, generalmente contienen niveles más altos de nutrientes dañinos que los PRETZELS, sin embargo, los medios estigmatizan más ampliamente los PRETZELS a través de la etiqueta de "comida basura" que a las BEBIDAS DE FRUTA [3]. En general, una gran cantidad de ejemplos desafía los fundamentos teóricos actuales y motiva una investigación más completa de los mecanismos que explican por qué las audiencias relevantes

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[2] Fuente: EPA Fuel Economy Guide, 2019, https://www.fueleconomy.gov/feg/download.shtml consultado en febrero de 2019.

[3] En nuestra investigación sobre la industria minorista de alimentos, medimos la cantidad de veces que los principales artículos de los periódicos asocian cada alimento con la etiqueta de "comida basura". Durante el período de 10 años examinado, este indicador es tres veces mayor para PRETZELS que para BEBIDAS DE FRUTAS.

asocian grados más altos de estigma a ciertas categorías, asociándolas con mayor frecuencia a una etiqueta vilipendiosa.

En este artículo, intentamos proporcionar una explicación para la aparente desconexión entre la teoría del estigma y la evidencia anecdótica. Específicamente, la predicción de que niveles más altos de atributos desviados conducen a un mayor grado de estigma requiere que se cumpla al menos uno de los tres supuestos implícitos a tener en cuenta al considerar la decisión individual de estigmatizar una categoría dada: o bien 1) los individuos toman decisiones en términos absolutos, es decir, evalúan cada categoría focal de manera aislada, considerando el nivel *absoluto* de atributos desviados que muestra la categoría, o 2) los individuos toman decisiones en términos relativos y pueden comparar mentalmente *todas* las categorías existentes en una estructura dada en base al nivel observado de atributos desviados, o 3) los individuos eligen algún *estándar común* contra el cual comparar cada categoría y usan ese estándar para juzgar cada categoría en una estructura dada. Estas suposiciones parecen evocar habilidades consistentes con una visión completamente racional de la toma de decisiones, es decir, una capacidad perfecta para 1) evaluar elementos sin ser influenciados por el contexto, 2) procesar mentalmente grandes cantidades de información, o 3) referirse constantemente a la misma lógica cuando se realizan diferentes evaluaciones. Sin embargo, considerando el conjunto de conocimientos acumulados que demuestran cómo los individuos no son completamente racionales en su toma de decisiones (Kahneman, 2003; Simon, 1955), es muy cuestionable que cualquiera de estos tres supuestos se mantenga, y por lo tanto, es poco probable que los juicios de los individuos se produzcan de esta manera.

Nos basamos en la literatura sobre la toma de decisiones, sobre la visión de que los individuos no son estrictamente racionales (Simon, 1947), para desarrollar un modelo de cómo los miembros de la audiencia deciden si estigmatizar una determinada categoría a través de la difamación intencional. Específicamente, nos basamos en los siguientes tres supuestos que son paralelos a los de la visión totalmente racional implícita en la teoría actual. Primero, los seres humanos evalúan los estímulos con respecto a puntos de referencia, en lugar de independientemente del contexto (Kahneman y Tversky, 1979). Esto implica que el estigma se conceptualizaría mejor como un fenómeno relativo en lugar de absoluto, en el sentido de que la desviación percibida depende del "sistema de referencia" seguido por cada individuo (Goffman, 1963). En segundo lugar, de acuerdo con el bien conocido principio de la economía cognitiva, los individuos intentan maximizar la calidad de sus juicios mientras minimizan el gasto de recursos cognitivos (Bitektine, 2011; Fiske y Taylor, 1991; Rosch, 1978). Esto implica que los miembros de la audiencia no evaluarán una categoría dada en comparación con *todas* las demás categorías existentes, sino con una categoría de *referencia* (Schwarz, 1995; Simon, 1955). En tercer lugar, el uso de la heurística en la toma de decisiones es generalizado y adaptativo (Bazerman y Moore, 2009; Gigerenzer y Gaissmaier, 2011; Kahneman, Slovic, Slovic y Tversky, 1982) y produce una gran cantidad de sesgos. El "sesgo de disponibilidad" es uno de los más documentados y determina que las personas dependen únicamente de la información que está fácilmente disponible en la memoria para realizar cada juicio (Kahneman, 2003; Tversky y Kahneman, 1973). Esto implica que, en lugar de ser inmutable, la categoría de referencia utilizada para la comparación variará para cada categoría (Kahneman y Miller, 1986), dependiendo de qué referencia "venga a la cabeza" y, por lo tanto, sin esfuerzo proporcione la base significativa para la comparación con la categoría que está siendo juzgada.

En resumen, en este ensayo defendemos el hecho de que los miembros de la audiencia perciban que una categoría focal exhibe un nivel desproporcionado de atributos desviados y, por lo tanto, decidan que merece una etiqueta vilipendiosa, depende crucialmente del nivel de atributos desviados que muestra la categoría de referencia que es recuperada de la memoria para comparar con la categoría focal. Contra este telón de fondo, avanzamos que la categoría que posiblemente se convierta en el punto de referencia para el juicio de desviación es aquella que, en respuesta a un estímulo dado, se invoca desde el mapa cognitivo de cada individuo, es decir, que se produce en la mente del individuo. Este razonamiento podría ayudar a explicar la evidencia mixta presentada más arriba. Por ejemplo, la valoración de las emisiones de los SUV podría informarse en comparación con otros vehículos de pasajeros como los COCHES GRANDES (que tienen mejores índices de contaminación que los SUV), lo que lleva a un mayor grado de estigma en comparación con los DOS ASIENTOS, que tienden a compararse con vehículos como como MINICOMPACT CARS (que tienen peores clasificaciones de smog). Del mismo modo, las BEBIDAS DE FRUTAS pueden exhibir un estigma más bajo porque se comparan con las BEBIDAS CARBONADAS, que contienen niveles más altos de nutrientes no saludables. Por otro lado, los PRETZELS se asocian con un mayor grado de estigma porque tienden a ser comparados con alternativas como el PAN, que contiene niveles más bajos de nutrientes no saludables.

Ponemos a prueba nuestra teoría en el mercado minorista de alimentos de EE.UU. y examinamos la incidencia de la etiqueta vilipendiosa de 'comida basura' en 35 categorías de alimentos de ese mercado entre 2006 y 2015. Encontramos que las categorías de alimentos que muestran niveles más altos de nutrientes no saludables, *en relación con la categoría de referencia más fácilmente disponible* (es decir, la categoría que es más similar en términos de la función que cumple) se estigmatizan más. Además, mostramos que la facilidad de comparación, es decir, la capacidad de establecer directamente comparaciones basadas en los mismos atributos, modera positivamente esta relación. Por el contrario, nuestras pruebas de robustez muestran que el nivel *absoluto* de nutrientes no saludables que muestra una categoría focal de alimentos no predice el estigma categórico. Del mismo modo, encontramos que ni las medidas relativas a *todas* las categorías en el mercado, ni las medidas de *estándares comunes*, pueden explicar el grado de estigma categórico. Tomados en conjunto, nuestros resultados respaldan el argumento de que el estigma surge como resultado de un proceso de toma de decisiones que no es perfectamente racional.

Nuestras contribuciones a la literatura sobre el estigma son tanto teóricas como empíricas. En primer lugar, proponemos un modelo que limita la racionalidad (Kahneman, 2003; Simon, 1955, 1990) de la decisión individual de estigmatizar una categoría dada, lo que cuestiona los puntos de vista predominantes sobre la incidencia del estigma. Lo hacemos subrayando el papel esencial que desempeña el contexto, en forma de referentes fácilmente disponibles (Bowers, 2015; Schwarz, 1995; Tversky y Kahneman, 1973), en los procesos de juicio que conducen al estigma, y ofreciendo una base teórica y evidencia empírica que ayuda a refutar una visión completamente racional del proceso de toma de decisiones individual que conduce al estigma. En segundo lugar, presentamos una explicación teórica del estigma que tiene lugar en el contexto de los mercados como estructuras integradas social y cognitivamente (Cattani, Porac y Thomas, 2017; Rosa, Porac, Runser Spanjol y Saxon, 1999). Nuestro estudio presenta un argumento que ha sido poco explorado en los estudios de estigma existentes: que las *relaciones* que exhiben las categorías en un mercado (por ejemplo, Negro, Koçak y Hsu, 2010b) son determinantes relevantes del estigma, más allá de sus *atributos* objetivos. En este respecto, también contribuimos a la literatura que investiga la interacción entre el grado de construcción social y las limitaciones objetivas en las evaluaciones sociales (Zuckerman, 2012). Finalmente, contribuimos a la investigación sobre sistemas de categorías completas (Paolella y Durand, 2016) y exploramos cómo emerge el estigma de los procesos que tienen lugar a nivel de categorías de mercado, en lugar de a nivel de la industria o a nivel organizacional (Vergne, 2012).

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CHAPTER 4: MANIPULATIVE OR FIRST AMONG EQUALS? PERFORMANCE EFFECTS OF IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT TACTICS IN STIGMATIZED CATEGORIES

Impression management is generally understood as any organizational action that intentionally seeks to influence stakeholders' perceptions (Elsbach, Sutton, & Principe, 1998), namely through the release of information that projects images of the organization, its products, practices, decisions, or policies in a favorable light (Beverland, 2005; Highhouse, Brooks, & Gregarus, 2009; Lamertz, Heugens, & Calmet, 2005). Such actions are indispensable for organizations to manage potential or confirmed violations of stakeholder expectations (Elsbach et al., 1998; Graffin, Haleblian, & Kiley, 2016; Zavyalova, Pfarrer, Reger, & Shapiro, 2012). Yet the benefits of impression management may come at a heavy cost, since it may be perceived as manipulative and accordingly punished through social and economic sanctions (Desai, 2011; Elsbach et al., 1998; Zavyalova et al., 2012). Extant theory suggests that for members of stigmatized categories, whose attributes conflict with audiences' institutionalized values and norms (Devers, Dewett, Mishina, & Belsito, 2009; Hudson, 2008), the risk of perceived manipulation is particularly high. In such a context, attempting to project a favorable image is likely to be interpreted as incongruent with deeply unfavorable perceptions of the category, and therefore perceived as manipulative. As a consequence, members of *stigmatized categories* should avoid impression management (Durand & Vergne, 2015). Put differently, scholars have predominantly assumed that impression management tactics will not be effective for members of stigmatized categories. Interestingly, such an assumption describes a paradox: impression management is not recommended precisely where it is most needed to manage negative stakeholder perceptions.

We argue that this might not necessarily be the case, and that in fact some impression management tactics may be more effective at high rather than low levels of categorical stigma. We believe that the prevailing theoretical view is somewhat constrained, as a result of two shortcomings. First, prior research has investigated impression management tactics as homogeneous and has thus neglected the possibility that different types of tactics may be appropriate in different contexts. In particular, this stream of research has confined the investigation of impression management to one type of tactic, which we label as *ego-centric*[1] in its informational content, that is, which relies on organization- or product-specific information. Yet it has overlooked another important type of tactic, which we label as *alter-centric*, that is, which uses information about meaningful others (e.g., competitors). With the exception of one very recent study (Cole & Chandler, 2019), minimal effort has been dedicated to understanding how organizations use impression management to positively influence stakeholders' perceptions of themselves by downplaying those of others (Mohamed & Gardner, 2004). Second, and as a result, scholars have paid scant attention to the possibility that perceived manipulation may emerge from the inadequate use of tactics that resort to information about others. Broadening the scope of impression management to include alter-centric tactics implies the recognition that the locus of perceived manipulation may reside not only in extensively researched forms of self-aggrandizement, but also in rather less

[1] We borrow from Podolny's (2001) elegant terminology, although we employ these labels in a very different fashion.

investigated tactics that seek the devaluation of others (Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999).

In this paper, we thus distinguish between *ego-centric* and *alter-centric* tactics and extend current theory by proposing a contingency model of impression management effectiveness in categories with different degrees of stigma (Vergne, 2012). We theorize that the use of ego-centric tactics will be more effective in low-stigma categories, where highlighting particularly positive attributes about ego will provide a signal that is congruent with shared beliefs concerning the category (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990), therefore raising little skepticism from stakeholders. However, these tactics will be less effective in highly stigmatized categories, since by definition membership in such categories implies the presence of stigma-inducing attributes (Devers et al., 2009; Slade Shantz, Fischer, Liu, & Lévesque, 2018). Under these circumstances, ego-centric tactics employed by individual category members will collide with generally negative beliefs about the category and will thus more likely be perceived as manipulative.

Conversely, we propose that alter-centric tactics will be more effective in categories that exhibit high as opposed to low levels of stigma. Alter-centric tactics do not aim to project images of the category member as exemplary or praiseworthy. Instead, they provide stakeholders with unfavorable information about others, which implicitly or explicitly triggers a convenient comparison for the focal member, projecting its image as “first among equals” or a “lesser evil”. They do so by transferring the focus of stakeholders’ attention to the negative attributes of others (Cole & Chandler, 2019). This allows them to remain accordant with negative perceptions about the host category, thus incurring in a minor risk of perceived manipulation. On the other hand, we contend, in low-stigma categories, alter-centric tactics will more immediately come across as manipulative and are therefore unlikely to be effective. We argue that the act of explicitly downplaying others in the context of categories that are characterized by generally favorable or neutral beliefs is likely to be judged as unjustifiable or even defamatory (Mohamed & Gardner, 2004), and therefore carry a high risk of perceived manipulation.

We test and find empirical support for these theoretical arguments in the context of the US food retail industry using a purposefully constructed dataset of impression management tactics employed by food manufacturers. We find that the implementation of ego-centric tactics originates a 127% increase in sales for low-stigma category members but have no significant impact on the sales of high-stigma category members. On the contrary, alter-centric tactics are related to a 113% increase in sales for members of highly stigmatized categories but have no significant impact on the sales of low-stigma categories' constituents.

Our paper makes several contributions to the impression management and stigma literatures. First, we show that the risk of perceived manipulation in impression management resides not only in tactics that use information about a focal category member, but also in tactics that focus on meaningful others. We make the novel argument that both these centers of interest may be at the origin of perceived manipulation, as a function of pre-existing perceptions about the category that hosts them, which are in turn shaped by categorical stigma (Hudson, 2008; Lashley & Pollock, 2019; Vergne, 2012). Second, we address recent calls for research that rethinks the underpinnings of the impression management literature in contested settings (Durand & Vergne, 2015). We probe into the factors that make impression management a more or less viable strategy in such settings and provide evidence of its effectiveness. We do not conceptualize the market space as continuous and indistinct, but rather as coherently segmented into categories with different features (Cattani, Porac, & Thomas, 2017; Durand & Paolella, 2013). While prior impression management studies appear overwhelmingly agnostic with respect to the properties of categories in which organizations or products are embedded, we treat the degree of categorical stigma as a key contingency determining signal (in)congruence in impression management tactics. Third, we contribute to the impression management literature by underscoring its strategic role in aiding category members to instrumentally position themselves in the competitive space of a market. While very recent work has formally given a first step to extend organizational impression management into a competitive context (Cole & Chandler, 2019), we take a further step and inspect its performance consequences in different competitive settings. Finally, we extend current stigma literature, which has mainly approached stigma from an absolute perspective and explained how members of stigmatized categories work to reduce or eliminate the sanctions imposed by stigma. We argue for an alternative interpretation of stigma as a relative phenomenon in the sense that it is determined by audiences' systems of reference (Goffman, 1963). From this perspective, it follows that one effective stigma management strategy, which has been overlooked in prior work, is to carefully craft favorable systems of reference and purposefully present them to evaluating audiences.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

The Problem: Image-Damaging Attributes

A prevailing problem for organizations is that some of their attributes would be better left unrevealed. This is the case, for instance, of food companies that include excessive levels of unhealthy ingredients in their products (Schlosser, 2001), firms that implement sweatshop practices (Rock, 2003), or those that overcompensate their CEO (Vergne, Wernicke, & Brenner, 2018). Because stakeholders view organizations as social actors that are accountable for the decisions they make (King, Felin, & Whetten, 2010), they are likely to impose social and economic sanctions when such attributes are brought to their attention. Accordingly, investors react with volatility in security prices (Bansal & Clelland, 2004; Graffin et al., 2016), customers react by halting purchases (Rhee & Haunschild, 2006), and alliance partners react by disengaging from ongoing cooperation (Bruyaka, Philippe, & Castañer, 2018).

The Solution: Impression Management

To handle this problem, organizations may resort to impression management, which can be used to create alternative frames where images of the organization, its products, practices, decisions, or policies are cast in a favorable light (Beverland, 2005; Highhouse et al., 2009; Lamertz et al., 2005). A positively valenced frame will likely deviate stakeholders' attention away from image-damaging attributes, thus preventing certain information that could originate a controversy from being noticed (Elsbach et al., 1998). Even if attention is not entirely deviated, the positive frame can be expected to either create ambiguity and equivocality that hinder any straightforward integration of information (Graffin, Carpenter, & Boivie, 2011), or counterbalance the diagnosticity and importance given to damaging attributes (Graffin et al., 2016).

We consider two types of impression management tactics, according to the focus of their informational content. *Ego-centric* tactics are those that release positive information that is specific to a focal organization or product. These tactics intentionally accentuate positive meaning or attenuate negative meaning (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992) on a particular attribute in which the organization excels, seeking to draw attention to it and therefore away from other damaging attributes. For instance, some companies selectively portray themselves as environmentally friendly based on their recycling programs, while concealing their troubling carbon footprints (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011). In calling stakeholders' attention to an alternative frame dominated by ego's positive attributes, these tactics neutralize perceptions of image-damaging attributes in three different ways: by obscuring their presence (Beverland, 2005; Elsbach et al., 1998), by undermining their interpretation (Graffin et al., 2011), or by diluting their effect (Graffin et al., 2016; Zavyalova et al., 2012). Accordingly, we expect ego-centric tactics to reflect positively in stakeholders' perceptions of ego's image, leading in turn to improved performance. Therefore:

Hypothesis 1: Ego-centric tactics will have a positive effect on performance.

Alter-centric tactics, on the other hand, also seek to purposefully offer alternative frames that deviate attention from image-damaging attributes, yet they do so by minimizing the favorable attributes, or maximizing the unfavorable attributes, of meaningful others (Mohamed et al., 1999). To illustrate, Canadian petrochemical companies defended the relative acceptability of their contribution to global warming by pointing to the transport sector as the largest emitter of greenhouse gases (Talbot & Boiral, 2015). Alter-centric tactics implicitly or explicitly direct stakeholders to compare the focal product or organization against a chosen set of referents that will make it stand out as “first among equals”. The alternative frames created by alter-centric tactics most obviously deviate attention from ego’s image-damaging attributes, since they are fundamentally aimed at transferring the focus of attention to others (Cole & Chandler, 2019). But they can also create ambiguity around ego’s image-damaging attributes (Graffin et al., 2011) or offset negative perceptions with respect to those attributes (Graffin et al., 2016). For instance, an economy hotel that receives bad customer reviews on staff friendliness might point out how unnecessary luxuries inflate other hotels’ prices (Mohamed et al., 1999). Such an action could, on the one hand, create ambiguity in stakeholders’ minds about the relative merits of staff friendliness and price. On the other hand, the implicit evocation of a lower price than that of its competitors could reinforce the idea that price is a more important attribute than friendliness, thereby reducing the importance that customers place on the friendliness attribute. In sum, through the promotion of negative portrayals of others, alter-centric tactics seek to ensure damage to others’ performance, and by implication, benefit to ego's own performance (Cole & Chandler, 2019). Hence, we expect alter-centric tactics to have a positive effect on performance:

Hypothesis 2: Alter-centric tactics will have a positive effect on performance.

The Risk: Perceived Manipulation

The risk of using impression management tactics, however, is that they may be perceived as manipulative (Desai, 2011). Conceptually, manipulation is the act of perverting how others reach decisions, form preferences, or adopt goals (Raz, 1986). Perceived manipulation therefore represents stakeholders' awareness that their judgment is being unreasonably and intendedly conditioned by organizations. And while many acts of manipulative intent may be ignored or go unnoticed (Barnett, 2014), prior research shows that, if detected or perceived, they can be severely punished through social and economic sanctions (Janney & Gove, 2011; Vergne et al., 2018; Wagner, Lutz, & Weitz, 2009; Zavyalova et al., 2012). Hence, if stakeholders become aware that either ego- or alter-centric tactics are unreasonably conditioning their judgement, these tactics could be rendered ineffective, or even worse, counterproductive.

A classic rhetorical view of manipulation would suggest that when people perceive they are being manipulated they will either distrust the source of the message ("Ethos"), question the logic or validity of the message's content ("Logos"), or disconnect from the frame of mind that the message is defending ("Pathos") (Steigenberger & Wilhelm, 2018; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Put differently, perceived manipulation implies that the underlying rhetoric of a given impression management tactic will lack overall credibility. As a consequence, the impression management tactic will not effectively achieve its purpose of deviating attention from image-damaging attributes, creating ambiguity in the audience's mind, or offsetting negative perceptions.

Thus, the effectiveness of impression management tactics is contingent on whether stakeholders interpret them as manipulative or not. We argue that two joint conditions are necessary for perceived manipulation to transpire: signal incongruence and perceived intentionality[2]. Perceived intentionality is a necessary condition because stakeholders might interpret signal incongruence as merely accidental or haphazard and therefore excuse it; yet, if on the contrary, they interpret signal incongruence as intentional, they are likely to feel manipulated. Since impression management efforts are defined as "any action *purposefully* designed and carried out to influence an audience's perceptions" (Elsbach et al., 1998:68; italics added), they are extremely likely to be interpreted as intentional. Consequently, perceived manipulation crucially hinges on signal incongruence.

Recent research has studied signal incongruence as emerging from either inconsistency *between expectations* determined by different types of social evaluations (Stern, Dukerich, & Zajac, 2014), or inconsistency *between information* elements (Vergne et al., 2018). We extend and combine this research to theorize that perceived manipulation may also result from signal incongruence *between expectations and information* released in impression management tactics. In other words, signal incongruence – between stakeholder expectations

[2] We need not assume that there *is* indeed intentionality on the part of organizations. The relevant condition to our argument is that stakeholders *perceive* intentionality.

and the informational content of the tactic – will determine whether impression management is effective or, on the contrary, becomes ineffective due to stakeholders' perception that they are being manipulated. As we explained above, the tactics we focus on – ego-centric and alter-centric – provide information about the organization's own attributes and those of its competitors respectively. Therefore, to assess signal incongruence we need to establish what stakeholders' expectations about the organization's and its competitor's attributes were before the tactic was implemented. We focus on expectations about these attributes as determined by one particular social evaluation: *categorical stigma* (Lashley & Pollock, 2019; Vergne, 2012). We defend that stakeholder expectations about the attributes of a specific organization or product, and those of competing firms and products, will be fundamentally different depending on the degree of stigma that characterizes their host category.

Stigma as a Determinant of Expectations

Categories are cognitive devices that serve an ordering purpose by organizing members into different domains (Negro, Koçak, & Hsu, 2010; Ruef & Patterson, 2009). Moreover, because categories can embody descriptive as well as normative attributes, they can also function as judgment devices (Arjaliès & Durand, 2019). Accordingly, categories largely influence perceptions and shape expectations with respect to their members (Hsu & Grodal, 2015). We consider categorical stigma as a key signal that integrates a focal category's code (Pólos, Hannan, & Carroll, 2002), and which determines blanket expectations for its members. Other things equal, the higher a focal category's degree of stigma

(Piazza & Perretti, 2015), the more negative will be expectations concerning the attributes of its members.

At its most elementary level, stigma reflects a profound incompatibility between a category's attributes and the values or expectations of evaluating social audiences (Devers et al., 2009; Goffman, 1963). The discredited attributes at the origin of categorical stigma – typically products and/or clienteles (Slade Shantz et al., 2018) – overwhelm perceptions of any positive attributes that individual category members may display (Devers et al., 2009; Lashley & Pollock, 2019). Thus, to speak of a highly stigmatized category is to speak of a set of organizations or products for which expectations are set such that the presence of negative attributes is "normal", and the presence of positive ones is not. For example, men's bathhouses, which are broadly condemned by society as a function of the sexual activities they promote (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009), are not expected to have dedicated spaces for STD testing and education. Therefore, the fact that many of these organizations do have such spaces runs counter to the category's code, and indeed is oftentimes the subject of controversy instead of applause (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009).

A low degree of stigma, on the other hand, indicates that category members in general exhibit little normative deviance in the eyes of stakeholders. For members of these categories, expectations are set in a different fashion: stakeholders expect the presence of positive or neutral attributes, linked to the socially accepted products or clienteles they serve, as well as the near absence of negative attributes. For example, movies in the drama genre are expected to contain elements of tension and anxiety created by intense emotional situations, but are not expected to contain elements of frontal nudity and explicit sex that are typical of pornography (Jensen, 2010). To be sure, negative attributes are expected to a minor degree – an erotic scene in a drama movie does not necessarily infringe the category's code. Yet the level of tolerance for the presence of such negative attributes will be substantially low in these categories.

Perceived Manipulation as a Determinant of Impression Management Effectiveness

In this section we develop our contingency model of the effectiveness of ego-centric and alter-centric impression management tactics by evaluating the degree of signal incongruence with stakeholder expectations emerging from different levels of categorical stigma.

Ego-Centric Tactics*.* We argue that ego-centric tactics are likely to be more appropriate for members of categories displaying low levels of stigma. As discussed, a low level of stigma indicates that stakeholders expect category members in general to display positive attributes. In this case, claiming that the category member excels on a particular attribute is consistent with generally positive or neutral expectations with respect to the category and therefore does not trigger a perceived signal incongruence*.* COFFEE companies*,* for example, can make credible claims for ethically sourced coffee beans, while keeping silent about the levels of chemicals present in their products[3]*.* As a consequence, the rhetoric of the tactic is effective, and it is more likely to have a positive effect on performance.

[3] https://www.businessinsider.com/chemicals-in-coffee-2015-3, accessed August 2019.

For members of highly stigmatized categories, however, it is problematic to credibly make ego-centric claims for positive attributes as, by definition, membership in a highly stigmatized category implies commonality with stigma-inducing attributes (Devers et al., 2009; Vergne, 2012). Therefore, self-ingratiating communications are more likely to be perceived as manipulative and punished by stakeholders (Galvin, Ventresca, & Hudson, 2004). As Mishina, Block, and Mannor (2012) argue, all positive indicators are weak signals of true behavior, but even more so for those who already enjoy limited approval on a specific dimension. For instance, it is very difficult for a JUNK FOOD restaurant chain to defend the healthfulness of its hamburgers, or for a MIXED MARTIAL ARTS organization to defend the safety of this type of contact sport (Helms & Patterson, 2014), even though these claims may technically deserve some merit. We therefore argue that the use of ego-centric tactics by members of highly stigmatized categories is likely to be seen by stakeholders as intendedly manipulative. In light of the above, we propose:

> *Hypothesis 3: Ego-centric impression management tactics will have a greater positive effect on performance at low rather than high levels of categorical stigma.*

Alter-Centric Tactics. Conversely, we propose that alter-centric tactics are likely to be more effective in highly stigmatized categories. When applied in these contexts, alter-centric tactics carry a low risk of perceived manipulation because they retain consistency with generally negative perceptions inherent to stigmatized categories (Lashley & Pollock, 2019). Claiming the existence of negative attributes concerning other members of the category is consistent with pre-existing beliefs about the presence of negative attributes in category members in general. Thus, the rhetoric of alter-centric tactics in highly stigmatized categories does not trigger perceptions of signal incongruence. Importantly, though, such tactics transfer the burden of negativity to others, and as such, they implicitly or explicitly trigger comparisons whose outcomes are favorable to the category member that originates them. For example, in the highly stigmatized sex industry, LEGAL BROTHELS face obvious difficulty in claiming laudable attributes, but frequently emphasize that STREETWALKING is dangerous with respect to issues such as personal safety and sexually transmitted diseases (Wolfe & Blithe, 2015). LEGAL BROTHELS use these tactics to project an alternative frame where they are favorably portrayed as "first among stigmatized equals", or a "lesser evil". By doing so, they transfer the focus of stakeholders' attention to the negative attributes of STREETWALKING while remaining consistent with the category's code (Pólos et al., 2002), thus minimizing the risk of perceived manipulation.

In low-stigma categories, however, alter-centric tactics are less likely to be effective. Stakeholders expect such category members to overwhelmingly display positive or neutral attributes. Under such circumstances, tactics that appear to denigrate competitors by calling attention to their negative attributes generate a signal that is incongruent with the overarching social evaluation that integrates the category's code (Pólos et al., 2002). In other words, the rhetoric of alter-centric tactics in low-stigma categories does not resonate with stakeholders because it does not "ring true" (Cole & Chandler, 2019). Rather than achieving the purpose of differentiating from competition, alter-centric tactics may instead be seen as unjustifiable, or even defamatory (Mohamed & Gardner, 2004), and as a result, may become perceived as intendedly manipulative. This is the case, for instance, of HEALTH INSURANCE companies that claim their competitors are slower to respond and thus customers could die before they get access to proper specialists or treatment[4]. Some research supports this assertion by suggesting that, although distinction from competitors is important for strategic purposes, the immoderate use of tactics that explicitly downplay competitors can indeed backfire by generating feelings of antipathy from key stakeholders (Parhankangas & Ehrlich, 2014). Therefore:

> *Hypothesis 4: Alter-centric impression management tactics will have a greater positive effect on performance at high rather than low levels of categorical stigma.*

EMPIRICAL CONTEXT

We chose to test our theory in the context of the US food retail industry, and the stigma of 'junk food', a pejorative label that is widely used to vilify food categories that are high in unhealthy nutrients. This setting is ideal to test our theory because it allows us to analytically distinguish and finely operationalize our key constructs (Smith, 2011), namely the image-damaging attributes, the adopted impression management tactics, and categorical stigma, as we explain next.

Image-Damaging Attributes

The contents of food product labels are regulated by the US Food & Drug Administration (FDA). Mandatory information includes the nutrition facts label, which typically features on the back or side of the package and contains detailed

[4] https://casetext.com/case/us-healthcare-inc-v-blue-cross-of-greater-philadelphia, accessed November 2019.

nutritional information about the product, aimed at guiding consumers in assessing the appropriateness of its inclusion in their diets. Figure 1 illustrates a common nutrition facts label. Contingent on the product's nutritional profile, the nutrition facts label may include salient negative information that is readily available to be scrutinized and interpreted, and with respect to which producers feel the need to manage impressions. Specifically, we consider that excessive levels of harmful nutrients revealed by the nutrition facts label are the *image-damaging attributes* that need to be managed in this empirical context.

Figure 1. Illustration of a Common Nutrition Facts Label

Nutrition Facts		
Serving Size 1 Cup (228g)		
Servings Per Container 2		
Amount Per Serving		
Calories 260		Calories from Fat 120
		% Daily Value*
Total Fat 13g		**20**%
Saturated Fat 5g		**25**%
Trans Fat 2g		
Cholesterol 30mg		**10**%
Sodium 660mg		**28**%
Total Carbohydrate 31g		**10**%
Dietary Fiber 0g		**0**%
Sugars 5g		
Protein 5g		
Vitamin A 4%	•	Vitamin C 2%
Calcium 15%	•	Iron 4%

Impression Management Tactics

In the food retail industry, impression management efforts materialize through apparently symbolic investments that signal specific product attributes and accordingly shape desired images in the minds of constituents (Beverland, 2005; Fisk & Grove, 1996; Highhouse et al., 2009). Instead of symbolic, we view these tactics as acts of strategic value that can be purposefully designed to manage stakeholders' perceptions. In particular, product labels and packages, which contain not only mandatory but also voluntary information, are indirect but crucial means by which firms regularly communicate with stakeholders through carefully crafted discourse and imagery (Beverland, 2005; Hsu & Grodal, 2015).

Voluntary information in food labels includes items such as pictures, descriptions of flavor or texture, and – central to our argument – nutrient content claims. These claims are subsumed under two types, absolute and relative, which correspond respectively to the ego-centric and alter-centric tactics in our theory. Absolute claims are made using qualifiers such as "low" or "free" and can only be made if the respective nutrient content is below a certain level defined by the FDA. Relative claims are made using qualifiers such as "reduced" or "less than" and are required to identify the "reference food" against which the claim is made. Despite the strict FDA rules governing both absolute and relative claims, there is room for agentic creativity through the exploration of product dimensions (Berry, Burton, & Howlett, 2017; Cornish, 2012), which allows us to defend that the claims constitute the impression management tactics in our context. Figure 2a provides a good illustration of our point. It shows an ice cream that makes a "low fat" claim, while exceeding the accepted levels for saturated fat and cholesterol. Conceptually, the producer is releasing positive information about one attribute, while knowing all too well that two other attributes may constitute sources of damage to its image. Figure 2b illustrates similar dynamics for relative claims: a product that declares to contain 40% less fat than the leading brand in the category, while exceeding the FDA threshold for saturated fat.

Figure 2. Illustration of Absolute and Relative Claims

Figure 2a. Example of an Absolute Claim: "Low fat ice cream"

Figure 2b. Example of a Relative Claim: "40% Reduced Fat than the leading brand of regular potato chips"

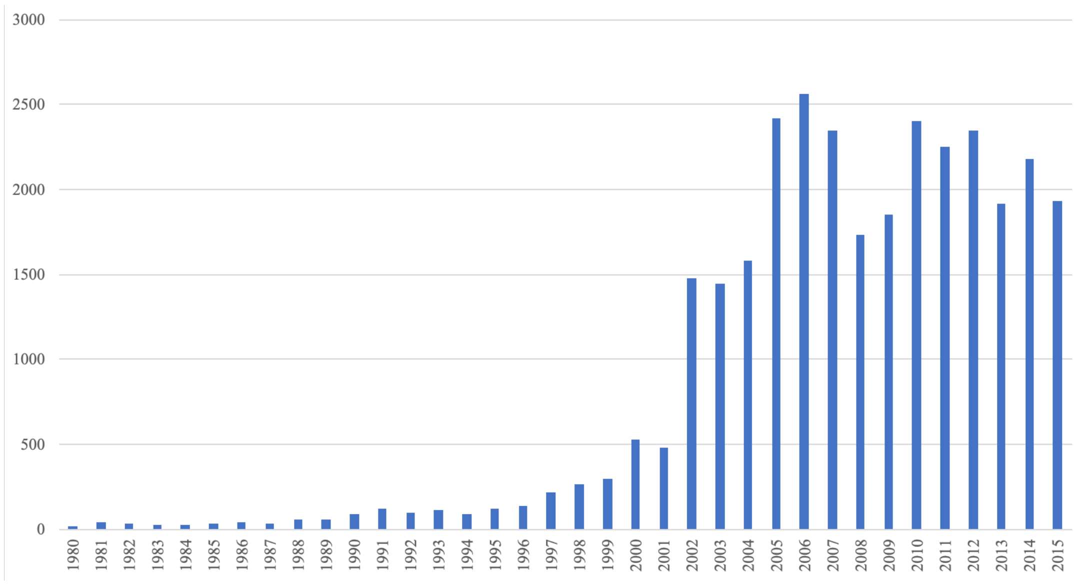
Categorical Stigma

Stigma can only be socially produced by those with sufficient power to label, stereotype, separate and inflict status loss and discrimination (Link & Phelan, 2001). The media, in particular, occupy a privileged social position to influence other stakeholders (Andrews & Caren, 2010; Greve, Palmer, & Pozner, 2010). By bringing certain issues into the public's attention and making them sufficiently salient (McDonnell & Werner, 2016; Piazza & Perretti, 2015), the media acts as a powerful social control agent, which can change widespread perceptions about an entire category. The hazardous effects of junk food were brought under the spotlight in 2004 by the Oscar nominated documentary "Super Size Me"[5]. Following the release of the documentary, junk food came under serious attack by the media. Figure 3 shows the total number of articles in the Factiva database that contain the term 'junk food' and depicts the sharp increase

[5] Unwholesome diet is currently the top risk factor leading to death in the US (U.S. Burden of Disease Collaborators, 2018) and consumption of energy dense foods has been singled out as the main cause of the country's obesity epidemic (Swinburn et al., 2011)

in media attacks that this topic received from the beginning of the new millennium, but especially since 2004. Our research indicates that the junk food label reflects a process of vilification and expression of negative affective reactions that is key to extant conceptualizations of stigma in the management literature (Devers et al., 2009).

Figure 3. Number of Press Articles Containing the Term 'Junk Food', 1980-2015



DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Data Sources

We collected and combined data from three different sources in order to construct our dataset. First, for product performance, product claims, and market structure characterization, we used the Nielsen Retail Scanner Data available from the James M. Kilts Center for Marketing at the Chicago Booth School of Business. The Nielsen Company is the leading measurement firm for fast moving consumer goods, and currently covers most world markets exhaustively. The product data consist of purchase and pricing information from 2006 to 2015, at the Universal Product Code (UPC[6]) level, generated from participating retail store point-of-sale systems in all US markets. These data further contain information about each product's features, namely nutritional claims that the product makes. From this set, we excluded products: i) for which Nielsen reports any reservations with regard to the integrity of the data; ii) that do not represent food items susceptible of being consumed as such (e.g., yeast, food coloring); iii) that stand for individual nutrients, i.e., sugar, fat and salt; iv) that are residual (e.g., 'remaining', 'other'). Furthermore, we excluded products related to alcohol, not only because this category bears its own stigma that is beyond the concept of junk food, but also because alcohol sales through retail channels are restricted in seventeen states across the US, making the data subject to bias. Finally, we excluded baby food because the thresholds for determining excessive content of harmful nutrients in baby food are different from those applied to food destined for the general population, thus making their comparison inadequate, per the methodology described below.

Second, for nutritional attributes, we used the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Composition Database for 'Branded Foods'[7]. This database provides nutritional data for over 175 thousand food items, identified by their UPC. Information includes nutritional values for dozens of nutrients (e.g., protein, lipids, sugars, etc.) on a per 100g or 100ml basis, as applicable, and also on a per serving basis. Manufacturers freely report their product data to the USDA, but when doing so, they must adhere to the USDA's predefined rules. We

[6] An item's UPC is a numerical code that corresponds to its barcode and uniquely identifies the item for scanning purposes.
[7] https://ndb.nal.usda.gov/, accessed between May and June 2017.

then matched the USDA nutritional information with the Nielsen data, at the UPC-year level.

Third, for categorical stigma, we followed prior work that acknowledges media content as a valid and reliable source from which to capture the stigma construct (Piazza & Perretti, 2015; Roulet, 2015; Vergne, 2012). Social stigmatization processes require a critical mass of adopters to accept a vilifying label (Devers et al., 2009). In turn, for the stigma belief to diffuse to a critical mass, it needs to be salient, familiar, and compelling (Strang & Soule, 1998), something the media is in a privileged position to accomplish. We captured the categorical stigma construct through the frequency of media attacks on food categories, namely through newspaper articles that associate a given food category with the vilifying label 'junk food'. We searched for this label on the Factiva news database for the period 2006-2015 in both the online and physical versions of the following newspapers: The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Los Angeles Times, The Chicago Tribune and The Wall Street Journal. The reasons for our selection of media sources are twofold. First, these are all national publications, the combination of which results in a good geographical coverage of the US. Second, we chose media outlets that are known for their editorial independence, differently from industry publications where market actors may sponsor articles' publication. We excluded articles where the 'junk food' label is used out of context, as well as duplicated articles that appear, for example in both the printed and online versions of the same newspaper. We thus obtained a set of 992 articles, which we then content-analyzed and coded for our stigma variable.

Sample Construction

Our estimation is concerned with products that are at risk of being scrutinized for image-damaging attributes that may impact performance. We therefore operationalized our risk set as those UPCs that contain excessive levels of either salt, fat, sugar, saturated fat, cholesterol, or calories, because these are the unhealthy elements included in the nutrition facts label[8]. We consider a product to substantively contain excessive levels of a given nutrient when it exceeds the thresholds established by the FDA (see Table 1). We excluded UPCs that exhibited excessive levels of more than one nutrient, to avoid any confounding effects. Overall, we identified 22,874 UPCs that meet these criteria.

Table 1. FDA Disclosure Requirements for Food Labeling§

	Meal Products		**Main Dishes**		**Other Foods**			
Nutrient limits	RACC* >= 283.5 g		283.5>RACC*>=170g		RACC* > 30g or RACC* > 2tbsp		RACC* <= 30g or RACC* <= 2tbsp	
Fat	26 g	per serving	19.5 g	per serving	13 g	per serving	13 g	per 50 g
Saturated Fat	8 g	per serving	6 g	per serving	4 g	per serving	4 g	per 50 g
Cholesterol	120 mg	per serving	90 mg	per serving	60 mg	per serving	60 mg	per 50 g
Sodium (Salt)	960 mg	per serving	720 mg	per serving	480 mg	per serving	480 mg	per 50 g

* Reference Amounts Customarily Consumed

§ Because the FDA thresholds do not consider **sugar** content levels, even though recent recommendations by both the FDA and the USDA point to a maximum daily intake of 50g of sugar, we took that amount as the benchmark to compute the thresholds for sugar, employing the same proportional rules as those established by the FDA for other nutrients. We conservatively assumed that a healthy person has at least 2 meals per day, making up for the maximum 50g allowance (25g in each meal). Based on this 25g limit, we computed the proportional limits for sugar following the ratios for main dishes and other foods. Furthermore, the thresholds do not consider **calories**. However, in the FDA's guidance for nutrition facts label interpretation, 400 calories per serving is considered "high". We took this number as the threshold for calories.

[8] Data limitations did not allow us to consider *trans-fat* in our analysis.

Next, using these 22,874 UPCs, we created two different samples: one where we test the effectiveness of ego-centric tactics and another where we test the effectiveness of alter-centric tactics. To test the effectiveness of each specific tactic, each sample must contain two types of UPCs: those that implemented the tactic at stake (treatment group) and those that did not implement any tactic but could have done so (control group). We now describe the construction of both treatment and control groups for each type of tactic.

Ego-centric Tactics.

Treatment Group. We define ego-centric tactics as absolute claims about the focal product (on nutrients other than the actual nutrient exceeding FDA thresholds). We identified a UPC as implementing an ego-centric tactic (treatment UPC) when one of the following combinations of text strings is included in its package during the period of analysis[9]: 1) low/no/non/zero/free and fat/saturated fat/salt/sodium/cholesterol/sugar/calories; 2) high and protein/fiber/calcium/vitamin. For example, Voortman Bakery's "SugarFree Strawberry Wafers" claims to be "sugar free" while exceeding the FDA threshold for total fat[10]. To avoid confounding effects, we excluded UPCs that made more than one claim. In addition, because we wish to test for the impact of the *implementation* of an ego-centric tactic, we excluded UPCs that showed absolute claims in all the years of our sample. Our final treatment group is comprised by a

[9] There exist slight textual variations of these qualifiers, such as "low *in* fat" rather than "low fat" that we omit from our methodological description for the sake of parsimony. The full coding is available from the authors upon request.
[10] Due to data confidentiality, we are not allowed to provide examples of specific products included in our dataset. However, the examples we use report publicly available information, which is illustrative of the exact same dynamics as those that occur in our data.

total of 228 UPCs that implemented absolute claims during the 2006-2015 period, which leads to a total of 1,904 UPC-year observations.

Control Group. To test the effectiveness of ego-centric tactics we need a control group comprised of UPCs that were equally at risk of implementing such tactics but did not. This quasi-control group was selected from among UPCs that made no claim throughout the ten-year period covered by our data. In order to respect the necessary assumption that both treatment and control group UPCs are equally at risk of implementing nutritional claims, the following criteria were applied consecutively. First, the control UPC had to exhibit excessive levels of the same nutrient as the treatment UPC, which ensures that both products were concerned with the same type of image damage. Second, control and treatment UPCs had to belong to the same category in the Nielsen structure (e.g., breakfast cereals, ice-cream), which establishes identical functional similarity between them, as well as the same degree of categorical stigma. Third, control and treatment UPCs should be present in exactly the same years in our panel dataset, which guarantees appropriate time comparisons. As an additional criterion, we restricted the sample to products that were measured in the same units, to avoid any inappropriate comparisons. Applying these criteria, we are able to find at least one match for every treatment UPC. There were some cases, however, where there was more than one control UPC for each treatment UPC. In such cases, we selected the closest match in terms of average sales throughout the ten-year period. Our final 1:1 matched set includes 1,904 UPC-year observations for treatment UPCs and 1,904 UPC-year observations for control UPCs.

Alter-centric Tactics.

Treatment Group. We define alter-centric tactics as relative claims on one of the product's nutrients (other than the focal nutrient exceeding FDA thresholds). We identified a UPC as implementing an alter-centric tactic (treatment UPC) when one of the following combinations of text strings as included in its package during the period of analysis: 1) fewer/reduced/less/half/ lower/light and fat/saturated fat/salt/sodium/cholesterol/ sugar/calories than an alternative product; 2) added/enriched/extra/fortified/plus/more and protein/fiber/ calcium/vitamin than an alternative product. This reflects the FDA's list of qualifiers for relative claims, which require the identification of a reference point or benchmark, thus allowing us to identify alter-centric impression management tactics. For instance, the Pink Himalayan "Sea Salt Baked Rinds" claim to contain 40% less fat than the leading pork rinds, yet they exceed the FDA threshold for salt content. Similar to our procedure for ego-centric tactics, we excluded products that made more than one claim and those that showed claims throughout the entire period of analysis. Our final treatment group contains a total of 72 UPCs that implemented a relative claim during the 2006-2015 period, which leads to a total of 508 UPC-year observations.

Control Group. Following the same procedure as we did for the ego-tactics sample, we created a control group comprised of UPCs that were equally at risk of implementing an alter-centric tactic but did not. This quasi-control group was again selected from among UPCs that made no claim throughout the ten-year period covered by our data. We applied the same criteria as described above: control and treatment UPCs must have excessive levels of the same nutrients, must belong to the same category, must be present in the same years in our data, and must be measured in the same units (e.g., ounces). Again, if after applying these criteria there was more than one control UPC for each treatment UPC, we selected the closest match in terms of average sales throughout the ten-year period. Our final 1:1 matched set includes 508 UPC-year observations for treatment UPCs and 508 UPC-year observations for control UPCs.

Estimation

To test the causal relationships between impression management tactics and performance, i.e., each tactic's effectiveness, we ran a difference-in-differences analysis. Since the decision to employ a nutrient claim is discrete, and according to our data, rarely reversed, our choice of a difference-in-differences specification allowed us to more confidently infer causality by showing that including absolute and relative claims in product labels (i.e., implementing ego- and alter-tactics respectively) is associated with variations in product performance that are significantly different from those observed for similar UPCs that do not bear such claims on their labels. Our models are formulated as follows:

$$Performance_{j,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Treat_j + \beta_2 Post_t + \beta_3 Treat \ x \ Post_{j,t} + \beta_4 Controls_{j,t} + FixedEffects + \varepsilon_{j,t}$$

Treat differentiates between treatment and control UPCs (1 for treatment UPCs and 0 for control UPCs), that is, whether product *j* implemented a nutrient claim during the period of analysis or not. *Post* captures the time period, i.e., whether the observation occurs before or after the tactic is implemented (1 for those treatment and control UPC observations after the tactic is implemented and

0 otherwise). The *interaction* between these two variables, also included in our models, gives us our independent variable of interest, as it estimates the performance impact of implementing a certain tactic – ego-centric or alter-centric –, compared to not implementing any tactic. In addition to category-, brand- and product-level *controls* (explained in detail in the next section), to be conservative we include *fixed effects* at the dyad- and year-level. Dyad-level fixed effects mitigate concerns with respect to time invariant characteristics of each treatment-control dyad that could explain variance in sales. Moreover, dyad fixed effects allow us to directly examine differences between the treatment and control UPCs within each dyad. Year-level fixed effects mitigate concerns with respect to temporal sources of endogeneity. In terms of the models' specification, we ran panel OLS regressions. To assess the effectiveness of each type of tactic, we separately tested models that include a) only UPCs that implemented ego-centric tactics and their respective control group, and b) only UPCs that implemented alter-centric tactics and their respective control group.

Measurement

Dependent variable. We measure product performance through each UPC's annual sales in US dollars (logged).

Difference-in-Difference variables. *Treat* is a dummy variable that takes the value of 1 if the focal UPC implemented a nutrient claim during the period 2006-2015, and 0 if it did not make a nutrient claim. *Post* is a dummy variable that takes the value of 0 before the tactic is implemented and 1 after the tactic is implemented.

Contingency Variable. In accordance with our contingency model, we wish to test the effectiveness of each type of tactic, contingent on the level of categorical stigma. To operationalize this variable, we began by content-analyzing each press article for when a given food item was directly associated by the media with the vilifying 'junk food' label. Since the coding process in content analysis is based on objective protocols, concerns regarding inter-coder agreement are less relevant than those that arise in qualitative research where subjective meanings are interpreted by coders and framed by their own mental schemata (Lee, 2009). In order to test for the reliability of our coding, we repeated the process for all the articles in the database four months after the first coding instance, thus ensuring that enough time had passed to avoid any recall bias. The Cohen's kappa coefficient between the two coding instances is 99%, indicating perfect agreement. Second, we matched the initial food item coding to the Nielsen category structure using the categories' descriptions as our reference. Where an exact textual match between the food item and the category description was not feasible (e.g., articles often refer to "soda"; however, there is no category called "Soda", the most appropriate one is "Carbonated Beverages"), a case-by-case assessment was a necessary desideratum. Given the complexity of this task, we purposefully created a coding protocol, which was revised and agreed upon by all the authors[11]. To be conservative, we did not code instances where classification was dubious. Consistent with the view that stigma is a matter of degree (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001), we measure categorical stigma

[11] For the sake of parsimony, we do not replicate the full coding protocol here, but it is available from the authors upon request.

through the number of articles per year where the media associate a given product category with ‘junk food’.

To test the contingencies proposed by our theory, we need to test interaction effects between the effectiveness of the tactics and the level of categorical stigma. Given that our conservative approach led us to choose a difference-in-differences specification, the most appropriate manner to conduct such a test is to split the sample into low and high levels of categorical stigma. In order to determine the cut-off point for splitting the sample, we calculated the sample’s median for the categorical stigma variable and found that it is situated at 1 annual article. Therefore, the low stigma portion of the sample includes UPCs that belong to categories where our stigma measure is less than or equal to 1, while the high stigma portion includes those UPCs that claim membership in categories where the measure is equal to or greater than 2.

Category-level controls. We control for *category performance*, which we operationalize using the log of category-year sales, to account for the fact that consumer trends, and not our types of impression management tactics, may drive some categories to be more popular than others at different points in time. We then control for variables that may affect the pattern and intensity of competition in each category. We control for *category contrast*, measured as the average grade of membership of competing brands in the category-year. Category contrast determines the required resources that new entrants need to spend to acquire credibility and competitiveness, as well as the extent to which established competitors can draw from pre-existing capabilities to compete (Carnabuci, Operti, & Kovács, 2015). We also control for *category concentration*, measured by the Herfindahl index of the brands composing the category, since the effects of focal members' actions on performance may be stronger in more concentrated categories (Derfus, Maggitti, Grimm, & Smith, 2008). Finally, we control for the *proportion* of category members that make *absolute* and *relative* claims in each category-year.

Brand-level controls. We control for *brand diversification* to account for different effects of diversification on performance across categories (Santalo & Becerra, 2008), as well as possible stigma dilution effects (Vergne, 2012). Brand diversification was measured as the inverse of the Herfindahl index for each brand in our sample. In addition, product recalls can also severely affect product performance (Rhee & Haunschild, 2006; Zavyalova et al., 2012), and indeed that of the entire brand. Food recalls are the responsibility of two different entities: the FDA for food in general, and the USDA for meat, poultry and egg products[12]. We identified all product recalls that happened in the period 2006-2015 by downloading information available from the FDA[13] and USDA[14] dedicated websites. For each recall, we noted down company, brand, and UPC. When a UPC was not made available, we visualized barcode and label pictures to obtain it and to complement the data given by the recall announcement. We then matched all recalled UPCs to those that were present in the Nielsen database. Based on these matches, we created a dummy variable that identifies those brands that had at least one product recalled in a given year, thus controlling for any *brand recall*, in order to account for possible brand spillover effects.

[12] https://www.foodsafety.gov/recalls/index.html
[13] https://www.fda.gov/Safety/Recalls/ArchiveRecalls/default.htm
[14] https://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/recalls-and-public-health-alerts/recall-case-archive

Product-level controls. We use a dummy variable to control for whether the focal product is the *category leader* in terms of sales, presuming that certain impression management tactics might be afforded to category leaders but not to followers and vice-versa. We also control for whether the product contains claims concerning dimensions other than its nutritional content, in particular, whether it claims to be *organic* or *natural*. Finally, we control for the absolute *nutritional content* of each of the nutrients that may originate image damage (salt, cholesterol, calories, fat, saturated fat, and sugar), as well as the nutrients that may promote positive images (protein, fiber, calcium, iron, magnesium, potassium, vitamin A, and Vitamin C), normalized on a "per serving" basis.

RESULTS

Table 2a presents summary statistics and pairwise correlations for both treatment and control UPCs in the ego-centric tactics sample. Similarly, Table 2b presents these statistics for treatment and control UPCs in the alter-centric tactics sample. To ensure that multicollinearity was not a concern in our models, we inspected the Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) in our models. All VIF are below 10, except for some of the nutritional content variables. Although it is theoretically important to control for the nutritional content of the products in our sample, we ran alternative models where the highly correlated controls were removed, and only those with VIF below 10 were kept. The results of these models are consistent with those of our main findings (available upon request), suggesting that multicollinearity does not represent a concern with respect to the results we report.

Table 3 shows the average effects of both ego-centric and alter-centric tactics on product performance. The results in Model 1 show that, when considering all the categories in the food retail market, irrespective of their degree of stigma, ego-centric tactics have a positive and strongly significant relationship with performance ($\beta=0.408$, $p<0.01$), lending support to Hypothesis 1. Similarly, Model 2 indicates that, on average, the relationship between alter-centric tactics and performance is positive and significant ($\beta=0.338$, $p<0.05$), thus supporting Hypothesis 2.

Table 2a. Descriptive Statistics and Pairwise Correlations for All Matched UPCs – Ego-centric Tactics

		Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Product performance	3,808	11.57	3.11	0.37	17.03								
2	Categorical stigma	3,808	3.71	6.45	0.00	32.00	0.05							
3	Category performance	3,808	19.96	1.30	16.01	21.67	0.05	0.31						
4	Category contrast	3,808	0.60	0.23	0.19	1.00	0.07	-0.09	-0.50					
5	Category concentration	3,808	0.16	0.10	0.03	0.88	0.25	-0.01	0.16	-0.24				
6	Percentage absolute claims	3,808	0.01	0.03	0.00	0.36	-0.08	-0.01	-0.12	-0.01	-0.16			
7	Percentage relative claims	3,808	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.18	0.10	0.04	-0.02	-0.01		
8	Brand diversification	3,808	0.72	1.28	0.00	22.02	-0.14	0.02	0.04	-0.35	-0.05	-0.01	-0.01	
9	Brand recall	3,808	0.02	0.13	0	1	-0.01	-0.01	0.03	-0.06	0.00	-0.03	0.06	0.08
10	Category leader	3,808	0.00	0.03	0	1	0.04	-0.01	-0.06	-0.01	0.07	-0.01	-0.01	0.03
11	Organic claim	3,808	0.09	0.29	0	1	-0.01	-0.04	0.13	-0.04	0.04	-0.02	-0.03	0.05
12	Natural claim	3,808	0.08	0.28	0	1	0.08	-0.04	0.16	-0.10	0.01	-0.05	0.14	0.07
13	Salt per serving	3,808	263.78	305.87	0.00	2428.50	0.20	0.00	-0.24	-0.06	0.07	-0.03	-0.05	0.00
14	Cholesterol per serving	3,808	7.22	10.98	0.00	54.67	0.04	-0.15	0.24	-0.18	-0.11	0.14	-0.01	0.05
15	Calories per serving	3,808	163.88	81.35	0.00	399.52	-0.15	0.37	0.34	-0.46	-0.05	-0.09	0.03	0.28
16	Fat per serving	3,808	7.79	8.26	0.00	37.50	-0.23	0.24	0.19	-0.35	-0.09	-0.09	0.05	0.21
17	Sugar per serving	3,808	10.48	9.79	0.00	47.22	0.02	-0.27	0.04	0.19	-0.01	0.07	-0.07	-0.05
18	Saturated fat per serving	3,808	1.76	1.63	0.00	7.15	-0.15	0.10	0.36	-0.28	-0.14	0.11	0.04	0.10
19	Protein per serving	3,808	4.63	3.83	0.00	18.01	-0.08	-0.16	0.30	-0.42	-0.13	0.07	-0.04	0.20
20	Fiber per serving	3,808	1.05	1.37	0.00	7.00	-0.18	0.02	0.13	-0.32	-0.08	-0.15	-0.01	0.17
21	Calcium per serving	3,808	85.60	110.95	0.00	500.94	-0.03	-0.19	0.32	0.02	-0.02	0.22	-0.09	0.00
22	Iron per serving	3,808	0.47	0.65	0.00	4.50	-0.15	0.01	0.12	-0.33	-0.06	-0.12	-0.01	0.19
23	Magnesium per serving	3,808	4.40	20.05	0.00	180.04	-0.10	-0.06	0.00	-0.14	-0.09	-0.06	-0.01	0.09
24	Potassium per serving	3,808	79.86	194.43	0.00	2808.00	0.09	0.19	0.30	-0.04	-0.03	-0.05	-0.01	-0.05
25	Vitamin A per serving	3,808	186.55	360.12	0.00	3000.16	0.04	-0.08	0.20	-0.15	0.13	0.07	-0.01	0.03
26	Vitamin C per serving	3,808	3.10	9.55	0.00	101.93	-0.03	0.09	0.04	-0.04	-0.03	-0.02	-0.02	0.11

Table 2a. (continued)

		9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
10	Category leader	0.00																
11	Organic claim	0.12	-0.01															
12	Natural claim	0.06	-0.01	0.03														
13	Salt per serving	-0.07	-0.02	-0.05	-0.14													
14	Cholesterol per serving	-0.06	0.00	-0.03	0.00	0.00												
15	Calories per serving	0.09	-0.01	-0.01	0.10	-0.29	-0.04											
16	Fat per serving	0.09	-0.03	-0.08	0.14	-0.25	-0.14	0.81										
17	Sugar per serving	0.00	0.05	0.10	-0.04	-0.41	0.22	-0.20	-0.53									
18	Saturated fat per serving	0.00	-0.02	-0.07	0.12	-0.34	0.57	0.44	0.48	-0.04								
19	Protein per serving	0.04	-0.02	0.12	0.14	-0.14	0.48	0.27	0.08	0.11	0.29							
20	Fiber per serving	0.07	-0.02	0.11	0.08	-0.04	-0.20	0.47	0.42	-0.26	0.04	0.23						
21	Calcium per serving	0.00	-0.01	0.22	-0.04	-0.29	0.47	-0.02	-0.24	0.56	0.23	0.53	-0.19					
22	Iron per serving	0.07	-0.02	0.10	-0.03	0.05	-0.05	0.40	0.35	-0.24	0.06	0.27	0.59	-0.07				
23	Magnesium per serving	0.01	0.01	-0.03	0.08	-0.11	-0.13	0.25	0.32	-0.16	0.07	0.15	0.31	-0.09	0.51			
24	Potassium per serving	-0.01	-0.01	0.02	0.01	-0.19	0.10	0.11	0.00	0.17	0.08	0.05	0.09	0.21	-0.10	-0.03		
25	Vitamin A per serving	-0.03	-0.02	0.01	0.00	0.15	0.27	-0.01	-0.11	0.09	0.08	0.17	0.05	0.29	0.19	-0.07	-0.08	
26	Vitamin C per serving	0.00	0.11	0.08	0.00	-0.05	-0.05	0.01	-0.10	0.16	-0.11	-0.09	0.07	0.04	0.11	-0.04	0.04	0.11

Table 2b. Descriptive Statistics and Pairwise Correlations for All Matched UPCs – Alter-centric Tactics

		Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Product performance	1,016	12.76	2.03	1.25	16.15								
2	Categorical stigma	1,016	3.80	5.38	0.00	32.00	-0.33							
3	Category performance	1,016	20.19	0.67	17.47	21.40	-0.10	0.56						
4	Category contrast	1,016	0.61	0.20	0.28	1.00	-0.04	0.31	0.40					
5	Category concentration	1,016	0.12	0.09	0.04	0.76	-0.25	0.04	-0.17	-0.37				
6	Percentage absolute claims	1,016	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.04	-0.22	0.28	-0.29	-0.03	0.29			
7	Percentage relative claims	1,016	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.36	0.57	0.76	-0.27	-0.15		
8	Brand diversification	1,016	0.83	1.64	0.00	12.44	-0.08	-0.07	-0.14	-0.27	0.06	0.03	-0.12	
9	Brand recall	1,016	0.03	0.16	0	1	-0.01	-0.01	0.06	0.07	-0.04	-0.06	0.04	0.02
10	Category leader	1,016	0.00	0.00	0	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
11	Organic claim	1,016	0.01	0.11	0	1	-0.08	-0.03	-0.03	-0.06	0.21	0.08	-0.06	-0.01
12	Natural claim	1,016	0.03	0.17	0	1	0.04	0.13	0.22	0.32	-0.08	-0.06	0.33	-0.09
13	Salt per serving	1,016	378.99	235.37	9.48	946.50	0.29	-0.49	-0.31	-0.52	-0.12	-0.10	-0.49	-0.03
14	Cholesterol per serving	1,016	15.74	19.04	0.00	99.83	0.22	0.05	0.05	-0.13	-0.15	-0.09	0.20	0.26
15	Calories per serving	1,016	127.58	46.23	8.50	300.00	-0.33	0.59	0.31	-0.05	-0.05	0.24	0.03	0.14
16	Fat per serving	1,016	8.17	4.05	0.00	25.00	-0.07	0.15	-0.03	-0.32	-0.15	0.19	-0.31	0.10
17	Sugar per serving	1,016	6.16	6.34	0.00	30.00	-0.20	0.08	0.20	0.50	0.23	-0.15	0.39	-0.12
18	Saturated fat per serving	1,016	2.48	2.06	0.00	10.72	0.04	0.14	-0.04	0.07	-0.23	-0.04	0.26	0.23
19	Protein per serving	1,016	2.92	4.26	0.00	29.00	0.08	0.07	0.07	-0.21	-0.13	-0.06	0.07	0.35
20	Fiber per serving	1,016	0.13	0.44	0.00	3.02	-0.22	0.26	0.17	-0.07	0.03	0.10	-0.07	-0.04
21	Calcium per serving	1,016	45.11	66.10	0.00	300.00	-0.22	0.14	-0.03	0.22	-0.20	-0.05	0.32	0.28
22	Iron per serving	1,016	0.15	0.34	0.00	1.80	-0.02	0.14	0.13	-0.27	0.06	0.07	-0.12	0.24
23	Magnesium per serving	1,016	0.09	1.22	0.00	15.96	-0.09	0.28	0.13	-0.02	0.04	0.11	-0.03	0.03
24	Potassium per serving	1,016	17.05	65.11	0.00	400.12	-0.28	0.51	0.34	0.16	0.02	0.13	0.15	-0.09
25	Vitamin A per serving	1,016	148.85	571.35	0.00	6000.12	-0.24	0.36	0.17	0.07	0.03	0.12	0.06	-0.04
26	Vitamin C per serving	1,016	1.45	6.21	0.00	72.05	-0.20	0.29	0.07	-0.12	0.41	0.10	-0.07	0.09

Table 2b. (continued)

		9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
10	Category leader	-																
11	Organic claim	0.04	-															
12	Natural claim	0.04	-	-0.02														
13	Salt per serving	-0.03	-	0.05	-0.25													
14	Cholesterol per serving	-0.03	-	-0.03	0.01	0.02												
15	Calories per serving	-0.02	-	-0.08	0.05	-0.34	0.15											
16	Fat per serving	-0.01	-	-0.01	-0.04	0.13	0.04	0.73										
17	Sugar per serving	0.05	-	-0.03	0.21	-0.64	-0.28	-0.06	-0.49									
18	Saturated fat per serving	0.00	-	0.02	0.09	-0.24	0.57	0.31	0.32	-0.21								
19	Protein per serving	-0.04	-	-0.06	-0.03	0.07	0.86	0.24	0.04	-0.26	0.33							
20	Fiber per serving	-0.04	-	-0.03	0.02	-0.13	-0.15	0.51	0.39	-0.04	-0.08	0.00						
21	Calcium per serving	0.00	-	-0.05	0.05	-0.40	0.34	0.19	-0.06	0.17	0.63	0.35	-0.05					
22	Iron per serving	-0.04	-	-0.05	-0.04	0.08	0.46	0.37	0.15	-0.15	-0.06	0.68	0.33	0.00				
23	Magnesium per serving	-0.01	-	-0.01	-0.01	-0.07	-0.06	0.23	0.15	-0.08	0.04	-0.02	0.15	-0.05	0.05			
24	Potassium per serving	-0.01	-	-0.03	0.00	-0.29	-0.14	0.41	0.14	0.04	-0.06	-0.03	0.38	0.00	0.16	0.42		
25	Vitamin A per serving	-0.02	-	-0.02	0.02	-0.20	0.00	0.31	0.14	0.07	0.05	0.02	0.39	0.17	0.07	-0.02	-0.03	
26	Vitamin C per serving	-0.02	-	-0.03	-0.04	-0.22	-0.13	0.24	-0.02	0.24	-0.13	-0.06	0.15	-0.06	0.04	0.06	0.15	0.277

Table 3. Estimates from Difference-in-Differences Models

Average Effects of Ego-Centric and Alter-Centric Tactics on Product Performance (all categories; dyad and year fixed effects)

Tactic	**Model 1** Ego-centric	**Model 2** Alter-centric
Post	-0.184†	0.242†
	(0.102)	(0.134)
Treat	-1.167**	-0.585**
	(0.154)	(0.190)
Interaction	**0.408****	**0.338***
	(0.134)	(0.170)
Categorical stigma	-0.031**	0.013
	(0.010)	(0.020)
Category performance	0.160*	-0.165
	(0.069)	(0.195)
Category contrast	1.982**	-1.376†
	(0.394)	(0.776)
Category concentration	5.143**	-6.085**
	(0.587)	(1.253)
Proportion absolute claims	-10.536**	1.467
	(2.011)	(17.135)
Proportion relative claims	-433.380**	245.064**
	(141.217)	(92.956)
Brand diversification	0.214**	0.050
	(0.047)	(0.048)
Brand recall	0.755**	-0.430†
	(0.234)	(0.226)
Category leader	1.467	-
	(0.928)	-
Organic claim	-0.110	-1.854**
	(0.169)	(0.425)
Natural claim	0.642**	-0.831
	(0.163)	(0.507)
Product nutritional content	Incl.	Incl.
Year Dummies	Incl.	Incl.
Constant	5.740**	19.954**
	(1.528)	(3.916)
Observations	3,808	1,016
R-squared	0.134	0.320
Number of Dyads	196	58
Log-likelihood	-7411	-1501

Standard errors in parentheses
** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<0.1

Table 4 reports the effects of each type of tactic on product performance, according to different levels of categorical stigma. Model 3 shows that the coefficient for ego-centric tactics in low stigma categories ($\beta=0.852$, $p<0.01$) is positive and strongly significant, suggesting that the use of these tactics in such environments is related to higher performance. Model 4 reports a positive but substantially lower and non-significant coefficient for this relationship at high levels of categorical stigma ($\beta=0.136$, n.s.). Moreover, the difference between the two interaction coefficients in Models 3 and 4 is statistically significant. Taken together, the results of these two models provide strong support for Hypothesis 3, which argues that ego-centric tactics are more effective at low rather than high levels of categorical stigma.

With respect to alter-centric tactics, Model 5 indicates that their use at low levels of categorical stigma has a non-significant relationship with performance ($\beta=0.111$, n.s.). Consistent with our theory and the prediction in Hypothesis 4, Model 6 shows that the coefficient for alter-centric tactics in high stigma categories ($\beta=0.637$, $p<0.05$) is positive and significant. In addition, the difference between the interaction coefficients in Models 5 and 6 is statistically significant, thus supporting Hypothesis 4. In sum, the results from Models 5 and 6 suggest that alter-centric tactics are more effective at high rather than low levels of categorical stigma.

Table 4. Estimates from Difference-in-Differences Models

Effects of Ego-Centric and Alter-Centric Tactics on Product Performance at Different Levels of Categorical Stigma (dyad and year fixed effects)

	Model 3	**Model 4**	**Model 5**	**Model 6**
Tactic	Ego-centric	Ego-centric	Alter-centric	Alter-centric
Level of stigma	Low	High	Low	High
Post	-0.059	-0.180	0.259	0.236
	(0.137)	(0.160)	(0.164)	(0.218)
Treat	-1.263**	-0.836**	-0.563*	-0.391
	(0.219)	(0.221)	(0.250)	(0.294)
Interaction	**0.852****	**0.136**	**0.111**	**0.637***
	(0.176)	(0.203)	(0.195)	(0.260)
Categorical stigma	-0.048	0.010	0.252	0.022
	(0.093)	(0.014)	(0.158)	(0.024)
Category performance	0.256*	0.084	1.289*	0.066
	(0.102)	(0.123)	(0.606)	(0.373)
Category contrast	2.126**	2.131**	6.062**	-3.792*
	(0.618)	(0.716)	(2.053)	(1.583)
Category concentration	4.865**	4.919**	-14.385**	-6.789**
	(0.758)	(1.523)	(5.480)	(1.863)
Proportion absolute claims	-11.444**	-6.291†	16.055	13.883
	(2.461)	(3.364)	(35.617)	(25.280)
Proportion relative claims	-1,459.458**	-173.490	600.797*	138.664
	(248.044)	(213.925)	(247.437)	(134.411)
Brand diversification	0.154**	0.276**	-0.278**	0.050
	(0.055)	(0.091)	(0.099)	(0.059)
Brand recall	1.162**	-0.068	-0.837**	0.246
	(0.281)	(0.419)	(0.249)	(0.375)
Category leader	0.977	0.639	-	-
	(0.970)	(2.040)	-	-
Organic claim	-1.306**	0.813**	-1.518**	-1.639
	(0.253)	(0.264)	(0.376)	(1.213)
Natural claim	0.187	0.836**	1.629†	-1.797*
	(0.216)	(0.238)	(0.934)	(0.733)
Product nutritional content	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.
Year Dummies	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.
Constant	4.329†	6.987**	-9.940	17.241*
	(2.313)	(2.705)	(13.031)	(7.310)
Observations	1,956	1,852	514	502
R-squared	0.223	0.094	0.316	0.476
Number of Dyads	171	191	40	58
Log-likelihood	-3539	-3586	-633.5	-722.7

Standard errors in parentheses
** $p<0.01$, * $p<0.05$, † $p<0.1$

Magnitude of the Effects

We assessed the economic magnitude of the significant effects in our models by measuring the variation in sales that results from implementing each of the two types of impression management tactics in different stigma environments. We estimated these effects by allowing our main explanatory variables (*post*, *treat*, and their *interaction*) to vary, while setting the remaining covariates at their mean levels. Through this methodology, we find that ego-centric tactics originate a 127% increase in sales for members of low-stigma categories but lead to just a 12% increase in sales for high-stigma category members. On the contrary, alter-centric tactics are related to a 113% increase in sales in highly stigmatized categories, whilst their impact is only a 15% increase in sales for low-stigma category members.

Robustness tests

Product Unobserved Characteristics. In our main analysis, we assumed that each discrete decision to implement certain impression management tactics was exogenous. However, this assumption might not hold, in the sense that unobserved product characteristics, not captured by our matching procedure, might instead determine the implementation of the tactic. This possibility would introduce substantiated concerns with respect to our assumption that treatment and control UPCs are equally at risk of implementing a given tactic. To address this possible source of endogeneity, we reran the analyses using *UPC-level fixed effects*, rather than dyad-level fixed effects. This approach, we believe, provides a very conservative test of our theory, as it rules out any explanations for our effects that may derive from time-invariant product characteristics. The results from these analyses are shown in Table 5, which display the effects for ego-centric and alter-centric tactics, respectively, at low and high levels of categorical stigma. All results are fully consistent with the crux of our contingency model, i.e., that ego-centric tactics are more effective at low levels of categorical stigma, while alter-centric tactics are more effective at high levels of stigma.

Table 5. Estimates from Difference-in-Differences Models

Effects of Ego-Centric and Alter-Centric Tactics on Product Performance at Different Levels of Categorical Stigma (product and year fixed effects)

	Model 7	**Model 8**	**Model 9**	**Model 10**
Tactic	Ego-centric	Ego-centric	Alter-centric	Alter-centric
Level of stigma	Low	High	Low	High
Post	0.057	-0.116	0.142	0.331†
	(0.097)	(0.105)	(0.113)	(0.188)
Treat	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-
Interaction	**1.077****	**0.301***	**0.154**	**0.564***
	(0.134)	(0.142)	(0.135)	(0.235)
Categorical stigma	0.017	0.002	0.000	0.028
	(0.070)	(0.011)	(0.122)	(0.020)
Category performance	0.599**	0.587*	0.381	0.375
	(0.145)	(0.230)	(0.880)	(0.646)
Category contrast	1.151	3.265	-2.977	-1.125
	(2.033)	(2.027)	(3.946)	(5.694)
Category concentration	3.000*	8.893**	3.277	2.708
	(1.280)	(1.715)	(4.881)	(2.745)
Proportion absolute claims	-6.124*	-0.951	-13.359	72.293**
	(3.107)	(3.494)	(38.380)	(25.688)
Proportion relative claims	-980.408**	99.610	19.568	-57.350
	(209.725)	(252.121)	(225.951)	(135.134)
Brand diversification	0.158**	0.084	-0.082	0.098
	(0.047)	(0.083)	(0.124)	(0.099)
Brand recall	0.615**	-0.418	-0.885**	0.082
	(0.210)	(0.294)	(0.165)	(0.318)
Category leader	0.030	-	-	-
	(0.909)	-	-	-
Organic claim	-0.364	-0.014	-0.631	-
	(0.254)	(0.280)	(0.643)	-
Natural claim	-0.056	0.367	1.558*	-1.689*
	(0.247)	(0.264)	(0.623)	(0.770)
Year Dummies	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.
Constant	-2.099	-3.767	6.678	4.608
	(2.496)	(4.706)	(18.262)	(14.373)
Observations	1,956	1,852	514	502
R-squared	0.153	0.053	0.199	0.153
Number of UPCs (products)	299	345	75	129
Log-likelihood	-2832	-2672	-407.1	-580.9

Standard errors in parentheses
** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<0.1

Alternative Dependent Variable. Our dependent variable – product performance – is measured through product sales (number of units multiplied by price). Thus, our results could potentially be driven by an external event or decision causing changes in price and occurring concurrently with the implementation of a particular tactic. To rule out this possibility, we tested our models using the *number of units* sold (logged) as the dependent variable and included a control for the product's price. These models allow us to test for whether the implementation of a particular type of tactic leads to variation in the volume (quantity) of products sold. The results are presented in Table 6 and are entirely accordant with those in our main analysis.

Unobserved Concurrent Marketing Strategies. It could also be argued that an omitted variable, such as changes in a brand's marketing budget, could be driving both the impression management tactics and changes in product sales. To mitigate concerns with respect to this alternative explanation, we control for *brand performance*, measured by the log of annual brand sales. The advantage of including this control is that the effects of any factors that could influence brand sales concurrently with the tactic (e.g., advertising campaigns, distribution agreements, prizes and awards) are absorbed by this control. The drawback of such a choice is that for brands with few products this control unduly absorbs a large part or even the entire effect of the tactic. Thus, this is a very conservative test in that we are only able to capture variance within those brands with a large number of UPCs. The results for the models including the control for brand performance are presented in Table 7 and, notwithstanding the potential drawback, are consistent with our main results.

Table 6. Estimates from Difference-in-Differences Models – Alternative Dependent Variable

Effects of Ego-Centric and Alter-Centric Tactics on Number of Units Sold at Different Levels of Categorical Stigma (dyad and year fixed effects)

	Model 11	**Model 12**	**Model 13**	**Model 14**
Tactic	Ego-centric	Ego-centric	Alter-centric	Alter-centric
Level of stigma	Low	High	Low	High
Post	-0.069	-0.164	0.201	0.232
	(0.135)	(0.155)	(0.162)	(0.217)
Treat	-1.218**	-0.645**	-0.604*	-0.396
	(0.216)	(0.216)	(0.246)	(0.291)
Interaction	**0.856****	**0.068**	**0.064**	**0.629***
	(0.174)	(0.198)	(0.192)	(0.258)
Price	-0.317**	-0.020	-0.014	-0.526**
	(0.038)	(0.042)	(0.113)	(0.141)
Categorical stigma	-0.033	0.013	0.213	0.023
	(0.092)	(0.014)	(0.155)	(0.024)
Category performance	0.283**	0.294*	1.015†	-0.021
	(0.101)	(0.121)	(0.601)	(0.374)
Category contrast	1.783**	1.847**	4.500*	-3.384*
	(0.610)	(0.697)	(2.091)	(1.585)
Category concentration	4.567**	4.376**	-14.286**	-7.268**
	(0.749)	(1.482)	(5.399)	(1.867)
Proportion absolute claims	-12.318**	-6.279†	7.724	9.902
	(2.432)	(3.280)	(35.108)	(25.199)
Proportion relative claims	-1,360.710**	-363.685†	500.734*	84.332
	(247.479)	(210.490)	(244.396)	(134.271)
Brand diversification	0.155**	0.234**	-0.277**	0.059
	(0.055)	(0.089)	(0.097)	(0.059)
Brand recall	1.086**	-0.001	-0.855**	0.222
	(0.278)	(0.408)	(0.245)	(0.372)
Category leader	1.036	1.873	-	-
	(0.960)	(1.989)	-	-
Organic claim	-1.246**	0.736**	-1.520**	-1.447
	(0.252)	(0.257)	(0.370)	(1.204)
Natural claim	0.138	0.772**	1.511	-1.774*
	(0.214)	(0.232)	(0.921)	(0.731)
Product nutritional content	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.
Year Dummies	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.
Constant	4.068†	2.226	-4.630	18.928*
	(2.293)	(2.683)	(12.896)	(7.358)
Observations	1,956	1,852	514	502
R-squared	0.256	0.092	0.325	0.457
Number of Dyads	171	191	40	58
Log-likelihood	-3514	-3534	-624.5	-717.4

Standard errors in parentheses
** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<0.1

Table 7. Estimates from Difference-in-Differences Models – Brand Sales

Effects of Ego-Centric and Alter-Centric Tactics on Product Performance at Different Levels of Categorical Stigma (dyad and year fixed effects)

	Model 15	**Model 16**	**Model 17**	**Model 18**
Tactic	Ego-centric	Ego-centric	Alter-centric	Alter-centric
Level of stigma	Low	High	Low	High
Post	0.075	-0.120	0.196	0.228
	(0.119)	(0.144)	(0.159)	(0.164)
Treat	-0.420*	-0.615**	-0.263	0.181
	(0.193)	(0.200)	(0.249)	(0.222)
Interaction	**0.549****	**0.223**	**-0.041**	**0.437***
	(0.153)	(0.183)	(0.191)	(0.195)
Brand performance	0.787**	0.646**	0.283**	0.693**
	(0.033)	(0.034)	(0.053)	(0.039)
Categorical stigma	0.054	0.013	0.145	0.011
	(0.081)	(0.013)	(0.154)	(0.018)
Category performance	-0.169†	-0.277*	0.423	-0.956**
	(0.090)	(0.112)	(0.611)	(0.286)
Category contrast	3.581**	3.002**	4.069*	-1.915
	(0.539)	(0.648)	(2.028)	(1.191)
Category concentration	2.473**	3.682**	-12.354*	-8.325**
	(0.664)	(1.376)	(5.332)	(1.399)
Proportion absolute claims	-1.669	1.870	-3.925	-46.164*
	(2.171)	(3.065)	(34.772)	(19.243)
Proportion relative claims	-1,328.696**	13.558	351.638	18.570
	(215.012)	(193.299)	(244.693)	(100.964)
Brand diversification	0.004	-0.126	-0.320**	-0.021
	(0.048)	(0.085)	(0.096)	(0.044)
Brand recall	0.660**	-0.824*	-0.881**	-0.104
	(0.244)	(0.380)	(0.241)	(0.282)
Category leader	-0.144	1.170	-	-
	(0.842)	(1.841)	-	-
Organic claim	-1.045**	-0.005	-1.457**	-1.374
	(0.219)	(0.242)	(0.365)	(0.909)
Natural claim	0.390*	0.598**	1.744†	-1.622**
	(0.188)	(0.216)	(0.906)	(0.550)
Product nutritional content	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.
Year Dummies	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.
Constant	-0.578	4.392†	3.338	28.115**
	(2.014)	(2.445)	(12.892)	(5.512)
Observations	1,956	1,852	514	502
R-squared	0.417	0.262	0.357	0.707
Number of Dyads	171	191	40	58
Log-likelihood	-3258	-3396	-617.5	-577.3

Standard errors in parentheses
** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<0.1

Unobserved Expansion Strategies. A final omitted variable that could influence our results is related to possible decisions concerning expansion (or contraction) of the product's geographical presence at the time the tactic was implemented that could nevertheless be unrelated to the benefits of implementing the tactic. To address this possibility, we control for the *number of stores* in which the product is sold in each year. The advantage of including this control is that the effects of variations in sales driven by unobserved distribution decisions are absorbed. The disadvantage is that instead, the implementation of the tactic itself may justify access to new stores, and as such, this specification could be an overly conservative test that does not capture all the potential benefits of a tactic. The results for these models are presented in Table 8 and remain consistent with those of our main analysis.

Table 8. Estimates from Difference-in-Differences Models – Number of Stores

Effects of Ego-Centric and Alter-Centric Tactics on Product Performance at Different Levels of Categorical Stigma (dyad and year fixed effects)

	Model 19	**Model 20**	**Model 21**	**Model 22**
Tactic	Ego-centric	Ego-centric	Alter-centric	Alter-centric
Level of stigma	Low	High	Low	High
Post	0.129	-0.020	0.113	0.223
	(0.124)	(0.142)	(0.099)	(0.178)
Treat	-0.869**	-0.864**	-0.482**	0.017
	(0.199)	(0.197)	(0.150)	(0.241)
Interaction	**0.669****	**0.290**	**0.079**	**0.469***
	(0.159)	(0.181)	(0.117)	(0.213)
Number of stores	0.000**	0.000**	0.000**	0.000**
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Categorical stigma	-0.068	0.012	0.051	0.031
	(0.084)	(0.013)	(0.095)	(0.020)
Category performance	0.039	-0.092	0.693†	-0.136
	(0.093)	(0.109)	(0.365)	(0.305)
Category contrast	1.747**	1.758**	5.067**	-1.992
	(0.559)	(0.637)	(1.233)	(1.298)
Category concentration	1.514*	2.824*	-3.462	-4.324**
	(0.706)	(1.359)	(3.314)	(1.530)
Proportion absolute claims	-8.509**	-5.884*	28.766	13.189
	(2.229)	(2.992)	(21.392)	(20.632)
Proportion relative claims	-1,334.972**	-189.978	52.573	44.720
	(224.291)	(190.307)	(149.872)	(109.893)
Brand diversification	0.135**	0.375**	-0.039	0.269**
	(0.050)	(0.082)	(0.060)	(0.050)
Brand recall	0.904**	-0.116	-0.701**	-0.049
	(0.254)	(0.373)	(0.149)	(0.307)
Category leader	0.339	-1.980	-	-
	(0.878)	(1.819)	-	-
Organic claim	-0.745**	0.536*	-0.493*	-0.751
	(0.230)	(0.235)	(0.229)	(0.992)
Natural claim	0.241	0.472*	1.767**	-1.393*
	(0.195)	(0.213)	(0.561)	(0.599)
Product nutritional content	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.
Year Dummies	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.
Constant	8.131**	10.367**	-4.768	17.406**
	(2.099)	(2.412)	(7.827)	(5.966)
Observations	1,956	1,852	514	502
R-squared	0.365	0.283	0.754	0.652
Number of Dyads	171	191	40	58
Log-likelihood	-3341	-3369	-370.8	-620.1

Standard errors in parentheses
** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<0.1

DISCUSSION

Prior studies have cautioned against the use of impression management tactics in stigmatized categories (Desai, 2011; Durand & Vergne, 2015). Yet because stigmatized categories represent an extreme case of generally inflated negative perceptions, they are arguably the type of setting where impression management is most needed. In this paper, we sought to address this puzzle by proposing that the effectiveness of different impression management tactics employed by category members depends upon the risk of perceived manipulation. We specified the mechanisms that lead to a higher risk of perceived manipulation for ego-centric tactics in highly stigmatized categories, and for alter-centric tactics in low-stigma categories. We then tested our theory through the examination of the effectiveness of these tactics across categories with varying degrees of stigma in one comprehensive market, namely the food retail industry. Our empirical analyses seem to lend general support to our contingency model. We believe our theory and findings have important theoretical and practical implications, which we discuss next.

Contributions

The Locus of Perceived Manipulation. Extant work on impression management has recognized the risk that some tactics may be perceived as hypocritical or manipulative if implemented in an inappropriate context (Carlos & Lewis, 2018; Zavyalova et al., 2012). However, prior studies have primarily focused on ego-centric tactics, and therefore attributed the locus of perceived manipulation to the focal organization. We contribute to this line of work by including alter-centric tactics in organizational repertoires of impression management. In this respect, our work follows-up on recent contributions that have formally extended the concept of organizational impression management to its competitive dimension (Cole & Chandler, 2019). We show that the locus of perceived manipulation may reside beyond the focal organization, depending on pre-existing beliefs about ego's host category. More broadly, our study suggests that shared beliefs concerning categories that structure a given market have a direct influence on the risk of perceived manipulation inherent to different types of impression management tactics.

Impression Management in Stigmatized Categories. Our paper speaks closely to the debate on the use of traditional impression management tactics in contested settings, i.e., those that are characterized by social contestation and scrutiny by hostile audiences (Durand & Vergne, 2015). Prior work has asserted that impression management theory developed for socially accepted contexts rests on assumptions that may not necessarily hold in contested settings (Durand & Vergne, 2015). We specifically examine the case of stigmatized categories as one particularly salient instance of contested settings and we provide a more nuanced view of what constitutes credible impression management in such settings. We therefore contribute to the cross-fertilization of stigma and impression management theories by showing that categorical stigma is a critical contingency that shapes the effectiveness of impression management tactics. Our theory and empirical findings also suggest that the extant body of work on organizational perception management (Elsbach, 2003) lacks a complete understanding of how interorganizational impression management can be used to complement and address the shortcomings of traditional forms of impression management (Cole & Chandler, 2019; Mohamed & Gardner, 2004). This paper contributes to advancing this research by conceptualizing and empirically identifying one type of interorganizational impression management – alter-centric tactics – that seems to be appropriate for contested settings.

Impression Management as a Market Competition Tool. A striking limitation in extant research is that it has paid scant attention to the competitive dimension of impression management (Cole & Chandler, 2019), and in particular, how firms utilize specific types of impression management tactics to support their market positioning. In this paper, we contribute to filling this gap by highlighting the role of impression management as a market competition tool. We therefore contribute to the complementary dialogue between strategy and marketing research (Morgan, Vorhies, & Mason, 2009; Vorhies, Morgan, & Autry, 2009). While consumer behavior research has extensively investigated the general effects of nutrient claims on product performance (Berry et al., 2017; Rao & Wang, 2017; Roe, Levy, & Derby, 1999), we note its focus on market demand, in particular on how different factors determine outcomes such as product evaluations and purchasing intentions.

In this paper, we are instead concerned with the agentic nature of impression management from a supply perspective. Put differently, we contribute to the literature by showing that, without ruling out demand effects, firms may successfully utilize specific types of impression management tactics to instrumentally position themselves in the market, with a view to outperforming their rivals. Our paper thus contributes to a broader literature that highlights the agency of producers in observing their peers when making critical economic and strategic decisions (Pontikes, 2018; White, 1981).

Managing Stigma Through Impression Management. Extant theory suggests a variety of strategies that category members can use to manage or avoid the consequences of categorical stigma. These strategies might be broadly classified into three types: acceptance, compromise, or defiance. Acceptance strategies involve submitting to the demands of stigmatizing audiences by explicitly adapting the organization or its practices to fit with those audiences' requirements, and include divesting from stigmatized industries (Durand & Vergne, 2015), disengaging from investments (Piazza & Perretti, 2015), and diversifying to more conventional and uncontested industries (Vergne, 2012). Compromise strategies, on the other hand, are designed to maintain the organization's focus on its core stigmatized activities while avoiding unwanted scrutiny and attention. These strategies are primarily intended to avoid any type of attention, and include approaches such as concealment (Hudson, 2008; Wolfe & Blithe, 2015) and boundary management (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009). Defiance strategies are usually adopted by category members who cannot engage in acceptance or compromise without risking their identity or exiting business altogether (Piazza & Perretti, 2015). Under such circumstances, they will seek to reduce or eliminate stigma through tactics such as label co-optation (Helms & Patterson, 2014), attacks on the stigmatizing stakeholder group, and allegiance to other groups (Hampel & Tracey, 2017).

What acceptance, compromise, and defiance strategies have in common is that they are all designed to either reduce the salience of deviant attributes or to minimize the negativity that audiences assign to those attributes. However, attributes are not evaluated in a social vacuum, but rather with respect to context (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). By contextualizing stigma as taking place in a market structure segmented into categories, we approach stigma as a relative rather than absolute phenomenon. For example, MIXED MARTIAL ARTS were stigmatized by some key audiences for being perceived as more violent, *relative to other contact sports* (Helms & Patterson, 2014). In fact, Goffman (1963) originally proposed that the perceived variety and meaning of deviance would be contingent on audiences' adopted "system of reference". If stigma is relative in the sense that it is determined by audiences' systems of reference, it logically follows that one type of strategy that category members can engage in to manage the consequences of categorical stigma is to influence the very systems of reference that audience members resort to. This is what the alter-centric tactics in our study seek to achieve, and we therefore contribute to this literature by uncovering an effective stigma management strategy, which has been overlooked in prior work.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

A limitation of our findings is that the scope of our data constrains us to use sales as a proxy for performance. Ideally, we would employ a measure of return that would include the products' cost and investment components as well. Data limitations also did not allow us to consider some factors that could affect product performance beyond the implementation of specific tactics, such as shelf space and promotions. We attempted to address this limitation with one robustness test where we control for brand-level performance, yet ideally, our data would have been more fine-grained, to allow us to disentangle these effects. A final limitation concerns the generalizability of our theory, in that it could be applicable only to industries that have common characteristics with food retail, such as a high level of segmentation into categories that organize foods into distinctive domains, as well as a high degree and intensity of competition.

This paper adopts a broader view on impression management tactics and their contingent effectiveness as a function of a social evaluation, namely stigma. In particular, it advances the idea that social evaluations of categories establish shared beliefs, which impression management tactics should not conflict with, lest they be interpreted as manipulative. We believe that future research could fruitfully extend this idea in a number of different ways. First, future studies could delve deeper into the dynamics of impression management tactics when shaped by other types of social evaluations of categories, such as status or legitimacy. Second, our work highlights the credibility of alter-centric tactics in contested settings and opens up the ground for other work that may investigate additional forms of impression management that might be appropriate in such settings. Third, and related, this study is only a first step in understanding how category members purposefully shape their systems of reference to fight off stigma consequences. We believe that this area of study merits much further work, and we hope that other scholars may feel motivated to pursue this line of investigation.

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CAPÍTULO 4: ¿MANIPULADOR O MAL MENOR? DESEMPEÑO DE LAS TÁCTICAS DE MANEJO DE IMPRESIÓNES EN LAS CATEGORÍAS ESTIGMATIZADAS

La gestión de impresiones se entiende generalmente como cualquier acción organizativa que busca influir intencionalmente en las percepciones de los interesados (Elsbach, Sutton y Principe, 1998), generalmente a través de la divulgación de información que proyecta imágenes de la organización, sus productos, prácticas, decisiones o políticas bajo una luz favorable (Beverland, 2005; Highhouse, Brooks y Gregarus, 2009; Lamertz, Heugens y Calmet, 2005). Dichas acciones son indispensables para que las organizaciones manejen violaciones, potenciales o existentes, de las expectativas de las partes interesadas (Elsbach et al., 1998; Graffin, Haleblian y Kiley, 2016; Zavyalova, Pfarrer, Reger y Shapiro, 2012). Sin embargo, los beneficios del manejo de impresiones pueden tener un alto precio, ya que el manejo puede ser percibido como manipulador y, en consecuencia, castigado a través de sanciones sociales y económicas (Desai, 2011; Elsbach et al., 1998; Zavyalova et al., 2012). La teoría existente sugiere que para los miembros de categorías estigmatizadas, cuyos atributos entran en conflicto con los valores y las normas institucionalizadas del público (Devers, Dewett, Mishina y Belsito, 2009; Hudson, 2008), el riesgo de ser percibidos como manipuladores es particularmente alto. En tal contexto, intentar proyectar una imagen favorable probablemente se interprete como incongruente con percepciones profundamente desfavorables de la categoría y, por lo tanto, se perciba como manipuladora. Como consecuencia, los miembros de *categorías estigmatizadas* deben evitar el manejo de impresiones (Durand y Vergne, 2015). Dicho de otra manera, los académicos han asumido predominantemente que las tácticas de manejo de impresiones no serán efectivas para los miembros de categorías estigmatizadas. Curiosamente, tal suposición contiene una paradoja: el manejo de impresiones no se recomienda precisamente donde más se necesita.

Argumentamos que este podría no ser necesariamente el caso y que, de hecho, algunas tácticas de gestión de impresiones pueden ser más efectivas cuando existen niveles altos de estigma categórico que cuando existen niveles bajos. Creemos que la visión teórica predominante está limitada por dos deficiencias. Primero, la investigación previa ha investigado las tácticas de gestión de impresiones como homogéneas y, por lo tanto, ha pasado por alto la posibilidad de que diferentes tipos de tácticas puedan ser apropiadas en diferentes contextos. En particular, esta corriente de investigación ha centrado la investigación del manejo de impresiones en un solo tipo de táctica, que calificamos como *ego-céntrica*[1] en su contenido informativo, es decir, que se basa en información específica de la organización o del producto. Sin embargo, ha pasado por alto otro tipo importante de táctica, que calificamos como *alter-céntrica*, es decir, que utiliza información sobre otros significativos (por ejemplo, competidores). Con la excepción de un estudio muy reciente (Cole y Chandler, 2019), se ha dedicado un esfuerzo mínimo a comprender cómo las organizaciones usan el manejo de impresiones para influir positivamente en las percepciones de las partes interesadas a través de la devaluación de otros (Mohamed y Gardner, 2004). Segundo, y como resultado, los académicos han

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[1] Seguimos la elegante terminología de Podolny (2001), aunque usamos estas etiquetas de una manera muy diferente.

prestado poca atención a la posibilidad de que la manipulación percibida pueda surgir del uso inadecuado de tácticas que recurren a la información sobre otros. Ampliar el alcance del manejo de impresiones para incluir tácticas alter-céntricas implica el reconocimiento de que el locus de la manipulación percibida puede residir no solo en formas ampliamente investigadas de auto engrandecimiento, sino también en tácticas bastante menos investigadas que buscan la devaluación de los demás (Mohamed, Gardner, Y Paolillo, 1999).

En este ensayo, distinguimos entre tácticas *centradas en el ego* y tácticas *centradas en el alter* y ampliamos la teoría actual al proponer un modelo de contingencia de la eficacia del manejo de impresiones en categorías con diferentes grados de estigma (Vergne, 2012). Teorizamos que el uso de tácticas centradas en el ego será más efectivo en categorías de bajo estigma, donde resaltar atributos particularmente positivos sobre el ego proporcionará una señal que es congruente con las creencias compartidas sobre la categoría (Fiske y Neuberg, 1990), levantando por tanto poco escepticismo en las partes interesadas. Sin embargo, estas tácticas serán menos efectivas en categorías altamente estigmatizadas, ya que, por definición, dichas categorías se caracterizan por la presencia de atributos estigmatizantes (Devers et al., 2009; Slade Shantz, Fischer, Liu y Lévesque, 2018). En estas circunstancias, las tácticas centradas en el ego empleadas por los miembros de la categoría individual colisionarán con creencias generalmente negativas sobre la categoría y, por lo tanto, es más probable que se perciban como manipuladoras.

Por el contrario, proponemos que las tácticas alter-céntricas serán más efectivas en categorías que exhiben altos niveles de estigma en lugar de bajos.

Las tácticas centradas en el alter no tienen como objetivo proyectar imágenes del miembro de la categoría como ejemplares o dignas de elogio, sino que proporcionan a las partes interesadas información desfavorable sobre los demás, lo que desencadena implícita o explícitamente una comparación conveniente para el miembro focal, proyectando su imagen como "primero entre iguales" o "un mal menor". Lo hacen centrando la atención de los interesados en los atributos negativos de los demás (Cole y Chandler, 2019). Esto les permite permanecer en consonancia con las percepciones negativas de la categoría, lo que conlleva un riesgo menor de manipulación percibida. Por otro lado, sostenemos que, en categorías de bajo estigma, las tácticas centradas en el alter serán percibidas como manipuladoras y, por lo tanto, es poco probable que sean efectivas. Sostenemos que el acto de minimizar explícitamente a otros en el contexto de categorías que se caracterizan por creencias generalmente favorables o neutrales es probable que se juzgue como injustificable o incluso difamatorio (Mohamed y Gardner, 2004), y por lo tanto conlleva un alto riesgo de manipulación percibida.

Testeamos y encontramos apoyo empírico para estos argumentos teóricos en el contexto de la industria minorista de alimentos de EE. UU. Utilizando un conjunto de datos de tácticas de gestión de impresiones empleadas por los fabricantes de alimentos, encontramos que la implementación de tácticas centradas en el ego origina un aumento del 127% en las ventas para los miembros de la categoría de bajo estigma, pero no tiene un impacto significativo en las ventas de los miembros de la categoría de alto estigma. Por el contrario, las tácticas alternativas están relacionadas con un aumento del 113% en las ventas para miembros de categorías altamente estigmatizadas, pero no tienen un impacto significativo en las ventas de los componentes de las categorías de bajo estigma.

Nuestro ensayo contribuye a la gestión de impresiones y la literatura sobre el estigma de varias maneras. Primero, mostramos que el riesgo de manipulación percibida en el manejo de impresiones reside no solo en tácticas que usan información sobre un miembro de categoría focal, sino también en tácticas que se enfocan en otros miembros significativos. Argumentamos que ambos centros de interés pueden estar en el origen de la manipulación percibida, dependiendo de las percepciones preexistentes sobre la categoría que los alberga, que a su vez están moldeadas por el estigma categórico (Hudson, 2008; Lashley y Pollock, 2019; Vergne, 2012). En segundo lugar, abordamos la investigación de la gestión de impresiones en un entorno novedoso por su controversia (Durand y Vergne, 2015). Investigamos los factores que hacen que el manejo de impresiones sea una estrategia más o menos viable en tales entornos y aportamos evidencia sobre su efectividad. No conceptualizamos el espacio del mercado como continuo e indistinto, sino más bien como segmentado coherentemente en categorías con diferentes características (Cattani, Porac y Thomas, 2017; Durand y Paolella, 2013). Mientras que los estudios previos de gestión de impresiones no prestan atención a las propiedades de las categorías en las que se integran organizaciones o productos, en este ensayo tratamos el grado de estigma categórico como una señal clave que determina la (in)congruencia en las tácticas de gestión de impresiones. En tercer lugar, contribuimos a la literatura sobre gestión de impresiones al subrayar su papel estratégico en ayudar a los miembros de la categoría a posicionarse instrumentalmente en el espacio competitivo de un mercado. Si bien el trabajo más reciente ha dado los primeros pasos en extender la gestión de impresiones organizacionales a contextos competitivos (Cole & Chandler, 2019), damos un paso más e inspeccionamos su desempeño en diferentes entornos competitivos. Finalmente, ampliamos la literatura actual sobre el estigma, que se ha definido el estigma desde una perspectiva absoluta y explicamos cómo los miembros de las categorías estigmatizadas trabajan para reducir o eliminar las sanciones impuestas por el estigma. Argumentamos por una interpretación alternativa del estigma como un fenómeno relativo en el sentido de que está determinado por los sistemas de referencia del público (Goffman, 1963). Desde esta perspectiva, se deduce que una estrategia efectiva para el manejo del estigma, pasada por alto en trabajos previos, es elaborar cuidadosamente sistemas de referencia favorables y presentarlos deliberadamente a las audiencias de evaluación.

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CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Although stigma is an important social evaluation that can determine organizational fates, it has only been recently that it received significant attention from management scholars (Pollock, Lashley, Rindova, & Han, 2019). The overarching aim of this dissertation is therefore to contribute to advancing research on stigma in the context of organizations along its maturity stage (Edmondson & McManus, 2007).

My initial literature review revealed three areas that emerged as topics in the literature susceptible of being fruitfully explored to advance our knowledge of stigma in the management tradition. First, while most authors seem to agree that stigma resides in the eye of the beholder (Hudson, 2008), the extant literature apparently lacks an integrative model of cognition that can explain how audience members attribute stigma to targets. Perhaps for that reason, most studies have focused on public stigma (Pescosolido & Martin, 2015), towards industries such as arms (Durand & Vergne, 2015; Vergne, 2012), pornography (Jensen, 2010), nuclear power (Piazza & Perretti, 2015), or “dirty work” (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007). Put differently, scholars have tended to investigate stigmas that have already undergone the social diffusion stage, while the precursory stage, through which individual audience members decide to stigmatize an organization or an entire category, has received scant attention.

Second, prior work has mainly considered stigma from an absolute perspective. Perceptions of deviance have been depicted as emerging from inconsistency between salient attributes of the organization and deeply institutionalized norms (Devers, Dewett, Mishina, & Belsito, 2009). However, Goffman (1963) originally proposed that the perceived variety and meaning of deviance would be contingent on audience members' adopted "system of reference", above and beyond the rules established by social norms. It seems, however, that this insight has been rather overlooked in extant work on stigma in the organizational context.

Third, the stigma management strategies described by the extant literature have sought to explain how organizations work to mitigate stigma by reducing the salience of deviant attributes or by minimizing the negativity that audiences assign to those attributes. Yet, once acknowledging, as discussed above, that a) stigma attribution is moderated by individuals' cognitive limitations and biases, and b) perceived deviance depends on a system of reference, it becomes feasible that stigma may be managed through the manipulation of the system of reference that audiences utilize in their judgment processes leading to stigma. This possibility also seems to have been rather neglected in prior studies.

In light of the above, the core of this dissertation comprises three interrelated essays that seek to address these limitations. The first essay proposes a micro-level model of stigma emergence that explains both the attribution and the consequences of stigma. It highlights how cognitive limitations and biases prevent individuals from attending to all available stimuli and discusses the adaptive application of social norms and expectations that produces the antagonistic attitudes behind stigma. The model ultimately explains variance in audience reactions to the same objective conditions exhibited by evaluation targets, which in turn represents a key premise to the malleable nature of stigma.

The second essay examines why some categories are stigmatized to greater extents than others in the same market structure. It proposes that individuals' perceptions of a focal category are not linearly established with respect to a normative standard, but rather relative to other categories that are "easily available" in their memory, and therefore effortlessly accessible to perform the judgment task that underlies stigma. Using data from the US food retail market between 2006 and 2015, the results of this study show that indeed audience members resort to only the most easily available referent to assess each focal category. Moreover, these results show that the pattern of inter-category relationships is a key determinant of stigma, above and beyond objective categorical attributes.

The third essay explores how organizations strategically use impression management to influence stakeholders' perceptions, either by directly focusing on their own attributes (ego-centric tactics), or by downplaying those of particularly meaningful referents (alter-centric tactics). Results of a difference in-difference estimation, based on a large dataset covering the food retail industry, indicate that ego-centric tactics are more effective for members of low-stigma categories, whereas alter-centric tactics are more effective for highly stigmatized categories' members. These results highlight that stigmatized category members may effectively manage the consequences of categorical stigma by manipulating the very systems of reference that audiences resort to.

The discussions emerging from the three essays, especially when combined, hold a number of research opportunities to further advance our understanding of stigma in the context of organizations. In the next and final section of this dissertation I outline additional challenges and directions for research that are beyond the scope of the essays per se, but which have emerged from my investigation of the stigma literature as interesting, important and relevant for the fields of organization theory and strategy. I hope that the dissertation in general, and its suggestions for future research in particular, may be a source of motivation for others to pursue stigma research in the context of organizations.

CHALLENGES AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE STIGMA RESEARCH

Measuring Stigma

Measuring stigma has proven to be an elusive task (Devers & Mishina, 2019; Pollock et al., 2019). With very few exceptions (see Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009; Piazza & Perretti, 2015), scholars have *assumed* rather than *demonstrated* that certain organizations or categories are stigmatized owing to a discrediting event or attribute. Relatedly, stigma has been portrayed as dichotomous in the extant literature. In some studies, a given organization or industry is taken as being stigmatized as opposed to non-stigmatized (e.g., Durand & Vergne, 2015; Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009), whilst other studies examine the process through which an organization or industry might 'become stigmatized' or eliminate stigma to 'become legitimate' (Hampel & Tracey, 2018). These approaches, however, largely ignore the notion that stigma is a matter of degree, which is well rooted in both the social psychology (Link & Phelan, 2001; Pescosolido & Martin, 2015) and the management (Hudson, 2008) literatures. Indeed, prior studies have emphasized the importance of differing degrees of stigma, for example, as a determinant of different stigma management strategies (Piazza & Perretti, 2015).

Furthermore, since stigmatization requires interaction (Paetzold, Dipboye, & Elsbach, 2008), by default it requires action from the originator. Put differently, in order to stigmatize, it is not enough to hold a profoundly negative perception of a given social actor or set of actors; the stigma originator needs to visibly express the negative perception. This carries a challenge with respect to measurement because communication is often verbal rather than written, especially in situations where a written record of stigma expression might be socially unacceptable. Taken together, these difficulties lead me to suggest that the development of methodological approaches to stigma measurement could constitute a contribution to this literature in its own right.

Testing the Stigmatization Process

Cynthia Devers and colleagues have published the only comprehensive study of organizational stigmatization processes to date (Devers et al., 2009). Although their seminal work is highly cited in the stigma literature, most of the propositions at the core of their proposed process unfortunately remain untested. There are ample opportunities to investigative its main effects, boundary conditions and contingencies. First, Devers and colleagues suggest that the triggering mechanism for the attachment of a vilifying label to an organization is a stakeholder group's perception of value incongruence, which in turn emerges from an inconsistency between salient attributes of the organization and deeply institutionalized norms. In short, the process suggests that when organizations deeply violate widely held expectations, they are sanctioned with a vilifying label. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, norms and expectations are conceptually distinct and bear distinct empirical implications (Levine et al., 2000). This distinction implies that more effort is needed to account for and discriminate between the roles of norms and expectations in stigmatization processes.

A further aspect in the stigmatization process that warrants further scrutiny is the role of the claim maker status. Devers et al. (2009) sagaciously propose that the status of the claim maker is a key determinant of the likelihood of a label being accepted by a critical mass of adopters. I note firstly that this proposition has not been empirically tested, and I additionally suggest that future research should aim to specify more clearly the distinction between the *absolute* status of the claim maker within the stakeholder group and the status of the claim maker *relative* to the stigmatized actor. I advance that both these types of status may determine the likelihood of a vilifying label becoming widely accepted, but research has yet to investigate this presumption. Studying how the status of an organization may influence the type and degree of stigma it is accorded also allows for an exploration of the complex interplay between different types of social evaluations (Pollock et al., 2019), which is an area of growing interest amongst social evaluation scholars.

Incorporating Time into Stigma Research

Time is a crucial, but often overlooked, element of organization theory (Ancona, Okhuysen, & Perlow, 2001). I propose that stigma research would benefit from more explicitly attending to the role of time in the stigmatization process and how it determines the interplay between evolving social norms and the path-dependent nature of stigma. Specifically, since social norms are relatively stable in time (Bicchieri, 2006) and social judgements are fundamentally path-dependent (Mishina, Block, & Mannor, 2012), it follows that when we look at stigma at any given point in time it seems to be set in stone and difficult to remove (Devers et al., 2009; Devers & Mishina, 2019). Yet, when we take a long-term perspective we see that there are “tectonic shifts” that cause social norms to change, and with them, so does stigma. For example, a little over 50 years ago in the US, the use of DDT pesticides was not just accepted, it was supported and welcome with enthusiasm for all the benefits it had (Maguire & Hardy, 2009). On the other hand, homosexuality in the UK was not only unaccepted, it was outlawed (Adut, 2005). In today’s day and age, we have a completely inverted picture of these two issues.

This observation provides the foundation for my suggestion that scholars should attempt to understand in each study’s particular research setting, whether stigma is in an “ascending”, “stable” or “descending” trajectory. The stigma of tobacco, for example, has stabilized and acquired rule-like status over the last few decades (Galvin, Ventresca, & Hudson, 2004). Conversely, the stigma of environmental harm caused by combustion of fossil fuels (Pralle, 2006) is in an ascending trajectory, while the stigma of online dating is in a descending trajectory (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012).

Characterizing the stigma trajectory has three immediate benefits. First, it may help to explain why, during the period under review in each particular study, some audiences (still/already) held a stigma towards a particular group of organizations and assist in the identification of audience-specific perceptions. Second, a consideration of the time element in the study of stigma diffusion may offer meaningful avenues for investigation. For example, we do not know whether stigma diffusion follows the iconic S-shaped curve described in the literature

(Etzion, 2013) or some other typical pattern. Research can meaningfully contribute both conceptually and empirically by explaining the rate at which a stigma diffuses across different stakeholder groups, thus informing the strategies that affected organizations might employ to manage it.

Third, considering stigma trajectories may help to explain why stigmatized organizations might choose compromise or acceptance strategies over defiance strategies. Perhaps it is the case that the appropriate choice of strategic action is partly determined by stigma trajectories. Intuitively, it seems reasonable to expect that organizations facing a stable stigma will tend to avoid defiance strategies more than organizations dealing with stigmas that are in ascending or descending trajectories, but research has yet to examine these relationships. For example, organizations engaged in the defense of stigmatized groups (e.g., women's suffrage, civil rights, anti-apartheid) initially adopt compromise strategies, involving themselves in secrecy, but eventually grow into fully-fledged social movements, shifting into defiance strategies and actively confronting stigmatizing audiences. But the inverse may be observed as well. For instance, tobacco companies initially engaged in defiance strategies (Galvin et al., 2004), but as the stigma unfolded, they ultimately retreated into compromise and acceptance (Vergne, 2012). Indeed, the relationship between stigma trajectories and strategies employed by affected organizations to manage it may be bidirectional, in the sense that the very strategies employed by affected organizations determine and are determined by the intensity of the stigma that is bestowed upon them. This mutually reinforcing process may hold interesting lessons for corporate strategy.

CAPÍTULO 5: CONCLUSIÓN

Aunque el estigma es una evaluación social importante que puede determinar el destino de las organizaciones, solo recientemente ha recibido una atención significativa de los académicos de administración (Pollock, Lashley, Rindova y Han, 2019). El objetivo general de esta tesis doctoral es, por lo tanto, contribuir a avanzar nuestro conocimiento sobre el estigma a lo largo de su etapa de madurez en el contexto de las organizaciones (Edmondson y McManus, 2007).

Mi revisión inicial de la literatura reveló tres áreas que la investigación podría explorar fructíferamente para avanzar nuestro conocimiento del estigma en los estudios de administración. Primero, a pesar de que la mayoría de los autores parecen estar de acuerdo en que el estigma reside en el ojo del espectador (Hudson, 2008), la literatura existente carece de un modelo cognitivo integrador que pueda explicar cómo los miembros de la audiencia atribuyen el estigma a los sujetos. Quizás por esa razón, la mayoría de los estudios se han centrado en el estigma público (Pescosolido y Martin, 2015), en industrias como las armas (Durand y Vergne, 2015; Vergne, 2012), la pornografía (Jensen, 2010), la energía nuclear (Piazza y Perretti , 2015), o el "trabajo sucio" (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark y Fugate, 2007). Dicho de otra manera, los académicos han tendido a investigar los estigmas que ya han pasado por la etapa de difusión social, mientras que la etapa precursora, a través de la cual los miembros de la audiencia individual deciden estigmatizar una organización o una categoría, ha recibido muy poca atención.

Segundo, el trabajo previo ha considerado el estigma generalmente desde una perspectiva absoluta. Desde ésta, las percepciones de incongruencia se han descrito como una consecuencia de la inconsistencia entre los atributos más destacados de la organización y las normas institucionalizadas (Devers, Dewett, Mishina y Belsito, 2009). Sin embargo, Goffman (1963) originalmente propuso que la variedad percibida y el significado de la incongruencia dependen del "sistema de referencia" adoptado por los miembros de la audiencia, más allá de las reglas establecidas por las normas sociales. Sin embargo, parece que esta idea se ha pasado por alto en el trabajo existente sobre el estigma en el contexto organizacional.

Tercero, las estrategias de manejo del estigma descritas por la literatura existente han tratado de explicar cómo las organizaciones trabajan para mitigar el estigma reduciendo la prominencia de los atributos incongruentes o minimizando la negatividad que el público asigna a esos atributos. Sin embargo, una vez que se reconoce, como se discutió anteriormente, que a) la atribución del estigma está moderada por las limitaciones y sesgos cognitivos de los individuos, y que b) la desviación percibida depende de un sistema de referencia, es factible que el estigma se pueda manejar mediante la manipulación del sistema de referencia que los miembros de la audiencia utilizan en los procesos de juicio que conducen al estigma. Esta posibilidad también parece haber sido ignorada por estudios previos.

A la luz de lo anterior, el núcleo de esta tesis doctoral comprende tres ensayos interrelacionados que buscan abordar estas limitaciones. El primer ensayo propone un modelo a nivel micro del surgimiento del estigma que explica tanto la atribución como las consecuencias del estigma. Destaca cómo las limitaciones cognitivas y los prejuicios evitan que las personas presten atención a todos los estímulos disponibles y explica la aplicación adaptativa de las normas y expectativas que producen las actitudes antagónicas detrás del estigma. El modelo explica en última instancia la variación en las reacciones de la audiencia a las mismas condiciones objetivas exhibidas por los sujetos evaluados, lo que a su vez representa una premisa clave para la naturaleza maleable del estigma.

El segundo ensayo examina por qué algunas categorías están estigmatizadas en mayor medida que otras en la misma estructura de mercado. Propone que las percepciones de los individuos de una categoría focal no se establecen linealmente con respecto a un estándar normativo, sino que se relacionan con otras categorías que son "fácilmente disponibles" en la memoria, y por lo tanto accesibles sin esfuerzo para realizar el juicio que subyace al estigma. Utilizando datos del mercado minorista de alimentos de EEUU entre 2006 y 2015, los resultados de este estudio muestran que, en efecto, los miembros de la audiencia sólo recurren a un referente fácilmente disponible para evaluar cada categoría focal. Además, estos resultados muestran que el patrón de las relaciones entre categorías es un determinante clave del estigma, más allá de los atributos categóricos objetivos.

El tercer ensayo explora cómo las organizaciones usan estratégicamente el manejo de impresiones para influir en las percepciones de los interesados, ya sea enfocándose directamente en sus propios atributos (tácticas centradas en el ego) o minimizando las de referentes particularmente significativos (tácticas centradas en el álter). Los resultados de una estimación de diferencia en diferencia, basada en una gran base de datos que cubre la industria minorista de alimentos, indican que las tácticas centradas en el ego son más efectivas para los miembros de categorías de bajo estigma, mientras que las tácticas centradas en el álter son más efectivas para los miembros de categorías altamente estigmatizadas. Estos resultados muestran que los miembros de la categoría estigmatizada pueden manejar efectivamente las consecuencias del estigma categórico al manipular los sistemas de referencia a los que recurre el público.

Las conclusiones que surgen de los tres ensayos, especialmente cuando se combinan, ofrecen una serie de oportunidades de investigación para avanzar aún más en nuestra comprensión del estigma en el contexto de las organizaciones. En la siguiente y última sección de esta tesis doctoral, describo los desafíos y las direcciones adicionales para la investigación que, aunque van más allá del alcance de estos ensayos, han surgido de mi investigación de la literatura sobre el estigma como interesantes, importantes y relevantes para los campos de la teoría de las organizaciones y la estrategia. Espero que esta tesis doctoral en general, y sus sugerencias para futuras investigaciones en particular, puedan ser una fuente de motivación para que otros prosigan la investigación del estigma en el contexto de las organizaciones.

DIRECCIONES PARA LA INVESTIGACIÓN FUTURA DEL ESTIGMA

Midiendo el Estigma

La medición del estigma ha demostrado ser una tarea difícil de alcanzar (Devers y Mishina, 2019; Pollock et al., 2019). Con muy pocas excepciones (ver Hudson y Okhuysen, 2009; Piazza y Perretti, 2015), los académicos han *asumido*, en lugar de *demostrado*, que ciertas organizaciones o categorías están estigmatizadas debido a un evento que las ha desacreditado o a un atributo concreto. Además, el estigma ha sido tratado como dicotómico en la literatura existente. En algunos estudios, una organización o industria dada se considera, o bien estigmatizada, o bien no estigmatizada (por ejemplo, Durand y Vergne, 2015; Hudson y Okhuysen, 2009), mientras que otros estudios examinan el proceso mediante el cual una organización o industria podrían 'estigmatizarse' o eliminar el estigma para 'legitimarse' (Hampel & Tracey, 2018). Sin embargo, estos enfoques ignoran en gran medida la noción de que el estigma es una cuestión de grado (Link y Phelan, 2001; Pescosolido y Martin, 2015). De hecho, estudios previos han enfatizado la importancia de diferentes grados de estigma, por ejemplo, como determinantes de las diferentes estrategias que pueden emplearse para manejar el estigma (Piazza y Perretti, 2015).

Además, dado que la estigmatización requiere interacción (Paetzold, Dipboye y Elsbach, 2008), por defecto requiere acción por parte del sujeto. Dicho de otra manera, para estigmatizar, no es suficiente tener una percepción profundamente negativa de un determinado actor social o conjunto de actores; el sujeto que estigmatiza necesita expresar de modo visible dicha percepción negativa. Esta forma de expresión conlleva un desafío con respecto a la medición porque la comunicación es a menudo verbal en lugar de escrita, especialmente en situaciones en las que un registro escrito de la expresión del estigma puede ser socialmente inaceptable. En conjunto, estas dificultades me llevan a sugerir que el desarrollo de enfoques metodológicos para la medición del estigma podría constituir una enorme contribución a esta literatura.

Testeando el Proceso de Estigmatización

Cynthia Devers y sus coautores han publicado el único estudio exhaustivo de los procesos de estigmatización organizacional hasta la fecha (Devers et al., 2009). Aunque su trabajo seminal ha sido muy citado en la literatura sobre el estigma, la mayoría de las proposiciones del proceso que propone aún no se han testeado. Por ello abundan las oportunidades para investigar sus principales efectos, condiciones previas y contingencias. Primero, Devers y sus coautores sugieren que el mecanismo desencadenante que lleva a la adjudicación de una etiqueta vilipendiosa a una organización es la percepción de incongruencia de valores por las partes interesadas, que a su vez surge de una inconsistencia entre los atributos sobresalientes de la organización y las normas institucionalizadas. En resumen, el mecanismo sugiere que cuando las organizaciones violan las expectativas ampliamente aceptadas, son sancionadas con una etiqueta vilipendiosa. Sin embargo, como se discutió en el Capítulo II, las normas y expectativas son conceptualmente distintas y tienen implicaciones empíricas distintas (Levine et al., 2000). Esta distinción implica que se necesita más esfuerzo para explicar y discriminar los roles de las normas y las expectativas en los procesos de estigmatización.

Otro aspecto en el proceso de estigmatización que justifica un mayor escrutinio es el papel del estado del reclamante. Devers et al. (2009) proponen sagazmente que el estado del reclamante es un determinante clave de la probabilidad de que una masa crítica adopte una etiqueta. Noto, en primer lugar, que esta proposición no ha sido probada empíricamente, y sugiero, además, que la investigación futura debería tener como objetivo especificar más claramente la distinción entre el estado *absoluto* del reclamante dentro del grupo de partes interesadas y el estado del reclamante *en relación* con el actor estigmatizado. Propongo que estos dos tipos de estatus pueden determinar la probabilidad de que una etiqueta vilipendiosa sea ampliamente aceptada, pero la investigación aún no ha investigado esta posibilidad. Estudiar cómo el estado de una organización puede influir en el tipo y grado de estigma que se le otorga también permite explorar la compleja interacción entre los diferentes tipos de evaluación social (Pollock et al., 2019), un área de creciente interés entre los investigadores de la evaluación social.

Incorporando el Tiempo en la Investigación del Estigma

El tiempo es un elemento crucial, pero a menudo pasado por alto, en la teoría de las organizaciones (Ancona, Okhuysen y Perlow, 2001). Propongo que la investigación sobre el estigma se beneficiaría de una atención más explícita hacia el papel del tiempo en el proceso de estigmatización y cómo éste determina la interacción entre las normas sociales y la naturaleza del estigma. Específicamente, dado que las normas sociales son relativamente estables en el tiempo (Bicchieri, 2006) y los juicios sociales tienen trayectorias dependientes (Mishina, Block y Mannor, 2012), se deduce que cuando consideramos el estigma en cualquier momento dado, éste parece inamovible y difícil de eliminar (Devers et al., 2009; Devers & Mishina, 2019). Sin embargo, cuando tomamos una perspectiva a largo plazo, vemos que hay "cambios tectónicos" que hacen que las normas sociales cambien, y con ellos, también lo hace el estigma. Por ejemplo, hace poco más de 50 años, en los EEUU, el uso de pesticidas DDT no solo estaba aceptado, sino que fue apoyado y acogido con entusiasmo por todos los beneficios que tenía (Maguire & Hardy, 2009). Por otro lado, la homosexualidad en el Reino Unido no solo no era aceptada, sino que también fue ilegal (Adut, 2005). En la actualidad, tenemos una imagen completamente invertida de estos dos temas.

Esta observación proporciona la base para mi sugerencia de que los académicos deberían intentar comprender, en el entorno de investigación particular de cada estudio, si el estigma se encuentra en una trayectoria "ascendente", "estable" o "descendente". El estigma del tabaco, por ejemplo, se ha estabilizado en las últimas décadas (Galvin, Ventresca y Hudson, 2004). Por el contrario, el estigma del daño ambiental causado por los combustibles fósiles (Pralle, 2006) está en una trayectoria ascendente, mientras que el estigma de las citas en línea se encuentra en una trayectoria descendente (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis y Sprecher, 2012).

Caracterizar el estado de la trayectoria del estigma tiene tres beneficios. Primero, puede ser útil explicar por qué, durante el período examinado en cada estudio en particular, algunas audiencias (todavía / ya) mantienen un estigma hacia un grupo particular de organizaciones, y con ello ayudar en la identificación de percepciones específicas de la audiencia. En segundo lugar, una consideración del tiempo en el estudio de la difusión del estigma puede ofrecer nuevas vías para la investigación. Por ejemplo, no sabemos si la difusión del estigma sigue la icónica curva en forma de S descrita en la literatura (Etzion, 2013) o algún otro patrón típico. La investigación puede contribuir de manera significativa tanto conceptual como empíricamente a explicar cómo se difunde un estigma entre los diferentes grupos de partes interesadas, informando así las estrategias que las organizaciones afectadas podrían emplear para gestionarlo.

Tercero, considerar las trayectorias del estigma puede ayudar a explicar porqué las organizaciones estigmatizadas eligen estrategias de compromiso o aceptación en lugar de estrategias de desafío. Puede que la elección de la acción estratégica esté determinada en parte por las trayectorias de estigma. Intuitivamente, parece razonable esperar que las organizaciones que enfrentan un estigma estable tenderán a evitar estrategias de desafío más que las organizaciones que enfrentan estigmas en trayectorias ascendentes o descendentes, pero la investigación aún no ha examinado estas relaciones. Por ejemplo, las organizaciones dedicadas a la defensa de grupos estigmatizados (por ejemplo, sufragio de mujeres, derechos civiles, anti-apartheid) inicialmente adoptaron estrategias de compromiso, trabajando en secreto, pero eventualmente se convirtieron en movimientos sociales de pleno derecho, adoptaron estrategias de desafío y confrontaron activamente a las audiencias que los estigmatizaban. Pero lo inverso también se puede observar. Por ejemplo, las compañías tabacaleras inicialmente se decantaron por estrategias de desafío (Galvin et al., 2004), pero a medida que se desarrolló el estigma, pasaron al compromiso y la aceptación (Vergne, 2012). Además, la relación entre las trayectorias de estigma y las estrategias empleadas por las organizaciones afectadas para gestionarla puede ser bidireccional, en el sentido de que las mismas estrategias empleadas por las organizaciones afectadas determinan, y están determinadas por, la intensidad del estigma que se les otorga. Este proceso de refuerzo mutuo puede ofrecer lecciones interesantes para la estrategia corporativa.

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DISCLAIMERS

This dissertation has received generous funding in the form of a research scholarship, granted by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia), under the European Social Fund and the Human Capital Operational Program (POCH – Programa Operacional Capital Humano) funding program.

Tables 2 to 6 in Chapter 3 and Tables 2a to 8 in Chapter 4 report my own analyses calculated based in part on data from The Nielsen Company (US), LLC and marketing databases provided through the Nielsen Datasets at the Kilts Center for Marketing Data Center at The University of Chicago Booth School of Business. The conclusions drawn from the Nielsen data are mine and do not reflect the views of Nielsen. Nielsen is not responsible for, had no role in, and was not involved in analyzing and preparing the results reported herein.