Major Shaming in Undergraduate Students

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ABSTRACT

Undergraduate college students face stigmas when selecting a college major. These stigmas stem

from stereotypes about each major which leads to shaming, a cycle that is identified and

discussed in this research. Smith's (2007) Stigma Theory and Meisenbach's (2010) Stigma

Management Communication were used to examine what the stigmas surrounding certain

college majors are and how these ideologies impact students. This research specifically focused

on the stigma communication cycle of stereotyping, spreading stigmas, and shaming.

Undergraduate students in an introductory communication course were asked to complete a

Qualtrics survey and focus group where they explained their college decisions and how they

have encountered major stigmas. Research was analyzed using thematic analysis and a

qualitative examination of findings followed. Future research regarding this thesis should

identify additional resources for educators to overcome the stigma cycle in university culture.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Each individual has their own personality made up of passions, intelligence, and grit that

forms a well-working society. However, not everyone sees things this way, and instead believe

that college degrees and careers that are not focused on making money or saving lives are

useless. They hear stereotypes about certain careers and college majors, turn these stereotypes

into stigmas, communicate them to those around them, and shame the individual for a decision

based on their personal wants and desires. The following research is based on this concept of

major shaming and identifies the stigma communication cycle that college students encounter

when selecting their undergraduate major.

According to McFarland and colleagues (2019), the 2016-2017 academic year observed

1,956,000 baccalaureate degrees awarded. Of these degrees, the most popular undergraduate

majors were (in order): business, health professions, social sciences, medical studies, and

engineering, followed by liberal arts related degrees. A liberal arts degree differs in other

clinical, professional, and technical programs due to the problem solving and critical thinking

skills they focus on within a wide realm of subjects, instead of direct certification and procedural

experience (Lair and Wieland, 2012).

While liberal arts degrees are in the top six of popular fields among students, research has

found that all undergraduate students face judgment about their major choice. Students in

business, engineering, and pre-medical sciences are often praised for their decisions due to the

belief that many of the world's present and future problems will be resolved by technology

industries (Myers et al., 2011). Individuals are socialized from birth that STEM (science,

technology, engineering, and math) programs will lead them to fulfilling, high-paying careers,

whereas those in the liberal arts, who develop more thorough critical thinking in lieu of direct

certification, are worthless and will not be an aid to society (Lair & Wieland, 2012).

The biggest problem with the judgement of certain majors is that students often tie their

degree choice with their identity, sense of self, and worth. These students often feel the need to

justify their undergraduate major decision to avoid feeling shamed or worthless (Clair, 1996).

Fife and Nelson (2008) found that one of the possible reasons as to why certain majors are

stigmatized is due to misconceptions. Their research found that students often enter introductory

courses with a different idea of what the field is really like and that the only way to change the

original misconceptions was to take multiple classes in a field to have a clearer view of the field

and its importance in society.

The purpose of this research was to learn more about the misconceptions among liberal

arts college majors while identifying the impact that these stigmas have on undergraduate college

students' major selection and overall wellbeing if they select a stigmatized major. As STEM

degree conferrals increase and liberal arts degrees begin to see a decrease (McFarland et al.,

2019), it is important to understand the choices college students are faced with and the outside

factors that may impact these choices. If every individual were to study and hold a job in the

medical field, then the world would be without educators, nonprofit administrators, television

broadcasters, and numerous other important professionals. This chapter will begin to outline the

practical problem that students are faced with by introducing relevant theory and giving a brief

overview of this thesis.

Stigma, Stereotypes, and Shaming

This thesis uses Smith's (2007) theory of stigma communication and Meisenbach's

(2010) theory of Stigma Management Communication and relies heavily on the concepts of

stigma, stereotypes, and shaming. While I will review previous communication research regarding these topics in chapter two of this thesis, this chapter will focus on how these terms are different from one another.

Stigma

First, stigma is a mark of dishonor associated with a particular individual or situation. Smith (2007) theorizes four attributes to stigma and defines stigma communication as "messages spread through communities to teach their members to recognize the disgraced," (Smith, 2007, p. 464). This thesis defines stigma as a social construct based on misconceptions that mark certain groups as less favorable than others. I define stigma communication as the way those messages are spread through a community to allow the socialization of the stigma.

Stereotype

According to Smith, stigma communication encourages stereotypes. While stigmas evolve from stereotypes, stereotypes differ from stigmas because a stigma is always negative (Smith, 2007). Odenweller and Rittenour (2017) describe stereotypes as mental embellishments created about groups or individuals grounded on overgeneralization. Based on this definition, a stereotype is a general grouping of individuals based on assumption, whereas a stigma takes a social construct and uses it to exclude the groups' members from society. Stereotypes lead to stigmas. For example, as an undergraduate student studying communication, I was often told: "Communication majors just talk a lot." The stereotype in this situation can be an offensive misconception but is not focused on much more than a personality trait. Meanwhile, a stigma for undergraduate communication majors would be that "Communication majors do not attain jobs

upon graduation, so they are worthless." This stigma is a direct attack and attempt at social

exclusion among the group, and unfortunately one I have heard from my own experience often.

Shaming

As stigmas and stereotypes are different, but similar, concepts previously found in

communication research, this paper will establish a less common term that ties stigma and

stereotype together. Shaming is the act or activity of subjecting someone to shame or humiliation

through public exposure or criticism. This research will use the term "major shaming" to identify

how specific college majors are shamed for their degree choice. My previous experience as a

collegiate student found major shaming within the communication degree, as well as many

others in the field of liberal arts. As a student of a stigmatized degree, I have found that the

process of shaming is intended to make an individual, or in this case a student, feel at fault for

their choice of study as well as a feeling of peril due to the misconceptions regarding the field of

study and potential careers within the field.

Shaming varies slightly from Smith's (2007) theory of stigma communication in that

stigma is the internalized, inherently negative stereotypes created and shared widely among

social groups whereas shaming is the negative connotations, actions, and behaviors that occur

and stem beyond the creation of the stigma.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this thesis was to identify the stereotypes associated with certain

undergraduate majors, stigmas that college students are faced with as they select their majors, the

stigma communication process that occurs due to their major selection, and how students manage

the stigmas associated with their major. This research adds to the field of communication by

looking at collegiate major selection in a new lens, and hopefully will be used in the future to

make the major selection process less stigmatized and college students accepted for their worth because they are all studying within worthwhile and important fields. The following chapter will examine past literature on stigma, stereotyping, and shaming and identify the research questions and methods that were used in this thesis.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

College students are shamed based on their major choice due to the stigmas and stereotypes surrounding certain majors. The following literature review will define stigma, stereotypes, and shaming. It will also explore work, dignity, and identity in reference to what a "real" job and "real" major are considered to be. In doing so, I will create an argument as to why many liberal arts majors are stigmatized compared to other majors on university campuses. Finally, I will summarize this chapter by presenting my research questions.

Stigma Communication

Defining Stigma

The concept of stigma originated with Goffman (1963) who explained that stigma is inherently negative and classified by an undesirable stereotype that goes against the status quo. However, our understanding of stigmas has been present in society since ancient Greek times, when criminals would be branded and isolated from the community to protect the members (Papadopoulus, 2000). Stigma is the concept of ostracizing individuals because of their personalities, beliefs, or actions. Goffman (1963) found that there are three types of stigmas categorized as: abominations of the body such as physical deformities, blemishes of individual character in reference to mental characteristics, and tribal stigmas based on group affiliation.

Individuals that are seen as a threat to society's status quo are grouped based on the type of stigma surrounding them. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) found that there are at least three types of existing taints or stigmas: physical, moral, and social. Rivera (2015) added the fourth concept of existing stigma at work which is emotional taint, or presentations of emotion at work that contain too much or too little display of emotion. Physical has been at the height of communication research regarding physical ailments that are easily seen and essentially 'mark'

an individual as stigmatized through physical characteristics (Goffman, 1963). However, physical stigma goes further than a disability or physical feature and is also seen in jobs that are considered 'dirty work' and may require physical danger, trash pick-up, or being exposed to bodily fluids (Stacey, 2005). Moral stigma occurs when people or jobs seem to lack virtue or morality. Rambo-Ronai (1992) used the example of sex workers who are stigmatized for wanting to earn money and support their families in a less traditional way. Social stigmas are based on associations with other stigmatized individuals or groups. Goffman (1963) coined the term tribal stigma, which refers to a stigma that is attached to a group rather than an individual and explains the third trait among his stigma of group identification. Within tribal stigma, simply being linked with a stigmatized group is enough for an individual to be seen as a social threat. Like tribal, courtesy stigma is the public disapproval brought about from associating with an already stigmatized group (Phillips et al., 2012).

Research has examined Goffman's (1963) stigma of individuals in a variety of ways, such as health (Meyer et al., 2020), mothers in the workplace (Zhuang et al., 2018), and religious beliefs (Cooper & Mitra, 2018). Health stigmas have focused on isolating those struggling with mental health disorders (Morrow et al., 2020), obesity (Malterud & Ulriksen, 2011), and sexually transmitted diseases (Meyer et al, 2020). These stigmas are publicly accepted, widespread, and impact the stigmatized individuals (Yanos, Roe, & Lysaker, 2010).

Organizational stigmas are also popular among researchers. One specific example of a highly stigmatized individual within the workplace is new mothers. Mothers are stigmatized for a variety of reasons to begin with, but the stigmatized concept of breastfeeding in the workplace is one that has drastic effects. Zhuang et al. (2018) explains the "ick factor toward pumping

breastmilk at work," (p. 492) and how this can result in early termination of breastfeeding or even complete termination of a job due to lack of support and levels of isolation among mothers.

Like working mothers, religion is also stigmatized in a variety of ways. In fact, followership has seen a decrease in numbers due to this stigmatization (Cooper & Mitra, 2018). Religious stigmas can be harmful for those following stigmatized religions, such as Muslim and Islamic traditions in the United States that have been targeted since September 11, 2001 (Riles et al., 2019). These stigmas serve a primary function of avoiding threats but are often unnecessary and create more complications than they solve.

Human stigma began with the specific function to help social creatures survive (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2003). Survivability is based on threats, which means stigmatized individuals, religions, and other groups are often seen as threatening. This fear of threats has evolved from a direct threat to life to threats on social norms and fear of breaking the status quo (Cohen & Garcia, 2005). This thesis argues that college major choice is seen as a modern-day threat with the fear that students will choose a major that will not directly benefit society or their community.

Social stigma is the topic of this research regarding how specific college majors are marked as less favorable. One can't tell what a student's college major is by looking at them, which means social stigmas often involve society going out of their way to identify and mark these individuals as 'bad' or 'worthless'. A student will not be stigmatized by their college major based on sight alone and they are often given a certain amount of respect upon meeting fellow peers and university staff, but there is one clear beginning of stigma for these students: being asked what their major is. Now that we have defined stigma, we will next explore concepts within stigma communication.

Stigma Communication

Stigmas are communicated to society in a variety of ways and have been present from historical times to modern day. As described above, stigmas are social constructions about groups or individuals based on stereotypes. Stigma communication is the theory and process of how stigmas are communicated to others in ways that continue to feed, develop, and spread them throughout society (Smith, 2007). Stigma communication has been defined as the way stigma messages are established, strengthened, and continued through the communication process and "how such messages spread through communities to teach their members to recognize the disgraced and react accordingly" (Tran, 2018, p. 24).

Smith (2007) introduced stigma communication by explaining that stigmatized groups are marked, labelled, given a physical and social responsibility, and isolated based on their membership. In other words, stigma communication messages contain four attributes: marking, labelling, responsibility, and peril. Marking categorizes an individual into a group based on recognition of an identifiable mark or trait (Smith, 2007). These traits can be a physical trait a person already has, for example a person with disabilities might be marked by their missing limb. Some marks are more easily concealed than others; a person with a birthmark on their arm can cover it with a long sleeve, whereas a missing limb is harder to hide. Marks can be temporary or permanent, and individuals with similar marks will usually be put into groups and labelled.

Labelling is the second attribute to Smith (2007)'s steps to stigma communication. Labelling puts a marked individual in the spotlight and goes beyond identifying that this individual is different than those around them. This helps distinguish the person from a crowd, so

a label is provided to groups of people with similar marks to continue to segregate them from the 'normal' community.

Third, the individual is assigned responsibility for their stigma (Smith, 2007). One that is marked will be labelled with a perception of responsibility based on the control the individual has over their different situation. Some individuals choose to be different whereas others are stuck in their situation, for example a person choosing to get a tattoo to mark their body physically or a person with a birthmark who was born that way. This is based on control over the situation and is identified within responsibility based on how the mark is concealed or fought against. The individual with the tattoo likely isn't covering it up, as they choose to be marked as different. The woman with the birthmark however might try to control their stigmatization by covering it with makeup so she blends in.

Peril is the last message choice within the stigma communication model's message choices. Peril involves announcing the danger with the marked and labelled person, in an attempt to warn the rest of the community about the differences of that person and the threat they pose to society's status quo (Smith, 2007). To explain this process, imagine a criminal who is marked and labelled within the media as their mugshot is displayed on the front page of magazines and newspapers. Their responsibility will be displayed in the heading, as they have been sentenced to life in prison for their actions, which were their choice. Their peril is lifelong recognition, as they are plastered on all forms of media to warn the public that this person is dangerous and should always be considered such.

Effective stigma messages are memorable and used to guide interactions with the stigmatized groups. These message choices then lead to possible message reactions or effects. Message reactions involve cognitive reactions, accessing stereotypes, emotional reactions, and

most commonly: disgust, anger, and fear. Message effects will either stem from these message reactions or come directly from the message choices. Possible message effects involve developing stigma attitude, isolating the stigmatized person, and sharing the stigma with a social network (Smith, 2007).

Stigma communication is harmful for many reasons, but specifically in that it labels a group of people, either creates a new stigma or reinforces an existing one, and spreads the stigma attitude to others. Smith and Eberly (2021) used stigma communication to discuss the recent coronavirus pandemic and treatment of Asian Americans. Their example follows the four steps to stigma communication theory, in that Asian Americans were marked through their genetic and cultural physical features and labelled as 'the cause of the pandemic' due to the origin of the coronavirus in China. American citizens wrongly placed full responsibility of the pandemic on Chinese citizens by saying that they spread it through following rituals, instead of placing responsibility on the viral disease itself. They then highlighted the danger of Asian Americans spreading the disease by stereotyping them, being fearful of them, and treating them with disgust and anger, which are message reactions in stigma communication. The message effects employed were deadly as some individuals attempted to isolate or even harm Asian Americans (Feuer, 2020), all while sharing the stigma that they are to cause for this pandemic.

Recent research has been done on stigma communication in addition to the coronavirus pandemic, on topics such as Hepatitis C and medical stigmas (Cama et al., 2015), turnover rates among those in fundraising roles (Meisenbach et al., 2018), and media perceptions of police officers (Chatterjee & Ryan, 2020). Stigma is a widespread disease that cannot be cured by just one individual. For the sake of this project, I contend that harmful stigmas are reinforced and created through negative stereotypes.

Stereotypes

As discussed in Chapter One, stereotypes are groupings of individuals based on their characteristics, beliefs, or traits. Stereotypes are not inherently bad but can lead to stigmas which are inherently negative. Like stigma, stereotype research has involved religion, health, and organizations. Fear of Muslims was encouraged through stereotyping after September 11, 2001, and these stereotypes lead to the stigma that all Muslims are terrorists and could attack the country at any given time (Luqiu & Yang, 2018). Numerous avenues can lead to stereotyping, including the media (Luqiu & Yang, 2018) and lack of useful information (Tajfel, 1978).

Previous research describes stereotypes as "overgeneralized and exaggerated pictures in our heads associated with social groups' characteristics and behaviors" (Odenweller & Rittenour, 2017, p. 58). Social information is continuously present, and stereotypes help individuals sort through the sludge of social information to distinguish their experiences within social groups and environments (Allport, 1954). Negative stereotypes are the focus of social categorization. If a prospective student meets a group of education majors during college study time and instead sees them having fun, being loud, and not completing their work, they might select the negative characteristics from this group without knowing the context. They would then use these negative traits of slacking off, being loud, and not following directions and eventually even accentuate them in their minds. This would give them a negative perception of all education majors. While this process would begin with just a stereotype due to this one experience, it could grow into a stigma that they spread to their friends about the one defining trait from this group experience: the education major.

The individual beginning the social categorization process described above would use Smith's (2007) stigma communication to internally mark and label this loud group as education

majors and put full responsibility on them for their choice to be an education major. They might

assume they have more free time than students in other majors and highlight the danger of the

education major as completing an 'easy' major and how that could make all college students

look like slackers. They would have a message reaction of anger and accessing and creating

social attributes and stereotypes, which would lead to their message effect of ignoring and

thinking less of future education majors to remove them from their social groups and spread this

stigma to friends and family members, letting them know that education majors are known for

being loud, disruptive, and other negative traits that they have accentuated in their minds.

Despite that this stereotype came from one experience, the stigma it creates can lead to shaming

on a more widespread level, which is harmful for the future of higher education.

Shaming

Shaming can make one feel "small, worthless, and powerless," (Murphy & Kiffin-

Peterson, 2017, p. 658). Kaufman (1989) defines shame as "sudden, unexpected exposure

coupled with blinding inner scrutiny" (p. 18). If shame is an intense emotion following behavior

that is perceived as negative (Lauricella, 2019), then shaming is the action verb, the process by

which an individual is led to feel negative due to their actions, thoughts, and feelings. Shame is

internalized and shaming is externalized. Shaming can occur directly in person, online through

social media, or even publicly through the media, commercials, and other networks. Shaming is

the method of using socialized stigmas created by stereotypes to purposefully make an individual

feel worthless, unimportant, or unvalued in their community. Shaming stems from stigma

communication but is the process that occurs *after* peril has been decided and an individual has

reacted to the message. It is the process after isolation occurs and the stigma begins to spread,

where an individual is made fun of and continually pressed for breaking the status quo in a

negative way.

Murphy and Kiffin-Peterson (2017) found that there are potentially positive benefits of

shaming regarding behavior adjustment. However, I argue that this 'benefit' is only a benefit to

society and must be understood in regard to the behavioral context. For example, if an individual

commits a crime like sexual assault, perhaps they deserve to be shamed for their direct, negative

actions with the hopeful intent that they will not cause harm to another individual again.

However, this thesis argues the idea that some shaming occurs based on harmless actions and

socialization, which encourages individuals to adjust behavior that doesn't need to be adjusted.

For example, if a student decides to study philosophy, they aren't causing harm to another being

and will be a benefit to society through the knowledge that they will offer their community

through their work or relationships. However, society may see them as worthless due to their

lack of direct job qualifications that promote a capitalistic society. Unlike a doctor or

stockbroker, the philosophy major may not contribute directly to society in a way to earn money

or provide immediate assistance, and instead may choose to continue to graduate school to study

a theoretical lens that can answer major philosophical questions. They may require taxpayer

assistance to finance graduate school and might not immediately begin putting that money back

in to society. Due to straying from capitalism, society may try to shame them into changing their

behavior, or in this case college major, which was never a negative choice to begin with.

However, society has cycled so deeply into shaming for having different color hair, tattoos, and

even college major selection that they continue to enforce a status quo that should have never

existed.

Differences among stereotypes, stigma, and shaming Stereotypes, stigma, and shaming

are all similar, but different, enforcers of status quo. Stereotyping is what occurs before and leads

to the stigma communication process. Stereotypes are present in an individual's mind before they

begin to mark and label someone for being different due to previous stigma communication that

has influenced them. Once they notice that someone is unique, they begin to mark them mentally

which is where stigma communication occurs. Stigma communication's message effects of

internalizing and spreading the stigma is what leads to the shaming process. Shaming is where

they blatantly spread stigmas, make fun of other individuals and groups for their differences, and

continue to feed stereotypes into others' mind until they personally begin this process, and it

continues among others. While all concepts are closely linked, it is their order that differentiates

them. Everyone manages the stereotypes, stigma, and shaming they face in different ways.

Stigma Management Communication explains this phenomenon.

Stigma Management Communication

Meisenbach (2010) identified that social stigmas are "construction[s] of human

perception of differences" (p. 272) and found that while the difference in discussion may be

permanent, the perceptions these stigmatized individuals face are not. She created the Stigma

Management Communication (SMC) theory, which incorporates Smith's (2007) research of

stigma but enhances it to explain how individuals manage the stigmas they encounter. SMC

challenges the idea that stigma is defined through a non-stigmatized individual's lens and adds to

stigma theory that a stigmatized person is aware of their stigma and manages it in a variety of

ways (Meisenbach, 2010).

SMC is focused on the perspective of the stigmatized individual wanting to challenge or

maintain social perception of their stigma and their attitude to how their stigma relates to

themselves. A stigmatized individual will either accept or challenge social comprehension of their stigma using the following strategies: accepting, avoiding, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, denying, and ignoring/displaying. For those wanting to simply accept the status quo and personal application of their stigma, they will passively accept, disclose, apologize for, use humor to ease discomfort, isolate themselves, push the blame to someone else, or befriend other stigmatized individuals. An example of acceptance is a student with an English major whose math major friend comments to them that English majors don't do much homework so their major must be very easy. The English student says nothing to combat the stigma the math major introduces and remains silent. If this individual accepts the socially accepted stigma but does not challenge how it applies to them, they will avoid the stigma by attempting to hide it, avoid situations where it could be displayed, change their behavior, or distance from interactions based on the stigma. The English student above could hear the comment and react by changing their major, ending their involvement within the stigma.

        If an individual wishes to change public understanding but still accept that the stigma applies to them, they will evade responsibility for or reduce offensiveness of the stigma (Meisenbach, 2010). To evade responsibility, a stigmatized individual will claim that they were provoked, that participation was unintended, or that they weren't knowledgeable of what they were participating in. An example of this is the English major from above could explain to their friend they were only studying English because their parents wanted them to.

        To reduce offensiveness, individuals will participate in bolstering or refocusing, minimizing, and transcending (Meisenbach, 2010). Bolstering/refocusing shifts the focus from the stigmatized part of one's personality to a non-stigmatized part as the focus. Minimizing is when an individual explains that their stigma is unimportant and misunderstood. Transcending

puts a positive display on the stigma to refocus how it can benefit oneself or society. To reduce offensiveness of their college major stigma, the English major might ignore the stigma that their major is easy, and instead highlight the fun they had at an international conference they attended with other English students.

Individuals can attempt to change both public perception of their stigma as well as challenge that the stigma applies to them to begin with. To do this, they would deny or ignore that the stigma applies to them (Meisenbach, 2010). To deny the stigma, the English student would stop their math friend and explain that their major is not easy and what they stated was untrue. If the student wanted to challenge the stigma by ignoring it, then when their math friend mentioned how easy their major was, they could have turned to their other friend, also an English major, nearby and stated: "Our major must be so easy." This direction manages stigma in an almost sarcastic way.

Understanding the processes of stereotyping, stigma communication, and shaming are helpful in regard to college major selection as they explain where college major stigmas originate, how they are continuously communicated, and how this can negatively impact students. Stigma Management Communication theory is important as it explains how students attempt to negotiate the stigmas about their college majors and can explain some decisions students make to either further spread the stigmas or attempt to disassociate with them. The reason that students would attempt to navigate stigmas that they face based on the major they have selected is because major selection is affected by a personal sense of identity. Being stigmatized and shamed due to the selected major can negatively impact dignity, which harms a student's identity. Similarly, selecting a dignified or 'real' college major is a reflection of the type of job a student will get after graduation.

Work, Dignity, and Identity

Organizations and organizational roles play an important part in shaping one's personal

identity. We have multiple identities within multiple organizations, but the most important

organizational identity is often our work and employment. Lair and Weiland (2012) argue "work

provides individuals with a sense of self and has become a primary anchor on which identity is

built" (p. 428). In other words, work is one of the most salient components to our sense of self-

worth and identity.

Cheney et al. (2008) found that positive identity is developed through meaningful work,

especially dignified work. Lucas (2011) defined dignity as "inherent worth and value and/or

being deserving of respect," (p. 354). Lucas later argues that work dignity is based on three basic

assumptions: 1) all jobs are important, 2) dignity is based on the performance and not the status

of the job, and 3) dignity emerges from social interactions in day-to-day life. While the

participants in her study explained that all jobs should be respected and talked about how

everyone deserves dignity based on their work ethic and not the job itself, they commonly

compared their jobs to other jobs in a way to boost their own moral and shape their personal

identities.

Dutton et al. (2010) explained that positive identity construction occurs not only through

a personal sense of dignity and identity, but also through specific social groups' sense of dignity

and identity. Individuals are constantly seeking to portray a positive identity, both for themselves

and their social groups. One way people do this is by negotiating their identities regarding what

they perceive to be less dignified. For example, a garbage collector that is told they have a gross

and undignified job might stick up for themselves by saying that it could be worse, they could

have to clean sewage systems for a living. This is called downward social comparisons (Ashforth

& Kreiner, 1999). These downward comparisons are incredibly harmful as they are constantly

reinforcing the status quo that certain jobs are not dignified and do not deserve social respect.

For this thesis, I argue that downward social comparisons are also common in higher

education. A stigmatized anthropology major might make sense of their academic identity by

focusing on the positives of their major (by bolstering in SMC), but also by making a statement

about another stigmatized major (avoiding in SMC through making favorable comparisons). For

example, if a student or faculty were questioning their major, they could share exciting facts they

have studied but also add "at least I am not an art major, what kind of job will they get after

graduation?". While this might make the anthropology student feel better and increase their

reputation on campus, it lowers an art student's reputation, which does not solve the major

shaming problem and instead enforces the status quo that some students do not matter or make a

positive impact on the campus community. Thus, it stands to reason that major choice is also a

pivotal component of college student's identity as it often directly leads to one's type of work

and the perceived dignity of that work.

Working a "Real Job"

Clair (1996) states that occupational choice is critical to society, specifically with "the

maintenance of a particular social order" (p. 249). Dunkerley (1975) examines socialization and

social hierarchy as leading factors with occupational choice. Socialization suggests that work

completed before entering the workforce, or anticipatory work, is not real work, but preparation

for real work (Jablin, 1987). Therefore, many individuals in modern society do not see college

students or graduate assistants as having 'real' jobs but instead preparing for a real job. Based on

a capitalist approach, a real job would consist of working at least 40 hours per week with

Monday through Friday obligations. Family, friends, supervisors, and coworkers socialize

individuals to have this understanding of what a real job is. Working at a restaurant in high

school is seen as a real job, but after college graduation it is no longer considered a dignified job

(Claire, 1996).

O'Connor and Raile (2015) also researched the definition of a real job, but they

specifically asked those in the millennial generation. This study found that millennials tended to

find a job to be considered real if it provided a stable salary, was fulfilling, and offered a range of

benefits. The current study is important as it will study the newest generation of college students:

Generation X. While a multitude of research has been completed on millennials within higher

education and the workforce, researching Generation X students will provide a more up-to-date

analysis of stigma research and major choice.

If employees are selective of their jobs because they have been socialized to think that

certain jobs are more real than others, then I argue that college students will also face a similar

decision when selecting their major. This thesis is based on the idea that when deciding on one's

major, a student may base their decision on the stigmas associated with different majors rather

than their passions or interests. The world cannot survive with only nurses and doctors.

Socialization, stigmatization, and stereotypes are harmful because survival and fulfillment of

society are based on the need to have people in varying positions in a community.

Choosing a "Real Major"

Conversations regarding major selection at the higher education level are seen to provide

a narrow sense of identity and self-worth, according to Lair and Wieland (2012), who studied

college students that had often been asked an important and common question in higher

education: 'What are you going to do with that major?'. These students reflected that they were

often asked this question by family members, friends, and members from different organizations.

This research found that 41% of students experienced negative emotions such as distress, fear, and anxiety upon being asked this question and only 18% of students reported feeling a positive emotion when answering the question. Some students reported that the question was helpful in figuring out what they should do with their major because major selection is closely tied in with their sense of identity (Lair & Wieland, 2012).

Since major selection is so closely tied with identity and is stigmatized, it is a stressful decision for young students to make. Students are subjected to process Smith's (2007) stigma communication attributes when selecting their major, whether they are conscious of it or not. Stereotypes surround existing majors and become stigmas that distinguish certain majors as 'elite' or 'real' and other majors as unimportant. The responsibility for having a 'real' major or not is placed on the individual who selects the major and the faculty that teach it. More importantly regarding stigma communication, majors that are not considered 'real' and the students that study them are conceptualized to be harmful to society. These majors are not believed to turn into a 'real' job as they are not seen to follow capitalistic beliefs or help others and benefit the community. A student's college major impacts their work and their major and job impact their worth. The stigmas that stem from existing stereotypes turn into shaming, which makes students feel judged and unimportant due to their major.

One critical aspect of Lair and Wieland (2012)'s study is that students felt judged not only by being asked the question, but by reactions to their responses. Students felt they had to think of a correct answer that was ambitious, achievable, financially stable, and realistic. Unsurprisingly, the students that enjoyed being asked about their major were studying fields related to STEM such as biology and engineering, whereas the students that expressed discomfort and felt judged by their responses were mostly studying liberal arts fields. For

example, an English major in the study even stated that she felt judged because people didn't ask her what she would do with her major, and instead assumed that she would teach because they couldn't fathom anything else she could do with that degree. In sum, students felt pressured by this question as they felt they needed to impress the questionnaire while also reinforcing their decision to themselves they were on the correct path for their lives.

One important distinction for students when deciding on a career is whether the major has a clear career path (Xu, 2013). For example, majoring in nursing leads to a certification in nursing and a job as a nurse. Most business and STEM fields fall within this certification type pathway. In fact, policy makers have considered increasing the number of workers in STEM fields as critical to the United States' success (Myers et al., 2011).

Alternatively, majoring in liberal arts allows students for more flexibility in their professional careers which is a key characteristic hiring managers look for in recent college graduates ("Adaptability and flexibility," n.d.). Lair and Wieland (2012) argue that the liberal arts do not get the credit they deserve because they "provide students with more nebulous skills such as critical thinking and problem solving that could be applied in a variety of ways to future work" (p. 445). In other words, hiring managers want college graduates to be flexible and show the ability to think critically in different situations while the government, and in turn society, views STEM and business to be more worthwhile academic pursuits.

Research Questions

This thesis explores undergraduate students' perceptions about different majors to identify stigmas surrounding liberal arts majors. Within this chapter, I have defined stigma, stereotypes, and shaming. I have also introduced two key theories to this research: Smith's (2007) stigma communication and Meisenbach's (2010) Stigma Management Communication.

Stigma communication explains how stigmas are created and spread through messages and the impact that this has on stigmatized groups. An individual's stigma is created when they are marked as being different, labelled based on that difference, given a personal responsibility for the stigma, and their threat to the status quo is identified. Stigma Management Communication explains that stigmatized individuals often manage their stigma through accepting, avoiding, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, denying, or ignoring/displaying their stigma. Throughout this chapter, I have also examined how work and dignity have a role in identity formation and how major selection is tied with identity, particularly in reference to what a 'real' major is and how this leads to a 'real' job. The above literature review ties these concepts together to argue that college students are faced with an important decision when selecting their undergraduate major. College students face stereotypes, stigmas, and possible feelings of shame if they do not select a 'real' major. They attempt to negotiate these negative connotations in a variety of ways to maintain a positive feeling of identity. To further understand how college students are affected by stigmas based on their major, we need to understand what these stigmas are and how they are communicated. To respond to these inquiries, this research was based on the following research questions:

    RQ1a: What stereotypes are associated with STEM majors?

    RQ1b: What stereotypes are associated with liberal arts majors?

    RQ2: How, if at all, are the stereotypes communicated as stigmas?

    RQ3: How, if at all, are these stigmas managed?

CHAPTER III: METHODS

This research project utilized qualitative research methods to collect and analyze data from focus groups and interviews to identify the stigmas college students face when selecting their undergraduate majors. The following chapter will explain the proposed methods to answer this project's research questions:

RQ1a: What stereotypes are associated with STEM majors?

RQ1b: What stereotypes are associated with liberal arts majors?

RQ2: How, if at all, are the stereotypes communicated as stigmas?

RQ3: How, if at all, are these stigmas managed?

I will next explain overarching methods of this study, the participants, data collection procedures, and steps to data analysis.

Method

The methods for this research project were inspired from Lair and Wieland's (2012) research on how undergraduate students choose their major. They asked students to narrate their feelings, emotions, thoughts, and responses when asked "What are you going to do with that [college] major?". They asked students to write a short paper reflecting on a time when they were confronted with the above question. The methods for this thesis were based on similar questions but involved focus groups and interviews from undergraduate students. I asked how students decided to select their major and what their process was upon selection. Students were also asked to reflect on their communication while choosing their college majors as well as what majors they identify as better for society.

Participants

As my project focused on the stigmas of undergraduate majors, I recruited undergraduate students. Students enrolled in introductory communication courses at a midsize university in the Midwest were recruited to participate in this study. The chosen university is known for its nursing and health professions programs, as it ranks number one in its state for nursing majors. This research is based on one university instead of multiple so richer connections could be made between the explanations of the students' environments and the environment of the university.

Twenty-eight undergraduate college students participated in both the Qualtrics survey and focus group/interview components of this thesis. All participants attended the same mid-size university in the Midwest United States, and were enrolled in an introductory communication course at the time of survey collection. The average age of all participants was 20 years old (range 18-53). Participants predominately identified themselves as Caucasian (n=24), with 3 participants identifying as Hispanic and 1 as Asian. Five participants identified themselves as male and 23 as female. Thirteen participants listed their current major as a STEM or healthcare field, 11 as liberal arts, one as business, and three as undecided. Twelve students had previously changed their major. Most students identified themselves as a first-year student (n=22), but four sophomores and two juniors also participated in this study. Four non-traditional students were involved in this thesis, with the majority categorizing themselves as traditional students (n=24). Of the 28 participants, seven participants described their parents' highest degree as a high school diploma/GED, three as some college but no degree, three with an associate degree, nine with a bachelor degree, and six as a graduate level degree or professional degree such as medical, law, or veterinary.

Data Collection

Upon receiving IRB approval, I sent information about the focus groups to introductory communication professors. These professors then invited their students to participate in these groups or individual interviews. Interested students filled out a Qualtrics survey form, found in Appendix A, to sign up for a time as well as answering basic demographic questions. During the focus groups, which were held over Zoom video calls, students were given question prompts asking them to explain their experiences they had when selecting their college major. Students were asked what their major is and what feelings they have about majors within the liberal arts and STEM fields. The question prompt, found in Appendix B, allowed for open discussion among the students. Participation in the discussion was optional and participants were allowed to exit out of the research at any time.

Two participants opted to partake in an individual interview. These interviews were 23 minutes and 27 minutes in duration. Six focus groups were held with an average of four participants in each (range: 3-10). The average duration of these focus groups were 29 minutes (range: 19-56 minutes). The interviews and focus groups were transcribed via Zoom auto-transcriptions and double checked for accuracy and resulted in 57 single-spaced pages of data.

Data Analysis

To properly analyze the collected data, a thematic analysis was conducted to find common themes based on the collective discourse of students who have experienced major stigmas. Braun and Clarke (2006) give an in-depth explanation of thematic analysis and explain that it focuses on identifying patterns within a data set. Since this research's goal was not to form a theory, but rather to identify the misconceptions about liberal arts majors, thematic analysis was more appropriate than grounded theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Braun and Clark (2006) provide a five-step process describing thematic analysis. These steps, or phases, are familiarizing yourself with your data, getting initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Analysis of this research followed these steps, beginning with phase one. To begin analyzing the data, I downloaded the Zoom focus groups' audio files and transcribed them with assistance from Zoom transcriptions. After downloading the transcriptions, I read through the data fully three times to familiarize myself with the content.

For step two, I began generating initial codes within the dataset. I used the initial ideas and themes from phase one to organize my data into meaningful groups. I had a large amount of codes when I first began this process. Some examples of the introductory codes I used were: 'major' when a student was discussing their major, 'change of major' when they discussed changing their major, 'self-realization' when they would explain their thought process behind their major selection, 'family influence' when they mentioned the influence their family had over their decisions, 'contradictions' when they contradicted a previous statement about college majors, and 'SMC' when students made mention of managing their stigmas. I completed this step by hand, noting the themes on the printed transcriptions when they occurred. I used highlighting to begin my possible codes with generalized groupings of the data. I wrote notes next to each theme, discussing any possible relationships among themes as well as subthemes that specify the data more. I examined data to see if there are any themes that don't fit in with the main groups I identified.

The fourth step I completed involved continuing to review all the themes I identified, specifically looking to see which were strong enough to stand alone and which needed to be reexamined. This involved themes being combined or discarded altogether from analysis. For

example, one of the themes I found was stigmas among liberal arts students. Under this theme, I had codes for 'no opportunities', 'harder to find a job', 'different', and 'meaningful work', among other. While multiple students made comments that fell within these terms, I combined them together under my final theme of 'fewer job opportunities' as this theme had depth to the research and defined what each comment represented. Lastly, I considered the verification of my themes to see if they accurately represented the original responses, as well as my research topic. This process involved confirming I had at least three quotes and comments from participants that directly related to each theme I was considering for my research.

I took all of the themes identified and created an in-depth thematic map answering each research question. For example, for RQ1 which asked about stereotypes among STEM and liberal arts students, I created two side-by-side maps. Each map had the major listed in the middle, and then branched out with the themes identified based on student comments. For my second research question, the map contained the narrowed down theme of 'contradictions' in the middle, and then branched out with multiple quotes from participants that provided evidence and depth for this theme. Once I had my thematic maps, which is a visual of common themes developed from the research showing possible subgroups branching out, I defined and named remaining themes in a way that was coherent, understandable, and reflected my research and data. I identified any possible subthemes and confirmed that each theme has support from participant comments. I also discarded themes that had lack of support from participant quotes with them. This is the last step I completed before pulling my analysis together into my final report, where I backed up each identified theme with the direct quotes from participants and a discussion of each theme.

Verification

In lieu of achieving and analyzing numeric results, qualitative data provides greater context without generalizing experiences among a population. Hays and Singh (2012) researched the use of qualitative research in both a clinical and educational setting. They explained that the real-world examples provided through qualitative data provide research with a real-world look into research topics and questions. Elliot and Timulak (2015) utilized qualitative data to enhance the perspective of participants in their research by separating their data from the external variables. As Tomita and colleagues (2021) explained in their use of qualitative data, this style of methods helps the researcher see the topic from participants' eyes.

Based on Tracy (2010)'s criteria for quality qualitative research, my research needed to have a worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, be ethical, and have meaningful coherence. My topic of stigmatized and shamed college majors was worthy as students in higher education needed to be researched to identify what these stigmas were so they can be addressed as higher education continues to grow. Thematic analysis provided rich rigor with my data collection and analysis, as it has been successfully used a multitude of times within qualitative research. This study reflected on students' experiences, in a way to provide credibility of their stories while explaining the phenomenon of major shaming. Findings from this research are transferable into the future of higher education research. IRB approval was given before research began and my participants were all treated ethically. Lastly, this study attained meaningful coherence as it used qualitative methods to attain the purpose of the research.

Summary

The purpose of this thesis was to identify stigmas that college students face when selecting their undergraduate majors and explain where these stigmas originate. To complete this study, students were asked to participate in a focus group to reflect on their experiences in college through the major selection process. The goal of this research was to find common themes through thematic analysis that helped explain a college student's perspective when selecting their major, as well as stigma messages that exist and where they originated from. In doing so, this research can help shape the future of higher education by explaining the impacts of major shaming and how it can be prevented.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Based on responses from six focus groups, two interviews, and 28 total respondents, each research question has been answered. I found that both STEM and liberal arts majors experience stereotypes, however STEM majors experience more positive stereotypes such as being labelled necessary, dedicated, male-dominated, impressive, and a benefit to society. On the other hand, liberal arts majors were stereotyped as easier and having fewer future job and financial prospects. Participants were found to communicate these stigmas themselves through contradictions, either by attempting to challenge or perpetuate the stigma. Participants managed these stigmas by using Meisenbach's (2010) strategies of avoiding, reducing offensiveness, and denying. An analysis of the findings from this study in response to each research question is below.

STEM Stereotypes

Participants had a much easier time explaining STEM majors over liberal arts majors. They immediately came up with a slew of positive stereotypes used to describe STEM majors, such as necessary, dedicated, male-dominated, impressive, and a benefit to society. While participants in these fields felt that they were stereotyped, they actually just faced higher societal pressures and more positive labels. This leads to society stereotyping STEM and healthcare majors as more beneficial to society than those in the liberal arts.

Necessary/Essential

One of the key themes participants used to describe STEM majors was necessary and essential to society. When asked to explain her thoughts on STEM majors, Emma, a nursing major, explained: "I think they're all like essential, like very essential for the community and like society." Bob, a radiologic technology major, and Hannah, a nursing major, got into a discussion

on the purpose and need for STEM jobs in society, specifically regarding the recent COVID-19

pandemic. Bob explained how necessary STEM jobs are at the present by stating "they are pretty

much the future…STEM is a growing field, and it's necessary." Hannah agreed and felt that

societal innovation was the cause for STEM majors being the main focus over the liberal arts:

"With the idea of more expansion on technology and healthcare and it's more needed now than

that of the arts." Hannah's thought when stating this was that society has moved on from the

times when art sustained life and that now technology, key to many STEM majors, is more

necessary to society. In addition to the majors being defined as more necessary, the students

within those majors were stereotyped as being more dedicated than others.

Dedicated

Participants also formed a key theme of dedication when describing STEM majors, their

workload, and their work ethic. Gabby, a double major in political science and Philosophy,

discussed the commitment STEM majors needed: "I think it takes a lot of dedication to be a

STEM major. Being a STEM major is pretty cool actually…kudos to them for being able to

continue with that." Piper, a communication studies major, also felt these majors were very

dedicated and used her friend as an example: "I do think that it does take a lot of dedication and a

lot of time because one of my friends who's a pre-med major spends like 6 hours a day in the

library doing all of her homework." Reese, a radiologic technology major, agreed with the idea

of STEM majors being dedicated, but also explained the required work ethic to be in this field:

"The one thing I can say about STEM majors is the work ethic. You have to put in a lot, a lot of

work into it and it's not easy, so you have to hold yourself accountable." Overall, participants

like Reese identified the positive stereotype that STEM majors require more dedication than

other majors. In addition to the stereotype that STEM majors are more dedicated, I also found a

stereotype that STEM fields are typically male-dominated.

Male-Dominated

Participants in this research expressed a stereotype that STEM fields are typically male-

dominated. In his focus group, Ian, a chemistry major, explained that he believed the reason

STEM majors are taken more seriously by society than those in the liberal arts or education

fields are due to the lack of women in those fields:

> "The more a profession has a greater male to female or female ratio, the more seriously
>
> it's taken…Stuff like engineering, mathematics, science, and technology those have like a
>
> lot more men in them than women…I notice that tends to be taken seriously by society."

The phenomenon that Ian explained is better known to communication scholars as Vocational

Anticipatory Socialization (VAS), which was identified by Myers and colleagues in 2011. This

study found that there were numerous gender prescriptions in society that socialized males and

females towards certain vocations, often leading males to STEM fields and women to nurturing

careers. Gabby, a political science and philosophy double major, expressed this need and her

desire for "a lot more women in the STEM majors." Like Gabby, Olivia, a health services major,

felt frustrated by how women were pressured into more nurturing careers:

> I definitely think like as women we're very kind of like guided into teaching, nursing,
>
> like social work, psychology…but a lot of girls are interested in math and construction
>
> and like business and stuff that are definitely male-dominated fields which kind of sucks
>
> because, like you would think like patriarchy would be done by now…at a young age,
>
> [women are told] they have to be a caregiver…even for men it's the same thing, like
>
> there's such a stigma with men being nurses and teachers.

A key stereotype identified in this research focused on gender norms within society, specifically how women are led to nurturing careers like nursing and turned away from STEM and predominately male fields, as previously identified in Myers et al. (2011). Overall, the participants in this research identified that society often reinforces gender norms to communicate negative stereotypes among different majors and maintain gender differences in career fields. Next, I will examine the last stereotype I found amongst STEM majors in this research, which is that they are more impressive than others.

Impressive

The final theme that participants used to define STEM fields was simply impressive. Participants used a variety of ways to describe the fields to be inspiring, awesome, and remarkable. When asked to define STEM majors, Olivia, a health services major, stated: "I just think that those people are blessings from the Lord for wanting to go into [a STEM] career… One of my friends [is] a biology major, he was a biochemistry major and [when] he told me that…I think my jaw literally dropped the floor." Olivia continued to mention how science majors were "really cool [and] not something I would literally ever do." Jasmine also explained the 'wow' factor that comes from someone stating they are in the STEM field:

> I just feel like there's more of a basis of 'oh wow', like that's your first reaction, you know, like you must be smart…with liberal arts, you know, like you don't really think about all of the things that go into it…with STEM…we think of all those bigger, higher-up kind of jobs.

Abigail, a political science major, was impressed by STEM majors, but also found them to be intimidating: "I'm super intimidated [with STEM] just because I'm not good at that kind of stuff and so it amazes me that people are so good at that…like it is intimidating to be around people

that are super smart and know a lot of stuff." Similar to everyone else, Andrea, an undecided

major, found STEM majors impressive and requiring a certain amount of respect: "I respect them

a lot, because I feel like I could never do that stuff, so I think you have to be pretty smart to get

most of that done." Most participants explained that STEM majors are stereotyped as impressive

and remarkable.

      Overall, the stereotypes among STEM and healthcare majors are that they are necessary,

more dedicated, male-dominated, and impressive. A lot of these stereotypes stemmed from direct

comparisons between those majoring in STEM fields and those majoring in the liberal arts.

However, many of these stereotypes initiated from participants' parents, as they often pushed

their children to go into STEM and medical fields. For example, some participants experienced

parents demanding they must be a certain major. Emma, a nursing major, felt her parents pushed

her towards "more advanced like fields and like science and stuff…the pressure was there to like

go into a good paying job." Grandparents also communicated these stereotypes through the

generations. Jasmine, an occupational therapy major, said her grandmother saw becoming a

doctor as the key to success and told Jasmine she needed to "be a doctor or you're going to

struggle." Emily, a business major, said her parents also held a negative influence and control

over her major decision: "My parents were like really into me choosing nursing at first…I

thought about interior design and stuff and they weren't as like, I don't know, they didn't think it

was like as good of an idea." Negative parental influence is harmful as it continues the cycle of

stigma communication: parents communicate stigma to their children and then the children

communicate the learned stigma to friends, peers, and others.

      In addition to examining the stereotypes among STEM majors, an analysis of stereotypes

among those in the liberal arts helps us understand the differences in stereotypes each group of

majors' face, but also helps us begin to understand the stigmas and how they are communicated both to and by students. Before I talk about how my participants shared stereotypes as stigma messages, I will provide an analysis of what stereotypes participants identified with liberal arts majors.

Liberal Arts Stereotypes

Overall, participants had a more difficult time explaining liberal arts majors than STEM majors. Participants became flustered, hesitated, and ended up with fewer terms overall and less positive terms to describe these majors. Olivia, a health services major, struggled to explain her thoughts on what liberal arts is: "All I know about liberal arts majors is foreign language and I don't want to do that." Allison, a biochemistry major, also shared how little she knew about the field: "I mean…like…psychology…I think that's…that's a liberal art. I think, I don't know, but I love my psychology class." While participants struggled to define liberal arts majors, they eventually identified a few short terms that they thought summarized the majors within this field. Among the terms they used, two main types of stereotypes were identified: liberal arts majors are easier and there are little career opportunities and financial stability within the field.

Easier

One of the themes found when identifying stereotypes liberal arts face was that liberal arts majors were perceived to be easier to complete. Claire, an undecided major, explained how she was thinking of going into the liberal arts field with a few of the major options she was most interested in. However, she recognized that these majors are stereotyped as being easier than others: "[Liberal arts majors] are looked at as like I don't know, not as difficult majors." Piper, a communication studies major, identified that while individuals do compare the workload of liberal arts and STEM majors, they often don't think of the amount of work that liberal arts have

to put in outside of the classroom. She spoke of her recent Introductory Spanish class when she

said: "People have the assumption that like liberal arts majors don't have as hard [a time] as the

science majors do, but Spanish is hard." This stereotype that liberal arts is perceived as easier

even caused some participants to avoid the field. Mary, a former history major, explained why

she changed her major: "I chose history because I just was like oh that's an easy way to go, and

then I wanted to push myself and that's why I ended up changing my mind" to political science.

Josie explained that once again, these thoughts are based on comparisons with STEM majors:

"STEM majors, they're considered really difficult…for whatever reason, English and

photography and things like that [in the liberal arts], they're not considered as difficult as a

subject to study." Overall, participants stereotyped liberal arts majors as easier degrees through

the comparison that STEM majors are more difficult. Before I talk more about how my

participants used these contradictions, I will explain my final liberal arts stereotype: career

opportunities.

Fewer Career Opportunities and Financial Stability

In addition to being stereotyped as easier, this study also found that liberal arts majors

were associated with fears of having fewer career opportunities and financial stability. Bob, a

radiologic technology major, struggled to find the words to define the liberal arts field when

asked: "Liberal arts…I believe it's harder to find…in most of those…. it's harder to find a

career." Like Bob, Ian, a chemistry major, also noted that liberal arts majors might face fewer

opportunities post-grad: "I think it takes a certain amount of bravery to be a liberal arts major

because, like they do get a lot of crap the other degrees don't and they might face worse like

employment prospects, but they do it anyways, because they love what they do." Jade, a dental

hygiene major, had previous experience within the liberal arts before she changed her major, but

like Bob and the others outside of the field, she still struggled to come up with a definition: "Before I came to college, I wanted to go into journalism and I think that falls under the liberal arts and like I changed it because I didn't think there was going to be enough opportunities out there for me." Abigail, a political science major, also experienced stereotyping from others when it came to her selected major and future financial stability: "When I told them my major was political science, they were like 'oh you better get ready to work fast food for the rest of your life, what are you going to do with that?'" Hannah, a nursing major, was even forced to select a different major than she wished due to her parents' expectations of her financial future: "I've always been told [I] have to become a doctor or something like really honored and makes a lot of money…I wanted to be an anthropologist, but my mom really didn't…she said I couldn't make enough money and wasn't going to be able to live." Regardless of if a student was majoring in the liberal arts themselves or another field, they recognized the perceived status quo that liberal arts are not known to lead to profitable future careers or a multitude of careers.

When participants were asked to define liberal arts majors, many struggled to come up with a definition. This was in sharp contrast to participants defining STEM majors, where they came up with numerous positive terms and stereotypes inevitably associated with these majors. Overall, participants stereotyped STEM majors very positively, using terms such as necessary, impressive, and dedicated. On the other hand, participants struggled to define the liberal arts. When they did, responses were short and choppy compared to responses about STEM majors. Based on their responses, two stereotypes that liberal arts majors experience were identified that labels them as easy and with little financial gain and career outlook. In addition to identifying the stereotypes that these participants identified through comparisons between the two types of majors, it is important to examine how these stereotypes are communicated as stigmas.

Communication of Stereotypes to Stigma

As stated in previously, Smith (2007) defines stigma communication as "messages spread through communities to teach their members to recognize the disgraced," (Smith, 2007, p. 464). Smith (2007) explains that stigmatized groups are marked, labelled, given physical and social responsibility for their stigma, and isolated based on their membership with the stigmatized group. This study identified that participants communicated stereotypes into stigmas without even realizing it through contradictory statements. These contradictory statements, explained in depth later, continue the spread of stereotypes into stigma and continue to create negative stereotypes about liberal arts majors.

Stigma Communication

Stigmas are social functions that form a communicative process. Stigmatized individuals need to be marked, labelled, and given responsibility and a level of peril (Smith, 2007). However, the communication process doesn't end there as these stigmas must be communicated in some way to others to maintain a status quo and alert others to the stigmatized individual.

Historically, stigmas have been physically marked on an individual's body to nonverbally communicate the danger of stigmas through scars or tattoos (Smith, 2007). In this research, participants were marked less directly when they were verbally asked by others what their major was. Andrea, who already had three years of college under her belt, had recently changed her major from Accounting, which she had been pursuing her three years in college, to undecided. She described how she knew she would be marked and stigmatized if she told people the truth, so she told them something that would prevent her from being marked:

> I feel like whenever people ask me [my major] I kind of just stick to accounting still because I feel like people look at me. Like I feel like most of the people that ask me they

know I've been in school for a while. So, I just [say] I'm like accounting, you know just

kind of stick with it. A lot of people are judgmental that you don't know what you want to

do.

On the other side of marking, Bryce, a biochemistry major with a focus in pre-medical studies,

explained how he never felt marked when he answered what his major was: "[People] always

seem very okay with [my major being biochemistry]. I never have to deal with somebody you

know…asking deeper into the question." Sophie, an English major, also explained how she felt

when asked about her major: "Most of the time when I say I'm an English major they think I'm

going into teaching or something like that, so they kind of just make a judgment right off the

bat." Sophie felt judged through stereotyping because individuals were immediately marking her

with a future career in teaching when she wants to pursue editing, which transforms into the

stigma that there are fewer known career opportunities for those in the liberal arts. Overall, these

participants provided interesting details of being asked what their major was, and it was

especially interesting to compare the undecided and liberal arts students' feelings on being

marked by what their major was versus the STEM majors' views. The next step of the stigma

communication process occurs when individuals are labelled.

   The labelling process of stigma communication brings attention to the stigma and

separates them from others (Smith, 2007). The labelling process in this research involved

assigning and associating stereotypes for STEM and liberal arts majors. As listed earlier in this

chapter, students positively stereotyped STEM majors as necessary, dedicated, male-dominated,

and essential. Students labelled liberal arts majors negatively with stereotypes about how they

are easier and have fewer financial and job prospects.

The next step in the stigma communication process is assigning responsibility. Responsibility is divided amongst the choice that individuals must continue within the stigmatized group or the control they have to discontinue association within the group (Smith, 2007). In this study, the stigma about liberal arts majors was formed through the marking of these majors as less impressive than STEM majors, labelling them as easier, and then assigning responsibility, depending on who is at fault for having selected that major. When this decision is in a student's control, or if they made the choice to continue in this field, then society would say they are undeserving of empathy based on the negative stereotypes and stigma surrounding them and their major. If a student were forced into a certain field and unable to remove themselves from the stigmatized group, then society would say this was out of their control and empathy would be allowable. However, as explained above, this study found that external forces such as parents heavily pushed their children into STEM and healthcare fields. As these fields are not negatively stereotyped and therefore stigmatized, responsibility is not assigned.

Regardless of the choice or control of responsibility, peril is the last step in the stigma communication process. Peril is like a warning sign informing the community to back away from the stigmatized group (Smith, 2007). In this research, the peril of the stigmatized liberal arts students was the continuation of the stigma communication cycle. Some students, like Mary, a current political science major, changed their major to leave the stigmatized group: "I used to be a history major with a secondary education minor but I realized I don't want to work in like the school system and I don't really want to be a teacher." Mary heard the stigma over and over again about how liberal arts (especially history) was "an easy way to go" and the only career with this major was education: "When I was a history major it was a lot different because, like when I get out of college, I could just be a history teacher and go to a school and teach history."

While there are many job prospects for those majoring in history, Mary heard the peril of the stigmatized group, changed her major because of it, and continued to communicate the stigma to others instead of looking into job prospects to challenge the stigma. Regardless of a students' intended major, the peril of the liberal arts' stigma was the communication and spread of the stigma to others that liberal arts majors do not contribute to society, make money, or get jobs after graduation. While the participants initially learned of the stigmas and peril of liberal arts' degrees through the warning signs from their parents and other family members, the participants' themselves continued to communicate stigmas about liberal arts' majors by attempting to perpetuate or challenge the stigma through contradictory statements.

Contradictions

During the interviews, it became increasingly noticeable that participants would state one thing and then immediately contradict their previous statement, especially in regard to the worth each major has on society. Key contradictions are shown below, grouped based on if they continued to perpetuate, challenge, or manage the stigmas.

Perpetuating the Stigma One way the participants used contradictions was by perpetuating the stigma. When asked if some majors were better for society than others, participants that perpetuated the stigma communication would start off by stating that all majors are equal, but then seem to change directions and contradict the previous statement by the end of the sentence by clarifying that perhaps some were more important than others. Ellen, a nursing major, responded: "Most liberal arts majors are like really important, but I also think it like depends on what you choose to do, and like if you can find a job afterwards…some are more important than others." While Ellen began with the idea that there isn't a stigma as all college majors are equal, she shifted gears at the end and contradicted herself by specifying that a

college major is actually only valuable if a student can find a job after graduation. Bob, a radiologic technology major, shared a similar expectation through his contradiction that continues to perpetuate the stigma. When originally asked which majors are more beneficial to society, Bob expressed that he believed "[all majors] have their own niche…each one of them has its purpose and it has its need and uses and, you know, need in society." However, when this question turned into a discussion about how society places a higher emphasis on STEM majors, Bob explained that this was necessary because it's "an amazing field, really needed…They push STEM a lot because there's major openings and that's where a lot of things are driving now towards the science, technology, engineering." While Bob originally expressed that all majors are equal, he followed up with a contradiction that makes it seem that not all majors are equal, and majors in STEM need to be placed at a higher importance.

Even students in the liberal arts fields perpetuated the stigma. Gabby, a political science major, said: "I don't think there's a better major…I think there are some majors and minors that will be more beneficial to society like nursing and health professions." Like Ellen, Gabby also contradicted her statement about each major's worth by saying all majors were equal, but then perpetuating the stigma that perhaps some are more valuable than others. While some participants used contradictions to perpetuate the stigma, others used them to challenge the stigma.

Challenging the Stigma While most participants vocalized contradictions of some sort, some students used these contradictions to challenge stigmas. When asked which majors were more valuable to society, Bryce, a biochemistry major, stated: "I don't feel like every degree is exactly like...it doesn't have the exact outcomes or the exact worth to society, but it all has its place…even if it's a small cog, all the cogs in the machine are important." Interestingly, Bryce

seemed to challenge the stigma by beginning with how some majors like STEM are better, but

then changing his mind and saying that each major has its place. Olivia, a health services major,

stated:

> I mean obviously there's the certain majors that are needed for the society to function,
>
> like nursing, doctors, teachers…like these are three very important but also all the other
>
> majors have a part in society that play. I don't really think one is more necessarily
>
> important than the other.

While Olivia began with a focus on the importance of those in healthcare, she contradicted

herself by saying all majors are important. Emily, a business major, responded: "I think [STEM]

majors are] definitely like harder, I mean like science-wise, I guess. It just depends like what

you're good at…everyone has their strong suits." Emily was beginning to completely reinforce

the stereotype that STEM majors are more difficult, but then realized that perhaps each student

has their own strengths, and that difficulty is based on an individual's strengths, and vice versa,

their weaknesses.

Other participants seemed to follow through with this idea. While they began their

statement with a mention of the stigma that STEM is more difficult, they contradicted their

statements to challenge the stigma that liberal arts majors are easier. Eve, a psychology major,

stated: "When I typically think of the STEM majors, I do think that they are harder, but then

again…other things are also really hard." Like Eve, Zach, a criminal justice major, said: "I do

think [STEM] is harder, but I'm not going to discredit anyone that chooses a lesser major. I'm

just going to give them the same credit." Zach is still saying there are stigmas, but that he's not

going to discredit them for having a "lesser major," which shows he is still stigmatizing them

through his contradictions. Zach and Eve gave similar contradictions focused on the stereotype

that STEM fields are more difficult, but then expressed that all majors are equal. While these two

participants were focused on challenging the stigma by reinforcing STEM stereotypes, Piper, a

communication studies major, and Sophie, an English major, focused specifically on the

healthcare fields at the beginning of their contradiction. Piper responded: "I think some people

might think that others are more beneficial to society like healthcare to other things that people

go to college for to actually do something…but I think other majors and career paths are just as

important, but in different ways." Like Piper, Sophie challenged the stigma by recognizing it and

then explaining how she doesn't see things like that: "Most people think like nursing or

engineering is better than others, but in my point of view I just don't think that's applicable

today." Piper and Sophie challenged the stigma most effectively, by explaining that the stigma

exists and recognizing its societal impact but denouncing it by saying it's not true. The other

participants that contradicted themselves challenged the stigma while still spreading warning

signs and symptoms of peril within stigma management communication.

Participants in this study communicated stereotypes as stigmas through Smith's (2007)

stigma message choices. The messages and contradictions these students used impacted the

students through marking, labelling, assigning responsibility, and warning of liberal arts majors'

peril. These message choices lead to reactions when students shared their major to society, which

either caused them to change their major or continue in the stigmatized major. Regardless of the

participants' major choices, participants continued to communicate the stigma about liberal arts

majors through contradictory statements to either challenge or perpetuate the stigma. In addition

to perpetuating and challenging stigma communication, some students attempted to manage the

stigmas through Meisenbach's (2010) Stigma Management Communication.

Stigma Management

As examined in chapter two, Meisenbach (2010) identified that social stigmas are "construction[s] of human perception of differences" (p. 272) and found that while the difference in discussion may be permanent, the perceptions these stigmatized individuals face are not. She created the Stigma Management Communication (SMC) theory, which incorporates Smith's (2007) research of stigma but enhances it to explain how individuals manage the stigmas they encounter in differing ways. In this research, when liberal arts participants felt judged by others' perceptions on their college major, they reacted using three of Meisenbach's (2010) Stigma Management Communication: denying, reducing offensiveness, and avoiding to manage the stigmas that they encountered.

Denying

Academic scholars refer to denying strategies as activism against major stigmas (Meisenbach, 2010). In this study, when participants majoring in the liberal arts felt judgements based on their major choice, they denied these perceptions through logical denials, which "provide specific evidence that refutes the stigma," (Meisenbach, 2010, p. 284). Sophie, an English major, used her job experience to provide evidence and explain the importance of the English major: "Editing is like a very big thing…I work for a newspaper at the moment, and if I didn't have my job there, there would be so much stuff that would just not make sense, published out there…this is needed." Whereas Sophie used logic about her job experience to deny the stigma, Piper, a communication studies major, used logic about the job market to defend her communication studies degree: "Most people just think communication majors are just looking for an easy way out of school…but there are so many different things you can do with it, and a lot of people don't realize that most jobs came from people majoring in communication studies."

Like Sophie and Piper, Hannah, a nursing major, also felt frustrated by how liberal arts majors

are represented, and defended them by explaining:

> A lot of times when we think about the liberal arts, we get mixed up with being talented
>
> versus like hard work. I feel like if you're liberal arts…a lot of times people come up to
>
> you and like judge you based on what you do…They also say you're so talented and they
>
> don't realize how much passion and hard work and time and repetition that's gone
>
> through.

These participants recognized the stigmas they were facing due to negative stereotypes and

attempted to deny these stereotypes to change social perceptions on their major choice. These

participants used logic to provide evidence on why the stigma is inaccurate. Sophie explained

how editing is an extremely important part in society to discredit why English majors are

stigmatized and Piper used logic to talk about how there are so many opportunities to

communication studies that a stigma shouldn't exist. Similarly, Hannah denied stigma by talking

about the hard work involved in the liberal arts. Like denying, participants also attempted to

reduce offensiveness to manage stigmas.

Reducing Offensiveness

To manage stigmas, some participants accepted that the stigma applies to them but

challenge public understanding of the stigma by reducing the offensiveness of the stigma.

Reducing offensiveness is for participants who "accepted that the stigma applied to them but

wished to change how the stigma was perceived by others," (Meisenbach, 2010, p. 283). These

participants attempted to reduce offensiveness of the stigma while defending their major choice

to others. When judged, Mary, a political science major, says she "just talk[s] about how, when

people talk bad about political science majors or like [say] I'm not going to have a career when I

graduate or there's no point in being in college…that I'm going to have to work hard." By explaining that she will work hard with her major, she is minimizing the stigma and attempting to refocus the conversation on her hard work.

Claire, an undecided major, took a more direct route to attempt to reduce offensiveness: "[I] usually find myself trying to argue back a little bit, but that's just because there's such a stigma." She was frustrated with how some individuals feel the need to speak up about matters that don't pertain to them and wanted to change how the stigma was perceived to others. Gabby, a political science and philosophy double major, was also frustrated with others' opinions and their feelings of need to express them. She stated: "College is really hard, so judging someone based on what their major is…it's kind of harsh and rude to make those assumptions when everyone is putting in time and effort into getting a better education for themselves." Gabby attempted to minimize the offensiveness while reducing the negative impacts of the stigma. Lastly, Piper, a communication studies major, took less direct, but still defensive, action when she used transcendence of reducing offensiveness: "If you enjoy [studying a major], then go with it. Everyone is doing completely different things and that's what college is for. People need to embrace all the different things, instead of having some pre-judgments on others for what they chose to do." While denying and reducing offensiveness tactics to manage stigma are very different, the participants in this research used both to attempt to change the public's mind about their majors. Participants also attempted to avoid stigmas, an explanation of which follows.

Avoiding

Other participants took less direct approaches to managing their stigmas by avoiding the stigma altogether and attempting to move on despite the stigmas. Emily explained how stigmas don't affect her decision: "I definitely don't think [major stigmas] impacted [my decision] at

all…it's just kind of annoying hearing the comments." Similarly, Emma, a nursing major,

managed stigma by avoiding direct confrontation but using the comments to succeed: "I don't

think [judgements] impacted me in a negative way, I think it almost impacted me in a positive

way…for me it just kind of made me want to work harder to like succeed in the field because

I'm tired of hearing people say stuff." Abigail, a political science major, took the most indirect

approach to managing stigma, although she wished the stigmas ceased to exist: "I've never really

defended it because it doesn't matter to me too much what they think, although it would be nice

if they were supportive…it's not my business, so I kind of just leave it be." Participants that used

the avoiding approach to Stigma Management Communication didn't feel like it was worth their

energy to fight against the stigmas they experienced, as it wouldn't make a difference in social

perception.

     As discussed in the literature review, stereotypes lead to stigmas which then lead to

shaming. In this research, negative stereotypes among liberal arts majors and positive stereotypes

about STEM majors were identified. These stereotypes created stigmas among participants and

their social networks. Stigmas were shared via verbal communication through family members.

Some of these stigmas caused participants to feel shamed and potentially even reconsider or

change their major to feel more secure about their path. However, the most notable finding from

this research was that regardless of a participants' major or experience with negative stereotypes

shared by society, participants themselves shared stigmas about certain majors through the use of

contradictions in their conversations. The contradictions can have a drastic effect as they

reinforce the spread of negative stereotypes and continue to communicate them as stigmas, as the

participants themselves had the stigmas communicated to them originally. This communication

phenomenon creates a cycle of negative statements being shared, which can have a drastic effect

on the higher education community.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Students face judgment about their major choice. Students in business, engineering, and pre-medical sciences are often praised for their decisions due to the belief that many of the world's present and future problems will be resolved by technology industries (Myers et al., 2011). Individuals are socialized from birth that STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) programs will lead them to fulfilling, high-paying careers, whereas those in the liberal arts who develop more thorough critical thinking in lieu of direct certification are seen as worthless and not an aid to society (Lair & Wieland, 2012). These students often feel the need to justify their undergraduate major decision to avoid feeling shamed or worthless (Clair, 1996). The focus of this thesis was to answer the following research questions:

RQ1a: What stereotypes are associated with STEM majors?

RQ1b: What stereotypes are associated with liberal arts majors?

RQ2: How, if at all, are the stereotypes communicated as stigmas?

RQ3: How, if at all, are these stigmas managed?

Implications of Stereotyping

Findings from this research were that students stereotyped STEM majors positively, using terms like necessary, dedicated, impressive, male-dominated, and as more of a benefit to society overall. Participants in this research stated that majors were only a benefit to society if they provided financial stability and helped others, traits that they said STEM and healthcare fields contained but liberal arts did not. Much of the reason for students' perspectives on benefitting society comes from the American tradition of capitalism. According to Fuchs (2020), "capitalism is a type of society where the logic of accumulation shapes the capitalist economic mode of production" (p. 335). Capitalism, prominent in the United States, focuses on the mass

accumulation of wealth, both individually and nationwide. If money is the key to being

successful in the United States and little is known about job prospects and financials among

those in the liberal arts, then those majors are seen as useless to society, as they are not

contributing to capitalistic views.

In this research, Bob, a radiologic technology major, explained this mindset when

examining why society needs to push STEM more than other fields. In his mind, more job

opportunities equaled more potential for growth and further accumulation of wealth. Bryce, a

biochemistry major, also explained how STEM majors are more beneficial to society due to their

ability to help others. Due to the inherent capitalistic bias that money is more important than

passion and happiness, students like Bob and Bryce would continue with their contradiction by

saying that majors in the liberal arts were important, but only if a good, stable career could be

found upon graduation. This opposed how most students believed happiness was the most

important factor when deciding their college major - until money and job prospects are brought

up.

Ciulla (2015) identified four values that determine how individuals make choices about

their employment. These four values are meaningful work, leisure, money, and security.

Meaningful work and leisure have a lot in common, as both focus on employees doing a job they

enjoy. However, meaningful work emphasizes doing something significant that contributes to

society, whereas leisure is based on the employee's own personal satisfaction. The money value

is purely based on the income that a job provides, which ties into capitalistic beliefs that money

makes the world function. Security, on the other hand, focuses on the stability of a job, such as

job security and future ability to earn a promotion. While it would be ideal to have all four values

within employment, individuals make tradeoffs based on their priorities. This thesis found that

participants initially mentioned the importance of meaningful work, but ultimately decided that money and security were more important. My participants spoke negatively about those that sought meaning over money or stability in their jobs, which encouraged the stigmatization of liberal arts majors.

Interestingly enough, research from the Association of American Colleges and Universities identified that most employers are actively seeking college graduates with a liberal arts background (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2021). Similarly, in 2020, a national survey identified that 82% of liberal arts majors earned an average salary of $55,000 after graduation, which is higher than the US average salary in 2020 of $41,535 (Census, 2021). As noted previously, stereotypes among liberal arts majors were negative due to the implication that liberal arts majors are thought of as easier and with fewer future career opportunities and financial stability, which is not accurate or backed by research. These stereotypes lead to the stigmatization of liberal arts majors, which causes students to shy away from these degrees. If money is the key to being successful in the United States and less is known about job prospects and financials among those in the liberal arts, then those majors are seen as invaluable to society as they are not contributing to our capitalistic ideologies.

Families were the primary communicators of the positive stereotypes found within STEM fields and negative stereotypes within the liberal arts. Family, primarily described as parents and grandparents, shed either a negative or uninvolved influence on their child's college major choice. This reinforces previous research from Myers et al. (2011) on Vocational Anticipatory Socialization. Myers and colleagues found that family members, primarily parents, were the most influential source of their children's choice of employment and that children take on their parents' attitudes about certain work selections. In this research, some students experienced

parents demanding they must be a certain major. These thoughts communicated stigmas to the students that some majors are better than others. Typically, parents preferred STEM and medical fields for their children, which is likely why participants in this research also held STEM majors in high regard. The problem with negative influence from parents found in this research is that the negative influence and initial communication of parent-to-child stereotypes communicate stigmas within the family, which their children then continue to communicate to friends, peers, and others.

Stereotyping had several implications in this research. Participants highlighted the importance of STEM fields over liberal arts fields. This belief system stems from capitalistic views which are prominent in the United States. While work choices should come from a balance of the four values found by Ciulla (2015): meaningful work, leisure, money, and security, participants in this research found that jobs were only beneficial to society if they led to money and stability. However, many participants were unaware that there are plenty of opportunities in the liberal arts that lead to money and stability, along with meaningful work. This socialization forms a cycle of stigma communication where stereotypes are formed, communicated as stigmas to children, and communicated by students themselves throughout society.

Stigma Communication

Stigma communication is the theory and process of how stigmas are communicated to others in ways that continue to feed, develop, and spread them throughout society (Smith, 2007). Stigma communication is problematic for many reasons, but specifically in that it labels a group of people, either creates a new stigma or reinforces an existing one, and spreads the stigma attitude to others. Participants in this research caused a cycle of stigma communication that enhances our understanding of stigma communication. This cycle highlights the continuation of

the stigma communication process. It begins with societal stereotyping, specifically when society

or family members tell students how STEM is a superior field due to the stability and financials

known about the field, whereas liberal arts are stereotyped as easier and with fewer future

prospects. These stereotypes form stigmas about liberal arts majors, specifically that they are less

beneficial to society. Students are then shamed for their beliefs, which is the process by which an

individual is led to feel negative due to their actions, thoughts, and feelings. Once a participant

was aware of this stigma that has caused them to feel shamed, they managed their stigma in one

of three ways: reducing offensiveness, avoiding, or denying. The avoiding tactic, described more

in-depth later in this chapter, involves fully accepting the stigma. This leads to a continuation of

the stigma communication cycle by participants choosing to spread the stereotypes to others.

However, denying and reducing offensiveness attempted to end the stigma cycle through

education.

Figure 1
Stigma Communication Cycle of Liberal Arts Majors
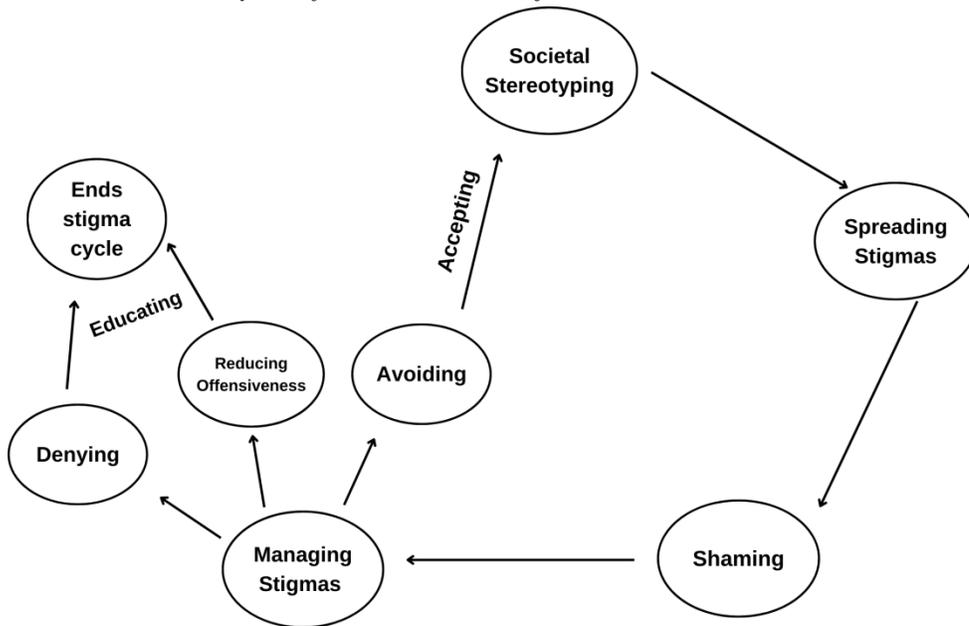
Participants themselves continued the stigma communication cycle by sharing the stereotypes about STEM and liberal arts fields as socially-tainted stigmas through their use of contradictions about the importance of majors. Participants either perpetuated or challenged the stigmas. Participants that perpetuated the stigma would start by saying that all majors were equal, but then end with a statement on how STEM was more important or made more money, therefore not equal as they previously stated. Overall, more participants seemed to challenge the stigma through contradictions, by saying statements about how STEM was a better field, but then ending their statement with that all majors are equal. While the contradictions challenging the statement are preferred when it comes to all majors being perceived equitably, the problem was that students were still acknowledging, and then spreading, the stereotypes about liberal arts majors in their initial statements.

These stereotypes are then communicated as stigmas primarily through contradictions. These contradictions form shaming behavior. Shaming is the action of spreading negative stereotypes and stigmas, as a way of purposefully making people feel bad about their majors (Lauricella, 2019). Society spreads stigmas on a wide-spread level, family spreads stigmas on a small-scale level, and students reinforce themselves shaming by sharing stereotypes as stigmas. This creates the cycle among stereotyping, forming and spreading stigmas, and shaming. When individuals are shamed, some accept the stigma provided and change their major. They then continue the cycle to share the stereotypes and stigmas to others through direct statements or contradictions. For example, Mary changing her major from history to political science because it was the easier route, now tells others that History is easy, causing others to believe this and shame History majors, who will potentially change their major. Some participants attempted to end the stigma cycle using the denying and reducing offensiveness tactics of Stigma

Management Communication (Meisenbach, 2010). They attempted to prove to others that they were working hard, that they will have meaningful careers, and that they too can benefit society. Next, we will discuss the implications of stigma management communication identified through this thesis.

Stigma Management

Stigmas were managed through Stigma Management Communication (Meisenbach, 2010) by denying, reducing offensiveness, and avoiding the stigma communication. As SMC is focused on the perspective of the stigmatized individual wanting to challenge or maintain the social perception of their stigma and their attitude to how their stigma relates to themselves, a stigmatized individual will either accept or challenge social comprehension of their stigma. Participants in this research utilized three SMC tactics to reduce the stigmas they were faced with. Interestingly enough, participants described using each quadrant except for one where they would accept that the stigma applies to them while accepting a public view of the stigma. Instead, participants would either describe moments where they accepted the public view of the stigma but denied that it applied to them (avoiding), challenge both the public opinion and application to self (denying), or challenge the public understanding but agree it applied to them (reducing offensiveness). A chart displaying which of the tactics were used to manage stigma in this thesis is below:

Figure 2
Stigma Management Communication Strategies Used by Liberal Arts Majors

Stigma Management Communication

The following tactics were utilized among liberal arts participants in this research:

Avoiding
- Challenges that stigma applies to self
- Accepts public stigma

Denying
- Challenges that stigma applies to self
- Challenges public stigma

Reducing Offensiveness
- Accepts that stigma applies to self
- Challenges public stigma

The tactics used by participants from this research show that liberal arts students are frustrated with stereotypes, stigmas, and shaming they face based on their college major, and they are less likely to accept both public perception and perception of self. This shows that SMC could actually be a way to help reduce stigmas faced by liberal arts majors, as the most common tactics involve shaping the stigmas in some way, either through social or self-reflection.

Liberal arts students were aware there was a stigma surrounding their major. Even students in other fields, like STEM, were aware of the stigmas surrounding the liberal arts. Liberal arts students that challenged both the public understanding of the stigma as well as how the stigma applies to themselves (by using the denying tactic) were still aware of the stigma, they just felt passionate that the stigmas were inaccurate and wanted to change the views on their major. These students were the ones who used communication to actively create change in society. They were confident that the stigmas about their majors weren't true, and they wanted to let others know to make a difference among liberal arts majors' perceptions while reducing the stigma for all.

Students that attempted to reduce offensiveness and accept that the stigma applied to them but challenge the public understanding were also aware of the stigma, but they were less secure with their self-perception of their major. They wanted to change the stigma that society viewed but still accepted that it applied to themselves. One potential reason for this is that these students could be determined to change the social stigma, but secretly feel inadequate and unsure of themselves. While they may be determined to showcase the hard work a liberal arts student puts into their major, they may wonder if STEM fields really are more difficult. This is a version

of imposter syndrome, which is common among high-achieving students who question their worth and intelligence (Maftei et al., 2021).

Finally, there were the students who accepted the societal stigma but denied that it applied to them. These students seemed that they really didn't believe in the truth behind the societal stigma, they just wanted to fit into society by avoiding confrontation and the stigma communication messages. For example, Andrea who switched to undecided after pursuing two years of an accounting major, went around telling her friends and family that she was still an accounting major to avoid the perception that she had wasted her time in college. Andrea did not feel as if she had wasted some of her time in college as she is now able to explore her passions, but she accepted that others thought of her as being wasteful and spent her time avoiding discussion of her college major to avoid being stereotyped.

Stigma Management Communication presented an interesting look at this thesis, as it showcased possible ways that stigmas continue to spread as well as the thought process amongst students who wanted to change some type of perception (either societal or within themselves) to reduce stigmas about undergraduate college majors. SMC can tie in with the numerous practical applications of this study, which will be discussed next.

Practical Applications

This thesis has many practical applications in the realm of higher education communication, specifically regarding identity work among students as future employees. Cheney et al. (2008) found that positive identity is developed through meaningful work. If meaningful work is less important than money and stability, then it will be more challenging for employees to establish a positive identity. Dutton et al. (2010) explained that positive identity construction occurs not only through a personal sense of dignity and identity, but also through

specific social groups' sense of dignity and identity. Individuals are constantly seeking to portray

a positive identity, both for themselves and their social groups. This research explains that

students in the liberal arts feel less dignified in their career choice than those in STEM fields.

Some students managed their sense of dignity and construction of a positive identity by changing

their major and removing themselves from the stigma, or avoiding or reducing offensiveness of

the stigma.

Education is the key to changing the stereotype-stigma-shaming cycle of stigma

communication. Students need to be educated about what liberal arts majors study and what their

workload, career opportunities, and financials actually look like. If students are educated on what

majors are available, their importance, and career or financial outlook, then students will both be

more interested in selecting a liberal arts major when they first come to college as well as

complete the degree. Faculty, staff, and other employees (both within the liberal arts and among

other colleges) also need to be educated on liberal arts majors. While they need to be aware of

what all can be done with a liberal arts degree, they also need to undergo training on college

major equity. Learning about potential biases when speaking and working with students can help

faculty and higher education administration learn to be more open-minded when speaking with a

student who wishes to pursue a liberal arts degree.

In addition to educational sessions about each liberal arts major for students and higher

education employees to learn about their career prospects, the value of meaningful work, and

financial aspects, universities need to put on informational sessions for the parents of prospective

or incoming students. As parents were the leading cause of major stereotyping within this thesis,

educating parents will go a long way to reduce the spread of societal stereotypes and stigmas. If

parents are taught to be open-minded about their child's college career and major selection,

students will feel more accepted to choose a college major they feel is meaningful and not just

stable. Colleges and universities should develop programs and activities based on college major

selection and education that would begin as soon as prospective students begin to look into their

educational institution. Pamphlets could be mailed to parents and future students educating on all

college majors while a student is still enrolled in high school. Programs like major and career

fairs should be held for parents and incoming students before they select a college major. It is

important for these fairs to have a heavy emphasis on the importance of all college majors, as

many of them just emphasize STEM and healthcare. If possible at the institution, students should

be required or encouraged to wait until their sophomore year to declare a major. This allows

them to explore all options their first year in college, while being educated on what each major

has to offer. Next, I will examine limitations from this study and how future research about SMC

and stigma communication can advance our understanding of undergraduate major stigmas.

Limitations and Future Research

There were three limitations to this study that provide room for future research to take

place. The first and primary limitation to this study was low sample size of participants. This

research project was marketed to students towards the end of the semester, which unfortunately

called for a limited sample of participants. This study would benefit from a wider and larger

perspective overall of participants from all majors, age groups, and thoughts on the college major

selection.

The second limitation involves potential biases. Potential biases from participants in

focus group responses are the second limitation. As focus groups contained students from a

variety of college majors and some participants knew each other, participants hesitated to share

their true feelings more, which might have been the cause of contradictions through potential

face-saving of themselves appearing to be nice and non-judgmental of college majors. While I

would continue to utilize focus groups in similar research about college major selection, this

research would have benefitted from larger focus groups of people that did not know or interact

with one another on a daily basis, so true feelings would be shared without worries of an

argument or judgment.

       The third limitation this study faced was difficulty obtaining resources for transcription.

While a grant application was submitted to provide professional transcription of focus groups

and interviews, there was a delay with the funding which led to self-transcription with assistance

from Zoom transcriptions. While these transcriptions were accurate, they were not timely which

delayed the project and made it more difficult to accurately show students' hesitations and

interjections.

       Future research should address these limitations by marketing the research project at a

different time of academic year to get higher sample size and data saturation. Similarly, a

grander timeline to attain grants for transcription and bigger focus groups would provide richer

data. Future research on the stereotypes and stigmas college students encounter when selecting

an undergraduate major can also continue to focus on identifying how major stereotypes,

stigmas, and shaming impact students, both with their college major decisions and their sense of

identity and well-being. Future research can also contain a perspective on the higher education

administrative side of this problem, by identifying if higher education administrators are aware

of this stigma and offering additional solutions for how educators can prevent major stereotypes

and stigmas and market all college majors equitably.

       Future research should also look into imposter syndrome among students in the liberal

arts fields, as most current research on imposter syndrome is focused on students within

healthcare and STEM fields (e.g., Freeman et al., 2022; Bhama et al., 2021; Qureshi et al., 2017).

In addition, it would be beneficial to examine the effects of stigma communication in first

generation college students to specifically see how parental education might cause an increase of

shared stigmas during the parents' time in college to provide options for how to break up the

stigma communication cycle identified above.

Conclusion

Students face judgment about their major choices. STEM majors are stereotyped

positively, whereas liberal arts majors are stereotyped negatively. Students in the liberal arts face

stigmas regarding their choice, due to inherent capitalistic views and the cyclical communication

of stereotypes. Families may communicate stigmas to students, but students themselves are

communicating stereotypes as stigmas through unconscious contradictions. This study identified

that students were either attempting to challenge or perpetuate the stigma associated with liberal

arts majors. While these students were unaware that they were communicating negative

stereotypes as stigmas, their communication causes a cycle that leads to major shaming among

undergraduate college students. While this study experienced limitations due to low sample size,

findings from this study can be used to advance communication research in higher education,

specifically examining the communication that universities and educators use when marketing

their college majors, in order to market all college majors equitably. Marketing all college majors

equitably and educating students, higher education employees, and parents will help reduce the

stigmas that surround liberal arts college majors, which will reduce the stereotype-stigmas-to-

shaming cycle that undergraduate college students experience.

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APPENDIX A: QUALTRICS QUESTIONNAIRE

College Major Selection
College Major Selection Survey
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN INDIANA
COLLEGE MAJOR SELECTION IN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS
IRB Net ID 34868035

You are invited to participate in a research study on college major selection. This study is being conducted by Cara Dunn, graduate student at the University of Southern Indiana and her faculty sponsor Dr. Jessica Rick. Cara can be reached at cmdunn2@usi.edu or 812-461-5215.

This study will involve completing a Qualtrics survey asking basic demographic questions and signing up for a time to participate in the focus group. The Qualtrics survey will take 5-10 minutes to complete, and the focus group will take 45-60 minutes. You will be asked questions about your college major and opinions on other college majors.

Your decision to participate or decline participation in this study is completely voluntary and you have the right to terminate your participation at any time without penalty. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. If you do not wish to complete this project, simply close your browser.

Your participation in this research will be completely confidential. There are no risks to individuals participating in this survey beyond those that exist in daily life. Please print a copy of this consent form for your records, if you so desire.

By signing this document, you agree to share demographic details and sign up for a focus group. Please type your name below to agree to the informed consent.

Please type your name to agree to the informed consent:
_____

What is your current major?
_____
Have you changed your college major?

  ○ Yes

  ○ No

Display This Question:
    If Have you changed your college major? = Yes
What was your previous major?
_____

What year are you?

○ First Year

○ Sophomore

○ Junior

○ Senior

Are you a transfer student?

○ Yes

○ No

Are you a non-traditional student?

○ Yes

○ No

What is your age?

_____

What is your race?

_____

What is your gender?

_____

Are you currently employed?

○ Yes

○ No

Display This Question:
   If Are you currently employed? = Yes

Where are you employed and what is your job?

_____

What is your parents' highest level of education?

○ No High School Diploma (10)

○ High School Diploma/GED (9)

○ Some college but no degree (11)

○ Associate Degree (5)

○ Bachelor Degree (6)

○ Master Degree (8)

○ Doctoral Degree (12)

○ Professional Degree (medical, law, veterinary) (13)

Thank you for your participation in this survey. To schedule your focus group, please submit this survey and follow this link: https://calendly.com/jrick/major-choice-focus-groups

APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUPS QUESTIONNAIRE

Please state your major and tell me the story on how you decided your major.

        If undecided, what majors are you thinking of choosing and why?

Have you changed your major?

        If yes, what was your previous major and why did you change it?

Have you ever felt judged when someone asks what your major is?

        If yes, Who was asking? What did they say? How did you feel and respond?

          Did this moment impact your major decision?

        How do you defend your major choice to others?

Are some majors better for society than others?

        If so, which ones?

What advice do you give to friends or siblings about their major?

How much influence did your parents have on your major choice?

Describe your thoughts on liberal arts majors.

Describe your thoughts on STEM majors.