

**Low Literate Consumers in a Literate Marketplace:  
Exploring Consumer Literacy and Its Impact**

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
Marketing

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October 17, 2001  
Blacksburg, Virginia

**KEYWORDS:** Low Literacy, Stigma, Coping Strategies, Disadvantaged Consumers

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**Natalie Ross Adkins**

(ABSTRACT)

Each day in the United States, millions of adult consumers possessing traditional literacy skills below an eighth grade reading level enter a marketplace packed with written messages. This research offers the first in-depth, systematic investigation exploring the impact of low literacy skills within the marketplace and the methods consumers utilize to cope with literacy deficits. Based on the body of literature on stigma theory (Goffman 1963), previous work suggested coping strategies to result as a mechanism to protect the consumers' feelings of self-worth. This research identifies seven categories of coping strategies. The data collected show that coping strategies are not only used to protect the consumers' self-esteem but also to facilitate problem-solving tasks within the marketplace. In several cases, informants reveal their successes in getting marketplace needs met. Thus, a new conceptualization of the consumer literacy construct is offered to consist of traditional literacy skills, coping strategies or surrogate literacy skills, and specialized knowledge of the marketplace environment.

Applying Link and Phelan's (2001) reconceptualization of the stigma concept to the data yields a richer understanding of the stigmatization process and consequences within the marketplace. Rather than passively accept the role of low literate, this research offers a perspective of the low literate consumer as an active challenger to the stereotypes that lead to negative evaluations and stigmatization. Implications of these findings for public policymakers, academicians, and members of the business community, as well as future researcher opportunities are discussed.

The Association for Consumer Research (<http://www.acrweb.org>), the Society for Consumer Psychology (<http://fisher.osu.edu/mkt/scp/>), and the Sheth Foundation provided financial support for this research in the form of dissertation grants.

**KEYWORDS:** Low Literacy, Stigma, Coping Strategies, Disadvantaged Consumers

*For Randy and Ross with love ...*

## Acknowledgments

In his letter to the believers of Christ at Philippi, the Apostle Paul wrote, “I thank my God every time I remember you” (Philippians 1:3). The love, support, and friendship of many people throughout my life helped to make this dissertation a reality. I am eternally grateful.

A special thank you is extended to my parents — my mother, Wynona Ellis Ross, who encouraged me to follow my dreams and taught me from an early age to treat everyone with respect regardless of their circumstances; and my father, the late Curtis C. Ross, who showered me with unconditional love and believed that I could make a difference in this world. While Dad is no longer here to see me achieve this goal, I trust he is looking down and smiling with great pride. I love you both.

A person could not ask for more love, support or understanding in a family than I continue to receive from my husband, Randall, my son, Ross, and faithful canine companions, Thor and Crash. Randy, you are my soul mate, my best friend, my protector, and the keeper of my heart. You continue to be my number one supporter and challenger, pushing me to think a little deeper and strive to become a better person. I hope you know how proud I am to be your wife. Thank you for always believing and sharing my dreams.

Ross, while it will be several years before you can understand why Mommy spent so much time at her office during your first 18 months of life, I promise that I carried you (both literally and figuratively) with me every moment of this journey. In the years to come, I will always remember the feel of your little arms around my neck and the smile on your face when I returned home from dissertating — *thank you*. My prayer for you is that you will continue to seek knowledge, explore new things, follow your dreams, and know that your Mommy and Daddy love you, always.

The limited space available here prevents me from individually recognizing those special friends who provided encouragement in various forms during this process. I hope you all know how much I appreciate your friendship. To my “old” friends back “home” and to my new friends in Omaha, Nebraska: the “Friday Fellows,” friends from Harvey Oaks Baptist Church, and colleagues at Creighton University, thank you for listening to my ideas, offering feedback, and providing needed diversions along the way.

This dissertation was made possible by the cooperation and support of many people and programs. My sincere appreciation is extended to the various literacy program directors and adult literacy students who became the informants quoted in this research who shared their personal experiences and let me catch a glimpse of the world through their eyes. I hope you all will be proud of your stories contained within this volume. Gratitude is also extended to Leslie Miller, who painstakingly transcribed the interview tapes, and a former student, Justin Howard (JustIn Graphics) who prepared the drawings used in the modified thematic apperception portion of the interviews. Financial support received from dissertation grants sponsored by the Association of Consumer Research, the Society for Consumer Psychology, and the Sheth Foundation opened many doors.

I am a better researcher and scholar due to the influence of people with whom I worked and met during my graduate school experience. I am especially grateful to:

- ◆ Meg Meloy and Ed Fern — for the “hands on” experience in research gained from being your graduate assistant. Thank you for your time and continued support.
- ◆ My doctoral program comrades... Lynnea Mallalieu, Onur Bodur, Ron Hess, and Don Cook — the journey would not have been nearly as enjoyable without “ya’ll.”
- ◆ Cliff Bryant — for taking a chance on someone in the “business school” and imparting your wisdom on how to appreciate the world in which we live.
- ◆ Ron Hill — for cheering me on and agreeing to be a part of this work. From our first meeting you encouraged me to pursue this research area, even though it was something “out of the ordinary.”
- ◆ Joe Sirgy — for pushing me to think about the “next step.” Thank you for being so supportive throughout the process.
- ◆ Kent Nakamoto — for suggesting I continue this research stream through my dissertation. Your insight and wisdom have improved this work greatly and your suggestions and feedback continue to do so.
- ◆ Julie Ozanne — for everything... What can I say about the one other person who knows this work inside and out? You have taught me many things through this process — some professional in nature, others personal. Through it all, your support and approval were always desired. You are my mentor, my role model, and now, my friend. It seems so inadequate to say thank you for all you have done, but for once, I am speechless...

Indeed, I thank God for each of you.

Natalie

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract . . . . .	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
List of Tables and Figures.....	ix
 <b>CHAPTER ONE</b>	
Introduction.....	1
Research Focus .....	3
The Importance of Studying Low Literacy in a Marketing Context .....	3
Relevancy to Business Practitioners .....	3
Relevancy to Academic Researchers .....	5
Relevancy to Public Policy Makers .....	6
 <b>CHAPTER TWO</b>	
Review of Relevant Literature .....	8
The Pervasive Impact of Low Literacy Skills.....	8
What does it mean to be literate?.....	9
Common misconceptions regarding literacy .....	9
The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS).....	11
Summary.....	13
Stigma Theory.....	14
Self-Protective Coping Mechanisms.....	16
Summary.....	18
Moderators of Use of Protective Strategies .....	19
Time Since Acquisition.....	19
Responsibility for Low Literacy.....	20
Degree of Visibility or Concealability.....	20
Summary.....	22
Marketing research on low literate consumers .....	22
Summary .....	25
Disseratation Research Focus .....	26
Conclusion .....	26
 <b>CHAPTER THREE</b>	
Methodology Overview .....	28
Pre-Study: Secondary Data from the National Institute for Literacy .....	28
Background .....	28
Characteristics of the Secondary Data Sample .....	29
Analysis.....	30
Emergent Themes from Secondary Data Analysis .....	30
Primary Data Collection.....	31
Sources of Data .....	32
Sampling .....	33
Points of Entry .....	34

Informants .....	35
Broad Resources of Informants.....	36
Confidentiality of Informants' Identities .....	37
Data Collection Method.....	38
Interview Guide and Protocol.....	38
Creation of Rapport.....	39
Modified Thematic Apperception Test.....	40
Exploration of Surrogate Literacy Skills .....	41
Investigation of Other Low Literates' Behavior.....	42
Validation and Expansion of Previous Findings.....	42
Data Analysis .....	43
Challenges of Interviewing Low Literate Consumers .....	43
 <b>CHAPTER FOUR</b>	
Data Analysis .....	51
Illiteracy Experienced as a Stigma.....	51
Factors that Increase the Use of Coping Strategies .....	54
Time Since Acquisition.....	55
Perceived Control or Responsibility for the Stigma .....	55
Potential of Concealing the Stigma.....	56
Low Literacy Impacts Multiple Life Domains .....	58
Memorization.....	59
Repetitive Behaviors.....	63
Practice and Preplanning.....	65
Shopping Help.....	66
Avoidance .....	70
Non-Disclosure .....	73
Deflection.....	75
Summary.....	76
 <b>CHAPTER FIVE</b>	
Interpretation of Findings .....	77
The Concept of Consumer Literacy.....	77
The Stigma of Low Literacy Revisited.....	79
The Low Literate Consumer as Active Challenger.....	85
Relationship between Marketplace Strategies & Consumers' Self-Esteem.....	86
Summary.....	87
 <b>CHAPTER SIX</b>	
Conclusions .....	88
Substantive Contributions .....	88
Conceptual Contributions .....	90
Methodological Contributions .....	90
Implications for Stakeholders	
Academicians .....	91
Marketing Managers .....	92

Policy Makers and Consumers with Low Literacy.....	96
Limitations of the Research.....	98
Future Research Directions .....	100
<b>APPENDIX A:</b>	
Letter to Adult Learners in Douglas and Brown Counties .....	102
<b>APPENDIX B:</b>	
Letter to Literacy Tutors in Douglas and Brown Counties .....	103
<b>APPENDIX C:</b>	
Permission Slip .....	104
<b>APPENDIX D:</b>	
Interview Protocol.....	105
<b>APPENDIX E:</b>	
Letter Received From Informant.....	110
<b>APPENDIX F:</b>	
Proposed Model of the Impact of Low Literacy on a Consumers' Self-Esteem.....	111
References .....	114
Curriculum Vita .....	122



## LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

<b>TABLE 1:</b> Literacy Levels of the Total US Population.....	12
<b>TABLE 2:</b> Key Informant Contacts .....	45
<b>TABLE 3:</b> Informant Information.....	46
<b>TABLE 4:</b> Coping Strategies and Implications for Marketing Managers .....	94
<b>FIGURE1:</b> Modified Thematic Apperception Test Drawing 1 .....	49
<b>FIGURE 2:</b> Modified Thematic Apperception Test Drawing 2 .....	49
<b>FIGURE 3:</b> Modified Thematic Apperception Test Drawing 3 .....	50