

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

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(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