Courtesy Stigma Management: Social Identity Work among China's 'Leftover Women'

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ABSTRACT

Prior consumer research has tended to focus on identity-related stigma management of individuals toward their own stigma. However, little is known about the consumption related identity work that stigmatized individuals undertake to discharge the courtesy stigma attached to close associates such as family members. Courtesy stigma refers to the discredit directed toward people who are closely associated with a stigmatized individual or group. Drawing on interview, ethnographic, and netnographic data on China's 'Leftover Women', our research analyzes the personal and, more centrally, the social identity work related consumption counternarratives that these women construct — through combinations of specific kinds of consumption and gift-giving practices — to counteract family and courtesy stigma. Counternarratives are the resistance stories that people tell and live to either implicitly or explicitly challenge the dominant cultural narrative. The findings of our investigation help to build an enhanced understanding of how stigmatized individuals act as consumers in the market and via digital channels to tackle the family identity challenges of courtesy stigma that have not been explored in extant studies of consumer stigma identity work.

Keywords: courtesy stigma, family identity, social identity, stigma, counternarratives

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Stigmatized individuals utilize identity-related consumption practices and discourses to combat their spoiled identities. For example, Star Trek fans discursively link prestigious forms of cultural capital, such as technological aptitudes and consumption, to their own tainted identities (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013, 231; Kozinets 2001, 73) and Black consumers may avoid or, alternatively, strategically utilize artifacts of Black culture in different contexts (Crockett 2017, 554).

These theoretically generative prior studies touch upon the identity-related stigma management of individuals towards their own stigma. Our investigation takes this understanding further, into the social dynamics of the stigma that is directed at those close to them. Courtesy stigma refers to the discredit directed toward people who are closely associated with a stigmatized individual or group (Goffman 1963/1990, 43). This is a different stigma than the discredit attached to the individual. For example, the stigma attached to the daughter of a convicted felon is not about her own criminality or propensity for criminality so much as it relates to her inescapable relationship to a known criminal.

Prior literature on courtesy stigma has explored some of the strategies used by the courtesy stigmatized (as we term them) to manage or counteract the discredit on their identities. Courtesy stigma management on the part of the courtesy stigmatized has been studied in numerous fields and has often emphasized avoidance or curative strategies (Alareeki, Lashewicz, and Shipton 2019; Blum 1991; Gray 2002; Tikkanen, Peterson, and Parsloe 2018). In consumer research, the concept of stigma by association was explored in the context of coupon redemption between shoppers (Argo and Main 2008). Prior studies have not yet explored the different social situations faced by the courtesy stigmatized, nor the practices used by the stigmatized to manage and counter the courtesy stigma of those who

their stigmatized status affects.

Understanding courtesy stigmatization is important because it helps us further understand one of the social aspects of consumer self-identity. The concept of a self is determined not merely by internal self-perceptions, but by a person's full set of relationships with others (Cooley 1902; James 1890; Mead 1934). Studying the courtesy stigma management practices of the stigmatized individual also opens a new window on an important and neglected aspect of the stigma management phenomenon. Furthermore, an identity focused emphasis on courtesy stigma management is especially salient where stigmatized individuals have the wherewithal in capital and agency to confront courtesy stigma using consumption discourses and practices (Crockett 2017; Crosby and Otnes 2010; Kates 2002, 2004; Nguyen, Chen, and Mukherjee 2011; Scaraboto and Fischer 2010). Thus, studying the courtesy stigma management practices of the stigmatized offers researchers new perspectives on stigma management, identity narratives, and the role of consumption discourses and practices in these significant social phenomena.

This article investigates the consumption related identity work that stigmatized individuals engage in to discharge the courtesy stigma attached to their close associates. First, we orient to this topic by providing a focused overview of relevant theoretical developments on stigma identity work and courtesy stigma. Next, we describe our methodological procedures and the context of our investigation. We subsequently elaborate the context of our study, a contemporary national culture in which an intersection of marital status, age, and gender are institutionally stigmatized. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for refining and extending our understanding of the role of stigma identity work and consumption.

COURTESY STIGMA AND IDENTITY WORK

Stigma is an "attribute that is deeply discrediting" and that reduces the identity of the bearer "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman 1963/1990, 3). Stigmatization is a complex process that includes and is characterized by the co-occurrence of its four component parts: (1) distinguishing and labeling differences, (2) associating human differences with negative attributes (or stereotyping), (3) separating "us" from "them", and (4) manifesting status loss and discrimination (Link and Phelan 2001, 363). In order for the component parts of stigmatization to unfold in social settings, stigma manifests through and with the exercise of power. For instance, stigma is one way of keeping particular categories of people from contesting their exploitation, keeping people in line so that they self-enforce social norms, and keeping categories of people apart so that they avoid contamination (Link and Phelan 2014, 25). With these notions in mind, Harris, Evans, and Beckett (2011) re-conceptualized stigma as a cultural category that dominant social groups impose, maintain, reinforce, and utilize as a way to maintain their power over other social groups. Courtesy stigma provides yet another way that this power can be asserted.

Courtesy stigma. Particular individuals or groups experience stigmatization not because of what they have or have not themselves done, but through their association with a stigmatized cultural category that is institutionalized in a social system (Harris et al. 2011; Link and Phelan 2001). One such vitally important, but under-studied group is the family unit, with its intimate "identity interplay" between family members (Epp and Price 2008, 62).

Blood ties between family members make it extremely difficult to avoid or terminate stigmatic associations and hence the courtesy stigma. Stigmatized individuals therefore often feel guilty or worried not only about their own stigma, but about bringing shame and discredit to their family members (Corrigan and Miller 2004; Li et al. 2006). Family members at the same time may employ shaming strategies such as devaluing remarks and even violence to

discipline the stigmatized and vent their frustrations and anger at the involuntary courtesy stigma affixed to their own identity (Lake 2018; Tagoe-Darko 2013). This makes it all the more important for stigmatized individuals to participate in courtesy stigma management, in addition to managing their own stigma.

Narrative identity theory and stigma identity work. A theoretically important aspect of stigma management, and thus potentially of courtesy stigma management, is narrative identity. Narrative identity theory is based in the interactionist notion that people's telling and living stories is an important part of their personal and social existence (Ainsworth and Hardy 2004; Gergen and Gergen 1997; Giddens 1991). The theory often highlights human agency and creativity and explains the continuous construction of identity over the life course, intersecting with prior consumer concepts such as consumer narratives, life themes, and life projects (Mick and Buhl 1992; Thompson 1997). Giddens (1991) also argues that self-identity presumes a narrative that needs to be shaped, altered and reflexively sustained in relation to rapidly changing personal and social circumstances, forming a discursive trajectory of how we have become who we are and of where we are going. These narratives intimately interweave family with other deep expressions of identity. "We are born into webs of interlocution or narrative — from familial and gender narratives to linguistic ones and to the macro-narratives of collective identity" (Benhabib 2002, 15).

Family and self identity are often involved in the traumatic, stigmatizing experiences in which "the reflexive self-narrative must be re-storied" to engage in resistance (Gergen and Gergen 1997; Lutgen-Sandvik 2008, 99). The construction of counternarratives thus becomes central to stigma identity work that requires active intervention and transformation of internalized self-stigma as well as stigmatizing social norms and (sub)cultural discourses — including those relating to close associates such as family members.

Counternarratives are "the stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives" (Andrews 2002, 1). Counternarratives challenge the discourses of powerful and often oppressive societal groups. There is research across the social sciences examining the use of counternarratives in contexts ranging from sexuality, race, abortion, religion, organizations, and addiction to various health conditions, dietary choices, and criminality (Lueg and Lundholt 2020).

Without invoking counternarratives or narrative identity theory directly, substantial research attention has been paid to the ways in which individuals with a stigmatized social identity mobilize identity narratives about consumption objects and tactics to manage, cope with or counteract stigmatizing discourses that relegate them to an inferior social status. Prior consumer research depicts the members of stigmatized groups as engaged in a moral and emotional struggle against oppressive forces in which adaptive consumption practices and meanings are utilized as identity related counternarratives that assist in counteracting the status loss, discrimination, and other diminishing features of their stigmatized identities (Adkins and Ozanne 2005; Arsel and Thompson 2011; Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013; Crockett 2017; Kates 2002, 2004; Kozinets 2001; Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013; Sandikci and Ger 2010; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013). Consumption counternarratives are thus linked intimately with discourses and practices related to persons managing their stigmatized identities. However, extant consumer research is limited to persons' use of these destigmatizing narratives to combat their own stigma. Yet, because identity narratives and counternarratives are such crucial elements of destigmatization strategies, we would expect them to be central parts of the courtesy stigma management strategies of the stigmatized as well.

Courtesy stigma and consumption-related stigma identity work. Studies of courtesy stigma

are plentiful in the social sciences, including research and theory conducted in the fields of psychology (Dwyer, Snyder, and Omoto 2013; Pryor, Reeder, and Monroe 2012), sociology (Link and Phelan 2001; Pescosolido and Martin 2015), and specialized subfields such as health studies (Alareeki et al. 2019; Corrigan and Miller 2004; Gray 1993; Green 2003; Mitter, Ali, and Scior 2019), criminology (Luther 2016; Maroto 2015; May 2000), and family research (Koro-Ljungberg and Bussing 2009; Li et al. 2008; Yang and Kleinman 2008). Many of these studies deal with the family identity related courtesy stigma of parents of children with physical or mental disabilities who, as Gray (2002) points out, often have no choice but to experience stigma involuntarily. For instance, parents are often discredited due to their children's disabilities (Corrigan and Miller 2004; Green 2003) and socially shunned (Turner et al. 2007; Yang and Kleinman 2008). They also may develop lasting negative self-evaluations (Mak and Cheung 2008).

The identity work of prior courtesy stigma researchers tends to focus on narratives depicting an active search for treatments, cures, and social support used by the courtesy stigmatized to counter their own stigma. For example, fathers of autistic children use counternarratives based in their struggles to find a treatment or even a miracle cure for their child (Alareeki et al. 2019). These tales, which were related often in social and social media settings, involved consumption practices such as hiring experts, putting their children on special diets such as a gluten-free regimen, or finding, purchasing, and using alternative remedies. As well as using counternarratives, some courtesy stigmatized parents sought to avoid mainstream consumer behaviors such as shopping in popular stores (Gray 2002; Tikkanen et al. 2018).

Research focus. By casting a light on how stigmatized consumers use consumption-related counternarratives to counteract the spread of stigma to those closest to them, we can provide

a more holistic view of the social meanings and roles of consumption and consumer identity in people's stigma management work. We can highlight not only how consumption counternarratives are invoked in the dynamic and destigmatizing self-stories of narrative identity work, but also how they interact with contemporary collectives such as family life. Our study thus addresses the following research question: How do stigmatized consumers use consumption related identity counternarratives to discharge the courtesy stigma affixed to those close to them? To move us closer toward answering this question, we now introduce the context of our study.

CONTEXT AND METHOD

Research Context: Chinese Leftover Women

Negative stereotyping and discrimination against unmarried people, especially unmarried women "of a certain age", are seemingly universal across cultures (Byrne and Carr 2005; DePaulo 2007; Koropeckyj-Cox 2005; Lahad 2012; Lai, Lim, and Higgins 2015). However, educated Chinese professional women who are beyond their late 20s and unmarried have become the target of a recent, widespread, and largely successful institutionalized stigmatization effort enacted by the Chinese state and its media channels (Fincher 2014; Fish 2015). The context of our study is this stigmatized group of unmarried Chinese women and the courtesy stigma experienced by their family members.

Background. China's egalitarian employment system, quality public education, market reforms, and rapid modernization have given women in the country a historically unprecedented economic power (Sun 2017). This power shift facilitated a corresponding shift

in values from a family-oriented collective ethos toward an emphasis on women's

independence, education, upward mobility, and personal growth (Sun 2017; Yan 2009, 2017).

Over the past fifteen years or so, a rapidly growing number of financially-independent

professional Chinese women have challenged the idea that marriage and children are

necessary for their personal happiness and success (Ji 2015; Lake 2018). However, the

Chinese government and some members of Chinese society seemingly view this newfound

independence as a threat to the prevailing sociocultural order, particularly because of the

skewed ratio of males-to-females in China (Fincher 2014; Fish 2015). Culturally, social

forces uphold a Confucian ideology of marriage and family as "the foundation of a

harmonious society" and also hold that having large numbers of unmarried men contribute to

social instability (Fincher 2014, 23). To curb this trend, in 2007, an official governmental

mouthpiece called the All-China Women's Federation created and publicized a new

stigmatized cultural category. This category was *sheng-nu*, which translates into *leftover

women* in English. According to official Chinese state communications, all well-educated

urban professional women who are not married by the age of 27 are to be considered sheng-

nu. According to these official government organs, regardless of what a Chinese woman has

achieved before she reaches that age, it should be considered morally problematic if she is not

married by the age of 27.

Sheng-nu stigma. The Chinese government media's creation of sheng-nu as a stigmatized

cultural category in 2007 marked the beginning of a misogynistic communication campaign

aimed at creating culture change by intentionally shaming millions of highly educated,

ambitious, independent, and career-minded women into marriage (Fincher 2014; Fish 2015).

A sample 2013 "news" article, which was also featured on official government sites, was

headlined "Survey Findings: Women with an Undergraduate Degree are the Happiest in

Marriage". The story quotes a sociology professor who states that highly educated women tend to become lost in their self-pursuits, distracting them from finding marriage partners and undermining their sense of happiness. Similar shaming sheng-nu discourses are frequently promoted in Chinese state-sponsored media and repeated in online discussion forums. Headlines on these official forums include: "I used to think you're not good enough for me, now I am a 32 years-old sheng-nu, you have become too good for me", "Reasons why it's so difficult for sheng-nu to find love", "Being a sheng-nu, how to get yourself married fast" and "The depressing consequences of becoming a sheng-nu". According to Fincher (2014) and Fish (2015), the sheng-nu stigma was successful in pressuring many Chinese women into marriage.

Sheng-nu and courtesy stigma. The concept of "face" refers to the extremely important Chinese cultural understanding of respect, honor, reputation, and social standing (Ho 1976; Yang and Kleinman 2008). Like the family identity of Epp and Price (2008), the Chinese family is said to share a "family face" in which parents and children are members of a tightly-knit social unit that participates in a mutual sense of family glory and shame (Hwang and Han 2010). When the children of a particular family are acknowledged as morally upright, high "suzhi" (an all-round quality of decency or upright character) or successful, the entire family will feel a sense of pride that they have gained collective face or share in a family-wide positive reputation. By contrast, when the children are considered immoral, low "suzhi" or unsuccessful, the children and parents will all be diminished by a shared sense of shame and a loss of family face. According to Wang and Chang (2010), Chinese children's failure is typically regarded as the result of bad parenting, and their success is often attributed to their good upbringing.

With this in mind, prior studies have shown that the parents of older single women often

face ridicule and courtesy stigma. For example, Lake (2018, 50-52) found that the mother of an older single woman in China experienced social pressure from her neighbors which led to "desperation" for her single daughter to bring a boyfriend home for Chinese New Year. In her study on older single professional women in Shanghai, Ji (2015) observed a parent who was accused in front of a crowd by her grandaunt of failing to get her daughter married (1065). She also related the shaming practice that a mother utilized to blame her single daughter for causing her to "lose face in front of people around her" (1064-1065). Some parents sign their daughters up to dating websites (Lake 2018, 130) or participate in "matchmaking corners" (Xiangqin jiao) in urban parks where they exchange contact information and photos of their eligible child with other parents (Zhang and Sun 2014). These prior studies clearly articulated the courtesy stigma that contemporary Chinese parents experience regarding their unmarried professional daughters.

Changing landscape for singles in China. There are approximately two hundred million single people in China today (Li 2017), which includes about 7 million urban single women between the ages of 25 and 34 (Vanham 2018). The emergence of the terms "single economy" and "single society" as well as the market creation of "singles' day" (Li 2017; Tao 2017; Wang 2017) all point to the rapidly changing landscape of Chinese society that has long treated marriage and family as foundations for prosperity and wellbeing (Fei 1992; Fincher 2014). However, government communications and mainstream media continue to stigmatize professional women who choose to remain single (Gong, Tu, and Jiang 2015). As Ji (2015) and Lake (2018) both note, the sheng-nu stigma has been meeting with increasing criticism and resistance. Changes in demography and economics set up a cultural clash between a government that uses identity and stigma to regulate and control women's behaviors and the women and their families who must combat or conform to these

stigmatizing efforts. This conflicted and stigmatized cultural context presents an opportunity for us to investigate our article's guiding research question: how do stigmatized consumers use consumption related counternarratives to discharge the courtesy stigma affixed to those closest to them?

Data Collection Procedures

Ethnographic engagement. To investigate the use of consumption in the courtesy stigma management of Chinese sheng-nu women, we began in 2015 with a general study of news, fiction, and popular culture. We extended this archival data gathering and popular culture engagement with ethnographic fieldwork among the courtesy stigmatized in matchmaking corners in China's urban parks in Beijing and Shanghai. As Zhang and Sun (2014) and Yang (2011) explain, matchmaking corners are locations where parents of their unmarried children can meet other parents looking a suitable spouse for their own children. This data gave important insights into the perspective of the courtesy stigmatized. We took fieldnotes and conducted informal conversations with approximately 25 parents over a 2-week period, resulting in 120 double-spaced pages of combined transcribed fieldnote and interview data.

Depth Interviews. Next, we turned our attention to the stigmatized women who managed their parents' courtesy stigma. We conducted semi-structured depth interviews of between one and three hours with 15 single, professional women between the ages of 30 and 42 about their experiences of stigma, courtesy stigma, and consumer behaviors. The average age of participants was 33 years. All were Chinese, educated, employed and had never been married. Interviews were conducted in Chinese by the first author (a native speaker) either via WeChat's video or audio call feature or in coffee shops located in Beijing and Shanghai.

Participants were not financially compensated. The first group of women was recruited

through the first author's personal contacts and snowball techniques were used to continue

recruiting women who had remained single by choice. It is worth noting that, although the

length of singlehood between participants varied, all research participants expressed a wish to

meet the 'right' person and welcomed opportunities to develop a significant relationship.

They were not opposed to dating or marriage, but they also wanted their late singlehood to be

recognized as a legitimate identity narrative and individual lifestyle choice. The average

length of an interview was approximately 1.6 hours. When transcribed, the 15 interviews

resulted in a text document of approximately 342,720 words and 572 double-spaced pages (if

translated fully into English words). Please see Table 1 for further information on interview

participants.

Insert table 1 about here

Netnography. Because there were no specific sheng-nu related online forums, we created a

discussion forum on Baidu, China's largest online search engine. Our Baidu discussion forum

reached out to older single women online and encouraged them to confidentially explore

topics of representation, consumption, and their responses to sheng-nu stigmatization. This

discussion forum was available to the public and used by them for a five-year period, from

2015 to 2020, when data collection ceased. Following the guidelines of Kozinets (2010, 107-

9) regarding the creation of a "netnographic research web-page", we followed appropriate

data collection and data ethics practices, including full disclosure, requiring appropriate

permissions for forum use, and pseudonymizing visual and textual data. Over approximately

6 years of operation, we received posted comments from 369 unique usernames, each of

whom self-identified as targets of sheng-nu stigma and many who spontaneously raised topics relating to courtesy stigma management. The data totaled 38,180 words and 64 double-spaced pages in Chinese, which is approximately 24,817 words and 110 double-spaced pages in English. In addition, the first author kept handwritten immersion notes during the time of the netnography, which totaled approximately 10,200 words (if translated into English) and 41 double-spaced pages.

Data analysis and interpretation. The topic of courtesy stigma management emerged inductively as we followed the general procedures of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998) to analyze our cultural data about sheng-nu stigma, and consumption. Our analysis involved carefully developing a systematic coding process (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013) to build a data structure that identifies key consumption counternarratives, categories and higher levels of abstraction related to forms of stigma identity work and courtesy stigma management. Please see the web appendix for a brief illustration. Our multiple data sources allowed triangulation and the productive exploration of intersecting topics among related social actors (Flick 2004). We used the ethnographic data to focus on media and governmental messaging and parental related narrative responses, the netnographic data to develop longer-term and socially situated insights into single women's narrative figurings, and the depth interviews to probe into personal perceptions, narratives, and behaviors that we were unable to sufficiently explore using the other methods. Team-based data analysis was advanced by multiple iterations of discussion, writing, and revision between authors, including searching for disconfirming evidence and questioning emerging interpretations. Differences of interpretation between the authors were resolved by careful investigation of the data and literature, and interpretation proceeded until we reached consensus on the findings.

FINDINGS

Capitalizing on China's economic market reform and the ever-growing influence of consumerism, our research participants engage in both personal and social identity work by utilizing combinations of specific kinds of consumption and gift giving practices to combat the courtesy stigma their family members perceive and endure (see Figure 1). By *personal identity work*, we mean sheng-nu women's efforts, which are often discursive, to cultivate a narrative of individuality to refute the stigmatized self and achieve an internally perceived authentic self, namely, a proud single woman of self-assurance and self-righteousness. By *social identity work*, we refer to sheng-nu stigmatized women's social facing efforts, which can include consumption and gift-giving, to promote a narrative of social identity based upon their narrative of individuality. This narrative is intended to be externally approved by important others such as their family members and related to their own wider social networks to counteract courtesy stigma. The social identity cannot work without the foundation of the personal. Both forms of identity work involve consumption discourses and practices, but consumption is particularly involved in the social identity work. Together, the two forms of stigma identity work cohere to establish a coherent counternarrative to deal with a spoiled identity (Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Lutgen-Sandvik 2008).

As Crockett (2017, 5) notes in relation to the counternarrative of Black respectability, furthering identity work requires "giving the counternarrative a material and behavior presence" by using marketplace goods. Counternarratives materially and discursively enact their challenges to norms. Consumption and gift-giving are thus deeply involved in the rebuilding of the Leftover Woman self-narrative — we cannot and should not separate the discourses of consumption and gift-giving from the identity narratives which they challenge

and seek to overturn. Thus, the counternarrative of an independent unmarried professional woman who uses status-oriented consumption to gain social legitimacy is simultaneously a discourse, a narrative about consumer practice and, presumably, a reflection of actual marketplace behavior (where we could, we verified that it was). All are fundamental to the provision of a courtesy stigma counternarrative of transforming or reinterpreting fundamental Confucian values such as self-cultivation, filial piety and familial harmony.

Whereas the personal identity work of the Chinese professional woman forms a solid foundation to counter the negative stories others tell of them, new narratives of an independent and successful social identity provide a positive social self that their family members can defend, promulgate, and honor. Our findings reveal how the reciprocal and interdependent relationship between personal and social identity work is realized and exhibited through a range of consumption related counternarratives and practices to manage self, parents, and society in ways that challenge courtesy stigmatizing identity narratives to increase or, at minimum, avoid losing family face.

There are various ways that this identity narrative is built, displayed, revised, and reinforced. As an interrelated material-discursive matter, the narrative can be related through discourse, conveyed in gifts, displayed through conspicuous brand consumption, reinforced on social media, or communicated in other ways. Gifts may be provided so that others may tell their own destigmatizing narratives, turning the destigmatization effort into a social and reciprocal matter. As shown in Figure 1 and as revealed in the following sections, there are various types of consumption related counternarratives. We identify six in our context — two based in personal identity work and four based in social identity work. Each of them interconnects to help stigmatized Chinese single women enact a market-based empowerment, providing them with a way to attempt to achieve social legitimacy and positive recognition for themselves and, perhaps more importantly, for their families.

Insert figure 1 about here

Personal Identity Work: Self-Oriented Consumption Counternarratives

Much of sheng-nu women's self-stigmatization is induced by the family stigma they internalize. For example, Nana described how family members play a key role in influencing her internal narrative of self-worth: "My uncles and aunties feel I am abnormal. My parents are normally supportive, but sometimes they will also say things like 'no wonder no one wants you' when they are angry with me…You then also start doubting yourself" (Personal interview). Below, we distinguish our findings on self-oriented consumption into two counternarratives used to overcome internalized self-stigmatization: (1) transcending shame, and (2) invalidating stigma. "Transcending shame" involves a counternarrative of a self-related consumption that focuses on combatting the internalized feelings of shame produced by the stigmatized identity narrative. In the sheng-nu context, "transcending shame" manifests through the therapeutic and leisure and hobby-related consumption that Chinese professional women use to buttress their self-esteem and provide enjoyable experiences related to a sense of self-completion. "Invalidating stigma" involves a counternarrative of self-related consumption that confronts and directly discharges stereotypes and negative connotations affixed to the spoiled Leftover Woman identity narrative. In the current context, "invalidating stigma" involves experiential and travel-related consumption that broadens, deepens, and enhances the experience of independence, freedom and growth relating to being a professional single Chinese woman. Both consumption counternarratives serve as the prerequisite for a narrative in which professional women effectively use consumption to

shield and enrich the inner self, protecting themselves against the dispiriting consequences of the sheng-nu stigma and the courtesy stigma it induces in family members.

Self-oriented Consumption Counternarratives on Transcending the Shame of Stigma. Despite efforts to prove their self-worth, many of our research participants admitted that their parents do not consider them successful. Meiling spoke about how her parents call her every day to see if she has met anyone new, because they have been pestered by friends and relatives (Personal interview). Several interviewees told stories about how their friends succumbed to family pressure, rushed into marriage — and then ended up divorced or leading an unhappy life. Avoiding this fate often involved therapeutic consumption, including attending counseling sessions and reading books on psychotherapy, as well as leisure and hobby-related consumption. These consumption practices are used to develop counternarratives of self-acceptance and contentment with the single lifestyle, transcending the feelings of shame that commonly result from internalized sheng-nu stigma.

Consider the words of Ziyu, whose consumption focus engages a self-dialogue that resists internalizing the stigmatizing narratives her parents (especially), as well as peers and other relatives, seek to impose upon her.

> "I feel my friends often see me as a failure because I've never had a boyfriend. I also used to feel guilty regarding my parents because our relatives constantly ridicule them and ask if there is something wrong with me. But now I no longer feel guilty…I've bought many books on psychotherapy such as "Reviving Your Life", "Being Truthful with Yourself", and "Love Yourself" to name just a few. I've been paying for counseling sessions. I continue to engage in a dialogue with myself and it is through

these efforts that I feel I could finally lead a life of my own and be true to myself."

(Ziyu, personal interview)

Ziyu's account indicates that she has struggled with internalized sheng-nu and the courtesy stigma of her family: she feels that others see her "as a failure". She says she "used to feel guilty" for subjecting her parents to "ridicule" by other family members. Thus, she is responding directly to her own experience of her parents' related experiences and reacting to the fact of their courtesy stigma. According to her narrative, her ongoing spending on self-help books and counseling sessions is an important response to her parents' courtesy stigma. Her psychotherapeutic consumption helps her develop a new sense of self-acceptance and self-confidence through which she counteracts the stigma she feels about her contribution to her parents' courtesy stigma: "Now I no longer feel guilty".

Therapeutically oriented consumption is a popular topic on the online discussion forum. Photographs of large collections of spirituality and self-help books are regularly related to sheng-nu women's strategies of self and societal acceptance. Figure 2 presents an example, with book titles including "The True Meaning of Happiness", "Love Yourself", "Loving What Is: Four Questions That Can Change Your Life", and "Age 30". Some of these titles were already mentioned by Ziyu, above. A common thread among the books' contents are the themes of self-appreciation, gaining freedom from others' judgment, and the consequent independent realization of a life of joy, peace, and happiness.

Insert figure 2 about here

Therapeutic consumption offers an alternative, competing, and arguably Western and consumerist psychotherapeutic narrative of acceptance and self-care to sheng-nu women.

Purchasing books and counseling services may also help reinforce the legitimacy of self-direction and personal choice that ideologically underpins neoliberal consumer culture. Psychically allying with a consumerist notion of independence seemingly grants a sense of enhanced ontological security and offers a vocabulary and counternarrative of self-love, self-acceptance, and even self-authenticity. These can counter feelings of stigma and self-identity that are both "robust and fragile" (cf., Giddens 1991, 55).

Being one of the only, or the only one of the women in their hometown who have not gotten married is another recurrent narrative in our interviews with sheng-nu women. Mingyu, who was taking lessons to learn how to play the drums at the time of the interview, stated, "Being a single person you can't always hang out with friends because they have their own family" (Personal Interview). Although these women often enjoy socializing with friends, they also understand that married friends prioritize their own family obligations, obligations that they may be perceived to have shirked. One important way that single women expressed their joie de vivre or emancipation from family obligations, including those to their parents, was through developing hobbies.

> "Every year, I'll pay to learn a couple of new skills. So far, I've taken lessons on guzheng (a Chinese plucked zither), ukulele (a small four-stringed guitar), done yoga classes and now I'm planning to learn Japanese (from a post in 2015). To give you all an update, I am still learning a couple of new skills a year. I've even learned how to make rubber stamps. I started taking ballet classes every Wednesday. Every time I learn a new skill, I feel it opens up a new world. It's important to know what you want from life because time is precious. I chose to be leftover. I am content now." (Yilin, post on discussion forum, 2019, age 30+, female)

The photograph shared online by Yilin visually represents her idea of permanent singlehood. Figure 3 is an illustration drawn from the original photograph. The image of the

ballerina was perceived as the ultra-feminine ideal that exemplified female vulnerability and elegance in the 19th century (Garafola 1985). In more recent years, the ballerina has been championed as an image of strength that communicates not only a female ballet dancer's ethereal exterior, but more importantly, her iron-willed interior to overcome the limits and expectations of gender identity (Fisher 2007; McRobbie 1991). The ballerina, Yilin, is posing, back to the camera, in front of a traditional Chinese circular moon gate, similar to the ones originally found in the gardens of wealthy Chinese nobles, who were often guided by Confucianism. As such, the photo provides a visual narrative that represents how Yilin faces the traditional, dominant, patriarchal, Confucian view with confidence, feminine power, and self-respect, while still respecting many Chinese traditions. The circular shape, a universal symbol of harmony and integration, frames her form in the photo. This could also indicate the sense of completion that Yilin has built through her many leisure pursuits and her contentment with her own choices.

Insert figure 3 about here

Responding to a comment on her post in 2017 urging her to reconsider permanent singlehood because of the surety of future loneliness, Yilin replied, "Being alone does not equate to being lonely. [Because I am single] I have lots of freedom to do the things I love. My life has its own rhythm". Her visualization captures this counternarrative beautifully. Free, complete, and independent, she is dancing to her own feminine rhythm and doing it while still respecting traditional Chinese society. Her various hobbies and leisure consumption — from learning ukulele and Japanese to practicing yoga and ballet — give her the poise and inner confidence to confront the stigma of late singlehood and its shame

inducing capacity. These consumption based counternarratives provide ample material for others close to her, including her parents, to confront the courtesy stigma affixed to them.

Self-Oriented Consumption Counternarratives on Invalidating Stigma. Much of the freedom our research participants experience is realized through experiential consumption that focuses on experience, escape, and broadening their horizons beyond the stigmatizing Chinese context, usually through travel. The freedom of these consumption experiences provides a counternarrative that seeks to invalidate the legitimacy of sheng-nu stigma and expose its bounded, socio-culturally constructed nature.

Xiaofei recounted how her confidence is undermined by her parents' narrow-minded stigmatization of her single identity. Yet her consumption of travel broadens her perspective and allows her to appreciate the many freedoms that her single status affords.

> "My mom calls me every day to tell me not to be too picky about men. My parents are afraid of others gossiping about their daughter who is still not married at this age. It's exhausting. Traveling shows me that the world is much bigger than the one I'm living in. I feel fortunate that I am single, that I am able to travel and see more of the world. I do love my parents. But I love my freedom more." (Xiaofei, personal interview)

As with Yilin's comments, when discussing ways of resisting the sheng-nu stigma, the broadening concept of "the world" is frequently invoked. Using the phrase "the world is much bigger than the world I am living in" suggests that Xiaofei's consumption of travel is also the consumption of a widened perspective, one that reveals her parents' courtesy stigma and family's shared cultural context as a localized social construction. As MacCannell (2013/1976) notes, the desire for escape is a common motivation for travel consumption, fixating it firmly in and linking it to the imagination of the traveler. Here, this consumer desire and imagination are employed in the service of a destigmatizing counternarrative about

singlehood. Travel allows Xiaofei to imagine and then experience an alternative life, one where late singlehood becomes not a shameful state but an asset that allows her to "see more of the world" and transcend family obligations such as marrying solely to relieve her parent's courtesy stigma.

Xiaofei's comments are similar to those of women in the single women's discussion forum on Baidu. When conversing on the subject of how to cope with the sheng-nu stigma and its effects on their parents and family, these women often shared beautiful travel-related photographs. As with Yilin's photograph in the circular gate, the photos commonly depict these women in poses and places suggesting a journey of self-discovery. In one, for example, a woman in a dress walks barefoot and carefree through desert dunes. In another, a solo woman with a backpack stands on a mountaintop with her arms raised in exultation. In these and many other examples we found, women use photos of their single travel experiences as a way to tell and illustrate their personal victories in leaving behind sheng-nu stigma, feelings of shame, and perhaps also transcending their collective family identity and responsibility for family face and stigma. As Qiongyi commented with a series of scenic pictures she took abroad in Luxor, Bosphorus, Jioufen, Sharm el-Sheikh, and Istanbul, "I don't mind people calling me a sheng-nu because my life quality is not something that will be determined by their disapproval [of my late singlehood]. Single women really should go out more, especially when they are not bound by family life. Go out and see new scenery, experience a new life. You might realize there is another possibility to live" (Post on discussion forum, self-professed older single woman, age unknown).

Social Identity Work: Parentally Directed Consumption and Gifts Related Counternarratives

Chinese society could be considered to be amplifying the strong family identity interrelations that were theorized by Epp and Price (2008). In contemporary Chinese society, marriage is often as much about families coming together to form a social network of mutual assistance as it is about the couple and their relationship with each another (Fei 1992; Yan 2009). Therefore, the sheng-nu stigma results in loss of family face that places both our research participants and their parents in an inferior social position in their local community (cf., Yang and Kleinman 2008). For instance, Leikai noted that he has been coming to Beijing's matchmaking corners twice a week to find a marriage partner for his daughter as well as to avoid people in his hometown who have been haranguing him about her marriage prospects. According to Leikai, "Whenever people ask me why my daughter excels in so many areas but she is still not married, I feel ashamed, incredibly embarrassed. People must think that she is low on emotional intelligence or wonder if she has serious health issues or personality flaws. Otherwise, she would have been married by now!" (Ethnographic fieldnote, father of a single woman in her 30s). Leikai's comments reveal the profound social stigma surrounding professional women and their parents. They also indicate the extent to which parents internalize their sheng-nu daughters' social stigma and experience related feelings of shame.

Parentally-directed consumption and gifts are used to combat family stigmatization. They are the goods, services and experiences that professional single women purchase and present as filial gifts to their parents. These gifts and consumer goods provide counternarratives that help the stigmatized individual's parents cope with, counter, or discharge courtesy stigma by building alternative narratives of financial success, independence, and consumer empowerment relating to their daughters.

We identify two distinct consumption counternarratives that fulfill this purpose: (1) refuting immorality and (2) empathy-driving. "Refuting immorality" involves consumption

and gift-giving that asserts or demonstrates a moral element that counteracts the stigma. In the case of sheng-nu women, "refuting immorality" is fueled by mundane and conspicuous filial gifts that represent our research participants' attempts to exhibit their filial (i.e., oriented toward family) conduct and problematize the courtesy stigma of sheng-nu that brands them immoral. "Empathy-driving" involves consumption and gift-giving that enable important others to gain an enhanced understanding of the stigmatized person's experience, so as to play a part in the furtherance of counternarratives. In the context of the current investigation, empathy driving is powered by experiential and leisure oriented gifts that help our research participants' parents experience the merits of a single lifestyle, develop empathy, and provide resilience in the face of cultural pressures to internalize the courtesy stigma.

Parental Gifting Counternarratives on Refuting Immorality. Chinese parents gain face when their children are filial and lose face when they are deemed unfilial or immoral, characteristics often attributed to women's late singlehood in traditional Chinese society and in contemporary Chinese state broadcast messages (Ji 2015). Yet, filial piety in contemporary Chinese consumer culture is a complex and dynamic construct. In contemporary market-based Chinese society, it is increasingly concerned with affection and the provision of material comfort to one's parents, rather than traditional notions of obedience and subservience (Rainey 2010; Sun 2017). Thus, the more material goods that our research participants give to their parents, the more of a filial child they may appear, and the more their single status might be viewed as a legitimate cultural identity and not a moral taint and sign of family shame. Legitimization would happen throughout discourse, as narratives of financial success and family support are used to counter the negative narratives attached to the sheng-nu stigma. Mundane and conspicuous filial gifts, therefore, do more than merely pamper — they publicly and privately display professional women's financial ability and

willingness to take care of their parents. Filial piety in modern China is thus reinterpreted in light of professional success. Economic success allows these women to construct counternarratives refuting immorality, projecting themselves as at least morally equivalent, if not even righteously superior, to their married counterparts.

By mundane filial gifts, we refer to gifts that provide for parents' basic necessities of life, that is, their needs for food, shelter, transportation and clothing. Aijia understands her generous giving to take care of her parents' everyday living as a way to manage courtesy stigma and elevate her parents' moral standing in the community.

> "Every year when I come home for Chinese New Year, my mother will tell our relatives in advance not to mention my marriage prospects. I know that my relatives talk about it [to my parents] when I'm not home…I've spent a tremendous amount of money on my parents. I send them new clothes and everyday necessities of the best quality, vitamins, shampoo, hand wash, oh and toilet paper, good quality toilet paper or they'd just buy really cheap ones that are not very comfortable to use [laughs]. Last year, I felt my father's car was too old so I bought him a new car. I've been paying the mortgage for the house my parents live in now for the past 10 years…Other people envy them for having all these things paid for. My parents feel they look very good in front of others because their daughter makes a lot of money and she has been very filial to them." (Aijia, personal interview)

Laughing at her parents' extreme frugality for not being willing to spend money on "quality toilet paper" for themselves, Aijia discursively links her ability to give generously in quality and quantity with her parents' acceptance of her single status. In the interview, as many of our participants do, she speaks about herself in the third person. Top of mind in her discourse is others' discourse about her: what others say about her to her parents and what her parents say to others about her. And what they think about her, according to her interview, is

that "she has been very filial to them". Aijia then added, "An average family with children can never give [their parents] as much as I can. Childcare expenses are exceptionally high in China". Many of our research participants' giving is about not merely taking care of their parents but eliciting "envy" from their parents' peer groups whose children are considered to be more morally upright for having adhered to normative life transitions. Here, eliciting "envy" in her parents' peer groups might play an important role in courtesy stigma management, because Aijia's success indicates a type of combined financial and moral superiority over her married counterparts.

When asked if their single daughters are filial, our fieldnotes at the matchmaking corners capture many instances of the parents talking about how their daughters are very filial, buying them shoes, clothes, cell phones, food, fruits, and just about anything they lack. These parents looked proud and joyful with their eyes shining as they recounted their single daughters' giving alongside their stable finances and promising career trajectories. Gifts of essential items seem to serve as everyday reminders of single professional women's filial conduct. Even though these items are household related and mundane, they are presented in a steady stream. Gifts of shampoo, vitamins, food, cell phones, and mortgage payments go to work every day to remind parents of their daughters' success and loyalty, increase family face, and provide internal and external counternarratives of generous independence to refute the negative claims of desperate dependence underpinning sheng-nu courtesy stigma.

Filial giving can also be pricey as well as prosaic. In the context of family stigma identity work, conspicuous filial gifts are gifts of luxuries that provide extravagant evidence of filial piety and daughters' discretionary economic power. Older single women use lavish gifts to establish generosity with their parents that go far beyond meeting basic needs. For example, Xiuna sportingly considers her luxury gift giving to parents to be a competitive form of filial piety exhibition: "I'd buy my parents windproof jackets and coats. They cost about 3000

RMB each (approximately $430 USD). My aunts always say that everything is great with my family — except for the fact that I'm still not married. I need to defend my parents' face by showing them and my family that I'm more giving and more successful than their married children" (Personal interview). In Xiuna's verbatim, her conspicuous gifting to parents is about being competitive and excessive. The emphasis is not on "windproof jackets and coats" per se, but "the 3000 rmb" price tag. More importantly, being "more giving and more successful" seems to be required in order to compensate for the family stigma that Xiuna perceives as a threat she needs to "defend" her parents against.

Besides doing family facework, giving luxury gifts is a way to signal the presence of financial resources. It therefore reassures parents and family that the filial single daughter can provide for them in their old age. For example, Zhilan, whose parents now live in the house she bought for them last year, revealed that her mother shares a discourse in which she often struggles to sleep at night because she is so worried about her daughter's single status. "What I remember most is that, when I bought my mother a golden ring, she was over the moon! My father was very poor when they got married, so she never received a ring from him. I wanted to show both of them that I can afford many, many things" (Personal interview). Zhilan's desire to "show them I could afford many, many things" is another example of an active attempt to manage courtesy stigma through excess, conspicuous display, and giving. A ringless daughter giving her ringless mother a golden ring acts as a powerful symbol of reassurance and a stabilizer of family relations. Seemingly, in contemporary China, the gold of excess consumption and gifting can outshine the stains of traditional, and even state-sponsored, stigma.

Parental Gifting Counternarratives on Driving Empathy. Even if parents acknowledge their single daughters' capacity to financially support them into their old age, they might

continue to be deeply worried about their daughters eventually becoming lonely as their own golden years approach. We met Xiaofong at one of the matchmaking corners in Shanghai. From our conversations, we learned that while she is very proud of having a filial daughter, she wanted her daughter to be as happy as she could possibly. To her, this meant having a family. "Happiness is not about how much money you have. You have to have a family of your own. That is the only way to achieve happiness" (Ethnographic fieldnote, mother of a single woman aged 27 who worked as an interpreter). To overcome this perception and seek parental support for their single identity, the single women we interviewed and studied emphasize the importance of experiential and leisure-related gifts in introducing their parents to a single lifestyle that celebrates and exemplifies counternarratives around freedom and self-fulfillment. If conspicuous consumption and material gifts to parents seed narratives about stigmatized women's financial wealth and independence, experiential and leisure gifts seed narratives about their internal sense of contentment and wellbeing.

Experiential filial gifts help strengthen or repair the family bond that is weakened due to constant arguments about the necessity of marriage and family for happiness. Zhilan confessed that this conversational center-of-gravity was a frequent problem when she was together with her parents: "When we're together, we often have nothing to talk about. I don't want to talk about dating with them and they don't understand what I do [as an IT developer]. So, instead, I would take my mother to shopping malls, watch movies or just go out for a walk to create new topics to talk about" (Personal interview). Through shopping, going to movies, and other types of experiential consumption, Zhilan is able to eschew conversations about her single status that deepen her experience of family stigmatization and her parents' concerns about it, replacing it with new, consumer culture based topics such as the exploration of popular culture.

As elaborated in an earlier section, experiential consumption helps these stigmatized

women broaden their horizons and appreciate a sense of liberty they believe they would not be able to experience if they were married with children. Applying the same logic, Mingyu took her mother to the movies and traveling to help her experience what it means to be an older, single woman living her life to the fullest. "My mom is the strongest opponent of my late singlehood… if my mom likes it [a motion picture] and I know she hasn't been to cinema for a while, I'll take her there. I also take her on holidays from time to time in the country to see the world. I wanted to show her the joy of being single. We can then develop mutual respect and understanding of each other's values in life" (Mingyu, personal interview).

Again using the broad term "the world" (whose Chinese meaning and connotations are very similar to those of the English word), Mingyu describes travel consumption as related to her efforts to have her mother escape from a local community where the pressure and effects of her courtesy stigma can be at their most profound. If the consumption is successful, and she escapes, her mother may then realize something antithetical to the disparaging narratives around the sheng-nu stigma: "The joy of being single". By using experiential consumption, Mingyu hopes that her mother can develop "respect and understanding", empathize with her daughter's perspective and identity — despite the stigma — and craft a legitimizing counternarrative from these realizations.

Leisure related filial gifts are focused on buying parents educational courses, instructional lessons, or hobby-related gifts, in order to divert their attention away from worrying or discussing the sheng-nu stigma. As well, they can provide parents with an appreciation for the individualized consumer pursuits that their single daughters enjoy. As shown in Nana's account: "I bought art courses for my parents to learn how to paint. I encourage them to develop hobbies and not have all their attention on me and on my marriage prospects. As an only child, it can be smothering. I want to help them learn how to enjoy life and have a sense of purpose without me" (Personal interview). According to Nana, her now retired parents

grew up in a very uncertain time in Chinese history (just after the cultural revolution of 1966-1976) and endured great hardship while raising her. In her interview, she told us how her parents placed all their hopes onto her. Because Nana understood that her parents rarely were able to enjoy the gift of personal leisure time or creative pursuits growing up, her gift of art courses is intended to expose them to a new, more individualistic, creative, and enjoyable experience. Her parents can then "enjoy life and have a sense of purpose" focusing on their own personal fulfillment, self-expression, and individual happiness, rather than revolving around their daughter's stigmatizing lack of "marriage prospects" and the narratives they construct about it.

Social Identity Work: Social Facing Consumption and Display Related Counternarratives

From our conversations with the parents of the single women in the matchmaking corners of Chinese parks, it became evident that many of these parents are deeply concerned about losing their social standing in the local community as a result of their daughters' single status. They are stigmatized for failing to provide proper guidance to steer their single daughters into married family life. The single professional women in our interviews were clearly aware of this social implication and mentioned how their parents are often harassed and stigmatized by the community. This awareness drives the single women to engage in social facing consumption as a type of social identity work. They use this type of consumption to showcase how being single can be glamorous, fashionable, and even gratifying to family life — an increase (not a decrease) in family face. In this way, they challenge the negative stereotyping of the sheng-nu label attached to them and to their parents by association.

Two consumption related counternarratives repudiate the sociocultural stigmatization expedited by the state: (1) myth busting, and (2) re-orienting normalization. "Myth busting"

involves engaging in consumption and gift-giving in order to rebuff stigmatizing myths. In this case, myth busting involves counternarratives of conspicuous, beauty, and fashion-related consumption that oppose the popular myths that sheng-nu women are unattractive, lead a miserable life, and are leftovers because they have no choice in the matter. "Re-orienting normalization" involves consumption and gift-giving that suggest or provide evidence of normalcy to counter stigmatizing connotations of deviance. In this context, re-orienting normalization occurs through the provision of digital evidence of sociality to normalize women's late/permanent singlehood as an equally attractive, if not an even more rewarding, consumerist lifestyle choice. Through these counternarratives, our research participants attempt not only to discharge existing negative impressions, but also actively seek social recognition and approval of their single status, especially from their parents' guanxi networks.

Social-facing Consumption and Display Related Counternarratives on Myth-busting

We know that status-oriented display (Crockett 2017; Han, Nunes, and Dreze 2010; Üstüner and Holt 2010) and fashion and cosmetics-related products and services (Lemay Jr, Clark, and Greenberg 2010; Liu, Keeling, and Hogg 2016; Schouten 1991) are often used to aid self-presentation and advance individual consumer identity work. However, our findings demonstrate and extend these appearance-focused forms of consumption by showing how they constitute an important narrative focus of courtesy stigma management. Because of the collective nature of Chinese familial reputation, sheng-nu women's impression management strategies also happen for the benefit of their parents, incorporating the idea of being a good representative of the family.

Myth-busting through social-facing consumption and display related counternarratives.
One of the most obvious societal changes in post-Mao China is the rise of conspicuous

consumption (Osburg 2013; Yan 2009). In the context of courtesy stigma management, we found that conspicuous consumption became part of a useful strategy to protect family face by redefining the single female identity in terms of a successful life and desirable lifestyle. In addition to giving her parents luxury gifts to exhibit the more superior form of filial piety, as shown in sections above, Xiuna pointed out the sign value that accompanies the active display of her consumption of status-related brands.

> During family gatherings, my aunt just loves to tease my parents about why I'm still single [rolls her eyes]. In her mind, I must lead a miserable life. She has a comparative mindset…and I need to defend my parents' face…[so] I constantly upgrade my own self-image by buying myself more and more expensive clothes to wear. I want the best of everything in life. My sunglasses are from Burberry, my handbag is from Louis Vuitton, my laptop is from Apple. I show that I'm not miserable and I lead a great life…they [my relatives] can then leave my parents alone. (Xiuna, personal interview)

Rolling her eyes, Xiuna uses the term "a comparative mindset" to refer to her aunt's propensity to stigmatize Xiuna and her parents by comparing her unfavorably with her married cousins. Later in the same interview, Xiuna used her possession of prestigious brands to argue that she is financially superior to her aunt's married children, who are "economically disadvantaged because of childcare expenses" (personal interview). As Xiuna "constantly upgrades" her self-image through the conspicuous display of "the best of everything in life" — Burberry sunglasses, a Louis Vuitton bag — she casts her conspicuous luxury brand use as a form of defense for her parents. Buying herself "more and more expensive clothes" is a way to announce that she leads "a great life". For Xiuna, luxury brands are evidence of a financially empowered "great life", a narrative that plays a critical role in counteracting the sheng-nu narrative of Leftover Women's allegedly sad and pathetic existence.

In China, one popular sheng-nu related saying states that there are actually three genders:

men, women and female-entities-with-PhDs. Consider Jiancheng's comments on people's impression of sheng-nu: "In the eyes of most people, the female-entity-with-PhD represents the third gender. They're thought of as old, highly educated, advanced sheng-nu, sloppy in appearance or a UFO (Ugly, Fat, and Old)" (Public post on a Chinese social networking site by someone who claimed to represent the good men of China). As our English translation might indicate, the scornful label "female-entity-with-PhD" is a generalized negative stereotype with intersectional implications of sexlessness and undesirability (Gopaldas and Fischer 2012). There is also an obvious and insulting devaluation of female intelligence. The negative connotations of the term are applied in China to many well-educated, career-minded women who are not yet married by their late 20s or early 30s — even those without doctorates or advanced degrees.

In response to these negative stereotypes, unmarried Chinese women utilize fashion and appearance-related consumption to cultivate a counternarrative that is visible to their family, their parents, and others tainted or touched by the sting of courtesy stigma. Consider the following verbatim from Tingying, whose spending on skincare and cosmetics constitutes one of her biggest yearly expenses.

> "I follow beauty influencers on Weibo and see what they recommend. Toner, cleanser, anti-aging serum, anti-redness face cream, hand cream, facial masks. I swear by IPL (Intense Pulsed Light) photo facial treatments. I definitely spend more time putting makeup on and dressing up when I know the people I'm going to meet are likely to think that I'm a sheng-nu…especially when I attend events my father's workplace hosts. They [his colleagues] often bring their wife and children and sometimes grandchildren along with them…[so] I need to look presentable on my family's behalf. They often say how classy I look and my father laughs and says I've got good genes. Once someone asked my father if I'm in a relationship. It's always a

bit awkward [for him]…my father usually says, 'She is independent. There are men interested in her, but she has her own ideas about what she wants out of life.'"

(Tingying, personal interview)

In studies of Western contexts, spending on fashion and appearance-related consumption is often related to individual needs and outcomes (Bloch and Richins 2006; Liu et al. 2016; Schouten 1991). In Tingying's narrative, her consumption of cosmetics and skin care incorporates a desire for family wellbeing. What is important to notice about Tingying's verbatim is the clear discursive linking of her elaborate personal grooming regimes with the sheng-nu stigma and the family face it undermines. It suggests that Tingying treats her beauty as a form of aesthetic capital (Anderson et al. 2010) that she uses to counter sociocultural oppression and the intersectional marginalization of her single identity and her parents by association. Tingying spends "more time" on her self-presentation when she believes that she will enter a stigmatizing environment in which people will understand her single status as a spoiled identity, namely a sheng-nu, "especially" one related to her father. She proudly quotes her father talking about her independence, which illustrate two things. First, that it is important for her to visualize her father seeing her positively. Second, and even more importantly, that her beauty consumption provides a strong return on investment as the core of her father's powerful sheng-nu counternarrative to others. Later in the interview conversation, Tingying emphasizes that she believes "the more people want to laugh at you, the more glamorous you need to look in front of them. When you look glamorous, people become more tolerant of you [and your family by extension]". Tingying's grooming practices aim for a "glamorous" look that transcends the norm. Glamour may be needed for family members, such as fathers, to counteract the disparaging connotations of the sheng-nu, or female-entity-with-PhD, label.

On the discussion forum, we also found that when fashion and appearance-related

consumption are mentioned as a way to cope with sheng-nu stigma, they are described in an elaborate manner both in terms of quality and quantity. For example, when answering a question regarding how to live a fulfilling life as an older single woman, "Peizen" devoted a whole web-page to describing her self-care regimen, highlighting high-end cosmetics brands including SK-2, La Mer, Yves St Laurent, Tom Ford, Chanel, Dior, and Armani. Beautifying with expensive brands helps these women counter the stigmatic images and narratives of successful professional women being viewed "as sexually undesirable for not being 'feminine' enough" (Ko and Zheng 2007, 234-237). As our analysis demonstrates, these derogatory stereotypes can damage not only personal, but also family, reputations.

Re-orienting normalization through social-facing consumption and display related counternarratives. There are many ways that consumers might display their consumption. These could include going to work, shopping, or simply promenading on city streets with noticeable consumption goods and conspicuous brands in hand. In the information age, another important way to display consumption is through digital devices and their capacity to communicate self-narratives with family, friends, and the public through social media. Our research participants display their social success in many ways, including through sending pictures or posting on social media. This behavior is used to re-orient others' definitions of normality (i.e., married family life) and to promote their own ideal of a happy and fulfilled single lifestyle pursued with pride and confidence.

In our investigation, we found that single daughters often use their mobile devices to send photographs of themselves engaged in pleasurable social activities directly to their parents' mobile phones and also via social media platforms such as WeChat (whose groups messaging functions are often used, especially outside North America). These digital photographs act as visual evidence that ostensibly stigmatized sheng-nu women are enjoying themselves and

thus helps to ease their parents' concerns. Consider the comments Nana made about the importance of sending her parents pictures showing her enjoying herself with others in social settings.

> "I was abroad during the Spring Festival. I spent it with several girlfriends. We had lots of fun and cooked a Chinese New Year's Eve dinner together. I took pictures and sent them to my parents so that they wouldn't be worried that I was alone on my own without a partner. My dad and mom showed these pictures to my grandma to make her happy and let her know that I am single, but I am not alone…Last year I was discouraged from attending a family wedding because they were afraid that my second uncle would say horrendous things to me, like how it has been very selfish of me to not get married…By sending pictures to my parents that they then show to my grandma, I feel this can better help them cope with pressure from people like my second uncle or I can get family members on their side, because they know that I am happy with or without a partner." (Nana, personal Interview)

From an earlier conversation with Nana, we learned that her parents had been criticized by close family members for sending her abroad to study, instead of focusing on getting her married. Understanding the pressure her parents are facing, the pictures she sends during the Chinese New Year — a time when the Confucian ideology of marriage and family is most profound — provide her parents with a counternarrative that their daughter, although unmarried, is happy, strong, out in the world, and living her best life. Nana repeatedly refocuses the discourse on her own happiness: "I am single, but I am not alone"; "I am happy with or without a partner". The role of digital content in this refocusing is key. Her mobile phone usage and consumption of social media platforms allows Nana to provide her parents with persuasive visual evidence to "get family members on their [her parents'] side" with a

narrative that can counteract the sheng-nu stigma. This digital evidence and its credibility normalize her parent's counternarrative of their daughter's pursuit of happiness and freedom.

We observed that single Chinese women also often post photographs on social media not only as a means of public display or self-presentation (Schau and Gilly 2003) but also as a way of sharing their impressive consumption acts and thereby advocating for a new moral order that celebrates singlehood as an expression of autonomy, individuality, and parental filialty.

> "My relatives always ask me when am I ever going to get married. They even went to a fortune-teller to ask about my marriage prospects!…When I take my parents to go on a holiday abroad, I'll post our travel pictures on WeChat to show my relatives that I am more filial than their married children who can't really afford to take them on holidays. They get jealous [of my parents] when they see these pictures."
>
> *Interviewer*: "How do you know they get jealous?"
>
> *Bingbing*: "I can tell from the comments they made on the post that they're jealous. And some of them they openly say that they are jealous!" (Bingbing, personal interview)

As with Aijia, whose generous and extensive filial giving elicits envy from her parents' peer groups, Bingbing uses the WeChat social media platform to provoke jealousy from her relatives towards her parents. The successful arousal of this strong emotion indicates a counternarrative and legitimizing alternative that defies the deprivileging Confucian ideology. Later in the interview, Bingbing gives an example of her aunt who often argues with her son and daughter-in-law about how to take care of her grandchild. In a conversation with Bingbing, the aunt apparently concluded that: "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence". Bingbing's family travel pictures typically contain images of smiles and laughter. They display a story of a harmonious family relationship in the context of

consuming travel, exploring new places, and sharing it through technology. Bingbing's narrative draws a stark contrast between these social media displays of family harmony and joy and the forlorn lives of her relatives, who are perceived to be preoccupied, and perhaps overwhelmed, with child and grandchild care-duties and their related conflicts.

Among the posts on the single women's discussion forum we started in Baidu, those that have received the most likes and admiring comments are typically the ones that communicate an accomplished, consumerist lifestyle. For instance, one of the posts that received the most likes (over 2,000) explicitly states that, "Although I do not have a boyfriend, I am busier than those who have" (Quan, post on discussion forum). Quan claims that she owns a car and a house and gives her parents her second credit card. These statements are reinforced by a series of photographs that exhibit her joy and sense of self-fulfilment while engaging in a wide range of consumption practices. The photograph posts contain her own paintings, more than one hundred used theater and concert tickets, assembled complicated Lego kits, jigsaw puzzles, books, mountain climbing trips, sports gears and travel snapshots of her at exotic locations alone or with friends. In the age of social media display, conspicuous displays of money and wealth such as these are increasingly framed as an alternate type of morality (Kozinets 2020). We find the 345 comments on Quan's post overwhelmingly supportive, including "This is what I call an independent personality, a life of independence", "What a beautiful, happy girl", "Giving your parents your credit card (!!!)", "I want to also just go traveling like you, but I have a family to take care of", "Seeing your post, I don't feel like getting married anymore", "I have fallen in love with you" and many similar types of comments. These responses communicate emotions such as jealousy, admiration, newfound realization, well-wishes and adoration, evincing the vigor of social media display in populating a consumerist counternarrative to a traditional familism that would otherwise relegate single professional women and their parents to an inferior social position.

DISCUSSION

As Epp and Price (2008) note, ""Being a family" is a vitally important collective enterprise central to many consumption experiences" (50). Our findings show how stigma attached to family identity may be re-constructed, repaired and re-established using counternarratives that involve consumption experiences. Using consumption and marketplace resources, Chinese women answer the shaming institutional narratives of the Leftover Woman courtesy stigma with a combination of personal and social counternarratives about individual as well as family identity. Through a range of narrative strategies that involve acquisition, gifts, discourses, and display, Chinese women as citizen-consumers resist some of the stigmatizing and stultifying effects of traditional, historical, cultural and institutional discourses on their sense of self and their family's shared identity. Rather than succumbing to the pressure to marry, the older single women in our study deploy the power of the market system and utilize the symbolic, aesthetic, social and moral capital that it provides to develop interlocking identity and family counternarratives for their parents to deploy. They use their power as consumers in the market and via digital channels to counteract and counter-argue the sheng-nu stigma and its accompanying courtesy stigma, as well as their cultural (Confucian) and institutional (Communist party-state) underpinnings.

Like Crockett's (2017) work on contemporary Black counternarratives of respectability or Sandikci and Ger's (2010) tesettürlü, who were able to reclaim and destigmatize Islamic veiling practices, our work is situated in a particular sociohistorical context whose contours demonstrate the weight of those circumstances. In modern communist-capitalist China (Osburg 2013), stigmatizing institutional and cultural discourses work alongside a strong Confucian cultural tradition. Their deeply embedded narratives contends that unmarried

daughters beyond a certain age are (1) unfilial, (2) morally deviant, and (3) liabilities to family planning and finances. As Fei (1992, 132) notes in the context of Chinese politics, "with paternalistic power, people are not allowed to oppose traditional forms. But as long as they pay lip services to the form, they may reinterpret and thereby change the content".

Our study shows how Chinese women use the resources at their disposal to enact and provide six groups of responsive counternarratives that reinterpret and change the content of traditional Confucian narratives of morality and family. Different forms of filial giving by stigmatized women provide strong evidence that, rather than being unfilial and immoral, they care about their parents. The gifts also counter the idea that these women will be a drag on their parents by demonstrating to all that they possess considerable financial and emotional independence. Older single women's steady and generous filial gifts embody and exemplify their attempts to both individually craft a counter-message and also provide a shared family identity narrative of solidarity, mutual understanding and communal respectability to reinstate the family face that is damaged by the Chinese government and society's propagation of the Confucian-based sheng-nu stigma.

Similar to Crockett's (2017, 22) work and Sandikci and Ger's (2010), our inquiry fits with the group of contemporary studies that foreground the role of sociohistoric conditions in different types of "mid-range" consumer resistance that are not exactly collective action or social movement, nor are they coping (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Izberk-Bilgin 2012; Luedicke 2015; Saatcioglu and Corus 2014; Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013; Sandikci and Ger 2010; Üstüner and Holt 2007). Unlike these other studies, however, ours is centered on the family dynamics of courtesy stigma, and its findings of the role of gift giving and its relation both to destigmatization and family identity counternarratives are novel contributions to our understanding. What they show us is that the culturally embedded and universal traditions of gift-giving may strengthen narratives of family identity as well provide counternarrative

ammunition that contravenes institutionalized and culturally embedded sheng-nu stigma. This insight builds on and synthesizes research indicating that gifts may create and sustain family relationships (Carrier 2005; Lévi–Strauss 1972), facilitate a sense of communal solidarity (Bajde 2009; Weinberger and Wallendorf 2011; Yan 1996) and yield important identity rewards for gift giver and recipient (Belk and Coon 1993; Fischer and Arnold 1990; Joy 2001; Ruth, Otnes, and Brunel 1999; Weiner 1992) and extends it into the realm of courtesy stigma. Importantly, the rehabilitative functions of gifts in this context — Chinese and Asian cultures have long, complex, and culturally central gift-giving traditions (Gao, Huang, and Brown 2017; Yan 1996) — play fundamental roles in both establishing and re-establishing personal and social identities (Klein, Lowrey, and Otnes 2015).

The conceptual framework provided by our nuanced categorizations of the various types of gifts and roles of gift-giving — from mundane to conspicuous, competitive to experiential and leisure-oriented, enjoyed by parents alone or with their stigmatized daughters — responds to Crockett's (2017, 575) call for more research into understanding "the specific cultural repertoires consumers bring in to resistance efforts" and could also open up future theoretical avenues for expanding our understanding of the role of gift-giving efforts to destigmatize. For example, in Coskuner-Balli and Thompson's (2013, 30) study, we learn that one stay-at-home father's wife gave him the gift of a more "manly" diaper bag made by a small California-based designer. The authors interpret this gift as an example of an entrepreneurial innovation tailored to the sociocultural position of the stay-at-home father community, which no doubt it is. However, it is also significant that it is a gift, of a certain type, given to the stigmatized person by a family member who also is managing their own — and their family unit's — courtesy stigma. Further exploration of the cultural patterning and categories of these stigma-related gift exchanges and their intended purposes could help to illuminate future understanding of the construction and realization of social and personal

identity narratives and counternarratives in family courtesy stigma management.

An important aspect of the stigma management process which our findings uncover is the role of shame — the socially derived sense of distress from public humiliation — in motivating proactive and reactive consumption of various kinds, such as therapeutic and gift-giving. Although existing research often conflates shame with guilt (Lewis 1998), most of it assumes that failing to fulfill one's perceived duties or causing suffering in others can lead to a deep sense of guilt (Sahoo et al. 2020; Silva-Segovia 2016; Thompson 1996). Future investigations might fruitfully explore how guilt interacts with shame, identity, stigma, and courtesy stigma management in contemporary consumption contexts.

Our findings also resonate with Crockett's (2017) important notion that stigma management follows two general paths involving avoidance of conflict or conformity (seeking "normative respectability" in his study) and confrontation or resistance ("oppositional respectability"). The former pathway of avoidance has dominated prior research into courtesy stigma. Extant research shows the courtesy stigmatized encouraging the stigmatized to avoid the stigmatizing gaze (Blum 1991, 272-273). The courtesy stigmatized avoid stigmatizing encounters — and even the birthdays of the stigmatized (Turner et al. 2007, 2097) — by not appearing together with them in public (Gray 2002, 741). Avoidance strategies are normalized because the experience of shame is so prevalent among the family members of stigmatized groups (Lewis 1998), such as persons with mental illness (Corrigan and Miller 2004; Ohaeri and Fido 2001; Yang et al. 2007), disability (Gray 2002; Tikkanen et al. 2018; Turner et al. 2007), or AIDS (Li et al. 2008; Yang and Kleinman 2008), motivating a range of avoidance and concealment-oriented behaviours. These courtesy stigma effects have serious and even tragic ramifications, such as members of stigmatized groups such as the mentally or physically ill refusing to seek medical treatments in order to avoid subjecting their family members to shame (Duffy (2005).

We do find some (admittedly muted) attempts to confront stigma in the courtesy stigma literature as well. For example, fathers of disabled children organize fundraising events to educate people about the stigma in concern (Tikkanen et al. 2018, 1547) or fathers of autistic children provide narratives about their searches for remedies and cures (Alareeki et al. 2019). Blum (1991, 272-273) finds family caregivers teaching appropriate dining behaviors to their relatives with Alzheimer's so as not to feel embarrassed when with them in public settings. Yet, none of these prior attempts at confrontation suggests the attempt to defy and alter perceptions that we see collectively among Sandikci and Ger's (2010), Coskuner-Balli and Thompson's (2013), or Crockett's (2017) participants and, individually, among our single professional Chinese women. It would be useful to understand the factors, especially the consumption related ones, under which certain stigmatized and courtesy stigmatized groups oppose, and others conform to, the burdens of their stigmatization.

The particular focus of our study, successful and stigmatic adult children dealing with the courtesy stigma of their parents, provides a unique lens on the courtesy stigma management phenomenon that reveals the workings of capital. Coskuner-Balli and Thompson's (2013) developments of Bourdieu's (1986) theories of capital are particularly useful to a fuller development of the insights that this lens provides. In particular, the professional Chinese women in our study deploy economic capital (finances, purchasing power, good-paying jobs), converting it into the symbolic capital of prestige products and brands that signal status, as well as experiences and vacations that signal leisure and success. Although Coskuner-Balli and Thompson's (2013) stigmatized stay-at-home fathers sought to convert their subordinate cultural capital as domestic homemakers into more respected forms of capital, our stigmatized women should be considered to be in an entirely different category regarding their cultural capital. Privileged by capital and escaping the economically undervalued realms of the domestic field, and despite attempts to stigmatize the cultural capital of their education

(the insulting third gender of "entity-with-a Ph.D."), the stigmatized Leftover Women were effectively exchanging their educational and professional credentials, occupational skills and knowledge into homologous forms of capital that are recognized and privileged by global markets and cultures. These types of capital became important elements in the character narratives of their parents, as we relate in our narratives from the matchmaking corners. Moreover, capital is shared as gifts and recorded in ways that can be utilized for social display, such as digital photographs sent to their parents' mobile phones. In these ways, investments in convertible capital become a central aspect enabling stigmatized women to manage the courtesy stigma of their parents. Because Coskuner-Balli and Thompson's (2013) stay-at-home dads lacked such capital convertibility, their attempts at stigma management, even though they are also identity-based, appear significantly less effective than those in our study — and, we assume, would probably have little effect upon family identity and its courtesy stigma.

Do all successful destigmatization and courtesy destigmatization efforts depend upon capital and the convertibility of capital? Although every cultural context is different, prior stigma related investigations in consumer research lend some support to this general conclusion. The successful efforts to destigmatize veiling by the tesettürlü studied by Sandikci and Ger (2010) are the product of an "urban middle class" that are empowered by their consumerist "choice-making behaviors" (33) — a "professional" (28) class of women. Just as with the efforts of our Chinese professional women to destigmatize their personal and family identities, these Islamic women's destigmatization attempts are enabled by access to resources and ability to exchange them. The Sheng-nu stigma was opposed in our study through women's investments in education, professional development, consumption, and gifts. Analogously, tesettürlü women used their own education, middle-class upbringing, and knowledge of Islam (as well as Western consumer culture) to build and remake the

stigmatized veiling practice into an aesthetically pleasing and legitimate statement of both fashion and resistance. On the other hand, the stigmatized family members in most other family courtesy stigma studies — such as parents of children with mental illnesses (Corrigan and Miller 2004) or rare genetic disorders (Hamlington et al. 2015; Mak and Kwok 2010), children of incarcerated parents (Wildeman and Wakefield 2014), or children of parents with a declining neurological condition (Blum 1991) – typically lacked the convertible cultural capital, social status, and resources of the professional Chinese women in our study. Obviously, there are still too few studies that focus on this particular conceptual point to reach any definitive conclusions. Future research that investigates the relationship between capital, social status, and courtesy stigma would help illuminate this important issue.

For Giddens (1991), identity work is a reflexive project, funnelled through the moral discourse of traditional forms of authority, in which the individual is responsible for her or his own do-it-yourself biographical work involving not only herself or himself but also her or his relations with important others. Our study peers into this reflexive project, emphasizing the role of consumption counternarratives in courtesy stigma management from the perspective of stigmatized women who must also manage their parents' courtesy stigma. One of the major challenges to maintaining a particular identity narrative is the need to achieve an internally perceived authentic self while obtaining external approval by important others (Ainsworth and Hardy 2004; Gergen and Gergen 1997). This is especially salient in the case of "stigma identity work" in which the stigmatized individual seeks to repair and restore a tainted self-image and escape negative judgments (Lutgen-Sandvik 2008, 100, 113). One of our article's findings is the important role of personal identity work such as therapeutic consumption (and, to a lesser extent, hobby and leisure related consumption) as forms of self-work that enable a stronger, confident, and more "self-realized" identity narrative to emerge. This therapeutic consumption is personal work necessary for the stigmatized individual to

develop an oppositional narrative of normalcy, choice, and independence. And this narrative then plays a central role in the reparative family identity narrative. Future investigations that invoke Lutgen-Sandvik's (2008) important concept of stigma identity work may benefit from our expansion of the term into courtesy stigma, family identity narrative work, and therapeutic consumption.

Another related and unique contribution of our article is to emphasize and develop the destigmatizing role of consumption discourse, practice, and display in the interplay between personal, family, and social identity narratives. Narratives can be conceptualized as "situated, ongoing processes of social action" (Ainsworth and Hardy 2004, 163). The narratives we examine are both sociohistorically contextualized and conditioned by the stimatized's access to convertible capital. As we know from Foucault's work (1981), all power relationships produce identities that are interpellated as subjectivities. In this study, moral narratives of the good daughter and good Chinese woman contend with those of the independent woman, the self-realized therapeutic ideal, the economically independent and successful citizen-consumer, and others. The family and personal identity narratives of the stigmatized Chinese women in our study variously reveal, reinforce, and resist the panoply of these interpellated subject positions.

In fact, the narratives of the women in our study move between one affiliated network of power — Confucian, Chinese Communist Party, traditional Chinese — to another, composed of Chinese capitalist institutions, high-status global brands, and an array of other global socioeconomic and cultural-ideological structures. Just as the tesettürlü of Sandikci and Ger (2010) marshaled their knowledge of Western global consumer culture and Islam in order to destigmatize veiling practices and as the stay-at-home fathers of Coskuner-Balli and Thompson (2013) attempted, but failed, to destigmatize their community, these Chinese women are using narratives that are embedded in power-laden ideologies (and their

commitments and affiliations) to opt out of one power structure by opting into the (arguably just as repressive in its own way) system of another.

Indeed, market actors have apparently already noticed these particular East-West fissures in traditional Chinese society and offered up brand-based solutions. In 2016, the Procter and Gamble-owned skincare brand SK-II launched a series of popular video narratives in China depicting single, professional women's refusal to be pressured into marriage and featuring their pleas to their parents for greater understanding. These advertising narratives are squarely aimed at addressing the sheng-nu stigma and its courtesy stigma, adding to the cultural discourse on the topic. Markus Strobel, SK-II's global president, said that "this campaign has put us on the map in China and. . . [is] helping us win with young professionals and executive women" (Hymowitz and Coleman-Lochner 2017). As a company that innovates with cultural meanings as well as products, P&G is not interested in social change so much as it is providing its Chinese young professional and executive women target market with social meanings that serve its own interests.

As brands like SK-II enter the cultural fray, attracted by the economic enticements of a large market of economically advantaged professional women who must deal with the trauma of stigmatized personal and family identities, their efforts lay bare the nature of sheng-nu resistance as a movement between competing systems of power. Our work suggests that future work in the generalized area of stigma management should begin to build in wider concepts of courtesy stigma. How are families affected by courtesy stigma? How do they cope? How do the stigmatized help them cope? More than this, we should continue to broaden our view of stigma as a broad-based and collective social phenomenon, using these opportunities to carefully track and analyze the contending power structures and institutions being enacted in particular ways. An important focus of this stigma-related power tracking might be through careful cultural analyses of brand positioning. Through a social and

cultural, rather than individual and psychological view of stigma, we can continue to develop understanding about how market, political, traditional, and modern ideologies and institutional counterforces play out in a range of other global and local stigma and courtesy stigma management contexts.

A final conceptual frame in our research is the link between certain kinds of media and technology use and courtesy stigma management. This frame emerged somewhat unexpectedly in the course of our investigation. Throughout our study, we failed to find any coherent subculture or distinctive groups dedicated to older single Chinese women. Unlike the digital activist "fatshionistas" (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013) or stay-at-home fathers (who organized playgroups and web-based at-home father forums (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013, 31-32), the older single women in our study seemed to be content to pursue change as isolated, but economically empowered, consumers.

We also struggled to identify any online sheng-nu support group forums. In fact, our Baidu-based discussion board, created for research purposes, appeared to be one of the only sites available for this dedicated purpose and it gained a significant following. As we note in this article, some of the posts to our Baidu site gained thousands of likes. As provided in the many examples in our findings, stigmatized Chinese women used our Baidu social forum as a place to unapologetically display and discuss the pleasures of their experiences living a single — and often excessively materialistic — lifestyle. Kozinets (2001), Coskuner-Balli and Thompson (2013), and Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) emphasize the critical role of social media for stigmatized consumers to build, promote, and negotiate their identity narratives and to raise the profile of their wants and needs to managers. Yet, in their lives outside of our research context, our professional Chinese women research participants seem far less public and activist than Trekkers, stay-at-home dads, and fatshionistas. They use more private, person-to-person, or person-to-group channels such as WeChat to manage their family's

courtesy stigma. Digital photographs of sociality and a life well lived allow the parents to present a verbal and visual counternarrative of their own to offset stigmatizing contentions providing parents with proof to exhibit to their own social network. They depict a fashionable, beautiful, independent, moral, popular, successful and strong daughter who is also filial, family-oriented, and devoted, a narrative that runs counter to the stigmatic Leftover Woman stereotype. Yet, it may be worthwhile for future research into destigmatization, especially in courtesy stigma contexts, to further examine the nature and role of social media and mobile communications to develop a more detailed understanding of the links between technology use, counternarratives, and destigmatization practices and discourses.

Limitations and Future Research

Comparing courtesy stigma management among the financially empowered and disempowered. A clear limitation of our study is the lack of financially disempowered Chinese single women and their situations, narratives, and voices. Although by no means wealthy by global standards, the women in our study are hard-working professionals who are securely positioned in the middle and upper tiers of the growing Chinese middle class. Hwang (2016) found that contemporary Chinese women with less economic or cultural capital tend to get married earlier than their well-educated and career-minded counterparts. They and their family members also tend to encounter significantly more sheng-nu related stigma and courtesy stigma. As Komter (1996) and Offer (2012) also suggest, the lower income families are less well-embedded in networks of support and often experience social exclusion and withdrawal, at least in part due to their limited resources to engage in gift giving — a critical dimension of the consumption counternarratives utilized by the single
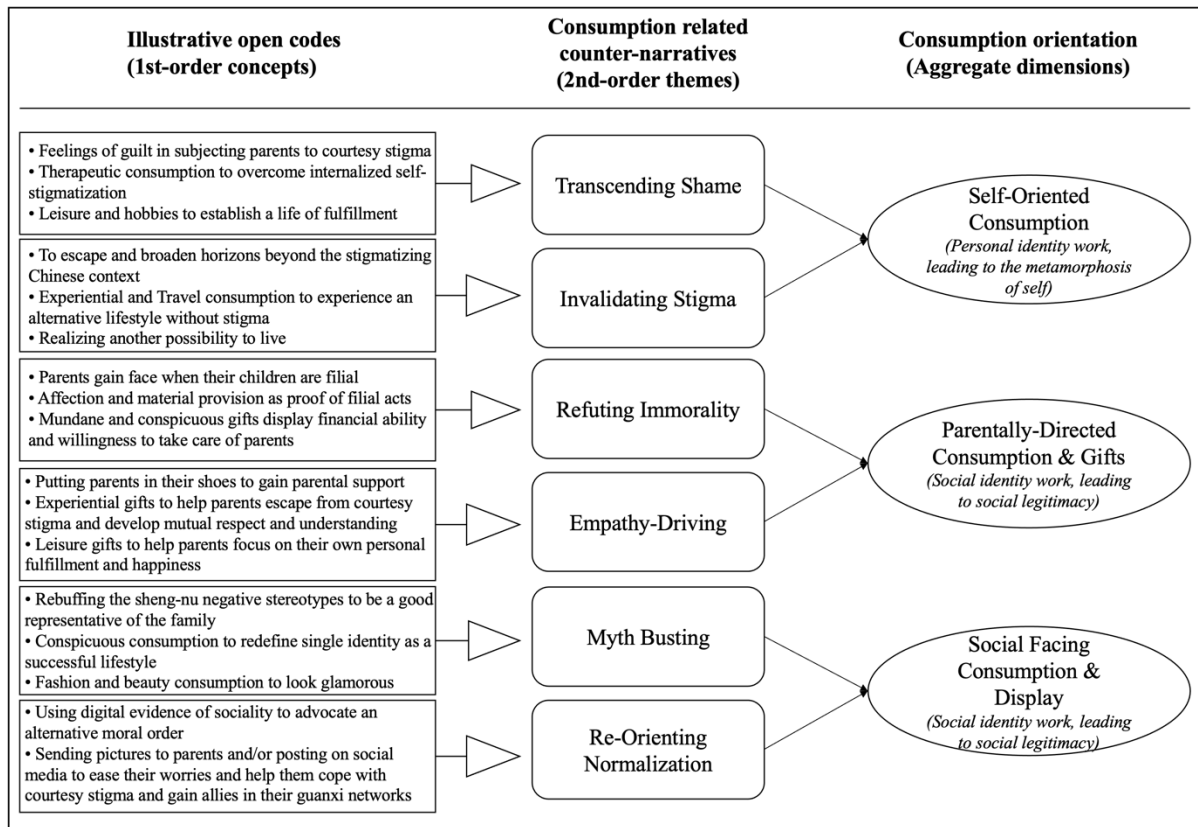
women in our study to bolster their social identity work and discharge the courtesy stigma affixed to their parents. Perhaps, if these lower economic status Chinese women resemble Üstüner and Holt's (2007, 55) disempowered Turkish migrant women, they may similarly experience "a shattered identity project".

However, despite its government firewalls and social isolation, Chinese culture does not operate in a cultural vacuum. Both global culture and market culture continue to shift beyond traditional patriarchal views of women, age, marriage, and child-rearing (Weinbaum et al. 2008), a rising tide that may lift even the financially disempowered. Our current study lacked the bandwidth to examine what happens to these working-class single women who lack the economic means to enact consumption-based legitimizing counternarratives for the benefit of their families. Additional research and further investigation in this context and in others might usefully compare the consumption and gift giving-related strategies of economically empowered and disempowered members of the same stigmatized groups, in China and in other global contexts. It might also raise important questions about how cultural capital and social class intersect with stigma, courtesy stigma, shame, guilt, brands and social empowerment. In market economies, is social empowerment and destigmatization mainly available for the upper middle and wealthy classes? Would lower income individuals and their families have no recourse but to suffer with shame, guilt, exclusion and stigmatization to a greater extent? Serious and important issues of inclusion and equity are raised by such inquiries.

DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The first author collected all the data from 2015 to 2020 through in-depth interviews, netnography and ethnographic fieldwork in matchmaking corners in China's urban parks in Beijing and Shanghai. Data were discussed and collaboratively analyzed by both authors on multiple occasions. The final article was jointly authored. All images, notes, and data are currently stored in Dropbox under the first author's management.

WEB APPENDIX: AN ILLUSTRATIVE CODING STRUCTURE

Illustrative open codes (1st-order concepts)	Consumption related counter-narratives (2nd-order themes)	Consumption orientation (Aggregate dimensions)
• Feelings of guilt in subjecting parents to courtesy stigma • Therapeutic consumption to overcome internalized self-stigmatization • Leisure and hobbies to establish a life of fulfillment	Transcending Shame	Self-Oriented Consumption *(Personal identity work, leading to the metamorphosis of self)*
• To escape and broaden horizons beyond the stigmatizing Chinese context • Experiential and Travel consumption to experience an alternative lifestyle without stigma • Realizing another possibility to live	Invalidating Stigma	
• Parents gain face when their children are filial • Affection and material provision as proof of filial acts • Mundane and conspicuous gifts display financial ability and willingness to take care of parents	Refuting Immorality	Parentally-Directed Consumption & Gifts *(Social identity work, leading to social legitimacy)*
• Putting parents in their shoes to gain parental support • Experiential gifts to help parents escape from courtesy stigma and develop mutual respect and understanding • Leisure gifts to help parents focus on their own personal fulfillment and happiness	Empathy-Driving	
• Rebuffing the sheng-nu negative stereotypes to be a good representative of the family • Conspicuous consumption to redefine single identity as a successful lifestyle • Fashion and beauty consumption to look glamorous	Myth Busting	Social Facing Consumption & Display *(Social identity work, leading to social legitimacy)*
• Using digital evidence of sociality to advocate an alternative moral order • Sending pictures to parents and/or posting on social media to ease their worries and help them cope with courtesy stigma and gain allies in their guanxi networks	Re-Orienting Normalization	

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