

# Digital Storytelling as a Solution to Destigmatize Products: Case of Women Lingerie from India

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## **Abstract**

*Purpose - The objective of the study is to develop a framework explaining digital storytelling as a solution to communicating about stigmatized products. In this study, women's lingerie was taken as the stigmatized product category.*

*Method - The study was conducted in three phases; the first phase included an in depth study of websites and online communication of lingerie brands, the second phase comprised of netnography where the women consumers were studied and the third phase included in depth interviews of women consumers along with projective techniques.*

*Findings - The major contribution of this research is the creation of a comprehensive framework based on stigmatization and storytelling. This study demonstrates the process of storytelling and how every part of the story can be managed with the stigma associated with the product. Additionally, the study also provides the features that each stage of the story should imbibe and manage different elements of the stigma.*

*Limitations - The study is qualitative in nature. Hence, for generalizability, another quantitative research can be conducted. Further, the present study was undertaken in the collectivistic culture in the Indian context. Thus, different research can be conducted to understand the varied culture and the values of the consumers.*

*Implications/recommendations - The study would help the brand communicate effectively to the consumers and destigmatize the products. Further, it will also help understand the way in which every feature of the story needs to be managed and issues be addressed effectively by the brand. The study has also proposed a theoretical framework by using the concepts of stigma and storytelling. Hence, the study has helped add to new knowledge in allied areas.*

*Originality/contribution - Storytelling is a partly historical form of learning which facilitates communication. This storytelling is used by brands and*

*organizations to connect with the consumers primarily by digital platforms. Thus, digital narratives and stories are developed which are relevant for the consumers. There is a dearth of literature on digital storytelling primarily in the context of stigmatized products such as lingerie for women. There are a few papers on digital storytelling and stigmatized products. But, there is no research that integrates these two areas and provides a comprehensive solution for this important dimension.*

**Keywords:** digital storytelling, stigmatized products, women lingerie, India, women consumer.

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## Introduction

Storytelling has been used in human history as a powerful tool of communication (Ochs *et al.*, 1992). This communication tool is used as the art of reaching out to the consumers through stories and narratives woven around the products. These narratives enable a brand to bring their products to life through well-constructed and appealing stories. They allow the consumers to connect with the brand emotionally and build a strong sense of brand identity (Woodside, 2010). Thus, a well-constructed story breaks through the clutter and engages the consumers on a personal level. In this way, stories are more impactful because the human brains are designed to remember them (Kaare, 2012). Therefore, marketers use different stories to engage with the consumers primarily through the digital platforms.

The reach of the digital platforms is increasing at an exponential rate. Around 51% of the world population has access to internet and Asian countries have the highest percentage of internet users which is 49% (“Asia Internet Usage Stats Facebook and 2018 Population Statistics”, 2018). Among the Asian countries, developing countries such as China and India have the highest number of regular internet users (“Asia Internet Usage Stats Facebook and 2018 Population Statistics”, 2018). This heavy usage of internet signifies high consumption of digital content. The content in these countries is preferred in terms of the stories. Thus, digital storytelling is useful for the marketers to engage with the consumers.

In these digital stories, marketers create narratives around the brand or the product. These narratives help the consumers in understanding the non-functional features of the brand (Woodside, Sood & Miller, 2008). Consumers are able to connect with the brands emotionally, which leads to a long and consistent relationship (Woodside, 2010). Hence, this form of storytelling is effective primarily for those products that are stigmatized. There are many products where the consumers and marketers are unable to communicate regarding the product because they are submerged with stigma. The stigma and social taboo can easily be seen with the products such as women lingerie. The women lingerie as a product category goes through high stigmatization because there is social taboo with the women body (Chrisler, 2011). In today's scenario as well, consumers are uncomfortable talking regarding women's body or their issues in public (DeSouza, Paludi & Paludi, 2010). This uncomfortable scenario is also observed in the case of women lingerie as well.

Consumers are not open and liberal due to which marketers are unable to communicate effectively about the products. However, with the advent of internet and high usage of digital platforms marketers can reach out to the consumers very easily. For instance, there are many national and international brands of women lingerie in India which are trying to connect with the consumers with the help of the digital platforms. These digital connections are helping the lingerie brands to grow at the exponential rate. By 2020, it is estimated that women lingerie market will value 280 billion Indian Rupee (Statista, 2018). This leap in the market is only possible because digital platforms are providing comfortable place to the consumers and marketers. Thus, to connect better, the brands are narrating digital stories to the consumers (Pera & Vigilia, 2016). Thus, the primary focus of the study is to explore the digital storytelling of the stigmatized products and how these stories help in destigmatizing products such as women lingerie. In order to explore the concepts of digital storytelling and stigmatized products, detailed literature review was carried out which is mentioned in the following section.

## **Literature Review**

As discussed in the introduction, the main objective of the study is to understand how digital storytelling can be a solution for destigmatizing products such as women lingerie. To understand the underpinning of the various concepts, the literature of digital storytelling, stigma and stigmatization of products and women lingerie product category was carried out meticulously. Further, different theoretical frameworks were also explored to legitimize the study.

### **Digital Storytelling and the Products**

Storytelling is used as a way of developing community that comprises of brand loyalists. This community has long term relationship among the members and the brand (Lugmayr *et al.*, 2016). These relationships build the story of a product which identifies with the brand proposition. Further, the prepositions form the base of the future content as well. Subsequently, digital storytelling is a particular form of

producing digital personal narratives for a specifically defined target audience for distribution over the digital platforms (Meadows, 2003). This concept originated from the western countries. Now this dimension is being accepted globally (Lundby, 2009). Digital storytelling is being used to drive community engagement over the digital platforms (Burgess and Klæbe, 2009). This engagement helps the consumer develop their identities which they can communicate with their social circles through digital storytelling (Lambert, 2012).

Extending further, digital storytelling is considered to be an institutionalized practice. However, in the past there are changes in the content of the digital stories (Lambert, 2012). This content helps the consumers to express their strong beliefs by illustrating the transformative digital stories and relevant narratives (Hull, 2003). These digital storytelling and narratives are premised on the lives of the consumers. Their relatable stories are connected with the strong community (Lambert 2009). The strong community is primarily seen in the emerging markets such as India. Thus, digital storytelling helps the consumers of this country in comprehending their lives and relatable stories. Consumers connect these stories while they search the products through the online platforms. Unfortunately, there are no papers that are being developed on these consumers and their orientation towards the digital storytelling. The digital storytelling also helps these consumers in expressing their views and thoughts about the stigmatized products very easily. This sharing of stories through the digital platform was visible very clearly in women lingerie category as the social stigma in this category is very high in the country. Thus, the subsequent section, we will explain the stigma and stigmatization of products.

### **Stigma and Stigmatization of Products**

Historically, stigma was known as a phenomenon that degrades, differentiates and discredits the life of individuals and groups (Goffman, 1963). This concept of stigma was developed from the fields of psychology and sociology. In these fields, scholars have focused on the concept of stigma, stigmatization of groups and individuals (Jones, 1984). This research was further established to understand the attitudes towards stigmatized groups and individuals and its impact on these groups (LeBel, 2008). These studies have found that stigmatized individuals are considered to be the inferior group in the society (Petty, Fleming & White, 1999).

This orientation and meaning of stigma is closely associated with the products as well. We could identify only two papers related to product stigmatization. These papers were related to consumers who find it difficult to buy stigmatized products. The other paper focused on the marketers who find the stigmatization as a challenging scenario for selling the products. In the last decade the research on stigmatization has extended to consumer products (Bailey and Waroonska, 2014). These products are considered stigmatized where significant consumer segments associate negative emotions to the users primarily for the purchase of the product. Additionally, the stigma is considered more profound when the purchase or use of the product takes place in the public domain (Bailey and Waroonska, 2014). Further, the consumers who

buy or use the stigmatized products need to go through coping mechanism because the stigma is associated to the comprehensive process of consumption. More specifically, the stigmatization of the products results in the challenges for the marketers to sell and communicate about the product seamlessly. These difficulties are primarily faced by marketers who sell women lingerie. Especially, in countries such as India where the mindset of the consumer is conventional, it is difficult to communicate about lingerie. However, due to increase in the usage of digital platforms consumers are easily able to connect with the marketers. These marketers are also able to sell the products easily via digital platforms. This is because consumers do not have to connect with the marketers in person and discuss about the product in the physical public space. Hence, the following section will explain the scenario regarding women consumers and stigma related to women's lingerie.

### **Indian Consumer's Perspective for Lingerie**

We could only identify one paper that aimed at lingerie brand experience and in terms of Indian consumer (Singh, 2014). However, this paper has not discussed about managing the stigma related to lingerie primarily in the case of Indian women. Therefore, this section is mainly developed from the company reports and articles which focuses on Indian women consumer. The Indian consumer has a conservative mindset regarding lingerie. These consumers consider lingerie discussion in the public set up as a taboo. Due to this taboo, it is difficult for the brands to provide detailed information with comprehensive content about lingerie in the advertisement. This is because the consumers have less knowledge about these products. Further, lack of knowledge and conservative environment has led to minimal understanding about the lingerie product category even among the women consumers in the country. These women consumers are unaware of different kinds of lingerie, especially in the context of their body types. These women have a habit to hide the product and treat them as 'undergarment' which should not be discussed by anyone in their social circles.

This conservative scenario changed after the online platforms marketed the lingerie products. These online platforms helped the women to make easier choices as they made the selection of a stigmatized product without having a discussion with any person. However, the online platforms also provided the discussion forums for these women which were accepted by their social circles and peers. This acceptance was seen as the online platforms provided privacy to these individuals. This privacy was supplemented by the lingerie portals as they provided unlimited shelf space, styles and sizes for these consumers.

All these changes due to internet and digital media made it easier for the marketers to adopt ways to destigmatize the products. One of the ways that the paper proposes is digital storytelling. Therefore, to give this paper strong theoretical foundation, two set of theories were used which are explained in the subsequent section. These theories help in understanding the stigma and storytelling in the integrated format as the objective of the present investigation is about understanding

the role of digital storytelling in destigmatizing the women consumers for the lingerie products.

## **Theoretical Framework**

As discussed in previous sections of this research, providing a solution to stigmatized products with the help of digital storytelling is important for women consumers. To achieve this objective two frameworks were used: stigma and stigmatization (Link & Phelan, 2001) and storytelling (Kalid & Mahmood, 2016). The theoretical framework used to explain the stigma, describes the steps involved in the process of stigma. Different steps in this process are labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss and discrimination (Link & Phelan, 2001). Labeling can be described as naming any entity with undesired characteristics. Further, the naming leads to stereotypical formation of the particular entity. The stereotypes over simplify the process of judgment. This generalization by easy judgments separates the stigmatized individual or group from the main stream. The separation makes the stigmatized entity feel different and inferior from others. The feeling of being inferior, changes the behavior of both the stigmatized and non-stigmatized entity. The stigmatized group feels low in self-esteem and non-stigmatized group feels superior to the others. In this way the stigmatized entity face loss in their status and feels discriminated. This differentiation between these groups leads to stigma. Hence, the study proposes stories to be a way of destigmatizing the entities.

In order to do so, the research used the phenomenon of how a story is developed. The building blocks of the story are divided into three phases: start, middle and end. In the 'start' phase of the story, describes the characters and problems faced by them. Further, in the 'middle' phase, the characters try to find out different solutions to the issues that are faced by the person. And at the 'end' of the story, the characters solve the problem and leave the audience with a learning. In this way, every story is developed and narrated.

These stories are used to explain various concepts. Consumers connect with the characters of these stories and try to learn from the solution. Taking this phenomenon forward, brands have indulged in storytelling. This helps the brand connect with their consumers effectively. Hence, storytelling is an effective solution to destigmatize the products in this research. This solution was researched in the present investigation because there are no papers that discusses about this important area and provides solution for the major issue that primarily is related with the women consumers.

Storytelling and stigmatization literature is diverse and has been studied independently under different contexts. Stigma related to people and groups has been studies in depth in the disciplines of sociology (Goffman, 1963, Jones, 1984, Petty, Fleming & White, 1999). Further, the concept of stigma has been explored in the context of market products by marketing scholars (Bailey and Waroonska, 2014; Boland and Perelli, 2015). Subsequently, storytelling has been researched extensively with in the preview of brands (Kalid & Mehmood; 2016; Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010).

However, to understand the phenomenon of storytelling as a preventive measure for stigmatization of products have not been studied in the earlier literature. Thus, this paper aims to address this identified gap and study how storytelling is a solution to destigmatize the product category.

## **Research Methodology**

A qualitative approach was used as the objective of study was exploratory in nature (Malhotra and Dash, 2010). This exploration helped us gain understanding about the role of storytelling as an effective method for destigmatizing products such as women lingerie. The research was conducted in three phases; first phase involved an inductive content analysis comprising of the study of websites and online communication of premium lingerie brands for comprehensive understanding of this domain. This phase was undertaken because there was minimal literature on content of marketing communication regarding premium lingerie. In the second phase, netnography was carried out where the online consumers' (women) responses were studied with the focus of comprehending the role of storytelling to destigmatize the product. Finally, in the third phase insights gathered from the first and second studies were used for in-depth interviews. These interviews were embedded with the projective techniques. These techniques were used to understand the sub conscious mind of the consumer.

### **Phase One: Content Analysis of Websites**

The content of leading lingerie websites was studied with the phenomenon of digital storytelling. This digital storytelling is specific to women and portrays direct stories about their products and stigma that influences their mindset. This approach of online storytelling was observed in premium lingerie brands such as Zivame, Clovia and Pretty Secrets. Further, this approach of these brands was studied by using inductive content analysis. This analysis provided us an understanding about the various categories and themes that the brands have used for the storytelling. The units of analysis were visual, text, themes, characters, colors, style of presentation, topics related to storytelling, narratives, dialogues and story boards (Malhotra and Dash, 2010).

### **Phase Two: Netnography**

After understanding the content of different premium websites, netnography was carried out to understand how consumer responded to the online storytelling content that was undertaken by the premium lingerie brands (Kozinets, 2002). Active netnography was carried out for a month, from three different premium lingerie websites. These websites were selected on the basis of their online traffic and activeness on other social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and so on. All the activities that the three brands carried out on these online platforms were documented for a month. We used this approach as we posted many questions

on these websites based on the objective of the study. This gave us unique consumer insights regarding the storytelling process used by the brands.

### **Phase three: In- Depth Interviews with Projective Techniques**

In-depth interviews are a direct and unstructured way to retrieve information and allow the researcher to gain deeper insights (Malhotra and Dash, 2010). Further there is a possibility of social pressure that may lead a respondent to conform to the group (Wilson, 1996). This method allowed us to explore the connections between stories told by the brands and stigma related to the product category. Interviews helped us gain in-depth insights from these respondents who might have not provided their perspective in a group (Qu and Dumay, 2011). This is because lingerie is considered to be a private and intimate product. We made respondents comfortable to talk about lingerie in the subsequent discussion.

A total of 30 in-depth interviews were conducted in the cities of New Delhi and Mumbai. These interviews were conducted with various women from different age groups and professional backgrounds. These differences were considered for the study because the cities are diverse and have heterogeneous groups. The in-depth interviews were supplemented by the projective techniques. These techniques helped us in making the respondent comfortable to discuss about the lingerie and their shopping experience. They also facilitated in understanding the storytelling that was used by the brands and its role in making them feel comfortable about the product. Further, when respondents were unable to express their views through direct questions, this technique helped us retrieve their responses. Projective techniques are considered a nonintrusive approach to encourage open disclosure with less hesitancy, verbally less demanding and suitable to overcome emotional, language and cultural barriers (Boddy 2004; Dykens *et al.* 2007; Hutcheon 2010; Porr *et al.* 2011) which is very important for the product such as lingerie. Projective techniques are ideal for exploring new research areas or issues of a sensitive or complex nature (Levin-Rozalis 2006; Ramsey *et al.* 2004) such as lingerie and social stigma associated with the product.

In this research, we used the completion category which required respondents to complete sentences by giving one-word answers to sentences pertaining to the stigma related to the product lingerie along with storytelling carried out by the premium lingerie brands.

### **Sampling**

The in-depth interviews along with projective technique were conducted in the metropolitan cities of New Delhi and Mumbai. These cities were chosen because Mumbai and New Delhi account for more than 80% of premium apparel consumption in India. This signifies that this consumption is also relevant to the lingerie products. This is further substantiated by the higher earning capacity of the individual residing in these two cities (McKinsey, 2012). This high earning of the individual is also seen in the buying patterns of premium products in these cities. This high earning capacity

and buying patterns were specifically observed among the young women primarily for lingerie. These women have high awareness about the premium lingerie brands and would like to purchase them.

This awareness was derived by extensive use of social media platforms (Liu, Burns and Hou,2013). The extensive use of social media was observed among various types of women who had different occupations, including students, working professionals and homemakers. Therefore, we included these individuals in this study to derive in-depth insights about the product. Their demographic details are illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Demographic Details of Respondents

<b>Age Group</b>	<b>No.of Respondents</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>
18- 25	12	Student	15
26-30	10	Working Professionals	10
31-35	8	Homemaker	5

All respondents belonged to Social Economic Class (SEC) A. The Indian Marketing Research society defines SECs on the basis of education and possession of goods. The population of SEC A1, A2 was selected as these individuals are key buyers of premium brands (BARC, 2015). They buy these products as they would like to spend and indulge themselves in these purchases. In this study, we selected those respondents who were in SEC A and who have purchased premium lingerie online in the last one year. These criteria helped us study the key objectives of the research, which was essentially about the role of storytelling to destigmatize premium lingerie product categories.

### **Protocol**

The protocol was developed based on the codes that emerged from the analysis of the online content, websites, netnography and literature review. The discussion was divided into three categories. These categories essentially focused on storytelling and its role in destigmatizing the product category of lingerie. Additionally, in different categories, there were also associated attributes that were studied along with this key dimension. The first category comprised of general discussions about premium lingerie, brands and perception regarding lingerie. The questions were associated with the stigma that surrounds the product category, how much women feel comfortable talking and discussing about the same. These questions were also related to the key influencers that affect the respondents while purchasing the products.

The second category emphasized on the communication from the brand side to tackle with the product stigma. This category was related to the promotions, campaigns, advertisements of lingerie brands, celebrity endorsements, visuals, text, narratives, dialogues that were presented online to the customers. The third category focused on the type of stories told by the brands. In this category, we studied how storytelling affected the feeling of the consumers regarding the product. The key attributes were online communication by brands, role of feedback, reviews and word of mouth (WOM) in the context of product storytelling. Finally, the consumer expectation about storytelling and stigma related to premium lingerie was also discussed.

## **Analysis**

The data collected through netnography and in-depth interviews were documented after receiving due permission from the respondents. Audio recordings of the interviews were used to develop verbatim transcripts. Finally, the notes and transcripts were analyzed to achieve the objective of the study. The triangulation analysis facilitated cross verification of the data. Triangulation facilitates the study as it strengthens the research design and provides clear prospective about the respondent (Denzin 1978; Patton 1990; De Vos 1998). Additionally, multiple methods were used to collect the data from the same sample so that comprehensive understanding of the respondents could be achieved (Whitty, Thiele and Scuffham 2012). The data derived from one method was supplemented and verified by the data retrieved from the second method (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall 1994). In this study the three methods that were triangulated: content analysis of the websites, netnography and in-depth interviews. Here, the base of the study was in-depth interviews and it was supplemented by the other two methods.

More importantly the data was analyzed by thematic content analysis. This analysis allows the researcher to analyze large amounts of textual information and by systematically identifying properties, such as the maximum used keywords by locating the important structures of its communication content (Krippendorff, 2004). The thematic analysis helped us in categorizing the customer response based on the role of storytelling to destigmatize lingerie product category from all the three methods (Krippendorff, 2004).

This analysis was undertaken after integrating the transcripts and the field notes (Hirschman,1992; Rubin and Rubin, 1995). We developed different categories and themes based on the common and exclusive elements (Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Patton, 2002; Spiggle, 1994; Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1990). The analysis of the data was done with the help of three sequential and broad phases: initial design, in course extension and full frame development (Pettigrew, 1997). Initial design is the way of coordinating the inductive and deductive logic (Singh, 2015). Further, in course extension involves selecting, integrating and operationalizing the respondent's observation (Creswell, 2010). With the help of this integration, a full framework is developed. Data was transcribed and analyzed via Butler- Kisber's (2010) two stage

thematic inquiry analytical process. The two stages of this process were open and axial coding. Subsequent to data analysis, themes and categories were derived. Hence, the following section will explain the results of the study.

**Table 2:** Data analysis: Codes, Categories and Themes emerging from the analysis

<b>Si. No.</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Sub Categories</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Codes</b>
1	Labeling and Stereotyping	First Phase of Story: Begin	-Societal Conservatism  -Stereotypical Thinking-High  -Dependency on Reference Group	-social pressure, negative emotions  -shame, weird, anxiety  -togetherness, discussion
2	Separation	Second Phase of Story: Middle	-Display of Confidence and Boldness with Beauty  -Self Driven Solution	-integrity, openness, positive attitude  -problem solving attitude, different thinking
3	Status Loss and Discrimination	Third Phase of Story: End	-Experiential and Non Transactional  -Introspection Leading to Happiness	-incidents, happy, achievement  -inspiration, bold, out of the box thinking

## **Result**

After the data analysis, we developed the framework (refer Figure 1) that was based on the insights and perspective of the maximum respondents. We identified that the key dimension that differentiates lingerie from the other apparels was social stigma. This is because the brands and consumers did not discuss openly about this product category. This apprehension regarding restricted the exchange of information from these stakeholders. Therefore, to develop the engagement between these stakeholders, premium lingerie brands used the storytelling approach. This storytelling was further embedded with the consumers' emotions. These emotions were projected very easily by the different characters in the various stories developed by the brands. This storytelling enabled the brand to discuss about the associated stigma in a very subtle approach. These stories were made subtle as the brands wanted to make women more comfortable about the content so that they can discuss it further. This comfort level was enhanced further by using fairytale stories. Interestingly, the content did not discuss anything about the product or the brands as the focus was to manage the stigma and make women consumer comfortable. More specifically, these stories had three categories: begin, middle and end. The begin category of the story discussed about the hardships and the problems faced by the protagonist and develop the foundation of the content. Further, the lingerie brands associated these problems with the needs of the consumers. These stories that were developed from the consumer needs lead to the labeling and stereotyping part of the stigmatization (Link & Phelan, 2001). The second category of the story is the 'middle' segment where the protagonist tries to find out different resources that could lead to the solution. These resources facilitate the consumers in taking decisions and solving the problems. These processes are encapsulated thoroughly by the brands as they provide different type of lingerie products with specific information for the divergent needs of the consumer. Link and Phelan (2001) suggested that labeling led to the separation of the stigmatized entity from the society. The last category of the story is the end. This 'end' category of the story provides nostalgic feeling to the consumers.

These associations have inspired the consumer to become liberal while discussing about de- stigmatization. In addition, this process does not make them feel discriminated. The 'end part' of the story restores the status of the consume (Link and Phelan, 2001). For example, the protagonist gets converted into spokesperson and inspires others with her story. These consumers' stories inspire other prospective consumers. More specifically, it is very important to understand the context before making the stories as they are directly associated with all the stages of stigma regarding a product. Further, the in-depth attributes of the framework will be explained by the various themes illustrated in the subsequent section.

### **Phases of Storytelling**

Every story is divided into three phases: begin, middle and end. A majority of the respondents stated that these phases were also used by the premium lingerie brands to develop their stories. In the following section, the paper has analyzed

different themes that emerged from these phases of the stories that was developed and used by the brands.

## **Begin**

'Begin' is the first phase of the story. In this part of the story, the needs and the problems faced by the protagonist is introduced. Many respondents mentioned that this feature of the stories is used by the premium lingerie brands in their storytelling. A majority of the respondents said that stigma associated with the products can be removed by fairy tale stories. This also helps as women can control their emotions related to their stigma. Further, the situation of women needs to be illustrated upfront in the 'begin' phase of the stories. There were sub themes that emerged from this stage of storytelling. These sub themes are explained clearly in the sub sections.

### *Societal Conservatism*

Our study found that the stigma associated to this apparel does not allow the individual to discuss about this category openly in the public. This is because these apparel are made for the private parts of the body. This privacy deflects discussions about the lingerie. We also found that consumers do discuss in seclusion because of the societal norms. To manage this stigma, premium lingerie brands have narrated fairy tales of Cinderella, Red Riding Hood and so on. In the begin phase of these stories, they have portrayed the societal norms and conditions. We identified through netnography that the lingerie brands have clearly used Cinderella as they have narrated, "Cinderella was bound by the rules of her step mother and the fear of rejection." This Cinderella story has close association with the women consumers as these stories narrate the effect of the rules and restrictions imposed by the society. Additionally, the narrow thinking of the society has led to close mindedness of the women. This close mindedness is specifically observed by the lingerie brands. These insights were substantiated by one of the respondents from Mumbai said, "I don't feel comfortable when my friends start discussing about lingerie and all." To summarize, societal norms and close thinking makes it difficult for the consumers to discuss about the lingerie which label it as undesired.

### *Stereotypical Thinking*

This study identified that stereotypes related to women's body parts and women's characteristics increase the issues for the premium lingerie. These stereotypes restrict the brands and the consumers from openly discussing about the products. Many respondents said that these stereotypes restrain them from discussing about their body parts in the open forums. After understanding these consumers' perspective through interviews, we identified through netnography that brands are providing better environment to the women consumers where they can openly discuss about their private body parts in public. This was illustrated by one of the lingerie brands where it was clearly stated in the video, "It is just a body part, like any other part of the body. So stop making fuss about it. It is just breast." Further, we found in our study that there are other stereotypes in the society which portray

women as a dependent individual. They are always understood as individuals who always try to seek help from their male counter parts for every issue. This situation was substantiated by one of the respondents who mentioned "Most of us have grown up listening to bedtime stories about princesses who got their perfect ending only when they met Prince Charming." Therefore, it showed that these types of stereotypes do not allow women and premium lingerie brands to open the discussion.

### *High Dependency on Reference Group*

Several respondents have revealed that reference groups have a high influence on their purchases, specifically premium lingerie brands. This reference group includes friends and family. This finding was substantiated by a respondent who said, "My mother would buy me sports bras when I was a teenager." Further, we identified through our study that reference groups have various degrees of influence on the customers. This influence was also seen in the associative reference group. This group is specifically related with the individuals who can easily influence the purchase. We found that most respondents mention this associative reference group as their friends. This was because they could openly discuss about lingerie with them. This finding is clearly demonstrated by one of the respondents who said, "Discussing with friends at college increased my knowledge about lingerie brands and influenced what I bought which had till then been limited to what my mother bought for me" Further, we also found that the consumers became more conscious about lingerie after getting married. As one 28-year-old Female from Delhi puts it, "After I got married I became more conscious of what lingerie I wore, and made it a point to purchase good expensive ones." To summarize, consumers have a high influence of the reference group on their lingerie purchase and they are always dependent on these individuals while they make the purchase.

Therefore, the above stated themes make it clear that the 'begin' part of the story addresses the labeling and stereotyping related to stigma about the product. During the start of the story, the brands address the issue by stating the problems caused due to stigma. Further, the involvement of the peer groups in the discussion helps in making the product category more desirable. Thus, the inclusion of more people helps in shattering the negative label and stereotype about the product.

### **Middle**

'Middle' is the second phase of the story. In this part of the story, the solution of the problem is explained. We found that this feature is also reflected in the storytelling carried out by the premium lingerie brands through netnography and content analysis of the websites. We also found through these methods that brands are trying to unsterotype the portrayal of women which leads to non-separation of their segment from the main stream. These portrayals also help break the stereotypes of the women consumers. We found that these stereotypes were broken by presenting women as a confident, bold and independent individual. We also observed that brands are trying to offer the solutions to the consumers through these lingerie

products. Additionally, the sub themes of this category are explained in the subsequent sections.

### *Display of Confidence and Boldness with Beauty*

We found in the study that premium lingerie brands portrayed the protagonist in their stories as strong and confident women. This insight was substantiated by the netnography that states, "She's firm, assertive and completely confident in her own skin." These brand approaches were also supported by the consumers when the interviews were undertaken. This happens because they also stated that the premium lingerie brands are those products that are created and developed for self-consumption. Many respondents also mentioned that this type of product provides them self-accomplishment and confidence. This was demonstrated by a respondent who said, "I feel bold, confident and powerful." Thus, we can state that women feel better about the premium lingerie when the social stigma is removed and they could think about this product for individual consumption.

### *Self Driven Solution*

We determine that women consumers are always dependent on others to find solutions for their problems. This thinking creates stigma among the women consumers. We found through netnography and content analysis of the brand websites that the premium lingerie brands would like to eradicate this stigma. They have tried to remove this stigma by portraying a woman protagonist who is a self-driven individual. This individual finds solutions to her problems by herself. We found that brands have changed the original story of Rapunzel (fairy tale), where the character waited for someone to come and rescue her. However, the new story created by the premium lingerie brands, has taken the opposite perspective. This perspective was created by the brands while portraying the character who finds solution for herself while she was in a castle which was like a prison. These changed perspectives were illustrated by the brand on their website as it was stated in the story, "This little damsel refused to stay in distress and she spent her time figuring out how to rappel out of the window. Why wait for someone else to come and tug at your hair when you can sashay down in style and set yourself free?" Further, in other stories, the brands have tried to change the perception about the relationship that exist between a man and woman. We found through netnography and content analysis that the brands do not want to portray as a wife or a girlfriend. They have portrayed women as an independent and an ambitious individual. In addition, the brand also illustrated that women can decide their own track and pursue the journey based on her requirements. These findings were substantiated by the brand as they mentioned, "Tiana chose the #Unroutine path instead. She realized the marketing potential of a talking frog and set up an innovative café that would have customers flocking in for the treats and the toad! Now that's what MBA colleges should be teaching!"

To summarize, brands are trying to change the stereotyped portrayal of women and the stigma that exist in the society about these individuals. They are doing it by creating and developing new stories about the women who are strong, independent

and self-confident. Lastly, they also find solutions for their issues. Thus, the finding solutions themselves make them as independent individuals. This independence gives them a strong hold in the society.

## **End**

'End' is the third and the last phase of the story. In this part of the story, the protagonist reflects upon his/her journey. In this research, the same feature was found in the storytelling technique of the premium lingerie brands. During the analysis of websites and netnography, we also found that this technique helps in celebrating the emotions of the women consumer. Further, it was noticed that women go through different emotions to destigmatize this type of women's clothing. This type of celebration is done with the help of experiential events, inspirations from others and self-satisfying journeys. Additionally, in the following section, we have explained the sub themes of the last phase of storytelling.

### *Experiential and Non Transactional*

After analyzing the data, we found out that, lingerie brands have experiential relationship with their women consumers. These brands understand that lingerie for women is just not any other product for them. There are many emotions and experiences associated with lingerie as a product. As one of the women respondent said, "I still remember that how nervous was I when for the first time I went for lingerie shopping,".

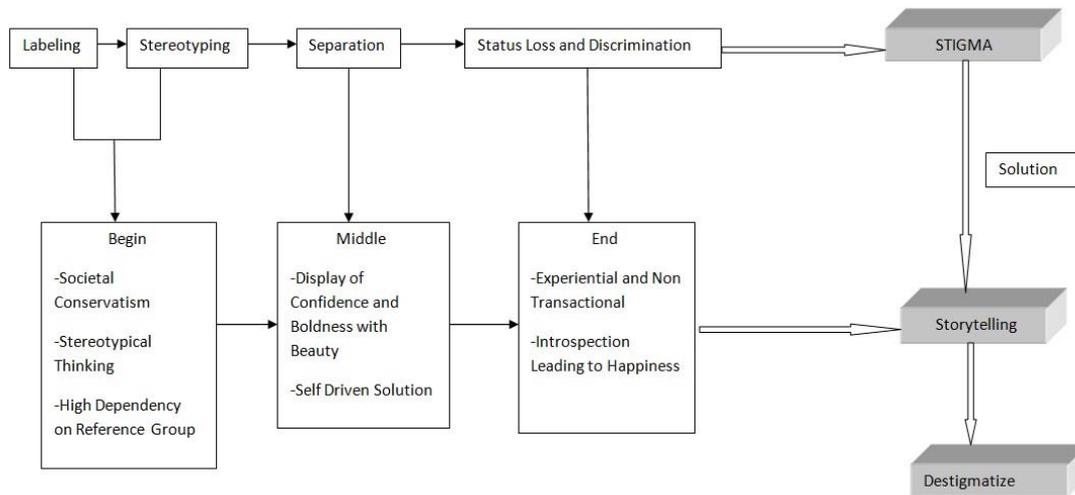
This shows how women have gone through different emotions at different point of their lives while purchasing lingerie for themselves. Due to these experiences, shopping for lingerie is never a transactional activity for the women. Hence, the marketers in their stories included the emotional journey of the women that they go through while facing the hard ships in their lives. In most of the stories told by the brands, the ending was always about the emotional achievements of the women. Further, the stories were never grounded to the materialistic achievements of the protagonist. They were more focused on the emotional journeys of the characters. Additionally, the stories talked about the decisions that the protagonist took and the choices that they make, differentiates them from others. As a woman respondent said after reading one of the stories, "I really like that the stories are such a roller coaster rides for us. How different the life becomes if we take decisions that are not taken by everyone. We learn how to dare and do things differently." These types of experiences make it easier for the consumer to connect with the stories and the products. These connections make them more comfortable to talk about their feelings and products freely. Thus, to summarize the theme, it is evident that the lingerie product category is an experiential product for the women consumers. Further, the stories help them talk about these experiences openly with others, which help in destigmatizing the product.

### *Introspection Leading to Happiness*

The study found out that, the stories told by the marketers help the women to think and introspect regarding the choices they make in their lives. These stories which mostly have women protagonist help them to introspect and see what kinds of changes are needed in their lives to achieve their goals.

To show these achievements, the marketers changed the ending of the famous story 'Princess and the Frog'. In the story, instead of kissing the frog and changing it to the prince who eventually helped her overcome her problems, the princess kept the frog with her as a pet. She further opens her own boutique store and lives her life independently. In this story she faces a lot of emotional troubles as she had to go through different problems at each stage of the business. However, she overcomes it with her intelligence and zeal. These types of stories with their twisted and unconventional ending make the reader think about their own actions. The women consumer gets inspired and sheds inhibitions. They think more about their lives and its achievements, rather than what others will think. As one of the consumer said, "I bought a blood red bra and I wore it under white colored clothes as well. I do not think twice that what will others say as one can see my bra. But I feel more confident and feel like a queen." Such kind of confidence helps the women take their own decisions and inspire others to do the same. In this way, they shed away their inhibitions and feel free. At the end, to summarize one can say that these stories about strong women who take risks in their lives help them to achieve their goals. Thus, helping the consumer realize to not to think about social taboos and buy and what they need to.

## Discussion and Implication



**Figure 1:** Storytelling a solution for stigmatized products

The major contribution of this research is the creation of a comprehensive framework based on stigmatization and storytelling. As illustrated in Figure 1, this

study demonstrates the process of storytelling and how every part of the story can manage the element of the stigma associated with the product.

As mentioned in the earlier sections of the present research, there are limited studies in the marketing literature which focuses on the stigmatized products (Bailey and Waroonska, 2014; Boland and Perelli, 2015). The literature of stigmatized products majorly focuses on the effects of the stigmas on the consumers. Further, these studies also focus on the problems that marketers face due to the social taboos related to their products or service (Boland and Perelli, 2015).

However, the current study encapsulates these areas and provides a solution for the stigmatized products to destigmatize consumers. The solution is storytelling around the products so that the consumers can relate themselves to the solutions provided by the marketers. Additionally, the study also provides the features that each stage of the story should imbibe and be managed with different elements of the stigma. The study suggests that to integrate the labeling and stereotyping, the 'begin' section of the story should discuss about the conservative nature of the society, the stereotypical thinking of the members of the society and the dependency of the consumers on their reference groups. These elements of the story help understand the scenario in which the consumer and the product survives. Further, the 'separation' stage of stigma can be answered by the 'middle' element of the story. This stage of the story should tell the ways in which one can break out from the stigmatized mindset by displaying confidence and boldness and provide self-driven solutions. Finally, the 'end' part of the story inspires the audience to take certain fruitful action in their lives so that they do not feel discriminated. In this way, a good story can be a solution to the stigma that surrounds certain products.

Further, the previous studies on stigma state the reasons that consumers feel while purchasing the stigmatized products is a "shame". Subsequently, it was also found out in the earlier studies that this shame is majorly felt when the transaction happens in public (Bailey and Waroonska, 2014). However, the current study gives a solution to these issues mentioned by the past literature. The study majorly discusses about digital stories where the transactions are not in public. Thus, this environment provides the consumers and marketers a private and safe place to openly discuss about the products. The consumers feel independent and they are able to connect with other like-minded people as well. Additionally, digital platforms provide an opportunity to the marketing managers to communicate with the consumers and narrate relevant stories around their products. Managers will also be able to understand the important elements that they can use while narrating the stories. Subsequently, the practitioners can focus on different stages of the story and how each stage can solve different issues related to stigma. On the other hand, academicians can better understand elements of stories and stigmatized products.

## Scope of Future Research

The current study is based on a qualitative exploration of concepts. However, it can be supplemented with quantitative research where the variables of the proposed framework can measure the relationships among the variables. In continuance, future studies can be done on male consumers and see how stories and stigmas work in their contexts. Further, the study can be undertaken with other stigmatized products such as condoms, sanitary napkins and so on. As the study discusses storytelling as one of the solution to stigmatized products, future research can work on other solutions. These studies would help the brand communicate effectively with the consumers and destigmatize the products. Extensions of this line of investigation can also include the offline scenario of the stigmatized products. Further, research can be undertaken to understand how marketers can use storytelling in the offline setting. Other ways of extending this line of thought is by making the study more socially oriented. The present investigation is aimed at individualistic behavior patterns. Further studies can be carried out where group behavior can be comprehended. The present study was carried out in a specific cultural context. Thus, the effect of stigma can be investigated with different cultural contexts. In conclusion, the present study has explored the concepts of stigma and storytelling rigorously and proposes that future studies can strengthen this research area very effectively.

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