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### Mothers with Empty Arms: Marketing, Stigma, and Bereaved Mothers

Elizabeth A. Minton  
*University of Wyoming*, eminton@uwyo.edu

Carissa Anthony  
*Drexel University*, cma348@drexel.edu

Cindy Xin Wang  
*California Polytechnic State University*, cwang96@calpoly.edu

Alexa Fox  
*University of Akron*

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# **Mothers with Empty Arms: Marketing, Stigma, and Bereaved Mothers**

**Elizabeth A. Minton**

*University of Wyoming*

**Carissa M. Anthony**

*Drexel University*

**Cindy Xin Wang**

*California Polytechnic University*

**Alexa K. Fox**

*University of Akron*

## **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Roughly one in four pregnancies ends in the devastating loss of a baby (Greves, 2018). For every 1,000 live births in the United States, there are 5.7 deaths of infants aged one and younger (CDC, 2020). In this paper, we refer to “baby loss” as the loss of a baby either in the womb before birth or up to one year after birth. Experiencing baby loss evokes intense grief and loss that is often not talked in both public and private spaces (Avelin, Rådestad, Säflund, Wredling, & Erlandsson, 2013). This silenced attitude toward baby loss is in part due to a negative stigma associated with it (Pollock et al., 2020). Importantly, this grief results in reduced physical and mental well-being with far reaching implications on all areas of a person’s life (Lannen, Wolfe, Prigerson, Onelov, & Kreicbergs, 2008). While the grief from baby loss softens over time, the loss has long reaching effects for mothers that extends for the duration of one’s life (Arnold & Gemma, 2008).

Consumers that have experienced baby loss suffer an influx of marketing touchpoints amidst their loss journey, most of which intensify grief and lower brand attitudes. Marketing actions influence how emotionally handles the loss of their baby and influences their consumption choices. Baby loss is a stigmatized topic that is not to be talked about, which further influences the burdens one carries into their decision making in the marketplace. Relevant marketing solutions include creating an ease in the unsubscribing process, adjusting targeted advertising algorithms, enhancing return policies, creating inclusive ad portrayals and positioning, and adjusting the language in demographic questions when asking a consumer’s number of kids. Our paper examines these topics and more as they relate to the bereaved mother’s journey.

## **Conceptual Development**

Link and Phelan (2001) clarify the conceptualization of stigma and extend Goffman’s seminal

work (1963) to produce a theoretical framework that we incorporate to examine how stigma affects bereaved mothers. We adopt their multifaceted term *stigma* to refer to a situation where “elements of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination co-occur in a power situation” (p.367) thereby enabling stigma to manifest (Link & Phelan, 2001). Sandikci and Ger (2010) explain that when faced with stigma, some consumers will succumb to the stigma, resulting in negative emotional outcomes and poorer consumption habits, whereas other consumers respond more proactively and try to overcome the stigma.

In the case of baby loss, prior research suggests that people often succumb to the stigma (Watson, Simmonds, La Fontaine, & Fockler, 2019). In fact, companies, hospitals, and baby-related resource organizations even promote this stigma by encouraging mothers-to-be to wait until 12 weeks to share that they are pregnant when miscarriage rates drop dramatically (Ross, 2015). This illustrates that no one should know about miscarriages and they should not be talked about. As noted by Gentry et al.’s (1995), “This understanding [of consumers, grief, and loss] will not develop as long as marketers adhere to the societal norm of ignoring death and isolating those in grief” (p. 78). While each person’s grief is understood as unique (Gentry et al., 1995), we identify trends in the consumer journey post loss to identify marketing’s role, understand their experiences, and identify solutions to best support bereaved mothers.

### **Study Results & Discussion**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 mothers that had lost at least one baby, either in the womb or within one year after birth. Informants were recruited through baby loss resource networks and a snowball sampling procedure. The recency of loss ranged from 2021 to 1989, where roughly 63% experienced a loss within the last two years. A semi-structured interview guide was used throughout each interview, which ranged in length from 44 minutes to 106 minutes, with the average lasting 65 minutes. Data analysis proceeded with an iterative, hermeneutical process consisting of numerous rounds of iterations.

Results reveal bereaved mothers seek two main things after the loss of their baby – acknowledgment and awareness. Acknowledgment, meaning acknowledging their mother identity, that their baby made an impact on the world, and the topic of their children is something worthy of talking about. Bereaved mothers desire marketing touchpoints from companies that already have their information to acknowledge their baby through birthday emails and discounts and with follow-up resources post-loss. With regard to awareness, bereaved mothers desire the topic of baby loss to be de-stigmatized by marketers by providing public resources to support those who have lost children, incorporating bereaved parents into both parenthood and mother’s/father’s day advertising as well as reframing questions to be more sensitive when asking how many kids they have to allow them to include their deceased children. Additionally, bereaved mothers requested marketers to decrease reoccurring harm caused to them by providing effective opt-out/unsubscribe policies, altering the strict return policies for baby and maternity items, and adjusting algorithms that identify and target them as potential baby product consumers, despite baby loss keywords and search history. This suggests that marketers have a responsibility in breaking down barriers due to the stigma of baby loss (and really all child loss more broadly). Our research provides powerful quotes representing these themes with marketing efforts that are aimed at empowering bereaved mothers, and their families, worldwide.

**Keywords:** *Stigma, Baby loss, Acknowledgment, Loneliness, Stigmatized behavior*

*References are available upon request*

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

**Elizabeth A. Minton** is an Associate Professor of Marketing at the University of Wyoming (UW) who conducts research on religion's influence on consumer behavior. She has publications in the *Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Psychology & Marketing*, and *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, among others, as well as a coauthored book on religion and marketing. Before joining UW, she worked in the tourism industry in Alaska. She holds degrees from the University of Oregon (Ph.D.), Idaho State University (MBA), and the University of Alaska (BBA).

**Carissa M. Anthony** is a doctoral student in Marketing at Drexel University. Her research interests are in sustainable and prosocial consumption. She has publications in such outlets as the *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* and the *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, among other outlets. Prior to starting her doctoral studies, she worked in brand management for large corporations and received her MBA from Villanova University, MS in Finance from St. Joseph's University, and BS from Bloomsburg University.

**Cindy Xin Wang** is an Assistant Professor of Marketing in the Orfalea College of Business. She holds a Ph.D. in Marketing from the Lundquist College of Business at the University of Oregon. Her research broadly studies how consumer social interaction (i.e., customer engagement, consumer sense of power) influences the effectiveness of marketing communication and promotions. Her research has been featured in journals including the *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, and *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*.

**Alexa K. Fox** is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at the University of Akron. She holds a Ph.D. in business administration (marketing) from the University of Memphis. Her research interests are in the areas of digital marketing, user-generated content, online privacy, sharenting, and the physiological measurement of cognition and emotion. She has publications in such outlets as the *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, *Journal of Advertising*, and the *Journal of Consumer Affairs*.