

Pricing And Prejudice: How Promotional Discounts Affect Consumer Attitudes Toward Brands
Linked with Marginalized Identities

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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to appeal to a broader market, most companies now offer products symbolically associated with stigmatized social identities, often advertising these products with discounts. Identity-based promotion and price promotion are usually good strategies, as indicated by earlier research, but the present research indicates that this method can have unintended adverse impacts. Findings from eight studies with various stigmatized groups in India and Asia indicate that if products linked with stigmatized identities are reduced in price, the members of those groups can respond adversely. Specifically, stigmatized consumers perceive these price cuts as offensive to their social identity, and thus are less inclined to purchase from the firm, more inclined to do so from rivals, and harmed in their attitude towards the firm. Whether the brand is regarded as an ingroup or outgroup member, the choice of other value products, and the promotional strategy are some of the factors that fuel such negative feelings, which are not observed among non-stigmatized consumers. The social risks of price-based promotions in stigmatized settings are brought to the fore by this research, which adds to our knowledge of stigmatized customers' interpretation of marketing cues as well.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, numerous businesses have started selling products symbolizing stigmatized identities—e.g., Each Lives Matter-branded water bottles or LGBTQ+ T-Shirts to appeal to a more diverse clientele. These products are imbued with cultural and social significance associated with marginalized groups, who tend to be devalued in society because of belonging to certain groups. Typically, those products are marketed at discounted prices. For example, Google Play discounted films about India and Asia by up to 60%, Forever 21 offered rainbow-themed masks at 50% off and Look Human sold “Asian is Beautiful” mugs with 35% discounts.

Yet data from real life indicate that this tactic can have collateral damage. Walmart faced criticism when it sold a Black Barbie at a reduced price while keeping its White counterpart on regular price. The ensuing outrage, including charges of racial insensitivity, revealed a larger issue. A study of tweets responding to the type of incident discovered that Black customers, more than any others, responded with disrespect and anger, using words such as “racism” and “racist” repeatedly.

Over the past few decades, several Indian brands and multinational companies operating in India have begun selling products that represent marginalized or stigmatized identities—such as “Dalit Lives Matter” merchandise, rainbow-themed apparel during Pride Month, or T-shirts supporting tribal and minority causes—to appeal to a more socially aware and diverse consumer base. These products carry deep cultural and social significance for the communities they represent, many of whom continue to face systemic exclusion and prejudice.



Often, these products are offered at discounted prices. For example, platforms like Amazon and Flipkart have provided discounts on films and books related to caste issues and LGBTQ+ themes during events like Pride Month or Ambedkar Jayanti. Similarly, fashion brands have launched capsule collections celebrating Northeast Indian identities, only to mark them down later in clearance sales.

However, real-world data reveals that such strategies can backfire. A well-known retail chain in India drew criticism when it sold a darker-skinned doll at a lower price compared to a fair-skinned one. The move sparked outrage on social media, with users accusing the brand of colorism and casteist undertones. Sentiments expressed by affected consumers included anger, disappointment, and repeated use of terms like “discrimination,” “prejudice,” and “insensitivity.”

This study explores whether such responses are isolated events or part of a broader pattern. Across eight studies conducted with stigmatized communities in India and across Asia—such as Dalits, LGBTQ+ individuals, and ethnic minorities—we analyze consumer reactions to promotional discounts on products aligned with their identity. Our findings suggest that when companies apply discounts to products symbolizing marginalized identities, members of those communities often interpret it as a sign of disrespect rather than inclusion. This perception leads to adverse outcomes like reduced brand trust, lower purchase intent, and a stronger inclination to support competing brands perceived as more authentic or respectful.

Importantly, we identify three conditions that can moderate this negative effect: 1. When the company is seen as part of the consumer’s ingroup (e.g., minority-owned businesses or brands with a long-standing record of advocacy), 2. When promotions apply equally to both marginalized and non-marginalized identity-linked products, and 3. When non-monetary promotions (such as “Buy One, Get One Free”) are used instead of direct price cuts.

.This study offers several important contributions within the Indian and broader South Asian context. To begin with, we are among the first to demonstrate that price discounts—typically viewed as consumer-friendly strategies—can act as cues of social identity threat for marginalized communities. Consumers interpret such promotions as signals of devaluation of their group identity, leading to perceptions of disrespect and triggering adverse behavioral responses. Unlike prior research that primarily focuses on individual concerns around redeeming discounts or offers (e.g., fear of appearing cheap or desperate), our study highlights that the very presence of a promotion—especially on identity-linked products—can be problematic, even for those who are not directly redeeming it.

Second, our research advances understanding of perceived respect in Indian marketplaces, particularly from the lens of socially stigmatized groups such as Dalits, tribal communities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and Northeast Indians. While earlier work has investigated interpersonal disrespect like caste-based price discrimination or biased customer service, our study reveals how institutionalized marketing signals, such as price discounts on identity-related products, can communicate group-level disrespect and social exclusion, even if unintentionally.

From a managerial perspective, this study urges caution. Decision-makers from dominant caste, class, or regional backgrounds may overlook how their marketing actions are perceived by historically marginalized consumers. The lack of backlash from dominant or non-stigmatized groups might falsely assure brands that their strategies are universally acceptable. To prevent reputational harm, marketers should consider inclusive promotional strategies, such as bundling identity-symbolic products across communities or offering non-monetary incentives like exclusive access, recognition, or community engagement.

Lastly, this research opens important avenues for further exploration of how Indian consumers from marginalized groups interpret, negotiate, and respond to marketplace cues. It provides actionable insights for brands seeking to build authentic, respectful connections with diverse segments, and lays the groundwork for a broader conversation on social identity, respect, and consumer behavior in multicultural, stratified societies like India.

2. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

While price promotions are often associated with financial profit, increased customer satisfaction, and increased perceived value, they can also have unintended negative consequences, such as reduced opinions regarding the quality of the product and costs to society. Significantly, earlier research has proven that offers like coupons or special discounts may generate stigma-related concerns, which end up resulting in avoidance behaviors among consumers, particularly marginalized consumers, for fear of being viewed as dependent or poor. The new study draws on this literature by exploring whether price promotions offered by companies, in contrast to those adopted by customers, can be perceived as communicating disrespect for stigmatized social groups. Since their identity is contextually devalued, stigmatized individuals are particularly susceptible to marketplace cues that affirm or challenge their social identity. Members of stigmatized groups might perceive a discount on products related to their identity (e.g., racial minorities, LGBTQ+) as proof that their identity is not valued, and so they experience social disdain. Stigmatized consumers believe the company's action as evidence of more social devaluing, and this will lead to adverse reactions such as reduced brand favorability and lower buy intentions compared to non-stigmatized consumers who may not perceive any harm. This study suggests that respect between consumers and brands extends beyond personal treatment to involve group-level acknowledgment and recognizes discounting identity-related products as a new threat signal. Ultimately, we expect stigmatized customers to react negatively to these discounts (H1), driven by their perception that the company ignores their social group (H2).



3. OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

There are eight experiments in the study, all designed to test hypotheses released regarding how consumers will react to price promotions on identity-based products. The fundamental effect (H1) is determined in Study 1 and illustrates that offering a discount on a product that is stigmatized within an identity results in fewer positive judgments of the company. While Studies 3–5 establish the phenomenon and demonstrate that it is specific to stigmatized consumers, to products symbolically associated with stigmatized identities, and not due to a general aversion to discounts, Studies 2–4 investigate the underlying mechanism and affirm that perceived disrespect toward the stigmatized group mediates the effect (H2). To assist marketers in avoiding unintended backlash, Studies 6–8 determine empirically effective moderating variables, including the nature of the offer, the presence of other discounted products, and firm ingroup status.

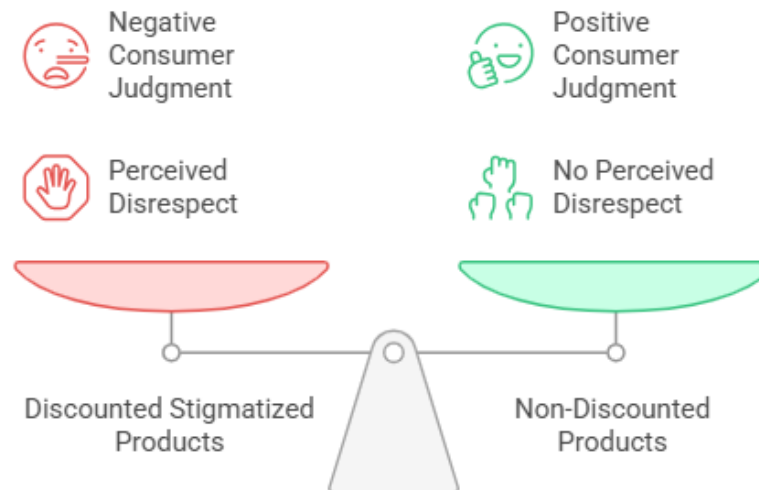


Figure 1: Discounts on stigmatized products can backfire.

Asian, and LGBT individuals were among the stigmatized groups for which participants were prescreened to be matched, and posttesting ensured that all identities were perceived as stigmatized. Some of the experiments were preregistered, and the stimulus statistical power and sample sizes were pretested. In Study 1, administered in the "Asian Lives Matter" campaign, Asian participants rated a company lower when it offered a discount for an "Asian Lives Matter" water bottle compared to no discount, consistent with H1. By applying the findings to LGBT customers and examining felt disrespect as a mediator in an incentive-compatible design, Study 2 builds on this and demonstrates the effect's broader cross-stigmatized identity applicability.

4. METHOD

In Study 2, the researchers focused on LGBTQ+ consumers in India, investigating whether perceived disrespect mediates the impact of discounting identity-congruent products. Participants ($n = 188$, after removing inattentive responses) were randomly assigned to a simulated shopping scenario where a fictional brand, NIVO, either offered or did not offer a 40% discount on a rainbow-themed water bottle symbolizing LGBTQ+ pride. Respondents then rated their perception of disrespect toward the LGBTQ+ community using a five-point Likert scale.

Interestingly, a significant number of respondents chose a Rs. 500 gift card from a competing brand, RINAI, over NIVO's higher-value Rs. 550 card, especially in the scenario where the rainbow bottle was discounted. This backlash effect—forgoing financial benefits to signal disapproval—was fully mediated by perceived disrespect, as confirmed by a mediation analysis. The discount was interpreted not as a reward, but as a signal of social devaluation of the LGBTQ+ identity, leading consumers to favor a rival brand that did not offer such potentially insensitive promotions.

Building on these findings, Study 3 examined whether this backlash was limited to identity-associated products or extended to discounts in general, using a broader Asian consumer base. A total of 400 participants were presented with a set of mugs in a 2x2 experimental design, where the sixth mug varied between an identity-neutral design (a palm tree) and an identity-linked design ("Proud to be North-Eastern"), with or without a discount.

The results confirmed that the negative response was specific to identity-linked discounts. Participants expressed feelings of disrespect and exclusion only when the identity-symbolic mug was discounted—not when the neutral design was. This suggests that stigmatized Indian consumers do not view discounts on symbolically charged items as ordinary price promotions, but as signals of social undervaluation.



Together, these findings underline that discounts on identity-congruent products can carry unintended symbolic meanings, particularly among socially marginalized communities. Brands operating in India and Asia must recognize that not all promotions are perceived equally—and that cultural sensitivity and identity respect are essential components of effective and ethical marketing.

Case 1: Promoting a Product with a Stigmatized Identity at a Discount Backfires

The 2021 “Asian Lives Matter” movement, which emerged in response to the rising stigmatization of Northeast Indians and other Asian-origin individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic, provided the backdrop for this study. The movement brought attention to issues of racial profiling, cultural exclusion, and identity-based prejudice, particularly in urban India. Against this context, the researchers sought to examine whether offering a price discount on a product associated with a marginalized identity group could influence consumer perceptions of the brand.

To explore this, an experimental study was conducted with 275 participants from India and other parts of Asia (excluding one participant who failed an attention check). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups. In both conditions, they were shown a collection of water bottles marketed by NIVO, a fictional outdoor gear company. One group saw a bottle labeled “Asian Lives Matter” offered at a 40% discount, while the other group saw the same identity-themed bottle at full price. Both groups also had access to neutral, non-identity-based bottles at regular pricing.

After reviewing the products, participants completed a brief survey evaluating their perception of the company. The results were striking: participants who saw the discounted identity-based bottle rated the company significantly lower (mean score: 4.37) than those who saw the same bottle at full price (mean score: 4.92). This statistically significant difference underscores how pricing strategies involving identity-linked products can negatively influence brand perception.

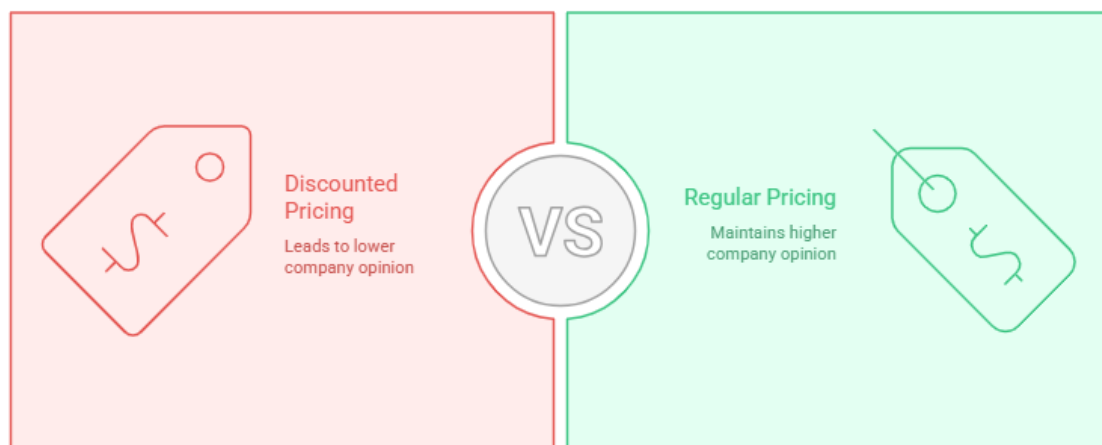


Figure 2: Companies prices products linked to minority groups to avoid negative perceptions

These findings support the hypothesis that members of marginalized communities such as the Northeast Indian and broader Asian diaspora may interpret discounted identity-symbolic products as signals of commodification, tokenism, or disrespect. When a company appears to undervalue a social identity by offering associated products at reduced prices, it risks alienating the very consumers it may intend to support.

The findings support the hypothesis that customers who come from marginalized groups are likely to respond negatively if they think that a company is underpricing identity-based commodities, especially if it seems like the identity is being commodified or underpriced.

Case 2: Perceived Disrespect Mediates the Effect

This research explored whether feelings of disrespect or contempt help explain the negative responses of marginalized consumers when companies offer discounts on products symbolically linked to their group identity. Building on prior studies, this work focused on LGBTQ+ individuals in India and other Asian countries, examining how identity-linked promotions affect consumer perceptions and behavior.

The study involved 188 self-identified LGBTQ+ participants, who were randomly divided into two groups. Both groups were presented with a rainbow-colored water bottle from a fictional outdoor brand named NIVO. One group saw the bottle offered at a significant discount, while the other saw it at regular price.

Participants completed a short survey rating how insulted or devalued they felt by the brand. They were then given a choice to enter a raffle for either a Rs. 4,400 (approx. \$55) NIVO gift card or a Rs. 4,000 (approx. \$50) gift card from RINAI, a competing brand. This setup allowed researchers to observe actual purchase intentions, rather than hypothetical preferences.



The results were revealing: even though the NIVO card held more monetary value, a larger proportion of participants in the discount group (13.75%) opted for the lower-value competitor card, compared to just 2.27% in the no-discount group. Further analysis revealed that this decision was driven by feelings of disrespect. Participants who saw the discounted identity-linked bottle reported significantly higher feelings of devaluation (mean score: 3.00) than those who saw the bottle at full price (mean score: 1.87).

These findings indicate that consumers from stigmatized communities—such as LGBTQ+ individuals in India—may reject financially superior offers when they sense their identity is being commodified or undervalued. Even subtle cues like offering a discount on a symbol-laden product can trigger a backlash, leading to brand rejection even at a personal cost.

In conclusion, the study not only reaffirms earlier findings in identity-linked marketing but also highlights the need for cultural sensitivity in promotional strategies. Respect, not just representation, is key to genuine engagement with marginalized groups.

Case 3: The Effect Is Specific to an Identity-Linked Product

The aim of this research was to assess whether negative consumer reactions to discounts on identity-linked products are uniquely tied to stigmatized social identities, or whether such responses reflect a general aversion to price reductions. To explore this, the study shifted focus to another marginalized group in this case, individuals from Northeast India, who often face racial and cultural prejudice in mainstream Indian society.

A 2×2 between-subjects experimental design was employed, with 400 participants identifying as Northeast Indian or from culturally similar Asian communities. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: price discount (discount vs. no discount) and product type (identity-linked vs. identity-neutral).

During a simulated online shopping experience with the fictional home goods brand NIVO, participants were shown a lineup of six mugs—five neutral designs and one target mug. In the identity-related condition, the featured mug bore the message “Proud to be Northeast Indian”. In the control (identity-neutral) condition, the target mug featured a palm tree design. In the discount conditions, the target mug was offered at 40% off, while in the no-discount condition, it was listed at full price.

This design allowed the researchers to isolate whether feelings of disrespect or devaluation were triggered only when a product symbolizing marginalized identity was discounted, as opposed to discounts in general. The study offered critical insights into how members of stigmatized communities in India perceive brand messaging and pricing strategies, particularly when tied to their social and cultural identity.

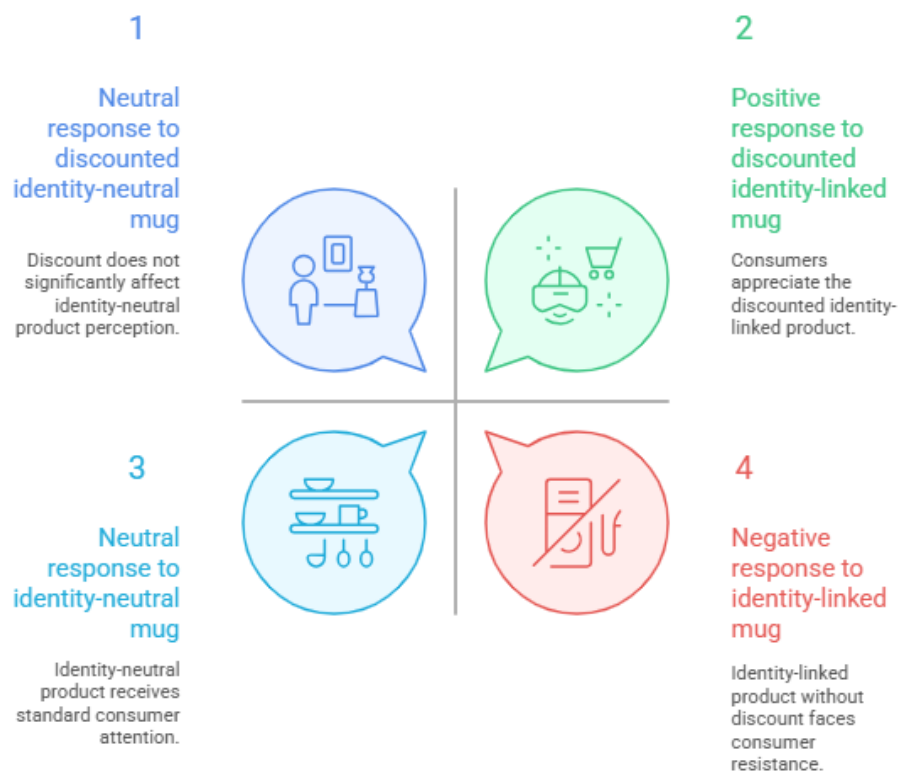


Figure 3: Consumer Response to Product Type and Price Discount

Next, participants were asked to rate their overall perception of the company and the extent to which they felt the Northeast Indian community was being disrespected. A 2×2 ANOVA revealed that offering a discount significantly reduced



participants' favorability toward the company when the product was identity-linked ($M_{\text{discount}} = 4.31$ vs. $M_{\text{no discount}} = 4.91$; $p < .001$). In contrast, no such effect was observed for identity-neutral products, indicating that the negative response was not driven by discounting per se but by its association with identity.

Similarly, perceived disrespect did not vary in the identity-neutral condition, but was significantly higher when the identity-linked product ("Proud to be Northeast Indian") was on discount ($M_{\text{discount}} = 3.10$ vs. $M_{\text{no discount}} = 2.46$; $p < .001$). Participants reported more negative attitudes and stronger feelings of contempt specifically when the discounted product was tied to a stigmatized identity—as compared to both identity-neutral conditions.

A moderated mediation analysis further confirmed that this effect was not merely about pricing, but rather about identity-based disrespect: only when the discounted product symbolized a marginalized group did perceived disrespect mediate the relationship between discounting and reduced corporate favorability.

These findings offer compelling evidence that discounting a product representing a stigmatized identity group—such as those from Northeast India—has a stronger and more harmful psychological and reputational effect than the act of discounting alone. Brands must recognize that symbolic products are not just commodities, and pricing strategies involving such products require sensitivity, respect, and cultural awareness.

Case 4: The Effect Is Specific to Consumers with the Stigmatized Identity

This research investigated whether members of non-stigmatized, majority groups also perceive discounts on identity-linked products as disrespectful, or whether such negative reactions are specific to members of stigmatized communities.

To explore this, the researchers conducted a survey with two distinct groups: 200 upper-caste, urban Indian consumers (representing a non-stigmatized majority) and 200 individuals from historically marginalized communities, such as Dalits and Scheduled Tribes (STs). Participants were randomly shown one of two product displays: one where a mug reading "Proud to be Dalit" was offered at a 40% discount, and another where the same mug was sold at full price. Both displays also featured five neutral mugs with no identity-based messaging.

Participants were then asked to rate their perception of the company and whether they believed the discount disrespected the Dalit community.

The results revealed a striking pattern: when the identity-themed mug was sold at full price, Dalit participants rated the business significantly higher (mean rating: 4.93) than when the same mug was discounted (mean: 4.26). Moreover, participants in the discount condition reported feeling more disrespected (mean = 3.17) compared to those in the no-discount group (mean = 2.42).

In contrast, upper-caste participants showed little change in their responses regardless of whether the mug was discounted or not, their perceptions of disrespect or the company remained stable. Further analysis confirmed that the decline in brand favorability among Dalit participants was entirely explained by their feelings of being disrespected. No such mediation effect was observed among upper-caste participants.

Overall, the study underscores a key insight: discounting identity-symbolic products negatively impacts consumers from stigmatized groups, who may view such pricing as a sign of social devaluation, rather than inclusion. In contrast, members of non-stigmatized groups do not interpret such offers through the same socio-cultural lens, highlighting the importance of identity sensitivity in pricing strategies within diverse societies like India.

Case 5: The Effect Is Specific to Stigmatized Identities

This research explored whether individuals react negatively only when products representing stigmatized aspects of their identity are discounted, or whether they show similar aversion to discounts on products tied to any part of their identity. The study focused on how Dalit Indians—a historically marginalized and stigmatized community—respond to price reductions on items symbolizing either their stigmatized identity (Dalit) or a non-stigmatized identity (Indian).

A total of 418 Dalit participants took part in the study and were randomly assigned to one of four experimental groups. Each group was shown a product display with different pricing scenarios:

1. No discounts on any products,
2. A 40% discount on a mug with "Jai Bhim" (a symbol of Dalit pride),
3. A discount on a mug featuring the Indian national flag, and
4. A discount on a neutral mug with a palm tree design.

Participants were then asked to rate their impression of Luxe, a fictional home goods brand, based on the display they saw.

The results were clear and statistically significant: participants rated the brand much lower (mean = 4.81) when the "Jai Bhim" mug was discounted, compared to the no-discount condition (mean = 5.34), the palm tree mug discount (mean = 5.37), or even the Indian flag mug discount (mean = 5.28). The fact that no negative reaction was observed in the other three scenarios suggests that the backlash was specific to the discounted product representing a stigmatized identity.



These findings underscore a key insight: consumers from historically marginalized groups, such as Dalits in India, are particularly sensitive to marketing actions that appear to devalue or commodify their social identity. They do not respond negatively to all identity-based products only those that are tied to their stigmatized group membership.

The research highlights the importance for brands in India to treat cultural and caste-linked symbols with respect. Price promotions, if not handled with cultural sensitivity, may unintentionally alienate the very communities brands aim to support, resulting in negative brand perceptions and loss of trust.

Case 6: The Effect Dissipates When the Company Is an Ingroup Member

This study explored whether negative reactions to discounts on stigmatized identity-linked products are influenced by whether the company is perceived as an ingroup or outgroup entity by the consumer. Building on prior evidence that perceived disrespect drives such backlash, the researchers hypothesized that marginalized consumers in India—such as Dalits—would not respond negatively to discounts offered by brands perceived to represent their own community (ingroup). However, they were expected to react negatively if the brand was perceived as belonging to the dominant caste or outsider group (outgroup).

A total of 277 Dalit participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (product: discount vs. no discount) × 2 (company identity: ingroup vs. outgroup) experimental design. The focal product was a “Jai Bhim” face mask, symbolizing Dalit pride, which was either offered at a 50% discount or sold at full price. The brand identity of the company (NIVO) was manipulated using visuals and written descriptions, portraying it as either a Dalit-owned business (ingroup) or a dominant-caste-owned business (outgroup).

Manipulation checks confirmed that participants correctly perceived the company's identity alignment. The results revealed a significant interaction between pricing and company identity for both brand perception and purchase intention. In the outgroup condition, the discounted identity-linked product led to significantly lower attitude scores toward the company ($M = 3.51$ vs. 4.41) and reduced purchase intent ($M = 3.03$ vs. 4.04). In contrast, in the ingroup condition, offering a discount did not lead to any significant drop in either measure.

These findings demonstrate that the perceived identity of the company plays a crucial moderating role in consumer reactions to identity-related promotions. When the discount appears to come from a trusted, ingroup source, it is not interpreted as disrespectful. However, when an outgroup brand applies the same discount, it is seen as undervaluing a stigmatized identity, resulting in consumer backlash.

In summary, the study underscores the importance of brand authenticity and social alignment in India's diverse and stratified marketplace. Brands engaging with marginalized communities must be aware that identity-sensitive promotions require not only respectful messaging but also cultural credibility and trust.

5. GENERAL DISCUSSION

The current research investigates how stigmatized consumer groups in India respond to price reductions on products symbolically associated with their marginalized identities. Our findings reveal that individuals from stigmatized communities—such as Dalits, LGBTQ+ individuals, and Northeast Indians—tend to experience resentment and respond negatively when brands offer discounts on products representing their identity.

Across eight experimental studies, we examined this phenomenon using various stigmatized groups and identity-linked products—including “Jai Bhim” face masks, rainbow-themed water bottles, cultural-symbolic mugs, and dolls representing regional or caste-based identities. The results consistently demonstrate that price cuts on such products are interpreted not as value-enhancing promotions, but as signals of social devaluation, leading to lower brand favorability and reduced purchase intent.

We further establish the psychological mechanism of perceived disrespect or disdain as the key driver of this effect. In addition, our studies highlight that non-stigmatized consumers do not exhibit similar negative responses, pointing to the unique socio-cultural sensitivity of stigmatized groups.

These insights offer crucial managerial implications—particularly in India's socio-diverse market—by emphasizing the need for cultural sensitivity and respect in identity-based branding and promotional strategies. Companies must be aware of the magnitude and risks associated with discounting identity-symbolic products, especially when targeting historically marginalized communities.

6. CONTRIBUTIONS AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Theoretically, this research makes several important contributions. First, it enriches the growing body of literature on the social costs of pricing strategies, particularly in the Indian and Asian contexts. Unlike prior studies that explored self-perceived stigma in redeeming coupons or targeted discounts—such as a senior citizen fearing age-based labeling (Tepper, 1994) or a customer feeling “cheap” for using a discount (Ashworth, Darke, & Schaller, 2005)—our work uniquely focuses on the social implications of a company's decision to offer a discount on products symbolically linked to stigmatized



identities. In contrast to prior consumer-driven discount aversion, our findings reveal that negative consumer judgments arise not from personal redemption behavior, but from the perception that “the company is devaluing my social group’s identity.”

Second, our study highlights how something as seemingly benign as a price cut can be interpreted as disrespectful or socially undermining, particularly when it involves stigmatized social identities in India—such as Dalits, tribal communities, LGBTQ+ individuals, or Northeast Indians. This perspective adds depth to research on market-based disrespect, extending beyond interpersonal dynamics (e.g., class-based interactions between low-income customers and affluent staff in elite malls, as seen in Jacob et al., 2022) or stereotype threats in advertising messages (such as gendered cues discouraging women from joining male-dominated fields like engineering, as discussed in Cheryan et al., 2009; Cheryan, Meltzoff, & Kim, 2011).

By shifting focus to the symbolic interpretation of pricing strategies, this research broadens theoretical understanding of how marginalized consumers interpret corporate behavior. It underscores that discounting identity-linked products can evoke social and psychological harm, even when the company’s intention is neutral or inclusive. Thus, price promotions are not merely economic tools—they are social signals that can either affirm or threaten a consumer group’s sense of dignity and inclusion in the marketplace.

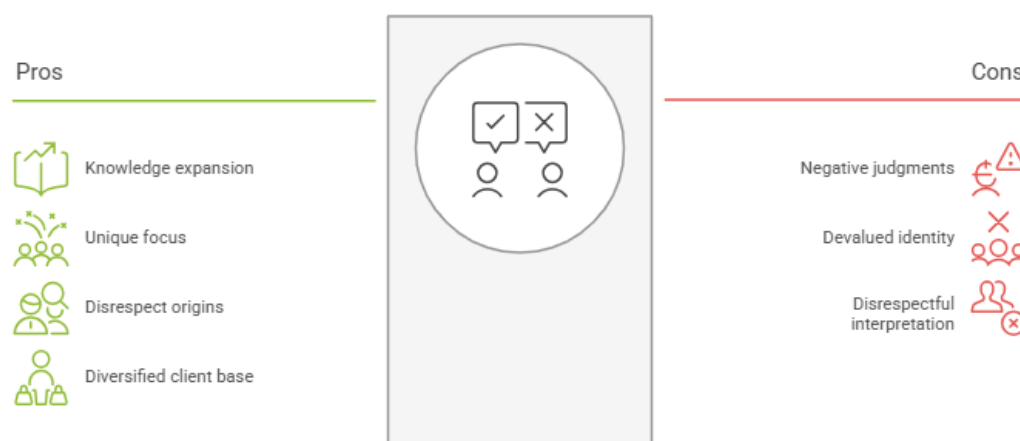


Figure 4: Discount Strategies

This research also carries significant practical implications for marketers and brands operating in diverse and socially sensitive markets like India. In recent years, several companies have attempted to promote products linked to marginalized communities—such as Dalits, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people from Northeast India—as part of their efforts to build a more inclusive customer base. Often, these products are offered at discounted prices, either to increase visibility or signal affordability.

However, our research highlights the potential pitfalls of such discount-driven strategies. We show that discounting products symbolically tied to stigmatized identities can backfire, leading to feelings of disrespect, brand alienation, and reduced purchase intent among the very consumers these campaigns aim to empower.

Importantly, our findings across Studies 6 to 8 reveal conditions under which this negative effect can be mitigated:

1. When the discounting company is perceived as an ingroup brand (e.g., Dalit- or LGBTQ+-owned),
2. When a non-stigmatized identity-linked product (e.g., Indian flag merchandise) is also discounted simultaneously, and
3. When the company uses non-monetary promotions (such as "Buy One Get One Free" offers or free shipping) instead of direct price cuts.

These insights offer critical guidance for marketers: if a mainstream or dominant-group-owned brand wishes to promote a product symbolizing a stigmatized identity, it would be more respectful and effective to use non-monetary promotional tactics, such as bulk deals, loyalty points, or waived delivery fees, rather than straightforward discounts. They can also pair such promotions with similar offers on non-stigmatized products to avoid perceptions of tokenism or devaluation.

Furthermore, by leveraging platforms like Prolific to reach marginalized yet underrepresented communities in India, our research makes a methodological contribution—demonstrating how digital participant panels can be effectively utilized to gather robust, ethically sourced consumer insights from hard-to-reach segments in the Indian context.



7. THE UNDERLYING MECHANISM AND ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

While our study suggests that perceived disrespect is the primary mechanism driving the backlash against discounts on identity-linked products, other psychological elements may also be at play. In the Indian context, where brands increasingly launch products symbolizing stigmatized identities (such as Dalit pride merchandise, rainbow-themed items, or regional affirmations like “Proud to be from Northeast India”), customers may feel targeted or tokenized when such products are discounted.

In our initial studies, these identity-linked products were presented alongside other neutral products. This raises a valid concern: Was the observed effect driven by customers feeling singled out? While we did not directly test this, insights from Studies 7 and 8 and Supplementary Study 1 (Appendix G) suggest that the negative response is amplified when the stigmatized product is the only one offered or discounted, and reduced when other similar products or neutral promotions are included. For example, Study 7 shows that when two identity-linked products are equally withheld from discounts, the backlash is not observed. Likewise, in Study 8, alternative promotions like BOGO (Buy One Get One) or free delivery eliminated the negative perception entirely.

Beyond disrespect, another area of interest is the distinction between felt disrespect and perceived stigmatization. While both concepts involve devaluation, they differ in origin and attribution. Disrespect is often attributed to a specific agent, such as a company or individual (e.g., a brand that appears to mock caste identity), whereas stigmatization stems from societal bias or public narratives (e.g., general negative stereotyping of LGBTQ+ communities). Empirical testing in Supplementary Study 2 (Appendix H) confirmed that perceived disrespect—but not stigmatization—mediated the effect of discounting on negative brand attitudes, establishing their discriminant validity.

Another hypothesis tested was whether the backlash stems from consumer suspicion of corporate profiteering—that is, stigmatized consumers might resent brands they believe are commercializing their identity for profit. However, Supplementary Study 3 (Appendix I) shows this was not the case: even when participants were told that proceeds from sales would be donated to social causes, negative brand feelings persisted. This suggests that the core issue remains disrespect, not profit orientation.

We also addressed whether the perception of disrespect arises purely from low pricing. That is, would charging a lower regular price (instead of applying a discount) yield the same response? To answer this, we replicated the paradigm of Lee and Tsai (2014) in Further Investigation 1 (Appendix G), using a single stigmatized-identity-linked product. The findings were clear: a consistently low regular price did not lead to negative brand perceptions, while a comparable discounted price did. This provides robust evidence that the act of discounting—not the low price itself—triggers disrespect.

Importantly, this research cautions against oversimplifying the pricing-disrespect dynamic. For instance, one may ask whether stigmatized customers would feel more valued if identity-linked products were priced higher. We argue this is an illogical extrapolation, as higher prices raise fairness concerns, especially in price-sensitive markets like India. As prior research (Bolton, Warlop, & Alba, 2003) shows, unjustified high pricing may lead to consumer outrage, especially among marginalized communities, but for different reasons—those rooted in economic injustice rather than identity-based disrespect.

In summary, this research differentiates the psychological underpinnings of consumer backlash and highlights the complex interplay between price, identity, and perceived fairness. For Indian marketers, it reinforces the need for deep cultural insight, inclusive brand communication, and pricing strategies that respect—not commodify—community identities.

8. AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research contributes to the growing understanding of how consumers from stigmatized identities react to market-based cues of disrespect, and it opens several avenues for future investigation—particularly within the Indian socio-cultural landscape. While this study focused on select marginalized groups, India’s complex social fabric contains many other stigmatized identities that merit exploration.

To begin with, each of the stigmatized groups examined—such as Dalits, LGBTQ+ individuals, or Northeast Indians—comprises a minority within the broader Indian population. However, not all stigmatized identities are numerically minor. For example, women in India, who make up nearly half the population, are still stigmatized and discriminated against in many spheres. As evidenced in Western contexts, stigmatization can occur regardless of numerical representation. We replicated this in Supplementary Study 4 (Appendix J), where a “Proud to Be a Woman” water bottle offered at a discount elicited negative reactions from female participants—suggesting that symbolic discounting can trigger backlash even within large but marginalized groups.

Second, the stigmas examined in this research are generally inherent or involuntary—based on caste, region, or sexual identity. But not all stigmatized identities fall into this category. For example, manual scavenging, widowhood, or even certain occupations like rag-picking or sex work may also be stigmatized, even though some may be acquired through socio-economic circumstance rather than by birth. Exploring these contextual or chosen stigmas—akin to how smoking is stigmatized in the West (Kim & Shanahan, 2003)—offers a compelling future direction.



Moreover, solidarity among stigmatized groups could also shape market responses. Research suggests that individuals who identify as part of a broader collective of marginalized people—such as those from oppressed castes, religious minorities, or queer communities—may react negatively even if the discount targets a different group. As Chaney, Sanchez, and Remedios (2018) argue, stigmatized individuals often perceive interconnected struggles and interpret disrespect toward one identity as affecting all. This could lead to broader consumer backlash, beyond the group directly targeted by the promotion. In India, such intersectional solidarity has been evident in various social movements, from anti-caste coalitions to queer-Dalit alliances.

It would also be insightful to examine the type of product being promoted. Our study focused on symbolic identity-linked products (e.g., a "Proud to Be Dalit" mug or a "Jai Bhim" face mask). However, products meant for functional use, such as fairness creams marketed toward dark-complexioned individuals or sanitary pads targeting menstruating women, may not trigger the same response. Drawing on Belk's (1988) idea of symbolic consumption, we argue that utilitarian goods are less likely to be viewed as identity-signaling tools, and thus, a price discount may not be interpreted as an affront to one's social group. This hypothesis invites further empirical testing.

Furthermore, marketers must be mindful of subtle market microaggressions—those indirect, routine, and often unconscious practices that marginalize certain consumer groups. In the Indian context, this could include ad campaigns that stereotype Northeast Indians as "foreigners," caste-coded language in hiring ads, or tokenistic representation of transgender people in Pride Month promotions. As Lui and Quezada (2014) describe, these microaggressions may be embedded in everyday marketing practices and deserve closer examination.

Notably, our findings indicate that non-stigmatized consumers do not view price cuts on identity-linked products as disrespectful (see Study 4), which suggests that only marginalized consumers detect the microaggression embedded in these strategies. This distinction is critical: it underscores the blind spots that marketers and decision-makers—often from non-stigmatized groups—may have, leading to well-intentioned yet harmful campaigns.

Future studies in India could investigate other forms of assertive market actions—such as targeted CSR campaigns, influencer branding using marginalized voices, or identity-specific loyalty programs—and whether these too are interpreted as microaggressions or genuine inclusion. Additionally, scholars and practitioners must explore how cultural humility, authentic storytelling, and participatory design with marginalized communities can help build a more inclusive marketplace.

In closing, while our research marks an early step in understanding the marketplace responses of stigmatized consumer groups, many questions remain open. We hope our work encourages deeper engagement, respectful brand behavior, and innovative research into how to serve marginalized groups with dignity, not just visibility.

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