

Avoid coupon redeemers: Their stigma is contagious (unless they're attractive)

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Less than 2 percent of Americans use coupons, likely because of fear of being viewed as cheap or poor. A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* demonstrates that not only do coupon users face stigmatization; people who stand near them do too.

Authors Jennifer J. Argo (University of Alberta) and Kelley J. Main (University of Manitoba) studied a phenomenon called "stigma-by-association," which has already been documented in regard to physical disabilities and alcoholism. In a series of studies, the authors found that coupon stigma is real and it transfers to people who are in close proximity to coupon users.

"One implication that arises from society's fascination with wealth and status is that when consumers engage in behaviors that differ from this view they risk being sanctioned," the authors explain. "Using a retail context, we conducted four experiments to demonstrate that the presence of one consumer redeeming a coupon results in a second non-coupon redeeming shopper being stigmatized-by-association (i.e., perceived as cheap)."

The researchers interviewed shoppers who observed people using various kinds of coupons. They tested participants' impressions of the coupon shoppers and people standing near them. They found that people had negative ideas about the people using coupons, especially low-value coupons. This stigma was more likely to be transferred if the shoppers knew each other well, stood in the same line, or were of similar

(average) attractiveness.

In addition, the authors discovered two ways to avoid catching the coupon stigma: standing in a different checkout lane or being highly attractive. In fact, being highly attractive also protected coupon redeemers from being stigmatized.

"Thus, in a naturally occurring environment, where our interest in coupon redemption is not salient, consumers appear to infer that one shopper in the retail environment is cheap based on the behavior of another," the study concludes.

Source: University of Chicago

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