Analysis of Social Stigma in Film Nomadland (2020)

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Abstract

Nomadland (2020) film directed by Chloé Zhao, dives deep into the world of modern nomads in America after the recession, inspired by Jessica Bruder's real-life research. This study uses a thematic approach to unpack how the movie portrays stigma, increasing in on issues like financial struggles, loneliness, and feeling pushed to the edges of society. By closely examining the story, conversations, camera work, and audio, it shows how the film pushes back against the shame society loads on these nomads, while celebrating their strength and grit. What stands out is how stigma shows up as outright rejection and treating people like they're less than human, but the movie flips that by making the characters feel real and alive, and by pointing out the bigger unfair systems at play. This has broader currents for talks about how media and society treat marginalized folks, stressing why we need more compassion for those on the fringes. Overall, it adds to our understanding of movies and stigma by showing how film can break down harmful stereotypes.

Keywords: Nomadland, Social Stigma, Film Analysis, Link and Phelan Theory, Chloé Zhao

Introduction

Negative stigma establishes a fundamental ontological issue, falling human dignity by downgrading individuals or groups to inferior statuses based on perceived differences, thereby perpetuating social exclusion and inequality driven by power imbalances (Link & Phelan, 2001). In Indonesia, this phenomenon operates systemically, where traditional values and religious ideologies emphasize communal cohesion over personal freedoms, unconsciously stimulating discrimination against minorities and nonconformists. Ethnic minorities, such as Papuan indigenous peoples, are frequently stigmatized as "primitive" or "insurgent," which restricts their access to education, employment, and public services, exacerbating cycles of poverty and cultural erosion (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Link & Phelan, 2001). Similarly, within dominant groups like Javanese or Muslim communities, individuals different from norms—such as unmarried women prioritizing professional aspirations—are subjected to internal stigma, labeled as immoral or disrespectful, resulting in familial ostracism and societal censure (Goffman, 1963; Corrigan, 2004). This

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devaluation undermines self-esteem and reinforces asymmetrical power relations, obstructing social integration and advancement.

The imperative to confront negative stigma in Indonesia is underscored by its adverse effects on public health, social cohesion, and economic progress, as it intensifies observation, unrest, and psychological distress, including diminished self-worth and restricted opportunities. Evidence from the World Health Organization (2021) and UNAIDS (2022) illustrates how stigma sustains discriminatory practices, bolstering hegemonic dominance and impeding equity initiatives in a rapidly modernizing society where global influences intersect with local traditions. In the absence of intervention, these entrenched mechanisms hinder societal progress, rendering stigma a critical concern necessitating prompt scholarly attention.

Existing scholarship offers essential frameworks for analyzing stigma's dynamics. Link and Phelan's (2001) model conceptualizes stigma as the interplay of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination, providing a robust foundation for understanding its processes. Goffman's (1963) notion of spoiled identities elucidates the resultant social alienation, while Corrigan et al. (2005) highlight the psychological repercussions and advocate for anti-stigma interventions. Indonesian-specific studies, such as those by Human Rights Watch (2023) and UNAIDS (2022), document stigmatization among minorities, yet they often neglect emerging phenomena like modern nomadism.

A notable gap persists in the application of these models to nascent social identities in Indonesia, including economic nomads who eschew conventional stability amid globalization. Although Link and Phelan (2001) address power disparities, their framework has not been extensively adapted to fluid lifestyles such as nomadism. Cinematic representations, exemplified by *Nomadland* (2020), portray nomads as marginalized figures enduring stereotyping and status diminution due to defiance of capitalist norms (Corrigan, 2014; Scott, 2009), underscoring the need for research that integrates stigma theory with contextual cultural realities.

The study posits stigma as a pernicious cycle comprising labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination. However, there remains a significant gap in applying these models to emerging social identities in Indonesia, such as economic nomads who reject traditional stability in the face of globalization. While Link and Phelan (2001) explore power imbalances, their approach has not been widely adapted to dynamic ways of life like nomadism. Film depictions, such as in Nomadland (2020), depict nomads as marginalized individuals facing stereotyping and diminished social standing for challenging capitalist expectations (Corrigan, 2014; Scott, 2009), highlighting the necessity for studies that blend stigma theory with specific cultural contexts.

Nomadland (2020) intensely demonstrates these elements, depicting economic nomads—opting for mobility over permanence—as stereotyped as transient and unreliable, leading to alienation and reduced status (Link & Phelan, 2001; Corrigan, 2014). This aligns with Scott's (2009) characterization of nomadism as a response to capitalist estrangement, yet it accentuates stigma's role in marginalizing dissenters, advocating for educational initiatives to cultivate empathy and dismantle stigmatizing labels toward enhanced societal acceptance.

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Method

Qualitative research is defined as an interpretive method aimed at investigating phenomena via thorough exploration instead of statistical measurement, rendering it ideal for examining cultural artifacts like films (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This investigation employed a case-study framework, concentrating on one piece of work—Nomadland (2020)—to reveal stigma themes using thematic analysis, a cyclical method of coding and theme construction

Moral issues, like respect for nomadic groups, were emphasized to sideste inaccurate portrayals, even though subjective interpretation poses a constraint (Goffman, 1963). In the author's opinion, the qualitative concentration on one movie hinders broad applicability but yields deep understandings of stigma representation. Examination targeted central sequences with Fern, in line with the inquiry into nomadic exclusion, while narrowing scope to preserve attention on the core issue.

Data gathering and examination adhered to a methodical qualitative workflow, starting with iterative film watches to acquire a profound, structural grasp of the storyline beyond superficial events. In this phase, deliberate selection was applied to photograph crucial sequences that visually and narratively illustrated stigma aspects, including seclusion, diminished standing, or societal critique. These images, paired with the script, functioned as core data for Thematic Analysis via a reflective coding approach. In technical terms, the examination entailed correlating visual signs (mise- en-scène and cinematography) and language (dialogue) with Link and Phelan's (2001) stigma model—encompassing labeling, stereotyping, separation, and status loss. To affirm reliability, outcomes were compared against scholarly writings and director remarks, enabling a sophisticated reading of the film's depiction of contemporary nomads' marginalization in a capitalist society.

Results and Discussion

The exploration of Nomadland (2020) offers profound insights into the five key social repercussions of stigma, as articulated by Link and Phelan (2001), encompassing labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination. These repercussions extend beyond mere theory; they are vividly portrayed in the film's representation of nomadic individuals, illustrating how stigma serves as an instrument of social control, where those in power marginalize people who diverge from established societal expectations. In the subsequent sections, each repercussion is analyzed, integrating personal viewpoints, references, and concrete examples from the movie.

Table 1 Data Nomor 1 Labeling

Data No	Scene/ Statement	Dialogue	Explanation
		Bob Wells: "We're called 'rubber tramps' by outsiders. They think we're just beggars living in old RVs, with no purpose or direction."	This dialogue illustrates labeling of nomads as "rubber tramps" by outsiders, reinforcing stigma as unproductive failures.

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Tabel 2 Data Nomor 2 Stereotyping

Data No	Scene/ Statement	Dialogue	Explanation
2		Fern: "They say people like us are lazy, unwilling to settle down and get a real job. But this is survival."	This dialogue reflects stereotyping of nomads as lazy or irresponsible, despite their role as economic survivors.

Tabel 3 Data Nomor 3 Separation

Data No	Scene/ Statement	Dialogue	Explanation
3	on	Fern: "I left my home, my family, everything. People in town called me crazy, but this was the only way."	This dialogue depicts physical and emotional separation from society, where stigma forces nomads into isolated lives on the margins.
		Nomad friend: "We live separated from the outside world. They don't want us close; they think we bring trouble."	This dialogue emphasizes social separation, where stigma prevents integration and compels nomads to form isolated communities.

Table 4 Data Nomor 4 Status Loss

Data No	Scene/ Statement	Dialogue	Explanation
4		Fern: "My home is gone, my job is gone. Now I'm nobody again."	This dialogue shows status loss as the erasure of identity as a stable worker, amplified by stigma viewing homelessness as failure.

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Table 5 Data Nomor 5 Discrimination

Data No	Scene/ Statement	Dialogue	Explanation
5.		Boss: "You're a nomad? We can't give you health insurance or bonuses like the others. You come and go, so we consider you unstable."	This dialogue demonstrates workplace discrimination, treating nomads as second-class workers without full rights.
		Fern's sibling: "You're living in that RV? People say it's crazy. We can't help you like we used to; you've chosen this life."	This dialogue highlights emotional discrimination, where stigma leads family to withhold support, deepening isolation.
		Nomad friend: "Outsiders always discriminate against us we can't park in public spots, get kicked out of stores for looking dirty. They think we're criminals."	This dialogue underscores physical and social discrimination, such as evictions, forcing nomads to live on the fringes.

Conclusion

The discussion of the movie, Nomadland, shows that stigma is depicted in the movie as a complex challenge, with an impact on people in terms of both the lack of money and social exclusion as well as the development of inaccurate self perceptions, but addresses this issue by sharing the stories of true survival and rediscovery. This tendency of society to disregard nomads would be confronted by the film, as it portrays them as a person with feelings and difficulties that can be relatable thus rejuvenating the discussion of stigmatization. Finally, it promotes more empathy which implies that behind the stereotypes, there are real human beings who should be put into focus and recognized.

Based on this analysis, the article Nomadland successfully tackles this research problem by demonstrating the concept of stigma as a multilayer barrier affecting the economic (financial hardship), social (isolation), and identity (negative stereotyping) levels, besides attempting to refute this depiction by sharing experiences of resilience and empathy. This is in line with the research objective, which estimates the film representation as an act to transform the population

attitudes. Overall, the movie reveals the ambiguity of stigma and encourages the discussion of the worth of personal stories, which can be achieved through the power of cinema that may reduce bigotry and create a sense of community. This conclusion confirms the logical connection of the research triangle, the stigma problem is addressed by the analytical purpose which can be highlighted again in the conclusion as the confirmation of the role of film in developing the understanding. The study suggests more studies on the societal implications of similar films.

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