

Place Stigma Formation Mechanism from a Mobility Perspective

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Abstract

The phenomenon of place stigmatization has become increasingly prevalent, severely damaging place image and the well-being of relevant groups, and hindering social equality, harmony, and stability. Existing research mostly employs narrative storytelling to explain place stigma, yet the reasons and mechanisms of its formation remain unclear. This study proposes a research framework for the formation mechanism of place stigma based on a mobility perspective, with place stereotypes at its core. Specifically, this study first categorizes place stigma into three types—moral, public security, and environmental—based on local conflict events, and subsequently constructs the mechanism and boundary conditions through which local conflict events affect place stigma by revealing the potential influence of factor mobility in the formation process of place stigma. The anticipated research will enhance understanding of place stigma, fill the research gap in existing studies regarding the formation mechanism of place stigma, and provide references for alleviating the practical problem of place stigma generalization.

Full Text

Preamble

The Formation Mechanism of Spatial Stigma from a Mobility Perspective

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Abstract: The phenomenon of places being stigmatized occurs with alarming frequency, inflicting serious damage on place image and the well-being of affected groups while impeding social equality, harmony, and stability. Existing research has predominantly employed narrative storytelling to explain spatial stigma, yet the underlying reasons and processes of its formation remain unclear.

This study proposes a research framework for understanding the formation mechanism of spatial stigma from a mobility perspective, with place stereotypes as the central construct. Specifically, we first categorize spatial stigma into three types—moral, security, and environmental—based on local conflict events. We then construct a theoretical model of how local conflict events influence spatial stigma by explicating the potential effects of factor mobility in this formation process. This research is expected to deepen understanding of spatial stigma, fill critical gaps in the literature regarding its formation mechanisms, and provide practical guidance for mitigating the widespread problem of spatial stigma generalization.

Keywords: spatial stigma, negative stereotypes, mobility, narrative storytelling

Subject Classification: B849; C913.9

1. Problem Statement

Spatial stigma represents a negative narrative tied to specific places that concerns local reputation and reflects public negative stereotypes about those places (Pinkster et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2022; Li & Deng, 2023). The stigmatization of places is a common phenomenon both domestically and internationally, exemplified by cases such as the slums of Orangi Town in Pakistan, Bangkok’s red-light district, Guangxi Bama’s “cancer village,” and Guangzhou’s “chocolate community.” Spatial stigma severely damages place image, while its internalization affects the identity and mental health of local populations (Guo et al., 2023; Hollinsaid et al., 2023; King et al., 2024), undermining social equality, harmony, and stability (Sisson, 2021). Particularly with the rise of the internet and social media, place-based stigmatization has become increasingly prevalent, with its negative impacts growing more severe and showing signs of generalized stigmatization (Durand & Vergne, 2014). In response, academic attention to spatial stigma has intensified, establishing it as a cutting-edge research topic (Pearce, 2012; Makki & Vuuren, 2017).

The scholarly discourse on spatial stigma remains largely centered in Western academia, with relatively limited domestic research in China. Western studies typically treat spatial stigma as an established social fact and fixed place meaning (Kelaheer et al., 2010; Schuster & Majidi, 2015; Tyler & Slater, 2018; Tran et al., 2020), emphasizing its existence as an outcome. This outcome-oriented approach has directed research toward examining the socio-cultural impacts of spatial stigma on local residents, landscapes, and neighborhood governance (Wacquant et al., 2014; Yin et al., 2019), often relying on macro-level narrative logics for explanation. While this research orientation helps galvanize scholarly attention by highlighting negative consequences, it fails to fully explain the potential typology and underlying causes of spatial stigma, leaving its formation mechanisms largely unknown.

Mobility constitutes a crucial context for spatial stigma formation and serves

as a catalyst that intensifies its severity and impact, offering a dynamic, processual, and relational perspective for examining its mechanisms (Adey, 2017; Zhu et al., 2019). Mobility represents the contemporary social condition, characterized by the interweaving and hybridization of material and information across time and space, and depicting the transformation of social space from relatively fixed structures to fluid, mutable forms (Sun et al., 2016). The flow and intermingling of people, materials, information, and other elements keep local socio-cultural dynamics in constant flux (Sun et al., 2016; Zhu et al., 2019), deepening regional differences and increasing the likelihood of cultural collisions and social conflicts. Through these collisions and conflicts, the meanings and connotations of places become distorted and reconstructed, leading to stigmatization. Moreover, the accelerated flow of information in the social media era facilitates the fermentation of negative place-based information, amplifying and expanding the influence and reach of spatial stigma (Song, 2020). Thus, mobility is an essential perspective for exploring the formation mechanisms of spatial stigma.

Based on this analysis, our core research question is: How do formation mechanisms and boundary conditions of spatial stigma operate from a mobility perspective? Addressing this question holds significant theoretical and practical importance. Theoretically, it illuminates the prominent role of various factor flows in spatial stigma formation, filling research gaps while offering a novel theoretical lens. Practically, it provides guidance for spatial stigma governance, contributing to healthy socio-cultural development and harmonious society building.

2.1 Research Progress on Spatial Stigma

Sociologist Goffman first introduced the concept of “stigma” to describe phenomena where individual identities are damaged and discrimination occurs (Goffman, 1963). Existing stigma research has concentrated on themes such as gender (e.g., Baiocco et al., 2020; Puckett et al., 2020), occupation (e.g., Li et al., 2020; Ji et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022), disease (e.g., Best & Arseniev-Koehler, 2023; Liu et al., 2024; Ocampo et al., 2023), and race (e.g., Loury et al., 2003; Loyd & Bonds, 2018; Hernandez et al., 2016), with scholars from psychology, sociology, management, geography, and other fields conducting in-depth analyses. However, most research centers on “people,” while stigma research targeting “places” has not received sufficient attention from disciplines such as psychology. Geographers have identified that places can also be stigmatized, proposing the concept of “spatial stigma” to describe phenomena where places suffer negative reputations and geographical imaginations, and arguing for cultural-geographical explanations (Bush et al., 2001; He et al., 2022). Over more than a decade of development, particularly following Sisson’s (2021) literature review on spatial stigma in *Progress in Human Geography*, the issue has gained traction in geography and become an important frontier topic.

Current research predominantly originates from foreign geography scholarship, examining different types of spatial stigma in urban fringe communities (e.g.,

Australia’s “Blockies”), immigrant and ethnic minority neighborhoods (e.g., Amsterdam’s red-light district), and environmentally polluted areas (e.g., Fukushima, Japan) (Bush et al., 2001; Makki & Vuuren, 2017; Cairns, 2018; Pinkster et al., 2020). However, these studies treat spatial stigma as an established outcome, tending to explain its essence through grand socio-spatial logics such as moral geography (spatial moral order) (Slater & Hannigan, 2018; Pinkster et al., 2020), geographical imagination (Pinkster et al., 2020), spatial inequality (Keene & Padilla, 2010; Pearce, 2012), and relational geography (Cairns, 2018). For instance, Makki and Vuuren (2017) view spatial stigma as a result of socioeconomic inequality, highlighting underlying issues of social stratification and value system collisions. While these studies critically illuminate how social inequality produces spatial stigma (Graham et al., 2016; Paton et al., 2017; Verdouw & Flanagan, 2019), they fail to reveal typological distinctions and formation processes from psychological and cognitive perspectives.

Domestic research on spatial stigma remains in its infancy compared to international scholarship, with limited studies focusing primarily on macro-level issues such as national stigma and pandemic-related regional stigma (Shi & Ni, 2020; Li, 2022). For example, some countries have attempted to use discursive hegemony to locate the origin of COVID-19 within China, thereby constructing the “China virus” stigma (Li, 2022). A small body of research has examined spatial stigma within Chinese society (Song, 2020), identifying factors such as resident quality, cultural environment, tourism environment, and public security and business climate as influences on spatial stigma in Northeast China and Henan (Song, 2020). Overall, however, domestic research remains overly macro-level and has not uncovered the micro-level formation processes or internal variations of spatial stigma, necessitating appropriate perspectives for deeper investigation.

In summary, both domestic and international research on spatial stigma has neglected the psychological and cognitive formation mechanisms, which are precisely what must be explored to address spatial stigma and achieve social harmony.

2.2 Place Stereotypes and Spatial Stigma

Stereotypes represent relatively fixed and widespread beliefs about groups, occupations, and regions that people automatically associate with certain attributes or events (Boysen et al., 2022; Motro et al., 2022; Wang & Guan, 2024). As a simplified cognitive process, stereotypes shape societal concepts and behaviors (Wang & Guan, 2021). Individual stereotypes about others can be positive or negative, simplifying cognitive demands and enabling faster information processing (Gershman & Cikara, 2023), but may also produce stereotype threat that negatively affects targeted groups’ psychology and behavior (Spencer et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2021).

Place stereotypes refer to relatively stable evaluations or behavioral expectations about a place and its elements, forming fixed cognitive schemas (Reed,

1991; Sun et al., 2019; Essien & Rohmann, 2024). Positive place stereotypes promote local progress and development (Sun et al., 2019; Feng et al., 2022), whereas negative place stereotypes—arising from issues in public security, resident behavior, or environmental protection—distort public perception, reduce place attractiveness and competitiveness, and intensify inter-regional conflicts (Li et al., 2014; Wang & Yang, 2018). Moreover, negative place stereotypes spill over to groups closely connected with the place. Kelaher et al. (2010) found that residents of stigmatized areas face negative stereotypes, while Levin and van Laar (2006) noted that individuals perceiving negative stereotypes about themselves feel shame about their associated characteristics.

Place stereotypes constitute the core element in stigma formation. Link and Phelan (2001) propose that stigma emerges when labeling, negative stereotypes, social isolation, status loss, and discrimination coincide. The public attaches undesirable labels to categories, and those labeled with negative stereotypes are treated as out-groups, experiencing status loss and discrimination that yields unfair outcomes (Li & Deng, 2023). Crucially, only negative stereotypes serve as the core element in stigma formation (Andersen et al., 2022). When negative stereotypes about a region are recognized and shared by mainstream cultural groups, that region becomes gradually stigmatized and marginalized (Zhang et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). Despite the undisputed central role of stereotypes, psychological understanding of place stereotypes and their influence mechanisms on spatial stigma remains limited.

2.3 Insights from the Mobility Perspective for Spatial Stigma Research

Mobility refers to the dynamic, ever-changing social formation that transcends static conditions, representing a crucial way of understanding the world (Sun et al., 2016). Research has examined how people as mobile subjects perceive external environments and the complex emotions and meanings generated during movement (Li & Liu, 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). The mobility paradigm advocates a dynamic perspective for examining regional differences, social relations, and cultural meanings emerging from factor flows (Zhang et al., 2023). Under this paradigm, local society is not immutable but undergoes dynamic social construction and cultural transformation (Ma et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2019), with all forms of place construction built upon extensive external connections (Qian & An, 2021). The mobility analytical framework provides a logical starting point for analyzing spatial stigma formation. Spatial stigma exists within extensively connected social space, representing a substantive change in observers' place imagination that can only be revealed through dynamic, relational, and processual perspectives. Thus, the mobility perspective offers both a dynamic research viewpoint and processual methodology to decipher how local events evolve into collective-level spatial stigma.

Population flow-induced changes in place imagination and meaning constitute important triggers for spatial stigma formation. As people migrate across places,

they carry personality traits and cultural concepts shaped by their origins, inevitably encountering and colliding with the cultural environments of destination areas (Yan et al., 2017). In this process, migrants often serve as cultural ambassadors and place image representatives of their origins; their images, behaviors, and incidents trigger geographical associations about their home regions among others (Bush et al., 2001; Conradson & McKay, 2007), becoming bases for moral judgment and cultural identification. Cultural exchange and collision inevitably spark socio-cultural conflicts between outsiders and locals. If unresolved, these conflicts may distort place meanings and erode cultural identity (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013; Sun et al., 2016; Zhu et al., 2019), generating negative place stereotypes. Notably, while mobility exposes differences in economic, social, and cultural landscapes (Yan et al., 2017), this does not necessarily lead to negative stereotypes and spatial stigma. Regional development levels influence public acceptance of cultural differences and tolerance for social conflict, thereby shaping understandings and evaluations of local conflict events.

Information flow represents a key factor in the generalization of spatial stigma. With social media development, accelerating information flows expand the speed and scope of local conflict event dissemination, making it easier for public cognition and evaluation to escalate from individual to collective levels (Li et al., 2020). Social media platforms actively promote information flow to expand event dissemination (Song, 2020). However, their effectiveness varies because the public differentially trusts media types and prefers different reporting formats. This suggests that media type, reporting timing, and narrative style may all influence collective-level moral judgments and evaluations.

In summary, the formation mechanism of spatial stigma represents an unresolved yet urgent research issue, and mobility provides a valuable theoretical perspective. This paper analyzes specific types of spatial stigma, clarifies its formation mechanisms, and identifies boundary conditions from a mobility perspective.

3. Research Conceptualization

Existing spatial stigma research predominantly treats it as an established outcome, employing macro-level perspectives to explain the phenomenon (Bush et al., 2001; Makki & Vuuren, 2017; Cairns, 2018; Pinkster et al., 2020), while lacking micro-psychological analysis of its typology and formation mechanisms. The mobility perspective posits that people, materials, information, and other elements are constantly flowing, keeping society in a dynamic state of continuous construction (Sun et al., 2016; Zhu et al., 2019). From this viewpoint, local conflict events trigger moral inferences and evaluations from individuals to places, representing the source of spatial stigma, while media propagation and amplification of conflict events facilitate negative information flow, intensifying stigma. However, not all local events produce identical stigma, nor do all places associated with conflict events receive equivalent stigma levels. Therefore, this paper categorizes spatial stigma types based on local conflict events and pro-

poses a research framework for spatial stigma formation mechanisms from a mobility perspective (see Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]). Specifically, we introduce place stereotypes as a mediating mechanism and place characteristics (e.g., economic level, diversity) and media reporting (e.g., media type, narrative style) as boundary conditions, arguing that local conflict events induce spatial stigma by influencing place stereotypes, with place characteristics and media reporting weakening or strengthening this effect.

3.1 Effects of Local Conflict Events on Place Stereotypes and Spatial Stigma

Local conflict events are social, cultural, and environmental conflicts closely tied to specific regions with strong local characteristics. This paper classifies them into three types: social moral conflicts, social security conflicts, and social environmental conflicts. Social moral conflicts arise from differences in cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, or social norms that lead to moral judgment-related disputes. Groups from different places hold contradictory values, customs, and moral standards, creating divergent views on behavior legitimacy (Mohd Yusoff et al., 2022), such as marriage customs, dietary practices, or religious behaviors. Social security conflicts involve violent incidents or illegal activities stemming from local interests, poor governance, or inadequate legal supervision (Leeds, 2008), such as tourist scams, forced purchases, or violent assaults. Social environmental conflicts generally originate from gaps between environmental quality demands and actual conditions, with some areas suffering from severe pollution and poor sanitation (Chakrabarty, 1991). These conflict events degrade residents' quality of life, tarnish place image, reduce investment attractiveness, and ultimately hinder sustainable local economic and social development.

When places frequently experience certain conflict types, they become passively associated with those events. Population migration flows information about local conflict events across regions, triggering public imagination about places and their elements, and attaching negative labels—that is, forming negative place stereotypes (Link & Phelan, 2001). These negative stereotypes affect cognition, emotion, and behavior (Chen et al., 2023), and without effective intervention, readily develop into stigma (Li et al., 2023). On one hand, once formed, negative stereotypes are difficult to eliminate due to the inertia and lag in public opinion (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2022). On the other hand, negative labels signify that places and their elements possess undesirable or unapproved characteristics, causing labeled places to face discrimination from mainstream groups (Link & Phelan, 2001; Li et al., 2022). Consequently, people from or living in these places are affected by these negative labels, being assigned unique spatial identities (Hernandez et al., 2016). This spatial identity becomes a dishonorable mark, subjecting them to unfair treatment, mainstream group isolation, and gradual status loss (Makki & Vuuren, 2017). Importantly, the type of stigma assigned to a place is inseparable from the type of frequent conflict events. People respectively assign moral stigma, security stigma, or environmental stigma

to places experiencing social moral conflicts, security conflicts, or environmental conflicts, with these stigma types being non-mutually exclusive—meaning one place may bear multiple stigmas (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014). Accordingly, we propose:

Proposition 1: Local conflict events generate negative place stereotypes.

Proposition 2: Negative place stereotypes induce spatial stigma.

Proposition 3: Local conflict events trigger spatial stigma through negative place stereotypes.

3.2 Effects of Local Economy and Diversity on Spatial Stigma

Mobility intensifies regional differences in economic development and cultural diversity, which gradually solidify into social norms (You et al., 2018; Zay Hta et al., 2024) that influence public acceptance of places and their conflict events. This study focuses on how local economic level and diversity affect spatial stigma formation. Economic development inevitably involves contradictions and conflicts considered unavoidable in pursuing economic benefits (Datta, 1973), leading the public to show greater tolerance for more economically developed places. Furthermore, economic development is closely linked to institutions, culture, and environment (Hoff, 1998). Higher economic levels also reflect potential in these dimensions, leading the public to hold higher expectations that these regions can resolve contradictions and conflicts. We predict that when local conflict events occur in economically developed regions, the public will perceive them as temporary and solvable issues less likely to develop into stable negative stereotypes.

Similarly, local diversity influences spatial stigma formation. Local diversity refers to a place's openness regarding ethnicity, language, nationality, religion, and immigration (Harries et al., 2019). Diverse areas host flows of people from different cultural backgrounds, and while this diversity sparks cultural and intellectual collisions, it inevitably generates conflicts (Magee & Massoud, 2011). Conflict events in these areas may be viewed as inevitable aspects of multi-cultural coexistence rather than manifestations of deep-seated contradictions. Moreover, diverse areas typically possess more comprehensive information dissemination channels (Yan, 2023), enabling them to promptly explain conflict backgrounds and response measures to external observers when unexpected local conflicts occur, thereby reducing suspicion and distrust from information asymmetry. Therefore, we infer that the public demonstrates higher tolerance for diverse regions, where local conflict events do not directly trigger negative labeling or stereotypes.

Accordingly, we propose:

Proposition 4: Local economy moderates the negative effects of conflict events. Compared to economically developed regions, conflict events in underdeveloped regions more easily trigger negative place stereotypes and spatial stigma.

Proposition 5: Local diversity moderates the negative effects of conflict events. Compared to highly diverse regions, conflict events in less diverse regions more easily trigger negative place stereotypes and spatial stigma.

3.3 Effects of Social Media on Spatial Stigma

With rapid information network development, media employs multiple channels to promote information flow and dissemination, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries (Lu et al., 2019). Media serves as a social supervisor, reporting and commenting on events to expose social problems. Notably, the emergence of self-media has lowered the threshold for information publication, often amplifying event sensationalism to gain traffic (You et al., 2018; Li et al., 2020), significantly affecting judgment objectivity (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Lu et al., 2019). Overall, as a form of public discourse, media information guides public judgment and evaluation, profoundly influencing social cognition and value orientation (Li et al., 2019). Media reporting and commentary on local conflict events promote public opinion fermentation and accelerate negative event dissemination, enabling more people to receive negative place-related information, with media attitudes even directly affecting public perceptions of local conflicts. Additionally, media's interactive and participatory nature provides information channels for the stigmatization process whereby individual evaluations escalate to collective cognition (Li et al., 2022).

As media information recipients, the public's cognitive processes are further influenced by media type and narrative style. Official media, backed by government credibility, produces more objective and authoritative content, focusing public attention on events themselves rather than escalating to place-level judgments. Conversely, self-media lacks policy constraints and easily publishes sensationalized or truth-deviating reports driven by profit and traffic. Hou (2022) found that official and self-media reporting on the same event elicits different emotional responses, with official media providing greater public security than self-media. We infer that earlier official media reporting on conflict events calms negative emotions, while earlier self-media reporting more easily triggers them. Even when official media subsequently attempts remediation, pre-existing public perceptions are difficult to change. Furthermore, many media outlets employ narrative storytelling to cater to audience demands, making it difficult to grasp event realities and creating imbalanced reporting. Conversely, objective reporting avoids labeling and makes fact-based judgments. Tian (2017) illustrated the importance of objective reporting in resolving social emotions and conflicts using the "sky-high bride price" example. Therefore, we infer that narrative storytelling promotes one-sided information dissemination, more easily leading the public to assign spatial stigma due to cognitive bias. Accordingly, we propose:

Proposition 6: Media information influences spatial stigma formation.

Proposition 6a: Following local conflict events, earlier reporting by self-media more easily triggers negative place stereotypes and spatial stigma.

Proposition 6b: Compared to objective reporting, narrative storytelling more

easily triggers negative place stereotypes and spatial stigma.

4. Theoretical Contributions

This study proposes a research conceptualization of spatial stigma formation mechanisms based on the mobility perspective, addressing the reality of damaged place image and identity among place-related groups. Our research breaks from the outcome-oriented approach of previous spatial stigma studies by categorizing conflict event types tied to places and examining their mechanisms and boundary conditions. This provides a new theoretical perspective for analyzing spatial stigma causes and directions for empirical research. Our theoretical contributions include:

(1) We construct a mobility perspective-based formation mechanism for spatial stigma, revealing the core role of place stereotypes and clarifying boundary conditions of the socio-cognitive process. Specifically, we find that local conflict events trigger negative place stereotypes, which then generate corresponding stigma types. Spatial stigma results from frequent local conflict events that prompt public moral evaluations, forming stable social cognitions that damage place image and group status (Link & Phelan, 2001; Li et al., 2022). However, not all conflict events produce these effects; we highlight how place characteristics (economic level, diversity) and media reporting (type, narrative style) create differential outcomes. This framework points toward examining spatial stigma causes and conditions.

(2) From a mobility perspective, we reveal the crucial role of place stereotype information flow in spatial stigma formation. Despite growing attention to spatial stigma, most research focuses on its negative consequences (e.g., Wacquant et al., 2014; Tyler & Slater, 2018; Tran et al., 2020). While raising awareness, these studies fail to fundamentally address how spatial stigma emerges—a processual research question. Some attempts, such as Sisson's (2021) conclusion that spatial stigma results from concentrated stigmatized groups, provide partial explanations but do not fundamentally interpret formation causes. Our mobility perspective identifies population migration and information flow as critical factors in spatial stigma emergence and intensification, offering a novel theoretical lens.

(3) We identify conflict event types tied to places and correspondingly categorize spatial stigma types. Zhang et al. (2021) propose that stigma can be classified by target into individual, organizational, and regional forms, with exploring specific types being fundamental to enhanced understanding. While Goffman (1963) categorized individual stigma into physical, character, and tribal types; Hughes (1962) classified occupational stigma into physical, social, and moral types; and Hudson (2008) distinguished organizational core stigma from event stigma, no research has systematically classified spatial stigma types. This limitation constrains spatial stigma research, leaving it at a superficial narrative stage without fine-grained analysis (Sisson, 2021) and lagging behind other

stigma research. We find that local conflict events can be divided into social moral, security, and environmental conflicts, which serve as the root causes of public stigma assignment. Accordingly, spatial stigma can be categorized into moral stigma, security stigma, and environmental stigma. This not only aids understanding of spatial stigma's essential characteristics but also provides valuable insights for future research exploring its formation causes.

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