Special Session Summary    Investigating the Impact of Negative Self-Conscious Emotions on Consumer Memory, Processing, and Purchase

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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/9070/volumes/v32/NA-32

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SESSION OVERVIEW

The negative self-conscious emotions, embarrassment, guilt, and shame involve distinct phenomenological experiences (Tangney 1992). Guilt results from actions or inactions that run contrary to internal or social standards and it is quite common for a transgression to elicit guilt based on its negative implications for another person. Embarrassment tends to involve trivial transgressions that have no implications for others but involve “a deficiency in one’s presented self” (Tangney, Miller, Flicker, and Barlow 1996, p.1258). Shame is a negative emotional state focused on the global self (e.g., I am bad) whereas with guilt and embarrassment experiences, the self is implicated but is not the central focus of the experience (e.g., I did something bad) (Tangney 1990).

Guilt and embarrassment are considered adaptive because the experience of these emotions can help signal whether particular behaviors should be undertaken or avoided. Generally, individuals are motivated not only to prevent but also to repair these negative states. Shame, on the other hand, can be maladaptive because the global self as opposed to a specific act is viewed as ‘bad.’ Thus the experience of this emotion is debilitating. Individuals often feel powerless to resolve their shame and as a result pursue inapt behaviors to cope.

Despite the phenomenological differences between guilt, shame and embarrassment, all of these three emotions involve the evaluation of the self against certain standards (Tangney and Fisher 1995, pg. 14). These standards are defined by socialization experiences and made salient in social contexts (Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton 1994). As such, the consumption context represents a sufficiently unique environment for exploring 1) why and what standards become salient and serve to elicit self-conscious emotions and 2) how consumers respond to and cope with the experience of these emotions. Each paper in this session investigates one or more of the identified negative self-conscious emotions and relates issues of salience and coping to consumer purchase or memory and processing.

The first paper in the session (by Lau-Gesk and Drolet) explores the consequences of consumer’s feelings of embarrassment and the strategies they employ to reduce such feelings in the context of embarrassing versus non-embarrassing product offerings. The moderating role of self-consciousness in response to embarrassing products is identified. Results of this research indicate that if embarrassment potential is salient, either because an individual is highly self-conscious or because the potential for a situation to be embarrassing is emphasized, individuals display an increased willingness to purchase embarrassing products in an effort avoid embarrassment.

The second paper (by Dahl, Honea, and Manchanda) examines the interpersonal aspects of guilt in the consumption context. Results of this research indicate that social connection with a retail salesperson can lead to a guilt response when a consumer does not foster that relationship through purchase. Furthermore, the experience of guilt motivates consumers to pursue reparative actions (e.g., commit to spending more money) during future purchase interactions in order to reciprocate that connection and resolve their guilt. The final paper in this session (by Matta, Patrick, and MacInnis) examines the distinct impact of shame and guilt on consumer information processing and memory. Results indicate that individuals that experience shame will recall more self-related counterfactuals regarding how the experience of shame could have been avoided. Comparatively, feelings of guilt are shown to produce retrieval of behavioral counterfactuals involving emotion avoidance. Finally, this research shows that experiencing either feelings of shame or guilt restricts cognitive processing on the part of the consumer.

Each of these three papers provides a distinct contribution to our understanding of self-conscious emotions by identifying both specific issues particular to a consumer behavior context as well as generating theoretical insights for the larger psychological and sociological literatures.

The role of embarrassment in consumer behavior, as suggested by this session, is interesting in that consumers are willing to incur some level of embarrassment in order to avoid situations that might involve greater embarrassment. Consumers will experience some level of an emotion to prevent the possibility of a deeper experience of that same emotion. The examination of guilt in a consumption context provides some equally unique insights. A social connection with salesperson that is not reciprocated through purchase can elicit guilt even if a consumer’s response to that connection involved reciprocal interaction. Consumers who experience guilt in such situations display a disposition to engage in reparative actions toward the salesperson. Interestingly, guilt and its related purchase intentions are motivated by an individual with whom the consumer had no previous relationship.

In a consumption context self-conscious emotions not only motivate certain behaviors (e.g., purchase) and impact intentions (e.g., willingness-to-spend) but can have a distinct impact on processing and memory. The experience of emotions such as shame and guilt can actually bias the counterfactuals an individual retrieves regarding avoiding these emotions. Taken together, the results of the research projects presented in this session provide an interesting catalyst for future research. We know that the potential for embarrassment motivates purchase (as an act of prevention) and the experience of guilt in relation to a salesperson inflates spending intentions (as an act of reparation)—drawing a connection between these findings and the biasing effect self-conscious emotions have on retrieval may help to develop a framework for understanding when the experience of a particular self-conscious emotion is likely to result in adaptive or maladaptive coping responses.

“Public Self-Consciousness and Purchase Intentions for Embarrassing Products”

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Aimee Drolet, University of California — Los Angeles

If you’ve ever had a credit card declined, triggered a store alarm because a salesperson forgot to remove a security sensor, or had to explain “accidentally” ordering an adult film from a hotel pay-per-view, you’ve probably experienced embarrassment as a consumer. Embarrassment can arise in a variety of consumer situations, including purchase (e.g., buying condoms or The National Enquirer), usage (e.g., using hemorrhoid medication or hair removal products), and disposition situations (e.g., donating out-of-style clothes or Milli Vinilli records to Goodwill).
To reduce and cope with negative feelings of embarrassment, consumers can use a variety of strategies. For example, consumers who anticipate feeling embarrassed during an upcoming purchase situation might plan to pay in cash rather than reveal their identity by paying with a check or credit card. Consumers may be motivated to overcome the embarrassment associated with a purchase if they are seeking to forestall greater future embarrassment. Indeed, a main purpose of many products (e.g., disposable absorbent underpants, gas prevention aids, acne medication, and mouthwash) is to help consumers avoid certain particularly embarrassing moments (e.g., bladder control loss, uncontrolled flatulence). Accordingly, the major emphasis of many marketing communication strategies is how consumers can prevent embarrassment through product purchase. The present research focuses on one individual difference variable that relates to consumers’ tendency to buy products aimed at preventing embarrassment: public self-consciousness (PUBSC).

Individuals high in PUBSC appear more eager to avoid embarrassment, and thus are more likely to alter their behavior in ways that will help them do so. For example, Froming, Corley, and Rinker (1990) paid college students to sing “The Star Spangled Banner” in front of another student. The longer they sang, the more money they earned. Students high in PUBSC sang for a shorter time than students low in PUBSC sang. Interestingly, the behavior of students high in PUBSC did not change when the student observer was a friend versus a stranger. This heightened concern with public self-impression also reveals itself in preferences for brand label products. Bushman (1993) finds that high PUBSC is associated with increased preference for national brand label products, which are generally considered to have more favorable public images, versus bargain brand label products, which are generally considered cheap or inferior by comparison. This finding implies that consumers high (vs. low) in PUBSC have a greater motivation to act in a socially desirable way.

In experiment 1, we tested whether consumers high in PUBSC are more likely to purchase products that may help them avoid future embarrassment, even if these products are embarrassing to purchase. We demonstrate that a high level of consumer PUBSC is associated with increased intentions to buy embarrassing (e.g., douche) but not non-embarrassing (e.g., shampoo) products (N=157).

In experiment 2, we investigate conditions under which the purchase intentions for embarrassing products between high and low PUBSC consumers might be comparable. Recent research indicates that, in general, individuals tend to overestimate the extent to which others notice and remember their embarrassing moments (Gilovich and Savitsky 1999; Savitsky, Epley, and Gilovich 2001). In one study, researchers had students walk into small college classrooms wearing a T-shirt with a large picture of Barry Manilow on it. At the end of class, students were asked to estimate how many others had noticed the Barry Manilow T-shirt. Students’ estimations were much higher than actually was the case. Their overestimates went down only slightly if students acclimated themselves to wearing the T-shirt by putting it on before the class and waiting around the hall prior to entry. Individuals high in PUBSC appear even more likely than other individuals to exhibit this overestimation bias. Given that high PUBSC individuals tend to feel others are watching them and judging them negatively and expect to experience embarrassment more often, we expect that the purchase intentions of low PUBSC consumers may be more equal to those of high PUBSC consumers under certain conditions. We expect that the purchase intentions of low versus high PUBSC consumers will be more equal when the experience of embarrassment is more readily imaginable.

In experiment 2, participants (N=214) were exposed to ads either showing embarrassment (uncontrolled flatulence at a social gathering purportedly because of not using the advertised product) or not showing embarrassment (controlled flatulence purportedly because of using the advertised product). We predicted and found consumers low in PUBSC to report increased purchase intentions in response to an ad depicting (vs. not depicting) embarrassment. For low PUBSC consumers, the depiction of embarrassment increased its salience. Because consumers high in PUBSC tend to see themselves feeling embarrassed, ads relating at all to embarrassment, either its experience or its avoidance, prompted high PUBSC consumers to think of embarrassment. These findings support the idea that higher purchase intentions for embarrassing products among consumers high versus low in PUBSC is due at least in part to the increased salience of embarrassment and its negative consequences for self-impression.

To provide additional support for this explanation, we tested the effects of cognitive load on the intentions of high versus low PUBSC consumers to buy embarrassing products in experiment 3 (N=114). Studies demonstrate that cognitive load can inflate dispositional tendencies. For example, Shiv and Fedorikhin (1999) study consumers who are chronically high versus low in impulsivity. High impulsivity consumers are generally more likely to choose impulsive alternatives (chocolate cake vs. fruit salad). Increased cognitive load due to a working memory task increases the tendency of high impulsivity consumers to choose impulsive alternatives. Cognitively preoccupied, individuals appear more likely to rely on more automatic, association-based thinking strategies versus more controlled, rule-based thinking strategies (see Drolet et al. 2004 for a review). Thus, we expected and showed that load will increase the intentions of high PUBSC consumers to purchase embarrassing products. Ward and Mann (2000) test the effects of load on the eating behavior of chronic restrained versus non-restrained eaters. They find no effect of load on the eating behavior of non-restrained eaters, suggesting that load does not influence the eating behavior of non-restrained eaters because they do not automatically associate restricted eating with positive self-impression. Thus, we expected and found that cognitive load does not influence the intentions of low PUBSC consumers to purchase embarrassing products.

On the whole, our investigation implies that embarrassment salience is an important psychological factor that moderates the effects of PUBSC on consumers’ intentions to buy embarrassing products. The present research adds to research on consumer embarrassment. As Dahl et al. (2002) discusses, even though the importance of this emotion for consumer behavior seems self-evident, very little research has examined consumer embarrassment.

“Guilt and Purchase Commitment: Understanding Feelings of Guilt in a Retail Purchase Context”
Darren W. Dahl, UBC
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Guilt can compel consumers to purchase (Ruth and Faber 1998) but also oblige them to return (Martin 2002). Critical incident reporting suggests both intrapersonal appraisals of control (e.g., Smith and Ellsworth 1985) and interpersonal concerns (e.g., Tangney 1991) as key drivers in the experience of guilt, yet to date there is no empirical examination of whether these factors are actually interdependent in the experience of guilt, the extent of a relational bond necessary to elicit guilt over interpersonal concerns, nor a clear understanding of the types of behaviors, adaptive or maladaptive, that guilt may motivate in a consumption context. This research develops a conceptual framework that identifies the role of the interpersonal factor of social connection and the intrapersonal factor of control in the elicitation of guilt. Furthermore, it explores
the potential outcome effects when a guilt response is realized by the consumer and identifies how guilt reactions can be avoided through purchase behavior.

In Study 1, participants were asked to visit a new store and acting as a “mystery shopper,” evaluate it as a prospective retailer in the campus community. When the participant entered the store a trained confederate, acting as a salesperson, either did not interact with the participant (no social connection condition) or initiated a scripted dialogue with the participant (social connection condition). After visiting the store the participants returned to the experimenter and were asked to complete a short questionnaire to provide their evaluation of the store (referred to as Retailer A for the remainder of this abstract). Within this series of questions, participants were asked to indicate the level of guilt they experienced on a battery of scale items drawn from previous research (Bozinoff and Ghingold 1983; Coulter and Pinto 1995; Jones, Schratter, and Kugler 2000). We expected that when participants developed a social connection with the store employee and did not make a purchase they would be more likely to feel guilt than when no social connection was realized and a purchase was not made. As predicted, participants that developed a social connection with the store employee felt a higher level of guilt for not patronizing the store than those participants that did not form a social connection.

It is important to note that in Study 1, participants visited a store and did not have directed goals related to purchase. This replicates situations where a consumer might be browsing as opposed to shopping with intention. Study 2 used a similar design and measures as Study 1 but broadened the experience of the participant by expanding the experimental task to include a shopping visit to another retailer (Retailer B) and asking the participant to make a purchase at one of the stores. This added complexity allowed for the introduction of self-agency into the purchase outcome decision and manipulation of purchase control (some participants were told to purchase from Retailer B and others were allowed to decide independently where they would purchase). As expected, there was a significant interaction between control and connection. When subjects did not make a purchase from Retailer A, participants in the social connection condition reported a significantly higher level of guilt when they had freedom in their purchase decision than when they were controlled in their decision. In contrast, participants in the no social connection condition did not experience significantly different levels of guilt whether the level of purchase control was controlled or not. In the social connection—indepedent decision cell, participants were most likely to report that the failure to make a purchase was the driver of their emotional response.

A last set of studies, an experimental field survey administered to a consumer panel and a follow-up laboratory study, explored potential outcome effects when a guilt response is realized by the consumer and how guilt reactions can be avoided through purchase behavior. Results suggest that guilt in response to even minor social connections in a consumption context serves to shift emphasis from the intrapersonal to the interpersonal. The resolution of interpersonally motivated guilt manifests itself in relationship-enhancing behavior as guided or distorted by the consumption context. Specifically, consumers’ intended future purchase amount increased in those instances where they experienced guilt. Satisfaction and willingness-to-return (loyalty) measures appeared to be impacted more generally by connection and the success of the purchase incidence, and were not directly affected by the guilt response.

This research provides a social-functional perspective of guilt in a consumption context and identifies a boundary condition under which the interpersonal dimension of guilt is more likely to be experienced. Significantly, we provide evidence that concern for others can be an important component of consumer guilt. Secondly, this research explores the behavioral intentions, adaptive or mal-adaptive, motivated by guilt in a consumption context. We identify the norms of both purchase and reciprocity as drivers of the guilt reaction. We also demonstrate the reparative strategies consumers employ to resolve experienced guilt. What is perhaps less obvious in our pattern of results, is the fact that emotional arousal does not simply guide an individual to be responsive in terms of interaction. The social aspects of the consumption context sets a standard for reciprocating connection but the consumption context inserts its unique twist, predicating that responsiveness to a connection with a salesperson should come in the form of purchase.

The results of this work indicate that based on the degree to which interpersonal motives are triggered in a consumption context, consumer behavior may or may not follow the same course as it might in the face of purely intrapersonal concerns. While an intrapersonal role for guilt would likely predict that it would serve to curb consumption behavior, it appears the interpersonal function of guilt may motivate purchase behavior and increase consumer spending. Thus, the elicitation of the self-conscious emotion guilt in a consumption context may or may not be truly functional at the intrapersonal level.

“Exploring Shame and Guilt in Consumer Behavior”
Shashi Matta, University of Southern California
Vanessa M. Patrick, University of Georgia
Deborah J. Machnus, University of Southern California
Shame and guilt are powerful, negative self-conscious emotions that can arise from consumption of products and services viewed as normatively inappropriate—those one ‘should not’ or ‘ought not’ to have consumed (e.g., overeating, compulsive buying, pornography, alcohol use, smoking, gambling, shoplifting). They can also arise from non-consumption of products and services viewed as normatively appropriate (e.g., failure to give a gift, failure to use exercise facilities, failure to consume healthy foods). Once activated, shame and guilt can, in turn, motivate consumption of normatively appropriate or non-consumption of normatively inappropriate products and services as a way of reducing these negative emotions. Despite their potential relevance, little research has examined the two emotions in a consumer context.

Two studies described here investigate (a) the incidence of, appraisals leading to, and motivations arising from the experience of shame and guilt—particularly as they apply to consumption contexts (Study 1), and, (b) their effects on information processing and memory (Study 2).

Defining Shame and Guilt
Though shame and guilt are often used interchangeably, research in psychology suggests they differ in causal locus. Shame concerns the self, which is the focus of evaluation. Guilt concerns behavior, in which the action engaged or not engaged in, is the focus (Lindsay-Hartz 1984; Niedenthal et al 1994; Schmader, Lickel, and Ames 2002; Tangney 1992; Tangney et al 1996; Wicker et al, 1983). Shame and guilt are thus defined as follows: Shame is an emotion evoked from a perceived transgression of the self in evaluating a consumption episode. Guilt is an emotion evoked from a perceived transgression of one’s own behavior in evaluating a consumption episode.

Shame and Guilt in Consumption Contexts
Study 1 investigated (a) whether shame and guilt are salient in a consumption context, (b) if the intensity with which they are experienced approaches their intensity in a non-consumption context, (c) the appraisals leading to, and the motivations arising from
these emotions, and (d) whether the marketplace is viewed as a mechanism for their reduction. One hundred and fifty seven undergraduates participated in a 2 x 2 (emotion: shame vs. guilt) x 2 (cause: emotion evoked by action or inaction) x 2 (context: consumption vs. non-consumption) between-subjects study. Students were instructed to provide a detailed written account of a personal shame or guilt evoking episode arising from doing or not doing something in a consumption or non-consumption context. They rated the intensity of experienced emotions using a battery of 24 emotions—including shame and guilt. Respondents were then asked to complete measures of appraisals leading to, and motivations arising from the experienced emotion. The results revealed four important findings: (1) shame and guilt in a consumption context arose from distinct appraisals, (2) led to different behavioral motivations (3) as intense in consumption contexts as they are in non-consumption ones, and that (4) consumers rely on (non)consumption to repair situations evoking shame or guilt.

The Effect of Shame and Guilt on Consumer Information Processing and Memory

It is well established in psychology and consumer behavior research that an individual’s emotional state can strongly influence various aspects of information processing including encoding and retrieval, processing strategies, evaluations, etc. (for a review, see Bagozzi, Gopinath and Nyer 1999). We expect the difference between shame and guilt (in implicating the self versus behavior) will manifest itself in the effect of these two emotions on information processing and memory. Specifically, consumers who are asked to recall an experience of shame (guilt) will present more counterfactuals involving the self (behavior) about how the experience of shame (guilt) could have been avoided compared to consumers who experience guilt ( shame). Also, consumers who experience shame (guilt) encode more personality-related traits (behaviors) when exposed to information about another person, compared to consumers who experience guilt ( shame).

In study 2, sixty undergraduates provided a detailed written account of a personal shame, guilt or pride experience. They were asked to list a set of counterfactuals about how the situation might have been different. They then read a narrative in which an individual describes two episodes involving shame or guilt in a consumer behavior context (one episode involving eating fatty food and the other involved purchase of adult entertainment on the Internet). Both were pre-tested as being equally likely to evoke shame and guilt. Following a two minute distracter task, participants were asked to write down as much of the narrative as they could recall. Consistent with the hypothesis, subjects who recalled an experience of shame (guilt) were more likely to retrieve counterfactuals involving how changes in their self (behavior) might have helped avoid the emotion compared to subjects in the guilt ( shame) or pride conditions. Consistent with expectations, subjects primed to consider shame or guilt recalled significantly less of the narrative than subjects primed to consider pride.

The contributions of this research lie in the introduction of shame and guilt in consumer behavior research, and in developing a foundation for future research in this area. Though the antecedents of and the motivations arising from shame and guilt have been researched in social psychology, the impact on information processing and memory are unique contributions of this article.

References


