How Embarrassing: an Examination of the Sources of Consumer Embarrassment and the Role of Self-Awareness

Rishtee Kumar, Boston University

The effects of consumer embarrassment extend beyond the obvious class of previously examined products such as condoms and laxatives. The manifestation of embarrassment impacts a host of industries, such as online dating, the weight-loss industry, and the plus-size clothing industry. Considering the widespread impact of consumer embarrassment, it is imperative to understand the causes of consumer embarrassment and also address possible ways to mitigate embarrassment in hopes of improving consumption decisions. Study 1 reveals that embarrassment in the consumption context might not entirely resemble that in psychology literature. Study 1 primarily serves to provide a better understanding of the situations in which consumers experience embarrassment and how they cope with it. Study 2 builds upon the findings of the first study to examine the effects of increased self-awareness on the purchase of socially embarrassing products.

[to cite]:


[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13546/volumes/v35/NA-35

[copyright notice]:

This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Recognizing the discomfort that many consumers experience while purchasing seemingly day-to-day products, websites such as www.shopinprivate.com offer customers a safe-haven from embarrassment. Such retail channels allow consumers to avoid the stares, questions, and comments they anticipate from other shoppers as they make their purchase of socially embarrassing products. However, the effects of consumer embarrassment extend beyond the obvious class of products such as condoms and laxatives. In fact, embarrassment in the consumption context is manifested in many other ways, impacting a host of industries, such as online dating, a $473 million industry, the weight-loss industry weighing in at $65 billion, and the plus-size clothing industry, estimated at $32 billion. Considering the widespread impact of consumer embarrassment, it is imperative to understand the causes of consumer embarrassment and also address possible ways to mitigate embarrassment in hopes of improving consumption decisions.

Though there have been a limited number of studies that examine specific aspects of embarrassment (Dahl et al, 1998, 2001), marketing has yet to avail a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamics of consumer embarrassment. Therefore, the goal of this paper is twofold—first, to examine the extent to which embarrassment, as identified in psychology literature, maps out onto the consumption context, and second, to identify and test the existence of factors that potentially affect consumer embarrassment. In study 1, an exploratory analysis reveals that the landscape of embarrassment in the consumption context might not entirely resemble that which was painted in psychology literature. Study 1 also serves to provide a better understanding of the situations in which consumers experience embarrassment and how they cope with it. Study 2 builds upon the findings of the first study to examine the effects of increased self-awareness on the purchase of socially embarrassing products.

In the extant psychology literature, authors have primarily reported the existence of two theoretical accounts of embarrassment—the social evaluation account (Miller and Leary, 1992; Miller, 1996) and the awkward interaction account (Parrott and Smith, 1991; Sabini et al, 2000; Silver et al, 1987). The former theoretical account posits that embarrassment is the result of a threat to one’s desired social identity and belonging to a while the latter describes embarrassment as the result of a public disruption of a social performance. A third theoretical account, the loss of self-esteem account (Edelmann, 1987; Babcock, 1988), has received very little attention and appears to be somewhat discredited in psychology. According to this account, people feel embarrassed as a result of a disappointment with themselves, resulting in what researchers have dubbed a loss of situational self-esteem. This account holds that embarrassment might even be expressed privately, as people fail to act in accordance with their own standards.

The results of Study 1 (n=76), consisting of both scaled and open-ended items, indicate that in fact consumers have experienced all three forms of embarrassment in the consumption context. Surprisingly, although the psychology literature might have speculated otherwise, 77% of the survey respondents indicated experiencing a private embarrassment that might be best captured by the loss of self esteem account, with as many as 39% of all respondents stating that they had experienced this form of embarrassment somewhat frequently. In fact, 21% of all respondents indicated that this was the most commonly experienced form of embarrassment in a consumption context. Of the several examples of private embarrassment subjects provided were:

"I felt embarrassed when buying embarrassing self-help books online from Amazon.com"
"I feel embarrassed when I try on a clothing that is a large size."
"I felt embarrassed in looking for singles online."

The results also indicated that a desire to maintain one’s social identity, consistent with the social evaluation account, was a source of consumer embarrassment for respondents, with 53% saying that they had experienced this form of embarrassment somewhat frequently and 23% agreeing that it was the most commonly experienced form of embarrassment in consumption situations. The following excerpts highlight the validity of the social evaluation account for embarrassment in the marketplace:

"It’s embarrassing to be seen shopping at a discount store like Marshalls or TJ Maxx. If I buy something from there I usually lie about where I got it.”
“Buying condoms or ‘feminine products’ is embarrassing.”

Lastly, the awkward interaction account of embarrassment found a great deal of support, with 78% of respondents agreeing that they had experienced this form of embarrassment somewhat frequently, and 56% stating that it was the most common form of embarrassment in consumption situations. Participants provided examples including knocking over product displays and breaking products because they did not know how to properly use them.

The results of study 1 not only helped to create a guideline for understanding how embarrassment is manifested in the marketplace, but also provided help in shaping study 2. Existing literature suggests that several individual level differences have been known to impact
the effect of embarrassment. In one study, self-monitoring was shown to be positively correlated with the level of embarrassment experienced in certain situations. (Sabini et al., 2000) Building upon this research, study 2 chose to examine a closely related factor—self-awareness. In reexamining the open-ended responses from study 1, it appeared that among the most frequently mentioned embarrassing consumption situations were those involving the purchase of condoms and feminine hygiene products. A pretest consisting 20 day-to-day consumer goods confirmed that condoms and personal hygiene products were considered among the most embarrassing products.

Study 2 (n=76) was an exploratory investigation of the effects of primed self-awareness, consisting of a design in which subjects were asked to imagine shopping with a fictitious grocery list consisting of 6 neutral and 3 socially embarrassing products. Participants in the priming condition were given a self-awareness enhancing task that asked them to write twenty sentences beginning with “I am” and engage in a pronoun identification task, where all pronouns referred to the self (i.e., I, me). The remaining subjects were administered a distraction task. Subjects were then given a photograph and brief description of each item on the list, followed by six questions assessing their attitude toward the product and likelihood to use the product, if needed. Unfortunately, the results indicate that there were no significant differences in the attitudes toward the neutral or embarrassing products for primed and non-primed participants.

After answering questions regarding each of the 9 products, subjects were told that they could only select 6 products to purchase. Interestingly, there was a significant effect of primed self-awareness on the number of socially embarrassing products purchased, F(1, 76)=3.908, p<.05. That is, although primed and nonprimed participants reported not having different attitudes toward the array of products, primed participants were more likely to remove socially embarrassing products from their shopping basket than nonprimed participants. Furthermore, a Chi-Square analysis corroborated that in fact, there was a difference in the proportion of embarrassing to non-embarrassing products chosen by primed and non-primed participants, \( \chi^2=47.789, p<.01 \). These results imply that although attitudes toward socially embarrassing products might not be affected by a state of heightened self-awareness, it might still impact purchase decisions. These findings are exploratory in nature and additional investigation would be useful in understanding what factors might moderate the impact of self-awareness on embarrassment, such as the ability to justify one’s purchases.

References
Accessed from Factiva Reports.

Product Failure and Warranty Purchase: Their Effects on Target-Specific Emotions and Attitude toward the Brand
Kiran Karande, Old Dominion University, USA
Mahesh Gopinath, Old Dominion University, USA

Abstract
This paper investigates the consumer affective responses to product failure as a result of making a decision to buy or not buy a warranty at the time of product purchase. Specifically, we present hypotheses about differences in consumers’ emotional reactions to products failure, and consequently their attitude toward the brand, depending upon whether they have purchased product warranties. The hypotheses are derived by arguing that different types of counterfactual thinking and attributions are invoked under conditions of product failure or no product failure, and the purchase of a warranty or no warranty purchase by the consumer. Theoretical and managerial implications are briefly discussed.

Introduction
Approximately 15 billion dollars are spent by U.S. consumers each year on purchase of warranties. It is the contention of this research that consumers’ emotional reactions to products failure, and consequently their attitude toward the brand differ depending upon whether they have purchased product warranties. The hypotheses are derived by arguing that different types of counterfactual thinking and attributions are invoked under conditions of product failure or no product failure, and the purchase or no purchase of a warranty by the consumer.