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Balancing the Basket: the Role of Shopping Basket Composition on Embarrassment

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When consumers purchase embarrassing products, they often make additional purchases to mitigate the threat. We demonstrate that additional purchases do not necessarily mitigate embarrassment and may, paradoxically, exacerbate it instead. We show that additional purchases attenuate (vs. exacerbate) embarrassment to the extent that they counterbalance (vs. complement) the undesired persona.

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Balancing the Basket: The Role of Shopping Basket Composition in Embarrassment

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Mellish: "I'll get a copy of Time magazine. And I think I'll take Commentary and the Saturday Review. And let's see, Newsweek. I'll just... grab one of these... [slyly picks up a pornographic magazine] I'll take 'em all."

Cashier: "Hey, Ralph, how much is a copy of Orgasm?"

Mellish: "...Just put 'em in a bag, will you?"

In this exchange from the film "Bananas," Woody Allen's character, Fielding Mellish, is in a store to purchase a pornographic magazine. Fearing that others will observe his purchase, he grabs several additional magazines in an attempt to hide his true shopping objective. Unfortunately, the strategy fails when the cashier's request for a price check makes the embarrassing product painfully salient to everyone within earshot.

The traditional explanation for this strategy is that additional purchases mitigate embarrassment because they reduce the salience of the embarrassing product (Brackett 2004; Lewittes and Simmons 1975). According to this *product prominence hypothesis*, products are either embarrassing to buy or they are not, and embarrassment results to the extent that an embarrassing product is salient in the context of the shopping basket. From this argument follows the intuitively appealing prediction that purchasing any additional product that is not itself embarrassing to buy will mitigate embarrassment relative to purchasing the embarrassing product alone.

Indeed, this prediction is consistent with the conventional wisdom, as reflected in a survey in which we asked consumers about their intuitions regarding this strategy. The data showed that the majority (81%) believed that purchasing a non-embarrassing product in addition to an embarrassing product would always be less embarrassing than purchasing the embarrassing product alone. When these respondents were asked why they believed the additional product would attenuate embarrassment, the majority (88%) provided a response implicating a shift in focus away from the embarrassing product.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, we show that embarrassment does not decrease monotonically with additional purchases. Moreover, we show that these additional purchases, which are not embarrassing in and of themselves, can paradoxically exacerbate embarrassment, such that consumers expect purchasing non-embarrassing products in addition to an embarrassing product to be *more* embarrassing than purchasing the embarrassing product alone.

In this context, we argue that the impact of an additional purchase on embarrassment is a function of the extent to which it balances against the undesired persona communicated by the embarrassing product, such that the more it counterbalances (vs. complements) the undesired persona, the more it will attenuate (vs. exacerbate) embarrassment. We label this proposition the *balanced basket hypothesis* and attribute the effect to embarrassment being a function of the impression made by the shopping basket as a whole rather than by its constituent products. We test this hypothesis in a series of four experiments.

In experiments 1A and 1B, we sought to demonstrate that embarrassment is not monotonically decreasing with additional purchases but is instead a function of shopping basket composition such that additional purchases attenuate (vs. exacerbate) embarrassment when they are unrelated (vs. complementary) to the embarrassing

product. Respondents were told to imagine that they were purchasing either *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Improving Your IQ* or *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Handling a Breakup* and were asked to rate how embarrassed they would feel. Half of the respondents were told that they were buying the book by itself whereas the other half were told that they were also purchasing a box of tissues and a pint of cookie dough ice cream (unrelated to the book on IQ but complementary to the book on handling a breakup). Results revealed the predicted interaction ($F(1, 91) = 8.03, p < .01$) such that the additional items attenuated embarrassment for respondents purchasing the book on improving IQ ($M = 2.87, SD = 1.66$ vs. $M = 4.88, SD = 1.45$; $F(1, 91) = 13.34, p < .001$) but not for respondents purchasing the book on handling a breakup ($M = 4.80, SD = 1.79$ vs. $M = 4.64, SD = 2.16$, respectively; $F(1, 91) < 1, NS$). Experiment 1B used joint evaluation to show that the additional products significantly exacerbated embarrassment in the breakup book condition where the additional purchases were complementary ($M = 5.23, SD = 2.34$ vs. $M = 4.08, SD = 2.18$; $F(1, 38) = 13.06, p < .001$). Thus, purchasing complementary products that would not be embarrassing to buy separately made the purchase of an embarrassing product even more embarrassing than purchasing the embarrassing product alone.

Experiment 2 sought to demonstrate that an additional purchase is more (vs. less) effective at attenuating anticipated embarrassment when it is perceived to be more (vs. less) effective at counterbalancing the undesired persona communicated by the embarrassing product. Respondents were told to imagine they were purchasing a Justin Bieber album and were asked to rate both how embarrassed they would feel to purchase the album by itself and how embarrassed they would feel to purchase the album along with an Adele album. We measured counterbalance perception by asking respondents to rate the extent to which buying the Adele album (vs. the Justin Bieber album) would accurately reflect who they are. A significant interaction between shopping basket composition and counterbalance perception emerged ($B = -.15, \beta = -.09, p < .05$). Spotlight analysis (Aiken and West 1991; Fitzsimons 2008) at 1.5 standard deviations below the mean of counterbalance perception indicated that purchasing the Adele album in addition to the Justin Bieber album had no impact on anticipated embarrassment relative to purchasing the Justin Bieber album alone ($B = -.18, \beta = -.04, p > .35$). In contrast, the corresponding analysis at 1.5 standard deviations above the mean of counterbalance perception revealed the Adele album significantly decreased anticipated embarrassment ($B = -1.10, \beta = -.24, p < .001$). Thus, the same additional purchase was more effective at attenuating anticipated embarrassment when it was perceived to be more effective at counterbalancing the undesired persona, independent of its effect on the perceptual salience of the embarrassing product.

To provide evidence for the robustness of the balanced basket hypothesis to scenarios involving real behavior, experiment 3 employed a field study to demonstrate that shopping basket composition can cause embarrassed consumers to strategically alter their purchase decisions even when doing so is economically disadvantageous. Participants in this experiment were required to go to a drug store to purchase either condoms or anti-gas medicine. They were given the option of purchasing the product by itself or of purchasing the product along with a box of tissues and a bottle of lotion (unrelated to anti-gas medicine but complementary to condoms).

The experimenters paid for the purchases and participants were allowed to keep whatever products they purchased, thus providing an economic incentive for all participants to purchase the additional products. We measured participants' level of public self-consciousness (PSC; Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss 1975) and predicted that individuals would be more likely to avoid additional complementary (vs. unrelated) purchases when they were higher in PSC than when they were lower in PSC, because avoiding embarrassment is a more compelling motive for these individuals. Supporting our predictions, a logistic regression predicting choice of purchasing the additional items revealed a significant interaction between the assigned product and PSC ($B = -.39, \beta = -.41, p < .05$) after controlling for purchase familiarity (Dahl, Manchanda, and Argo 2001). Spotlight analysis 1.5 standard deviations below the mean of PSC indicated an equivalent likelihood of choosing the larger basket regardless of which product was assigned for purchase ($B = -.17, \beta = -.04, p > .90$), indicating that individuals lower in PSC were likely to purchase the additional products regardless of whether they were unrelated or complementary. In contrast, the corresponding analysis at 1.5 standard deviations above the mean of PSC revealed a reduced likelihood of choosing the larger basket when condoms were assigned for purchase as compared to when anti-gas medicine was assigned for purchase ($B = -4.34, \beta = -1.11, p < .05$, one-tailed). Thus, individuals higher in PSC were more likely to sacrifice their own economic self-interest when the additional items were complementary in order to avoid embarrassment.

Across these four studies, we find consistent support for our hypotheses regarding the role of shopping basket composition in embarrassment.

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