The Effect of Embarrassment on Preferences For Brand Conspicuousness: the Roles of Self-Esteem and Self-Brand Connection

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We demonstrate that embarrassed consumers resort to branded products to cope with the threat to self-views. Specifically, low (high) self-esteem individuals are likely to take protecting (repairing) coping strategies, and thus, prefer less (more) conspicuous designs. This interaction between self-esteem and embarrassment is moderated by self-brand connection.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Embarrassment refers to “an aversive and awkward emotional state following events that increase the threat of unwanted evaluation of self from a real or imagined social audience” (Dahl, Manchanda and Argo 2001). While prior consumer research has focused on when such emotions arise in various consumption settings (e.g., Dahl et al. 2001), this paper investigates the downstream consequence of embarrassment on consumer preferences for branded products.

Two general behavioral tendencies accompanying this negative emotion were documented. First, embarrassment may entail a tendency to avoid social interaction. Second, embarrassment may activate a motivation to repair one’s damaged public self-image (Brown 1970). We examine the effect of one important dispositional factor, chronic self-esteem, on consumers’ primary response to embarrassment. Baumeister, Tice, and Hutton (1989) find that people with low self-esteem choose relatively “safer” strategies such as avoiding social contacts to protect themselves from negative events that may threaten their self-views. However, people with higher levels of self-esteem may engage in enhancement approaches to demonstrate their desirable positive attributes in public. This paper focuses on how these two kinds of responses influence consumers’ preferences for brand conspicuousness, which is operationalized as how salient the brand is to others (e.g., product with small vs. large logo). Thus:

**H1**: An incidental feeling of embarrassment makes consumers evaluate a more conspicuous branded product less favorably when they have lower self-esteem but more favorably when they have higher self-esteem.

However, the effect of embarrassment on brand conspicuousness will not occur to all brands. Embarrassment would have influence only when brands are related to self-view. To test this, we investigate the moderator: self-brand connection. The self-brand connection represents the overlaps between consumers and brands in terms of their shared traits and characteristics, and thus, would influence the extent to which consumers can relate the brand to self-concept. We hypothesize that:

**H2**: When consumers feel a greater connection to a brand, embarrassment makes consumers with lower self-esteem (higher self-esteem) evaluate a more conspicuous branded product less (more) favorably. When the self-brand connection is weaker, the interaction effect between embarrassment and self-esteem is diminished.

Two studies were conducted. Study 1 tested H1 and had two parts happening at two points of time. In part 1, we measured participants’ chronic self-esteem using Rosenberg’s (1965). Part 2 happened two weeks later, in which participants performed two alleged independent tasks. First, we manipulated levels of embarrassment using a widely used experiment paradigm (Apsler 1975; Harris 2001). Specifically, participants in the embarrassment (control) condition were asked to sing a weird song in front of others (write down the lyrics). Second, participants were shown images of two Nike T-shirts differed only in the presence/absence of brand logo and were asked to evaluate the two products. The results supported H1.

In study 2 which tested H2, participants’ self-esteem was also measured when they signed up for the study at time 1, but with a different scale. We asked participants to indicate how much they liked their names on a 7-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) (Gebauer et al. 2008). Two weeks later, participants were assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (emotion: embarrassment vs. control) ×2 (self-brand connection: low vs. high) between-subjects design, and completed three seemingly independent tasks. The first task was an advertisement evaluation task: a TV ad for Durex for embarrassment group and a TV ad of Mac Air for control group. Then, half of the participants were told to identify the personal characteristics they shared with Adidas and the ways in which they differed from Nike (high self-brand connection with Adidas). The other half did the opposite (low self-brand connection with Adidas). Participants were then asked to indicate their preference between the two designs of the same Adidas T-shirt differing only for the size of the logos printed on them. A significant three way interaction effect among emotion, self-esteem and self-brand connection was revealed, as predicted by H2.

**REFERENCE**


