How Embarrassing For You (And Me): the Nature of Observer Embarrassment

Alexander Ziegler, University of Kentucky, USA
John Peloza, University of Kentucky, USA
Alexis Allen, University of Kentucky, USA

The consumer embarrassment literature focuses largely ignores observer embarrassment. However, the negative effects of embarrassment are not contained on an actor level but also impact observers. We find evidence that observer embarrassment results in negative consumption experiences for the unrelated observer and introduce boundary conditions for the effect.

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Alexander Ziegler, University of Kentucky, USA
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research on embarrassment finds that the presence of observers is a necessary requirement that all embarrassing situations share (Dahl, Machanda, and Argo 2001; Blair and Roese 2013; Grace 2007, 2009). The effect of the embarrassing situation on the observer, however, has been largely ignored. This research aims to address the question: How are observers impacted by the embarrassing situation? We define observer embarrassment as the observer’s emotional reaction to an intentional or accidental norm violation of an actor. Because one actor’s embarrassment is often witnessed by multiple observers, observer embarrassment is more ubiquitous than actor embarrassment. In spite of the potential impact this imposes for marketers, the consumer literature at large has not examined observer embarrassment.

Drawing on Cognitive Appraisal Theory (Lazarus 1993), we examine the nature of observer embarrassment in a series of three experiments. In study 1, we show that observer embarrassment impacts consumers’ consumption experience, and embarrassed observers exhibit the same avoidance strategies as embarrassed actors. Next, we introduce social identity congruence between observer and actor, as well as the social presence of other observers, as moderators that provide additional support for our conceptualization of observer embarrassment.

In study 1, one hundred and eighty-six undergraduate students at a large North American university imagined themselves in a hotel lobby observing the check-in process of an unrelated customer. Actor embarrassment is created when the checking in a customer has a credit card declined. Analysis demonstrates an indirect effect of observing an embarrassing situation, through observer embarrassment, on avoidance intentions (total indirect effect: 95% CI = .0004 to .1816). This analysis provides evidence supporting the positive relationship between observing an embarrassing situation and experiencing observer embarrassment, as well as the subsequent avoidance intentions of the observer.

Study 2 provides further evidence of the underlying process behind the generation of observer embarrassment. The study uses a 2 (Perceived actor embarrassment: yes/no) X 2 (Actor identity: congruent/incongruent) design. We manipulate observer embarrassment and introduce social identity congruence (university affiliation: home versus rival) as a boundary condition for the presence of observer embarrassment. We recruited 210 undergraduate students at a large North American university who imagined themselves standing in the self-check-out lane at a store. Another customer purchases an embarrassing product (genital wart remover cream, pretested as an embarrassing product). We manipulate perceived actor embarrassment by having either the customer or a store clerk inquire about the price of the product. Analysis reveals a significant interaction between perceived actor embarrassment and social identity of the actor (F(1, 209) = .86, p = .05). Furthermore, the impact of the perceived actor embarrassment on observer embarrassment is only present for participants in the identity incongruent condition (M_congruent = 4.92 vs. M_incongruent = 4.26, F(1, 209) = 4.65, p < .05). Thus, study 2 provides further evidence in support of our conceptual framework.

Study 3 had two main objectives. The first objective is to rule out a possible alternative explanation by demonstrating that observer embarrassment can occur without the presence of empathy. Further, we examine the role of social presence of others on observer embarrassment. This distinguishes observer embarrassment from other related interpersonal emotions.

One hundred sixty-two undergraduate students at a large North American university participated in the study as part of a course requirement. The design was a 2 (Presence of Others: crowded/not crowded) X Continuous (Observer Embarrassment: Measured) design. Participants imagined an incident of customer rage directed at the front-desk employee during a hotel check-in process due to a lack of an available room. Social presence was manipulated by describing the lobby as virtually empty versus crowded. Analysis reveals a significant interaction between observer embarrassment and social presence (F(1, 161) = -.23, p = .04). We conducted a simple slopes analysis to qualify this interaction. Observer embarrassment leads to lowered observer satisfaction in a crowded environment. Satisfaction ratings were not impacted if the setting was not crowded. This underlines the impact that a social presence has on observer embarrassment.

The results across three studies highlight the nature and consequences of observer embarrassment. Thus, consumer embarrassment impacts their behavior as well as the behavior of others who observe the embarrassment. The mere observation of an embarrassing situation is enough to create observer embarrassment and observer embarrassment can, in turn, impact observers in ways unfavorable for marketers. Namely, observer embarrassment leads to avoidance intentions (Study 1) and lowered satisfaction (Study 3). Furthermore, we introduce boundary conditions for the antecedents of observer embarrassment as well as for the impact that observer embarrassment has on the observer in the form of identity congruence (Study 2) and social presence (Study 3). The social nature of observer embarrassment presents a particular challenge for marketers because crowded retail setting provide many benefits for marketers, but can also exacerbate negative consumer emotion.

REFERENCES


