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Exploring the Concept of Brand Embarrassment: the Experiences of Older Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Although consumer behavior researchers pay continuing attention to brands and their importance to consumers, not much is known about the negative emotional effects of brands. The authors extend prior research by introducing a new construct called 'brand embarrassment'. Brand embarrassment refers to anxiety and negative emotions evoked by brands in certain consumption contexts. A qualitative study with older adolescents in the United Kingdom finds that embarrassment is experienced in the private and public domains. Brand embarrassment is explained in terms of issues of the *personal-self* and *relationships with brands*. Overwhelmingly, the participants claim that they try to avoid possible brand embarrassment.

INTRODUCTION

Branding research is largely premised on the belief that consumers want brands as they form a shortcut in the minds of consumers when making a purchase decision, make a quality promise, package meaning, and define the consumer's sense of self (e.g., Aaker and Biel 1993; Chan et al. 2003). However, a perspective that is largely absent from the literature is that brands can evoke negative feelings in consumers. The position advanced in this research suggests that in certain consumption contexts, brands can cause embarrassment to consumers. Growing attention has been dedicated in recent years to deepening our understanding of the emotion of embarrassment in consumption contexts. It has been recognized as a "familiar and widely occurring emotion that affects many facets of our social behavior" (Dahl et al. 2001: 473) and hence deserving of scholarly attention. It remains an under-researched subject however in comparison to the dominant moral emotions of shame, anger, empathy and guilt (Haidt 2003: 853). And yet as Miller (1995) highlights, embarrassment is an emotion that all humans experience at some point, as it is unlikely that an individual will never be affected by what others think of him or her.

In a consumption context, a growing body of researchers have focused on identifying incidents of embarrassment through different stages of the consumer purchasing cycle, from initial purchase through usage until disposal (Dahl et al. 2001; Verbeke and Bagozzi 2002; Iacobucci et al. 2003; Grace 2007). Researchers to date have detailed instances of product and service-related embarrassment irrespective of the existence and importance of brand meaning in that experience. This ignores the symbiotic relationship between consumer's emotional feelings, both positive and negative, and the influence of brand associations, image and meaning (Edel and Burke 1987; Aylesworth et al. 1999). The paper will examine links between the negative emotion of embarrassment and theories of branding before detailing a qualitative study exploring the conceptualization of brand embarrassment.

EMBARRASSMENT IN A CONSUMPTION CONTEXT

Embarrassment is an emotion almost all humans feel at some point, given the importance of how individuals are influenced by what others think of them (Miller 1995). It can be defined as a commonly occurring, short-lived, negative emotional response arising from a perceived threat to the presented or public-self, in the presence of real or imagined audiences (Miller and Leary 1992). Unlike other self-conscious emotions such as guilt and shame,

embarrassment involves social interaction. If embarrassment is experienced in private, it is thought to be because individuals are imagining what others might think of them (Sabini et al. 2001). Protecting the public-self from unflattering and unwanted evaluation is a powerful motive that underlies such behavior. In this way, embarrassment can be viewed as an important regulator of social behavior (Goffman 1956).

Miller (1996) reminds us that negative relationships occur between embarrassment and previous events and so researchers have focused on the importance of familiarity as an influence on embarrassing experiences (Dahl et al. 2001). Uncertainty following an unwanted event can produce feelings of embarrassment for either party (Parrott et al. 1988). Baumeister et al. (1995) remind us however of the importance of social context in any evaluation of self-conscious emotions, defined by individual's socialization experiences. This might include issues of social environment and place (Verbeke and Bagozzi 2002), social composition and social status.

LINKING BRAND ASSOCIATIONS TO EMBARRASSMENT

Negative emotions have a significant influence on consumers' purchase and consumption patterns (Kapoor 2008). Mizerski and White (1986) argue that brand-related cues seek to overcome such negative affective reactions. It has long been recognized that branded products are capable of influencing, even shaping consumer emotions and feelings. Dobni and Zinkhan's (1990) definition of brand image specifically highlights the emotional, as well as reasoned perceptions consumers attach to brands. As Levy (1959) argues, products are often purchased (or avoided) not for their functional qualities, but because of how, as symbols, they impact on the user's status and self-esteem. According to Aaker (1997), brands have distinct personalities (defined along the dimensions of sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness) and consumers are generally expected to seek brands that are consistent with their personality. The concept of brand image is therefore a shared mental concept, steeped in emotional as well as rational interaction. It therefore suggests a relationship between emotional states (both positive and negative) and consumer brand image. Banister and Hogg (2003: 850) discovered in the UK fashion context that "consumers often decide whether to accept or reject products and brands on the basis of their symbolic (as opposed to functional) attributes".

Researchers have detailed relationships between advertising (the dominant driver of brand image) and such positive and negative feelings (Batra and Ray 1986; Aylesworth et al. 1999). This covers both conscious and more involuntary consumption conditions. Edel and Burke (1987) extended this work to include the impact of emotions toward branded associations but remind us that negative feelings will not always predict advertising and hence brand attitudes. One rare study linking embarrassment with brand advertising (Ray 2001) focused on embarrassment communicated by advertising acknowledging that over time, a process of image transfer occurs with repeated exposure to negative stimuli.

An important link between the emotional state of embarrassment and brands is the involvement of reference or peer groups (Stafford 1966). Sirgy (1982) suggests that consumers attach varying degrees of importance to how they believe others view their

preferred brand. Given the prerequisite for self-conscious evaluation before experiencing embarrassment, it is likely that negative feelings such as embarrassment may emerge if the values and attributes collectively held amongst peers are deemed socially unacceptable. A consumer's need for social approval often leads consumers to evaluate the perceived risks attached when purchasing a specific brand. Certain brands inevitably carry negative consequences, either physical or social. Consumers are therefore more susceptible to group influence and perceived risk when a brand decision involves social interaction. There are also instances of consumer avoidance of social encounters where negative feelings toward brands might occur. Leith and Baumeister (1996) referred to this as the dark side of embarrassing situations. Consumers may disown their favored brands if they foresee the potential for embarrassment as was recently evidenced by the problems for the Burberry brand in the United Kingdom.

In summary therefore, we hypothesize the existence of what we have termed 'brand embarrassment', a form of social anxiety that occurs when a person's public identity in a particular situation is threatened. This form of embarrassability refers to an individual's general susceptibility to feelings of awkwardness and uncomfortableness in connection with a branded encounter. The embarrassment might be experienced by either party in anticipation, during or shortly after the event.

AN EXPERIENTIAL UNDERSTANDING OF BRAND EMBARRASSMENT

In this study, we seek to explore stories of embarrassment as they relate to past, present and anticipated branded experiences. Our focus on the negative emotional experiences of late adolescence (aged from 18 to 22), reflects their transition from highly brand conscious years as adolescents through to a growing sense of maturity in adulthood (see Wooten 2006). In this sense, we hoped to tap into their experiences of brand embarrassment, reflecting adolescents' status as media and marketing literate (Buckingham 2002) yet highly self-conscious consumers. This age group merits special attention because theirs is a time of experimentation and risk-taking (Larson 2001), embroiled in issues of peer-influenced identity formation and the projection the 'self' identity (Moschis and Churchill 1979). According to Chaplin and John (2005: 121) "adolescence brings an even greater appreciation of brand images along with an increased understanding of the role that brands play in defining the self" suggesting a time in which negative branded experiences could be highly influential.

Thompson et al. (1989) argued that an approach based on the principles of existential phenomenology allows for analysis of context-dependent, 'lived-in' experiences; researchers ask participants to articulate their own "personalized understandings of consumption phenomena" (Thompson and Haytko 1997: 19). This implies that any meanings derived from an experience are always situated in their current experiential context. In this study, we treat embarrassment as intrinsically embedded rather than distinct from the phenomenological surrounding (Tangney 1995). Experiences of brand embarrassment were recounted in the context of older adolescents' everyday lives thereby providing thematic descriptions of the consumption phenomena in question.

Research Method

In keeping with phenomenological principles, this study used a series of in-depth discussion sessions, conducted amongst friendship pairs. According to Hunt and Miller (1997 cited in Banister and Hogg 2003: 857), 'friendship pairs' provide a naturalistic, intimate setting encouraging participants to more openly discuss issues of identity and consumption. Six initial sessions comprising of twelve

participants were conducted in the summer of 2007, providing opportunities to explore different lines of questioning and to pilot naturally-forming 'friendship pairs'. A further thirteen sessions were then held from autumn 2007 till early 2008, allowing for the emergence and exploration of core themes. Although there emerged a balance of gender across the study, 'pairs' were as often mixed as single sex, reflecting participants' ease in the company of mixed gender. All respondents were United Kingdom undergraduates, or friends of undergraduates. A £15 incentive linked to a local record store was used as incentive to encourage participation.

Participants were encouraged to provide visual representation of potential embarrassing brands to discuss, including newspaper and online images, and even digital photographs. These were used in a projective manner to help alleviate any issues of inhibitions before recalling embarrassing incidents, and to enrich discussions surrounding those events. Discussions were unstructured, but covered initial experiences, differences across product categories, the nature of embarrassment and resultant behaviors and linked emotions. Once transcribed, the data was analyzed using phenomenological interpretation (Thompson et al. 1989). Salient themes, recurring ideas and patterns of beliefs linking people and cultural setting together were identified. A second stage then involved relating patterns of commonality between different transcripts and seeking different interpretations of similar phenomena.

FINDINGS

This paper will focus on the range of influences that combine to create and perpetuate brand embarrassment. Influences are artificially separated into those relating to the *personal-self* and then *relationships with brands* although such distinctions are difficult to separate given the interlinked, symbiotic nature when discussing experiences of brand embarrassment.

Influences of the Personal-Self

Issues of social class and status

Given the nature of embarrassment with its signaling of a perceived or actual threat to the presented or public-self, many of the initial and more obvious experiences related to participants' perceived social status with class distinctions apparent. Such examples were most marked when discussing secondary school experiences where issues of class distinction are marked and on view. As Andy explains when discussing his embarrassing memories of drinking branded vodka when seventeen:

It wholly depends on the class thing, when I look at what Glen's (vodka) ... it completely reminds me of people that I knew in school and the phrase "drinking Glen's by Inverness Castle".

In this example, the cheaper brand of vodka serves to remind Andy of unpleasant memories of school amongst fellow classmates he did not want to be associated with. The brand of vodka plays a central associative link, providing a strong emotional tie between the social status of its users, the matching downmarket associations of the brand and his implicit reaction. Experiences of such ties between brand and social status extended across many different product categories, from retail stores visited, to cars driven, to mobile phones owned. Most prolific were stories relating to fashion clothing brands as Iain explains:

I would never go and buy another pair of trainers or a Kappa tracksuit—it's the connotation, you can just hear the screech of 'neds' in the back. That is not something you want to be associated with. ... that's the thing, because Kappa do produce

some really good clothes and it is generally reasonably priced and I am sure I have got a t-shirt that I use for training now and again—I do my best to sort of hide it.

In his case, it was not the product quality of the clothing that was in question but the user-associations that caused the embarrassment. 'Neds' is a euphemism for socially undesirable adolescents, often from underprivileged backgrounds who hang around in gangs, clearly distinguishable by prominent branded clothes they display. In certain cases (such as the commonly reported Burberry brand), high quality expensive fashion brands were requisitioned by such groups resulting in a transferal of negative user imagery to the clothing brand. Other examples in this study included Berghaus (outdoor wear), Lacoste and Firetrap. Branded clothing was recognized as a form of tribal uniform causing embarrassment for companies and others who came into close proximity.

In school environments, especially those with restricted uniform policies, adolescents use brands as a means of establishing social standing. As Tracey explains, branded clothing creates social status and inevitably feelings of awkwardness and a very visual sense of social inferiority:

It was always like when you were doing PE in school and stuff you always had brand names and without like, say the two stripes down your trousers instead of three like the adidas ones and it would be "why are you wearing them kind of things?". It was always like "oh, you don't have any money?" and we were always paranoid about what kinds of tops you wore.... not realizing you were judging people.

Social judgments, through the clothes displayed, extended to more functional items such as the make of white shirt or the choice of black shoe, with the brand recognizable just by the style:

Fraser: At my state school, the only freedom you had was the type of shirt, it has to be white but you could buy an expensive or a cheap white Asda shirt and the shoes, they were the most obvious because they had to be black but the type of shoes ... these were the only two items you really had any freedom of choice over; it became whether you had a Calvin Klein shirt or a George shirt from Asda, or whatever cool shoes were in. If you did not have the best in these, it defined your social standing.

Feelings of embarrassment were not however linked exclusively to concerns over downmarket stigma. There were also a few examples of embarrassment when faced by brands that signified more upmarket associations according to Jamie:

Where I was brought up, and where my dad was brought up, it was a sort of rougher area. I notice it when I go back, my dad has got quite a nice brand of car and you are parking it and heads are turning. It is not an outrageous one, it is an Audi. You are almost embarrassed to have such a good car when you are driving about and stuff—it stands out a mile.

Both however indicate that brands play an important part in creating feelings of discomfort and social stigma and highlight how the brand imagery and related user associations create both personal embarrassment (in defense against the ridicule of the accusers) or projected toward others who might be the focal point for the brand in question.

Transitions in adolescence

For adolescents in particular, the rapidly changing public and private worlds, with its associated issues of experimentation and social risk, provided fertile ground for stories of branded embarrassment. In one particularly vivid episode, Grant tells us how his lack of social knowledge in a new school setting provided the impetus for an acute case of brand embarrassment:

This is really peculiar because I went to a private school for high school but still lived with a lot of friends that I had gone to primary (state) school with so it was obviously two completely different worlds. Especially at that age and it was sort of like my 1st year at high school, first school disco. I turned up with a Helly Hansen jacket which would have been really cool (at my primary school), but it meant different things at the private school. It gets worse because underneath I had a Kappa tracksuit. The tracksuit was really acrylic shiny fabric ... there was a complete scene at the disco. In retrospect, I am really embarrassed about it but at the time, I wasn't so much because I had this kind of feeling that I was right and they were wrong. But as time progressed and they educated me in the ways of fashion, I was mortified ... meeting lots of new people and trying to create my own identity.

This case demonstrates a temporal aspect to brand embarrassment. Embarrassment can emerge unexpectedly with changing circumstances and although not always overtly obvious to the recipient, the effects in terms of reduced social standing and a feeling of inadequacy are evident. Identification with brands can change very quickly during the formative identification years of adolescence with both the changing cycles of fickle fashion and the constant movement between social circles. It is likely that brand embarrassment may also occur in other situations of transition, such as the move to a new job or a geographical re-location as consumers move between social expectations and social norms. This was however beyond the scope of this research study.

Generational and age distance

There were numerous examples of how brand embarrassment might emerge when faced with an age-related generational gap. Such embarrassment typically emerged between adolescents and their parents, even grandparents. Examples such as highlighted by Jamie below, illustrate how powerful user associations from one generation compare with ignorance or ambivalence from an older one:

My dad used to climb when he was younger but he is quite a savvy shopper, like he usually gets the cheap stuff normally, but decent stuff—he comes into the house one day with a big grin on his face, he has bought the most expensive jacket of his life, and I was like, "...all right, let's see it", and he tells me it was £320, puts it on and we just start laughing. It was a Berghaus Europeak jacket—he works down in Parkhead (east Glasgow), that's where all his patients are, lots of 'neds', so he does not wear it there any more!

The experiences of Jamie's father illustrate the complex mix of generational differences, social status and negative brand associations. Stories of adolescents being embarrassed to be associated with the brands displayed by their parents included dissociation with downmarket supermarket brands purchased by their parents, expensive designer clothes worn by image-conscious mothers and even the brands of cars driven by parents on the school run.

Embarrassment, sometimes never revealed, led to examples of masking the brand, parental avoidance and even lying to their friends. For many, their parents either lacked the same brand-driven values or were ignorant of the depth of meaning implicit.

Socialization: Distance, tribes and environments

Brand embarrassment was also a function of the nature of the socialized relationship between parties growing up in a peer driven culture. For many of those spoken to, brand embarrassment occurred not between the very best of friends but between those they knew less well or not at all. Tracey highlights how a feeling of embarrassment relates to a past friend:

When we were younger, even still now, I would say that say you are in Asda and you buy Smart Price (Asda Own Label) and you go to the check out, and then your pal who you were at school with, is serving you, it is an embarrassing thing. We kind of recognize that it should not be an embarrassing thing because it is, because of the cheap associations.

This type of avoidance behavior is consistent with Goffman's (1956) description of efforts to avoid the gaze of others as visible signs of embarrassment. Indeed, the highly tribalized nature of adolescent lives leads to stories of embarrassment between the brand conscious cliques and social circles. Adolescents are known to join such groups for the purposes of ego enhancement, achievement of status superiority and identity formation (Danesi 1994). In the formative secondary school years, brands were used to define social acceptance and for those not able to, or unwilling to display those brands, a sense of embarrassment was felt as a result of ridicule and social exclusion:

Amanda: In high school, it was always because you were in such tightly packed social environment, where everyone was sort of competing to be popular, so if you did not wear Kickers shoes, you were excluded.

Fraser: When I was back in school, it was just my mates, and I had a pair of shoes and I just wore them with jeans one day and just got a ripping because of the pressure to wear branded trainers like, sort of more skate brands like Vans or Ethies, and all that sort of thing, and I was wearing, I think they were from Clarks or somewhere, just black normal shoes.

Such stories bear a close resemblance to Leary's (1995) understanding of embarrassment as an aversive stimulus that encourages circumspection of public image and importantly, discourages behaviors that might threaten that desired peer-driven image. Furthermore, such cases of embarrassment were often shared amongst observers around, in which teasing and social degradation was a shared social norm (Miller 1987). Wooten (2006) argues that embarrassment in such circumstances is a consequence of the peer ridicule that has arisen and such individuals will become conditioned over time to recognize and takes steps to avoid grounds for potential embarrassment.

Participants also emphasized the importance of social context and place. Environments such as the sports changing room in which the wrong choice of brand of deodorant or make-up displayed could lead to feelings of embarrassment through teasing, ridicule or even fears of bullying. In such circles, the need to establish and maintain social approval became dominant. Haidt (2003) locates this within individuals' powerful desire to 'belong' in group situations. This need to belong extends toward the consumption of branded products and the desire to keep up with group fashions. In fast moving markets such as mobile phones, brand embarrassment was per-

ceived to occur when individuals in the group were left behind by the latest technological fashion as Colin comments on:

In 2nd year, the first phone I got was really top of the range at the time, a Nokia 3310 which is now a brick, but at the time, it was fantastic but within a couple of months, all my mates had them and I was "ok, you had a perfectly good phone anyway", and they do the same thing, but maybe they felt they needed to get them because they felt embarrassed about their against mine.

Feelings of brand embarrassment were also contingent upon the occasion as much as the brand in question. Alcoholic drinks were perceived to be potent territory for brand embarrassment given the image-conscious nature of drinks marketing and changing brand loyalties between differing social groups and drinking occasions. In the example below, Martin talks about an experience in which embarrassment was caused as much by a change in social environment, from one which was acceptable to one that was clearly not:

About three months ago, I was with this person who was the only person I knew. All his friends were drinking Bacardi Breezers and I was like "this is not the way we do it in my group of friends", we always bought a few pints .. I think in that sort of environment, you're a bit embarrassed and everyone else is drinking this so...you feel pressured because you don't want to stand out ... whereas if I was with my mates, I would feel embarrassed to drink that.

Issues of self perception and identity

Finally, participants believed that embarrassment with brands was also a function of issues of self-perception, a lack of self-confidence and individuals' personality and character. Negative images and associations linked to brands worn or consumed produced feelings of undesirability, similar to what Banister and Hogg (2001: 244) described as the "undesired self". This was often based on experiences resulting in teasing, ridicule and isolated cases of bullying. In one such example, a fifteen-year-old boy was so embarrassed to be wearing the wrong choice of school bag that he still remembers the hurtful taunts that followed. Some six years on, he feels that this and several other branded incidents led to a draining of confidence and arguably a deep rooted negative self-portrayal.

Relationships with Brands

In her study, Fournier (1998), drawing on interpersonal relationship theory, suggests that consumers form different types of relationships with their brands. A deeper understanding the phenomenon of brand embarrassment relates not just to issues of the self and socialized environment but also the types of branded relationships consumers establish, maintain or disown.

Brand familiarity and knowledge

Consistent with theories of embarrassment which recognize that a lack of familiarity can encourage the formation of embarrassment (Miller 1992) and also studies of product and purchase embarrassment (Dahl et al. 2001), participants in this study such as Scott below recounted examples in which a lack of knowledge about either a brand's attributes or a lack of confidence in the brand image might result in possible future embarrassment:

It would be different if you did have a really good brand, say you bought a big Sony, I am not saying you would be like "check out my Sony television" but you would maybe slide it

in there. At the other end, I would be embarrassed if I had a television like say a Matsui

In the same vein, stories of embarrassment, either actual or anticipated, occurred in situations in which the participant risked perceptual ridicule if they revealed their lack of branded knowledge in keeping with Gilovich et al.'s (2000) concept of the 'spotlight effect'. In one such example, the choice of a brand of malt whisky to present to a twenty-one year's father as a gift was fraught because he was concerned that the brand of whisky he chose, Glenfiddich, might reveal his lack of knowledge about the sophistication in choice of Scottish malt whisky brands.

The scrutiny of brand attributes and brand knowledge also worked in reverse with examples of feelings of embarrassment because of a lack of knowledge amongst others consuming the brand in question. As Kai explains, he anticipates embarrassment as he does not want to be associated with a brand of wrist bands because of the ignorance of its users:

The *Make Poverty History* (wrist bands)—I found really difficult—everybody just jumped on the bandwagon and obviously became a fashion statement around that summer ... never mind the whole politics behind the whole actual event, I just thought it would be really embarrassing to be walking round because I would be seen to be like somebody who just like, you know, they may not even know the ins and outs of the campaign and stuff. They just wanted a wrist band to prove a fashion point.

Therefore, the lack of brand knowledge can create both experienced embarrassment and projected embarrassment, amongst known individuals and in the case of Kai, unknown passer-bys.

Associations and meaning

As Levy (1959) argues, the symbolism of brands plays an important part in the creation of meaning influencing positive and negative associations with brands. In this research, there were different forms of symbolism creating feelings of embarrassment toward the brand in question. Perhaps the most frequently cited example was the Burberry 'check' design, the most visible emblem of the 'ned' culture so prevalent in the United Kingdom from the late nineties onwards. But other examples included the design patches on jeans pockets, the archway 'M' for McDonalds and even the crocodile label for Lacoste. In Judith's case, it relates to Diesel jeans:

Some folk were going out to spend more money on buying, say, a £150 pair of Diesel jeans or something. And I think folk did, well I certainly did, feel kind of pressured as such, but you would buy say like jeans that had like the brand name plastered across the back pocket so that you would be seen to be wearing them.

In such examples, the brand through its most visible association becomes synonymous with those who visit, purchase and consume it. The embarrassment becomes more vivid with a single symbolic focal point for negative feelings. In a similar vein, embarrassment was also evident toward those who sought to identify with a faked or imitation brand. In such situations, the embarrassment was more akin to sympathy, even antipathy toward the recipient. One participant described occasions in which she would always look down to check whether a passer-by was indeed wearing original 'ugg' boots, identified by their minimal label on the back heel. When noticing individuals wearing the fake version without the original label, she felt embarrassed that such individu-

als should be seeking a shared identity with genuine 'ugg' owners. The concept of a shared mental image (Dobni and Zinkhan 1990) was therefore compromised and negative emotions are fostered.

Participants described how brand names and logos were sometimes covered over to avoid potential embarrassment including the removal of labels from bottles of own-label water, the covering up of laptop logos, the scratching of a brand name off a skateboard with childish associations and the customization of a fashion brand label to disguise its true provenance. In the example below, the increased importance of ethical credentials for branded foods is evident in the actions of a mother seeking to avoid embarrassment when serving coffee. The mere sight of the wrong label was sufficient to provoke a negative reaction as Judith tells us:

Take my mother—she would be embarrassed to buy a brand that was not ethical. She would be embarrassed to say to her friends that it was not ethical so she would be embarrassed to buy Nestle. I remember when we were growing up and my brother Stephen really wanted something from Nestle and she would buy it and hide it in the cupboard or put it in a different package so that when her friends came round, they would not see she had bought Nestle.

In common with theories of symbolic consumption and image transfer, there were many examples of anticipated embarrassment because of the negative associations these might infer:

Mediums of branded embarrassment

Studies have shown that advertising socially sensitive products can cause embarrassment through the awkward nature of how the product is promoted, classically through its advertising, causing feelings of awkwardness and discomfort (Ray 2001). This research suggests that embarrassment can also be caused through the branded communication, creating a sense of embarrassment in a product category not normally associated with embarrassment. Examples centered around either the style of the advertising or the characteristics of the source celebrity used to communicate the branded message. Carlenes explain why she would be embarrassed to be associated with a perfume promoted by an infamous UK celebrity:

I would really have to push myself before I would buy it. Because I just think that it is the tackiest concept in the world and that I would just feel really embarrassed if someone said "oh what are you wearing" and I would have to say "oh, it's Jade perfume"—I would just feel that would be really embarrassing.

In other commonly cited examples, several participants claimed to no longer shop at a well known frozen foods retailer because of a recent association with a fallen pop celebrity, Kerry Katona. Once an ideal role model for families with young children, the celebrity suffered a downward slide in popularity with several high profile incidents eroding her family-friendly image. For Gary, who took pride in the quality of his cooking, the negative brand associations caused by the fallen celebrity were enough to cause acute embarrassment avoidance.

Beyond the negative associations of celebrity promotion, sometimes the style and tone of the advertising was sufficient to cause mild forms of embarrassment causing the viewer to 'cringe' and feel negatively disposed toward the advertiser. Although such examples were often 'enjoyed' for their awfulness, any thoughts of association with the advertiser would undoubtedly have led to personal ridicule and social stigma. Examples discussed included past advertising for Ferrero Rocher, current campaigns for Esure online insurance and finally a well known DIY chain.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

A review of the literature highlights how previous studies focusing on the consuming aspects of embarrassment take little or no account of anticipated or experienced embarrassment centered on the 'branded encounter'. Our findings confirm that this is rich territory to explore; the embedded nature of brand associations, image and meanings in adolescents' everyday lives making experiences of embarrassment almost inevitable. Brand embarrassment was found to be influenced by the symbiotic relationships between the *personal-self* and individuals' *branded relationships*. The findings enhance our understanding of the processes of advanced socialization, identifying how issues of status and class, age and generational differences, interaction within and between groups, social transitions and finally the development of self-identity contribute toward feelings of embarrassment when faced by negative branded encounters. Given the brand-saturated society through which adolescents now navigate, such feelings are widespread. This research gave rise to a range of behavioral consequences, from playful teasing and awkwardness through to possible long-term harm from social stigma and even bullying.

The research also provides a bridge between our understanding of embarrassment and the symbolic consumption of branded products and services. It recognizes the symbolic importance of consumption during adolescent years (Belk et al. 1992) but refines our understanding of how branded associations, images and meaning contribute toward negative as well as positive emotional feelings amongst adolescents (Chaplin and John 2005) through the conceptual lens of embarrassment.

We recognize that this is a small scale study with an emphasis at this stage on exploration but believe it provides fertile ground for continued extensive research which seeks to examine the conceptual links between causes, nature and consequences of brand embarrassment.

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