

A Review of Consumer Embarrassment as a Public and Private Emotion

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Whether the result of mispronouncing a fancy brand name, miscalculating a tip, purchasing a sensitive product, or stumbling into a product display, embarrassment is an important part of the consumer landscape. Embarrassment has traditionally been considered a social emotion, one that can only be experienced in public. In this paper, we offer a comprehensive review of consumer embarrassment and consider situations in which embarrassment can affect consumer behavior in both public and private contexts. We define embarrassment using this broader conceptualization and outline the transgressions that might trigger embarrassment in consumption contexts. We also discuss the diverse implications of embarrassment for consumer behavior, and review the strategies that both consumers and practitioners can use to mitigate embarrassment and its negative consequences. We hope this framework will stimulate new research on consumer embarrassment in both public and private contexts.

Keywords embarrassment; emotion; coping; appraisal; self-consciousness

Introduction

Imagine you are walking through a crowded upscale bar. You do not see the few steps going down and you trip and fall, dropping the martini in your hand. As people approach you to help, you quickly get up and walk back toward the bar, blushing and looking down.

Picture the following: as you are about to leave work after a long day, you exit your cubicle, only to look down and realize that your fly is wide open; not only that, but the tip of your white shirt is clearly sticking out of your pants. Fortunately, by now the office is deserted. But, you still feel mortified as you think of the many co-workers who could have noticed it under other circumstances.

Visualize yourself as an 8-year-old waking up in the middle of the night. You are on your way to the bathroom. You glance in the direction of your parents' bedroom, only to see them having sex – the door has been

left open! They do not notice you and you quickly run back to your room. You know what they were doing, but you have never seen it before. You feel uncomfortable and hide under the covers.

In all the examples above, you would likely feel embarrassed. But, what is “embarrassment?” Embarrassment has typically been defined as a social emotion whereby one feels an aversive state of abashment and chagrin associated with unwanted mishaps or social predicaments (Goffman, 1955; Miller, 1995; Modigliani, 1968). The first two examples above are consistent with this definition. In example 1, the embarrassment stems from others seeing you fall—you are clumsy and there is a public scene; in example 2, you imagine all of the co-workers who might have seen your fly open and felt too uncomfortable to say anything. However, in example 3, no one sees your transgression and you do not imagine them doing so. Importantly, you do not necessarily imagine anyone judging you—the negative feelings come from you judging yourself.

The idea that embarrassment can also be a private emotion, and be experienced without a real or

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imagined audience, has only recently begun to receive attention in psychology and consumer behavior research (Babcock, 1988; Higuchi & Fukada, 2002; Krishna, Herd, & Aydinoglu, 2015). This paper provides a review of consumer embarrassment, considering both the public and private perspectives, with the goal of stimulating research on embarrassment in the consumer context. We next discuss the overall conceptual framework that will structure this review.

Embarrassment is widespread and can impact consumers in a multitude of ways. The vast majority of research emphasizes consumer embarrassment in a public context. While the private view has received much less academic attention, it can be equally detrimental, particularly in relation to consumer behavior. To establish this standpoint, we provide an integrated review of consumer embarrassment, using the framework outlined in Figure 1. In doing so, we hope to improve our understanding of what consumer embarrassment is, how it can be measured, and how it can most effectively be managed—both by consumers and marketers. While much of consumer embarrassment research considers a single trigger or a specific way to manage embarrassment, we hope that our framework will encourage future research to examine multiple elements of embarrassment, and their complex and multi-faceted relationships.

We first outline what embarrassment is and how it operates. We posit that in order for embarrassment to ensue, a transgression (that violates socially accepted conventions or personal codes of conduct) occurs in a public or private context, and is then appraised by others or by oneself. We highlight common transgressions that cause embarrassment in general, and more specifically in consumption contexts. Some of these transgressions have received extensive consideration in previous research, but many have not.

Our conceptual framework also considers how embarrassment—both felt and anticipated—can be measured and differentiated from related emotions such as shame and guilt. We also acknowledge and review individual differences that may moderate embarrassment and its downstream consequences. Our framework then highlights the diverse implications of embarrassment for consumer behavior, evidenced by the various coping strategies that consumers use to manage or prevent embarrassment and its negative consequences, as well as practitioner interventions that aid in this coping. Finally, we offer suggestions for future research.

Throughout the review, we emphasize important similarities between public and private embarrassment as well as ways in which they diverge. Our framework highlights that embarrassment—whether occurring in a public or private context—

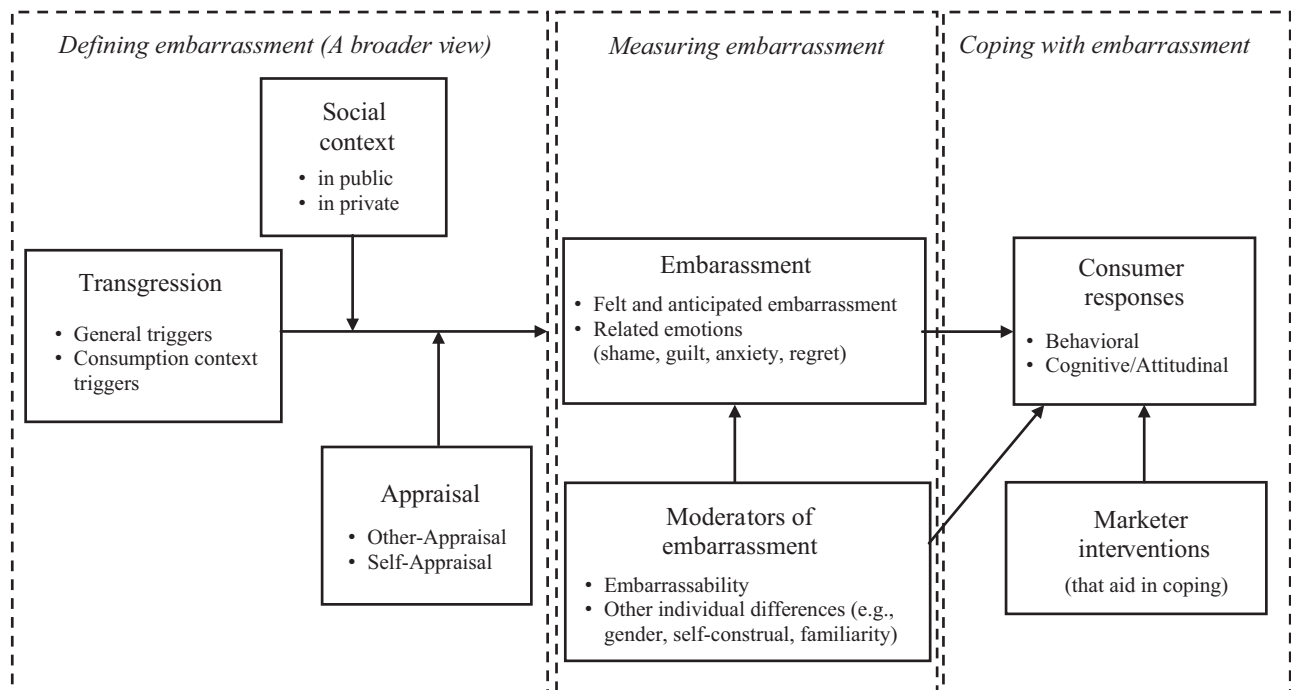


Figure 1. Overall conceptual framework.

may arise due to self- or other-appraisal, can be measured via self-reports, and may result in similar physiological manifestations (e.g., blushing). Many transgressions that cause embarrassment, such as tripping or misremembering a name, result in the same emotional experience whether in a public or private context. However, public and private embarrassment may also diverge in important ways, such as in subsequent consumer responses to embarrassing transgressions. For example, while embarrassment often causes a desire to flee a situation, particularly in a public context, such an intention may offer no reprieve when embarrassment occurs in private and is due to one's self-appraisal (Krishna et al., 2015).

We next discuss how embarrassment has been defined in the literature, and offer our own broader definition that considers embarrassment across public and private contexts and as a result of other- and self-appraisal.

Defining Embarrassment (A Broader View)

Embarrassment has been defined in many ways with researchers focusing on the emotional state itself, the associated mishaps or predicaments, their appraisal, and the contexts in which it arises. Researchers generally agree that when embarrassed, we feel uncomfortable, awkward, foolish, flustered, nervous, and surprised (Goffman, 1955; Miller, 1992). Where previous definitions of embarrassment diverge the most, is regarding the type of transgression that triggers embarrassment, the social context in which the transgression occurs (public or private), and the nature of the appraisal (by self or by others). Given their centrality to our understanding of consumer embarrassment, we first discuss social context and appraisal, and then turn to the types of transgressions that might cause embarrassment.

Social Context and Appraisal

While embarrassment is pervasive in the consumer landscape, in both public and private contexts, the vast majority of research suggests embarrassment must occur in a public context and due to others' appraisal. We consider how embarrassment has been defined as both a public and private emotion, and then offer our own integrated definition that considers both viewpoints:

Public (Social) view of embarrassment. The dominant perspective, the public (social) view of

embarrassment, defines embarrassment as an emotional reaction to "unintentional and undesired social predicaments or transgressions" (Edelmann, 1985, p. 223). The key element of this definition is that individuals are concerned with how others will perceive and appraise them (Edelmann, 1985; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Research on consumer embarrassment predominantly follows this public account, requiring the observation and evaluation of real or imagined audiences in order to occur (e.g., Dahl, Manchanda, & Argo, 2001; Lau-Gesk & Drolet, 2008).

Based on this public view of embarrassment, researchers have developed several models to explain its effect. Building off of Erving Goffman's early research in sociology (1955), the *dramaturgic* model suggests embarrassment occurs when people are unable to sustain a certain image in order to attain desired impressions (Parrott, Sabini, & Silver, 1988; Sabini, Siepmann, Stein, & Meyerowitz, 2000). Shakespeare's famous line "All the world's a stage" is often used to describe Goffman's theory (Joosse, 2012). In front of others, we may be uncertain of how to behave or unable to sustain a particular identity, which prompts uncertainty and embarrassment. According to this model, embarrassment will not occur in private (i.e., backstage), because individuals drop their societal roles and concerns. Similarly, the *social evaluation* model (Manstead & Semin, 1981; Miller, 1996) and the *loss of self-esteem* model (Edelmann, 1987; Modigliani, 1971) emphasize that embarrassment stems from perceived undesired appraisal by others or individuals' concerns about how others might appraise them.

Public embarrassment has been tested in a variety of consumer experiments, the majority of which focus on sensitive products such as condoms (Dahl et al., 2001; Moore, Dahl, Gorn, & Weinberg, 2006), self-help books (Kumar, 2008), or hearing aids (Iacobucci, Calder, Malthouse, & Dulachek, 2002). For example, Dahl et al. (2001) show that consumers report higher levels of embarrassment when purchasing condoms in front of a confederate (vs. no confederate) at a real pharmacy, but only when they are less familiar with the product category. In a second study, consumers purchase condoms from a vending machine in an empty but open bathroom or in an out-of-order empty bathroom. Again, when consumers are less familiar with the product category, they experience greater embarrassment in the open (vs. out-of-order) bathroom, imagining others walking in and seeing their purchase. Although consumers and practitioners alike often focus on public embarrassment in relation to sensitive

products, embarrassment may influence consumer behavior in a variety of other public contexts—ranging from speed dating to concerns about how to dress in a fancy restaurant (Kumar, 2008; Wan, 2013). Even mundane consumption practices such as redeeming coupons may be seen as embarrassing in a public context (Brumbaugh & Rosa, 2009).

Private view of embarrassment. By contrast, Babcock (1988) suggests that although embarrassment often appears as a response to the feared reaction of an audience, it best reflects a concern with upholding personal standards, not merely a concern over what others will think. As such, Babcock (1988), Babcock and Sabini (1990) *violation of personal standards* model suggests embarrassment occurs due to a self-perceived discrepancy between one's personal standards and how one has actually behaved. Similar to other self-consistency theories (e.g., cognitive dissonance), conflict between one's behavior and personal beliefs create distress (Leary & Kowalski, 1997), in this case, embarrassment.

Babcock (1988) articulates this theory with an example: imagine an individual, who defines himself based on intelligence and independence, has difficulty completing a Calculus problem set and ends up looking up answers in the back of his book. He may feel embarrassed even though he believes no one knows of this transgression and no one ever will. Babcock and Sabini (1990) conduct several follow-up experiments to test this theory and find that this type of personal standard violation is particularly embarrassing when it is perceived by the individual as "out of character."

Integrated view of embarrassment. Some researchers have considered both the public and the private aspects of how embarrassment may be generated. In Modigliani's (1971) model, "esteem in the eyes of the other" (i.e., one's perceived situational public esteem or social image) affects "esteem in the eyes of self" (i.e., situational self-esteem), and the latter is what causes embarrassment. Modigliani tests for this model by asking participants to solve hard (leading to failure) or easy (leading to success) anagrams as part of a group. He considers two scenarios: in the public case, others see the participant solving the anagrams; in the private case, they do not. Interestingly, although Modigliani proposes and tests for an indirect model through public evaluation, he also finds support for a "private embarrassment" model directly through self-esteem; however, he does not discuss this model in detail or explore it further. In his words, "The sole unexpected result. . . is the significant difference between

the private failure and private success conditions. Originally, it was posited that loss of situational subjective-public-esteem was a necessary condition for embarrassment. . . (but, there is) a possibility that loss of situational self-esteem may, after all, be a sufficient condition for embarrassment" (p. 24). However, and as he states, even in the private condition, the results from the anagrams are given to another person in the group, and are not completely private, highlighting the need for further empirical work.

Focusing more directly on the possibility of embarrassment also occurring in private, Higuchi and Fukada (2002) conduct a study in which they present participants with two embarrassing scenes representing either public (e.g., falling over on a crowded platform) or private (e.g., failing an examination due to lack of studying) contexts. Participants then rate the scene in terms of how much they believe the experience would lead to embarrassment. The authors conclude that public embarrassment is driven by concerns of social evaluation and uncertainty about how to act around others, and that private embarrassment is caused by inconsistency with one's self-image and lower feelings of self-worth.

Krishna et al. (2015) develop a typology which highlights that embarrassment can occur across public and private contexts and due to other- and self-appraisal. They test this typology in several studies. For example, in one study, they ask participants to imagine experiencing incontinence (the involuntary leaking of urine); participants then read about a drug-purchasing experience for their problem, either through a physical (public) or an online (private) drugstore. Prior to reading the purchase scenario, participants are primed for other- versus self-appraisal by writing about and providing examples for either their own general evaluations of themselves as a person or their perceptions of others' evaluations. The authors find evidence for embarrassment across all four quadrants of their typology.

Building on this integrated view, we offer a broader definition of embarrassment that considers public and private social contexts as well as other- and self-appraisal: Embarrassment reflects an aversive emotional state in which one feels chagrin following deliberation on perceived negative appraisal by others or negative appraisal by oneself for transgressions that occur either in public or in private contexts.

Our definition recognizes a conceptualization of embarrassment that is broader than what has

traditionally been considered, extending beyond requirements of “social presence” and “other-appraisal.” While Krishna et al. (2015) demonstrate that embarrassment can exist in both public and private contexts and due to other- or self-appraisal, we build on this typology to further articulate how the transgressions and the individual’s deliberation on context and appraisal may differ across these situations. We present this integrated view in Table 1. We also note where previous research rests within this conceptualization, based on how it incorporates social context and appraisal into the definition of embarrassment.

This conceptualization of embarrassment emphasizes that social context and appraisal are orthogonal. Most research in psychology and consumer behavior assumes that embarrassment caused by any transgression that occurs in a public context is due to concerns about appraisal by others, which results in lower perceptions of one’s presented self (quadrant 1 in Table 1; e.g., Blair & Roese, 2013; Goffman, 1955). The individual, in turn, deliberates on the situation from the audiences’ perspective who observes and appraises the transgression. Embarrassment arises due to concerns of others’ negative evaluations of one’s presented self. In

Table 1
Embarrassment Across Social Context and Appraisal

Appraisal	Social context	
	In Public: Others are present	In Private: No others are present
Other-Appraisal (Real or Imagined)	<p><i>Transgression:</i> An incident violating social conventions occurs</p> <p><i>Social context:</i> Actor is in public context and perceives or imagines observation of transgression by others present</p> <p><i>Appraisal:</i> Actor deliberates on his/her perceptions of others’ appraisal of the transgression</p> <p><i>Transgression example:</i> “Your expired credit card is declined at a checkout line in store, and you don’t have fallback cash. You feel uncomfortable while everyone waits for you sort the situation and cancel your purchase.”</p> <p><i>Subset of prior research in this quadrant:</i> e.g. Blair and Roese (2013), Dong et al. (2013), Eller, Koschate, and Gilson (2011), Goffman (1955), Grace (2007, 2009), Keltner and Buswell (1996), Miller (1995), Modigliani (1968), Parrott et al. (1988)</p>	<p><i>Transgression:</i> An incident violating social conventions occurs</p> <p><i>Social context:</i> Actor is in private context and imagines the possibility of observation of transgression by others not currently present</p> <p><i>Appraisal:</i> Actor deliberates on his/her perceptions of imagined others’ appraisal of the transgression</p> <p><i>Transgression example:</i> “Your expired credit card is declined while trying to make an online purchase. You cancel the transaction since your other cards are not available. You can’t help imagining what others would think if they had observed the incident.”</p> <p><i>Subset of prior research in this quadrant:</i> e.g. Dahl et al. (2001), Edelmann (1981), Miller (1996)</p>
Self-Appraisal	<p><i>Transgression:</i> An incident violating social conventions or personal codes of conduct occurs</p> <p><i>Social context:</i> Actor is in public context, but no others observe transgression or the actor does not attend to others’ observation (self as observer)</p> <p><i>Appraisal:</i> Actor deliberates on his/her own appraisal of the transgression</p> <p><i>Transgression example:</i> “Your expired credit card is declined at a checkout line in store, and you don’t have fallback cash. You don’t necessarily focus on the impression you have left on the cashier or others, but you feel so stupid and uncomfortable while you sort the situation and cancel your purchase.”</p> <p><i>Prior research in this quadrant:</i> Krishna et al. (2015)</p>	<p><i>Transgression:</i> An incident violating social conventions or personal codes of conduct occurs</p> <p><i>Social context:</i> Actor is in private context, hence no others observe transgression (self as observer)</p> <p><i>Appraisal:</i> Actor deliberates on his/her own appraisal of the transgression</p> <p><i>Transgression example:</i> “Your expired credit card is declined while trying to make an online purchase. You cancel the transaction since your other cards are not available. You can’t help thinking how stupid you are and feel ridiculous to have gotten yourself into this situation.”</p> <p><i>Prior research in this quadrant:</i> Babcock (1988), Higuchi and Fukada (2002), Krishna et al. (2015)</p>

quadrant 2, the transgression occurs in private, without anyone present; however the individual imagines the possibility of observation and appraisal by others (e.g., Dahl et al., 2001). Embarrassment is caused by concerns about possible negative evaluations of these imagined others. In the other two quadrants, a transgression occurs in public (quadrant 3) or in private (quadrant 4). Irrespective of the social context, in these latter quadrants, the self is the key observer and embarrassment ensues through negative self-appraisal; others' observation and appraisal does not necessarily occur or need not be imagined (e.g., Babcock, 1988; Krishna et al., 2015). We further articulate how embarrassment may differ across the four quadrants of Table 1 with an example of having one's credit card declined (see Table 1; see also Figure 2 for a graphic representation of the example across the four quadrants).

We next focus, in more detail, on embarrassing transgressions and see how they may differ across the quadrants of Table 1—what might trigger embarrassment in public or in private social contexts and due to other- or self-appraisal.

Embarrassing Transgressions

The dominant, public, view of embarrassment suggests that embarrassment usually follows a transgression in the form of violation of socially accepted codes of conduct (Miller & Leary, 1992). For example, one might feel embarrassment when shouting out the wrong answer on an easy question

(“What computer brand is named after a fruit?”) at a bar trivia night. This might be an embarrassing transgression because everyone agrees such a question is common knowledge, and for an adult not to know the answer is surprising and violates a social convention. In contrast, Babcock (1988) recognizes that embarrassment may occur following a transgression in which “one has acted in a way that is inconsistent with one's persona, that is, that one has violated one's personal standards” (p. 460). For example, as a business professor, one might read a *BusinessWeek* article and misunderstand a somewhat complex marketing concept. Here, no socially accepted codes of conduct are violated, but embarrassment occurs due to a breach of one's own personal standards.

We recognize that embarrassment can be experienced when one violates a socially accepted convention or personal code of conduct, and that the nature of the transgression may differ based on who is appraising the situation. While other-appraisal typically reflects a social convention violation, self-appraisal may lead to embarrassment when either a social convention or personal code of conduct is violated (see Table 1).

Next, we consider a wider array of transgressions that might trigger embarrassment. We discuss general triggers that have received consideration in psychology and further develop our understanding of triggers of embarrassment in a consumption context.

General triggers. Researchers from psychology have considered a variety of triggers that may

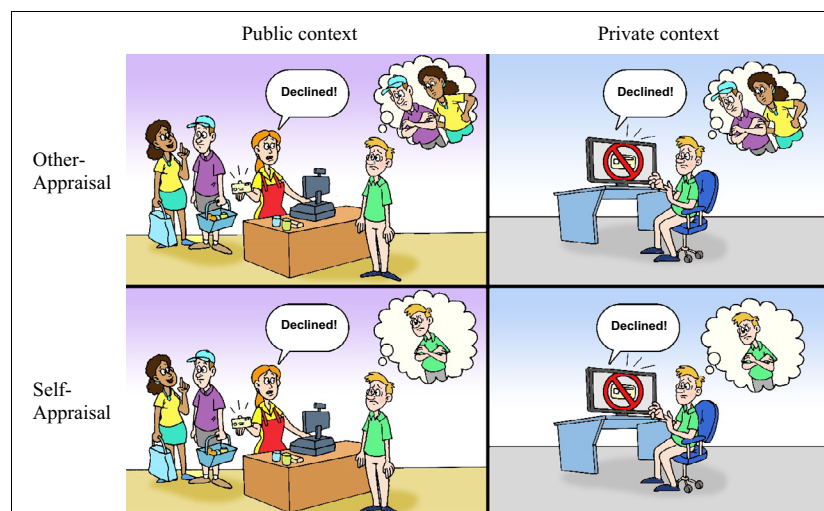


Figure 2. An example of how embarrassment differs across social context and appraisal (Original graphic design commissioned from www.fiverr.com/quickcartoon). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Table 2
Triggers of Consumer Embarrassment

	Trigger	Explanation	General example	Consumption context example
Prominent Interpersonal Interactions	Prominent Consumption Context	Inappropriate interpersonal encounter	Being berated by a family member in public	Arguing with concierge in a hotel
	Awkward social encounter	Being the target of public criticism or banter	Being praised by the teacher in front of the class	Receiving an excessive compliment from a service employee in front of a new date
	Center of attention (positive)	Receiving excessive praise or attention from others	Receiving a series of negative comments on an Instagram post	People commenting about your expensive purse when they have much simpler ones
	Center of attention (negative)	Public display or discussion of sexual or bodily issues	Watching a sex scene on TV with family	Purchasing online pornography or gas prevention medication
	Bodily- or sex-related topics	Discussions around money, politics, religion, etc.	Making an adverse comment about a religious domain at a dinner party	Losing one's cool with a service employee
Products, Services, Communications	Other sensitive topics	Involuntary physical actions, mishaps	Tripping, falling, spilling	Knocking down a pile of cans in a supermarket display
	Clumsiness and physical actions	Not knowing how to behave, what to do in a situation	Being underdressed at a formal function	Attending a 5-course dinner at a nice restaurant and not knowing what utensils to use
	Uncertainty	Not knowing or forgetting something that is expected	Forgetting the name of an acquaintance	Not being able to describe a basic product problem to a service clerk
Consumer Incompetence	Intellectual	Self-consciousness around appearance-related characteristics	Being conscious about one's large chest	Purchasing large-size clothing or underwear
	Physical appearance	Breaches to self-image	"Liking" a controversial public figure on Facebook	Holding onto one's attachment to an outdated brand
Identity Signals	Identity-related			

cause embarrassment, the vast majority of which reflect a violation of social convention in public contexts and due to other-appraisal. Edelman (1981), for example, proposes a classification of triggers of embarrassment with six categories: failure to confirm the self-image that was presented to others (e.g., performing poorly in a presentation to colleagues), loss of poise and social skill (e.g., stumbling on a rug or forgetting someone's name), failure to mesh (e.g., realizing a person is more important than one assumed), breach of privacy (e.g., bodily noise), overpraise (e.g., being made the undeserving center of attention), and empathic reaction to someone else's embarrassment (e.g., watching an extremely bad comedian). Metts and Cupach (1989) develop a similar set of categories, again reflecting violations of social conventions in public contexts and due to other-appraisal: faux pas (intentional acts that prove to be inappropriate when the correct interpretation of the situation becomes clear, for example, wearing informal attire to a formal function), mistake (intentional acts that would be appropriate but are incorrectly executed, for example, forgetting to turn off one's cell phone before an important meeting), accident (unintentional acts that are inappropriate to the situation, for example, spilling coffee, tripping), and recipient (predicaments arising for the individual due to the behavior of others, for example, being criticized, receiving excessive praise).

Consumption context triggers. Research on consumer embarrassment is relatively newer, and is predominantly focused on identifying and understanding specific isolated instances, as opposed to such comprehensive categorization attempts of different triggers. In fact, almost all of the various triggers identified in psychology also apply to consumption contexts. Consumption contexts, however, also have their unique characteristics and specific implications for how felt or anticipated embarrassment may affect individuals, and should offer additional insights into how embarrassment works. In Table 2, we build on various categorization attempts from psychology and previous research on consumer embarrassment to propose a more comprehensive list of the types of triggers that are most relevant to consumer behavior, and those that may violate either social conventions or personal codes of conduct.

The proposed set of triggers can manifest across a range of consumption domains and contexts. Previous work demonstrates that consumer embarrassment is typically triggered through transgressions in interpersonal encounters in the market, and

during the purchase and consumption of products and services that are themselves regarded as embarrassing (e.g., Dahl et al., 2001; Grace, 2007)—here, the transgression typically violates social convention. Embarrassment can also manifest in other consumer contexts that have received little if any attention in academic research, for example, when voting or sharing controversial political opinions. We focus on each of these consumption domains, and discuss the corresponding triggers of embarrassment in relation to our conceptualization, and also consider transgressions that may violate either social conventions or personal codes of conduct.

Embarrassing interpersonal interactions. Much of the marketplace involves interacting with another human being—whether a salesperson or a service provider, or with other consumers. Previous research examines how such interpersonal interactions in retail settings can prompt embarrassment, and influence a variety of consumer behaviors, even when the product or service itself is not embarrassing (e.g., Grace, 2007, 2009; Verbeke & Bagozzi, 2003). These triggers include *awkward social encounters* and *center of attention* effects, which both require the presence of others (public context). While the center of attention triggers embarrassment through other-appraisal, awkward social encounters may prompt embarrassment through other- or self-appraisal.

Grace (2007) examines the effects of *awkward social encounters* (i.e., improper, inappropriate or ungraceful acts, expression of emotions, and verbal blunders) on felt embarrassment and repatronage. In one experiment, she asks participants to report their own personal embarrassing experiences as consumers. One participant recalls a particularly vivid service encounter:

I entered a lingerie shop to buy a nice gift for my girlfriend of 1 year. I approached the counter and told the sales assistant that I wanted to buy some lingerie for my girlfriend. As I am in my 40s, she must have assumed I was married (which I have never been), and she very sarcastically and loudly snapped at me “why don't you buy some nice lingerie for your wife instead!!!!” I was shocked and extremely embarrassed. I don't know what her problem was, but I left in a hurry never to return (and never to forget). I will stick to buying chocolates for my girlfriend in future, it is a lot safer!(Grace, 2007, p. 278)

The author finds that this type of embarrassment caused by service providers is particularly

damaging, leading to greater felt embarrassment and a higher likelihood of avoiding shopping at that store again compared to triggers by other consumers. Marketers can offer careful staff training and standardize service encounters (e.g., design service protocols) in order to mitigate this sort of consumer embarrassment (Grace, 2009).

Being the *center of attention*, both negatively, such as when being the subject of criticism, but also positively, such as when receiving excessive praise, can also prompt embarrassment (Metts & Cupach, 1989). In consumption domains, such negative or positive attention may come from salespeople or other consumers, and may trigger embarrassment. In fact, Esmark, Nobleb, and Breazeale (2017) demonstrate that simply perceiving that an employee is watching a shopper can create embarrassment, causing the shopper to either permanently or temporarily leave the store. The authors find, in a field study, that shoppers are significantly more likely to abandon their purchase than to place the product in their cart, when such eye contact is made with a confederate dressed as an employee.

Embarrassing products, services, and marketing communications. Much of the research on consumer embarrassment focuses on products and services that are inherently more embarrassing than others. Purchase and consumption of these products and services, such as contraceptives, erectile dysfunction drugs, or treatment for impaired hearing, are generally deemed embarrassing, as demonstrated in the studies we reviewed in the introduction (Dahl et al., 2001; Iacobucci et al., 2002; Krishna et al., 2015). A predominant portion of such products pertain to *bodily- or sex-related topics*. Other examples noted in previous research include, but are not limited to, personal hygiene articles, gas-prevention medication, pornography, and some medical services such as venereal disease treatment, vasectomies, and abortions (e.g., Dahl et al., 2001; Fost, 1996; Lau-Gesk & Drolet, 2008; Rehman & Brooks, 1987; Song, Huang, & Li, 2017; Wilson & West, 1981).

The dominant focus within the field of consumer behavior has been on such embarrassing, controversial, or so-called “unmentionable” products and services (Wilson & West, 1981), which might also relate to *other sensitive topics* such as political views, religion, or controversial issues. In their conceptual paper, Wilson and West (1981) present an overview of unmentionable products, and suggest a “scale of unmentionability” based on society’s and buyers’ own attitudes toward specific products. This scale includes products that would be considered

sensitive to buy, ranging from regular products such as toothpaste, to moderately sensitive products such as burial arrangements, and to condemned or not marketable products such as hard drugs and murder for hire. More commonly, products and services are embarrassing if consumers need or want them but are reluctant to seek them out or are uncomfortable discussing openly. The majority of research considering these triggers emphasizes public context and others’ appraisal, though some research has begun to consider how and when these triggers may also prompt consumer embarrassment in private contexts and due to self-appraisal (Krishna et al., 2015).

Embarrassment due to consumer incompetence. Embarrassment research from psychology documents a variety of triggers based on instances of individual errors and perceived personal failures, which might also directly apply to consumption contexts. The simple case of *clumsiness and involuntary physical actions* can generate consumer embarrassment if the triggering incidents occur as part of consumption domains—as in the case of knocking down a pile of cans in a supermarket display. Such acts of consumer clumsiness or physical errors have not yet been the topic of academic study, but could be explored as cases of transgressions in public consumption contexts.

Concerns over feeling incompetent might also be triggered through *uncertainty* or *intellectual* errors when consumers might feel stupid for not knowing or for forgetting something expected. In a consumption context, a consumer might mispronounce a brand name or foreign food when ordering off the menu. Consumers may seek to demonstrate their knowledge when purchasing or reviewing products, but such actions come with potential for appearing incompetent to others or oneself (Lutz & Reilly, 1974). For example, one may avoid sharing negative word-of-mouth experiences as doing so may signal the individual was unable to get a good price, is unknowledgeable about a product or is just “an overall incompetent consumer” (Philip & Ashworth, 2013).

Consumers’ concerns over their *physical appearance* might also prompt feelings of incompetence, and trigger public and private consumer embarrassment. Particularly for young women, more than 50% of whom report being dissatisfied with their bodies (Bearman, Presnell, Martinez, & Stice, 2006), consumption related to physical appearance, such as purchasing larger sized clothing, might prompt embarrassment. Beyond altering purchase behavior, this embarrassment can stimulate other actions such

as compensatory consumption behavior (Dong, Huang, & Wyr, 2013). We will revisit this idea while discussing coping with embarrassment.

Embarrassment due to negative identity signals. While much of the research on identity, uniqueness, and self-expression emphasize their benefits for consumer well-being (e.g., Berger & Heath, 2008; Richins, 1994), certain actions may come with risk of embarrassment through *identity-related* triggers. For example, relationships with certain brands may be embarrassing (Grant & Walsh, 2009). This “brand embarrassment” may lead consumers to disown favored brands if they perceive or anticipate feelings of awkwardness or discomfort in using them (Leith & Baumeister, 1996).

Beyond traditional consumption, academics and journalists have recently acknowledged the role of identity-related triggers of embarrassment in consumer behavior beyond typical purchase and consumption domains, and into the sharing and spreading of ideas. Specifically, embarrassment influences social media use and how we portray ourselves online, particularly in conjunction with various products and brands. Based on personal and cultural perceptions, if consumers have tastes and preferences, they think will cause others to judge them, they are less likely to exhibit these preferences on social media. In one study conducted by Spotify, men and women show highly similar musical tastes (Van Buskirk, 2014); however, Facebook reveals major differences in artists “liked,” because men seem to publicly affiliate themselves with artists they perceive to be more masculine. Finally, it may come as a little surprise that although irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and migraines are similarly prevalent, the Facebook group for migraine sufferers is 2.5 times larger than that for consumers suffering from IBS (Stephens-Davidowitz, 2017).

Identity-related embarrassment concerns may also influence the predictability of political polls, and could be used to explain the discrepancies between election polls and observed results (Krishna, 2016, reproduced in *Scientific American*, PBS NewsHour, and *The Daily Mail*; Williams, 2016). Just as concerns of anticipated embarrassment can lead to response biases in other forms of marketing research (Fisher, 1993), when asked about future votes, consumers may over-report plans to vote for candidates they perceive to be more popular (Krishna, 2016; Williams, 2016). This effect, known as the Bradley Effect, is a well-studied political phenomenon in which voters tell pollsters what they want to hear, because they are

embarrassed to say otherwise. In 1982, a poll showed Tom Bradley, Los Angeles’ first African-American mayor and a Democrat leading the polls over his white Republic competitor in the race for Governor. When Bradley lost, political scientists concluded some voters opted to misrepresent their voting plans in order to avoid anticipated embarrassment or perceptions of racism (Payne, 1988). More recently, Krishna (2016) suggested that voting for Donald Trump over Hilary Clinton in the 2016 U.S. Presidential race may have been perceived as violating an expected social convention for some voters, leading them to report an “undecided” vote in the polls, even though they knew they would ultimately vote for Trump; and that this would have been one reason for the inaccuracy of the polls.

We acknowledge that the instances discussed here are not necessarily a fully exhaustive list of the possible transgressions that might trigger embarrassment in consumer contexts. We hope that this discussion and the contents of Table 2, including the examples provided for each category, will stimulate researchers to think of other triggers not included, and also to explore how and when these triggers could occur in public or private contexts. For instance, awkward social encounters may only occur in public, but concerns about one’s physical appearance or competence could exist in either context. Similarly, each of these experiences may prompt other-appraisal, self-appraisal, or some combination of the two. We provided an example of how one trigger would align with the four quadrants of our integrated conceptualization of embarrassment (the declined credit card as an example of consumer error, as presented in Table 1) and will return to this discussion as an interesting avenue for future research later.

Measuring Embarrassment

In the following sections, we first consider *felt* and *anticipated* embarrassment; these related, but distinct emotional experiences are often discussed interchangeably within experimental research. We discuss the many direct and indirect ways in which embarrassment, both felt and anticipated, can be measured via self-reports, physiological manifestations, and behavioral tendencies, and how each of these measures are similar or different based on whether the embarrassment occurs in public or in the private context. We then consider other related emotions such as shame and guilt that often occur

in conjunction with embarrassment. Finally, we recognize that not all individuals experience embarrassment in the same way and consider individual differences, which may moderate embarrassment in a consumer context.

Felt and Anticipated Embarrassment

Our definition of embarrassment emphasizes *felt* embarrassment in response to an embarrassing transgression that has occurred or is occurring. However, thinking about possible transgressions might trigger *anticipated* embarrassment, which can result in a similar emotional experience and can be measured in similar ways (e.g., Bagozzi, Baumgartner, Pieters, & Zeelenberg, 2000; Cohen, Pham, & Andrade, 2008; Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994).

Given the challenges of creating negative emotional experiences in the lab or in online studies, much of the experimental research across psychology and consumer behavior involve participants responding to hypothetical scenarios or accounts of past experiences, which actually captures anticipated or remembered embarrassment, but is presented as a proxy for felt embarrassment. For example, Tangney, Miller, Flicker, and Barlow (1996) examine embarrassment in an experimental context by asking participants to remember and provide detailed written accounts of past embarrassing experiences, and then to rate those experiences in terms of “how much they experienced being embarrassed (self-conscious/blushed)”.

In Blair and Roese’s (2013) experiments studying embarrassing products and shopping basket composition, participants are told to imagine that they are in a store purchasing the products listed on their screens (e.g., anti-odor foot powder vs. black t-shirt) and to report “how embarrassed (uncomfortable/awkward) they would feel”. In this case, participants may be envisioning how they would feel or perhaps remembering how they have felt in similar past experiences. This is just one example to highlight that “felt embarrassment” is actually quite challenging to capture. Below we review some clever ways in which researchers create embarrassing experiences and capture the emotion via both direct and indirect measures.

We consolidate some of these diverse measurement approaches in a typology that captures self-reported embarrassment, and the physiological manifestations and behavioral tendencies associated with embarrassment (e.g., Grace, 2007) (see Table 3). The overall emotional and physiological

experience is often quite similar whether embarrassment is prompted by other- or self-appraisal and whether it occurs in a public or private context. There may, however, be important differences with regard to behavioral tendencies. We discuss this in further detail below.

Self-reported embarrassment. The most widely recognized self-report multi-item scale within consumer behavior was used by Dahl et al. (2001), who asked participants how “embarrassed/uncomfortable/awkward” (7-point scales anchored at “not at all” and “very”) they felt when purchasing condoms (also used by Blair & Roese, 2013; Grace, 2007; Krishna et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2006). Other research includes different items that are also closely related to embarrassment, such as “not at ease, ridiculous, stupid, laughable” (Barnier & Valette-Florence, 2006), “constrained, mortified, self-conscious” (Lau-Gesk & Drolet, 2008; Modigliani, 1971), or “humiliated, foolish, frustrated” (Grace, 2007). As suggested by Krishna et al. (2015) empirical work and our current conceptualization, the same self-report measures can effectively be used for multiple types of embarrassment across public and private contexts.

Similar multi-item scales for self-reported embarrassment have been used in both psychology and consumer behavior research to capture felt and anticipated embarrassment. For instance, in one study, Apsler (1975) has participants engage in four either high- or low-embarrassment tasks, such as laughing for 30 s as if they had just heard a funny joke or imitating a 5-year-old having a temper tantrum versus counting aloud or walking around a room. Participants then indicate their reactions to each task by rating them on bipolar adjective scales: “at ease – self-conscious, poised – awkward, constrained – free, unembarrassed – embarrassed.” Similarly, in consumer behavior research, Dahl et al. (2001) have participants go through actual experiences of condom purchases (for instance, in a pharmacy or from a vending machine), while Krishna et al. (2015) have participants respond to scenarios of purchasing Viagra using the same 3-item scale of “embarrassed/uncomfortable/awkward” (7-point scales anchored at “not at all” and “very”).

Physiological manifestations. Emotions are usually accompanied by physiological manifestations in the form of internal sensations and external displays, which have been used by previous research to measure felt embarrassment. For instance, Tangney et al. (1996) ask participants to provide detailed written accounts of remembered personal

embarrassing experiences, after which they rate their internal sensations at that time, through measures such as “I felt physically smaller” or “I felt blushed,” on 5-point scales anchored at “the feeling was mild” and “the feeling was extremely intense.” Similarly, Krishna et al. (2015) ask participants to rate the physiological changes they thought they would experience in the described embarrassing scenarios, based on their agreement with the measures: “I would feel my face turning red” and “I would feel blood rushing through my body” (7-point scales anchored at “not at all likely” and “very likely”). They find that the expected internal sensations for anticipated embarrassment are similar in nature across social context and other- vs. self-appraisal, but could differ in intensity such that public embarrassment leads to greater feelings of blood rush compared to embarrassment in private contexts.

Focusing on direct measurement of physiological manifestations, Harris (2001) demonstrates elevated heart rate and blood pressure during embarrassing experiences. She asks study participants to sing the *Star Spangled Banner* in front of a video camera and an experimenter, followed by a resting period. Baseline and continuous physiological measures are taken through all phases, using a noninvasive small finger cuff. Harris reports elevated blood pressure and heart rate levels for the embarrassment phase. Participants’ heart rates return back to normal during the resting period; however, blood pressure remains elevated. Similarly, Miller (1987) focuses on another physiological marker, electrodermal activity (EDA), which captures below-skin sweating through observing changes in the resistance of the skin to small electrical currents. In one of his studies, he reports increased levels of EDA for participants while watching someone perform

Table 3
Measures of Embarrassment

	Measurement Method
Self-Reported Embarrassment	<i>Embarrassed-Uncomfortable-Awkward</i> [e.g., Dahl et al. (2001), Blair and Roese (2013), Grace (2007)] <i>Not at ease, ridiculous, stupid, laughable, mortified, self-conscious, humiliated, foolish, frustrated, abashed, flustered, constrained. . .</i> [e.g., Barnier and Valette-Florence (2006), Lau-Gesk & Drolet; Grace (2007)]
Physiological Manifestations	Reported Physiological Manifestations: Blushing, shaking, heart racing, nausea, crying [Grace (2007)] <i>“Underwent physical changes – blushed, heart rate up, etc.”</i> [Tangney et al. (1996)] <i>“I would feel my face turning red”/“I would feel blood rushing through my body”</i> [Krishna et al. (2015)] <i>“Felt physically smaller/felt isolated from others/felt superior/inferior to others/time moved quickly”</i> [Tangney et al. (1996)] Observed Physiological Manifestations: Heart rate, blood pressure [e.g., Harris (2001)] Stress activation (EDA: Electrodermal activity, sweating) [Miller (1987)] Blushing [e.g., Drummond and Lim (2000), Shearn, Bergman, Hill, Abel, and Hinds (1990, 1992)]: (i)facial blood flow (pulse transducer attached to the forehead) (ii)cheek and ear temperature (surface thermistor) (iii)cheek and ear coloration (photoplethysmography/personal observation by other) Magnetic resonance imaging (i.e., MRI) [Muller-Pinzler et al. (2015)]
Behavioral Tendencies	Reported Behavioral Tendencies: <i>“Wanted to be with others/hide”/“Wanted to admit/hide what was done”/“Wanted to make amends”/“Wished had acted differently”</i> [Tangney et al. (1996)] <i>I would want to leave the scene/hide from everyone/get away from the situation”/“I should do everything to never be in this situation again”</i> [Krishna et al. (2015)] Observed Behavioral Tendencies: Smiling, self-touching, gaze shifts, looking down. . . [e.g., Keltner (1995), Marcus and Miller (1999)] Attitudes toward embarrassing products or experiences [e.g., Apsler (1975), Keltner (1995), Marcus and Miller (1999)] Purchase intentions toward embarrassing products, e.g., douche vs. shampoo [Lau-Gesk and Drolet (2008)] Choice of embarrassing vs. nonembarrassing products [Kumar (2008)]

embarrassing acts, and uses this as a proxy for activated (empathic) embarrassment in observers.

People tend to generally agree upon and accurately identify the expression of embarrassment through external signals (e.g., Keltner, 1995; Keltner & Buswell, 1996; Marcus & Miller, 1999). In addition to blushing, embarrassment manifests itself in frequent gaze shifts, looking down, smiling, and touching one's own face. More specifically, Keltner and Buswell (1996) use the following to characterize the embarrassed facial displays used in their research: "a non-Duchenne smile (*involving only the zygomatic major muscle which raises the corners of the mouth, but not the cheeks*), lip press, gaze down, head movement to the left and down, and a face touch" (p. 255, clarification added in italics; see Figure 3).

Some recent work has begun to use magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) technology to investigate neural correlates of felt embarrassment. Muller-Pinzler et al. (2015) create conditions of public failure for participants as a trigger of embarrassment, by having them engage in a cognitive estimation task in the scanner for which bogus feedback about their performance is shared with a group of confederates. The researchers observe that the brain regions hypothesized to be associated with an overall feeling of embarrassment are indeed activated (e.g., dorsal anterior insula: arousal, amygdala: affect and socially evaluative context). To our knowledge, no research has yet examined private embarrassment

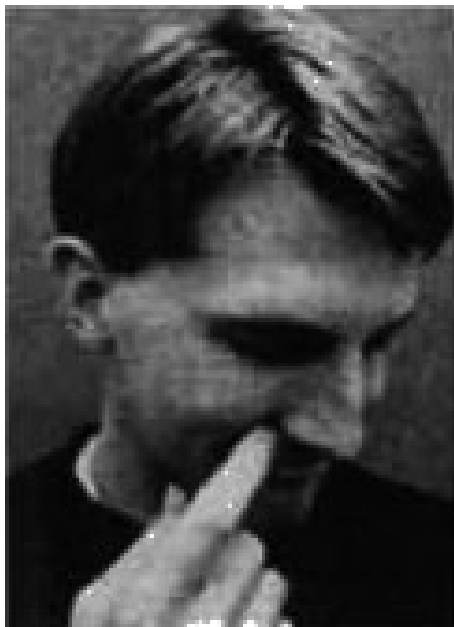


Figure 3. Prototypical display of embarrassment (reproduced from Keltner, 1995, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, p. 449).

using this methodology, but we would expect similar neurological reactions across public and private contexts and appraisal sources, but this remains an interesting question for future research.

Behavioral tendencies. The negative experience of felt or anticipated embarrassment typically activates action tendencies such as avoidance, escape, and repair. Previous research has attempted to capture embarrassment indirectly through self-report measures of such tendencies. For instance, in their study (described in the previous section on physiological measures), Tangney et al. (1996) also ask participants to rate the embarrassing experiences they had described for resulting tendencies (5-point scales, anchored at e.g., "wanted to hide what I had done" vs. "wanted to admit what I had done," and "wanted to be with others" vs. "wanted to hide from others").

Krishna et al. (2015) inquire about participants' escape versus prevention tendencies through their agreement with the statements "I would want to leave the scene/hide from everyone/get away from the situation" and "I should do everything to never be in this situation again," respectively, on 7-point scales anchored at "not at all likely" and "very likely." In relation to our conceptualization, they observe a significant difference between different types of public and private embarrassment in their accompanying action tendencies. They find that the public (vs. private) social context is characterized with stronger escape action tendencies, and that self-appraisal leads to stronger preventive action tendencies compared to other-appraisal, presumably since escaping one's self is not perceived to be possible. We will revisit these tendencies while discussing coping with consumer embarrassment and consider some strategies that may be effective in a private context and when embarrassment is driven by self-appraisal.

Some researchers opt for a more subtle approach to capture embarrassment from the resulting attitudes and behaviors. For instance, Lau-Gesk and Drolet (2008) ask participants to review pre-tested print ads for *douche* (embarrassing) or *shampoo* (nonembarrassing) products and then rate the extent to which they would consider buying the advertised product (7-point scales anchored at "definitely" and "definitely not"). More indirectly, Kumar (2008) asks study participants to choose six products out of a list of nine (with six neutral and three embarrassing products on the list). Kumar's dependent measure is how likely the participants are to remove embarrassing products from their shopping basket, which the author uses as a proxy for embarrassment.

Often when researchers measure and discuss embarrassment, they must consider it with respect to related negative self-conscious emotions such as shame and guilt. In the next section, we discuss these sometimes intertwined emotional experiences to clarify what constitutes embarrassment as a discrete emotion.

Related Emotions

Embarrassment is often confused with shame, guilt, social anxiety, and regret, which are sometimes felt alongside each other. Consider for a moment, giving a bad speech: you might be embarrassed about your performance, while also feeling anxious about the large audience looking at you, shame about your inadequacy, regret for not preparing better, and guilt for poorly representing your superior. Thus, when measuring embarrassment, researchers often consider these other related emotions.

In fact, early research in psychology treated embarrassment as synonymous with shame and social anxiety (Izard, 1971; Lewis, 1971). However, some later conceptual and empirical work has focused on establishing embarrassment and the other discrete emotions as unique experiences. For instance, Keltner and Buswell (1996) focus on differential facial expressions of these emotions. In their study, participants view slides of facial expressions for 14 emotions, each posed by the same two female and two male individuals. These emotions include, for example, anger, disgust, and happiness, as well as the likely facial displays for embarrassment, shame, and guilt (established by Keltner, 1995). Participants have 10 s to review each slide and to select “the word that best matched the emotion displayed by the person in the slide.” Participants accurately identify the displays of embarrassment and shame, that is, the emotions acted out as embarrassment and shame are also identified as embarrassment and shame. Participants rarely judge displays of embarrassment as shame (7%) or the displays of shame as embarrassment (3.4%), supporting the assertion that they are distinct emotions. Accordingly, the experience and manifestation of these related emotions include unique aspects, which are also inherently recognized by laypersons.

In another study, Keltner and Buswell (1996) attempt to identify the conceptual distinctiveness of selected discrete emotions by focusing on their differential triggers. In an effort to differentiate

embarrassment, shame, and guilt, the researchers ask study participants to describe multiple different events that made them feel each target emotion. The 757 instances generated by the participants are coded into 45 categories such as physical pratfall, violation of privacy, failure at duties, and damage to others or objects. Based on a review of the categories, the authors conclude that embarrassment is associated with transgressions of conventions that govern public interactions (public embarrassment), shame with failure to meet important personal standards (private embarrassment per our conceptualization), and guilt with actions that harm others or violate duties.

Krishna et al. (2015) focus on public versus private social context more closely (in their study 1 where they ask participants to report own embarrassing experiences), and also measure other emotions such as shame, guilt, anger, disgust, etc. for the recalled embarrassing instances. As expected, embarrassment is the most intensely felt emotion for both public and private contexts, followed by shame. The authors do not find any significant differences in the intensity of reported embarrassment or shame across public and private contexts. Krishna et al.’s (2015) research suggests context is not enough to distinguish embarrassment and shame.

Building on our conceptualization, we differentiate embarrassment from related emotions by focusing on the content of specific transgressions. In order for any of these emotions to occur, a negative transgression takes place, which is perceived to be relevant and harmful to one’s well-being. Where they differ, though, is in the content of the incident and the aspect of personal well-being at stake (Lazarus, 1991). While embarrassing transgressions are characterized by violations of social conventions or personal codes of conduct, guilt is said to be triggered when the individual perceives violation of duties or real or potential harm to others in his behaviors (Tangney, 1991). Shame, on the other hand, occurs following perceived failure to live up to significant others’ expectations as well as one’s superordinate personal expectations (Lazarus, 2001). Regret ensues in relation to disappointment over personal decision-making and perception that one has made a wrong choice (Inman & Zeelenberg, 2002). Anxiety, can be triggered by any incident that prompts uncertainty or existential threat (Lazarus, 2001).

On the whole, the same transgression might have multiple components or could be interpreted differently based on individual or contextual

factors, creating perceived threat for these different aspects of well-being, and triggering multiple emotions simultaneously. Previous research also notes that in empirical work, related emotions, such as embarrassment and shame, are found to co-occur based on the same transgression, but with the one being felt more intensely (Borg, Staufenbeil, & Scherer, 1988; Kaufman, 1989). To further articulate these differences, we return to our discussion of the example of having one's credit card declined during a purchase, and consider how that transgression that might trigger these different negative self-conscious emotions. If, for example, you forgot your card had reached its limit and you actually have another card sitting at home, you may experience embarrassment. If the reason you have reached your credit limit is because you recently lost your job and now cannot pay for basic necessities, you may feel shame. If you anticipate calls from debt collectors, anxiety may result. If you realize you overspent on frivolous purchases and cannot pay for basic needs, you may feel guilt. Finally, if you purchased an expensive item that cannot be returned, which is causing the problem, regret is more likely. Also, the evaluative processes and experience of these discrete emotions might further trigger related emotional reactions, such as regretting your carelessness on keeping track of your financials after you go through the embarrassing experience of having your card declined.

The nature and magnitude of all discrete emotions, and embarrassment specifically, will inherently depend on individual characteristics, which we discuss next.

Moderators of Embarrassment

Not all consumers experience embarrassment in the same way. Research recognizes that some individuals are more prone to experiencing embarrassment than others (e.g., Miller, 1995; Modigliani, 1968). We first discuss this general disposition of embarrassability as a central moderator of embarrassment research, and then review other individual differences that can also moderate consumers' levels of embarrassment.

Embarrassability. Modigliani's (1968) Embarrassability Scale and Kelly and Jones' (1997) Susceptibility to Embarrassment Scale are the most prominent trait measures that consider proneness to embarrassment. The Embarrassability Scale asks participants to rate how embarrassed they might feel in various potentially embarrassing scenarios on a 9-point scale ranging from "acutely

embarrassed" to "not the least embarrassed" (e.g., "You are muttering aloud to yourself in an apparently empty room when you discover someone else is there"). All scenarios in this scale refer to transgressions that occur in a public context and suggest direct or implied appraisal by others.

By contrast, the Susceptibility to Embarrassment Scale assesses personality characteristics related to embarrassment rather than reactions to potentially embarrassing situations. It captures an individual's propensity to feel emotionally exposed, vulnerable, and concerned about making mistakes in front of others. Participants respond to statements such as "Sometimes I just feel exposed" and "I feel inadequate when I am talking to someone I just met" on 7-point scales anchored at "not at all like me" and "very much like me". While the scale also includes general statements such as "I feel unsure of myself" and "I am not easily embarrassed (reversed)," most of the items emphasize public embarrassment and other-appraisals similar to the Embarrassability Scale. Researchers could consider developing an embarrassability scale or adding measures to these scales based on our broader view. For example, items like "What other people think of me is very important" could be supplemented with "What I think of myself is very important".

Other individual differences. Past research has studied the correlation between embarrassment (and embarrassability) and individual difference variables such as gender, self-esteem, familiarity, and culture. Interestingly, women tend to be more easily embarrassed than men (Miller, 1995) and work harder than men to remediate embarrassment (Gonzales, Pederson, Manning, & Wetter, 1990). For instance, Parrott et al. (1988) present study participants embarrassing story contexts involving dating and sex (e.g., asking a coworker out for a date and being declined, making a sexual advance toward a date and being declined). After imagining themselves in the situation, participants respond to the question "At this point in time, how embarrassed do you feel?" on a 7-point scale anchored at "not at all" and "extremely". The authors find that women report being more embarrassed than men.

High self-esteem can be an effective buffer against embarrassment as an individual trait. Past research demonstrates negative correlation between general self-esteem and embarrassability (e.g., Kelly & Jones, 1997; Modigliani, 1968). The explanation behind these findings reflects the commonly held public view of embarrassment: high self-esteem inhibits one's acceptance of others' negative evaluations and might decrease the severity of

embarrassment felt in public. We posit that researchers should also consider self-esteem in relation to embarrassment across both public and private contexts and due to both other- and self-appraisal. For example, some research suggests that self-esteem affects individual's self-judgment and related negative emotional experiences (e.g., shame), but only when an event is interpreted from a third-person (i.e., other-appraisal) perspective. When interpreted from a first-person (i.e., self-appraisal) perspective, self-esteem has no effect on the individual's emotional reactions (Libby, Valenti, Pfent, & Eibach, 2011). Thus, while high self-esteem might protect against the negative effects of other's appraisal, high self-esteem may do little to protect against embarrassment due to self-appraisal.

Extant research recognizes that self-esteem may be delineated into specific aspects such as appearance self-esteem, academic self-esteem, and social self-esteem (Marsh, 1986). It is feasible that these individual aspects of self-esteem (vs. a more global self-esteem) may influence consumers' embarrassment across contexts. For example, one's high academic self-esteem may protect when embarrassed over failing a spelling bee in front of others, but only when embarrassment is due to others' appraisal and not one's own self-appraisal where it can backfire in line with one's higher personal standards of oneself.

Previous research in both psychology and consumer behavior also recognizes a negative correlation between familiarity and embarrassability (Dahl et al., 2001; Miller, 1996). Because uncertainty surrounding social situations and the related indecisiveness in terms of how to behave has been shown to be an important precursor of embarrassment (Miller, 1995; Silver, Sabini, Parrott, & Silver, 1987), it follows naturally that a lack of familiarity with a situation can be a driver of public embarrassment. This individual difference, in particular, has interesting implications for marketers, and should be considered in relation to private embarrassment and self-appraisal as well. For example, marketers selling "really new" and unfamiliar sensitive products may mitigate embarrassment through informative advertising which seeks primarily to educate consumers about the product and enhance feelings of familiarity. Such attempts might help to redefine perceived social conventions and also personal codes of conduct. Many new products (e.g., Google Glass, the Segway) failed because of concerns of embarrassment coupled with product category unfamiliarity (Annacchino, 2003).

Researchers interested in new products and innovation adoption could further consider embarrassment, and how familiarity and education can minimize this perceived risk as it relates to both other- and self-appraisal.

Limited research has considered how some other individual or cultural factors interact with embarrassability. Embarrassment has been shown to operate similarly across diverse cultures with its triggers, processes, and consequences (e.g., Edelman et al., 1989). However, a cultural contrast may be in its potential severity across collectivist and individualist cultures in relation to how the self is construed. More specifically, interdependent self-construal is shown to be positively correlated with a greater concern for public image and accordingly increased propensity for embarrassment, whereas independence is associated with lower embarrassability (e.g., Singelis, Bond, Sharkey, & Lai, 1999). As suggested in the process explanation, this research follows the public view of embarrassment focusing on other-appraisal. Our broader conceptualization suggests an opposite prediction for how private embarrassment, through self-appraisal, might relate more positively with independent self-construal, and remains to be tested. Future research could also consider how other individual differences such as self-concept clarity (i.e., the extent to which contents of an individual's self-concept are clearly defined, internally consistent, and stable; Campbell, 1990) might also influence both public and private aspects of embarrassment.

Coping with Consumer Embarrassment

Marketers have long tried to smooth the path to purchase and consumption of potentially embarrassing products and awkward service experiences. Our review of the various triggers of consumer embarrassment in the previous section highlights the potential adverse implications of embarrassment in the marketplace further. We first review the strategies used by consumers in this section to cope with embarrassment, and then discuss the various techniques marketers employ to assist in this coping.

Consumer Responses

Consumers usually have to cope with anticipated or felt embarrassment in consumption contexts. While their inclination may be to avoid

embarrassing products or awkward service experiences, when avoidance is not possible, they need to find ways to manage or repair the negative consequences of felt embarrassment. Building on Folkman and Lazarus' (1988) model of stress and coping, Moore et al. (2006) identify that coping with embarrassment can be behavioral, where the emphasis is on changing or avoiding the perceived embarrassment trigger (e.g., "I do not buy this product"), or cognitive, where the emphasis is on managing the distressing emotion by changing interpretation of the situation (e.g., "I shouldn't be embarrassed because everybody buys condoms"). Both types of coping may be used in a given situation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988).

Behavioral strategies. Consumers often develop their own specific strategies to avoid, escape, or repair embarrassment in the marketplace. For example, a consumer may avoid buying condoms or using condoms when embarrassment is anticipated (Brackett, 2004). Consumer embarrassment, felt or anticipated, can also lead individuals to leave or avoid potentially negative service experiences. For example, many consumers report avoiding certain health-related services, and when they do seek healthcare, they report a tendency to avoid discussing potentially embarrassing healthcare questions with their service providers, which has important health, social, and economic consequences for individuals and at a societal level (Hook et al., 1997; McCambridge & Consedine, 2014).

When public embarrassment is anticipated, some consumers may choose to do online shopping, to minimize exposure to others when buying embarrassing products, and other consumers may shop in physical stores but in low-store-traffic hours, in order to minimize exposure to the observation and appraisal of others. Consumers may also avoid potentially embarrassing experiences by not shopping in their own neighborhood for sensitive products (Moore et al., 2006), or avoid specific shopping venues if they anticipate awkward service encounters. In all these situations, consumers either try to be alone, or around others who ignore them as a means of behavioral coping with public embarrassment (Dahl et al., 2001; Lau-Gesk & Drolet, 2008). Interestingly, shoplifting is one extreme way to avoid interacting with salespeople (Mitchell, Balabanis, Schlegelmilch, & Cornwell, 2009). Products such as hemorrhoid creams and condoms are some of the most commonly stolen items "simply because they may be too embarrassing to obtain in a legitimate manner" (Toth, 2007, p. 2).

Consumers may also seek to purchase potentially embarrassing products from salespeople who are of similar age and gender, and whom they find to be less attractive. In one study, Wan and Wyer (2015) ask female participants to test a thermal waist belt. Each of the participants is placed in a room where she can try on the waist belt and also see some advertising posters about the product. The posters are manipulated to show the belt as an embarrassing (weight-reduction) or nonembarrassing (muscle-relaxation) product. A physically attractive man serves as the salesperson to all the participants; however, he is presented as either attractive (wearing a well-fitted t-shirt and styled hair) or of average attractiveness (wearing an oversize t-shirt and ungroomed, with glasses that are found to detract from his attractive appearance). Participants in the embarrassing condition report lower purchase intentions when the salesperson is attractive than when he is not.

Blair and Roese (2013) examine another interesting behavioral strategy consumers use to manage or avoid embarrassment in a shopping context. Prior research and intuition suggest that when purchasing a potentially embarrassing product (e.g., diarrhea medication), consumers may benefit from adding other products to their shopping basket, because the extra products may detract from the focal (embarrassing) product (Brackett, 2004). Picture an excited teenage couple purchasing condoms at a local drugstore. Concerned that the cashier may judge them, they quickly add a collection of other items: candy bars, toothpaste, and magazines with the hopes that the condoms may go unnoticed. In their research, Blair and Roese (2013) suggest, however, that this tactic may not always be effective. Purchasing additional products lowers embarrassment only when the additional purchases are perceived to counterbalance (vs. complement) the undesired identity communicated via the embarrassing product. Across five studies, the authors find that products that are perceived to be related may actually exacerbate embarrassment (e.g., a bottle of lotion and a box of tissues are more closely related to condoms than to anti-gas medicine).

Dong et al. (2013) report a different behavioral strategy to avoid social attention. They find that when prompted with embarrassing scenarios, consumers prefer to wear larger and darker sunglasses in order to symbolically "hide their face" and avoid social attention. Note that the authors do not explicitly test whether consumers feel more anonymous when wearing sunglasses; this could be an

interesting avenue for future research. Consumers may also be inclined to repair a threatened self-image when faced with embarrassment through reparatory or compensatory purchases. Specifically, when consumers with low self-esteem are embarrassed, they are more likely to purchase cosmetics (Dong et al., 2013), which have been shown to repair one's threatened self-image.

Cognitive/Attitudinal strategies. Marketers and consumers alike tend to emphasize behavioral strategies for coping; but, they should also consider the positive impact of cognitive strategies to avoid embarrassment. As outlined earlier, embarrassment is a self-conscious emotion and requires deliberation in order to be experienced (Lazarus, 1991). Thus, by changing the nature of deliberation, embarrassment can be minimized, even when the trigger cannot be completely avoided.

Moore et al. (2006) outline seven positive thoughts, under the umbrella term of "cognitive strategies," which individuals can use to manage negative emotion-focused cognitions when purchasing embarrassing products. For example, the authors ask participants to picture themselves buying condoms and further instruct them to manage the negative affect with various thought exercises (e.g., think "I shouldn't be embarrassed because condoms are important to have and use.") Utilizing these thought exercises do reduce embarrassment. Researchers and practitioners interested in these types of cognitive coping mechanisms for consumers can look toward other research in psychology that considers how individuals may mentally disengage, deny the negative consequences of an event, or positively reinterpret the negative event in some way when dealing with negative emotional experiences (Yi & Baumgartner, 2004). Specifically, in the case of embarrassment, consumers may cope with the negative experience by denying their feelings of awkwardness, reappraising the situation as not embarrassing, or planning to engage in some rational action intended to eliminate the threat (Laux & Weber, 1991).

Our broader view of embarrassment, outlined previously (Table 1), suggests that these cognitive strategies will be very valuable in reducing embarrassment in private contexts with self-appraisal since behavioral coping strategies will not be equally applicable in these situations (Krishna et al., 2015). If marketers can offer these cognitive strategies to change social or individual perceptions around social norms and conventions, and also personal codes of conduct, consumers may be better

able to cope with and experience less embarrassment when purchasing certain sensitive but essential products (e.g., condoms, HIV testing kits) in either public or private contexts.

Marketer Interventions that Aid in Coping with Embarrassment

Marketers also make efforts to help consumers avoid or minimize embarrassment, most of which centers around public embarrassment and other-appraisal. One such technique is to change product packaging. Marketers can consider how the colors and details of the package design may increase conspicuousness of the product and influence public embarrassment, both at the time of purchase and during usage. For instance, Barbara E. Kahn notes, "If you have a feminine hygiene product and you can change the packaging to make it look very design-y and sophisticated, that helps that it doesn't look like some medical weird thing in your check-out basket" (Knowledge@Wharton, 2014). One group of students developed a discreet package for sanitary napkins (see Figure 4a). They recognized a problem in the marketplace: women are often embarrassed to carry feminine products. Thus, the students developed a package in which the product information is displayed on one side of the package, which can then be flipped to show only a brown bag. Similarly, companies such as Trojan offer condoms in an "elegant travel case" that "fits discreetly in your pocket or purse" (see Figure 4b).

Other similar techniques in assisting consumers with their own behavioral coping strategies could be to offer alternative purchase methods such as vending machines or online sales and mail delivery of sensitive products to minimize the threat of public observation and appraisal (Kumar, 2008). As discussed earlier, however, these kinds of marketing strategies will not be effective in offsetting the negative consequences of violations of personal codes of conduct or social conventions as a source of private embarrassment. Some marketers, perhaps recognizing this limitation, instead focus their efforts on changing social conventions and lifting individual stigmas around sensitive products and services. Wilson and West (1981) suggest that some embarrassing products such as sanitary napkins might require hyperactive marketing to overcome a resistance threshold that inherently exists in the category. This strategy is nicely exemplified by Tampax, a leading tampon company, and Thinx, a "period-proof" underwear



Figure 4. Product packaging examples to minimize public embarrassment. (a) Prototype feminine hygiene product packaging *Used with designers’ permission (<https://www.packagingoftheworld.com/2016/04/sanitary-napkins-student-project.html>; Shah & Chougule, 2016). (b) “Discreet travel pack” condom packaging example. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

company, both of which have made efforts to normalize discussion on menstruation through their advertisements, social media, and other communications. Similarly, Depend, an adult diaper company, created an “underawareness” campaign in which they “show the world that wearing a different kind of underwear is no big deal” (see Figure 5). In their advertisements and social media campaigns, they depict attractive young consumers wearing Depend (without pants) while going about their daily business; they also encourage consumers to share their own “pants drop” images with the hashtag #DropYourPants (McQuilken, 2014). Rather than focusing specifically on their product or brand, they emphasize shifting cultural norms and minimizing embarrassment surrounding an entire product category. Other companies in product categories such as hair-regrowth medication (e.g., Rogaine) may benefit from a similar marketing strategy, which may mitigate different types of embarrassment across public and private context, as well as other- and self-appraisal.

General Discussion and Avenues for Future Research

How embarrassing it is to be human. – Kurt Vonnegut

Embarrassment is a pervasive and powerful emotion that can affect consumers in varied and meaningful ways. Whether the result of leaving a restaurant with spinach in one’s teeth or toppling over while practicing yoga at a public studio, embarrassment is an important part of the consumer landscape, and has received limited attention in the literature, which is surprising given its ubiquitous nature. Embarrassment—or concerns about anticipated embarrassment—influence consumers in a variety of contexts ranging from purchasing products, to political voting, to socializing with friends. Our review provides a conceptual framework to improve our understanding of what consumer embarrassment is, how it operates, and how it can most effectively be managed, to stimulate new research within this domain.



Figure 5. Depend's "underawareness" campaign: Marketing communication example to minimize (public and private) embarrassment from category. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Researchers primarily emphasize embarrassment as a social emotion, but some more recent work recognizes that embarrassment can also be a private emotion, and importantly, that the consequences are equivalent whether embarrassment is experienced in a public or private context. We build upon and further this view by defining embarrassment through an explicit review of (a) the *transgressions* that may trigger consumer embarrassment, (b) the *social context* of the transgression (in public or in private), and (c) the *appraisal* of the transgression (by self or by others), recognizing that all three must be deliberated on by the individual in order for embarrassment to be felt or anticipated.

As outlined in Table 1, although most research emphasizes a public context with concern about other-appraisal, embarrassment can occur in a private context and as a result of self-appraisal. By defining embarrassment within this conceptualization, our review considers (consumer) embarrassment that extends beyond traditional requirements of social presence and social evaluation. We establish the discrete nature of embarrassment further through a structured discussion of its measures, and also by deliberating on how it relates to and differs from other negative self-conscious emotions.

Our review also proposes a more comprehensive categorization of consumption context transgressions that may trigger embarrassment, and how consumers may opt to cope with its consequences. Specifically, in line with our conceptualization, we emphasize the questions of when consumer embarrassment may be driven by self-appraisal or in private contexts, and how marketers can mitigate embarrassment in these situations.

As highlighted earlier, due to the challenges of creating negative emotional experiences in the lab or in online studies, much of the experimental research across psychology and consumer behavior discussing embarrassment actually capture anticipated or remembered embarrassment (e.g., Blair & Roese, 2013; Tangney et al., 1996). We discuss this important point in our consideration of triggers,

measurement, and coping. Limited research actually creates embarrassing situations in an experimental context and captures felt embarrassment (see Apsler, 1975; Dahl et al., 2001; Harris, 2001; and Miller, 1987 for notable exceptions). It is worth noting, however, that anticipated embarrassment may be particularly relevant in a consumption context where embarrassment is more often due to "intentional" actions that can be anticipated and controlled (e.g., purchasing condoms) compared to other types of everyday embarrassment that often occurs more accidentally or unintentionally (e.g., tripping). Anticipated embarrassment is particularly relevant from a managerial perspective as it may lead consumers to avoid purchasing some products and also influence whether those products are used after purchase i.e., consumed at all (e.g., Jiang, Drolet, & Scott, 2018).

Hence, a better understanding of embarrassment—felt and anticipated—offers important practical implications for marketers, public policy makers, and individual consumers seeking to mitigate or better cope with this negative emotional experience.

Future Research Directions

Our conceptualization acknowledges that embarrassment is quite similar across public and private contexts—often with similar triggers, measures, and negative consequences. However, as little is known about private embarrassment, more research is needed to understand its consequences and how best to avoid and cope with this form of embarrassment. For instance, our review suggests that while felt embarrassment may be similar across public and private contexts and other- versus self-appraisal (Krishna et al., 2015), anticipated embarrassment may differ. Because consumers typically equate embarrassment with public contexts and appraisal of others, they may more readily anticipate embarrassment in these situations (e.g., giving a speech in public, quadrant 1 of Table 1). Thus, one of the benefits of our research, in highlighting these other types of embarrassment, may be to enable

individuals and marketers to anticipate embarrassment across the other quadrants. In fact, it is possible that because consumers are less likely to anticipate embarrassment across the three quadrants with some aspect of privacy (quadrants 2–4 of Table 1), they may even be less prepared when they do experience embarrassment and therefore the emotional reaction may be even more detrimental.

Our conceptualization and emphasis on embarrassment as a deliberative and negative self-conscious emotion paves the way for further research on other similar emotions (e.g., regret, guilt, shame). Each of these emotions may occur in public or private contexts and be driven by deliberation on other-appraisal, self-appraisal, or some combination of the two. Future research can also consider how and when these other self-conscious emotions may occur simultaneously in public or private contexts, and how recognition of self-appraisal influences the emotional experience.

One central goal of this work is to stimulate new research on embarrassment specific to consumer domains, both in public and private. The overall structure of the review, as outlined in Figure 1, proposes a comprehensive research agenda for future work on consumer embarrassment that could center explicitly on the various triggers, measures, or consequences of embarrassment as well as coping strategies—any of which could be quite fruitful. For example, we apply prior research from psychology on triggers for embarrassment to various consumer domains, several of which have received no attention in the consumer behavior literature. How might being the positive center of attention in a consumer context (e.g., winning a random drawing at checkout) create feelings of embarrassment? Some limited research has considered consumer incompetence (e.g., Lutz & Reilly, 1974), but feelings of incompetence, or concerns of *potential* incompetence—in public or private contexts—may drive a variety of consumer behaviors.

Our review identifies the implications of consumer embarrassment in contexts more obviously associated with embarrassment (e.g., purchasing diarrhea medication), but also recognizes that embarrassment can occur in more subtle, nuanced forms, as part of the consumption landscape. For example, consumers may feel embarrassment after dropping a shopping list in a puddle outside of the grocery store. Consumers may also experience more subtle forms of embarrassment in other marketplace domains such as social media and political voting, which have received little consideration in academic research.

Future work could consider these subtler degrees of embarrassment across domains and how they exist in conjunction with other emotions (e.g., surprise) in either a public or private consumer context.

There is also great potential for research from consumer behavior to consider additional measures of embarrassment especially for such subtle transgressions in the marketplace. Future research on consumer embarrassment can move beyond using measures of purchase behavior and self-reports, and instead utilize more complex methodologies such as measurement of physiological manifestations or physical behavioral displays (e.g., gaze shifts), as suggested by our review of psychology research.

Future research can also try to identify situations where embarrassment is more damaging—under the influence of individual or situational factors. For instance, a yoga aficionado may be more embarrassed if she stumbles in a yoga class versus a novice. This embarrassment may be particularly strong when self-appraisal occurs, regardless of whether the incident occurs in her private home studio or in front of a large class. While self-esteem has been shown to serve as a protection mechanism to the negative consequences of embarrassment (e.g., Modigliani, 1968; Parrott et al., 1988), specific self-esteem might trigger harsher self-evaluations.

Embarrassment is a universal and timeless emotion, however, what is considered embarrassing may differ across cultures, or even within a culture as social conventions evolve. Existing cross-cultural research on embarrassment is predominantly limited to the study of public embarrassability in relation to self-construal as discussed earlier (Singelis et al., 1999). Cross-cultural and temporal research on other aspects of embarrassment, especially in relation to its different or changing triggers, and the different ways consumers might opt to cope with embarrassment, might be a fruitful avenue for future research. Similarly, some products that were previously considered “unmentionable,” such as pregnancy tests, may be considered less so in time; on the other hand, products such as cigarettes or fur coats that may not have been embarrassing in the past, may now be embarrassing to use, in some parts of the world and for some segments of consumers (Katsanis, 1994). Therefore, while Wilson and West (1981) outline some specific examples of sensitive products, it is important for marketers to consider these shifts when making marketing decisions, particularly around segmentation and targeting.

The notion of brand embarrassment can also be studied with a more systematic consideration of

social relationships and reference groups (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Miller (2001) discusses how some social groups are more likely to “suffer the highest potential personal embarrassment from contravening the standards of acceptable taste” through their consumption choices (p. 573). Individuals more likely to experience embarrassment are those with a clear sense of rules and belongingness when it comes to fashion or brands; these individuals and groups have stringent guidelines as to what is acceptable among and firmly insinuated into their social groups (Miller, 2001).

There are also examples of actions by social groups mitigating embarrassment. For example, Malcolm Gladwell (2002) discusses Hush Puppies shoes in *The Tipping Point*. As he notes, in the early 90s, the shoes were considered obsolete and “suburban”, potentially quite embarrassing. But, when a group of trendy “hipsters” in Manhattan began purchasing the shoes, they became cool, and suddenly not participating in this trend was embarrassing. Limited research considers how social groups might influence embarrassment, yet this is an area ripe for research.

From a managerial perspective, it is unreasonable to assume marketers can fully preclude the onset of consumer embarrassment or its negative consequences. Still, they may be able to mitigate consumers’ public and private embarrassment. Offering consumers more inconspicuous means of purchase and consumption, such as online sales or discreet packaging strategies, can provide consumers some protection from social observation and hence public embarrassment. Discreet packaging may even help with private embarrassment, but this remains to be tested. We suggest that more work needs to be done to address consumers’ concerns for private embarrassment—this may require more subtle and complex strategies in which marketers can aid in shifting social norms and individual standards as to what constitutes appropriate behavior.

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