Advertising-induced Embarrassment

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Abstract

Consumer embarrassment is an important concern for marketers. Yet, little is known about embarrassment in passive situations like advertising viewing. The authors investigate when and why consumers experience embarrassment as a result of exposure to socially sensitive advertisements. The theory distinguishes between viewing potentially embarrassing ads together with an audience that shares the social identity targeted by the message and viewing the same ads together with an audience that does not share the targeted social identity. Four studies provide support for the theory, demonstrating that advertising targeting and social context jointly determine feelings of embarrassment and advertising effectiveness.

Keywords: embarrassment, advertising, self-conscious emotions, social identity.

Many products, ranging from personal hygiene and pharmaceuticals to medical services and contraceptives, pose special problems to marketers because of their socially sensitive and potentially embarrassing nature. The limited body of marketing research on embarrassment has shown that the purchase of socially sensitive products (Dahl, Manchanda, and Argo 2001; Lau-Gesk and Drolet 2008) and salesperson-customer interactions (Verbeke and Bagozzi 2003) can generate feelings of embarrassment. In these situations, people are actively engaged in potentially embarrassing behaviors or social interactions. Yet, consumers may also regularly experience embarrassment when passively viewing commercials concerning sensitive topics such as erectile dysfunction, skin conditions, baldness, or female hygiene. At present, however, little is known about how embarrassment arises in advertising settings. To address this gap, the present paper explores advertising-induced embarrassment. Four studies reveal how personal and situational factors interact during exposure to potentially embarrassing ads to determine both the level of embarrassment experienced by consumers and advertising effectiveness.

EMBARRASSMENT

Like guilt and shame, embarrassment is a self-conscious emotion (Lewis 2000). It is an aversive feeling that arises when a social incident threatens one's presented social identity (Goffman 1956; Miller 1996). A social identity is the aspect of one's self-concept based upon group membership. Social identities can vary from well-defined, stable identities that are central to one's sense of self (e.g., being a woman) to less important, situationally cued identities (e.g., supporting an unknown tennis player vs. her opponent). The psychological literature often conceptualizes embarrassment as a tool for the

regulation of social relations (the social functional account; e.g., Keltner and Haidt 1999). Accordingly, embarrassment belongs to people's repertoire of appeasement-related submissive and affiliative behaviors designed to signal one's desire to be included in a group and adhere to the social norms of that group (Keltner and Buswell 1997).

Consistent with this view of embarrassment as an appeasing and affiliative cue, embarrassment is largely a publicly-evoked emotion (Goffman 1956; Miller 1996) and it is an emotion with especially strong physiological correlates, like facial blush (Keltner and Buswell 1997). As a result, most studied incidents of embarrassment are those for which the individual is personally responsible. For example, Weinberg (1968) discusses four elementary forms of embarrassment: faux-pas (e.g., turning up at a party with the wrong attire), accidents (e.g., spilling coffee on a colleague), mistakes (e.g., walking into a classroom with unzipped trousers), and duties (e.g., singing at a religious service). The feelings resulting from these situations can thus be referred to as *embarrassment with agency*. Consumer research on embarrassment has mostly investigated embarrassment with agency, focusing on two common settings. First, purchasing products can give rise to feelings of embarrassment. Dahl et al. (2001) show that buying condoms is more embarrassing when other customers are in the store and Lau-Gesk and Drolet (2008) show that public self-consciousness is associated to lower purchase intentions for potentially embarrassing products (e.g., for feminine hygiene). Second, personal selling contexts can trigger embarrassment. Verbeke and Bagozzi (2003) found, for example, that discovering a mistake in one's figures can lead a salesperson to feel embarrassed when interacting with customers and worsen the salesperson's performance.

Although existing emotion research provides valuable insight into antecedents and consequences of embarrassment, little attention has been paid to situations where individuals are not personally responsible for the social incident. Yet, people can experience embarrassment even if they have not committed a violation of norms of appropriateness. Lewis (2000) argues that embarrassment can emerge as a result of feeling under a spotlight of unwanted attention. For example, being stared at can trigger embarrassment. In addition, situations that make people aware of negative topics (e.g., hearing a story about a taboo subject) or even positive topics (e.g., being the target of praise) can provoke embarrassment (Lewis 2000; Miller 1996). We term this type of incident, in which the embarrassed person is "innocent," *embarrassment without agency*. The existing construct closest to the notion of embarrassment without agency is empathic, or vicarious, embarrassment (Miller 1987), which occurs when an individual experiences embarrassment as a consequence of another person's social predicament. As in the examples above, however, embarrassment without agency does not require another person's embarrassment. Embarrassment without agency therefore subsumes, but is not limited to, empathic embarrassment.

Social functional accounts (e.g., Keltner and Buswell 1997; Keltner and Haidt 1999) do not lend themselves well to explain embarrassment when the person has no responsibility for the occurrence of the embarrassing episode. These accounts focus on appeasement motives and remedial behaviors but, in the case of embarrassment without agency, there is no prior behavior to apologize for or faux pas to be remedied. Embarrassment without agency emerges as the result of cues that draw attention to one's social identity and its potential shortcomings. In other words, what triggers

embarrassment without agency is not what *we do* but who *we are*. To understand embarrassment without agency we thus need to understand the role of social identity.

ADVERTISING TARGETING AND SOCIAL IDENTITIES

Consumers have little opportunity to anticipate, let alone affect, the content of commercial breaks. Embarrassment without agency is therefore especially relevant for understanding consumer reactions to socially sensitive advertising. Embarrassment arises as a result of threats to one's social identity (Goffman 1956). One such threat can be advertisements for socially sensitive products. For example, ads for anti-acne treatments may threaten a teenager's social identity as a young adult and generate feelings of embarrassment. Existing evidence confirms that advertising viewing can trigger embarrassment (Aaker and Bruzzone 1985; Lau-Gesk and Drolet 2008).

Advertising viewing often occurs in the presence of other people (Puntoni and Tavassoli 2007). In these situations, social identities can overlap within and across individuals (Roccas and Brewer 2002). In particular, the combination of the social identities of any two individuals gives rise to the following possibilities: identities that are held by both individuals and identities that are held by only one of them. In an advertising context, this leads to two different embarrassment situations: a potentially embarrassing ad targeting a social identity that is shared by the viewing companion or a potentially embarrassing ad targeting a social identity that is not shared by the viewing companion. When an ad speaks to a social identity shared by all members of an audience, we denote the ad as targeting shared social identities. An example could be two young people watching an ad warning young people of the danger of unsafe sex. In contrast,

when an ad concerns the social identity of a particular person within an audience, we denote the ad as targeting non-shared social identities. An example could be a male and a female watching together an ad for feminine hygiene products.

CONSUMER RESPONSE TO POTENTIALLY EMBARRASSING ADS

Prior literature has investigated the consequences of sharing versus not sharing social identities with other consumers (e.g., Fisher and Dubé 2005; Raghunathan and Corfman 2006). We add to this literature by studying the consequences of exposure to potentially embarrassing ads that target shared versus non-shared social identities. The starting point of our theorizing is that embarrassment arises from a threat to a social identity that draws unwanted attention to oneself (Goffman 1956; Lewis 2000). Individuals pay attention to the impression that they make on others and carefully monitor the social environment for signs of social exclusion (Leary and Kowalski 1990; Leary et al. 1995). We therefore propose that the extent to which individuals share or not the social identity threatened by a potentially embarrassing ad should have important repercussions for emotional processes and consumer response to advertising.

Embarrassment

When an embarrassing ad targets a shared social identity, no member of the audience is being singled out by the ad. In contrast, ads targeting non-shared social identities should remind the targeted consumer of the differences separating him or her from the viewing companion. Consumers should therefore feel less similar to their viewing companions, and have stronger feelings of being targeted by the ad, when exposed to ads targeting non-shared social identities than to ads targeting shared social

identities. These processes should contribute to make consumers targeted by an embarrassing ad feeling like under a spotlight of unwanted attention. Stated differently, potentially embarrassing ads targeting non-shared social identities should subject consumers to a greater risk of negative evaluation by others than ads targeting shared identities. If ads targeting non-shared social identities expose consumers to more unwanted attention than ads targeting shared social identities, consumers targeted by the ad should experience more intense embarrassment in the former than in the latter case.

Advertising effectiveness

Although the extant literature emphasizes the positive consequences of embarrassment for social relations (e.g., Keltner and Buswell 1997), embarrassment can sometimes have detrimental interpersonal consequences (Miller 1996; Sharkey 1992). For example, Verbeke and Bagozzi (2003) found that an embarrassing salesperson-customer interaction can result in reduced engagement and lower salesperson effectiveness. In the case of embarrassment without agency, one is placed under a spotlight of unwanted attention without having done anything to "deserve" it. Embarrassment without agency is therefore an aversive feeling that is caused (intentionally or unintentionally) by an external person, organization, or event. Because of its aversive nature, it is reasonable to assume that in most instances of embarrassment without agency consumers will not appreciate being placed in such a situation, resulting in reduced liking for the person or organization that caused the embarrassing episode. This seems especially likely in an advertising context where embarrassment arises because an organization decided to broadcast a potentially embarrassing message. Because ads targeting non-shared social identities should subject consumers to more

unwanted attention, they should generate less positive ad responses than ads targeting shared social identities.

SUMMARY OF PREDICTIONS AND OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

We conducted four studies to explore a series of predictions. First, a pilot b validated the experimental setting and materials for subsequent studies. Moreover, it tested two premises of our theorizing and showed that (1) embarrassing ads targeting non-shared social identities make consumers feel less close, or less similar, to their viewing companions than ads targeting shared social identities and that (2) consumers experience stronger feelings of being targeted by a potentially embarrassing ad when the ad targets non-shared social identities than when it targets shared social identities.

Next, three studies investigated ad-induced embarrassment. To study actual emotional experiences, in all studies we manipulated social context in real TV viewing situations. Study 1 tested our key hypothesis concerning ad-induced embarrassment, revealing that (3) potentially embarrassing ads targeting non-shared identities generate more embarrassment than ads targeting shared identities. Males watched a deodorant commercial targeting males together with either another male or a female. To provide additional evidence for the role of social processes, the study also manipulated shared versus non-shared identities in a second, independent way using bogus personality feedback. The results showed that (4) increasing the perceived similarity between target consumer and a viewing companion can reduce the embarrassment generated by a subsequent ad targeting a non-shared social identity.

Study 2 explored additional sources of embarrassment without agency in the context of females watching a sanitary napkin ad together with males or females. Social distance can be manipulated in many ways and in study 2 we focused on how advertising timing would impact embarrassment without agency. Study 2 demonstrated that (5) embarrassing cues targeting a shared social identity can reduce the embarrassment generated by a subsequent ad targeting a non-shared identity.

Finally, study 3 tested our predictions concerning advertising effectiveness. Females watched a personal hygiene commercial targeting females either with another male or a female to test whether (6) ads targeting non-shared identities lead to more negative ad responses (attitudes towards the ad, purchase intentions, usage intentions) than ads targeting shared identities. Together, these studies suggest that advertising can have profound effects on viewers' embarrassment feelings and subsequent consumer behaviors.

PILOT STUDY

Female participants viewed either an ad for a female hygiene product (targeting only females) or one warning against sexually transmitted diseases (explicitly targeting young people of both sexes). They were then asked to imagine two scenarios, one in which they saw the ad together with a young male and one in which they saw it together with a young female. After imagining each scenario, participants answered questions about perceived similarity to the viewing companion and perceived targeting. The logic of this design is the following: by varying both advertising targeting and social context we manipulated whether an ad targeted both the participant and the viewing companion

(two young females watching ads targeting either females or young people, or a young female and a young male watching an ad targeting young people) versus whether the ad targeted only the participant (a young female and a young male watching an ad targeting females). This design allowed assessing the consequences of potentially embarrassing ads targeting shared versus non-shared social identities via the interaction effect between ad type and gender of viewing companion.

Method

Participants and design. Fifty-six female students (M_{age} = 20.11) were contacted in the cafeteria of a large European university and asked to participate in an advertising study in return for a small reward. They were randomly assigned to watch either a female-targeted commercial or a youth-targeted one (ad type manipulation). Next, all participants completed questions about two separate scenarios, our within-participant manipulation of viewing partner (same-sex vs. opposite-sex). The order of the two scenarios was counterbalanced between participants.

Procedure and measures. After introducing the study, the (female) research assistant asked participants to watch a TV commercial on a laptop. Participants in the female-targeted ad condition watched a real ad for Libresse, a well-known European brand promoting sanitary napkins designed to protect clothing from blood stains. The commercial featured shots of young female friends in a bar mixed with lab demonstrations of the product's effectiveness, accompanied by a voice-over describing the product. Participants in the youth-targeted ad condition watched an ad warning young people against sexually-transmitted diseases that clearly targeted both genders. The ad

stressed the danger of syphilis as a gateway for HIV. The ad portrayed young individuals in a bar while a voice-over warned against the risk of HIV for young people.

After viewing the ad, participants completed a booklet. First, as a check for the ad type manipulation, they were asked to describe the group of people targeted by the ad (open-ended). Next, they answered questions about two separate scenarios. For both scenarios, they imagined seeing the ad together with a stranger in a public setting. In the same-sex (opposite-sex) condition, the viewing partner was described as "a female (male) of about the same age as you." For each scenario, participants indicated the extent to which seeing the ad in that situation would "draw attention to the similarities between us," and "underline the fact that we are both young people and have similar problems," (from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree", all five-point). These items constituted our measure of perceived similarity ($r = .56$, $p < .01$). Next, for each scenario participants rated their feelings of being targeted by the ad by indicating their agreement with the following item: "seeing the ad in that situation would make it clearer that the ad is targeting me." Finally, as an additional check for ad type, participants indicated which of two identities (female vs. young) they felt the ad was targeted at: "Seeing this ad would underline the fact that I am a young person/female" (young = 1, female = 7).

Results and discussion

The manipulation checks validated the ad type manipulation. In the open-ended question about which group was targeted by the ad all participants answered "females" or "women" in the female-targeted ad condition, whereas none of those in the youth-targeted ad condition did so, $\chi^2(1) = 56.00$, $p < .01$. Conversely, none of the participants indicated young people as the target of the female-targeted ad, whereas 73% (19 out of

26) did so in the case of the youth ad (e.g., "young people"), $\chi^2(1) = 33.18$, $p < .01$. These results were replicated with the second manipulation check, where high (low) scores indicated females (youth) as the target of the ad. The ad in the female-targeted ad condition was rated higher ($M = 5.46$) than the one in the youth-targeted ad condition ($M = 2.88$), $t(54) = 8.01$, $p < .01$.

A repeated-measures ANOVA with ad type (female-targeted vs. youth-targeted) as between-participants factor and viewing partner (same- vs. opposite-sex) as within-participant factor on perceived similarity ratings supported our hypotheses. There were main effects of ad type, $F(1, 54) = 11.71$, $p < .01$, and of viewing partner, $F(1, 54) = 128.93$, $p < .01$. Similarity ratings were higher in the youth ($M = 3.31$) than in the female ad condition ($M = 2.68$), and higher in the same-sex ($M = 3.55$) than in the opposite-sex viewing partner condition ($M = 2.39$). Crucially, there was a two-way interaction between ad type and viewing partner, $F(1, 54) = 87.66$, $p < .01$. In the opposite-sex condition, similarity ratings were higher in the case of the youth-targeted ad (which targeted a shared social identity; $M = 3.21$) than the female-targeted ad (which targeted a non-shared social identity; $M = 1.68$), $F(1, 54) = 55.19$, $p < .01$. Instead, the effect of ad type was not significant in the same-sex condition, $F(1, 54) = 1.82$, $p = .18$, because in this condition both ads were targeting shared social identities ($M_{youth} = 3.68$, $M_{female} = 3.40$).

Similarly, a repeated measures ANOVA on perceived targeting revealed a main effect of ad type, $F(1, 54) = 23.13$, $p < .01$, and of viewing partner, $F(1, 54) = 12.09$, $p = .01$. Perceived targeting ratings were higher in the female- ($M = 3.28$) than in the youth-targeted ad condition ($M = 2.44$), and higher in the opposite- ($M = 3.18$) than in the same-sex condition ($M = 2.61$). These main effects were qualified by a two-way interaction,

$F(1, 54) = 22.78$, $p < .01$. Ad type was a significant predictor of perceived targeting in the opposite-sex, $F(1, 54) = 40.73$, $p < .01$, but not in the same-sex condition ($p > .55$, $M_{youth} = 2.54$, $M_{female} = 2.67$). In the opposite-sex condition, perceived targeting scores were higher for the female-targeted ad ($M = 3.90$) than for the youth-targeted ad ($M = 2.35$).[1]

In sum, potentially embarrassing commercials can induce perceptions of dissimilarity with viewing partners and feelings of being uniquely targeted. Moreover, these perceptions vary depending on whether the ad targets shared or non-shared identities.

STUDY 1: EMBARRASSMENT

Study 1 examined the influence of viewing potentially embarrassing ads targeting shared versus non-shared social identities on feelings of embarrassment. We recruited male participants and manipulated shared versus non-shared identities in two independent ways. First, participants watched a potentially embarrassing commercial targeting males either in the presence of a male or of a female. We expected participants to experience more intense embarrassment when they did not share the targeted identity with a viewing companion. Second, we independently induced feelings of similarity or dissimilarity using a bogus personality feedback procedure and manipulating whether the respondent belonged to the same group as another person or to a different one. We expected participants to report more intense embarrassment following exposure to an embarrassing ad when earlier personality feedback underlined the dissimilarity (vs. similarity) between

1 Alternative models were estimated adding order of scenario presentation as an additional between-participants factor. None of the coefficients related to this variable were significant in any of the models. Moreover, as a robustness check, the model for similarity was re-estimated using only the first item. Given the presence of the word "young" in the other item, we wanted to rule out that the results were somewhat driven by the mention of one of the two target identities. This was not the case as the results were analogous to those presented.

the participant and the viewing companion.

Method

Participants and design. One hundred and five male students (M_{age} = 20.98) participated in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. They were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (personality: shared vs. non-shared) × 2 (gender: shared vs. non-shared) between-participants design with embarrassment as the main dependent variable. Next to these male participants, forty six female students were recruited to participate in the non-shared gender identity condition (these data were not used in the main analysis).

Procedure and variables. To manipulate gender sharedness, participants were randomly assigned to a seat in a room together with either another male participant (shared gender condition) or a female participant (non-shared gender condition). Participants were informed that the session consisted of two separate studies and that they would start with a personality test. They were told that they would complete a newly developed personality test designed to assess ten different personality types, some of which were more common than others.

After participants answered the 30 personality items, the research assistant checked the answers on the personality test and provided participants with (bogus) personality feedback. Participants were randomly assigned to the shared or non-shared personality condition. In the shared (non-shared) personality condition, the research assistant said: "This is really surprising, I have hardly ever seen this. I've checked your answers, and you two have exactly the same (opposite) personality type. Thus, according to the personality test, you are very similar (dissimilar)." Participants continued reading their personality feedback (adapted from Noel, Wann, and Branscombe 1995). We used

two different personality profiles which were randomly assigned to participants. For all participants, the feedback featured information concerning extraversion and locus of control described in such a general way that all participants could identify aspects as applying to their own personality. Participants then shortly discussed how the feedback applied to them by providing examples of their daily lives, in order to generate even stronger feelings of (dis)similarity between participants.

Next, as manipulation checks for the personality manipulation, participants indicated on 7-point scales whether the feedback fit them, whether the feedback was wrong, and whether the feedback was accurate (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree). As a measure of perceived similarity, participants indicated the extent to which they felt connected with the other participant by drawing a mark on a line ranging from "feel a strong sense of personal connection" (0 mm) to "feel completely disconnected from this person" (125 mm). Additionally, participants answered the Social Attraction Scale (McCroskey and McCain 1974). This commonly used scale of interpersonal attraction included items such as "I would like to have a friendly chat with this person" and "this person would just not fit into my circle of friends" (reversed, all ranging from 1 = completely disagree to 7 = completely agree).

Participants then continued with an ostensibly unrelated study concerning evaluations of TV commercials (all 30 secs). After two fillers (for Renault cars and KLM airline), participants saw the target commercial. This ad (for Lynx deodorant, a well-known European brand) addressed the potentially embarrassing issue of conspicuous sweating for men. The ad showed a young male sweating copiously in different social settings (e.g., when walking on the beach or dancing in a club) and stressed the negative

reactions of other people to excessive male sweating. The ad display ended with a final filler ad (for WWF). Following the ad display, participants indicated for each ad to what degree they felt happy, awkward, interested, uncomfortable, embarrassed, and surprised when viewing the ad (1 = not at all, 7 = very strongly). Embarrassment was measured with the items embarrassed, awkward, and uncomfortable (Dahl et al. 2001; αs > .87 across the four ads). Finally, participants were thanked and debriefed.

Results and discussion

Manipulation checks. Analyses of the questions concerning the reliability of the personality feedback showed that participants believed the feedback fit them (M = 5.57), thought the feedback was accurate (M = 5.20) and did not think the feedback was wrong (M = 1.95). Our personality manipulation had the intended effect on feelings of perceived similarity. Participants in the shared personality condition felt more similar to their partners (M = 60.75) compared to participants in the non-shared personality condition (M = 70.92), $t(104) = 1.99$, $p < .05$. Moreover, we averaged the items for the Social Attraction Scale and found that participants in the shared personality condition felt more connected with their partners (M = 5.11) than participants in the non-shared personality condition (M = 4.71), $t(101) = 2.70$, $p < .01$ (the lower degrees of freedom for this test are due to the fact that three respondents failed to complete the scale).

Embarrassment. Supporting our hypotheses, a 2 (personality: shared vs. non-shared) × 2 (gender: shared vs. non-shared) ANOVA with embarrassment as dependent variable showed main effects of personality, $F(1, 104) = 5.58$, $p < .05$, and gender, $F(1, 104) = 5.78$, $p < .05$. When viewing the target commercial, participants in the non-shared personality condition felt more embarrassed (M = 2.61) than participants in the shared

personality condition ($M = 2.11$) and participants in the non-shared gender condition felt more embarrassed ($M = 2.84$) than those in the shared gender condition ($M = 2.19$). The two-way interaction was not significant, $F(1, 104) = 1.41$, $p = .24$.[2] .

These results might raise two questions. First, one could wonder whether the target ad generated the feelings of embarrassment in our participants, or whether simply being together with a dissimilar person would be enough to experience feelings of embarrassment. To test this alternative explanation, we conducted two different analyses. Using again the data from the male participants, we analyzed the reported embarrassment for the filler ads (Renault, KLM, and WWF). The alternative explanation would predict that participants in the non-shared condition would also experience embarrassment when seeing the filler ads. We averaged the reported embarrassment for the filler ads into one variable, and ran a repeated measures ANOVA with personality (shared vs. non-shared) and gender (shared vs. non-shared) as between participants factors, and ad (target ad vs. filler ads) as a within participants factor on embarrassment. The results demonstrated a main effect of personality, $F(1, 101) = 4.98$, $p = .03$, a marginal main effect of gender, $F(1, 101) = 2.91$, $p = .09$, and a main effect of ad, $F(1, 101) = 32.12$, $p < .01$. More importantly, there were two-way interactions between ad and personality, albeit marginally significant, $F(1, 101) = 3.59$, $p = .06$, and between ad and gender, $F(1, 101) = 8.61$, $p < .01$. There was no three-way interaction, $F(1, 101) = 0.11$, $p = .18$. It thus appeared that the differences between shared and non-shared personality and between shared and non-shared gender that were found for the target ad were not found for the

2 There were three participants who did not believe the personality feedback. Results were similar when those participants were left out of the analyses: a 2 (personality: shared vs. non-shared) × 2 (gender: shared vs. non-shared) ANOVA with embarrassment as dependent variable showed main effects of personality, $F(1, 101) = 4.90$, $p < .05$, and gender, $F(1, 101) = 6.10$, $p < .05$. The two-way interaction was not significant, $F(1, 101) = 1.79$, $p = .18$.

filler ads, all *t*s(104) < 1.57, *p*s > .12. A second way to test the alternative explanation that being together with a dissimilar person is enough to experience feelings of embarrassment is to take a look at the data from the female participants. The alternative explanation would predict that female participants, who were not targeted by the Lynx ad, would feel embarrassment especially in the non-shared personality condition. Yet, a comparison between females in the non-shared personality condition ($M = 2.24$) and females in the shared personality condition ($M = 2.57$) did not reveal a difference on reported embarrassment for the Lynx ad, $t(44) = 0.53$, $p = .61$.

Second, one could question whether being together with dissimilar others would only increase feelings of embarrassment, or could also increase the experience of other emotions. To address this question, we analyzed the other reported feelings for the target commercial (happy, interested, and surprised). For all the emotions, 2 (personality: shared vs. non-shared) × 2 (gender: shared vs. non-shared) ANOVAs with the emotion as dependent variable showed no main effects of personality, all *F*s(1, 104) < 1.12, *p*s > .29, and no main effects of gender, all *F*s(1, 104) < 0.41, *p*s > .52. There were also no two-way interactions, all *F*s(1, 104) < 0.44, *p*s > .51, suggesting that only the experience of embarrassment and not of other emotions was increased.

Discussion. Study 1 corroborates our theorizing about the role of advertising targeting in ad-induced embarrassment and, at a more general level, about the role of social identities in embarrassment without agency. Males watching an ad about male sweating were more embarrassed by the ad when the viewing companion was a female than when it was a male. Moreover, regardless of the gender of the viewing companion, participants who had earlier received (bogus) personality feedback which highlighted

their dissimilarity to the viewing companion were more embarrassed than participants who received feedback emphasizing similarity. This finding is important because it shows that drawing attention to differences between a consumer and the viewing companion can impact embarrassment even when the consumer and the viewing partner are similar on aspects that are targeted by the commercial. These findings are consistent with results in the embarrassment literature showing that social incidents tend to be more embarrassing when experienced in the presence of strangers than in the presence of close relationships (e.g., Miller 1996).

STUDY 2: SOURCES OF EMBARRASSMENT WITHOUT AGENCY

Study 2 aimed to provide additional insights into the social antecedents and consequences of embarrassment without agency. We did so by introducing a new independent variable alongside those used in the previous studies (audience composition and advertising targeting): the media context preceding potentially embarrassing ads.

To maximize internal validity, we manipulated the content displayed prior to encountering a potentially embarrassing ad by merely manipulating advertising timing. Ads targeting shared social identities make consumers feel more similar to the viewing companion than ads targeting non-shared social identities (cf. pilot study). Moreover, embarrassment is a function of the social distance between members of an audience (cf. study 1). Putting these two results together led us to the prediction that ads targeting non-shared social identities should generate less embarrassment when preceded by ads targeting shared social identities. In other words, if ads targeting shared social identities make respondents feel more similar to their viewing companion, such ads should reduce

the threat posed by subsequent exposure to embarrassing ads targeting non-shared social identities. This prediction is important because it can be used to draw more general conclusions about the effect of program context and, hence, media planning, on ad-induced embarrassment. We will review the managerial implications more thoroughly in the general discussion.

Female participants watched a series of commercials in the presence of either a male or a female. These included neutral (i.e., non-embarrassing) ads, a potentially embarrassing female-targeted ad (the ad for sanitary napkins from the pilot study; hereafter called female-targeted ad), and a potentially embarrassing youth-targeted ad (the ad warning against sexually transmitted diseases from the pilot study; hereafter called youth-targeted ad). We manipulated the order in which participants saw the two embarrassing ads and predicted a three-way interaction between ad type, order of ad presentation, and gender of viewing companion. As in the pilot study, for our (female) participants, the female-targeted ad targeted a non-shared social identity in the presence of a male and a shared social identity in the presence of a female. The youth-targeted ad, instead, targeted a shared social identity in the case of both male and female viewing companions. Based on the reasoning above, in the presence of a male, prior exposure to the youth-targeted ad should lead to a reduction in the embarrassment generated by the female-targeted ad. No such effect of ad order should occur in the presence of a female (in this case both embarrassing ads were targeting a shared social identity). We also did not expect an interaction between ad order and viewing partner in the case of the youth-targeted ad and the neutral ads.

Method

Design and participants. Participants were 96 female students (M_{age} = 20.95). The experiment had a mixed 3 (ad type: female-targeted vs. youth-targeted vs. neutral) x 2 (ad order: female-targeted ad before youth-targeted ad vs. vice versa) x 2 (viewing partner: shared vs. non-shared gender) design. Ad type was a within-participant factor. Order of ad presentation and viewing partner were instead manipulated between participants.

Procedure and variables. Upon arriving to the laboratory, participants were randomly assigned to viewing partner conditions. In the shared-gender condition, the study was administered by a female student assistant. In the non-shared gender condition, it was administered by a male student assistant. The study employed four assistants (all students in their early twenties, all blind to the hypotheses, two males and two females). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two ad presentation order conditions. Participants first completed a short survey about their TV viewing habits and then watched a video clip. They sat next to the student assistant in front of a TV screen and watched a segment from a popular talk show. A commercial break featuring four ads was embedded in the clip. Two were the embarrassing ads used in the pilot study and two were neutral, non-embarrassing ads (one for KLM airline and one for Saab cars). The sequence was always the same: neutral ad, embarrassing ad, neutral ad, and embarrassing ad. We varied between participants the order of the two embarrassing ads (ad order manipulation). We also counterbalanced between participants the order of the two neutral ads. At the end of the video, the assistant left the room with the pretext that (s)he needed to speak to the lab manager. (S)He mentioned that, in order to avoid disturbing them, (s)he would wait outside the room while participants completed the final booklet. All

participants therefore completed the dependent variables alone. To support the cover story, the booklet also contained questions about the talk show.

Embarrassment was measured for each ad with the same items that were used in study 1 (across ads, αs > .85). Finally, to check that participants experienced embarrassment without an accompanying sense of agency, we added two items to confirm participants' perceived lack of control over the situation: "The research assistant controlled the sequence of events" and "I had no role in choosing the video segment" 1 = "very false", 7 = "very true").

Results

One participant failed to complete all items for the dependent variable, leaving data from 95 participants for all analyses below. In general, participants felt that the research assistant controlled the sequence of events (M = 5.60) and that they had no role in choosing the ads (M = 6.64). This suggests that if embarrassment would be experienced in this study, it would be embarrassment without agency. The three items for embarrassment were averaged to create an index. In the analyses below we used the scores for the two embarrassing ads and for the neutral ad positioned between them (i.e., for half of participants the neutral ad was the car ad and for the other half was instead the airline ad).[3] Means and standard deviations can be found in Table 1.

PLACE TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

A repeated-measures ANOVA with viewing partner and ad order as between-participants factors and ad type as within-participants factor on embarrassment showed no main effect of ad order (p = .35), and a marginally significant main effect of viewing partner, $F(1, 91) = 2.99$, p = .09. In the presence of a male (M = 2.09), participants felt

[3] Adding the neutral ad order counterbalancing factor to the model below left all results unchanged.

slightly more embarrassed than in the presence of a female (M = 1.88). We also observed a main effect of ad type, $F(2, 182) = 13.22$, $p < .01$. The two embarrassing ads ($M = 2.28$) made participants feel more embarrassed than the neutral ads ($M = 1.74$, $p < .01$), with no differences between female-targeted ($M = 2.34$) and youth-targeted embarrassing ads ($M = 2.22$, $p > .30$).

Crucially, there was a three-way interaction between ad type, ad order, and viewing partner, $F(2, 182) = 3.14$, $p < .05$ (no other effects were significant in this model). As expected, the effect was driven by a two-way interaction between ad order and viewing partner for the female-targeted ad, $F(1, 91) = 4.58$, $p < .05$. The same interaction was not significant for either the youth-targeted ad ($p > .30$), or the neutral ads ($p > .90$). The shape of the significant two-way interaction between ad order and viewing partner for the female-targeted ad provides support for our predictions. In the presence of a male, the female-targeted ad was rated as more embarrassing when presented before ($M = 2.99$) than when presented after the youth-targeted ad ($M = 2.08$), $F(1, 45) = 4.65$, $p < .05$. In contrast, when the viewing partner was female, the female-targeted ad targeted a shared social identity and ad order did not affect the embarrassment generated by the ad ($p > .43$). Ad order was not significant for the youth-targeted ad in both viewing partner conditions ($ps > .26$).[4]

[4] Additional analyses were conducted to confirm that mere anchoring cannot account for the results. In general, the two embarrassing ads were not rated differently when they were presented first ($p > .20$). We observed, however, a marginal difference within the male viewing partner condition in the embarrassment generated by the female-targeted and youth-targeted ads when they were presented first ($M = 2.99$ vs. 2.23, $p < .08$). This finding raises the possibility that the three-way interaction emerged as a consequence of a floor effect in the embarrassment generated by the youth-targeted ad when this was presented first in the presence of a male. To rule out this alternative explanation, we re-estimated the three-way ANOVA removing participants in the male viewing partner condition who selected the lowest end of the embarrassment scale for the first embarrassing ad in the sequence. Eleven participants were excluded, seven of which based on scores on the youth-targeting embarrassing ad. Despite the substantial reduction in sample size, the three-way interaction remained significant, $F(2, 160) = 3.26$, $p < .05$, and the pattern of results was unchanged.

Discussion

Study 2 replicates and extends the effects of shared versus non-shared social identities observed in the previous studies. First, this study demonstrates that relatively small situational factors such as ad order can influence feelings of embarrassment. When people do not share the social identity targeted by an embarrassing ad, first viewing another embarrassing ads that instead targets a shared social identity can help overcome feelings of embarrassment.[5] Second, study 1 explored the social and emotional effects of potentially embarrassing ads placed in isolation. In study 2, we explored the substantive importance of our theory in more detail by manipulating the media context preceding exposure to a potentially embarrassing ad.

STUDY 3: ADVERTISING EFFECTIVENESS

An important question that we have not addressed so far concerns the consequences for advertising effectiveness of potentially embarrassing ads targeting shared versus non-shared identities. Study 3 explored the marketing implications of our theorizing by measuring attitudes, purchase intentions, and usage intentions after viewing potentially embarrassing ads targeting shared or non-shared social identities.

Method

Seventy-three female students (M_{age} = 20.84) participated in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. They were randomly assigned to the shared or non-shared gender

5" It is worth noting that in the pilot study participants completed questions about two separate scenarios (where they were asked to imagine seeing an ad in the presence of, respectively, a male and a female). One could therefore wonder how the findings for the ad order manipulation in study 2 fit with the findings of the pilot study, where counterbalancing the order of the two scenarios exerted no effect. It is important to recognize that the pilot study differed from study 2 in two critical aspects. First, participants were asked to imagine (vs. actually being) in a social situation. Second, the scenarios in the pilot study were presented as two separate tasks and we did not lead people to speculate on how the experience from the first scenario might have exerted carry-over effects on the second.

condition of a between-participants design. Next to these female participants, thirty three male students were recruited to participate in the non-shared gender identity condition (these data were not used in the main analysis).

In a reversal of the procedure used in study 1, participants were randomly assigned to seat in a room together with either another female participant (shared gender condition) or a male student (non-shared gender condition). Participants were informed that the session consisted of multiple, unrelated studies and that they would start with a study concerning television commercials. Participants watched together four commercials: two fillers, one target embarrassing ad, and one filler. The fillers were the same ads that were used in study 1. The target embarrassing ad was for a well-known European brand (Lactacyd) and promoted a detergent for intimate feminine care. The ad showed a number of everyday life scenes (e.g., showering, dancing) in the life of a young woman as seen from the point of view of her genitals. The ad reminded women of the importance of personal hygiene.

Next, participants indicated for each commercial to what extent they thought the ad was interesting, attractive, informative, nice, and likeable (all seven-point; $\alpha = .88$ for the target commercial). This was our dependent measure of attitudes towards the ad. Participants also answered the emotion items of study 1, including the embarrassment items ($\alpha = .86$ for the target commercial). Further, participants indicated whether they would buy the product (purchase intentions: yes vs. no) and whether they would use the product (usage intentions: yes vs. no). Finally, participants answered the items "this ad incites me to buy the product", "it is likely that I will spend money on this product", and "I want to have this product" (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree) as a second

measure of purchase intentions ($\alpha = .93$ for the target commercial), and "it is likely that I will use this product" as a second measure of usage intentions.

Results and discussion

According to our predictions, viewing socially sensitive ads in a non-shared social identity setting should generate more embarrassment, more negative attitudes towards the ad, and lower purchase and usage intentions. The findings supported these predictions. Participants in the non-shared gender condition experienced more embarrassment (M = 3.81) for the target ad than participants in the shared gender condition (M = 3.08), $t(71) = 1.96$, $p = .05$. They did not differ on reported happiness, interest, or surprise for the target ad, all ts$(71) < 1.86$, ps $> .10$, and they did not differ on embarrassment reported for the filler ads, all ts$(71) < 1.69$, ps $> .10$.

Importantly, participants in the non-shared condition had a less positive attitude towards the ad (M = 3.98) compared to participants in the shared condition (M = 4.68), $t(71) = 2.25$, $p < .05$. Marginally fewer participants in the non-shared condition expressed an intention to buy the product (36%) compared to participants in the shared condition (58%), χ^2 (1, N = 73) = 3.24, $p = .07$, and fewer participants in the non-shared condition expressed an intention to use the product (42%) compared to participants in the shared condition (68%), χ^2 (1, N = 73) = 4.62, $p < .05$. Finally, participants in the non-shared gender condition reported lower intentions to buy the product (M = 3.04) than participants in the shared gender condition (M = 3.97), $t(71) = 2.59$, $p = .01$, and they reported lower intentions to use the product (M = 3.15) than participants in the shared gender condition (M = 4.33), $t(71) = 2.79$, $p < .01$. These differences between the shared and non-shared conditions were not found for the filler ads: participants in the shared and

non-shared conditions reported equally positive attitudes, all ts(71) < 0.76, ps > .45, intentions to buy the product, all χ^2 (1, N = 73) < 0.41, ps > .51, and all ts(71) < 0.87, ps > .39, and intentions to use the product, all χ^2 (1, N = 73) < 0.31, ps > .58, and all ts(71) < 0.44, ps > .66 .

To summarize, study 3 demonstrates that socially sensitive messages are responded to differently depending on the social context. Viewing such messages in settings where consumers do not share the targeted identity with others can have negative consequences for attitudes towards the message, and for future purchase and usage intentions.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Theoretical contributions

Advertising-induced embarrassment is far from being an uncommon experience and yet, to date, very limited research has examined this phenomenon. Advertising researchers have recently begun to recognize the importance of exploring the influence of the social context at the time of ad exposure on liking of, and memory for, advertising messages (e.g., Faseur and Geuens 2012; Fisher and Dubé 2005; Puntoni and Tavassoli 2007; Raghunathan and Corfman 2006). This literature demonstrates that, during advertising viewing, consumers are concerned with both the situational appropriateness of certain cues (or behavioral expressions) and other persons' opinions. Our findings add to this growing body of work by exploring potentially embarrassing advertising messages in a social context. In particular, they demonstrate how advertising targeting and social

context interact to determine the level of embarrassment experienced by consumers during exposure to socially sensitive commercials.

Our theory of embarrassment without agency also contributes to the growing body of psychological research on self-conscious emotions. Tracy and Robins (2007) proposed a general model of self-conscious emotions that highlights the critical importance of perceived agency or, in their terminology, internal attributions over the emotional event. This stance is consistent with most research on embarrassment, which focuses on the emotional consequences of an individual's self-generated predicament (e.g., Keltner and Buswell 1997). Tracy and Robins (2007) note, however, that internal attributions should be conceptualized more broadly than typically done in the literature to include aspects related to one's identity. This is especially important in the case of embarrassment, where internal attributions "are often made about events for which one has no responsibility or intentionality" (Tracy and Robins 2007; p. 12). Despite earlier suggestions to the experience of embarrassment in more passive situations (e.g., Lewis 2000), hardly any empirical research has been conducted on this topic (for exceptions, see Miller 1987; Sharkey 1992). To the best of our knowledge, our studies provide the first analysis of how the notion of overlapping social identities in a social context can be fruitfully applied to the study of self-conscious emotions. By doing so, we offer a new perspective on how person and situation interact to influence self-conscious emotions.

Practical contributions

Copywriting. Our studies on embarrassment without agency also have practical implications. Embarrassment is an aversive emotion and our findings suggest that minimizing ad-induced embarrassment should be a priority for advertisers of potentially

embarrassing products. To limit the amount of embarrassment generated by their ads, marketers in industries that address socially sensitive issues for consumers prevailingly focus on copywriting (e.g., Aaker and Bruzzone 1985; Barnes and Dobson 1990; Wilson and West 1981). For example, an ad by Novartis concerning irritable-bowel syndrome drew attention to a checklist to "help to cut through the embarrassment factor" (quoted in Young 2004, p. 3). Similarly, Rogaine used humor to promote its hair loss treatment in the belief that humorous copy would reduce the embarrassment generated by the ad (Creative Review, 2002). Our findings provide new insights by stressing the importance of considering the way the message addresses specific social identities. Advertisers could reduce the risk of generating embarrassment in target consumers by creating feelings of similarity with other people (cf. study 1), for example by emphasizing a social identity shared by all members of an audience (e.g., an appeal to national values).

Media planning. The current research has also several implications for media planning. First, media vehicles differ in the likelihood of private versus public viewing (e.g., online vs. outdoor) and, in the latter case, in the likelihood of occurring in a social context where the targeted social identity is shared versus not shared by the viewing companions (e.g., pre-screening cinema advertising for Jane Eyre vs. Fight Club). Media planners should therefore consider the likely social context when making vehicle selection decisions for potentially embarrassing ads, because ads targeting shared social identities generate less embarrassment than ads targeting non-shared identities.

Second, consumer response to an ad may sometimes depend on other ads presented in the same commercial break (cf. study 2). Although advertisers tend to pay little attention to the structure of commercial breaks, recent research demonstrates the

importance of surrounding ads for the effectiveness of one's message (Schweidel, Bradlow, and Williams 2006; Poncin and Derbaix 2009). Prior exposure to a message that increases social connectedness (e.g., a potentially embarrassing ad targeting shared social identities, study 2) should reduce the embarrassment generated by a potentially embarrassing ad targeting non-shared social identities. More generally, these results are informative for media placement decisions. Often, media content addresses socially sensitive issues (e.g., TV talk shows or documentaries) and this may offer opportunities for advertisers. Although we did not manipulate program context in the studies, one can extrapolate from our findings to predict that, for example, it should be beneficial to advertise a solution to a specific (i.e., non-shared) health problem within a TV program addressing a taboo (i.e., shared) topic.

Finally, and beyond the context of embarrassing ads, the finding that ads targeting non-shared social identities lead consumers to feel uniquely targeted suggests the intriguing possibility of a trade-off between advertising reach and effectiveness. If it is important for marketers to make consumers strongly targeted, it may be beneficial to reach target consumers when they are a minority in a social situation.

Limitations and future research

Our studies investigated embarrassment among both males and females, manipulated gender composition as well as personality feedback, and used a variety of commercials (public service announcements and ads for intimate detergents, sanitary napkins, and deodorants). Despite this variety of contexts, a limitation of the current paper is that in all studies the key embarrassing ad targeted consumers based on their gender. Addressing this limitation would be difficult due to the constraints of lab research

(e.g., the need to avoid serious ethical issues, as embarrassing participants in the lab based, for example, on their race/ethnicity or body weight would). To generalize the current findings and to gain more insights into the underlying process, it would be interesting for future research to study other social identities and contexts, and to further explore the social dynamics underlying the effect documented in this paper.

Interestingly, previous research has shown that inducing negative self-conscious emotions can have positive consequences on, for example, prosocial behavior and donations (De Hooge, Breugelmans, and Zeelenberg 2008; De Hooge, Zeelenberg, and Breugelmans 2007). Thus, it seems logical to assume that embarrassment could sometimes have positive marketing effects. The current findings demonstrate that embarrassing advertisements can have negative effects on attitudes and purchase intentions. Yet, in for example interactions with salespeople it might be possible that the experience of embarrassment without agency would have positive effects. Additional research is needed to further explore the consequences of embarrassment in consumer settings.

One of the most important current trends in advertising and marketing is the fragmentation of markets and advertising audiences. Because of growing consumer diversity and increasingly sophisticated marketing practices, advertising targeting applies to ever narrower segments. With marketers striving to make finer distinctions between consumers in new product design and advertising, our discussion of the effects of targeting shared versus non-shared social identities is both timely and relevant.

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TABLE 1

MEANS (AND SDS) OF EMBARRASSMENT AS A FUNCTION OF VIEWING PARTNER, AD ORDER, AND AD TYPE CONDITION IN STUDY 2

	Male viewing partner		Female viewing partner	
Ad type	Female-targeting before youth-targeting	Youth-targeting before female-targeting	Female-targeting before youth-targeting	Youth-targeting before female-targeting
Female-targeting embarrassing ad	2.99 (1.60)	2.08 (1.24)	1.97 (1.21)	2.26 (1.36)
Neutral ad	1.89 (0.98)	1.79 (1.10)	1.69 (0.99)	1.57 (0.83)
Youth-targeting embarrassing ad	2.69 (1.53)	2.23 (1.24)	1.92 (1.16)	2.03 (1.41)

Note. Embarrassment scores could range from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very strongly).

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