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Advertising-Induced Embarrassment

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Consumer embarrassment is a concern for many advertisers. Yet little is known about ad-induced embarrassment. 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 ad 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 influence feelings of embarrassment and advertising effectiveness. These findings have important theoretical and practical implications for advertisers.

Many products pose special problems to advertisers because of their potentially embarrassing nature. Consumers may regularly experience embarrassment when viewing commercials concerning such sensitive topics as erectile dysfunction, skin conditions, birth control, body odor, baldness, or female hygiene. Even when the advertised product is not socially sensitive, the pressing need to break through advertising clutter is leading many agencies to adopt provocative messages that can be perceived as embarrassing by consumers. Some exploratory studies suggest that offensive (Barnes and Dotson 1990) and

irritating (Aaker and Bruzzone 1985) ads trigger negative reactions among consumers, and the commercials used in these studies are often socially sensitive or potentially embarrassing. Moreover, studies showing that embarrassment can have negative consequences, such as health care avoidance (McCambridge and Considine 2014), suggest that embarrassment feelings during advertising viewing are something that advertisers might want to avoid. Underlining the relevance of this topic, the television network HBO recently launched a campaign for mobile television viewing with the message that watching sex scenes as an adolescent with one's parents is an embarrassing experience that can be avoided by watching the scenes privately on a mobile device. In our experience interacting with marketers from a range of companies and industries (e.g., SCA, a world leader in hygiene products for women and elderly people), concerns about reducing ad-induced embarrassment appear to be common. Yet to the best of our knowledge no research has investigated when and why people experience embarrassment during advertising viewing and what are the potential consequences for ad effectiveness. We aim to address this gap by exploring ad-induced embarrassment.

The dominant theoretical perspective on embarrassment is the functional account (e.g., Keltner and Buswell 1997; Keltner and Haidt 1999). This account suggests that embarrassment is an affiliative behavior designed to signal one's desire to be included in a group. When individuals are personally responsible for breaking a social norm, they can signal their regret by displaying embarrassment. Indeed, almost all studied incidents of embarrassment are those for which the individual is personally responsible. For example, marketing research has investigated the occurrence of embarrassment during the purchase of potentially embarrassing products (Blair and Roese 2013; Dahl, Manchanda, and Argo 2001; Lau-Gesk and Drolet 2008) and salesperson-customer interactions (Verbeke and Bagozzi 2003). In these situations, people are actively engaged in potentially embarrassing behaviors or social interactions.

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The present research recognizes that advertising viewing is fundamentally different in that, in the case of ad-induced embarrassment, the viewer is passive or “innocent.” We propose that what triggers embarrassment in an advertising context is not what we *do* but who we *are*. Our research therefore takes a social identity perspective to explain the phenomenon of ad-induced embarrassment. We propose that a key factor is whether viewers share the personal identity that is targeted by the embarrassing ad. Compared to a situation where viewers share the targeted identity, if viewers do not share the targeted identity, the ad should draw attention to the dissimilarity between the viewers and increase the embarrassment experienced by the targeted viewer.

In this article, we present four studies that reveal how personal and situational factors interact during exposure to potentially embarrassing ads to determine both the level of embarrassment experienced and advertising effectiveness. Study 1 shows that embarrassing ads can impact perceived distinctiveness from a viewing companion and feelings of being targeted by the ad. The three subsequent studies investigate ad-induced embarrassment. In Study 2, males watched a potentially embarrassing ad for a deodorant in the presence of either another male or a female. Embarrassment was lower when the ad targeted identities shared by the viewers than when it targeted nonshared identities. Study 3 focuses on how advertising timing can impact perceived distinctiveness and embarrassment. Finally, Study 4 examines the effectiveness of a personal hygiene commercial targeting shared or nonshared identities.

THEORY

Social identities are the aspects of one’s self-concept based on group membership. They can vary from well-defined, stable identities that are central to one’s self (e.g., being a woman) to less important or short-term identities (e.g., being a team A or team B player during a parlor game). Embarrassment is the negative, self-conscious feeling that arises when an event threatens one’s social identity (Goffman 1956; Miller 1996). Although the literature has predominantly focused on social identity threats caused by the person himself or herself (e.g., Keltner and Buswell 1997; Keltner and Haidt 1999), it has been suggested that people can experience embarrassment even if they have not violated any social norm. For instance, embarrassment can occur when being stared at as well as in 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; Lewis 2000; Miller 1996).

Targeting Shared Versus Nonshared Identities

We believe that advertising viewing is one of most prominent contexts in which people experience embarrassment without engaging in norm-violating behavior. Advertising viewing often occurs in the presence of other people. In these

situations, social identities can overlap within and across individuals (Roccas and Brewer 2002). In particular, when any two individuals are together, they possess identities that are held by both individuals and identities that are held by only one of them. When these two individuals together watch a potentially embarrassing ad, the ad may thus target a social identity that is shared by both individuals or a social identity that is not shared. When an ad speaks to a social identity shared by all members of an audience, we denote the ad as targeting *shared identities*. Examples could be two female friends together watching an ad for a feminine hygiene product or two teenagers watching an ad concerning acne. In contrast, when an ad speaks to the social identity of a particular individual within an audience, we denote the ad as targeting *nonshared identities*. Examples could be a female watching an ad for a feminine hygiene product together with a male, or a teenager watching an ad concerning acne together with an older relative.

Even though people may be similar in many respects to their viewing companions, we propose that a potentially embarrassing ad can activate a focus on the distinct social identities of viewing companions and thereby feelings of distinctiveness—a person’s feeling of being different from others around her or him (McGuire 1984). When an embarrassing ad targets a shared identity, no member of the audience is being singled out by the ad because everybody is being targeted. In contrast, ads targeting nonshared identities should draw attention to the differences between a consumer and his or her viewing companions and thereby increase feelings of distinctiveness (McGuire 1984). 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 nonshared identities than to ads targeting shared identities.

H1: Potentially embarrassing ads targeting nonshared identities increase feelings of distinctiveness compared to ads targeting shared identities.

H2: Consumers experience stronger feelings of being targeted by a potentially embarrassing ad when the ad targets nonshared compared to shared identities.

These feelings of distinctiveness can have important consequences for the experience of ad-induced embarrassment. Advertising research has shown that the experience of feeling distinct from a viewing companion can predict the intensity of emotional reactions during advertising viewing (Raghunathan and Corfman 2006; Ramanathan and McGill 2007). Moreover, psychological research shows that social incidents tend to be more embarrassing in the presence of strangers than of close relationships (Miller 1996), suggesting a relationship between feelings of distinctiveness and embarrassment. Building on this work, we posit the following:

H3: More intense feelings of distinctiveness increase the embarrassment generated by potentially embarrassing ads.

We suggest that there are two different mechanisms with which feelings of distinctiveness and ad-induced embarrassment can arise. First, based on the social identity perspective, we predict that the potentially embarrassing ad itself may activate a focus on existing (non)shared social identities and single out a consumer. If feelings of distinctiveness are a function of whether the potentially embarrassing ad targets shared versus nonshared identities (hypothesis 1) and if situations that increase feelings of distinctiveness are associated to more intense feelings of embarrassment (hypothesis 3), then it directly follows that whether an ad targets shared versus nonshared identities should impact feelings of embarrassment.

H4: Potentially embarrassing ads targeting nonshared identities generate more embarrassment than ads targeting shared identities.

A second mechanism that can generate ad-induced embarrassment is advertising timing. We predicted that exposure to ads targeting nonshared identities leads to an increase in feelings of distinctiveness (hypothesis 1). One could go a step further and propose that ads targeting shared identities have the opposite effect. That is, by the same reasoning used to predict hypothesis 1, one could argue that exposure to ads targeting shared identities leads to decreased feelings of distinctiveness. Combined again with the prediction that ad-induced embarrassment is a function of feelings of distinctiveness (hypothesis 3), this reasoning suggests that embarrassing ads targeting nonshared identities should trigger less intense embarrassment when preceded by an embarrassing ad targeting shared identities.

H5: Previous exposure to a potentially embarrassing ad targeting a shared identity decreases the embarrassment generated by a potentially embarrassing ad targeting a nonshared identity.

It is important to note that this hypothesis about the effect of advertising timing could be extended to media content in general. Then, potentially embarrassing media content addressing nonshared identities should increase feelings of distinctiveness (e.g., a TV program about a medical condition affecting the viewer but not the viewing companions), whereas media content addressing shared identities should do the opposite. Hypothesis 5's broader implications for media planning are reviewed in the general discussion.

Advertising Effectiveness

Although extant literature suggests that embarrassment tends to have positive consequences for social relations because it helps overcome small social incidents (e.g., Keltner and Buswell 1997), in the case of ad-induced embarrassment consumers experience an aversive feeling that can be

attributed to an organization's advertising strategy. Because of its aversive nature, it is reasonable to assume that in most instances consumers will not appreciate being placed in such an embarrassing situation. Therefore, we suggest that ads targeting nonshared identities will trigger more negative consumer responses.

H6: Compared to potentially embarrassing ads targeting shared identities, ads targeting nonshared identities will trigger more negative (a) attitudes toward the ad, (b) purchase intentions, and (c) usage intentions.

STUDY 1

According to our predictions, ad-induced embarrassment is generated when consumers experience feelings of distinctiveness and of being uniquely targeted. Therefore, Study 1 focuses on whether potentially embarrassing ads can induce feelings of distinctiveness and feelings of being targeted (hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 2).

Method

Participants and design. In this study, 56 female students ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.11$) at a large European university participated in return for a small reward. They were randomly assigned to the female or youth ad condition (ad-type manipulation). Participants also completed questions about two separate scenarios, our within-participant manipulation of viewing partner (same-sex versus opposite-sex, order counterbalanced).

Procedure and measures. Participants first watched a TV commercial. Participants in the female ad condition watched an ad for Libresse, a well-known European brand promoting sanitary napkins. The commercial featured shots of young female friends in a bar mixed with lab demonstrations of the product's effectiveness, with a voiceover describing the product. Participants in the youth ad condition watched an ad warning young people against sexually transmitted diseases that clearly targeted both genders. The ad portrayed young individuals in a bar while a voiceover warned against the risk of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) for young people.

Next, participants described the group of people targeted by the ad (open-ended) in a booklet. They then imagined seeing the ad together with a stranger in a public setting, described as "a (female/male) of about the same age as you" (same-sex/opposite-sex condition). For each scenario, participants indicated the extent to which the ad would "draw attention to the similarities between us" and "underline the fact that we are both young people and have similar problems" (1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*; perceived similarity; $r = .56$, $p < .01$). They also indicated feelings of being targeted by the ad ("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 identity they felt the ad was targeting: "Seeing this ad would underline the fact that I am a young person/female" (1 = young, 7 = female).

Results

The ad-type manipulation worked. On the open-ended question, all participants answered "females" or "women" in the female ad condition, whereas none in the youth ad condition did so, $\chi^2(1) = 56.00, p < .01$. Conversely, none of the participants in the female ad condition indicated young people as the target, whereas 73% in the youth ad condition did so (e.g., "young people"), $\chi^2(1) = 33.18, p < .01$. Similarly, the second manipulation check demonstrated that the ad in the female ad condition was targeting the female identity ($M = 5.46$) more than the ad in the youth ad condition ($M = 2.88$), $t(54) = 8.01, p < .01$.

A repeated-measures ANOVA with ad type as between-participants and viewing partner as within-participants factors on perceived similarity showed two main effects, $F_s > 11.71, p_s < .01$, and a two-way interaction, $F(1, 54) = 87.66, p < .01$. 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 scenario condition ($M = 2.39$). Crucially, in the opposite-sex condition, similarity ratings were higher in the case of the youth ad (shared identity; $M = 3.21$) than the female ad (nonshared identity; $M = 1.68$), $F(1, 54) = 55.19, p < .01$. Ad type was not significant in the same-sex condition, $F(1, 54) = 1.82, p = .18$, because in this condition both ads targeted shared identities ($M_{\text{youth}} = 3.68, M_{\text{female}} = 3.40$). These results are consistent with hypothesis 1.

Similarly, a repeated-measures ANOVA on perceived targeting showed two main effects, $F_s > 12.09, p_s < .01$, and a two-way interaction, $F(1, 54) = 22.78, p < .01$. Perceived targeting was higher in the female ($M = 3.28$) than in the youth ad condition ($M = 2.44$) and higher in the opposite- ($M = 3.18$) than in the same-sex condition ($M = 2.61$). Importantly, ad type was a predictor of perceived targeting in the opposite-sex ($M_{\text{youth}} = 2.35, M_{\text{female}} = 3.90$), $F(1, 54) = 40.73, p < .01$, but not in the same-sex condition ($p > .55, M_{\text{youth}} = 2.54, M_{\text{female}} = 2.67$). These results are consistent with hypothesis 2. Yet one could argue that the female and youth ads in Study 1 differed on more aspects than just social identity (for example, they differed on ad content and targeted product/warning). To address this weakness, we ran Study 2.

STUDY 2

Study 1 demonstrates that feelings of distinctiveness and of being targeted by a potentially embarrassing ad depend on whether the ad targets shared or nonshared identities (hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 2). Study 2 tests whether increased

feelings of distinctiveness increase the embarrassment generated by potentially embarrassing ads (hypothesis 3). To manipulate feelings of distinctiveness we used bogus personality feedback. Crucially, Study 2 also tests whether ads targeting nonshared identities trigger more intense feelings of embarrassment than ads targeting shared identities (hypothesis 4).

Method

Participants and design. In Study 2, 105 male students ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.98$) participated in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. They were randomly assigned to one of the 2 (personality: similar versus dissimilar) \times 2 (gender: shared versus nonshared) between-participants conditions with embarrassment as the main dependent variable. Next to these male participants, 46 female students were recruited to participate in the nonshared gender identity condition. (These data were not used in the main analyses).

Procedure and variables. To manipulate gender composition, participants were randomly assigned to a room together with either another male participant (shared gender condition) or a female participant (nonshared gender condition). Participants started with a newly developed personality test designed to assess 10 different personality types, some of which were more common than others. After answering the 30-item survey, the research assistant checked the answers and provided participants with (bogus) personality feedback. In the similar (dissimilar) 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 randomly assigned two different personality profiles. For all participants, the feedback was 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 to generate even stronger feelings of (dis)similarity between participants.

Next, as manipulation check, participants indicated whether the feedback fit them, was wrong, and was accurate (1 = *Completely disagree*, 7 = *Completely agree*). To measure perceived similarity, participants indicated the extent to which they felt connected with the other participant by drawing a mark on a line ("feel a strong sense of personal connection" [0 mm] to "feel completely disconnected from this person" [125 mm]). They also answered the Social Attraction Scale (McCroskey and McCain 1974), an interpersonal attraction scale with items such as "I would like to have a friendly chat with this person" (1 = *Completely disagree*, 7 = *Completely agree*).

Participants continued with an ostensibly unrelated study concerning evaluations of TV commercials (all 30 seconds). 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. It showed a young male sweating copiously in different social settings and stressed the negative reactions of other people to excessive male sweating. The display ended with a filler ad (for WWF). Participants then 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 embarrassed, awkward, and uncomfortable (Dahl, Manchanda, and Argo 2001; $\alpha s > .87$).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks. Participants believed the personal-ity feedback fit them ($M = 5.57$), thought the feedback was accurate ($M = 5.20$), and did not think the feedback was wrong ($M = 1.95$). Moreover, participants in the shared personality condition felt more similar to their partners ($M = 60.75$) compared to participants in the nonshared personality condition ($M = 70.92$), $t(104) = 1.99$, $p < .05$. An average of the Social Attraction Scale items showed that participants in the shared personality condition felt more connected with their partners ($M = 5.11$) than participants in the nonshared personality condition ($M = 4.71$), $t(101) = 2.70$, $p < .01$ (lower *dfs* due to three respondents failing to complete the scale).

Embarrassment. A 2 (personality: similar versus dissimilar) \times 2 (gender: shared versus nonshared) ANOVA with embarrassment as dependent variable showed two main effects, $F_s > 5.58$, $ps < .05$, but no two-way interaction, $F(1, 104) = 1.41$, $p = .24$. When viewing the target commercial, participants in the dissimilar personality condition felt more embarrassed ($M = 2.61$) than participants in the similar personality condition ($M = 2.11$; supporting hypothesis 3) and those in the nonshared gender condition felt more embarrassed ($M = 2.84$) than those in the shared gender condition ($M = 2.19$; supporting hypothesis 4).

These results raise two questions. First, could simply being together with a dissimilar person be enough to trigger embarrassment? If so, participants in the nonshared conditions would also report embarrassment when seeing the filler ads. A repeated-measures ANOVA with personality (similar versus dissimilar) and gender (shared versus nonshared) as between participants factors, and ad (target ad versus filler ads) as within-participants factor on embarrassment demonstrated three main effects $F_s > 2.91$, $ps < .09$, two-way interactions between ad and personality, $F(1, 101) = 3.59$, $p = .06$, and between ad and gender, $F(1, 101) = 8.61$, $p < .01$, but no three-way interaction, $F < 1$. Thus, there were no differences between the shared and nonshared conditions for the filler ads,

$ts < 1.57$, $ps > .12$. In addition, female participants, who were not targeted by the Lynx ad, should then feel embarrassment especially in the dissimilar personality condition. A comparison between females in the dissimilar personality condition ($M = 2.24$) and females in the similar personality condition ($M = 2.57$) did not reveal a difference on reported embarrassment for the Lynx ad, $t < 1$.

Second, one could question whether being together with dissimilar others would increase the experience of emotions in general. For the emotions happy, interested, and surprised for the target ad, 2 (personality: shared versus nonshared) \times 2 (gender: shared versus nonshared) ANOVAs showed no main effects or two-way interactions, $F_s < 1.12$, $ps > .29$. Thus, only the experience of embarrassment was affected.

Discussion. Study 2 corroborates our theorizing about the role of social identities in ad-induced embarrassment. Males watching an ad about male sweating were more embarrassed by the ad when the viewing companion was dissimilar in gender or personality than when the viewing companion was similar. This finding implies for advertisers that drawing attention to similarities between viewers, even when the viewers are different on aspects that are targeted by the commercial, can impact embarrassment.

STUDY 3

Study 2 shows that situational factors can influence ad-induced embarrassment. Study 3 further explored this issue by focusing on advertising timing. It tested the prediction that previous exposure to potentially embarrassing ads targeting shared identities can decrease the embarrassment generated by a potentially embarrassing ad targeting nonshared identities (hypothesis 5).

Method

Design and participants. A total of 96 female students ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.95$) participated in a mixed 3 (ad type: female versus youth versus neutral) \times 2 (ad order: female ad before youth ad versus vice versa) \times 2 (viewing partner: shared versus nonshared) design. Ad type was a within-participants factor, whereas ad order and viewing partner were between-participants factors (randomly assigned).

Procedure and variables. In the shared (nonshared) condition, the study was administered by a female (male) assistant. All assistants were students in their early twenties and blind to the hypotheses. Participants first completed a short survey about their TV viewing habits and then watched a video clip. They sat next to the assistant and watched a popular talk show including a commercial break featuring four ads. Two were the embarrassing ads used in Study 1 and two were neutral ads (for KLM and 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) and counterbalanced the order of the neutral ads.

Next, the assistant left the room and mentioned that, to avoid disturbing them, he or she would wait outside the room while participants completed the booklet. To support the cover story, the booklet contained questions about the talk show. Embarrassment was measured for each ad with the items of Study 2 ($\alpha s > .85$).

Results and Discussion

The three items for embarrassment were averaged (see Table 1). 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 Saab and for the other half it was KLM).¹

A repeated-measures ANOVA with viewing partner and ad order as between-participants and ad type as within-participant factors on embarrassment showed only a marginal effect of viewing partner, $F(1, 91) = 2.99, p = .09$, a main effect of ad type, $F(2, 182) = 13.22, p < .01$, and, crucially, a three-way interaction, $F(2, 182) = 3.14, p < .05$. Participants felt more embarrassed in the presence of a male ($M = 2.09$) than in the presence of a female ($M = 1.88$) and when seeing the embarrassing ads ($M = 2.28$) compared to the neutral ads ($M = 1.74, p < .01$). There were no differences between female-targeted ($M = 2.34$) and youth-targeted embarrassing ads ($M = 2.22, p > .30$).

To explore the nature of the three-way interaction, we conducted follow-up analyses in each of the three ad-type conditions. As expected, the three-way interaction was driven by a two-way interaction between ad order and viewing partner for the female ad, $F(1, 91) = 4.58, p < .05$. This interaction was not significant for either the youth ad or the neutral ads ($p > .30$). 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 ad ($M = 2.08$), $F(1, 45) = 4.65, p < .05$. In contrast, when the viewing partner was female, the female 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 ad in both viewing partner conditions ($ps > .26$).² The results therefore support hypothesis 5. In sum, Study 3 demonstrates that advertisers can regulate ad-induced embarrassment via advertising timing decisions. The results suggest that the media context preceding exposure to potentially embarrassing ads targeting nonshared identities can influence ad-induced embarrassment by emphasizing distinctiveness of viewers.

STUDY 4

A remaining question concerns the consequences for advertising effectiveness of potentially embarrassing ads targeting shared versus nonshared identities (hypothesis 6). Study 4 explores our theorizing's managerial implications more directly by measuring attitudes, purchase intentions, and usage intentions after viewing potentially embarrassing ads.

Method

A total of 73 female students ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.84$) were randomly assigned to the shared or nonshared identity condition; 33 male students were also recruited to participate in the nonshared condition. (These data were not used in the main analyses). Participants were randomly assigned to a room together with either a female (shared identity condition) or a male participant (nonshared identity condition). They watched four TV commercials: two fillers, one potentially embarrassing ad, and one filler. The fillers were the ads from Study 2. The 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 in the life of a young woman as seen from the point of view of her genitals.

Next, participants indicated for each ad to what extent it was interesting, attractive, informative, nice, and likeable (attitude; all 7-point; $\alpha = .88$ for the target commercial). They also answered the emotion and embarrassment ($\alpha = .86$ for the target commercial) items of Study 2. They

TABLE 1
Means (and Standard Deviations) of Embarrassment as a Function of Viewing Partner, Ad Order, and Ad Type Condition in Study 3

Ad type	Male viewing partner		Female viewing partner	
	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*).

indicated whether they would buy the product (purchase intention: yes versus no) and would use the product (usage intention: yes versus 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” (purchase intention scale: 1 = *Completely disagree*, 7 = *Completely agree*; $\alpha = .93$ for the target commercial), and “It is likely that I will use this product” (usage intention scale).

Results

Participants in the nonshared condition experienced more embarrassment ($M = 3.81$) than participants in the shared condition ($M = 3.08$), $t(71) = 1.96$, $p = .05$. They did not differ on reported happiness, interest, or surprise, $t_s < 1.86$, $p_s > .10$, nor on embarrassment for the filler ads, $t_s < 1.69$, $p_s > .10$. More importantly, participants in the nonshared condition (who saw the feminine hygiene ad in the presence of a male) had less positive attitudes toward the ad ($M = 3.98$) compared to participants in the shared condition (who saw the same ad in the presence of a female; $M = 4.68$), $t(71) = 2.25$, $p < .05$. Marginally fewer participants in the nonshared condition expressed an intention to buy the product (36%) compared to participants in the shared condition (58%), $\chi^2(1, N = 73) = 3.24$, $p = .07$, and fewer participants in the nonshared condition expressed an intention to use the product (42%) compared to participants in the shared condition (68%), $\chi^2(1, N = 73) = 4.62$, $p < .05$. Finally, participants in the nonshared condition reported lower intentions to buy the product ($M = 3.04$) and to use the product ($M = 3.15$) than participants in the shared condition ($M_{buy} = 3.97$; $M_{use} = 4.33$), $t_s(71) > 2.59$, $p_s < .01$. These differences between the shared and nonshared conditions were not found for the filler ads, $t_s < 1$ and $\chi^2_s < 1$. The results provide support for hypothesis 6.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Ad-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 (e.g., Fisher and Dubé 2005; Puntoni and Tavassoli 2007; Raghunathan and Corfman 2006). Our findings add to this growing body of work by exploring embarrassing advertising messages in a social context. In particular, they demonstrate how advertising targeting and social context interact to determine embarrassment and advertising effectiveness. Concretely, embarrassing ads targeting nonshared identities tend to be responded to more negatively. Together, these findings have several implications for advertising practitioners and academics.

First, our studies suggest specific ways in which advertisers of potentially embarrassing products can reduce feelings of

ad-induced embarrassment. To limit the amount of embarrassment generated by their ads, marketers in industries that address socially sensitive issues for consumers prevaillingly focus on copywriting (e.g., Aaker and Bruzzone 1985; Barnes and Dobson 1990; Wilson and West 1981). For example, 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 show that minimizing feelings of distinctiveness and of being uniquely targeted reduces ad-induced embarrassment and negative ad responses. Our findings also provide new insights by stressing the importance of considering the way the message addresses specific social identities. For example, advertisers could reduce the risk of generating ad-induced embarrassment by focusing on social norms (e.g., “90% of females use Lactacyd”) or by using other ways of highlighting consumers’ similarity to others (e.g., an appeal to widely shared national values).

Second, our studies suggest how media planning can play an important role in the generation and avoidance of ad-induced embarrassment. Media messages can differ in the likelihood of being experienced in a social context where the targeted social identity is shared versus not shared by the viewing companions (e.g., prescreening cinema advertising for *Jane Eyre* versus *Fight Club*). Media planners should use this knowledge to their advantage and consider the likely social context when making vehicle selection decisions for potentially embarrassing ads: placing an ad in a medium that reduces feelings of distinctiveness should reduce the embarrassment generated by an ad targeting nonshared identities and result in more positive evaluations and purchase intentions.

Third, Study 3 shows that advertising timing can play an important role in the generation and avoidance of ad-induced embarrassment. Consumer response to an ad sometimes depends on other ads presented in the same commercial break. Prior exposure to a message that increases social connectedness should reduce the embarrassment generated by a potentially embarrassing ad targeting nonshared identities. More generally, the results imply that media content addressing socially sensitive issues (e.g., TV talk shows or documentaries) offers opportunities for advertisers. Our findings suggest that it should be beneficial to advertise a solution to a specific (i.e., nonshared) problem within a TV program addressing a potentially embarrassing topic related to a shared identity.

Fourth, the findings provide useful suggestions for ways to generate ad-induced embarrassment if advertisers wish consumers to experience this emotion. Advertisers may want to generate ad-induced embarrassment to reduce harmful behavior or enhance quitting behavior. Our findings suggest that antismoking or antidrinking campaigns benefit from making target consumers feel both targeted and distinct from viewing companions.

Limitations and Future Research

We investigated embarrassment among both males and females, manipulated gender composition as well as personality feedback, and used a variety of ads. However, in all studies the embarrassing ad targeting a nonshared identity was gender specific. Gender is an easily perceived social identity that avoids constraints of lab research (e.g., focusing on identities related to ethnicity or body weight would raise ethical issues). Moreover, despite its validation in Study 1, the ad targeting shared identities in Study 2 implied intimacy between genders (at least among heterosexual participants) and this may have somehow affected the results. Finally, our studies used only self-report measures and future research would benefit from other approaches (e.g., facial expression measurement or eye tracking). To generalize the current findings and gain more insights into the underlying process, future research should therefore study other social identities and contexts using a broader set of measures.

Throughout this article, we relied on the assumption that advertisers' prevailing goal is to engender more positive attitudinal responses to the message and greater purchase intentions. However, for unknown brands with a small advertising budget, the key obstacle is awareness. If using potential advertising copy can draw attention and engagement from a previously unaware audience, it may thus be beneficial for companies to do so, even if the prevailing consumer response is negative. For example, negative book reviews are bad news for well-known authors but are beneficial for unknown authors (Berger, Sorensen, and Rasmussen 2010). Moreover, if a campaign focuses on increasing elaboration and memory, advertisers may benefit from making unexpected media choices, such as advertising feminine hygiene products during the Super Bowl. Research shows that incongruent media contexts stimulate elaboration (e.g., Dahlén et al. 2008). Incongruent media choices could also result in increased word of mouth and unpaid media exposure.

The current studies do not investigate the reaction of consumers not targeted by an ad. We focused on targeted consumers because this is a setting more directly relevant to advertisers, but future research should also explore embarrassment among nontarget markets. For example, nontarget consumers could experience empathic embarrassment (Miller 1987), with potentially interesting ramifications. At a more general level, it is important to investigate the role of individual differences, such as embarrassability (Modigliani 1968).

Another issue that the studies left unexplored is that sometimes potentially embarrassing ads target more than one identity (e.g., ads for prostate problems speak to both gender and age). In these cases, the relative salience of each targeted identity is likely to impact consumer reaction to the ads in different social contexts.

Finally, participants in all our studies interacted with strangers. However, social advertising viewing often occurs with close relationships and future research should validate

our findings in such a context. As suggested by the HBO campaign described in the opening paragraph, we suspect that ad-induced embarrassment frequently occurs in the case of more intimate relationships, like a teenager watching an ad teaching young people about safe sex in the presence of her parents. More generally, future research should explore the impact of the type of social relation between viewing companions on embarrassment (e.g., status concerns when hearing a conversation about an embarrassing product together with a colleague of superior rank).

NOTES

1. Adding the neutral ad order counterbalancing factor to the model left all results unchanged.
2. Mere anchoring cannot account for the results. 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 embarrassment generated by the female and youth ads when they were presented first ($M = 2.99$ versus 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 ad when this was presented first in the presence of a male. To rule out this explanation, we reestimated the three-way ANOVA removing participants in the male viewing partner condition who selected the lowest embarrassment score for the first embarrassing ad in the sequence; 11 participants were excluded, 7 based on scores on the youth ad. Despite this reduction, the three-way interaction remained significant, $F(2, 160) = 3.26$, $p < .05$, and the pattern of results was unchanged.

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