Appreciating Anonymity: An Exploration of Embarrassing Products and the Power of Blending In☆

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Abstract

While most research suggests using ostentatious packaging as a strategy to increase sales, using such packaging for embarrassing products can actually decrease purchase intentions. Five studies explore two components of packaging that influence product anonymity and the relationship between anonymity, embarrassment, and purchase intentions. The studies use a variety of methods including one field study, three scenario-based experiments, and one virtual reality video study with a behavioral component. This research contributes to retailing literature by examining the effect of packaging dimensions on product anonymity and the subsequent impact on embarrassment and purchase intentions. We consistently show more anonymously packaged products are perceived as less embarrassing and are more likely to be purchased than less anonymously packaged products. Consumers are able to circumvent undesirable stigmas associated with embarrassing products by selecting products that are more anonymously packaged and positioned in the store. Additionally, increased sales due to product packaging differences are more likely when an embarrassing product is positioned in an aisle versus on an endcap. Promotional incentives, such as coupons, in-store discounts, or bonus buys, can mitigate the negative effect of embarrassment onto purchase intentions. These findings have important implications to our understanding of shopper behavior when threatened with embarrassment.
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The modern retail environment is packed with fantastic fonts, strategically designed color combinations, and unique product forms, all competing to draw the attention of consumers in the retail space. While most research in regards to package differentiation touts its success (e.g., Ampuero and Vila 2006; Dickson and Ginter 1987; Orth and Malkewitz 2008), some calling it necessary (Ng 2006), this research shows differentiation by overtly standing out may not always be a good thing. In particular, when considering the packaging or placement of products associated with some sort of embarrassing stigma, a highly noticeable or visible product could be a deterrent. While creative packaging usually provides the opportunity to set products apart, packaging can also draw attention to products shoppers may rather not be made so salient. Shoppers may prefer that products associated with a medical issue or a stigma not be noticed by other people in the vicinity. When faced with a potentially embarrassing purchase, shoppers go out of their way to minimize embarrassment by going to less-crowded stores, waiting for other customers to leave the aisle, not asking employees for help, and adding more items to their basket to distract from the embarrassing item (Blair and Roese 2013). Yet, how customers select an embarrassing product in a store when such a purchase is necessary has yet to be explored.

Recently, online purchases have begun to outnumber purchases made in-store (excluding groceries). In 2016, 51 percent of purchases in the US were made through web channels. This trend is continuing to grow, even among older generations (Stevens 2016). Many managers at brick-and-mortar stores struggle both to get shoppers in their doors and to convince them to buy while in-store. One reason shoppers make purchases online is to minimize the embarrassment of being seen with stigmatized products (e.g., condoms, diet related products,

or plus-size clothing; Nye 2012). A recent survey discovered retailers may even contribute to this problem. For example, 60 percent of stores who carry women's sizes 16 or above separate their clothing into "normal" or "plus-sized" by placing them in either different departments or separate stores (Garcia 2015). While intentioned to cater to the "plus sized" audience, this can be off-putting as shoppers may feel embarrassed or ashamed to shop in that section or store.

Regardless of preference, it is sometimes necessary to purchase a product that is embarrassing. Instead of using highly visible packaging that calls attention to these "undesired" associations and makes shoppers feel uncomfortable, there might be ways to reduce embarrassment by making products seem less visible. Could minimizing noticeability through packaging cause certain products to seem less embarrassing? Are there any other steps retailers can take to minimize embarrassment? How might minimizing embarrassment impact sales? If embarrassment does affect purchasing behavior, then what is the process by which this occurs?

In addressing these questions, the current research addresses three gaps in the literature through five studies. First, the impact of product packaging onto embarrassment is assessed. Elements of product form and packaging have been shown to impact psychological and behavioral responses through package color, typography, shape, image (Bloch 1995) and even product positioning (Ampuero and Vila 2006). However, the resulting effect on shopper embarrassment and purchase intentions is unknown. We propose that traditional uses of product packaging and placement meant to make products stand out have a negative effect on purchase intentions for embarrassing products.

Second, perceived anonymity is examined as the mechanism through which product form causes embarrassment. According to social identity theory, people strive to act in accordance to a desired social identity. We propose when shoppers cannot conform to a desired social identity and must make a purchase associated with some embarrassing stigma they will attempt to become less noticeable, or more anonymous. By being able to select a more anonymous package, their embarrassment should be mitigated.

Finally, the manner in which retailers can ultimately improve purchase intentions is investigated specifically regarding the location of the product in-store and offering a promotion on the product. Research suggests putting products on an endcap will increase attention (Dulsrud and Jacobsen 2009; Phillips et al. 2015) and limit information processing, resulting in quick selection of the more salient endcap product (Schindler, Berbaum, and Weinzimer 1987). We suggest this may not be an optimal strategy for embarrassing products, as placing products on endcaps also decreases perceived product anonymity. However, there may be other ways to increase sales of embarrassing products; offering promotions on merchandize usually causes a temporary increase in sales (Bridges, Briesch, and Yim 2006; DelVecchio, Henard, and Freling 2006; Gijsbrechts, Campo, and Goossens 2003; Manning and Sprott 2007), thus promotions could offer an economic incentive to overcome embarrassment.

We answer the research questions and fill the stated research gaps by creating a conceptual model which examines the antecedents and consequences of embarrassment for product packaging. This research provides retailers with information about what happens when shoppers interact with various product forms, how embarrassment is magnified, and what effect embarrassment has on purchase intentions. Across five studies, the findings consistently show that a product packaged in a blue box is more likely to be purchased than a red tube shaped product. An increased perception of anonymity with a blue box results in reduced embarrassment for the shopper. This relationship is especially important at an endcap and can be overcome through the use of promotional discounts. Ultimately, the findings guide retailers on what can be done to mitigate the impact of consumer embarrassment on purchase intentions.

Conceptual Development

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory helps to explain group and intergroup processes and behavior (Hogg, Terry, and White 1995) and guides the conceptualization of how embarrassment is influenced through the purchasing process. According to Goffman's (1959, 1967, 2009) work on stigma, first interactions allow one to categorize other peoples' attributes and create a perception of their social identity or virtual social identity, as opposed to the person's actual social identity which consists of the characteristics they truly possess. If there is some abnormal attribute about the individual, a stigma can create a gap between the virtual social identity and the actual social identity. Stigma is described as a perceived undesired deviation from what is anticipated (Goffman 1959, 1967, 2009).

According to social identity theory, embarrassment can be caused when a shopper's social identity is threatened and the approval of others is at stake (Tangney et al. 1996). Just as a person with a physical abnormality will try to hide it to blend in with the mainstream crowd to avoid stigma, a shopper may adopt stereotypical group behaviors and thoughts in an attempt to conform with a group that the shopper feels defines them (Hogg, Terry, and White 1995) and to avoid the threat of being categorized into an undesirable group (Branscombe et al. 1999). The more a shopper identifies with a particular group, the more likely that shopper's behaviors will match stereotypical group norms (Hogg 2003). Therefore, the more important an identity is to a shopper, the more important it will be for members of that group to see the person acting in accordance to the identity. A shopper can ensure control over their identity by adopting acceptable group behaviors even if they conflict with personally defining values (Devine 1989). Behavior of an individual is dependent upon the interaction of the shopper and their current environment (Turner, Brown, and Tajfel 1979). Theory and research suggest retail environments interact with a shopper to determine their behavior (Bitner 1992). This research examines differences in product packaging and the impact on embarrassment and behavior, particularly purchase intentions. The results add to social identity theory by showing what a shopper does when faced with actions contradictory to a desired identity, such as shopping for embarrassing products.