The Influence of Self-esteem, Self-other and Embarrassment Avoidance on Purchase Intention

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ABSTRACT

Two studies were conducted in this research to investigate how self-esteem and self-other influence the customer’s purchase intention mediated by embarrassment avoidance when buying embarrassing products. Study 1 examined how self-esteem influences purchase intention of embarrassing product through embarrassment avoidance. The results showed that when purchasing embarrassing products, compared to the people low in self-esteem, people with high self-esteem exhibit higher embarrassment avoidance and lower purchase intention. Furthermore, study 2 tested the moderating effect of self-other. The results showed that to those with high self-esteem, when the closeness to the target whom to buy for is higher, the embarrassment avoidance is much greater, whereas those with low self-esteem have an insignificant increase. Through the outcome of these studies, companies can develop different strategies and campaigns to effectively increase the revenue and eliminate consumer embarrassment avoidance.

Keywords: Self-esteem, Self-other, Embarrassment avoidance, Purchase intention

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever faced an embarrassing situation? Embarrassment, a negative self-conscious emotion, is frequently experienced by individuals in their daily life. Prior research shows that individuals have the tendency to avoid an unfavorable state or outcome (e.g., regret aversion, loss aversion, risk aversion and so on). Regarding the negative state of regret, Zeelenberg & Beattie (1997) mentioned that individuals do not expect to experience this emotion and would choose the default way to minimize the regret they may feel. However, the issues concerning avoidance intention of embarrassment induced from the customer’s anticipation and how embarrassment avoidance may influence customer decision making have been ignored.

In addition, prior researchers focused on the “coping strategies” when they studied the topic of an embarrassing emotional state. Coping strategies are employed when individuals face some embarrassing situation that will threat their reputation, social status or image; individuals will find ways to solve these “troubles” with behavior consequences like making additional purchases (Blair & Roese, 2013). But few studies have examined the effect of customer personality. In the current study, self-esteem was selected to understand how the different levels of self-esteem affect the avoidance tendency and consequently the purchase intention.

Self-esteem refers to the self-evaluation of the worth as a person in an individual’s subjective opinion; it can be seen as the overall attitude about him- or herself. According to prior research, the different levels of self-esteem entail different orientations of self-presentation, that is, the behaviors of individuals with high self-esteem are based on their desire to enhance their prestige and reputation. In
In other words, compared to individuals with low self-esteem, individuals with high self-esteem will care more about their evaluation by others, and will want to present themselves perfectly to achieve the expectations and standards of other people. They tend to do anything that might get acceptance from others even if risk is involved (Jang, Bucy & Cho, 2018). Furthermore, when they face a situation that may cause embarrassment, such as when they buy an embarrassing product, they will face a higher level of discrepancy compared to persons with low self-esteem as well as lower purchase intention because they want to avoid the negative emotion of embarrassment. Based on the affect-as-information theory, this study predicted that embarrassment avoidance resulting from the high level of anticipated embarrassment plays an important mediating role in explaining how self-esteem influences the purchase intention when buying an embarrassing product.

In this research, we conducted the pretest first in order to find the embarrassing product that we use for comparing the outcomes later. Furthermore, we did study 1 to test how two kinds of self-esteem influence purchase intention through the different levels of embarrassment avoidance when buying an embarrassing product, as well as to investigate the moderator effect of self-other on the relationship between self-esteem and embarrassment avoidance in study 2.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

In the field of psychology, self-concept and self-esteem may be viewed as similar terms; sometimes the two terms are even used interchangeably in past research. Self-concept includes all the characteristics of oneself; it can be seen as a complex system including your physical, academic and social information (Shavelson, Hubner & Stanton, 1976). Self-esteem is not only influenced by ourselves, but also by others; it emphasizes how you feel about all that you know about yourselves (Huitt, 2004) and the degree to which you like or accept yourself. Briefly, self-esteem is the personal and overall attitude to one’s self-concept (Heatherton, Wyland & Lopez, 2003).

Individuals who have a more favorable attitude of, and confidence in, themselves score higher in self-esteem, while individuals with a more unfavorable self-evaluation are more likely to exhibit low self-esteem (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger & Vohs, 2003). Prior research states that individuals have different types of self-presentation, self-enhancement and self-protection, based on the difference in their self-esteem (Song, Huang & Li, 2017). Self-presentation is a kind of designed behavior that can be seen as a means when individuals want to build the impression of themselves or deliver some information about themselves to others. The people with high self-esteem tend to present themselves as self-enhancement types; they may even engage in aggressive, active and risky behavior in pursuing more approval from others. Those with low self-esteem have the self-protective tendency; in order to minimize the possibility of failure, they always adopt the passive strategy that rejects performing publicly (Baumeister et al., 1989). In other words, compared to the low self-esteem individuals, those with high self-esteem are more eager to undertake behavior that meets others’ expectations and standards to win reputation and social status. We will discuss the effects of different consumer personalities in relation to different levels of purchase intention when buying same embarrassing product.

The emotional state, embarrassment, is mostly experienced when individuals face situations may threaten their public image and gain an undesired public identity (Modigliani, 1968; Parrott & Smith, 1991). The term “public identity” means a set of characteristics and attributes described by others in a specific situation (Blair & Roese, 2013). Because the embarrassment usually violates social expectations and results from individuals’ failure to maintain a desirable identity (Miller, 1987), when individuals...
purchase an embarrassing product, they may face some degree of discrepancy resulting from the gap between the actual and the ideal state that other people want them to achieve in their own opinion (Higgins, 1987). In sum, the purchase behavior of people with high self-esteem when buying an embarrassing product will induce greater discrepancy than among those with low self-esteem because they will fail to get the acceptance and fame from others as they always did before. With higher motivation want to keep their public identity, individuals concerned with self-enhancement will have less purchase intention.

According to our inferences, we find that the consumer affect plays an important role while shopping. This research examines the mediating role of embarrassment avoidance between self-esteem and purchase intention. Based on the affect-as-information theory, similar to other sources of information, affect can be seen as a kind of information influencing consumer’s decision-making process (e.g., Stewart & Koh, 2017). Previous research shows that because people may anticipate the feeling of regret if they make an inappropriate decision, they will have the avoidance intention and choose a more conventional or default option to minimize the level of regret (Simonson, 1992). Similarly, people also have the intention of embarrassment avoidance when they anticipate the embarrassment they will experience and consider what others think about them when they buy such products that may fall short of the normative expectation. That is, embarrassment avoidance plays a mediating role to explain why self-esteem may influence purchase intention when buying an embarrassing product.

In conclusion, we predict when individuals buy an embarrassing product that may badly hurt their public identity, people with higher self-esteem will have lower purchase intention through higher embarrassment avoidance. Thus, we offer the following hypothesis:

**H1:** Embarrassment avoidance will mediate the relationship between self-esteem and purchase intention.

The role that people play varies depending on whom they are buying for in the shopping scenario. The term “buyer” refers to the individuals or corporations that make the transaction with the seller and the “consumer” is the person who actually uses the product or service (Lackman & Lanasa, 1993). As mentioned above, in the scenario where you buy something for yourself, you play the buyer and the consumer role simultaneously. In contrast, when you choose a product for another, you are only a buyer in this situation.

Based on Jones and Nisbett (1971), when individuals make a judgment on their own behavior, they are the actor, while they turn into an observer when explaining another’s behavior. The role will change when they buy for another instead of for themselves. Furthermore, the observers’ access to another’s interior condition is difficult, whereas actors realize their own state effortlessly.

The role that one plays influences the degree of information available, including the beliefs, values and internal state derived from the level of closeness with the user (Chang et al., 2012), thereby leading to a large difference between making decisions for oneself and for others. Prior research shows that people take more information into consideration when purchasing for themselves (Kray & Gonzalez, 1999), while tending to choose the heuristic option for others because while they can deeply understand their own needs but have comparatively scant information about others (Chang et al., 2012). Previous research states that when individuals make personal decisions, they are more involved in the decision-making process and the outcomes of the decisions directly influence them (Beisswanger, Stone, Hupp & Allgaier, 2003).

In sum, when individuals buy embarrassing products, we assume that the degree of embarrassment will be higher when buying for themselves (high closeness) than for others (low closeness). That is, when the buyer perceives having a much closer with the user, s/he will more inclusion of other in self (Aron,
Aron & Smollan, 1992) and more reactive to the emotional state, including the embarrassment of the user (Miller, 1987).

Individuals with high self-esteem are more expect to get acceptance from others through interactions. The importance of anticipated social reward leads them actively build and maintain interpersonal relationships with others, whereas those with low self-esteem focus on the cost of rejection, forcing them to avoid and hesitate interacting with other people.

We tested the moderator role of self-other on the relationship between self-esteem and embarrassment avoidance. In the scenario of buying an embarrassing product, compared to individuals with low self-esteem, those with high self-esteem will feel more embarrassment with the increase in closeness to the product user, as they have more chance to access the user’s internal state through frequent interaction. On the other hand, the discrepancy between the ideal state and actual state when facing a highly embarrassing situation will greater with higher level of closeness, the embarrassment avoidance of high self-esteem will be greater. However, for those with low self-esteem, even with closeness to the user, the embarrassment avoidance will not significantly increase because of the fear to exchange information with others, and their degree of self-discrepancy exhibits no obvious difference between all the scenarios.

In brief, the difference in embarrassment avoidance between buying for self (high closeness) and for other (low closeness) is much greater for people with high self-esteem than people with low self-esteem. To summarize, we assume the following hypothesis:

**H2: Self-other will moderate the relationship between self-esteem and embarrassment avoidance.**

**METHOD**

**Study 1**

1. Participants and design

Study 1 is a one factor two level design. Self-esteem was measured by 10 statements that Rosenberg (1965) employed in previous research into two levels. The effect on purchase intention of an embarrassing product was tested through the mediated role of embarrassment avoidance. A total of 121 participants were recruited to join study 1.

2. Materials and procedure

First, we conducted the pretest first with 47 participants about twenty years old. According to the results, two high-embarrassing products exhibited significant difference to low-embarrassing product. We chose the ointment for tinea pedis in study 1 (M ointment for tinea pedis=5, SD=1.71 vs. M lip balm=1.6, SD=1.21, t=11.13, p=.000<.001) and chose the condom/contraceptive pill in study 2 (M condom/contraceptive pill=5.14, SD=1.4 vs. M lip balm=1.6, SD=1.21, t=13.118, p=.000<.001).

Second, participants are asked to imagine that they buying the embarrassing product (ointment for tinea-pedis) in the store for themselves. They were asked to answer three items on 7-point scales that prior researchers adopted to rate the degree of embarrassment: “How embarrassed would you feel when buying this product for yourself?” (1= “Not embarrassed at all”, 7= “Strongly embarrassed”); “How awkward would you feel when buying this product for yourself?” (1= “Not awkward at all”, 7= “Strongly awkward”); “How uncomfortable would you feel when buying this product for yourself?” (1= “Not uncomfortable at all”, 7= “Strongly uncomfortable”); and forth question “How much is it possible that other people would have a negative impression of you when you buy this product?” (1= “Not possible at all”, 7= “Strongly possible”).
Third, participants are asked to answer two items on 7-point scales that Dodds, Monroe & Grewal (1991) adopted to measure the degree of purchase intention: “Taking the degree of embarrassed, awkward, uncomfortable and the negative impression into consideration, what is your willingness to buy this product?” (1= “very low”, 7= “very high”) and “Taking the degree of embarrassed, awkward, uncomfortable and the negative impression into consideration, how likely are you to actually purchase this product?” (1= “very low”, 7= “very high”).

Finally, all of participants were asked to finish a questionnaire employed by Rosenberg (1965) to evaluate their self-esteem. Ten descriptions deal with the overall feeling about themselves in the questionnaire, such as: “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.”; “I am able to do things as well as most other people.” Also included were reverse statements like “I certainly feel useless at time.”; “All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am failure.” Participants were asked to measure each statement on 7-point scales (1= “Strongly disagree”, 7= “Strongly agree”). All items were summed and higher scores indicated people with higher self-esteem personality. Lastly, they also filled in personal information, completing the process in study 1.

3. Results

In study 1, we used regression to test whether embarrassment avoidance mediated the relationship between self-esteem and purchase intention. The results show that self-esteem has a significant effect on purchase intention ($\beta=−.563$, $t=−7.423$, $p<.001$) and embarrassment avoidance ($\beta=.562$, $t=7.418$, $p<.001$). Furthermore, when the purchase intention was simultaneously regressed on the variable of self-esteem and embarrassment avoidance, the effect of self-esteem on purchase intention remained significant ($\beta=−.216$, $t=−2.981$, $p<.01$) and the effect of embarrassment avoidance on purchase intention also significant ($\beta=−.616$, $t=−8.503$, $p<.001$). We confirmed that embarrassment avoidance plays the mediating role because the effect of self-esteem on purchase intention was weaker after adding embarrassment avoidance into the regression. In addition, individuals with higher self-esteem will have lower purchase intention through higher embarrassment avoidance. All of the results support H1.

Study 2

1. Participants and design

The design included two factors, one of which was manipulated between subjects (self-other: for self vs. friend) and the other was measured into two levels (self-esteem: high vs. low). A total of 136 participants were recruited to join study 2. All the participants were randomly assigned into one of two scenarios that buy for different targets. Following is the number of participants in the two situations: for self (n=66), for friend (n=70).

2. Materials and procedure

Participants were randomly divided into 2 (self-other: for self vs. friend) scenarios. First, because the degree of self-closure affects interpersonal relationships, we used three dimensions of self-closure: amount, depth, honesty that Wheeless and Grots (1976) used to manipulate the closeness between the buyer (participants) and user (themselves vs. their friend). “Amount” refers to the frequency and time span of self-closure, “depth” signifies the degree of completion and the degree that individuals pour their heart out and “honesty” is how honest individuals are when they reveal their internal state. Two versions of a written scenario asked participants to imagine they faced a difficult decision lately and found it hard to make the final choice, so they pour out their troubles to themselves or friend. In the version of self, the high degree of closeness was described in the statements like: “You usually listen to your heart”, “You reveal yourselves totally”, “You face your internal state honestly” and “You are loyal to your feelings
and make final decisions for yourselves”. In the friend version the statements on the low degree of closeness include: “You have infrequent interactions with this friend”, “You describe your difficulties in a rough and brief way”, “You do not reveal yourselves to this friend honestly”, and “Your friend does not give you some advice and does not help you solve your question.” Lastly, we checked the manipulation of closeness success through the two items on the 7-point scales: “The target and you have high closeness” (1= “Strongly disagree”, 7= “Strongly agree”) and a reverse statement “The target and you have low closeness” (1= “Strongly disagree”, 7= “Strongly agree”).

In step 2, participants were asked to imagine they were buying an embarrassing product (condom/contraceptive pill) in the store for the target manipulated in the step 1. Similar to study 1, they needed to answer the questions on 7-point scales about the degree of embarrassment: “How embarrassed (1= “Not embarrassed at all”, 7= “Strongly embarrassed”), awkward (1= “Not awkward at all”, 7= “Strongly awkward”) and uncomfortable (1= “Not uncomfortable at all”, 7= “Strongly uncomfortable”) would you feel when buying the product for yourself/friend?” The last question: “How possible is it that other people would have a negative impression of you when you buy the product for yourself/friend?” (1= “Not possible at all”, 7= “Strongly possible”).

Step 3, participants answered the questionnaire including the same 10 statements as in study 1 to rate the degree of self-esteem. Finally, they also filled in personal information, completing the process in study 2.

3. Manipulation check

We averaged the two items about the closeness in step 1 and used independent sample T-test to compare the averages in the two conditions. As expected, the participants felt much closer in the self-version than the friend version (M_self=5.44, SD=1.29 vs. M_friend=2.84, SD=1.03, t=12.92, p<.001).

4. Results

We used general linear model analysis to examine the moderating effect of self-other on the relationship between self-esteem and embarrassment avoidance. The results showed a significant interaction effect between self-esteem and self-other on embarrassment avoidance (F=2.095, p=.012<.05). Furthermore, we also used ANOVA to test the difference in embarrassment avoidance between ‘for self’ (high closeness) and ‘for friend’ (low closeness). The results revealed that the difference was much greater for individuals with high self-esteem (M_for_self=5.72 vs. M_for_friend=4.27, p<.001) than those with low self-esteem (M_for_self=3.47 vs. M_for_friend=3.39, p>0.1). All of results support Hypothesis 2.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Conclusion

This research conducted two studies to test the mediating role of embarrassment avoidance between self-esteem and purchase intention. Furthermore, we examined the moderating effect of self-other on the relationship between self-esteem and embarrassment avoidance. All of our hypotheses were supported by the results of the two studies. This research makes the following theoretical contributions. First, we found a mediating factor, embarrassment avoidance. Embarrassment can be seen as a negative state that people are unwilling to encounter, like regret and loss. We confirmed that embarrassment avoidance induced from the anticipated embarrassment plays an important role in explaining why different personalities have different purchase intention of an embarrassing product.

Second, some previous research states that people with different personalities may choose the opposite coping strategy after facing embarrassing situation, that is, low self-esteem persons tend to recall
more negative memories and thoughts when they are in a bad mood, whereas those with high self-esteem come up with positive strategies (Smith & Petty, 1995). However, in our research, we focused on the effect of personality on the degree of embarrassment avoidance before making an embarrassing product purchase decision.

Third, our findings extend the relationship between self-esteem and embarrassment avoidance by the moderating effect of self-other. The self-other difference in decision making is mentioned in several prior researches in regard to many situations. Thus, combined with this research, self-other difference not only influences the final decision in shopping, but also the avoidance intention of a negative emotion state like embarrassment before engaging in purchase behavior.

**Practical contribution**

In practical implication, customers frequently experience embarrassment in their daily life. Even if anticipated embarrassment makes customers tend to avoid situations that may induce embarrassment, such like buying an embarrassing product; sometimes we have no choice regarding the purchase behavior. Many companies rack their brains to solve the problem of lowering customer embarrassment. For example, customers’ anticipated embarrassment usually results from their past experience or the social standard. Managers may change the product package, name and description in creative or amusing ways to mitigate embarrassment avoidance and increase purchase intention. In addition, according the change of the level of embarrassment avoidance when buying for different targets, managers may use discounts or other campaigns to encourage customers to buy for their family, lover or friend. Not only will this effectively reduce the avoidance intention, but also increase the company’s competitiveness at the same time.

**REFERENCES**


