

# Investigating Consumer Embarrassment in Service Interactions

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## ABSTRACT

*This study focuses on the elicitation and consequences of consumer embarrassment in service interactions. As customer embarrassment potentially induces negative word-of-mouth intentions, it is necessary for management to understand the antecedents of consumer embarrassment and provide prevention/recovery strategies. Following a role theory perspective, we identified three potential elements for embarrassment: a vague service script, mishap from the target customer and his/her realization of the mishap, and the presence of fellow customers. We further propose that the attribution of mishap, the number of fellow customers, and the familiarity among the fellow customers will interactively contribute to the elicitation of embarrassment. Further, we propose that embarrassed consumers are more likely to initiate negative word-of-mouth intentions. Adopting an experimental design, we test the proposed hypothesis and provide results, managerial implications and discussions for limitation and directions of future research.*

**Keywords:** *embarrassment, consumer behavior, fellow customers, service script*

## INTRODUCTION

Embarrassment is a widely occurring emotion that affects many facets of our social behavior (Dahl et al., 2001). Previous literature have investigated consumer embarrassment in product purchase (Brumbaugh & Rosa, 2009; Dahl, et al., 2001; Wilson & West, 1981) and service interactions (Grace, 2009; Wan et al., 2008). As a negative self-conscious emotion, embarrassment was found to raise individuals' negative self-evaluation or unwanted self-exposure, which further arouses their intention to flee the situation (Robbins & Parlavecchio, 2006). Previous literature identified the service provider, the target customer, and fellow customers as three basic sources of embarrassment in service interactions (Grace, 2007) and was largely centered on embarrassing stimuli (Iacobucci et al., 2003; Rehman & Brooks Jr, 1987; Wilson & West, 1981). What remains unclear is the causal relationship between the elements in service interactions (e.g. service script, focal customer, service provider, other customers, etc.) and the identified embarrassing stimuli. Simply identifying embarrassing stimuli in service interactions is not adequate to conceptually propose strategies to avoid such situations. On the other hand, empirical results investigating the consequences of consumer embarrassment are also sporadic (Grace, 2009).

Based on role theory (Solomon et al., 1985), this study aims to investigate customer embarrassment in the service interaction with the focus on both its antecedents and consequences. This study aims to conceptually articulate the relationship between elements in a service encounter and the identified embarrassing stimuli. This study also aims to empirically test the influence of consumer embarrassment on perceived service experience and future service intentions.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Embarrassment as a Self-Conscious Emotion

As one type of discrete emotion (Richins, 1997), embarrassment is different from basic emotions of joy, sadness, etc. It's been identified as one of the self-conscious emotions (Lewis et al., 2008). Self-conscious emotions appear later in life and the elicitation of these emotions involves elaborate cognitive processes that have, at their heart, the notion of self (Stipek et al., 1992). The elicitation of self-conscious emotions requires an individually incorporated set of standards, rules, or goals (SRG) which has been developed through every individual's social learning. For each specific type of self-conscious emotion, there is a specific one-to-one correspondence between thinking certain thoughts and the occurrence of a particular emotion (Lewis, et al., 2008). Linked with the attribution literature (Weiner, 2000), Lewis (2008) proposed that self-conscious emotions are elicited when individuals accept personal responsibility for their behavior and evaluate this behavior according to the SRG along two dimensions: success or failure, and attribution of a global self or a specific self. As for embarrassment, its elicitation typically involves negative self-evaluation, or unwanted self-exposure (Robbins & Parlavecchio, 2006), and consequently causes real damage to a person's identity.

### The Elicitation of Embarrassment

As embarrassment is a self-conscious emotion, its elicitation involves cognitive evaluation of the involved individual's self. On an individual level, previous literature provides various cognitive processing models that explain the occurrence of embarrassment. The **social evaluation model** (Manstead & Semin, 1981) suggests that any undesired evaluation, whether positive or negative, will result in embarrassment. The **dramaturgic model** (Silver et al., 1987) postulates that embarrassment primarily comes from a disruption of social interaction due to a person's inability to act his or her given social role. In other words, once the person perceives him/herself failing to follow a social script, the embarrassment will occur. The **center of attention model** (Sabini et al., 2000) proposes that merely being the center of attention can be embarrassing, even when there is neither a loss of esteem nor dramaturgic failure. The **loss of self-esteem model** (Modigliani, 1971) emphasizes on the consequences from a loss of self-respect or dignity as a result of perceiving negative evaluations from others. The **personal standards model** (Babcock, 1988) focuses on the role of the embarrassed person, and suggests that embarrassment results from a discrepancy between one's behavior and one's self-imposed ideals. The **transgression of others' expectations model** (Sugawara, 1992), focuses on the fact that the person is threatened with the possibility of acting in a way that is contrary to the expectations of the other people who are present to witness the behavior. While processing models view embarrassment from the individuals' perspectives, other research has investigated embarrassment from a "social setting" perspective, identifying different situations that elicit

embarrassment. According to Miller (1992), there are two contending theories of what makes a social situation embarrassing: the **Social Evaluation Theory** (Milgram & Sabini, 1978; Modigliani, 1968, 1971) and the **Dramaturgical Theory** (Parrott et al., 1988; Silver, et al., 1987). The Social Evaluation Theory emphasizes the social presence of others in a situation to elicit one's emotion of embarrassment (Zajonc, 1965), while the evaluation could be either negative or neutral. On the other hand, the dramaturgical theory postulates that there exists one specific script in a given social setting and one's behavior is supposed to follow that script. As far as "I" perceive that "my" behavior is not following the script, "I" could be embarrassed.(Miller, 1992, 1997)

### **Behavioral Consequences of Embarrassment**

As embarrassment is closely correlated with the "self" (Keltner, 1995), its elicitation could at the same time cause real damage to a person's desired identity and hurt one's "need to belong" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Therefore, embarrassment has commonly been identified as a self-aversive emotion. Individuals, either consciously or subconsciously, bear the concern that embarrassment usually comes with potential public punishment of certain kinds (Stonehouse & Miller, 1994). Therefore, *"the possibility of being embarrassed seems to dictate and constrain a great deal of social behavior; much of what we do and, perhaps more important, what we don't do is based on our desire to avoid embarrassment"* (Miller & Leary, 1992). At times, individuals overestimate the severity of negative social consequences of their misbehavior (Semin & Manstead, 1982) and therefore risk their long-term well-being to evade temporary, short-term embarrassment (Lewis, et al., 2008).

## **CONCEPTUALIZATION**

### **Potential Embarrassing Elements in Service Interactions**

#### ***Role Theory and the Dramaturgical Model***

Based on role theory, Solomon, et al.(1985) proposed that a service encounter is a social setting in which the dyadic interaction between a service provider and a customer is an important determinant of the customer's global satisfaction with the service. Further, the dyadic interaction in a service encounter was conceptualized to consist of three basic dimensions: temporal duration of the interaction, emotional content, and the spatial proximity of a service provider and a focal customer (Price et al., 1995). The audience of a service encounter will be fellow customers (who come together with the focal customer as a group) or other customers (who are present in a shared service environment). This theoretical perspective relates well with the **dramaturgic model** (Silver, et al., 1987) of the elicitation of embarrassment, which suggests that people feel embarrassed when they are incapable to follow a widely accepted social script. Therefore, this study will adopt this perspective to conceptualize a service encounter (in which embarrassment could potentially get elicited). We view a service encounter as it consists of the dyadic interaction between one target customer (who will feel embarrassed) and the service provider and the social presence of fellow customers.

According to Grace (2007), in service interactions there are three basic sources of embarrassment: the service provider, the focal customer, and fellow customers. There are six categories of embarrassing situations: criticism, awkward acts, inappropriate image, forgetfulness or lack of knowledge, environment/surroundings, and violations of privacy. Further, Grace (2007) classified consumer embarrassment by source and situations and proposed that

different future behavioral intentions would be generated based on different types of embarrassment. However, in reality there are situations where the consumer's embarrassment could hardly be attributed to a unique source in service interactions. There are also times when several different embarrassing situations jointly work to influence the embarrassed individual. Classification of embarrassment by source and situation might be problematic at certain times. In this study, we follow the dramaturgical model of embarrassment elicitation and focus on the incongruence between service script and actual service interaction to explain the elicitation of consumer embarrassment.

### ***“Mishap” as a Prerequisite***

Based on role theory, the service script was proposed as an important construct for investigating behaviors in service interactions (Solomon, et al., 1985). By definition, the service script represents the expectation of the target customer for the various activities/actions, temporally organized, in a service interaction. A mutual understanding of the service script secures the smooth processing of the service experience. Consistent with this line of thought, the **dramaturgic model** (Silver, et al., 1987) suggests that embarrassment primarily comes from a perceived disruption of social interaction due to a person's inability to act his or her given social role. When the service script is vague, customers might not know how to behave in the first place. In such situations, customers are more likely to make mishaps, which they would realize later with the assistance of environmental cues in the setting. Then, they would feel embarrassed. Therefore, a “mishap”, which is inconsistent with the service script, would be one prerequisite factor leading to consumer embarrassment.

### ***The Situational Influence from Fellow Customers***

Previous literature suggests that the social presence of others is an indispensable element of embarrassment's elicitation (Miller, 1997; Modigliani, 1971). As far as there perceived to exist a source of social presence, either real or imagined (Brown & Garland, 1971; Edelman et al., 1987; Miller, 1992, 1997; Miller & Leary, 1992), the focal individual could feel embarrassed due to the unwanted exposure of the self (Robbins & Parlavecchio, 2006). However, in a public social setting like a service encounter, the customer normally perceives his/her self as, to different extents, publically-exposed. The influence from others' social presence will not always be salient as much as in previous findings (Robbins & Parlavecchio, 2006). However, throughout the individual customer's personal interaction with the service provider, he/she is still aware of the fact that he/she is being observed by the audience of the setting - other customers, among which his/her fellow customers are observing most closely. Therefore, when a focal customer's behavior is not consistent with the service script and a mishap has already taken place, the individual will potentially feel embarrassed. Given the fact that the individual is also aware of the fact that his/her mishap is noticeable to his/her fellow customers, the level of elicited embarrassment should further be influenced by his/her fellow customers who are present in the setting.

In conclusion, in a service interaction a mishap would be a prerequisite of consumer embarrassment. Situational factors of the service interaction will jointly determine whether the individual customer feels or how much the individual customer feels embarrassed. Appraisal theory is adopted to conceptualize the process of embarrassment elicitation.

## **Appraisal Theory**

Embarrassing situations simultaneously increase individuals' anxiety and stress (Edwards & Baglioni, 1993). Godwin, et al. (1999) suggests that in stressful situations, consumers are found to adopt two different types of appraisals: 1) Primary Appraisal – to identify what is at stake (e.g. goal relevance, goal congruence, and ego involvement) and 2) Second Appraisal – what they can do about it (e.g. blame or credit to be derived, coping potential, and future expectancy) (Godwin, et al., 1999). It is the interaction of these two appraisals that determines the degree of stress and the strength and content of the emotional reaction (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) – for our context, the strength of embarrassment to be elicited.

### ***Primary Appraisal: The Split-effect of “Self” Presentation Goal***

To conceptualize the influence of fellow customers in primary appraisal, we propose that there is a split-effect of “self” presentation goal in the elicitation of embarrassment. We propose a two-dimensional model to conceptualize individuals' self-presentation goals based on familiarity and group size of fellow customers. We propose that, as the level of familiarity among the focal customer and the fellow customers increases from total stranger to close friends, the focal customer's “self” presentation goal changes from “self-protection” (does not want to expose the self) to “self-showing” (want to show the good “self” according to individual's situational goals for image management). Group size would have different effects for the two scenarios eliciting consumer embarrassment. More specifically, when the focal customer is not familiar with his/her fellow customers, his/her “self” presentation goal is, by nature, to protect the self. Following the Center of Attention model (Zajonc, 1965), a small group of unfamiliar fellow customers will increase the spotlight effect and the individual will feel more embarrassed. Therefore, when the individual's goal is to protect the self, but the social setting contradicts to this “self-protection goal” with unfamiliar fellow customers, a large group size of fellow customers will enhance felt embarrassment. When the focal customer is familiar with his/her fellow customers, the social relationship among the group will be perceived as more intimate and friendly, the individual will perceive his/her “self” as more “protected” and will no longer be that much self-protective. (MacDonald & Davies, 1983) However, the intimacy protection effect will only work when fellow customers are in a small group size. Therefore, when the individual's goal is no longer to protect the self in a social setting – that is when the individual is with familiar fellow customers, a large group of fellow customers will be more likely to make the individual feel embarrassed.

### ***Secondary Appraisal – Potential Space for Coping***

In secondary appraisal, the focal customer makes appraisals of “what to do”. The more the coping potentials the individuals perceives, the more alleviated the individual will be and the less embarrassed the individual will feel. If the embarrassed individual thinks that there are no other people realizing his/her embarrassment, he/she will perceive more coping potential. If the involved individual perceives the embarrassment as already exposed, the individual's coping potential will be perceived to be less and will feel more embarrassed.

In conclusion, as primary appraisal and secondary appraisal interactively lead to the content and strength of experience emotions, the contrary effects above could be explained by the interaction of “the split effect of self-presentation goal” and “the potential space for coping strategy”. Therefore, we propose that:

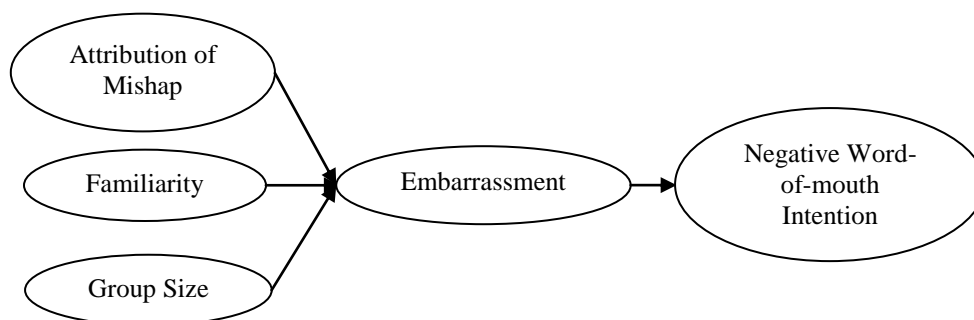
**H<sub>1</sub>:** Familiarity among the group of fellow customers, the group size of fellow customers, and the attribution of the mishap interactively contribute to the elicitation of embarrassment.

### **Behavioral Consequences of Embarrassment**

Service encounters are conceptualized to consist of three basic dimensions: temporal duration of the interaction, emotional content, and the spatial proximity of service provider and customer (Price, et al., 1995). All three dimensions contribute to customers' assessed service experience and future behaviors. Grace (2007, 2009) proposed that in a service interaction, embarrassed customers report having a strong intention to flee the situation and are less likely to return to the business. They are even more likely to boycott the service when they perceive that their embarrassment is caused by the service provider. In Verbeke & Bagozzi (2003), self-provoked embarrassment causes individuals to lose adaptive resources: losing flexibility and assertiveness. In service interactions, embarrassed customers, as they lose adaptive resources, they are more likely to "shut-off" themselves from external contact and they are less likely to generate negative word-of-mouth intentions. Therefore, we propose that:

**H<sub>2</sub>:** Familiarity among the group of fellow customers, the group size of fellow customers, and the attribution of the mishap interactively contribute to consumers' negative word-of-mouth intentions, mediated by the elicited level of embarrassment.

In conclusion, following a role theory perspective, we identify three potential elements for embarrassment: a vague service script, mishap from the target customer and his/her realization of the mishap, and the presence of fellow customers. Based on the appraisal theory, we further propose that the attribution of mishap, the number of fellow customers, and the familiarity among the fellow customers will interactively contribute to the elicitation of embarrassment and negative word-of-mouth intentions. The hypothesized relationships are visually presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Model of the Study**

## **MAIN STUDY**

### **Experimental Design**

For hypothesis testing, a 2 (attribution of the mishap: internal flagging vs. external flagging) x 2 (familiarity among fellow customers: high vs. low) x 2 (group size of fellow customers: large vs. small) between-subject design was adopted in the main study of this study. The research instruments include written vignette, which was proved for validity via a pilot study,

and a following questionnaire that measured the dependent variables and control variables of interest.

### **Participants and Procedure**

The study sample was derived from the faculty and staff population at a large Northeastern state university in U.S. Participants were approached via campus mail with an invitation letter, an implied consent form and a survey questionnaire. In total, 229 surveys were returned, yielding a response rate of 22.9 %. The average age was 46 and the gender split was 30% male; 70% female. Once they accepted the invitation, participants were instructed to read the implied consent form, read the designed vignettes, finish the questionnaire, and then mail the completed survey back to investigators. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the eight between-subjects scenarios.

### **Manipulations**

The attribution of the mishap was manipulated as the “source of flagging” of the mishap – whether the mishap was flagged by another person or was realized by the individual himself/herself. The attribution literature suggests that the attribution mediates the felt emotion and individual’s behavior. Therefore, an external source of flagging suggests an external attribution of the mishap while an internal source of flagging suggests an internal attribution of the mishap. The two levels of familiarity among fellow customers were manipulated as old friends and new friends. Specifically, the new friends were manipulated as “just knew each other earlier today”. The two levels of group size were manipulated to a group of 2 and a group of 7.

### **Measure**

Consumer embarrassment was measured by one question “How would you feel in this situation? Please state the extent to which you would feel embarrassed.” Other than the emotion of embarrassment, emotions of: anger, cheerfulness, disappointment, delight, guilt, peace, furiousness, shame, happiness, pleasure were also assessed in the questionnaire. The “Negative Word-of-mouth Intentions” measure was developed based on the findings from Grace (2007) with 2 items: “discourage others to visit this restaurant in the word-of-mouth” and “complain to others about your dining experience at this restaurant”. The correlation test indicates that this is a valid scale with Pearson’s correlation coefficient = .749 (p-value < .001).

Control variables of “influence on friendship” and “personality” were also measured. The control variable of “influence on friendship” was measured by two questions of “this incident will make my friends think less of me” and “this incident will make me lose face in front of my friends”. ( $r = .841$ ,  $p\text{-value} = .000$ ). The personality measure of 10 items was developed based on the finding from Sabini et al. (2000). A sample question would be “Would you agree that social interactions usually make you feel anxious”. The reliability check indicates that this is a valid scale with Cronbach’s Alpha = .739.

## **RESULTS**

To test the first hypothesis, we fit the data with an ANCOVA model to test hypothesis one. Variables of “Influence on Friendship” (IOF) and “Personality” were included in the model as covariates. For hypothesis two, we ran a hierarchical linear regression to check if elicited embarrassment further induces negative word-of-mouth intentions.

### Elicitation of Embarrassment

Results showed that, for consumer embarrassment, the overall model is significant ( $F[9,205]=4.435$ ,  $p\text{-value}=.000$ ). The three way interaction was significant ( $F[1,213]=5.827$ ,  $p\text{-value}=.017$ ). The covariate effects of IOF ( $F[1,213]=20.645$ ,  $p\text{-value}=.000$ ) and Personality ( $F[1,213]=5.718$ ,  $p\text{-value}=.018$ ) were significant. None of the main effects or lower-order interaction effects was significant.

**Table 2: ANOVA Table for Embarrassment**

Source of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F	p-value
Corrected Model	93.172	9	10.352	4.435	.000
Intercept	188.081	1	188.081	80.566	.000
IOF	48.195	1	48.195	20.645	.000
PERSONALITY	13.350	1	13.350	5.718	.018
Group Familiarity	2.078	1	2.078	.890	.347
Group Size	.031	1	.031	.013	.908
Source of Flagging	1.730	1	1.730	.741	.390
Group Familiarity * Group Size	4.577	1	4.577	1.961	.163
Group Familiarity * Source of Flagging	.079	1	.079	.034	.855
Group Size * Source of Flagging	.013	1	.013	.006	.941
Group Familiarity * Group Size * Source	13.603	1	13.603	5.827	.017
Error	478.568	205	2.334		
Total	7092.000	215			

To better understand the three-way interaction, the whole data set was further split by “source of flagging”, and then ANOVA test was run for embarrassment by “group familiarity” and “group size” for each of the data sets. Results of analysis showed that when source of flagging comes from the internal self, the two way interaction model of “Familiarity” and “Group Size” on embarrassment with “Influence on Friendship” and “Personality” as covariates was significant ( $F[5,89]=3.921$ ,  $p\text{-value}=.003$ ). Within the model, the two way interaction effect of familiarity and group size was significant ( $F[1,89]=8.236$ ,  $p\text{-value}=.005$ ) as well as both covariate effects of “personality” and “influence on friendship”. However, none of the main effects was significant.

**Table 3: ANOVA Table for Embarrassment, Internal Source of Flagging**

Source of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F	p-value
Corrected Model	36.121	5	7.224	3.921	.003
Intercept	90.287	1	90.287	49.002	.000
IOF	13.738	1	13.738	7.456	.008
PERSONALITY	6.293	1	6.293	3.416	.068
Group Familiarity	.946	1	.946	.513	.476
Group Size	.033	1	.033	.018	.894
Group Familiarity * Group Size	15.176	1	15.176	8.236	.005
Error	163.985	89	1.843		
Total	3213.000	95			



The interaction plot suggests that when source of flagging comes from the internal self and the fellow customers are unfamiliar, a small group size (*Mean* = 6.00) will arouse higher level of embarrassment than a large one (*Mean* = 5.31) ( $t=1.675$ ,  $p\text{-value}= 0.100$ ). However, when the source of flagging was internal and the fellow customers are familiar, a small group size (*Mean* = 5.30) will lead to lower level of embarrassment than large (*Mean* = 6.11) ( $t=-2.031$ ,  $p\text{-value}=0.048$ ).

When the source of flagging was external, the two way interaction model was significant too ( $F[5, 119]=4.216$ ,  $p\text{-value}=.001$ ). However, the covariate effect of “Influence on Friendship” was the only significant effect in the model.

**Table 4: ANOVA Table for Embarrassment, External Source of Flagging**

Source of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F	p-value
Corrected Model	57.584 <sup>a</sup>	5	11.517	4.216	.001
Intercept	99.003	1	99.003	36.243	.000
IOF	37.391	1	37.391	13.688	.000
PERSONALITY	5.942	1	5.942	2.175	.143
Group Familiarity	1.105	1	1.105	.405	.526
Group Size	.007	1	.007	.003	.959
Group Familiarity * Group Size	1.377	1	1.377	.504	.479
Error	311.408	114	2.732		
Total	3879.000	120			

Therefore, the three hypothesized independent variables interactively contribute to consumers’ embarrassment. Only when the mishap was suggested internally, the interaction of group size and familiarity of fellow customers significantly lead to consumer embarrassment. When the mishap was suggested externally, group size and familiarity of fellow customers does not contribute to consumer embarrassment.

### Negative Word-of-Mouth Intention

We ran a hierarchical regression analysis to test the second hypothesis on negative word-of-mouth intentions. We controlled covariate effects and treatment effects to test the effect of embarrassment on negative word-of-mouth intentions. At first stage, only treatment effects and covariate effects were entered as predictors for negative word-of-mouth. At the second stage, embarrassment was entered into the model.

Results showed that adding embarrassment in the model was significant (*F-change*[1,208]=5.603,  $p\text{-value}=.019$ ). The second-stage model (with embarrassment included) was significant ( $F[6,208]=5.636$ ,  $p\text{-value}=.000$ ). Results revealed that “Influence on Friendship” ( $\beta=.383$ ,  $t=5.434$ ,  $p\text{-value}=.000$ ) and embarrassment ( $\beta=-.164$ ,  $t=-2.367$ ,  $p\text{-value}=.019$ ) were significant predictors of negative word-of-mouth intentions. Personality was marginally significant ( $\beta=-1.912$ ,  $t=-1.912$ ,  $p\text{-value}=.057$ ). None of the other effects was significant. The value of beta coefficient indicated that embarrassment is negatively related to negative word-of-mouth intentions. That means, the more embarrassed the involved individual is the less likely he/she will spread negative word-of-mouth.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **The Two Stage Appraisal Processing**

For the elicitation of embarrassment, this study adopted the appraisal theory and proposed that the two stages of appraisal interactively determine the strength of embarrassment to be felt by the individual customer. The results supported our hypothesis with a significant three way interaction effect of source of attribution, familiarity and group size of fellow customers on consumer embarrassment. Also, none of the main effects or two way interaction effects was significantly supported by our results. This implies that the appraisal processing model is appropriate to conceptualize the situational factors in a service interaction leading to consumer embarrassment. This processing was found to be individually based, as the level of elicited embarrassment is affected by individual traits – their personality and their concerns for the influence on friendship.

This study conceptualized the influence of fellow consumers as important situational factors leading to focal consumer's experience emotion of embarrassment. It was proposed that there is a split effect of customer's "self" presentation goal. And a two dimensional model of familiarity and group size of fellow customers was proposed to conceptualize the split effect of "self" presentation goal. It was proposed that as the level of familiarity among the focal customer and his/her fellow customers increases from total stranger to close friends, the focal customer's "self" presentation goal changes from "self-protection" (does not want to expose the self) to "self-showing" (want to show the good "self" according to individual's situational goals for image management). For the two goal scenarios, the effect from group size of fellow customers contradicts each other in eliciting consumer embarrassment.

The results supported this hypothesis with a significant three way interaction effect on consumer embarrassment. Though the mean results of descriptive analysis showed an interactive pattern among elicited embarrassment across different scenarios, the two-way interaction effect of familiarity and group size was not significant. This suggests that the split effect is only one part of the general appraisal processing model of individuals' embarrassment elicitation. Besides appraising the relevance and congruence of self-presentation goal, coping potential is also appraised by individuals in embarrassing situations. And the attribution of mishap implies the coping potential for appraisal, which further interacts with the split effect of self-presentation goal to elicit consumer embarrassment.

### **The Negative Word-of-Mouth Effect**

Our results identified the three factors of: attribution of mishap, group size of fellow customers and the familiarity among the group interactively contribute to consumer embarrassment, when consumer's mishap has already taken place. Further, embarrassment leads to negative word-of-mouth intentions. The more an individual feel embarrassed, the less likely he/she will generate negative word-of-mouth intentions. In our manipulations, we controlled service quality to a constantly high level. That means, when the service quality is high but customers experienced a mishap that could potentially lead to embarrassment, negative word-of-mouth intentions will be induced. Unless the embarrassment level was really high and induce a "shut-off" effect, the embarrassed customers will spread negative word-of-mouth to his/her friends and family in order to disrupt their patronage intentions. Therefore, embarrassment could be a significant potential factor leading to negative word-of-mouth behaviors.

## Managerial Implications

Different from previous literature which identified situational incidents that leads to consumer embarrassment or potential source that causes consumer embarrassment, this study emphasized on the concept of “mishap” in a serve interaction. Mishap was conceptualized as inconsistent behavior according to the socially accepted service script. As the mishap was found to be attributed by individual customer either internally or externally and that attribution further leads to elicit consumer embarrassment, findings of this study suggests the importance of a clear service script accurately comprehended by customers. The factors of “source of attribution”, “group size of fellow customers” and “familiarity among the fellow customers” were found to significantly induce negative word-of-mouth intentions. This suggests the importance of service providers’ sensitivity about the on-going service interaction and service providers’ ability to read customers. Based on their “reading”, service providers’ behaviors will further influence customers’ appraisal processing of the situation and that further influences on their emotional reactions. For service companies, one way to avoid embarrassing situations that will cause negative influence on customers is to train employees to understand the group effect on customers. It is also important for service companies to provide a clear service script and make sure that the script is accurately communicated to customers, especially customers who are not familiar with the specific type of service encounter.

## LIMITATIONS

As with any research, this study has several limitations. First, the current sample size is small. The rule of thumb for experimental design suggests that for each design scenario, at least a number of 30 observations per cell is required for significant results. It is necessary to collect more data to get robust results for this study. Second, the method of designed vignettes could be problematic as often times it could very likely over-eliciting or under-eliciting the desired emotion. Therefore, the scenario method might not be as effective as a field study in capturing emotions such as embarrassment.

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