

# How embarrassing is that? Purchasing sensitive products and the potential for self-service

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# How Embarrassing is That? Purchasing Sensitive Products and the Potential for Self-service

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**Abstract**

Consumers might feel uncomfortable or embarrassed when buying products that are inconsistent with the desire to project a positive self-image to others [3], [5], [7], [16]. Embarrassment and shame are key elements in the relationship between sales assistant and consumer [7] and may affect the likelihood of engagement with a service provider [10]. We explored the circumstances under which embarrassing retail experiences occur, with a view to identify the potential for self-service solutions to alleviate these experiences.

**Author Keywords**

Consumer strategies; anonymity; embarrassment;

**ACM Classification Keywords**

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**Why are people embarrassed?**

Embarrassment is associated with negative emotions about the self as a result of self-reflection and evaluation, accrued by a transgression against standards, serving a function of feedback about the social acceptability of our behaviour [14]. Individual differences mediate the feeling of embarrassment, in

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### **Exploratory observation**

We employed an exploratory observation (design ethnography) of consumers in an actual shopping context (shop-alongs), and interviews to reveal a more comprehensive account of the embarrassing nature of some forms of shopping

**Participants:** The UK study took place in autumn 2013. Seven British females, aged 21-27, took part in the interviews and allowed us to observe their shopping trips. The Singapore study was conducted subsequent to the UK one, and six Asian females aged 26-37 took part.

**Method:** Interviews and shop-alongs were conducted in specialty stores (e.g., adult shops, lingerie boutiques, see Figures 1 and 2), drugstores, convenience stores, supermarkets, and department stores at different times of the day and in different locations.

that individuals with a high concern for observable behaviour, conformity, and the desire to please others are more susceptible to embarrassment than those with low concerns [8]. Avoiding shame is of particular importance for Chinese Asian cultures [11] which are presumed to be more 'interdependent' than the 'independent' Western cultures; however, both images of self can co-exist within individuals [13]. Embarrassment is at a subordinate level to the basic emotion shame [12]. Shame allows a better understanding of consumer feelings concerning certain products compared to mere positive or negative affect, and might in turn strongly affect behaviour [12], such as boycotting a particular service.

### **Which products and purchase interactions are associated with embarrassment?**

Associated with embarrassment is the purchase of a variety of products or services that are 1) "unpalatable to society at large but are, nevertheless, tolerated – indeed often highly sought after – by a limited number of customers" [16], p92, and 2) "...by all standards acceptable to society but that the buyer is reluctant to acknowledge or discuss" [16], p92. Examples are products associated with sexual services and activity, e.g., condoms [3], [5], and personal hygiene or beauty products. With respect to condom purchase, familiarity with the purchase act reduces feelings of embarrassment [7]. However, embarrassment can occur whether a social presence is physically present or merely imagined in the purchasing context [7]. The purchase of condoms is particularly embarrassing, especially for females, in communities with little anonymity [5]. Presence of others thus seems to be a strong factor in feeling embarrassment.

### **What are the behavioural consequences of embarrassment?**

One of the most concerning consequences of embarrassment is the avoidance of product purchase when it is a health-related product [3], [5]. One identified reason for adolescent shoplifting is that individuals might be embarrassed to buy the item [6]. Embarrassment may result in boycotting, and reduced re-purchase or re-patronage intentions or negative word of mouth [9], [10]. Even if a product is not necessarily embarrassing per se, consumer concerns about self-representation might induce them not to select it, for example, if the product is of poor quality [1] or associated with a dissociative group [15] (e.g., males are less likely than females to order a steak labelled "ladies' cut" in a restaurant).

### **Which strategies do consumers use to deal with embarrassment?**

People use strategies to deal with embarrassing situations throughout the shopping journey. Identified strategies before the selection of an item, e.g., a condom, are to monitor other customers, select a more/less busy store, location, brand and particular time of day, bringing a friend (female consumers only). Strategies during item selection include [5] avoiding assistants or seek assistance of same sex assistant (the same sex assistant was perceived to be more empathetic and less critical towards buyer), move quickly, wait for other customers to leave, purchase additional items (see also [4]). Strategies after the selection of an item include paying at the pharmacy, avoiding eye contact and concealing the item [5]. Most strategies minimize social interactions with others, consistent with consumers wanting to avoid negative representations of self.

### Quotes by UK and Singapore participants

“When I’m choosing products and I see people waiting for me to finish, I would move away and let them choose the products first.” - Lily, Singapore

“It is embarrassing to be seen entering a sex-shop. What if someone I know saw me?” - Alice, Singapore

“I don’t want to pay for condoms at a SCO because of the potential errors and alarm, which will bring attention to me.” - Vivian, Singaporean

“...It is hard to buy this product because everyone knows the brand and the packaging is quit visible even in the shopping bag...” - Fiona, UK (Verruca and sexual health products)

“I’ll place the sensitive purchase in my bag instead of carrying it because I don’t want people to look at what I buy.” - Lily, Singapore

### Summary of initial findings and implications for self-service technology

Illustrative quotes from participants are displayed in the side bar. Our findings are consistent with the reviewed research in that anonymity and positive self-representation are critical factors:

- concerns when selecting products, e.g., store layout and (social) presence of others;
- concerns about carrying products, as items are visible;
- concerns at the point of purchase, if interactions with or attention of staff are anticipated;
- concerns about administrative matters, such as discounts and returning products as they involve direct encounters with sales assistants.

#### *Selection of products*

Future research could assess whether self-service technology, such as information kiosks or location-based mobile app, integrated in the retail space could be beneficial for consumers. Using Augmented Reality, shoppers can access useful information about products and promotions on their personal devices and/or remotely, without spending too much time near those products. Shielded screens on self-service kiosks could allow consumers to browse for products discreetly.

#### *Carrying products*

Opaque shopping trolleys or baskets fitted with retractable covers would allow more privacy while carrying sensitive products. Linking with the strategies shoppers use for packing and hiding embarrassing products, technologies can enable customers to literally pocket the product in the aisle itself. Adding point of purchase functions technologies such as RFID can be

applied so consumers could scan, purchase and pocket products on the spot.

#### *Point of purchase*

The proliferation of smart phones could be leveraged to provide personalised information seamlessly to consumers. Recent self-service innovations that are location-aware and sensor-based pave the way for consumers to receive personalized information upon entrance to the store and make payment anonymously via their smart devices. Another technological solution would be a ‘checkout shopping trolley’ where payment is made simply by walking a trolley through a doorway-like sensor, and security tags being automatically disabled with proof of purchase.

#### *Administrative matters*

At the point of selection, kiosks or self-service checkouts could highlight return policies for certain products in advance of purchasing items. Technology can be used to reduce staff interaction when it comes to product return, via a dedicated kiosk. Shoppers simply need to drop the item and be refunded. Another way to reduce direct association with the embarrassing products is to reduce the time spent at the cashier, e.g., waiting for change. Change can be credited to be used later as store credit, and this can be done at self-service or staffed checkouts.

### Conclusion

There is potential for the beneficial effects of self-service technology and its variants to alleviate some consumer embarrassment, to the extent that it might allow anonymity and the preservation of positive self-representations. We outlined several technological solutions based upon our in-depth qualitative consumer



**Figure 1.** Adult shop, selling sex-related products



**Figure 2.** Purchasing female hygiene products

research. Future work can explore in more detail how effective these technologies and their subtle

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