

People experience embarrassment buying personal products online

March 31 2015, by Greta Guest



Do you blush or avoid eye contact when you're standing in line to buy personal items? What about when you buy them online?

New research from University of Michigan marketing professor Aradhna Krishna found that people feel embarrassed even when they buy things online such as incontinence products or impotence drugs.

"We usually think of embarrassment as a social emotion—that there has to be somebody present to feel it," said Krishna, the Dwight F. Benton Professor of Marketing at the Ross School of Business. "But we find that even in private, people can appraise their own behavior and find that their self-concept is violated. People can feel the same kind of embarrassment in private."

Krishna and colleagues Nilufer Aydinoglu of Koc University in Istanbul and Kelly Herd of Indiana University ran a series of studies that revealed feelings of embarrassment when [buying](#) online. Their results will be published in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

The authors demonstrate that embarrassment is an emotion which can also be experienced without the presence of others, and by self-judgment. Such private embarrassment can occur, for instance, when one wets the bed as an adult or overeats in the privacy of one's own kitchen.

In one of their studies, they recorded the feelings of people buying Viagra for two different reasons—one group for enhanced performance, the other for impotence. They found that if people purchased Viagra in a physical store, both groups felt embarrassed equally—the act of buying the Viagra with people looking on was embarrassing. But if people bought Viagra online, the group buying for impotence felt a much higher level of embarrassment.

This suggests private [embarrassment](#) depends more heavily on the buyer's purpose—self-concept was affected more when the purchase was for impotence than for performance.

The results show that sellers of sensitive products need to make the consumer feel comfortable purchasing the sensitive product, even when buying online.

"Promoting home testing kits for STDs ([sexually transmitted diseases](#)) online, for instance, is perhaps not the most effective way to encourage consumers to seek help and reduce spreading of the disease," Krishna said. "Instead, marketers and public policymakers could focus on trying to reshape consumers' own self-concepts as well as cultural norms related to STDs and other potentially embarrassing purchase situations."

More information: "Wetting the bed at twenty-one: Embarrassment as a private emotion," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, Available online 25 February 2015, ISSN 1057-7408, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2015.02.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2015.02.005)

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