

# If you purchase an embarrassing product online, do you still blush? New study says yes

August 6 2015

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Published research and common knowledge suggest that embarrassment is something we experience only when we are around other people.

But a new research study co-authored by an Indiana University professor found that people often are embarrassed when buying sensitive health care products privately and online—products such as home test kits and medications for incontinence and sexual dysfunction.

The paper, which appears in the latest issue of the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, has important ramifications for retailers who have established online environments where they believe shoppers feel more comfortable making such purchases.

That's simply not the case, according to "[Wetting the Bed at Twenty-One: Embarrassment as a Private Emotion](#)," co-authored by Kelly Herd, assistant professor of marketing in the IU Kelley School of Business. Other authors of the paper are Aradhna Krishna, professor of marketing at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan, and Nilüfer Aydın, professor of marketing at Koç University in Turkey.

"There is a misconception that buying products online insulates consumers from being embarrassed," Herd said. "But while the product may arrive at the doorstep discretely, the act of purchasing is what triggers the [embarrassment](#). You still feel embarrassment because you're judging yourself. It's not about you even thinking about others judging you."

It is believed to be the first research study of private embarrassment within a marketing context.

The researchers initially set out to confirm their view that embarrassment is an emotion that also can be experienced in private settings, through a random online survey of 177 people who were asked to describe their own publicly and privately embarrassing experiences.

A follow-up survey of 124 people presented them with a potentially embarrassing scenario involving purchasing an over-the-counter medication for incontinence. Herd and her co-authors found that the intensity of embarrassment felt did not lessen when the scenario involved a private, online purchase.

In fact, it often was worse.

"Participants' desire to escape an embarrassing situation for in-public context suggests that simply removing oneself from the situation makes the negative emotions dissipate; but for embarrassing situations experienced within an in-private context, one cannot easily 'escape' the embarrassment," the authors wrote.

The researchers conducted a third study involving purchases of Viagra for impotence versus pleasure. They surveyed 304 men over the age of 35, reflecting the target market for the erectile dysfunction product.

Not surprisingly, the intensity of embarrassment was higher when Viagra was purchased for impotence rather than for pleasure and was higher when purchased in public. However, the feelings of embarrassment were much lower for those buying it online for non-medical reasons.

"When you buy it in public, it doesn't matter why you're buying it, because you perceive that people are going to judge you just for having

purchased the product," Herd said. "In private, it's much more nuanced ... you know you need it due to performance."

The paper's results suggest that sellers of sensitive health care products need to make consumers feel more comfortable when buying them. For example, promoting home health kits online may not be the best way to encourage people to seek help and prevent spreading disease.

"When it comes to getting people to purchase STD testing kits or to buy condoms or to buy incontinence medicine, the general understanding from marketing companies is that if you offer it online, people won't be embarrassed and therefore are more likely to purchase it," Herd said.

"However, our results suggest that maybe that's not necessarily the case. It seems that the Band-Aid that companies are offering, to get people to engage and purchase these products is to offer it online, which of course 20 years ago wasn't an option," she said. "Our research suggests that is not the fix."

She said marketers and public policy makers need to focus on changing cultural and social norms about seeking help for sexually transmitted diseases and consumers' own self-concepts about condoms and other products they now find embarrassing to buy.

"Embarrassment is clearly an important emotion to understand," Herd said. "It has similar consequences to stress, and people can go to great lengths to avoid feeling embarrassed and can engage in compensatory behavior for coping.

"Embarrassment may prevent consumers from purchasing necessary medication, practicing safe sex or voicing their feedback on products," she said. "By gaining a better understanding of embarrassment and considering the under-studied yet highly prevalent circumstances under

which it may occur, this research offers insights for marketers, public policy makers and consumers."

The paper's title came from responses to the first portion of the research about whether private embarrassment was a real emotion.

"People talked about extremely private events where they still experienced embarrassment," Herd said. "Of all the online studies I've done, it was one where people wrote paragraphs. They told us about experiences that were obviously embarrassing to them, and they were very open about it."

Provided by Indiana University

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