

Economists developed an instrument to measure brand embarrassment

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The team of economic researcher Prof. Dr. Gianfranco Walsh developed an instrument to measure brand embarrassment and the 'embarrassment potential' of a particular brand. Credit: Jan-Peter Kasper/FSU

It's laundry day and the only clean T-shirt sports the big logo of a brand

that used to be trendy but is only embarrassing now. What can you do? Wait until the tumble dryer has finished and be too late for the date or just put on the T-shirt? How you decide in a situation like this depends on a person's 'brand embarrassment tendency' (BET).

This is how economic researchers call the feeling of shame and embarrassment that is caused by the use of certain brands. Professor Gianfranco Walsh from the Friedrich Schiller University Jena (Germany) together with Jena colleagues and partners from the Florida State University (USA), University of Strathclyde (UK) and the Keio University (Japan) recently took a closer look at this phenomenon. The international team of researchers recently published their results in the *Journal of Business Research*.

Until now, researchers had largely concentrated on the positive aspect of [brand](#) awareness. "In doing so, we forget that brands can trigger negative connotations," Prof. Walsh says and adds "these feelings can have a strong impact on the decision to buy a product of a certain brand."

Embarrassment is an intense, negative emotion and it derives from worrying about the possibility of other peoples' negative judgement about oneself. In some people however this concern is more pronounced than in others. Especially when it comes to buying particular brands the question frequently arising will be how the social environment will react. During their research the team of scientists noticed that consumers often communicate parts of their identity through their choice of clothing. The feeling of embarrassment will be more acute, as it is perceived as threatening the own identity, Prof. Walsh points out. People, who for instance choose a cheap brand, might worry that the 'low-price image' will be transferred from the brand onto themselves.

"What is finally being seen as embarrassing depends on the individual and their respective reference group. In ecologically aware consumers

the use of brands that are known to waste resources can trigger embarrassment," co-researcher Arne Albrecht says. The research team devised a tool to measure consumers' BET, which makes it possible to determine which consumers are more likely to perceive brand embarrassment and which specific brands will trigger such a feeling. With the help of qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys, which have been conducted in Germany as well as in the USA, the researchers developed a nine-item BET scale, which provides information about how pronounced the brand embarrassment is in a person. So, for instance, the test persons had to score on a scale how embarrassing they find it to wear low priced clothing from a discounter in front of their friends and others, or if they are more likely to wear brand products in public than at home.

The measuring tool can also be used to assess the '[embarrassment](#) potential' of a particular brand. 'Ed Hardy' and 'Lonsdale' were amongst the brands that were analyzed in the study and that were identified as being particularly embarrassing whereas 'Adidas' and 'Esprit' were not being perceived as embarrassing.

Along with BET goes the buying intention, as customers who find certain brands embarrassing will not purchase them. "We were able to show that embarrassing clothing is not only a problem of insecure teenagers but that this poses a real image problem with far-reaching consequences for companies," according to Albrecht. With the measuring instrument developed by Walsh and his colleagues the researchers not only have the possibility now to analyze positive brand relations as well as brands which are connected with negative emotions. "Moreover, practitioners can use the instrument in order to understand their own customers and their own brand better," Gianfranco Walsh says.

More information: Gianfranco Walsh et al. Developing and validating

a scale of consumer brand embarrassment tendencies, *Journal of Business Research* (2015). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.08.029](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.08.029)

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