
Awkward Shopping: The Embarrassing & Embarrassed Ethnographer

Wei Eng Koh

NCR
9 Tampines Grande
Singapore 528735
WeiEng.Koh@NCR.com

Graham Johnson

NCR
Discovery Centre, 3 Fulton Road
Dundee DD2 4SW, Scotland
Graham.Johnson@NCR.com

Andrea Szymkowiak

Abertay University
Bell Street
Dundee DD1 1HG, Scotland
a.szymkowiak@abertay.ac.uk

Jocelyn Sie

NCR
9 Tampines Grande
Singapore 528735
Jocelyn.Sie@NCR.com

Abstract

How often do you open up about your embarrassing moments to others, even entertaining their prying? We recognise that embarrassment is a social construct that most people wish to hide and is rarely discussed openly. Using an ethnographic approach, we explored the value and challenges of studying consumers' embarrassing experiences in retail contexts. In particular, reflecting upon our experience as ethnographers with that of the respondents during the study, and the implications for future research.

Author Keywords

Embarrassment; ethnography; methodology

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.2. [Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI)]: User Interfaces – Evaluation/methodology, theory and methods, user-centered design.

Why are people embarrassed?

Embarrassment is associated with negative emotions about the self as a result of self-reflection and evaluation, brought forth by a deviation from socialised standards, pronouncing the social (un)acceptability of said behaviour [9]. Individuals mediate embarrassments differently, in that those with a higher concern for observable behaviour, conformity and the desire to please others are more susceptible to embarrassment than those with lower concerns [5].

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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 more comprehensive accounts of the embarrassing nature of some forms of shopping.

Respondents: A UK study took place in Dundee. Seven British females, aged 21-27, took part in the interviews and allowed us to observe their shopping trips. A complementary study ensued in Singapore, where six Asian females, aged 26-37, participated.

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

Embarrassment in the retail context is often accrued by purchase 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[10]” and 2) “...by all standards acceptable to society but that the buyer is reluctant to acknowledge or discuss[10]”. Presence of others contributes significantly too; whether a social presence is physically present or merely imagined in the purchasing context [4].

Challenges of studying embarrassment

There has been limited exploration of consumers and embarrassment in service encounters, and the impact on the other actors in the servicescape[6]. Studies around embarrassment are typically product-focused, such as those associated with condoms, personal hygiene or beauty products [4,1,2].

Our study of shoppers’ embarrassment was motivated by an interest in the use of self-service technology from the consumers’ perspectives. We employed an ethnographic approach where we observed shoppers in their naturalistic environment—retail spaces—and conducted in-depth interviews with respondents to probe further on the triggers and effects of embarrassment felt while shopping. Besides the environment helping respondents bring their stories to life, conducting interviews in these retail spaces help evoke memories of embarrassing retail incidents.

According to Brewer [3], ethnography is “not a particular method of data collection but a style of research that is distinguished by its objectives, which are to understand the social meanings and activities of people in a given ‘field’ or setting, and an approach,

which involves close association with, and often participation in, this setting”.

It is understandably difficult to find respondents willing to share their embarrassing shopping experiences with someone they are not familiar with. More so given the degree of scrutiny and probing required for the study. Pragmatic decisions had to be made in the research design, including focusing on a single gender; female ethnographers and female respondents.

Considering how Chinese Asian cultures are presumed to be more ‘interdependent’ than the ‘independent’ Western cultures and where avoiding shame is of particular importance [7], these consumers are expected to internalise or suppress feelings of embarrassment. Also informed from the study conducted in Dundee which involved cold-calling for respondents, we decided to capitalise on existing relationships instead to reduce the anxiety and lower the barrier of discussing their embarrassment for respondents; friends were recruited as respondents. Such recruitment also shortens the time previously needed to build rapport/trust with the respondents.

Effects of multiple roles of the ethnographer

One of the difficulties of an ethnographic approach is that of maintaining ‘distance’, i.e. adopting an impersonal and objective outlook. In this study, we caught ourselves involuntarily playing varying roles: a neutral observer, the catalyst of respondents’ embarrassment and the friend sharing the embarrassment. What is important, though, is to remain reflexive throughout the process, so we are aware of the position being taken and its implications on the data collected.



Figure 1. Adult shop; selling sex-related products



Figure 2. Shop-along; buying sanitary pads

We took care not to be part of the “perceived gaze” that was attributed as one trigger of embarrassment. In Singapore, where self-checkout kiosks (SCO) are relatively new, respondents shared their habit of studying others using SCO in order to learn how to use it and avoid usage hiccups. Hence while using SCO to make embarrassing purchases, respondents expressed unease knowing that others might be observing them as well.

Studies [8] suggest that witnessing an individual in embarrassing circumstances may also affect observers. Indeed, during the study, the ethnographer who accompanied one respondent, who was a teacher, to the sex shop noted personal embarrassment induced by the situation:

“Orchard Road was already quite crowded by the time we reached the entrance of ‘Naughty’... It felt awkward that right opposite the shop entrance there were a few smokers smoking and chatting beside a bin. It wasn’t easy to walk into the shop naturally.”

Another consequential embarrassment that arose was empathic embarrassment, where the ethnographer puts herself in the shoes of the respondent and in turn mentalizing the respondent’s emotions. This was noted by the ethnographer who accompanied one respondent on a condom purchase.

“While she was paying at the cashier, a man entered the store so she quickly kept the packet of condom in her bag before the cashier bagged it. Although I knew I wasn’t the one getting the condom, I too panicked and found myself edging towards the exit.”

Finally, we also felt the “impulse to help” the respondents, i.e. empathic concern; an instinctive response due to empathy for a person in need and an increased tendency to assist [11]. In such instances the ethnographer had to assume a neutral position and observe how the respondent would cope with the situation unaided. Back to the first scenario, when the respondent was hesitant to enter the sex shop, instead of encouraging her as a friend, the ethnographer made a conscious effort not to influence but gave her space to process the situation herself. While interviewed, unlike the ethnographer, she was not as concerned about the men smoking near the store. Rather, as a teacher, she was more worried her students who frequent Orchard Road, a popular shopping district in Singapore, might walk past and spot her.

Implications for future research

Given the commercial yet sensitive nature of this study, leveraging on existing relationships was advantageous. But with it entails the added complexity of managing existing friendships between the ethnographer and respondent, where the former may face dilemma of how to deal with the additional sensitive private details about her friend’s life, which would not have been revealed otherwise if not for the study.

That also brings about ethical concerns where the ethnographer might reserve certain information about her friend she deems overly sensitive and unnecessary for analysis, unaware that the study could have benefitted from such information.

Approaching our analysis autoethnographically; being reflexive and generous with personal experiences on

the ethnographers' part, helped create more data points and enriched our findings.

The anecdotes taken from ethnographers' fieldnotes show that embarrassment is an emotional response that has important personal and social consequences, both for the subject of embarrassing circumstances and for the observers, regardless of how naturalistic the setting is.

Since we know that embarrassment can occur whether a social presence is physically present or imagined [4], further studies could also explore other means of observations, without the physical presence of the ethnographers, possibly using pre-mounted video cameras in the retail space. This would enable the understanding of the effect of cameras or CCTVs on shoppers' embarrassment, as well as the behavioural impact of ethnographer's absence on respondents.

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