Bad Hair Day? The Role of Self-consciousness on Coping with Embarrassing Service Encounters

Pamela M. H. Kwok1,*, Alison E. Lloyd2

1Division of Business, PolyU Hong Kong Community College, Hong Kong SAR, China
2Department of Management and Marketing, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR, China
*Corresponding Author: ccpam@hkcc-polyu.edu.hk, Alison.lloyd@polyu.edu.hk

Abstract The paper studies the importance of self-consciousness (public and private) on the types of coping strategy deployed in the face of an embarrassing service encounter. Using a quasi-experimental design, results indicate that in individuals high on public self-consciousness are more likely to engage in active coping in comparison to their low public self-consciousness counterparts. Findings also show that avoidance coping strategy impinges on the service encounter and represents an important opportunity for firms to offer more ways to encourage customers to voice out their dissatisfaction with service failure. The work described in this conference paper was fully funded by a grant from the College of Professional and Continuing Education, an affiliate of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

Keywords Self-consciousness, Embarrassment, and Service Encounters

1. Introduction

From a service provider’s viewpoint, although zero defects in the encounter are almost impossible, complaints nonetheless provide highly valuable insight that can be used to improve service design and delivery, create a customer focused culture, and enhance customer loyalty (Lovelock, 1996). However, there are many instances when consumers opt to keep quiet about their unhappy experience. Hence for leading service firms, understanding not only those customers who voice out is pertinent, but also those who do not. The extent of non-complaining is substantial with recent industry estimates that 25% of consumers do not give the service firm a chance to fix their problem (ICS, 2010). Despite the acknowledged importance of complaints only a few authors have considered the importance of personality variables as moderators of complaining behavior (Marquis and Filiatrault, 2002). This article continues the work that is done on using self-consciousness as a personality disposition in examining its effects on coping strategy to negative service encounters. This research is in response to calls for extending research on coping to embrace other consumer traits and emotions (Yi and Baumgartner, 2004).

1.1. Embarrassment

Embarrassment is a short-lived negative emotion that arises when there is a threat to the public self in the presence of a real or imagined audience (Lau-Gesk and Drolet, 2008) and involve a threat to an individual’s desired social identity (Dahl et al, 2001). With embarrassment, social evaluation is important and there is a concern about what others are thinking (Stets, 2003). Embarrassment can arise from trivial social transgressions or unpleasant interactions (Tangney et al., 1996). In consumption, embarrassment can arise in different situations such as that experienced when purchasing certain products (laxatives, pornography), or in service consumption (weight loss, speed dating), or in product/service usage (credit card denied, inappropriately dressed for an event) (Wan, 2011). Consumers generally experience higher levels of embarrassment in the presence rather than in the absence of other customers (Dahl et al., 2001). In Chinese culture, generally speaking, Chinese consumers have a high propensity to avoid embarrassment in social settings because they do not want to lose face in front of others.

1.2. Self-consciousness

Self-consciousness is the degree to which individuals focus is directed either toward the environment or internally on the self (Fenigstein, Scheier and Buss, 1975). Public self-consciousness is concerned with attention to the self as a social and public object (Gould and Barak, 2001). Publicly self-conscious individuals are highly concerned with the impression they make on other people (Bushman, 1993). This disposition is highly linked with overt displays and impression management (Cheek and Briggs, 1982). They are also found to be more concerned with physical appearance and fashion (Marquis and Filiatrault, 2002). Such individuals are more likely to use make-up and clothing to influence
their public images. Private self-consciousness individuals are preoccupied with thinking about the covert aspects of the self that are not obvious to others such as inner feelings, fantasies, thoughts, inner states, focal stimuli, and motives (Buss, 1980).

1.3. Coping

Coping responses are the cognitive/behavioral efforts of individuals to manage situations that tax or exceed their resources (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Coping is influenced by both situational elements such as affective responses and cognitive appraisals, as well as dispositional traits. Coping is triggered by negative emotions because individuals seek to reduce their emotional distress and induce more favorable emotional states (Duchachek, 2005; Gelbrich, 2010). Duchachek (2005) proposes that there are three coping strategies – expressive, active, and avoidance/denial. Expressive involves the consumer seeking social support by expressing emotions to others to manage negative emotions and seek comfort (Duchachek, 2005); this type of coping strategy is of interest to consumer researchers because of the similarity to word-of-mouth and Duchachek and Iacobucci (2005) argue that certain personality traits impact the usage of this form of coping. Active coping involves the consumer attempting to cognitively or behaviorally taking action, including engaging in rational thinking (Strizhakova et al. 2012). Avoidance/denial is a passive way of coping through problem dismissal (Strizhakova et al. 2012).

2. Hypotheses

According to Wan (2011), service failures can be delineated into those that are embarrassing and non-embarrassing. Embarrassing failures occur when the consumer perceives that the core service is not delivered properly and other consumers form undesirable evaluations, which subsequently threaten the embarrassed consumer’s self-identity. In the non-embarrassing failure, the consumer does not perceive that the failure results in undesirable evaluations from other consumers, so the consumer’s self-identity is not affected (Wan, 2011). Some individuals are more inclined than others to regulate their behavior to avoid embarrassment (Lau-Gesk and Drolet, 2008). Public self-consciousness has been shown to correlate positively with embarrassment (Scheier and Carver, 1980) and is useful to understand embarrassment and the associated coping strategies pursued.

High public self-consciousness individuals experience higher levels of embarrassment due to their heightened self awareness and exaggerated beliefs about other people noticing and judging them (Lau-Gesk and Drolet, 2008). Kowalski (1996) suggests that individuals with high public self-consciousness often seek for approval from others and are particularly concerned with the impression they make on other people (Bushman, 1993). As complaining may lead others to form a bad impression of the complainer, individuals who are dispositionally more sensitive to the impressions that others have of them, may be less likely to complain (Kowalski, 1996). Furthermore, high public self-consciousness individuals have a high propensity of not making complain because they perceive the act as potentially threatening their social interactions with others (Marquis and Filiatrault, 2002). Therefore, high public self-conscious individuals may be less likely than low public self-conscious individuals to use expressive coping strategy:

H1: High public self-conscious subjects will be less likely to use expressive coping strategy than low public self-conscious individuals in response to an embarrassing service failure.

High public self-conscious individuals, owing to the pressure to behavior in socially desirable ways will refrain from displaying strong overt complaint behaviors, and may prefer more discreet options instead (Marquis and Filiatrault, 2002). Therefore, high self-conscious individuals may be more likely to exercise active coping strategies as these are observed by fewer individuals:

H2: High public self-conscious subjects will be more likely to use active coping strategy than low public self-conscious individuals in response to an embarrassing service failure.

It may also be reasonable to expect that high public self-conscious individuals may even use avoidance coping strategy as complaining can have mood contagion effects, whereby the person listening to the complaint may experience dissatisfaction (Kowalski, 2002).

H3: High public self-conscious subjects will be more likely to use avoidance coping strategy than low public self-conscious individuals in response to an embarrassing service failure.

Conversely, high private self-conscious individuals are self-attentive (Marquis and Filiatrault, 2002). Kowalski (1996) argues that people who are more likely to direct attention inward are more apt to complaining than their outward-looking counterparts, because the self-focus may increase their negative thoughts and feelings. Complaining for such individuals may have its positive aspect, in that it releases tension and allows them to get their frustrations off their chest (Kowalski, 2002). When individuals do not vent, they may become obsessed with the object of their dissatisfaction, and the continued rumination leads to negative affect, which produces heightened dissatisfaction (Kowalski, 2002). In line with this, it is construed that high private self-conscious individuals will be more likely to use both expressive and active coping strategies in response to service failure:

H4: High private self-conscious subjects will be more likely to use expressive coping strategy than low private self-conscious individuals in response to an embarrassing service failure.
**H5:** High private self-conscious subjects will be more likely to use active coping strategy than low private self-conscious individuals in response to an embarrassing service failure.

3. Methodology

3.1. Procedures

Hypotheses were tested in a hybrid 2 x 2 factorial design experiment. The variable of embarrassment (high vs. low) was manipulated, and the variable of the level of public self-consciousness was measured using a standard test. The mean score of all items used to tap public self-consciousness was then subjected to a conventional median-split method to obtain two groups (high vs. low). A total of 265 respondents comprising primarily of undergraduate students at a large university in Hong Kong participated in the study without any incentive. Employing mostly students in experiments is a common practice as they possess homogenous backgrounds, which means that several extraneous variables can be controlled (Wan, 2011). Prior to undertaking the experiment, a pre-test on several scenarios was performed to find the one best representative of an embarrassing service encounter. The service context selected for the experiment is hair dressing. The selection of this context is suitable given that shortcomings in appearance are cited as a common trigger of embarrassment (Sabini et al. 2001).

3.2. Measures

Self-consciousness was measured using the Revised Self-Consciousness (RSC) Scale of Scheier and Carver (1985). The RSC scale is comprised of 22 items with each item rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 representing “not like me at all” to 3 representing “a lot like me”. Scheier and Carver (1985) report that a three-factor structure underlies the 22 items with 9 related to private self-consciousness, 7 to public self-consciousness and 6 to social anxiety. In this study the 22 items of the RSC scale was analyzed with principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation as comparable to previous studies (Marquis and Filiatrault, 2002). Items that failed to load at 0.500 or cross-loaded were removed. The final scale comprised 14 items representing public self-consciousness (6 items), social anxiety (4 items), and private self-consciousness (4 items). The Cronbach alphas obtained are comparable to those from prior studies. In this study, the Cronbach alphas were 0.826 (public self-consciousness), 0.746 (social anxiety), and 0.710 (private self-consciousness). Subjects were classified as either high or low on the public and private self-consciousness subscale based on a median split procedure.

Coping was measured using Duchachek’s (2005) three-dimensional coping scale. The items were analyzed using exploratory factor analysis with oblique rotations. The final scale included all the 17 items pooled from the three factors. There were no correlated errors and all items loaded on their respective factors. In this study, the Cronbach alphas were 0.909 (active coping), 0.892 (expressive coping), and 0.870 (avoidance coping).

In the current study, embarrassment is measured using three items rated on a Likert scale of 1 representing don’t feel this at all to 7 being feel this very much. The three items are embarrassed, ashamed, and humiliated. These items are drawn from the Consumer Emotions Set (Richins, 1997).

Demographic characteristics of age and gender were obtained. Most respondents were aged 18-21 (45.1%), and 35.4% comprised of individuals aged 22-30. Female respondents made up 59.8% of the sample.

4. Results

4.1. Manipulation Check

After reading the provided scenario (embarrassment vs. control condition), respondents rated the degree to which they felt eight negative emotions (embarrassment, shame, humiliation, frustration, anger, unfulfilled, discontent, and irritation). Participants rated the level of embarrassment associated with the respective scenario using a on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 being “do not feel this at all” to 7 being “feel this very much”. The embarrassment condition (M = 4.59, SE = 0.09) and the control condition (M = 2.84, SE = 1.16) demonstrated a significant difference in level of perceived embarrassment (t[334] = 8.86, p = .00) as expected.

4.2. Test of Hypotheses

Hypotheses were tested in the context of the full model. ANOVA based on the 2 (experiment vs. condition x 2 (low public self-consciousness vs. high public self-consciousness) between-subjects design. The results are given in following Table 1:
5. Discussions

Results indicate that public self-consciousness influences the use of both expressive and active coping when facing an embarrassing encounter. Only in the use of avoidance coping does the condition have impact on this. Also for private self-consciousness both main and interaction effects are significant. Unexpectedly the hypotheses were not supported for H1 and H3. This can be explained in several ways. Firstly, all respondents are local Chinese people in Hong Kong, it may be feasible that cultural nuances such as the need to preserve self-face and other face could be at play, and dampen the incentives of seeking social support from others. Secondly, Lau-Gesk and Drolet (2008) argue that the spotlight effect would be greater in individuals of high public self-consciousness. A third reason for the occurrence may be due to the high proportion of female respondents in the study. Research suggests that women may be more apt in expressing complaints but not necessarily to the source directly as it may jeopardize the relationship they have with another individual (Kowalski, 1996). Avoidance coping was shown to be dependent on the condition rather than on disposition. This is aligned with suggestions that avoidance coping is distinct from other forms of emotional coping as consumers do not position themselves in a positive light, they turn away from the situation (Stephens and Gwinner, 1998).

Firms that are able to drive more coping towards either expressive or active strategies are in a better position to have more individuals voice out their dissatisfaction and have a chance to rectify the problem rather than losing the customer entirely (Stephens and Gwinner, 1998).

Future research should embark on exploring self-conscious emotions in more service settings to ascertain a better picture of its effects. Secondly, embarrassment was the consumption emotion under study. Examining the impact of other factors such as age and gender in future studies is called for as these may influence complaining behavior.

6. Managerial Implications and Future Research

The study validates the importance of paying attention to emotions in service encounters and has linked coping strategies with trait dispositions such as self-consciousness.

Table 1. Results Summary of Hypotheses Testing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
<th>Support or not</th>
<th>ANOVA Results</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesis 1</td>
<td>Not supported</td>
<td>however, the ANOVA indicated a significant main effect for public self-consciousness (F(3, 338) = 19.41, p &lt; .000). Means were for high public self-conscious individuals of expressive coping (M = 4.71) was higher than those of low public self-conscious individuals (M = 4.08).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hypothesis 2</td>
<td>Supported</td>
<td>ANOVA indicated a significant main effect for self-consciousness (F(3, 338) = 8.00, p &lt; .000). High public self-conscious individuals used active coping more (M = 5.00) than their low self-consciousness counterparts in embarrassing situations (M = 4.55).</td>
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<td>Hypothesis 3</td>
<td>Not supported</td>
<td>however ANOVA indicated a significant main effect for the condition only (F(3, 338) = 10.65, p &lt; .017). Means indicated that low public self-conscious individuals were more likely to use avoidance coping strategy (M = 4.10) than high public self-conscious individuals (M = 3.93).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesis 4</td>
<td>Supported</td>
<td>ANOVA indicated a significant main effect for both the condition (F(3, 340) = 23.96, p &lt; .000) and private self-consciousness (F(3, 340) = 7.97, p &lt; .005). High public self-conscious individuals used active coping more (M = 5.00) than their low self-consciousness counterparts in embarrassing situations (M = 4.55). The interaction effect was also significant (F(3, 340) = 3.86, p &lt; .050) highlighting that individuals who are high in private self-consciousness reported more likelihood to use expressive coping when there was an embarrassing situation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hypothesis 5</td>
<td>Supported</td>
<td>ANOVA indicated significant main effects for both the condition (F(3, 340) = 16.40, p &lt; .000) and private self-consciousness (F(3, 340) = 24.95, p &lt; .000). The interaction effect was also significant meaning that individuals who are high in private self-consciousness reported more likelihood to use active coping when there was an embarrassing situation (F(3, 340) = 3.57, p &lt; .059).</td>
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REFERENCES


