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Don't get embarrassed, get creative! How creative thinking helps mitigate consumer embarrassment

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Abstract
Consumer embarrassment occurs frequently and can negatively impact both consumers and marketers. The current work demonstrates that encouraging consumers to engage in creative thinking—whether generating new ideas (e.g., crowdsourcing) or through exposure to creativity-related words—is one way for marketers to address the challenges posed by consumer embarrassment. Three studies demonstrate that prompting creative thinking makes consumers feel less embarrassed in subsequent consumer contexts. Specifically, the findings suggest that when consumers are prompted to think creatively, they assess behaviors that violate social norms as more socially acceptable, lowering feelings of embarrassment across a variety of consumption contexts. This research contributes to our understanding of the many benefits of engaging consumers in creative thinking and the growing stream of work exploring tactics companies can employ to help mitigate consumer embarrassment. This research also offers practical implications for both marketers and consumers.

Keywords Creative thinking · Consumer crowdsourcing · Consumer embarrassment · Acceptance of social norm violations

1 Introduction

More than half of consumers report not seeking medical care and certain products due to a fear of embarrassment (Harris, 2006), which can have detrimental effects on their health and well-being. For example, consumers will forgo condom purchases that could prevent STDs or unwanted pregnancies (Dahl et al., 1998), avoid

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health screenings or potentially life-saving doctor visits (McCambridge & Consedine, 2014), or even risk arrest by shoplifting sensitive products (Toth, 2007). Likewise, consumer embarrassment can negatively impact companies, as research finds that consumer embarrassment can lead to decreased customer satisfaction, negative word-of-mouth, damage to the brand image, and loss of business (Grace, 2009; Kilian et al., 2018). As such, both marketers and consumers can benefit from a better understanding of consumer embarrassment—a social emotion elicited by unintentional, undesired mishaps or social predicaments that lead to an aversive state of abashment or chagrin (Edelmann, 1985; Modigliani, 1968)—and how it can be mitigated.

While extensive research considers product-specific strategies that help mitigate embarrassment, these strategies often come at a high cost to marketers. For example, companies can redesign a product to use more anonymous packaging (e.g., personal lubricant sold in a nondescript box) or alter their distribution strategies (e.g., placing products within (vs. at the end) of a store aisle) (Dahl et al., 2001; Jones et al., 2018)—both of which can be quite costly.

Limited research examines strategies that can decrease embarrassment by changing consumers' thinking rather than making costly changes to the product or marketing strategy. Examples of such work include Jiang et al. (2018), who find that picturing oneself as an observer helps to reduce the tendency to avoid embarrassment, and Moore et al. (2006), who demonstrate that consumers who are purchasing condoms can utilize coping strategies to change their interpretation of the situation and better manage feelings of embarrassment. Adding to this line of work, we introduce creative thinking as a novel strategy that will help consumers to reframe the way they think about social norms (i.e., society's unwritten expectations for how individuals should behave; Désilets et al., 2020), thus mitigating feelings of embarrassment.

Creative thinking involves the ability to think in a way that prevents the copying of existing ideas and promotes seeing alternatives to typical associations (Sassenberg et al., 2017). Companies regularly involve consumers in tasks that require creative thinking by inviting them to actively participate in crowdsourcing new ideas or customizing products (Acar, 2018). When companies engage consumers in creative thinking, research finds that such engagement leads to predominantly positive outcomes, including increased brand loyalty (O'Brien et al., 2019), more enjoyment of repeated consumption activities (You et al., 2019), and increased charitable donations (Xu et al., 2021) (see Gino & Ariely, 2012 for one notable exception). In this work, we introduce a new positive benefit of engaging consumers in creative thinking. Specifically, we propose that creative thinking can help mitigate embarrassment by making actions typically considered social norm violations (e.g., dancing on a subway train) feel more acceptable. We posit that this effect occurs because creative thinking involves developing novel ideas and solutions that intentionally break away from the norm. As a result, we propose that when consumers engage in creative thinking prior to purchasing sensitive products, they will feel less embarrassed because engaging in creative thinking changes how they assess their own behaviors.

From a practical perspective, we expect there are two key ways that companies can apply our findings. First, we suggest companies use consumer crowdsourcing to purposely prompt creative thinking to mitigate consumer embarrassment. In fact, a

limited number of companies are already doing this. For example, Poo-Pourri, the anti-odor toilet spray company, recently ran a "Breathe Easy" crowdsourcing sweepstakes, where entrants were asked to post a creative video sharing how they "breathe easier" when using Poo-Pourri products. Second, marketers for embarrassing products can aim to capture consumers' attention when they are already in a creative thinking mindset. For example, companies that sell embarrassing products may consider advertising on a creativity-related podcast (e.g., *Creative Pep Talk* hosted by Andy J. Miller), in a creativity-related magazine (e.g., *Creative Review*), or on commercial breaks during a TV show that encourages creative thinking (e.g., *Making It* on NBC).

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Creative thinking

As defined earlier, creative thinking involves the ability to think in a way that prevents the copying of existing ideas and promotes seeing alternatives to typical associations (Sassenberg et al., 2017). Although most research on consumer creativity focuses on how to increase creative thinking and enable consumers to develop more creative products and ideas, recent work has called for more research that looks at the downstream consequences of engaging consumers in creative thinking (Mehta & Dahl, 2019). We add to this line of work by exploring how creative thinking impacts consumers' embarrassment in subsequent consumer contexts.

When consumers engage in creative thinking, they become more flexible in their thinking, such that they can better imagine how seemingly unrelated things can go together in a new way (Goncalo & Katz, 2020; Sassenberg et al., 2017). As a result, creative thinking helps consumers to develop ideas that break away from convention and norms (Burroughs et al., 2008). In other words, when a consumer is prompted to think creatively, they become better able to break away from familiar concepts and envision how things that may, at first, not seem to go together *can* make sense together in a novel way. In this research, we examine how this capacity for making unconventional connections influences how consumers assess their own behaviors in subsequent consumer contexts.

2.2 Acceptance of social norm violations

Consumers judge behaviors—both their own and the behaviors of others—based on social norms (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Social norms are the shared, unwritten expectations for how individuals should behave in society (Désilets et al., 2020; Stamkou et al., 2020), while social norm *violations* are behaviors that go against individual or societal expectations (Déprez et al., 2019). In a marketing context, consumers violate social norms regularly through behaviors like cutting store lines (Lin et al., 2013).

Consumers form opinions regarding how acceptable (or unacceptable) it is to violate different social norms based on their perceptions of what is "appropriate" conduct (Cialdini, 2007). Importantly, however, these perceptions are malleable (Luo et al., 2020; Sawada & Nomura, 2020). We propose that creative thinking increases an individual's acceptance of social norm violations because it helps them more naturally envision solutions that break from the norm (Burroughs et al., 2008), enabling them to consider different ways in which things that seem unacceptable can be acceptable. If social norm violations feel more acceptable, we expect consumers to feel less embarrassed when faced with a sensitive purchase or awkward social encounter.

2.3 Consumer embarrassment

Embarrassment is a social emotion elicited by unintentional, undesired mishaps or social predicaments that lead to an aversive state of abashment or chagrin (Edelmann, 1985; Modigliani, 1968). Feelings of embarrassment can arise for consumers throughout the purchase process (before, during, and after a purchase is made), while using a sensitive product, or during interactions with service providers or other customers that can lead to violations of privacy, awkward acts, forgetfulness, self-image concerns, or criticism (Dahl et al., 2001; Grace, 2009).

Embarrassment occurs when an individual believes an act they have committed violates some established social norm (i.e., doing something that goes against social conventions) and/or personal standard (i.e., doing something that is out of character) (Keltner & Buswell, 1997; Krishna et al., 2015). Embarrassment is thus an emotional reaction that is influenced by an individual's evaluation of whether or not their behavior feels acceptable. Research identifies a variety of factors that can affect how acceptable a violation feels, including whether others react to it happily or angrily (Heerdink et al., 2013) or how often the violation occurs (McGraw & Warren, 2010). We add to this line of work by introducing creative thinking as a novel factor that can increase how acceptable social norm–violating behaviors feel, reducing subsequent feelings of embarrassment when purchasing products or acting in a way that is perceived to violate societal expectations (e.g., needing climax control medication during intercourse).

We test these propositions across three studies. In study 1, we measure both creative thinking and embarrassment as individual difference variables (traits) and examine whether consumers with more creative personalities are less susceptible to embarrassment in everyday life. In study 2, we explore whether participants who engage in a creative thinking (vs. control) crowdsourcing task are less likely to be embarrassed when purchasing a sexual enhancement product. In study 3, we isolate participants' degree of acceptance toward social norm violations as the mechanism that explains the link between creative thinking and consumer embarrassment. We also rule out belongingness and open-mindedness as alternative explanations.

3 Study 1: the relationship between creative thinking (trait) and susceptibility to embarrassment (trait)

In study 1, and in line with prior research that examines the relationship between trait creative thinking and other measures (e.g., dishonesty, perspective taking; Gino & Ariely, 2012, Yang & Hung, 2021), we explore the relationship between the individual traits of creative thinking and susceptibility to embarrassment using established personality scales. We expect a negative relationship between these individual traits because individuals with a more (vs. less) creative personality are more likely to engage in creative thinking and should therefore be less likely to experience embarrassment in daily life.

3.1 Method

We pre-registered this experiment at "https://aspredicted.org/TS1_2W3" (#133123). Two hundred and forty-eight US-based "CloudResearch approved participants" completed the study for nominal payment (Litman et al., 2017). In line with our pre-registration document, we excluded thirty-nine participants (six participants who failed an attention check and thirty-three participants who were identified by Qualtrics' Expert Review Fraud Detection as fraudulent, duplicate, or bot responses). Thus, our final sample for all analyses is 209 ($M_{age} = 39.57$, 46% female). All participants were asked to complete a commonly used measure of creative personality: the 5-item Creative Cognitive Style (CCS) scale (e.g., "I have a lot of creative ideas," Kirton, 1976, $\alpha = .88$) and the Susceptibility to Embarrassment trait scale, a 25-item measure that assesses the extent to which individuals become easily embarrassed in daily life ("I am easily embarrassed"; Kelly & Jones, 1997, $\alpha = .98$) (see Appendix A for scale items). To control for potential order effects, we presented the two scales in a randomized order.

3.2 Results and discussion

As predicted, susceptibility to embarrassment was negatively and significantly correlated with creative cognitive style ($r = -.170$, $p = .014$).

Study 1 demonstrates the correlational relationship between creative thinking (trait) and susceptibility to embarrassment. We find that people who report a greater ability to think creatively report less susceptibility to experiencing embarrassment across a variety of contexts in daily life. In study 2, we build on study 1 by examining the causal relationship between creative thinking and consumer embarrassment.

4 Study 2: the effect of creative thinking on consumer embarrassment

4.1 Method

We pre-registered this experiment at "https://aspredicted.org/BEX_JCJ" (#67138). Two hundred and two US-based "CloudResearch approved participants" completed the study for a nominal payment. In line with our pre-registration document, we excluded sixteen participants (four participants who did not provide a real response to the manipulation task (e.g., NA, good) and twelve participants who were identified as location duplicates). Thus, our final sample for all analyses is 186 (M_{age} = 37.80, 56% female). We used a one-factor between-subjects design (thinking: creative vs. control) with random assignment. To begin, participants indicated their gender (male/female). In line with previous research, participants were then asked to complete a creative (control) product development task that involved coming up with potato chip flavors that were creative, novel, and unique (generic, conventional, and typical) (Goncalo & Katz, 2020; see Appendix B). Next, participants viewed a product based on their identified gender. Women (men) viewed an image of a vaginal dryness (climax control) cream and were asked to imagine shopping in the store for this product (see Appendix B for full task details).

Participants then reported the level of embarrassment they would expect to feel when purchasing the (vaginal dryness/climax control) product using three items (embarrassed, uncomfortable, awkward) on 7-point Likert scales (1 = Not at all to 7 = Very), and the scores of these three items were averaged to form an overall embarrassment index (Dahl et al., 2001; α = .96). Finally, participants provided their age, gender, and prior product usage.

4.2 Results and discussion

ANOVA results indicate that participants in the creative thinking condition expected to feel less embarrassed when purchasing the product than participants in the control condition ($M_{creative}$ = 4.43, SD = 1.96 vs. $M_{control}$ = 5.07, SD = 1.73; $F(1, 184)$ = 5.51, p = .020, d = .35). The effect holds when controlling for prior product usage (p = .032).

Study 2 provides initial evidence that creative thinking can reduce consumer embarrassment when purchasing an embarrassing product. This study induced creative thinking through engagement in an activity requiring the production of something novel. To test the robustness of the focal effect, we also conducted a supplemental study which demonstrates that the effect also holds when creative thinking is induced through creative priming (i.e., when creativity-related concepts are made salient) and using a different product category (see Appendix C for full study details).

The goal of study 3 is to provide support for our hypothesized process: creative thinking increases acceptance of social norm violations, which in turn decreases consumer embarrassment. This study helps demonstrate the generalizability of this

effect by using another established creative thinking manipulation and a different embarrassment task than study 2. We also rule out two potential alternative explanations: open-mindedness and belongingness. Prior literature suggests that open-mindedness and creativity are closely related (Jacoby, 1967) and that increased open-mindedness leads to a less judgmental attitude toward different groups, norms, and practices (Ward et al., 2009). As such, we expect that if creative thinking increases open-mindedness, individuals may judge themselves less harshly when faced with embarrassing circumstances. In addition, since creative thinking is thought to increase acceptance of ideas that are different (Sassenberg & Moskowitz, 2005), it may also increase feelings of acceptance more broadly, potentially increasing how accepted one feels by others (i.e., feelings of belongingness). If consumers feel that they are more accepted by others, they may be less likely to think that others will judge them, thus reducing how embarrassed they might feel across various consumption contexts.

5 Study 3: the effect of creative thinking on acceptance of social norm violations and consumer embarrassment

5.1 Method

Two hundred and thirty-seven US-based "CloudResearch approved participants" completed the study for nominal payment. In line with study 2, we excluded eleven participants using the same exclusion criteria (one participant who did not provide a real response to the manipulation task and ten participants who were identified as location duplicates). Thus, a final sample of 226 participants (M_{age} = 37.02, 51% female) was randomly assigned to a creative thinking or control condition.

Participants in the creative thinking condition engaged in an alternative uses task (AUT) (Guilford, 1967), while participants in the control condition were asked to complete a 10-item sentence-making task in which no word was related to a specific thinking style (Yang & Hung, 2021). Next, participants were asked to imagine how they would feel in response to three embarrassing scenarios (Eller et al., 2011; see Appendix D for full task details). Participants then reported the level of embarrassment they would expect to feel in each scenario using the same three items from study 2 (Dahl et al., 2001; $\alpha = .88$). In order to determine the overall effect on embarrassment, we created a composite variable by calculating the mean embarrassment level across all three scenarios ($\alpha = .88$).

Next, participants responded to scale items for belongingness (Malone et al., 2012) and open-mindedness (Minton, 2020; see Appendix D for full scales). Participants then responded to five scenario questions to assess our mediator: acceptance of social norm violations. Specifically, participants judged whether they felt five behaviors (e.g., flirting) were appropriate or not (1 = Not at all appropriate, 7 = Very appropriate) in three situations, which were pre-classified as strongly inappropriate

(e.g., at the Doctor's office), weakly inappropriate (e.g., at the Post Office), or appropriate (e.g., at a bar) (Mu et al., 2015; see Appendix D for full task details). In line with prior research, the appropriate condition served as our control condition, and we averaged the "weakly" and "strongly" inappropriate behaviors to form a composite variable ($\alpha = .83$) that served as our mediator (Mu et al., 2015).

5.2 Results and discussion

ANOVA results revealed that participants in the creative thinking (vs. control) condition expected to feel less embarrassment on average across all three embarrassing scenarios ($M_{creative} = 5.46$, SD = 1.08 vs. $M_{control} = 5.74$, SD = 0.99; $F(1, 224) = 4.11$, $p = .044$, $d = .27$) and that participants in the creative thinking (vs. control) condition indicated higher overall acceptance of social norm violations ($M_{creative} = 3.53$, SD = 1.07 vs. $M_{control} = 3.07$, SD = 0.95; $F(1, 224) = 11.81$, $p = .001$, $d = .45$; the effect held separately for both weakly and strongly inappropriate violations as well; see Appendix D). There were no differences in the appropriate condition ($F < 1$). In addition, ANOVA results reveal that there were no significant differences in belongingness ($M_{creative} = 5.22$, SD = 1.30 vs. $M_{control} = 5.03$, SD = 1.39; $F(1, 224) = 1.11$, $p = .293$) or open-mindedness ($M_{creative} = 5.62$, SD = 1.06 vs. $M_{control} = 5.53$, SD = 1.22; $F(1, 224) = .337$, $p = .562$).

Next, we employed the SPSS bootstrapping macro by Hayes (2017, model 4) with 5000 bootstrap samples. We simultaneously tested all three potential mediators (Buechel & Janiszewski, 2014). The path from creative thinking (0 = control, 1 = creative thinking) to consumer embarrassment was mediated by acceptance of social norm violations ($b = -.20$, SE = .14) as the 95% CI for this indirect effect excluded zero (−.190, −.022), while the 95% CI's for belongingness (−.030, .044) and open mindedness (−.027, .063) did not. The impact of creative thinking on consumer embarrassment became insignificant when the mediator acceptance of social norm violations was added ($b = -.20$, SE = .14, $p = .145$), see Fig. 1. When only acceptance of social norm violations (95% CI = −.197, −.026) was retained in a reduced model, the indirect effect remained significant. Creative thinking positively predicted acceptance of social norm violations and did not predict the other potential mediators (belongingness, $p = .293$; open-mindedness, $p = .562$).

Study 3 provides support for our hypothesized process: creative thinking increases acceptance of social norm violations, which in turn decreases consumer embarrassment. We also ruled out two alternative explanations and demonstrated the generalizability of this effect by using a different creative thinking manipulation and a different embarrassment task than study 2. Although we rule out two plausible alternative explanations and provide convincing evidence in support of our proposed process, we understand that this study does not test an exhaustive list of potential mediators. We suggest that future research may consider ruling out additional processes (e.g., whether creative thinking may decrease one's desire to belong or feelings of inhibition).

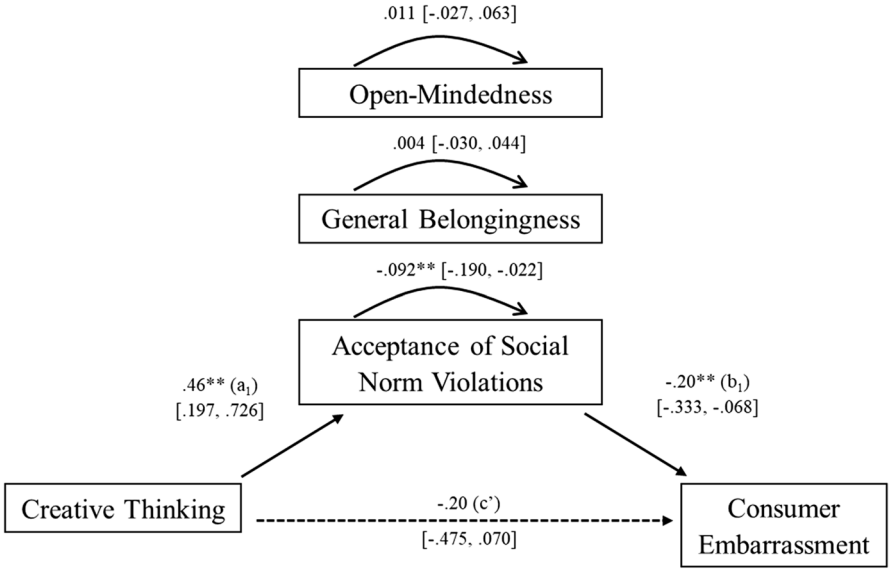

Fig. 1 Study 3 mediation model

6 General discussion

As companies increasingly engage consumers in creative thinking through various methods (including creative ad campaigns and creative tasks like crowdsourcing and customization), more research is needed to help companies understand each of the important (though often unintended) benefits of these tactics. In our work, we find that marketing tactics that prompt creative thinking can benefit both consumers and marketers by helping to reduce embarrassment in subsequent consumer contexts.

Our research offers several practical implications for marketers. First, companies can engage consumers in creative thinking tasks, including consumer crowdsourcing and customization, before they purchase sensitive products. Specifically, we suggest that participating consumers could be offered an incentive to purchase a product immediately after completing a crowdsourcing or customization task. In line with this suggestion, a handful of companies that sell embarrassing products have already begun to run crowdsourcing campaigns and offer customization options. For example, the condom brand, Durex, and the anti-odor toilet spray company, Poo-Pourri, each hosted crowdsourcing campaigns inviting consumers to develop and submit creative videos. Other examples include the condom brand, Callvin, which allows consumers to customize their own condom packaging designs, or the tampon brand Kotex, which has been using social media to crowdsource ideas for future projects. Second, companies that sell sensitive products can seek to capture their audience's attention in contexts that already encourage creative thinking. For example, these companies can pay for advertising spots during a creativity-related podcast like *The Unmistakable Creative Podcast*, place print ads in *Creative Boom* magazine, or run commercials during ad breaks for the TV show *LEGO Masters*. By targeting

consumers at times when they are thinking creatively, our results suggest that consumers should exhibit more favorable reactions to sensitive products and brands and be more willing to seek out such products (for example, searching for the product online after seeing an ad) because they will feel less embarrassed and instead focus on the benefits of these products.

In addition to the practical implications of our work, we also outline several fruitful areas of research we hope will stem from our findings. First, we suggest that future research continue to identify new strategies that can decrease embarrassment and other negative consumer emotions simply by changing consumers' thinking, rather than making costly changes to the product or marketing strategy (e.g., using more anonymous packaging and avoiding end-of-aisle displays; Dahl et al., 2001; Jones et al., 2018).

Second, we suggest that future research continue to explore the downstream consequences of creative thinking, a nascent area of work in the domain of creativity. While companies tend to involve consumers in tasks like crowdsourcing to find fresh ideas to bring to market, our research (alongside other recent works) highlights that there may be a host of additional benefits that companies can also use to their (as well as their customer's) advantage. For example, we find that creative thinking changes consumers' perception of social norm violations. Future research could examine the influence of creative thinking on other social cognitions (e.g., inclusivity). Future research may also consider testing the impact of actual performance on the creativity task (e.g., by coding the creativity of the individual responses), and whether lower levels of creative performance might attenuate the effect.

Finally, we propose multiple moderators that may play a role in determining how creative thinking will influence consumer embarrassment. For example, cultural differences may moderate the focal effect. That is, when social norms are violated, there is variance in how the violation is perceived at both the societal and individual levels (Désilets et al., 2020). At the societal level, Gelfand et al.'s (2011) cultural tightness and looseness distinction suggest that human groups with generally high (low) threat, such as China (the USA), evolve to be tight (loose), meaning they have stronger (weaker) norms and lower (higher) levels of acceptance for behavior that violates norms. Thus, cultural tightness and looseness may be an important moderator of our effect. Since our research was conducted in the USA, future studies could test the effect of creative thinking on embarrassment across other cultures. In addition, future research might also study contexts in which embarrassment occurs as a result of personal standard violations (vs. social norm violations), or whether a public (vs. private) purchase context moderates the effect.

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Declarations

Ethical approval This research was approved by the University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Consent to participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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