

EXCELLENCE IN SCHOLARSHIP WINNER 2020



Scott
Swanson

Professor
Department of
Marketing & Management

An Explanatory Study of Vicariously Embarrassing Classroom Incidents

Vicarious embarrassment is a negative emotion which an individual can experience when witnessing others act in an embarrassing way. This study introduces vicarious embarrassment to the education literature. The findings suggest that vicarious embarrassment is experienced by students and identifies three incident types, six cognitive/emotional reactions, and six action responses. Significant incident type by both cognitive/emotional and action responses, as well as behavioral outcomes are identified. Attributions are significantly associated with both incident type and behavioral outcomes. This paper also provides insights to instructors with suggestions on how they might actively manage situations that cause vicarious embarrassment in the classroom.

An Exploratory Study of Vicariously Embarrassing Classroom Incidents

Scott R. Swanson

Purpose of the Study: This study introduces vicarious embarrassment to the marketing education literature. It identifies the types of incidents that generate vicarious embarrassment in the classroom and the cognitive/emotional and action responses to experienced vicarious embarrassment. Attribution theory provides clarity to identified relationships of incident type on the cognitive/emotional, action, and consequences (i.e., word-of-mouth, class participation, future course enrollment) of vicarious embarrassment as experienced by marketing students in the college classroom setting.

Method/Design and Sample: The Critical Incident Technique is conducted to acquire data from 483 marketing students. Content analysis is utilized in conjunction with t-tests, ANOVA, and Chi-square tests to investigate four research questions.

Results: The findings suggest that vicarious embarrassment is experienced by marketing students and identifies three incident types, six cognitive/emotional reactions, and six action responses. Significant incident type by both cognitive/emotional and action responses, as well as behavioral outcomes are identified. Attributions are significantly associated with both incident type and behavioral outcomes.

Value to Marketing Educators: This study provides the first known empirically based typologies for classroom vicarious embarrassment incidents, associated cognitive/emotional reactions, and action responses from the marketing student perspective. This study provides insights to instructors that suggest how they might actively manage situations that cause vicarious embarrassment in the classroom.

Keywords: vicarious embarrassment; Critical Incident Technique (CIT); attribution theory of motivation; classroom encounters.

Scott R. Swanson, Professor of Marketing, Management and Marketing Department, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Eau Claire, WI 54701. Tel: 715-836-5127. Email: swanson@uwec.edu

Embarrassment for an individual ensues if a behavior is believed to be unacceptable by others or indicates the individual's failure to successfully perform or to act properly based on their social role (Grace, 2007; Miller, 2008). As such, embarrassment is felt based on personal failures and/or inappropriate behaviors (Grace, 2007, 2009). Crozier (1998) notes that "embarrassment and the fear of embarrassment are common and unwanted experiences in everyday life" (p. 715). Vicarious embarrassment is a negative emotion which an individual can experience when witnessing others act in an embarrassing way (Kilian et al., 2016; Miller-Fritzer et al., 2012, 2016; Uysal et al., 2014; Ziegler et al., 2015).

Embarrassment for others is common, and can be experienced across a variety of social situations (Kraich et al., 2011). To the best of our knowledge, the types of incidents that initiate vicarious embarrassment and subsequent reactions thereto have not been analyzed in the context of the college classroom. Facilitating the simultaneous production and consumption of educational services in the classroom involves an encounter where unexpected occurrences are common. Hoffman and Lee (2014, 2015) point out the importance of marketing educators enhancing their understanding of the forces that impact the classroom

experience. Greater understanding provides a basis to develop strategies for better managing the experience (Swanson et al., 2015). Investigating vicarious embarrassment in a classroom environment is important as it can provide new insights into how instructors and other students who are present can impact the learning experience, which, in turn, may impact a student's future actions.

Grace (2009) notes that "attribution theory in the context of emotion may well be a fruitful avenue for future research" (p. 8). One approach to better understanding student responses to vicarious embarrassment is to explore the perceptions of an incident's causes. Attributions are perceptions of the causes behind observed events. The attribution theory of motivation proposes that people form opinions regarding the causes of observed events and the subsequent effects, which then guide their succeeding responses, centered on three facets: control, locus, and stability (Weiner, 1985). Stability signifies whether a person perceives that situational circumstances will stay constant (stable) or will vary (unstable). Stable consequences are believed to repeat, while unstable consequences produce doubt regarding what is yet to come. The locus of causality dimension is the individual's assessment of who is responsible for a particular occurrence. Controllability is determined by