

Please Process the Signal, but Don't Praise It:
How Compliments on Identity Signals Result in Embarrassment

LISA A. CAVANAUGH

JOSEPH C. NUNES

YOUNG JEE HAN

Lisa Cavanaugh is Assistant Professor of Marketing at the Marshall School of Business, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0443, lisa.cavanaugh@marshall.usc.edu. Joseph C. Nunes is Professor of Marketing, Marshall School of Business, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0443, joseph.nunes@marshall.usc.edu. Young Jee Han is Assistant Professor of Marketing at Sungkyunkwan University, Seoul, South Korea, youngjee.han@gmail.com. Questions should be directed to either lisa.cavanaugh@marshall.usc.edu or jnunes@marshall.usc.edu.

Abstract

As social beings, consumers seek approval from others and therefore frequently make an effort to communicate aspects of their identity, actual or ideal, with the intention of impressing those around them. They often express these aspects (e.g., being smart, funny, athletic, stylish, or sexy) through the products they use and brands they exhibit.

Conspicuous branding helps consumers insure their signal will be noticed and validated by others. One of the most common forms of validation is a compliment. However, we know surprisingly little about how compliments, particularly compliments on identity signals, impact consumers. This paper explores how consumers respond to compliments related to an identity signal. Four studies show such compliments often result in embarrassment, an arguably unforeseen and generally unwelcome self-conscious emotion. We find the amount of embarrassment experienced depends on the conspicuousness of the signal as well as the extent to which the signal and one's beliefs about oneself are incongruent. The emotional response is explained further by public self-awareness. Consumers experience embarrassment regardless of whether the compliment comes from a friend or stranger and whether or not the identity signal itself is explicitly acknowledged.