Oh my gosh, I got to get out of this place! A qualitative study of vicarious embarrassment in service encounters

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Abstract
Vicarious embarrassment is a negative emotion, which is experienced by an individual when others misbehave. People can feel vicariously embarrassed when observing other people's pratfalls or awkward appearance. For instance, vicarious embarrassment is elicited when watching reality TV or in service encounters where many other customers are present. However, the relevance of vicarious embarrassment in physical service environments has not yet been thoroughly analyzed in the context of service encounters. The objective of the present study is to close this research gap and to introduce the phenomenon of vicarious embarrassment to service research. The findings of 25 in-depth interviews indicate that vicariously embarrassing incidents mostly occur in service encounters and that these incidents are triggered by the violation of social norms in both customer-to-customer and customer-to-employee interactions. The authors of the present paper identified closeness of relationship, the service context, and parties involved as important situational variables influencing vicarious embarrassment and further emotional, cognitive, and behavioral consequences for the observing person. From a managerial point of view, the relevance of vicarious embarrassment in physical service environments is caused by negative spillover effects of the service experience, which lead to decreasing customer satisfaction, negative word-of-mouth and purchase intentions, and a negative impact on the overall image of the service provider.

KEYWORDS
consumer behavior, service encounters, vicarious embarrassment

1 INTRODUCTION

The investigation of emotions in service encounters is important for marketing research and marketing practice. There is a growing body of research on the impact of consumers' experience of negative emotions in retail as well as service encounters in particular, leading to anger or guilt (e.g., Chebat & Slusarczyk, 2005; Liljander & Strandvik, 1997; Smith & Bolton, 2002; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2004). Overall, the results of such studies show that the experience of negative emotions in physical service environments will lead to consumer dissatisfaction with the service encounter, negatively influence consumer loyalty, increase negative word-of-mouth, and can also negatively influence the image of the service provider.

In this context, experiencing embarrassment has recently gained greater attention in marketing research (Grace, 2007, 2009; Wan, Bhatnagar, & Qiu, 2008). Embarrassment occurs “whenever an individual is felt to have projected incompatible definitions of himself before those present. These projections do […] occur […] at certain places in a social establishment where incompatible principles of social organization prevail” (Goffmann, 1956, p. 264). Embarrassment is a self-conscious, socially occurring emotion that stems from a person's fear of losing his or her social identity because of the negative evaluations of others (Miller, 1996). More specifically, embarrassment occurs if a behavior is considered inappropriate by others or signals the individual's failure to perform well or to act according to his or her social role (Miller, 1996). The findings of Dahl, Manchanda, and Argo (2001) and Lau-Gesk and Drolet (2008) have shown that the experience of embarrassment has an impact on consumer purchase behavior in purchase decisions for potentially embarrassing products (e.g., condoms). Moreover, if consumers anticipate feeling embarrassed by a purchase, they often balance their shopping basket by purchasing additional nonembarrassing products to weaken the negative consequences of embarrassment (Blair & Roese, 2013).

In contrast to embarrassment, vicarious embarrassment occurs when a person observes other people behaving awkwardly or just because of the appearance of others. More precisely, vicarious embarrassment might be experienced because an individual feels ashamed for someone else who did something inappropriate. Hence, it differs from personal embarrassment that an individual experiences because of his/her own misbehavior. In reality TV programs, for example,
television producers seemingly use persons who are behaving inappropriately and evoke vicarious embarrassment to attract viewers. Similarly, in face-to-face service encounters, most people have encountered situations of vicarious embarrassment in physical service environments, such as a customer cutting the line in a grocery store or arguing with a service employee. Compared to reality TV programs, the latter examples are not entertaining but rather evoke negative emotions and/or negative evaluations in the observing customer. For example, the findings of Porath, Macninnis, and Folkes (2010) have shown that if consumers are witnessing an incident of employee–employee incivility, this will lead to negative evaluations of the firm as a whole, as well as negative evaluations of the firm by other employees present and negative expectations of future encounters with the firm. However, to date researchers have not thoroughly investigated whether such incidents as well as incidents caused by customer–employee or customer-to-customer interactions elicit feelings of vicarious embarrassment in the observing consumer in physical service environments and if so to which degree negative consequences (e.g., negative evaluation of the service and the service provider) are caused by vicarious embarrassment.

In this context, it seems imperative to examine whether the consequences of embarrassment, as noted in the embarrassment literature, such as the intention to flee embarrassing situations (Robbins & Parlavecchio, 2006), also occur in situations in which a customer is simply observing someone else violating social norms. If the source of embarrassment is another person who fears no consequences for him/herself, such as losing face, will these negative consequences still occur?

From a managerial point of view, it is worth investigating vicarious embarrassment in physical service environments because service providers and other customers who are present can significantly influence the emotions that one experiences during service provision, which, in turn, have a substantial impact on customer satisfaction and service quality evaluations (e.g., Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Grace, 2007).

By addressing this issue, this qualitative study contributes to two streams of research in service marketing. First, prior research has mainly focused on the customer–employee relationship and has rarely investigated customer-to-customer interactions in physical service environments (e.g., Groth, Hennig-Thurau, & Walsh, 2009; Harris, Davies, & Baron, 1997; Martin, 1996). This research gap is addressed in this paper by considering the effects of vicarious embarrassment from the observing consumer’s perspective. Situations in which customers are vicariously embarrassed occur when other customers are present and violate social norms. This empirical investigation aims to clarify whether such incidents in which a customer generates vicarious embarrassment in service encounters has a negative impact on the overall service experience of the observing consumer.

Second, the present study contributes to research on dysfunctional consumer behavior in service marketing. Research on dysfunctional consumer behavior concentrates on the occurrence of negative customer-to-customer interactions and refers to consumer misbehavior or deviant, unethical, or aberrant consumer behavior (e.g., Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Mitchell & Ka Lun Chan, 2002; Moschis & Cox, 1989). Individuals showing this behavior in service encounters are called “problem customers” (Bitner et al., 1990) or “jaycustomers” (Lovelock, 1994). By transferring this understanding to the context of the present investigation, the authors focus on dysfunctional behavior of other individuals in service encounters, resulting in the experience of vicarious embarrassment and analyze its impact on the observing customer.

Existing studies have shown that witnessing other customers' violent behavior or dirty appearance during service consumption, others being upset or complaining about the service, loudness or rudeness, hearing dirty jokes, or seeing that someone is noticeably intoxicated in public can all significantly reduce customer satisfaction (e.g., Grove & Fisk, 1997; Zhang, Beatty, & Mothersbaugh, 2010). Nevertheless, these studies have not identified the potential negative effects of vicarious embarrassment among observing customers in a service context (e.g., reduced customer satisfaction).

Thus, the overall objectives of the present study are (1) to demonstrate the existence of vicarious embarrassment in physical service environments; (2) to explain the consequences of vicarious embarrassment, including the corresponding emotions for the observing customer; and (3) to identify the situational variables that enforce vicarious embarrassment in a service context. The present study explores vicarious embarrassment with a qualitative approach that aims to build a comprehensive understanding for this phenomenon in service research to define possible avenues for future research.

## 2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 | Interactions in service encounters and dysfunctional consumer behavior

Interactions before, during, or immediately following the fulfillment of a service are an important factor that can positively or negatively influence the perception of a service (Fisk et al., 2010; Huang, Lin, & Wen, 2010; Lovelock, 1994; Martin, 1996; Wu, 2008). For example, a nice chat with another customer in the queue can shorten the perceived waiting time and result in a more positive overall service experience (Harris et al., 1997), whereas a person cutting in line ahead of other waiting customers can lead to the opposite result (Huang, 2008).

To date, only few studies have investigated the impact of service interactions in physical service environments on the observing consumer, probably because of the low controllability attributed to such interactions from a managerial point of view and the difficulty of evaluating the possibly negative effects for service firms (Wu, 2008). Martin (1996) investigated the relationship between the inappropriate behavior of other customers in various situations and customer satisfaction and found a strong negative impact on the satisfaction of observing customers. Furthermore, the strength of the relationship depends on the specific service context (i.e., restaurant vs. bowling center) and the respondents’ characteristics, such as consumer demographics and religion. Similar results were reported by Wu (2008) for foreign travel service. Malcontent or crude incidents, such as witnessing others being upset, complaining about the service, or telling dirty jokes and being noticeably intoxicated in public, significantly decreased satisfaction.
with the service. Using the critical incident technique (CIT), Grove and Fisk (1997) surveyed customers of theme parks and identified two major categories of critical incidents, leading to customer dissatisfaction due to other consumers’ behavior: physical, verbal, or other protocol incidents as well as unfriendly or ambiance incidents in the service encounter. Zhang et al. (2010) found in their CIT study only two major negative and indirect categories that could evoke vicarious embarrassment: loudness and rudeness. However, all those studies focused only on the incidents and did not analyze emotional reactions or further consumer-related outcome variables, such as negative word-of-mouth intentions or decreasing loyalty of the observing consumer.

Another research stream concentrates exclusively on negative customer-to-customer interactions, often called dysfunctional consumer behavior (e.g., Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Mitchell & Ka Lun Chan, 2002). Most studies agree that dysfunctional customer behavior during service consumption can lead to customer dissatisfaction and reduces loyalty (e.g., Bitner et al., 1990; Grove & Fisk, 1997). Martin (1996) identifies individual characteristics like age and gender should have an effect on the perception and evaluation of dysfunctional consumer behavior. The findings of this study show that elder consumers are likely to be more dissatisfied with dysfunctional public consumer behavior of others. Furthermore, previous research has identified that the experience of vicarious embarrassment is more likely for women and that such experiences might also lead to other or stronger emotional, cognitive, and behavioral consequences for female consumers (e.g., Miller, 1995). However, to the best knowledge of the authors, there is no study in the fields of consumer-to-consumer interactions or dysfunctional consumer behavior in physical service environments, which has yet investigated the determinants and effects of vicarious embarrassment in service encounters.

2.2 | Embarrassment and vicarious embarrassment

According to Miller (1987, p. 1061), embarrassment can be defined as an “uncomfortable state of mortification, awkwardness, and chagrin that can result whenever undesired events publicly threaten one’s social identity.” Embarrassment is triggered by someone’s fear of losing his or her social identity through others’ evaluations and can lead to “changes in bodily functions, and the verbal and nonverbal actions of the consumer” (Grace, 2007, p. 281).

The social evaluation model argues that embarrassment is linked to the appropriateness of social behavior, that is, embarrassment occurs if a behavior is considered inappropriate by others (Manstead & Semin, 1981). In the context of vicarious embarrassment, this appropriateness has been linked to the compliance to societal norms (e.g., Krach et al., 2011). However, research has not yet analyzed the role service standards set by the service firm may have. The dramaturgic model offers a further explanation for embarrassment as it poses that an individual’s failure to perform well or to act according to his or her social role leads to embarrassment (Miller, 1996). For example, in a face-to-face purchase situation a customer may feel embarrassed by what the service provider might think of him or her buying an adult video, which consequently could affect the purchase behavior itself. However, the dramaturgic model has not yet been expanded to include a customer B who only observes the incident. Surprisingly, although it is known that service experiences are largely influenced by emotions (Grace, 2007), there is little research analyzing embarrassment in the context of consumer behavior or service marketing. Exceptions are Blair and Roese (2013), Brumbaugh and Rosa (2009), and Dahl et al. (2001) who examine embarrassment in purchase decisions. Moreover, Wan et al. (2008) investigate personalized services, and Grace (2007) studies different service experiences. Grace (2007) identifies a number of antecedents (e.g., the customer, the provider, others present) and stimuli (e.g., the environment, appropriateness, awkwardness, knowledge, etc.) for embarrassment. The findings of the mentioned studies show that embarrassment has long-term consequences for a service provider including both positive and negative behavioral intentions and word-of-mouth communications as well as on patronage behavior.

Vicarious embarrassment is a special form of embarrassment that describes the feeling of embarrassment occurring while observing other people behaving awkwardly and/or not according to social norms and standards (Krach et al., 2011). Research shows that vicarious embarrassment is evoked even without any form of personal relationship between the observer and the protagonist’s predicament and without any responsibility of the observer for the protagonist’s situation (Marcus, Wilson, & Miller, 1996; Miller, 1987). The experience of vicarious embarrassment could be highly relevant in service transactions (e.g., Parath et al., 2010), because such encounters often consist of interactions among a service provider and customers and other customers present.

Some research exists on empathic embarrassment (Miller, 1987), which is similarly under-researched as vicarious embarrassment (Stocks, Lishner, Waits, & Downum, 2011). Miller (1987) hypothesized that maintaining one’s face is of such high relevance that imagining oneself in place of someone who causes embarrassment possibly causes empathic embarrassment for the observer. However, those studies stem from social psychology and focus on personal characteristics, social functions, and consequences for the participants and are not related to the service context. For example, Marcus et al. (1994) linked personal embarrassability to the probability that others are actually embarrassed in a certain situation. Further, the perception of vicarious embarrassment depends on the feelings and cognitions evoked in observers and other determinants, which so far have largely been neglected in literature (Huang, 2008; Huang et al., 2010; Stocks et al., 2011). In this sense, research on vicarious embarrassment can also be delineated from studies focusing on disturbances created by other customers.

Recently, Krach et al. (2011) conducted an experimental study that clearly separated vicarious embarrassment from other forms of empathy. Empathy describes the coexistence and sharing of feelings, which is a fundamental prerequisite to identify with another person, and accordingly, to feel vicariously embarrassed (Shearn et al., 1999). The study demonstrated the existence of vicarious embarrassment and that it does not matter whether an incident occurs intentionally or unintentionally, or with the embarrassed customer’s awareness. When observing the embarrassing behavior of another person, the test persons experienced vicarious embarrassment. With regard to that, the findings of Krach et al. (2011) have shown that empathy is an important
prerequisite for the experience of vicarious embarrassment and connects affect and cognition to interpersonal processes. Further, Krach et al. (2011) found that the same neural correlates that exist for other vicarious feelings (e.g., feeling others’ pain) are also activated when experiencing vicarious embarrassment.

3 | METHOD AND ANALYSIS

3.1 | Procedure

After conducting the literature review as well as from their daily observations, the authors of the present paper already had an idea about the relevance of vicarious embarrassment and what may cause such incidents in consumer-to-consumer interactions. In the next step, in-depth interviews were conducted to systemically analyze the phenomenon. Because the primary aim of this study is to analyze vicarious embarrassment in the service sector, which has to the best knowledge of the authors not yet been done before, the use of a qualitative approach seems appropriate.

The authors used a convenience sample of 9 male and 16 female interviewees with ages ranging from 17 to 81. Convenience sampling is an appropriate sampling method with regard to the objectives of the present study because the sampling goal was not to achieve representativeness, that is, to make generalizations about the total population, but rather to explore vicarious embarrassment in physical service environments with a rather broad demographic and attitudinal spread. The authors of the present study stopped after 25 interviews because after approximately 20 interviews no new insights were gained, which is not uncommon in qualitative research. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) call this the principle of data saturation, which states that the need for additional interviews decreases if additional interviews would only reveal what the researcher already knows from previous interviews. The respondents came from urban and rural districts of a larger German university city and were asked by the authors if they were willing to take part in the study. If so, the respondents were interviewed in their own homes, which allowed the interviews to take place in a relaxed atmosphere. Open, one-on-one, in-depth interviews were conducted to explore incidents of vicarious embarrassment. The interviewees also included employed and unemployed people. The latter included high school and college students, as well as housewives. The group of employed people included both people with academic backgrounds and people with nonacademic backgrounds. Table 1 provides an overview of the interviewees’ backgrounds indicating a demographically diverse sample in terms of gender, age, and profession.

At the beginning of the interviews, the feeling of vicarious embarrassment was illustrated for the respondents using the example of two women at the doctor’s office. The respondents were told that one of the women needed a prescription and that when the employee was not able to help this woman immediately, she became upset and started to argue with the employee, which made the other woman present feel vicariously embarrassed for her. Providing this example to each of the respondents ensured a consistent understanding of the concept of vicarious embarrassment. Further, the example helped the participants to spur associations and own experiences and to explore their experiences with incidents of vicarious embarrassment in a profound way. This made the participants feel comfortable from the start because they knew exactly what the interview was about and thereby helped to improve the quality of the data (Myers & Newman, 2007).

The second part of the interview concentrated on the actual incidents reported by the interview partners. The respondents were asked if they had ever been in or had ever observed a service situation in which they had felt vicariously embarrassed for another person in physical service environments. They verbally recounted as many incidents as they were willing to and provided as much detail as they liked. The service context is highly relevant for this study because it often involves social interactions of employees and customers, but also of customers and other customers. Each respondent was encouraged to tell his or her particular story in detail and to provide information about his or her feelings and reactions. Thus, the respondents were not pushed in a particular direction due to the researcher’s preconceptions (Edvardsson, 1992). By asking interviewees to recount incidents that they were actually part of, the data collection relies on the participants’ memories and description of their lived experiences. Thereby, the risk of abstractions, generalizations, and social desirability was reduced (Schultze & Avital, 2011). The lengths of the interviews varied from 20 to 52 minutes, as some respondents had more to tell than others. The total data amounted to more than 43 single-spaced pages of 12-point text representing approximately 24,600 words. To ensure that the findings could be presented to an international audience, these transcripts were translated into English. During translation, the authors aimed to achieve an equivalence of meaning rather than a direct translation, thus the excerpts in the following sections do not necessarily convey the colloquial language used by the respondents. Moreover, the excerpts used in the following section were translated back into German by a senior German researcher who works in the United Kingdom for years to ensure equivalence of meaning (e.g., Sekaran, 1983).

3.2 | Coding

The aim of the analysis was to detect variations and similarities in how interviewees experienced vicarious embarrassment. The analysis followed the steps outlined by Saldaña (2009) using two coding cycles. In the first cycle holistic coding was used which is a very common coding technique with almost no preliminary restrictions. Holistic coding aims at capturing the essence of text excerpts. Consequently, descriptive codes were used that summarize the data material to form subcategories. For example, most interviewees reacted in some way or another on the incidents and reported their reaction. Descriptive codes were assigned to those passages and the subcategories calming and ignoring emerged among others. During this coding phase, the transcribed interviews were read and reread to gain an overall understanding of the informants’ experiences with vicarious embarrassment. The results of the first coding phase built the foundation for the second where pattern coding was used to identify the overall essence emerging from the data. Thereby, the data corpus was restructured and reorganized and ultimately synthesized resulting in a smaller list
of main categories. For example, in this phase the categories calming and ignoring were assigned to the category behavioral reactions and this category to the main category consequences of the experience of vicarious embarrassment. Thereby, major themes were developed from the data that allow inferring to theoretical constructs and processes like cause and effect. Each category then includes phrases with similar meanings or connotations (Weber, 1990). The emergent scheme consisted of mutually exclusive, reliable categories. Because the authors worked closely together during the coding phases with conversations on a daily basis, the calculation of an inter-judge reliability was dispensed with to avoid misleading reliability values (e.g., Perreault & Leigh, 1989). The quotations provided in the following sections are the most representative of the respective category or theme.

4 | RESULTS

Through the inductive approach of the qualitative study a number of themes emerged. First, the violation of service standards or social norms was identified as the major antecedent of vicarious embarrassment. Second, the authors determined situational variables that possibly reinforce and hence, potentially moderate the relationship between the violation of social norms and/or the violation of service standards and vicarious embarrassment. Third, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions of customers observing the incidents were analyzed as outcomes of the experience of vicarious embarrassment in detail. A summary of the major themes and possible relationships is provided in Figure 1.

4.1 | Violation of social norms and service standards

The incidents of vicarious embarrassment described by the respondents are always initiated by a certain cue that has provoked their attention. Table 2 summarizes the findings regarding the violation of social norms and the violation of service standards that will lead to the experience of vicarious embarrassment of the observing customer and which were influenced by different situational variables (e.g., relationship closeness, service context). In the following, examples derived from the interviews are provided and the impact of the constructs on the experience of vicarious embarrassment is discussed.

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**TABLE 1** Demographics of the interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Number</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Profession</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Research assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Dental assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Machine operator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Architect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#7</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Parish worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#8</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#9</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Daycare provider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#10</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#11</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Pharmacy assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#12</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Commercial clerk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#13</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Pharmacist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#14</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#15</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>Teacher (retired)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#16</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Public officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#17</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Clerk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#18</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Assistant tax consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#19</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Nursery nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#20</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>High school student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#21</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Law officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#22</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>College student</td>
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<tr>
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<td>m</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Instructor of collegiate sports</td>
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<td>m</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#25</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Descriptives 36% m 74% f  M = 39.88 (15.58) MD = 42  24% Unemployed 76% Employed

m, male; f, female.
especially, it will be shown how the violation of social norms as well as the violation of service standards is influenced by several situational variables.

In the following incident, an example for the violation of social norms, a customer lost his temper in public:

I think it was the first or second day after the opening of an ice cream parlor. Everybody was happy; finally, [there was] ice cream. There was a giant line and it was rather unclear where to line up. There were a few lines but everybody stayed lined up and well-behaved. However, then one customer behind us really started shouting, saying “Faster—otherwise, I will go to the front [of the line], and he got terribly upset…” (Interview #1)

Other incidents related to the violation of social norms were triggered by customer misbehavior such as (obvious) attempts to cheat the service provider, public drunkenness, or cutting in line, all of which harm the service atmosphere and can significantly impact the service evaluation of other customers present.

The cue that attracts the other customers’ attention in all incidents contains a violation of norms of daily manners or of service standards set by the service providers. The respective form of norm violation describes the essence of each incident. Normative standards are defined by society, and for all people whose sense of morality and fairness is comparable, the violation of such standards results in negative feelings and reactions such as embarrassment, shame, guilt, and outrage (Krach et al., 2011). In the above-cited excerpt a customer violated daily manners by behaving very impolitely toward both the service personnel and other customers. Politeness in daily business can be perceived as a norm and its violation can elicit the experience of vicarious embarrassment.

A lack of politeness was a major reason for incidents in which customers offended other people personally, which subsequently triggered feelings of vicarious embarrassment in their fellow customers. The lack of politeness went as far as insulting other customers present or even threatening service employees. It could be argued that a lack of politeness, especially toward other customers, will not compromise the actual service provision. One might suggest that politeness is only a secondary norm in service provision, rather than a core norm. However, the following excerpt shows how a service experience can be spoilt by other customers’ impoliteness.

I have a colleague. He is quite loud and talks a lot and he does not give others the chance to speak. Even when you have lunch with him, he does the talking, cuts the others short and talks on full blast so that the other tables get the conversation. (Interview #6)

Accordingly, existing literature (e.g., Harris & Reynolds, 2003) has found that impoliteness by other customers can compromise the service experience or at least lead to “spoilled consumption.” Future
research should investigate which norm violations elicit greater feelings of vicarious embarrassment and under which circumstances they are attributed to the service firm.

An example for violation of service standards, in this case norms for hygiene in a service setting, was reported by a respondent who is a regular customer in a gym and observed another customer who went to the gym in dirty clothes and without having bathed (interview #23). In another example a customer in a clothing store took many more garments into a fitting room than allowed (interview #20). Again, in both of these examples the service experience is spoilt for the observing customer, this time because service standards set by the supplier are disregarded. Service standards are obviously rooted in societal norms but are so important to service providers that they reiterate them.

Overall, incidents related to the appearance of other customers were not often mentioned in the interviews, possibly because it did not seem socially appropriate to discuss them. It is likely that most respondents in an interview situation are unwilling to report on incidents that, for instance, involve homeless people because they fear that they may be judged as being contemptuous of homeless people in general.

Overall, the findings of this section supported by prior research, for example, Martin (1996), who examined the relationship between the inappropriate behavior of other customers in various situations and customer satisfaction. He identified seven behavioral factors of which violent behavior and grungy appearance (e.g., dirty clothing or an unpleasant smell) led to the most negative evaluations by the respondents. However, in the interviews in this study the respondents were clearly focused on the norm transgression committed by their fellow customers.

This is something you simply don’t do in public. (Interview #24)

and on the violation of service standards that were considered as unfair and not on behavior alone.

### 4.2 Situational variables as potential moderators

Particularly from a service company’s point of view, it is essential to know which situational variables influence vicarious embarrassment in order to be able to prevent incidents and possible negative consequences for both customers and the company. Table 3 summarizes the findings regarding the situational variables, which might act as moderators between the relationship of the violation of social norms as well as the violation of service standards and vicarious embarrassment.

#### 4.2.1 Relationship closeness

The following excerpt reports an incident where a respondent unintentionally causes her cousin to flirt with an employee to obtain a poster for her.

… My cousin always tries to get her way by flirting. One day, we were at the movies. We watched a movie and I desperately wanted to take home a poster of the film. So she said, “No problem!” and went to one of the movie theater employees and started flirting with him right away. And even her sister started to be embarrassed for her and said, “Mmh, wonder what her boyfriend would think of that.” (Interview #20)

Obviously in this case the closeness of relationship had a major influence on the vicarious embarrassment felt by the interviewee. Generally, closeness of relationships is a measure of how customer B is linked to the person behaving in an embarrassing manner (customer A). In the interviews, incidents with family members or friends, with acquaintances (like colleagues), but also with strangers were reported. Thus, at first glance, it seems that vicarious embarrassment generally occurs regardless of the degree of closeness of one’s relationship with the other customer, which contradicts the results of Miller (1987) and Stocks et al. (2011) regarding empathic embarrassment. The latter identified a similar construct called “liking the target” that increased empathic embarrassment. However, the results are similar to those of Tangney, Miller, Flicker, and Barlow (1996), who found that embarrassment was more common for strangers but that stronger feelings such as guilt and shame were more commonly inspired by one’s loved ones. Hence, it is assumed that vicarious embarrassment is felt independently of the nature of the underlying relationship between the customers, but that the intensity of the emotion and the corresponding reactions may differ. The respondents felt more vicariously embarrassed if they thought that the incident was somehow attributable to them. One interviewee put it in the following way:

… If the person is a total stranger, then I just observe and think: Oh my God! Turn around and go. Perhaps I think about the situation. But if it is a friend or someone I know, then I will say something or even try to resolve the situation somehow because it is somehow linked to me … (Interview #20)

This comment shows that although vicarious embarrassment is triggered by another person and thus the observer strictly speaking is not responsible for the incident, relationship closeness between the person causing the embarrassment and the observer influences the attribution of the incident on the observer’s part and hence, should moderate the relationship between the violation of social norms and vicarious embarrassment. That is, if the relationship is close, the observer feels in a way responsible for the incident and thus attributes what happens internally as opposed to externally (Kelley & Michela, 1980). External attribution may arise when one observes complete strangers behaving awkwardly. This connection between attribution and vicarious embarrassment is even stronger for children and their mother as the following section shows.

Mothers in particular felt accountable for their children, who made them feel vicariously embarrassed more easily than other family members would have because children may not yet know social norms and standards or should have learned them from their parents. One interviewee explained the influence of the closeness of relationship in the following way:

… Let’s say I am with a friend and she misbehaves in my opinion and it reflects poorly on me; then, I would refer to that as vicarious embarrassment … (Interview #2)
### Table 3: Overview of situational variables influencing vicarious embarrassment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situational Variables</th>
<th>Example(s)</th>
<th>Other Sources (Focus of Study)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship closeness</td>
<td>- High closeness: parents or cousin&lt;br&gt;- Low closeness: stranger</td>
<td>Miller (1987) and Stocks et al. (2011) (empathic embarrassment); Tangney et al. (1996) (embarrassment); Goffman (1956) and Eller et al. (2011) (embarrassment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service context</td>
<td>Services with high/low number of customer-to-customer interactions:&lt;br&gt;- High number: for example, shopping for clothes in a crowded retail shop&lt;br&gt;- Low number: for example, stranger caught for fare evasion in the bus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconvenience of service setting</td>
<td>- “Everything was overcrowded…”&lt;br&gt;- “… There was a long queue…”</td>
<td>Breffni and Mattila (2009) (crowding)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual characteristics</td>
<td>- Age&lt;br&gt;- Gender</td>
<td>Fisk et al. (2010) (dysfunctional customer behavior); Martin (1996) (consumer-to-consumer relationships)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of employees</td>
<td>Yes or no</td>
<td>Huang et al. (2010) (customer misbehavior)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This result supports earlier research by implying that vicarious embarrassment most likely depends on in-group or out-group effects (Eller, Koschate, & Gilson, 2011; Goffman, 1956): it plays a role if the participants feel connected with the aberrant customer in general and identify with the person through empathy.

### 4.2.2 Service context

The different service sectors seem to play a role for the occurrence of vicarious embarrassment, but overall, the incidents took place in notably diverse contexts. In public services and retailing 22 incidents each were found, considerably less in gastronomy (10), and other service sectors (7). Closer examination of the different service sectors suggests that vicarious embarrassment is moderated by the service context, that is especially relevant when interactions occur face-to-face and when the presence of other customers, and thus customer-to-customer interactions, are more frequent. In service environments with usually a high number of contacts with other customers, the experience of vicarious embarrassment seems to occur more often as well as seems to be stronger compared to experiences in service environments with a lower number of customer-to-customer interactions, e.g. low number:

*When someone is caught for fare evasion in the bus I am not too agitated. I only think to myself, how embarrassing. (Interview #18)*

or high number:

*When I go shopping for clothes with a friend it always ends in embarrassment because she is always taking like 50 items to the wardrobe and occupies all the sales persons in the store when something does not fit, she wants to try on different colors etc. (Interview #20)*

This finding could be explained by situational involvement, which is characterized by temporary feelings of intensified involvement that accompany a distinct incident and determine the personal relevance of a situation (Houston & Rothschild, 1978). Thus, people who are involved in a situation react more intensely.

### 4.2.3 Inconvenience of the service setting

The inconvenience of the various situations describes an unpleasant atmosphere in which service interactions occur. Inconvenience was described in statements such as

*... Everything was overcrowded …* (Interview #10)

or

*... There was a long queue …* (Interview #19)

The underlying data indicate a positive relationship between hectic service encounters in which a large number of people are present and vicariously embarrassing incidents. Crowdedness can increase perceived waiting time and annoyance, which, in turn, can decrease tolerance for others’ misbehavior. As a result, the likelihood of vicarious embarrassment will increase. Prior research has found that perceived crowdedness and customer density influence emotional and behavioral responses to services (e.g., Breffni & Mattila, 2009). However, no study has posited a moderating impact of the inconvenience of the service setting on the relationship between the violation of social norms and/or the violation of service standards and vicarious embarrassment in customer-to-customer interactions yet.
4.2.4 | Individual characteristics

The individual characteristics of age and gender are supposed to have an influence on the perception of vicarious embarrassment according to prior research on dysfunctional customer behavior (Fisk et al., 2010; Martin, 1996). However, the data did not indicate clear differences in perceived vicarious embarrassment by age or gender. An explanation is that most of the incidents in question were triggered by the violation of standards and norms, which are defined by society and thus its effects on vicarious embarrassment are not moderated by age or gender, but rather consistent across age ranges and backgrounds.

4.2.5 | Parties involved in the conflict

Different parties were involved in the incidents, which can have an effect on the attribution of the conflict. The following incident, for example, only contained two customers and one service employee in a time when a university cafeteria is rarely occupied:

... Yesterday, I was in the university cafeteria, and there was not a lot going on because we are on vacation. A girl arrived and took some coffee and a sandwich. You could see that behind the glass cabinet, there was a cafeteria employee preparing sandwiches, and the two of them had already made eye contact. It was obvious that the woman was going to come to the counter immediately. However, the girl went straight to the counter and called, "Hello, hello!" The cafeteria employee nervously approached and apologized and even cleaned her hands on her T-shirt. I just thought that this was so outrageous. I then watched to see how the story ended because I thought that maybe the girl was in a hurry. But no, she calmly sat down and was having her breakfast ... (Interview #22)

This example shows that if a service employee is present during an incident that causes vicarious embarrassment, there is a chance that the employee will be able to intervene and resolve the issue. Furthermore, it can be argued that employees are obligated to react in such situations. As Huang et al. (2010) have shown, customers will evaluate a service more negatively when they feel that other customers’ misbehavior could have been controlled by the firm. However, if there are only customers present, there is little that the service firm can directly do to resolve the conflict. Thus, it could be argued that the violation of norms and service standards is moderated by parties involved: incidents in which employees are present are perceived differently from those in which only customers are involved and the attribution of responsibility to the service firm is of higher relevance in the former case.

Overall, in contrast to the expectations of the authors and inconsistent with prior research on dysfunctional customer behavior, age and gender could not be identified as variables that have an effect on vicarious embarrassment in the present study. Relationship closeness, the service context, the inconvenience of the service setting, and the parties involved, however, seem to play a role as moderators that determine the intensity of vicarious embarrassment. However, future research must further examine the strength of the impact of each situational variable on the relationship of the violation of norms and service standards and the experience of vicarious embarrassment.

4.3 | Outcomes of vicarious embarrassment

The outcomes of vicarious embarrassment can be divided up into different categories. For the observer of the incidents, emotional and cognitive reactions may arise that can also lead to behavioral reactions. Those reactions can either be directed toward the person behaving awkwardly or toward the service firm. In the latter case those reactions can also have business consequences which is why from a managerial point of view the analysis of the consequences arising from vicarious embarrassment is crucial. Table 4 provides an overview as well as examples for the outcome of the experience of vicarious embarrassment in service encounters.

4.3.1 | Emotional and cognitive reactions of the customer

Emotional and cognitive reactions are feelings or thoughts that occur during or immediately after incidents of vicarious embarrassment. These feelings include embarrassment, vicarious shame, the intention to flee, irritation, agitation, annoyance, and discomfort. Some of the respondents felt bad, had compassion for those who were being treated unfairly, felt the need to help to resolve the issue, or judged their fellow customers or the situation as ridiculous. These feelings can be seen as strong indicators of vicarious embarrassment. Interview excerpts mostly express a lack of understanding and ranged from

Oh my god, how embarrassing (Interview #8) and Please stop it, idiot (Interview #1)

to

No, I don’t know him (Interview #5)

and

You can’t treat people like that. (Interview #13)

In the interviews that reported on past incidents, cognitive and emotional reactions were hard to separate which is exemplified in the following excerpt where the first sentence recounts emotions experienced and the second a cognition:

I felt ashamed. I thought: How can a grown up behave childish like that? (Interview #12)

Thus, the model proposes an interaction between emotions and cognitions that is backed by prior literature. Authors from different research streams have investigated the interplay between cognitions and emotions as well as their effects on behavior (e.g., Andreu, Bigné, Chumpitaz, & Swaen, 2006; Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999). Nonetheless, the relationship between emotions and cognitions is not entirely clarified. For example, Shiv and Fedorikhin (1999) conclude that there is no consensus in research about whether emotions are consequences or antecedents of cognitions. However, as the following examples show, emotions seem to dominate the processing of the incident.

Closer examination of the interview data clarified that in incidents with strangers and (not so close) acquaintances feelings of discomfort
TABLE 4 Overview of outcomes of vicarious embarrassment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table Entry</th>
<th>Example(s)</th>
<th>Other Sources (Focus of Study)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Emotional and cognitive reactions | - “I felt ashamed. I thought: How can a grown up behave childish like that?”  
- “Oh my god, how embarrassing. You can’t treat people like that.” | -                                                                       |
| Behavioral reactions |                                                                 |                                                                   |
| Acting | - “… I made him leave the drugstore …”  
- “… I told him to be quiet …” | -                                                                       |
| Calming | - “Don’t take them seriously”  
- “Sometimes people can give you a hard time” | -                                                                       |
| Ignoring | - “To say to strangers that they have no manners is difficult” | -                                                                       |
| Apologizing | - “Sorry, for my old man …”  
- “I excused my son and told the clerk that he only knows rather large men like my husband” | -                                                                       |
| Business consequences |                                                                 |                                                                   |
| Negative word-of-mouth intentions | - “When I see something like that I tell my friends and family about it” | Huang (2009) (other-customer failure)                               |
| Image loss | - “This was image-damaging for them”:  
- “… When I go into that shop again, I will think about this situation …” | -                                                                       |
| Switch service providers | - “… I avoid shops that are visited by crummy people […]” | Huang (2009) (other-customer failure)                               |
| More job stress for employees | - “… and the responsible employee gets more work …”  
- “… You could notice that she [the employee] was annoyed …” | Ben-Zur and Yagil (2005) (customer aggression); Harris and Reynolds (2003) (dysfunctional customer behavior) |
| Positive consequences | - Employee friendliness  
- Chance for employees to learn | Fisk et al. (2010) (dysfunctional customer behavior)                 |

were most prevalent. When the individuals in question were family members and friends the feeling of vicarious embarrassment tended to lead to stronger, closely related feelings, such as vicarious shame or guilt. There was also a higher likelihood that the person in question would intervene. As mentioned before, an increase in relationship closeness seems to enhance internal attribution of the incident on the part of the observer. The desire to resolve the issue seems to result from a feeling of greater responsibility for the person’s embarrassing behavior, as exemplified in the following statement:

… I feel embarrassed because I feel as though I didn’t bring them [my children] up properly. At the grocery store in front of the registers, if the children see something they want to have, and then they don’t stop … then I feel embarrassed … (Interview #13)

4.3.2 Behavioral reactions

The behavioral reactions with which observing customers (mostly) intervene in service encounters comprise acting, calming, apologizing, and ignoring. Acting describes intervening in the situation by commenting on the other person’s violation of social norms. This strategy is represented in excerpts such as

… I made him leave the drugstore … (Interview #13)

and

… I told him to be quiet … (Interview #15)

The participants also reacted with calming tactics by saying

Don’t take them seriously (Interview #24)

or empathized with the service provider by saying:

Sometimes people can give you a hard time (Interview #6)

Ignoring tended to increase as the closeness of the relationship between the offending party and the observer decreased. The explanation for such behavior can be found in examples such as the following:

… To say to strangers that they have no manners is difficult, […] but if [the person] is an acquaintance or a friend, you can say something. With strangers it is more difficult because you can easily make a mistake in how you react, and then you are the embarrassing person … (Interview #2)

Thus, observers seem to ignore inappropriate behavior of strangers because they are uncertain of how the fellow customer might react. Apologizing for the customer causing the incident interestingly only occurred for persons with whom the observing customer has a close relationship like father (interview # 24) or son (interview #20) as shown in Table 4.
4.3.3 | Business consequences

As discussed above, the incidents analyzed were followed by diverse emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions by the observing customers, which can have serious negative business consequences. Some respondents directly mentioned having negative word-of-mouth intentions after such incidents. The following excerpt is representative for that:

When I see something like that I tell my friends and family about it (Interview #6)

Other negative consequences arise simply from negative associations with the firm, resulting in damage to the firm’s image:

… When I go into that shop again, I will think about this situation … (Interview #1)

or

This was image-damaging for them (Interview #20)

Furthermore, customers may be willing to leave the shop or switch providers:

… I avoid shops that are visited by crummy people […] because I will feel uncomfortable … (Interview #20)

Huang (2009) also found effects of other-customer failure on negative word-of-mouth intentions or on the intention to switch providers but was not focusing on vicarious embarrassment.

In addition, time-intensive, difficult customers may produce more work for service personnel which can result in greater job stress (e.g., Ben-Zur & Yagil, 2005; Harris & Reynolds, 2003). Consequences of this type were reported in the following excerpts:

… and the responsible employee gets more work … (Interview #8)

… You could notice that she [the employee] was annoyed … (Interview #14)

However, somehow surprising the interviewees also mentioned positive consequences for them or the service employee. In some cases, observers found service employees to be unusually friendly after an incident, others themselves behaved in an unusually friendly manner, and some customers characterized the situation as a chance for the service employee to learn how to work with difficult customers. Thus, it can be concluded that vicarious embarrassment also can have positive effects in particular if customers feel pity for or empathize with the service provider because of other customers’ rude behavior. Positive consequences of dysfunctional customer behavior have also been proposed in a literature review by Fisk et al. (2010), but have to the knowledge of the authors not been addressed in an empirical study yet.

5 | DISCUSSION

5.1 | Conclusions

Each of the incidents presented contains a particular story and a personal perspective on vicarious embarrassment in physical service environments told by an observer. Correspondingly, the authors of this paper identified explicit differences in the way the interviewees perceived the respective incidents. The results of the empirical analysis reveal that vicarious embarrassment—in which person A feels embarrassed for person B—can occur in situations in which a customer interacts with another customer, as well as in situations in which a customer interacts with a service employee. Overall, by identifying various vicariously embarrassing incidents, the authors were able to support the results of prior research on customers’ dysfunctional behavior (e.g., Fisk et al., 2010; Huang et al., 2010), which identified other customers as particularly relevant in service interactions. Vicariously embarrassing incidents, for example, incidents in which a customer cuts in line or argues with a service employee, occur during different types of service transactions and can have substantial consequences on the observing customers’ perception and the evaluation of the service experience. However, from a managerial perspective there are similarities in the ways that vicarious embarrassment is triggered, under which situational circumstances it arises and to which effects. The results suggest that vicarious embarrassment is a rather common in service situations. The findings of the present study have shown that such incidents can have negative effects on customer loyalty to the service firm, for example, due to negative word-of-mouth. Therefore, it is crucial that service firms understand and properly address vicariously embarrassing situations.

Vicarious embarrassment is triggered by the violation of social norms and service standards. Such incidents will lead to different emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions of the observing customers and can also have business consequences. The responses and consequences that the authors have identified in this study are in line with research on the experience of embarrassment in the field of psychology. For example, in their study on the effects of the experience of first-person embarrassment, Turner and Husman (2008) identified emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions as important dimensions. Even while this study finds the same dimension of reactions, there slightly differences concerning the reactions within the single dimensions as well as that different situational variables are relevant for the experience of vicarious embarrassment. For example, Turner and Husman (2008) had shown that the experience of embarrassment might lead to emotional reactions like being scared or feeling disheartened. The results are also related to such feelings of discomfort, but the main difference is that these emotional reactions were triggered by the misbehavior of other individuals in a service context. Moreover, different reactions with regard to the cognitive and behavioral dimensions were obtained. Turner and Husman (2008) have shown that the experience of first-person embarrassment will foster, for example, self-assessment and self-regulating behavior in a way that an individual will be able to attain a specific future goal that is important for them (e.g., passing an examination). Participants of the study did not report such
cognitive and behavioral consequences. Their reactions are more strongly related to, for example, ignore the vicariously embarrassing incident or to calm the situation in general. In this context, their reactions were triggered by the immediate experience of the dysfunctional behavior of others, but not related to the attainment of a specific personal future goal.

Furthermore, these authors identified physical consequences as a fourth potential dimension of the experience of embarrassment. Such reactions include a faster heartbeat or blushing. Although the findings of the present study provide no empirical evidence of consequences of this type, the authors cannot rule out the possibility that individuals will experience physical reactions in vicariously embarrassing situations.

In addition, due to the qualitative nature of this study it is not yet clear which of the identified consequences are most likely to occur or to be identified in vicariously embarrassing situations. However, the findings suggest that vicariously embarrassing incidents in particular tend to induce emotional and cognitive reactions. These emotions and thoughts can be described as feelings such as discomfort, irritation, agitation, annoyance, and compassion for the service provider, intention to flee, vicarious shame, as well as ridiculousness. The strength of these consequences may depend on circumstances such as the closeness of the relationship between the parties involved in the incident and the individual observing the situation. In the present study, among family and friends, vicarious embarrassment tended to lead to stronger, closely related emotions that could positively influence the likelihood of different observable behavioral reactions or consequences.

The authors also identified various behavioral consequences of vicarious embarrassment in the data analysis: acting, calming, apologizing, and ignoring the incident. For example, if the degree of relationship closeness is high, then intervention in a situation is more likely than if the degree of relationship closeness is low. In the latter instance, it is more likely that the observer will simply ignore the situation.

Behavioral reactions like acting or calming should be more likely in situations in which friends or family members are involved compared to incidents with strangers. According to previous studies, this finding could also be of crucial relevance for the perception and evaluation of the service provider and its brand due to a potential effect of self-congruity (the match between consumer's actual self-image and the image associated with a particular service or brand) and self-extension (how products, services, people, places, or other elements contribute to, expand, or reinforce what people want to be) related to the service and the brand (e.g., Caruana, 2002; Sirgy, Lee, Johar, & Tidwell, 2008). Dysfunctional behavior of others in physical service environments, whether they are strangers, close friends, or family members, might negatively affect the evaluation of congruity between the observing customer and the service provider, especially when service employees are responsible for or are not able to solve vicariously embarrassing incidents, which in turn has a negative impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty or weakens self-extension due to the brand or the use of the service.

Furthermore, the authors identified relevant business consequences of vicarious embarrassment for service firms, such as negative effects on customer satisfaction, negative word-of-mouth intentions, and increased negative associations with the firm. Overall, these consequences can result in image damage, depending on the severity of the incident and the skill of the service employee at handling instances of vicarious embarrassment. Moreover, this study found evidence for the intention to flee the situation as a component of vicarious embarrassment, which supports literature on embarrassment (e.g., Robbins & Parlavacchio, 2006). Thus, the authors conclude that customers are willing to leave a shop or switch providers when they experience vicarious embarrassment. Service personnel may also have more work because of time-intensive, difficult customers, and they may experience more stress due to the increased emotional labor required of them and the negative feelings or feelings of uncertainty that they may feel, as indicated by Fisk et al. (2010) and Groth et al. (2009). The experience of stress and the negative feelings of service employees can lead to poor treatment for subsequent customers. This poor treatment, in turn, can cause dissatisfaction, decreasing loyalty and increased costs (e.g., Kallis & Vanier, 1985).

In addition to these consequences, several situational variables that potentially moderate the relationship between the violation of social norms and the violation of service standards on vicarious embarrassment in service encounters were identified. These variables are the service context, relationship closeness, the degree of inconvenience of the service setting, and the parties involved in the conflict. Contrary to expectations, individual characteristics like age and gender seem to have no moderating influence on the perception of vicarious embarrassment. With regard to these findings, the results of this study differ from those of Miller (1995) and Martin (1996), which have shown that, for example, elder consumers are slightly more dissatisfied with dysfunctional behavior of others in physical environments and that the experience of vicarious embarrassment is more likely for female consumers. Moreover, empathy could be considered as a relevant individual trait in the context of experiencing vicarious embarrassment (Krach et al., 2011; Turner & Husman, 2008). Given the findings of this qualitative study, no specific influence of empathy was found, but with regard to the approach used in the present study, it is not possible to preclude a moderating impact of empathy on the experience of vicarious embarrassment. Moreover, the findings indicate a moderating influence of the service context on the perception and effects of vicarious embarrassment; the particular service sector and the customer's involvement in the service being provided are both potentially influential. For example, based on the results of this study, one might conclude that a vicariously embarrassing incident in a snack bar will have weaker effects on customer loyalty than an incident in a renowned restaurant.

Relationship closeness was found to be another important moderating variable. In this study, incidents involving strangers or friends and family evoked emotional and cognitive reactions of observers. One could argue that it is more difficult for an observer to explain a stranger's misbehavior, that is, there is a greater lack of misunderstanding if customer A does not know customer B. In contrast, the behavior of family members or friends is most likely familiar but could nonetheless generate vicarious embarrassment. Another argument comes from research on the impact of social distance on the behavior of individuals (e.g., Trope, Liberman, & Waksleak, 2007). According to Liviatan, Trope, and Liberman (2008) social distance could be
understood as the degree of interpersonal similarity between individuals. The less similar someone is to oneself, the more socially distant they typically seem. On this basis, feelings of vicarious embarrassment seem to be stronger for friends, family, and for people of the in-group than for strangers or individuals belonging to the out-group (Eller et al., 2011). However, in line with Krach et al. (2011), the findings of this study show that vicarious embarrassment can also occur without a connection between the target and the observer because the influence of empathic processes might be stronger than the effects of relationship closeness. Therefore, it is assumed that vicarious embarrassment is also elicited by empathy with the service provider, that is, customer A’s feelings of pity for the service provider due to the rude behavior of customer B. The analysis also indicates that there may be negative consequences for service firms when only customers are involved in an incident.

The findings suggest that the relevance of incidents could be moderated by the identity of the actors involved in the conflict. According to attribution theory (Weiner, 1974), which is concerned with how individuals interpret events and how these interpretations relate to their cognitions, emotions, and behavior, one might conclude that the attribution of responsibility for vicariously embarrassing incidents by the observing customer is of crucial relevance to his/her evaluation of the situation, as well as to the strength of their potential effects. A customer who is observing another customer behaving embarrassingly may attribute the responsibility for this behavior to the customer himself or to the service firm, especially when a service employee is present. The insights from the qualitative interviews indicate that incidents in which service employees are involved in are more likely to be understood as the responsibility of the service firm and might have stronger negative effects on the evaluation of the service provider compared to incidents in which only customers are involved in.

5.2 Implications for future research

Overall, the findings of the present study on vicarious embarrassment suggest that the incidents (1) are mainly based on norm transgressions, (2) are in some way or another moderated by variables such as relationship closeness or service context, and (3) can result in emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions and ultimately in business consequences. Those variables can be used to set up future studies on vicarious embarrassment and to test and verify the relevance of those constructs and relationships posited in this study.

With regard to social evaluation model and the dramaturgic model that both explain embarrassment, evidence was found that can be seen as arguments for an extension of both models. It was shown that the social evaluation is reinforced by service standards set and communicated by the service to all customers. Future research may address if social evaluation is reinforced by service standards actively communicated by service firms has a better effect on preventing embarrassing incidents than relying on customers acting appropriately according to societal norms. Further, the analysis has shown that the presence of a customer B can have grave consequences for service firms. Future research should therefore expand the dramaturgic model to include customer B and his reactions.

The results show that in a service context, vicarious embarrassment can occur in situations in which a service employee interacts with a customer as well as in customer-to-customer interactions. In general, previous research in service marketing has shown that face-to-face interactions in service encounters are one of the most influential factors of customer satisfaction with services and that they affect customer loyalty to the service provider, as well as additional important outcomes (e.g., Bitner, Brown, & Meuter, 2000). These outcomes can be affected by emotions (Bloemer & de Ruyter, 1999) and cognitions during the service experience (Bigné, Mattila, & Andreu, 2006) and will have different behavioral consequences. The authors obtained similar results from the analysis, but due to the qualitative approach, which involved the use of the CIT, it is unclear which dimension is dominant and how strong the effects are on the mentioned outcomes of various embarrassing situations. Hence, future research should analyze the relevance of the mentioned dimensions in vicariously embarrassing situations in service environments and their potentially mediating impact on, for example, consumer satisfaction, loyalty, and purchase behavior in more detail.

This study has identified the service context, inconvenience of the service, relationship closeness, and the parties involved as potential moderators of the experience and the evaluation of vicarious embarrassment. The participants repeatedly linked the handling of incidents by service providers to the severity or the occurrence of the consequences. Consequently, this aspect should be analyzed in more detail in future research. Experimental studies should manipulate the service context and the degree of situational involvement (e.g., using a fast-food restaurant vs. a renowned, expensive restaurant as the setting) and should control the degree of relationship closeness and thus the social distance between the customers in the context of vicarious embarrassment. Such investigations would provide insights on the various consequences of vicariously embarrassing incidents, which can have a serious negative influence on the overall evaluation of a service provider. With regard to the concept of social distance (Buchan, Johnson, & Croson, 2006), it should also be pointed out that there might be a moderating impact of the status of the offending customer between the relationship of the violation of social norms and/or the violation of service standards on vicarious embarrassment: The higher the evaluation of difference between the social status of the offending person and the observing person, the more likely vicarious embarrassment may be experienced by the observer. The potentially moderating impact of the particular service sector as part of the situational context should also be considered in future research, as should the effects of customer satisfaction as well as the consequences of negative word-of-mouth intentions on postpurchase behavior.

Furthermore, for researchers to understand the experience of vicarious embarrassment and its potential negative and positive effects on service providers, it seems to be of relevance to analyze the impact of attribution in an experimental setting. According to the findings of the present study, who is perceived as responsible for a vicariously embarrassing incident (the service employee or the customer) and how this will influence the impact of the incident on consumer-related outcome variables seems to be of relevance.
Moreover, it is currently unclear how vicarious embarrassment could be measured in survey studies. To date no scale has been developed that measures vicarious embarrassment. In the field of psychology, Turner and Husman (2008) introduced the “Experience of Shame Scale (ESS)” and Cook (1988) proposed the “Internalized Shame Scale (ISS).” Both of these scales address the emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and physical consequences of shame and embarrassing incidents. Future research should investigate whether these scales can be adapted for analyzing vicariously embarrassing incidents. If not, given the relevance of the topic, a scale that covers all of the important aspects of vicarious embarrassment will be necessary.

Several researchers have noted that dysfunctional customer behavior may not necessarily have negative consequences in every situation (Fisk et al., 2010; Huang, 2008). For example, customers’ feelings of vicarious embarrassment could lead them to develop a more positive self-image when they respect social norms, which, in turn, could have positive consequences for service firms. In one case of the present study, the customers felt more appreciated when the provider made the right verbal response; consequently, customer satisfaction increased. In addition, regardless of the provider’s behavior, vicarious embarrassment can have positive effects when fellow customers who observe the misbehavior of consumer B feel sorry for the service provider and thus attempt to be particularly friendly. Overall, the violation of social norms reminds people of normative standards and thereby can help to reflect and affirm those standards. However, because the negative consequences may outweigh the positive consequences, strategies for preventing inappropriate behavior of customers should be considered.

The present study has focused on the perception and evaluation of vicariously embarrassing incidents from the customer’s point of view. However, such incidents can also have an impact on service employees. For instance, according to Harris and Reynolds (2003), psychological, emotional, behavioral, and physical effects are expected for service personnel who are exposed to dysfunctional customer behavior. The degree of stress perceived by a service provider may increase with the volume of individuals present and the number of customers waiting. The degree of emotional labor is likely to rise as time restrictions increase. Therefore, future research should also investigate the various consequences of vicarious embarrassment for service employees.

In the qualitative study, the incidents observed were not classified as accidental or intentional and the offending customers were not classified as aware or unaware. Krach et al. (2011) found that these characteristics had no effect on the perception of vicarious embarrassment. However, several participants mentioned feeling more vicariously embarrassed if the other customer was unaware of his or her behavior, that is, if he or she did not realize that his or her behavior was embarrassing. Consequently, future research should re-investigate the differences between accidental or intentional incidents and those in which customers are aware or unaware.

Individual characteristics (age, gender) of the observers, which can foster vicarious embarrassment were not considered extensively in this study; rather, the authors focused on the incidents themselves. According to prior research on dysfunctional customer behavior, demographic characteristics like age are likely to have an influence on perceived vicarious embarrassment. For example, Martin (1996) finds that older consumers are slightly more dissatisfied with dysfunctional public consumer behavior of others, although not for all types of behavior. However, the data did not indicate clear differences in perception of vicarious embarrassment and related variables by age, gender, or the other demographic variables. Future research should address the possible effect of demographic characteristics on the experience of vicarious embarrassment and their influence on its different consequences.

Whether women are more likely to experience vicarious embarrassment or whether they differ in their reactions, their narrative style or the consequences of vicarious embarrassment remains unknown. However, as prior research suggests that such a relationship exists (Martin, 1996; Miller, 1995), gender should be reconsidered in future studies as well. It is also likely that additional personal variables exist that influence vicarious embarrassment. For example, Krach et al. (2011) found that empathy influences vicarious embarrassment. This finding could also be considered in future research.

Additionally, culture can play a role in the perception that social norms have been violated and could lead to differences in the perception and evaluation of vicariously embarrassing incidents, which might be affected by different forms of culture dependent self-construal. According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), consumers in different cultures have different construal of the self, of others, and of the relationship between these two. The different construal will influence the individual experience of consumers in different cultures, including their cognitions, experienced emotions, and motivations. For example, in non-Western cultures, especially Asian cultures, consumers have a distinct understanding of individuality, which is based on the fundamental relatedness of the individuals to each other within this culture, for example, attending to others, fitting in, and harmonious interdependence with them, while in Western cultures the emphasis is on the separateness and uniqueness of the individual (Singelis, 1994). Hence, consumers in non-Western cultures are likely to be more sensitive to vicariously embarrassing incidents than in Western cultures. In this context, it would also be interesting to investigate whether people from non-Western societies are more likely to notice awkward behavior than are people from Western cultures. Furthermore, it might be considered what types of incidents are perceived as embarrassing. Vicariously embarrassing incidents in Western societies could be perceived as normal in other societies (e.g., eating rice with one’s hands in a high-class restaurant). Therefore, future studies investigating the impact of culture on the experience of vicarious embarrassment and its consequences will lead to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

Last but not least, vicarious embarrassment seems to be increasingly relevant in society, daily life, and, particularly, business in various ways. This socially conscious negative emotion has become a trend in a way that shows such as America’s Next Top Model, American Idol, and Big Brother rely heavily on vicarious embarrassment as a source for entertaining its viewers. Therefore, future studies could also address vicarious embarrassment in a media entertainment context.
5.3 Implications for business practice

Vicarious embarrassment may have various consequences for the overall performance of a service firm. The findings of the present study show that vicariously embarrassing incidents generally have negative effects regardless of how the customer assigns the responsibility for such situations. However, the authors conclude that customers perceive incidents where an employee is one of the conflicting parties as more serious. Overall, the relevance of vicarious embarrassment elicited by dysfunctional behavior is caused by negative spillover effects on the service experience of other customers. These negative effects are negative word-of-mouth intentions among fellow customers, decreases in repurchase intentions, intentions to leave the shop, and the negative effects on the overall image of the service provider. If a customer’s misbehavior is tolerated, such neglect could even lead customers who experienced vicarious embarrassment to avoid the business in the future. Furthermore, the participants of the qualitative study reported that vicariously embarrassing situations had a negative impact on the behavior of service employees and the treatment of fellow customers. Service employees were perceived as unfriendly, irritable, and annoyed. Such perceptions could foster the previously mentioned negative impact of vicarious embarrassment. Therefore, it is important that service providers are aware of the various potential consequences of vicarious embarrassment. Furthermore, it seems important that service employees have the necessary skills and empathy to handle such situations appropriately without tolerating customer misbehavior, whether in customer-to-customer interactions or when a service employee is involved.

According to previous research in the field of psychology, the experience of embarrassment of an individual could be embodied in different appeasement gestures that are mostly easy to decode for others (e.g., Keltner & Buswell, 1997; Keltner et al., 1997; Modigliani, 1971). For example, controlled smiles, averted gaze, head movements down and away, downcast eyes, diminished posture, and blushing have been identified as universally recognized gestures (Krach et al., 2011). Such reactions of customers should serve as a signal for service employees that the incident they observe might be a critical one, not only for the people directly involved in the incident, but also for observing customers. Certainly, employees who are aware of the gestures related to the experience of embarrassment will be able to react properly to such situations and may salvage the service experience not only for observing customers, but also for the customers directly involved in the incident. Huang (2008) found that perceived employee effort had substantial effects on customer satisfaction in cases of customer failure. Thus, the authors propose training for employees that will help them to identify situations that are embarrassing for observing customers that could be perceived as the responsibility of the service firm. Based on the findings of Locke and Latham (1994, 2002), a possible strategy to calm misbehaving or problem customers and to mitigate negative observer feelings could be to remind the problem-causing customer on his or her actual goal in the service encounter. This should support calming the situation by fostering goal commitment: If a customer is attracted to a specific service output and considers it as important and hence, wants or needs to attain it, then the customer will stick with it also in the face of obstacles. This will help to calm the situation in general, might result in a positive service experience for the problem consumer and last but not least, will also positively influence the service experience of observing customers by minimizing the negative consequences of the experience of vicarious embarrassment.

Vicarious embarrassment can seriously disrupt the service experience for customers and thus is especially threatening to companies whose main competitive advantage is the service experience. Service firms and their employees should monitor different incidents that could provoke vicarious embarrassment. If certain types of incidents are frequent, the company’s service design may need to be changed. For example, service environments in which many different types of customers must wait to be helped in close contact with one another are particularly threatened by vicarious embarrassment (Martin & Pranter, 1989). Sensitivity to vicarious embarrassment, its antecedents, and its consequences, as well as to customers in general, is an important prerequisite for success in diverse human service interactions.

Furthermore, such incidents generate a higher workload for service employees who need to properly address customer A and soothe customer B. Thus, such interactions are likely to generate indirect financial costs (Harris & Reynolds, 2003). To meet fellow customers’ expectations and to compensate for their dissatisfaction, active intervention by service employees may be required; it is not advisable to ignore the aberrant customer. Training in skills such as politeness, friendliness, tact, understanding, and coping with difficult situations is a wise prevention strategy that will enable service personnel to react appropriately and reduce their own stress.

Other implications for practice have already been suggested by prior research and were supported by the findings of the present study. For example, Wu (2008) recommends a code of conduct and education for customers. This type of code of conduct teaches customers what the service company expects of them and helps them to act accordingly without violating social norms in their interactions with the service employees or their fellow customers. Likewise, customers can be told what to expect from a specific service business; for instance, in family restaurants loud children are anticipated. Other researchers (Martin, 1996; Martin & Pranter, 1989) have called for compatibility management techniques that separate customer A from others by arranging the servicescape accordingly. Overall, it is important to adjust businesses according to their target groups and the compatibility of these groups with one another (Huang et al., 2010).

REFERENCES


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