

People Prefer Products That Help Them 'Save Face' in Embarrassing Moments

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People who are feeling embarrassed are more likely to choose items, such as sunglasses or 'restorative' lotion, that hide or 'repair' the face, according to new research published in [*Psychological Science*](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#). The research indicates that feelings of embarrassment can be alleviated by using so-called 'restorative' products — effectively helping people to “save face.”

“Previous research on embarrassment mainly documents that embarrassed individuals are motivated to avoid public exposure,” explains Ping Dong, a doctoral student at the University of Toronto and lead author of the new research. “However, little work has been done to examine how they could cope with embarrassment.”

Dong and colleagues Xun (Irene) Huang of Sun Yat-Sen University and Robert S. Wyer, Jr. of the Chinese University of Hong Kong hypothesized that metaphorical reasoning — the idea of “saving face” — might be one tool for coping with embarrassment, a common negative emotion.

In their first experiment, Dong and colleagues asked some participants to describe an embarrassing situation from their past, while others in the control group were simply asked to describe a typical day at school; later, all participants rated various pairs of sunglasses.

The findings showed that participants who relived their embarrassing experience tended to prefer large, darkly-tinted sunglasses. In effect, they favored the options that covered up their faces.

In another experiment, embarrassed participants expressed greater interest in sunglasses and restorative face creams — products that would conceal or cover the faces — than in scarves or shoes.

Additional research revealed that participants who actually used the “restorative” facial cream after re-experiencing an embarrassing moment reported lower embarrassment ratings, and they were more likely to seek out social interaction. Wearing sunglasses, however, did not seem to alleviate feelings of embarrassment.

“Although embarrassment leads people both to hide their face and to restore their face, only by restoring their face can their embarrassment be decreased, as evidenced in their greater desire to participate in social activities,” Dong explains. “It is interesting to speculate that people who wear cosmetics on a daily basis may be more tolerant of potentially embarrassing behavior.”

The findings highlight the unconscious influence that metaphorical thinking can have on everyday behaviors, but Dong notes that this influence may depend on cultural differences not examined in the present studies given that all participants were Hong Kong Chinese.

“The metaphorical concept of ‘hiding one’s face’ is fairly widespread, but the concepts of ‘losing face’ and ‘saving face’ are more pervasive in Asian than in Western cultures,” she observes. “Although the effects of embarrassment on symbolically hiding one’s face are likely to generalize to Western cultures, the effect of symbolically restoring one’s face might not.”

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