INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was 1) to demonstrate the existence of vicarious embarrassment in a classroom environment; 2) to ascertain the consequences of vicarious embarrassment, including corresponding emotions; 3) to classify the situational variables that create vicarious embarrassment in a classroom context, and 4) to identify behavioral consequences. It is not known if observed classroom incidents can elicit feelings of vicarious embarrassment, and if so, to what degree negative consequences are caused by vicarious embarrassment. The study includes both a qualitative and quantitative approach to build a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon. Findings suggest that experiencing vicarious embarrassment in a classroom environment can significantly influence the emotions experienced during learning, which, in turn, impacts student word-of-mouth and future course attendance behaviors.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE & CONCEPTS

Vicarious embarrassment is a negative emotion, which is experienced by an individual when others misbehave. Vicariously embarrassing incidents mostly occur in service encounters and are triggered by the violation of social-norms in both customer-to-customer and customer-to-employee interactions (Kilian, Steinmann, Hammes, 2018). To date, the relevance of vicarious embarrassment in physical service environments has not yet been analyzed in the context of the classroom. We performed our research in the classroom environment for the sole purpose of seeing if it existed there. If it did exist in the classroom, we then wanted to find out the effects that violation of social-norms between student-to-student or student-to-professor had on the students’ learning experience.

METHODS & PARTICIPANTS

Utilizing an intercept approach, undergraduate students (n = 215) at an AACSB-accredited college of business of a mid-sized, 4-year public university located in the Midwest were surveyed. Of the 227 participants, 12 responses were redacted due to their story not being in college, or not being related to vicarious embarrassment.

RESULTS

The following diagram depicts the 10 main variables that were tested. The differences in these variables were evaluated based on the source of embarrassment being either the student or the professor. Results of some factors were not affected by the source of embarrassment.

IMPACT ON STUDENTS BASED ON THE SOURCE OF EMBARRASSMENT

The survey asked, “Thinking of the story you just told, what were your exact thoughts and feelings at the moment of embarrassment?” All the responses were coded in six main categories: shock, anger, empathy, relief, fear, and awkwardness. Percentages are reflected in the chart to the right, with empathy being felt the most at 39%. Demographics had no effect on which emotions were experienced.

EMOTIONS EXPERIENCED

The survey asked, “What immediate actions did you take to try and cope with or decrease the embarrassment you felt?” Responses were coded into six categories. The two highest results were move-on (just started doing something else) and disengage (tried to mentally separate or pay no attention). Other actions taken were physical (body movements), prepared (planned for similar situation), humor (laughed), and sought confirmation.

TYPES OF STORIES

1 Criticism: unsolicited negative comments, accusations, being made focus of attention (41.4%)
   “I had a professor who was talking to a student in front of the whole class, he told her that she didn’t do very well on the test despite having a learning disability. Her face was bright red and she happened to be sitting next to me, I felt so bad for her.” –Respondent 130
   “There was a lecture where the professor was super strict about cell phones and occasionally he would call a student out. Every time, I felt embarrassed because everyone would look at the student.” –Respondent 148

2 Awkward Acts: improper acts, awkward act, clumsy act, ungraceful act, expression of emotions and verbal blunder (33.5%)”
   “Someone doing a presentation was really bad at speaking and everyone was ignoring them, so I felt awkward and embarrassed for them.” –Respondent 112
   “One time in class the professor asked the student about his parents’ name, but the student was an orphan. The whole situation felt so embarrassing.” –Respondent 116

3 Forgetfulness: lack of knowledge/misunderstanding, mistakes and errors (25.1%)
   “I was in a class where a student was giving a presentation and completely forgot what to say for her presentation. She couldn’t complete it because she completely blanked. I felt embarrassed for her and myself because I couldn’t image being in that situation.” –Respondent 121
   “A professor left her mic on while going to the bathroom. The mic picked up more noise than one would think obviously. I felt embarrassed for her because a whole class is sitting listening to her pee.” –Respondent 154

FINDINGS

➢ After looking further into the data, it was discovered that factors of location, control and stability supported attribution theory. Attribution theory explains the interpretive process by which people make judgements on the causes of behaviors. Especially in the criticism category, we learned that 95.5% of the respondents believed the source had control and 79.5% felt that it was a reoccurring situation. The criticism results were significantly higher than the awkward and forgetfulness acts.
➢ We found that the actions most taken, move on and disengage, remove the student from a learning environment which detracts from the educational experience.
➢ Nothing that we tested for determined why people choose to discuss the embarrassing situation or not. When someone did discuss, they were most likely talk to a classmate or friend.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrated the existence of vicarious embarrassment in the college classroom. Respondents provided incidents that they had experienced and reported on their emotions, actions, causes and subsequent behaviors. We found the consequences of vicarious embarrassment do affect students in the college classroom and impact their future behaviors.

LIMITATIONS/OPPORTUNITIES

Since we only surveyed at the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, there are opportunities to survey students and/or professors across departments, campuses, majors, and in general classes versus upper level classes.

SOURCES