

# Examining Service Provider Response to Guilty Customers: An Abstract

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**Abstract** Previous research in service contexts finds customers feel guilty after they violate a social norm. Such contexts may include the customer not leaving a tip, being late, or trying a different service provider (i.e., cheating). Interestingly, despite being a negative emotion, prior research shows customer-induced guilt leads to increased repatronage intention (Dahl et al. 2003, 2005). Guilt is associated with the action tendency of feeling like undoing what one has done (Swartz 1994). Accordingly, guilt can motivate positive change (Tangney and Dearing 2002), such as apologizing or engaging in other reparative actions (Tangney and Dearing 2002).

Previous work, however, has not considered how service providers should react when a customer experiences guilt. Given customer-induced guilt leads to increased repatronage intention, *emphasizing* the customer's norm violation may further increase a customer's guilt and, thus, increase the customer's repatronage intention. Such a tactic is similar to guilt appeals studied in advertising research, which have been shown to lead to increased donation intention (e.g., Basil et al. 2006) and other positive intentions and behaviors. Nonetheless, *emphasizing* the customer's norm violation may also increase the customer's anger. Customers may perceive that they are being manipulated – that the service provider is attempting to induce guilt in them (see Sommer and Baumeister 1997) or what we label perceived guilt induction. As such, *minimizing* the customer's norm violation may instead be the ideal response.

An online experiment tested these two alternative strategies. Participants ( $n = 80$ ) were presented with a scenario that described a customer running late for his/her appointment with his/her hair stylist. In this one factor, between-subjects design, participants were then randomly exposed to one of two conditions – the hair stylist (1) *emphasizing* the norm violation (i.e., “Well, it’s about time you got here. I was starting to wonder about you...”) or (2) *minimizing* the norm violation (“No

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problem. I just got finished up with my previous customer.”). The dependent multi-item measures included guilt, anger, and repatronage intention. A newly created perceived guilt induction scale was also included.

Data were analyzed using ANOVA, ANCOVA, and hierarchical regression. Experimental findings suggest that emphasizing the customer’s norm violation increases guilt, which increases repatronage intention. However, doing so also increases anger and perceived guilt induction, which decrease repatronage intention. Specifically, anger partially mediates the effect on repatronage intention and perceived guilt induction fully mediates the effect. As such, the results suggest that while customers’ guilt can increase repatronage intention, service providers should not attempt to capitalize on those guilty feelings by further emphasizing the customer norm violation and should instead minimize it.