

# GUILT AS AN ANTECEDENT TO THE CONSUMER EVALUATION PROCESS IN THE SERVICES CONTEXT

Claire P. Bolting, University of Virginia  
Andrew M. Forman, Hofstra University, New York

## ABSTRACT

As consumers increase their usage of ongoing services, where both the customer and the service provider must interact and work together to create a complete service encounter, there will be times when customers fail to fulfill their duties and consumer guilt may arise. Little attention has been given to the role of guilt in customer evaluations. This paper explores the meaning of consumer guilt, offers an expanded disconfirmation paradigm with guilt incorporated into the evaluation process, and discusses implications for the recognition and use of consumer guilt in marketing strategies.

## INTRODUCTION

While the disconfirmation paradigm is widely accepted as a useful model of consumer evaluation processes, recent research is shifting towards a focus on antecedent states that change the impact of pre-usage evaluation constructs on subsequent post-use evaluation concepts. Many different consumer and situational characteristics have been reviewed (Bolting and Woodruff 1988; Cadotte, Woodruff, and Jenkins 1987; Kennedy and Thirkell 1982; Oliver and Bearden 1983; Oliver and DeSarbo 1988; Swan 1977; Swan and Trawick 1979, 1983). In general, these studies have focused on antecedent states that are traditional information processing constructs and are cognitive mediators of evaluation differences. There is growing recognition, however, of the importance of affective antecedent states as major contributors to consumer decision making (Aaker, Stayman, and Hagerty 1985; Batra and Ray 1986; Gardner 1985; Weinberg and Gottwald 1982), but only a handful of studies have examined the role of affective states within the disconfirmation paradigm (Holbrook et al. 1984; Westbrook 1980, 1983, 1987; Woodruff, Cadotte, and Jenkins 1983). As economies move toward more emphasis on the delivery of services and services marketing, the problem of underdeveloped consumer decision process models intensifies. Differences between products and services, their use, and their evaluation may necessitate unique models for the study of customer evaluations (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry 1985; Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1988). Most of the studies just listed on antecedent states focus on product/brand evaluations, so there is little research on affect in service strategies. The growth of the services sector presents a need and offers an opportunity to test affect or feeling state relationships across many different service encounters.

Many service encounters are ongoing relationships, where consumers and service providers build and maintain interactions to achieve long-term benefits, e.g. patient-dentist and weight loss clinic associations (Booms and Nyquist 1981). Ongoing dyadic interactions offer opportunities for both cognitive and affective states to influence and shape the manner in which service provider

and client react to one another. As ongoing service encounters develop, one affective state that can influence service evaluations is guilt. When consumers are expected to actively participate in a service delivery, such as performing ongoing dental hygiene and maintaining dietary programs, their failure to do so can create guilt and anxiety. Guilt over their own shortcomings may seriously impact customer evaluations of the service provider.

The concept of guilt has long been dominant in such diverse fields as theology, philosophy, and counseling and psychiatry, disciplines in which guilt and guilt arousal are viewed as effective agents of attitude and behavior change (Stein 1968). However, there is very little nonproprietary research upon which to base conclusions regarding guilt's effectiveness in marketing strategies. This paper presents a conceptual framework for the inclusion of guilt in evaluation processes. Since very little is known about guilt's relationship to consumption evaluations, several issues are explored. First, the formation of guilt is examined, with attention given to self-induced versus marketer-induced guilt feelings. Second, guilt's role in the formation of pre- and post-usage evaluation constructs is addressed. Additionally, the selectivity of guilt's impact and patterns of guilt influence are explored. Finally, marketing implications for the use of guilt in service relationships are suggested.

## THE NATURE OF GUILT

Guilt is one of many affective states that are common to the human experience. A typical list of feeling states includes shame, guilt, surprise, joy, distress, disgust, fear, anger, contempt, and interest (Izard 1977). This short list of feeling states indicates that there are both positive and negative affects influencing human processes.

Guilt is defined as the feeling that one has violated some rule of conduct to which one attaches value (Miller 1985). Guilt requires not only a perception that one has violated the moral order, but also the taking of responsibility for that violation, with the understanding that one could and should have done something differently to keep the violation from having occurred (Frijda 1986; Lindsay-Hartz 1984). Although an individual may be aware that others could be blamed, one is convinced that s/he is at fault. The transgression can create concern because the violation is perceived as disturbing the sense of equity with others or with the self (Izard 1977).

The creation of guilt does not presuppose that rational assessment of one's actions was undertaken. One may feel profoundly guilty and thus responsible for a wish, a feeling, or an action even though objectively, there was no possibility of personal control. All that is required is the feeling--not the rational evaluation--that one could have done differently had one wished to do so. Conversely, if an individual did not have to assume control for his/her actions, there is no opportunity for guilt to occur (Lindsay-Hartz 1984). There must be some event which takes place (or fails to occur) based on cause-effect

relationships. Events of chance cannot lead to guilt.

There is general agreement that all positive and negative affect states may vary in stability, specificity, and intensity (see Gardner 1985 for review; Isen 1984; Westbrook 1980). Westbrook suggested four types of affective influences that capture degrees of stability and specificity:

1. Stable/generalized affective influences which describe basic personality dispositions;
2. Transient/generalized affective influences which are moods;
3. Stable/consumer domain affective influences which describe an individual's ongoing feelings toward business/marketing/consumption issues; and
4. Transient/consumer domain affects which are temporary feelings generated by specific marketing practices in a consumption experience.

Gardner (1985) and Clark and Isen (1982) also reviewed the nature of affect and suggested that feeling states may be of three types: general feelings, more transient moods, and intense, attention-getting emotions. A general feeling or affect is characterized as a consciously experienced, stable, subjective state (Westbrook 1987); a mood is transient, particularized to a specific time and situation, and may or may not be consciously experienced; and an emotion is an intense, conscious, attention-getting personal affect.

Several researchers have explored the notion that guilt may fall into more than one of the above Westbrook or Gardner categories (Ghingold 1980; Miller 1985; Otterbacher and Munz 1973). Consider the case where an individual seems to feel perennially guilty. This person may go through life assuming responsibility for all manner of shortcomings. Otterbacher and Munz (1973) have called this stable guilt state G-Trait, while Ghingold (1980) labeled it inherent guilt. They suggest that guilt inventory measures can capture this stable guilt state. On the other hand, specific consumption occasions can lead to guilt feelings which can be quite strong but of limited duration. Labels for this transient guilt state or guilt mood include G-State (Otterbacher and Munz 1973) and aroused guilt (Ghingold 1980).

Thus, guilt can be both a stable or a transient feeling, but it likely exists only because of some consumer domain or consumption experience. The notion of transgression inherent in the definition of guilt assumes that discrete events must have occurred to create the feeling of guilt. These events can be small or major incidents in a life setting. Moreover, an individual cannot have guilt as a personality trait, only personality traits that are side effects of recurring guilty feelings, e.g. shame and low self-acceptance. Thus, guilt fits into the Westbrook typology as a stable and/or transient consumer domain affect.

It is widely accepted that affect can vary in intensity or strength. Much of the research in this area has focused on the motivational potential associated with various affect intensities, i.e., affect arousal can lead to some type of performance. A discussion of intensity effects is covered in depth in the next section.

## THE EFFECTS OF GUILT ON CONSUMER DECISION PROCESSES

A growing body of literature now indicates that affective states, including guilt, can influence thoughts, cognitive processing, and social behavior in many ways (Hoffman 1986; Isen 1984). However, positive and negative affects influence psychological processes in somewhat different fashions. Gardner (1985) and Isen (1984) summarized social psychological research on feeling states and moods and reported that effects of positive feeling states are pronounced and in the same direction, i.e., more positive associations and behaviors emerge. The effects of negative feelings such as guilt, anger, sorrow, anxiety, and depression were much more difficult to predict. Sometimes negative feeling states give rise to reinforcement of negativism, while at other times there are attempts to change or eliminate negative perceptions by engaging in positive behavior and thinking. Kelman (1979) also suggested that an inverse relationship between negative affect and attitude change can occur. If individuals are unable to make a previously negatively-perceived decision more acceptable, they are likely to "change their attitudes in the direction of more favorable evaluation of the object or issue involved in the action."

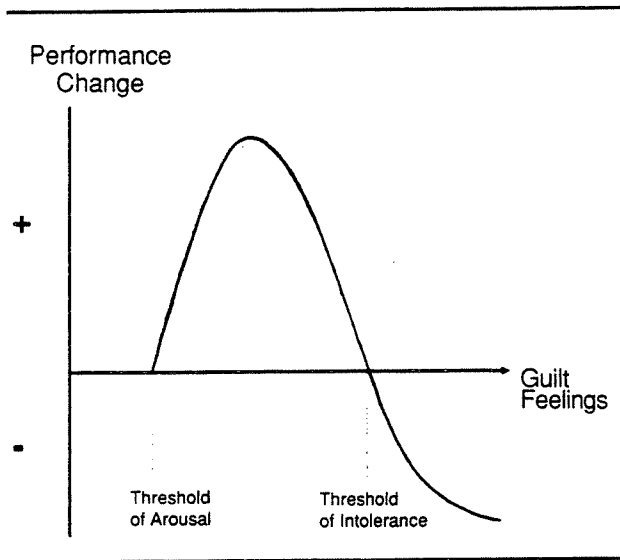
These seemingly contradictory findings are also reported in the few marketing studies examining negative affects and relationships to beliefs, attitudes, and behavior change. Axelrod (1963) found that affective and cognitive evaluations were directly related to shifts in feeling states. Westbrook (1980; 1983; 1987) also reported inverse relationships (or direct relationships such as in the Axelrod study, if constructs are stated in the same direction) between negative affect states and satisfaction, complaining behavior, and word-of-mouth. Moreover, the Westbrook studies used both stable and transient negative affect states as precursors of attitudinal, cognitive, and behavioral change. Even though Bozinoff and Ghingold (1983) failed to show attitudinal or behavioral intention change from guilt arousing marketing communications, they suggested that the predicted change would not have been direct as in the above marketing studies, but rather of an inverse nature. They expected to show that guilt would lead to guilt reduction mechanisms that would, in turn, necessitate a change in behavior or a change in attitudes. These changes would be of a positive nature, reflecting more willingness to engage in corrective behavior and more favorable attitudes toward a stimulus, since guilt feelings reflect a failure to uphold standards of conduct.

### Guilt Arousal and Subsequent Effects

Why is there a disagreement among researchers on the ability of guilt and other negative affects to predict direction of performance levels? Perhaps the disagreement is relative rather than absolute, and a review of the role of affect intensity may shed some light on the discussion. Research has supported the existence of an inverted U-shaped relationship between arousal and performance, i.e., performance is facilitated by moderate levels of arousal but reduced by either extremely low or extremely high levels of motivation. Thus, there may exist a threshold

model for guilt (Ghingold 1980), as shown in Figure 1. Low levels of guilt do not trigger any resolution response from consumers, but when the level of guilt surpasses the individual specific threshold, resolution of the guilt is desired. The result is that guilt has been linked to increased helping or compliance with a request following recognition of one's responsibility for a transgression (Izard 1977). However, should the level of guilt be too high, surpassing the threshold of intolerance, an individual may decide there is no possibility of making

**Figure 1**  
**Relationship of Guilt Arousal**  
**to Performance**



reparation or admitting the other party was more correct. Positive, proactive performance changes are not likely to occur, but rather, the individual may lay the blame on the injured party.

It is possible to see how moderate and high levels of guilt arousal may impact an ongoing service encounter. One may know that s/he has not held up the client end of the service encounter and must accept therefore the consequences (an otherwise unacceptable level of service delivery). The patient knows that s/he did not follow the dentist's recommendations regarding proper dental hygiene over the past six months, so the patient is to blame, not the dentist. Weight loss clinics operate on the notion that clients will lose a certain number of pounds each week by following a specified regimen. Client guilt can motivate better performance in subsequent weeks and even create better evaluations of the clinic operators who must have been correct in their assessment of weight loss dynamics. But when guilt for failure to uphold a service role is too high, the client can counterbalance the guilt by adjusting the service evaluation of the service provider downwards. This denial mechanism tries to shift some of the blame from the client to the service provider, so the client does not feel overwhelmed by the transgression. The result may be more negative attitudes and beliefs about the service provider and aspects of the service delivery and

refusal to follow behavior modification recommendations for the future. The ultimate performance possibility in the face of denial may be termination of the ongoing service relationship.

#### Sources of Guilt and Subsequent Effects

Ghingold (1980) and Gardner (1985) also recognized that there may be two sources of guilt and other affect states which are relevant to performance change--self-induced, i.e., inherent, and marketer-induced, i.e., aroused, feeling states. Self-induced feelings are anticipated by the individual and are factored into a decision process. They represent the more stable feeling states previously discussed and create a consumer environment which affects susceptibility to aroused guilt. Marketer-induced feelings are strategic and tactical marketing actions that occur at the point-of-purchase or service delivery. A setting is created, a procedure is initiated or an interaction is controlled that tells the customer in some fashion that s/he has failed to fulfill the customer role in an ongoing service encounter. The service provider thus is able to evoke an affective response or mood because of the marketing action. A marketing action that precedes the service delivery, e.g., an advertisement, may of course affect the formation of guilt, but the communication would impact self-induced guilt rather than the limited notion of marketer-controlled guilt just defined. Given the difference between stable feeling states and transient mood states, an advertisement seen before the pre-usage evaluation process begins would be assimilated into prior experience and used accordingly to influence a customer's susceptibility to guilt arousal (see Figure 2). Marketing communications delivered within an experimental design are so immediate that they may constitute marketer-controlled manipulations, but there have always been validity issues associated with these kinds of manipulations. We simply propose that these differences be recognized when marketers are realistically building marketing strategies.

In addition, marketer-induced and pre-existing affect states may interact and thus dramatically influence marketing strategies. Certainly, the roles of both constructs need to be examined in an expanded model of pre- and post-usage evaluations of ongoing service encounters. The next section outlines such a model and details specific hypotheses regarding the disconfirmation paradigm and the two sources of guilt.

#### GUILT, ONGOING SERVICE ENCOUNTERS, AND THE DISCONFIRMATION PARADIGM

Given some of the basic differences between goods and services, ongoing service encounters offer some unique perspectives on construct relationships, including the role of guilt as an antecedent affective state, in the confirmation/disconfirmation paradigm. Figure 2 outlines the key relationships between the two types of guilt previously discussed and selected disconfirmation paradigm constructs.

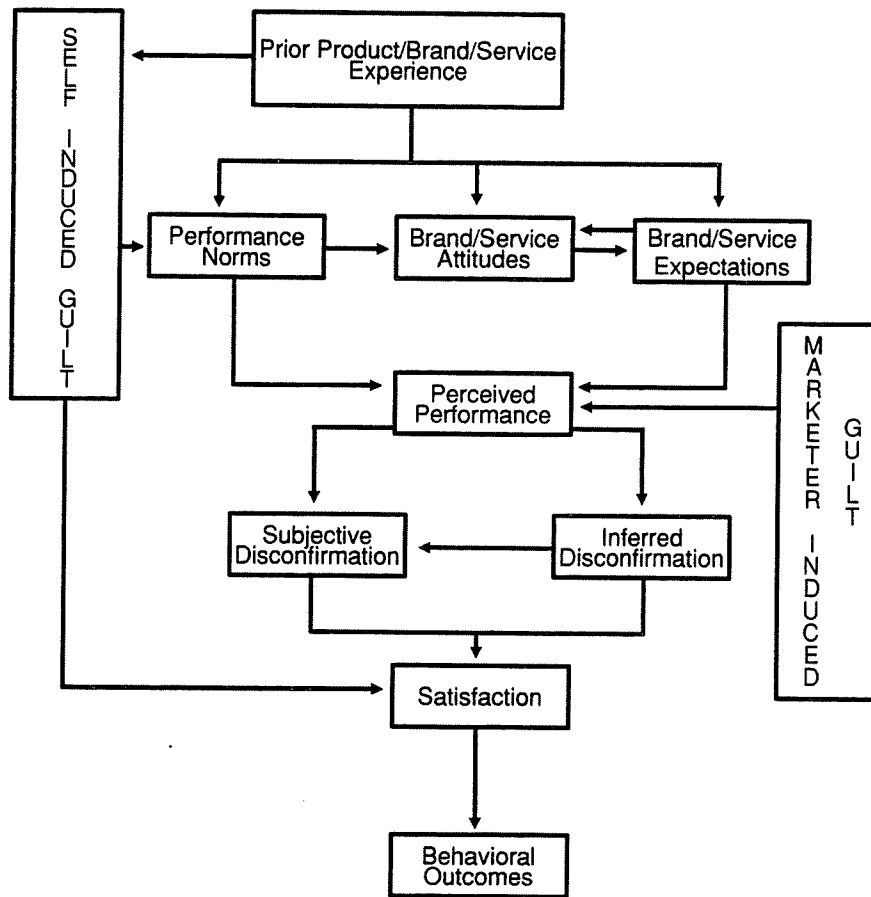
**Normative Standards Versus Expectations**

There are several characteristics of services that are relevant to the creation and selection of subsequent performance standards. Smith and Houston (1983) suggest that consumers use a learned sequence of causal chains to create service scripts. There will be a set of expectations regarding actions which compose the event, the order in which the actions normally occur, the actors who perform the actions and the setting in which the event takes place (Solomon et al. 1985). Thus, all aspects of the consumption experience, e.g., players, occasions, settings, etc., comprise this "cognitive script." Schank and Abelson (1977) acknowledge that cognitive scripts are so well practiced in everyday life that some consensus is possible on script components. However, the ongoing service relationship may generate a high degree of variability from one encounter to the next. Thus, it is difficult to insure that each focal service experience

will deliver a "correct" level of service. The scripts based on experience across a number of service encounters give a better feel for what should be occurring in a particular service encounter. These scripts are the conceptual equivalent of the experience-based performance norm construct in the Woodruff, Cadotte and Jenkins (1983) CS/D model.

The inseparability of production and consumption in the service encounter implies that each party is expected to play a particular role. The consumer develops a set of role expectations with regard to the actions of the service provider and the manner in which these actions are to be performed (Solomon et al. 1985). Additionally, the service provider has expectations regarding actions on the part of the client. The expectations regarding consumer behaviors in the delivery of a service may be extremely relevant to successful service delivery. These expectations may refer to behavior during the service encounter (e.g., sitting still in the dentist chair, with mouth opened wide)

**Figure 2**  
**The Role of Guilt in the Disconfirmation Paradigm**



or behaviors that were to have occurred between encounters (e.g., practicing prescribed dental hygienic measures). The consumer learns from previous interpersonal encounters that failure to conform to prescribed behaviors can evoke personal feelings of guilt. Anticipated guilt feelings thus become part of the consumer's experience-based norm.

Two issues are of concern here. First, the consumer is capable of using anticipated or self-induced guilt to shape performance norms, which in turn can be used as standards for evaluating the subsequent service encounter performance. Second, marketer-controlled guilt is likely to have little effect on normative standards, given the timing of the delivered marketing communication. Performance norms are composites of all the learning that has preceded the evaluation process in question, so it is not possible for an immediate marketing tactic to affect this construct to any great extent.

### Performance

Recent studies have provided support for the extension of the traditional disconfirmation paradigm with the inclusion of the separate construct, performance (Cadotte, Woodruff, and Jenkins 1987; Churchill and Surprenant 1982; Oliver and DeSarbo 1988; Tse and Wilton 1988). More importantly, some elements of brand or service performance may not have been factored into pre-usage performance standards but become important during the consumption of the good/service. This may be especially true for ongoing service relationships, given the social nature of the service encounter.

When the service provider communicates displeasure with the client's failure to carry out prescribed actions, marketer-induced guilt feelings may result. If these feelings were unanticipated and not accompanied by self-induced guilt (i.e., not incorporated within the performance norm), their arousal may directly influence the consumer's evaluation of the service relationship. Moreover, this sudden message of customer guilt is likely to bring the individual to rather intolerable levels of guilt rather quickly, since it was unexpected. With marketer-induced guilt affecting performance, the impact will probably be in the same direction as the intensity of the negative feeling, i.e., the stronger the guilt message, the more negative the performance perception will be.

### Disconfirmation, Satisfaction, and Behavioral Outcomes

**Disconfirmation.** An important distinction is made in the literature today between two forms of disconfirmation. Researchers have classified the approach to disconfirmation based on difference scores between pre- and post-usage product attribute ratings as *inferred* or *subtractive* disconfirmation, while the consumer's overall assessment of pre- versus post-usage evaluations has been referred to as *perceived* or *subjective* disconfirmation (Oliver and Bearden 1985; Swan and Trawick 1980, 1981; Tse and Wilton 1988). Evaluation models using brand expectations as the standard of comparison have routinely used the inferred disconfirmation construct as the basis of positive or negative discrepancy determination. But Smith

and Houston (1983) propose that consumers will evaluate ongoing service encounters as complete events based on the more elaborate cognitive scripts, rather than solely on the basis of focal brand or service performance predictions. Given the uncertainty associated with a single service encounter, the consumer is more likely to incorporate information across a number of contextual, actor, and action cues. A more global, perceived disconfirmation measure develops.

Or, the two disconfirmation constructs can both be used in a single evaluation process. Inferred disconfirmation can precede a more global determination of disconfirmation which directly affects satisfaction evaluations (Oliver and Bearden 1985; Swan and Trawick 1981). Thus, focal brand or service judgments may feed into a global assessment of the service encounter and later be used to refine the performance norms for subsequent service experiences.

Guilt can therefore influence disconfirmation in two ways. The unanticipated feelings of guilt that a marketer is capable of controlling in the service encounter context may leave the consumer with an impression that the focal service experience did not go as well as had been predicted. Strong marketer-controlled guilt, working through performance, will vary directly with inferred disconfirmation. If one embarks on a service encounter and is meant to feel too guilty and perhaps threatened by accusations, crossing the threshold of intolerance leads to more negative cognitive disconfirmation scores.

The second role of guilt in the disconfirmation process involves the feelings of guilt a consumer may have before actually experiencing a service delivery. Self-induced guilt, working through performance norms, can also affect disconfirmation, but should act more specifically on the global or perceived disconfirmation construct. And the differences in guilt thresholds for individuals will affect how service providers are rated on cognitive dimensions. With moderate guilt arousal, the phenomenon referred to as "mood repair" occurs, whereby the consumer may look for an opportunity to alleviate feelings of guilt. Mood repair may be achieved by conscientiously abiding by the cognitive script during the course of the encounter, by transferring part of the responsibility to the service provider and/or by promising to improve upon future compliance with service provider requests. If the level of guilt falls back below the threshold level, a feeling of relief might ensue leading to a positive evaluation of the service relationship.

**Satisfaction.** The effects on satisfaction are again dependent on the source of guilt, and the links between the guilt states and satisfaction as affect may be viewed as both direct and indirect. A direct linkage may occur when self-induced guilt creates associations that are recalled and used to develop conditioned satisfaction responses (Griffit and Guay 1969). But the threshold level of acceptable guilt will determine whether the net result is an improvement or reduction in satisfaction with the service encounter. Marketer-controlled guilt is more likely to act on satisfaction in an indirect manner, whereby guilt is mediated by the cognitive performance and disconfirmation activities.

**Behavioral outcomes.** The influence patterns for behavioral outcomes are similar to those for satisfaction.

Moderate levels of self-induced guilt will actually encourage the customer to look beyond the service problems that developed because of client violations. The consumer may reward the service provider who continued to fulfill his/her role expectations by strengthening the ongoing service relationship and/or engaging in favorable word-of-mouth communication. High guilt levels are likely to generate complaining, negative word-of-mouth, and perhaps an end to the service relationship.

### Summary of Research Propositions

Our review of guilt, the ongoing service encounter, and the disconfirmation paradigm suggests the following research propositions:

- (1) When consumers perceive they have failed to fulfill actions promised to a service provider in an ongoing service relationship, self-induced feelings of guilt are elicited.
- (2) Self-induced feelings of guilt are incorporated into the consumer's experience-based performance norms.
- (3) Unanticipated, marketer-induced guilt will affect post-usage evaluation constructs rather than pre-usage norms or focal service perceptions.
- (4) Moderate feelings of self-induced guilt may be reduced via mood repair tactics undertaken during the service encounter. The removal of self-induced guilt contributes directly to a positive satisfaction judgment and also indirectly by acting through a perceived disconfirmation evaluation. Behavioral outcomes will also be more favorable.
- (5) Intense feelings of self-induced guilt are not amenable to mood repair tactics and will negatively influence the consumer's overall evaluation of the service relationship.
- (6) Marketer-induced guilt will not respond to mood repair tactics, resulting in more negative cognitive, affective, and behavioral evaluations.

### MARKETING IMPLICATIONS

This paper has examined the antecedent state of guilt, an affect that has been widely accepted and studied in communications research but rather neglected from a marketing theory perspective. There may exist a number of opportunities in product and especially services marketing where consumer guilt can be creatively used to channel customer reactions. In the ongoing services sector alone, where both the service client and service provider must work together to create a positive service experience, guilt can play a vital part in the development and fulfillment of role expectations. Indeed, some service practitioners encourage customer guilt. A noted pediatrician feels that guilt feelings can persuade parents to seek the very best in childcare for their children (Chapman 1987). On the other hand, there may be limitations to the usefulness of guilt in evaluation processes. At some point, it may be detrimental for the service provider to use guilt as a motivator and arousal agent in pre- and post-usage evaluations. Certainly these issues should serve as a basis for research in the services

sector.

Research is also needed on the sources of guilt. If marketer-induced guilt is perceived as an inhibitor of favorable service evaluations, practitioners must be very careful in the way they interact with service clients. Rather than induce guilt, they must become proficient in recognizing self-induced guilt and offering techniques for resolving guilt. Mood repair is perhaps a more important tactic for service providers that mood induction.

Questions remain on the usefulness of inferred and global post-use constructs. Guilt as a mediator of evaluation processes may be helpful in tracking the relevance of norms and focal brand/service perceptions and in differentiating between types of disconfirmation. Structural equations of the evaluation process may be needed to determine how antecedents such as guilt affect the entire evaluation sequence.

As research continues on affective states, all types of consumer affect must be included in marketing research efforts. Consumer guilt is a prevalent affect and can influence evaluations and behaviors. Exactly how guilt affects the disconfirmation paradigm seems to merit further exploration.

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