
AI translation · View original & related papers at
chinaxiv.org/items/chinaxiv-202106.00006

Customer Responses to Customer-Oriented Deviant Behavior: A Moral Emotions Perspective

Authors: Jiajing Hu, Zhang Meng, Ma Xiuli, Liu Yan, Zhang Meng, Liu Yan

Date: 2021-06-02T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

Pro-Customer Deviance behavior, where frontline employees consciously deviate from formal organizational rules and regulations to help customers or safeguard customer interests, is widespread in service enterprises. This paper constructs a customer response model of pro-customer deviance behavior, using the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework as the logical mainline, the dual moral attributes of pro-customer deviance behavior as the research perspective, and based on cognitive appraisal theory of emotion and functional differentiation theory of emotion. The main contents include: (1) establishing a moral cognition evaluation system for customers' perception of pro-customer deviance behavior, and clarifying customers' moral emotional responses to pro-customer deviance behavior; (2) exploring the mediating mechanism of customers' moral emotions in the relationship between pro-customer deviance behavior and customer repatronage; (3) examining the moderating effects of customer responsibility attribution and service contextual factors on moral emotions and behavioral responses. The article proposes relevant propositions regarding customers' moral emotions and repatronage intentions triggered by pro-customer deviance behavior, and elaborates on the methods for testing these propositions, striving to clarify the controversial topics in existing research regarding the outcomes of pro-customer deviance behavior, which holds significant theoretical importance for research on pro-customer deviance behavior from the perspective of moral attributes, and simultaneously provides guidance for service enterprises to comprehensively evaluate the service performance of pro-customer deviance behavior, leverage its positive effects, and avoid its negative consequences.

Full Text

Preamble

Research on Customer Response to Pro-Customer Deviance: A Moral Emotion Perspective

Hu Jiajing¹, Zhang Meng², Ma Xiuli¹, Liu Yan¹

(¹College of Tourism, Sichuan Agricultural University, Dujiangyan 611830, China)

(²School of Business Administration, Southwestern University of Finance and Economics, Chengdu 611130, China)

Abstract

Pro-customer deviance (PCD)—defined as boundary employees’ conscious deviation from formal organizational rules to help customers or safeguard customer interests—is prevalent in service enterprises. Using the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework as the logical foundation and adopting the dual moral attributes of PCD as the theoretical lens, this study constructs a customer response model based on cognitive appraisal theory and the differential emotions theory. The research comprises three main components: (1) establishing customers’ moral cognitive evaluation system for PCD and clarifying their moral emotional reactions; (2) investigating the mediating mechanisms of moral emotions in the relationship between PCD and customer repatronage intention; and (3) examining the moderating roles of customer attribution of responsibility and service context on moral emotions and behavioral responses. The study proposes propositions regarding how PCD triggers customer moral emotions and repatronage intention, outlines methods for testing these propositions, and seeks to resolve existing controversies about the consequences of PCD. This research offers significant theoretical contributions to understanding PCD from a moral attributes perspective and provides practical guidance for service enterprises to comprehensively evaluate the service performance implications of PCD, harness its positive effects, and avoid its negative consequences.

Keywords: pro-customer deviance, dual moral attributes, moral emotion, crowding-in effect, crowding-out effect

1. Problem Statement

As service consumption transforms and upgrades, standardized services no longer satisfy customers’ personalized needs. Customized service has become a critical means for service enterprises to enhance customer experience and stimulate repatronage. Service boundary employees enjoy high job autonomy, frequent customer interaction, and strong customer orientation (Zhang et al., 2012). Combined with the uncertainty of service contexts and the incompleteness of service protocols, employees can easily overstep organizational norms or even violate formal regulations when providing personalized service. This phenomenon— “pro-customer deviance” (PCD), where employees consciously deviate from formal organizational rules to help customers or safeguard their interests (Boukis, 2016; Leo & Russell-Bennett, 2012)—places managers in a dilemma: employees’ “goodwill” must be protected, yet institutional “iron laws” cannot be arbitrarily broken.

From the “employee-service-profit” profit logic of service enterprises (Gounaris

& Boukis, 2013), PCD represents the outcome of employees meeting personalized customer needs and possesses dual moral attributes: altruistic motivation and deviation from organizational norms (Boukis, 2016; Morrison, 2006; Vardaman et al., 2014). On one hand, because its primary motivation is to help customers, PCD is perceived as a moral behavior that benefits individuals personally, eliciting customers' positive judgments and emotional responses of appreciation toward others. On the other hand, the undeniable fact that it deviates from formal organizational norms can also be perceived as an immoral act that breaks rules and harms others. Customers' cognitive processing, experiential responses, and behavioral reactions to this "deliberate violation" by service employees constitute the key to whether employees' service intentions can be realized. Therefore, what kinds of customer cognition and experience do the attribute characteristics of PCD produce? Can it achieve its intended positive customer responses? This represents an urgent research question for both service enterprises and academic inquiry.

A systematic literature review reveals two diametrically opposed perspectives on PCD outcomes: one emphasizing positive effects based on altruistic motivation, the other highlighting negative consequences based on norm deviation. Research grounded in altruistic motivation argues that PCD stems from employees' noble motivations to genuinely help customers or protect their interests (Leo & Russell-Bennett, 2012; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004). This motivation drives employees to attend to and satisfy customers' personalized needs during service encounters, bringing customers pleasure, joy, satisfaction, and surprise while alleviating frustration, anxiety, worry, and embarrassment (Du & Fan, 2007; Bock et al., 2016). Such effects significantly enhance perceived service quality (Lastner et al., 2016), build customer trust (Kang & Hyun, 2012), strengthen customer commitment (Roy, 2015), and ultimately promote repatronage intention (Kim, 2009; Wagner et al., 2009).

Conversely, research focusing on norm deviation contends that despite its altruistic motivation, PCD—like ant holes undermining a dam—can increase organizational costs, threaten organizational stability (Ghosh & Shum, 2019), reduce organizational effectiveness, and harm organizational interests when accumulated over time (Kluemper et al., 2015; Zhou et al., 2016). PCD signals organizational institutional arbitrariness, challenging the stability and authority of organizational norms. Employees' deviant behavior may trigger customers' opportunistic psychology, consume additional organizational resources, and lead to perceived service unfairness among other customers, undermining service quality stability (Litzky et al., 2006) and ultimately affecting service evaluations, causing customer defection.

Although scholars recognize PCD as a "double-edged sword" (Li, 2018; Tu, 2020), most existing research overlooks the most fundamental challenge in PCD studies: PCD essentially represents "employees' compromise choice between the moral principle of helping customers and the moral principle of not violating organizational norms" (Vardaman et al., 2014). Its dual moral attributes of altruistic

motivation and norm deviation are inseparable. Ignoring this duality prevents researchers from addressing customers' essential cognitive evaluations of the behavior and their corresponding emotional and behavioral responses, leading to contradictory conclusions (Morrison, 2006). Boukis (2016) notes that the intertwined dual moral attributes of PCD break customers' cognitive evaluation patterns for single-attribute service behaviors, potentially triggering complex moral cognition and emotional reactions that generate diverse behavioral tendencies. During service encounters, customers engage in different levels of moral reasoning and cognitive evaluation based on certain moral standards, which induces complex and contradictory moral emotions that subsequently influence behavioral responses such as repatronage. Unfortunately, existing research has not thoroughly examined customers' diverse responses to PCD.

Therefore, this study aims to construct a customer response model to PCD in service enterprises, reframing theoretical propositions about PCD outcomes from a moral behavior perspective. First, based on the conceptual characteristics of PCD, we explore customers' moral cognitive evaluation and moral emotional response models. Second, from the perspective of moral emotions' complexity and contradictions, we investigate the influence mechanisms of PCD on repatronage intention through moral emotions, specifically examining the reinforcing and crowding-out effects of moral emotions. Finally, we analyze how customers' cognitive traits and service contexts moderate their moral emotions and behavioral responses to PCD.

2.1.1 Connotation and Characteristics of Pro-Customer Deviance

Inspired by research on positive deviance such as pro-social rule breaking, service scholars define PCD as "employee behavior that consciously deviates from enterprise regulations to help customers or safeguard customer interests during service encounters" (Boukis, 2016; Leo & Russell-Bennett, 2012). PCD has four key characteristics: First, its primary motivation is to help customers or safeguard their interests, not for employees' personal gain (Boukis, 2016; Leo & Russell-Bennett, 2012; Morrison, 2006; Li et al., 2020). Second, the criterion for judging PCD is deviation from formal organizational rules, systems, policies, procedures, or prohibitions, excluding informal group norms (Morrison, 2006; Dahling et al., 2012; Hu et al., 2018). Third, PCD is a deliberate, rational behavior by boundary employees, excluding unconscious violations or deviations implemented because employees know certain rules are nominal (Morrison, 2006; Dahling et al., 2012). Fourth, the behavioral outcomes of PCD are uncertain; noble motivations do not necessarily produce positive results (Boukis, 2016; Leo & Russell-Bennett, 2012; Morrison, 2006; Li et al., 2020).

Although characteristics of altruistic motivation or deviation from organizational rules are not unique to PCD, these four features distinguish it from other workplace behaviors. First, unlike broad pro-social rule breaking, whose primary motivations include improving organizational efficiency, helping colleagues, and

helping customers (Dahling et al., 2012; Morrison, 2006), PCD—as a subset of pro-social rule breaking—represents a specific manifestation and particular form during service encounters. Second, unlike general customer-oriented service behavior, which emphasizes attending to customer needs but requires employee behavior to occur within the organizational institutional framework without permitting deviation from or violation of organizational norms (Leo & Russell-Bennett, 2012). Third, unlike counter-role behavior, which centers on task revision and, although not fully compliant with group norms or regulations, stems from managerial authorization and discretion granted to service boundary employees, with the purpose and outcome of promoting service process transformation and service innovation (Marinova et al., 2015).

2.1.2 Impact of Pro-Customer Deviance on Customer Emotions and Behavior

Research findings on PCD' s impact on customer emotions and behavior have emerged indirectly in studies of positive deviance within organizations and customer-oriented service behavior. Methodologically, this research has evolved through theoretical deduction, field surveys, qualitative analysis, model analysis, and experimental studies. The research content comprises both positive and negative behavioral outcomes.

Scholars focusing on positive effects place their logical starting point on altruistic motivation, arguing that customers—as beneficiaries of deviant behavior—will respond positively. Morrison (2006) pioneered this line of inquiry by drawing on positive organizational theory, using interview analysis and quantitative research to identify that service boundary employees' rule-breaking behaviors to help customers significantly improve perceived service quality and customer satisfaction. Subsequent research has introduced more variables related to customer experience and post-purchase behavior to validate the effects of employee deviance during service encounters (Wang et al., 2020). Wagner et al. (2009) employed emotion theory through scenario experiments and industry field studies, finding that attending to customers' personalized needs and safeguarding their interests brings customers pleasant, surprising emotional experiences that influence word-of-mouth, repatronage intention, and price premiums, whereas failure to do so generates negative emotions like disappointment and embarrassment that reduce customer loyalty. Li et al. (2020) noted that customer-oriented deviance can create perceptions of unfairness, leading to negative evaluations of employees or enterprises. Some scholars, from a change-oriented behavior perspective, used structural equation modeling to conclude that employees' proactive, risky, and challenging responses to customers' extraordinary service expectations help gain customer trust (Kang & Hyun, 2012), guide customer participation in value co-creation and service innovation (Marinova et al., 2015; Menguc & Boichuk, 2012), and thereby establish more stable, long-term customer relationships (Roy, 2015).

Scholars emphasizing negative effects start from the established fact of norm de-

violation, arguing that even altruistically motivated behavior produces unintended adverse consequences. When analyzing PCD' s potential impact on customers, researchers note that once service organization employees help customers by deviating from norms, they face significant role conflict and role stress, causing customers to feel guilty (Menguc & Boichuk, 2012). Service performance accompanied by psychological pressure also leads to unstable perceived service quality, triggering customer dissatisfaction (Bock et al., 2016; Litzky et al., 2006). Furthermore, Dahling (2012) revealed during scale development for pro-social rule breaking that customer-oriented violations not only induce guilt in involved customers but also cause other customers to perceive unfairness, thereby violating customer-employee psychological contracts, causing customer defection, and harming organizational performance.

2.2.1 Cognitive Appraisal System of Moral Emotions

Moral emotions are emotional experiences that arise when individuals evaluate their own or others' thoughts and behaviors according to certain moral norms or behavioral standards, reflecting the relationship between objective reality and individuals' moral needs (Haidt, 2003; Rudolph & Tscharaktschiew, 2014). Moral emotions develop later and differ from basic emotions, requiring two cognitive capacities: the ability to distinguish self from others (self-awareness) and the ability to self-evaluate moral behavior according to moral norms or standards (Tracy & Robins, 2006). For instance, while infants display all basic emotions by nine months, moral emotions only emerge after age three because both self-awareness and self-evaluation abilities require developmental time to establish stable connections among moral behavior, moral cognition, and moral emotions in specific contexts (Tracy & Robins, 2006).

Moral emotions belong to the category of complex emotions composed of specific emotion blends, primarily including four types: other-condemning emotions (contempt, anger, disgust); self-conscious emotions (guilt, embarrassment, shame, pride); other-suffering emotions (sympathy); and other-praising emotions (gratitude, awe, elevation) (Haidt, 2003). With the rise of ethical consumption research, moral emotions with opposite valences—such as guilt and shame versus gratitude and awe—have become key variables in studies of workplace deviance (Harvey et al., 2017), pro-environmental behaviors like green consumption (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014), pro-social behaviors like charitable donation (Jiang & Shi, 2017), service experiences (Tian et al., 2015), and marketing interactions (Antonetti & Baines, 2015; Fei et al., 2011).

Cognitive appraisal theory emphasizes that emotional experiences do not stem from stimuli themselves but from individuals' cognitive evaluation of stimuli, making cognitive participation a necessary condition for moral emotion formation. The cognitive components of specific moral emotions (e.g., gratitude, guilt) typically combine several appraisal dimensions. Exploring these dimensions is key to distinguishing which moral emotions are triggered by moral behavior stimuli. Smith and Ellsworth (1987) divided the cognitive appraisal system

into primary and secondary appraisal, comprising six dimensions: pleasantness (whether the individual feels happy), certainty (certainty about the situation), attention (whether the individual is attentive), control (whether events are controlled by the individual, situation, or others), anticipated effort (whether physiological or psychological effort is required), and responsibility attribution (whether others or oneself are responsible for the event). This framework identified 15 emotions and has gained widespread acceptance in the field.

Recently, researchers have constructed different appraisal systems, though none can completely distinguish all moral emotions. For example, the six-dimensional model does not include dimensions such as rule violation, harm to others, or unfairness perception (Shepherd et al., 2013), which are important conditions for guilt and shame (Tracy & Robins, 2006). It also excludes dimensions like helping intention and cost, which are crucial for gratitude in beneficiaries (Wood et al., 2008). Exploring the cognitive appraisal dimensions of specific moral emotions in particular contexts (e.g., PCD) is important for explaining and predicting individuals' emotional reactions and how different emotions influence behavioral intentions (Zhang et al., 2020).

2.2.2 Motivational Differentiation Function and Interaction of Moral Emotions

The motivational differentiation function of emotions emphasizes that moral emotions are fundamental organic power systems that can amplify or even transcend motivation to directly release dynamic signals, guiding organisms to make behavior decisions corresponding to emotional experiences. For example, in charitable donation behavior, consumers experiencing gratitude are more willing to provide reciprocal feedback to benefactors (Baker & Bulkley, 2014). Guilt is particularly common in green consumption or marketing interaction scenarios, where consumers experiencing guilt are more willing to engage in compensatory behaviors to alleviate guilt (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014; Fei et al., 2011), such as suppressing complaints or negative word-of-mouth, maintaining close relationships and cooperation with employees or enterprises, and increasing repeat purchases (Antonetti & Baines, 2015). Consumers experiencing shame, by contrast, reduce purchases or even stop patronizing (Fei et al., 2011).

Although different moral emotions can independently influence behavior, interactions may exist between specific emotions, and whether these interactions produce reinforcing or crowding-out effects remains unresolved. McCullough et al. (2004) found that gratitude, guilt, and shame are all influenced by social norms as an important cognitive dimension, proposing that gratitude coexisting with guilt and shame constitutes complex moral emotions that interactively predict behavioral tendencies. Some studies suggest guilt and shame are functionally consistent moral emotions (Allpress et al., 2014; Nelissen et al., 2007; Rees et al., 2013), where individuals experiencing gratitude who simultaneously experience guilt (or shame) are more likely to engage in reciprocal (or even super-reciprocal) or compensatory behaviors toward benefactors (Desteno et al., 2010).

In this case, guilt (or shame) and gratitude have consistent emotional functions, producing a crowding-in effect.

However, most research argues that guilt and shame, while both negative emotional experiences of deviating from moral standards, are fundamentally different. Regarding emotional origins, guilt is behavior-oriented, stemming from evaluation of behavior that violates moral norms, whereas shame develops from behavior-oriented to self-oriented, stemming from evaluation of the moral self threatened by serious consequences of norm-violating behavior. Regarding experienced pain, shame is more intense and aversive than guilt (Lewis & McCann, 2004; Fan & Yu, 2008; Sheikh & Janoff-Bulman, 2010). Regarding behavioral consequences, guilt-prone individuals tend toward compensatory behavior, whereas shame-prone individuals fear others' moral scrutiny and tend to hide their behavior and avoid interpersonal interaction (Tangney et al., 1996). Regarding measurement, Cohen et al. (2011) developed the Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale (GASP), which distinguishes guilt and shame as different moral emotions. The GASP includes two guilt subscales ("Guilt-Negative Behavior Evaluation," "Guilt-Repair") and two shame subscales ("Shame-Negative Self-Evaluation," "Shame-Withdrawal"), each with four items, distinguishing and measuring these emotions through emotional orientation and corresponding behavioral tendencies. Thus, when individuals experiencing gratitude simultaneously experience shame, they inhibit their connection to pro-social behavior and are more likely to withdraw and avoid the emotion-eliciting situation (Greenbaum et al., 2020; Michl et al., 2014; Rees et al., 2015). In this case, shame differs from guilt and has inconsistent emotional function with gratitude, producing a crowding-out effect.

2.3 Brief Review

In summary, existing research has examined PCD' s impact on customer responses from both positive and negative perspectives, but by revealing only unilateral mechanisms, several issues warrant further investigation:

First, current research overlooks the fundamental challenge in PCD studies: altruistic motivation and norm deviation are inseparable dual moral attributes of PCD. Selecting either attribute alone as the logical starting point fails to comprehensively reveal its influence mechanism on customer responses, making the resulting contradictory conclusions questionable.

Second, although emotion theory is widely applied in consumer behavior, PCD as a moral compromise behavior should trigger specific moral cognition and emotional responses based on its moral attributes. Few scholars have explored the diverse response mechanisms of PCD from the path of moral cognition and moral emotion.

Third, while the individual effects of moral emotions such as gratitude, guilt, and shame on consumer behavior have been widely verified, moral emotions belong to the category of complex emotions where interactions may exist among

specific emotions. Further exploring these interactions helps comprehensively reveal the influence mechanism of moral emotions on consumer behavior and improves research precision.

Fourth, research on personal trait factors and service context factors (public vs. private settings) that influence moral emotion generation remains relatively scarce and needs further development.

To address these important but underexplored issues, this study systematically analyzes the impact of PCD in service encounters on customer emotions and behavioral intentions, providing theoretical explanations and practical guidance for understanding PCD's internal mechanisms, enhancing its positive effects, and avoiding its negative consequences.

3. Research Framework

This study employs the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model as the logical framework, adopts the dual moral attributes of PCD as the research perspective, and draws on cognitive appraisal theory and differential emotions theory to explore the influence mechanisms of PCD on repatronage intention mediated by moral emotions. Additionally, it examines how customers' cognitive traits and service contexts moderate their moral emotions and behavioral intentions, constructing a comprehensive customer response model to PCD. Specific research objectives include: (1) establishing customers' moral cognitive evaluation system for PCD and clarifying how moral cognitive evaluation triggers specific moral emotions; (2) investigating the mediating mechanisms of moral emotions between PCD and customer behavioral responses; (3) verifying the moderating effects of customer attribution of responsibility and service context on moral emotions and behavioral responses; and (4) exploring management strategies for employee PCD in service encounters.

To achieve these objectives, this study adopts a stepwise, progressive research design, dividing the research content into three interrelated modules. The overall research framework is illustrated in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]: Customer Response Mechanism Model of Pro-Customer Deviance

Stimulus (S) → Moral Cognitive Appraisal (O) → Moral Emotions (O) → Behavioral Intention (R)

- **Stimulus:** Pro-customer deviance
- **Moral Cognitive Appraisal:** Perceived care, surprise, system stability disruption, resource consumption, employee blame, unfairness perception
- **Moral Emotions:** Gratitude, guilt, shame
- **Behavioral Intention:** Repatronage intention

Moderating effects: Customer attribution of responsibility (self vs. other) and service context (public vs. private)

3.1 Study 1: Moral Emotional Responses to Pro-Customer Deviance Based on Moral Cognitive Appraisal

Cognitive appraisal theory emphasizes that individuals' emotional reactions stem from cognitive evaluation of environmental stimuli (Smith & Ellsworth, 1987). Therefore, customers' emotional responses to PCD depend on their cognitive appraisal of the behavior. Scholars have reached consensus that "PCD possesses dual moral attributes of altruistic motivation and deviation from organizational norms" (Morrison, 2006; Vardaman et al., 2014), but research on customers' cognitive appraisal of these dual attributes remains limited.

According to cognitive appraisal theory, individuals' appraisal of moral behavior involves primary and secondary appraisal. Primary appraisal confirms the behavior's relevance to the individual, while secondary appraisal confirms whether the behavior is controllable and determines coping strategies. If controllable, individuals adopt behavioral coping; if uncontrollable, they engage in emotional coping (Smith & Ellsworth, 1987). On one hand, because PCD's primary motivation is helping customers, customers conduct primary appraisal from the perspective of personal benefit, viewing the behavior as morally beneficial to themselves. Appraisal dimensions include perceived care and surprise, which are conditions for gratitude (Rudolph & Tscharktschiew, 2014). On the other hand, despite employees' good intentions, deviation from formal organizational norms that harms others is an undeniable fact, prompting customers to conduct secondary appraisal from the perspective of harm to others, viewing the behavior as immoral. Appraisal dimensions include extra resource consumption, employee blame, and service fairness disruption, which are conditions for guilt and shame (Chen et al., 2015; Harvey et al., 2017). Based on the different origins of guilt and shame, if perceived harm to others is low, customers experience only low-intensity indebtedness (guilt); if perceived harm is high, customers weaken their moral self-identity and experience high-intensity guilt (shame).

Proposition 1: Customers' contradictory cognitive appraisals of PCD trigger complex moral emotions. Specifically, appraisal dimensions of personal benefit trigger customer gratitude, while appraisal dimensions of harm to others trigger customer guilt (when harm is low) and customer shame (when harm is high).

3.2 Study 2: The Mediating Role of Moral Emotions in the PCD-Repatronage Intention Relationship

As discussed, although existing research has verified the individual effects of specific moral emotions such as gratitude, guilt, and shame on consumer purchasing behavior, interactions may exist among specific moral emotions. PCD triggers complex moral emotions where gratitude coexists with guilt and shame, and the emotional functions may be either consistent (crowding-in effect) or inconsistent (crowding-out effect). Therefore, we explore the mediating role of moral emotions from four aspects.

3.2.1 The Mediating Role of Gratitude

Gratitude is a positive moral emotion that beneficiaries experience toward benefactors, making individuals more likely to provide feedback beyond reciprocity (Davis et al., 2016; Layous et al., 2017). In charitable donation behavior, grateful consumers are more willing to reciprocate benefactors (Baker & Bulkley, 2014). Gong et al. (2020) confirmed, based on affective events theory, that customer-oriented constructive deviance in service encounters triggers gratitude, which enhances customer satisfaction and strengthens loyalty. Additionally, Jung and Yoo (2019) found that when customers perceive employees deviating from organizational rules to help them, they develop a sense of being favored, which further promotes service friendship between customers and employees. Regarding PCD, as beneficiaries, customers naturally feel gratitude when they sense employees' attention to and satisfaction of their personalized needs under special circumstances. Motivated by the principle of "returning a favor" (Tsang & Martin, 2019), customers strengthen their repatronage intention.

Proposition 2: When PCD triggers gratitude, customer repatronage intention is strengthened.

3.2.2 The Mediating Role of Guilt

Guilt is a negative emotion experienced when individuals realize their thoughts or behaviors have violated socially or personally recognized moral standards, causing negative outcomes or threats to others (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014). Li (2018), in exploring customer psychology regarding PCD, presented an interviewee's experience: at a gas station, the customer was short 50 cents for snacks, and the cashier didn't charge for an 80-cent drink. The customer felt "happy but a little guilty," worrying the cashier might get in trouble for helping. Although a negative emotion, guilt has evolutionary advantages and adaptability (He & Ding, 2016). Guilt-prone individuals, out of remorse or compensation, are more likely to "provide care and avoid harm," strengthening interpersonal relationships (Rees et al., 2013; Sheikh & Janoff-Bulman, 2010). Baumeister et al. (1994) noted that one function of guilt is to activate relationship-enhancing behavior patterns, specifically compensatory behavior (Tangney et al., 2007). Guilt is particularly common in green consumption and marketing interactions, where guilty consumers engage in compensatory behaviors to alleviate guilt (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014; Fei et al., 2011), such as maintaining close relationships with employees or enterprises, suppressing complaints or negative word-of-mouth, and increasing repeat purchases (Antonetti & Baines, 2015). Thus, regarding PCD, when customers realize employees deviate from organizational norms to satisfy their personalized needs, causing some degree of harm to others, they may experience guilt (Oc et al., 2015). Out of compensation psychology, customers strengthen their repatronage intention.

Proposition 3: When PCD triggers guilt, customer repatronage intention is strengthened.

3.2.3 The Mediating Role of Shame

Although shame, like guilt, originates from violating social moral standards and causing negative outcomes to others (Nelissen et al., 2007), extensive research in social and neuropsychology confirms their essential differences (Lewis & McCann, 2004; Fan & Yu, 2008; Sheikh & Janoff-Bulman, 2010). Guilt is a behavior-oriented negative emotion with less intense pain that can be alleviated through compensation (O'c et al., 2015). Shame, however, is a self-oriented negative emotion that directly threatens the moral self, producing more intense, painful experiences that lead to avoidance and withdrawal (Greenbaum et al., 2020; Michl et al., 2014; Rees et al., 2015; Sheikh & Janoff-Bulman, 2010). Shame is considered a maladaptive emotion that tends toward relationship avoidance rather than maintenance (Tangney et al., 2007). Consumers experiencing shame reduce purchases or even stop patronizing (Fei et al., 2011). In Butori and Bruyn's (2013) study, one author described a personal experience: before joining a long security line at an airport, he bought an expensive suitcase. Seeing the line, a store employee made him a clearance note that allowed him and his wife to bypass the 90-minute queue. However, recalling bypassing hundreds of passengers, he called the experience "the walk of shame." Thus, if customers perceive that PCD satisfying their personalized needs seriously harms others, their negative emotion becomes shame rather than guilt. Out of avoidance psychology, customers weaken their repatronage intention.

Proposition 4: When PCD triggers shame, customer repatronage intention is weakened.

3.2.4 Interactive Effects of Guilt, Shame, and Gratitude on Repatronage Intention

Ethical consumption research often calls for examining how multiple specific moral emotions jointly influence behavioral intentions (Wang & Wu, 2015), because specific emotional functions can either 叠加 form a crowding-in effect or dilute each other in a crowding-out effect, collectively mediating the influence of events or behaviors on purchase intention (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014). Gratitude arises when beneficiaries perceive helpers' actions as genuine expressions of intent. Especially when beneficiaries realize helping behaviors incur costs, guilt also emerges (Algoe et al., 2008; Valor et al., 2018). Here, guilt and gratitude have consistent emotional functions that 叠加 gratitude's emotional function, strengthening behavioral intention. When beneficiaries realize helping costs are high enough to threaten negative evaluation of the moral self, shame emerges (Harvey et al., 2017; Michl et al., 2014). Here, shame and gratitude have inconsistent emotional functions that dilute gratitude's emotional drive, crowding out behavioral intention formation. Therefore, PCD that causes low perceived harm to others triggers complex emotions of gratitude and guilt, where guilt 叠加 gratitude's function, strengthening repatronage intention. PCD causing high perceived harm triggers complex emotions of gratitude and shame, where shame dilutes gratitude's function, weakening repatronage intention.

Proposition 5: Guilt, shame, and gratitude jointly mediate the effect of PCD on repatronage intention. Specifically, when PCD triggers coexisting gratitude and guilt, repatronage intention is strengthened; when PCD triggers coexisting gratitude and shame, repatronage intention is weakened.

3.3 Study 3: Moderating Effects of Customer Attribution of Responsibility and Service Context

Evaluator traits and service contexts are two important moderating variables affecting moral emotional reactions. This study further examines how customer attribution of responsibility and service context moderate the effects of PCD on moral emotions and behavioral intentions.

3.3.1 Moderating Effect of Customer Attribution of Responsibility

Customer attribution of responsibility refers to customers' trait tendency to attribute behavioral causes to themselves (self-responsibility attribution) or others (other-responsibility attribution) (Ortony et al., 1988), playing an important role in moral emotion generation. Attribution of responsibility is an important dimension moderating gratitude: Algoe and Zhaoyang (2016) noted that gratitude in helping situations arises when beneficiaries attribute their positive state to others' efforts; if attributed to themselves, gratitude intensity decreases. Attribution also moderates guilt and shame: Fischer and Roseman (2007) found that when norm-deviating behavior harms others, if individuals believe they caused the harm, the pain source shifts from behavior to person, threatening the moral self and intensifying pain, transforming guilt into shame. Conversely, if individuals believe others caused the harm, the pain source shifts from person to behavior, relieving moral self-threat and reducing pain, transforming shame into guilt.

Although PCD is implemented by service enterprise employees to help customers, modern word-of-mouth mechanisms like online reviews have empowered customers (Lü et al., 2011), who often request employees to satisfy personalized needs through flexible operations (e.g., unauthorized discounts, extra gifts), pushing employees to engage in PCD. When customers attribute PCD to themselves, they credit themselves for the positive state, weakening gratitude, but also bear moral responsibility for harm caused to others, threatening the moral self and intensifying indebtedness, making guilt likely to transform into shame. Under the joint effect of these complex emotions, repatronage intention is weakened. When customers attribute PCD to others, they credit others for the positive state, strengthening gratitude, while relieving themselves of moral responsibility for harm, reducing indebtedness, making shame likely to transform into guilt (Antonetti & Baines, 2015; McNulty & Dugas, 2019). Under these complex emotions, repatronage intention is strengthened.

Proposition 6: Customer attribution of responsibility moderates the effects of PCD on moral emotions and repatronage intention. Specifically, self-

responsibility attribution weakens gratitude and transforms guilt into shame, weakening repatronage intention; other-responsibility attribution strengthens gratitude and transforms shame into guilt, strengthening repatronage intention.

3.3.2 Moderating Effect of Service Context

Public versus private service encounter contexts represent a situational variable that distinguishes guilt from shame. Cohen et al. (2011) consider guilt a “private” emotional experience, whereas shame is a “public” emotional experience; shame is more concerned with others’ evaluation and typically arises in public settings with others present. Therefore, if PCD occurs in private settings, customers’ moral emotions may not change. Once PCD occurs in public settings, even with low perceived harm to others, customers will examine their moral self through self-monitoring, making guilt likely to transform into shame. Under the joint effect of these complex emotions, repatronage intention is weakened.

Proposition 7: Service context moderates the effects of PCD on moral emotions and repatronage intention. Compared to private settings, guilt is more likely to transform into shame in public settings, weakening repatronage intention.

4. Theoretical Construction

Pro-customer deviance is widespread in service organizations, and customer responses provide the primary basis for organizational guidance and management. Although existing research has thoroughly examined both positive and negative effects of PCD, analyzing its impact based solely on either altruistic motivation or the fact of norm deviation provides only partial and potentially contradictory conclusions. To fundamentally dissect PCD’s “double-edged sword” effects and mechanisms, this study begins with the logical starting point of PCD’s dual moral attributes and introduces moral emotion theories to construct a customer response model that deeply examines customers’ moral cognitive evaluation, emotional reactions, and behavioral responses to PCD. Through three theoretical modules, the study discusses how PCD influences gratitude, guilt, shame, and repatronage intention, and how these effects differ under various contingent conditions.

First, based on PCD’s conceptual characteristics and cognitive appraisal theory, this study proposes that customers’ moral emotional responses to PCD include other-praising moral emotions (primarily gratitude) and self-conscious moral emotions (primarily guilt and shame). Previous research mostly introduced emotions from the circumplex model, such as pleasure and surprise (Wagner et al., 2009) or dissatisfaction (Bock et al., 2016), to validate customer responses to PCD, rarely attending to customers’ moral emotional reactions. A primary reason is that previous studies did not examine PCD from a moral behavior perspective and thus could not address customers’ moral cognitive evaluation and emotional responses. This study recognizes PCD’s dual moral attributes and

analyzes customers' primary and secondary appraisal processes and outcomes from perspectives of perceived personal benefit and perceived harm to others. It posits that PCD's altruistic attributes bring customers feelings of being cared for and surprise, triggering gratitude, while its norm-deviating aspect causes employee blame and service fairness disruption, triggering guilt or shame. This reframes theoretical propositions about emotional responses to PCD.

Second, based on the complexity and contradictions of moral emotions and drawing on differential emotions theory, this study not only discusses how specific moral emotions (gratitude, guilt, shame) individually mediate the PCD-repatronage intention relationship but further infers interactive effects between gratitude and guilt/shame on repatronage intention. While individual effects of specific moral emotions on behavioral intentions have received extensive attention, moral emotions are complex, and whether their functions are consistent remains unverified (Greenbaum et al., 2020). To comprehensively understand emotions' influence on PCD and improve research precision, this study analyzes the motivational differentiation functions of gratitude, guilt, and shame, proposing that gratitude and guilt triggered by PCD are both relationship-enhancing moral emotions that 叠加 to further strengthen repatronage intention, whereas shame is a relationship-avoiding moral emotion with inconsistent function to gratitude in PCD contexts, diluting gratitude's emotional drive and crowding out repatronage intention. This expands and deepens theoretical applications of emotional motivational differentiation.

Finally, this study infers the moderating effects of customer attribution of responsibility and service context on the PCD-customer response relationship. Service recipient traits (Li et al., 2014) and consumption contexts (Wang et al., 2020) are important contingencies affecting customer emotional experience and decision-making. Based on attribution theory, this study proposes that different responsibility attributions produce different moral cognition and emotional responses to PCD. When customers engage in self-responsibility attribution, they credit both positive outcomes and negative responsibility to themselves, weakening gratitude while transforming guilt into shame, which collectively weakens repatronage intention. When customers engage in other-responsibility attribution, they credit positive outcomes and negative responsibility to others, strengthening gratitude while transforming shame into guilt, which collectively strengthens repatronage intention.

Based on contingency theory, this study argues that PCD's impact on customers differs across service contexts. In private settings, customers' moral emotions are unlikely to change. In public settings, even with low perceived harm to others, customers' self-monitoring prompts examination of the moral self, making guilt likely to transform into shame, which collectively weakens repatronage intention. Rooted in real problems in service encounters, this study contributes to service management theory and practice.

Overall, this study constructs a theoretical model of diverse customer responses to PCD, extending existing research in several ways. First, by starting from

customers' contradictory moral cognition and complex moral emotions, it is the first to incorporate both positive and negative effects of PCD into a single model, comprehensively explaining PCD's influence on moral emotions and repatronage intention and providing a novel theoretical perspective for PCD outcome research. Second, it discovers that PCD triggers coexisting gratitude with guilt (or shame) and, based on interactions among complex moral emotions, analyzes the crowding-in effect when gratitude and guilt have consistent functions and the crowding-out effect when gratitude and shame have inconsistent functions, revealing the mediating mechanism of complex moral emotions between PCD and repatronage intention. This expands and deepens emotion function theory in cognitive psychology, compensating for existing research's focus on single moral emotions. Third, responding to research calls and management practice, this study fully considers PCD implementation contexts, exploring how customer attribution of responsibility (self vs. other) and service context (public vs. private) moderate customer responses, identifying boundary conditions for changes in moral emotions and behavioral reactions triggered by PCD, which helps service enterprises intervene more scientifically.

In conclusion, pro-customer deviance is widespread in service enterprises, and its dual moral attributes create managerial dilemmas. Managers need to clarify whether employees' PCD can achieve desired positive customer responses to avoid the awkward situation where "good intentions bear bitter fruit." The expected conclusions of this study can provide service enterprises with new perspectives, guiding managers to correctly understand PCD's attribute characteristics, comprehensively evaluate resulting customer responses, scientifically determine whether to restrict or encourage PCD in current contexts, and maximize positive effects while avoiding negative consequences.

References

- Chen, Y., Bai, L., & Li, L. (2015). Characteristics, development, and behavioral impacts of moral emotions. *Studies of Psychology and Behavior*, 13(5).
- Du, J., & Fan, X. (2007). The impact of customer loss and emotion on recovery expectations and complaint tendencies in service failure contexts. *Nankai Business Review*, 10(6), 4-10.
- Fan, Z., & Yu, G. (2008). The relationship between self-esteem, attribution style, and guilt and shame. *Psychological Exploration*, 28(4), 57-61.
- Fei, X., You, Y., Yang, H., & Ding, Y. (2011). Consumer guilt in marketing interactions: An exploratory study of critical incidents. *Management World*, (9), 116-126.
- He, H., & Ding, D. (2016). Guilt: A beneficial negative emotion. *Psychological Research*, 9(1), 3-8.
- Hu, J., Wan, Q., & Xiong, L. (2018). Customer-oriented deviance: A new direction in hospitality service research. *Tourism and Hospitality Prospects*,

2(6), 69-74.

Jiang, L., & Shi, M. (2017). The relationship between corporate donation and consumer response based on emotional perception. *Consumer Economics*, 33(4), 52-58.

Li, J., Luo, J., Liu, H., & Qin, H. (2014). How should service employees respond to customer incompatibility? Examining compatibility management effectiveness of employee response styles and effort levels. *Luojia Management Review*, 8(002), 119-129.

Li, P., Zhou, Y., Wang, Z., & Sun, Y. (2020). Borrowing flowers to offer Buddha: Customer-oriented deviance. *Advances in Psychological Science*, 28(12), 2150-2159.

Li, T. (2018). *Is customer orientation really considerate? Research on the impact of customer-oriented deviation on customer brand attitude* (Master's thesis). Jinan University, Guangzhou.

Lü, X., Xu, H., & Yang, Y. (2011). Research on tourist power from a supply chain perspective. *Tourism Tribune*, 26(11), 34-38.

Tian, Y., Lu, D., & Powpaka, S. (2015). Tourist awe and loyalty: An explanation based on emotion appraisal theory. *Tourism Tribune*, 30(10).

Tu, M. (2020). The double-edged sword effect of customer-oriented deviation. *China Business and Market*, 34(10), 80-89.

Wang, J., & Wu, L. (2015). Categories, dimensions, and mechanisms of emotion in pro-environmental behavior research. *Advances in Psychological Science*, 23(12).

Wang, Y., Liu, J., & Sun, G. (2020). Acquaintance or stranger: For whom do consumers change? The impact of different types of others' presence on consumer variety-seeking behavior. *Journal of Central University of Finance and Economics*, (4), 91-97.

Wang, Y., Deng, H., & Lan, Y. (2020). The impact of coworker incivility on employee work withdrawal behavior: Based on belongingness need theory. *Human Resources Development of China*, 37(12), 45-57.

Zhang, H., Bai, C., & Chen, Y. (2012). Research on the relationship between hotel employees' psychological ownership and boundary-spanning behavior. *Tourism Tribune*, 27(4), 82-90.

Zhang, J., Liu, H., & Guo, W. (2020). Cloudy or sunny? Research on the impact of leader emotion on employee work engagement. *Human Resources Development of China*, 37(4), 6-19.

Zhou, H., Long, L., & Wang, Y. (2016). Overall justice, affective commitment, and employee deviance: A multi-foci perspective analysis. *Management Review*, 28(11), 162-169.

English references follow the same format as in the original text, preserving all citation details.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv – Machine translation. Verify with original.