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Holiday Shopping Madness: When Do Consumers Seek to Punish Fellow Shoppers for Behaving Badly?

Consumers seek to punish fellow consumers who violate social norms while shopping but also make exceptions depending on the situation, according to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#).

“Punishment is a complex decision for consumers to make as it is difficult to punish someone but also difficult to look the other way. Consumers do not seem to make these decisions lightly, and a number of interesting factors influence consumer punishment decisions,” write authors Lily Lin, Darren W. Dahl (both University of British Columbia), and Jennifer J. Argo (University of Alberta).

Consumers are expected to follow numerous social norms while shopping. Yet violations of these norms are also very common. For example, some consumers may cut in front of others while waiting in line for a cashier at the supermarket, while others may take multiple free samples when they aren’t supposed to or create a huge mess at a store display. How do consumers respond when other shoppers “break the rules” in their presence?

One study revealed that consumers were less likely to punish another consumer for creating a mess if they had already been punished by a store employee. Other studies showed that consumers were also less likely to punish a fellow consumer for cutting in line if that person had experienced adversity due to a situation (a computer glitch during airport check-in) or a negative physical attribute beyond their personal control (obesity due to a medical condition).

Another interesting study showed that consumers were less likely to want to punish a fellow consumer who was late for an appointment if this individual had higher status. In this instance, the consumer in the higher status position was held to a different standard and excused for their bad behavior.

“We all have frequent interactions with other consumers in shopping environments and can attest to times when other shoppers haven’t behaved properly. Companies need to be aware of how this could negatively affect their business since these types of conflicts can affect how consumers make decisions and evaluate their shopping experience,” the authors conclude.

Lily Lin, Darren W. Dahl, and Jennifer J. Argo. “Do the Crime, Always Do the Time? Insights into Consumer-to-Consumer Punishment Decisions.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: June 2013. For more information, contact Darren Dahl (darren.dahl@sauder.ubc.ca) or visit <http://ejcr.org/>.

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