Why do showroomers experience feelings of guilt?

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Abstract

Due to the development of information technology (IT), consumers have multiple online as well as offline channels for the information search and purchasing. A common way to utilize both offline and online channels is *showrooming behavior*, where customers browse products in physical stores and compare them online for a potential purchase. Although the ethics of showrooming has been debated and consumer guilt has been studied in many contexts, reasons for potential feelings of guilt among showroomers have not been studied. Therefore, this qualitative study examines why showroomers experience feelings of guilt. 120 showrooming diary entries written by 24 Finnish consumers were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings show that many showroomers experience feelings of guilt due to five main reasons: (1) utilization of store services, (2) doubts about the store's profitability, (3) social interaction with staff, (4) disruption to other customers, and (5) the moment of exiting the store. The findings contribute theoretically by identifying the main reasons for showroomers' guilt and by enriching also the broader discussion of consumer guilt. Based on the findings, the study also offers recommendations for practitioners who aim to either encourage customers to showroom on their own online channels or aim to reduce showrooming behavior in their physical stores.

Keywords

showrooming, showrooming behavior, showroomers, guilt, consumer guilt

1. Introduction

Due to the development of IT, today's consumers have multiple online as well as offline channels available for information search, product comparison, and purchasing. Therefore, many consumers utilize the opportunity to get the best aspects of offline and online channels during their purchase journey (Daunt & Harris, 2017). A consumer behavior where consumers first examine products in offline channels – the physical stores – and then buy or compare products for potential purchase online is referred to as *showrooming behavior* (Rapp et al., 2015). Showrooming behavior is very common: industry reports show that 55% of US consumers showroomed in 2023 and 63% in 2024 (Salsify, 2025). Showroomers often buy via competing retailers' online channels (Spaid et al., 2019), referred to as competitive showrooming, but also loyal showrooming via the same retailer's online channels exists (Schneider & Zielke, 2020). Competitive showrooming can lead to a decrease in sales in physical stores (Fassnacht et al., 2019) and stress among salespeople (Rapp et al., 2015). Therefore, it has been categorized as channel free-riding (Heitz-Spahn, 2013).

Because of the aforementioned reasons, it would be understandable if some showroomers experienced feelings of guilt while showrooming. Also, prior research suggests that some showroomer segments experience bad conscience (Fiestas & Tuzovic, 2021; Schneider & Zielke, 2020). Additionally, feelings of guilt have been briefly mentioned among other findings concerning

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showroomers' experiences (Arora et al., 2022). Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine further why showroomers experience feelings of guilt. Understanding showroomers' potential guilt experiences and where they stem from is important to better comprehend the debated phenomenon of showrooming. Also, concerning guilt, emotions have been shown to play an important role in customer experience in general (Susan et al., 2011).

However, there is a research gap in understanding why showroomers experience feelings of guilt. Although some showrooming studies mention guilt or bad conscience experienced by showroomers (Arora et al., 2022; Fiestas & Tuzovic, 2021; Schneider & Zielke, 2020), none of these studies focuses on guilt or addresses why it is experienced. Also, concerning showroomers' store visits, Kayal et al. (2017) identified a research gap regarding consumers' guilt for not buying from a salesperson who spends time and effort for a consumer. Also in general, showrooming behavior has been mainly studied from the perspective of its antecedents, outcomes, and retailers' interventions (Fiestas & Tuzovic, 2021) with less studies focusing on showroomers' subjective experiences. As showrooming behavior is a complex phenomenon, Fiestas and Tuzovic (2021) call for an in-depth understanding of showroomers' emotions. Concerning guilt, Saintives (2020) calls for research on guilt experienced on offline versus online channels. Lastly, qualitative research on showrooming behavior has been called for (Kokho Sit & Hoang, 2018).

Therefore, the research question of this study is: *Why do showroomers experience feelings of guilt?* To answer this question, we collected and analyzed 120 diary entries about showrooming written by 24 participants. The study contributes to research by identifying five main reasons why showroomers experience feelings of guilt. By doing so, it opens the discussion for showroomers' guilt research and also contributes to the broader discussion on consumer guilt. Additionally, the study contributes practically by providing nine actionable recommendations for retailers based on the findings.

The article is structured as follows: In section two, we provide a literature review on consumer guilt and showrooming behavior. In section three, data collection and data analysis procedures of our empirical study are described. Section four presents the findings of the study and in section five, we conclude by discussing the findings and providing theoretical and practical contributions, limitations of the study, and proposals for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Consumer guilt

Psychologically, guilt is an evaluative self-conscious emotion which is usually perceived as "negative" by nature. Differing from primary emotions (fear, anger, pleasure, and joy), feeling guilt requires cognitive capabilities to self-conscious evaluation of one's behavior (Lewis, 1995). Temporally, it can be experienced as reactive guilt in response to one's actions against one's moral standards or as anticipatory guilt when contemplating or planning such acts (Rawlings, 1970). Guilt can also be categorized based on who or what is perceived to be violated. Here, guilt can be experienced as intrapsychic guilt, where guilt is experienced as a "personal punishment" due to acting against one's inner values. On the other hand, guilt can also be interpersonal, where an individual not only acts against their own moral values but knows having perpetrated an interpersonal transgression. Thus, interpersonal guilt can push one "to act appropriately, with the advantage of being well accepted in the group they belong to" (Carnì et al., 2013: 338). Additionally, guilt can also be experienced without transgression, for instance, if an individual perceives their situation as better than others', without even being responsible for the inequity (Baumeister et al., 1994). In addition to being an emotion, guilt can also be perceived as a personality trait of an individual, defined as "generalized expectancy for self-mediated punishment for violating, anticipating violating, or failing to attain an internalized moral standard" (Mosher, 1980: 602). However, in this study, we refer to guilt as an emotion, not as a personality trait.

In the consumer context, Lascu (1991: 290) defined consumer guilt as "an affect triggered by the anxiety a consumer experiences upon the cognition that he/she is transgressing a moral, societal, or ethical principle. The transgression can be purchasing a product, service, idea, or experience (i.e., a brand that does not abide by quality standards), or not purchasing a product prescribed by moral, societal, or ethical principles". Thus, consumer guilt covers both intrapsychic guilt and interpersonal guilt. Similarly, consumer guilt is perceived as a negative emotion that arises "from a consumer decision that violates one's values or norms" (Burnett & Lunsford, 1994: 33).

Building on the work of Burnett and Lunsford (1994), Martins et al. (2024) suggest five dimensions as sources of consumer guilt: health guilt (about buying something the individual believes is not good for their health), extravagance guilt (about buying products that augment pleasure and are considered enjoyable, such as impulse buying), misevaluation guilt (upon a purchase decision based on an erroneous assessment of alternatives or an assessment made in the absence of all relevant information to make a decision), social influence guilt (about purchasing something that reference groups do not appreciate), and ethics and sustainability guilt (due to the purchase of products that may jeopardize responsible decisions towards society or environment). In more detail, the ethics and sustainability guilt consists of social responsibility guilt and guilt to others. Social influence guilt, on the other hand, consists of violation of social standards. Misevaluation guilt, on the other hand, could be perceived as intrapsychic guilt that consists of time-related and information-related guilt, where a consumer perceives lack of time or information in their unsuccessful purchase decision as a reason for the guilt they are feeling.

Prior findings on consumer guilt shed light to the phenomenon. Consumer guilt has been studied from many perspectives, such as purchase intention of domestic products (Mishra et al., 2023) and fair trade (Lindenmeier et al., 2017). As consumers, women are suggested to experience guilt more than men (Hanks & Mattila, 2014), especially in individual cultures (Kayal et al., 2017). Saintives and Lunardo (2016) find that after negative feedback from peers, high levels of guilt decrease purchase intentions. Resonating with the socio-technical perspective, consumer guilt has been studied through topics that combine the technological component and ethical perspectives. Makkonen et al. (2024) found that online shoppers are using multiple neutralization techniques for their anticipated guilt from irresponsible online shopping behaviors. Kim et al. (2023) found that consumers experience less anticipatory guilt with non-human agents and, thus, more probably engage in unethical consumer behaviors, such as lying for customer service chatbots about the reason for returning a product to get a free return shipping. According to Saintives (2020), when the perceived value of a purchase is purely hedonic, individuals feel guiltier about an in-store purchase compared to an online purchase. However, online channels are not guilty-free arenas, as Bennett (2009) suggests that consumer guilt is often felt after impulsive online purchases. Also, Kayal et al. (2017) suggest that consumer guilt would be experienced more strongly in online channels compared to offline channels. Therefore, there are conflicting views on which channel consumer guilt is experienced more.

2.2. Showrooming behavior as a socio-technical phenomenon

Rapp et al. (2015) present one of the first definitions of showrooming behavior as "a practice whereby consumers visit a brick-and-mortar retail store to (1) evaluate products or services first-hand and (2) use mobile technology while in-store to compare products for potential purchase via any number of channels". The verb "to showroom" originally refers to physical showrooms, for example at trade fairs, where consumers can familiarize themselves with sample products and place an order instead of getting the chosen product with them right away (Fan et al., 2021; Rapp et al., 2015). In the age of e-commerce, showrooming has been given a new meaning of the combined use of offline and online channels during one's consumer journey. This type of showrooming is possible in the omnichannel environment (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013) where retailer's offline and online purchasing channels coexist inseparably. Showrooming behavior can be viewed from the socio-technical perspective, where studying the continuous interaction of the social and technical component is central (Lee, 2004; Sarker et al., 2019). We argue that showrooming behavior emerges

in a hybrid environment where the social and technical components are intertwined. In this hybrid environment, showroomers interact with social and organizational actors, which constitute the social component. These actors can be, for instance, salespeople (Fiestas & Tuzovic, 2021), other customers, ethical principles (Burns et al., 2018), and organizational policies of the retailer, such as price matching strategies (Zeng & Hou, 2024). Simultaneously, the technical component of showrooming behavior constitutes of showroomers' usage of retailers' mobile applications (Brubakken et al., 2024), customer-facing in-store technologies (Holkkola et al., 2025), search engines, and online stores with mobile (Chimborazo-Azogue et al., 2021; Fiestas & Tuzovic, 2021) and stationary devices. Also voice assistants, chatbots, and voice and image search can be utilized (Quinones et al., 2023).

Although omnichannel research emphasizes the interaction between the channels, few studies on showrooming behavior have explicitly framed showrooming as a socio-technical phenomenon (Maurion, 2017). If located on a social-technical continuum (Sarker et al., 2019), our literature review shows that research on showrooming behavior includes studies with an equal emphasis on social and technical components (Brubakken et al., 2024; Chimborazo-Azogue et al., 2021) as well as studies leaning more on the sociocentric research (Burns et al., 2018; Holkkola et al., 2025; Rapp et al., 2015; Schneider & Zielke, 2020). Although only implicitly, studies with equal emphasis on the social and technical component have examined, for instance, the efficiency of real-time information provided by in-store Internet of Things (IoT) technologies in reducing competitive showrooming (Brubakken et al., 2024) and consumers' acceptance and use intention of mobile showrooming (Chimborazo-Azogue et al., 2021). Showrooming studies which we categorize having a more sociocentric approach have examined, for instance, consumers' views on showrooming and its ethicality (Burns et al., 2018), consumers' emotions evoked by in-store QR codes enabling loyal showrooming (Holkkola et al., 2025), salespeople's perspective on witnessing showrooming behavior (Rapp et al., 2015), and psychographic factors of showroomer segments (Schneider & Zielke, 2020). Thus, showrooming behavior has been studied with a more sociocentric approach as well as with an equal emphasis on social and technical components.

In Information Systems (IS) science, Burns et al. (2018) define showrooming as "the activity of shopping in bricks-and-mortar stores and partaking in their services without payment, but making the purchase from a lower priced online retailer". Although lower prices of online stores are associated with showrooming behavior, studies have also found more antecedents to showroom (Holkkola et al., 2024). According to prior research, showroomers are motivated to visit physical stores due to the perceived value of in-store product search (Arora et al., 2020) and desire for offline customer service (Burns et al., 2018). On the other hand, showroomers are motivated to purchase via online channels due to better assortment and the aforementioned lower prices (Arora & Sahney, 2018). Thus, showroomers can get the best of both offline and online shopping. However, if the physical store serves only as a showroom for competitive showroomers, it is logical to think that some showroomers might feel guilty about their behavior.

In the context of showrooming and guilt, Da Silva et al. (2022) suggest that customers' moral feelings decrease showrooming behavior. These moral feelings are developed by a sense of commitment and duty toward concluding the store visit with a purchase (da Silva et al., 2022). Also, if customers are aware of the environmental impact of home delivery, customers tend to buy in-store instead of showrooming, and bad conscience has been found to increase this effect (Miquel-Romero et al., 2025). Dahl et al. (2005) suggest that consumers feel more guilt when they do not make a purchase in a physical store if they felt a social connection to a salesperson. Also, these customers are more likely to try and compensate for their guilt by, for instance, making future purchases (Dahl et al., 2005). It is also suggested that, in general, some showroomer segments experience bad conscience more than other showrooming segments (Fiestas & Tuzovic, 2021; Schneider & Zielke, 2020).

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection

To study the subjective experiences of showroomers, we chose a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research approach is useful for studying new phenomena and for collecting data on subjective experiences (Myers, 2019). We chose to collect data from participants in a diary form. This enabled participants to capture their transitory showrooming experiences in a self-reflective way, which enabled gaining new insights related to everyday situations (Hyers, 2018). Diary data was collected as part of a Master's course in a Finnish university. Most participants were young adults: fourth- and fifth-year university students. Finnish young adults showroom more than older adults, and the generational difference is especially significant in showrooming simultaneously while being in the physical store (Holkkola et al., 2022). Socially, Finnish young adult consumers are partly guided by the need for integration: they want to show obedience and affiliate to consumer groups, such as sustainable or reasonable consumers (Syrjälä et al., 2015). Young adult consumers in Finland are also suggested to have more responsible consumer values than underage consumers (Wilska et al., 2023) and more economic concerns than older population (Ranta et al., 2020).

Data collection took place during April and May 2025. The participants were assigned to keep a diary about showrooming behavior. Each participant was instructed to report five cases of showrooming and write about the showrooming situation and environment, what added value the digital channel brought, and emotions felt during the showrooming. To prevent data bias, we did not ask specifically about guilt but about emotions in general, as we wanted participants to describe their emotions in their own words without the task directing them to focus on any specific emotion. Participants were instructed that they could showroom, for instance, in brick-and-mortar stores, grocery stores, and restaurants. At the time of the assignment, the students had already familiarized themselves with the concept of showrooming with a lecture, reading assignment, and writing assignment. Showrooming could be both competitive and loyal. It could also consist of online information search while in-store, without necessarily buying online (Rapp et al., 2015). Students were given a chance to opt out from giving their diaries for research use and it was emphasized that opting out would not affect grading. In total, 24 students volunteered that their diaries can be used as research data. Because each participant delivered five diary entries, the data consists of 120 diary entries. Table 1 presents the sex of the participants, the product categories they showroomed, and whether their diary entries described feelings of guilt.

Table 1
Information on participants' showrooming diaries

Participant	Sex	Product categories	Guilt described
P1	Female	Food, Books, Food, Electronics, Books	Yes
P2	Male	Kitchen utensils, Kitchen utensils, Accessories, Food, Shoes	Yes
P3	Female	Furniture, Electronics, Food, Car, Shoes	Yes
P4	Male	Shoes, Décor, Décor, Luxury, Books	Yes
P5	Female	Food, Books, Hardware, Sports, Books	Yes
P6	Male	Food, Food, Fashion, Food, Books	No
P7	Female	Books, Food, Cosmetics, Fashion, Sports	Yes

Participant	Sex	Product categories	Guilt described
P8	Female	Décor, Cosmetics, Cosmetics, Fashion, Furniture	Yes
P9	Male	Sports, Electronics, Shoes, Food, Food	No
P10	Male	Fashion, Electronics, Shoes, Accessories, Electronics	Yes
P11	Female	Accessories, Shoes, Fashion, Electronics, Books	No
P12	Female	Fashion, Electronics, Cosmetics, Food, Food	No
P13	Female	Cosmetics, Books, Optician, Cosmetics, Fashion	Yes
P14	Male	Fashion, Food, Hardware, Optician, Electronics	No
P15	Male	Food, Sports, Sports, Electronics, Furniture	Yes
P16	Female	Food, Pets, Shoes, Food, Food	Yes
P17	Male	Food, Sports, Electronics, Fashion, Food	Yes
P18	Female	Cosmetics, Books, Food, Fashion, Food	Yes
P19	Female	Food, Furniture, Food, Fashion, Cosmetics	No
P20	Female	Hardware, Hardware, Hardware, Hardware, Hardware	No
P21	Female	Books, Fashion, Shoes, Electronics, Cosmetics	Yes
P22	Male	Shoes, Books, Gifts, Electronics, Decor	No
P23	Female	Sports, Accessories, Fashion, Massage, Food	Yes
P24	Male	Fashion, Sports, Electronics, Fashion, Food	Yes

3.2. Data analysis

After the data collection was finished, all 120 diary entries were collected into a single-line spaced text document which became 49 pages long. The diaries were carefully read by two researchers, who then discussed the initial observations together. After that, diary entries that explicitly reported feelings of guilt, such as “I felt guilty”, or similar expressions, such as “I felt bad leaving without buying anything”, were listed in Microsoft Excel. This resulted in 28 showrooming cases, meaning that approximately one of four diary entries explicitly reported feelings of guilt. Next, diary entries that described guilt were re-read and thematic analysis (Myers, 2019) was used inductively to identify the reasons why showroomers experienced feelings of guilt. The initial themes were formed by two researchers. After identifying the most prevalent themes, the final themes were formed and named. This resulted in five themes which represent the five main reasons why showroomers experience

feelings of guilt. They are presented in the next section. Lastly, the quotations were translated from Finnish to English.

4. Findings

Based on the analysis, we find that most participants reported feelings of guilt in at least one of their diary entries. In total, 28 diary entries explicitly described feelings of guilt. Based on the analysis, we find five main reasons for showroomers' guilt. These are (1) utilization of store services, (2) doubts about the store's profitability, (3) social interaction with staff, (4) disruption to other customers, (5), and (5) the moment of exiting the store. These findings are presented in their own sub-sections below.

4.1. Utilization of store services

When showrooming, participants reported feeling guilty for utilizing the services of physical stores. This included the possibility to physically examine and fit the products as well as utilizing time and knowledge of staff. Those participants who were competitive showroomers felt guilty of utilizing these services because they perceived they were taking advantage of the physical store by utilizing its services without making a purchase from the same retailers' channels.

Firstly, showrooming journals showed that participants felt guilty for utilizing the possibility of fitting products. For instance, P1, P17, and P15 fitted the products they were planning to buy online. They got the certainty of the correct size and feel of products in physical stores but purchased the products from competitors' online stores. They described how this caused them feelings of guilt:

I wanted to make sure the size and fit of running shoes were correct before purchasing. --- After fitting them, I ordered the shoes from another [retailer's] online store on sale, even though I felt a little guilty about taking advantage of the store's service without making a purchase. (P1)

I knew in advance that I could order the shoes for a significantly lower price from a foreign online store, from which I would make my purchase if the shoes fit my foot and were comfortable. While trying on the shoes, I somehow felt a small sense of guilt. (P17)

I felt a bit conflicted when I left the store without buying a [golf] putter, as I only took advantage of the fitting opportunity. The better price and wide selection online ultimately influenced my decision to buy online, although visiting the store helped ensure the products' fit. (P15)

Secondly, participants experienced guilt for the utilization of staff's knowledge and help. In these cases, guilt was not reported in relation to social interaction with staff but more broadly to the utilization of store resources, in which staff belongs to. In other words, according to the journals, some participants did not feel guilt towards the staff on a personal level, but more towards the company whose staff's work time they were taking up. For instance, P16 reported feeling bad to leave the store without buying when she had received service and taken up staff's time. Also, P4 and P8 described how utilizing staff's time and resources feels bad when engaging in competitive showrooming:

I was already pretty sure about which shoes I wanted and knew the price online. I feel pretty bad about wasting the store staff's time and resources pretending to be interested in buying from them, only to end up buying the same product cheaper online later. (P4)

When trying out concealers, I had a hard time deciding which color would best suit my skin tone, and I didn't want to ask the salesperson for help, knowing that I wasn't buying the product from there. I feel

like I didn't want to waste the salesperson's time, because I wouldn't be bringing in any revenue for the company. (P8)

4.2. Doubts about the store's profitability

According to the showrooming journals, participants experienced feelings of guilt when having doubts about physical stores' profitability. Their desire to support local businesses, their sadness about witnessing an empty store, and their desire that money goes to the rightful address seemed to lead to feelings of guilt when showrooming competitively. P5 describes how she experienced feelings of guilt when showrooming in a small local store:

The feeling of feel-good consumption arose from the fact that when I buy from an [organic] store, I support a small brick-and-mortar business and buy second-hand, saving natural resources. However, the feeling also led to the idea that I should buy something because it will only lead to positive consequences. (P5)

Concerning the profitability doubts, participants seemed to feel sad about witnessing an empty store when they were engaging in showrooming behavior in the same store. They seemed to feel that it is unethical to showroom in a physical store which already has few customers. P3 describes her feelings of guilt and pity when she entered a furniture store where she intended to showroom:

The store was quiet when we arrived, maybe even too quiet. We were greeted by three salespeople, and one of them immediately came over to ask what we were looking for. --- I felt ashamed and sorry for the store because of the showrooming. Three salespeople in a quiet store made me wonder if the store was doing badly [financially]. (P3)

Some of the participants also showed signs of hoping that their money will go to the right party. For instance, P4 was thinking at the bookstore whether an author will get the same compensation from a sold copy in offline versus online channels. Thus, although not necessarily acting true to their ideals, they preferred that a rightful compensation would be paid regardless of their potential showrooming behavior.

4.3. Social interaction with staff

Participants described feelings of guilt related to social interaction with staff. Here, the emphasis was more on the social situation than on utilizing the company's resources. In social interaction with staff, showroomers reported feeling guilt due to friendliness of the salesperson and lying for the salesperson.

Friendliness of the salesperson made participants feel guilty for their competitive showrooming. For instance, when testing a bed in-store and intending to buy it via second hand online channels, "the helpfulness of the salesperson" made P3 feel embarrassed and guilty. Participants seemed to think that if they have interacted with staff and had a friendly conversation, they personally owe something to that salesperson: purchasing from them, not via online channels. P13 and P16 emphasize the friendliness and helpfulness of the salesperson when describing their feelings of guilt during their showrooming behavior:

When I search for the book online on my phone [in a physical store], I immediately notice that the book is significantly cheaper in another [retailer's] online store, but something tells me that I should buy the book in the brick-and-mortar store, because of the nice salesperson. (P13)

As usual, I always feel uncomfortable in a store if I have to leave without buying anything. ---- Because of the salesperson's kindness and help, I somehow feel like I owe them, that I got to buy the shoes I tried on. (P16)

Some participants reported lying to the salesperson while showrooming, which also caused them guilt. The combination of competitive showrooming and lying about it during the social interaction was described leading to feelings of guilt. For instance, P16 reported coming up with an excuse why she cannot buy a bag of dog food now and how her spouse will buy it later. After lying to the salesperson about her showrooming behavior, she felt guilty and therefore bought a dog treat. Also, P8 and P17 describe their feelings of guilt while showrooming and lying about it to the salesperson:

I asked the salesperson to open the locked cabinet, and they helped me sniff around the different [perfume] options and finally I found the best one. I told the salesperson that I would think about it, knowing that I was not going to buy the product from the store. At this point I felt guilty because I knew I was lying to the salesperson and they had even helped me find the best option. (P8)

The salesperson got more involved when they noticed me trying on the shoes [which P17 had told the salesperson he was just looking at], and they clearly started to more and more sell me the shoes. When I knew deep down that I wasn't going to buy the shoes, I somehow felt the need to skirt the subject and even lie to the salesperson a little about it. (P17)

4.4. Disruption to other customers

When showrooming, feelings of guilt were experienced due to the perceived disruption to other customers. This was because of two main reasons. Firstly, showroomers perceived that they may block other customers' view or way. Secondly, showroomers anticipated that they will arise disapproval in other customers if being recognized as showroomers. P24 describes how he was experiencing feelings of guilt when showrooming in a crowded coffee shop, trying not to block other customers' way.

I went to the store in the middle of the day that day, so the store was full. Of all the places I wrote my showrooming diary in, this was the most challenging, as there is hardly any time in the store to look at the selection without ordering anything. This made me feel stupid, as I let the queue get ahead of me and continued to browse the selection before leaving the store. This caused a little stress, even though I knew that looking at the selection and leaving the store was not in itself reprehensible behavior. (P24)

Also, some participants anticipated that their showrooming behavior will arise disapproval in other customers due to ethical perspectives. Thus, they seemed to perceive that some customers might be annoyed when witnessing competitive showrooming. P5 describes how showrooming in front of other customers as well as staff makes her guilty on a regular basis:

Going to a secondhand bookstore opened up a new way of processing my previous emotional experiences, and I noticed that the same pressure to make a purchase decision was present every time I went to a brick-and-mortar store. I believe the feeling stems from social pressure when the salespeople and other customers see me looking but not buying. (P5)

4.5. The moment of exiting the store

In showrooming journals, feelings of guilt were often reported when exiting the store. That particular moment arose feelings of guilt for many reasons. Participants described feeling guilty for exiting without buying. Guilt was heightened if the store was one they thought people usually would not leave without buying something. Another aspect that increased guilt was if the checkout was near exit doors. Also, some participants even associated exiting the store without buying with shoplifting, hoping that no one would associate them with such an act.

Some participants felt guilty for exiting the store without buying anything. For instance, P13 who was showrooming contact lenses felt "awkward to leave empty-handed" (P13) from an optician's

store, so she left some eyeglass frames on reserve. Some of the participants were even loyal showroomers intending to buy from the same retailer's online channel, but they still felt guilty for leaving the store without purchasing anything at that moment. P16 reflected on how she anticipated the moment of exiting the store:

The salesperson came to ask me if I needed any help. I replied that I was just looking at the products, after which I became a little nervous. I think this nervous feeling was because I was about to leave the store without buying anything. (P16)

Leaving a store without buying anything seemed to cause guilt of varying intensity depending on the type of store. This seemed to be related to how common participants thought it to be to leave different types of stores without buying anything. P24 described how exiting a kiosk where consumers usually buy something made him feel guilty:

When I engaged in showrooming behavior, I felt a little ashamed, because the situation felt pointless in a certain way, since people usually buy something from a kiosk and don't leave "empty-handed". (P24)

Also, the location of the checkout affected feelings of guilt when leaving the store. The easier it was for other people to notice that the showroomer was leaving the store empty-handed past the checkout, the more participants seemed to feel guilty. P5 described this phenomenon:

The pressure of buying from a brick-and-mortar store can be increased by placing the checkout near the doors. There is no similar pressure in an online store, and I can go and look at the product offering without any further thoughts or worries about it. (P5)

Some of the participants associated walking past the checkouts without buying anything with shoplifting. Although they knew they were not stealing but showrooming, they felt guilt about looking like a potential shoplifter. To prevent this association, impulse purchases could be made:

I feel embarrassed and guilty if I don't buy anything – it feels like I'm looking like a thief. Who is going to the grocery store just to look? So I buy small impulse purchases near the checkout: loose candy, tissues and a bottle of soda. (P16)

5. Discussion

In this qualitative study, we examined why showroomers experience feelings of guilt. By doing so, the study addresses the research gap of the experiential side of showrooming behavior and, in particular, showroomers' feelings of guilt. As a result of thematic analysis of empirical data consisting of 120 showrooming diary entries written by 24 Finnish consumers, we find five main reasons why showroomers experience feelings of guilt. These are (1) utilization of store services, (2) doubts about the store's profitability, (3) social interaction with staff, (4) disruption to other customers, and (5) the moment of exiting the store. The findings are visualized in Figure 1 and discussed below.

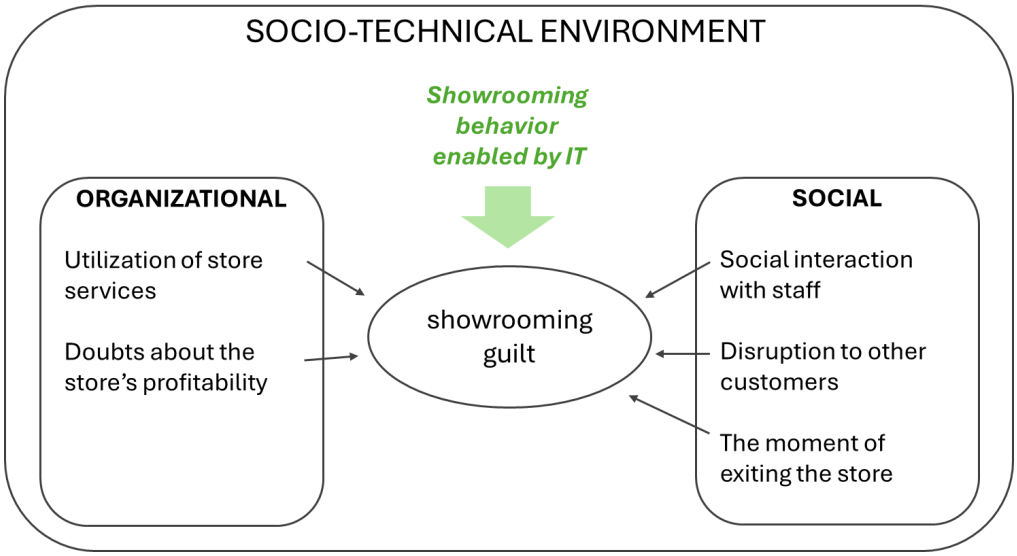

Figure 1: Reasons for showrooming guilt.

Based on our findings, the five reasons for showrooming guilt emerge in the hybrid environment where the technological component together with social and organizational component enable showrooming behavior. Showrooming guilt emerges for many showroomers when engaging in this socio-technical behavior. The reasons for showrooming guilt relate to social and organizational components in particular. The technical component is not found as a root cause of showrooming guilt but, instead, an intertwined enabler of showrooming behavior. We believe that for showroomers, the technical component serves more as an enabling actor than as a source of guilt because in showrooming behavior, the technical component is not perceived as violated. Based on our findings, organizational reasons why showrooming guilt is experienced are utilization of store services and doubts about the store's profitability. Social reasons why showrooming guilt is experienced consist of social interaction with staff, disruption to other customers, and the moment of exiting the store.

In more detail, guilt for utilization of store services includes opportunities to fit products as well as utilizing time and knowledge of salespeople. Based on our findings, some showroomers also feel guilty if they have reason to suspect that the store is doing poorly. The doubts about the store's profitability may arise, for instance, if the store has no other customers inside. We believe that these showroomers' desire to support local businesses and the desire that money goes to the rightful address are causing the guilt. Indeed, many young adult consumers in Finland strive to be responsible in their consumption choices (Syrjälä et al., 2015; Wilska et al., 2023). Also, the findings show that when social interaction with staff is perceived as friendly, many showroomers feel guilty about their behavior, as if they personally owe the friendly salesperson a favor. Another root cause of showroomers' guilt during social interaction is lying to the salesperson. Concerning disrupting other customers, it seems that perceiving to block other customers' view or way is one of the root causes for showroomers' guilt. Another root cause is that showroomers anticipate that they will arise disapproval in other customers if being recognized as showroomers. This, again, speaks of the pursuit of affiliating to the responsible consumer group (Syrjälä et al., 2015). Lastly, we find that many showroomers anticipate the moment of exiting the store empty-handed. Based on the findings, this guilt is heightened if the store is not usually exited without buying anything, if checkouts are near exit doors, or if showroomers associate exiting a store without buying with shoplifting. Thus, there are multiple reasons for showrooming guilt, and we believe that they can affect showrooming guilt both separately and together.

5.1. Theoretical contributions

The study makes a theoretical contribution by identifying five main reasons for showroomers' guilt. To our best knowledge, this is the first time when the reasons for showroomers' guilt have been studied. Thus, the study provides novel findings and opens a dialogue for future showrooming guilt research. Additionally, the findings strengthen the body of knowledge more broadly, both in the research areas of consumer guilt and showrooming.

Based on our findings, guilt is not experienced by all showroomers or in all showrooming situations of an individual. However, there are many showroomers who at least sometimes experience feelings of guilt. Concerning reactive guilt and anticipatory guilt (Rawlings, 1970), our findings show that showroomers experience both. Some showroomers experience reactive guilt from their showrooming behavior, and some showroomers experience anticipatory guilt already when thinking of their showrooming plan. Concerning intrapsychic guilt and interpersonal guilt (Baumeister et al., 1994; Carnì et al., 2013), we propose that showroomers experience both. Based on our findings, some showroomers perceive that showrooming is utilization of store services and causes disruption to other customers, making these showroomers' guilt interpersonal. In other words, they perceive violating other people or their businesses by their showrooming behavior. For some showroomers, utilization of store services and disruption to other customers may also cause intrapsychic guilt if they personally consider their behavior unethical. For those showroomers who perceive showrooming behavior as ethical per se, intrapsychic guilt can be experienced when lying to salespeople while showrooming. Here, white lies about, for instance, one's reasons to exit the store do not violate salespeople but are against some showroomers' inner values. Similarly, Kim et al. (2023) found that lying to human staff causes consumer guilt, compared to lying to an online store chatbot.

Our finding that the moment of exiting the store causes guilt for showroomers is in line with showroomers' sense of commitment toward concluding the store visit with a purchase (da Silva et al., 2022). Our finding of social interaction with staff is in line with Dahl et al.'s (2005) finding that feeling a social connection to a salesperson increases consumer guilt if the consumer will not buy anything. Similarly with Dahl et al. (2005), we also find that some showroomers compensate for their guilt with purchases. This can happen if a showroomer is experiencing anticipated guilt about the moment of exiting the store empty-handed and mitigates this by buying something small.

Concerning the dimensions of consumer guilt (Burnett & Lunsford, 1994; Martins et al., 2024), our findings bring a new perspective. The consumer guilt dimensions only cover guilt about *what* is bought, while our five reasons for showroomers' guilt focus on *how* something is bought. Concerning the misevaluation guilt (Martins et al., 2024), we believe that some showroomers may utilize multiple channels to prevent this type of consumer guilt. Indeed, it has been suggested that consumers engage in showrooming to increase their price consciousness (Dahana et al., 2018), enhance the product evaluation (Rajkumar et al., 2021), and decrease the perceived risk related to the purchase decision (Dahana et al., 2018). Thus, we believe that as the product comparison and the expected price range of the chosen product have been informed by multiple channels, showroomers can mitigate the anticipated misevaluation guilt. However, when misevaluation guilt from a purchase with insufficient background information is mitigated by showrooming, consumers may feel showrooming guilt instead, which was shown in this study.

5.2. Practical contributions

Based on our findings, we provide actionable recommendations for retailers concerning physical stores. We offer recommendations for two types of retailers: those who would like to encourage customers to loyal showrooming on their own online channels and, on the other hand, those who would like to reduce showrooming behavior. Our recommendations for retailers who would like to encourage customers to loyal showrooming are as follows: Firstly, communicate to customers that it is not unethical to utilize the store services (fit the products, get help from salespeople) and buy via your online store. Secondly, to reduce feelings of guilt and to encourage customers to loyal

showrooming, the online store should be linked to the physical store by providing customer-facing in-store technologies. Thirdly, salespeople should be informed to offer help also for those customers who are "just looking". Fourthly, to reduce feelings of guilt about exiting the store without buying, the checkouts could be located in another place than right next to the exit.

Our recommendations for retailers who would like to reduce showrooming behavior are as follows: Firstly, provide customers with extraordinary facilities of fitting products. For instance, a shoe retailer could provide a shoe fitting area with different surfaces to walk on. Thus, the in-store experience will offer an outstanding advantage for customers, and potential showroomers may feel too much guilt to showroom competitively. Secondly, instruct the salespeople to socially connect with the customers they are helping. Thirdly, concerning customers' doubts about the store's profitability, communicate to customers that business cannot run without paying customers. Fourthly, concerning the moment of exiting the store, locate the checkout next to the exit. Fifthly, concerning other customers, locate a possible waiting area so that it seems that customers in the queue easily see when potential showroomers walk past the checkouts to exit the store.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This study has two main limitations. Firstly, the study was conducted in one country, Finland, where consumers may have higher ideal for being "an honest customer" than the world average. Therefore, showrooming guilt could be studied in other cultural contexts as well. Secondly, due to the young age of participants recruited among university students, they may be more sensitive to what staff and other customers think of them. Thus, also older consumers and their showrooming guilt could be studied. Future research could study also other emotions that showroomers are experiencing while in physical stores, which could be of practical relevance. The findings of this study can also inspire scale-development and validation in quantitative research.

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Declaration on Generative AI

The authors have not employed any Generative AI tools.

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