Not Guilty Until Proven Guilty: Neutralization Techniques in the Context of Temu Shopping

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Abstract

Extremely low-cost online marketplaces, such as Temu, have been widely portrayed as questionable due to concerns about product safety, manufacturing conditions, and the use of aggressive gamification and marketing strategies. Despite the controversial reputation and negative media attention, consumers are repeatably online shopping on these platforms. When engaging in irresponsible consumer behavior, consumers have been found to justify their irresponsible behavior and mitigate their feelings of guilt by using neutralization techniques. The purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of guilt neutralization related to Temu online purchases. Qualitative in-depth interview data was collected from authentic Temu customers. The findings revealed that customers neutralize guilt from Temu purchasing with denial of responsibility, denial of injury, condemnation of the condemners, appeal to higher loyalties, defense of necessity, claim of relative acceptance, and hiding behind imperfect knowledge. The findings extend knowledge of neutralization techniques in the context of online shopping at ultra-low-cost online stores.

Keywords

guilt neutralization, neutralization techniques, customer behavior, online shopping, Temu

1. Introduction

Ultra-low-cost online stores have been criticized for their socially and environmentally unsustainable production practices and the use of dark patterns in their online interfaces. Their massive global footprint is powered by aggressive algorithmic curation, gamification, and manipulative interface designs, which clash with growing societal and environmental sustainability norms [1]. These gamified online marketplaces attract consumers globally with extremely low prices and an exceptionally broad product catalogue [2] – but have controversial reputation due to their socially unsustainable actions and persuasive online store elements [3]. Hence, these ultra-low-cost online stores represent the apex of what Alter [4] describes as a highly competitive, agile, and aggressively data-driven digital ecosystems. For instance, Temu's mobile application has exceeded one billion downloads on the Google Play Store, reflecting both

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its extensive global reach and highly engaged user base. From an information systems perspective, such online marketplaces are complex gamified platform ecosystems that leverage advanced engagement mechanisms within a broader infrastructure capable of influencing large-scale consumer behavior.

When consumers interact with these controversial platform architectures, a value conflict may occur. The desire for extremely cheap prices and the entertaining shopping experiences provided by ultra-low-cost online stores [5] may create tension with ethical awareness. To resolve such discomfort, consumers have been found to use guilt neutralization techniques [6, 7, 8], which are distinct rationalizations and excuses to one's irresponsible behavior [9]. Neutralization techniques are widely used in irresponsible online shopping to mitigate the anticipated guilt, for instance when buying products that pose a health risk or are unsustainably produced [10]. Previous research has found that neutralization techniques are used when making environmentally unsustainable purchases and suggests that consumers use these techniques to various extents depending on their engagement with sustainable behaviors in general [11]. The usage of neutralization techniques also moderates the relationship of consumer guilt and purchasing stolen items [12]. Thus, consumers seem to use neutralization techniques for various reasons and to various extents. In the context of online platforms, modern technological platforms integrate end users directly into networks of production and value creation [13], which represents complex socio-technical systems [14]. Within such ecosystems, structures and operating practices that generate value conflicts may emerge. This can be illustrated by ultra-low-cost online marketplaces, such as Temu.

However, prior neutralization research has focused on physical retail or standard e-commerce, ignoring how ultra-low-cost, highly gamified app environments alter this dynamic. Studying neutralization techniques in the contexts of ultra-low-cost online stores is crucial, as they have increased their popularity enormously [3], making decisionmakers and officials struggle with the customs regulations and parcel logistics, for example in the context of Temu [15]. Illustrating the Temu phenomenon in a small local Western market, Finland, the Finnish Customs is struggling to deal with the flood of Temu packages as the number of parcels arriving from outside the EU increased by 3,218% between 2022 and 2024 [15]. Additionally, Temu's popularity is growing in every age group in Finland, especially among consumers aged over 50 years [16]. In Europe, responsible and sustainable consumer behavior is publicly promoted for ethical and environmental reasons, but the presented trends show that such behavior does not consistently occur in practice. Liu and Gómez-Cruz [3] suggest that although many Western consumers perceive Temu as an "evil platform", they still tend to use it – perhaps due to its ultra-low-cost pricing strategies, gamification strategies, and slogans promoting the idea of "shopping like a billionare".

Therefore, this study investigates consumers' usage of neutralization techniques in the context of online shopping and controversial online stores. We pose the following research questions: (1) *Which neutralization techniques do consumers deploy to justify ultra-low-cost platform purchases?* and (2) *How do these techniques interact with the platform's unique characteristics?* The study approaches the phenomenon qualitatively to ensure gaining in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. The study draws from interviews of Temu customers in Finland on their experiences regarding their Temu purchasing. By doing so, the study identifies seven neutralization techniques used by Finnish Temu shoppers. The usage of these techniques is examined in detail from customers' own perspectives. By extending the understanding of

customers' usage of neutralization techniques in irresponsible online purchasing. This study contributes to the IS literature by investigating how ultra-low-cost platform architectures promote dark design practices that encourage irresponsible consumer behavior and facilitate guilt-neutralization processes.

The article proceeds as follows: in the second section, the literature background is presented, followed by research methodology and findings. The final section discusses the phenomenon and concludes with limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Background

2.1. The Technical Axis: Manipulative Platform Architectures and Irresponsible Consumption

Certain online shopping platforms and behaviors are often perceived as irresponsible. Regarding the platforms, an online store can be seen as irresponsible when it is manipulative toward the customer [17] by using dark design elements [2]. Thus, online store can be acting as an addiction-enhancing socio-technical artefact bypassing moral filters of consumers. Especially Temu has been found to manipulate their customers in ultra-low-price traps together with gamified shopping and flash sales from the variety of products from niches to wide of range [3]. Temu has been found as an exciting and entertaining platform that enables consumers keep purchasing even with limited purchasing power [5].

From a technical perspective, Temu is a technological artefact that uses dark patterns and tactics that force psychological tension while online shopping that may drive consumers to justify their morally questionable purchasing. Sommerville [18] emphasized that the essence of designing systems for large-scale user populations lies in understanding how people engage with and react to technical structures, rather than in the technology per se. The case of Temu highlights a critical sociotechnical tension arising from the interaction between its highly optimized and persuasive platform design and the ethical assessments of millions of global consumers, underscoring the need for deeper examination of its consequences. This is particularly important because the realities of modern information systems require a socio-technical perspective that acknowledges external users and consumers as active participants in shaping and enacting the system [19].

Additionally, dark patterns [2] and platform cynicism [3] may create psychological tension by increasing the cognitive load imposed by the platform's technical subsystem. Gamified mechanisms and manipulative design elements, such as countdown timers, lottery-style rewards, and endless algorithmic scrolling, can overwhelm or pressure consumers and encourage self-destructive shopping behaviors while they are immersed in online shopping [20]. For instance, such manipulative design elements can lead to impulse buying [21] and shopping addiction [22].

2.2. The Social Axis: Guilt Neutralization Theory in Consumer Environments

The theory of guilt neutralization was developed in 1950s by Sykes and Matza [23] in the context of juvenile criminals. It includes several identified neutralization techniques by which individuals can mitigate their feelings of guilt from irresponsible behavior. In other words, neutralization techniques are justifications and excuses for irresponsible or deviant behavior

[24]. Cromwell and Thurman [25] argue that guilt neutralization can happen both before irresponsible behavior to mitigate the anticipated guilt as well as after irresponsible behavior as later rationalization of one's committed acts. From the consumer perspective, neutralization techniques have been studied regarding inappropriate consumer behavior [26], sustainable consumption [6], and irresponsible online shopping [7, 8].

This study uses the neutralization techniques identified by Sykes and Matza [23] as its base. Sykes and Matza [23] categorize neutralization techniques as follows: Denial of responsibility refers to the technique where one claims not to be responsible for irresponsible behavior; that one's behavior cannot change the circumstances or is out of their personal control. Denial of injury is used when one justifies the irresponsible behavior by claiming that it did not cause any injury. Condemnation of the condemners refers to the technique where those who condemn the irresponsible behavior are claimed to similarly engage in irresponsible behavior, invalidating the condemners' accusations. Appeal to higher loyalties is used by claiming that the irresponsible behavior aimed at actualizing a higher-order ideal or value. These neutralization techniques have also been addressed in the consumer context [7, 8].

In addition to the neutralization techniques identified by Sykses and Matza [23], this study also recognizes newer neutralization techniques identified by Klockars [27], Minor [28], Cromwell and Thurman [25], Henry and Eaton [29], Gruber and Schlegelmilch [6], and Kaptein and van Helvoort [9], which are relevant in the online shopping context. Similarly, studies on the consumer context [6, 7, 8] have addressed numerous neutralization techniques relevant for consumers. Adding to the work of Sykes and Matza [23], Klockars [27] identifies metaphor of the ledger which refers to the technique where one claims that their previous good behavior counterbalances the present bad behavior. Further, Minor [28] has identified defense of necessity as a technique where one justifies irresponsible behavior by claiming that it was necessary. Justification by comparison, identified by Cromwell and Thurman [25], refers to a technique where an individual claims that irresponsible behavior is still better in comparison to some other behaviors. In the context of ultra-low-cost online marketplaces, this could be exemplified by a technique where a consumer justifies their online shopping by pointing out that at least they are not doing something even worse, like illegally buying endangered animal products. In turn, Henry and Eaton [29] have identified claim of relative acceptability as a technique where one justifies their behavior by claiming that other people are doing the same, and potentially even more often than one. In the context of this study, this technique could be used if one's friends engaged in similar shopping behavior even more often. Henry and Eaton [29] have also identified the claim of individuality being used when one claims to be not interested in what others think of their irresponsible behavior. Claim of entitlement, identified by Gruber and Schlegelmilch [6], refers to a technique where one feels that they deserve the benefits they get from irresponsible behavior, no matter what kind of impact it has. Finally, hiding behind imperfect knowledge by Kaptein and van Helvoort [9] means that an individual defends their behavior by claiming to be not aware of the relevant information to make informed moral decisions. This technique has been studied, for instance, in the context of not buying fair trade products [30].

2.3. Synthesis: The Socio-Technical Intersection of Platform Design and Neutralization

Based on the above, this study investigates how the technical design of ultra-low-cost platforms structurally distances consumers from moral accountability, as the timely topic requires a fresh socio-technical investigation. In the context of Temu, the irresponsible nature of Temu [3] and the problematic shopping addictions that its ultra cheap prices enable make Temu shopping as generally irresponsible. Despite moral friction when purchasing from Temu, one's social environment may enhance this irresponsible purchasing or consumer's personal circumstances (e.g., purchasing power, life situation) and invidual motivations (e.g., entertainment, excitement) might act as a reason for Temu shopping [5]. Temu can be understood as a socio-technical artefact that has been deliberately designed to provide a seamless and highly engaging shopping experience through both its e-commerce platform and mobile application. It offers consumers a comprehensive marketplace that fulfills a wide range of purchasing needs [5], while enhancing the shopping process through gamified features [3]. Consequently, Temu may be viewed as an irresponsible and potentially addictive socio-technical artefact, designed in ways that can circumvent consumers' moral filters by combining exceptionally low prices with a highly refined and frictionless user experience. Digital environments push users into morally ambiguous or dangerous decisions, presenting the modern paradigm of structural risk and complex problem solving [31]. To resolve the resulting psychological tension between whether necessity and morality, Temu shoppers may need to rely on rationalization to justying their irresponsible Temu shopping behavior somehow.

Although consumers' reasons for online shopping from Temu have been investigated [5], our knowledge on how consumers justify their use of these controversial online platforms remains limited. To investigate this question, this study utilizes the neutralization theory, presented in section 2.2. Traditional neutralization theory was developed primarily in relation to physical consumption contexts, such as shoplifting [25], where consumers remain relatively connected to the consequences of their actions. In contrast, purchasing ultra-low-cost products through gamified digital platforms distances consumers from the real-world consequences of production, including supply chain practices, child labour, and carbon emissions. This structural distance makes it particularly easy for consumers to employ neutralization techniques to justify their purchasing decisions, thereby creating a clear research gap that the present study seeks to address.

To conclude, there are several distinct neutralization techniques which have been found to be used by consumers. However, neutralization techniques used by customers of the ultra-low-cost online store Temu, which has worried the Western world's officials [15] and consumers [3], have not been investigated. Investigation is needed, as Temu platform may change how neutralization theory operates because consumer's consumption decisions are affected by the shopping experience and its' engaging gamified designed online store elements and appealing ultra-low-cost products.

3. Methodology

The purpose of the current study is to investigate guilt neutralization in Temu purchasing from the perspective of Finnish customers, who have made purchases from Temu's online store. A qualitative research approach was selected to support gaining in-depth understanding [32]. An

information system can only be meaningfully investigated by exploring the unique, subjective problem-solving perspectives of individual actors [33]. Utilizing an in-depth qualitative design allowed us to capture how authentic users internally navigate, experience, and rationalise their interactions with the platform's architecture. Temu customers were selected as the target group because Temu is an aggressively marketed and globally popular online store that customers use despite its controversial reputation among many Western consumers [3] and officials [15]. Therefore, Temu customers represent a relevant customer group to be investigated in the context of guilt neutralization. Understanding Temu customers' guilt neutralization is important due to the global aggressive marketing of "shopping like a billionare" in Temu [3] during a time when sustainable production and consumption are crucial in achieving global sustainability targets.

3.1. Data Collection

The participants of this study were recruited via purposive sampling from a Finnish informal Temu-themed Facebook group with more than 21,000 members. We posted in the group asking volunteer participants to participate in our interviews. Additionally, we shared our call for study participants in our personal networks. Our intentional selection strategy was designed to capture the specific demographic shift toward an older customer base within the Finnish ecosystem, as Temu's popularity is growing most rapidly among consumers aged 50 and over, according to Kavander [16]. In addition, the selection criterion for the participants was that they should be authentic Temu customers who have made a purchase from Temu within last three months. The time frame of three months was selected to ensure that participants could recall their experience. The participants did not receive any compensation for their attendance and they participated voluntarily.

We utilized semi-structured interviews as the data collection method, which permitted us to ask questions outside the interview guide and gave participants a possibility to digress in whichever direction they wish to share [32]. The interview guide addressed participants' experiences with Temu, their Temu purchases, online shopping habits, Temu shopping habits, the perceived influence of other people on one's Temu shopping, and participants' perceptions of the visual and functional characteristics of Temu's online store. In the interviews, we aimed to allow the participants to describe their authentic experiences in their own words.

The interviews were conducted between June 2024 and February 2025. The participants' age, gender, purchased Temu products, the purchase channel and device, and the interview duration are presented in Table 1. Participants' age ranged from 23 to 71 with an average age of 50. Out of the seven participants, five were women, one was man, and one was non-binary. The duration of the interviews was lengthy. Averaging at 71 minutes, we were able to gain sufficiently rich in-depth data on the sensitive phenomenon of this study. The sample size was determined by conceptual sufficiency. Validity of the data stems from its capacity to unearth rich, subjective human realities [34] as the extensive nature of this study's semi-structured interviews – averaging 71 minutes – provided the necessary information power to map the hidden structures of consumer guilt neutralization.

The interviews were conducted remotely: five via a video conferencing application and two via a mobile phone call. The mobile phone calls were used due to technical issues with the video conferencing applications faced by the participants. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent. The interviews were transcribed using the university's internal AI

transcription software, whereafter the transcripts were carefully manually checked by the researchers.

Table 1
Interview Participants

	Age	Gender	Purchased Temu products	Purchase channel; device	Interview duration
P1	71	Woman	Jewellery, underwear, socks, clothing, dog toys, men's swimsuit	Application; mobile phone	56
P2	23	Non-binary	Eyebrow trimmer razors, hair bands, elastic hair bands	Application; mobile phone	82
P3	28	Man	Clothing, golf gear, socks, baseball caps, sunglasses	Online store; mobile phone	63
P4	54	Woman	Clothing, crafting supplies, wall hook, wall stickers, bracelet beads, wall decoration, metallic toy cars, mug	Application; mobile phone	77
P5	54	Woman	Vacuum spare parts, clothing, sandals, socks, essential oils, makeup, cat toys, make up sponges, solar cell lights, balloons	Application; mobile phone	70
P6	54	Woman	Clothing, stickers, flashlights, pens, decorations, blankets, cat products, color catcher towels, smartwatch	Online store; laptop	63
P7	67	Woman	Clothing, kitchen and domestic items, decoration, health items, shoes, lamps, phone, headphones	Online store; laptop	87

3.2. Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data analysis was carried out using the Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software. The analysis followed an abductive logic, shifting between the empirical data and the theoretical background of guilt neutralization [35]. In the first phase of data analysis, a researcher familiarized themselves with the data by reading it multiple times. Second, the data was marked with guilt-related issues on a general level. In the third phase, the marked content was carefully read, mirrored with the theory of guilt neutralization, and coded accordingly, leading to the emergence of the initial categories. In this step the coding was done by one researcher to ensure the coding consistency. To ensure internal consistency, one researcher conducted the primary open coding of the transcripts. Subsequently, to ensure inter-coder trustworthiness and resolve subjective bias, three researchers collectively reviewed, debated, and refined the emergent codes against the neutralization literature until a 100% consensus on the final seven categories was achieved in following analysis steps. Fourth, we refined the analysis guided by revisiting guilt neutralization literature, which allowed us to determine the final categories. Fifth, one

researcher engaged closely with the data and systematically categorized the material under categories of neutralization techniques identified in prior literature [6, 9, 23, 25, 27, 28, 29]. Sixth, three researchers participated in the assessment of the final categorization, and disagreements were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Through this process, we ultimately recognized seven neutralization techniques and identified how these techniques are used in the context of Temu online shopping. The findings are presented in the following section, and the presented quotes have been translated from Finnish to English.

4. Findings

Based on our findings, participants neutralized their guilt by using seven neutralization techniques: denial of responsibility, denial of injury, condemnation of the condemners, appeal to higher loyalties, defense of necessity, claim of relative acceptance, and hiding behind imperfect knowledge. These are presented in detail below.

4.1. Denial of Responsibility

Denial of responsibility was present at situations in which participants did not feel responsible for their norm-breaking behaviors when purchasing from controversial online stores. Participants obviously understood the reputation of Temu from media but still felt that a single individual is unable to make an impact by refraining from buying from Temu. Additionally, easy product returns emerged as another reason for evading personal responsibility. Potential mis purchases were morally neutralized by emphasizing the ease and convenience of returning items, which meant that participants did not need to take responsibility for the re-selling or disposal of the mis-purchase after they had easily returned it. The ease of product returns can be understood as the convenience of digitalized return processes, particularly in situations where returns were seamless and managing them through digital channels functioned as a moral reset switch. Participants typically only needed to bring the returned item to a postal service point, and in some exceptional cases, the product did not need to be returned at all, as explained by Participant 1: "And if there is any issue with the shipment, I immediately receive a text message saying that there is no need to return the item and that I will be refunded. So, I've been very satisfied with this" (P1). The digital and rapid communication between the customer and the platform removed the need for customers to assume responsibility themselves. Another factor that evoked denial of responsibility among participants was the unethical conditions associated with production. They felt that these issues were beyond their personal control, while platforms offering extremely low-priced products remained highly appealing to them. Regarding the ethical problems in production, Participants 4 and 3 described their guilt neutralization process:

"*I've always had kind of mixed feelings about child labor anyway. It's a horrible thing, but on the other hand, for some of those families without that income they might literally starve. The world is what it is, and you can't fix everything.*" (P4, Woman, 54)

"*When I ordered clothes from Temu, I actually started looking at some of the other stuff they had there as well. And by then I had basically heard all those stories, or seen the news reports, about how the clothes were supposedly being produced very cheaply, practically using child labor. So that*

got me curious about what the products were actually like. It was quite an interesting shopping experience, really, because I knew that the pictures and everything like that probably wouldn't match the actual products very well." (P3, Male, 28)

4.2. Denial of Injury

Denial of injury emerged in situations in which participants described that compared to widely acceptable consumer behaviors, one's behavior had not resulted in any additional harm. Some participants neutralized their feelings of guilt about Temu shopping by pointing out that they were essentially buying common products but simply obtaining them from a different brand or from another retailer. Participants were framing Temu purchases as only cheaper versions of identical or similar products that would otherwise be bought, for instance, from a local supermarket. Some participants even claimed the items were exactly the same products they saw on local store shelves. Regarding shipping, some participants thought that their single-package Temu orders caused no more environmental harm than buying any other product that has been produced in countries of cheap production. For example, Participant 7 described her assumptions as follows:

"*There are plenty of shops in Finland too whose products come from China. But the difference is that those shops aren't making individual orders the way I do. A store orders, say, ten thousand units of a certain item from a wholesaler. I'm ordering just one. And Temu isn't flying my single little package here separately by plane — there are millions of other orders coming to Finland at the same time. In a way, it's basically comparable to the store's bulk order: the company has its ten thousand items in one big sack, and then the ten thousand individual orders from Finnish customers are in another sack, one small packet at a time. The carbon footprint ends up being the same.*" (P7, Woman, 67)

4.3. Condemnation of the Condemners

Condemnation of the condemners emerged in situations in which participants pointed out that the condemners buy themselves products manufactured using low-cost labor, although the brand would be more expensive than Temu. Thus, buying from Temu was framed as not significantly worse: "If you buy seventeen wardrobes' worth of clothes from New Yorker or H&M or whatever, that's not any better" (P2). P6 further described:

"*People try to promote certain [anti-Temu] agendas and blame Temu shoppers, but many Finnish companies too, like Marimekko and Finlayson [traditional Finnish brands], they have their products made in China or Bangladesh as well. So it's not necessarily such a straightforwardly bad thing after all.*" (P6, Woman, 54)

4.4. Appeal to Higher Loyalties

Appeal to higher loyalties was present in situations in which participants perceived that their Temu shopping served a higher purpose. Their narratives revealed that they neutralized their guilt from shopping in controversial platforms by perceiving themselves as pursuing a more important goal. The higher purposes that their Temu shopping was perceived to serve were making children happy and improving one's wellbeing. For instance, Participant 1 had bought

"a purchase of two or three euros because a grandchild asked, that's not a bad thing". Similarly, Temu purchasing was neutralized and justified, because without it, participants could not purchase gifts or seasonal craft supplies for their family. Participant 4 justified her Temu purchases as follows: "For example the craft supplies for the kids… I just wouldn't be able to afford that kind of quantity in Finland, or that wide a range of different things" (P4). The extensive product range available on Temu allowed participants to meet gifting- and crafting-related needs, especially in situations where they wished to purchase highly affordable products for people within their close social networks. Thus, Temu acted as a provider of great feelings and happiness of the family. Regarding one's wellbeing, Temu purchases were perceived as giving sense of control over improving one's wellbeing. For instance, Participant 7 described her Temu shopping behaviors as follows:

"[I buy from Temu] Mostly for my mental wellbeing. Whether it's about clothing or these assistive devices, the wellbeing comes from knowing that I can do something. That I can manage tasks that are difficult because of my functional limitations with less effort […] and that I can comfortably move in my clothes. Now [with Temu shopping] I don't have to wear the same clothes year after year, but I can [afford to] use a new piece of clothing, a new accessory. Maybe it is kind of narcist [selfish] or maybe it isn't, I don't know." (P7, Woman, 67)

4.5. Defense of Necessity

Using the technique of defense of necessity was evident in the way participants described a compelling need that, in their view, made their otherwise irresponsible purchasing behavior unavoidable. At times, participants felt they had little real choice but to purchase from Temu when local brick-and-mortar retailers failed to offer products that met their needs. In such instances, consumption through the platform was not experienced even as a matter of preference but as a necessity born of exclusion from conventional retail channels. Temu purchases were specifically portrayed as necessary because of the participants' circumstances. One example was making one's low income as an excuse of necessity, even in the case of purchases that do not seem obligatory in the first place. Participant 1 explained: "As a pensioner, I can't spend big amounts on this kind of stuff" (P1). However, some participants were thinking the consequences of Temu shopping but perceived their financial situation to force them to be a Temu customer, as Participant 4 exemplified: "Child labor is a horrible thing […] But at least right now, because of my financial situation, I'm going to kind of push that aside" (P4). Although participants had witnessed and received criticism toward Temu shopping, they portrayed that they had no other choice than buying from Temu. For instance, Participant 2 experienced considerable internal conflict, as they were unable to find appropriately sized and comfortable clothing in physical retail stores. In this case, a conflict emerged between the exclusionary physical infrastructure of local retail environments and the radically inclusive digital catalogue offered by the global Temu platform. As a result, what might otherwise be considered a casual purchase was reframed as a material necessity:

"*I've seen the harshest comments [about Temu shoppers] in the [big Finnish] Facebook group 'Women's Room', things like 'no one can be that stupid and such an idiot,' and, 'come on, we live in Finland, no one here can be so poor that they'd have to order clothes from somewhere else.' But*

those people don't understand that if I'm searching for a cheap T-shirt, local stores, like the nearest H&M store […], don't have sizes big enough." (P2, Non-binary, 23)

"*My daughters are totally against Temu. They're like 'don't do it, you're employing those little kids [child laborers] over there', and they guilt trip their mom like crazy. Then I tell them: when you are in a situation where you want something, and maybe you can't afford, say, a Dyson air purifier, then you'll end up buying a cheaper version from somewhere else.*" (P5, 54, Woman)

4.6. Claim of Relative Acceptability

Claim of relative acceptability was present in the data. Although the Temu Facebook group was described as a supportive community where Temu shoppers are not judged like the media does, participants compared their Temu shopping to other group members who were shopping more. This comparison made participants' own consumption appear relatively insignificant. For instance, participants compared their own shopping to those who were selling their Temu purchases in the Facebook group, implying those had bought beyond their own needs. Participants also noted that their friends and relatives were shopping on Temu more regularly or using more money on Temu, resulting participants to perceive their own shopping as not so irresponsible. Participant 2 and Participant 4 referred to other people's Temu shopping:

"*My little brother explained that he had ordered stuff just because everything was so cheap literally one euro a piece, two euros a piece. And then I asked him how much the whole order ended up costing. And it was probably over a hundred euros. So, he had bought, like, maybe sixty products just because they were cheap, and then there were all these completely random things that basically went straight into the trash as soon as they came out of the package.*" (P2, Non-binary, 23)

"So, there's Temu and Shein and this Facebook secondhand market group... sometimes I, like, follow it. I've never actually bought anything there, though. Sometimes I just wonder how much people order, and then they sell the stuff there. Well, not really anything specific, but somehow, I noticed that there seems to be quite a lot of stuff being sold there. Maybe things that turned out to be the wrong size for someone, or maybe they ended up ordering two of something by mistake, or things like that. And of course, it's perfectly fine to try to get rid of those items afterwards, even though those companies do have certain return policies. But still, I kind of think, okay, hmm, interesting." (P6, Woman, 54)

4.7. Hiding Behind Imperfect Knowledge

Hiding behind imperfect knowledge was used to neutralize participants' guilt when they were browsing between gamified platform interface filled with lottery wheels, countdown timers and flashing discounts. Potential negative aspects related to manufacturing practices, delivery processes, product safety, or the presence of toxins were largely absent from participants' awareness or interests while shopping. Participants felt that they could engage in Temu shopping as they did not know how exactly harmful and unsustainable it was behind that colorful gamified platform interface and they did not even want to know. Participants think incorporated both the production and transportation of the products, enabling them to neutralize their purchases by attributing responsibility to their own lack of knowledge and

information. For instance, Participant 7 described that "if I knew that the item I ordered was coming by private jet from somewhere, and I didn't have to pay the costs or face the consequences, then I probably wouldn't order it" (P7). As this quotation illustrates, participants at times jokingly dismissed concerns about how the products would be delivered to them. They neutralized their behavior by appealing to their own ignorance. The participants did not want to do an uncomfortable thinking process of the ethicality regarding their shopping behavior with credible and sufficient information.

"*Ethically, if someone put the facts right in front of me and I would actually see what it really is, then I probably wouldn't even want to see it. But if I would see how it really is, then yeah, I might start thinking about whether I should keep buying online.*" (P5, Woman, 54)

"*I've never ordered clothes from a store that far away before. You kind of think of it as being somewhere in Asia. I'm not exactly sure where it is, but it's somewhere in Asia. And then it was also different from the places I would normally order from.*" (P3, Man, 28)

5. Discussion

This study investigated guilt neutralization in the context of online shopping in irresponsible online stores. Drawing from interview data of Temu shoppers, the study identified seven guilt neutralization techniques and their usage patterns in online shopping from irresponsible platforms. The identified neutralization techniques are denial of responsibility, denial of injury, condemnation of the condemners, appeal to higher loyalties, defense of necessity, claim of relative acceptability, and hiding behind imperfect knowledge. The study contributes to online shopping behavior and guilt neutralization literatures by extending existing knowledge of neutralization techniques in the online shopping context. More closely, neutralization techniques in this article extend the understanding of traditional neutralization techniques that have been utilized in immediate physical retail contexts, such as shoplifting [25]. In addition to the physical existence, these findings show how Temu's ultra-low-cost digital ecosystem encourages consumers to make a purchase while overriding their moral reservations. Moreover, in this "*Socio-Technical Decoupling"*, Temu platform distracts consumers with gamified interfaces and captures their attention and prompts them to purchase without moral reflection. This platform ecosystem with automated tracking and personalized algorithms create an environment, where consumers are persuaded to shop like a millionaire – not sustainable shopper.

The findings of this study are discussed in detail below, demonstrating how specific interface design choices act as catalysts for psychological defense mechanisms as neutralization techniques. Section 5.1. explains how Temu customers are relying on *denial of responsibility*, *denial of injury* and *claim of relative acceptability* with the help of platform-mediated moral distance. Section 5.2. provides information about how persuasive design and the manufacture of consumer necessity frame consumer guilt neutralization in *appeal to higher loyalties* and *defense of necessity*. Section 5.3. explains how Temu system offers structural opacity and system-facilitated ignorance that encourages consumers to use the neutralization techniques *condemnation of condemners* and *hiding behind imperfect knowledge*. The findings are visualized in Figure 1 and discussed in more detail in upcoming sections 5.1., 5.2. and 5.3.

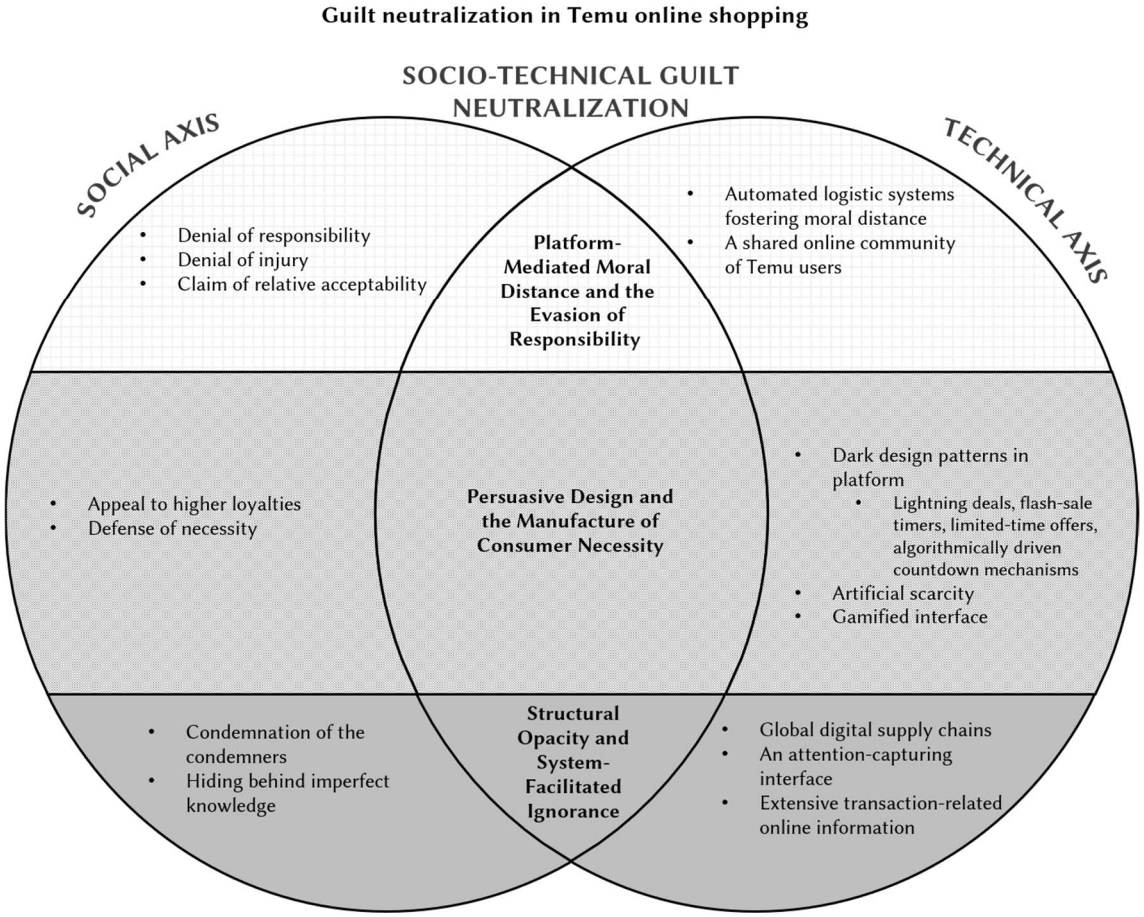


Figure 1: Summary of the Findings

5.1. Platform-Mediated Moral Distance and the Evasion of Responsibility

Consumers' guilt neutralization in Temu shopping manifested through the techniques of denial of responsibility, denial of injury, and claim of relative acceptability, which were facilitated by platform-facilitated moral distance and the evasion of responsibility within the Temu platform ecosystem.

More closely, we identify that customers of irresponsible online stores neutralize their guilt by using Sykes and Matza's [23] *denial of responsibility*. Temu consumers have become trapped in a state of "dangerous decision-making" [31], where the pursuit of extremely low-cost alternatives, driven by inflation and limited retirement income, possibly conflicts with their social values, such as opposition to child labour and concern for environmental sustainability. As a result of this value conflict, Temu consumers distanced themselves from responsibility and resorted to neutralization techniques to reconcile their purchasing behavior with their moral beliefs. Based on our findings, consumers may feel that purchasing or refraining from purchasing will not affect the working conditions of the production of ultra-cheap products

sold on Temu. Additionally, the ease of returning products seems to help consumers to shift responsibility away from themselves, reducing feelings of guilt: once the item is returned, customers may no longer see the mis-purchase as their concern. Thus, the Temu platform created platform-mediated moral distance, as consumers could simply return unwanted items through automated logistics systems. The issue was handled seamlessly on their behalf, reducing the need for consumers to engage with the broader consequences of their purchasing decisions. Similarly, previous research suggests that consumers use denial of responsibility when online shopping, especially male consumers [8]. Based on these findings, we suggest that consumers easily neutralize their guilt by denial of responsibility, as the products are readily accessible to consumers at very low prices and the media-driven moral criticism may feel distant to consumers. Thus, this spatial distance was produced, as products were manufactured in geographically distant locations and the associated workers, factories, and environmental consequences remained far removed from consumers' everyday experiences. This separation made it easier for consumers to focus on the shopping experience itself, while a physical and psychological distance emerged between purchasing decisions and their potential harmful impacts, similarly as the lack of consumer motivation identified by Kemppainen et al. [36].

Regarding *denial of injury* [23], we find that consumers may neutralize their guilt with this technique to the extent that is applicable in the context of shopping. As shopping physical items will always require natural resources in one form or another, denial of injury was not present in the interviews in its purest form, where causing any environmental harm at all would be denied. However, based on the findings, denial of additional injury is used by consumers. We find that some consumers deny additional environmental harm from their parcels' shipping and claim that their packages would be shipped to their countries in any case. If the packages had not been shipped as customers' individual orders, consumers may reason that the packages would be shipped as local retailers' bulk shipments, and therefore consumers' Temu purchases would not constitute any additional harm. Furthermore, we find that consumers may deny the environmental harm of their online shopping by reasoning that local stores are selling exactly the same or at least very similar products, which serves to neutralize Temu shopping. After all, the "same" product is available in local supermarkets as well, only at a significantly higher price. In addition, consumers may equate domestic design brands' products which are produced in low-wage countries with Temu products. The findings are in line with Harris and Dumas [37] who find that denial of injury is used in online consumer misbehavior by consumers of online entertainment. These findings suggest that consumers interpret the issue through their own assumptions. Believing in one's own interpretation is likely more comfortable and thus serves to neutralize their irresponsible purchasing behavior.

This consumer behavior demonstrates the ultimate consequence of what Mumford [38] identified as the historical shift away from humanistic socio-technical principles toward hyper-optimized lean production and aggressive cost-cutting within the global digital economy. By prioritizing extreme transactional efficiency and rock-bottom pricing above social or environmental protections, platforms like Temu systematically alienate the user from the human consequences of production. Consumers must subsequently deploy techniques like denial of injury to mentally survive within this intensely decoupled socio-technical environment.

Based on our findings, also *claim of relative acceptability* [29] can emerge by claiming that others buy even more from irresponsible online stores. The digital ecosystem played a

crucial role in this process, as conversations within Temu-related Facebook groups as online communities reinforced the perception that others were purchasing substantially more than the participants themselves, thereby neutralizing feelings of guilt through online social comparison. Purchasing from Temu was also socially accepted within online communities, creating a form of comfort bubble in which participants collectively identified as "Temu shoppers." This sense of belonging to a shared digital community within the broader Temu ecosystem helped normalize purchasing behavior and reduced feelings of moral discomfort. Thus, it can ease the discomfort associated with one's own purchasing volume, whether measured in number of items or in money used. This is in line with Harris and Dumas [37] who found the technique utilized in the context of online consumer misbehavior.

5.2. Persuasive Design and the Manufacture of Consumer Necessity

Through persuasive design, the Temu platform guided consumers throughout their purchasing experience and produced perceived consumer necessity, distracting consumers from moral concerns and encouraging them to ignore ethical considerations. Consequently, consumers drew upon the guilt-neutralization techniques of *appeal to higher loyalties* and *defense of necessity* to justify their purchases.

Temu platform's gamified and colorful shopping experience distracted consumers into thinking about the joy their grandchildren would experience from the purchases, rather than pausing to rationalize the ethical implications of their purchases. Based on the findings, shopping from irresponsible online stores can be neutralized by *appeal to higher loyalties* [23]. This can be done, for instance, by framing the shopping to delight children or to contribute to one's personal well-being. These findings suggest that consumers tend to generate a morally important justification – such as buying Halloween decorations for a child's party – in order to legitimize their consumption and potential addiction to online shopping [22] from gamified platforms with enormous offerings. Similarly, Makkonen et al. [8] found that many different consumer segments utilize the appeal to higher loyalties. Thus, it seems that a "good reason" can always be found to neutralize the guilt of a controversially made purchase. Through persuasive and gamified design elements, Temu actively shapes consumer decision-making by directing attention toward immediate economic gains and perceived necessities. This process may strengthen the use of appeal to higher loyalties as a neutralization technique, as consumers come to frame their purchases as serving legitimate financial or familial priorities rather than as discretionary consumption. Consequently, ethical concerns associated with the platform become secondary to goals that consumers perceive as more important or urgent.

Furthermore, the technique of *defense of necessity* [28] was produced by Temu's persuasive design producing a sense of consumer necessity and was often further rationalized by consumers' life situations and poverty. Based on the findings, consumers can portray the narrower selections of other retailers as a necessity to buy from Temu. We also find that Temu shopping can be perceived as the only possibility for consumers living in poverty. This is in line with Makkonen et al. [8] who suggest that consumers with lower income appeal to necessity in their irresponsible online shopping more than consumers with higher income. However, we find that buying affordable but unnecessary products from Temu can also be portrayed as one's only option. We believe that the gamified and manipulative designs of ultra cheap online stores, as well as consumers' delight of waiting for a new parcel may lure consumers to Temu shopping and to frame their shopping behavior as necessity. The gamified features and persuasive design

embedded within the Temu platform generate artificial scarcity through lighting deals with flash-sale timers, limited-time offers, and algorithmically driven countdown mechanisms, similarly as in study by Paananen et al. [20] as dark design elements [2] and irresistible ultra-cheap offerings in Temu [3]. By creating a heightened sense of urgency, these features exert psychological pressure on consumers, increasing the likelihood of impulsive purchasing. Consequently, consumers may cognitively rationalize their purchase decisions as defense of necessity, thereby employing justifications to alleviate potential post-purchase dissonance.

5.3. Structural Opacity and System-Facilitated Ignorance

The Temu platform inundates users with purchase-oriented information designed to support consumption and enhance the shopping experience. This information-rich environment generates structural opacity, directing users' attention away from the ethical implications of their purchases and enabling system-facilitated ignorance of morally relevant concerns. Consequently, consumers were observed to neutralize feelings of guilt by drawing on techniques such as *claim of relative acceptability*, *condemnation of the condemners*, and *hiding behind imperfect knowledge*.

Condemnation of the condemners, first identified by Sykes and Matza [23], is found to be utilized by consumers of irresponsible online stores. Consumers may shift the attention away from controversial purchase platforms by pointing out that criticizers also buy items produced in low-cost production and little regulation countries, which are sold under different brands. Here, the same logic of equating Temu products with local brands' design products, which enables the denial of injury, also enables condemnation of the condemners. The difference between these is the social aspect of other people and their accusations, which are present in condemnation of the condemners. Acknowledging the opaque nature of global digital supply chains, consumers rely on denial of injury to downplay their individual contribution to social and environmental harms. At the same time, consumers engage in condemnation of the condemners by questioning the credibility of critics and drawing attention to similar practices among established retailers. As a result, supply-chain opacity serves as a key enabler of these neutralization techniques. Thus, consumers may rationalize their purchasing behavior through platform cynicism [3, 17], continuing to engage with the Temu platform despite acknowledging the problematic nature of its ecosystem.

Hiding behind imperfect knowledge [9] seems to be utilized by consumers. Consumers may refrain from obtaining information and be comfortable continuing their shopping on Temu without considering ethical or environmental issues. This act is active and system-facilitated ignorance, where the platform distracts consumers' attention away from ethical concerns with bright colors, high-energy, and engaging interface combined with gamified elements. Previous research found Temu irresistible [3] and similar dark online store design patterns have been found by Brignull et al. [17] and Singh et al. [2]. Consumers are exposed to extensive transaction-related information while shopping at Temu platform, such as user reviews with images, product ratings, delivery guarantees, and price histories, which strengthens their perception of being adequately informed. Potentially negative information from the consumer's perspective was omitted, thereby assisting consumers in remaining ignorant of the broader consequences of their purchases. This asymmetry in information availability fosters an illusion of informed consumption while diverting attention from the ethical and sustainability-related consequences of purchasing decisions. Although some consumers perceive a value conflict, they

may neutralize it by emphasizing their lack of reliable information, expecting effortless and easily accessible information of ethical and environmental issues.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

This study draws from in-depth interview data consisting of subjective experiences of Temu customers from Finland. As such, the presented findings are not generalizable to larger populations, but they should be rather considered as descriptive findings offering in-depth insights and understanding based on individual customers' experiences. Notably, data in this study was collected before July 2026 when the European Union introduced a 3 € customs duty per item for online orders under 150 € shipped outside Europe. The participants of this study range between 23 and 71 years, represent male, female, and non-binary individuals as we targeted authentic Temu customers reflecting Finnish market trends, and not a specific age group or gender. These demographic as well as cultural settings are likely to influence the presented findings. Future studies should study other demographic groups and their neutralization techniques. Future quantitative research should aim to produce generalizable results. Further, future studies should examine strategies to curb Temu purchasing – such as actions that aim to prevent consumers' usage of neutralization techniques. Alternatively, future studies could investigate if providing more accessible information on ethical, environmental, and health-related issues in production and delivery would decrease the usage of neutralization techniques and encourage consumers to adopt more responsible buying practices. Future research could adopt a socio-technical perspective to examine how algorithmic design elements on Temu, including gamification mechanisms and countdown timers, facilitate the use of neutralization techniques among younger Temu consumers.

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Declaration on Generative AI

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Microsoft Copilot in order to check grammar and spelling. After using the tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the publication's content.

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