

# Familiar Strangers: The Role of Social Context in Consumer Reparatory Behavior

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## **Abstract**

Consumers often act to correct the wrongdoings of people who are close to them such as a family member or a friend. In this paper, we demonstrate across seven experiments that consumers engage in a variety of reparatory behaviors—from a simple apology to gift-giving or purchasing—even when the wrongdoer is a complete stranger. The desire to correct the wrongdoings of a stranger occurs situationally: when the social context in which a wrongdoing occurs highlights a shared feature between the wrongdoer and bystander, a temporary sense of closeness is formed. We show that under these conditions, bystanders experience greater vicarious embarrassment for the transgressor's actions, leading to costly reparatory consumption behaviors. We identify important boundary conditions for our effect: when the transgression is not observed by others, bystanders do not experience embarrassment and are less likely to repair the actions of the transgressor. We show with a behavioral measure of consumption that consumers can be motivated to engage in reparatory consumption.

**Keywords:** *reparatory consumption; vicarious embarrassment; social identity*

**Track:** Consumer Behaviour