

“I Did It! I Feel Guilty!”: Expressing Guilt and Facing Less Punishment by Independent Observers

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## **Abstract**

We examine the interpersonal effect of expression of guilt following a norm violation on the severity of punishment recommended, or executed, by independent observers. In a series of five experiments (4 preregistered), we consistently show that expressing guilt after violating a norm reduces the severity of punishment. Drawing on the Emotion as Social Information (EASI) model, we also show that the perceived warmth and entitlement of the violator explain the effect of guilt expression on punishment. Further, we propose and empirically document that observers' guilt-proneness moderates the effect of guilt expression on punishment such that more guilt-prone individuals tend to punish a norm violator who does not express guilt more severely. By showing that people's acknowledgment of their wrongdoings and transgressions via expressing guilt have interpersonal benefits, we offer managerial and interpersonal implications for consumers, in online and offline communities, and service staff.

**Keywords:** *Guilt; Norm-violation; Punishment*

**Track:** Consumer Behaviour