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## Guilt Trip or Vacation Trip? Guilt as a Vacation Constraint

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# **Guilt Trip or Vacation Trip? Guilt as a Vacation Constraint**

## **1. Introduction**

The average American took 20.3 days of paid days off each year between 1976 to 2000 (Project: Time Off, 2017). By 2016, however, this had declined to only 16.8 days, which is counter-intuitive considering that employees are being given more time off than before (Project: Time Off, 2017). The amount of unused paid time off is estimated to represent \$236 billion in lost spending for the overall U.S. economy, which, if realized, would have supported 1.8 million American jobs and \$70 billion in additional income for American workers (Project: Time Off, 2017).

Even though paid days of leave can be utilized for a number of reasons, one of the main ones would be for purpose of taking a vacation. Unutilized paid days off therefore mean missed opportunities to benefit from vacations in a number of other ways, such as decreasing job stress and improving overall psychological well-being (Chen & Petrick, 2013). Indeed, actual usage of paid time off for purpose of vacationing is often used as a key indicator of workplace and personal health in organizational behavior and public health studies (NPR et al., 2016).

The widespread reluctance to take paid days off specifically for a vacation indicates that there could be a force inhibiting what should be entitled and beneficial choices or behavior. Several industry reports have suggested guilt to be an important reason (Expedia, 2017, 2016; Glassdoor, 2014). To explain this phenomenon, this study proposes that taking paid time off could be perceived as a violation of workplace norms by some individuals. This violation is hypothesized to pose a threat or potential damage to the employee's social self at work, such that guilt results to decrease vacation intention and increase need for reparative actions (e.g. apologizing for vacation plans or taking a shorter vacation). These consequences are in accordance with the social self preservation theory, which is built on the premise that individuals tend to take action to preserve the social self when the primary goal of maintaining a positive social self is threatened (Gruenewald et al., 2004; Kemeny et al., 2004).

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Guilt and Social Self Preservation (SSP) Theory**

Guilt is associated with a negative evaluation of the self and feelings of uncertainty, incompetence and anxiety (Baumeister et al., 1995). Guilt results when a person judges him/herself as having violated some obligatory, moral standards as a result of his/her own behavior (Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Keltner & Buswell, 1996). Like other types of self-conscious emotions, guilt plays an important role in motivating and regulating people's thoughts, feelings and behavior (Tracy et al., 2007). Through self-awareness, self-representation and reflexive self-evaluations, individuals go through cognitive appraisal processes to result in self-conscious emotions (Tracy & Robins, 2004). Since the generation of these emotions involve the projection of self to others as well as an evaluative component, self-conscious emotions motivate people to behave in socially and/or morally accepted ways in their social interactions and intimate relationships (Baumeister et al., 1994) so as to avoid social approbation (Tangney et al., 2007).

On this basis, the SSP theory maintains that self-conscious emotions, such as guilt, are experienced when the primary goal of maintaining a positive social self is threatened (Gruenewald et al., 2004;

Kemeny et al., 2004). Humans are concerned with the positive or negative portrayal of the social self for purpose of maintaining social relationships necessary for survival, reproduction, mental and physical well-being as well as quantity and quality of social ties (Gruenewald et al., 2007; Seeman, 2000). Threats to the social self would “provide the potential for a loss of social esteem, social status or social acceptance” to result in self-conscious emotions (Dickerson et al., 2004, p. 1195), which in turn drive individuals to preserve the social self (Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004).

## 2.2 Travel Constraints

Travel constraints have been extensively studied but due to space limit, a complete review is not provided here. Research on tourism constraints originated from leisure constraints literature with the latter explained as barriers or obstacles that stopped the use of a recreation service (Backman & Crompton, 1989; Iso-Ahola & Mannell, 1985). Much of the more recent research on travel constraints is built upon the hierarchical leisure constraints model (HLCM), which posits that leisure participation can be achieved only when there is successful sequential negotiation of intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural constraints (Crawford et al., 1991; Crawford & Godbey, 1987).

While the HLCM provides a typological framework, it does not identify specific constraints nor does it clarify the role of each constraint type (Godbey et al., 2010). Consequently, it remains unclear which constraint(s) work under which circumstances. Also, many of these constraints were originally identified in leisure and recreation and subsequently applied directly to tourism, arguably without sufficient consideration of a different consumption context.

Additionally, existing research on tourism constraints focuses predominantly on brand-level considerations. Constraints, such as destination attributes, function to influence vacation selection between different options, as opposed to influencing the decision on whether to take a vacation. A main contribution of this study is therefore its original identification and empirical validation of a tourism constraint that is at product-level consideration. The authors postulate that guilt as a vacation constraint directly determines whether an individual goes on a vacation. Without such product-level commitment, brand-level considerations are inconsequential.

## 2.3 Hypotheses

Threats to the workplace social self can take the form of potential damage to social esteem, social status and social acceptance (Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004) within the organization. Taking paid days of leave to go on a vacation could be negatively evaluated when it is perceived as not being willing to sacrifice his or her personal interests for the benefit of the organization or group (Leary et al., 2014). This may result in less respect or admiration from colleagues, particularly since employees who work especially hard or put in extra effort into their jobs are often accorded higher status (Allen & Rush, 1998; Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1997). Because these negative evaluations threaten the positive workplace social self, individuals are hypothesized to experience guilt as a result of having violated obligatory norms of how an employee should behave (see Fig. 1):

*H1. Threats to the workplace social self is positively related to feelings of guilt regarding plans to take paid days off for a vacation.*

In accordance with the SSP theory, when the social self at work is threatened, guilt is theorized to result, which in turn triggers behavior to restore the positive social self. Such behavior include

actions to mitigate wrongdoings or to seek emotional relief by behaving in a socially and/or morally accepted way (Baumeister et al., 1994; Baumann et al., 1981). Put formally:

*H2. Feelings of guilt is negatively related to intention to take paid days off for a vacation.*

*H3. Feelings of guilt is positively related to reparative actions regarding plans to take paid days off for a vacation.*

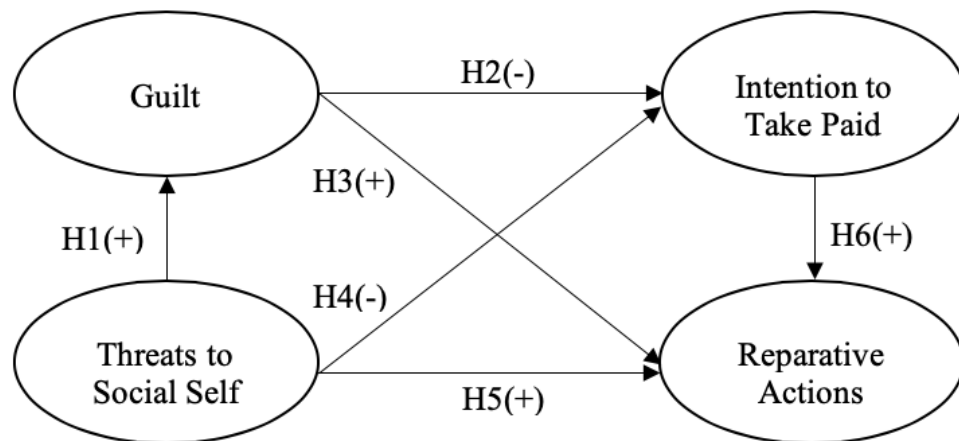
Transgressions of workplace norms (i.e. threats to the workplace social self) may threaten the individual's place within the organization's social group (Keltner & Buswell, 1997). In order to avoid social rejection, appeasement or reparative actions in the form of placating or pacifying others becomes essential (Keltner & Buswell, 1997); otherwise, individuals risk unpleasant reactions, e.g. ostracism, from others (Gilbert, 2007). This aligns with organizational behavioral research which shows that strong organization cultures will insist on subordination of personal beliefs to organizational beliefs so as to avoid sanctions (Schein, 1992).

*H4. Threats to the workplace social self is negatively related to intention to take paid days off for a vacation.*

*H5. Threats to the workplace social self is positively related to reparative actions regarding plans to take paid days off for a vacation.*

*H6. Intention to take paid days off for a vacation is positively related to reparative actions.*

**Figure 1. Research Model**



### 3. Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of guilt as a travel constraint construct and the extant lack of empirical tourism-related data, a two-phase mixed-methods approach was used for this study (Creswell & Clark, 2017; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). In Phase 1, qualitative data gathering and analysis through interviews established the presence of the vacation guilt phenomenon through first-hand recounting and enabled the identification of survey items for Phase 2. In Phase 2, quantitative data were collected and analyzed.

## **3.1 Phase 1**

### **3.1.1 Method & Sample**

Seven semi-structured Skype interviews were conducted in July 2018. The duration of each interview ranged from 23 to 50 minutes with data saturation in terms of guilt themes, ways of being made to feel guilty and ways of dealing with guilt being reached by the fifth interview. All interviewees were either Americans or have had the experience of working at full-time jobs in the U.S. for at least ten years. Interviewees came from different industries and represented different management levels of administrative assistant to country head of sales. All of them (5 females, 2 males) were at least college graduates between 23 to 50 years old.

### **3.1.2 Qualitative Results & Discussion**

Analysis of the transcripts identified several key themes:

- a. Being made to feel guilty about taking paid days of leave to go on a vacation was perpetuated as a form of unsupportive organizational culture rather than a situational reaction to an employee's leave application.
- b. Interviewees were made to feel guilty through a number of ways, e.g. requiring others to cover for them, not being a team player and not being serious/dedicated about work.
- c. As a way of dealing with the guilt experienced, interviewees tended to over-justify their vacation plans prior to going on vacation.
- d. Even if interviewees could ultimately go on a vacation, it would be shorter than what they would have liked and they continued to feel guilty.

This qualitative phase of the study establishes vacation guilt as a social phenomenon within the workplace context, demonstrating guilt as a vacation constraint. Moreover, since vacation guilt is perpetuated as part of the overall organizational culture, this further justified the use of survey methodology in Phase 2. Also, interviewees identified different ways in which they were made to feel guilty and their subsequent actions to deal with the guilt. These formed key inputs for Phase 2 in terms of survey instrument design.

## **3.2 Phase 2**

### **3.2.1 Survey Instrument**

As there is no single established scale to measure threats to the social self, this study uses three different scales including a ten-item scale on need for self-esteem (Hill, 1987), a seven-item scale on need for social status (Flynn et al., 2006) and an eight-item scale on need to belong (Leary et al., 2013). These three scales were chosen as threats to the workplace social self can take the form of potential damage to social esteem, social status and social acceptance (Dickerson et al., 2004). Other than the measurement of guilt using a three-item scale from the modified differential emotions scale (Galanakis et al., 2016), a three-item scale for vacation intention (Lam & Hsu, 2006), a five-item scale measuring reparative guilt actions (Tangney et al., 1996) and an eleven-item travel constraints scale (Huang & Hsu, 2009; Pennington-Gray & Kerstetter, 2002) were used. All responses were measured on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

### 3.2.2 Sample

Following a pre-test, data for the actual survey were collected on Mturk in July/August 2018. Only American adults (>21 years old) currently employed in a full-time position were recruited, as paid days of leave tend not to be given to those employed part-time. Labor laws in the U.S. do not mandate paid days of leave; hence, employees who do not receive any such benefits are screened out. Those who are self-employed or who work in industries that have vacation-friendly policies (e.g. education and government/public administration service) were also screened out.

A total of 816 usable responses (47.5% males, 52.5% females) were collected with a mean age of 35.0 years. 90.5% had at least college education and 62.6% of them possessed an annual household income of more than US\$75,000. On average, each respondent had 11.3 years of full-time work experience.

### 3.2.3 Quantitative Results & Discussion

As three different scales were used for the purpose of measuring social self, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was first carried out to determine the underlying factor structure of this construct. While key metrics indicated good suitability of the dataset for EFA (KMO = 0.986, Bartlett's test at  $p < 0.001$ ; Cerny & Kaiser, 1977), the emergence of one main factor (eigenvalue = 17.42, total variance explained = 69.67%) with high factor loadings (>0.75), high inter-item correlation (>0.60) and a Cronbach's alpha of 0.98 (Hulin et al., 2001), suggest item redundancy. In order to maximize the breadth of construct measurement, only items with high factor loadings and low inter-correlations were retained, resulting in the final inclusion of eleven items with a reliability measure of 0.96.

The measurement model was then assessed through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Goodness-of-fit indices demonstrated a good fit with RMSEA of 0.06 (<0.08), CFI of 0.96 (>0.90) and TLI = 0.96 (>0.90) (Hu & Bentler, 1998).

Internal validity of the measurement model was assessed to be adequate. Average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) are higher or only marginally lower than the values of 0.50 and 0.70 respectively (Fornell & Larcker, 1981); therefore, the convergent validity of the model was deemed adequate. Additionally, the square root of AVE values extracted exceeded that of bivariate correlations between the constructs, thus showing discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Detailed results are available upon request.

The structural model was then assessed to verify the research model (Figure 1) while controlling for gender, age, education, ethnicity, household income, travel constraints and overall number of years of full-time work experience. Goodness-of-fit indices for the structural model were acceptable with a RMSEA of 0.06 (<0.08), CFI of 0.95 (>0.90) and TLI = 0.94 (>0.90) (Hu & Bentler, 1998). Therefore, the proposed model was assessed to have a good fit with the data.

Five out of the six hypotheses tested are supported (Table 1). The only hypothesis not supported was H6, i.e. travel intention did not significantly influence reparative actions ( $\beta = -0.05$ ,  $\beta = -0.05$ ,  $p = 0.082$ ). Meanwhile, the effect of threats to social self on travel intention (-0.13) is fully mediated by guilt (-0.18), resulting in a total effect of -0.31 (Table 2). Additionally, threats to social self on reparative actions (0.51) is partially mediated by guilt (0.21). However, even as guilt has a significant direct impact on both travel intention (-0.24) and reparative actions (0.28), the

indirect effect through travel intention (0.01) is not significant. This suggest that travel intention does not mediate the relationship between guilt and reparative actions.

**Table 1.** Hypotheses Testing

	$\beta$	Std Error	$\beta$	p-value
H1. Threats to social self → Guilt	0.75	0.03	0.82	<0.001*
H2. Threats to social self → Travel intention	-0.13	0.07	-0.15	0.038**
H3. Threats to social self → Reparative actions	0.51	0.07	0.61	<0.001*
H4. Guilt → Travel intention	-0.24	0.08	-0.25	0.002*
H5. Guilt → Reparative actions	0.28	0.07	0.30	<0.001*
H6. Travel intention → Reparative actions	-0.05	0.03	-0.05	0.082

\*Significant at  $p < 0.01$  \*\* Significant at  $p < 0.05$

**Table 2.** Direct, Indirect & Total Effects of Relationships

	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect			Total Effect
		Guilt	Travel Intention	Guilt & Travel Intention	
Threats to social self → Guilt	0.75*	--	--	--	0.75*
Guilt → Travel intention	-0.24*	--	--	--	0.24*
Travel intention → Reparative actions	-0.05	--	--	--	-0.05
Guilt → Reparative actions	0.28*	--	0.01	--	0.29*
Threats to social self → Travel intention	-0.13	-0.18*	--	--	-0.31*
Threats to social self → Reparative actions	0.51*	0.21*	0.01	0.01	0.73*

\*Significant at  $p < 0.01$

#### 4. Conclusion & Implications

Empirical results contributed significantly and meaningfully to existing tourism literature by identifying vacation guilt, a previously unaddressed travel constraint. A key gap in understanding travel constraints is bridged by showing that guilt exists as a product-level constraint of vacation decisions. This was demonstrated through: (i) a significant decrease in intention to take paid days of leave to go on a vacation, and (ii) a significant increase in reparative or compensatory actions.

Equally important is this study's theoretical contribution of identifying threats to the social self as an antecedent of vacation guilt. By extending existing knowledge in psychology and sociology to vacation consumption, this study shows that how one is viewed by others at the workplace is a

strong enough reason to make people feel guilty about and affect their vacation plans. This antecedent is especially meaningful in shedding more light on one of the key drivers of poor workplace and personal health. It demonstrates that mitigating vacation guilt requires the efforts of not just tourism practitioners but also potentially policy planners, healthcare professionals and company managers. For instance, insurance policies and state legislation could be developed to encourage vacation consumption so that employees can directly enjoy the benefits of going on a vacation, such as reducing job-related stress (Kühnel & Sonnentag, 2011), increasing job performance (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2006) and improving overall life satisfaction (Sirgy et al., 2011).. Healthcare professionals, e.g. psychologists and life coaches, can help employees learn ways of coping with vacation guilt. Also, management practices and/or policies can be purposefully developed to cultivate healthier workplace social norms that encourage taking paid time off for a vacation.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, it is recognized that there are several limitations that can be addressed by future studies. Firstly, generalizability of the research model can be increased by testing it in other non-workplace settings. Also, the impact of culture was not analyzed as sample was collected from only one country. National culture varies widely from place to place and there are many studies to demonstrate its impact on organizational behavior and practices. Finally, the moderating impact of variables, e.g. susceptibility to normative influence, could also be considered.



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