



Vulnerability to and acceptability of different types of sludge *Lades et al. (2025)*

Context

Sludge describes the unnecessary frictions that make it harder for people to complete a task, from broken website links to jargon-heavy documents and unhelpful staff. Most research examines sludge case by case, so little is known about which frictions people find hardest to bear or least acceptable, and who is most exposed. This survey of 1,591 people in Ireland compares ten types of sludge across public and private settings, testing which frictions people report struggling with and which they judge unfair.

Key Insights

Which frictions hurt most

- Highest reported difficulty: outdated sites with broken links, unfriendly staff, jargon-heavy documents, cluttered websites
- These frictions also rank among the least acceptable, so difficulty and unfairness track together
- Public versus private origin made only a minor difference (sector was randomized), so firms can't assume consumers judge private-sector friction more leniently

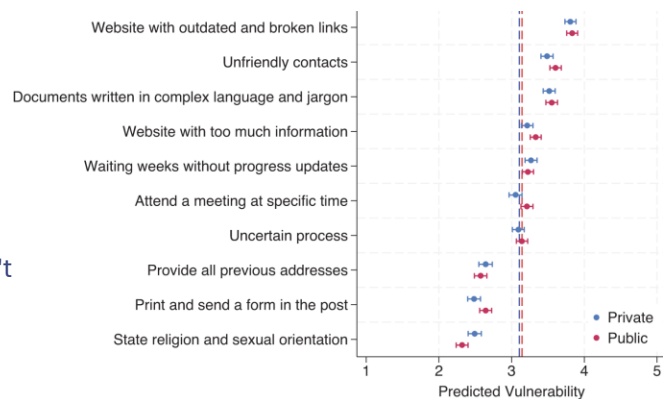


Figure: Vulnerability to sludge predicted by type of sludge only based on multi-linear regressions with 1,591 individuals and 15,910 observations, depending on whether the sludge emerges from either the private or the public sector.

Plain language protects the most vulnerable

- Administrative literacy acts as a buffer, as higher literacy predicts lower reported vulnerability and higher acceptance
- Its protective effect is strongest for complex, jargon-heavy documents
- Procrastination, time scarcity and low mental energy predict higher vulnerability; poorer mental health links to both, likely through reduced mental energy

Why self-reports understate the risk

- Findings capture beliefs about hypothetical tasks, not measured behaviour, so they are correlational
- People struggle to anticipate real-world friction (an empathy gap), which is why sludge that mainly adds steps to a process, such as posting a form, looked least troubling here
- Strategic friction, such as cancellation barriers, can look acceptable when described abstractly yet still steer behaviour, so the most harmful sludge may be the least visible in surveys

Implications

- How might friction in your documents and digital journeys affect customers with low administrative literacy differently from the average user?
- Where in your processes could friction be quietly steering customer behaviour while still appearing acceptable on paper?
- What methods beyond customer surveys could surface frictions people fail to notice or report?