

Exploring Existential Guilt Appeals in the Context of Charitable Advertisements

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between existential guilt, inferences of manipulative intent, attitude towards the brand, and donation behaviour intentions. A scale was also developed to measure existential guilt. Although it is exploratory in nature, it fills the gap in the literature that guilt is not a unified construct and should be measured separately. This research found that consumers perceived World Vision's ad to be non-manipulative and suggested that consumers had a very strong attitude towards the brand. The results implied that advertisers could employ more intensive existential guilt ads for credible brands and potential contributions are also discussed.

Background of Guilt in Advertising

Guilt appeals in advertising are powerful tools for advertisers due to their persuasive nature (Cotte et al., 2005). According to Lewis (1993), guilt is a motivating, action oriented emotion due to the unambiguous nature of the linkage between feeling of guilt and actions that led to its elicitation. Ghingold (1980) stated that when someone is anticipating the feeling of guilt or feeling guilty, they will attempt to reduce the feeling of guilt by making retributions. This is supported by the Negative State Model and suggested that individuals will seek to reduce these negative emotions (Cialdini and Kenrick, 1976). Therefore, if advertisers can evoke guilt successfully through advertising campaigns, they can offer solutions to minimise the feelings of guilt. The importance of guilt in a social marketing (Alden and Crowley, 1995; Bennett, 1998; Lindsey, 2005; Becheur et al., 2007; Hibbert et al., 2007), marketing communications (Ghingold, 1980; Pinto and Priest, 1991; Ruth and Faber, 1988), and advertising (Coulter and Pinto, 1995; Cotte et al., 2005) has been empirically shown to influence consumer decision making process (Burnett and Lunsford, 1994), ad and brand attitudes (Coulter and Pinto, 1995; Godek and LaBarge, 2006), and donation intentions (Hibbert et al., 2007).

While the literature has identified three types of guilt appeals namely; existential, anticipatory, and reactive guilt appeals, researchers have primarily explored guilt appeal as a unified construct (Cotte et al., 2005; Lindsey, 2005; Godek and LaBarge, 2006; Hibbert et al., 2007; Basil et al., 2008). As such, the measurements are not designed to measure each specific type of guilt and there has been a constant call to develop scales for each of these categories (such as Lindsey, 2005).

This paper will take the first step to study specific guilt appeals by focussing on the use of existential guilt appeals on charitable donation behaviour. Specifically, it will explore the relationships between existential guilt, attitude towards the brand, inferences of manipulative intent, and donation behaviour intentions. In response to the different dimensions of guilt, this research also explores a potential scale to measure existential guilt.

Relevant Literature and Hypotheses Development

Izard (1977) asserts that existential guilt is evoked through the result of a comparison of one's own well being to the well being of others. In the process, there is an urge to bring the two closer together. Huhmann and Brotherton's (1997) indicated 85.7% of existential guilt appeals were used in public service announcements (PSA), and charitable adverts. Hence, this type of guilt appeal is more important for academics and practitioners within the non-profit industry than the other guilt appeals. Furthermore, studies show that the use of dramatic emotional appeals such as guilt appeals is increasingly used by advertisers as they are attention grabbing (Samalin and Hogarty, 1994; Moore and Harris, 1996).

However, evoking guilt and changing consumers' behaviour through the ad is a difficult task. Past studies have indicated that blatant attempts to arouse guilt simply do not work (Coulter and Pinto, 1995). It is found that highly intensive guilt appeals tend to evoke anger, irritation and annoyance, hence consumers responded negatively towards the ad. This could be due to consumers perceiving these ads to be manipulative. Low intensive guilt appeals on the other hand tend to stimulate little emotional response. Thus it suggests that moderate levels of guilt appeals were most effective. Coulter and Pinto's (1995) findings were consistent with Bennett's (1996) research in fear appeals which suggested that there is an inverted-U relationship between ad intensity and ad effectiveness. That is, ad effectiveness will increase with ad intensity only to a certain point. Once ad intensity reaches its threshold, ad effectiveness will face diminishing returns because the ad will be viewed as being manipulative. More recently, Cotte et al., (2005) have shown that guilt appeals will have a positive effect on attitude towards the brand if audiences do not find the ad manipulative.

Campbell's (1995) findings suggest that there is a positive relationship between attitude towards the brand and behaviour intention. The theory of planned behaviour supports Campbell's argument and suggests a favourable attitude toward behaviour will result in favourable intentions (Ajzen, 1991). Hence it will lead to a more favourable donation behaviour intentions. Furthermore, literature suggests that the effect of humour advertisements and behaviour was moderated by prior attitude towards the brand (Chattopadhyay and Basu, 1990). Based on this concept, the relationship between existential guilt and donation behaviour intentions could be moderated by attitude towards the brand.

Studies have indicated that existential guilt has a positive effect on donation intent (such as Hibbert et al., 2007). However there are conflicting results, some suggesting that guilt and behavioural intentions are not related (e.g. Ghingold and Bozinoff, 1982; Coulter and Pinto, 1995). The ambiguity of these results suggest that there is a latent relationship between guilt and donation intent, and the lack of a specific scale to measure existential guilt (in place of the generic guilt scale) may have contributed to these inconsistencies (Cotte et al., 2005; Hibbert et al., 2007).

It is reflected in the review that inferences of manipulative intent (IMI) emerged to have a significant influence in the relationships involving guilt appeals in advertising. The construct of IMI is defined as advertisers' attempt to persuade audiences by inappropriate, unfair or manipulative means (Campbell, 1995). IMI impact on donation intent directly and indirectly through guilt, and the importance of manipulative intent has been clearly identified (Hibbert et

al., 2007). Furthermore, IMI has a negative effect on guilt (Hibbert et al., 2007; Cotte et al., 2005) and attitude towards the brand (Campbell, 1995; Cotte et al., 2005). Reactance theory explains their findings and verifies that forceful messages are rejected by audiences due to perceived loss of freedom to choose their own course of action (Brehm, 1966).

Building on the preceding discussion, this paper presents a number of hypotheses relating to the key constructs of existential guilt appeal, attitude towards the brand, inferences of manipulative intent, and donation behaviour intentions. They are as follows:

- H1:** A positive relationship exists between existential guilt and donation behaviour intentions.
- H2:** A positive relationship exists between attitude towards the brand and donation behaviour intentions.
- H3:** Inferences of manipulative intent will moderate the relationship between existential guilt and donation behaviour intentions.
- H4:** Attitude towards the brand will moderate the relationship between existential guilt and donation behaviour intentions.

Methods

A convenience sample consisting of two hundred and three undergraduate students from a Western Australian University participated in the survey. The sample consists of 43.3% males and 56.7% females. It mainly consists of students in the age bracket of 20 to 22 (55%), and majority of whom are Australian citizens (38.9%). A real broadcast ad from World Vision lasting six minutes was used as the stimulus. The choice of ad was tested using a focus group of 20 members which rated the ad highly as evoking existential guilt. Prior to viewing the ad, respondents were asked to fill in a scale to measure their attitude towards World Vision. Respondents then recorded their reactions to the ad based on a number of scales on a self administered survey.

Three established scales namely attitude towards the brand (adapted from Webb et al., 2000), inferences of manipulative intent (adapted from Campbell, 1995), and donation behaviour intentions (adapted from Ranganathan and Henley, 2007) were measured on a seven point Likert scale. The scale on existential guilt was developed for this study. This scale was developed following the guidelines by DeVellis (2003), Churchill (1979), and Wells et al. (1971). The initial 42 items were reduced down to two factors namely, Spending Guilt (Cronbach α coefficient = .931), and Social Guilt (Cronbach α coefficient = .882). The other statistics are all deemed acceptable (KMO and Bartlett's test = .904, Approx Chi-Square = 1842.415, Df = 66, Sig. = .000). Analysis of scale reliability using Cronbach's alpha value shows that, attitude towards the brand scale was 0.837, inference of manipulative intent scale was .830 and donation behaviour intentions was 0.872, all of which are unidimensional and statistically deemed acceptable (Nunnally, 1978).

Results

Regression analysis of the model indicates that existential guilt has a positive influence on donation behaviour intentions ($R^2 = .26$, $Beta = .419$, $Sig. = .000$) hence H1 is supported. Results from the second regression shows that there is a positive relationship between attitude towards the brand and donation behaviour intentions ($R^2 = .175$, $Beta = .418$, $Sig. = .000$). Hence H2 is also supported.

However, the results did not reflect that IMI moderated the relationship between existential guilt and donation behaviour intentions, thus rejecting H3 (Table 1). Finally, attitude towards the brand moderated the relationship between existential guilt and donation behaviour intentions (Table 2), supporting H4.

Table 1: Moderated Regression Results for IMI (H3)

Independent Variables	Sig.	R ²	F	df	R ² Change	F Change	df
Existential Guilt	.000	.249	66.652	1	.249	66.52	201
Existential Guilt + IMI	.015	.271	37.130	1	.022	5.963	200
Existential Guilt + (Existential Guilt + IMI) + (Existential Guilt x IMI)	.174	.278	25.482	1	.007	1.864	199

Dependent variable: donation behaviour intentions

Table 2: Moderated Regression Results for Attitude Towards the Brand (H4)

Independent Variables	Sig.	R ²	F	df	R ² Change	F Change	df
Existential Guilt	.000	.249	66.652	1	.249	66.52	201
Existential Guilt + Attitude towards the brand	.000	.303	44.931	1	.061	17.680	200
Existential Guilt + (Existential Guilt + Attitude towards the brand) + (Existential Guilt x Attitude towards the brand)	.042*	.314	31.822	1	.014	4.177	199

Dependent variable: donation behaviour intentions

Concluding Comments

The finding supports Hibbert et al.'s (2007) conclusions and suggests that when audiences feel existential guilt they will attempt to minimise the feeling of guilt by donating to a charity. The findings further validate the conception that guilt appeals can evoke positive behaviour. Furthermore, the results also support the literature that when consumers have a favourable attitude towards the brand they are more likely to behave in a positive manner (e.g. Campbell, 1995). This research revealed that consumers perceive World Vision as a credible brand. Hence, consumers are likely to donate to World Vision.

In contrast to suggested beliefs (such as Cotte et al., 2005), IMI does not moderate the relationship between existential guilt and donation behaviour intentions. This suggests that consumers may have high tolerance towards existential guilt appeals due to the nature of charitable advertisements. That is, consumers perceive existential guilt appeals to be appropriate for charitable advertisements, and this perception may have developed over time due to the continuous bombardment of guilt appeals in charitable advertisements (Friestad and Wright, 1994). For example, fear appeals are heavily used in drink driving campaigns and consumers almost expect fear appeals to be used due to its effectiveness and appropriateness. Similarly, consumers have developed high tolerance towards existential guilt appeals in charitable advertisements. Hence, consumers are also expecting existential guilt ads to be used in charitable ads. This may explain why IMI is an insignificant moderator between existential guilt and donation behaviour intentions. That is, respondents perceive existential guilt appeals in charitable advertisements as none-manipulative. Results suggest consumers may have higher ad intensity threshold towards existential guilt and imply that advertisers may use more intensive existential guilt ads for charitable ads. This concept extends Coulter and Pinto's (1995) research, that ad intensity threshold could vary between the three different types of guilt appeals.

Analysis of attitude towards the brand showed that it moderated the relationship between existential guilt and donation behaviour intentions. The finding was inline with Chattopadhyay and Basu's (1990) view. Results suggest that consumers' favourable belief of World Vision actually inflates their likelihood of donation. It indicates World Vision is a strong brand and implies that trustworthy brands will increase the effectiveness of existential guilt ads.

This research has explored a scale to measure existential guilt appeals to assist academics and practitioners with manipulation checks. The scale could be used to ensure that the advertisements are only evoking intended emotions (Coulter and Pinto, 1995). Findings of this research are limited to charitable donation behaviour and should be extended to other products and contexts. In addition, this research is part of a larger study and it has limited only to one type of guilt appeal. The major study will cover and explore the other two types of guilt appeals. To identify which type of guilt appeal has the strongest influence on donation behaviour, future studies need to measure all three constructs in one survey. Furthermore, the research is limited to a small student sample and future studies should attempt to validate the findings using a larger sample representative of the target audiences. Future studies should also explore whether IMI and attitude towards the brand have a moderating or a mediating role in anticipatory and reactive guilt appeals. Finally, future researchers should explore the generalisability of existential scale between different brands, consumers, product categories, and cultures to further validate the scale.

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