

**GUILT APPEALS IN ADVERTISING: INVESTIGATING THE ROLES
OF INFERENCES OF MANIPULATIVE INTENT
AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ADVERTISING**

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ABSTRACT

Guilt appeal has always been studied as a unified construct, literature however identifies three classifications of guilt namely, anticipatory, reactive and existential guilt, and this has left limiting our understanding of guilt appeals in advertising. This appeal is increasingly important for advertisers, due to changes in the Australian demographics, family lifestyles and societal values. These alterations have led to higher prevalence of guilt appeals in luxury and symbolic brands which are previously unexplored. Based on the research gaps, a research framework is proposed to examine these untested relationships between attitude towards the ad, ad credibility, inferences of manipulative intent and guilt arousal. Potential contributions are also discussed.

KEYWORDS: Guilt appeals, Advertising, Australia, Symbolic brands, Inferences of manipulative intent.

BACKGROUND OF GUILT APPEALS

Emotional appeal is a powerful tool in advertising as it can influence customers' attention (e.g. Olney et al. 1991), effect customers' reaction to advertisements (e.g. Edell and Burke 1987) and effect brand attitudes (e.g. Aaker, Stayman and Hagerty 1986). Studies in emotional appeals have largely explored and nurtured fear appeals, while other emotional appeals such as guilt still remains unexplored in terms of a well-defined conceptual model (Huhmann and Brotherton, 1997). Of these they are only focused in social marketing context (Alden and Crowley 1995; Bennett 1998; Lindsey 2005; Becheur et al. 2007; Hibbert et al. 2007; Basil, Ridgway and Basil 2008) and have particularly neglected and ignored their influences in consumer reactions to ads using guilt appeals (Coulter and Pinto 1995; Cotte, Coulter and Moore 2005).

Numerous definitions of guilt exist but Lewis's (1993) definition exemplifies the importance of guilt appeals for marketers and advertisers. He defines guilt as an emotion that motivate actions, due to the explicit nature of the linkage between the feeling of guilt and actions that lead to its elicitation (Lewis 1993). That is, if advertisers can evoke guilt through the ad, audiences will act to reduce the feeling of guilt. This is well supported by Negative State Model as theorised by Cialdini and Kenrick (1976) and validated by Ghingold (1980).

Guilt is an important construct for marketers and advertisers due to a number of factors. Firstly, full time female employment rate in Australia has increased from 47% to 61% during 1980 and 2000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001). More significantly, females in the workforce with children aged between 0-4 have increased from 47.4% in 1996 to 52.4% in 2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007). Studies have suggested new "mothers" feel guilty for leaving their offspring to go to work (Murphy 1994; Lewis 1993).

Secondly, the increasingly longer working hours have changed family lifestyle. In 2002, 1.7 million Australians worked 50 hours or more per week, twice as many as in 1982 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003). Parents feel guilty for not spending adequate time with their children. In response, they spend more on branded clothes and toys on them to

remove the feeling of guilt (Turner, Kelly and McKenna 2006; Tozzi 2007). Thirdly, changes in our societal values increase our emphasis on looking after the environment (Gibbons and Nye 2007) and of our health (Wooten 2000). As such, there is a higher propensity for individuals to evoke guilt resulting from failing to live up to one's social obligations (Burnett and Lunsford 1994) such as adopting a green lifestyle. In addition, an individual will feel guilty when they believe they are not taking care of their physical welfare (Burnett and Lunsford 1994).

GAPS AND OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

As revealed in the preceding discussion, these three factors play an integral role in the increasing prevalence of guilt appeals in advertising (Samalin and Hogarty 1994; Moore and Harris 1996). Guilt appeals need not be focused just on charitable advertisements (Bennett 1998; Lindsey 2005; Becheur et al. 2007; Hibbert et al. 2007) alone as there is an emergence of luxury brands using low intensive guilt ads (Soscia, Busacca and Pitrelli 2007) in response to guilt evoked through changing demographics and lifestyles. However, limited empirical studies have explored guilt appeals in luxury and symbolic brands.

Past studies have also focused on guilt as a unified construct. According to scholars there are three classifications of guilt namely, anticipatory, reactive and existential (Rawlings 1970; Izard 1977). Limited studies have researched on each classification of guilt (Cotte, Coulter and Moore 2005; Lindsey 2005; Godek and LaBarge 2006; Hibbert et al. 2007; Basil, Ridgway and Basil 2008) and there is a renewed call for future research into these areas of guilt (Cotte, Coulter and Moore 2005). Further, studies only focused on one type of guilt and have not compared the effectiveness of the three guilt appeals (Cotte, Coulter and Moore 2005; Lindsey 2005; Hibbert et al. 2007; Basil, Ridgway and Basil 2008). Hence, it is still unclear which guilt appeal is more effective in a given situation. As such a comparative study of the three types of guilt is warranted.

There are conflicting results on the effectiveness of guilt appeals (Ghingold and Bozinoff 1982; Coulter and Pinto 1995; Hibbert et al. 2007). Ambiguity of these results suggests

there maybe a latent relationship. Previously untested relationships between attitude towards advertising, ad credibility and inferences of manipulative intent between the three classifications of guilt are also needed.

RELEVANT THEORY AND LITERATURE

Anticipatory guilt is defined as the individual contemplation of a possible violation of one's own standards (Rawlings 1970). It is the most commonly used guilt appeal in advertising, accounting for 61.9% of all guilt ads (Huhmann and Brotherton 1997). Previous studies have indicated anticipatory guilt is low intensive and occurs negatively over a short period (Giner-Sorolla 2001). Hence anticipatory guilt ads are subtly executed. Past studies have shown that anticipatory guilt evokes positive emotions (Godek and LaBarge 2006; Giner-Sorolla 2001) as there is an opportunity to avoid the feeling of guilt. Godek and LaBarge's (2006) research also found anticipatory guilt messages were processed heuristically, that meant consumers accepted the messages without much thought.

Literature defines reactive guilt as, a response to the past and over an act of having violated those standards (Rawlings 1970). Reactive guilt is less common than anticipatory guilt because it evokes past transgressions and evokes negative emotions. Thus it creates a short term negative mood (Godek and LaBarge 2006). Additionally, reactive guilt appeals produced higher inferences of manipulative intent due to consumers reacting negatively towards the ad (Godek and LaBarge 2006). Consumers process reactive guilt ads systematically and every detail of the ad is questioned (Godek and LaBarge 2006). This enhances negative reactions towards the ad and consequently, advertisers tend to avoid the use of reactive guilt (Huhmann and Brotherton 1997).

Existential guilt is defined as a comparison between one's one well being to the well being of others and encourages action to bring the two closer together (Izard 1977). Charities often use this type of guilt appeal because their strategy fits well with the philosophy of existential guilt. Hence charitable ads often attempt to evoke existential guilt to gain donations (Hibbert et al. 2007). Literature shows 85.7% of existential guilt

ads were used by charities (Huhmann and Brotherton 1997). Studies in existential guilt appeals showed there is a positive relationship between existential guilt and donation intentions (Hibbert et al. 2007). However, results are conflicting with other researchers suggesting guilt and behavioural intentions are not related (Ghingold and Bozinoff 1982, Coulter and Pinto 1995). Inconsistency in these results suggests more empirical research is required and new studies should explore potential moderating and mediating factors between guilt and behaviour intentions.

Consumers are active readers of the ad and they are continuously evaluating advertisers' messages through the advertisement. In ads using guilt appeals, consumers often evaluate whether the message is credible or whether the advertiser is attempting to manipulate their attitudes. Consumers' evaluation of these two factors influences how they respond to a guilt ad.

Attitude towards the advertisement (Aad) is defined as, a learned response to a particular advertising stimulus in a favourable or unfavourable manner (Lutz, 1985). Past studies indicate Aad is a mediator of advertising response (Batra and Ray 1986; Lutz, Mackenzie Belch 1983; MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch 1986; Moore and Hutchinson 1983). Literature suggests a positive relationship exists between Aad and emotional response (Batra and Ray 1986; Edell and Burke 1987; Mackenzie and Lutz 1989). Coulter, Cotte and Moore (1999) conceptualisations of guilt also suggests a positive correlation exists between intended emotions such as guilt and favourable attitude towards the ad.

Ad credibility (Acr) is defined as, the degree to which consumer perceives claims made about the brand in the ad to be truthful and believable (MacKenzie and Lutz 1989). Cognitive response theory implicates that when consumers perceive communications or arguments about the brand as credible, their cognitive responses and attitude towards the ad will be more positive (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Ad credibility has empirically proven to have a positive influence on evoking guilt (Cotte, Coulter and Moore 2005; Hibbert et al. 2007) and attitude towards the ad (Kavanooret, Grewal and Blodgett 1997; MacKenzie and Lutz 1989).

Inferences of manipulative intent or (IMI) have been described as consumers' inferences of advertisers' persuasion techniques to be inappropriate, unfair or manipulative (Campbell 1995). Previous studies in advertising appeals have concluded consumers will resist the message when they perceive the message as manipulative (Eagly, Wood and Chaiken 1978; Wood and Eagly 1981). Reactance theory supports this claim and suggests a forceful message will evoke negative reactions due to perceived loss of freedom (Brehm 1966). Research into emotional and guilt appeals have found similar findings (Batra and Ray 1986; Coulter and Pinto 1995). More recent studies have found IMI have a negative influence on guilt (Hibbert et al. 2007) and attitude towards the ad (Campbell 1995). Furthermore, ad credibility and IMI are negatively correlated, when consumers perceive high levels of ad credibility, they will perceive low levels of IMI (Cotte, Coulter and Moore 2005).

PROPOSED RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Gaps identified in the literature posed a number of unanswered questions and posit previously untested relationships between the different constructs. This research therefore proposes a framework as depicted in figure 1, to compare the effectiveness of the three different guilt appeals in the context of luxury and symbolic brands. Specifically, it proposes the following to be empirically tested:

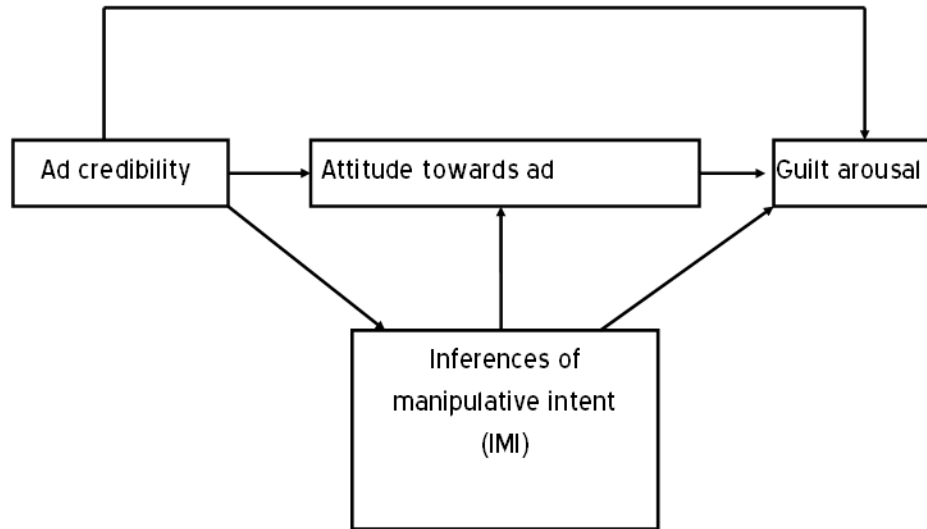
- (a) Ad credibility will have a positive relationship with attitude towards the ad and guilt arousal.
- (b) Ad credibility will have a negative relationship with IMI.
- (c) IMI will have a negative relationship with attitude towards the ad and guilt arousal.
- (d) Attitude towards the ad will have a positive effect on guilt arousal.

The framework also suggests four mediations:

- (i) IMI will mediate the relationship between ad credibility and guilt arousal.
- (ii) IMI will also mediate the relationship between ad credibility and attitude towards the ad.

- (iii) Attitude towards the ad will mediate the relationship between ad credibility and guilt arousal.
- (iv) Attitude towards the ad will mediate the relationship between inferences of manipulative intent and guilt.

Figure 1: Proposed Framework of Guilt Arousal



CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Research to date has only tested on functional products (e.g. Coulter and Pinto 1995) and charities (e.g. Lindsey 2005). This study potentially contributes to the academic literature and industry by increasing our understanding of guilt appeals through a new framework to be examined in a luxury and symbolic branding context. Changes in the environment have been identified and this research calls for future studies to attempt to verify appropriateness of guilt appeals in this specific era of this industry. Researchers should seek to compare the effectiveness of the three guilt appeals under this context and aim to produce a categorisation of guilt appeals in specific product categories under this context. This framework could become the blue print to categorise effectiveness of guilt appeals.

This research framework extended guilt appeals framework with mediating roles of IMI and Aad. It provided some testable propositions, however empirical support is needed to

test these relationships. This research helps identify key variables and relationships in the development of guilt messages, and in turn describe how practitioners can avoid negativity towards guilt advertisements.

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