

# **Guilt Appeals in Advertising: The Mediating Roles of Inferences of Manipulative Intent and Attitude Towards Advertising**

**Michael Lwin, Ian Phau, Curtin University of Technology**

## **Abstract**

Literature identifies three classifications of guilt namely, anticipatory, reactive and existential guilt. However most studies in guilt are devoted towards charitable advertisements and this has limited our understanding of guilt appeals in advertising. Guilt appeal is increasingly important for advertisers, due to changes in demographics and family lifestyles. It has 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.

## **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 et al., 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 a social marketing context (Alden and Crowley, 1995; Bennett, 1998; Lindsey, 2005; Becheur et al., 2007; Hibbert et al., 2007; Basil et al., 2008) and have particularly neglected and ignored the influences of guilt appeals in consumer products (Coulter and Pinto, 1995). It is surprising since, Huhmann and Brotherton (1997) identified 51% of guilt ads were used in consumer durable and non durable products. There is an emergence of luxury brands such as Patek Philippe, Peter Kim Jewellery and Mont Blanc using low intensive guilt ads (Soscia et al., 2007).

In addition, guilt is an important construct for academics and practitioners due to changes in the external environment. Firstly, full time female employment rate in Australia has increased from 47% to 61% between 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 infant to go to work (Lewis, 1993; Murphy, 1994).

Secondly, longer working hours have changed the Australian 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). It suggests, parents are spending more time at work and less time with their children. Burnett and Lunsford (1994) suggested guilt may influence consumption decision of working parents. Their study proposes that working parents may need to make extra or special purchases as a substitute for their time with the kids. Recent study in the U.S. indicate parents spent \$115.6 billion on food, clothing, personal care, entertainment and readings for kids in 2006 and this figure is expected to grow to \$143 billion by 2010 (Tozzi, 2007). The research

indicates 53.5% of married couples had both spouses working and it helps explain the reason why parents are spending more on children, more specifically purchasing more luxury and symbolic brands (Tozzi, 2007).

### **Gaps and Objectives of Study**

As revealed in the preceding discussion, these factors play an integral role in the increasing prevalence of guilt appeals in consumer product advertising (Samalin and Hogarty, 1994; Moore and Harris, 1996). Most studies in guilt are devoted towards charitable advertisements (Bennett 1998; Lindsey, 2005; Becheur et al., 2007; Hibbert et al., 2007). This is in response to guilt evoked through changing demographics and lifestyles. However, limited empirical studies have explored guilt appeals in a luxury and symbolic brand context.

Furthermore, past studies have 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 et al., 2005; Lindsey, 2005; Godek and LaBarge, 2006; Hibbert et al., 2007; Basil et al., 2008) and there is a renewed call for future research into these areas of guilt (Cotte et al., 2005). Further, these studies only focus on one type of guilt appeal and have not compared the effectiveness of the three guilt appeals (Cotte et al., 2005; Lindsey, 2005; Hibbert et al., 2007; Basil et al., 2008). Hence, it is still unclear which guilt appeal is more effective in a specific situation. As such a comparative study of the three types of guilt is warranted (Huhmann and Brotherton, 1997). This study takes the first step to investigate which type of guilt appeal is most appropriate in a luxury and symbolic brand context.

In addition, 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**

Numerous definitions of guilt exist but Lewis's (1993) definition exemplifies the importance of guilt appeals for 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 supported by the Negative State Model, which states that individuals will seek to reduce these negative emotions (Cialdini and Kenrick, 1976; Ghingold, 1980). Hence the importance of guilt appeals in advertising. The differences between the three types of guilt appeals will be discussed in the following proceeding.

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). Thus anticipatory guilt ads are subtly executed. Recent studies suggest that anticipatory guilt evokes the most positive emotion out of the three forms of guilt (Godek and LaBarge, 2006; Giner-Sorolla, 2001; Huhmann and Brotherton, 1997) 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 accept the messages with little evaluation.

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 more 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 appeals (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 (Huhmann and Brotherton, 1997). Hence charitable ads often attempt to evoke existential guilt to gain donations (e.g. Hibbert et al., 2007). Literature shows 21.6% of charitable ads used guilt appeals and 85.7% of these ads used existential guilt appeals (Huhmann and Brotherton, 1997). Recent studies show 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 other studies suggest there could be moderating and mediating factors between guilt and behaviour intentions (Cotte et al., 2005).

The following proceeding will provide a quick overview of the persuasion communication literature and it's influences on guilt appeals. Cotte et al. (2005) suggested consumers are active readers of ads and they evaluate advertisers' messages through advertisements. They indicated consumers' evaluation of ad credibility and inference of manipulative intent may influence their attitudes (Cotte et al., 2005). This research will only focus on consumers' evaluation of these two factors on attitudes and guilt arousal.

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 (Lutz et al., 1983; Batra and Ray, 1986; MacKenzie et al., 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 et al. (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 consumers perceive claims made about the brand in the ad to be truthful and believable (MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989). Cognitive response theory implies 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 et al., 2005; Hibbert et al., 2007) and attitude towards the ad (MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989; Kavanoor et al., 1997).

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 et al., 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). In addition, Cotte et al. (2005) indicated ad credibility and IMI are negatively correlated, when consumers perceive high levels of ad credibility, they will perceive low levels of IMI. Their research was limited to direct relationships between ad credibility, IMI and guilt arousal. However, Cotte et al. (2005) did suggest consumers may perceive the ad as credible, but if the ad was presented in a manipulative manner, consumers will respond negatively. Thus, IMI must have some influence on the relationship between ad credibility and guilt arousal. Additionally, more recent studies found IMI have a negative influence on guilt (Hibbert et al., 2007) and attitude towards the ad (Campbell, 1995).

### **Proposed Research Framework**

Gaps identified in the literature posed a number of unanswered questions and posit previously untested relationships between the different constructs. Cotte et al.'s (2005) model was limited to direct impacts of attitude towards the ad, ad credibility and IMI on the guilt arousal. The 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:

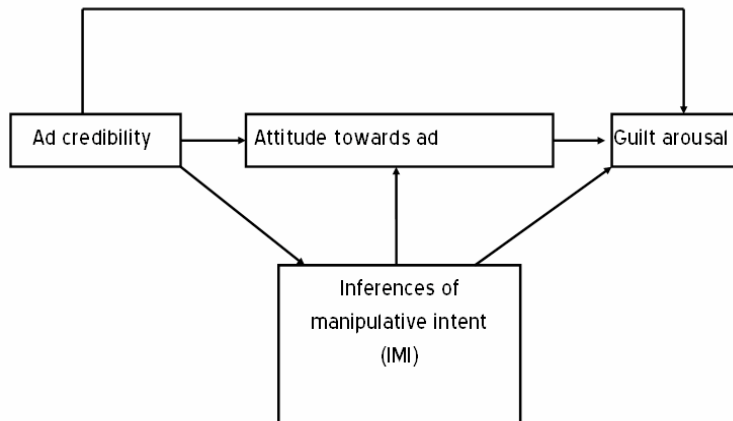
- (a) Attitude towards the ad will have a positive effect on guilt arousal.
- (b) Ad credibility will have a positive relationship with attitude towards the ad and guilt arousal.
- (c) Ad credibility will have a negative relationship with IMI.
- (d) IMI will have a negative relationship with attitude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

The framework also suggests four mediations:

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

**Figure 1:** Proposed Framework of Guilt Arousal



### Concluding Comments

Firstly, research to date has only tested on functional products (e.g. Coulter and Pinto, 1995) and charities (e.g. Lindsey, 2005). Studies that explore the applicability of guilt appeals in other product categories is limited and further investigation is needed to extend the generalisability of guilt appeals (Huhmann and Brotherton, 1997). The review of literature shows luxury and symbolic brands using guilt appeals, and changes in the external environment suggest guilt appeals may have some influence on the consumption of luxury and symbolic brands.

Secondly, the research has identified the need to evaluate all types of guilt appeals using the same ad and sample to categorise which appeal is more appropriate in a specific situation. The proposed framework attempts to measure the appropriateness of the three guilt types in a luxury and symbolic brand context. Future studies should seek to compare the effectiveness of different guilt appeals under this context and aim to produce a categorisation of guilt appeals' effectiveness in specific product categories.

Thirdly, the study presents a conceptual framework that extends Cotte et al.'s (2005) model. The direct influence of attitude towards the ad, ad credibility, and IMI on guilt arousal has been discussed in the model. In addition, the framework accounted for possible mediating relationships between these variables. Hence, the study potentially contributes to the academic literature and the industry by increasing our understanding of guilt appeals through a new framework that incorporates the mediating relationships in a luxury and symbolic brand context.

The research is bound by a number of limitations, and it is important to recognise these before interpreting the conclusions. First of all, there are other factors in persuasion and this research is limited to influences of ad credibility and IMI. Future models could include factors such as coping tactics and goals, as past studies suggest some people are more prone to guilt appeals than others (e.g. Basil et al., 1998). In conclusion, the research calls for further research into guilt appeals specifically in consumer products and services.

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