
An Exploratory Study of Reactive Guilt Appeals

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This study explores the relationships between reactive guilt, attitude towards the brand, inferences of manipulative intent and purchase intentions. Results show no relationship between reactive guilt and purchase intentions. However, attitude towards the brand increased the likelihood of purchase intentions. The research suggests that reactive guilt appeals are inappropriate for the durable consumer goods advertisements. It raises an interesting question why so many advertisers are utilising this type of guilt appeal to target consumers. Managerial implications and future directions radiating from the results are discussed.

Introduction

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).

Further, researchers have primarily explored guilt appeal as a unified construct (e.g. Coulter and Pinto 1995; Ghingold and Bozinoff 1982), the literature has identified three types of guilt appeals namely; reactive, anticipatory, and existential guilt appeals. As such, discrepancies between the findings have been reported with studies that have explored specific types of guilt appeals (Cotte et al. 2005; Hibbert et al. 2007). These findings are further questioned when the measurement of guilt is conceptualised using the unified construct despite the differences. There have been calls to develop specific guilt scales (such as Lindsey 2005). In recent years, scholars have investigated the effectiveness of anticipatory and existential guilt appeal (e.g. Cotte et al. 2005; Lindsey 2005; Godek and LaBarge, 2006; Basil et al., 2008;), however empirical research for reactive guilt appeal is almost non-existent.

This exploratory study is part of a larger study and it will attempt to bridge the gaps in the literature by focusing only on reactive guilt appeals. Specifically, it will explore the relationships between reactive guilt, attitude towards the brand, inferences of manipulative intent and purchase intentions. In response to different measurements of guilt,

this research also explores the development of a potential scale to measure reactive guilt.

Background of Guilt in Advertising

The persuasive nature of guilt appeals can be a powerful tool for advertisers (Cotte et al. 2005). That is, guilt can act as a motivating, action oriented emotion due to the unambiguous nature of the linkage between feeling of guilt and actions that led to its elicitation (Lewis 1993). Thus the individual will respond to a past failure due to the feeling of guilt and it will arouse the individual to reduce the feeling of guilt by making retributions. This phenomenon is also supported by the Negative State Model which suggests that individuals will seek to reduce these negative emotions (Cialdini and Kenrick 1976). Guilt is defined as a negative emotion therefore the individual will attempt to reduce the feeling of guilt by following a suggested course of action.

A review of the literature shows that guilt construct has been demonstrated as an important variable in social marketing (e.g. Alden and Crowley 1995; Becheur et al. 2007; Bennett 1998; Hibbert et al. 2007; Lindsey 2005), marketing communications (Ghingold 1980; Pinto and Priest 1991) and advertising (Cotte et al. 2005; Coulter and Pinto 1995). It has also 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 previous studies have focused on the use of guilt appeals in a social marketing context extensively (Alden and Crowley, 1995; Bennett, 1998; Lindsey, 2005; Becheur et al., 2007; Hibbert et al., 2007; Basil et al., 2008), the influences of guilt appeals in consumer products have been neglected and ignored (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.

As suggested earlier there are three types of guilt; reactive guilt is defined as a response to the past and over an act of having violated those standards (Rawlings 1970). Out of the three guilt appeals, reactive guilt is considered as the most negative because it evokes past transgressions and therefore it evokes more negative emotions. Scholars have suggested that 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). In fact, Huhmann and Brotherton (1997) showed that only 29.4% guilt advertisements used reactive guilt appeals as an execution. Further, Huhmann and Brotherton (1997) showed that 17.8% of reactive guilt appeals were used in a consumer durable context. To this date only one study has explored the effects of reactive guilt (Godek and LaBarge 2006). Godek and LaBarge's (2006) research had some limitations; firstly the stimulus was confined to a scenario that was given to the respondents. Secondly reactive guilt was measured using a general felt emotions scale. Thirdly, the effect of reactive guilt on behavioral intentions was shown to be significant, however the behavioral intentions scale was measured using a one item scale. Therefore, the current research will attempt to resolve these issues.

Rawlings (1970) defined anticipatory guilt as guilt evoked when an individual contemplates a potential violation of one's own standards. Past research shows that this type of guilt is more positive than others, as it can lead to action as a mean to avoid the feeling of guilt (Godek and LaBarge 2006; Lindsey 2005; Rawling 1970). Due to this unique characteristic anticipatory guilt is used more than other types of guilt. In fact, research indicates that over 61% of guilt advertisements applied the use of anticipatory guilt (Huhmann and Brotherton 1997). Additionally, Huhmann and Brotherton (1997) showed that a majority of anticipatory guilt ads are used in the non-durable consumer goods advertisements. Research to date has only explored anticipatory guilt in the following contexts, organ donation (Lindsey 2005), obesity control (Wansink and Chandon 2006) and financial services (Godek and LaBarge 2006).

Existential guilt is defined as a comparison between one's one wellbeing to the wellbeing 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).

The study will present a section of the findings in particular the results from reactive guilt appeals will be discussed. Further, this type of guilt appeal has been chosen for the study due to its prevalence in the durable consumer goods advertisements (Huhmann and Brotherton 1997).

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Changing consumers' behaviour through evoking guilt is a difficult task. Literature indicates that blatant attempts to arouse guilt simply do not work (Coulter and Pinto 1995). Past research suggests that highly intensive guilt appeals evoked anger, irritation and annoyance, hence consumers responded negatively towards the ad (Coulter and Pinto 1995). It is suggested that moderate levels of guilt appeals are most effective (Coulter and Pinto 1995). Their 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 degree. Once ad intensity reaches its threshold, ad effectiveness will face diminishing returns because the ad is 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.

Previous studies indicate reactive guilt has a positive effect on behaviour (Godek and LaBarge 2006). However, there are conflicting results. It has been suggested that guilt and behavioural intentions are not related in a consumer non-durable goods context (Coulter and Pinto 1995). However, their research explored guilt as a uniform construct. Therefore, it is possible that specific type of guilt appeals could be more appropriate under this context. The ambiguity between the results suggests that there could be a latent relationship between guilt and behavioural intentions. Further, the lack of a specific scale to measure reactive guilt (in place of the generic guilt scale) may have contributed to these inconsistencies (Cotte et al. 2005).

H1: A positive relationship exists between reactive guilt and purchase intentions.

Campbell's (1995) findings suggest that there is a positive relationship between attitude towards the brand and behavioural intentions. The theory of planned behaviour supports Campbell's argument and suggests that favourable attitudes towards the behaviour results in favourable behavioural intentions (Ajzen 1991). Furthermore, researchers have shown that attitude towards the brand can moderate the relationship between consumers' reaction to emotional advertisement and behavioural intentions (Chattopadhyay and Basu 1990). Based on this concept, the relationship between reactive guilt and behavioural intentions could be moderated by attitude towards the brand. In this study, purchase intention will be measured to capture behavioural intentions.

H2: A positive relationship exists between attitude towards the brand and purchase intentions.

H3: Attitude towards the brand will moderate the relationship between reactive guilt and purchase intentions.

It is reflected in the literature 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 has a direct and indirect impact on behavioural intentions and the importance of IMI has been clearly identified by researchers (Cotte et al. 2005; 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 can be used to explain these 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).

H4: Inferences of manipulative intent will moderate the relationship between reactive guilt and purchase intentions.

Methodology

Data Collection

A convenience sample consisting of one hundred and seventy seven respondents from a large Western Australian suburb participated in the study. The sample consists of 41.2% males and 58.8% females. The majority falls in the age bracket of 18 to 19 (38.4%), and majority of whom are Australian citizens (52.0%). Further, a large percentage of respondents had an annual income between 0-\$5000 (26.6%). A real broadcast ad from an unknown brand (Patek Philippe) lasting two minutes was used as the stimulus. It has been suggested that prior brand knowledge may have an impact on emotional response (Chattopadhyay and Basu 1990) thus a brand with limited knowledge was used for the study. The choice of the ad was tested using a focus group of six members which rated the ad highly as evoking reactive guilt. The ad shows the relationship between the father and the son, and how the father tries to pass down his legacy by giving his watch to the son. However, the son did not value the watch and sold the watch because he needed the money. When the son became a man and he himself became the father, he realises the value of his father's watch. The son had a strong emotional attachment with the watch and felt guilty for selling the watch. He searched and searched for the watch and finally he found the watch and bought it at an auction. Respondents were asked to position themselves as the son from the ad and how they will respond after seeing the ad. The respondents then recorded their reactions to the ad based on a number of scales on a self-administered survey.

Survey Instrument

Three established scales namely attitude towards the brand (adapted from MacKenzie and Lutz 1989), inferences of manipulative intent (adapted from Campbell, 1995), and

purchase intentions (adapted from Putrevu and Lord 1994). Further, brand familiarity was measured using one item "I am very familiar with this brand". All the scales were measured on a seven point Likert scale. The reactive guilt scale was developed for this study. This scale was developed following the guidelines by DeVellis (2003), Churchill (1979), and Wells et al. (1971). The initial 34 items were reduced down to 10 items. The scale was described the individuals' State Guilt and the analysis showed that it was a reliable measure (Cronbach α coefficient = .891). Further analysis of scale reliability using Cronbach's alpha value shows that, attitude towards the brand scale was 0.892, inference of manipulative intent scale was .853 and purchase intentions was 0.921, all of which are unidimensional and statistically deemed acceptable (Nunnally, 1978). Additionally, results indicated a low brand familiarity ($M = 2.486$, $SD = 1.940$) for the Patek Philippe brand.

Result and Analysis

Regression Analysis

Multiple regressions analysis was used to test hypotheses 1-2 and Hierarchical moderated regression analysis was used to test hypotheses 3-4 in this study. Analysis of the model indicates that no significant relationship exists between reactive guilt and purchase intentions (t -value= 0.316, $Beta = 0.023$, $Sig. = 0.752$) hence H1 is rejected. Results from the second regression shows that there is significant relationship between attitude towards the brand and purchase intentions (t -value = 4.291, $Beta = 0.311$, $Sig. = 0.000$). Hence H2 is accepted.

Further, the results did not show that attitude towards the brand moderated the relationship between reactive guilt and purchase intentions, thus rejecting H3 (Table 1). In addition, IMI moderated the relationship between reactive guilt and purchase intentions hence H4 was rejected (Table 2).

Discussion and Implication

In Godek and LaBarge (2006) study a scenario was used as a stimulus and they measured the respondent's feelings of guilt using a unified guilt construct. The findings supported Godek and LaBarge (2006) conclusions. The results show that there is no relationship between reactive guilt and purchase intentions in the context of durable consumer goods. The current study has further confirmed their conclusions using the specific measure of reactive guilt appeal. Further, the study extended on previous studies, by further exploring this phenomenon.

Firstly, the study investigated the effectiveness of reactive guilt for an unknown brand. It is possible that consumers' brand familiarity is influential to the effectiveness of reactive guilt appeals. This suggestion is

supported from Lwin and Phau (2008) that showed the moderating impact of prior attitudes toward the brand on

donation intentions. Thus it may be a requirement for a brand to achieve familiarity and favorable attitudes before utilizing guilt appeals.

Table 1: Moderated Regression Results for Attitude Towards the Brand (Abr)(H3)

Independent Variables	R ²	F	Df1	R ² Change	F Change	Df2	Sig.
Reactive Guilt	.000	.046	1	.000	.046	173	.830
Reactive Guilt + Abr	.097	9.230	1	.097	18.409	172	.000*
Reactive Guilt + (Reactive Guilt +Abr) + (Reactive Guilt x Abr)	.098	6.182	1	.001	.175	171	.676

Dependent variable: Purchase Intentions

*Sig at P<0.05

Table 2: Moderated Regression Results for Inferences of Manipulative Intent (IMI)(H4)

Independent Variables	R ²	F	Df1	R ² Change	F Change	df	Sig.
Reactive Guilt	.000	.033	1	.004	.000	174	.856
Reactive Guilt + IMI	.019	1.693	1	.019	3.353	173	.069
Reactive Guilt + (Reactive Guilt + IMI) + (Reactive Guilt x IMI)	.021	1.216	1	.002	.276	172	.600

Dependent variable: Purchase Intentions

*Sig at P<0.05

Secondly, consumers may view reactive guilt appeal as an inappropriate method to advertise durable consumer goods (such as luxury watches). This could be driven from consumer's knowledge of the advertiser's persuasion techniques (Friestad and Wright 1994). Thus the consumers could have a negative attitude towards reactive guilt appeal due to years of advertisers using this appeal. If this is the case, the current findings questions why a large number of advertisers are using reactive guilt in a durable consumer goods context. This concept is also supported by Godek and LaBarge (2006). However, more empirical support is needed before validating the findings.

Thirdly, the measurement for reactive guilt is still in development and it needs further refinement. Thus this may have influenced the results. The research has explored the use of reactive guilt in a durable consumer goods context and it has extended the theoretical understanding from Godek and LaBarge (2006) research.

In addition, a significant relationship was observed between attitudes towards the brand and purchase intentions. The finding confirms the conclusion from the literature and shows that a favourable attitude towards the brand predicted purchase intentions (e.g. Campbell 1995).

However, in contrast to previous findings (such as Cotte et al. 2005), IMI did not moderate the relationship between reactive guilt and purchase intentions. This confirms past studies (Lwin and Phau 2008). However, Cotte et al. (2005) and Hibbert et al. (2007) did suggest that IMI have an indirect effect on guilt thus IMI could act as a mediator. Analysis of attitude towards the brand showed that it did not moderate the relationship between reactive guilt and purchase intentions. That is favourable attitude

towards the brand did not enhance the likelihood of purchase intention. As suggest above, brand familiarity could be a key factor in the persuasiveness of reactive guilt appeals.

Further, the research has provided methodological contributions by exploring a scale to measure reactive guilt appeals to assist academics and practitioners with manipulation checks as well as to measure this specific type of guilt appeal. For example, the scale could be used to ensure that the advertisements are only evoking intended emotions (Coulter and Pinto 1995). However, the scale is still in the development stage, and further validation of the scale is necessary. In addition, findings from Godek and LaBarge (2006) were limited due to the use of one item behavioural intention scale. This study has overcome these issues and provided a validation on the effectiveness of reactive guilt appeals.

However, findings of this research are limited to purchase intentions in a durable consumer goods context (i.e. luxury watches) and future research should extended this to other products and contexts. Further, the research is part of a larger study and it is limited only to one type of guilt appeal. Future research should compare which type of guilt appeal has the strongest influence on purchase intentions by measuring all three types of guilt in one study. Further, validation of the reactive guilt scale through other forms of products and services is also needed. The convenience sample may have its merits in this context, but a larger non-convenience sample with more variation in demographic profiles should also be pursued for future studies.

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