
The Role of Guilt Appeals on Donation Behavior

Michael Lwin, Curtin University, Australia

Ian Phau, Curtin University, Australia

This study explores the relationships between existential guilt, attitude towards the brand, inferences of manipulative intent (IMI) and actual donation behaviour. World Vision advertisement was used as the stimulus and the results show a positive relationship between existential guilt and actual donation behaviour. Interestingly, attitude towards the brand did not increase the likelihood of donations. IMI did not moderate the relationship between existential guilt and actual donation behavior. The research suggests that existential guilt appeals are appropriate for the charitable advertisements and it shows a direct link between guilt and actual donation behavior.

Background of Guilt in Advertising

Guilt appeals have been studied in numerous contexts including, 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) and advertising (Coulter and Pinto, 1995; Cotte et al., 2005). It 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 most importantly donation intentions (Hibbert et al., 2007).

Persuasive nature of guilt is a powerful tool for advertisers as it can motivate donors to donate (Cotte et al., 2005). It is defined 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). Cialdini and Kenrick's (1976) Negative State Model helps explain why guilt appeals are powerful. The theory defined guilt is as a negative emotion (Cotte et al., 2005) and thus individuals will seek to reduce the negative emotions. Therefore, if advertisers can evoke guilt successfully through advertising campaigns, they can offer solutions to minimise the feelings of guilt.

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 actual charitable donation behaviour. Specifically, it will explore the relationships between existential guilt, attitude towards the brand, inferences of manipulative intent, and actual donation behaviour. 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 (Moore and Harris, 1996). Thus, in recent years scholars have explored the influence of existential guilt and donation intentions (e.g. Cotte et al., 200; Hibbert et al., 2007). However, their studies were limited to donation intentions and there is limited empirical evidence to show that existential guilt can lead to actual behaviour.

Evoking guilt and changing consumers' behaviour through the ad is a difficult task. The advertiser must understand the persuasion process. The Persuasion Knowledge Model provides a theoretical foundation to comprehend how consumers are persuaded (Friestad and Wright, 1994). It suggests that persuasion is depended on consumer's knowledge of the persuasion attempt and consumer's persuasion coping behaviour. That is how much do consumers know about the current advertising technique and how much acceptable are they of the advertiser's persuasion technique. 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.

There is strong evidence to suggest that existential guilt and donation intent are positive related (such as Hibbert et al., 2007). However there are some conflicting results, some studies found 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).

Thus, the based on these findings the following hypothesis is predicted:

H1: *A positive relationship exists between existential guilt and actual donation behavior.*

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 behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Hence it is predicted that positive attitude towards the brand could lead to positive actual donation behaviour. 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 actual donation behaviour could be moderated by attitude towards the brand.

H2: *A positive relationship exists between attitude towards the brand and actual donation behaviour.*

H3: *Attitude towards the brand will moderate the relationship between existential guilt and actual donation behaviour.*

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). 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). That is if you force viewers to feel existential guilt through the ad, the viewers will reject your message and will feel anger and irritation. Furthermore, past research has shown that 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). However, the impact of IMI in the actual donation behaviour context has not been investigated and the research will provide new findings for the literature. The current study will investigate the indirect impact on IMI on actual donation behavior. Building on the preceding discussion, the following hypothesis is anticipated:

H4: *Inferences of manipulative intent will moderate the relationship between existential guilt and actual donation behaviour.*

Methodology

Data Collection

A convenience sample consisting of two hundred and sixty seven students from a Western Australian University participated in the survey. The sample consists of 44.4% males and 55.6% females. It mainly consists of students in the age bracket of 20 to 22 (52.9%), and majority of whom are Australian citizens (28%). 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 watched the ad and 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 Webb et al., 2000) and inferences of manipulative intent (adapted from Campbell, 1995). All the scales were measured on a seven point Likert scale. Actual donation behaviour was measured by calculating how much the individual has donated. 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 a two factor scale and the final existential scale consisted of five items. The reliability of the scale was measured using Cronbach α coefficient (.914) and other statistics are all deemed acceptable (KMO and Bartlett's test = .876, Approx Chi-Square = 1017.345, Df = 10, Sig. = .000). Analysis of scale reliability using Cronbach's alpha value shows that, attitude towards the brand scale was 0.826 and inference of manipulative intent scale was .914,

all of which is unidimensional and statistically deemed acceptable (Nunnally, 1978).

Results

The model was analysed using multiple regression analysis and it shows that existential guilt has a positive influence on actual donation behaviour ($R^2 = .030$, $Beta = .166$, $Sig. = .005$), hence H1 is supported. Results from the second regression shows that there is no significant

relationship between attitude towards the brand and actual donation behaviour ($R^2 = .003$, $Beta = .059$, $Sig. = .340$). Hence H2 was rejected.

Further, the results did not reflect that attitude towards the brand moderate the relationship between existential guilt and actual donation behavior, thus rejecting H3 (Table 1). Finally, inferences of manipulative intent did not moderate the relationship between existential guilt and actual donation behaviour. (Table 2), thus H4 was rejected.

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.
Existential Guilt	.029	7.683	1	.029	7.683	260	.006
Existential Guilt + Abr	.030	3.998	1	.010	.334	259	.564
Existential Guilt + (Existential Guilt + Abr) + (Existential Guilt x Abr)	.030	2.655	1	.000	.000	258	.991

Dependent variable: Actual donation behaviour

*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.
Existential Guilt	.029	7.818	1	.029	7.818	259	.006
Existential Guilt + IMI	.032	4.295	1	.003	.778	258	.378
Existential Guilt + (Existential Guilt + IMI) + (Existential Guilt x IMI)	.033	2.887	1	.000	.102	257	.750

Dependent variable: Actual donation behaviour

*Sig at P<0.05

Discussion and Implication

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. The paper extended Hibbert et al.'s (2007) research by exploring the link between existential guilt appeal and actual donation behavior. Thus, it has provided strong empirical support to show that existential guilt appeals in charitable donation advertisements can lead to charitable donations.

In addition, the results failed to 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 reliable brand ($M = 5.421$). However, this did not increase the likelihood of donation to World Vision. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is a majority of the respondents were international students and they had limited knowledge of

the World Vision brand. Therefore, this may have affected the results.

Analysis of attitude towards the brand failed to show any moderation between existential guilt and donation behaviour intentions. Results suggest that consumers' favourable belief of World Vision did not inflate their likelihood of donation.

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.

This research has provided 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. Finally, future researchers should explore the generalisability of existential scale between different brands, consumers, product categories, and cultures to further validate the scale.

References

- Ajzen, I. (1991). The Theory of Planned Behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 50 (2), 179-211.
- Alden, D.L. and Crowley, A.E. (1995). Sex Guilt and Receptivity to Condom Advertising. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 25 (16), 1446-1463.
- Basil, D.Z., Ridgway, N.M. and Basil, M.D. (2008). Guilt and Giving: A Process Model of Empathy and Efficacy. *Psychology and Marketing* 25 (1), 1-23.
- Becheur, I., Dib, H., Merunka, D. and Valette-Florence, P. (2007). Emotions of Fear, Guilt or Shame in Anti-Alcohol Messages: Measuring Direct Effects on Persuasion and the Moderating Role of Sensation Seeking. *European Conference of the Association for Consumer Research Proceeding*, Milan, Italy.
- Bennett, R. (1996). Effects Of Horrific Fear Appeals On Public Attitudes Towards AIDS. *International Journal of Advertising* 15 (3), 183-202.
- Bennett, R., 1998. Shame, Guilt and Responses to Non-Profit and Public Sector Ads. *International Journal of Advertising* 17 (4), 483-499.
- Brehm, J.W. (1966). *A Theory of Psychological Reactance*. Academic Press, New York.
- Burnett, M.S. and Lunsford, D.A., 1994. Conceptualizing Gilt in the Consumer Decision Making Process. *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 11 (3), 33-43.
- Campbell, M.C. (1995). When Attention-Getting Advertising Tactics Elicit Consumer Inferences of Manipulative Intent: The Importance of Balancing Benefits and Investments. *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 4 (3), 225-54.
- Chattopadhyay, A. and Basu, K. (1990). Humor in Advertising: The Moderating Role of Prior Brand Evaluation. *Journal of Marketing Research* 27 (4), 466-476.
- Churchill, G.A. (1979). A Paradigm for Developing Measures of Marketing Constructs. *Journal of Marketing Research* 16 (1), 64-73.
- Cialdini, R.B. and Kenrick, D.T. (1976). Altruism and Hedonism: A Social Development Perspective on the Relationship of Negative Mood State and Helping. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 34 (5), 907-14.
- Cotte, J., Coulter, R.H. and Moore M. (2005). Enhancing or Disrupting Guilt: The Role of Ad Credibility and Perceived Manipulative Intent. *Journal of Business Research* 58 (3), 361-368.
- Coulter, R.H. and Pinto, M.B. (1995). Guilt Appeals in Advertising: What Are Their Effects. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 80 (6), 697-705.
- DeVellis, R.F. (1991). *Scale Development: Theory and Application*. Sage Publications, Newbury Park.
- Friestad, M. and Wright, P., 1994. The Persuasion Knowledge Model: How People Cope With Persuasion Attempts. *Journal of Consumer Research* 21 (1), 1-31.
- Ghingold, M. (1980). Guilt Arousing Marketing Communications: An Unexplored Variable. In: Monroe, K. B. (Eds.), *Advances in Consumer Research*, Association for Consumer Research, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 442-448.
- Ghingold, M. and Bozinoff, L. (1982). Construct Validation and Empirical Testing of Guilt Arousing Marketing Communications. In: Mitchell, A. (Eds.), *Advances in Consumer Research*, Association for Consumer Research, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 210-214.
- Godek, J. and LaBarge, M.C. (2006). Mothers, Food, Love and Career--The Four Major Guilt Groups? The Differential Effects of Guilt Appeals. *Advances in Consumer Research* 33 (1), 511-511.
- Hibbert, S., Smith, A., Davies, A. and Ireland, F. (2007). Guilt Appeals: Persuasion Knowledge and Charitable Giving. *Psychology and Marketing* 24 (8), 723-742.
- Huhmann, B.A. and Brotherton, T.P. (1997). A Content Analysis of Guilt Appeals in Popular Magazine Advertisements. *Journal of Advertising* 26 (2), 35-45.
- Izard, C. E., 1977. *Human Emotions*, Plenum, New York.
- Lewis, M. (1993). Self-conscious Emotions: Embarrassment, Pride, Shame and Guilt. In: Lewis, M., Haviland J.M. (Eds.), *Handbook of Emotions*, Guilford Press, New York, 563-573

Lindsey, L.L.M. (2005). Anticipated Guilt as Behavioral Motivation An Examination of Appeals to Help Unknown Others Through Bone Marrow Donation. *Human Communication Research* 31 (4), 453-481.

Moore, D.J. and Harris, W.D. (1996). Affect Intensity and The Consumer's Attitude Toward High Impact Emotional Advertising Appeals. *Journal of Advertising* 25 (2), 37-50.

Nunnally, J. C. (1978). *Psychometric Theory* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill: New York.

Pinto, M.B. and Priest, S. (1991). Guilt Appeals in Advertising: An Exploratory Study. *Psychological Reports* 69 (2), 375-385.

Webb, D.H., Green, C.L. and Brashear, T.G. (2000). Development and Validation of Scales to Measure Attitudes Influencing Monetary Donations to Charitable Organizations. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 28 (2), 299-309.

Wells, W.D., Leavitt, C. and McConville, M. (1971). A Reaction Profile for TV Commercials. *Journal of Advertising Research* 11 (6), 11-17.