

**THE ROLE OF EXISTENTIAL GUILT APPEALS
IN CHARITABLE ADVERTISEMENTS**

Michael Lwin

School of Marketing, Curtin Business School
Curtin University of Technology

Ian Phau¹

School of Marketing, Curtin Business School
Curtin University of Technology

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Associate Professor Ian Phau
School of Marketing

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¹Corresponding author:

Ian Phau
School of Marketing, Curtin Business School
Curtin University of Technology
GPO BOX U1987
Perth, WA 6845
Australia
Tel (+61 8) 9266 4014
Fax (+61 8) 9266 3937
Email: Ian.phau@cbs.curtin.edu.au

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This study focuses on existential guilt and it 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.

KEYWORDS: Guilt appeals, Existential guilt, Charitable advertisements, Charity

BACKGROUND OF GUILT IN ADVERTISING

Guilt appeals in advertising are a powerful tool for advertisers due to its persuasive nature (Cotte, Coulter and Moore 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 its advertising campaigns, it can offer consumers a solution to minimise these feelings of guilt through intentions and behaviours. 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 Coulter and Moore 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, Coulter and Moore 2005; Lindsey 2005; Godek and LaBarge 2006; Hibbert et al. 2007; Basil, Ridgway and Basil 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 (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 and luxury symbolic brands. Specially, it will explore the relationship between existential guilt appeal, attitude towards the brand, inferences of manipulative intent, and donation intent. 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 a 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) research indicated that this type of guilt appeal is commonly used in public service announcements (PSA) and charitable ads. Furthermore, studies show that the use of dramatic emotional appeals such as guilt is increasingly used by advertisers as it is 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. It is thus suggested 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, Coulter and Moore (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 more favourable donation intent. 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 guilt and behaviour could be moderated by attitude towards the brand.

Studies have indicated that existential guilt had 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 suggests 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, Coulter and Moore 2005; Hibbert et al. 2007).

It is reflected in the review that inferences of manipulation 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, Coulter and Moore 2005) and attitude towards the brand (Campbell 1995; Cotte, Coulter and Moore 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 intent. 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.
- H3:** Inferences to manipulation 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 appeal. 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, Green and Brashear 2000), inferences of manipulative intent (adapted from Campbell 1995), and donation intent (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, Leavitt and McConville (1971). The initial 42 items were reduced down to two factors namely, Spending Guilt (Cronbach α coefficient = .931), and Charitable 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; all of which are deemed acceptable (Nunnally 1975).

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 moderate the relationship between existential guilt and donation behaviour intentions, thus rejecting H3 (Table 1). Finally, attitude towards the brand moderate the relationship between existential guilt and donation behaviour intentions (Table 2), supporting H4.

Table 1: Moderated Regression Results for IMI

| Independent Variables | Sig. | R2 | F | d f | R2 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 |

Table 2: Moderated Regression Results for Attitude Towards the Brand

| Independent Variables | Sig. | R2 | F | df | R2 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 |

CONCLUSION

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. Findings from this research 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, Coulter and Moore 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. In the same vein, 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 insignificant as a moderator between existential guilt and donation behaviour intentions, as they do not consider existential guilt ads as being manipulative. As a result, consumers may have higher ad intensity threshold level towards existential guilt and implies that advertiser may use more intensive existential guilt ads. This concept extends Coulter and Pinto's (1995) research, that ad intensity threshold could vary between the three different types of guilt appeals.

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 further cements World Vision as 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 and this in itself is a major contribution in developing a greater understanding of specific guilt appeals. The exploratory scale is important for academics and practitioners as it could be used as a manipulation check 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. 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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