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## **Guilt Decreasing Marketing Communication: an Unexplored Appeal**

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Guilt is relevant to a variety of consumption experiences and practitioners around the world have continued to use it as a communication appeal. Marketing literature demonstrated that guilt as a distinct emotion can be aroused by advertising. Nevertheless, the ability of advertising to decrease guilt was neglected by marketing scholars and the aim of this research is to assess the role of the guilt decreasing appeal in reducing anticipated guilt. Findings demonstrate the efficacy of the decreasing guilt appeal in advertising and they show that it does not compromise the hedonic component of a guilty pleasure.

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# Guilt Decreasing Marketing Communication: An Unexplored Appeal

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

### 1. Purpose of the research

In spite of the presence of inconsistent findings in the marketing literature concerning guilt, practitioners around the world have continued to use it as a communication appeal (Huhmann and Brotherton, 1997).

Marketing literature demonstrated that guilt as a distinct emotion can be aroused by advertising. Nevertheless, the capacity of guilt appeal to decrease guilt was neglected by marketing scholars and the aim of this research is to assess the role of the guilt decreasing appeal in reducing anticipated guilt.

### 2. Theoretical framework

In consumer behavior, only two studies in recent years could be found that examined this particular negative emotion (Burnett and Lunsford, 1994; Dahl et al, 2003). With respect to Dahl et al. observations in (2003) and Burnett and Lunsford (1994), we might note that consumers feel guilty for actions (i.e. spending money for unneeded goods) as well as for inactions (i.e. not donating money to a charity).

In the former case, marketing managers may communicate to the market using guilt arousing appeals to induce the target to act in a certain way. In the latter case, a potential customer may feel anticipated guilt when he/she is considering the possibility, for example, to buy an unneeded good (i.e. a very expensive watch). With respect to this guilt inducing circumstance, marketing managers may be interested in decreasing guilt felt by potential customers.

Thus, both guilt arousing and decreasing appeals may be carried out by marketers in the course of stimulating demand. Will both of these appeals work?

Some researchers have tried to answer the above questions (Bozinoff and Ghingold, 1983; Coulter and Pinto, 1995; Bennett, 1998; Cotte, Coulter and Moore, 2005).

The above mentioned studies of guilt appeals focused exclusively on guilt arousing appeal. Moreover, with a few exceptions (see Coulter and Pinto, 1995), they were conducted only in the contexts of nonprofit organizations. Guilt decreasing appeals, namely the capacity of advertising to depress and even extinguish consumer anticipated guilt, have been totally ignored by marketing literature.

According to Ghingold (1980) dissonance theory can be used to help explain how guilt functions in decision making.

Dissonance occurs when two or more cognitions conflict, contradict each other, or in some way clash (Festinger, 1957). As originally conceived by Festinger (1957), thoughts and opinions are generally linked in a consistent way. When inconsistencies occur between thoughts, people typically feel psychological discomfort, which Festinger (1957) termed dissonance. Since guilt is defined as a violation (or potential violation) of a norm, we might think of guilt as a form of cognitive dissonance: one's desire for a product will be "inconsistent" with thoughts about negative consequences or noxiousness associated with a purchase. According to Festinger (1957), when a person experiences feelings of dissonance, he/she attempts to avoid situations that might increase the dissonance or seeks to reduce the negative inconsistencies. The first strategy is to make plans regarding future actions, like not to give in to a temptation.

The second one is to look for justifications for future guilty actions. With respect to the latter possibility of dissonance reduction, advertising may meet the requirement of the receivers to find a ready and persuasive justification for committing the transgression. We expect that this ready excuse may reduce consumers' guilt:

H1: Ads that include justifications for purchasing a guilt-laden product (versus ads that do not) will reduce anticipated guilt.

Moreover, it is desirable that manipulations of justifications for making a purchase that aim to reduce anticipated guilt do not at the same time depress positive emotions associated with an advertised brand. According to the psychology literature, typical consumption situation are characterized by this inverse correlation, namely when consumption guilt decreases, positive emotions are likely to increase. Therefore,

H2: The more successful ad is in depressing anticipated guilt, the more successful it will be in increasing positive emotions.

Finally, according to Holbrook and Batra (1987) there is a negative association between guilt and attitude toward the advertisement. In concert with these findings, we expect that, to the extent that anticipated guilt is depressed, attitude toward the ad will be enhanced. Thus,

H3: The more successful an ad is in depressing anticipated guilt, the more successful it is in enhancing attitude toward a ad.

### 3. Method

A two independent group mixed design was used to manipulate type of advertisement (guilt reducing versus neutral), and happiness, guilt, and attitude toward advertising were measured variables. With respect to the aforementioned hypotheses, the independent variables are thus the format of advertising (guilt reducing versus neutral), the pre-exposure happiness and guilt felt by participants. The dependent variables are the post-exposure happiness and guilt experienced by respondents and their attitude toward the advertisements. 288 participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in which they were exposed to a guilt decreasing or neutral print ad. Information was analyzed from 226 completed surveys.

### 4. Results

In order to test the first hypothesis, we built a repeated measure design with guilt as a within-subject variable and the type of group as a between-subjects variable. The results revealed a significant effect of the exposure to advertisement on guilt ( $F(1.000, 222.000) = 84.06, p < .001$ ) which shows higher guilt before the exposure to advertisement ( $M = 2.43$  for the neutral ad and  $M = 2.56$  for the guilt decreasing ad) than after the exposure of advertisement ( $M = 2.29$  for the neutral ad and  $M = 1.99$  for the guilt decreasing ad). Moreover, findings indicated that there was a significant interaction between

the level of guilt felt by participants and the type of communication appeal used (neutral vs. guilt decreasing):  $F(1,222.000)=31.50$ ,  $p<.001$ . Thus, the findings support the first hypothesis.

In order to test the second hypothesis, we built a repeated measure design with mild happiness as a within-subject variable and the type of group as a between-subjects variable. Participants of both groups, control and experimental, increased their level of mild happiness after the exposure of the advertisement but the means are not significantly different:  $F(1,224.000)=1.62$ ,  $p=.20$ . We obtain similar results referring to the intense happiness. The findings do not support the second hypothesis.

In order to test the third hypothesis, we run two linear regressions: in the first one the dependent variable is attitude toward the ad and the independent variable was the guilt felt after the exposure to the ad. Results show that the level of guilt felt by participants after the exposure to the ad seems to influence their attitude toward the ad. Thus, the guilt decreasing appeal may be effective in determine a positive attitude toward the marketing communication.

## 5. Discussion

Findings demonstrate the efficacy of the decreasing guilt appeal in reducing the amount of anticipated guilt that a customer feels when he/she is considering purchasing a product. Such messages apparently provide consumers with excuses to buy seemingly guilt-ridden products. Moreover, our findings showed that the guilt decreasing appeal does not decrease positive emotions associated with the advertised product. Thus this appeal does not compromise the hedonic component of a guilty pleasure and meets the needs of marketer and consumer alike.

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