Mothers, Food, Love and Career – The Four Major Guilt Groups? The Differential Effects of Guilt Appeals

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Marketers have become increasingly interested in the use of emotions in advertising appeals, especially negative emotions. Guilt in particular is an often employed, though not clearly understood, type of persuasive appeal. The differences between two types of guilt, anticipatory and reactive, are examined with two experimental studies. The results of these studies provide evidence that anticipatory and reactive guilt appeals differ in the nature and types of emotions they elicit, as well as in the way that the appeals themselves are processed. These findings have important implications for both researchers and marketers.

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The Differential Effects of Guilt Appeals
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Marketers have become increasingly interested in the use of
emotions in advertising appeals, particularly negative emotions.
Several of the negative emotions that are of interest include fear,
guilt, embarrassment, regret, remorse, annoyance, and irritation
(Burke and Edell 1983). From a marketing perspective, it is impor-
tant to understand how the use of these different negative emotions
affects consumers’ reactions to persuasion attempts. Guilt is a
complex emotion, with correspondingly complex effects on per-
suasion. For example, in response to guilt appeals, Englis (1990)
found that consumers experienced high levels of anger, disdain,
disgust and embarrassment. Coulter and Pinto (1995) found that
while guilt appeals may be successful at inducing behavioral
compliance, they also produce unintended reactions such as anger
that can ultimately negatively impact perceptions of the advertiser.
In this paper we examine several aspects of guilt and determine the
effects of different types of guilt appeals on attitudes and behavior.

Guilt: Definition and Characteristics
Guilt can be seen as a combination of negative emotions such
as regret, remorse and self-blame that are usually experienced upon
either contemplating or actually committing a transgression (Lascu
1991). Generally that takes the form of some sort of comparison
between one’s actual and one’s optimal behavior according to a
socially-defined standard, rule or moral imperative (Lewis 1993,
Ortony et al. 1988, Giner-Sorolla 2001). Guilt can be broken down
into three distinct types: existential, anticipatory, and reactive. Each
of these types is currently employed by advertisers (Huhmann and
Brotherton 1997, Cotte et al. in press, Coulter et al. 1999). Existen-
tial guilt is most often found in social marketing advertisements
which compare one’s own well-being to the well-being of others
(Izard 1977) and encourage action to bring the two closer together.
Anticipatory guilt is stimulated when an individual contemplates
the potential future violation of some internalized standard of
acceptable behavior, whereas reactive guilt occurs in response to a
past, overt act of having violated those standards (Coulter et al.
1999, Cotte et al. in press).

Anticipatory and reactive guilt in particular are of interest as a
recent content analysis by Huhmann and Brotherton (1997)
showed them to be common appeals in popular print advertising.
Of more than 2,000 advertisements processed, the content analysis
found that 5.8% employed guilt appeals, of which 61.9% could be
classified as anticipatory and 29.4% as reactive. In addition, re-
search indicates that there is a differential effect in then intensity
with which these two types of guilt are experienced. Giner-Sorolla
(2001) found that, in the case of a short-term benefit/delayed-cost
activity (e.g. going off one’s diet for an immediate sugar fix),
anticipatory guilt is felt less intensely and less negatively than the
reactive guilt that is experienced after actually engaging in the guilt-
inducing behavior. The opportunity to avoid the behavior that
would cause reactive guilt also increases feelings of self-efficacy
and self-control in the anticipatory condition. In contrast, in the
reactive condition, having one’s failure to resist temptation pointed
out increases feelings of helplessness and worthlessness and overall
contributes to negative affect.

Implications for Persuasion
Although guilt appeals may influence behavior, they may also
elicit negative emotions. Anticipatory guilt could be construed as
the most positive of the three types, since it focuses on the future and
the hopeful potential of avoiding a negative emotion through some
individual effort or exercise of self-control. Reactive guilt, on the
other hand, can be construed as more negative, since it focuses on
past transgressions and feelings of guilt in order to spur action
towards avoiding that emotion again. These differences in the
nature of the emotion elicited by anticipatory and reactive appeals
has several implications for the persuasiveness of these appeals.
The first of these concerns how consumers perceive the ad itself as
well as the brand that is depicted in the ad. Since prior research has
demonstrated that emotional responses to ads affects attitude to-
wards the ad (A_ad) and attitude towards the brand (A_br) (Batra and
Ray 1986, Edel and Burke 1987, MacKenzie and Lutz 1989), we
would expect that consumers would respond more positively when
ads used anticipatory appeals as compared to reactive appeals.

Additionally, research in the area of information processing
indicates that affect plays a role in determining whether a message
is processed heuristically or systematically (Schwarz and Clore
1996). In particular, the “feelings-as-information” view holds that
our affective response to a target is a useful source of information
when evaluating the target, and whether we experience positive or
negative emotions will determine our information processing strat-
agy. In general, individuals in a sad mood or experiencing negative
emotions are both more willing to invest cognitive effort than happy
individuals, as well as more likely to process information at a lower
level of abstraction. This is because the negative affect cues us to a
potential discrepancy between our current and our desired situation
(or a “better watch out” message), and stimulates a desire for
accuracy, which is in turn manifested in the systematic processing
of the message (Schwarz and Clore 1996). As such, we would
expect that reactive advertising appeals would elicit more system-
atic processing of the content of the ad than anticipatory appeals.

In order to test these propositions we conducted three experi-
mental studies. The first examined the differential effects of antici-
patory and reactive advertising appeals on various positive and
negative emotions. The second study examines differences in the
types of processing that consumers engage in when exposed to
anticipatory and reactive advertising appeals. The third study
examined differences in experienced emotions and depth of pro-
cessing according to sex and need for cognition.

All the studies examined the implications that these differential
effects on emotions and processing have on consumers’ atti-
uides and behavior intentions. Our results provide evidence that
anticipatory and reactive guilt appeals differ in several ways that
have important implications for these types of persuasive attempts.