Consumer Guilt: Preliminary Construct Assessment and Scale Development

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Negative emotions such as anger, fear, shame, and guilt have received very little attention in consumer research. This is notwithstanding the fact that negative emotions are the most common appeals used in advertising (e.g., Huhmann and Brotherton 1997) and for which consumers develop coping strategies (Yi and Baumgartner 2004). This study seeks to contribute to filling this gap in the literature by conceptualizing consumer guilt and proposing a measurement instrument for it. Preliminary results from our empirical research reported here suggest that there are at least 3 dimensions to consumer guilt namely remorse, self-blame and self-control failure.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12997/volumes/ap07/AP-07

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Emotions constitute an important dynamic of human action (Elster 1998) and in consumer research emotions have been found to influence consumer action. Despite this understanding of the importance of consumer emotions, the majority of research has focused on positive emotions and negative emotions such as anger, fear or guilt have received very little attention in the discipline. This is notwithstanding the fact that negative emotions are the most common appeals used in advertising (e.g., Huhmann and Brotherton 1997). This study seeks to fill this gap in the literature by providing a conceptualization of consumer guilt and proposing a measurement instrument for it.

Guilt regulates interpersonal social functioning and mitigates against primordial instincts by enforcing social rules and norms (De Rivera 1984). Theorizing in the field has suggested that psychological and social goals interact to make guilt a potentially potent tool to regulate consumer action. That guilt is a consequence of action or inaction and is an interpersonal emotion resulting from one’s recognition of having violated internalised personal or social moral standards. Guilt manifests itself in intense experiences of self-blame, remorse, and a perceived lack of control over the source of guilt (Baumeister et al 1994; Mosher 1980; Tangney and Dearing 2003). This understanding of how guilt can manifest itself informs our conceptualization of the underlying dimensions of guilt in the consumption context in the current study.

For guilt to be aroused, the consumer must accept responsibility for its origin or source. Consumer guilt indicates a strong sense of self-awareness that enhances a consumer’s sense of self-inadequacy and prompts the individual to seek corrective action (Izard 1977; Mosher 1980). A consumer in this situation acknowledges a mistake and accepts blame for that mistake. So described, guilt seems similar to the concept of regret as defined in the consumer literature (e.g., Yi and Baumgartner 2004). However, while it acknowledges a mistake and calls for corrective action, regret is neither indicative of the necessary violation of moral/social standards, nor does it involve the generalised expectation of self-mediated punishment that is associated with guilt (Mosher 1988). Like Simonson (1992) and consistent with the broader literature in psychology and sociology, we differentiate regret from feelings of responsibility, although we acknowledge that both are independent components of consumer guilt. In sum, consumer guilt is conceptualised as a three-dimension construct comprised of regret, self-blame, and self-control failure.

Guilt has been conceptualised and measured in a number of different ways in the literature and most measures have been criticised for measuring a person’s ascription to moral standards rather than the experience of guilt as affect Kugler (1989). In addition, the scales were found to have robust psychometric properties only in the specific domains of guilt for which they were defined. Only one scale – the Tulsa Guilt Inventory (Jones 199x) – exhibits robustness across conceptual domains and contexts (Kugler and Jones 1992). The current evidence seems to suggest then that the effectiveness of any guilt scale depends on the domain for which it is defined. It is in light of this that we set out to develop a reliable measure of consumer guilt.

This study reports on a preliminary investigation of consumer guilt. Our empirical examination suggests that there are three dimensions to consumer guilt namely remorse, self-blame and self-control failure. The factor structure and their related internal consistencies demonstrate the viability of these measures as representing the construct of consumer guilt. By providing a measure of consumer guilt, we hope to motivate increased research into negative emotions in general and their relevance in the consumption experience.

REFERENCES


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