The Relationship Between Consumer Guilt and Product Categories

Yu-Tse Lin, Fu Jen Catholic University
Kang-Ning Xia, Yuan Ze University

Although previous research has defined consumer guilt, the relationship between consumer guilt and product categories is still not available in previous research. Therefore, this study focuses on the relationship between consumer guilt and the product categories consumers buy and intends to explore the constructs and evolution of consumer guilt. The results pointed out consumers are more likely to feel guilty when they buy indulgences than necessities. Also, consumer guilt had six constructs of emotion: hesitation, fear, scruple, reluctance to spend, regret, blame.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14895/volumes/ap08/AP-08

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com.
The Relationship between consumer guilt and product categories
Yu-Tse Lin, Fu Jen Catholic University
Kang-Ning Xia, Yuan Ze University

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Walking on the streets, you’d easily be attracted by the clothing on the models in the display windows. Unconsciously you bought it with your credit card just because you felt it fit yourself. After backing home and looking at the tag, however, you then thought it cost too much. Also, there aren’t quite a few chances for you to wear it, so you began to regret it all and wondered why you’d spend so much money on such a useless product. In that case, the so-called “consumer guilt” took place.

The definition of “the sense of guilt”, in the past, was discussed by theologians, philosophers and psychologists. Freedman Wallington & Bless (1967) indicated the sense was based on one’s originally existing knowledge, and then judged it against his moral standard. Stein (1968) indicated that the sense was a kind of feeling to explain disobeying innermost standard. While Wolman brought up that when the sense took place, it reduced self-respect and then produced the thought of being willing to accept punishments. Roseman (1984) told that the sense of guilt was a kind of negative emotion as one experienced the right side but shouldn’t be done (like buying an extremely expensive handbag), or experienced the wrong side but should be done (like being unwilling to donate money). Baumeister, Stillwell & Heatherton (1994) considered that the sense was an intention or a situation one dislikes, and then caused an unpleasant emotion. Tangney, Miller & Barlow (1996) showed it as a negative emotion. Tangney, Miller & Barlow (1996) showed it as a negative emotion which means one realizes to disobey personal or social level, and it usually arouses one’s behavior of compensation.

In marketing area, the discussion of negative emotions is mainly aimed at fears, and the studies of fears claim the influences to customers. Not until Ghingold (1980) claimed the sense of guilt as a model of communication did the issue of the sense of guilt begin to ferment in the marketing area. Also, Lascu (1991) made such a definition, “A consumer feels anxious because he learns he violates the criterions concerning ethics, moralities or the society.” While Burnett & Lunsford (1994) defined the consumer guilt as “A consumer made a shopping decision against one’s values, and a negative emotion happened; one would reduce his self-respect for what’s discussed above.” They also suggested four dimensions of consumer guilt: financial guilt, health guilt, moral guilt, and social responsibility guilt. According to the statements indicated by the scholars, owing to this study’s focus is on consumers’ doing shopping, so we’d use limited “consumer guilt” rather than generalized “sense of guilt.” Now we’d like to make a clear definition, “the negative emotion of a consumer disobeys social standards or personal values when he does his shopping.” Although previous research has defined consumer guilt, the difference between consumer guilt versus guilt in a general term is not clear. Beyond the several categories of consumer guilt, the construct and measurement of consumer guilt are still not available in previous research.

Thus, “the sense of guilt” could be thought as an old but modern issue as “it” appears and disappears without being highly noticed. At the same time, it affects customers’ shopping desires, and unconsciously controls their shopping actions. Besides, consumers purchase different product in order to satisfy different desire (e.g., Maheswaran, 1974; Sirgy, 1982). Sometimes consumers feel good, sometimes feel bad (e.g., Belk, 1988; Dittmar, Beattie, and Friese, 1995). According to what’s being discussed above, we’d like to realize what kind of reaction the so-called “consumer guilt” is when customers do their shopping. Also, we’ll concern about what dimensions are included, when it takes place, and the relationship between consumer guilt and product categories consumers buy.

Therefore, the study illustrates these major purposes. First, this study focuses on the construct of consumer guilt and intends to explore when consumer guilt occurs. Second, understand consumer will buy what kind of product in order to satisfy their self-concept, such of ideal self and actual self. Third, test the relationship between self-concept and consumer guilt. Forth, clarify the major construct of consumer guilt on different self-concept. For example, what is the major of reactive guilt and anticipatory guilt on ideal self or actual self. Finally, find out the difference of consumer guilt when consumers buy necessities or indulgences.

The results illustrate these major findings. First, the results pointed out consumer guilt had six constructs of emotion: hesitation, fear, scruple, reluctance to spend, regret, blame. Second, the past researches indicated consumer guilt can divide into two categories: reactive guilt and anticipatory guilt. This study finds that besides anticipatory consumer guilt and reactive consumer guilt, consumer guilt occurs at the point of buying. We name it proceeding consumer guilt. Third, the major construct of anticipatory consumer guilt is hesitation, the major construct of proceeding consumer guilt is reluctance to spend, and the major construct of reactive consumer guilt is regret and blame. Forth, consumers are more likely to feel guilty when they buy indulgences than necessities. Finally, if consumers’ ideal-self is very different from actual-self, consumers feel guilty when they buy something in order to satisfy their ideal-self.
What is the best way to enter a new market for the firms whose brand is not known to the market? Samsung had positioned with an image of low price when it entered the U.S. market. For an unknown brand, a low price strategy is very typical because customers are not confident of the quality of new products. For inexperienced products, price is a good perceptional indication to predict the quality of the product. Dodds et al. (1991) found that the subjects clearly perceived quality to be related positively to price when price was the only extrinsic available cue.

Low price products are attractive to be purchased, but at the same time, they have a potential risk to be perceived as low quality. The word “cheap” usually means inferior quality and “expensive” is becoming a synonym for superior quality (Scitovszky 1945). Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal (1991) found that price had a positive effect on perceived quality, but a negative effect on perceived value and willingness to buy in their conceptual model of the effect of price on product evaluation. According to their findings, the effect of price on buyers’ perceptions of quality is not significant in the either high brand name or low brand name, but is significant in the brand absent level. When price was the only available extrinsic cue, people perceived quality to be related positively to price. But when other extrinsic information was present, the effect of price was less persuasive. There is a cognitive tradeoff between perceptions of quality and price (Scitovszky, 1945). Cooper (1969) find people avoid purchasing a product when they consider the price too high and are suspicious of the quality of a product when the price is much lower than their expectations.

Based on this previous research, I propose an alternative pricing strategy of an unknown brand. According to the previous strategy, many foreign and unfamiliar brands have positioned with homogeneous low price for all product lines when they enter a new market. The limitation of a homogeneous low price strategy is possibly to invoke a question of quality of the product. To reduce concern of low quality, an alternative strategy is the heterogeneous price strategy. In the heterogeneous condition, price of a targeted product of an unfamiliar brand is lower than that of established brands like the previous strategy, but price of other nontargeted products of the unfamiliar brand is almost equivalent to that of established brands. Rather than the homogeneous low price strategy, the heterogeneous price strategy is expected to reduce a perceptual risk of low quality because heterogeneous price hinders consumers in a quick judgment of price-quality belief.

Suppose that Samsung launches televisions on a new international market in which the brand of Samsung is not well known, and that the firm has two kinds of televisions: 32 inch and 42 inch. It is supposed that 32 inch television is a targeted product. In the homogeneous price strategy, the price of two products is all lower than that of established brands. On the other hand, in the heterogeneous price strategy, the price of the targeted product (32 inch) is lower, but the price of the other product (42 inch) is equivalent to that of established brands. What I expect is that consumers will be less suspicious on quality of a targeted product of an unfamiliar brand in the heterogeneous price, because the price of the other product of the same brand could be played as a role of reference point to evaluate quality of the brand, and such price strategy can prevent or at least delay invoking consumers from ‘low quality-low price belief’. In addition, the effect of the heterogeneous price strategy is expected to be different from consumers in cultures high in uncertainty avoidance and low in uncertainty avoidance. Consumers in cultures low in uncertainty avoidance are expected to have more willingness to buy the targeted product in the heterogeneous price strategy. Another moderating effect is what product is used as a target. If 42 inch television is used as a nontargeted product that is used as a reference point for evaluating a targeted 32 inch television, which is arbitrary designated as the downward inference of quality, the heterogeneous price strategy will be significant, but if the target is reversed, which is designated as the upward inference of quality, the heterogeneous price strategy will be less