Alleviating Mommy’S Guilt: Emotional Expression and Guilt Appeals in Advertising

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Guilt is a powerful emotion and used in advertising often, especially targeting working mothers. This research examines moderators of such influence. Emotional disclosure literature in clinical psychology suggests one - writing about their maternal guilt. I plan to show that expressing their maternal guilt will alleviate the influence of guilt appeals on their spending patterns. Then, I will examine practical applications that act similarly: the use of spokespeople expressing their guilt, and solicitations of such emotional expression by various entities. This research will provide managerial implications regarding how to better utilize guilt appeals in advertising.

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Extended Abstract

Guilt results from “essentially private recognition that one has violated a personal standard” (Kugler and Jones 1992): Its anticipation influences people’s behaviors (Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton 1994). Guilt appeals have been studied in marketing (Ghingold, 1980; Pinto & Priest, 1991; Ruth & Faber, 1988a, 1988b). Though not as their main focus, numerous studies implicitly assume the influence of guilt behind impulsive buying (Rook 1987), overspending (Pirisi 1995), pre-commitment to reward programs (Kivetz and Simonson 2002), compulsive consumption behavior (O’Guinn and Faber 1989), and donating to charities (Strahilevitz and Myers 1998). More specifically, some examined advertising campaigns that attempt to arouse guilt (Wheatley & Oshikawa, 1970; Huhmann and Brotherton, 1997); others investigated consumer reactions to advertisements containing guilt appeals (Ghingold, 1980).

Guilt is intrapersonal, mainly arising from transgressions of personal values or societal norms (e.g., McGraw 1987), but also interpersonal, arising from inequities in social comparisons (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1994; Walster, Berscheid, and Walster 1976). Consistent with this main distinction, self-reported guilt in consumption contexts is categorized into guilt arising from either actions or inactions related to a) others in close and distant relationships, b) societal standards, and c) oneself (Dahl, Honea, and Manchanda 2003).

One group of those who are affected by the experience of such guilt is mothers. Their guilt involves all three categories of the consumption guilt, not just one. It entails the children who are in an extremely close relationship to themselves. The society idealizes the Madonna, the symbol of the perfect mother as the perfect standard which every mother should strive to equal. Every mother, moreover, has her own goals and ideas of being a mother, which influences her own self-esteem. Divorced mother (Boney 2002), working mothers (Elvin-Nowak 1999), and mothers of handicapped children (Natale and Barron 1994) all suffer from the inherent maternal guilt they experience.

Especially, working mothers are influenced by guilt appeals in advertising. Coupled with this inherent “it goes with the territory” kind of maternal guilt, there is the potentially manipulative survival tendency of the babies, not to mention their helplessness and dependency. Even infants under a year of age possess ability to use the mere information about an adult’s direction of gaze and emotional expression to predict action (Phillips, Wellman, and Spelke 2002). Given this, it becomes more difficult for the working mothers to manage their negative emotions. Since the baby must spend most of the daytime with caretakers, it may only be natural for these mothers to feel compelled to compensate for their absence in other ways. One particular kind of ways is shopping for their children (e.g., to buy the very best for the children). The advertising effects of guilt appeals on working mothers have been studied (Coulter and Pinto 1995), using print stimuli of every day products (bread and dental floss, but not with products directly related to the baby); their results indicated that moderate guilt appeals elicited most felt guilt in the working mothers. However, there have not been any moderators that may alleviate the guilt in them.

The purpose of this research is to introduce one such moderator, drawn from the emotional disclosure literature in clinical psychology. Since early 1990’s there has been much research on why talking or writing about emotional events can influence mental and physical health (e.g., Pennebaker 1990; 1995; Pennebaker and Seagal 1999). Expressing one’s emotions regarding traumatic or stressful events in life leads to both psychologically and physically healthier state. Specifically, writing about emotional experiences produces improvements in immune function, drops in physician visits for illness, and better performance at school and work (e.g., Esterling, Antoni, Fletcher, Marguilles, and Schneiderman 1994; Pennebaker 1993; Spera, Buhrfeld, and Pennebaker 1994). Consistent with this stream of research, I hypothesize that writing about their maternal guilt related to their career choice for the working mothers can strengthen their ability to resist the guilt appeals in advertising.

Proposed studies involve a sample of employed mothers of infants under a year of age, and a stimuli set of baby products that are used by infants, in addition to everyday products. Planned design for the first study is 2 (writing about maternal guilt vs. control group of not writing) X 3 (level of guilt appeals: low, medium, and high) X (baby products vs. everyday products). I hypothesize that for the controls for everyday products, the previous research results will be replicated, such that moderate guilt level is most effective in inducing purchase; but for those who write about their maternal guilt, the effect will show a different pattern. Their guilt will be more resolved and will not be as influenced by the guilt appeals in advertising. This effect will appear across different domains, but in different magnitude, such that it will be significantly greater for the baby products but not for the non-baby products, since the maternal guilt is specifically targeted to the baby-related domain.

Subsequent studies will examine various practical ways that may serve a similar role to that shown by emotional expression. The second study will examine whether showing a sponsor or a spokesperson who expresses her maternal guilt in advertising will show equivalent effects to emotional expression, though vicariously; and whether this effect will show a similar pattern in baby-related domain.