Defend Self Or Impress Others?: Mortality Proximity and Guilt Advertising

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This research introduces mortality proximity as a moderator for two distinct motivations that influence advertising appeals evoking consumer guilt. Mortality proximity involves perceived proximity to self, such that proximal (vs. distal) mortality regards one’s own (vs. someone else’s) death. I predict that proximal mortality motivates self-preservation, to facilitate guilt-lessening appeals encouraging self-indulgent consumption; and distal mortality motivates impression management, to assist guilt-magnifying appeals promoting socially desirable purchases. The results will aid the mortality literature by understanding when either motivation is activated, and the guilt literature on showing how guilt appeals are influenced within each process.

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Preserve Self or Impress Others: Mortality Proximity and Guilt Advertising

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Since the initial discussions by Ghingold (1981), the construct of consumer guilt has received some attention in the consumer behavior literature (e.g., Lascu 1991), mostly related to hedonic or luxury consumption (Kivetz and Simonson 2002). To further enrich understanding of the guilt construct, the current research investigates conditions under which advertising utilizing guilt appeals can be more effective.

Guilt appeals stress how you should (or should not) do something in order to avoid violating moral standards, as such transgressions will produce unwanted guilt. I classify guilt appeals into two categories, based on the focal users of the market offering and the direction of intended guilt manipulation. Interestingly, these two types attempt to manipulate the amount of guilt people anticipate in two opposite directions. The first category, guilt-lessening appeals, focuses on indulgences for purchasers themselves (e.g., spa treatment, expensive jewelry, etc.) to lessen guilt most consumers feel about self-indulgent consumption. These argue: “It’s about time you should do something for yourself. You are worth it.” The second category, guilt-magnifying appeals, intends other people than the purchaser as the focal users (e.g., children’s education, birthday gifts, insurance, wills, etc.) and attempt to magnify the level of guilt most consumers feel about having to uphold socially desirable behaviors involving their loved ones. These ask “Are you doing what you should be doing for your loved ones?” In this research, the compliance to these two types of guilt appeals is the primary dependent variable.

The extant literature suggests a list of mediators of the process within which advertising appeals influence guilt perceptions and purchase intentions of consumers: self-esteem (Ghingold 1981; Lascu 1991), locus of control (Rotter 1966; Ghingold 1981; Lascu 1991), susceptibility to guilt (Kivetz and Simonson 2002), motivation to comply (Carlsmit and Gross 1969), and self-competence (Deci 1975; Lascu 1991), to name a few. However, few moderators have been studied. Specifically, under which conditions can guilt appeals be more effective, regardless of individual-level mediators? Moreover, do these moderators operate in unique processes?

The key moderator in this research is drawn from mortality salience, a well-studied construct in the Terror Management Theory (TMT; see Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski 1997). I draw on the two different motivations underlying TMT: self-preservation and impression management. Mortality salience has been shown to increase likelihood of behaviors that a) preserve own material interests, under self-preservation motivation, and b) are socially desirable, under impression motivation (Maheswaran and Agrawal 2004). Consistent with the self-preservation motivation of defending own material interests and increasing self-worth, mortality facilitates purchase of high-status objects (Mandel and Heine 1999), for which guilt-lessening appeals are usually employed. Similarly, materialism helped buffer consumers from mortality (Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, and Sheldon 2004). In these contexts, mortality salience appears to foster the motivation where a boost of self-worth becomes compulsory—which may simultaneously favor compliance to guilt-lessening appeals. At the same time, mortality salience has also been linked to impression motivation that promotes socially desirable behaviors (Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski 2002). Socially desirable behaviors usually involve other people, who often are the foci of guilt-magnifying appeals. In this line of reasoning, I hypothesize that preservation motivation will increase compliance to guilt-lessening appeals that promote self-indulgent consumption, whereas impression management will increase compliance to guilt-magnifying appeals that recommend socially desirable consumption.

It is important to distinguish these two distinct mechanisms of motivation (Maheswaran and Agrawal 2004). I hypothesize a new variable of mortality proximity to do exactly that. It is interesting that TMT literature does not differentiate the focal death person in terms of proximity to the perceivers (proximal vs. distal). If a consumer feels a specific type of death is proximal to him or herself, then it will not only generate stronger effects of death-thought accessibility, but also create and strengthen specific motivation regarding self-preservation (versus social impression management) for subsequent behaviors. For example, if a college-aged student views news about how some college students commit suicides, then the resulting death-thought accessibility will be more focused on self-preservation motivation (perhaps resulting in the purchase of a luxury item for oneself) than viewing a story about rising occurrences of deaths caused by breast cancer in middle-aged women, which may perhaps be more focused on impression management motivation regarding their mothers (perhaps resulting in buying a luxury gift for mother’s day).

Thus the hypotheses to be tested in this research are as follows:

H1: Proximal mortality will increase compliance to guilt-lessening appeals via inducing motivation of self-preservation.

H2: Distal mortality will increase compliance to guilt-magnifying appeals via inducing motivation to enhance socially desirable impressions.

The results of this research will theoretically aid the understanding of how consumer guilt construct operates in the advertising context, considering mortality proximity as a moderator. In addition, results will contribute to the progress of literature on mortality by suggesting a moderator that determines which process is evoked under mortality salience. Practical recommendations of this research inform advertisers using guilt appeals to choose a context that primes the appropriate sort of mortality proximity. For example, TV shows