Guilt Appeals in Green Advertising: Influences of Issue Proximity and Environmental Involvement

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The present research seeks to further the understanding of guilt appeals in green advertising by clarifying the moderating roles of issue proximity and environmental involvement. Experimental results indicate that a guilt appeal is more effective than a positive appeal.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

With increasing public concern about the environment and corporate social responsibility on environmental sustainable development, the 1990s was declared the decade of environmentalism (Drumwright, 1994; Kangun, Carlson, and Grove, 1991). Consequently, recent studies have begun to examine potential factors that might affect the effectiveness of green marketing campaigns and how consumers respond to green marketing initiatives (e.g., Chan, 2000; Obermiller, 1995; Schuhwerk and Lefkoff-Hagius, 1995). One influential variable that has been identified to determine the success of green marketing is its advertising (e.g., Karna et al., 2001). Emotional appeals are widely used to “cut through the clutter” and arouse persuasive communication. Among them, guilt appeals are identified as popular, especially in the contexts related to public service announcement.

This article contributes to this evolving stream of research by applying guilt appeals in green marketing campaigns to demonstrate that guilt appeals are not equally persuasive in all conditions, and can be influenced by the impacts of issue proximity and environmental involvement. A fictitious product, leftover-grounds printer, was developed as the test product. An experiment with 2 (advertising appeal: guilt appeal vs. positive appeal) X 2 (issue proximity: low vs. high) X 2 (environmental involvement: low vs. high) factorial design was conducted. The first two factors were manipulated and the final one was measured. Therefore, four experimental versions were produced. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the conditions above. After successful manipulation checks, a series of analysis of variance were conducted to examine proposed hypotheses.

The results indicate that focusing on the comparison between guilt and positive appeals may be overly simplistic. Indeed, the findings presented here establish that the influence of guilt appeals on consumer response is relatively complex and contingent on issue proximity and environmental involvement. Three observations are noteworthy.

First, in terms of the relative effects of issue proximity, this study shows systematic effects on consumer responses by comparing low and high issue proximity. High proximity made a difference in advertising effectiveness; a local issue, as opposed to a foreign issue in a less familiar region, yielded more favorable evaluation and higher behavioral intention. This perspective is conceptually consistent with social impact theory and signaling theory. The reason could lie in the notion that the local community is more salient to consumers—regardless of the advertising appeal. No differences are found between a guilt and positive appeal in advertising effectiveness of high-proximity issue. This idea does not suggest, however, firms only address local issues and neglect global or foreign issues because advertising appeal may not be a concern in their advertising campaign when presenting a local issue. When an issue is perceived as less proximal, the tactic of guilt appeal allows a firm to enhance consumers’ attitudes toward the product and purchase intention.

Second, that effects of advertising appeal are contingent on environmental involvement is noteworthy. This construct delineates the boundary conditions for the guilt appeals on persuasion. A guilt appeal works for those with low environmental involvement, compared with individuals with low environmental involvement, those with high environmental involvement are less likely to be not influenced by the advertising appeals. The results are consistent with the observation by Schuhwerk and Lefkoff-Hagius (1995). The study here also echoes that guilt can generate negative responses and disrupt the advertiser’s intended objectives as well (Cotte et al., 2005; Shrum et al., 1995).

Third, the effectiveness of guilt and positive appeals depends on issue proximity and environmental involvement simultaneously. Instead of blindly applying any type of advertising appeal, advertisers should pay particular attention to perceived proximity of the environmental issue and consumers’ individual differences in environmental involvement. When facing individuals with low environmental involvement, the guilt appeal performed better than the positive appeal in promoting an issue with high proximity. Thus, when dealing with a problem people regard as relatively important or about which they are self-relevant, the impact of guilt appeal may offer advantages. As Schuhwerk and Lefkoff-Hagius (1995) note that consumers pay attention to external cues such as how an ad is framed when they do not possess strong beliefs about the environment. Alternatively, when concern for the issue is low (low issue proximity), no differences of advertising effectiveness between a guilt and positive appeal can be found. Because of weak impetus to process the message and less well-developed green product schema, the less involved consumers may not be able to identify the differences between the two appeals. When facing highly involved consumers, the guilt appeal was more persuasive than the positive appeal in promoting a less proximal issue. However, this observation appears to be reversed when the ad was presented to less involved consumers. The guilt appeal may offer a redundant warning, or worse, cause a boomerang effect. Consistent with prior work on involvement and skepticism about advertisers’ environmental claims, environmentally involved individuals may engage in more effortful and elaborate processing and discount the received information. In such cases, the positive appeal is preferable. The implication is that advertisers must be careful not to arouse guilt feelings through the ads. If such care is not taken, a backlash may occur whereby the consumers develop negative attitudes toward the promoted product. In any event, advertisers are advised to adopt a situational perspective by taking the possible interaction effect among advertising appeal, issue proximity, and environmental involvement.

Findings from this investigation are informative both theoretically and pragmatically. This study contributes to the academic literature and industry by increasing our understanding of guilt appeals in a green marketing context by proposing issue proximity and environmental involvement as factors that moderate the relationships between guilt appeal and consumer responses toward the promoted product. The findings underscore the importance for green marketers to learn more about whether guilt appeals work, and in turn describe how practitioners can avoid negatively toward guilt appeals. The present research should serve a starting point for entry into this under-researched area.