Guilt Appeals As a Blessing Or a Curse? Influences of Sponsorship Identity and Sponsor-Issue Fit on Guilt Appeals in Charity-Related Advertising

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We examine guilt appeals in charity-related advertising with moderators of sponsorship identity and sponsor-issue fit. Guilt appeals are more effective than non-guilt appeals when a non-profit is the ad-sponsor. Guilt appeals backfire when fit in a corporate social ad is high, or fit in a cause-related marketing ad is low.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT  
Nowadays as companies experience increasing competition, social cause efforts become a prominent role in the profit-seeking efforts of the corporation domain. Two types of societal marketing programs are common: (1) social sponsorship through explicit donation to a cause and (2) cause-related marketing (CRM) through consumer purchases. Because advertising determines the success of societal marketing programs (e.g., Chang, 2008), many advertising persuasion techniques are adopted. Emotional appeals are widely used to “cut through the clutter” in crowded media environment. Among them, guilt appeals are identified as popular to arouse persuasive communication, especially in prosocial and charitable contexts (e.g., Basil, Ridgway, and Basel, 2006 and 2008; Hibbert et al., 2007). Chang (2011) suggested the importance of exploring potential moderating variables in explaining the effects of guilt appeals.

Although societal marketing programs with charitable causes become popular among corporations, consumers may respond differently to corporate-sponsored social messages than they do to the similar ads sponsored by a non-profit. A corporate sponsor in association with a social message is likely to make ulterior motives accessible, which lead consumers to question the reasons behind sponsorship (Szykman, Bloom, and Blazing, 2004). People possess stereotypes of organizations merely based on the knowledge that a firm is a for-profit or non-profit (Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner, 2010). Therefore, we predict that sponsorship identity will matter in consumer information processing and moderate the effects of guilt appeals.

Selecting the “right” cause by a company is a key to a successful societal marketing program. Nevertheless, the results of previous studies are inconsistent and contradictory regarding the influences of guilt appeal on purchase intention for the condition of corporate social advertising and CRM. Univariate results with dependent measures of attitudes toward the ad, attitudes toward the sponsor, and behavioral intentions are summarized in Table 1. Table 2 presents related descriptives across experimental conditions. Three main findings are noteworthy.

First, guilt appeals are found more effective than non-guilt appeals when the ad sponsor is a non-profit. The findings are consistent with previous studies (anti-alcohol: Becheur et al., 2008; bone marrow donation: Lindsey, 2005; charity donation: Basil et al., 2006 and 2008; Hibbert et al., 2007; condom promotion: Alden and Crowley, 1995; mammogram promotion: Turner et al., 2009). Social responsibility guilt has been identified as one of the major forms of consumer guilt (Burnett and Lunsford, 1994). The findings also echo the charity donation literature that the guilt may be viewed as an awareness of the difference in well-being between oneself and others (Ruth and Faber, 1988) and guilt feelings can be used as a method of gaining compliance (Lindsey, Yun, & Hill, 2007).

Second, guilt appeals backfire when the sponsors-issue fit in a corporate social ad (i.e., explicit donation) is high. Maladaptive responses to charity appeals occur when an individual feels he or she is being manipulated, causing the individual to respond in a negative manner (Coulter and Pinto, 1995). Such responses make sense in that they seek to protect a consumer’s balanced (homeostatic) state. In ads using guilt appeals, consumers may evaluate the degree to which the advertiser is attempting to manipulate their attitudes. Consumers will resist the message when they perceive the message as manipulative (Wood and Eagly, 1981). When guilt appeals are used to promote a corporate social ad, consumers are likely to interpret the ad as an explicit placement and view the advertising message as manipulative. Promotion with a high-fit social cause may be viewed as opportunistic and the sponsored company as merely seeking commercial gain for itself. Consumers thus counterargue the message and discount the sponsor to protect themselves from the persuasion attempt.

Third, guilt appeals have boomerang effects when the sponsorship fit is low. When consumers could not find the link between the brand and the cause, they might not understand why they should give away a small fraction of the price they pay to a social cause. Consumers may also feel skeptical why the company “sells” such a low-fit cause to them. Due to people’s fiscal associations with the for-profit’s motive, the suspicion may negatively influence guilt appeals on sponsor evaluation.

The main goal of the present study was to extend earlier work on guilt appeals by identifying boundary conditions associated with the role of guilt appeals in consumer perceptions and attitudes. Findings from this investigation are informative both theoretically and pragmatically, and underscore the importance for marketers to learn more about when guilt appeals work, and in turn describe how practitioners can avoid negatively toward guilt appeals.

REFERENCES


