Guilt Trips: Transportation and the Persuasiveness of Guilt Appeals
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Guilt appeals are popular despite inconsistent evidence on their effectiveness. We examine their longitudinal effectiveness and show that 1) the persuasiveness of guilt appeals over time is mediated by narrative transportation, and 2) their effect is stronger when the message is delivered through a video compared to a text.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In three longitudinal experiments, we test a model proposing narrative transportation as a determinant of guilt appeal effectiveness. Eliciting guilt favors immersion in the communication and this process facilitates compliance. We examine guilt appeals’ longitudinal effectiveness (in a recycling promotion context) and show that 1) the persuasiveness of guilt appeals is mediated by narrative transportation, and 2) their effect is stronger when the message is delivered through video rather than text.

Three days after exposure to a guilt appeal, participants were recontacted. In study 1 and study 2, participants were allocated to one of two conditions (high guilt versus low guilt). Study 3 has a 2 (guilt: high versus low) X 2 (medium: video versus text) design and tests the role of media on the longitudinal effects of transportation. A chain of causal links that connects guilt elicited at time one, as a consequence of seeing the campaign, with the individual likelihood to anticipate guilt at time two is proposed. It is further hypothesized that the ability to anticipate guilt at time two will drive compliance. A thorough assessment of guilt messages require the examination of these indirect paths and their effects on persuasion (Antonetti & Baines, 2015; Antonetti, Baines, & Walker, 2015). Narrative transportation in the campaign (Green & Brock, 2000; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010) is a key mediator linking reactions at time one with the potential outcomes at time two.

In study 1 and 2 participants are asked their intentions to recycle (Knussen and Yuke, 2008). In study 3 we measure self-reported recycling behavior “over the last few days” (Webb, Mohr, and Harris, 2008). We also ask whether participants would be willing to share their personal email address in order to receive “more information on the campaign and other steps you might take to promote recycling in your local community.” The dichotomous answer (Yes/No) is treated as a further dependent variable.

At time one the guilt appeal influences 1) guilt felt by participants and 2) narrative transportation. However, the manipulation does not influence directly the other variables. A mediation analysis using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013; Model, 6) allows testing for the indirect effects predicted. We calculate 95% confidence intervals using bias-corrected and accelerated bootstraps and 10,000 resamples (Hayes, 2013). Results are consistent with our expectations. The indirect effect is in line with our theorizing. For study 3, we estimate the model using also the dichotomous dependent variable measuring decisions to share the email. Results show a positive indirect effect through narrative transportation (effect: .06, CI from .02 to .13). The model offers a Nagelkerke R² of 11%.

The role of the medium used to communicate the message moderates the impact of narrative transportation on self-reported behavior. At time one, the medium used to deliver the message does not interact with the guilt appeal condition (PROCESS, Model 1) neither in the prediction of experienced feelings of guilt (effect: .003, p = .97, CI from -.17 to .17) nor on the level of narrative transportation (effect: -.05, p = .36, CI from -.16 to .06). To assess whether the medium used has an effect consistent with our model, we test for a possible interaction on the dependent variable at time two (PROCESS, Model 14). The model yields a positive interaction between medium and narrative transportation (effect: .15, p < .05, CI from .03 to .26). While the impact of narrative transportation is very weak when the message is delivered through text (effect: .05, CI from .001 to .08), it is significantly stronger when the communication is through a video (effect: .12, CI from .07 to .18).

Data from study 3 is used to conduct a path analysis using a PLS-SEM approach (Hair, Ringle, and Sarstedt, 2011; Henseler et al., 2014). Results of model estimation using SmartPLS 3.0 and 5000 re-samples for bootstraps are in line with our predictions. Guilt experienced as an outcome of watching the ad leads to narrative transportation (β = .23, t = 3.96, p < .001, F = .23) and transportation influences the anticipation of guilt at time two (β = .45, t = 8.88, p < .001, F = .26). Anticipated guilt contributes to explaining recycling behavior (β = .31, t = 5.21, p < .001, F = .09). We find that guilt experienced after watching the video at one time has a small negative direct effect on self-reported recycling at time two (β = -.26, t = 4.82, p < .001, F = .03). Finally, the effect of transportation on behavior is not statistically significant (β = .10, t = 1.54, p = .11). The indirect effect of guilt experienced after watching the appeal on the behavior measured at time two is positive (β = .11, t = 3.51, p < .001, R² for the model 16%) supporting our theoretical expectations.

A multi-group analysis indicates the paths between anticipated guilt and behavior (p = .04) and between narrative transportation and anticipated guilt (p = .06) are different between the two media (the latter marginally). The group seeing the video shows stronger paths between transportation and anticipated guilt (β_video = .54 vs. β_text = .39) and between anticipated guilt and behavior (β_video = .42 vs. β_text = .21).

While some are skeptical about guilt appeals (Graton et al., 2016; O’Keefe, 2002) others advocate their use (Agrawal and Duhachek, 2010; Han et al., 2014). The model presented offers an alternative account. Our study indicates guilt appeals have weak effects and can backfire. However, they have a positive indirect effect and facilitate individual tendency to immerse in the message and anticipate feelings of guilt; a powerful source of self-regulation (O’Keefe, 2002). This raises two implications. Firstly, to understand the effectiveness of guilt appeals under different conditions it is necessary to explicitly hypothesize the different paths that might cause persuasion (or resistance) under different circumstances (Hayes, 2009). Secondly, marketers should use guilt cautiously and more research is needed before the explicit use of guilt in marketing messages is implemented.

REFERENCES


