

# Enhancing or disrupting guilt: the role of ad credibility and perceived manipulative intent

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## Abstract

Viewing the consumer as an active, skeptical reader of the persuasion attempt is an emerging perspective in advertising research. This perspective suggests that a consumer's recognition of an emotional "tactic" in an ad can have a significant impact on an ad's intended effect. Adopting this approach, we examine whether consumers' evaluations of an ad's credibility can enhance, and perceptions of manipulative intent can disrupt, the emotional response intended by the advertiser. We also investigate the effects of these two variables on attitude toward the ad and corporate attributions, including attitude toward the sponsor of the ad. We examine a commonly employed emotional tactic—the guilt appeal—and report the results of an experimental study. Our results suggest that credible guilt advertisements that are not overtly manipulative induce guilt feelings and positive attitudes. However, when consumers infer manipulative intent by the marketer, consumers do not feel guilty, but do have negative attitudes toward the sponsor of the advertisement and the advertisement.

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*Keywords:* Advertising; Credibility; Manipulation; Guilt

## 1. Introduction

Marketing communications specialists use a variety of appeals to accomplish their objectives. For example, informational appeals are often used to introduce a new product or to provide an update on brand enhancements, and emotional appeals are developed to make the viewer laugh or feel guilty. Sometimes advertisers are successful in achieving their intended objectives with a particular advertisement and sometimes they are not. Indeed, research has documented that there are no guarantees that the viewing audience actually feels the intended emotion associated with the appeal (Englis, 1990; Stout et al., 1990). For example, advertisers using a guilt appeal expect the audience to feel guilty and have some feeling of failing at their own ideals or ethical principles (Ruth and Faber, 1988; Wolman, 1973), but viewers do not always feel guilty (Coulter and Pinto, 1995).

This article discusses two factors—consumers' evaluations of the advertisement's credibility and the advertiser's

manipulative intent—that we believe can affect whether or not the advertiser accomplishes his or her objectives. We consider these two variables by examining the congruency between visual representation (the advertisement) and consumers' responses (Scott, 1994) in the context of guilt appeals. We posit that one explanation for a lack of congruency between advertisers' intentions and the consumers' reactions is that consumers are active recipients of the advertising attempt. Specifically, consumers evaluate ad credibility and advertisers' motivations. Further, we believe that when consumers perceive the advertiser as ill-intentioned, the intended emotion associated with the appeal, in our case guilt, may be attenuated such that the consumer does not feel guilty. In contrast, when an ad is perceived as credible and not manipulative, our expectation is that the consumers will experience the guilt intended by the advertiser.

We begin by briefly discussing the use of guilt appeals in advertising. Then, we introduce two consumer evaluations—ad credibility and inferences of manipulative intent (IMI)—which we believe can enhance and interfere with marketers' intentions, respectively. We then describe the experimental research designed to test our hypotheses and discuss our results. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications of our investigation.

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## 2. Guilt advertising appeals

Guilt appeals—appeals where an advertiser attempts to make consumers feel guilty to influence their behavior—are commonplace in advertising. In fact, the use of this type of appeal is growing (Huhmann and Brotherton, 1997; Samalin and Hogarty, 1994). The psychology literature describes several forms of guilt, including anticipatory, existential, and reactive guilt (Izard, 1977; Rawlings, 1970). Further, Huhmann and Brotherton (1997) have documented the types of advertisers that attempt to generate these forms of guilt. Below, we define each type of guilt and provide a fictitious ad scenario to demonstrate the use of each form of guilt appeal (all ad scenarios taken from Coulter et al., 1997).

Guilt that results from an individual contemplating a potential violation of one's own standards is referred to as anticipatory guilt (Rawlings, 1970). Huhmann and Brotherton (1997) document that companies that manufacture and promote consumer nondurable goods and health care products, health care services, and charities often use this type of guilt appeal. The ad scenario below describes an appeal that attempts to create anticipatory guilt; the ad offers consumers the ability to avoid disappointing their children by purchasing a cell phone.

Ad Scenario 1: It's Saturday morning. The long-awaited (and many times postponed) trip to the beach is finally here. You and the kids are excited about the day's activities. Then the phone rings. . . It's your boss. He wants you to contact a potential multimillion dollar client today. Your youngest daughter, mortified by what might be another "Well, we can go to the beach next week" bleats "Daddy, when can I become one of your clients?". . . If only you had a cellular phone. You could avoid disappointing your kids and talk to the potential client en route to the beach.

The second type of guilt is reactive guilt, i.e., a guilt response to having violated one's standards of acceptable behavior (Rawlings, 1970). Huhmann and Brotherton (1997) found that manufacturers and advertisers of consumer goods (both durable and nondurable) and health care products and services focus on reactive guilt. The second scenario illustrates an ad attempting to remind readers of their own past transgressions in an attempt to sell a phone reminder service.

Ad Scenario 2: It is 6:00 p.m., and you're swamped with work, but you promise your wife. . . "I'll be packing up soon. I just have to read one or two more reports." Predictably, you become engulfed in your work and the next thing you know it's 9:00 p.m.! Well, she'll understand. . . As you walk through the dining room, you stumble upon what once was a magnificent dinner for two. But the food is cold and the candles have burned down. Staring you in the face is a card saying, "Happy Anniversary, Darling." You can't believe it. How could you let such an important date slip by? If only you had

signed up for that "Special Event" phone calling service that would have reminded you of important dates.

Finally, existential guilt is experienced as a consequence of a discrepancy between one's well-being and of others (Izard, 1977), and Huhmann and Brotherton (1997) find that charity ads very often use this type of appeal. The final ad scenario depicts an ad attempting to evoke existential guilt by contrasting the condition of a starving child with the (presumably healthier) condition of the ad's reader to solicit charitable donations.

Ad Scenario 3: An emaciated child is perched on a log in the barren waste of the desert. He can barely move, as he has no muscle, to support his frail body. His eyes tell a tale of a boy who, if only someone had helped to provide him nutrition, could have blossomed into a bright young man. In the background, a vulture looks on. With just a small contribution, you can help stop such famine and the tragedy faced by these innocent youths. You can make a lifesaving difference.

Common to these three forms of guilt appeals is the expectation that seeing ads that employ these tactics will cause viewers to feel guilt and take some action (for example, become volunteers or purchase a product or service).

### 2.1. Cognitive evaluations of advertisements

We argue that understanding more about the effects of ad credibility and perceptions of the advertiser's motivations will help to explain why some guilt ads work, i.e., have the intended effect of making the viewer feel guilty, whereas other guilt ads do not work.

In the advertising and consumer behavior literature, ad credibility has been defined as the "extent to which the consumer perceives claims made about the brand in the ad to be truthful and believable" (MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989, p. 51). Thus, ad credibility focuses on the advertisement and the consumer's evaluation of the truth and believability of the content of the advertisement (i.e., the visual and verbal content in the ad). We believe readers will interpret the ad itself (rather than only the source) to determine if the claims it makes are true. For example, concerning the ad depicted in Ad Scenario 3, one reader may believe the claim, "with just a small contribution, you can help stop such famine," whereas another reader may not believe the claim in the ad.

IMI have been defined as "consumer inferences that the advertiser is attempting to persuade by inappropriate, unfair, or manipulative means" (Campbell, 1995, p. 228). Hence, consumers' IMI concern their assessments of the advertiser's motivations as well as the extent to which the ad is perceived as fair. Thus, the reader who believes the ad (it is credible) and the reader who does not believe the ad (it is not credible) may have an independent assessment of whether the ad is manipulative or not. For example, a reader considering the ad in Scenario 3 might find the ad credible,

but feel the ad was manipulative because of its use of a very poignant picture, rather than simply words.

To summarize, we believe that ad credibility and perceptions of manipulative intent (by the advertiser) are distinct constructs that will negatively covary. That is, we would expect that the greater the perceived credibility of the ad, the less likely the consumer would perceive the advertiser being ill intended. A consumer can read an ad and think that the claims in the ad are true and credible (for example, one may agree that many children around the world are starving), yet concurrently perceive the advertiser is attempting to manipulate them (i.e., they are trying to make me feel guilty so that I will donate to the charity). Hence, we hypothesize:

**H1:** A negative relationship exists between perceived ad credibility and perceptions of manipulative intent.

## 2.2. The effects of ad credibility and perceived manipulative intent on feeling guilty

Research on persuasive communications has indicated that consumers have a variety of emotional responses to advertisements (Englis, 1990; Stout et al., 1990), and that those responses are not always the intended responses. Research investigating emotional reactions elicited by the use of guilt appeals has identified the felt emotions of guilt, annoyance, and unhappiness as yielding the greatest impact on subsequent attitudes and purchase intention (Coulter and Pinto, 1995; Englis, 1990; Pinto and Priest, 1991). Positive emotions (e.g., feeling happy) yield a positive influence on attitudes toward the ad ( $A_{ad}$ ) (Holbrook and Batra, 1987). Alternatively, negative emotions (e.g., feeling annoyed) can result in a negative  $A_{ad}$  (Burke and Edell, 1989; Edell and Burke, 1987), yet evoke a positive influence on behavior (Bagozzi and Moore, 1994; Ray and Wilkie, 1970; Sternthal and Craig, 1974). Other negative emotions, such as fear (Shelton and Rogers, 1981) and sadness (Cialdini and Kenrick, 1976), can also have a strong influence on creating a positive attitude toward helping. As we have noted previously, we believe that whether or not a guilt appeal will have its intended effect is, in part, dependent upon the viewers' assessment of the advertiser's motivations and ad credibility. We discuss each, in turn.

### 2.2.1. The effects of perceived manipulative intent

Research by Eagly et al. (1978) and Wood and Eagly (1981) suggests that when a viewer perceives manipulative intent by the advertiser, they are likely to "resist" the message. We believe that this resistance has an impact on the viewers' emotional responses (Batra and Ray, 1986). Research on guilt appeals provides some support for our contention (Coulter and Pinto, 1995). Specifically, Coulter and Pinto (1995) examined working mothers' responses to low-, medium-, and high-intensity guilt ads and found that for high-intensity guilt appeals, the mothers did not feel guilty, but were rather angry. Englis (1990) also found high

correlations between guilt appeals and the unintended emotions of anger, disdain, and disgust. We believe that this reaction is a function of the subjects evaluating the ad and perceiving it as inappropriate and unfair. Specifically, with regard to guilt appeals, we posit that:

**H2a:** As consumers perceive more unfairness, inappropriateness, or manipulative intent, they are less likely to feel guilty.

**H2b:** As consumers perceive more unfairness, inappropriateness, or manipulative intent, they are more likely to feel angry.

### 2.2.2. The effects of ad credibility

Cognitive response theory and empirical research suggest that when persuasive communications are perceived as more credible or include strong arguments for the product or topic, the cognitive responses and  $A_{ad}$  are more favorable (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). We believe that ad credibility will also affect emotional responses. We suggest that if consumers believe an ad (find it credible) and perceive no manipulative intent, then consumers' emotional responses will be more congruent with the intent of the advertiser. In our context, this means that the viewer seeing a credible guilt appeal will likely feel guilty. Thus, we posit that:

**H3:** The greater the perceived ad credibility, the more likely the consumers feel guilty.

## 2.3. The effects of ad credibility and perceived manipulative intent on $A_{ad}$

Research has theorized about and empirically examined the effects of ad credibility and perceived manipulative intent on measures of ad effectiveness, including  $A_{ad}$ . This research suggests that ad credibility is likely to have a positive effect on consumer reactions to the ad (Kavanaugh et al., 1997; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989) and overall ad effectiveness (Goldberg and Hartwick, 1990). Furthermore, IMI have a negative effect on attitude toward the ad (Campbell, 1995). We believe that actually feeling guilty may influence  $A_{ad}$  positively or negatively, depending on perceived credibility and level of manipulation. Consistent with this perspective, we posit:

**H4:** A positive relationship exists between perceived ad credibility and  $A_{ad}$ .

**H5:** A negative relationship exists between perceptions of manipulative intent and  $A_{ad}$ .

## 2.4. The effects of ad credibility and perceived manipulative intent on the attitude toward the sponsor of the ad ( $A_{sponsor}$ )

Researchers have also theoretically and empirically examined the effects of ad credibility and perceived manipulative intent on  $A_{sponsor}$  and attributions about the sponsor

(Campbell, 1995; Friestad and Wright, 1994). In the extreme, perceptions of manipulative intent may create cognitions of mistrust of the company, which can lead to a consumer backlash against the advertiser (Basil et al., 1998; Osterhus, 1997). Thus, we expect:

**H6:** A positive relationship exists between perceived ad credibility and corporate attributions and  $A_{\text{sponsor}}$ .

**H7:** A negative relationship exists between perceptions of manipulative intent and corporate attributions and  $A_{\text{sponsor}}$ .

### 2.5. Ad selection and pretesting

Consistent with recent advertising research, we chose to use real ads in our study (see e.g., Kover, 1995). We made a concerted effort to identify ads for which our subject pool (undergraduate students) perceived that the advertiser's intent was to create guilt in the audience. As a first step in identifying print advertisements to use in our study, we asked 80 undergraduate students to collect print ads for which they perceived that the advertiser's intent was to instill guilt in them. From this collection, the authors identified four ads that appeared with the greatest frequency and then talked with the students to understand more about their reactions to the advertisements. The ads were for (1) MCI, (2) Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), (3) Save the Children (STC), and (4) Wrigley's Gum (WG).

Our next decision concerned which ads to use as stimuli. We wanted to examine only one type of guilt—so that our results would not be a function of type of guilt—and so the three authors individually evaluated the types of guilt evoked in the four ads. Social marketing causes often use guilt appeals, and the type of guilt appeal they most frequently use is existential guilt (Huhmann and Brotherton, 1997). We concurred that both the EDF and STC ads intended to evoke existential guilt, whereas the MCI ad intended to evoke anticipatory guilt and the WG ad intended to evoke reactive guilt. Thus, based on the debriefings and our assessments of the types of guilt intended in the ads, we selected the EDF and STC ads for our experiment. Due to the prevalence of existential appeals by charitable organizations, readers of these ads should be familiar with guilt appeals in social marketing ads. Although as we discuss below, prior familiarity with the specific ad shown did not affect our results.

Past research has indicated that the intensity of the guilt appeal has an effect on emotional reactions and attitude to the ad, as well as behavior (Coulter and Pinto, 1995). To ensure that the EDF and STC ad had similar levels of perceived intended guilt, we conducted a pilot study with 37 undergraduate students (none of whom participated in the previous data collection). The EDF ad was originally in color, and research has shown that color gets more attention and creates longer viewing (e.g., Chute, 1980; Lamberski and Dwyer, 1981). We wanted to minimize this potential confound and so we used black and white versions of both ads. We told the students we were interested in understanding more about

what they thought advertisers were attempting to accomplish with a series of ads and that each student would get one ad to assess. After examining the ad, students completed a short questionnaire. Embedded among other questions regarding intended emotions (e.g., make me happy, feel afraid) was a five-point Likert-type question, “[The sponsor] intended for me to feel guilty when viewing this advertisement” (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). The two ads did not differ significantly from one another in their perceived level of intended guilt [ $\bar{x}_{\text{EDF}} = 3.67$ ,  $\bar{x}_{\text{STC}} = 4.00$ ,  $t(35) = 0.85$ ,  $P > .40$ ].

## 3. Methodology

Sixty-three undergraduate students, none of whom participated in our previous data collections, participated in our study. We randomly gave black and white copies of the EDF ( $n = 32$ ) and STC ads ( $n = 31$ ) to the students and instructed them that we were interested in their initial reactions to the ad. Having seen the ad, the students completed a questionnaire. The first question assessed subjects' prior exposure to the ad. On the following pages, the subjects completed a questionnaire including 17 five-point Likert-scaled felt emotional responses to the ad (Edell and Burke, 1987; Izard, 1977; Plutchik, 1980). Several guilt items were embedded among many other emotion items to ensure that subjects did not focus on guilt. Additionally, the subjects completed five-point Likert ad evaluation items measuring  $A_{\text{ad}}$  and the sponsor, or organization ( $A_{\text{sponsor}}$ ) in the ad (MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989). Next, the subjects indicated the level (on a five-point Likert scale) of five emotions (including guilt) they believed the advertiser was intending to create, as well as three items measuring attributions about the ad's sponsor (Coulter and Pinto, 1995). Last, they evaluated the advertiser's manipulative intentions (Campbell, 1995). All measures of felt emotions were taken before any items asking about inferences of advertisers' intentions.

### 3.1. Measurement

The five-point scale items used to measure each variable and the corresponding reliability coefficients are included in Table 1. The scales were either entirely or partially adopted from previous research. Specifically, the items measuring ad credibility are a combination of items used by Eaton (1988) and MacKenzie and Lutz (1989). The IMI scale is adopted from Campbell (1995). A factor analysis (including a scree plot) of the IMI indicates that the scale is unidimensional, with one factor accounting for 68% of the variance extracted (eigenvalue of 4.1), and other factors having eigenvalues of 0.5 or less.

Feeling guilty is comprised of four items found in the research conducted by Bozinoff and Ghingold (1983) and Pinto and Priest (1991). The measures for attitude toward the ad ( $A_{\text{ad}}$ ) and sponsor ( $A_{\text{sponsor}}$ ) come from MacKenzie

Table 1  
Scales and reliabilities

Scale items	Reliability measure ( $\alpha$ )
<i>Ad credibility</i> <sup>a</sup>	
Believable	.87
Truthful	
Realistic	
<i>Inferences of manipulative intent</i> <sup>a</sup>	
The way this ad tries to persuade people seems acceptable to me.	.89
The advertiser tried to manipulate the audience in ways I do not like.	
I was annoyed by this ad because the advertiser seemed to be trying to inappropriately manage or control the consumer audience.	
I didn't mind this ad; the advertiser tried to be persuasive without being excessively manipulative.	
The ad was fair in what was said and shown.	
I think that this advertisement is unfair/fair.	
<i>Feeling guilty</i> <sup>a</sup>	
Guilty	.80
Irresponsible	
Accountable	
Ashamed	
<i>Attitude towards the ad</i>	
Good/Bad	.96
Favorable/Unfavorable	
Positive/Negative	
<i>Attitude towards the sponsor</i>	
Good/bad	.97
Favorable/unfavorable	
Positive/negative	

<sup>a</sup> Items measuring this construct were on a five-point Likert scale, 1 being *strongly disagree* and 5 being *strongly agree*.

and Lutz (1989). Items used to assess corporate attributions were taken from Coulter and Pinto (1995) and appear in Table 2.

### 3.2. Manipulation check

To determine whether subjects perceived the advertiser was intending to make them feel guilty, we embedded the same five-point Likert-type question, “[The company] intended for me to feel [emotion] when viewing this advertisement” (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*), that was used in the pilot study. Subjects perceived no significant difference in level of intended guilt across the two ads [ $\bar{x}_{EDF} = 3.78$ ,  $\bar{x}_{STC} = 4.13$ ,  $t(61) = 1.28$ ,  $P > .21$ ].

### 3.3. Results

Our analyses indicate that all our hypothesized relationships were significant in the predicted direction. Across the two ads, we found that ad credibility and IMI are negatively correlated ( $r = -.51$ ,  $P < .001$ , supporting H1). Additionally,

there is a significant negative correlation between IMI and feeling guilty ( $r = -.42$ ,  $P < .01$ ). This finding supports H2a; as readers infer more of a manipulative intent on the part of the marketer, they are less likely to feel guilty. In addition, as readers perceive more manipulation, they are more likely to become angry ( $r = .34$ ,  $P < .01$ ), supporting H2b. Furthermore, ad credibility is positively related to feeling guilty ( $r = .48$ ,  $P < .001$ , supporting H3). Thus, if readers view an ad as credible, they are more likely to feel guilty. As expected, ad credibility is positively related to  $A_{ad}$  ( $r = .52$ ,  $P < .001$ , supporting H4), whereas perceived manipulative intent is negatively related to  $A_{ad}$  ( $r = -.62$ ,  $P < .001$ , supporting H5). Supporting H6, ad credibility is positively related to corporate attributions and attitude toward the sponsor (see Table 2). Additionally, we found that the greater the perceived manipulative intent, the more negative the attributions made about the sponsor of the ad, and the more negative the overall attitude to the  $A_{sponsor}$  (supporting H7, see Table 2).

The two ads were perceived by readers as equally credible [ $\bar{x}_{EDF} = 4.14$ ,  $\bar{x}_{STC} = 4.06$ ,  $t(61) = 0.30$ ,  $P > .76$ ]. However, the ads did differ on perceived manipulative intent, with readers perceiving significantly higher IMI in the children's relief charity ad [ $\bar{x}_{EDF} = 1.78$ ,  $\bar{x}_{STC} = 2.72$ ,  $t(61) = 3.45$ ,  $P < .001$ ]. Therefore, we also analyzed each ad individually. Reactions to the same ad varied across subjects, although the variation was not very large. Because these variances are not large, using correlations to explain the variance accounted for in our tests is relatively conservative; a significant correlation depends in part in how much variance there is to explain in the variable.

Our analyses of the individual ads again illustrate the significant negative relationship between ad credibility and IMI ( $-.62$  for the EDF ad and  $-.48$  for the STC ad; see Table 3). Analyses of ad credibility, IMI, and feeling guilty demonstrate that when the ad is not perceived as manipulative (the EDF ad), ad credibility is positively and significantly related to feeling guilty,  $A_{ad}$ , and corporate attributions. In addition, the relationship between IMI and the other variables is nonsignificant (see Table 3). However, when the advertiser is perceived as manipulative (the STC ad), credibility is not significantly related to feeling guilty.

Table 2  
Credibility, inferences of manipulative intent, and corporate attributions

	Ad credibility	IMI
$A_{sponsor}$	.45***	-.49***
Corporate attributions		
[The sponsor] is primarily concerned with making money.	-.41*	.55***
I have a good feeling about [the sponsor].	-.39*	-.56***
[The sponsor] has consumers' best interests at heart.	.49***	-.38*

$n = 63$ .

\*  $P < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $P < .001$ .

Table 3  
Credibility, inferences of manipulative intent, feeling guilty

	EDF ad		STC ad	
	Ad credibility	IMI	Ad credibility	IMI
IMI	-.62***		-.48***	
Feeling guilty	.64***	-.30	.29	-.44**
A <sub>ad</sub>	.67***	-.31	.44**	-.72***
A <sub>sponsor</sub>	.34	-.21	.60***	-.66***
Corporate attributions [The sponsor] is primarily concerned with making money.	-.47*	.29	-.49*	.52*
I have a good feeling about [the sponsor].	.52*	-.27	.47*	-.41**
[The sponsor] has consumers' best interests at heart.	.43**	-.22	.39**	-.71***

EDF,  $n=32$ ; STC,  $n=31$ .

\*  $P < .01$ .

\*\*  $P < .05$ .

\*\*\*  $P < .001$ .

Thus, if consumers believe that an ad is credible, yet manipulative, they are less likely to react as the advertiser intended, i.e., feel guilty. Moreover, consumers will have negative ad and sponsor evaluations, and make negative attributions about the corporation. At the same time, credibility remains positively and significantly related to  $A_{ad}$ ,  $A_{sponsor}$ , and corporate attributions. Feeling guilty is positively related to  $A_{ad}$  for both ads (EDF:  $r=.46$ ,  $P < .001$ ; STC:  $r=.54$ ,  $P < .01$ ).

Since a potential confound might have been prior familiarity with the ad used in the study, it is important to point out that there was no difference in familiarity (reported number of times the ad was seen) between the two ads used and familiarity with the ad was not significantly related to either feeling guilty or IMI for either ad.

#### 4. Discussion

This article discusses two factors—consumers' evaluations of the advertisement's credibility and consumers' perceptions of the advertiser's manipulative intent—that can, respectively, enhance or disrupt the advertiser's intended objectives. Because consumers are active readers of advertising, they may or may not respond as the advertiser expected, that is, they may or may not feel guilty as a consequence of seeing a guilt appeal. Specifically, when consumers perceive that a guilt appeal ad is credible, they are more likely to feel guilty. However, this is only the case when consumers infer the advertiser's intent is not manipulative. If the consumer does perceive manipulative intent, he or she is less likely to feel guilty. Thus, a consumer's evaluation of an ad's credibility and the advertisers' motivations can either enhance or disrupt message response.

Our findings also suggest that consumers' evaluations of ad credibility and advertiser motivations extend beyond

message response and impact subsequent attitudes toward the ad, attitudes toward the sponsor, and corporate attributions. Specifically, if consumers perceive an ad as credible, they are more likely to hold a positive attitude toward the advertisement and sponsor. Conversely, if consumers perceive manipulative intent on the part of the marketer, they are more likely to hold a negative attitude toward the advertisement and sponsor as well as negative corporate attributions. As such, advertisers need to walk a fine line between getting a message across and being perceived as overtly manipulative. Advertisers need to use caution when selecting guilt-inducing tactics due to the negative effects of perceived manipulation and unfairness on attitudes towards the company.

Our research sheds some explanatory light on a controversy in the research dealing with negative emotional appeals (like fear or guilt). In their recent meta-analysis, Brown et al. (1998) point out that there are "strong and robust" results stating that negative appeals lead to negative ad, brand, and sponsor attitudes. However, they point out conflicting research that demonstrates positive effects of negative appeals. The present research demonstrates that if a negative appeal ad (in our case guilt) is credible and is not perceived as manipulative, the ad will lead to positive corporate attributions and attitudes. However, if the ad is seen as manipulative, despite the fact that it may be credible, then negative appeals can lead to negative corporate attributions and attitudes.

One possible explanation for why one ad may be seen as manipulative and one may not (given equal credibility and levels of intended guilt) may be the type of guilt intended. As we reviewed earlier, there are three main types of guilt: reactive, anticipatory, and existential (Huhmann and Brotherton, 1997). Our study focused exclusively on two ads intended to elicit existential guilt. Future research might examine whether there is a link between the type of guilt intended and IMI: If there is indeed a link, advertisers would have some guidance on how to avoid these types of inferences by portraying different types of guilt in their ads.

Although we did not assess individual differences in this research, it is possible that some people are more prone to feeling guilty, or feeling emotions in general (Basil et al., 1998; Moore and Harris, 1996). Future research should examine the role dispositional (trait) guilt plays in evaluating the advertiser's intentions, and the ad itself (see, for example, Basil et al., 1998).

Finally, although we did assess levels of prior familiarity with the ad (and found no difference), the persuasion knowledge literature suggests that consumers do not necessarily need to be familiar with the ad itself, but can call on their prior knowledge (Friestad and Wright, 1994) to make their evaluations. This knowledge may be of the tactics of this particular marketer in previous ads (for example, that STC "always" includes pictures of starving children) or knowledge of the typical marketing tactics in a product category (for example, charities "always" try to make you

feel guilty in their ads). Future research could determine how this type of agent and topic knowledge might interact with ad credibility and IMI (see Coulter et al., 1999). Some product categories (like social marketing campaigns) have used guilt appeals for decades. Persuasion knowledge of these guilt tactics in these categories may be higher than in some other areas, like nondurable consumer products. If the use of a guilt appeal is novel for a product category, then perhaps a lack of persuasion knowledge might lead to less perceptions of marketer manipulation.

#### 4.1. Implications for marketers

Looking across our results, we suggest that the advertiser striving for an effective use of a guilt appeal should focus on presenting viewers with messages that resonate with consumers' experiences. More speculatively, marketers may also want to consider offering strategies for reducing guilt, such that consumers believe the claims, feel guilty, and act (by purchasing or following through with some other behavior) to alleviate the guilt, all without feeling overtly manipulated. However, an important caveat is that the more guilt tactics have been used in an industry, the higher will be the persuasion knowledge of most readers of the ad and the less likely it is that the tactic will go unrecognized.

This research offers some empirical insights on guilt appeals, a growing strategic choice of advertisers (Murphy, 1994; Samalin and Hogarty, 1994). Guilt appeals that are perceived as containing well known manipulative tactics do not "work"; there will not be a congruency between the representation in the ad and the consumer's response (Scott, 1994). In this era of increasingly market-savvy consumers, advertisers need to avoid well-known guilt "tricks" and rather develop appeals that provide credible information in a nonmanipulative way.

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