



Investigating gender differences in consumers' experience of guilt: A comparative study



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ABSTRACT

The literature of guilt in the context of consumer behavior is notably limited. It is particularly limited with respect to examining gender differences across nations. Existing studies have only evaluated gender differences, in terms of consumer guilt, in the United States. In addition, those studies evaluated gender differences in specific consumption situations such as consumer boycotting and food consumption. Thus, they do not give a comprehensive understanding of gender variations in consumer guilt. Notably, gender differences with regard to consumer guilt were shown to be limited in countries other than the United States. These studies provided contradictory results to established findings in social psychology. In view of this, by using quantitative techniques, numerous consumption settings, and samples from two distinct countries, this study provides a holistic assessment of gender differences in consumer guilt across nations. The findings indicate that gender differences, with respect to consumer guilt, are predominately present in individualistic countries and notably absent in collectivist countries. Hence, marketers should consider gender as an influential variable when devising guilt related strategies in individualistic countries. In contrast, marketers may reconsider allocating resources, with respect to gender related marketing strategies, in collectivist countries.

1. Introduction

“Show me a woman who does not feel guilty and I will show you a man”

Fear of Flying – Erica Jong

Researchers and practitioners have long acknowledged the importance of guilt in influencing individuals' behavior (Antonetti and Baines, 2015). However, due to the complexity of the cognitive processes leading to guilt, as well as the lack of a universally acknowledged facial expression that determines this emotion (Tracy et al., 2007), researchers have encountered conceptual and methodological difficulties when examining this topic (Cohen et al., 2011; Tracy et al., 2007). As a result, guilt-related research in marketing, especially in consumer behavior, is considerably limited (Antonetti and Baines, 2015). Specifically, there is a shortage of studies that assess gender differences in consumers' experience of guilt (Antonetti and Baines, 2015), despite the ease and significance of utilizing gender as a segmentation tool to target specific consumers (Hanks and Mattila, 2014) and to influence their decisions (Bakshi, 2012). For instance, women are found to experience more guilt than men (Else-Quest et al., 2012); thus, they would have

different attitudes and behaviors towards the market offering that triggered that emotion.

Notably, available literature in consumer behavior emphasizes that there is a difference between genders with respect to their feelings of guilt in consumption circumstances, and this difference is statistically significant (Hanks and Mattila, 2014; Lee-Wingate and Corfman, 2010; Sukhdial and Boush, 2004). However, most of these studies only examined consumer guilt in specific behaviors associated with consumption circumstances like boycotting behavior (Cruz et al., 2013), impulsive behavior (Hanks and Mattila, 2014), and food consumption (Sukhdial and Boush, 2004). Hence, they do not provide a holistic understanding of gender's influence on feelings of guilt within the context of consumer behavior. Furthermore, the majority of these studies were implemented in the United States (US) (Hanks and Mattila, 2014; Lee-Wingate and Corfman, 2010; Sukhdial and Boush, 2004). Thus, such findings cannot be utilized by marketers in other countries, due to empirical evidence in social psychology that found no significant difference between genders among participants of non-white ethnicity (Else-Quest et al., 2012).

Therefore, to resolve these issues, this study aims to 1) provide a comprehensive knowledge that determines gender differences in

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consumers' feelings of guilt and to 2) evaluate this difference across nations. To achieve these aims, this study begins by examining existing literature that clarifies the definition, forms, experiences, and applications of consumer guilt. Furthermore, literature that examines available research that sheds light on gender differences with respect to consumer guilt is evaluated, particularly the literature that assesses gender differences across nations. In view of that, the research hypotheses are developed and the methodology is described. The results are presented and their consequences are discussed. After that, the theoretical and practical implications of the findings are presented. Finally, the limitations of this study are examined, and future research directions are recommended.

2. Literature review

2.1. Consumer guilt

Kugler and Jones (1992), p. 318) defined guilt as “the dysphoric feeling associated with the recognition that one has violated a personally relevant moral or social standard”. Accordingly, guilt is experienced when an individual violates a personal standard, value, or rule (Lewis et al., 2010), or fails to self-regulate (Zemack-Rugar et al., 2012). That is why guilt is found to have an important influence on individuals' self-regulation processes and thus behaviors (Eisenberg, 2000). Specifically, individuals who experience guilt remain in a state of distress, which prompts them to attempt to resolve this state by confessing or apologizing (Tracy et al., 2007).

Guilt has been classified as a personality trait and an emotional state (Kugler and Jones, 1992). Guilt as a personality trait reflects an individual's predisposition to experience guilt, whereas guilt as an emotional state exemplifies feelings of guilt in a particular moment (Cohen et al., 2012). Notably, marketing practitioners often emphasize the importance of guilt as an emotional state to their practice (Antonetti and Baines, 2015), because feelings of guilt in a specific moment allow marketers to implement guilt-related strategies in both advertising and consumer behavior. In the advertising domain, guilt appeals are designed specifically to cause a desired emotional reaction in consumers (Bagozzi et al., 1999) and thus influence their attitudes and behaviors (Boudewyns et al., 2013; Coulter and Pinto, 1995).

Whereas experienced guilt, also labeled as consumer guilt, refers to feelings of guilt that arise as a result of violating moral, ethical, or societal norms in a consumption situation (Lascu, 1991), consumer guilt is experienced when consumers, for instance, buy junk food; refrain from making charity donations; and dispose of items given by someone important to them (Dahl et al., 2003). Notably, consumer guilt can be experienced in two forms: anticipatory and reactive (Lascu, 1991). With respect to anticipatory guilt, it is experienced when an individual thinks about potential negative outcomes that may occur in the future (Tracy et al., 2007). Reactive guilt arises as a consequence of an action that took place in the past and that caused a negative result (Burnett and Lunsford, 1994).

Furthermore, consumer guilt can be further categorized based on the consumption circumstances responsible for its elicitation (Dahl et al., 2003). These circumstances are associated with one's self (Dahl et al., 2005), others, and societal standards (Dahl et al., 2003). First, guilt associated with one's self reflects consumption situations where individuals failed to meet their personal standards or were unsuccessful in regulating their behavior, (Dahl et al., 2003) such as eating unhealthy food (Kemp and Grier, 2013; Cornish, 2012; Mohr et al., 2012) or smoking cigarettes (Dahl et al., 2003). Second, guilt associated with others reflects consumption circumstances that include interpersonal concerns, such as making a complaint (Dahl et al., 2005) or being impolite to service providers (Dahl et al., 2003). Third, guilt associated with societal standards reflects consumption scenarios where a social standard is violated (Dahl et al., 2003), such as buying products that damage the environment (Gregory-Smith et al., 2013).

Despite its negative nature, guilt is characterized as a functional emotion, because it drives individuals to acknowledge their responsibility in violating a personal or social standard (Tangney et al., 1996), and it prompts them to take reparative measures to resolve their feelings of guilt (Dearing and Tangney, 2002). Higher levels of guilt particularly influence purchase intention (Zielke, 2014) and lead to more change in behavior (Okeefe and Figge, 1997). In view of this, marketers utilize consumer guilt to influence consumers' consumption decisions (Antonetti and Baines, 2015). For example, consumer guilt encourages individuals to choose healthier food options (Cornish, 2012); save money (Soman and Cheema, 2011) and boycott unethical establishments (Klein et al., 2004). It deters complaining behavior (Soscia, 2007) and other unethical or impulsive consumption activities (Ayadi et al., 2013; Darrat et al., 2016; Sinclair and Green, 2016).

Despite consumer guilt's significance to marketers, it has not been comprehensively examined by researchers in consumer behavior (Antonetti and Baines, 2015). This is mostly due to guilt's complexity with respect to the cognitive processes required for its occurrence (Cohen et al., 2011; Tracy and Robins, 2004; Tracy et al., 2007) and the lack of a universally recognized facial manifestation that portrays this emotion (Tracy and Robins, 2006). Researchers faced many obstacles when examining guilt (Tracy et al., 2007). As a result, there is a scarcity of research that evaluates guilt in consumer behavior, especially with respect to studies that examine gender differences in consumption situations that elicit guilt (Antonetti and Baines, 2015). Thus, due to evidence that suggests that gender differences exist between men and women (Else-Quest et al., 2012), as well as the fact that gender is considered to be one of the major factors that influences consumer behavior (Hanks and Mattila, 2014), this research gap should be inspected.

2.2. Gender Differences in Experiencing Consumer Guilt

With respect to the literature of guilt in psychology and social psychology, the research emphasizes that women and men significantly differ with respect to their experience of guilt (Else-Quest et al., 2012). It stresses that women feel more guilt in comparison to men (Baumeister et al., 1994; Else-Quest et al., 2012). In addition, empirical evidence illustrates that women are more predisposed to experiencing guilt than men, and they are more likely to engage in reparative actions (Cohen et al., 2011). In contrast, the literature states that even though there are significant differences between men and women regarding their feelings of guilt, men tend to experience more guilt than women (Kugler and Jones, 1992). Thus, the majority of the studies agree that there is a significant but marginal difference between men and women with regard to experiencing guilt. However, they disagree on which gender experiences higher levels of guilt (Baumeister et al., 1994; Else-Quest et al., 2012; Kugler and Jones, 1992).

Within the context of consumer behavior, the literature consistently emphasizes that women experience more guilt than men in various consumption settings. For example, research that examines consumer guilt in relation to self-indulgent behavior states that women exceeded men in their feelings of guilt (Lee-Wingate and Corfman, 2010). Furthermore, studies that investigate consumer guilt and boycotting behavior found similar results (Cruz et al., 2013). In addition, research that evaluates consumer guilt in terms of impulse buying behavior correspondingly stresses that women have a lower threshold for experiencing guilt than men, and they experience higher levels of guilt in comparison to men (Hanks and Mattila, 2014). Moreover, studies that examine guilt in food consumption highlight that contextual factors affect the level of consumer guilt in both men and women, stating that women feel more guilt when they care about their physical appearance while men experience more guilt when they are specifically concerned about eating healthy (Sukhdial and Boush, 2004).

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