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Belief in fate and self-efficacy in road safety advertising based on guilt: An explanation based on negotiable fate

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effectiveness of using guilt in road safety advertising among young populations characterized as having high levels of belief in fate, and refutes the positive relationship between belief in fate and health message ineffectiveness, by introducing the notion of negotiable fate. This type of coping implies that when belief in fate increases, persuasion increases and this relationship operates through self-efficacy perceptions. That is, when exposed to guilt-based road safety messages, belief in fate generates self-efficacy perceptions, which motivates drivers to focus on the problem instead of denying it, leading to a higher persuasion. The current research constitutes a first empirical test of the relationships between belief in fate, self-efficacy, and compliance with guilt-based road safety communications. We also test a moderation-mediation model proving that the mediator role of self-efficacy is reinforced with the use of higher levels of guilt in the message. Results can provide guidance for non-profit organizations and public agencies on how to develop future policies to promote safe behaviors among young drivers who have high belief in fate.

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1. Introduction

Globally, the rate of crash involvement among people in the 16–24 age group is high, and road traffic injuries are now the leading killer of young adults (World Health Organization, 2018)¹. In Qatar, in 2011, young drivers accounted for 32.6% of total fatalities, 29.3% of total major injuries, and 26.9% of total minor injuries (Shaaban et al., 2018). Hence, young drivers are considered to be at highest risk of crashing, making the need to change their behaviors among the most important and challenging priorities for public authorities.

Extant evidence shows that road safety campaigns, particularly threat-based campaigns employing negative appeals (such as fear appeals), are extensively used to motivate young drivers to change their behaviors. However, evidence on the efficacy of these campaigns is scarce and inconsistent (Lewis et al., 2007; Phillips et al., 2011). The limited prior research has found that, among young audiences, advertisements featuring social threat (e.g., social disapproval) and inducing self-conscious emotions (e.g., guilt) work better than those highlighting physical threat and activating other types of emotions (e.g., fear) (Becheur and Valette-Florence, 2014;

Pechmann et al., 2003; Schonbachler and Whittler, 1996). Indeed, young people seem more vulnerable to social threat (e.g., causing injury to others and/or social exclusion) than to physical threat (e.g., injury) (King and Reid, 1990). In this regard, Schonbachler and Whittler (1996) argue that feelings of self-consciousness and concern about social acceptance (which may be triggered by guilt appeals) should encourage coping responses to social threat messages. This is one motivation for our investigation of the role of guilt (among other possible emotions) in inducing a change in young drivers' behavior.

Guilt appeals (compared to other emotional appeals) might play a more prominent role than other emotional appeals in the context of road safety advertising, where personal responsibility plays a crucial role (Basil et al., 2008). Indeed, Turner et al. (2018, p. 136) argue that “guilt is caused by the appraisal that a relevant threat was caused by a human ... and that the human was oneself.” On the road, this sense of personal responsibility is reinforced by the risk of one's bad driving behaviors inflicting harm on others, which could generate high feelings of guilt.

However, previous research has shown contradicting results on the effectiveness of guilt appeals. Indeed, while the meta-analysis of O'Keefe (2000) contends that guilt appeals are more persuasive at lower (rather than higher) intensity, some other studies recommend using high levels of guilt in advertising (Becheur and Valette-Florence, 2014; Bennett, 1998), and still others suggest that moderate levels of guilt are more effective (Coulter and Pinto,

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¹ World Health Organization (2018): <https://www.who.int/>.

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1995; Pinto and Priest, 1991). Therefore, this study aims to test whether low or high levels of guilt work better in road safety campaigns targeting young adults.

On another note, certain studies argue that health campaigns are ineffective in fatalistic societies, where people tend to attribute negative life events to God (or a higher power), which highlights the potential importance of fatalism as a barrier to effective behavior change and participation in health promotion programs (Plante et al., 2001). Kouabenan (1998) emphasizes the importance of culture, especially fatalistic beliefs, in risk-taking and accident prevention, as they incite risk-taking and neglecting safety measures.

However, this study theorizes and empirically demonstrates the reverse, based on the notion of negotiable fate: in fatalistic societies, belief in fate triggers high levels of self-efficacy among individuals, which positively affects the persuasive power of guilt-based road safety messages. These relationships are reinforced as the guilt level in the message increases. Indeed, Au et al. (2012) show that in contexts where individuals face many constraints in pursuing their goals, and despite high levels of fatalism, the belief in negotiable fate promotes active coping and positive self-views. The belief in negotiable fate is supposed to be more prevalent in Muslim societies, where belief in fate (elaborated later) differs from determinism.

To summarize, the importance of the current study is threefold. First, as a self-conscious emotion associated with health-related consumer behavior, guilt has received little attention and the few studies to have explored the impact of guilt-based advertising in road safety communication show contradicting results (Coulter and Pinto, 1995; O'Keefe, 2000; Pinto and Priest, 1991). Second, the interaction between belief in fate and response to health-related communication (particularly guilt appeals) has been understudied, especially among young populations who rely on belief in fate as a strategy of defense and avoidant coping against threats. Few papers highlight how belief in fate influences non-compliance with health-related messages and healthy behaviors (e.g., Niederdeppe and Levy, 2007; Powe and Finnie, 2003), and the malleability of this concept is often overlooked. Third, while previous research considers belief in fate as a barrier to persuasion in fatalistic societies, integrating the notion of negotiable fate in the persuasion frameworks for road safety can boost efforts to effectively fight unhealthy behaviors in these cultures, as fatalistic individuals believe they can exercise a certain degree of agency over their fate; their belief in fate is thus associated with high self-efficacy.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 first presents the concepts discussed in this paper, namely belief in fate in psychology and religion and its relationship with risky health behaviors and persuasion, guilt and guilt appeals, and self-efficacy. It then articulates the research hypotheses on the main and mediated effects of belief in fate on persuasion, before finally focusing on the moderating role of guilt in the mediated relationship between belief in fate and persuasion. The research methodology is described in Section 3, after which the results are reported in Section 4. Finally, Section 5 generally discusses the findings and their implications, along with directions for future research.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. How can fate be negotiable?

"It was meant to happen," "Mektoub," "Karma," "al-qaḍā' wa al-qadar": all are expressions from different languages and cultures that refer to the predominance of destiny and fate on individual behaviors and decision making. They encapsulate the belief that whatever happens was supposed to happen and that outcomes are ultimately predetermined (Norenzayan and Lee, 2010). From a psy-

chological perspective, it can be seen as a form of external locus of control (Rotter, 1966). Across cultures, belief in fate varies in degree and may take different forms. For instance, it has been shown that an individual's belief in fate is malleable and varies according to situations, religiosity, and predicated events (Cheng et al., 2013; Dweck et al., 1995). Ruiu (2013) shows that more regulated societies also tend to be more fatalistic, and that being religious, regardless of affiliation, implies a more fatalistic view of life. Belief in fate exerts an influence over people's decisions and behaviors. For instance, Wu (2005) shows that people characterized by fatalistic beliefs are less likely to save. Likewise, Ruiu (2012) sustains that fatalistic beliefs may be an important cultural barrier to entrepreneurship. In the health and medical literature, past research acknowledges that tendency to rely on fate is positively correlated with risky health behaviors such as negative coping with AIDS risks (Varga, 2001), lower health-screening behaviors (Niederdeppe and Levy, 2007; Powe and Finnie, 2003), or a higher tendency to commit suicide (Roberts et al., 1998).

However, other studies do not support these systematic positive relationships between belief in fate and fatalistic tendencies. Depending on the cultural context and situation, individuals may be motivated to challenge their fate in order to avoid negative outcomes (Cheng et al., 2013; Dweck et al., 1995). The limited impact of belief in fate on behavior has been highlighted by Au et al. (2012) via the concept of negotiable fate. Individuals can negotiate with fate for control by exercising personal agency within the limits that fate has determined. The authors also show that negotiable fate is more prevalent – and promotes active coping and positive self-views – in contexts where individuals face many constraints in pursuing their goals.

Leung and Bond (2004) call this phenomenon fate control belief, which they define as a general belief that although there are impersonal, external forces such as fate, destiny, and luck that determine life events, there is also the possibility to exert influence over or shape event outcomes (fate) through various culture-specific practices.

In Islam, although belief in fate and destiny is a main basis of faith,² fate is presented as both pre-determined and chosen, and so could be susceptible to negotiation. This duality of fate has been widely disputed in Islamic theology, with multiple interpretations of whether human actions are chosen or determined (De Cillis, 2014). Islamic texts are clear regarding intentional killing, with no doctrine daring to deny or argue it, nor attribute it to fate. For crimes committed inadvertently or by mistake, as a result of negligence or lack of reserve (such as road fatalities), religious scholars' views have differed on the extent of human responsibility.³ While common sense suggests that determinism is incompatible with responsibility, this is not a clear-cut issue in Islamic reflections, with a fundamental division regarding theological determinism and libertarian free will. That is to say, the question is: "Do humans choose their actions, knowing that even though God knows their actions before they happen, it does not affect the outcome, or does God have absolute control of their actions?"⁴ Apart from Mu'tazilis, who claim that humans have complete freedom to decide and perform their actions (see Souaiaia, 2007), Islamic juridictions are split between hard and soft determinism. This fluctuation reflects the notion of negotiable fate, as the belief that though

² It should be noted that belief in fate differs from fatalism. In Islam, "the Koran both teaches strict predestination and appeals to man's free choice—but this should probably not be classified as fatalism but rather as religious determinism, where the point is God's omnipotence, not predestination itself" (Ringgren, 1967, p. 56).

³ Peters (2005, p. 43) notes that "The basic distinction [about the legal effects of killing in Islam] is between intentional and accidental homicide or wounding."

⁴ For a review about the controversy of free will and determinism in Islam, see De Cillis (2014).

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