



# The persuasiveness of guilt appeals over time: Pathways to delayed compliance<sup>☆</sup>



Paolo Antonetti<sup>a,\*</sup>, Paul Baines<sup>b</sup>, Shailendra Jain<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Neoma Business School, Rouen Campus, France

<sup>b</sup> Cranfield School of Management, Cranfield University, UK

<sup>c</sup> Foster School of Business, University of Washington, USA

## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Guilt appeals  
Persuasion  
Guilt elicitation  
Narrative transportation  
Emotions  
Anticipated guilt

## ABSTRACT

Past research on guilt-elicitation in marketing does not examine how the communications' effects might persist over time, when there is a gap between advertising at time 1 and the time of choice consideration at time 2. This study explores the processes leading to delayed compliance through guilt-based communications. Guilt elicitation enhances transportation into the message, driving message compliance through the effect of transportation. Transportation explains the effects recorded several days after campaign exposure. The influence of transportation is mediated by two pathways: increases in anticipated guilt and perceived consumer effectiveness. The message type moderates the relevance of different pathways in explaining persuasiveness. Appeals delivered through a text and image message (rather than text only) are more effective in driving compliance and shape reactions via guilt anticipation. The study raises important implications for research on the use of guilt appeals and the design of more effective messages based on this emotion.

## 1. Introduction

Messages that employ the elicitation of guilty feelings to persuade consumers and change their behaviors (i.e., guilt appeals) have been common in marketing for decades (Huhmann & Brotherton, 1997). These types of communications are frequently adopted in social marketing campaigns (e.g., promoting health-related behavior or pro-environmental behavior; Antonetti, Baines, & Walker, 2015), by firms wishing to communicate the guilt-relieving features of some of their offerings (e.g., fat-free food alternatives, environmentally friendly products; Mishra & Mishra, 2011) as well as charity fund-raising campaigns (Basil, Ridgway, & Basil, 2008).

Despite their popularity, the question of *how* guilt appeals influence consumers remains unanswered (Antonetti & Baines, 2015). Past research is characterized by extensive debates on the true effectiveness of guilt-eliciting messages, under different circumstances (Brennan & Binney, 2010; O'Keefe, 2002) but examination of the process remains understudied.

Evidence indicates that guilt-based messages drive behavioral compliance under laboratory conditions (e.g., Duhachek, Agrawal, & Han, 2012). In these investigations, guilt is manipulated through an emotional appeal and behavior is recorded immediately after exposure.

The mechanism assumed to explain guilt's influence is a coping process: since guilt is an unpleasant emotion, it creates a desire to act to deal with the problem that is causing the emotional state. In real marketing campaigns, however, there is often a temporal gap between the communication eliciting the emotion and the time when compliance materializes. For example, an advert might activate a direct desire to recycle, but the opportunity to act is unlikely to appear immediately after message exposure.

This study, examining guilt appeals under more realistic conditions, extends past research by examining two novel and distinctive pathways by which guilt-based messages generate delayed compliance. We posit that guilt enhances transportation into the message, and that transportation, in turn, drives compliance through the mediation of anticipated guilt and Perceived Consumer Effectiveness (PCE). In three studies, spanning two different behavioral contexts, we illustrate that increased transportation caused by guilt impacts positively on relevant cognitive (i.e., PCE), affective (i.e., anticipated guilt), and behavioral (i.e., recycling or purchasing) persuasion measured after a three-day delay.

<sup>☆</sup> The authors are grateful to Tamara Ansons for her helpful comments and assistance in the pre-testing of the materials.

We gratefully acknowledge financial assistance from the British Academy (Small Research Grant 142942) which has supported the development of this research.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [paolo.antonetti@neoma-bs.fr](mailto:paolo.antonetti@neoma-bs.fr) (P. Antonetti), [paul.baines@cranfield.ac.uk](mailto:paul.baines@cranfield.ac.uk) (P. Baines), [spjain@uw.edu](mailto:spjain@uw.edu) (S. Jain).

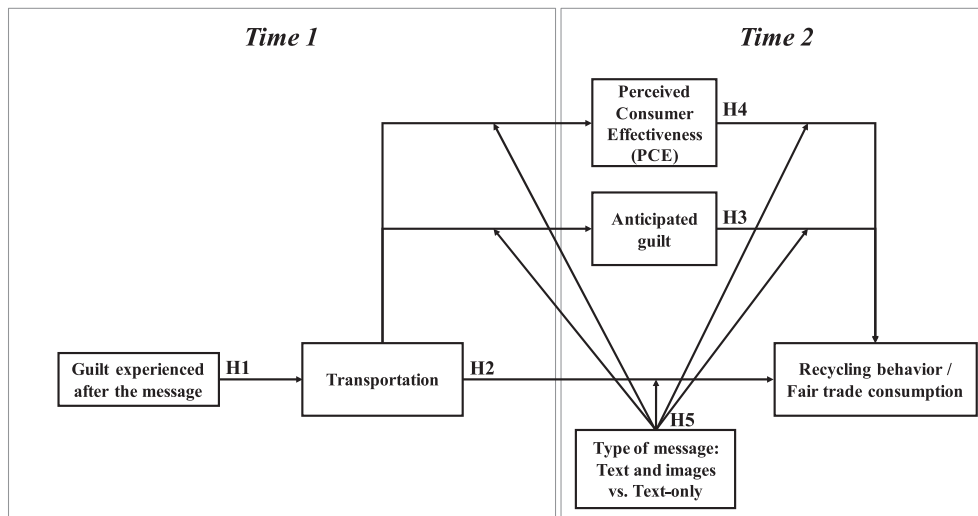


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

## 2. Research background

The study suggests a model of delayed compliance based on enhanced transportation via experienced guilt (Fig. 1). Increased transportation into the message at the time of exposure to the advert (time 1), influences a number of delayed outcomes (time 2) which include PCE, the anticipation of guilt, and changes in behavior. This perspective suggests that the effect of exposure to an advert on behavior is indirect and mediated by a series of cognitive and emotional processes. Different types of message used to deliver the appeal are also expected to influence the pathways underpinning persuasion. In our empirical study we focus on two different behaviors: recycling and the purchase of faire trade products. To support our research hypotheses, we provide a detailed rationale below.

### 2.1. Persuasion through guilt

Guilt is a negative emotion caused by the perception of negative consequences associated with the self (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). Although guilt is often elicited by acts that are directly caused by the individual (Folkes, Koletsky, & Graham, 1987; Roseman, 1991), scholars recognize that behaviors more indirectly associated with the self are also sufficient to elicit guilty feelings (Tracy & Robins, 2004). When guilt is elicited through an appeal, however, marketers tend to stress the personal responsibility of individual behavior in order to yield more effective messages (Basil, Ridgway, & Basil, 2006).

An important debate has focused on consumers' ability to manage their own guilty feelings, especially in situations where consumers realize that such feelings have been elicited by an external agent as part of a persuasion attempt (Hibbert, Smith, Davies, & Ireland, 2007). Individuals can rationalize the appeal content in order to suppress guilt (Brennan & Binney, 2010). At the same time, meta-analytic evidence and large scale reviews of research on guilt demonstrate that very strong appeals eliciting intense guilt are less persuasive (Antonetti & Baines, 2015; O'Keefe, 2000). Scholars describe an 'inverted-U' relationship between guilt and compliance, arguing that eliciting moderate guilt maximizes effective persuasion (Chang, 2011; Hibbert et al., 2007). This is because high levels of guilt would coincide with disruptive feelings of resentment and anger at the message source, which are ultimately counterproductive (see Coulter & Pinto, 1995).

O'Keefe (2000, p. 80) remarks that "a guilt-based persuasive appeal characteristically has two parts: one is material designed to evoke some degree of guilt [...] the other is the message viewpoint or action, which presumably might offer the prospect of guilt reduction." Although

consumers may experience guilt when exposed to an appeal promoting recycling, the message becomes relevant again only at time 2 when the individual considers recycling (Antonetti & Baines, 2015; p. 343). Successful persuasion attempts need to be able to bridge this temporal gap. Since evidence suggests that the feelings elicited at time 1 will need to be moderate to avoid negative reactance (Hibbert et al., 2007), the question arises of which process explains delayed effects. Guilt as an emotional state dissipates quickly and therefore will have only indirect influences on future behavior (Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007). Consequently, scholars need to theorize an alternative persuasion process that does not rely on the coping mechanisms that explain persuasion under laboratory condition, when individuals make decisions while experiencing the emotion (Duhachek et al., 2012). This research offers the first account of how message compliance at time 2 precipitates.

Our research posits transportation into the appeal (Green & Brock, 2000) as a key explanatory mechanism. Transportation refers to an experience of intense immersion or absorption into the message characterized by "an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings [...] a convergent process, where all mental systems and capacities become focused" (Green & Brock, 2000; p. 79). The idea of transportation as a persuasive mechanism first emerged in the analysis of how stories and narratives can be used to influence people's beliefs (Green & Brock, 2000). Recently, however, scholars have noticed that transportation as a form of persuasion does not require the use of clear narrative forms (i.e., characters and a succession of events) but that different types of advertisements can lead to transportation. For example, scholars show that the use of imagery and grotesque is sufficient to trigger transportation (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010). More broadly, self-references in the advertisement's text (Escalas, 2007) as well as autobiographical memories associated with the product advertised (Sujan, Bettman, & Baumgartner, 1993) can trigger transportation into the ad.

Guilt experiences offer another avenue to generate transportation. When guilt is elicited, people construct alternative versions of reality where the negative outcomes appraised could have been avoided (Baumeister et al., 2007; p. 173). This mental simulation, consistent with self-referencing processes (Escalas, 2007), leads to message immersion. Consequently, we expect that:

**H1.** Feelings of guilt influence transportation into the appeal positively.

While testing H1, we also rule out the possibility that the appeal triggers a volitional process by influencing consumers' attitudes towards the advertisement topic (Ajzen, 1991). From this perspective, feelings of guilt would lead individuals to see a certain action or

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