



# Men hate it, women love it: Guilty pleasure advertising messages ☆,☆☆,☆☆☆

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of a guilty pleasure has become a cultural touchstone, and messaging employing the concept has been increasingly used in advertising to gain consumers' attention and enhance the perceived value of the product. However, the present research finds guilty pleasure messages have strikingly different effects in men vs. women, for both physical and service products. Such messages result in more negative attitudes and lowered likelihood of purchase in men, yet higher attitudes and purchase likelihood in women. Using a mediated moderation model, this research shows these differential gender effects are driven by imagery generation via the experience of low agency emotions.

## 1. Introduction

The concept of a guilty pleasure has become a touchstone of our cultural conscience. Musicians from Barbara Streisand to Quiet Riot to Ashley Tisdale have all recently released Guilty Pleasure(s) titled albums, and the band Meat Loaf spent 2011 and 2012 on their Guilty Pleasures Tour. In the run up to the 2016 U. S. presidential election, a piece in Business Insider attempting to explain his appeal declared “Donald Trump is the guilty pleasure candidate” (Barro, 2016). In *The New Yorker*, Jennifer Szalai (2013) argues that “[g]uilty pleasures refer to cultural artifacts with mass appeal...that bring with them an easy enjoyment without any pretense to edification.” She goes on to note that, “[a]ccording to the online [New York] Times archives, ‘guilty pleasure’ shows up approximately twelve hundred and sixty times—twelve hundred and forty-seven of those since 1996.”

In line with this growing prominence in the broader culture, marketers increasingly promote their products as guilty pleasures. For instance, TV's Food Network's show “Guilty Pleasures” is dedicated to the “guilty-pleasures secrets” of Food Network stars and celebrities. CBS extensively promotes its hit TV show “Big Brother” as “the summer's guilty pleasure.” In the realm of consumer products, a recent series of print ads for Kraft Dinner (a macaroni and cheese product) by Kraft Canada show a series of people “disguised” by covering their eyes with the product box, with the words “A guilty pleasure” prominently displayed next to the product image (See Fig. 1).

The question that arises, of course, is does this type of advertising message work? The growing cultural resonance of the concept of guilty

pleasures would suggest that consumers identify with and relate to a normative belief that certain things are both highly pleasurable, yet also worthy of a guilty conscience. Recent research supports this. Goldsmith, Cho, and Dhar (2012) found that priming subjects with feelings of guilt enhanced the pleasure of their consumption experience.

However, the concept of surreptitiously partaking in guilty pleasures would not appear to apply evenly to all consumers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that guilty pleasures are more often female- or both gender-focused than male-focused. For instance, the PBS documentary “Guilty Pleasures” that aired in July 2012 focused on five female devotees of romance novels. Further, a Google image search for “guilty pleasures” revealed that of the top twenty images that contained pictures of people, eighteen were of women alone, and the remaining two were of a man and woman together. Yet the Kraft ad campaign noted above used both male and female models in their print ads. If men and women do not respond similarly to the concept of guilty pleasures, then marketers may benefit from a more gender-specific approach in their messaging. The present research, in fact, makes a stronger argument—that men are not simply less amenable to guilty pleasure messaging than women, but in fact men and women respond in opposite ways to such messages.

## 2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

### 2.1. The emotion of guilt

Researchers in the psychological domain extensively examine the

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Fig. 1. Kraft Dinner advertisement.

emotion of guilt. Guilt is a moral emotion, or more specifically a self-conscious moral emotion (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007), as the individual's understanding and evaluation of the self are fundamental to the emotion (Eisenberg, 2000). Guilt results from a focus on “bad” behavior, rather than on the bad self, which is more closely associated with shame (Lewis, 1971; Tangney et al., 2007). Further, recent research develops two models of guilt, one derived from interpersonal theory, known as altruistic guilt, and the other based on a psychoanalytic approach, labeled deontological guilt. Deontological guilt arises when we fail to follow our own internal moral values, whereas individuals feel altruistic guilt in response to having unjustifiably caused harm to another or, more generally, failing to act altruistically. The distinction between these forms of guilt is conceptual, since they are often experienced together, and is based on appraisal theories of emotion (Mancini & Mancini, 2015). The current research conceptualizes the guilt arising from consumption of goods perceived as deontological guilt, since the transgression is against an internally accepted norm, rather than a slight against another (even if said norms are externally derived).

## 2.2. Guilt and guilty pleasures in advertising

Most research on guilt in advertising examines its effectiveness as a form of persuasion resulting from guilty emotions elicited by the ad, such as the earlier work by Bozinoff and Ghingold (1983), which finds that counterarguments generated by receivers of the ads mitigate the guilt-arousing communications. Guilt has recently received newfound attention from both researchers and advertisers for its potential role as an inducement for consumer action (Chang, 2012; Dahl, Honea, & Manchanda, 2003). Huhmann and Brotherton (1997) find that largely

negative guilt appeals are a fairly common form of advertising appeal. Much of the current research examines the proscriptive role that emotion plays in the reduction of negative behaviors by associating them with the negative experience of guilt, such as excessive drinking (Agrawal & Duhachek, 2010). Some advertising agencies embrace its use in such contexts (Roberts, 2009). Others have examined its role in encouraging positive behaviors, such as charitable giving (Basil, Ridgway, & Basil, 2008; Cotte, Coulter, & Moore, 2005; Hibbert, Smith, Davies, & Ireland, 2007), blood donation (Renner, Lindenmeier, Tscheulin, & Drevs, 2013), or pro-environmental behavior (Elgaaied, 2012), by associating failure to act with the negative experience of guilt. Similarly, guilt enhances the effects of negative fear appeals that induce positive actions to reduce negative consequences, such as with sunscreen use (Passyn & Sujun, 2006). It also increases the desire for self-improvement products (Allard & White, 2012) via its focus on previous wrongdoings. Brennan and Binney (2010) distinguish between fear, guilt, and shame appeals' influence on message compliance. They find that fear appeals have better recall, but guilt appeals can be more effective as they play on the empathy of message recipients; though they can also become less effective due to wearout associated with frequent use. On the other hand, Kemp, Bui, and Chapa (2012) show that advertisers can take guilt-mitigation measures to reduce the guilt associated with hedonic products, and increase purchase intention.

The use of guilt to create direct positive associations with an ad or product, however, has been little examined. Though the concept of guilty pleasures has become a common one in popular culture and the advertising realm, it's study in business or marketing academic journals is very limited. Further, even in those situations in which research shows a negative guilt appeal to be an effective means of inducing product purchase, such as with health-club memberships, some marketers have chosen to nevertheless avoid its use so as to reduce negative associations with their brand (Anonymous, 2009).

Such caution would seem to make sense, since guilt is generally viewed as a negative emotion, and thus its use in advertising would appear limited to calls for action (or inaction) that would otherwise lead to negative consequences (and thus individual or societal guilt), such as those situations noted above. Its use has therefore been somewhat limited to charities, non-profits, or public service announcements. When considered in broader terms, however, guilt is often associated with perceived overindulgence in positive or neutral things, such as food, luxuries, leisure time, etc.; or with the enjoyment experienced in the consumption of something that is met with disapproval, such as high-calorie desserts, or a frivolous reality TV show. In other words, guilt is often associated with too much of a good thing, or the enjoyment of a “bad” thing. As Lascu (1991) observes in one of the earlier scholarly examinations of guilt as a potential marketing tool, consumers often feel the guiltiest about the things that provide them with the highest pleasure. In fact, research shows that as time goes by our choices to refrain from certain guilt-inducing “vices” result in feelings of regret for “missing out on the pleasures of life” (Kivetz & Keinan, 2006). Thus, if one feels guilt for acquiring or using a product then that product may, in fact, be viewed as “excessively good.” It's just that it's so good that too much of it is somehow bad. These products—and similarly positioned services and experiences—are commonly referred to as guilty pleasures. The studies by Goldsmith et al. (2012) back this up. They find that the pleasure from hedonic consumption that arises when guilt is primed is due to the cognitive association between guilt and pleasure.

Guilt is a cognitively mediated emotion—negative affect predicated by a judgment that one's thoughts or actions are inappropriate, or that others would judge them to be so. In one of the earlier examinations of guilt in the consumer decision-making process, Burnett and Lunsford (1994) define guilt as “a negative emotion that results from a consumer decision that violates one's values or norms. Consequently, one will experience a lowering of self-esteem as a result of his decision.”

In their typology of consumer related guilt, Dahl et al. (2003)

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