

**HOW INTENSITY OF CAUSE-RELATED MARKETING GUILT APPEALS  
INFLUENCES CONSUMERS**  
THE ROLES OF COMPANY MOTIVE AND CONSUMER IDENTIFICATION WITH  
THE BRAND

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the role of guilt appeal intensity in cause marketing advertising. Employing an experiment, the study reveals that guilt appeals in cause marketing communications are effective at fostering positive corporate image perceptions when low in intensity. Low intensity appeals stimulate consumer-company identification and lower inferences of negative motives of the company, both contributing to shaping perceptions of corporate image perceptions and purchase intentions. The study extends advertising research on the efficacy of low intensity guilt appeals in cause marketing advertising. Crucially, it advances knowledge on the psychological processes underlying consumer responses to guilt appeals in cause marketing advertising.

**Keywords:** guilt appeal intensity, cause marketing, advertising, inferred motive, consumer-company identification

## **MANAGEMENT SLANT**

- In cause-marketing, guilt appeals of low intensity engender consumer-company identification, which in turn, enhances positive perceptions of corporate image and purchase intentions.
- Guilt appeals of high intensity lower inferences of positive motives of the company, that is perceptions that the company is truly willing to support the social cause.
- High intensity guilt appeals should be avoided in cause marketing advertising.
- Extensive pre-testing of advertisement copies to understand the brand's motives conveyed to consumers is recommended.
- The brand's negative motives should be inoculated through the use of guilt appeals set at the apposite intensity level.

## INTRODUCTION

*Every man is guilty of all the good he did not do.*  
Voltaire

Supporting a cause for the benefit of society is a widely-used practice by companies, commonly known as cause-related marketing or cause marketing (CM, Varadarajan and Menon, 1988). Studies show that CM reinforces brand image and can be a source of competitive advantage (*e.g.*, Adkins, 2011; Vanhamme, Lindgreen, Reast, and van Popering, 2012; Varadarajan and Menon, 1988). Given such beneficial effects, marketing professionals are increasingly aiming to leverage companies' CM initiatives as communication tools in order to persuade consumers to buy products and services, and to create positive perceptions towards the company investing in CM (*e.g.*, Hesz and Neophytou, 2010; Hudson, 2013; Roberts, 2009). In CM advertisements, appeals to guilt emotion are often used. For example, in a recent fundraising campaign with Red Cross, Ikea created the replica of a war-damaged home in Syria in some of its stores. The replica highlighted the Syrian citizens' plight and implicitly appealed to consumers' guilt in order to encourage donations to Red Cross. For the same purpose, Unilever uses highly sympathetic language and real-life testimonies in their CM campaign (*e.g.*, #ShareAMeal Program) supporting *Feeding America* charity in fighting child hunger.

The popularity of guilt appeals in advertising is evidenced by scholarly research on the topic. Among other aspects, existing studies have examined the conceptualization and operationalization of guilt appeals in advertising (Bozinoff and Ghingold, 1983), the role of guilt appeals in crowdfunding campaigns (Chen, Thomas, and Kohli, 2016), and the impact of guilt appeals on consumers' attitudes towards commercial advertisements (Coulter and

Pinto, 1995; Cotte, Coulter, and Moore, 2005). Notwithstanding, knowledge on the effect of guilt appeals in CM advertising remains scarce, barring a few prior studies showing that CM efforts are more persuasive at soliciting charitable donations when guilt-arousing appeals are present, rather than absent (Basil, Ridgway, and Basil, 2006; Chang, 2011).

Issues regarding the effect of guilt appeals, however, go beyond the mere presence of appeals in advertisements. The degree of emotional appeal can, in fact, vary across brands and CM campaigns. Extant consumer research on emotions, grounded in Differential Emotions theory (Izard, 1977), suggests that consumer emotions vary in intensity; emotional appeals, such as guilt appeals, can similarly vary in intensity. Some initial evidence shows that high intensity appeals at times increase negative (rather than positive) responses from consumers (Coulter and Pinto, 1995; Pinto and Priest, 1991). Taking prior consumer research into account, we examine the relative efficacy of low (vs. high) intensity guilt appeals at enhancing profitable customer outcomes, namely corporate image and purchase intentions, in the hitherto overlooked context of CM advertising. In doing so, we address earlier calls for further research on the role of intensity in guilt-arousing appeals (*e.g.*, Antonetti and Baines, 2015; O'Keefe, 2000).

Crucially, we extend research on the psychological processes underlying consumer responses to low (vs. high) intensity guilt appeals in CM advertising. Corporate social initiatives and advertising communicate the company's values and identity (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). As beliefs about a company's identity become self-referential and self-defining, consumers identify themselves with the company in a process known as consumer-company identification, or C-CI (Pratt, 1998). Consumer identification occurs when corporate social initiatives convey values of the company, which are distinctive and relevant to consumers (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, and Gruen, 2005). For instance, when relevant, messages around the company's corporate social responsibility commitments are found to enhance identification

(Homburg, Stierl, and Bornemann, 2013; Lii and Lee, 2012). Drawing on Social Identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), we contend that, similar to CSR, guilt appeals in CM advertising function as stimuli fostering consumer identification with the company. With low intensity appeals making persuasion attempts acceptable (Coulter and Pinto, 1995), guilt appeals of varying intensity are likely to differentially influence C-CI.

In addition, corporate social initiatives and advertising can trigger attributional processes, such as attributions about the motives of the company (Ellen, Webb, and Mohr, 2006). Attributional thoughts can lead consumers to appreciate, or alternatively question the motives of the company, and thus represent critical intervening factors determining whether the intended effects of company's persuasion attempts are achieved (Kirmani and Zhu, 2007). Emotional appeals in advertising, more specifically, can suffer from allegations of deception (Cotte *et al.*, 2005) when perceived as persuasive and trying to force a response, resulting in negative attitudes toward the brand (Coulter and Pinto, 1995). Based on the tenets of Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958), we argue that attributional thoughts are important in explaining the efficacy of guilt appeals as persuasion attempts in CM advertising.

Our study offers novel theoretical contributions. We demonstrate that in CM advertising, low intensity guilt appeals consistently lead to comparatively more positive perceptions of corporate image than high intensity appeals. Consequently, we extend advertising research on the efficacy of low intensity guilt appeals in advertisements promoting CM initiatives. Crucially, our findings underscore the need for further advertising research to consider the intensity of emotional appeals explicitly. Further, we show that low intensity appeals encourage consumer identification with the company, whilst also lowering suspicion of negative motives of the company. By doing so, we advance knowledge on two psychological processes underlying consumer responses to guilt appeals in CM advertising, namely consumer-company identification and inferred motive. Finally, our study documents

the effect of guilt appeal intensity in CM advertising on profitable customer outcomes of corporate image and purchase intentions. Managerially, our findings inform decisions on the design of CM advertisements that can leverage on guilt appeals.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT**

### **Guilt Appeals in Advertising**

Guilt is a self-conscious emotion that involves remorse for one's thoughts, feelings and actions, or inactions (Izard, 1977). Guilt is often associated with feelings of being responsible for a wrongdoing and for immoral behavior (Kugler and Jones, 1992). O'Keefe (2000) suggests that '*a paradigmatic guilt-arousing circumstance is one in which a person has acted in some manner inconsistent with his or her own conception of proper conduct*' (p. 329). Guilt appeals, therefore, seek to arouse feelings of responsibility indicative of guilt. In persuasive advertising messages, guilt is typically aroused due to the receivers experiencing cognitive inconsistency, such as inconsistency between their actions and moral standards (Ghingold, 1981).

Extant research refers to three forms of guilt to which advertisements can appeal, namely anticipatory, reactive and existential guilt (Cotte *et al.*, 2005; Huhmann and Brotherton, 1997). The above authors suggest that anticipatory guilt appeals highlight potentially negative outcomes resulting from an individual's inaction. Reactive guilt appeals, on the other hand, depict the negative consequences of an individual's actions. Existential guilt appeals emphasize the social inequality between one's own condition and the condition of others.

Prior studies indicate that most charity and public service advertisements employ existential guilt appeals, for example, by showing images of people living in impoverished countries (Huhmann and Brotherton, 1997; Lwin and Phau, 2014). Similar advertisements

prompt viewers to compare their lives against the lives of less fortunate others. Given their prevalence in advertising practice, existential guilt appeals in CM advertisements are the focus of our study. We contend that guilt appeal *intensity*, as manifested with varying levels of emotion aroused by advertisements (Coulter and Pinto, 1995; Izard, 1977), influences consumer perceptions of corporate image, as discussed below.

### **Guilt Appeal Intensity and Corporate Image**

Extant evidence on the effectiveness of guilt appeals in advertisements is sparse, and shows inconsistent findings. A number of studies suggest that guilt appeals are effective in encouraging problem-focused coping especially when messages communicate gains associated with problem-solving behavior (*e.g.*, Agrawal and Duhachek, 2010; Duhachek, Agarwal, and Han, 2012). Feelings of guilt triggered by the appeal have been shown to activate a sense of responsibility to act, which ultimately leads to pro-social behavior (Basil *et al.*, 2006), and general commitment to take action (Dahl, Honea, and Manchanda, 2003). Another body of work, however, contends that guilt appeals are not always effective, but can cause annoyance and irritation (O’Keefe, 2000), and feelings of being manipulated (Hibbert, Smith, Davies, and Ireland, 2007), especially when made explicit to consumers. An explanation for the persuasion inefficacy of guilt appeals is the inability of consumers to resolve guilt-arousing problems (Antonetti and Baines, 2015). From a psychoanalytic perspective, individuals reject guilt-arousing messages that generate shame, as a mechanism of self-protection (Lewis, 1971).

Prior studies primarily examine the presence versus absence of guilt appeals in advertisements (Chang, 2011), or the extent to which guilt appeals are explicit or implicit (Peloza, White, and Shang, 2013). Further, the same studies consider consumer preferences (Peloza *et al.*, 2013), attitudes toward the featured company (Chang, 2011), and guilt-reparatory behavior (Duhachek *et al.*, 2012). There is, so far, limited understanding on the

role of guilt appeal *intensity*. Advancing knowledge in the domain, Coulter and Pinto (1995) link low intensity guilt appeals to positive consumer attitudes toward the brand and advertisements. In the context of CM advertising, corporate image is highly relevant, as it provides a conduit for companies to promote their responsible corporate initiatives. Extending the above body of knowledge and answering calls for research on emotional appeal intensity (*e.g.*, Antonetti and Baines, 2015; Coulter and Pinto, 1995), we investigate the effect of guilt appeal intensity in CM advertising on profitable outcomes such as corporate image and purchase intentions.

According to Differential Emotions theory (Izard, 1977), emotions vary in intensity. In a similar vein, appeals to emotions vary in intensity, and can have differential effects on consumers (Coulter and Pinto, 1995). Appeals in persuasive messages such as advertisements ideally enhance consumers' compliance with the message, and positive perceptions toward the featured brand. Persuasive messages restricting individual needs for freedom and autonomy might, however, lead consumers to cognitively reject the message (Brehm, 1966). As demonstrated by Pelozo *et al.* (2013), appeals perceived as overtly manipulative can give impetus to anger and non-compliant behavior.

Consistent with the above reasoning, we postulate that consumers perceive CM advertisements including high intensity guilt appeals as impinging upon their freedom of action and autonomy, and such effect is manifested with lowered corporate image perceptions. High intensity appeals could motivate consumers to act defensively, to distance themselves from the message, and to behave unfavorably towards the company (Brehm, 1966). By contrast, low intensity appeals could result in positive corporate image perceptions. Therefore:

*H1: Low intensity guilt appeals in CM advertising lead to greater positive Corporate Image (CI) perceptions than high intensity guilt appeals.*



## **The Mediating Effect of Consumer-Company Identification**

Prior research suggests that needs for self-congruity, self-distinctiveness, and self-enhancement, encourage consumers to identify themselves with the brand, in such a way that consequent evaluations of the brand are also influenced (Ahearne *et al.*, 2005; Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen, 2007; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). Seeking to extend knowledge on the effects of CM advertisements on consumers, we put forward the view that through guilt appeals, CM advertising communicates the company's values. In an effort to address self-enhancement needs, consumers who identify with the values of the advertised brands report consumer-company identification. Consumer-company identification, in turn, explains perceptions of corporate image (CI).

The concept of consumer-company identification (hereafter C-CI) is grounded in the Social Identity theory, which postulates that affiliation to a group influences the attitudes and behavior of the members belonging to the group (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). A fundamental assumption of the theory is that social categorization is a natural cognitive process, whereby people assign others to social categories in an effort to make sense of reality and to define their self-concept. Social categorization helps people to *identify* themselves with members of the same social category (i.e. in-group), and to *differentiate* themselves from non-members (i.e. out-group) (*e.g.*, Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail, 1994). Social categorization and identification are, therefore, intrinsically linked (Ashforth and Mael, 1989).

Consistent with Social Identity theory, CM advertisements can function as stimuli portraying the company's identity, and consequently, as drivers of consumer identification with the company. When the company's socially-oriented messages communicated in CM advertising are perceived as congruent to customers' own values, identification with the

company occurs (Homburg *et al.*, 2013; Lii and Lee, 2012). Consumers' identification with the company, in turn, explains their corporate image perceptions (Vanhamme *et al.*, 2012).

We contend that consumers identify with the company and the values portrayed in CM advertising when low intensity guilt appeals are employed (Cornwell and Coote, 2005; Lichtenstein, Drumwright, and Braig, 2004). High intensity appeals overtly portraying the company's persuasive efforts, on the contrary, can foster resistance to the message and lead to diminished consumer-company identification. It is, therefore, through the effect of C-CI that low intensity guilt appeals promote positive perceptions of corporate image. Hence:

*H1a: The effect of guilt appeal intensity in CM advertising on CI is mediated by consumer-company identification, with CI being less favorable as appeal intensity increases.*

### **The Mediating Effect of Inferred Motive**

The concept of inferred motive (hereafter IM) draws upon Attribution theory (Heider, 1958) postulating that individuals have a natural tendency to act as naïve researchers constantly striving to understand reality and the causes underlying human behavior. This pursuit is a persistent psychological process known as 'causal attribution' (Folkes, 1984). Given that causes are often unobservable, causality is an ascription imposed by the individual, thus inferred or speculated (Weiner, 1986). IM is a form of causal attribution by which individuals establish the goals and/or motivations underlying one's actions. Motives can be either positive or negative, depending on whether an individual's actions are perceived as genuine or manipulative (Campbell, 1999; Joireman, Grégoire, Devezer, and Tripp, 2013). Social psychology research shows that attributions of motive influence the decision to forgive a transgressor (Reeder, Kumar, Hesson-McInnis, and Trafimow, 2002), with forgiveness being typically associated with attributions of positive motives (Struthers, Eaton, Santelli, Uchiyama, and Shirvani, 2008).

The extent to which individuals accept (or resist) persuasion attempts emanated by advertisements often depends on inferences about the motives of the source of the advert, such as the corporate brand (*e.g.*, Ahluwalia and Burnkant, 2004; Isaac and Grayson, 2017; Kirmani and Zhu, 2007). Crucially, inferences of motives are important when guilt is aroused. Guilt is a negative emotion that creates cognitive inconsistencies (Ghingold, 1981). In an effort to protect the self and reduce cognitive inconsistencies, consumers infer the motives underlying the company's decision to arouse negative emotions (Wheatley and Oshikawa, 1970). Inferences of negative motive in relation to perceived credibility of social marketing advertising appealing to guilt have shown to enhance consumers' negative attitudes towards the company (Cotte *et al.*, 2005).

Extending prior research, we examine inferences of motive in relation to CM advertisements that include guilt appeals of varying intensity. We contend that consistent with Attribution theory (Weiner, 1986; 2000), consumers are rational thinkers and active interpreters of persuasive messages, hence they strive to understand the company's motives for arousing guilt. Specifically, the intensity of guilt appeals in CM advertising is expected to dictate consumer inferences about the motives of the company, and consequently CI perceptions. As the intensity of the appeal lowers, consumers' perceptions that the company is ill-intentioned in its persuasion attempt (*i.e.* advertisement) are likely to diminish, whilst favorable CI perceptions increase. Thus, low intensity guilt appeals promote positive perceptions of CI through the effect of inferred motive. Accordingly:

*H1b: The effect of guilt appeal intensity in CM advertising on CI is mediated by inferred motive, with CI being less favorable as appeal intensity increases.*

### **Corporate Image and Purchase Intentions**

Guilt appeals can influence perceptions as well as behavior. Research on health consumption, for instance, shows that feelings of guilt motivate reparative actions such as

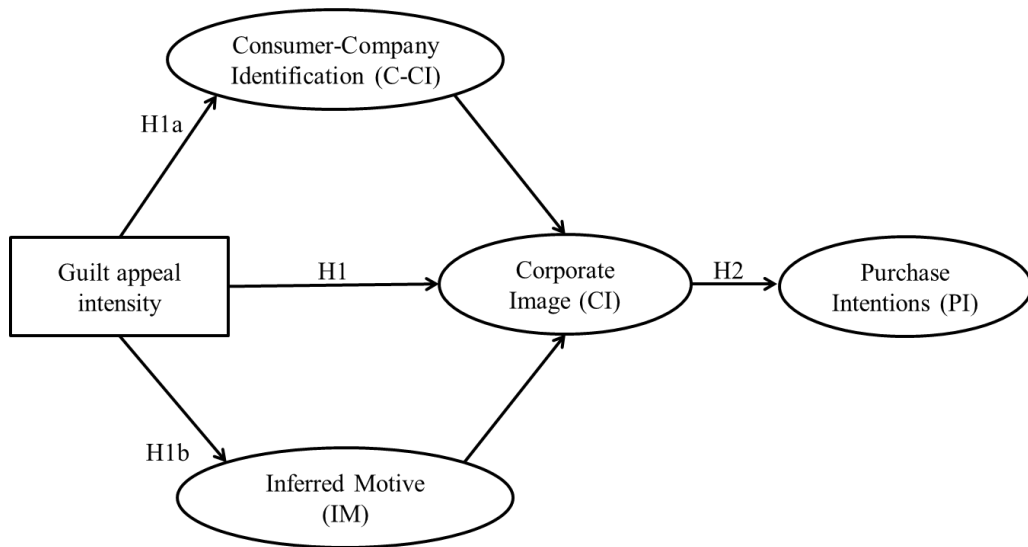
switching to healthy food alternatives (Cornish, 2012). Similarly, sustainability research demonstrates that individuals anticipating guilt from inactions are inclined to support pro-environmental behavior (Muralidharan and Sheehan, 2017). Consumers engage in behavior that reinforces their perceptions, and that minimizes cognitive inconsistencies typically aroused by guilt appeals.

Consistent with the above evidence, we posit that guilt appeals in CM advertisements influence consumer perceptions of CI, and consequently, purchase intentions. A number of studies examine the link between CI and purchase intentions in the contexts of environmental marketing (Ko, Hwang, and Kim, 2013; Miles and Covin, 2000), cross-country branding (Hsieh, Pan, and Setiono, 2004), and new product evaluations (Gürhan-Canli and Batra, 2004). There is, however, little research addressing the CI – purchase intentions relationship in the context of CM advertising employing negative emotional appeals. We contend that following the exposure to guilt-arousing CM advertisements, positive CI perceptions will result in consumer behavioral responses which are beneficial to the company. Consumers are likely to behave in a way that reinforces existing perceptions of the corporate brand, and circumvents cognitive inconsistencies associated with guilt emotion. Our hypothesized effect stems from prior research suggesting a positive link between CM, brand attitude and purchase intentions (*e.g.*, Hajjat, 2003), and between CSR and consumer purchase intentions (*e.g.*, Groza, Pronschinske, and Walker, 2011; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). Thus:

*H2: Corporate image perceptions resulting from the exposure to guilt appeals in CM advertising positively influence purchase intentions.*

The research hypotheses are summarized in the conceptual model in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Conceptual model



## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design and Sample

We employed a between-subjects experimental design, consistent with prior research on guilt (*e.g.*, Block, 2005; Muralidharan and Sheehan, 2017). The sample consisted of UK consumers mainly in younger age groups, given their high levels of familiarity with the brands selected for the study. Out of the 270 UK consumers who participated in the survey, the final usable sample was 181 across three sectors (n=60, clothing; n=60, technology; n=61, food). The sample split was even across experimental groups. For clothing, the sample included 55 per cent females, out of which 58 per cent belonged to the 18-24 age group, and 42 per cent belonged to the 25-34 age group. For technology, the sample included 53 per cent females, with 60 per cent in the 18-24 age group, 38 per cent in the 25-34 age group and 2 per cent over 35 years of age. For food, the sample included 47 per cent females, with 63 per cent in the 18-24 age group, and 31 per cent in the 25-34 age group.

### Stimuli

Experimental stimuli were developed based on two pre-tests. Pre-test one (n=40) identified the brands and social causes to be included in the stimuli. Consistent with Roehm and Tybout (2006), we selected market-leading brands in the three sectors examined, namely clothing, technology, and food. As market leaders, these brands enjoy high market shares in the respective sectors. Participants were shown ten market-leading brands, along with a list of social causes, and were asked to rate familiarity with the brands and the importance of social causes. Finally, three brands rated as the most familiar (H & M, Samsung, Subway), and two social causes rated as the most important (child hunger relief and child cancer awareness), were selected. The use of real brands ensured that respondents could relate to the newly-created advertisements (*e.g.*, Alcaniz, Cáceres, and Perez, 2010; Singh, 2016), and enhanced the realism of the experiment (Morales, Amir, and Lee, 2017). Further, the selection of brands with high familiarity and market shares (and therefore high penetration/popularity) enhanced the likelihood of respondents being users of the brand, appropriate for the study given that brand users (past and present) are known to respond to advertising awareness differentially to non-users (*e.g.*, Bird and Ehrenberg, 1990; Vaughan, Beal, and Romaniuk, 2016).

We created one minute long ad clips as experimental stimuli. Guilt appeal intensity was manipulated at high and low levels, following the approach by Pelozo et al. (2013). In the high condition, we manipulated perceptual prominence of the message through the use of vivid imagery, such as images of severely malnourished children, strong language and melancholic music. In the low condition, we used less vivid imagery, such as images depicting brighter days for children fighting cancer, less melancholic music and language. The images employed in our ad clips were selected through pre-test with the respondents, consistent with Coulter and Pinto (1995). For generalizability purposes, we replicated the experiment across the three sectors. Pre-test two (n=40) confirmed that the experimental

manipulations functioned as desired (detailed results are discussed in the Analysis and Results section).

### Data Collection and Measures

Data were collected through a self-completion questionnaire created in Qualtrics and administered electronically via handheld tablet devices. Participants were approached through street intercepts in popular shopping areas in the south east region of England, and randomly allocated to one experimental condition, consistent with a between-subjects design (Kamins and Assael, 1987). Questions were randomized in order to partially offset bias associated with the order of presentation of questions (*e.g.*, Bradburn and Mason, 1964; DeMoranville and Bienstock, 2003). Established scales were used and contextualized for the study, as presented in Table 1. Correlations between the constructs are reported in Appendix A.

**Table 1: Measures**

<b>Constructs</b>	<b>Measurement items</b>	<b>Sources</b>
Inferred motive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thinking of the message in the video, do you think [company name]               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Has bad intentions – has good intentions</li> <li>○ Wants to take advantage of customers – does not want to take advantage of customers</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Joireman et al. (2013)
Customer-company identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am interested in what others think of [company name]</li> <li>• When someone praises [company name], it feels like a personal compliment</li> <li>• When someone criticizes [company name], it feels like a personal insult</li> </ul>	Lii and Lee (2012)
Corporate image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thinking of the video you just watched, please indicate whether you think that [company name] is:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ good – bad</li> <li>○ useful – useless</li> <li>○ positive – negative</li> <li>○ necessary to society – unnecessary to society</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Vanhamme et al. (2012)
Purchase intentions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I would consider purchasing from [company name] in the near future</li> <li>• I would try products from [company name]</li> <li>• The probability of purchasing from [company name] is high</li> </ul>	Lii and Lee (2012), Spears and Singh (2004)

**Note:** Items for customer-company identification and purchase intentions were on a 7-point Likert-type scale,

anchored at 1='strongly disagree' and 7='strongly agree'. All other items were on a 7-point, bipolar scale.

## **ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

The data were analyzed in three stages. Following manipulation and realism checks, we assessed the measurement model using Partial Least Squares approach to Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 3.0 software (Ringle, Wende, and Becker, 2015). Second, we assessed the mean differences for our conceptual variables across high vs. low intensity appeal conditions using MANOVA, and estimated the impact of CI on purchase intentions using regression analysis. Third, we assessed the mediating effects of C-CI and IM employing the mediation analysis approach by Preacher and Hayes (2008).

### **Realism and Manipulation Checks**

Results from realism checks confirmed that participants perceived the advertisements as realistic (mean realism ratings significantly greater than the scale mid-point of 4). For the manipulation checks, participants indicated feelings of guilt. Results from univariate ANOVAs confirmed that participants' feelings of guilt are significantly different across high and low guilt intensity conditions, in all three sectors (clothing:  $t(58)=9.91, p<.01$ ; technology:  $t(58)=8.03, p<.01$ ; food:  $t(59)=16.01, p<.01$ ). Guilt ratings were significantly higher in the high guilt appeal intensity group (clothing:  $M=3.99, SD=.94$ ; technology:  $M=3.74, SD=.88$ ; food:  $M=5.20, SD=.81$ ), when compared with the low guilt appeal intensity group (clothing:  $M=2.04, SD=.52$ ; technology:  $M=2.19, SD=.58$ ; food:  $M=2.26, SD=.62$ ). Informal qualitative feedback from participants also established that the experimental manipulations function as desired.

### **Measurement Model Assessment**

For the measurement model assessment, Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) and composite reliability ( $P_c$ ) estimates for all constructs are above the recommended thresholds of 0.7 ( $\alpha$ : between .73 and .97,  $P_c$ : between .85 and .97). Hence, the internal consistency reliability of



the scales is confirmed (Henseler, Ringle, and Sinkovics, 2009). The loadings of the single items on the corresponding construct are above the acceptable cut-off point of 0.7, thus confirming item reliability. All constructs show Average Variance Extracted (AVE) estimates exceeding the threshold of 0.5, thus confirming convergent validity (Chin, 1998). Further, the squared correlations of a construct's AVE are greater than their bivariate correlations with other constructs, thus confirming discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Results from discriminant validity checks are presented in Appendix B. All constructs achieved adequate reliability and validity; thus the data were deemed amenable to further analysis.

### **Main Effects and Mediation Analyses Results**

Consistent with our expectations, we found multivariate effect of guilt appeal intensity on all outcome variables, with low intensity appeals increasing CI perceptions (Wilks  $\Lambda = .000$ ). The use of low guilt appeals in CM advertisements generally increases C-CI and inferences about positive motives of the company, with a few sector-specific differences as discussed below. Descriptive statistics across all three sectors are summarized in Table 2. The effect of low intensity guilt appeals at enhancing positive inferences about the motives of the company featured in CM advertisements is consistent across all three sectors (clothing,  $F(1, 55) = 6.56, p < .05$ ; technology,  $F(1, 55) = 19.45, p < .01$ ; food,  $F(1, 56) = 130.34, p < .001$ ). By contrast, when considering C-CI, low intensity guilt appeals enhance C-CI in the food sector ( $F(1, 56) = 10.99, p < .05$ ), marginally in the technology sector ( $F(1, 55) = 2.77, p = .10$ ), but show no C-CI increment in the clothing sector ( $F(1, 55) = .006, p > .05$ ). Overall, consistent with our theorizing, both C-CI and IM are significantly above the scale mid-point in the low intensity appeal condition, and significantly below the mid-point in the high intensity appeal condition. The above finding indicates that guilt appeals in CM advertisements are beneficial when low in intensity. Hence, H1 is supported.

We conducted the analyses again considering brand attitude, age, and gender as controls, and did not find any evidence that the variables affect the results.

**Table 2:** Descriptive statistics

Appeal intensity		H&M		Samsung		Subway	
		High	Low	High	Low	High	Low
<b>Corporate Image</b>	Mean	2.05	5.73	2.93	5.17	2.78	5.72
	<i>SD</i>	.54	.62	.81	.91	1.53	.51
<b>C-CI</b>	Mean	3.60	5.01	3.19	4.51	4.50	5.17
	<i>SD</i>	.69	.73	1.06	.83	.59	.68
<b>Inferred motive</b>	Mean	2.52	5.25	3.50	5.00	2.40	5.92
	<i>SD</i>	.91	.99	.75	.84	.38	.86
<b>Purchase Intentions</b>	Mean	2.37	5.22	2.63	5.58	2.91	5.88
	<i>SD</i>	.85	.49	.65	.66	1.39	.65

Results from regression analysis confirmed that CI perceptions resulting from the exposure to guilt appeals in CM advertisements positively influence purchase intentions. The finding holds across all three sectors (clothing:  $\beta=.91, p=.000$ ; technology:  $\beta=.83, p=.000$ ; food:  $\beta=.97, p=.000$ ). Hence, H2 is also supported.

Finally, we examined the mediating effect of C-CI and IM using the approach by Preacher and Hayes (2008, Model 4). We present results of the mediation effects across the three sectors in Table 3 (the mediation model results are graphically provided in Appendix C). The indirect effect of guilt appeal intensity through IM significantly influences CI perceptions, in clothing (.43, CI: .21 to .59) and technology sectors (.24, CI: .04 to .42), however, not in the food sector (.09, CI: .002 to .31). The indirect effect through C-CI is found in the technology sector only (.35, CI: .20 to .49). Hence, H1a and H1b are partially supported.

**Table 3: Mediation analysis**

	Path A (X → Y)	Path B (X → M)	Path C (M → Y)	Confidence Intervals
<b>Clothing</b>				
Guilt → C-CI → CI	-.3.68**	-1.41**	.16 <sup>ns</sup>	.007 to .38
Guilt → IM → CI	-.3.68**	-2.73**	.31**	.21 to .59
CI → PI	.91**			
<b>Technology</b>				
Guilt → C-CI → CI	-1.12**	-.66**	.54**	.20 to .49
Guilt → IM → CI	-1.12**	-.75**	.38**	.04 to .42
CI → PI	.83**			
<b>Food</b>				
Guilt → C-CI → CI	-1.47**	-.34**	-1.75 <sup>ns</sup>	.008 to .36
Guilt → IM → CI	-1.47**	-.75**	.38**	.002 to .31
CI → PI	.97**			

**Note:** CI=Corporate Identity; C-CI=Consumer-Company Identification; PI=purchase Intentions; IM=Inferred Motive

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Results from our study show that guilt appeal intensity in CM advertising matters. As compared to high intensity guilt appeals, low intensity appeals are more effective at positively influencing consumer perceptions of CI, as well as purchase intentions. The finding indicates that guilt appeals in CM advertising play a pivotal role in shaping consumer perceptions of the corporate brand and purchase intentions, if set at low intensity. The above evidence adds to prior research in advertising suggesting that guilt appeals are most effective when less overt (*e.g.*, Coulter and Pinto, 1995; Lindsey, 2005; O’Keefe, 2000). Our findings provide novel insights by demonstrating the efficacy of low intensity guilt appeals in the context of CM advertising, across three sectors.

Further, our findings advance knowledge on the psychological processes underlying consumer responses to guilt-arousing CM advertisements. The first psychological process concerns causal attributions, specifically inferences of motive. CM advertisements including intense guilt appeals encourage attributions that the company is ill-intentioned, as manifested with lowered inferences of positive motives (that is, the company is genuine in its persuasion

attempt and truly willing to support the social cause). The above effect is evident in the technology and clothing sectors, however, not in the food sector. The absence of the mediating effect in the food sector emphasises the distinctiveness of the three brands employed in the study, and indicates consumers' ability to differentiate among these. Further, given that the selected social cause relates to child hunger, the food brand might have been perceived as highly compatible with the cause, and thus could have influenced consumer evaluations (Pracejus and Olsen, 2004; Rifon, Choi, Trimble, and Li, 2004; Samu and Wymer, 2009). In this context, perceived cause-brand compatibility is likely to have outweighed the effect of guilt appeal intensity.

The second and equally important psychological process relates to consumer-company identification (C-CI). Our study reveals that high intensity guilt appeals in CM advertising lower positive perceptions of CI by diminishing C-CI. When exposed to high intensity guilt appeals in CM advertising, consumers seem to be unwilling to identify with the company, and through such psychological process, perceptions of CI are formed. According to Social Identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), and prior research on C-CI (Homburg *et al.*, 2013; Lii and Lee, 2012), C-CI occurs when consumers perceive the company's identity to satisfy their needs for self-distinctiveness and self-enhancement. We show that high intensity guilt appeals in CM advertising do not satisfy consumers' self-definitional needs, thereby preventing consumer identification. In other words, high intensity guilt appeals fail to act as a stimulus to foster consumer identification. The finding specifically applies to the technology sector, where C-CI shows a mediating effect, not the clothing and food sectors. Given the relatively high level of consumer involvement for electronic products (Gu, Park, and Konana, 2012; Laurent and Kapferer, 1985), consumers are particularly prone to identifying themselves with technology brands – a plausible explanation for our finding.

## **THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

Our study makes notable contributions to the literature on advertising and CM. Evidence on the efficacy of guilt appeals in CM advertising, so far, overlooks accounts from Differential Emotions theory (Izard, 1977) which posits that emotions vary in intensity. Adopting the above view, our study is the first to investigate guilt appeal *intensity* in CM advertising, and its effects on CI and PI. Guilt appeals in CM advertising are, as evidenced by our study, not always efficacious. In fact, such appeals can even raise suspicion of negative motives of the company when high in intensity. The above finding is noteworthy and extends research portraying a largely positive picture of CM advertising as a persuasion attempt that positively impacts brand image, consumers' attitudes and behavior (*e.g.*, Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001; Vanhamme *et al.*, 2012; Varadarajan and Menon, 1988; Westberg and Pope, 2014). Our first contribution is, therefore, in shedding light on the potential risks associated with the use of high intensity guilt appeals in CM advertising.

The second contribution is in advancing persuasion literature. Our study extends knowledge on the effectiveness of emotional appeals as persuasion attempts (*e.g.*, Cotte *et al.*, 2005; Coulter and Pinto, 1995). While our findings apply to guilt appeals specifically, appeals to negative emotions, in general, could be inefficacious in creating desirable consumer responses if their intensity level is overlooked. Further, by documenting the effects of guilt appeal intensity on corporate image and consequent purchase intentions, our study establishes the link between guilt appeal intensity and profitable customer outcomes.

Our third contribution lies in advancing knowledge on the psychological processes underlying consumers' responses to CM advertising, specifically advertising employing guilt appeals. While the use of advertising promoting CM initiatives through guilt appeals is widespread, research addressing consumers' reactions to CM advertising remains underdeveloped. We establish the relevance of C-CI by showing that consumers reject

advertising messages embedding high intensity guilt appeals, and such messages fail to stimulate consumer identification with the company.

Another notable insight from our study concerning the psychological processes underlying consumer responses to guilt appeals in CM advertisements relates to causal attributions. Past research suggests that consumers often attempt to understand the causes of events, the motives, and intentions behind behavior (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1986). As discussed earlier, attributions help consumers to accept (or resist) persuasion attempts embedded in, for instance, advertising (Ahluwalia and Burnkant, 2004; Isaac and Grayson, 2017). We show that when exposed to CM advertisements, consumers actively try to interpret the motives behind the company's message, and consequently accept (or resist) the persuasion attempt. We demonstrate that high intensity appeals in CM advertisements create suspicion that the company may not be truly committed to the social cause. More broadly, our study puts forth social identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) and attribution theories (Heider, 1958) as relevant theoretical lenses for explaining how consumers respond to CM advertisements arousing guilt.

From a managerial perspective, our results demonstrate that guilt appeal intensity in CM advertising can produce variations in consumer perceptions and behavioral intentions, thus offering twofold recommendations for advertising agencies. First, practitioners should accord careful consideration to guilt appeal intensity when crafting CM advertisements. Specifically, high intensity guilt appeals in CM advertising should be avoided, since these lower positive CI perceptions, and in turn, purchase intentions. Second, advertisers are advised to extensively pre-test advertising copies paying particular attention towards the intensity of guilt appeals embedded within the advert. In the process of creating CM advertisements, low intensity guilt appeals can be leveraged in order to enhance consumer-company identification, and positive CI perceptions.

In addition, our study demonstrates that guilt appeals of high intensity activate inferences that the company is not genuine in its efforts to support the advertised social cause, rather it is driven by motivations to persuade consumers and increase profits. The above finding underscores the importance for marketing managers to be aware of the fact that consumers are naturally inclined to infer motives underlying the firm's support of a social cause. Such inferences can adversely influence CI perceptions and purchase intentions. It is, therefore, critical for firms to convey genuine motives for supporting a social cause. Creative agencies responsible for designing CM advertisements should carefully assess whether the brand's motives are implicitly, or explicitly, conveyed to consumers and whether such motives are seen as genuine. Brands should also exercise caution while courting controversial issues; a Pepsi ad campaign, for example, featuring the model Kendall Jenner (BBC News, 2017) backfired and the brand was accused of exploiting a social issue. Firms are recommended to be proactive at inoculating negative motives, for instance, through the use of apposite images, language, and music in the advertisements that lower guilt intensity.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

Our study has limitations which provide fruitful avenues for further research. We examined the mediating effects of customer-company identification and inferred motive. While the literature suggests that the above concepts are important and merit attention, other variables may impact how consumers evaluate guilt appeal intensity in CM advertising. For example, guilt is widely recognized as a self-regulatory emotion (Izard, 1977), and self-motives may play an important role in encouraging reparative actions that lower feelings of guilt. Moreover, self-motivation is shown to influence customer-company identification and ultimately behavior (*e.g.*, Wolter and Cronin, 2016). Future studies could advance research by examining the role of self-motives in explaining how consumers respond to guilt-arousing

CM advertising. Additionally, as Fombelle, Jarvis, Ward, and Ostrom (2012) note, individuals hold multiple and distinct personal and social identities. Future research could investigate how different types of guilt appeal in CM advertising prompt consumers to activate multiple identities.

A second limitation is that we considered appeals to existential guilt, given their relevance in CM marketing (Antonetti and Baines, 2015; Huhmann and Brotherton, 1997). Future research could investigate whether and how the intensity of appeals to other types of guilt – anticipatory or reactive – influences consumers’ perception of the corporate brand. Another area of future research could relate to how guilt appeals influence different parts of the brain, employing the fascinating advancements in neuroscience research. Further, we measured corporate image perceptions, given that CM advertising is initiated by the corporate brand. Future research could extend our findings by testing the relative impact of intense and less intense guilt appeals on consumer attitudes towards product brands, rather than the corporate brand. Understanding attitudes toward the CM advertisement campaign and message framing are other fruitful areas for advancing research.

In our study usage bias is addressed, to an extent, through pre-testing for brand familiarity and market shares, and the random allocation of participants to experimental conditions; nonetheless, future studies can accurately account for usage bias, which is an important consideration in sample selection in advertising-related studies. Prior studies, for example, show differential impact of users (past and present) and non-users on brand image (Romaniuk, Bogomolova, and Dall’Olmo Riley, 2012), as well as advertising awareness measures (Vaughan *et al.*, 2016). Further, recent consumer research distinguishes between degrees of brand usage, whether direct (*e.g.*, driving a Mercedes Benz car) or peripheral brand usage (*e.g.*, reading about Mercedes Benz car) (Park and John, 2018). Future research



could examine whether the effects of high and low intensity guilt appeals vary between brand users and non-users, as well as between well-known or lesser-known advertisements.

Another limitation of our study relates to the use of purchase *intentions*. Although intentions are widely used as a proxy for actual behavior, our findings are restricted to the identification of associations between guilt appeal intensity, consumer-company identification, and intentions, which might (or might not) eventually lead to actual behavior (brand purchase). A fruitful avenue for further research could be to explore the effect of guilt appeal intensity on actual purchase behavior. Finally, we examined guilt appeals in CM advertising across three sectors, namely food, technology, and clothing, using a largely younger age group sample. For generalizability purposes, future research could replicate the present study using different product categories, services, social causes, and brands with varying levels of familiarity, with participants across different age groups.

APPENDIX A - Construct correlations

<b>Clothing</b>	C-CI	IM	CI	PI
C-CI	1	.72**	.72**	.75**
IM	-	1	.87**	.87**
CI	-	-	1	.91**
PI	-	-	-	1
<b>Technology</b>	C-CI	IM	CI	PI
C-CI	1	.57**	.75**	.70**
IM	-	1	.70**	.78**
CI	-	-	1	.83**
PI	-	-	-	1
<b>Food</b>	C-CI	IM	CI	PI
C-CI	1	.48**	.26**	.27**
IM	-	1	.77**	.80**
CI	-	-	1	.97**
PI	-	-	-	1

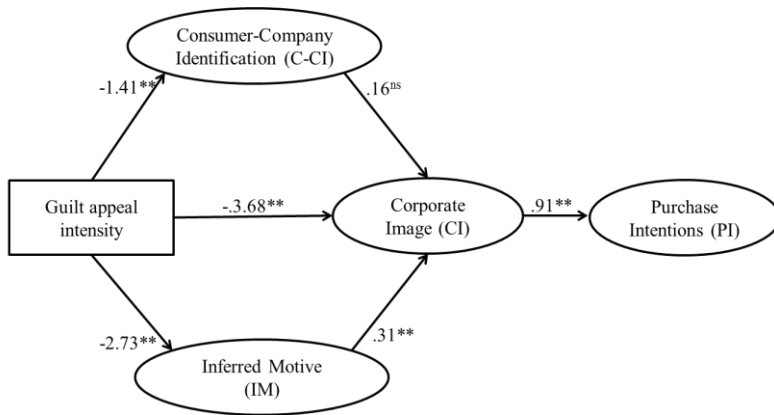
APPENDIX B – Discriminant validity

Clothing				
	<b>C-CI</b>	<b>CI</b>	<b>IM</b>	<b>PI</b>
<b>C-CI</b>	.814			
<b>CI</b>	.734	.943		
<b>IM</b>	.725	.873	.947	
<b>PI</b>	.748	.907	.867	.931
Technology				
	<b>C-CI</b>	<b>CI</b>	<b>IM</b>	<b>PI</b>
<b>C-CI</b>	.901			
<b>CI</b>	.759	.859		
<b>IM</b>	.569	.707	.874	
<b>PI</b>	.693	.830	.782	.917
Food				
	<b>C-CI</b>	<b>CI</b>	<b>IM</b>	<b>PI</b>
<b>C-CI</b>	1.000			
<b>CI</b>	.254	.965		
<b>IM</b>	.392	.769	.972	
<b>PI</b>	.221	.971	.797	.951

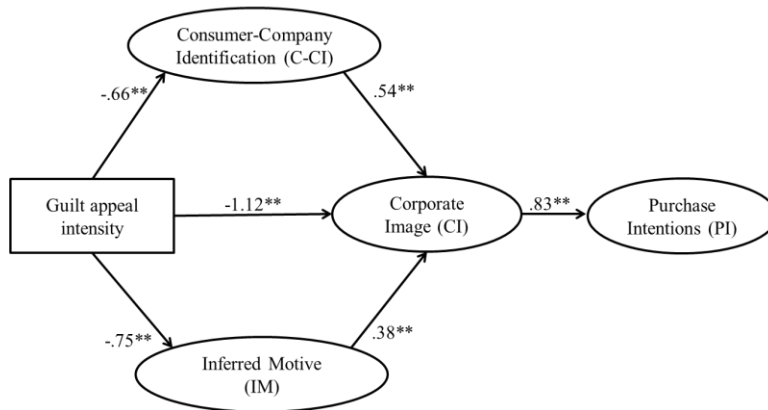
**Note:** *CI=Corporate Identity; C-CI=Consumer-Company identification; PI=purchase intentions; IM=Inferred Motive*

APPENDIX C - Mediation model (across three sectors)

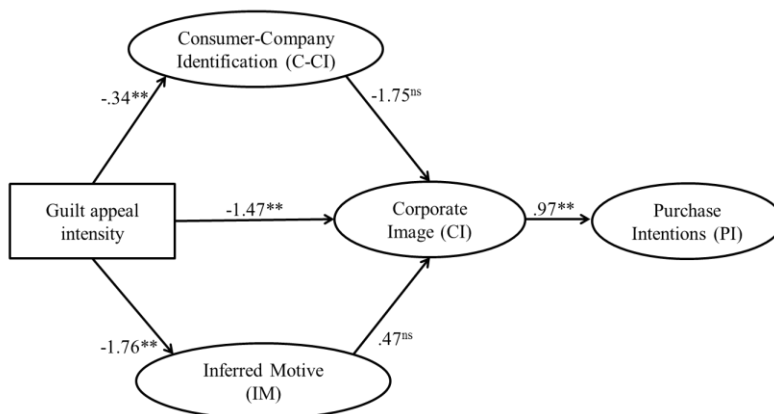
**Clothing**



**Technology**



**Food**



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