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GUILT, THE MOST INTRIGUING INGREDIENT:

How communicating guilt can affect taste-perception

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Abstract

The present research shows that communicating guilt through slogans can affect a person's taste perception of chocolate. Participants were divided in three different guilt communication conditions (control, implicit guilt and explicit guilt). Implicit guilt communication is a way of communicating guilt without using the word 'guilt'. The explicit way of communicating guilt, by actually using the word 'guilt' was also part of this research. The participants filled in questionnaires that were manipulated by the type of slogans the participants had to read, which differed per condition. Results showed that participants in the explicit guilt condition perceived the chocolate as tastier than the participants in the other conditions did. However, the implicit guilt condition did not significantly differ from the control condition in taste perceptions. Moreover the other aspects of taste perception (sweetness, richness and creaminess) were not significantly perceived differently in the different conditions.

Introduction

Marketers try to persuade consumers with temptation, but what often comes after someone gives in to temptation is a feeling of guilt (Hofmann, Kotabe & Luhmann, 2013). Guilt however, is a negative emotion and is not a feeling that people would want to have (Tangney, Stuewig, and Mashek 2009). So the question we wish to address is, is it really more effective to use temptation and in that way also guilt to advertise a hedonic good? When desire turns into temptation, it is because one tries to prevent giving in to the desire by using self-control (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996). If this self-control is not enough to contain oneself, the feeling of guilt might step in. Usually the feeling of guilt is not something someone desires, because it can ruin pleasure or any other positive experience (Giner Sorolla, 2001). Sometimes marketers use the feeling of guilt as something that is intuitively connected with pleasure (Raghunathan et al. 2006). Earlier research by Goldsmith et al. (2012) showed

that in some cases, inducing guilt by priming participants, can increase the pleasure they gain from consuming hedonic goods. This is an interesting finding because guilt is often associated with negative emotions (Giner Sorolla, 2001). However, other research finds that guilt will not induce a more pleasurable consumption afterwards but would even spoil the pleasure, because guilt is a negative emotion (Summerville, 2011). These results are very contradictory and this makes it hard to make a concluding statement. This means that it is still uncertain whether the feeling of guilt has a definitive positive or negative effect on a person's perception of a hedonic good.

Marketers are making use of the "unhealthy equals tasty intuition". This intuition that people have, makes them think that unhealthy food is tasty (Raghunathan, Naylor & Hoyer, 2006). That means that when people try to enjoy their hedonic and unhealthy food, this could bring about the feeling of guilt. So when marketers create a context that activates guilt, it could realize the expectation of pleasure (Goldsmith et al., 2012). Other research states that when people feel guilty after indulging in eating something that they shouldn't (for example because it is fattening), they will repair their mood instead of regaining self-control (Giner Sorolla, 2001). The fact that someone will repair their mood or repair a cognitive dissonance before they would try to regain self-control, shows that a good that induces guilt can still elicit a positive emotion. This could explain why certain guilt-eliciting goods can still be attractive.

Meanwhile studies show that the feeling of guilt will decrease the positive feelings when consuming a hedonic good (Winkielman & Berridge, 2004). This effect of guilt on positive feelings is possible when someone is actually being susceptible to guilt when eating a hedonic good. Gender might have an influence on this as well since females are more self reflective when it comes to their health and men seem to care more about how certain food tastes (Verbeke, 2005). On the one hand temptation is associated with guilty pleasures, a positive thing, but on the other hand it is associated with negative feelings of guilt when

someone yields to temptation. So the key question to derive from this paradox is whether there is a positive association with temptation and guilt or not. The answer to this question and the results of this research could have important implications in the advertising world.

Unhealthy equals tasty intuition

According to the article by Raghunathan et al. (2006) there are two factors that explain why people have an unhealthy equals tasty intuition. The internal source that forms such an intuition comes from personal experience and self-observation and the external source are the environmental cues that could create this vision. The principle of unhealthy equals tasty intuition states that internally people have this general idea about things that are good for you and that are healthy. These good and healthy things are not associated with fun but sometimes, bad or unhealthy goods are associated with excitement and fun, these two types of things seem mutually exclusive. This general principle was tested by Raghunathan and colleagues (2006) and they found that this also applies to cars. When a car seems more exciting, it also seems more dangerous and when a car looks dull people automatically assume the car is safer, even when this is not the case.

According to Raghunathan et al.(2006) this principle is rooted in religious messages, according to which a person is obliged to prioritize hard work and necessities over luxury and fun. This religious rooted intuition is speculated to be an internal factor that gives people this unhealthy equals tasty intuition. According to Raghunathan et al. (2006) the external factors that have determined this intuition are mainly because of mass media and personal communication, because a lot of magazines, movies, newspapers and other types of media tend to show that a lot of tasty food is unhealthy. So, together, internal and external factors feed the beliefs about the unhealthy equals tasty intuition. For example, also stated by Raghunathan et al. (2006), is that parents tend to demonize tasty foods (such as sweets)

because they are unhealthy. The same goes for the magazines and reports that show that a lot of tasty food is actually unhealthy. This trend probably also contributes to the unhealthy is tasty intuition that people have. So when someone wants to eat something that seems very tasty they assume that therefore it is probably also very unhealthy, and vice versa. So what we wanted to know was, is communicating that something is unhealthy also making people think that it is better or tastier? Will they desire the unhealthy good because it is tempting? Is the chance of feeling guilty after consuming a certain good making the good more tempting?

Desire and Temptation

Desire is defined as an affectively charged motivation towards something that is associated with pleasure or relief of displeasure (Kavanagh, Andrade, & May, 2005). Desire is wanting something or wanting to do something and thus motivates behavior (Hofmann & Van Dillen, 2012). A temptation is a desire that conflicts with one's values or goals (Hofmann, Baumeister, Förster, & Vohs, 2012). Not being allowed to do or to eat something that you desire can turn a desire into a temptation which brings us back to the "unhealthy equals tasty" intuition. When a person knows that certain hedonic food is bad for their health or diet and if they still desire the food, this becomes a temptation. This is in line with the unhealthy equals tasty intuition. Bushman (1998) also proposed that people will often make the assumption "anything I shouldn't have, is probably really fun to have". Because food that is bad or unhealthy for oneself, is often also restricted to consume, this could turn something unhealthy in to something tempting or desirable. Prior research has also shown that women who were shown pictures of chocolate have increased cravings and a feeling of guilt at the same time (Fletcher, Pine, Woodbridge & Nash, 2007). When people feel tempted they are willing to be a little dishonest and rationalize their honesty when they cheat on their goal (Ariely, 2008). The small things, like eating chocolate are easily rationalized and that is why people are easily enticed (Tang & Sutarso, 2013). However when people are not able to rationalize it that

easily, or still feel negative emotions after they have yielded into temptation, there is a big chance that they will feel guilty about their behavior. This could mean that a forecast of feeling guilty might make people feel more tempted towards a certain product, which in turn can make people enjoy hedonic food more according to the unhealthy equals tasty intuition.

Guilt (guilty pleasures)

As was stated earlier, normally guilt is associated with negative feelings. However there is also such a thing as guilty pleasures, which are guilt inducing activities or products that still elicit enjoyment (Goldsmith et al. 2012). This can be realized by personal experiences and personal contact that strengthen the associations between guilt and certain hedonic consumptions (Ramanathan & Williams, 2007). Previous research has shown that guilt is a negative self-conscious emotion that will inhibit undesirable behavior (Tangney, Stuewig, and Mashek 2009). By combining this feeling of guilt when consuming a hedonic good and the “unhealthy equals tasty” intuition I talked about earlier, I hypothesize that when a feeling of guilt is being elicited this might affect the evaluation of a hedonic good in a positive way because the association one can make between a feeling of guilt when consuming a hedonic food and the “unhealthy equals tasty” intuition. If this intuition is active, people might not only think the food is tastier, but they may also be willing to pay more for it (Goldstein, 2012). When talking about guilt there is a distinction to be made for this research, between communicating implicit guilt and explicit guilt. Implicit guilt communication means that participants can derive a feeling of guilt from the message without us using the word ‘guilt’. Explicit guilt communication means that participants can get a feeling of guilt from a message that does have the word ‘guilt’ in it. We make this distinction based on the assumption that people derive different feelings from implicitly communicating guilt by not directly using the word ‘guilt’ or by explicitly mentioning ‘guilt’ in the guilt communication. By communicating that chocolate is criminally tasty, which communicates guilt implicitly,

people might think that this is because it has some unhealthy but tempting aspects to it. However when guilt is communicated explicitly, by saying that eating chocolate will make you feel guilty, one might think that it is even healthier, because it leaves nothing to the imagination and blatantly tells you it is wrong to eat it. These different conditions of guilt and the unhealthy equals tasty intuition might make temptation of the food more salient and that is why I want to present the following hypotheses: *“Inducing or advertising a feeling of guilt (implicitly or explicitly communicated) will make people perceive a hedonic food as tastier than using a neutral way of advertising a hedonic food.”* And *“Inducing or advertising a feeling of guilt (implicitly or explicitly communicated) will make people willing to pay more for a hedonic food than when using a neutral way of advertising a hedonic food”*. As described before research has already shown that priming feelings of guilt has certain effects (positive and negative) when it comes to the emotions people experience during and after consuming a hedonic good (Tangney, Stuewig, and Mashek 2009; Goldsmith, 2012). However research has not yet showed if, an expectation of guilt via temptation, would benefit the cause of a marketer or not. Finding out if using guilt in advertising is beneficial, that was the goal of this research.

Method

Participants and design

At the Leiden University 145 participants were recruited (56 male and 89 female; mean age 21 years). The experimental design was a 3 (guilt communication: control, implicit guilt and explicit guilt) between subjects design. The recruited participants were randomly assigned to one of these conditions. The control condition had 49 (17 male, 32 female) participants, the implicit guilt condition had 50 (20 male, 30 female) participants and the explicit control condition had 46 (19 male, 27 female) participants. The main dependent

variables were the participants' perceptions of tastiness, creaminess, richness and sweetness. The participants were recruited in one week. If participants stated they had a food allergy, they were told they could not participate in the experiment. Participants were also asked if they speak English fluently, if this was not the case then they could not participate in the experiment.

Procedure

Students at the Leiden University were approached and asked if they wanted to participate in a chocolate taste study. Participants were recruited by asking them, face-to-face in the faculty, to participate. We told participants we had to do this research for our internship at a company called "Pure Pleasures", we used this cover story so that participants would be less suspicious of our intentions for the actual research. When the participants arrived at the experiment they were seated at a table and received an informed consent to sign and a questionnaire to fill in for the experiment. We also asked them if they had any dietary concerns we should know about. If the participants did not have any concerns about the chocolates they were allowed to continue the experiment, otherwise they were excluded from the experiment.

When the experiment started the participants were either shown the advertisements framed with explicit guilt, implicit guilt or the neutral control condition and asked to read them carefully. We varied guilt communication (control, implicit and explicit) in the way the slogans were presented by not using guilt inducing words to describe the chocolate (control condition), by using words that could hint that one would feel guilty after eating the chocolate (implicit guilt condition) and explicitly using the word guilt in the slogans (explicit guilt condition). We needed to find out if our slogans would elicit the right emotion, so we let participants rate slogans in a different questionnaire to find out whether the slogans from the

different conditions would actually elicit different amounts of guilt. These pilot ratings of the material ($N = 43$) on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) were tested with a paired samples t-test and showed that explicit ($M = 4,2$, $SD = 1,9$, $t = -7,1$, $p < .01$) and implicit guilt ($M = 3,3$, $SD = 1,5$, $t = -6,8$, $p < .01$) slogans induced more feelings of guilt than the slogans in the control condition ($M = 2,2$, $SD = 1,26$) would ($p < .05$). In the experiment the participants rated the slogans and then took a piece of chocolate that was presented on the table. Then they were asked how tasty, creamy, rich and sweet (DV 1,2,3,4) they perceived the chocolate on a seven point Likert-scale (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much) and were asked to take another piece.

Next, we asked them how much they were willing to pay (DV 5) for a chocolate bar of the chocolate they have just consumed. For purposes of illustration, a wrapped bar of chocolate was presented on the table so that the participants could see how big the chocolate bar was that they could buy. After the experiment the participants were asked if they had any idea what the experiment was about and were then debriefed. After the participants filled in the questionnaire, they were given the choice to take as many chocolates as they liked on their way out. This was framed as a “thank you” from the experimenters to the participants. In reality, this way the experimenters could unobtrusively report how much pieces of chocolate the participants took.

Materials

Demographics. The questionnaire consisted of social demographical questions (age, weight and height). The weight and height were used for the other student in this research and were not relevant for this hypothesis. We also asked the participants about their “attitude towards chocolate” and hungeriness but these measures were taken into the research of the other student. We asked subjects on a 7 point Likert scale if they felt hungry (1 = Not at all, 7

= Very much). Participants had to answer an open question about how many hours ago they have eaten the last. There were six dietary constraints related questions and they were also rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much). These measures were used for the by the other student as well so these will not be discussed in this paper.

Guilt. Participants were randomly assigned to the different guilt communication conditions with their matching slogans, these differed on the guilt that was communicated through the slogan (implicit guilt, explicit guilt and control condition). For example in the control condition, the participants had to read slogans like “real delight”, “A truly tasty experience” and “get the real sensation”. These slogans had in no way insinuations that people could derive a guilty feeling from consuming chocolate that was communicated in this way. In the implicit guilt condition, participants read slogans like “Devil’s delight”, “Get the evil sensation” and “Desire. What a tasty ingredient”. Here people could derive a feeling of guilt because the words that were placed in the slogan have a guilt eliciting connotation in them, with words as “Devil”, “Desire” and “Evil”. In the explicit guilt condition, participants found slogans like “Guilty delight”, “A truly guilty experience” and “Guilt. What a tasty ingredient.”. Participants in their respective condition were asked to read a slogan and are then provided with a box with pieces of chocolate. Every participant took chocolate from the same box, but the slogans differed per condition.

Taste-test. After the manipulation, participants were asked to try a piece of chocolate, which they could take from the box by themselves. Thereafter the participants were asked to fill in a short questionnaire to rate the taste perception of how creamy, rich, sweet and tasty the chocolate was on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). They also had to write down how much they were willing to pay for a bar of this chocolate, this was an open question.

After the experiment the participants were debriefed by telling them the real purpose of the study. Also the participants were asked not to tell the real purpose of the study to other students at the university. The participants were thanked for their participation.

Results

Taste evaluations

To test the hypothesis predicting that *“Inducing or advertising a feeling of guilt (implicit or explicit) will make people perceive a hedonic food as tastier than using a neutral way of advertising a hedonic food”*, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) has been performed on the perceptions of participants on the chocolate’s tastiness with the respective guilt categories (control, implicit guilt and explicit guilt) as the independent variable. As expected the ratings of the extent to which the participants found the chocolate tasty differed significantly between conditions, $F(2,144) = 3.98, p < .05$. Multiple comparisons indicate that, as hypothesized, the rating of tastiness of chocolate was significantly higher among the participants in the explicit guilt condition ($M = 5.57, SD = .83$) than in the control condition ($M = 5.04, SD = 1.19, p < .05$) and the implicit guilt condition ($M = 5.02, SD = 1.13, p < .05$). However contrary to the hypothesis stated earlier, the implicit guilt condition did not differ significantly from the control condition ($p = .923$). A multiple comparisons analysis showed that the perception of sweetness, richness and the creaminess on the chocolate by the participants was not significantly influenced by the explicit guilt condition nor the implicit guilt condition, so these will not be discussed further.

Willingness to pay

To test the hypothesis *“Inducing or advertising a feeling of guilt (implicit or explicit) will make people willing to pay more for a hedonic food than when using a neutral way of*

advertising a hedonic food” a one-way ANOVA was conducted. As hypothesized, the WTP (willingness to pay) and the guilt communication (control, implicit guilt and explicit guilt) as the independent variable showed a significant effect $F(2,144)$, $p < .005$. A post hoc analysis revealed that the WTP was significantly higher in the implicit guilt condition ($M = 1.66$, $SD = 0.77$) than in the control condition ($M = 1.25$, $SD = 0.43$, $p < .005$) and the explicit guilt condition ($M = 1.32$, $SD = 0.64$, $p < .05$). Though, contrary to the hypothesis stated earlier, the explicit guilt condition did not differ significantly from the control condition.

Discussion

In this study we investigated the role of the communication of guilt in taste perception and the role of communicating guilt on the willingness to pay, for chocolate. I hypothesized that communicating guilt would significantly influence taste perception, and I wanted to find out if there would be a difference in effect between implicitly communicating guilt and explicitly communicating guilt. In line with this idea the study showed that communicating guilt explicitly does influence taste perception. Participants in the explicit guilt condition reported that the chocolate was tastier than the participants that were assigned to either the implicit guilt condition or the control condition. Results also showed that the implicit guilt condition did not differ significantly from the control condition with respect to the taste perception. The study additionally showed that the other dependent variables of taste perception were not significantly influenced by the explicit guilt condition, or any other condition for that matter.

The willingness to pay for chocolate that was being communicated with slogans that either had an implicit guilt, explicit guilt or a neutral message, was also studied. I hypothesized that the WTP would pay for a hedonic good when it is advertised with a slogan that communicates guilt. The results were partly in line with the hypothesis, because the

implicit guilt condition showed significant effects, still the explicit guilt condition showed no significant difference with the control condition.

The present study shows that by communicating guilt explicitly through slogans, people can perceive a food as tastier than implicit guilt communication or neutral communication. This result is in line with previous research about the unhealthy is tasty intuition (Ragunathan, Naylor & Hoyer, 2006). This is because the guilt that is explicitly communicated can be linked with the perception that something is bad for you, say unhealthy, because consuming the food is communicated as a guilt inducing act. The fact that, this is communicated and participants in the explicit guilt communication condition thought the chocolate was tastier in this condition than the neutral and implicit guilt condition, reveals some similarities with the unhealthy equals tasty intuition. The outcome of this research is also in line with a similar earlier research, which showed that when a health message for certain food is subtle it is seen as tastier than when the message explicitly states that it is healthy (Wagner, Howland & Mann, 2015). This confirms that the unhealthy equals tasty intuition by Raghunathan et al. (2006) also works the other way around. This experiment fits right between these older experiments and therefore contributes to the knowledge about affecting taste perception with communication.

Secondly, the results of this study are also in line with earlier research by Goldstein (2012). This research showed that when participants were primed with a feeling of guilt, which was not related to the hedonic product, they were willing to pay more for the hedonic food product. This research strengthens that idea of Goldstein (2012) that a feeling of guilt is making people willing to pay more for a hedonic food, by showing that not only priming but also communicating the feeling of guilt through slogans can affect willingness to pay. This communication of guilt was linked to the food itself.

Lastly, the results of this study show that WTP is affected by the way guilt is used in communication towards consumers. When guilt was communicated explicitly, there was not a significant effect on WTP. However, when guilt was communicated implicitly it made the participants want to pay more for the chocolate. Practically, this research suggests that marketers can use implicit guilt communication to make consumers pay higher prices for hedonic goods. This research makes room for a new line of research because there is not much research about the way slogans are communicated towards consumers and how this affects their willingness to pay for (hedonic) goods.

Limitations and future perspectives

The present research demonstrates that communicating guilt through the use of slogans can make people perceive food as tastier than if it was neutrally communicated. However, this research does not cover a report of the feelings of the participants. This means that in the explicit guilt condition, participants do not necessarily experience guilt themselves. The participants only do a affective forecast. In the pilot study we found that participants reported that they would feel guilty if they were to eat the chocolates that were being communicated via guilt (implicit and explicit). However this is affective forecasting, which is often incorrect compared to the actual feeling in the situation that is forecasted (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003). This makes it hard to say that an actual feeling of guilt is involved when participants in the explicit guilt condition perceived the chocolate as tastier than the participants in the implicit guilt condition and the participants in the control condition. The results of this research identify for the most part with the unhealthy equals tasty intuition, proposed by Raghunathan et al. (2006).

For this experiment we used printed questionnaires for the participants to fill in. However we did not take into account that an order-effect bias could have played a role in the

effects of this experiment (Serenko & Bontas, 2013). The order of the questions in the questionnaires was the same for every participant, which gives the opportunity for order-effect bias to occur. The first aspect of the chocolate that the participants can give their opinion on is tastiness and tastiness is also the only component with a significant effect. Serenko and Bontas (2013) stated that the first journals in a list were rated higher than the other journals by survey respondents and they advised to make randomized lists to prevent this from happening. This means that because tastiness was first in all our lists of the chocolates components, our results might have been influenced by the order effect bias. This also means that if we would have randomized the order of the questionnaires for all the participants, we might have had a different result. For future research it is advised to make use of randomized lists in questionnaires to avoid having to question if there is an order effect bias in your research.

Future research is advised to get a deeper understanding of guilt communication toward consumers, to see if the effect that was found is limited to food only or if there is a more general effect. Raghunathan et al. (2006) already stated that the unhealthy equals tasty intuition is not limited to one type of hedonic food and the research of Bushman (1998) confirms this statement as well by using cream cheese for his experiments. Bushman (1998) shows by warning people about eating the fatty foods, they only desired to eat it more, even though the effects were not significant. He warned participants by using warning labels on the cream cheese, compared to information labels or no labels in the other conditions. Perhaps communicating guilt explicitly will affect perceptions of consumers when they buy services or other product types in the same way as it affects perception of hedonic foods. Raghunathan et al. (2006) already assumed that this is possible because of the deep rooted religious intuition that the more unwholesome is associated with more fun. However it is not sure if this

can be generalized. If this effect is also salient in more types of products or services, is food for thought for future research.

The results of both of the hypotheses are somewhat contradictory, one states that the best practice is to use explicit guilt communication when using slogans for a hedonic good, the other states that it is best to use implicit guilt communication for this purpose. However it really depends on what the goal is of the person that wants to make use of guilt communication in his advertising. When the goal of the advertiser is to make people perceive the advertised food as tastier these results suggest that it is better to use explicit guilt communication. However when the goal of the advertiser is to make people pay more for the food, it is better to use implicit guilt communication. Perhaps it is even possible to combine both types of guilt communication. Future research might be able to get a clearer view on the best practices when using this type of communication and if it is advisable to even combine both types of guilt communication.

Conclusion

This research was conducted to better understand why marketers use the feeling of guilt in communicating their product to the consumer, and we found that there is something to say for this tactic. This research helped understand a part of the underlying mechanisms that makes this type of communication towards consumers work in two ways. By explicitly communicating a feeling of guilt to the participants, we affected their perception of taste in a positive way. However the implicit guilt communication made participants willing to pay more for the chocolate they tasted. Even though this experiment strongly confirms and broadens knowledge on the subject of guilt and taste perception, still much more research needs to be done to fully grasp the impact of this type of communication on the consumers mind and how to make good use of it.

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