How do Guilt and Shame Help You Participate in Physical Activity? The Role of Message Framing

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People frequently feel guilt and shame if they fail to perform desirable and healthy behavior such as physical activity. Guilt and shame are universally, evolutionarily, and sociologically based motivator for doing right and avoiding wrong doing (Kroll & Egan, 2004). In the context of ad message, these fundamental emotions play role as well. Guilt is associated with approach motivation by focusing on positive end state, while shame is associated with avoidance motivation by highlighting on negative end states (Elliot, 2008; Schmader & Lickel, 2006). But less attention has been paid to the impacts of guilt and shame on message framing persuasion for promoting participation in physical activity. Therefore, this study investigates how guilt and shame influence responses to ad messages. In addition, we examine the endowment effects on message perception and moderating role of self-control. Accordingly, we posit the following hypotheses:

H1: A gain-framed message will elicit greater intention to participate in physical activity than a loss-framed message for guilt-primed participants.

H2: A loss-framed message will elicit greater intention to participate in physical activity than a gain-framed message for shame-primed participants.

H3: Self-control will have moderating impact on the relationship between message frame and emotion valence, and intention to participate in physical activity.

For a 2 (negative emotion: guilt vs. shame) × 2 (ad message framing: gain vs. loss) × 2 (self-control: high vs. low), the total data (n = 264) was collected. After watching the ads based on a random assignment, the participants reported their current intention to participate in physical activity. Furthermore, after measuring participants’ self-control, the groups were divided based on the median.

As a result of ANOVAs, two-way interaction of negative emotion × message framing was significant on intention to participate in physical activity (F = 37.45). Participants primed with guilt express higher intention after they view a gain-framed ad (F = 20.52). Participants primed with shame express higher intention after they view a loss-framed ad (F = 17.01). And three-way interaction of negative emotion × message framing × self-control was significant on intention to participate in physical activity (F = 49.32). Within the low self-control condition, we obtain a significant two-way interaction between negative emotion and message framing (F = 35.27). Within the high self-control condition, although two-way interaction was significant (F = 6.93), simple effect analysis results showed guilt-primed participants do not have significant interaction with message framing (F= 2.47. p > .05).

The finding overall provides converging evidence for the interplay between negative emotions, message framing, and self-control. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed for developing advertising message strategies for promoting participation in physical activity.