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## Examining the impact of differing guilt advertising appeals on charitable giving among the Generation Z cohort

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# Examining the impact of differing guilt advertising appeals on charitable giving among the Generation Z cohort

## Abstract

Generation Z (Gen Z), consisting of individuals born between 1995-2010, is an important target for nonprofits due to the cohort's high degree of social consciousness. However, Gen Z consumers are challenging to impact via advertising appeals due to their short attention spans. Our research investigates the relative impact of advertising appeals based on reactive guilt, anticipatory guilt, and existential guilt on Gen Z students at a West Coast private university. The study fills a research gap by comparing all three types of guilt in one study and examining their effect on Gen Z vs. non-Gen Z individuals. Student groups at a private university in the U.S. are tested using a within-subjects experimental design. Findings indicate that advertising appeals eliciting existential guilt most motivate advertisement engagement and likelihood to donate among Gen Z individuals. In addition, the effect of existential guilt is stronger in the Gen Z cohort than non-Gen Z ones, and particularly high among women vs. men. Results are valuable to nonprofits seeking to make inroads on charitable giving with Gen Z.

**Keywords** Generation Z, Charitable giving, Advertising, Guilt

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## 1 Introduction

Generation Z (Gen Z), comprising individuals born between 1995-2010, is a particularly important group for nonprofits. The cohort is the one immediately after millennials, born in 1977-1994. An estimated 44% of Gen Z individuals give to an average of 4.6 charities each, and are skilled at influencing others to donate through digital technologies (Blackbaud Institute for Philanthropic Impact 2018). In addition, Gen Z donation activity is receptive to marketing communications, as 59% are motivated to give to charity by a message/image they view on social media (Giving Report 2017).

Despite its importance to nonprofits, the Gen Z cohort poses challenges for these organizations. Gen Z consumers show an average attention span of 8 seconds, compared to 12 seconds for millennials (MediaKix 2017). Also, the percentage of consumers who are more negative than positive to mobile digital display ads is greater for Gen Z, at 13%, than Millennials, at 3%, and Gen X, at 9% (Southgate 2017). For mobile video ads, the same measure is 19% for Gen Z, 8% for Millennials, and 14% for Gen X (Southgate 2017). This relative unreceptivity to mobile ads occurs even though Gen Z consumers are on their smartphones over 3.5 hours a day (Young 2017).

An additional reason for studying Gen Z is that benevolent habits early in life have lasting effects. Studies have established that charitable behavior when young translates into increased giving in adulthood (Freeland et al. 2015; Hart et al. 2007; Metz et al. 2003). Therefore, capturing the attention and donor dollars of Gen Z now will likely be beneficial into the future.

The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen 1991) helps explain the cohort's focus on social responsibility due to the mechanism of moral norms (Knowles et al. 2012). The theory states that people's behavior is shaped by their intentions, with these intentions influenced by three constructs: attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Attitudes are defined as positive or negative assessments of engaging in a behavior, subjective norms as social expectations of performing in a certain manner, and perceived behavioral control as the expected ease or difficulty of behaving in a particular way. Knowles et al. (2012) expand the theory to include moral norms and apply it to charitable giving. These norms are defined as internalized moral rules which emphasize feelings of social responsibility (Parker et al. 1995). While the original factors of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control significantly forecast donations to nonprofits (Smith and McSweeney 2007), Knowles et al. (2012) show that moral norms are an additional influence on charitable giving.

Given the relevance and challenges in Gen Z for nonprofits, a key issue is how the organizations can best craft advertising appeals towards them. A recent meta-review (Poels and Dewitte 2019) summarizes research showing that emotion plays a key role in advertising. The article mentions that an array of specific emotions has been investigated in the advertising literature but that more work needs to be done on their effect on advertising-related behaviors. Erlandsson et al. (2018) also compare advertising appeals based on negative vs. positive emotions, and find that negative appeals are better at eliciting charitable giving. A series of four studies finds that while positive appeals are more effective in causing favorable attitudes toward the ad and organization, negative appeals are more or at least equally effective in securing actual donations. The effect of negative ad appeals on charitable giving can be explained by the

negative state relief model (Baumann et al 1981), which holds that people have a deep motivation to decrease negative emotional experiences.

As a specific type of negative appeal, guilt has been widely investigated for its impact on charitable giving (Hibbert et al. 2007; Huhmann and Brotherton 1997; Lwin and Phau 2014; Urbonavicius et al. 2019). The theory of objective self-awareness (Duval and Wicklund 1972; Silvia and Duval 2001) helps explain the importance of guilt in negative advertising appeals. This theory posits that people alter parts of themselves according to their own conception of moral correctness. Our research fills a research gap by comparing the impact of three types of guilt – reactive, anticipatory and existential -- on charitable giving. The study also fills a gap by being the first one which does so among the Gen Z population. We test the effect of the three kinds of guilt appeals on Gen Z vs. non-Gen Z in a within-subjects design. The research thus provides insight into how to encourage donations in a cohort with great opportunity for nonprofits (Blackbaud Institute for Philanthropic Impact 2018).

## **2 Guilt appeals and charitable giving**

Researchers have shown that a variety of negative emotions may impact charitable giving. Guilt, defined as “a negative emotional state experienced by an individual remembering or imagining privately that he or she is associated with an outcome deemed socially or personally negative and threatening to his or her self-identity goals” (Antonetti and Baines 2014), has been shown to influence donations (Hibbert et al. 2007; Huhmann and Brotherton 1997; Lwin and Phau 2014; Urbonavicius et al. 2019). Sympathy, defined as “emotional concern for the welfare of another individual” (Small and Verocchi 2009), has been demonstrated to affect prosocial behavior and charitable giving (Bagozzi and Moore 1994; Cao and Jia 2017; Pham and Septianto 2020; Small and Verocchi 2009; Sudhir et al. 2016). Fear, defined as “an expectation of an external punishment or threat” (Ghingold 1981), has also been identified to promote desired outcomes in research on public service announcements (Dickinson and Holmes 2008; Jäger and Eisend 2013; Manyiwa and Brennan 2012; Yang 2018).

The effect of negative ad appeals on charitable giving can be explained by the negative state relief model (Baumann et al 1981). This theory posits that individuals have an innate motivation to decrease negative emotional experiences. When undergoing these experiences, people are driven to engage in behaviors which reduce their negative feelings. After being exposed to a negative ad appeal, the aroused negative feelings stimulate a desire to donate because doing so reduces the source of the negative emotions. Research has supported this theory by showing that altruistic activity cancels the enhanced tendency for self-gratification to a greater extent among subjects in a negative mood than among subjects in a mood which is neutral (Cialdini and Kenrick 1976) or positive (Baumann et al. 1981).

We focus our study in the area of negative appeals, because this type of advertising has been shown to be more or at least equally effective than positive appeals in stimulating charitable giving (Erlandsson et al. 2018). Within the realm of negative emotions, we concentrate on guilt because we feel its heightened moral component gives the feeling a special effectiveness with the Gen Z cohort. The importance of guilt in the advertising area is shown by Huhmann and Brotherton (1997). In a survey of 2769 magazine ads, the researchers find that 6% of all campaigns contain guilt appeals. Ads for charities or public service announcements make up the largest share of guilt appeals, at 22%. Graça and Zwick (2020) also cite the mitigation of guilt as an important factor in motivating donation among millennials.

The effectiveness of guilt in advertising appeals may be explained by the theory of objective self-awareness (Duval and Wicklund 1972; Silvia and Duval 2001). This theory is rooted in the idea that as individuals develop, they become increasingly conscious of their own selves as sources of perception and action. Growing self-awareness also takes on a moral dimension, as consciousness of a distinct self serves as a feedback mechanism which induces people to change elements of themselves according to their own conception of moral correctness. Negative affect plays an important role in this process, as individuals seek to move out of unpleasant emotional states. Alterations in moral behavior or attitudes are motivated by people's desires to avoid negative affect caused by their awareness of discrepancies between standards of correctness and their actual behavior or attitudes. Basil et al. (2008) support the theory by showing that the relationship between guilt and donation behavior is mediated by a sense of responsibility to help. Froming et al. (1998) also confirm the role of objective self-awareness in prosocial behavior. They demonstrate that pro-social self-schema among children predict prosocial activities under conditions of self-awareness. In addition, Rogers et al. (1982) show that internal attributions of responsibility increase the desire to help, as measured attitudinally or behaviorally.

Huhmann and Brotherton (1997) identify reactive guilt, anticipatory guilt, and existential guilt as three different types of guilt appeals. Reactive guilt is a response to a violation of one's own behavioral standards, anticipatory guilt a result of anticipating the violation of one's own moral standards, and existential guilt an awareness of a difference between one's own and others' well-being. The researchers find that among charities and public service announcements, existential guilt is the most common guilt type, at 86%, vs. 16% for anticipatory guilt and 13% for reactive guilt. Hibbert et al. (2007) show the impact of existential guilt advertising appeals on charitable giving. This relationship is further confirmed in other studies (Basil et al. 2008; Lwin and Phau 2014). Urbonavicius et al. (2019) also demonstrate the association between existential guilt and charitable giving, with past donation experience as a moderating variable. Coleman et al. (2020) show a relationship between anticipatory guilt appeals and charitable giving. In addition, Lindsey (2005) and Renner et al. (2013) identify an association between anticipatory guilt and bone marrow/blood donations. Other researchers (Godek and Labarge 2006; Lwin and Phau 2011) test the effect of reactive guilt in durable goods advertising, but do not find any significant impact of this type of appeal.

An interesting finding in the research on guilt ad appeals is that guilt can lead to a derogation of the source of the message if people perceive a manipulative intent (Brennan and Binney 2010; Cotte et al. 2005; Coulter and Pinto 1995; Hibbert et al. 2007; O'Keefe 2002). These studies also show that ads with a moderate level of guilt are more effective in eliciting donations than ads with a low or high level of guilt. They find that the suspicion of manipulative intent causes ads eliciting higher guilt to be less effective. These results have particular relevance for Gen Z, as individuals in the cohort may be sensitive to being manipulated. The reason is that the Gen Z cohort places great value on authenticity (IRI 2018), or how a brand aligns with the values attributed to it. The concept of authenticity also has strong relevance for nonprofit organizations as a way of influencing perceived brand experience (Wymer and Akbar 2017).

### **3 Advertising appeals and Gen Z – hypothesis development**

Our research investigates the impact of advertising appeals based on reactive, anticipatory and existential guilt on charitable giving among Gen Z vs. non-Gen Z individuals. Given the heightened social consciousness of Gen Z individuals (Blackbaud Institute for Philanthropic Impact 2018), we believe that existential guilt will be particularly impactful for the cohort because it puts particular focus on the well-being of others.

An important way to evaluate the impact of guilt ad appeals on Gen Z individuals is advertising engagement, as measured by the likelihood to click on an online ad. Defined as “turning on a prospect to a brand message enhanced by the surrounding context” (Kim et al. 2017), advertising engagement has been shown to be a strong predictor of ad effectiveness (Ziliak 2011). Because monetary resources are limited among Gen Z individuals, spurring an immediate donation via an advertisement from an unfamiliar organization might be unrealistic. Rather an ad might impact Gen Z individuals’ awareness of a nonprofit, and assist them in forming a positive attitude before being motivated to donate. This “hierarchy of effects” perspective (Barry and Howard 1990) assumes that before intending to donate, consumers go through a cognitive stage of gathering information and then move to an affective stage in which they develop an emotional connection to an organization. Therefore, we examine whether an ad will impact the likelihood of doing research or learning more about a nonprofit by testing its level of engagement. Of course, we are also interested in the likelihood to donate, as behavioral intention is used as a measure in numerous studies of the effect on emotional appeals on charitable giving (Cao and Jia 2017; Jäger and Eisend 2013; Lwin and Phau 2014; Manyiwa and Brennan 2012; Pham and Septianto 2020; Urbonavicius et al. 2019).

Given the particularly high degree of social consciousness among the Gen Z cohort (Blackbaud Institute for Philanthropic Impact 2018), we feel that advertising appeals based on existential guilt will lead to higher advertisement engagement and likelihood to donate than appeals based on reactive or anticipatory guilt. Due to the same rationale, appeals based on existential guilt should cause greater advertisement engagement and likelihood to donate among Gen Z than non-Gen Z individuals. These beliefs lead to the following hypotheses:

H1: An advertising appeal based on existential guilt will cause a greater engagement in advertising, as defined by likelihood to click on an ad to learn more about the cause, than appeals based on reactive or anticipatory guilt among the Gen Z cohort.

H2: An advertising appeal based on existential guilt will cause a greater likelihood to donate than appeals based on reactive or anticipatory guilt among the Gen Z cohort.

H3: An advertising appeal based on existential guilt will cause a greater engagement in advertising, as defined by likelihood to click on an ad to learn more about the cause, among the Gen Z cohort than non-Gen Z cohorts.

H4: An advertising appeal based on existential guilt will cause a greater likelihood to donate among the Gen Z cohort than non-Gen Z cohorts.

Because women in the general population have been shown to have a greater inclination to donate than men when shown an ad eliciting a negative emotion (Kemp et al. 2013), we feel that the same effect will occur among the Gen Z cohort. These results are consistent with literature in the psychology area which shows that women experience emotions more intensely than men and are more expressive of emotions (Fujita et al. 1991). The extension of findings to the Gen Z cohort is also in line with research which shows that gender differences are molded from early childhood (Deaux et al. 1995). We believe that this gender effect will be most pronounced in existential guilt appeals, since these types of ads are the ones we feel to be most impactful among the Gen Z cohort. Thus further hypotheses are as follows:

H5: Advertising appeals based on existential guilt will cause a greater engagement in advertising, as defined by likelihood to click on an ad to learn more about the cause, in women than men among the Gen Z cohort.

H6: Advertising appeals based on existential guilt will cause a greater likelihood to donate in women than men among the Gen Z cohort.

## **4 Methodology**

To conduct the research, we used student groups from two undergraduate upper division level marketing research classes at a West Coast private university in the U.S. These students did not actually take the survey, but rather administered it to a wider group of individuals. Thus the sample was not biased towards the type of person taking the marketing research class. As a first step, the students surveyed ads for nonprofits featuring dog welfare which could be classified as having appeals based on reactive guilt, anticipatory guilt, and existential guilt. The reason for choosing only dog welfare ads was so that we could control for cause. In addition, Generation Z individuals are particularly committed to animal causes (Blackbaud Institute for Philanthropic Impact 2018). To maximize external validity, actual ads, not mockups, were used.. After an extensive search, each class selected three ads for each type of guilt.

In order to maximize the probability that the ads to be tested were in fact conveying the respective type of guilt, a panel of experts was convened. The experts were six marketing, communication and advertising professors at the university. Each faculty member was shown the aforementioned nine ads. Thereafter, each faculty member rated the nine ads on a 7-point Likert scale to assess how strongly they agreed or disagreed that the ads conveyed the three types of guilt. Based on the results, each class chose one ad for each type of guilt (see Figure 1 in appendix). Order of ads was randomized in the study to preclude order effects.

The chosen anticipatory guilt ad was from the Animal Anti-Cruelty League, stating “STOP THE ABUSE... Report Cruelty in your neighborhood”. It shows a dog in the shape of a soccer ball in front of a soccer goal net. The reactive guilt ad was from the Society for the Protection of Animals and states “Help us fight the effect of cosmetic testing”. It shows a woman spraying perfume on herself, with the perfume coming from a dog’s mouth instead of a bottle. The existential guilt ad was from [www.gegenpelz.de](http://www.gegenpelz.de) and shows a dog wearing a “human” collar, i.e., the reverse of a person wearing a fur collar.

The survey was distributed by students of the marketing research class via email to individuals between the ages of 18-24, representing the Gen Z cohort, and individuals between the ages of 25-73, representing non-Gen Z cohorts. The data collection occurred in November, 2020, with a total of 903 people sending back completed questionnaires, 599 in the Gen Z cohort, and 304 in other cohorts. The total sample was 81% female and 19% male, with Gen Z respondents 82% female and 18% male and non-Gen Z respondents 79% female and 21% male. Utilizing a within-subjects experimental design, each respondent was shown three advertisements, one with a reactive guilt appeal, one with an anticipatory guilt appeal and one with an existential guilt appeal. Our rationale for using a within-subjects design is that these types of designs have larger statistical power than between-subjects designs, meaning that one needs fewer participants to find statistically significant effects. For example, the between-subjects version of a standard t-test requires a sample size of 128 to achieve a power of .80, whereas the within-subjects version requires a sample size of only 34 to achieve the same power. In addition, the use of within-subjects designs precludes concerns about individual differences confounding results because all treatment groups include the exact same participants. The main disadvantage of within-subjects designs is the potential for confounds due to environmental and time-related effects (Webcourses 2013). Since we exposed respondents to the three advertisement treatments at one time, however, we believe we controlled for any external time-related effects.

#### **4.1 Instruments and measures**

Because we felt donating money to a nonprofit is a high involvement decision for Gen Z, we utilized a hierarchy of effects framework (Barry and Howard 1990) and thus included multiple measures to test the motivational impact of ads. We specifically tested likelihood of clicking on a link to learn more about the cause in the ads (advertising engagement) and the likelihood to donate to the cause in the ads, using a 5-point monadic behavioral intention scale (I definitely will, I probably will, I might or might not, I probably will not, I definitely will not) for both measures. As a check to see whether the ads were actually eliciting the feeling of guilt, we assessed this emotion on a multi-item scale adapted from Coulter and Pinto (1995). We also tested respondents on adapted multi-item scales of the related feelings of sympathy (Lee 2009) and fear (Block 2005), and asked if they felt manipulated and exploited. These measures used 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very strongly) to rate each emotion. See Table 1 in the appendix for a list of variables tested in the study.

### **5 Results**

To assess H1, we examined the likelihood of clicking on a link to learn more about the cause, or advertising engagement, by ad (see table 2). In order to determine whether the mathematical differences in the means and distributions on the likelihood of clicking on a link based on type of ad were statistically significant, we used the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. It is a non-parametric statistical hypothesis test used to compare repeated measurements on a single sample. Comparing existential guilt to reactive guilt among the Gen Z cohort, the results showed statistical significance,  $Z=-5.320$ ,  $p=.000$ , with existential guilt more motivating than reactive guilt. When comparing existential guilt to anticipatory guilt among the Gen Z cohort, the results showed statistical significance,  $Z=-6.530$ ,  $p=.000$ , with existential guilt more



motivating than anticipatory guilt. No statistical significance was found comparing reactive guilt to anticipatory guilt. Thus advertising appeals based on existential guilt caused a greater engagement in advertising than appeals based on reactive guilt or anticipatory guilt among the Gen Z cohort, supporting H1.

**Table 2** Likelihood of clicking on ad (advertising engagement) by ad among Gen Z cohort

Type	Reactive Guilt	Anticipatory Guilt	Existential Guilt
Definitely will not	12.5%	13.6%	6.5%
Probably will not	28.0%	38.9%	17.9%
May or may not	28.5%	27.3%	31.8%
Probably will	25.4%	15.7%	36.3%
Definitely will	5.5%	4.5%	7.5%
Total	100%	100%	100%

In order to evaluate H2, we examined the likelihood of donating to support the cause by ad (see table 3), also using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. Comparing reactive guilt to existential guilt among the Gen Z cohort, the results showed statistical significance,  $Z=-5.757$ ,  $p=.000$ , with existential guilt more motivating than reactive guilt. When comparing anticipatory guilt to existential guilt among the Gen Z cohort, the results showed statistical significance,  $Z=-2.872$ ,  $p=.004$ , with existential guilt more motivating than anticipatory guilt. No statistical significance was found comparing reactive guilt to anticipatory guilt. Thus advertising appeals based on existential guilt caused a greater likelihood to donate than appeals based on reactive guilt or anticipatory guilt among the Gen Z cohort, supporting H2.

**Table 3** Likelihood to donate by ad among Gen Z cohort

Type	Reactive Guilt	Anticipatory Guilt	Existential Guilt
Definitely will not	22.5%	12.6%	8.0%
Probably will not	32.5%	30.8%	23.9%
May or may not	25.5%	29.3%	34.8%
Probably will	15.5%	23.7%	28.4%
Definitely will	4.0%	3.5%	5.0%
Total	100%	100%	100%

To assess H3, we examined the likelihood of clicking on a link to learn more about the cause, or advertising engagement, by an ad eliciting existential guilt between the Gen Z and non-Gen Z cohorts (see table 4). In order to evaluate whether the mathematical differences in the means and distributions on the likelihood of clicking on an ad link were statistically significant, we used the independent samples Kruskal-Wallis test. It is a non-parametric statistical hypothesis test used to compare repeated measurements of independent samples. Advertising appeals based on existential guilt caused a greater engagement in advertising among the Gen Z cohort than the non-Gen Z cohorts,  $Z=-7.728$ ,  $p=.000$ , supporting H3. The results were also significant between the Gen Z cohort and non-Gen Z cohorts for anticipatory guilt,  $Z=-3.004$ ,  $p=.003$ , but not to as great an extent as for existential guilt. Findings were not significant between the Gen Z cohort and non-Gen Z cohorts for reactive guilt.

**Table 4** Likelihood of clicking on existential guilt ad (advertising engagement)

Type	Gen Z cohort	Non-Gen Z cohorts
Definitely will not	6.5%	28.0%
Probably will not	17.9%	34.4%
May or may not	31.8%	26.4%
Probably will	36.3%	10.4%
Definitely will	7.5%	0.8%
Total	100%	100%

In order to evaluate H4, we examined the likelihood of donating to support the cause by an ad eliciting existential guilt between the Gen Z and non-Gen Z cohorts also using the Kruskal-Wallis test (see table 5). Advertising appeals based on existential guilt caused a greater likelihood to donate among the Gen Z cohort than the non-Gen Z cohorts,  $Z=-6.497$ ,  $p=.000$ , supporting H4. The results were also significant between the Gen Z cohort and non-Gen Z cohorts for reactive guilt,  $Z=-2.022$ ,  $p=.043$ , and anticipatory guilt,  $Z=-3.764$ ,  $p=.000$ , but not to as great an extent as for existential guilt.

**Table 5** Likelihood to donate to cause for existential guilt ad

Type	Gen Z cohort	Non-Gen Z cohorts
Definitely will not	8.0%	30.4%
Probably will not	23.9%	30.4%
May or may not	34.8%	30.4%
Probably will	28.4%	8.8%
Definitely will	5.0%	0.0%
Total	100%	100%

To assess H5, we conducted a cross tabulation examining the likelihood of clicking on a link to learn more about the cause, or advertising engagement, for men and women in the Gen Z cohort using the Kruskal-Wallis test (see table 6). Females were much more likely to say they definitely or probably would do so than males (33.3% vs. 19.8%). Comparing females to males, the results showed statistical significance,  $Z=-4.014$ ,  $p=.000$ . Thus H5 was supported, with women in the Gen Z cohort being more motivated by the existential guilt ad. Females in the Gen Z cohort were also significantly more motivated by the reactive guilt ad than men,  $Z=-3.771$ ,  $p=.000$ , but to a slightly lesser degree than for the existential guilt ad. Gender results were not significant for the anticipatory guilt ad.

**Table 6** Likelihood of clicking on existential guilt ad (advertising engagement) by gender among Gen Z cohort

Type	Male	Female
Definitely will not	30.2%	8.7%
Probably will not	33.0%	27.0%
May or may not	17.0%	31.0%
Probably will	16.0%	27.4%
Definitely will	3.8%	5.9%
Total	100%	100%

In order to evaluate H6, we conducted a cross tabulation examining the likelihood of donating to support the cause by an ad eliciting existential guilt ad for men and women in the Gen Z cohort using the Kruskal-Wallis test (see table 7). Females were much more likely to say they definitely or probably

would do so than males (28.8% vs. 17.0%). Comparing females to males, the results showed statistical significance,  $Z=-3.409$ ,  $p=.001$ . Thus H6 was supported, with women in the Gen Z cohort being more motivated by the existential guilt ad. Females in the Gen Z cohort were also significantly more motivated by the reactive guilt ad than men,  $Z=-3.023$ ,  $p=.003$ , as well as by the anticipatory guilt ad,  $Z=-2.579$ ,  $p=.010$ , but to lesser degrees than for the existential guilt ad.

**Table 7** Likelihood to donate to cause for existential guilt ad by gender among Gen Z cohort

Type	Male	Female
Definitely will not	29.2%	11.2%
Probably will not	36.8%	27.4%
May or may not	17.0%	32.7%
Probably will	13.2%	24.5%
Definitely will	3.8%	4.3%
Total	100%	100%

To gain more insight into these results, mean scores on the feelings of guilt (“guilty”, “accountable”, “ashamed”, and “bad”), sympathy (“sad” and “heartbroken”), fear (“tense”, “scared”, and “afraid”), as well as feelings of being “manipulated” and “exploited” were calculated for Gen Z respondents (see table 8). Seven-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very strongly) were used to rate each emotion. A factor analysis on these emotions, using a varimax rotation method, revealed three key factors: “sad, guilty, accountable”, “fear”, and “manipulated” (see table 9). These three factors explained 77.6 percent of the variation in the data (see table 10).

**Table 8** Mean scores on feelings elicited by ads among Gen Z cohort

Ad		Accountable	Guilty	Ashamed	Bad	Sad	Heartbroken	Tense	Scared	Afraid	Manipulated	Exploited
Reactive Guilt	Mean	3.71	3.15	3.05	4.31	4.95	4.58	4.09	3.31	3.21	2.80	2.55
	N	201	201	201	201	201	201	201	201	201	201	201
	Std. Dev.	2.06	2.08	2.01	2.08	1.84	2.05	2.03	1.99	1.96	1.77	1.69
Anticipatory Guilt	Mean	3.61	3.84	3.04	4.59	5.42	5.08	3.37	2.41	2.39	2.89	2.48
	N	198	198	198	198	198	198	198	198	198	198	198
	Std. Dev.	1.75	1.98	1.81	1.73	1.57	1.72	2.00	1.64	1.66	1.77	1.51
Existential Guilt	Mean	3.46	3.71	3.32	4.77	5.26	5.06	3.98	3.07	2.92	3.06	2.71
	N	200	200	200	200	200	200	200	200	200	200	200
	Std. Dev..	1.74	1.97	1.88	1.87	1.64	1.83	2.01	1.92	1.90	1.86	1.73
Total	Mean	3.59	3.56	3.14	4.56	5.21	4.90	3.8	2.92	2.84	2.92	2.58
	N	599	599	599	599	599	599	599	599	599	599	599
	Std. Dev..	1.85	2.03	1.90	1.90	1.70	1.88	2.04	1.89	1.87	1.80	1.66

**Table 9** Rotated component matrix

	Component		
	1	2	3

Accountable	<b>0.631</b>	0.400	0.100
Guilty	<b>0.643</b>	0.392	0.307
Ashamed	<b>0.585</b>	0.532	0.232
Bad	<b>0.822</b>	0.261	0.095
Sad	<b>0.907</b>	0.095	0.047
Heartbroken	<b>0.891</b>	0.187	0.068
Tense	0.488	<b>0.592</b>	0.266
Scared	0.232	<b>0.925</b>	0.098
Afraid	0.213	<b>0.928</b>	0.097
Manipulated	0.138	0.07	<b>0.914</b>
Exploited	0.087	0.187	<b>0.905</b>

Extraction Method -- Principal Component Analysis, Rotation method – varimax with Kaiser normalization, A rotation converged in 5 iterations.

**Table 10** Total variance explained

Component	Initial		
	Total	Eigenvalues % of Variance	Cumulative %
1	5.817	52.885	52.885
2	1.525	13.863	66.747
3	1.198	10.888	77.635
4	0.82	7.452	85.087
5	0.399	3.625	88.712
6	0.377	3.43	92.143
7	0.275	2.497	94.639
8	0.24	2.183	96.822
9	0.174	1.583	98.405
10	0.111	1.009	99.414
11	0.064	0.586	100.000

Extraction method – Principal component analysis

A multiple regression analysis was performed to identify which feelings elicited by the ads most drove the likelihood of clicking on an ad (advertising engagement) among Gen Z individuals (see table 11). We chose likelihood to click on an ad, rather than likelihood to donate, as the dependent measure because the respondents' likelihood to donate is impacted by other factors, e.g., the availability of money to donate. Four feelings were strong predictors of likelihood of clicking on an ad: "sad", "heartbroken", "accountable" and "manipulated" (see table 11). These findings thus provide more insight into why the ads are motivating to the Gen Z cohort, i.e., the ads arouse sad and heartbreaking feelings which make respondents feel accountable but not manipulated. The results suggest that both sympathy and guilt are important emotions to consider in the reactions to ads among Gen Z individuals. In addition, the findings confirm previous research (Brennan and Binney 2010; Cotte et al. 2005; Coulter and Pinto 1995; Hibbert et al. 2007; O'Keefe 2002) that a perception of being manipulated can diminish the impact of ads.

**Table 11** Multiple regression analysis on likelihood to click on ad among Gen Z cohort

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	$\beta$	Std. Error	$\beta$		
Constant	1.721	0.126		13.689	0.000
Accountable	0.141	0.028	0.236	5.121	0.000
Guilty	-0.068	0.033	-0.124	-2.038	0.042
Ashamed	0.075	0.035	0.129	2.145	0.032
Bad	0.121	0.034	0.208	3.591	0.000
Sad	0.24	0.049	0.367	4.909	0.000
Heartbroken	0.296	0.045	0.503	6.552	0.000
Tense	-0.002	0.028	-0.004	-0.069	0.945
Scared	-0.091	0.052	-0.155	-1.757	0.079
Afraid	0.167	0.051	0.283	3.283	0.001
Manipulated	-0.166	0.033	-0.27	-5.108	0.000
Exploited	0.053	0.035	0.079	1.504	0.133

Furthermore, Gen Z respondents rated the existential and anticipatory guilt ads higher than the reactive guilt ads on feelings of sympathy, i.e., “sad” and “heartbroken” (see table 8). An Analysis of Variance (see table 12) showed the main effects for these two variables to be significant ( $F = 4.145$  and  $p = .016$  for “sad”, and  $F = 4.666$  and  $p = .010$  for “heartbroken”). In addition, single degree of freedom contrasts indicated that anticipatory guilt ( $t = 3.768$  and  $p = .000$  for “sad”, and  $t = 3.654$  and  $p = .000$  for “heartbroken”) and existential guilt ( $t = 2.440$  and  $p = .016$  for “sad”, and  $t = 3.580$  and  $p = .000$  for “heartbroken”) were significantly higher than reactive guilt but not significantly different from each other. The findings thus continue to point to the impact of existential guilt, although anticipatory guilt also scored well in this particular analysis.

**Table 12** Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on likelihood to click on ad among Gen Z cohort

			Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.

Accountable * AD	Between Groups	Combined	6.215	2	3.107	0.906	0.405
	Within Groups		2044.206	596	3.43		
	Total		2050.421	598			
Sad * AD	Between Groups	Combined	23.609	2	11.804	4.145	<b>0.016</b>
	Within Groups		1697.306	596	2.848		
	Total		1720.915	598			
Heartbroken * AD	Between Groups	Combined	32.678	2	16.339	4.666	<b>0.010</b>
	Within Groups		2086.898	596	3.502		
	Total		2119.576	598			
Manipulated * AD	Between Groups	Combined	7.175	2	3.588	1.106	0.331
	Within Groups		1932.651	596	3.243		
	Total		1939.826	598			

## 5 Conclusion

The main results from our study indicate that an ad appeal based on existential guilt is more motivating than appeals based on reactive guilt or anticipatory guilt among Gen Z consumers. The findings are supported by advertisement engagement and intention to donate. In addition, the impact of existential guilt is stronger in the Gen Z cohort than in non-Gen Z ones. The results may be explained by the high degree of social consciousness among Gen Z individuals (Blackbaud Institute for Philanthropic Impact 2018), which makes the cohort particularly attune to the deficiencies in the welfare of others aroused by existential guilt. Our findings also support the theory of objective self-awareness (Duval and Wicklund 1972; Silvia and Duval 2001). This theory posits that people change their behavior to avoid negative affect caused by their awareness of differences between correctness standards and their actual behaviors or attitudes. In addition, results are particularly strong among women, indicating that the gender differences on response to negative affect found in the general population (Kemp et al. 2013) extend to existential guilt in the Gen Z cohort. The findings also indicate that the emotion of sympathy helps explain the reaction to ads, and that a perception of being manipulated detracts from ad effectiveness.

### 5.1 Managerial implications

Nonprofits have a particular opportunity with Gen Z because of the cohort's high degree of social consciousness (Blackbaud Institute for Philanthropic Impact 2018). In addition, attracting these younger consumers may result in increased donations as they grow older (Freeland et al. 2015; Hart et al. 2007; Metz et al. 2003). However, the challenges posed by reaching Gen Z individuals via communication vehicles are daunting due to their short attention spans (Southgate 2017). Our research suggests that focusing advertising on existential guilt can aid charities in reaching Gen Z consumers. These kinds of ads may appeal to a sense of social consciousness among the Gen Z cohort, and frame the respective nonprofit organization as a worthy recipient of donations. However, organizations need to make sure that

they do not go overboard in the degree of existential guilt displayed in ads. An excessive amount of emotion could seem exploitative and result in a derogation of the source of the message, similar to results found in numerous studies of guilt (Coulter and Pinto 1995; Hibbert et al. 2007; O’Keefe 2002). In terms of Gen Z consumers, they may have a particularly difficult time trusting companies and brands due to growing up in a world with “fake news”, privacy concerns, product recalls, and scandals. This issue with trust is why it is important for organizations to maintain an authentic reputation (Macke 2018). Thus developing ad appeals with a moderate level of existential guilt may be the most prudent avenue for nonprofits seeking to strengthen their appeal with the Gen Z cohort.

## **5.2 Limitations and Future research**

One limitation of our study is that the non-Gen Z sample was a combination of all cohorts besides Gen Z. It would be beneficial to test robust samples of each specific non-Gen Z cohort, i.e., millennials, Gen X and Baby Boomers. In addition, our sample was heavily weighted to females. A more even distribution between males and females would be preferable. We also tested only one ad per emotion. Although we used real ads and added an expert panel to help ensure the ads were communicating their respective emotions, it would be beneficial to include more ads per emotion in a future test. Lastly, our study was conducted only in the U.S. It would be advantageous to implement the research in more countries in order to identify potential cross-cultural differences., as Chan et al. (2021) showed the effect of cultural values like individualism-collectivism on public service advertising appeals. Shazly and Mahrous (2020) also identified the role of campaign feedback in the success of cause-related marketing campaigns in Egypt.

A promising area for future research would be to investigate ad appeals with differing levels of existential guilt. Given the Gen Z concern with being manipulated, this type of study could help identify the degree of existential guilt which resonates best with the authenticity required by the Gen Z cohort. In this regard, it would be beneficial to add specific questions on whether consumers feel manipulated by ads. We would expect appeals with a moderate level of existential guilt to be the most motivating for Gen Z consumers. Another area for further study would be to test the impact of existential guilt ad appeals across differing types of causes. In our research, we included only one type of nonprofit in order to control for cause. However, it would be valuable to investigate the impact of the appeals among a variety of different social, medical and other charities. In addition, the findings on the importance of the sympathy emotion indicate that more work should be done to investigate the interplay of this feeling with guilt. Lastly, future studies could include neuromarketing measures as dependent variables, as used by Martinez-Levy et al. (2021).

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## APPENDIX

**Fig. 1** Tested advertisements

### Anticipatory Guilt



### Reactive Guilt





Table 1 Variables tested in study

Independent Variables	Anticipatory Guilt ad
	Reactive Guilt ad
	Existential Guilt ad
Dependent Variables	Likelihood to click on ad to learn about cause (advertising engagement)
	Likelihood to donate to cause
	Feelings elicited by ad: guilt (“guilty”, “accountable”, “ashamed”, and “bad”), sympathy (“sad” and “heartbroken”), fear (“tense”, “scared”, and “afraid”), “manipulated”, and “exploited”.