

## How do men and women process anti-alcohol ads which stimulate negative emotions?

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### Abstract

In this research, we investigate the differences between men and women in processing three anti-alcohol ads respectively stimulating fear, guilt and shame. We experimentally test three distinct messages, each one focusing on one of the three negative emotions using a total sample of more than a thousand students. Results show that the impact of affect intensity on threat perceptions is greater for all scenarios among women. Moreover, fear, shame and guilt proved to be more effective on women than men.

Key words: Fear, guilt, shame, negative emotions, gender differences, anti-alcohol messages, persuasion

## **How do men and women process anti-alcohol ads which stimulate negative emotions?**

### **Introduction**

Emotions refer to motivational states that underlie behaviors and interactions with an environment. They are not simply reactions to event evaluations but rather include action tendencies as well (Frijda, 1986). This motivational characteristic of emotions has prompted advertisers to use emotional stimuli for persuasion. We study the effects of negative emotions—i.e. fear, shame, and guilt, within the framework of health communication among men and women. This research attempts to demonstrate that, as stipulated in psychology, women are more sensitive to fear, shame, and guilt and have higher levels of emotional intensity than men.

### **Theoretical Background**

#### Negative emotions in public health communication

Most of the studies on the role of emotions in public health communication focused on the use of fear and neglected the study of the impact of other negative emotions such as shame, guilt, anger or sadness.

Witte and Allen (2000) examined the previous studies conducted on fear appeals and identified a list of outcome variables, which they separated in two groups. The first group includes variables linked to recommendation's acceptance (i.e. attitude, intention, and behavioral change), and the second is relative to recommendation's rejection variables (i.e. self-defense, message denial, reactance, etc.).

The majority of the recent studies show a positive relationship between fear and persuasion (Bécheur et al., 2007). Block and Keller (1997) evaluated the effects of a fear appeal containing vivid information on sexually transmitted diseases and skin cancer. Results show that the audience prefers vivid messages to neutral and ones when perceived self-efficacy is high. These results give more empirical validation to fear appeal models.

In the same context, Block and Keller (1995) showed that in case of low perceived self-efficacy, people are forced to evaluate the results of compliance with the message recommendation. In that case, negatively framed messages prove to be more efficient than positively framed messages. On the contrary, in case of high perceived self-efficacy, positive and negative messages have identical effects. LaTour, Snipes and Bliss (1996) found that purchase intentions of the promoted gun brand was significantly higher for messages activating intense fear.

Although guilt appeals are used in many contexts (anti-alcohol campaigns, AIDS prevention, female hygiene product promotion, etc), studies on the effectiveness of guilt in persuasion are limited (Bennett, 1998). Some rare contributions appeared during the last three decades (Bécheur et al., 2007; Cotte, Coulter and Moore, 2005; Bennett, 1998; Coulter and Pinto, 1995; Bozinoff and Ghingold, 1983; Burnett and Lunsford, 1994).

Guilt appeals are often used in social marketing and the most used type of guilt in this case is the existential guilt (Huhmann and Brotherton, 1997), which results from a difference between one's own welfare and the welfare of others (Izard, 1977). Some empirical studies having tested the impact of guilt led to divergent results and do not allow to affirm its positive effect on persuasion. In this regard, Bozinoff and Ghingold (1983) say that, although guilt is easily activated after exposition to guilt appeals, these messages prove to be inefficient in changing attitudes and behaviors. This failure could be due to a feeling of manipulation (Coulter, Cotte, and Moore, 1999). In spite of these warnings against the use of guilt in persuasion, Bécheur et al. (2007) showed that guilt is an emotion which enhances persuasion and motivates the adoption of the recommended actions.

Finally, regarding shame appeals, research is limited. Bennett (1998) compared the effects of shame and guilt in advertising persuasion. Results show that reactions to guilt appeals are more positive than reactions to shame appeals. Bennett (1998) argues that the distinction shame / guilt often made in psychology is appropriate in advertising and that advertising based on guilt might be efficient provided that shame is not activated. Moreover, Bécheur et al. (2007) recently showed that among fear, shame and guilt, shame is the most efficient against alcohol abuse risks.

#### Emotions and gender

In their study, Allen and Haccoun (1976) asked young persons « what they would feel» in regard to 4 emotions. Subjects did not express any difference on emotions frequency but rather on emotions intensity. Women expressed greater emotional intensity on 3 of 4 emotions - fear, sadness and joy. Also, Diener, Sandvik and Larsen (1985) measured emotional intensity for subjects aged from 16 to 68 and showed that women had had higher levels of emotional intensity (positive and negative emotions) and extreme mood variations in comparison with men.

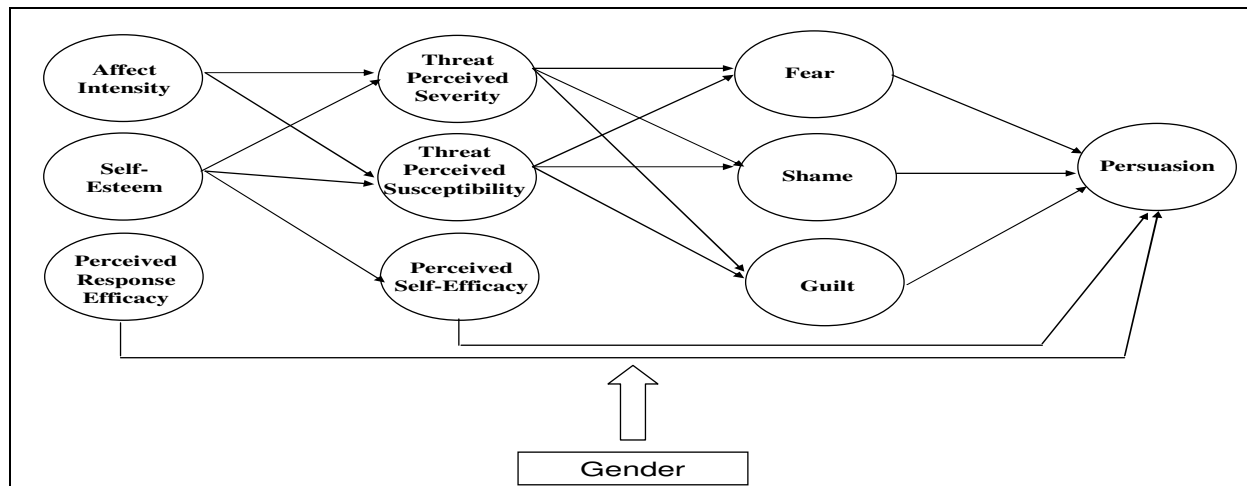
Tangney (1990) showed that women express more shame and guilt than men. This result is a consequence of a weaker social status, less physical aggressivity, and traditional and natural roles of women (taking care of children, maternal relationships), which require from her a bigger capacity to interpret the emotional signals of others. On the other hand, anger, pride and contempt are more present among men regarding their need to be different, to compete with others, to minimize their vulnerability, and to maximize their success chances (Brody and Hall, 1993).

### **Analyses, Results and Discussion**

Our work stands in the field of social marketing, especially public health. We focus on the use of negative emotions appeals in the case of advertising targeting an audience of young adults and directed towards prevention of physical and psychosocial risks linked to drinking and driving, which constitutes a major safety issue in many countries.

The model below (figure 1) was tested in a previous research (Becheur et al., 2007). Here, we complete this study by investigating the moderating impact of gender on all the model paths.

#### **Figure 1. The Moderating Role of Gender**



### Stimuli

Four advertising messages use fear (one message), guilt (one message), and shame (two messages, one for each gender) scenarios and attempt to generate perceptions of severe threats, high threat susceptibility, high solution efficacy, and high self-efficacy (Witte, 1992).

### Sample and Preliminary Tests

Students from different French universities, aged between 18 and 25 years, responded to an online questionnaire and provided 1082 usable questionnaires (391, 401, and 290 for the fear, guilt, and shame scenarios, respectively). All measurements come from existing scales. Our sample was composed of 202 men and 189 women in the fear condition, 179 men and 222 women in the guilt condition, and 107 men and 183 women in the shame condition.

### Results

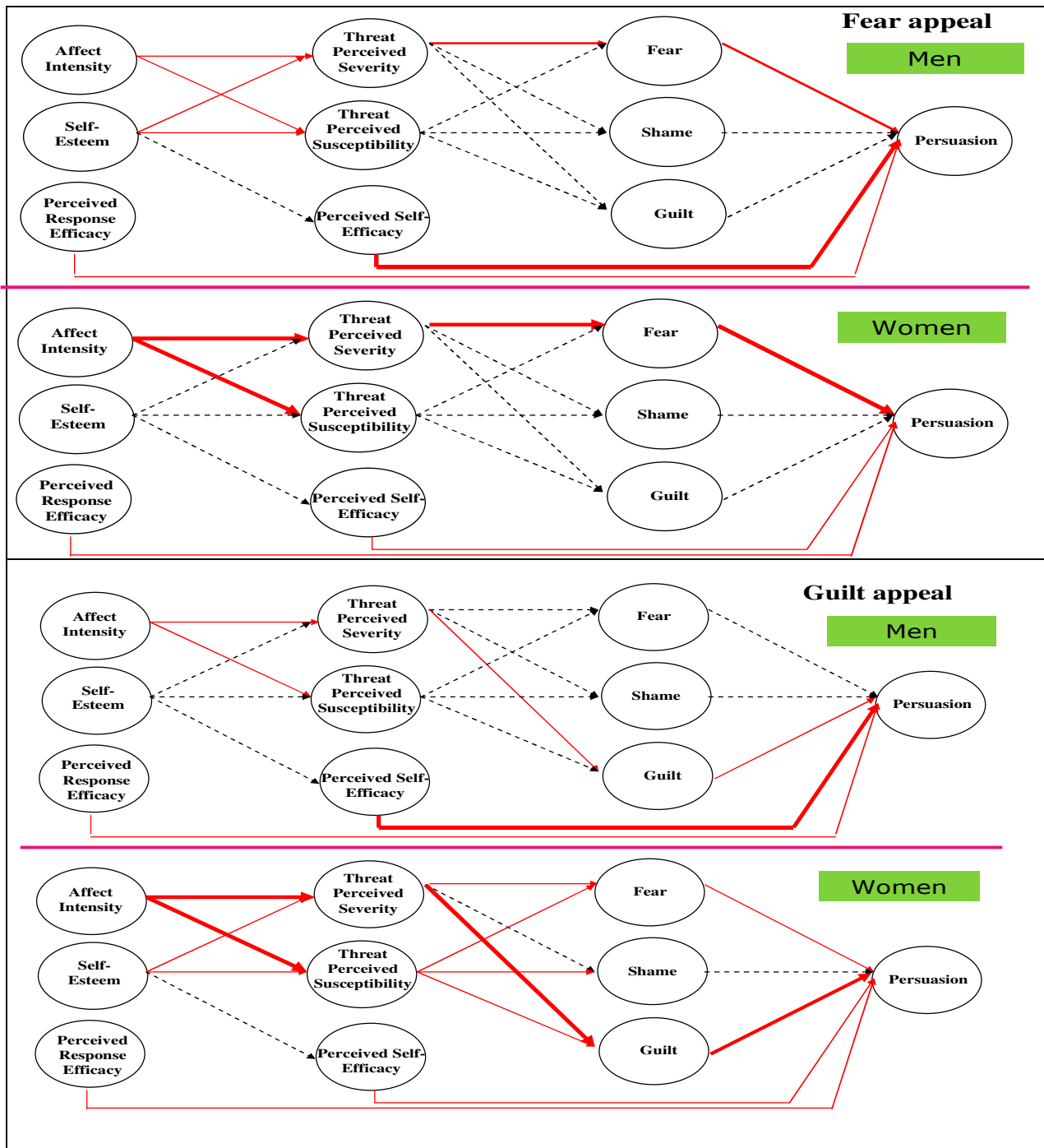
Overall, we notice stronger path coefficients in all conditions within women samples. Only the effect of perceived self-efficacy, i.e. the ability to adopt the recommended solution, on persuasion was more important among men.

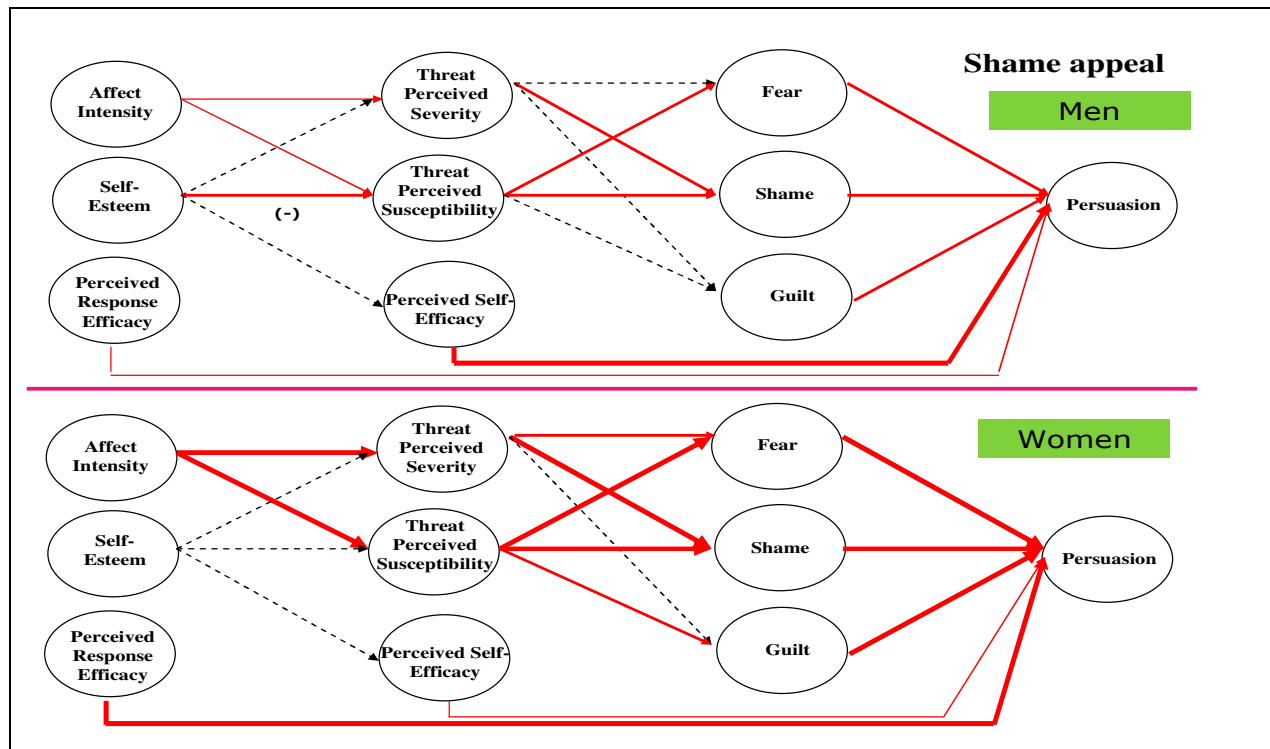
Results show, for instance, that the impact of affect intensity on threat perceptions is greater for all scenarios among women. Similarly, fear (guilt/shame) was more effective within women under the fear (guilt/shame) condition.

In the case of the shame appeal, persuasion occurred because the three emotions studied here were activated. All these emotions had stronger effects on persuasion amid women. The effect of perceived response efficacy on persuasion was greater on women when exposed to the shame condition.

Although the effect of perceived self-efficacy on persuasion was stronger among men in the case of the fear scenario, fear had a stronger impact on persuasion among women. This may suggest that the level of fear stimulated by the fear condition can be increased among men in order to provoke a better impact on persuasion.

Figure 2. Results





In conclusion, this study proved that negative emotions are more persuasive among women. Women showed higher levels of affect intensity and experienced more fear, shame, and guilt than when exposed to our three conditions. This result approves findings in psychology on emotion activation and gender differences (Tangney, 1990).

Of course, this research suffers from several limitations. In fact, this study measures emotions through a questionnaire, which may overestimate emotional states or make it difficult for respondents to express their affective states (Derbaix and Poncin 2005). Therefore, further research should investigate other populations and employ additional measurement instruments. Other individual variables also might influence the relationship between negative emotions and persuasion, such as risk aversion, authoritarianism, or introversion.

Emotions are not stable across cultures. In fact, each culture dictates to its subjects what they should feel and do in each situation. Therefore, cultures that differ in their moral order also differ in the range of emotions that individuals may experience.

In the context of health communication, some researchers found cultural effects on emotional reactions to threatening stimuli (Debarnier et al., 2004; Vincent and Dubinsky, 2005). Therefore, it would be interesting to test our model across different cultures (French vs Australian men and women) and see the effects of culture on gender responses to emotion .

While, this research proved that fear, shame and guilt are more effective among women, other negative emotions more present amid men, like anger and pride should be tested. From a managerial standpoint, this would help advertisers choose the right emotions to address their audience and adopt their ads regarding if they are targeting men or women.

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