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THE IMPACT OF PURCHASE TYPE, PRE-PURCHASE MOOD, AND GENDER ON  
LEVELS OF CONSUMER GUILT IN AN IMPULSE PURCHASE CONTEXT

A Dissertation in  
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by  
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## **ABSTRACT**

In this mixed-methods study, we examine the emotion of consumer guilt. Two focus groups were conducted to establish the presence of consumer guilt and explore the ways in which consumers experience guilt about purchases. Subsequently, we conducted a quantitative study using scenarios and a survey to investigate the relationship of purchase type, pre-purchase mood, and gender on consumer guilt. ANCOVA analysis revealed a significant three-way interaction among these variables, and hierarchical regression analysis demonstrated a significant effect of consumer guilt on anticipated satisfaction with the purchase. Using information processing theory as a framework, we found that gender-based and mood-based information processing had a clear impact on levels of consumer guilt. Our results contribute to the literature on emotions by shedding light on the construct of consumer guilt and its impact on anticipated satisfaction. These findings have significant implications for service managers and marketers as well, as they suggest ways in which the effects of consumer guilt may be mitigated.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Overview**

The experience of consumer guilt is familiar to us all. Who among us has not experienced a twinge of guilt after purchasing an expensive luxury, a calorie-laden dessert, or an impulse item we simply did not need? While consumer guilt is a common phenomenon, occurring for a variety of reasons in diverse circumstances, it has not received robust attention as a research construct. The purpose of this study is to add to the literature on consumer guilt by exploring the circumstances in which it occurs and investigating antecedents that influence the experience of consumer guilt.

Guilt as an emotion has been extensively studied in the psychology literature, particularly since the work of Freud. More contemporary researchers have defined guilt as “an individual’s unpleasant emotional state associated with possible objections to his or her actions, inaction, circumstances, or intentions” (Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton 1994, p. 245). A key element of this emotion is the violation of the individual’s internal standard of right and wrong (Tangney, Miller, Flicker et al. 1996). This violation can be an overt act or the contemplation of such an act. Additionally, a person may feel guilt when he perceives that he has been the recipient of benefits that

others did not receive, although he is no more deserving (Dahl, Honea, and Manchanda 2003).

While guilt as an emotion has received decades of attention in the scholarly literature, the concept of consumer guilt has received relatively little attention in comparison. Consumer guilt can be defined as “an affect triggered by the anxiety a consumer experiences upon the cognition that he is transgressing a moral, societal, or ethical principle (Lascu 1991, p 290). An individual may feel consumer guilt as the result of making a purchase of goods or services that violates one’s standards of behavior. This could be because the purchase is more costly than the consumer can afford, or produced in a socially irresponsible manner, bad for one’s health, or simply an unneeded expenditure (Burnett and Lunsford 1994). Consumer guilt is triggered when a customer realizes that by making this purchase, he has violated his own internal standards of right and wrong.

Consumer guilt, and its impact on consumer behavior, has not been fully explored in the literature. To help close this gap, we wanted to first establish that it does indeed occur in consumer situations, and then explore the types of circumstances that give rise to it. Finally, we wished to explore the impact of consumer guilt on satisfaction with the purchase. To that end, we first conducted two focus groups composed of staff members at a large university. Participants in both groups indicated that they did indeed feel consumer guilt, particularly when shopping for themselves. Their experiences varied widely, depending on their age and family situation, the sort of items purchased, and how they were feeling about the purchase.

Given this, we then wanted to further explore several of the factors that impact levels of consumer guilt. We selected purchase type as our first variable – whether the purchase was of a material good or an experiential service. All purchases inherently fall in to one of these categories, and recent research on regret has suggested that consumers view these two purchase types differently (Rosenzweig and Gilovich 2011). We also investigated the impact of pre-purchase mood on levels of consumer guilt. Previous research on information processing has suggested that good moods lead to rather shallow, heuristic cognitive processing, while bad moods lead to deeper, more effortful information processing (see Bagozzi, Gopinath, and Nyer 1999; Clore, Schwarz, and Conway 1994 for reviews). As the experience of guilt requires rather effortful processing, we felt that pre-purchase mood had the potential to impact the level of experienced guilt. Finally, we included gender in our analysis. Gender has also been demonstrated to impact cognitive processing level in a consumption context (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991; Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1993; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1998). This research found that women tend to process information at a deeper, more elaborate level, while men tend to use heuristic processing in order to limit the use of cognitive resources. In addition, there is some evidence that men and women value their material possessions differently, with men valuing traits like functionality and utility, and women valuing the social and emotional aspects of a purchase (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Kamptner 1991; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988).

Using a written scenario followed by a survey, we tested the impact of these three variables on consumer guilt. We predicted a three-way interaction among purchase type,

pre-purchase mood, and gender, and this prediction was confirmed. Women felt guilty about material purchases regardless of pre-purchase mood, but when making an experiential purchase, women felt much less guilty when in a good mood than when in a bad mood. We also predicted that when in a good mood, men would not experience high levels of guilt over either material or experiential purchases. This prediction held true when men were purchasing material items, although the effect was only marginally significant, and the hypothesis was not supported for the purchase of experiential items

Hierarchical regression analysis also indicated that consumer guilt affected levels of anticipated satisfaction with the purchase, over and above the effect attributed to purchase type, pre-purchase mood, and gender.

### **Statement of Purpose and Research Objectives**

The global objective of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of consumer guilt. This paper addresses three important research goals: 1) To confirm the presence of consumer guilt and gain insight into how participants experience it 2) To examine how purchase type, pre-purchase mood, and gender interact to impact the experience of consumer guilt 3) To investigate the impact of consumer guilt on anticipated satisfaction with the purchase. Drawing on information processing theory, mood theory, and the customer emotions literature, this research utilizes both qualitative and quantitative analysis in an effort to more fully understand the construct of consumer guilt.

## **Contributions of the Research**

The results of this study add to the consumer behavior literature by confirming the presence of consumer guilt and investigating some antecedents of consumer guilt; namely, purchase type, pre-purchase mood, and gender.

Our findings also have theoretical implications for information processing theory, as our results suggest that there may be some boundary conditions for this effect, based on gender and purchase type

Our regression analysis demonstrated that high levels of consumer guilt adversely impacted the consumer's level of anticipated satisfaction with the purchase. To our knowledge, no other studies have examined the relationship of these two variables.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Introduction**

#### **Guilt as a Distinct Emotion**

Previous literature has demonstrated that people experience guilt for a number of reasons and in a variety of circumstances. Guilt has been described as “an individual's unpleasant emotional state associated with possible objections to his or her actions, inaction, circumstances, or intentions” (Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton 1994, p. 245). Guilt typically occurs when an individual knows that he has done something wrong

by violating some standard of behavior, or even when he contemplates doing so (Tangney, Miller, Flicker et al. 1996). In order for guilt to be present, the individual must measure his actions against some set of behavioral standards, such as the standards imparted to him by parents, religion, peers, or the society in which he lives. Ausubel (1955) notes that the individual must internalize this set of standards, accepting them as his own. In addition, he must accept the responsibility to conform his behavior to these standards. Previous studies have suggested that this sense of responsibility is a predictor of feelings of guilt (Weiner, Graham, and Chandler 1982). Finally, he must be able to recognize when his behavior has violated these standards. Feelings of guilt arise when the individual evaluates his own behavior negatively in relation to the internalized standards (Lindsey 2005; Tangney 1990).

The experience of guilt can be aroused by inaction, as well (Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton 1994; Lazarus 1991). When an individual's internalized set of behavioral standards dictates that he should engage in a particular action (i.e. he should help an injured person or feed the hungry), guilt can be the result of failure to act according to these standards. These guilt feelings result not from the doing of harm to another, but rather from the knowledge that failing to act has affected another adversely (Lazarus 1991; Lindsey 2005). Guilt can also occur when a person feels that he has been overrewarded compared to others although he is no more deserving (Dahl, Honea, and Manchanda et al. 2003; Montada, Schmitt, and Dalbert 1986).

Early conceptualizations of guilt deemed it primarily a private emotion (Ausubel 1955; Benedict 1946). These theorists suggested that guilt was the result of a breach of one's own internalized conscience or set of moral standards, and the presence of others

was not necessary in order to experience guilt (Lewis 1971). While a person's set of moral and behavioral standards was learned from caregivers or primary relationships (usually one's parents or peer group,) once these standards were internalized, guilt would arise from a violation of these standards, even in the event that no one else was aware of the transgression (Tangney and Dearing 2002). Mosher (1965) proposed a behaviorist model in which guilt is the result of an expectation of self-mediated condemnation for a transgression against or violation of one's own internalized standards of behavior. This focus on the self as the regulator of behavior and inducer of guilt makes the presence of others unnecessary. Buss (1980) suggested that guilt is intrapsychic in nature, a function of a private awareness of the self. By definition, this requires no other people for guilt to take place. He notes, "Guilt is essentially private. The best test of guilt is whether anyone else knows of the transgression" (Buss 1980, p. 159.) This understanding of guilt as a private emotion resulting from a transgression against one's own moral standards, often termed the "moral perspective" (Tangney 1995), neglects the idea that in order to feel guilt, the transgressor must become aware that his actions have (or will potentially) cause harm to another (Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton 1994; Lindsey 2005). Recently, the conceptualization of guilt as a private emotion has been criticized as offering a limited understanding of such a complex phenomenon, and researchers have devoted attention to considering the interpersonal nature of guilt.

This interpersonal concept of guilt, termed the "relational perspective" (Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton 1994; Kugler and Jones 1992), is grounded in the idea that the presence of others is fundamental to the experience of guilt in several important respects. This presence may be real, implied, imagined, or in some cases, an

internalized other” who sits in judgment, evaluating the self according to an external standard without the presence of others being necessary (Lewis 1971). The formation of the standards of moral behavior, the violation of which causes guilt, is predicated on the existence of others. Even those theorists for whom guilt is constructed as a private emotion acknowledge that the child must learn a standard of behavior from adults or peers in society prior to internalizing them (Barrett 1995). While previous theorists have put forth numerous divergent suggestions as to the timing, conditions, and situations necessary for the development of guilt (Barrett 1995), it is generally agreed upon that such development requires the absorption of a set of behavioral standards from salient reference groups, including parents, peers, or society at large. These standards may be learned through the absorption of social norms, both descriptive and injunctive (Reno, Cialdini, and Kallgren 1993). Descriptive norms alert the individual as to what others *are* doing, while injunctive norms suggest to the individual what he *should* do. It is possible that these standards may change as one’s reference groups change, or as relationships within these groups change. As a person’s standards of right and wrong are absorbed from those with whom one has the closest or most relevant relationship, as these relationships shift, the standards against which one’s behavior is judged similarly shifts (Baumeister et al. 1994). Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius (2008) also note that the closer and more relevant the others are to the focal individual, the more influential these norms are. This information assists the individual with setting his internal standards of right and wrong. Thus, the formation of guilt is necessarily interpersonal in nature.

Regardless of whether feelings of guilt are the result of a transgression against another, a violation of moral standards, behavior that deviates from one’s internal norms,

or a failure to act when required, the experience of guilt leads to a negative emotional state. As Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton (1994) note, “Clearly, guilt means feeling bad.” This negative emotional experience motivates individuals to try to avoid these feelings by correcting the situation.

### **Guilt and Regret**

Regret is an emotion that is closely related to guilt, and it is also relevant in a consumer context. Regret and guilt, however, differ in a number of important ways. Regret occurs when an individual realizes, or imagines, that a foregone alternative would have led to a better outcome than the course of action that was selected (Zeelenberg, van Dijk, and Manstead 2000). Regret is a cognitively-oriented emotion, in that one must carefully consider the relative value of the two outcomes and make a cognitive judgment as to which was the better alternative. Regret cannot be experienced without such cognition. This focus on the road not taken makes regret a counterfactual emotion, where the individual considers “what might have been, rather than “what is” (Miller and McFarland 1986). This counterfactual thinking is central to the construct of regret.

Guilt also requires effortful cognitive processing, but is more concerned with the violation of a moral standard that has harmed oneself or another (Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton 1994). This violation is not necessary to experience regret. For example, a surgeon may regret having to tell family members that their loved one has passed away as the result of a car accident without having any blame or committing any transgression.

Regret differs from guilt in terms of behavioral outcomes as well. While both emotions can result in a determination to “do things differently next time,” guilt typically results in an apology, confession, reparation, or compensation (Lindsay-Hartz 1984). A person experiencing regret, however, may have additional means available to him to cope with the emotion. Since regret does not necessarily entail a transgression or self-blame, future situations may be out of his control, individuals may cope through acceptance or positive reinterpretation (Yi and Baumgartner 2004). In the surgeon example above, the doctor will realize that as much as he regrets having to break bad news to families, it is part of his job and he will have to continue doing so, and come to an acceptance of this fact. Positive reinterpretation is an attempt to control or change the way one feels – for example, “I made a terrible decision, but in the end it was good, because I learned from it and I am wiser now” (Yi and Baumgartner 2004). These behavioral outcomes are unique to regret and differentiate it from the guilt construct.

Regret and guilt can also be distinguished based on the scope of the two emotions. Landman (1987) argues that it is possible to experience regret without guilt, as when the circumstances are beyond the control of the individual, or when a person regrets their actions but has not violated a moral standard. In these cases, a person might regret the circumstances or the outcome without feeling any guilt about having done something wrong. Guilt, on the other hand, cannot be experienced without regret. Inherent in the guilt process is the feeling of regret that one did something wrong or violated a moral or ethical standard.

### **Types of Guilt**

Huhmann and Brotherton (1997) suggest three types of guilt: reactive, existential, and anticipatory. Anticipatory guilt can occur when a person considers committing an act that violates one's own standards (Hibbert, Smith, Davies et al. 2007; Lindsey, Yun, and Hill 2007), when an individual imagines doing something wrong (Lazarus 1991), or when he considers not taking an action that he knows he should (Rawlings 1970). For example, when contemplating stealing, an act that violates a moral code, an individual could experience anticipatory guilt prior to even committing the act. Conversely, anticipatory guilt can be experienced when contemplating NOT undertaking an action that adheres to one's internal behavioral standards. In this situation, the negative outcome will occur if the action is not performed, and the awareness of this negative outcome engenders feelings of anticipatory guilt (Huhmann and Brotherton 1997). A parent who is considering purchasing a luxury car rather than saving for his child's college education may experience anticipatory guilt while considering the purchase, because he realizes that this course of action will violate his internal standard of educating his children and that this act will harm his children.

Existential guilt occurs as the "result of a discrepancy between oneself and others" (Dahl, Honea, and Manchanda 2003). Individuals may experience existential guilt when they feel that they have been overrewarded compared to others or when they become aware of a discrepancy between their own circumstances and those of the less fortunate (Dahl, Honea, and Manchanda 2003; Montada, Schmitt, and Dalbert 1986). Montada, Schmitt, and Dalbert (1986) note that in order for an individual to experience

existential guilt, he must perceive that his own good fortune (relative to others) is not fully deserved or justified by the circumstances. In addition, he must perceive that his own advantages or somehow related to the disadvantages of the victim. The individual must accept or feel some sense of responsibility for the inequity, although it may not, in fact, be his fault (Cunningham, Steinberg, and Grev 1980; Lindsay-Hartz 1984). For example, individuals enjoying a comfortable life in first world countries may experience existential guilt when seeing news stories about war refugees or hungry children in third world countries.

Reactive guilt is experienced after one performs an act that violates one's own internal standards of behavior (Rawlings 1970). This could take the form of an action that violates a standard of behavior (stealing) or the failure to commit an act that should have been undertaken (failing to come to the aid of someone in need.) In order for reactive guilt to occur, the individual must accept the standards of right and wrong as his own. In addition, he must take responsibility for regulating his behavior to conform to these standards (Ausubel 1955) and have control over his course of action.

This study focuses on the experience of reactive guilt. We examine the consumer's feelings of guilt immediately after having made an impulse purchase.

### **Consumer Guilt**

As evidenced by this body of literature, guilt can occur in a wide variety of settings for a number of diverse reasons. In this study, we are particularly interested in

the experience of guilt in a consumer context. Previous research has identified guilt as a key emotion in the consumer purchase context (Lascu 1991; Richins 1997). Consumer guilt can be defined as “an affect triggered by the anxiety a consumer experiences upon the cognition that he is transgressing a moral, societal, or ethical principle” (Lascu 1991, p. 290). It can be the result of making, or planning to make, a purchase of goods or services that violates one’s standards of behavior. This could be because the purchase is outside of one’s price range, bad for one’s health, or produced in a socially irresponsible manner (i.e. products that are detrimental to the environment or produced under unsafe working conditions) (Burnett and Lunsford 1994). Consumer guilt is triggered when a customer realizes that by making this purchase, he has violated his own internal standards of right and wrong.

A number of previous studies have investigated the circumstances under which consumer guilt can be attenuated, mitigated, or eliminated. For example, Strahilevitz and Myers (1998) found that participants who made hedonic purchases were more likely to engage in charitable donation activities when given the option. They postulated that the positive emotions elicited by the donation offset the negative affective experience of guilt of the hedonic purchase, thereby “balancing out” the consumer’s emotional state.

Another method that consumers use to attenuate guilt over purchases is to “earn” the hedonic item through the use of frequency or loyalty programs. While paying for luxuries with money induced guilt over the purchase, earning them through effort mitigated the guilt and allowed participants to choose and enjoy the hedonic prize option (Kivetz and Simonson 2002). Prior research has also shown that licensing is an effective means of overcoming consumer guilt when making a hedonic or luxurious purchase

(Khan and Dhar 2006). The licensing effect occurs when a person performs a good deed prior to the consumption decision, such as volunteering, tutoring, or donating money. Another method that consumers may use to alleviate consumption-related guilt is rationing (Werthenbroch 1998). Rationing occurs when consumer choose to purchase only a limited quantity of a desired item, thereby artificially constraining their ability to consume it.

While the techniques used to mitigate consumer guilt in the studies above may resonate as familiar with many consumers, a common theme in these papers is the *assumption* that the customer experiences consumer guilt. Interestingly, while prior literature has focused on how to contend with consumer guilt, little work has been done to establish whether or not customers do, in fact, experience such guilt, under what conditions, and why. In order to gain a deeper insight into these emotions, we conducted two focus groups to explore the emotion of consumer guilt in an impulse purchase context.

### **Impulse Purchases and Guilt**

While some purchases are planned, researched, and budgeted for, many purchases are made on impulse (Block and Morwitz 1999). Impulse purchasing is a significant factor in consumer behavior (Lee and Kacen 2008), as anyone who has picked up a magazine or candy bar in line at the grocery store can attest. Impulse buying can be defined as an unplanned purchase characterized by “(1) relatively rapid decision-making, and (2) a subjective bias in favor of immediate possession” (Rook and Gardner 1993, p.

3; see also Rook 1987). The item is purchased after the customer sees the article (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991), although he was not actively looking for that item and did not have plans to purchase it (Jones, Reynolds, and Weun 2003). Impulse buying is characterized by an “urge” to purchase the item, and the satisfaction of that urge is gratifying (Jones, Reynolds, and Weun 2003).

Impulse purchases are likely to be made spontaneously, without a great deal of prior reflection (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991), and such spontaneous purchases may lead to post-purchase guilt. “Impulse buying occurs when a consumer experiences a sudden, often powerful and persistent urge to buy something immediately. The impulse to buy is hedonically complex and may stimulate emotional conflict” (Rook 1987). Feelings of guilt are likely to be particularly salient when making an impulse purchase, as impulse purchases are generally not budgeted for, unnecessary, and motivated by things other than utility or need (Gardner and Rook 1988). Gardner and Rook (1993) found that after making impulse purchases, consumers frequently reported feeling happiness, pleasure, and excitement, but also reported feeling guilty. Rook (1987) also demonstrated that impulse shoppers often exhibit feelings of guilt and anxiety. Miao (2011) studied emotional responses to impulse purchases and found that while customers derive pleasure from their impulse purchases, this is often accompanied by feelings of guilt as well.

In this study, we are interested in how various elements of the impulse purchase situation influence post-purchase guilt. First, we examine the influence of purchase type (material good vs. experiential service.) Second, we are interested in the consumers’ pre-purchase affect on post-purchase guilt. Third, we investigate the role of gender as it impacts the experience of consumer guilt.

### Purchase Type

A great deal of previous research has examined the differences in levels of satisfaction experienced by consumers when purchasing material goods vs. experiential services (Carter and Gilovich 2010; Van Boven, Campbell, and Gilovich 2010). Results indicated that, by and large, consumers derive more happiness and satisfaction from experiential purchases (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). Recently, however, Rosenzweig and Gilovich (2011) examined the flip-side of this happiness and satisfaction: regret. In a series of five studies, they found that there is an interaction between purchase type (material good vs. experiential service) and sins of action or inaction. For example, people tend to experience more regret when *purchasing* a material good (a sin of action) than when they elected not to purchase it. Conversely, when considering experiential purchases, participants reported more guilt and regret when they decided *not to purchase* it (a sin of inaction). Given the similarities between regret and guilt, we were interested to see if this pattern held true for the experience of consumer guilt. As our scenario involves a purchase situation, we would predict that consumers would experience more guilt after purchasing a material item than after purchasing an experience.

In addition, previous studies have shown that men and women appear to value various types of purchases differently (Dittmar, Beattie, and Friese 1995). Past research in a variety of contexts suggests that women value emotional and symbolic items more highly, while men tend to value more functional, utilitarian items (Kamptner 1991; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). The reasoning behind this difference in value varied, as well. Men appreciated the instrumental aspects of their purchases (i.e. what can this do?),

while women stated emotional, social, and relationship-oriented reasons for valuing possessions (Dittmar 1989). Given this, we expected that women would value their experiential purchases more highly than material ones, and therefore experience less guilt about these purchases.

### **Pre-purchase Mood**

Previous research suggests that mood can impact the processing of information. Happy moods appear to result in more global, heuristic processing, while sad moods lead to more detailed, effortful processing (Bagozzi, Gopinath, and Nyer et al. 1999; Clore, Schwarz, and Conway 1994). The mood-as-information model (Schwarz 1990) postulates that a good mood indicates a pleasant, happy environment requiring minimally elaborate information processing, thereby leading to heuristic processing. A bad mood, conversely, indicates a less than ideal situation, which the individual would presumably like to remedy. This leads to more elaborate, effortful processing. An alternative theory posits that good moods result in heuristic processing due to the distracting nature of the good mood (Mackie and Worth 1989). It is suggested that as positive memories and thoughts are highly connected in memory (Isen 1984; Mackie and Worth 1989), being in a good mood naturally primes a large number of positive memories, thereby leaving less cognitive capacity for information processing. This, in turn, results in the use of heuristic processing. While these theories differ in terms of the mechanics of the process, both lead to the conclusion that a positive mood is related to global, more heuristic processing, while a negative mood is associated with deeper, more effortful processing.

While guilt is an emotional reaction, the experience of guilt requires relatively effortful processing. First, an individual must examine their internal standards of right and wrong. Next, he must compare these standards with his actions in order to determine whether his actions violated those standards. Finally, he must determine whether or not he was in control of his actions and knowingly violated his standards (Lindsey 2005; Tangney 1990; Tangney, Miller, and Flicker 1996; Weiner, Graham, and Chandler 1982). Given this process, we propose that individuals who are experiencing a negative mood and are therefore engaged in deeper, more effortful processing will be more likely to experience consumer guilt than those in a good mood who are engaged in shallower, heuristic processing.

### **Gender and Information Processing**

Substantial evidence suggests that information processing is also affected by gender. A great deal of previous research has indicated that men and women process information differently (Martin 2003). For example, differences have been shown between genders when performing sequencing tasks, color naming tasks, and object recognition exercises (Harshman, Hampson, and Berenbaum 1983; Saucier, Elias, and Nylen 2002). Neuropsychology and psychophysiology research suggests that different regions of the brain may be activated for men and women during such tasks (Blackhart, Kline, Donohue et al. 2002) and that hormonal differences may influence brain function, which in turn affects information processing (Duff and Hampson 2001; Pogun 2001).

In particular, differences in the level of cognitive elaboration during information processing have been demonstrated in a marketing context by Meyers-Levy and associates (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991; Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1993; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1998). This research suggests that men tend to process information using less elaborate processing, limiting cognitive effort by using heuristic processing. Women, on the other hand, appear to have a lower threshold for elaboration, leading to deeper, more effortful processing of information. While men seem to prefer an impulsive, holistic approach to processing, women prefer a logical, sequential approach (Pogun 2001).

It should be noted, however, that these gender-based predispositions can be overridden by situational factors. While gender differences in processing are the result of inherent characteristics, temporary but salient characteristics of the situation, such as the nature of the stimulus, the mood of the subject, or the motivational state of the subject, can exert influence on information processing styles (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991). Temporary mood states have been demonstrated to override the influence of long-term traits (Cacioppo and Petty 1982; Tice, Bratslavsky, and Baumeister 2001; Watson, Clark, and Carey 1988). Thus, it is suggested that when a short-term state (such as mood) co-exists with a long-term trait (such as gender,) the mood state will exert a predominant influence over information processing styles (Martin 2003).

Based on this research, we predict that men will process the purchase consumption information heuristically, resulting in low levels of guilt, when in a good mood. However, when they are in a bad mood, this negative mood state will override their natural processing tendencies and cause them to process more deeply, resulting in a

higher level of guilt. We expect no such difference for women, given that women tend to process at a more elaborate level naturally.

### **Anticipated Satisfaction**

In our regression analysis, we used anticipated satisfaction as the dependent variable. Anticipated satisfaction occurs when “consumers assess the likely satisfaction with each item” (Shiv and Huber 2000). While satisfaction is always an important measure in consumer behavior studies, it can be measured only after consumption has occurred. In our scenarios, the consumer has purchased the material good or experience, but has not yet consumed it. Therefore, anticipated satisfaction was the appropriate measure for this context.

### **Guilt Proneness**

Guilt proneness can be defined as “the propensity to experience guilt and shame across a range of personal transgressions” (Cohen et al. 2011, p. 947). This is an individual-level trait measure that assesses how likely a person is to experience guilt, rather than a state measure that measures how guilty a person feels at any given time. Given that this study measured state guilt level immediately after the impulse purchase, it was essential that we control for guilt proneness. We utilized the guilt-related measure from the Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale (GASP) developed by Cohen et al. (2011) to control for this variable.

### **Vividness**

Vividness was also used as a covariate in the regression analysis. Vividness, in the context of anticipated satisfaction, can be defined as “the ease of constructing attribute-related images” (Shiv and Huber 2000). In other words, when a person is attempting to assess how satisfied they will be with a purchase, this anticipated satisfaction is impacted by how clearly they can picture the purchase object in their head. Shiv and Huber (2000) demonstrated that vividness can impact a participant’s level of anticipated satisfaction, as so we included it in our regression analysis on anticipated satisfaction.

### **Hypotheses**

Based on this extensive body of literature, we formed a number of predictions regarding consumer guilt. First, we predict that in an impulse purchase context, purchase type, pre-purchase mood, and gender will interact to influence the level of consumer guilt. Specifically, we expect that men will experience less guilt than women, but that this effect will be moderated by purchase type and mood. Thus, we posit the following hypothesis:

**H1:** In an impulse purchase context, the impact of gender on the level of consumer guilt will be moderated by purchase type and pre-purchase mood.

As women tend to process information more deeply, and this type of processing lends itself to the experience of guilt, we expect that women will experience high levels

of guilt. However, because of the high value women place on experiential purchases, we expect that when in a good mood, women will process experiential purchases heuristically, focusing more on the positive overall benefits of the experience, rather than engaging in the deeper, more detailed processing that is associated with feelings of guilt. There, we predict that:

**H1a:** In an impulse purchase context, for female participants, we predict that women in a good mood will experience less consumer guilt when purchasing an experience than women in a bad mood. No such difference is expected for women purchasing a material item.

Because men tend to engage in heuristic processing, which does not lend itself to feelings of guilt, we expect that when in a good mood, men will not experience high levels of guilt over either material or experiential purchases. However, as noted by Martin (2003), when a short-term state such as mood co-exists with a long-term trait such as gender, the mood state will exert a predominant influence over information processing styles. As a negative mood is expected to lead to detailed information processing, thereby facilitating the experience of guilt, we expect that when men are in a bad mood, they will experience relatively more guilt about their purchases than when in a good mood.

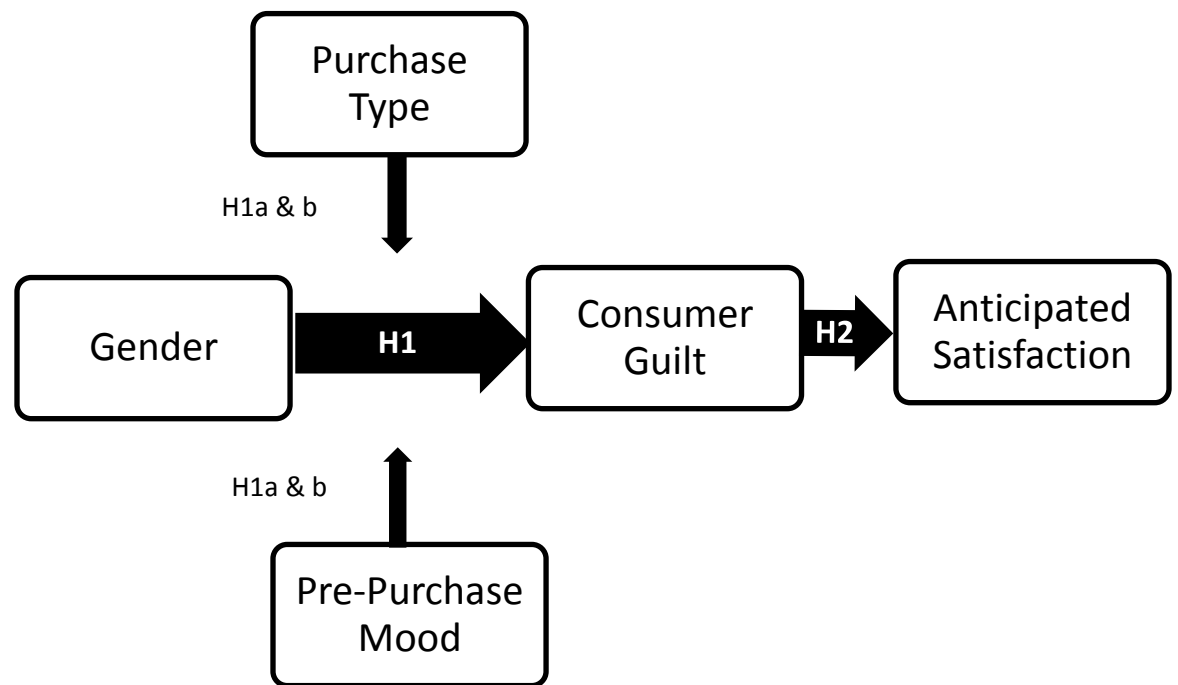
**H1b:** In an impulse purchase context, for male participants, we predict that purchasing either an experience or a material item while in a bad mood will lead to more consumer guilt than purchasing these items in a good mood.

Finally, we expect that the experience of guilt will impact the customer's anticipation of satisfaction with the purchase. . The relationship between emotions and satisfaction has been widely studied (Bigné, Mattila, and Andreu 2008; Oliver 1993; Richins 1997; Westbrook and Oliver 1991). In particular, regret, which although a separate emotion, shares many characteristics with guilt, was demonstrated to impact satisfaction (Tsiros and Mittal 2000). Thus:

**H2:** In an impulse purchase context, higher levels of consumer guilt will result in lower levels of anticipated satisfaction with the purchase.

A proposed model of the hypotheses is included below:

**Figure 1**



The following chapter describes the procedures and methods used in the qualitative and quantitative portions of this study.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

#### **Qualitative Study**

Qualitative methods are ideal for exploratory research, as they allow participants to describe phenomena in their own words and result in thick, rich description of the participants' experiences (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Because the construct of consumer guilt had not been robustly explored in previous literature, we elected to conduct focus groups of consumers. Our purpose was three-fold: to discover if consumer guilt was indeed an emotion that participants experienced and could describe, to learn under what conditions they experienced it, and to explore what kinds of factors mitigate or attenuate their experience of consumer guilt.

#### **Subjects**

Subjects were recruited from the staff of a large university. A list of 300 campus addresses for staff members was randomly selected by selecting every Nth name after a random start. Recruitment letters were mailed through campus mail to these 300 addresses, explaining the study, the focus group procedure, and how to sign up. Recipients were told that a maximum of 10 men and 10 women would be selected to participate on a first-come, first-served basis. In exchange for participating, subjects would receive a \$20 gift card to a local restaurant.

The first 10 men and 10 women to register were selected for the focus group. After attrition due to personal circumstances or time conflicts, 7 men and 8 women participated in the focus groups. As conventional wisdom suggests that men and women experience shopping differently, we conducted two separate focus groups divided by gender.

### **Procedure**

First, approval for the focus groups was obtained from the Institutional Review Board. The focus groups were held at a campus meeting room that was equipped with recording equipment. Audio recordings were made of the focus groups, but no video tapes were made. Participants were welcomed and given an informed consent form. We reviewed the items on the form as a group, informing the participants that this focus group was part of a research study, their participation was completely voluntary, and that data would be reported without the use of names or identifying information. Participants were advised that they would receive compensation for participating. After ascertaining that there were no questions as to the procedure, the participants signed the informed consent forms and the audio recording was started. At the conclusion of the discussion, participants were asked if they had any questions about the focus group or procedures. Participants were then given a \$20 gift card to a local restaurant and thanked for their time. These same procedures were followed for both focus groups.

## **Materials**

The focus group discussions were guided by a set of questions about shopping, purchases, emotions, guilt, and spending (See Appendix A.) However, participants were informed that these were merely guiding questions to generate discussion, and they were encouraged to add their own thoughts, stories, and experiences about these topics. We allowed discussions to evolve organically, and when a topic seemed to have run its course, we generated conversation by asking a new question from the question guide.

## **Quantitative Study**

### **Design**

To test the above hypotheses, we employed a 2 (purchase type: material vs. experiential) X 2 (pre-purchase mood: good vs. bad) X 2 (gender: male vs. female) between subjects factorial design.

### **Subjects**

Participants were recruited using Qualtrics and Mechanical Turk, two online survey sites. A total of 384 subjects were recruited. The requirements for participation were that subjects must be over the age of 18 and have opted in to the survey voluntarily. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of the 4 conditions (purchase type X pre-

purchase mood.) Approximately 33% of the subjects were male, 49% had a college degree, 36% had a household income of \$60,000 or above, and 83% listed their ethnicity as Caucasian.

### **Procedure**

Approval for the focus groups was obtained from the Institutional Review Board. After agreeing to participate, subjects were directed to an online survey hosted on the Qualtrics site and given an informed consent form. After reading it, subjects had the option to click “I Agree” and continue with the survey, or click “I Do Not Agree” and exit the survey. They then read the scenarios, completed the survey, and arrived at a “Thank You” page. Subjects were compensated with \$1.00 for their participation upon completion of the study.

### **Stimuli**

Pre-purchase mood was manipulated using instructions adapted from Schwarz and Clore (1983). Subjects were asked to write about an event in their lives that made them feel “really good” or “really bad.” They then read a scenario describing a purchase they had made on impulse. For purchase type, the experiential purchase was a 3 day Caribbean cruise. The product purchase was a new iPod Touch Air. The price was held constant at \$500. See Appendix B for the scenarios.

## Measures

Manipulation checks for the mood induction were assessed using a 5 item scale from Peterson and Sauber (1983). Manipulation checks for product type were assessed using four items (I would classify going on a cruise as an experience/I would classify going on a cruise as a product; I would classify an iPod Touch Air as an experience/I would classify an iPod Touch Air as a product.)

We measured several covariates on the survey, as well. We measured guilt proneness using the 8 guilt items from the Guilt and Shame Proneness scale (GASP) (Cohen, Wolf, and Panter 2011) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ). Anticipated satisfaction was measured with 3 items taken from Botti and Iyengar (2004) and Shiv and Huber (2000) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .94$ ). The items were "Will you be satisfied with this purchase when you receive it;" "Will you be happy with the purchase you made;" and "How satisfied do you think you will with this purchase when you get (experience) it?" Vividness was measured with an item adapted from Shiv and Huber (2000): "How easy is it for you to imagine yourself or someone you know in the scenario?"

Post-purchase guilt was measured with an item adapted from the Guilt Inventory (Kugler and Jones 1992): "Recently, I have made a purchase that I feel guilty about." Demographic information, including gender, was also collected.

## Chapter 4

### Results

#### Results of Qualitative Study

After the completion of the focus groups, we used open coding to analyze our data, during which the data were sorted into meaningful groups in order to search for trends, themes, and thought processes. The data were compared first within and then between gender groups. Our results demonstrated several important themes. First, for both the male and female participants consumer guilt was definitely a part of their purchasing experience, and this guilt was experienced over a variety of purchase types, in varying circumstances, and for multiple reasons.

For example, they felt guilty about buying items that were not essential:

*“I think, at this point in my life, it is anything that I feel is really not essential because times are pretty tight financially at this point.”*

*“I try to be conservative enough that maybe we could’ve spent that money differently; maybe we could’ve moved it and, you know, had more money to spend on something else that is more necessary I guess.”*

*“Guilt, if it’s a purchase for myself... usually guilt, I want to take it back.”*

*“I guess, yeah, depends on need too. I look at, say the washer dryer broke...we need to get a new washer dryer so that is a fairly large purchase. I am not going to feel guilty about that. I know my wife, who does all the washing and drying, needs that. It is fine.”*

*“I really think of the utility. Do I need it? Will I use it?”*

*“I agree with [name omitted]. For me, it’s the utility of the item and if I really think I will use it, then if I have the money and I can afford it...I am OK with spending it.”*

Participants also indicated feeling guilty for paying too much for an item:

*“I’m thinking I am only feeling the guilt when I am buying something for myself at the dollar amount that could have been done for a little bit less.”*

*“It wasn’t as good of a deal as I could have but I just got it anyway.”*

The sense that their spending habits were harming other members of the family also induced guilt:

*“I think the guilt comes in when it affects another person. So, I have a family, and I like the big purchase thing... I bought too big of a house, and now my kids kind of have to suffer. So, do I feel guilty over that? A little*

*bit. I have to admit that this big purchase now has an impact on somebody else. Like going on vacation, or spending for piano lessons...”*

*“That is where my guilt was coming from – because of the effect on other people.”*

*“... I know when my kids were small, I mean, I didn’t buy...I would feel guilty, yeah.”*

Gender differences were also apparent in the focus group results. For example, women indicated that they had a very low threshold for feeling guilt:

*“It doesn’t matter if it is a ninety-nine cent thing of lipgloss or a hundred dollar coat. It wouldn’t matter. I’d still feel guilty if I am buying it for myself.”*

*“I can’t tell you how many times I’ve had an eyeliner in my hand and I end up going back, and I really should, no I still have enough left, no maybe I should get it, no, and then I end up just putting it back even though it is only ninety-nine cents. “*

Women also indicated that they felt an internalized sense of guilt, even if their significant other was encouraging them to make the purchase:

*(Interviewer): "So if you bring him (husband) along and he is like oh, oh yeah, that is nice, you should get that, does that eliminate any possibility of guilt about it?"*

*(Respondent 1) "No."*

*(Respondent 2) "Not for me."*

*(Respondent 3) "No."*

*(Interviewer): "So, even if he is like oh yeah you should get that you would still feel guilty? So, the guilt is not dependent on him? It is internal?"*

*(Respondent 1) "Yeah. It's internal."*

*(Respondent 3) "It's internal."*

*(Interviewer): What, where do you think that internal guilt comes from?*

*(Respondent 6) "I think that is just being a female."*

Men also experienced guilt after purchases, but their threshold seemed to be higher, and they seemed to experience it less often. While women indicated that they often felt guilt when buying anything at all for themselves, men seemed to feel guilty primarily when the purchase had put them over their monthly budget, if they felt that they did not receive value for their money, or if they had not gotten a "good deal."

*"... I might be guilty and feel badly at first when I purchase a thing but, but, really it comes down to if, by at the end of the month, if I know I am OK, then that guilt is gone. "*

*“I don’t feel guilt until the end of the month if I can’t juggle all the chainsaws.”*

*“You know, as long as I can come through the month without going under, I’m ok.”*

*“I’m thinking I am only feeling the guilt when I am buying something for myself at the dollar amount that could have been done for a little bit less.”*  
*(I feel guilty if)... “It wasn’t as good of a deal as I could have but I just got it anyway.”*

*“If I spent a lot of money and it was not what it should’ve been...”*

*“I would feel guilty if it wasn’t a good meal.”*

After analyzing our data from the focus groups, some clear themes emerged, as they were repeated by several participants. It was clear that our participants did indeed experience consumer guilt, and that the presence and level of guilt can vary according to the purchaser and the situation. These results extend the extant literature, in which the presence of such guilt was merely assumed, by establishing the presence of this emotion in consumer situations. The fact that our participants, who were of varying ages, backgrounds, and genders, spoke of experiencing guilt in a wide variety of consumer situations gives rise to new research questions.

Knowledge of the conditions under which consumer experience guilt about their purchases has practical implications for managers and marketers, as guilt about purchases can discourage customers from purchasing. To this end, we wanted to test how levels of consumer guilt were impacted by factors suggested by our focus group responses and also those typically encountered in a shopping scenario, such as the type of purchase, the customer's pre-purchase mood, and the gender of the consumer. For the quantitative portion of our study, we chose an impulse purchase as our setting, as research shows that a large percentage of all purchases are spontaneous (Block and Morwitz 1999) and impulse purchases often result in guilt (Gardner and Rook 1988).

### **Results of Quantitative Study**

#### **Manipulation Checks**

To check the efficacy of the mood manipulation, an independent sample t-test on the mood scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.93$ ) was performed between the good and bad mood conditions. As expected, participants in the positive mood condition exhibited much higher levels of positive mood than participants in the bad mood condition ( $M_{Pos} = 5.71$  vs.  $M_{Neg} = 3.97$ ;  $t(276) = -14.46$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

To check the effectiveness of the purchase type manipulation, a paired samples t-test was performed between the material and experiential conditions. As expected, participants in the experiential condition classified cruise as much more experiential than material ( $M_{Exp} = 5.71$  vs.  $M_{Mat} = 3.39$ ;  $t(382) = 14.006$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Similarly,

participants in the material condition classified the iPad Touch Air as more material than experiential ( $M_{\text{Mat}} = 5.86$  vs.  $M_{\text{Exp}} = 3.97$ ;  $t(275) = -10.897$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Overall, participants indicated that the scenarios were realistic ( $M = 5.48$  on a 7-point scale) with no differences between conditions.

### **Results of Hypothesis Testing**

To investigate customers' level of consumer guilt, a 2 (Purchase type: material vs. experiential) x 2 (Pre-purchase mood: positive vs. negative) x 2 (Gender: male vs. female) between-subjects ANCOVA test on consumer guilt was performed. Age, income, and education were included as covariates in the ANCOVA analysis.

To first check the homogeneity assumption associated with ANCOVA test, Levene's test of equality of error variances was performed. The results were highly insignificant ( $F(7, 374) = .892$ ,  $p > 0.52$ ), suggesting that equality of error variances across different experimental conditions can be assumed. Table 1 presents the means and standard errors of the dependent measure.

**Table 1 - Descriptive Statistics**

Dependent Variable: Guilt

Mood	Material vs. Experiential	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Good	Material	Male	3.41	1.964	37
		Female	4.59	2.089	68
		Total	4.17	2.114	105
	Experiential	Male	3.63	1.911	35
		Female	3.79	2.012	68
		Total	3.74	1.970	103
	Total	Male	3.51	1.928	72
		Female	4.19	2.082	136
		Total	3.96	2.051	208
Bad	Material	Male	4.33	1.761	24
		Female	4.74	1.947	65
		Total	4.63	1.897	89
	Experiential	Male	3.23	1.870	30
		Female	4.56	1.922	55
		Total	4.09	1.998	85
	Total	Male	3.72	1.888	54
		Female	4.66	1.929	120
		Total	4.37	1.960	174
Total	Material	Male	3.77	1.927	61
		Female	4.66	2.015	133
		Total	4.38	2.025	194
	Experiential	Male	3.45	1.888	65
		Female	4.14	2.001	123
		Total	3.90	1.985	188
	Total	Male	3.60	1.906	126
		Female	4.41	2.021	256
		Total	4.14	2.018	382

**Table 2 - Tests of Between-Subjects Effects**

Dependent Variable: Guilt

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	114.338 <sup>a</sup>	10	11.434	2.952	.001	.074
Intercept	281.028	1	281.028	72.568	.000	.164
Income	.302	1	.302	.078	.780	.000
Education	2.515	1	2.515	.649	.421	.002
Age	.997	1	.997	.257	.612	.001
Mood	11.345	1	11.345	2.929	.088	.008
Purchase Type	18.884	1	18.884	4.876	.028	.013
Gender	50.890	1	50.890	13.141	.000	.034
Mood * Purchase Type	2.410	1	2.410	.622	.431	.002
Mood * Gender	.788	1	.788	.203	.652	.001
Purchase Type* Gender	.055	1	.055	.014	.905	.000
Mood * Purchase Type * Gender	18.838	1	18.838	4.864	.028	.013
Error	1436.743	371	3.873			
Total	8111.000	382				
Corrected Total	1551.081	381				

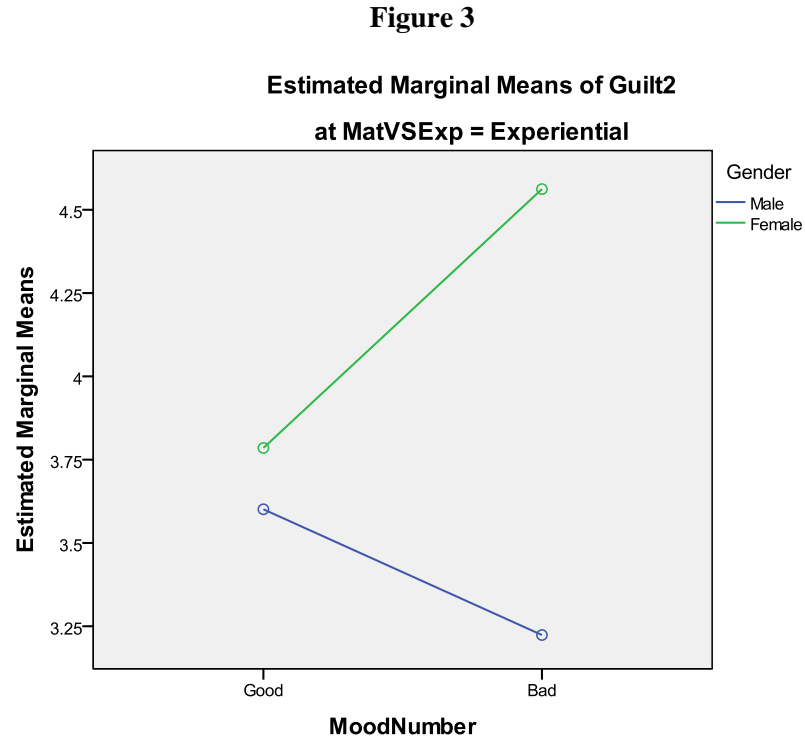
a. R Squared = .074 (Adjusted R Squared = .049)

Results showed a main effect for gender ( $F=13.14$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and purchase type ( $F=4.88$ ,  $p<.03$ ). In addition, we found a marginally significant effect for mood ( $F=2.93$ ,  $p<.088$ ). However, these main effects were qualified by a significant three-way interaction ( $F=4.86$ ,  $p<.05$ ). These results provide support for H1.

To illustrate our triple interaction, we split the data by purchase type and the results are plotted in Figures 1 and 2.



Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: Income = 3.09, Edu = 2.48, Age = 44.12



Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: Income = 3.09, Edu = 2.48, Age = 44.12

To test H1a, and H1b, we performed a series of planned comparisons. In the material goods condition, women exhibited high levels of guilt regardless of their mood, MGood=4.59, MBad=4.74,  $t = -.429$ , ns. Men felt higher levels of guilt when they were in a bad rather than good mood, MBad=4.33, MGood=3.41,  $t = -1.87$ ,  $p = .07$ .

These results were reversed in the experiential service condition. Female participants in a bad mood felt significantly higher levels of guilt than their counterparts in a good mood, MBad=4.56, MGood=3.79,  $t = -2.03$ ,  $p < .05$ . The difference in the guilt ratings was insignificant for male participants faced with an experiential service, MBad=3.23, MGood=3.63,  $t = -.395$ , ns. Taken together, these results are consistent with

H1 and H1a. However, H1b was only partially supported. In the material condition, men did indeed feel more guilt in a bad mood, but this effect was marginally significant, and there was no significant difference in the experiential condition.

### **Regression Analyses on Emotional Responses and Encounter Satisfaction**

In the ANCOVA analysis, consumer guilt was included as a dependent variable, with purchase type, pre-purchase mood, and gender as independent variables. However, because it is feasible that consumer guilt has a direct influence on anticipated satisfaction with the purchase, it is of great interest to investigate the effect of consumer feelings of guilt on anticipated satisfaction. In H2, we predicted that higher levels of consumer guilt would lead to lower levels of anticipated satisfaction with the purchase.

Prior to running the regression analysis, we checked for the assumptions. For linearity, we analyzed the standardized residuals and as shown in Figure 3, and we did not observe any violations of linearity and homogeneity of variance. Similarly, the distribution of standardized residuals exhibits a normal distribution as shown in Figure 4. The cumulative normal probability plot also shows that the distribution is normal (see Figure 5). Finally, an examination of the residuals didn't detect any large residuals, thus indicating that outliers do not pose a threat in the analysis.

Figure 4

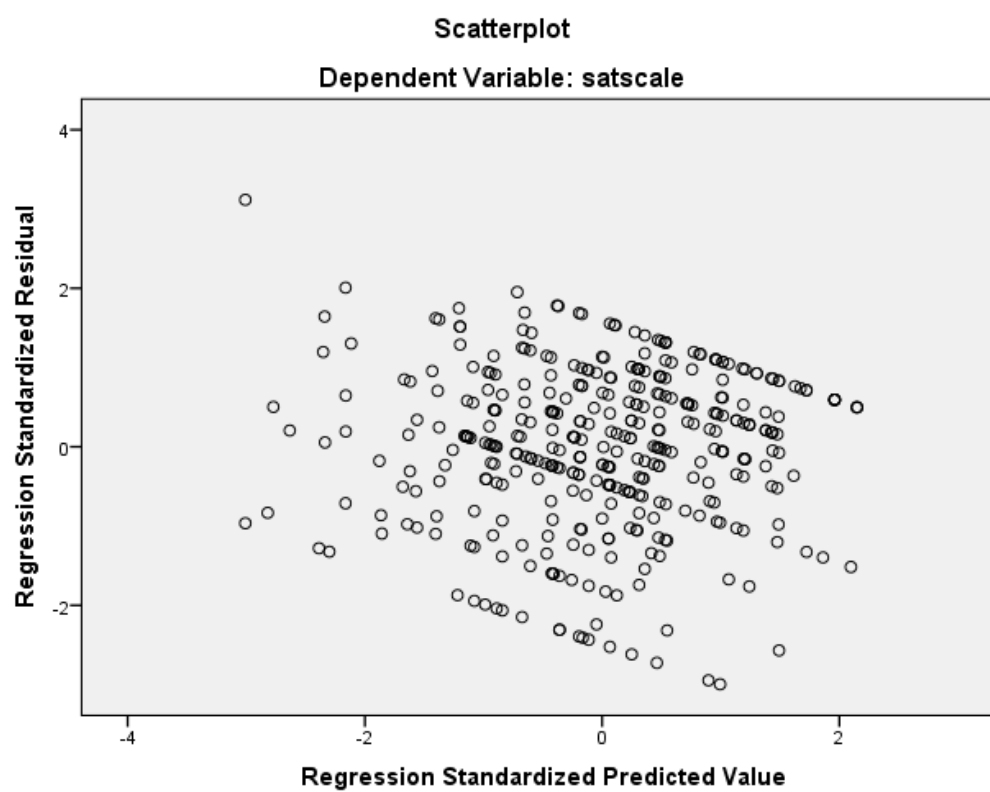


Figure 5

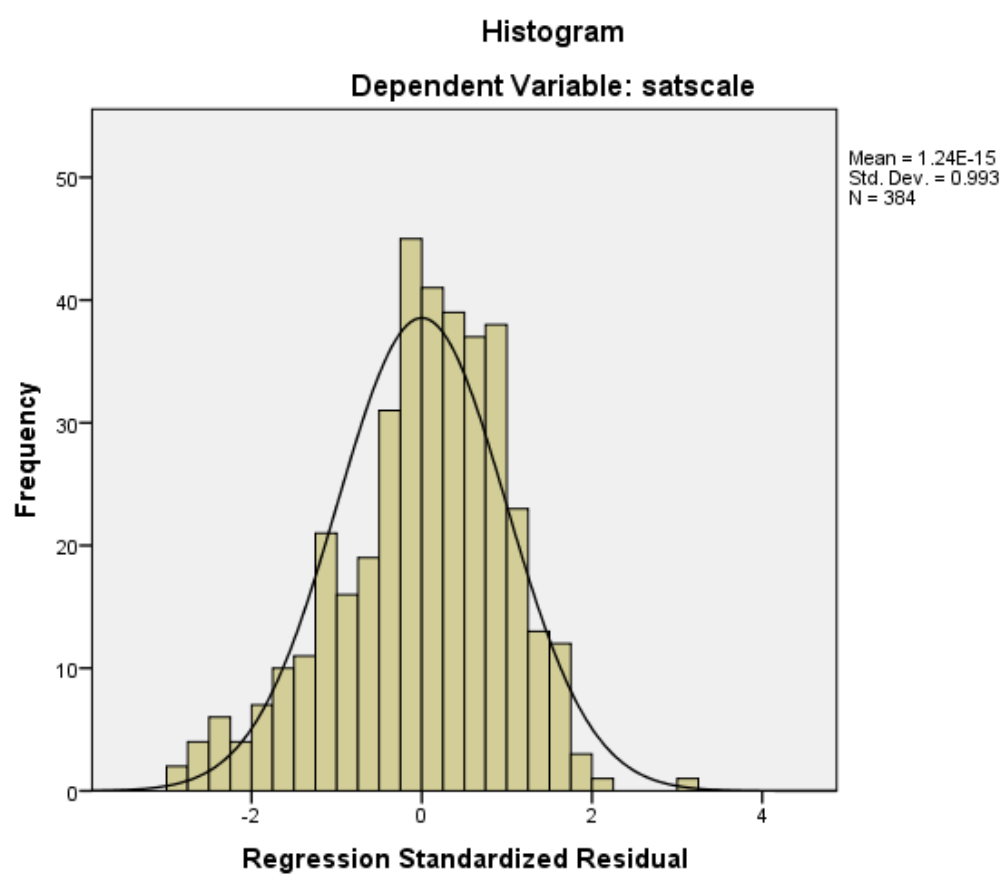
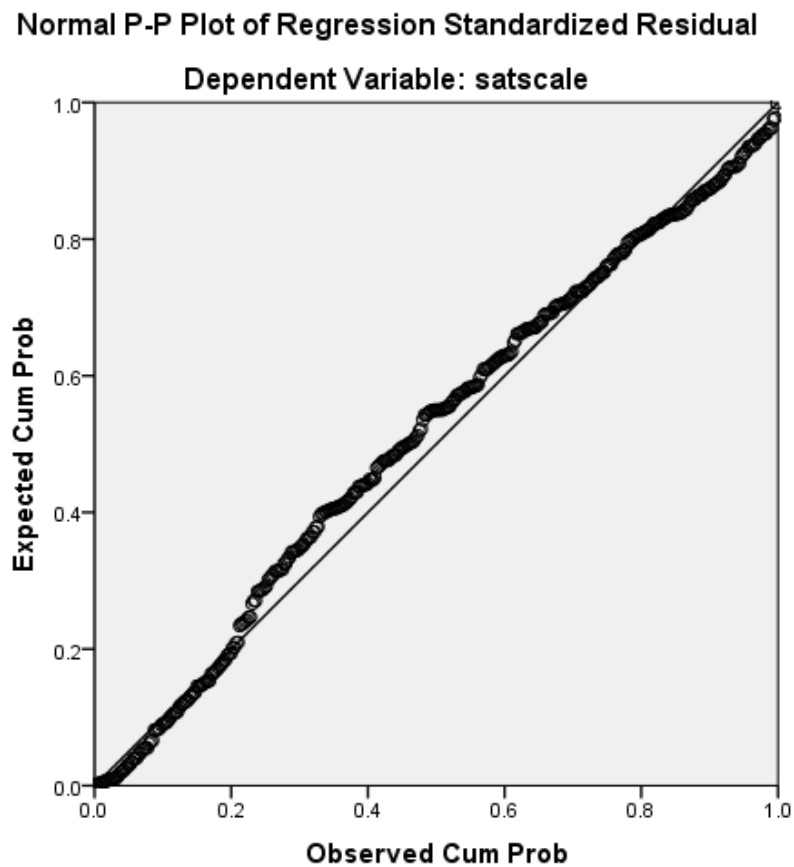


Figure 6



We used hierarchical regression analysis to test impact of guilt on anticipated satisfaction. The three manipulated variables (purchase type, pre-purchase mood, and gender) were entered in the first step, followed by guilt and vividness. Vividness was measured with one item (How easy is it for you to imagine yourself or someone you know in the scenario?) and was included because prior research has demonstrated that

vividness is closely related to anticipated satisfaction (Shiv and Huber 2000). The results from the multiple regression analysis are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3 - Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

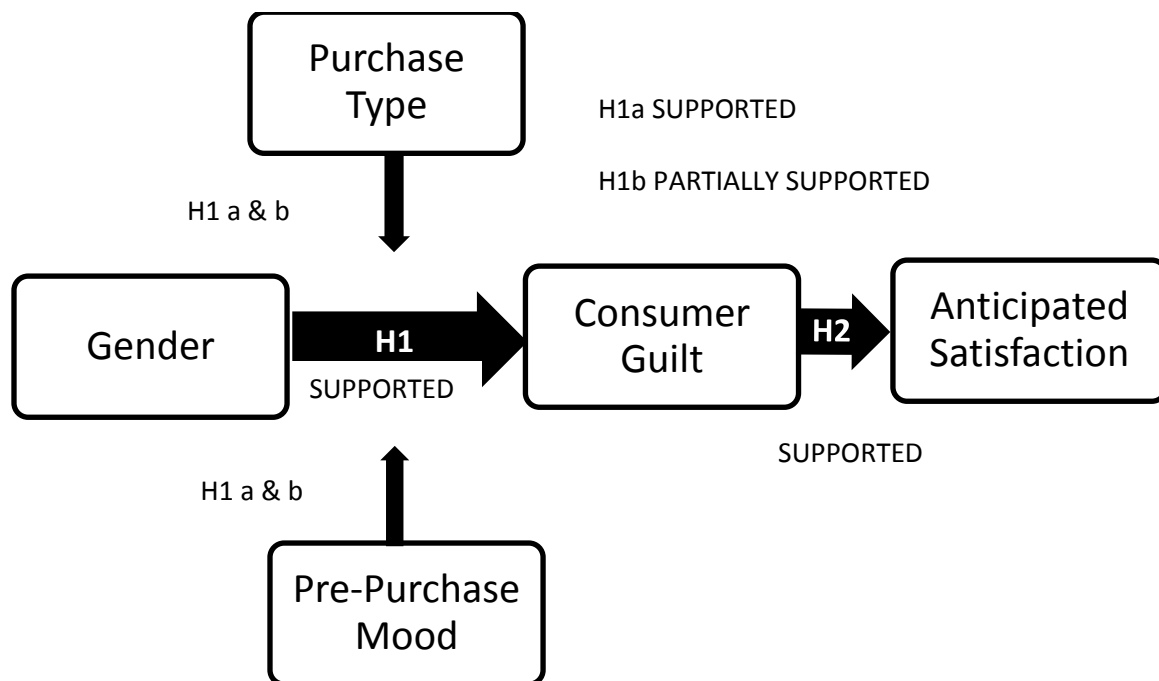
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	3.839	.459	8.354	.000		
	Mood	.006	.166	.002	.970	.998	1.002
	Purchase Type	.564	.166	.172	3.403	.001	1.001
	Gender	-.015	.176	-.004	-.086	.932	1.003
	(Constant)	2.585	.487	5.307	.000		
2	Mood	.141	.152	.043	.928	.986	1.014
	PurchaseType	.490	.151	.149	3.240	.001	1.015
	Gender	.038	.163	.011	.231	.961	1.041
	Vividness	.360	.045	.366	7.972	.000	1.007
	Guilt	-.176	.038	-.216	-4.592	.000	1.060

a. Dependent Variable: anticipated satisfaction

All the VIF values are small, thus indicating that multicollinearity is not a problem. Overall, guilt and vividness accounted for a significant increase in  $R^2$ , change in  $R^2 = .178$ ,  $F(2, 378) = 43.33$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that these variables explained a significant amount of the variation in anticipated satisfaction beyond that explained by the control variables. An examination of the regression coefficients indicate that purchase type (standardized  $B = .149$ ,  $p = .001$ ), guilt (standardized  $B = -.216$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and

vividness (standardized  $B=.366$ ,  $p < .001$ ) are significantly linked to anticipated satisfaction. These results are consistent with H2.

**Figure 7**



## Chapter 5

### Discussion

This mixed-methods study was comprised of a qualitative study consisting of two focus groups, and a quantitative study employing a scenario and survey. This paper addressed three important research objectives: 1) To confirm the presence of consumer guilt and gain insight into how participants experience it 2) To examine how purchase type, pre-purchase mood, and gender interact to impact the experience of consumer guilt

3) To investigate the impact of consumer guilt on anticipated satisfaction with the purchase.

### **Discussion of Qualitative Study Results**

The results of our qualitative study suggest that consumers do indeed experience consumer guilt. Participants indicated that they felt guilt after making purchases for a variety of reasons. Buying things they did not need, paying too much for an item, and spending money on themselves that could have been better spent on other member of the family, going over budget, and not getting a good deal were all discussed as potential sources of consumer guilt.

Although exploratory, our results suggested differences in the experience of consumer guilt depending on the type of purchase. We also detected a difference in the ways in which men and women experienced consumer guilt. These preliminary results suggested that an empirical investigation of consumer guilt was warranted, and to this end, we developed a quantitative study based on scenarios and a survey.

### **Discussion of Quantitative Study Results**

The results of our empirical study shed further light on the experience of consumer guilt. Our results also supported our prediction of a three-way interaction between purchase type, pre-purchase mood, and gender.

As we expected, women felt guilty about material purchases regardless of pre-purchase mood. These results corroborate our qualitative results and are in line with information processing theory, which suggests that women engage in more effortful, detailed processing (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991; Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1993; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1998; Pogun 2001). Interestingly, when making an experiential purchase, women felt much less guilty when in a good mood than when in a bad mood. One possible explanation for this is that women feel less guilty about experiential purchases because they value them more. Prior research has shown that experiential purchases tend to make people happier than material purchases (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003), and that consumers tend to regret not making experiential purchases because they feel that they have missed out on an enriching experience (Rosenzweig and Gilovich 2011). Additionally, women value emotional and symbolic purchases more highly, because of the emotional, social, and relationship-oriented qualities that experiential purchases possess (Kamptner 1991; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Thus, it is possible that when in a good mood, women are more focused on the value and other positive aspects of the experience, rather than on the guilt of spending the money. However, when in a bad mood, more detailed information processing is utilized, leading to the experience of guilt over the purchase.

Our data also yielded interesting results with regards to male participants. Because men tend to engage in heuristic processing (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991; Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1993; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1998; Pogun 2001), which does not lend itself to feelings of guilt, we predicted that when in a good mood, men would not experience high levels of guilt over either material or experiential

purchases. As a negative mood is expected to lead to detailed information processing, thereby facilitating the experience of guilt, we expected that when men are in a bad mood, they will experience relatively more guilt about their purchases than when in a good mood. We predicted this change because, as noted by Martin (2003), when a short-term state such as mood co-exists with a long-term trait such as gender, the mood state will exert a predominant influence over information processing styles.

This prediction held true when men were purchasing material items, although the effect was only marginally significant, and the hypothesis was not supported for the purchase of experiential items. Rather, when men in a bad mood made an experiential purchase, their level of guilt decreased. These results are somewhat counter-intuitive, as a bad mood and the effortful processing induced by this negative mood should lead to higher levels of guilt. One possible explanation for this is that perhaps the men are using the experiential purchase to mitigate the effects of their negative mood. Response style theory (Nolen-Hoeksema 1987; Nolen-Hoeksema 1991) posits that while women deal with negative moods by ruminating over the bad feelings, men tend to deal with bad moods by seeking distraction. It is possible that the men in our study were using their experiential purchase as a distraction from their negative mood, and that they felt justified, rather than guilty, for doing so. The fact that this same effect did not hold true for material purchases could indicate that men find experiences more distracting than material goods. Future research could shed additional light on this unexpected result.

Hierarchical regression analysis also indicated that consumer guilt affected levels of anticipated satisfaction with the purchase, over and above the effect attributed to

purchase type, pre-purchase mood, and gender. This relationship carries important managerial implications, which will be further discussed in the following chapter.

In addition, it should be noted that we wished also to examine the moderating role of temporal distance – in this case, the time lapse between making the purchase and consuming the product or service. This temporal distance is important in a consumer context, because the product or service may be available immediately in some circumstances (the customer purchases an iPad at the store and takes it home,) while in some cases the item is not available until some point in the future (the customer pre-orders the iPad prior to its release.) We were interested to see how this delay impacted the consumer's feelings of guilt about the purchase. However, our initial manipulations for temporal distance did not result in any significant differences between short and long temporal distance, and this variable was subsequently dropped from the analysis. One possible explanation is that the “long” temporal distance condition was manipulated as 4 weeks. It is possible that subjects did not find four weeks a long time to wait for a cruise or a new iPod. Because temporal distance has practical applications in the consumer context, and particularly in the case of impulse shopping, future studies could further examine the impact of this variable on consumer guilt.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Implications, Limitations, and Future Research**

#### **Theoretical Implications**

Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, this study sheds new light onto the topic of consumer guilt. Prior research on consumer guilt is scant (for exceptions, see (Burnett and Lunsford 1994; Lascu 1991; Richins 1994), and our findings add to the body of literature on this topic. The following section discusses the theoretical contributions of this study.

#### **The Presence of and Nature of Consumer Guilt**

The results of this study add to the consumer behavior literature by confirming the presence of consumer guilt. Prior research about consumer guilt has not fully explored the construct, and although a number of studies have investigated ways in which consumer guilt may be overcome or attenuated, these papers have merely assumed the presence of guilt (Strahilevitz and Myers 1998; Kivetz and Simonson 2002; Khan and Dhar 2006; Wertenbroch 1998).

One of the goals of this dissertation was to confirm the presence of consumer guilt and explore how consumers experience it. The descriptions of the experience of guilt about purchases, given in the participants' own words, lend weight to the construct and suggest a number of boundary conditions to be further explored. The confirmation of the

consumer guilt experience builds on previous work on the topic (Burnett and Lunsford 1994; Lascu 1991; Richins 1994) by providing descriptions of the emotion from the participants' own points of view. This is a significant development that can serve as a point of origin for future empirical studies. This research also investigated some boundary conditions of consumer guilt; namely, purchase type, pre-purchase mood, and gender. Our results contribute to the literature in that, to our knowledge, these three variables have never before been studied together in the context of guilt.

### **Implications for Information Processing Theory**

Our results also have theoretical implications for information processing theory. Previous research suggests that happy moods appear to result in more global, heuristic processing, while sad moods lead to more detailed, effortful processing (Bagozzi, Gopinath, and Nyer et al. 1999; Clore, Schwarz, and Conway et al. 1994). Additionally, a number of prior studies have indicated that men and women process information differently (Martin 2003). In particular, differences in the level of cognitive elaboration during information processing have been demonstrated by Meyers-Levy and colleagues (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991; Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1993; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1998). This research suggests that men tend to process information using less elaborate processing, limiting cognitive effort by using heuristic processing. Women, on the other hand, appear to have a lower threshold for elaboration, leading to deeper, more effortful processing of information.

Our results suggest that there may be some boundary conditions for this effect, based on both gender and purchase type. We found that for women, the expected pattern held true for experiential purchase, but for material purchase even a positive mood produced high levels of guilt. This suggests that these women were processing information in an effortful, detailed manner in spite of their good mood. Conversely, men in a bad mood felt far less guilt when making experiential purchases, suggesting an absence of the effortful processing that information processing theory would predict. These results represent an interesting contribution to information processing theory and suggest a number of areas for future research.

#### **Effect of Consumer Guilt on Anticipated Satisfaction**

Our results also contribute to the emotions and satisfaction literature. The relationship between emotions and satisfaction has been widely studied (Bigné, Mattila, and Andreu 2008; Oliver 1993; Richins 1997; Westbrook and Oliver 1991), but research on the construct of consumer guilt is scant. The results of our regression analysis demonstrated that high levels of consumer guilt adversely impacted the consumer's level of anticipated satisfaction with the purchase. To our knowledge, no other studies have examined the relationship of these two variables, making this study a unique contribution to the field.

### **Managerial Implications**

In addition to providing theoretical contributions, this dissertation provides a number of important managerial implications for service marketers and managers. These implications are discussed in the following sections.

#### **Gender Differences in the Experience of Consumer Guilt**

Our results yielded some useful information for managers and marketers regarding the ways in which the genders experience consumer guilt differently. First, women reported feeling higher levels of consumer guilt than did men. Both our qualitative and quantitative results suggest that for both material and experiential purchases, women feel more guilt. As consumer guilt has the potential to adversely impact anticipated satisfaction with the purchase, an awareness of these results could be helpful during the marketing process. Marketing campaigns aimed at female consumers highlight the benefits and justifications for making a purchase.

In addition, our results suggest an effective strategy for marketing to female consumers. We found that when in a good mood, women felt far less guilt about making experiential purchases than they did about material purchases. Service marketers and managers could use this information to frame their services as experiential in order to capitalize on this information. For example, a restaurant marketing campaign, rather than focusing on food quality or price, may wish to emphasize the relaxing atmosphere, the social time with friends, and the opportunity to sample exotic foreign cuisine.

Similarly, our findings suggest that when men are in a bad mood, they are least likely to feel guilt about experiential purchases. This information could be valuable to service marketers who are targeting men when they are likely to be in a negative mood; for example, when driving home from work or after the home team loses a big game. These occasions may prove ideal for the marketing of experiential services to men, as they are unlikely to feel guilty about making an impulse purchase under these circumstances.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

As with all research, our study has a number of limitations. First, our sample was not a representative one. As the goal of this research was theory testing, this homogenous sample was appropriate. However, caution must be exercised when interpreting results gathered from such a narrow sample. Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) point out that much of psychology and behavioral sciences research is conducted on “WEIRD” samples: Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic subjects. In a comprehensive study comparing study results from a number of research domains, they found that this demographic was not representative of larger populations. They suggest that conclusions drawn from research with such samples are extremely poor predictors of human responses, motivations, and behavior (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010).

This issue is particularly important given that the internal standards of right and wrong, which give rise to guilt, are developed in relation to salient reference groups,

including parents, peers, or society at large. As reference groups change, or as one's relationship to certain groups becomes more or less salient, it is possible that these standards may change (Baumeister et al. 1994; Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius 2008). Given this, it is important that future research replicate this study with samples taken from various ethnic and socio-economic populations in order to increase the generalizability of the results. In addition, the salience of various reference groups could be manipulated or measured as a factor in future studies.

Second, further research is warranted to explain our unexpected results regarding men in bad moods feeling little guilt over experiential purchases. One possible explanation that we proposed for these results is that men were using experiences to distract themselves, thereby mitigating their negative mood. This explanation, although plausible given the literature, is by no means exhaustive. Future studies could test alternative explanations for such results.

Third, our study examines only one aspect of consumer guilt: financial guilt. Burnett and Lunsford (1994) suggested that individuals could also experience health guilt, moral guilt, and social responsibility guilt, all in a consumer context. Future research is needed to test these categorizations and determine if other types of consumer guilt do indeed exist, and if so, to test the boundary conditions for each.

Fourth, our study controlled for guilt proneness and purchase price, but future studies could control for other possibly related variables. Factors such as regret, involvement, refund options, and brand loyalty were not explored in the current study, but would serve as interesting variables for future research.

Fifth, although our results demonstrate an inverse relationship between guilt and anticipated satisfaction, we propose that this relationship may not always be the case. It is possible to imagine scenarios where a person could feel extremely guilty yet still derive a great deal of satisfaction out of the experience. Future research could explore such situations.

Lastly, our study examined only three antecedents to consumer guilt: purchase type, pre-purchase mood, and gender. There are a number of other social and personality factors that could influence the experience of consumer guilt. For example, future studies could examine the impact of culture, age, the presence of other consumers, servicescape, and concurrent emotions on levels of consumer guilt.

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A**

#### **Qualitative Question Guide**

After you make a purchase, what feelings do you experience?

When you make a very expensive purchase, how do you feel?

If you purchase junk food, what emotions do you have about that purchase?

Does it matter if you are purchasing these things for yourself or someone else?

What if someone else is around when you make the purchase? Does that change things?

How?

One emotions I've heard some of you mention (I haven't heard any of you mention) is guilt. I'd like to hear more about that.

What kinds of purchases make you feel guilty?

How much do you need to spend for you to feel guilty about the purchase?

What if you have the money? Do you still feel guilty?

Do you feel differently when you pay with cash vs. credit?

Does the guilt keep you from making the purchase?

What sorts of things do you do to feel less guilty?

What do you feel about things made in other countries?

What others kinds of purchases make you feel guilty?

If you went to a restaurant, what kinds of purchases might make you feel guilty?

What about if you see what others around you are buying?

What happens if you are there with friends? Does it change your feelings?

Does it change your mind about what to buy?

Think back to a time when you felt guilty about a purchase. Can you tell us about it?

How do you feel if you get an unexpected upgrade that you were not expecting? What about the other people in line?

What if someone else gets it?

Is there anything else that you would like to share? Anything we should have covered that we didn't?

## **Appendix B**

### **Mood Manipulations and Scenarios**

#### **Good Mood**

The primary purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how people feel in life situations. In the space provided below please describe a recent event that had affected you personally. More specifically, you are asked to describe an event that made you feel “really good”. Please be as vivid and detailed as possible since the more information we gain the better understanding we will have.

#### **Bad Mood**

The primary purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how people feel in life situations. In the space provided below please describe a recent event that had affected you personally. More specifically, you are asked to describe an event that made you feel “really bad”. Please be as vivid and detailed as possible since the more information we gain the better understanding we will have.

#### **Material Purchase**

You are out shopping one day at the mall in Miami, where you live, and you walk past your favorite store. In the window you see a poster for the new iPad Air. It’s even thinner and lighter than the previous generation. You’ve been thinking about getting one. It’s \$500, though, and you know you shouldn’t be spending that kind of money on

something so unnecessary. You've been trying to build up a little emergency fund, you have bills to pay, and you know your car is going to need new tires pretty soon.

You find a sales clerk and ask about the iPad Air. He says that the release date is tomorrow, but that you can preorder it today to be sure you get one out of the first shipment. He asks if you would like to reserve your iPad by pre-buying it now, and that you can come pick it up tomorrow anytime after 4 pm. You can't resist, so you say "Why not?" and he rings up your purchase.

### **Experiential Purchase**

You are out shopping one day at the mall in Miami, where you live, and you walk past a store that specializes in travel-related services. In the window you see a poster for a 3-day Caribbean cruise leaving out of Miami. You've been thinking about trying a cruise. It's \$500, though, and you know you shouldn't be spending that kind of money on something so unnecessary. You've been trying to build up a little emergency fund, you have bills to pay, and you know your car is going to need new tires pretty soon.

You walk in, find a sales clerk, and ask about the cruise. He informs you that the cruise you are asking about actually leaves tomorrow evening. You have the next few days off from work. You can't resist, so you say "Why not?" and he rings up your purchase.

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## **VITA**

### **Lydia Hanks**

Lydia Hanks is from Munice, Indiana, U.S.A. She received her undergraduate degree from The University of Louisiana, Lafayette, with a major in psychology and a minor in English. She earned her MBA at The University of Denver, after which she worked as a Spa Director for a number of hotel chains and privately owned spas. She received her Ph.D. in Hospitality Management from The Pennsylvania State University.

Lydia Hanks will begin her academic career at Florida State University, where she has accepted an assistant professor appointment. She will teach Hospitality Marketing and Lodging Management.