



# The relationship between mothers' guilt and their consumption decisions

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## Abstract

**Objective:** This article seeks to understand the relationship between mothers' guilt in relation to the child's well-being and their consumption decisions.

**Methodology:** We used an exploratory qualitative approach, with thirteen in-depth interviews with mothers and one specialist. We used content analysis to scrutinize the data.

**Main results:** Four research propositions are presented: (i) allowing the child to have greater influence over their consumption decisions reduces the mother's guilt; (ii) less time spent with the child leads to greater guilt experienced by the mother regarding the child's well-being; (iii) the purchase of superfluous products for the child reduces the mother's guilt; and (iv) compliance with the child's social norms of consumption reduces the mother's guilt.

**Relevance/Originality:** Most of research on guilt in consumer behavior lies in the antecedents of such emotion, and few articles have investigated the consequences of guilt. However, no study thus far has investigated coping strategies (to reduce guilt) used by guilty mothers, towards their children, that are associated to consumption decisions concerning their children.

**Research implications:** The implications of this work consist in stimulating the understanding of how guilt interferes in mothers' decisions pertaining to consumption of products for the children.

**Keywords:** Guilt. Motherhood. Social norms. Children.

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## Introduction

Guilt and its relation to consumption became the subject of studies in the early 1980s (Ghingold, 1981), but only in the 1990s consumer guilt became a subject of interest in the scientific literature on consumer behavior (Lascu, 1991). From that point on, several studies on guilt and its influence on consumer decisions has emerged (Pinto & Priest, 1991; Burnett & Lunsford, 1994; Huhmann & Brotherton, 1997). Guilt is defined as a negative emotion that arises when there is recognition that the subject has violated their moral or social standards (Kugler & Jones, 1992). It can also be defined as the feeling that the subject violated ethical, moral, or religious principles, and is accompanied by a sense of regret or low self-esteem (English & English, 1976).

Potential outcomes of a negative emotional experience, such as guilt, are emotion-focused coping or problem focused coping. The former indicates a coping approach that focuses on regulating the negative emotion to restore the internal imbalance, such as creating rationales to justify the self (Antonetti & Baines, 2014). Problem-focused coping includes, instead, all the actions that try to deal with the source of the negative emotional experience, such as changing personal behavior or redressing past wrongdoing (Tangney et al. 2007). Those potential outcomes are easily observed in modern mothers, a group of people especially susceptible to guilt. In Brazil, as the saying goes, “*nasce uma mãe, nasce a culpa*”, meaning that when a woman becomes a mother, she starts having guilt feelings. Guilt became a recognized part of motherhood when, at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Jean-Jacques Rosseau published his work *Émile* (Monteiro, 2012), a divisive landmark in the history of Western education, which brought a new concept of education and maternity (Paiva, 2011, p. 5). Rosseau highlighted the importance of the presence of mothers in the education of their children, who were previously left to the care of nannies. After the emphasis turned to mothers' need to look after their children simultaneously to the obligation to be active in their education, a general sense of guilt associated with maternity arose, which was further strengthened when women entered the labor market and needed to divide their time between their careers and taking care of their children. A mother's guilt arises when she discovers that she is not able to match the idealized model of the “perfect mother” and match all the expectations about her role.

The relevance of guilt to Consumer Behavior lies in the assumption that it can influence mothers' consumption decisions. The redemption of guilt could lie in attempts to achieve more intense coexistence with the children, or to search for information to deal with situations that generate guilt, or consumption, since redemption of guilt has "become a new form of merchandise" (Fontenelle, 2010, p. 215). For example, a company that presents a real value proposition of sustainability for a product can attract consumers who are seeking to redeem themselves for the guilt of consuming less sustainable products. Then, some situations of mothers' consumption concerning their children may occur as a form of redemption from guilt, such as the lack of day-to-day coexistence with their children, the "outsourcing" of motherhood to nannies, or the simple belief that they are failing to educate their children effectively. The redemption of guilt would then occur through the consumption of products, especially in the form of toys and tasty food (e.g., hamburgers, snacks, and fried foods, to the detriment of healthy and nutritious food) that serve to minimize the guilt arising from absence or failure.

Most of research on guilt in consumer behavior lies in the *antecedents* of such emotion, such as when consumers experience contextually the pleasure of consumption and the guilty feelings caused by the perception of not resisting temptation, especially in food consumption (Mishra and Mishra, 2011). Few articles have investigated the *consequences* of guilt, such as reduction of consumption of unhealthy foods (Durkin et al., 2012), financial prudence and increasing saving (Soman and Cheema, 2011), boycotting decisions (Braunsberger & Buckler, 2011) and environmentally responsible consumption choices (Peloza et al., 2013), and mother's desire to save financial resources to spend on children their well-being (Soman and Cheema, 2011). However, no study thus far has investigated coping strategies (to reduce guilt) used by guilty mothers, towards their children, that are associated to consuming decisions concerning their children. The purpose of this article is to understand the relationship between guilt, especially that arising in mothers towards their children, and consumption decisions. To this end, an exploratory study was carried out, composed of a theoretical review on the subject in consumer behavior and field research with in-depth interviews with consumer mothers.

The importance of the current study is twofold. First, we add to the emotions literature the perspective on guilt as an antecedent for consumption, when guilty mothers use consumption to cope with guilt towards their children. Second, we present research proposals so that the

phenomenon can be further investigated in empirical research. The article is structured as follows: this introduction presented the topic and objective of the research. Next we present the theoretical review, which emphasizes guilt from the consumption point of view, followed by the method and results. We finish by presenting the research proposals and suggestions for future research in the area of emotions in consumer behavior.

### **Consumer Guilt**

Languages of Latin origin have different words to name what in English are called emotions. In Portuguese, the word used to refer to primary emotions is “*emoções*,” while the word used to refer to secondary emotions is “*sentimentos*” (Rodríguez-Torres et al., 2005). Primary emotions (*emoções*) are human beings’ natural and automatic reactions that are not controlled by consciousness. They originate in the nervous system, specifically in the amygdala, and trigger a response that may be physiological (Scliar, 2007). It is believed that emotions are not exclusively human, and may also be encountered in animals. Some examples of emotion are tension, fear, anger, surprise, nervousness, and pleasure (Rodríguez-Torres et., 2005). On the other hand, secondary emotions (*sentimentos*) are more complex psychological situations and reflect a state of consciousness generated by external stimuli or memories. Secondary emotions are learned in life in society—through time spent with family and friends, for example—and depend on the culture in which the individual is inserted. They are related to the interaction of the amygdala with the prefrontal cortex (Scliar, 2007), and include hatred, resentment, envy, hope, despair, love, and guilt (Rodríguez-Torres et al., 2005).

In the context of psychology, guilt is a feeling that arises when the individual recognizes that a moral or social standard has been violated (Kugler & Jones, 1992). Consumer guilt is defined as an effect caused by the anxiety experienced by the consumer when they realize that are transgressing a moral, ethical, or social principle. The transgression can be the purchase of a product, service, idea, or experience (for example, buying a product that does not meet certain quality standards, or buying a high luxury product that leads to feelings of guilt for consuming it in a society in which others lack basic goods, such as food). The transgression may also be due to

the nonpurchase of a product determined by moral, social, or ethical principles (Lascu, 1991), such as the guilt generated by the nonpurchase of a gift for a child, the opportunity lost in the nonpurchase of an item that is on sale, or the nonpurchase of a product that would facilitate socialization, such as a fashionable outfit. Consumer guilt is specifically associated with situations in which consumer decisions are made. It can also be defined as “the negative emotion of a consumer disobeys social standards or personal values when he does his shopping” (Lin & Xia, 2008, p. 332), or as “the dysphoric feeling associated with the recognition that one has violated a personally relevant moral or social standard” (Lee-Wingate and Corfman, 2009, p. 386).

Consumer guilt comprises a range of different dimensions and classifications (Burnett & Lunsford, 1994; Dahl, Honea & Manchanda, 2003; Dedeoğlu & Kazançoğlu, 2010). Dahl et al. (2003) classified guilt into three categories according to the circumstances that cause it:

- i) Guilt related to others: This arises when the individual’s action, or lack of action, has negative consequences for other people. An example of this type of guilt due to an action is buying a pirated CD but feeling guilty for harming the artist by failing to pay for the rights to the music. An example due to inaction is not giving a tip in a situation in which the individual has had good service.
- ii) Guilt related to social norms: This arises when the event that caused guilt is related to situations that involve the transgression of social standards, and can also result from some action or lack of action. An example related to an action is throwing a recyclable item in the organic trash. An example from a lack of action is the individual ceasing their participation in a charity campaign in which their friends participate.
- iii) Guilt related to the self: This arises when the individual fails to achieve the standards or objectives they have defined for themselves; that is, when the behavior is different from what was idealized, again by an action or lack of action. An example pertaining to an action is the individual deciding to go on a diet and feeling guilty when consuming chocolate, while that from an inaction is the individual blaming themselves for not attending the gym despite having paid the monthly fee.

A fourth classification is existential guilt, which results from the perception of a discrepancy between the well-being of the subject and the well-being of others (Cotte, Coulter, & Moore, 2005). For example, a consumer may feel guilty when they are in a restaurant eating a large meal and thinking about people who are hungry, or when spending a lot of money on a luxurious and superfluous product while remembering that there are people whose income is insufficient to cover basic human needs.

Consumer guilt can also be categorized according to when it occurs (Lin & Xia, 2008); that is, it can be:

- i) Anticipatory, if it occurs before the moment of consumption, while the individual is imagining or planning their consumption. A mother who plans to purchase a carseat for her baby might experience guilt from the thought that she may have a car accident and the baby will not be protected if she does not choose the best available option.
- ii) Reactive, if it occurs after the subject has committed the transgression. An example is a father who buys an expensive car but wonders whether he should have saved the money for his son's education.
- iii) Procedural, when it occurs during the process or moment of consumption, as per a mother who feels guilty about spending the afternoon at a beauty salon when she believes she should be spending more time with her children.

As seen from the above, consumer guilt can arise as a consequence of the realization or nonrealization of a purchase (Burnett & Lunsford, 1994); that is, guilt can also be classified more broadly as the consequence of an action or lack of action (Bonsu & Main, 2006). For example, an individual who consumes a product that it is not good for their health, such as cigarettes or alcohol, may feel guilty as a result; an individual who stops attending a gym may feel guilty as a result of that lack of action.

Burnett and Lunsford (1994) identified four types of consumer guilt: (1) financial guilt, characterized as resulting from purchases that are not easily justified, are unnecessary, or are extravagant/superfluous; (2) guilt over health, which occurs when the individual believes that they are not taking care of their health, such as by not exercising or not following a diet; (3) moral guilt,

which occurs when a purchase decision goes against the moral values of the subject, such as the consumption of pirated DVDs; and (4) social responsibility guilt, which occurs when the individual makes a purchase decision that goes against what is perceived as their social obligation, such as the consumption of polluting products (e.g., the use of automobiles, which contribute to air traffic pollution and congestion on public roads).

The work of Burnett and Lunsford (1994), however, was restricted to consumption related to the purchase of goods and foods, while guilt can refer to several types of product and have several forms in a single consumption situation (Bonsu, Main, & Wilner, 2008). For example, a consumer might experience financial guilt and guilt over health at the same time due to consuming a high-calorie meal in an expensive restaurant when they are on a budget and ought to be following a diet. Other types of guilt can be also considered, such as the guilt that results from a lack of concern for the environment, or that which arises when the subject consumes something that transgresses the norms imposed by their religion.

## **Dimensions**

There is no consensus among authors about the dimensions of guilt. Dahl et al. (2003) associated guilt with feelings of remorse, regret, and empathic concern. For Bonsu and Main (2006), guilt includes remorse, or a feeling of responsibility for the outcomes of the individual's action (self-blame) and lack of self-control. Dedeoğlu and Kazançoğlu (2010), who carried out a phenomenological study on consumer guilt using in-depth interviews and the projection technique, found five dimensions of guilt: hesitation, sadness, reluctance to spend, regret, and a sense of responsibility for the outcome of their action (self-blame). Finally, Lin and Xia (2008) found six dimensions of consumer guilt: hesitation, fear, scruples, reluctance to spend, regret, and responsibility for actions (blame).

Thus, there is no definition that is common to all the aforementioned authors. The most frequently used are regret and remorse: the former occurs when the subject is aware of an unselected alternative that could have given better results, while the latter is focused on an action and occurs in ethical or social contexts that involve a consideration of right and wrong (Dedeoğlu

& Kazançoğlu, 2010). Regret can be related to action or lack of action. In relation to utilitarian products, regret arises when associated with a perception of value. In case of hedonic products, it comes about through the perception of transgression of a norm, whether the norm is imposed by others or established by the subject. Regret due to a lack of action usually happens when the consumer loses out on a promotion, and can also arise when the consumer perceives an incongruity between the product and its image. Such cases have been reported mainly by men when buying products that are considered feminine, such as cosmetics: they want to buy a particular cosmetic but do not buy it for fear of being seen with something that is not masculine (Dedeoğlu & Kazançoğlu, 2010). Regret is associated with a lack of self-control, which refers to “the self's capacity to alter its own states and responses” (Baumeister, 2002, p. 670) and represents the ability to resist temptations that lead to regret.

Guilt is related to various emotional constructs according to the moment at which it occurs. The main construct associated with anticipatory guilt is hesitation. Returning to the example of the mother buying a car seat for her baby, she might hesitate when deciding on the best model so that, in case of an accident, she will not feel guilty for not having made the best choice. The reluctance to spend is related to procedural guilt, because it is during the process of buying a product that the consumer will question whether the amount to be paid is fair. On the other hand, the main constructs associated with reactive guilt are regret and responsibility for the actions (blame), as in the case of a consumer who buys clothes and, when arriving at home, realizes that they have paid a very high price for something they will only use a few times, which generates purchase regret (Lin & Xia, 2008).

Guilt is one of the dimensions of the consumer's propensity to desire objects, along with pleasure, discomfort, and control. The desire to consume can create a dilemma between abstinence and satisfaction, and meeting the craving for consumption can cause feelings of guilt. Consumer desires usually involve financial considerations, which lead consumers to hesitate before they act, and sometimes to feel guilty before and after consumption. Some consumers even feel guilty due only to the presence of the desire to consume, either because they have many desires for consumption or because they want expensive, ostentatious objects (Boujbel, 2008).



Attending to a desire, buying luxurious items, and taking part in impulsive or compulsive shopping can lead to feelings of guilt. Although it is generally accepted that it is a lack of self-control that leads to impulsive buying, it is also known that the feeling that one may lose out on some pleasure or opportunity in life can lead consumers to try to fulfill their immediate desires (Kivetz & Keinan, 2006).

### **Guilt in Marketing Communications**

Early marketing research that studied negative emotions emphasized fear, while guilt was a marginally studied emotion. Guilt has been studied in parallel with fear because both are negative feelings that are related to the outcome of a behavior. Fear arises as an anticipation of the outcome of a behavior; guilt can also arise in anticipation of a result, or as the consequence of a behavior that has already been carried out (Ghingold & Bozinoff, 1982; Burnett & Lunsford, 1994).

The first marketing study on guilt reported that marketing communication can increase one's guilt feelings, and this increase is tempered by the individual's susceptibility to guilt appeal (Ghingold, 1981). "A guilt appeal usually consists of material designed to evoke guilt and recommendations for remedial action" (Boudewyns, Turner, & Paquin, 2013, p. 812). These authors suggested hypotheses that the increased guilt provoked by marketing communications will make the subject more susceptible to the persuasive appeal of the communication, whereby if the guilt is increased beyond the limit tolerated by the individual, they will enter into a state of mind that will drive them to resolve or lessen guilt. Within marketing, resolution of this mental state is sought via a change in belief, intention, or attitude.

The relationship between mothers and guilt is so strong that they are the main target of guilt appeals in marketing communications (Coulter & Pinto, 1995). Mothers who work outside of their homes are particularly influenced by such guilt appeals. Marketers have been using guilt as a communication technique with persuasive appeal since 1920 (Pinto & Priest, 1991). Marketing communications can seek to stimulate different guilt intensities. Bozinoff and Ghingold (1983) conducted an experiment in which they showed undergraduates ads soliciting donations to a charity. The ads were selected based on the different levels of guilt they induced: one was selected

to incite guilt on a very low level, two others at intermediate levels, and a fourth was designed to incite guilt at a very high level. The experiment proved that it is possible to incite a sense of guilt via marketing communications at different levels, however it did not lead to a change in the respondents' attitudes or behavioral intentions. One possible explanation for this is that the guilt was not stimulated above the students' level of tolerance, or that students were able to reduce the feeling of guilt by seeking counterarguments for the message, rather than changing their attitudes or behavioral intentions (Bozinoff & Ghingold, 1983).

Different intensities of guilt provoke different responses on the part of individuals, such that determining the intensity of guilt to be provoked may be important for empirical research on consumer behavior. Moderate or low guilt appeals are more effective in communication, in that they tend to be more persuasive, compared to very high-level guilt appeals. Furthermore, the higher the level of guilt generated by the appeal, the greater the level of anger and irritation, which mediates the relationship between the guilt appeal and consumer attitudes (Coulter & Pinto, 1995).

Contrary to Coulter and Pinto's (1995) assertion, Boudewyns, Turner, and Paquin (2013) argued that it is possible for communications based on guilt appeal that generate anger to in fact cause shame rather than guilt. Shame is a feeling that causes the desire to "disappear," or to stop being perceived, whereas guilt leads the individual to perform a repair action. In psychology, the feeling of shame is positively and significantly correlated with anger, while the sense of guilt has no explicit relation to anger. In a study by Boudewyns et al. (2013), an ad based on shame appeal was found to lead to a more significant increase in anger than one based on guilt appeal. The differentiation between the two types of appeal was the emphasis given to the subject or the action, since shame-inducing appeals emphasize the subject rather than the action. For example, the message "Last night you let a child go to sleep hungry again" emphasizes the subject and generates a feeling of shame, while the message "Last night a child went to sleep hungry again" emphasizes the situation itself, and generates a sense of guilt (Niederdeppe, Bu, Borah, Kindig, & Robert, 2008). Because shame is attached to the subject rather than to action, the individual may also feel anger; however, if the appeal provokes only guilt and not shame, anger will not be generated (Boudewyns et al., 2013).

The first article to generalize guilt appeals to targets other than charitable campaigns or volunteer work was that of Pinto and Priest (1991). Their research sought to analyze working mothers via frozen food ads that were intended to incite different levels of guilt. The authors asked the mothers what feelings the ads provoked, and then conducted personal interviews to find out whether purchases were made to relieve guilt or anxiety. This article reaffirmed findings by Bozinoff and Ghingold (1983) that perceived guilt is much greater in advertisements with moderate than high guilt appeal. However, the work of Boudewyns et al. (2013), in contrast, identified that in cases of high guilt appeal the feeling generated is anger, which can result in a “boomerang” effect that places the consumer against the company. This is demonstrated in the quote “Working moms feel enough guilt. Companies don't have to lay any more on them!”, mentioned by a respondent confronted with an advertisement showing high guilt (Pinto & Priest, 1991, p. 383).

Marketing communications can also have the opposite effect—that is, lessening the consumer's sense of guilt. For example, in the case of consumption of hedonic goods, which can generate a feeling of guilt as they are not considered to be primary necessities, advertising can mitigate guilt by changing consumer buying intentions, as in the case of the advertisement that states “Ford Fusion: whoever has it, deserves it.” Kemp, Bui, and Chapa's (2012) survey demonstrated that the greater the emotional response to a communication the greater the perception of decreased guilt, and that the mitigation of guilt is positively related to the intention to buy. It is also possible, through marketing communications, to reduce anticipatory guilt at the time the consumer is considering buying a product (Soscia, Busacca, & Pitrelli, 2008).

In a content analysis of advertisements that use guilt appeals, Huhmann and Brotherton (1997) concluded that guilt appeal is used as often as other appeals (e.g., humor, sex), and that most of them use anticipatory guilt appeals. Guilt appeals in advertising seem to be directed primarily at women (Pinto & Priest, 1991), and appear more in philanthropic advertisements and those for health-related products (Huhmann & Brotherton, 1997). However, guilt appeal is so widely used in marketing communications that consumers have developed resiliency mechanisms to deal with them. Consumers may also have negative feelings towards communications with guilt appeals, even if such appeals are for a good cause (Brennan & Binney, 2010). However, Brennan and Binney (2010) carried out their study out in Australia, which represents a very different context compared to Brazil, and thus investigations in the Brazilian environment are warranted.

### **How do consumers deal with guilt?**

Guilt generates a negative state in the individual, and informs them that they have violated personal or social patterns and motivate them to perform a remedial action (Dahl, Honea, & Manchanda, 2005). Unlike other negative emotions, guilt can lead to both positive and negative outcomes. A reprobable act can have positive or negative consequences, and the guilt generated by either situation will manifest in the same way (Ghingold, 1981; Lascu, 1991). For example, the guilt generated from smoking cigarettes can lead an individual to smoke less, which can have a positive effect (improving the individual's health).

When experiencing guilt, the individual's self-esteem diminishes and they begin to feel decreased personal value. In order to recover from this, it is necessary to take some action that will reduce the guilt to a tolerable level (Ghingold, 1981) to repair or compensate for the damage caused. Alternatively, promises and plans may be made for future actions that can be taken in a similar situation to the event that caused the guilt (Dahl et al., 2003). For example, in situations where there is a social connection between a buyer and a seller but the sale does not materialize, the buyer may experience guilt, and plan to buy from the same seller in future in order to repair this guilt.

In order to obtain pleasure without guilt, consumers seek justification. For example, they tend to consume hedonic goods when the context provides flexibility to justify this consumption (Okada, 2005). For example, a consumer who decides to spend the day at an expensive spa may feel guilty for spending that money, and, in order to enjoy the day without this guilt, seek justification by saying that they deserve to take care of themselves or that they work very hard.

The guilt incited by items such as hedonic products may be reduced if the purchase also includes something that is utilitarian, or if the hedonic product is a gift for a person other than the buyer (Lee-Wingate & Corfman, 2009).

### **Guilt and mothers**

Forna (1998) described the myth of the “perfect mother,” a model built over the several centuries, in which the mother is capable of making many sacrifices and yet remains tender, patient, loving, balanced, and feminine—thus, “perfect.” But when the birth of the first child occurs, the woman realizes that this is an impossible ideal and begins to experience feelings that are contradictory to the idealized image.

The myth of the perfect mother is such a strong model that motherhood is seen as something natural and innate for all women, and when a woman becomes a mother and fails to achieve this ideal she starts to feel guilty (Forna, 1998). Although motherhood varies depending on context, the social expectation of motherhood as an ideal experience is ubiquitous. Benute et al. (2009) argued that the transgression of moral laws, in this case noncompliance with the expectation of ideal motherhood, leads to conflicts, and one of the consequences of this is the feeling of guilt. The mother feels guilty, and may even experience postpartum depression, due to her disappointment at not being able to fulfill the role idealized by society and constantly reaffirmed by advertisements for products such as disposable diapers or actions such as breastfeeding (Azevedo & Arrais, 2006).

Many authors (Lee-Wingate, 2006; Dedeoğlu & Kazançoğlu, 2010; Veloso, Hildebrand & Campomar, 2012) agree that there is a positive relationship between the mothers’ guilt and their compensation of this guilt through consumption. In addition to the aforementioned factors, such as the myth of the perfect mother and the guilt that comes from not being able to follow this model, the insertion of women in the labor market and their consequent absence from home for most of the day are also factors that lead to guilt. In turn, feelings of guilt arising in relation to the child enhances the child’s importance in family consumption decisions: “when both parents work, a guilt environment is created or there is a need to take the children shopping to compensate the little time they spend together” (Veloso, Hildebrand & Campomar, 2012 p. 135).

The concept of guilt is closely related to the idea that in order to alleviate guilt it is necessary to repair the damage caused by the transgression (Sukhdial & Boush, 2004). In the case of mothers, the feeling of guilt is caused by failures, real or imaginary, in their relationship with their child. Dedeoğlu (2006) analyzed the discourse of group discussions of online forums and articles written by mothers and found that women blame themselves for not being good mothers when they cannot devote all their time to their child, thus losing out on some important factors, such as first steps and first words. This sense of guilt, and the need to spend “quality” time with their children, affects

consumption decisions, as the mothers end up spending more of their leisure time in places where their children can eat their favorite food, where they can buy toys, and where their children can have fun—such as parks. This situation was described by Massyliouk and Campos (2016), who found that a mother who has a guilty feeling for working and do not spending much time at home does not stablish rigid feeding rules and let their children drink soft-drinks when they want to. Thus, the first proposition arising from the theory is as follows:

***P1. Allowing the child to have greater influence over their consumption decisions reduces the mother's guilt regarding the child's well-being.***

Other propositions arise from the exploratory research, as explained below.

## **Method**

An exploratory study was conducted to understand the relationship between mothers' guilt and consumption. This approach was chosen because no studies were found that dealt with this relationship in consumer behavior, and an exploratory approach seemed most appropriate for an initial investigation on this topic. Since the purpose of the study is develop propositions from empirical data, a qualitative approach is the most appropriate choice (Flick, 2009).

It was applied a purposive, snowball sampling strategy, were we identified mothers who knew other mothers that would generate an information-rich interview (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted, thirteen of them with mothers with different profiles and one with a specialist psychologist who is also the mother of four (adult) children. The interviewees participated voluntarily and the interviews were conducted in their homes or in places that were convenient to them. A profile of the mothers is presented on Table 1.

Table 1 - Profile of interviewed mothers

	Age	Number of children	Level of Education	Work Activity
N.	28	1	Undergraduate	Homemaker
L.	32	1	Undergraduate	Work full-time from home
B.	32	2	Undergraduate	Homemaker
R.	41	1	Undergraduate	Work full-time away from home
T.	42	3	Graduate	Work part-time away from home
A.	42	2	Graduate	Homemaker
P.	41	1	Graduate	Work full-time away from home
D.	42	1	Graduate	Work part-time away from home
V.	36	3	High-School	Work part-time away from home
S.	40	2	Graduate	Work full-time away from home
P.	35	2	Undergraduate	Work full-time away from home
A.	36	3	Undergraduate	Homemaker
Z.	37	1	High-School	Work part-time away from home

The interviews were conducted according to a semi-structured script that included five major topics to be investigated.

- i) We sought to understand whether the interviewees agreed and identified with the popular saying “the mother is born and with her the guilt,” and the reasons that mothers feel guilty. The behavior of other mothers, who were part of their social circle, from the interviewees’ perspective (how they perceived the relationship of other mothers between guilt and consumption) was also analyzed.

- ii) Next, we tried to understand what mothers do when they feel guilty, how they react to this feeling, and what actions they take to eliminate or minimize it.
- iii) We then explored the relationship between guilt and consumption, particularly if consumption was highlighted as a way of minimizing guilt—that is, if guilt was also noted as an antecedent of consumption, and not only a consequence.
- iv) Subsequently, we sought to understand the situations in which reactive guilt occurs—that is, whether guilt arises as a consequence of a specific situation in which the individual has consumed or stopped consuming something (e.g., a product, trip, course, etc.).
- v) Finally, we explored marketing communications to see whether any kind of communication made them feel more or less guilty about a particular purchase or form of consumption.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and individually analyzed. The interviews lasted from 30 to 70 minutes and were held in the city of São Paulo. The methodology used to analyze the data was content analysis. This is a classical procedure and one of its main characteristics is the creation of categories that are compared to the empirical data, evaluated and, if necessary, modified (Flick, 2009). “The goal of content analysis is the systematic examination of communicative material” (Mayring, 2004, p.266). The communicative material can be a text, and should be recorded. Content analysis can target the content of verbal material, and its formal aspects or latent meaning (Mayring, 2004).

The analysis of the data followed the procedure presented by Mayring (2004): (i) define the research question; (ii) define general categories, what was done according to the five major topics listed above; (iii) gradual category formation from the empirical material; (iv) revision of categories after half of the material was processed; (v) final processing of material and (vi) its analysis. This type of procedure is called *summarizing content analysis* and its goal is to reduce the material to a short text but preserve the content.



## Results

Almost all of the interviewed mothers agreed with the popular saying that “a mother is born and with her the guilt.” The first category defined sought to identify the reasons that mothers feel guilty and the explanations for the emergence of this feeling were in accordance with what Forna (1998) described as the myth of the perfect mother. The idea of perfection and “omnipotence” in educating children was explained by the psychologist as follows:

*The mother does not have all this omnipotence! And, in the end, women ended up convincing themselves that they had that power! That they are responsible for everything that goes right and wrong with their child and nurtured that power, they were convinced of that. So, when they realize that they are not perfect, that they have done something that is not within what is conceived as a standard, of course, they carry enormous guilt. (Specialist)*

Two types of situations were identified that cause mothers to feel guilty. The first is the idea that there is a need for perfection because mothers feel responsible not only for their children’s education, but also for their happiness. The mothers expressed the need to seek perfection in all situations in which they interact with their children by anticipating the guilt that will be generated if any of their actions have a negative impact on their child’s education or relationship with them, as clearly shown below:

*I believe that [before the birth of her daughter] there was no such intense guilt. I think we feel responsible for the happiness of the child. [...] I think we feel guilty for somehow not supplying what the child needs, so that she has everything she needs to. [...] But the guilt arises because you think ... [Am I] doing it right? [...] You are not doing something simple, you are educating! (N., 28 years)*

*I think it’s a burden, a responsibility to have to raise, to educate, to prepare a child for the world, we want it to come out perfect. (L., 32 years)*

One interviewee mentioned the conflict between the ideal she desired to achieve and the action she really takes. Repeating her mother's behavior, which she doesn't agree with, makes her feel guilty, because she realizes that she cannot be perfect.

*Sometimes I scream, my whole life I said that ... my mother screamed a lot and I always said "I will not scream at my children!" But it's natural, it's action and reaction, then I blame myself, and I feel bad. (A., 36 years)*

Since the ideal of perfection is something that causes guilt in mothers when they realize that they cannot achieve this ideal, marketing communications (which represent ideal situations that are not possible to achieve) also generate guilt, as reported below:

*There are those advertisements of a mother playing with her son on the floor, which I don't have. So, I feel guilty! I feel guilty for not having the patience to play with my son. (B., 32 years)*

The fact that a marketing communication can enhance someone's guilt was already mentioned on the literature (Ghingold, 1981). Most studies present consequences of guilt appeals (Coulter & Pinto, 1995; Bozinoff & Ghingold, 1983, Boundewyns et al., 2013), but none of them presented the fact that guilt can be generated by communications that represent the idealization of a perfect situation.

The second type of situation that generates guilt is the absence caused by the need or desire to work. The need to delegate childcare to a third person, be it a nanny, a grandparent, or a teacher, and not being fully available to the child, was a cause of guilt highlighted by all interviewees.

*I think that guilt has more to do with working hard, or traveling a lot, of not being able to spend as much time together. (R., 41 years)*

*When I am away for work, I feel guilty. In general, when we are not present we feel guilty. (B., 32 years)*

*I feel guilty because I work away from home and take care of the children. I feel guilty in the sense that I spend very little time with the children. Even though I think I dedicate a lot, I always feel there's something missing, that I could be more present [...] [there is a] sense of guilt in this aspect. (T., 42 years)*

Guilt arising from absence was mentioned in all of the interviews. Even the homemakers mentioned times when they had had to work but the guilt was too much, which led them to leave their job. This kind of guilt can be classified as guilt related to others (Dahl et al., 2003) since it is generated by an action that has, from the perspective of the mother, a negative consequence for her children. The mother believes that if she is not able to personally take care of her child the child will somehow suffer from this absence, therefore provoking her guilt. Thus, we have the second proposition:

***P2. Less time spent with the child leads to greater guilt experienced by the mother regarding the child's well-being.***

Guilt is a negative state that motivates the individual to repair the damage caused (Sukhdial & Boush, 2004) in order to reduce this feeling to a bearable level (Ghingold, 1981). In the case of the mothers, the damage they believe it was caused by their absence cannot be repaired, so one of the ways in which mothers stated reducing feelings of guilt is providing consumption situations that please children. However, consumption became the primary form of redemption only for women who had already developed a consumerist lifestyle before becoming mothers. Other ways mentioned for dealing with guilt also had some relation to the mothers' tastes and lifestyles, or their concern about setting a positive example for their children. The redemption of guilt through consumption is highlighted in quotes such as:

*I used to arrive and could not see either [children] at night. I'd see them for 30 or 40 minutes a day [...] But then the weekend would come, I do not know if it was intentional, but I think it happened. "Oh, I want that," so let's go to RI Happy at PB Kids [toy stores]. (A., 42 years)*

*When I went back to work, on the first day I bought a toy for each one [of my children, so] I came back home with a present. (B., 32 years)*

*To make up for it, sometimes I end up giving the kids more things than they really need. Since I work all day [...] I end up giving a lot of extra things, maybe to compensate for this guilt. (T., 42 years)*

On the other hand, mothers who highlighted being preoccupied with overconsumption or who had a more frugal lifestyle valued other activities and found ways to deal with guilt that were more appropriate to their economic status, such as:

*To compensate for my guilt, I have outdoor programs, like cycling, going to the park or swim club. (P., 41 years)*

We mapped the relationships between conceptual elements and data provided by the respondents on explicit associations (Spiggle, 1994). The interviews indicate a possible relationship between the guilt generated by a lack of time dedicated to the children and the purchase of superfluous items, such as excess gifts. Therefore, it is proposed:

***P3. The purchase of superfluous products for the child reduces the mother's guilt regarding the child's well-being. This relationship is moderated by the style of consumption of the mother (consumerist or frugal).***

The search for information is also a means of dealing with guilt, because understanding different milestones as a mother and knowing what to do about different issues pertaining to the child brings more security to some mothers, who thus feel able to take informed actions and thereby minimize their feeling of guilt.

*What I always do is read about children's behavior, about child psychology. [...] Several articles on the Internet, even a book, to know what goes on in the child's head. (N., 28 years)*

Anticipatory guilt appears as an antecedent of consumption in situations in which mothers perceive that the child is not following the consumption pattern of their group, since there is great concern for keeping the child up with the group's social norms (i.e., behavioral patterns [Burchell, Rettie & Patel, 2013]). The mothers understand that not conforming to these rules of behavior and consumption means that their child may be excluded from the group, or will feel inferior because they do not have the same consumer items (such as toys and clothing) as other members of the group.

*Because they need to have the minimum to also be on the same level as the group they are living with. So, what's the minimum? Have a PlayStation, but it does not have to be the latest version. (A., 42 years)*

*It is no use for you to want them to be part of a given environment in which you cannot provide everything that is normal for the people around you, because then the child will feel inferior. (T., 42 years)*

*It is complicated with children, how are you going to explain that all their little friends have the toy and they don't? Then I think you feel guilty. (T., 42 years)*

*I think it's very cruel to leave your child out of the group's standard. You need to have a very strong core for both you and the child in order to accept being outside the group, of [not] belonging; and I think there's a [strong need to belong] in children. I was going to be the first to buy this Barbie [the toy she doesn't like, in order to be accepted], even though I did not agree. (D., 42 years)*

From these testimonies, it is proposed:

***P4. Compliance with the child's social norms of consumption reduces the mother's guilt regarding the child's well-being.***

Below, we outline the implications of this research, as well as possible implications for future empirical research.

### **Final considerations**

Consumer behavior literature defines (Lin & Xia, 2008), classifies (Dahl et al., 2003) and identifies dimensions of guilt (Bonsu & Main, 2006). It also reports that marketing communications can increase or decrease guilt feelings (Ghingold, 1981) and identifies that mothers are a good target for marketing communications with guilt appeals (Coulter & Pinto, 1995), probably because guilt is an inherent feeling in mothers. The myth of the perfect mother, a model impossible to be achieved, generates this feeling (Forna, 1998). Thus, the purpose of this article was to understand, from the point of view of consumer behavior, the relationship between the guilt that mothers feel regarding their children's well-being, and their consumption decisions. The findings suggest that situations that give rise to a feeling of guilt in mothers can be basically classified into: lack of time to dedicate themselves to their children, absence related to work, and desire to achieve perfection in fulfilling the role of mother, which is obviously impossible. These situations can be classified according to Dahl et al. (2003). They are related to others, since it is a guilt generated by the perception of a negative consequence for a child as a result of the mother's action. It is also related to the self, since the mother fail to achieve something that she idealized for herself, such as being present at all important events related to her child.

How does guilt relate to consumption? Guilt generates a negative state in the mother, and she will do something to alleviate this feeling (Sukhdial & Boush, 2004). Since it is a guilt related to others the action she takes must have a positive consequence for the other, (Dahl et al., 2005) on this case the child. We propose that (P1) allowing the child to have greater influence over their consumption decisions reduces the mother's guilt regarding the child's well-being. So mothers seem to minimize their guilt regarding the child's well-being by allowing the child to have greater

influence over their own consumption decisions. In addition, (P2) less time spent with the child leads to greater guilt experienced by the mother regarding the child's well-being and (P3) the purchase of superfluous products for the child reduces the mother's guilt regarding the child's well-being, being this relationship moderated by the style of consumption of the mother (consumerist or frugal). The positive consequence for the child would be the greater influence she has on the consumption decision, and the pleasure of buying a superfluous product. This behavior appears to be a way in which to both compensate for the mother's absence, and increase enjoyment of the moments during which the mother is with her child. An alternative way to reduce the guilt would be to make promises or plans for future actions (Dahl et al., 2003), but this situation was not mentioned on this context. As mentioned earlier, the concept of guilt is closely related to the idea that in order to alleviate guilt it is necessary to repair the damage caused by the transgression (Sukhdial & Boush, 2004).

Other efforts by the mothers in this study to mitigate their guilt related to the need to comply with the social norms of the group to which the child belongs, which is in accordance with Dahl et al. (2003) who proposes that guilt can be classified as related to social norms. Mothers understand that not conforming to these norms means excluding their child from the group, or making them feel inferior because they do not possess the same goods as others. This observation gave rise to the last proposition, that (P4) compliance with the child's social norms of consumption reduces the mother's guilt regarding the child's well-being.

The implications of this work consist in stimulating the understanding of how guilt interferes in mothers' decisions pertaining to consumption. As identified by Ghingold (1981), guilt can be diminished or increased by marketing communications, but it is critical for managers to understand the implications of this for consumer decisions.

Future research could test the propositions presented in this work via experimental approaches or structural models. Insights for managers need to be further developed in future research, but it is suggested that attention be paid to communications directed at mothers that represent an ideal of perfection that cannot be achieved, as this type of communication can lead mothers to feel guilty due to realizing that they cannot reproduce that idealized world. Indeed, even communications that do not use guilt appeals can generate this feeling in mothers, which could give rise to resistance to the brand.

This study also has implications for nonprofit organizations working on child-related consumption issues. Mothers may feel guilty and compensate via consumption without being aware of the impact of this attitude on the development of their child's identity, since in this case consumption arises to meet emotional needs and as a way to show affection. In this case, guilt can be highlighted within social marketing campaigns to show mothers that there are other ways to deal with this feeling.

Consumption today serves not only to supply basic needs, but also to meet desires and emotional needs. Consumption has become a means of showing love and affection. Children who have contact with advertisements directed at them, which push concepts as absolute truths and exploit mothers' feelings of guilt, are transformed into real consumers. This represents a possible avenue of future research on consumption.

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