

Research Report

Inspire me to donate: The use of strength emotion in donation appeals

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Abstract

Previous research has shown that the use of negative emotions such as sadness in donation appeals can make people empathetic towards the donation target, increasing their tendency to donate (the “empathy-helping” hypothesis). In this research we propose an “inspiration-helping” hypothesis, and find that the positive emotion of strength can inspire people to donate. We show that combining the positive emotion of strength and the negative emotion of sadness is more effective as a means of persuading people to donate than the sadness-dominating or the strength-dominating emotion.

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For decades researchers and marketers in charity organizations have tried to find out what persuades people to donate. Answers to this question would enable charity organizations to design more effective communications in donation appeals. One common practice used in donation appeals is to emphasize the unfortunate situations facing the donation target (e.g., poverty) to convey negative emotions such as sadness, fear or tension (Bagozzi & Moore, 1994). These negative-dominating emotions are said to make people more empathetic towards the target’s plight and increase their tendency to donate (the “empathy-helping” hypothesis; Bagozzi & Moore, 1994; Fisher, Vandenbosch, & Antia, 2008).

In contrast to this focus on the use of negative emotions, there has been little research examining the effectiveness of using positive emotions in donation appeals. In this research we focus on donation appeals that request donations for victims of unfortunate situations. As there is bound to be negative emotions in such appeals, we aim to examine the impact of

using both the positive emotion of strength and the negative emotion of sadness as a means of soliciting donations.

Theoretical background

The use of sadness and strength emotions in persuasive appeals

One reason why little research has examined the effect of positive emotions in eliciting donation may be that negative emotions typically dominate in donation appeals (Bagozzi & Moore, 1994). Although it is less likely that a donation ad conveys exclusively positive emotions, it may convey both positive and negative emotions. In fact, research has shown that it is common for people to experience both types of emotions in many contexts (e.g., watching movie; wedding planning; Andrade & Cohen, 2007; Otnes, Lowry, & Shrum, 1997). Previous research has also shown that although using both emotions may lead to feelings of uncomfortable inconsistency (Williams & Aaker, 2002), this felt discomfort is often regarded as representing a more accurate reflection of the reality and sparks a positive attitude towards the ad (Williams & Aaker, 2012).

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In this research, we focus on the effect of combining two specific emotions, the negative emotion of sadness and the positive emotion of strength on consumer reactions to donation appeals, for a few reasons. First, recent studies suggest that it is important to examine the impact of specific, discrete emotions rather than general positive or negative emotions (DeSteno, Petty, Wegener, & Rucker, 2000; Garg, Wansink, & Inman, 2007). Sadness is a typical and relevant negative emotion for donation appeals (e.g., Bagozzi & Moore, 1994). Second, previous research has shown that the positive emotion of happiness may decrease willingness to help by reducing empathy/sympathy or developing jealousy towards the donation target (Schaller & Cialdini, 1996; Small & Verrochi, 2009). But it is not clear whether depicting other positive emotions would have the same effect. A careful examination of the PANAS scale (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) and the “High Positive Affect” dimension (Watson & Tellegen, 1985; p. 221) shows that “strong” and “determined” (these two emotions are perceived as similar in pretests and thus combined as ‘strength’) are more relevant positive emotions for donation appeals than other positive emotions such as interested, excited or attentive. Meanwhile, the content analysis of donation ads in China (the present research context and a representation of Asian culture where mixed emotions are found to be more acceptable; Williams & Aaker, 2002) shows that “strength” is a typical positive emotion used in donation appeals. This emotion of “feeling strong” has been discussed in recent research. For example, Tibubos, Schnell, and Rohrmann (2013) have empirically shown that negative situations can cause not only anger but also the positive affect of feeling strong (see also Ratcliffe, 2005; Slaby, 2008). In this research we examine the effect of combining sadness and strength emotions evoked from viewing donation appeals. We propose an “inspiration-helping” hypothesis, and find that the positive emotion of strength can inspire people to donate.

Inspiration-helping hypothesis

In their seminal article on the inspiration construct, Thrash and Elliot (2003, 2004) define inspiration as a motivation state that energizes and directs one’s behavior. This motivation state can be triggered by sources/objects either internal to oneself (e.g., ideas, goals, achievement) or external (e.g., nature, music, other people). Being inspired, a person feels compelled to respond to the trigger object and direct oneself towards a target (e.g., actualization of the idea, personal goal, or a better outcome of a given situation). In other words, inspiration involves two processes, one being the “appreciation and accommodation” of the trigger object (i.e., the “inspired by” process), the other being the motivation to “express, actualize, concretize, or transmit” what is being inspired (i.e., the “inspired to” process) (Thrash & Elliot, 2004; p. 958, p. 971). Thrash and Elliot (2003, 2004) also suggest that inspiration is positively correlated with psychological resources such as perceived competence, self-esteem, and optimism.

Previous research (e.g., Lazarus, 1991) has shown that appraisals (of objects) can lead to emotional responses (e.g., sadness) and subsequent coping strategies (Bagozzi & Moore,

1994). For example, the appraisal of a sad situation can produce negative emotions such as sadness; and the viewers cope with sadness by being empathetic of the victim and developing and acceding to an urge to help (Bagozzi & Moore, 1994). Similar to this line of reasoning, we argue that appraisals of a donation ad that produces strength emotion can evoke inspiration as a psychological response. Acknowledging that inspiration can be triggered by sources internal to oneself or external (Thrash & Elliot, 2003, 2004), we focus on inspiration induced by emotions evoked by praising the qualities/behaviors of others (Algoe & Haidt, 2009), and define it as other-praising inspiration. Specifically, a donation ad may describe the courage, perseverance, or extraordinary competence of the person in dealing with an unfortunate situation (e.g., poverty, natural disasters). The appraisal of these virtuous qualities/behaviors would produce the positive emotion of feeling strong. The emotion of strength makes one feel optimistic and competent, and these psychological resources are said to induce the feeling of inspiration (Thrash & Elliot, 2003).

If inspiration is a motivational state that energizes and directs one’s behavior (Thrash & Elliot, 2003), then we expect the viewers being inspired to react positively to the ad and the requested behavior (e.g., donation). In other words, the motivational property of inspiration induces an urge to act on the situation (e.g., donate). As compared to the sadness-dominating emotion, the combination of sadness and strength emotion has not only the motivation to cope with a negative emotion, but also the psychological mind state (inspiration) that drives a positive reaction to the donation request. Thus we expect that combining the emotions of strength and sadness would be more effective in making people respond positively to the donation appeal than the sadness-dominating emotion, as this difference is mediated by the feeling of inspiration.

The cognitive inference of strength emotion

Although the focus of this research is to show that the strength emotion can inspire people to donate (studies 1 & 2), we also explored its impact on donation through cognitive inferences (study 2). Previous research suggests that appraisals can affect behaviors through both emotional responses to and cognitive inferences about the appraisal object (e.g., Nyer, 1997; So et al., 2015; Weiner, 1985). Specifically, appraisals of an object first give rise to a rather primitive, rapid affective reaction (Lazarus, 1966; Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999). Following the immediate affective reaction, people may also engage in cognitive inferences about the appraisal object (Weiner, 1985) and the felt emotions can be used as input for such inferences (Schwarz & Clore, 1983). In the context of our research, we argue that appraisals of donation appeals produce immediate, rapid affective reactions by making donors feel sad, strong, or both. At the same time, these emotions can serve as informational input to the cognitive inferences about the appraisal object (Loewenstein, Weber, Hsee, & Welch, 2001). These cognitive inferences should help people decide their reactions to the appraisal object and the associated issues. As such, the cognitive inferences in our context would focus on the need to donate. For example, if the feeling of strength makes people infer that the donation target is capable of coming out of the

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