A smile – the key to everybody’s heart?

The interactive effects of image and message in increasing charitable behavior

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Abstract
Purpose – This paper aims to investigate how to improve the effectiveness of charitable advertising by matching emotional appeal (happy-faced vs sad-faced beneficiary) and message framing (recognition vs request) within advertising messages.

Design/methodology/approach – Two experiments examining real donation allocations were conducted. Study 1 established the “match-up” effect between advertising image and message. Study 2 replicated the findings of Study 1 as well as testing the mediating role of hope and sympathy.

Findings – The authors provide empirical evidence that consumers allocate a greater donation amount to a charity when they see an image of a sad-faced child combined with a request message (e.g. “please donate”), or an image of a happy-faced child combined with a recognition message (e.g. “thank you”). Notably, these effects are mediated by the emotions of hope and sympathy, respectively.

Research limitations/implications – This research highlights the importance of matching images of beneficiaries with the appropriate advertising copy. Depending on whether a charity seeks to position itself in a positive perspective to evoke hope, or alternatively, portray itself in relation to a sadder landscape that elicits sympathy, the respective choice of recognition or request messages can help boost donation outcomes.

Practical implications – Charities and non-profit organizations can develop more effective charitable advertising by purposively matching specific emotional appeals and message framings when designing advertisements.

Originality/value – The research illustrates a novel mechanism that shows when and how combining image and message can influence the effectiveness of charitable advertising.

Keywords Charitable advertising, Hope, Sympathy, Recognition, Request

Paper type Research paper

Americans donated a record US$410bn to charity in 2017 (accounting for 2.1 per cent of GDP), an increase of 5.2 per cent from 2016, with 70 per cent of the total coming from individuals (Frank, 2018). In other words, it is not big foundations or corporations but the general public who are responsible for the vast majority of charitable giving. Nonetheless, while the amounts donated may be encouraging, a research study tracking the philanthropic behavior of over 9,000 individuals and families over 15 years reports that volunteering and charitable giving has dropped by around 11 per cent overall since the early 2000s (Anzilotti, 2017). Thus, it would seem that our individual generosity is on something of a downward trend.

As a result, competition between different organizations and charitable causes for limited donation money calls for greater effort and creativity in charity advertising. In addition,
emerging platforms for charitable giving, such as social network (e.g. Facebook’s Donate button) and crowd-funding sites (e.g. GoFundMe, MyCause Australia), have changed the way people donate and how quickly decisions (to donate) can be made. Among more innovative approaches, viral marketing campaigns with emotional messages are able to quickly reach a wide variety of potential donors (Paynter, 2017). This is because emotions have a significant influence on consumer decision-making (Lerner et al., 2015) and allow consumers to use heuristics in processing simple messages (Bohner et al., 1992). As a consequence, we can expect that any associated message that carries meaning congruent with the evoked emotion will enhance the effectiveness of the communication message. This has managerial significance in terms of charitable organizations identifying a simple and effective way to motivate charitable behavior, whereby people can quickly grasp the information but still respond in an emotional manner.

Table I summarizes key prior research examining emotion and prosocial behaviors. As can be seen, most past studies have examined the effects of negative emotions, including guilt (Hibbert et al., 2007), anger (Vitaglione and Barnett, 2003) and sadness (Bagozzi and Moore, 1994; Small and Verrochi, 2009), on charitable behavior. Notably, while a few studies have flagged the potential of positive emotions such as awe and love (Cavanaugh et al., 2015; Piff et al., 2015), the existing research does not directly compare the effectiveness of positive versus negative emotions. Thus, it is less clear whether positive emotions can be truly effective in promoting charitable behavior.

Managerially, this is also problematic because practitioners and non-profit organizations are currently calling for the use of more positive messages. In fact, while most beneficiaries understand why images of suffering are used for fundraising purposes, they would prefer not to be exclusively depicted as suffering (Birkwood, 2016). Homeless individuals have also expressed frustration with charitable imagery that reinforces negative stereotypes by only depicting beneficiaries in their worst situations (Breeze and Dean, 2012). Thus, while extant literature might be informative, it offers incomplete understanding of when and how positive and negative emotional appeals can leverage the effectiveness of charitable advertising.

The current research aims to systematically investigate the conditions under which charitable advertising using positive and negative emotional appeals can increase charitable behavior. Specifically, we investigate the influence of using a positive (smiling-faced child) versus negative (sad-faced child) image of a beneficiary as the emotional appeal in conjunction with a short message (recognition vs. request message). Drawing upon the emotion-congruence effect (Kamins et al., 1991; Kim et al., 2010; Lajos et al., 2009), we propose that a match (vs. mismatch) between image and message will increase charitable behavior, such that an advertisement will be more effective when an image of a happy (sad) child is accompanied by a recognition (request) message. Importantly, we argue that the emotional response to the image will mediate the match-up effect on charitable behavior. Specifically, hope will mediate the effect of a happy-faced image, while sympathy will mediate the effect a sad-faced image. Thus, the key purpose of this research is to propose a novel perspective on how marketers can develop effective charitable advertising strategies by matching appropriate images and messages.

In the following sections, we first review the relevant literature on charitable advertising as well as emotion and consumer psychology to develop the two key hypotheses. Next, we present three experimental studies designed to test the hypotheses. We then follow up with a general discussion of the theoretical contributions and managerial implications of our findings and conclude with limitations and future research avenues stemming from the current research.
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Theoretical development

Negative emotional appeals and sympathy

Prior research on emotional contagion has shown that consumers can “catch” the emotion expressed by another person (Hatfield et al., 1993; Small and Verrochi, 2009). For example, exposing a person to another happy person results in a positive attitude towards a product (Howard and Gengler, 2001). In the charitable advertising context, this causes observers of the advertisement to experience a similar emotional state to the one expressed by the image of the victim (Small and Verrochi, 2009). Consequently, many fundraising campaigns regularly use negative images of beneficiaries (e.g. photos of sad or poorly clothed victims to evoke sympathy) to motivate giving behavior (Small et al., 2007; Small and Verrochi, 2009; Sudhir et al., 2016). While different negative emotional appeals have been used in charitable advertising, including anger and guilt (Hibbert et al., 2007; Vitaglione and Barnett, 2003), sympathy is the negative emotion most commonly evoked by these negative images (Small et al., 2007; Small and Verrochi, 2009; Sudhir et al., 2016).

Sympathy is emotional concern for the welfare of another person (Small and Verrochi, 2009), and is often triggered by another person’s misfortune (Cavanaugh et al., 2015; Sudhir et al., 2016). As sympathy involves a higher sensitivity to, and understanding of, the feelings of another (Gruen and Mendelsohn, 1986), feelings of sympathy associated with an image of a victim are often associated with increased desire to help those who are suffering (Powell et al., 2015; Small and Verrochi, 2009). For instance, Small and Verrochi (2009) showed that consumers feel sad when viewing an image of a sad-faced child. In this case, it is the sadness contagion that facilitates sympathy, as the observer shares the pain of the victim, which in turn motivates them to donate. Other studies have also shown that viewing the victims of a terrorist attack (Iyer et al., 2014) or ongoing conflict in the Central African Republic (Powell et al., 2015) increased observers’ appraisals of the victims’ undeserved suffering, thus eliciting feelings of sympathy and increasing intentions to help.

While there seems to be robust evidence linking negative facial expressions, sympathy, and subsequent charitable behavior, such negative emotions may not always result in a favorable response. For instance, continuously seeing images of distress and sadness can make people angry or upset at the sender of the appeal (Berkowitz, 1973). Further, Isen and Noonberg (1979) showed that presenting a picture of a handicapped child in a door-to-door campaign reduced amount contributed to the charity compared to not showing that picture. It seems unpleasant pictures may generate psychological reactance or elicit negative emotions among donors (Berkowitz, 1973). In fact, when such negative appeals are repeated, these feelings can become more intense, leading to reduced sympathy and even negative attitudes toward the organization behind the appeal (Stayman and Aaker, 1988).

Positive emotional appeals and hope

Parsing out this issue, more recently, a number of studies have started to argue the efficacy of employing positive emotional appeals (e.g. photos of happy and healthy people). For example, the image of a laughing child allows potential donors to see the positive consequences of donating (Burt and Strongman, 2005). Bhati and Eikenberry (2016) have also shown that child beneficiaries respond more positively to positive images of themselves, where they are portrayed as happy, with clean clothes and in a positive light. As described earlier, homeless individuals have also expressed frustration with charitable imagery that reinforces negative stereotypes by only depicting them at their lowest ebb (Breeze and Dean, 2012).

In particular, using a positive image of a victim (e.g. a laughing child) allows donors to see the positive outcome of their actions (Burt and Strongman, 2005; Chang and Lee, 2009).
In other words, the image depicts hope for the victim’s future due to the donor’s giving (Chang and Lee, 2009). Hope is defined as the feeling that effort may result in a positive change in outcome, a desire for the better, or a belief that the wished-for ending is possible (Cavanaugh et al., 2015; Lazarus, 1999). In terms of action tendency, hope is driven by positive feelings toward a future goal (Snyder, 2000), and thus is associated with future-focused appraisals manifesting in forward-oriented thinking and action for improvement in the future (Cohen-Chen et al., 2015). Research by Cavanaugh et al. (2015) confirms that hope increases prosocial behavior toward close known entities such as a charitable organization that helps local families in need, a domestic relief fund, or a local environmental defense fund.

In summary, drawing from past research, we argue that the facial expression of a beneficiary featured in a charitable advertisement will elicit distinct emotional responses. Specifically, an image of a sad beneficiary will evoke sympathy, whereas an image of a happy beneficiary will evoke hope. However, while previous research has demonstrated that positive and negative emotions promote charitable behavior (Hatfield et al., 1993; Howard and Gengler, 2001; Small and Verrochi, 2009), how and when one emotional appeal is more effective than another is unclear. Our research proposes that negative and positive emotions can be similarly effective in increasing charitable behavior, depending on the matching communication message.

Emotion-congruent effects between advertising image and message
Building on emotion-congruence theory, we now develop our argument on the effectiveness of a match (vs mismatch) between an image showing a person with a specific emotional expression and the accompanying message in charitable advertising. In seeking to understand emotion effects on cognitive decisions, many studies have attributed effects not only to the emotion itself, but also to the activation of semantic emotion concepts – that is, the presumed knowledge and semantic meaning behind that emotion (Innes-Ker and Niedenthal, 2002). A classic demonstration of emotion-congruence is a series of experiments showing that participants in the happy condition processed happy words faster than did participants in the sad condition, and vice versa for participants in the sad condition (Niedenthal and Setterlund, 1994).

The current research extends the literature in this area by examining how different images can elicit distinct emotions and how such images can be “matched” with appropriate messages. This is significant because the congruence between the emotional appeal expressed by the image and the emotional tone of the message is a key element in evaluative judgments (Kamins et al., 1991; Kim et al., 2010; Lajos et al., 2009). Research reported in the communication literature shows that using both image and message when communicating information can improve memory and learning (Gibson and Zillmann, 2000; Paivio, 1991), especially when the image and the message are congruent (Brosius et al., 1996; Chang and Lee, 2009; Kim et al., 2010). This is because consumers’ current emotions can enhance the accessibility of related semantic concepts (Bower, 1981; Innes-Ker and Niedenthal, 2002; Niedenthal and Setterlund, 1994). Consequently, a message that is congruent with the image (and the associated emotion) can increase the memorability of an image and provide a clear structure for the message (Geise and Baden, 2014).

Other research has provided some evidence that supports this relationship. Psychological research examining interpersonal relationships demonstrates that individuals are attracted to emotionally similar others (Locke and Horowitz, 1990; Rosenblatt and Greenberg, 1991), and will be most satisfied by a conversation with someone with whom they share a similar mood (Locke and Horowitz, 1990). Research in
the area of aesthetics also shows that individuals experiencing sadness in a relationship prefer sad (vs happy) music (Knobloch and Zillmann, 2003; Lee et al., 2013). Of particular relevance to the current research, emotion-congruent effects have been identified in studies of advertising (Kamins et al., 1991; Kim et al., 2010; Lajos et al., 2009). For instance, when a TV advertisement shares similar emotional tones to the TV program during which it appears, consumers report more favorable evaluations of the advertisement (Lajos et al., 2009). Further, in other research, Kim et al. (2010) showed that when consumers’ current emotional state is consistent with the emotional claim of an advertisement, they will show more favorable attitudes toward the product or service. In the context of prosocial behavior, recent research has demonstrated that congruency between the ethical concerns of an organization (care vs justice) and specific positive emotions (compassion vs gratitude) can enhance donations (Goenka and van Osselaer, 2019). Charities can also increase volunteering when they match positive emotions (personal pride vs vicarious pride) with the appropriate message foci (promotion vs prevention messages) (Septianto et al., 2018).

These findings suggest that emotion-congruence theory will allow us to inspect when and how both negative and positive emotions can be effective in eliciting donations, which is important because past research tends to examine negative and positive emotions separately (see Table I). Building on known emotion-congruent effects, we argue that positive and negative emotional appeals may be more effective in motivating charitable behavior when the emotional tone of the message is compatible with the emotional tone of the image. In this regard, while charities and non-profit organizations can use multiple strategies in their advertising messages, the manner of communication in these messages is typically a simple request (e.g. “please donate”) (Shearman and Yoo, 2007; Weyant and Smith, 1987). Such requests highlight a call for help from donors and are compatible with the underlying notion of the emotional appeal of sympathy. As discussed, sympathy emerges when observing another person’s misfortune (Cavanaugh et al., 2015; Sudhir et al., 2016). Hence, we would expect that consumers who view an image of a sad beneficiary and feel sympathetic will be more likely to take action after reading a strong call for help (i.e. a request message).

In contrast, another way charities can communicate with potential donors is by expressing their appreciation or recognition of donors (Grant, 2012; Grant and Gino, 2010; Merchant et al., 2010). We define recognition as the appreciation expressed to a person who engages in a prosocial behavior (Fisher and Ackerman, 1998). In particular, recognition can represent symbolic approval for an individual (Grant, 2012). Hence, a message conveying appreciation (e.g. “thank you”) can be considered as a recognition message. Showing recognition by emphasizing the positive outcomes of an individual’s donation is compatible with the emotional appeal of hope, because hope is associated with the desire that the wished-for ending is possible (Cavanaugh et al., 2015; Lazarus, 1999). Accordingly, we would expect that consumers who view an image of a happy beneficiary and feel hopeful will be more likely to take action after reading an expression of appreciation (i.e. a recognition message).

In summary, we expect that charitable advertisements expressing the victim’s sadness or happiness will activate distinct emotional responses – sympathy and hope, respectively. Further, informed by the tenets of emotion-congruence (Kamins et al., 1991; Kim et al., 2010; Lajos et al., 2009), we propose that a request message will be more effective when consumers feel sympathetic, whereas a recognition message will be more effective when consumers feel hopeful (see Figure 1). As such, our study tests the following hypotheses:
**H1.** The effect of the facial expression of a beneficiary featured in an advertisement will be moderated by the advertising message, such that: (a) an image of a sad beneficiary matched with a request message will be more effective in increasing donation allocations; and (b) an image of a happy beneficiary matched with a recognition message will be more effective in increasing donation allocations.

**H2.** Emotion will mediate the “match-up: effect on donation allocations such that sympathy (or hope) will mediate the effect of a sad (or happy) beneficiary.

**Study 1 A**

The aim of Study 1A is to provide initial support for H1. We test this prediction by examining donation allocations to help children living in a war zone. We expect participants to report greater donation allocations when they view an advertisement featuring a sad beneficiary matched with a request message or a happy beneficiary matched with a recognition message.

**Methods**

*Participants and design.* Two hundred and twelve participants (43 per cent female, M<sub>age</sub> = 36.08, SD = 11.88) were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk[1] in exchange for monetary compensation. This study employed a 2 (image: happy vs sad) × 2 (message: recognition vs request) between-subjects design.

*Procedure.* Participants evaluated one of four advertisements developed for this study. All advertisements featured similar images and body copies. The only differences were: (1) whether the person in the advertisement looked happy or sad (we used different images for each study); and (2) whether the message was “THANK YOU” (recognition) or “PLEASE DONATE” (request). All advertisements are available upon request from the authors. Following prior research ([Winterich et al., 2013](#)), we incentivized participants with the chance to win a $50 gift card. We then informed participants they could donate some portion of the $50 prize money in $10 increments. Hence, the dependent variable was the proportion of the $50 allocated as a donation ($0, $10, $20, $30, $40, or $50).

As a manipulation check for facial expression, participants rated the facial expression of the beneficiary on a single bipolar item (“The beneficiary in the advertisement looks [...]”; 1 = “sad”, 7 = “happy”). As a manipulation check for the message, we asked participants to rate whether “The message in the advertisement focuses on [...] a potential donation” (1 =
“recognizing”, 7 = “requesting”). Finally, in this and the subsequent studies, we measured and included statistical controls such as participants’ trust in and familiarity with the charitable organization (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).

Results and discussion

Manipulation checks. We conducted two-way ANOVA (image × message) on the emotion expressed by the beneficiary and the focus of the message. As expected, only the main effect of the image emerged in the emotion assigned to the beneficiary (F(1, 208) = 433.29, p < 0.001). Specifically, participants reported that a smiling beneficiary (M = 5.91) looked happier than a non-smiling beneficiary (M = 1.86, t(208) = 20.82, p < 0.001). Similarly, only the main effect of the message emerged for the focus of message (F(1, 208) = 26.61, p < 0.001). Specifically, participants considered the request message (M = 5.60) to be more focused on “requesting” their donation compared to the recognition message (M = 4.38, t(208) = 5.16, p < 0.001). These results show that our manipulations were successful.

Donation allocations. A two-way ANOVA was conducted for image, message and their interaction as independent variables, with donation allocations as the dependent variable. We also included participants’ familiarity with the charitable organization (Thornton et al., 1991), trust in the charitable organization (Sargeant and Lee, 2004) and gender (Winterich et al., 2009) as statistical controls. Note that change in donation allocations, the dependent variable, was equivalent at each level and ratio-scaled ($10), thus two-way ANOVA was an appropriate method[2].

The results revealed a significant effect of trust such that participants who trusted the charitable organization were also more likely to donate (B = 0.21, t(205) = 2.85, p = 0.005). However and as predicted, we found a significant interaction effect between image and message (F(1, 205) = 9.75, p = 0.002). Other effects were non-significant. Planned contrasts revealed that participants viewing an advertisement depicting a sad beneficiary reported greater donation allocations after evaluating the request message (M = 21.66) compared to the recognition message (M = 15.45, t(205) = 2.03, p = 0.044). Conversely, participants who viewed a happy beneficiary image reported greater donation allocations after evaluating the recognition message (M = 20.84) compared to the request message (M = 13.64, t(205) = 2.38, p = 0.018; Figure 2). These findings provide evidence for H1.

Figure 2
Donation allocations (US$) by image and message conditions (Study 1 A)
Study 1B

Study 1B seeks to replicate the findings of Study 1A in a different context. Specifically, while many charities are for children, it is less clear whether our predictions will hold if the advertisements are for charities with an adult target. However, as our arguments are built upon the facial expression of the beneficiary, we still expect that $H1$ will hold even if the beneficiary is an adult (vs a child).

Methods

Participants and design. Two hundred and five participants (49 per cent female, $M_{age} = 37.48$, $SD = 12.63$) were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk in exchange for monetary compensation. This study employed a 2 (image: happy vs sad) × 2 (message: recognition vs request) between-subjects design.

Procedure. This study used similar procedures to Study 1A with the exception we used different charitable advertisements aiming to help refugees. Similarly to Study 1A, participants then indicated their donation allocations (between $0 and $50) and completed manipulation checks, statistical controls and demographic items.

Results and discussion

Manipulation checks. Two-way ANOVA (image × message) were conducted on the emotion expressed by the beneficiary and the focus of the message. As expected, only the main effect of the image emerged in the emotion assigned to the beneficiary ($F(1, 201) = 738.90, p < 0.001$). Specifically, participants reported that a smiling beneficiary ($M = 5.84$) looked happier than a non-smiling beneficiary ($M = 1.46$, $t(201) = 27.18, p < 0.001$). In addition, only the main effect of the message emerged for the focus of message ($F(1, 201) = 23.71, p < 0.001$). Specifically, participants considered the request message ($M = 5.35$) to be more focused on “requesting” their donation compared to the recognition message ($M = 4.16$, $t(201) = 4.87, p < 0.001$).

Donation allocations. A two-way ANOVA was conducted for image, message and their interaction as independent variables, with donation allocations as the dependent variable. Similarly to Study 1A, we included participants’ familiarity with and trust in the charitable organization and gender as statistical controls.

The results revealed a significant effect of trust such that participants who trusted the charitable organization were more likely to donate ($B = 3.05$, $t(198) = 4.39, p < 0.001$). However and as predicted, we found a significant interaction effect between image and message ($F(1, 198) = 11.23, p = 0.001$; other effects were non-significant). Planned contrasts showed that participants viewing an advertisement depicting a sad beneficiary reported greater donation allocations after evaluating the request message ($M = 16.02$) compared to the recognition message ($M = 9.70$, $t(198) = 2.32, p = 0.021$). Conversely, participants who viewed a happy beneficiary image reported greater donation allocations after evaluating the recognition message ($M = 17.06$) compared to the request message ($M = 10.41$, $t(198) = 2.41, p = 0.017$; Figure 3). These findings provide further support for $H1$.

Study 2

The main purpose of Study 2 is to extend the findings of studies 1A and 1B by testing the underlying process driving the predicted effects, thus we investigated the mediating role of emotions ($H2$). In addition, we were seeking to rule out alternative plausible explanations that might influence charitable behavior, including self-efficacy (Sharma and Morwitz,
positive affect (Andreoni, 1989; Cavanaugh et al., 2015) and moral identity (Winterich et al., 2013; Winterich et al., 2009). In addition, we used a different context by examining donation allocations to help struggling families of children with cancer. Finally, we used a different way to conceptualize donation allocations to increase confidence in our findings.

Methods
Participants and design. Two hundred and twelve participants (46 per cent female, $M_{\text{age}} = 35.96$, $SD = 10.79$) were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk in exchange for monetary compensation. This study employed a $2 \times 2$ (image: happy vs sad) × 2 (message: recognition vs request) between-subjects design.

Procedure. Participants evaluated one of four advertisements developed for the study. Following prior research (Sharma and Morwitz, 2016), we then informed participants they could donate a portion of their $0.70 study payment to help the beneficiary. Participants were told explicitly that the decision was entirely up to them. They could indicate a preference to donate any amount in $0.10 increments. Participants were told the amount they chose to donate would be deducted from their study payment and donated directly to the American Children’s Cancer Foundation. Hence, the dependent variable was the portion of the $0.70 allocated as a donation ($0.00, $0.10, $0.20, $0.30, $0.40, $0.50, $0.60, or $0.70).

Participants completed identical manipulation checks (facial expression of the beneficiary and focus of the message) as for studies 1A and 1B. To measure the posited mediators and additional possible explanations, participants indicated the extent to which they experienced six emotional items (two items each to measure hope, sympathy, and positive affect) on a seven-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely). Specifically, “hopeful” and “optimistic” were collapsed into a hope score ($\alpha = 0.95$) (Cavanaugh et al., 2015) and “sympathetic” and “compassionate” were collapsed into a sympathy score ($\alpha = 0.94$) (Small and Verrichi, 2009). In addition, we included “positive” and “pleasant” and collapsed them as a positive affect measure ($\alpha = 0.91$) (Smith and Ellsworth, 1985). We also measured self-efficacy (Sharma and Morwitz, 2016), moral identity internalization ($\alpha = 0.80$) and moral identity symbolization ($\alpha = 0.93$) (Aquino and Reed, 2002) because we wanted to rule them out as alternative plausible explanations (see Appendix 1 for full details of the measures used for these additional variables).
Results and discussion

Manipulation checks. We conducted two-way ANOVA (image × message) on the emotion expressed by the beneficiary and the focus of message. As expected, only the main effect of the image emerged for the emotion expressed by the beneficiary (F(1, 208) = 537.60, p < 0.001). Specifically, participants reported that a smiling beneficiary (M = 6.19) looked happier than a non-smiling beneficiary (M = 2.13, t(208) = 23.19, p < 0.001). Similarly, only the main effect of the message emerged for the focus of message (F(1, 208) = 11.57, p < 0.001); that is, participants considered the request message (M = 5.08) to be more focused on “requesting” their donation as compared to the recognition message (M = 4.28, t(208) = 3.40, p < 0.001).

Donation allocations. A two-way ANOVA was conducted with image, message and their interaction as independent variables and donation allocations as the dependent variable. Similarly to studies 1A and 1B, we included participants’ familiarity with and trust in the charitable organization and gender as statistical controls.

The results revealed a significant effect of trust such that participants who trusted the charitable organization were also more likely to donate (B = 0.52, t (205) = 3.74, p < 0.001). There was also a marginal effect of gender, such that males were less likely to donate than females (B = –0.64, t (205) = –1.79, p = 0.076). However and as predicted, we found a significant interaction effect between image and message (F(1, 205) = 15.69, p < 0.001). Other effects were non-significant. Planned contrasts revealed that participants viewing an advertisement depicting a sad beneficiary reported greater donation allocations after evaluating the request message (M = 0.34) compared to the recognition message (M = 0.21, t (205) = 2.54, p = 0.012). Conversely, participants who viewed an image of a happy beneficiary reported greater donation allocations after evaluating the recognition message (M = 0.33) compared to the request message (M = 0.18, t(205) = 3.07, p = 0.002; see Figure 4). These findings support H1.

Moderated mediation analysis. A two-way ANOVA (image × message) was conducted on levels of hope and sympathy. As expected, only the main effect of the image was significant for both hope (F(1, 208) = 8.01, p = 0.005) and sympathy (F(1, 208) = 5.08, p = 0.025). Specifically, participants viewing a happy beneficiary (M = 4.84) reported higher levels of hope than those viewing a sad beneficiary (M = 4.16, t(208) = 2.83, p = 0.005). In contrast, participants viewing a sad beneficiary (M = 5.88) reported higher levels of sympathy than those viewing a happy beneficiary (M = 5.39, t(208) = 2.25, p = 0.025).

To test H2, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 14 (Hayes, 2017) with 5,000 bootstrap resamples. Specifically, we examined the indirect effect of...
image (1 = happy beneficiary, 0 = sad beneficiary) on donation allocations via hope and sympathy, as moderated by message (1 = recognition, 0 = request). In addition, as prior research has suggested that self-efficacy (Sharma and Morwitz, 2016), positive affect (Andreoni, 1989; Cavanaugh et al., 2015), and moral identity (Winterich et al., 2013; Winterich et al., 2009) may influence charitable behaviors, we also included these three variables in the model as covariates to test whether our predicted “match-up” effect might increase these factors rather than hope and sympathy.

The results revealed that the indirect effect of image on donation allocations via hope was significant for the recognition message condition (B = 0.0183, SE = 0.0106, 95 per cent CI excluded zero: 0.0033 to 0.0475), but not for the request message condition (95 per cent CI: −0.0018 to 0.0349). In contrast, the indirect effect of image on donation allocations via sympathy was significant for the request message condition (B = −0.0237, SE = 0.0134, 95 per cent CI excluded zero: −0.0560 to −0.0030), but not for the recognition message condition (95 per cent CI: −0.0062 to 0.0285). These findings support H2 (see Appendix 2 for full mediation results).

General discussion
The current research examines the interactive effects between the facial expression of a beneficiary (happy vs sad) and the advertising message (recognition vs request). Study 1 investigated donation allocations to help children living in a war zone. The results show participants made larger donation allocations after seeing an advertisement featuring a sad beneficiary matched with a request message, and a happy beneficiary matched with a recognition message. Study 2 extended Study 1 in a different context (i.e. donation allocations to help struggling families of children with cancer). More importantly, Study 2 provided evidence on the mediating role of emotions and ruled out alternative plausible explanations, namely, self-efficacy, positive affect and moral identity.

This research has several theoretical and managerial implications. First, it contributes to the literature on prosocial behavior by systematically examining how and when positive and negative appeals can be leveraged in motivating charitable behavior. Our research offers concrete empirical evidence that both types of emotional appeal can be purposively matched with specific messages to increase persuasion. More importantly, we showed that positive emotion can be as effective as negative emotion in advertisements seeking donations. This contribution is significant because most research in this area has focused on negative, as opposed to positive emotional appeals (Bagozzi and Moore, 1994; Hibbert et al., 2007; Small and Verrochi, 2009; Vitaglione and Barnett, 2003). While some studies have considered the potential problems of using negative emotion appeals (Berkowitz, 1973; Isen and Noonberg, 1979), scant attention has been paid to how we can effectively and purposively use positive emotional appeals (Bhati and Eikenberry, 2016; Burt and Strongman, 2005).

In particular, recent research has shown that positive emotions such as strength, which makes people feel optimistic and competent, can inspire them to donate more (Liang et al., 2016). In another study, Goenka and van Osselaer (2019) found that donating behavior can also be boosted if the positive emotions of compassion and gratitude are congruent with the charity’s objectives (i.e. humanitarian and social justice causes, respectively). Our findings on the constructive role of happy facial expressions and feeling hopeful align with the current shift toward understanding why and how positive emotions can be as effective as negative emotions in increasing consumers’ tendency to donate, without discounting the “negative emotion-empathy-helping” hypothesis.
Second, we establish the underlying mechanism driving the effects. Specifically, we have demonstrated that the facial expressions featured in charitable advertisements elicit different emotional responses. Specifically, an image of a sad beneficiary will evoke sympathy, whereas an image of a happy beneficiary will evoke hope. These findings replicate those from past research showing that a sad beneficiary face can elicit the emotion of sympathy (Small and Verrochi, 2009). Furthermore, our findings highlighting the mediating role of hope are important because previous work typically shows that engaging in prosocial behavior may lead to a general positive affect (Andreoni, 1989; Andrews et al., 2014), as opposed to discrete positive emotions such as hope. Furthermore, we also ruled out the potential effect of positive affect as an alternative plausible explanation for our effects (Study 2). Hence, our research extends prior research on specific positive emotions (Cavanaugh et al., 2015; Septianto and Chiew, 2018) by confirming the importance of hope as a result of viewing a happy beneficiary image.

In addition, we established the mediating role of sympathy and hope, even after controlling for individual differences that might influence charitable behavior, such as self-efficacy and moral identity. This is significant because charitable behavior is a complex phenomenon and can be influenced by different factors. However, we show it is primarily the facial expression of a beneficiary featured in an advertisement that influences emotional reactions, regardless of (cognitive) individual differences such as self-efficacy (Sharma and Morwitz, 2016) and moral identity (Winterich et al., 2013; Winterich et al., 2009). Thus, our research adds to our understanding of the significance of emotion in consumer decision making, particularly in relation to charitable behavior.

Third and more importantly, our findings offer actionable managerial implications for social marketers and not-for-profit organizations in designing uncomplicated, yet effective charitable advertising campaigns. These advertisements are simple to create and easy to implement on various platforms, including traditional billboards, at supermarket checkouts, and on Facebook posts that utilize the “donate” button. In other words, even when the organization does not have a huge budget for creative work, they can easily design the advertisement poster and implement it on various low-cost platforms such as websites, in social media, and in partnership with other organizations.

In addition, there may be questions regarding practical limitations on the use of a “thanks for donating” message because most media appeals are requests and “thank you” messages are currently really only used for online donations, or perhaps in the form of a “thank you” letter for other forms of donation. In other words, “thank you” messages are not commonly used in the way we suggest. However, given that our findings demonstrate that a “thank you” message is effective when accompanying an image of a happy potential beneficiary, charities should not wait until receiving the donation to deliver their “thank you” message, but instead use it appropriately with their advertisement campaign.

Moreover, we support the idea of using a positive image of the beneficiary in charity advertisements as this also benefits the charitable organization. A happy, smiling image not only promotes charitable behavior but also enhances the image of the charity. Donors tend to associate happy images of beneficiaries with the charity, and so think positively about the charity, as well as its good works. These findings are consistent with the growing momentum toward using more positive messages among practitioners and non-profit organizations (Birkwood, 2016; Breeze and Dean, 2012).

Our research also offers important and interesting avenues for future research. The first avenue relates to the ongoing exploration of different types of emotion and the conditions under which they may (not) be effective. For instance, if sadness or sympathy...
are too intense, they may evoke a sense of helplessness (Garg and Lerner, 2013) and cause people to become more self-focused and relate less to others (Lyubomirsky and Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995). This state may have a negative impact on helping and giving. Conversely, intense emotion experienced via rich media such as Virtual Reality can also induce a stronger empathetic response and feeling of responsibility towards the cause (Kandaurova and Lee, 2018).

Another contextual factor is the number of beneficiaries shown in the image. Past research has discussed the individual victim effect, such that most people will be more caring and exert a greater effort to help individual victims, while the same people will ignore multiple victims (Sharma and Morwitz, 2016). This is interesting because when the number of people in need of help increases, ironically, the degree of compassion felt for them tends to decrease (Cameron and Payne, 2011). However, this may not necessarily apply to a group of children, or in cases where the emotional expression is positive. Accordingly, future studies could research emotional expression toward a group of children, either all happy or all sad, and associated effects on prosocial behavior.

While our research focuses on the “match-up” effect between images and messages in the charity and non-profit sectors, it also provides several implications that could extend emotion-congruence theory in other contexts. For example, future research could explore whether a similar set-up for advertisements works effectively for promoting and selling ethical products, such as environmentally friendly and fair-trade products. Cosmetics companies promoting cruelty-free products might consider whether, as well as when and how to use cute images of animals that evoke positive emotion versus disturbing images of animals as the victims of the testing of products by the traditional cosmetics industry. It would thus be of interest for future studies to examine whether congruence only works effectively when applied to prosocial behavior, or can extend to buying behavior. This is interesting because in general companies want their customers to have an overall positive experience. As a consequence, they could tend to use images of positive faces and recognition messages. However, our findings suggest that a face with negative expression of emotion and relevant request messages can also make a strong impression, and therefore evoke a stronger buying choice.

Another direction for future research is extending the sampling population. In the current research, we tested child and adult stimuli among adult respondents. While many researchers believe that emotions are learned, some of our basic emotional reactions may be innate. Examining perceptions of and reactions to the message and image among young consumers (e.g. children) could help us understand whether negative and positive emotions have a similar effect on an inexperienced audience, or perhaps have a stronger influence. Furthermore, understanding how children react to charity advertisements and the promotion of ethical products could help in educating younger generations about making better and more socially responsible decisions in the long run.

With these ideas for future directions in mind, the current research provides concrete empirical evidence for how contrasting images can benefit charitable behavior, depending on their match with the accompanying message. Theoretically, our research provides insight into how sadness can induce sympathy while happiness can evoke hope, and when combined with a matching image and message, both emotions can increase donation allocations. Importantly from a practical perspective, our research has value for the non-profit sector, and also for commercial entities that want to use similar images in their corporate social responsibility campaigns. A sad face is unforgettable, but a smile can also go a long way.
Notes

1. In all studies, we recruited participants from the Amazon Mechanical Turk. This online panel has been considered to be more diverse (Buhrmester et al., 2011) and more attentive (Hauser and Schwarz, 2016) than typical student samples. Moreover, because MTurk participants received financial compensation, we can modified and adapted this incentive in our dependent variables to provide a stronger empirical evidence for our predictions (Sharma and Morwitz, 2016, Winterich et al., 2013).

2. As additional analyses, we conducted ordinal logistic models in all studies. As expected, we replicated our predictions such that significant interaction effects between image and message emerge in Study 1A (B = 1.73, SE = 0.50, Wald = 11.98, \( p = 0.001 \)), Study 1B (B = 1.04, SE = 0.51, Wald = 4.11, \( p = 0.043 \)), and Study 2 (B = 1.47, SE = 0.49, Wald = 8.73, \( p = 0.003 \)).

References


Anzilotti, E. (2017), “Americans are giving less to charity than they were a decade ago”, available at: www.fastcompany.com/40481190/americans-are-giving-less-to-charity-than-they-were-a-decade-ago


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**Appendix 1. Additional measures (alternative explanations)**

**Self-efficacy** *(Sharma and Morwitz, 2016)* – (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

“I believe that if I donate, I can help families of kids with cancer.”

**Moral Identity** *(Aquino and Reed, 2002)* – (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

Listed below are some characteristics that might describe a person: caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, helpful, hardworking, honest, kind.

The person with these characteristics could be you or it could be someone else. For a moment, visualize in your mind the kind of person who has these characteristics. Imagine how that person would think, feel and act. When you have a clear image of what this person would be like, rate the following statements.

1. It would make me feel good to be a person who has these characteristics. (I)
2. Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am. (I)
3. I strongly desire to have these characteristics. (I)
4. I would be ashamed to be a person who had these characteristics. (Reverse-coded I)
5. Having these characteristics is not really important to me. (Reverse-coded I)
6. I often wear clothes that identify me as having these characteristics. (S)
7. The types of things I do in my spare time (e.g., hobbies) clearly identify me as having these characteristics. (S)
8. The kinds of books and magazines that I read identify me as having these characteristics. (S)
9. The fact that I have these characteristics is communicated to others by my membership in certain organizations. (S)
10. I am actively involved in activities that communicate to others that I have these characteristics. (S)

Note: (I) Internalization, (S) Symbolization
### Table AI. Full mediation results (study 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Antecedent</th>
<th>Coeff</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Coeff</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Coeff</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.0443</td>
<td>0.3653</td>
<td>-0.1213</td>
<td>0.9036</td>
<td>1.6819</td>
<td>0.5739</td>
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<td>0.0038</td>
<td>-0.3049</td>
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<td>-2.1496</td>
<td>0.0328</td>
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<tr>
<td>Image (X)</td>
<td>0.3405</td>
<td>0.1278</td>
<td>2.6633</td>
<td>0.0083</td>
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<td>0.2008</td>
<td>-1.9359</td>
<td>0.0542</td>
<td>-0.0279</td>
<td>0.0366</td>
<td>-0.7643</td>
<td>0.4456</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hope (M1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sympathy (M2)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Message (V)</td>
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<tr>
<td>M1 x V</td>
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<tr>
<td>M2 x V</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>0.1049</td>
<td>0.0439</td>
<td>2.2869</td>
<td>0.0232</td>
<td>0.1565</td>
<td>0.0721</td>
<td>2.1712</td>
<td>0.0311</td>
<td>0.0421</td>
<td>0.0131</td>
<td>3.2131</td>
<td>0.0015</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive affect</td>
<td>0.6902</td>
<td>0.0427</td>
<td>16.1694</td>
<td>&lt; 0.0001</td>
<td>0.0087</td>
<td>0.0671</td>
<td>0.1442</td>
<td>0.8855</td>
<td>-0.0251</td>
<td>0.0179</td>
<td>-1.4055</td>
<td>0.0015</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internalization</td>
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<td>0.0588</td>
<td>2.0700</td>
<td>0.0397</td>
<td>0.4251</td>
<td>0.0924</td>
<td>4.6015</td>
<td>&lt; 0.0001</td>
<td>-0.0081</td>
<td>0.0177</td>
<td>-0.4603</td>
<td>0.6438</td>
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<tr>
<td>Symbolization</td>
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<td>$R^2 = 0.7438$</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** The two mediators (hope and sympathy) are operating in parallel. Denoting them as M1 and M2 does not imply a sequence, but rather allows for shorthand in the interactions.