

Sad but smiling? How the combination of happy victim images and sad message appeals increase prosocial behavior

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Abstract

The present research examines how a combination of a happy (vs. sad) victim image and a strong sad message appeal can promote prosocial behavior. The underlying reason is that consumers can more easily see how their help can positively change the victim's situation (i.e., high levels of perceived outcome efficacy). This research tests these predictions across four experimental studies, involving volunteering behavior (study 1) and donation allocations (studies 2–4) across two different markets (Indonesia and the USA). We address the challenge charities face to represent the victims in a good light while at the same time showing their "need" to potential donors. These findings provide advice to marketers and consumers on how to develop effective charitable advertising strategies by combining a happy victim image and a strong sad message appeal.

Keywords Victim image · Mixed appeals · Outcome efficacy · Prosocial

In 2018, more than \$427 billion was raised by US charities (Giving USA 2019), with approximately 70% of the total contribution made by individuals (Frank 2018). While this result seems to be encouraging, another research has suggested that since the early 2000s, the trend of consumers engaging in volunteering and charitable giving has

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dropped by around 11% (Anzilotti 2017). Hence, it is crucial for charities to construct effective strategies in order to promote prosocial behaviors among consumers.

Consumers often base their decision to engage in prosocial behavior by relying on visual representations (e.g., pictures) of the victims (Carvalho et al. 2019; Cryder et al. 2017). Among different visual cues, previous research on prosocial behavior has highlighted the significant role of emotional expressions of a victim (Pham and Septianto 2019; Small and Verrochi 2009; Zemack-Rugar and Klucarova-Travani 2018). As can be seen in Table 1, while some research have suggested that sad victim images are more effective in promoting prosocial behavior (Baberini et al. 2015; Small and Verrochi 2009), recent works seem to argue that happy victim images can be more beneficial (Li and Atkinson 2020; Zemack-Rugar and Klucarova-Travani 2018). However, portraying victims in a positive manner can also lead consumers to perceive that they do not really need help (Carvalho et al. 2019; Liang et al. 2016). These findings indicate that it is still unclear how charities can construct effective requests featuring happy victim images.

Against this backdrop, the present research examines a novel prediction by testing how a happy (vs. sad) victim image can increase prosocial behavior when combined with a strong sad message appeal. Drawing upon a recent research on qualitative change hypothesis (Bechler et al. 2019), we further argue that our predicted effect emerges because it is easier for consumers to see how their support can positively change the victim's situation and perceive that their help can make a meaningful difference for the victims (Sharma and Morwitz 2016). We test these predictions across four experimental studies, involving volunteering behavior (study 1) and donation allocations (studies 2– 4) in two different markets (Indonesia in study 2, and the USA in studies 1, 3, and 4).

In doing so, the research makes three theoretical contributions and managerial implications. First, the present research reexamines mixed findings in the literature on victims' emotional expressions (Baberini et al. 2015; Zemack-Rugar and Klucarova-Travani 2018) by introducing the moderating role of strong sad message appeals in leveraging the effectiveness of happy (vs. sad) victim images. Notably, our research is among the first articles examining how a mixed emotional appeal (i.e., a happy victim image with a strong sad message appeal) can promote prosocial behavior. Second, we contribute to the recent work on the qualitative change hypothesis (Bechler et al. 2019) by applying it in the context of charitable advertising. Third and from the managerial standpoint, the findings of this research not only provide information for layperson crowd-funders and charities' marketing managers to develop effective charitable advertising strategies across different markets (Indonesia and the USA).

1 Conceptual development

In the domain of consumer and prosocial behavior, past research has showed that consumers can "catch" the emotion expressed by another person (Small and Verrochi 2009). Consequently, when consumers evaluate a sad victim image, they also feel sad and sympathize with the victim, motivating prosocial behavior (Baberini et al. 2015; Small and Verrochi 2009). However, continuously being exposed to such images may also elicit psychological reactance (Berkowitz 1973) and evoke a sense of loneliness (Choi et al. 2016), leading to unfavorable attitudes towards the advertisement and diminished prosocial behavior (Dyck and Coldevin 1992; Van Kleef et al. 2015). More

Study	Moderator	Mediator	Main findings
Baberini et al. (2015)		Sympathy	Sad (vs. happy) victim images are more effective because they elicit sympathy.
Choi and Park (2020)	Regulatory focus	Skepticism	Sad (vs. happy) victim images are less effective when evaluated by prevention-focused consumers.
Cao and Jia (2017)	Psychological involvement	Donation efficacy	Sad (vs. happy) victim images are more effective, unless consumers have high levels of psychological involvement with the charities.
Dyck and Coldevin (1992)			Happy (vs. sad) victim images are more effective.
Jang (2019)	Donation occasions	Personal distress	Sad (vs. happy) victim images are more effective for a one-time donation (but not for repeated donations).
Li and Atkinson (2020)	Helping mode	·	Happy (vs. sad) victim images are more effective, unless when they are combined with cause-related marketing (as compared to a pure donation request).
Liu et al. (2013)	Contribution type	Happiness	Happy victim images are more effective to increase money contribution, whereas sad victim images are more effective to increase time contribution.
Pham and Septianto (2019)	Message type	Hope and sympathy	Happy victim images are more effective when combined with a recognition message, whereas sad victim images are more effective when combined with a request message.
Small and Verrochi (2009)	Cognitive load	Sympathy	Sad (vs. happy) victim images are more effective because they elicit sympathy.
Zemack-Rugar and Klucarova-Travani (2018)	Regulatory focus	Response efficacy	Happy (vs. sad) victim images are more effective when combined with a promotion-focused message.

Table 1 Key research on victims' emotional expression and prosocial behavior

recent research shows that happy victim images can be more beneficial to promote prosocial behavior because such images leverage favorable consumer evaluations and donations (Li and Atkinson 2020; Zemack-Rugar and Klucarova-Travani 2018). However, portraying victims in a more positive manner can make consumers perceive that the victims do not really need help (Bhati and Eikenberry 2016; Carvalho et al. 2019; Liang et al. 2016).

This juxtaposition thus creates a challenge for charities to represent the victims in a good light while at the same time showing their "need" to potential donors (Bhati and Eikenberry 2016). In light of that and consistent with the recent literature, the present research examines how a happy victim image can be more effective than a sad victim image. More importantly, however, the present research extends prior works by testing a novel prediction that a happy (vs. sad) victim image can increase prosocial behavior when combined with a strong (but not weak) sad message appeal.

Using a strong (vs. weak) sad message appeal by describing difficult situations of a victim can elicit sadness among consumers (Liang et al. 2016) and convey a greater need (Bhati and Eikenberry 2016). Consumers may then cope with this sadness by sympathizing with the victim and developing an urge to help (Bagozzi and Moore 1994). Subsequently, using a happy victim image then allows consumers to see the potential outcomes of their prosocial behavior (Burt and Strongman 2005; Chang and Lee 2009) because those images can elicit hope among consumers (Chang and Lee 2009; Pham and Septianto 2019). Hence, we argue that the combination of a strong (vs. weak) message appeal and a happy (vs. sad) victim image highlights the high contrast between the victims' *current negative* situations and *potential positive* outcome.

We draw upon a recent work on a qualitative change hypothesis, positing that "people perceive qualitative change as greater than non-qualitative change" (Bechler et al. 2019, p. 161). Specifically, Bechler et al. (2019) propose that changes of valence (e.g., from negative to positive attitudes) are perceived to be larger in behavioral impact than changes within valence (e.g., from very negative to less negative attitudes). This is because it is easier for people to understand changes across valence, leading to increased perceptions of behavioral impact (Bechler et al. 2019).

In line with this reasoning, we expect that presenting a happy victim image with a strong sad appeal highlights the high contrast between the victims' current negative situations and potential positive outcome, thus make consumers easily perceive the positive change they can bring to the victim. As a result, consumers should perceive that their help could make meaningful difference for the victims—that is, high levels of perceived outcome efficacy (Sharma and Morwitz 2016). Such perceptions should then increase prosocial behavior among consumers (Sharma and Morwitz 2016; Zemack-Rugar and Klucarova-Travani 2018). Formally stated:

H₁: Happy (vs. sad) victim images will increase prosocial behavior when combined with strong sad message appeals.

H₂: The interactive effect between facial expressions and strong sad message appeals on prosocial behavior will be mediated by perceived outcome efficacy.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model of the present research. We test these predictions in four studies with different sets of stimuli and across two different markets (Indonesia and the USA). Study 1 tests Hypothesis 1 by examining volunteering as a



Fig. 1 Conceptual model

prosocial behavior. Study 2 extends study 1 using donation allocations as the dependent variable. Studies 3 and 4 then test the mediating role of perceived outcome efficacy. Notably, study 4 also further rules out several alternative explanations.

2 Study 1

Study 1 provided initial evidence to Hypothesis 1. Following prior research (Septianto et al. 2018; Winterich et al. 2013), we operationalized volunteering behavior (the dependent variable) by asking participants to complete an additional task without compensation.

2.1 Method

Participants (MTurkers located in the USA, N = 175, $M_{age} = 38.55$, 42% female) completed a 2 (victim image: happy, sad) by 2 (sad message appeal: strong, weak) betweensubjects study. Participants were asked to evaluate an advertisement from UNICEF with a happy or sad victim (adapted from Pham and Septianto 2019), combined with a short description of the victim using a strong or weak sad message appeal (adapted from Liang et al. 2016). In this and subsequent studies, we manipulated the message appeals by differentiating the elaboration of information related to the victims. For instance, while in the weak sad appeal condition, participants were informed about the situation of the victim (e.g., born with a serious disability), in the strong sad appeal condition, participants were provided with more elaborate situation (e.g., how such disability lead to difficulties for the victims and their families). Next, for the dependent variable, participants were asked whether they were willing to complete a 5-minute task to assist UNICEF (Yes = 1, No = 0) (Septianto et al. 2018). As manipulation checks, participants rated on a single bipolar item whether the person in the advertisement looked "sad" (1) or "happy" (7) (Pham and Septianto 2019). Participants also rated the extent to which they felt "sad," "sorrow," and "distress" ($\alpha = .90$) when reading the description of the person (1 = not at all, 7 = very much) (Liang et al. 2016).

2.2 Results and discussion

Manipulation checks As expected, participants reported that a smiling victim (M = 5.39) looked happier than a non-smiling victim (M = 2.97, F(1, 171) = 125.93, p < .001). Participants reading a strong sad message appeal (M = 4.64) also reported higher levels of sadness than those reading a description with a weak sad message appeal (M = 4.07, F(1, 171) = 6.56, p = .011).

Volunteering Table 2 provides the summary of result of this and all subsequent studies. We conducted a moderated logistic regression analysis using PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes 2017) with victim image, sad message appeal, and their interaction as independent variables, and participants' choice to complete the additional task as the dependent variable. Results revealed non-significant main effects of victim image (p = .165) and sad message appeal (p = .589). However and as predicted, there was a significant interaction effect (B = .41, z = 2.59, p = .010). In the strong sad message appeal condition, participants evaluating a happy victim image (63.5%) were more likely to volunteer than those evaluating a sad victim image (36.5%; B = .62, z = 2.80, p = .005). However, such differences between participants evaluating a happy (44.4%) versus sad (55.6%) victim image were non-significant in the weak sad message appeal condition (B = -.19, z = -.86, p = .391). These results supported Hypothesis 1 such that a happy (vs. sad) victim image increased volunteering behavior when combined with a strong (but not weak) sad message appeal.

3 Study 2

Study 2 sought to replicate and extend the findings of study 1 using a new set of stimuli, a distinct prosocial behavior (donation allocations), and in a different market (Indonesia).

Study 1 ($N = 175$, 42% female; $M_{age} = 38.55$, DV: Percentage of participants volunteer	MTurkers in the USA)							
	Happy victim image	Sad victim image						
Weak sad appeal	44.4%	55.6%						
Strong sad appeal	63.5%	36.5%						
Study 2 ($N = 185, 54\%$ female; $M_{age} = 30.04$, Indonesian Panel) DV: Donation allocations (US\$)								
	Happy victim image	Sad victim image						
Weak sad appeal	20.85	23.19						
Strong sad appeal	30.83	24.88						
Study 3 ($N = 240, 40\%$ female; $M_{age} = 38.86$, MTurkers in the USA) DV: Donation allocations (US cents)								
	Happy victim image	Sad victim image						
Weak sad appeal	28.57	30.67						
Strong sad appeal	38.60	31.50						
Study 4 ($N = 209$, 32% female; $M_{age} = 36.77$, MTurkers in the USA) DV: Donation allocations (US cents)								
	Happy victim image	Sad victim image						
Strong inspiration appeal	32.83	33.81						
Strong sad appeal	39.23	33.65						

Table 2 Summary of results

3.1 Method

We collaborated with a non-profit organization affiliated with a large public university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. We asked permissions to send an email containing an online survey link to its customer database of 20,225 adult consumers. The participation rate (0.92%) was similar to those of prior research (Fajardo et al. 2018; Kupor and Laurin 2020). Participants (N = 185, $M_{age} = 30.04$, 54% female) completed a 2 (victim image: happy, sad) by 2 (sad message appeal: strong, weak) between-subjects study.

Similar to study 1, participants evaluated an advertisement from the non-profit organization with a happy or sad victim (adapted from Pham and Septianto 2019), combined with a short description of the victim using a strong or weak sad message appeal (adapted from Liang et al. 2016). For the dependent variable, following prior research (Septianto 2020; Winterich et al. 2013), we incentivized participants such that we would select a few participants to win \$50. We then adapted this incentive and asked them to indicate the amount they would like to donate to the non-profit organization in \$10 increments (\$0, \$10, \$20, \$30, \$40, or \$50).

3.2 Results and discussion

Manipulation checks As expected, participants reported that a smiling victim (M = 4.75) looked happier than a non-smiling victim (M = 2.92, F(1, 181) = 102.48, p < .001). Participants reading a strong sad message appeal (M = 4.74) also reported higher levels of sadness than those reading a description with a weak sad message appeal (M = 4.07, F(1, 181) = 10.24, p = .002).

Donation allocations A two-way ANOVA (victim image × sad message appeal) was conducted to examine donation allocations. Results revealed a significant main effect of sad message appeal (F(1, 181) = 8.52, p = .004)¹ and a non-significant main effect of victim image (p = .368). However, this was qualified by a significant interaction effect (F(1, 181) = 4.30, p = .040). In the strong sad message appeal condition, participants evaluating a happy (vs. sad) victim image reported higher donation allocations ($M_{happy} = 30.83$, $M_{sad} = 24.88$, F(1, 181) = 4.35, p = .038). However, such differences were non-significant in the weak sad message appeal condition ($M_{happy} = 20.85$, $M_{sad} = 23.19$, F(1, 181) = .70, p = .405). These findings were consistent with Hypothesis 1 such that a happy (vs. sad) victim image increased donation allocations when combined with a strong (but not weak) sad message appeal.

4 Study 3

Study 3 sought to test the underlying process of our predictions. Specifically, we examined the mediating role of perceived outcome efficacy (H_2) .

¹ We note that while Studies 2 and 3 revealed significant main effects of message appeal, Studies 1 and 4 did not show such effects. These differences might be influenced by different factors, such as the nature of time (Study 1) versus money contributions (Studies 2 and 3; Liu et al. 2013). Study 4 also used different emotional messages (inspiration vs. sadness) that might further influence the presence of a main effect.

4.1 Method

Participants (MTurkers located in the USA, N = 240, $M_{age} = 38.86$, 40% female) completed a 2 (victim image: happy, sad) by 2 (sad message appeal: strong, weak) between-subjects study. Study 3 employed similar materials and procedure to those of study 1 with two exceptions. First, the dependent variable was donation allocations (between 0 and 50 cents) (Septianto 2020; Sharma and Morwitz 2016). That is, we asked participants to allocate their financial compensation (50 cents) as a donation (in 10 cents increment). Second, we measured the posited mediator using five items ($\alpha =$.95; adapted from Bechler et al. 2019; Zemack-Rugar and Klucarova-Travani 2018). Specifically, we asked participants to rate the following: (1) "How easy was it to understand the way the donation could change the victim's situation?" (2) "How easy was it to see the change in the victim's situation, if a donation was made?" (3) "To what extent your donation would meaningfully support the victim?" (4) "To what extent your donation would make a difference to the victim?" (5) "To what extent your donation would change the victim's situation?"

4.2 Results and discussion

Manipulation checks As expected, participants reported that a smiling victim (M = 5.74) looked happier than a non-smiling victim (M = 3.23, F(1, 236) = 161.23, p < .001). Participants reading a strong sad message appeal (M = 4.93) also reported higher levels of sadness than those reading a description with a weak sad message appeal (M = 4.22, F(1, 236) = 12.56, p < .001).

Donation allocations A two-way ANOVA revealed non-significant main effect of victim image (p = .183) and a significant main effect of sad message appeal (F(1, 236) = 8.41, p = .004). However, this was qualified by a significant interaction effect (F(1, 236) = 6.02, p = .015). In the strong sad message appeal condition, participants evaluating a happy (vs. sad) victim image reported higher donation allocations ($M_{happy} = 38.60, M_{sad} = 31.50, F(1, 236) = 7.01, p = .009$). However, such differences were non-significant in the weak sad message appeal condition ($M_{happy} = 28.57, M_{sad} = 30.67, F(1, 236) = .64, p = .424$). Replicated the findings of study 2 and consistent with Hypothesis 1, a happy (vs. sad) victim image increased donation allocations when combined with a strong (but not weak) sad message appeal.

Underlying mechanism We have proposed that our predicted effects would be mediated by perceived outcome efficacy. As predicted, in the strong sad message appeal condition, participants evaluating a happy (vs. sad) victim image perceived higher levels of outcome efficacy ($M_{happy} = 5.29$, $M_{sad} = 4.51$, F(1, 236) = 7.28, p = .007). However, such differences were non-significant in the weak sad message appeal condition ($M_{happy} = 4.64$, $M_{sad} = 4.63$, F(1, 236) = .01, p = .958).

We conducted a moderated serial mediation analysis (see Fig. 1) using PROCESS Model 8 (Hayes 2017) with 5000 bootstrap resamples. Specifically, we examined the indirect effects of a happy (vs. sad) victim image, moderated by a strong (vs. weak) sad message appeal, on donation allocations via perceived outcome efficacy. The indirect effect was significant in the strong sad message appeal condition (B = 2.505, SE = .869,

95% CI: .906 to 4.333) but non-significant in the weak sad message appeal condition (B = .047, SE = .958, 95% CI: -1.877 to 1.890; see Table 3 for details). These results offered empirical evidence to Hypothesis 2.

5 Study 4

We conducted study 4 to rule out several alternative explanations and provide strong empirical evidence to our predictions. First, in studies 1–3, the images of happy (but not sad) victims were looking directly at the camera. Because a recent research suggests that direct (vs. averted) eye gaze might influence consumers' perceived relationship

Study 3	Conseque	ant							
Study 5	Deresived outcome afficient (M)				Donation	allocati	ons (V)		
Antecedent	Coeff	SE	t enneaej	n	Coeff	SE	t	n	
Constant	4 767	0.100	17 572	$P \sim 0.001$	1 400	2 203	0.676	P 0.500	
Viotim imaga (V)	4.707	0.100	1 069	0.050	-0.026	0.683	-0.028	0.000	
Messee anna 1 (M)	0.122	0.100	1.908	0.030	- 0.020	0.005	- 0.038	0.970	
Message appeal (w)	0.133	0.100	1.330	0.185	1.852	0.680	2.720	0.007	
X × W	0.190	0.100	1.895	0.059	1.069	0.682	1.567	0.118	
Perceived outcome efficacy (M)					6.470	0.440	14.712	< 0.001	
Model summary	$R^2 = 0.03$ p = 0.032	36, <i>F</i> (3, 2	236) = 2.9	974	$R^2 = 0.51$ p < 0.001	12, F(4,	235) = 61.	.697	
Study 4	Consequent								
	Hope (al	ternative	: 1)		Perceived	d need (a	alternative	2)	
Antecedent	Coeff	SE	t	р	Coeff	SE	t	p	
Constant	5.533	0.071	78.009	< 0.001	5.996	0.059	101.042	< 0.001	
Victim image (X)	0.048	0.071	0.671	0.503	-0.109	0.059	-1.845	0.066	
Message appeal (W)	-0.033	0.071	-0.467	0.641	0.081	0.059	1.359	0.176	
$\mathbf{X} \times \mathbf{W}$	0.010	0.071	0.143	0.887	0.033	0.059	0.549	0.584	
Model summary	$R^2 = 0.003, F(3, 205) = 0.230$ p = 0.875				$R^2 = 0.750, F(3, 205) = 1.864$ p = 0.137				
Study 4	Consequent								
	Perceived outcome efficacy (M)				Donation allocations (Y)				
Antecedent	Coeff	SE	t	р	Coeff	SE	t	р	
Constant	5.325	0.082	65.221	< 0.001	7.955	5.909	1.346	0.180	
Victim image (X)	0.065	0.082	0.802	0.424	0.367	0.784	0.468	0.640	
Message appeal (W)	0.036	0.082	0.446	0.656	1.191	0.777	1.533	0.127	
$\mathbf{X} \times \mathbf{W}$	0.173	0.082	2.119	0.035	0.874	0.780	1.121	0.264	
Perceived outcome efficacy (M)					6.060	0.740	8.190	< 0.001	
Hope (alternative 1)					0.292	0.936	0.313	0.755	
Perceived need (alternative 2)					-1.119	1.055	-1.061	0.290	
Model summary	$R^2 = 0.025, F(3, 205) = 1.774$ p = 0.153				$R^2 = 0.314, F(6, 202) = 15.380$ p < 0.001				

 Table 3
 Mediation results (studies 3 and 4)

(Ilicic and Brennan 2020), study 4 used happy versus sad victim images with the same (direct) eye gaze. Second, it was plausible that our effect was driven by the emotion of inspiration (Liang et al. 2016). Hence, we compared sad versus inspirational message appeals to test this possibility. Lastly, we sought to empirically rule out perceived need (Bhati and Eikenberry 2016) and the emotion of hope (Pham and Septianto 2019) as alternative explanations.

5.1 Method

Participants (MTurkers located in the USA, N = 209, $M_{age} = 36.77$, 32% female) completed a 2 (victim image: happy, sad) by 2 (message appeal: strong sad, strong inspirational) between-subjects study. Study 4 used similar materials and procedure to those of study 3 with three exceptions. First, study 4 used a different set of stimuli (adapted from Liang et al. 2016; Pham and Septianto 2019). Second, as an additional manipulation check, participants rated the extent to which they felt "inspired," "moved," and "encouraged" when reading the description of the person (1 = not at all, 7 = very much) (Liang et al. 2016). Third, as alternative explanations, we asked participants the extent to which the person was in need and the extent to which they felt "hopeful" and "optimistic" ($\alpha = .79$; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much) (Pham and Septianto 2019).

5.2 Results and discussion

Manipulation checks As expected, participants reported that a smiling victim (M = 5.46) looked happier than a non-smiling victim (M = 4.06, F(1, 205) = 32.74, p < .001). In addition, participants reading a strong sad message appeal (M = 4.99) reported higher levels of sadness ($\alpha = .91$) than those reading a description with a strong inspirational message appeal (M = 4.52, F(1, 205) = 4.65, p = .032). Participants reading a strong inspirational message appeal (M = 5.23) reported higher levels of inspiration ($\alpha = .86$) than those reading a description with a strong sad message appeal (M = 4.94, F(1, 205) = 7.68, p = .006).

Donation allocations A two-way ANOVA revealed non-significant main effects of victim image (p = .322) and message appeal (p = .149). There was a significant interaction effect (F(1, 205) = 4.35, p = .038). In the strong sad message appeal condition, participants evaluating a happy (vs. sad) victim image reported higher donation allocations ($M_{happy} = 39.23$, $M_{sad} = 33.65$, F(1, 205) = 4.72, p = .031). However, such differences were non-significant in the strong inspirational message appeal condition ($M_{happy} = 32.83$, $M_{sad} = 33.81$, F(1, 205) = .60, p = .440). These findings were consistent with Hypothesis 1.

Underlying mechanism We have proposed that our predicted effects would be mediated by perceived outcome efficacy ($\alpha = .91$). As predicted, in the strong sad message appeal condition, participants evaluating a happy (vs. sad) victim image perceived higher levels of outcome efficacy ($M_{happy} = 5.60$, $M_{sad} = 5.12$, F(1, 205) = 4.25, p = .041). However, such differences were non-significant in the weak sad message appeal condition ($M_{happy} = 5.18$, $M_{sad} = 5.40$, F(1, 205) = .87, p = .352).

We conducted a moderated serial mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 8 (Hayes 2017) with 5000 bootstrap resamples. Specifically, we examined the indirect effects of a happy (vs. sad) victim image, moderated by message appeal, on donation allocations via perceived outcome efficacy. In addition, we included hope and perceived need as potential mediators. The indirect effects of hope (95% CI for strong inspiration: – .292, .225; strong sadness: – .221, .238) and perceived need (95% CI for strong inspiration: – .245, .698; strong sadness: – .190, .470) were non-significant. However and consistent with Hypothesis 2, the indirect effect of perceived outcome efficacy was significant in the strong sad message appeal condition (B = 1.445, SE = .727, 95% CI: .139 to 2.966) but non-significant in the strong inspirational message appeal condition (B = -.652, SE = .686, 95% CI: –2.055 to .675).

6 General discussion

Our research makes three theoretical contributions and managerial implications. First, extant literature examining the effect of happy versus sad victim images has provided somewhat conflicting findings, suggesting that happy victim images may (not) be effective in promoting prosocial behavior (Small and Verrochi 2009; Zemack-Rugar and Klucarova-Travani 2018; see also Table 1). Extending prior research in this area, we test a novel prediction that the combination of a happy victim image and a strong sad message appeal (a mixed emotional appeal) can effectively increase prosocial behavior.

Notably, to the best of our knowledge, this research is among the first studies examining a mixed emotional appeal in donation, except for Liang et al. (2016). Liang et al. (2016) have showed that a mixed emotional appeal of sadness (arising from the victim's current situation) and determination (from the victim to be better) could inspire Chinese consumers to donate. Our research diverges from this research and extends the literature by examining a distinct positive appeal (i.e., a happy victim image) and establishing the effects across different markets (Indonesia and the USA).

Note that we examined strong (vs. weak) sad message appeals in studies 1–3 because the context of charitable advertising is bound to have negative emotions to some extent (Liang et al. 2016). However, we also acknowledge that in some situations, employing positive emotional appeals such as inspiration (Liang et al. 2016) and gratitude expression (Pham and Septianto 2019) can be applicable. As such, the examination of strong sad versus inspirational message appeals in study 4 allowed us to investigate the role of (mis)match of valence, thus offering additional insights into this regard.

We found that only the combination of happy (vs. sad) victim image with a sad (but not inspirational) message appeal led to higher donation allocations. On the one hand, this is in line with prior research suggesting that inspiration-dominating appeals can indicate that the victims do not really need help (Carvalho et al. 2019; Liang et al. 2016). On the other hand, it is interesting that we did not find an effect for a sad victim image with an inspirational message appeal (a mixed emotional appeal) because Liang et al. (2016) found that a combination of inspirational and sad message appeals can be beneficial. While this is beyond the context of our research, it is possible that a sad

victim image was not strong enough to elicit sadness. Regardless, the results of study 4 suggest that the emotion of inspiration did not drive our effect and thus, it is distinct from the argument of Liang et al. (2016).

Overall, the current research contributes to the current literature on victims' facial expressions and seeks to take a step forward in reconciling such conflicting findings (Small and Verrochi 2009; Zemack-Rugar and Klucarova-Travani 2018; see also Table 1) by introducing strong sad message appeals as a moderator of the influences of happy victim images. Note that our findings do not necessarily overturn prior research (e.g., Liang et al. 2016); however, our research provides a more nuanced understanding of the importance of contextual factors (e.g., emotional message appeals) in developing effective charitable advertising.

Second, we provide empirical evidence of the underlying process of our prediction—perceived outcome efficacy. This is consistent with prior research showing the significant role of donation efficacy in driving prosocial behavior (Sharma and Morwitz 2016; Zemack-Rugar and Klucarova-Travani 2018). More importantly, our findings add to our understanding of the implications of recent work on qualitative change hypothesis (Bechler et al. 2019). That is, the combination of a strong negative sad message appeal and a happy victim image highlights a high contrast that consumers can easily understand how much their help can bring a positive change to the victims. This is meaningful because while prior research has used the qualitative change hypothesis to understand attitudinal change in general (Bechler et al. 2019) and persuasion target in particular (Bechler et al. 2020), we demonstrate the relevance in the context of prosocial behavior.

Third, the findings of this research are beneficial for layperson crowd-funders and charities' marketing managers to develop effective charitable advertising strategies. Notably, we demonstrate the effectiveness of the combination of a happy victim image and a strong sad message appeal approach across different prosocial behaviors (time and money contributions) and in different markets (Indonesia and the USA). This is important because prior research seems to suggest that a mixed emotional appeal is more acceptable and effective in Asian countries (Liang et al. 2016; Williams and Aaker 2002). However, at least in our case, we show that a mixed emotional appeal of a happy victim image and a strong sad message appeal is effective across Asian and Western countries.

Our work also provides exciting future research avenues. First, while we tested our predictions using child and adult images, we only recruited adult participants for our research. It would be interesting to examine whether young consumers (e.g., children) may have different responses to such images. This is important because such understanding could help to educate younger generations. Second, we focused on the prosocial behavior context; however, our findings can be potentially extended to other domains. In particular, given the nature of social marketing, it is appropriate for social marketing campaigns to employ negative emotional appeals (Brennan and Binney 2010). Thus, future research can explore whether a mixed emotional appeal can promote the purchase of ethical and environmentally friendly products and/or encourage sustainable behaviors among consumers.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Appendix

No Smile - Low Sadness (Studies 1 and 3)

Pat was born in January 2010. She was born with a serious disability: missing the part of the legs below knees.

Donate to UNICEF and change Pat's life for the better!



No Smile - High Sadness (Studies 1 and 3)

Pat was born in January 2010. She was born with a serious disability: missing the part of the legs below knees. Because of this disability, she had no choice but staying on bed by himself day after day from his infancy. By her school age, her family has exhausted their financial resources to care for her disability and the parents themselves also had chronic illness, making it very difficult for the whole family to make a living. When she sees other children of her age going to school each day, she is very sad and does not know where her future is.

Donate to UNICEF and change Pat's life for the better!

No Smile – Low Sadness (Studies 1 and 3)



Pat was born in January 2010. She was born with a serious disability: missing the part of the legs below knees.

Donate to UNICEF and change Pat's life for the better!



No Smile - High Sadness (Studies 1 and 3)

Pat was born in January 2010. She was born with a serious disability: missing the part of the legs below knees. Because of this disability, she had no choice but staying on bed by himself day after day from his infancy. By her school age, her family has exhausted their financial resources to care for her disability and the parents themselves also had chronic illness, making it very difficult for the whole family to make a living. When she sees other children of her age going to school each day, she is very sad and does not know where her future is.

Donate to UNICEF and change Pat's life for the better!



No Smile - Low Sadness (Study 2)

Two years ago, Rini was diagnosed with a severe form of leukemia. Donate to KAGAMA and change Rini's life for the better!



No Smile - High Sadness (Study 2)

Two years ago, Rini was diagnosed with a severe form of leukemia. Because of repeated bleeding, the young girl not only developed arthropathy in her joints, her hands and feet also began to become disabled. Her family has spent all of their savings to treat the disease and her parents themselves also suffer from chronic illnesses. The whole family is now homeless, struggling for life. Seeing other girls' happy and healthy life, she is very sad, and wonders when her illness can be cured so that she can live a healthy life as other girls. Donate to KAGAMA and change Rini's life for the better!



Smile - Low Sadness (Study 2)

Two years ago, Rini was diagnosed with a severe form of leukemia. Donate to KAGAMA and change Rini's life for the better! Donate to KAGAMA and change Rini's life for the better!



Smile – High Sadness (Study 2)

Two years ago, Rini was diagnosed with a severe form of leukemia. Because of repeated bleeding, the young girl not only developed arthropathy in her joints, her hands and feet also began to become disabled. Her family has spent all of their savings to treat the disease and her parents themselves also suffer from chronic illnesses. The whole family is now homeless, struggling for life. Seeing other girls' happy and healthy life, she is very sad, and wonders when her illness can be cured so that she can live a healthy life as other girls. Donate to KAGAMA and change Rini's life for the better!



No Smile - High Sadness (Study 3)

Jim was born in January 2010. When he was two years old, he was diagnosed with a severe form of leukemia. Because of repeated bleeding, the young boy not only developed arthropathy in his joints, his hands and feet also began to become disabled. His family has spent all of their savings to treat the disease and his parents themselves also suffer from chronic illnesses. The whole family is now homeless sleeping on the street, struggling for life. Jim and his parents shelter themselves under a pedestrian crossing bridge and live on leftovers from the garbage bins of restaurants. Seeing other children's happy and healthy life, he is very sad, and wonders when his illness can be cured so that he can live a healthy life as other children.



No Smile – High Inspiration (Study 3)

Jim was born in January 2010. When he was two years old, he was diagnosed with a severe form of leukemia. But he has been a very sensible boy since a young age and stays strong in adversity. He also often encourages his parents to be optimistic about the future. In order to treat his disease, his family has not only sold the house but also spent all of their savings. But Jim has never given up on himself. He and his parents recycle products from garbage bins on the streets and save every penny that they made from it. Whenever they have saved enough money to continue the treatment, Jim would go to the hospital for the treatment. He strongly believes he can be healthy one day.



Smile - High Sadness (Study 3)

Jim was born in January 2010. When he was two years old, he was diagnosed with a severe form of leukemia. Because of repeated bleeding, the young boy not only developed arthropathy in his joints, his hands and feet also began to become disabled. His family has spent all of their savings to treat the disease and his parents themselves also suffer from chronic illnesses. The whole family is now homeless sleeping on the street, struggling for life. Jim and his parents shelter themselves under a pedestrian crossing bridge and live on leftovers from the garbage bins of restaurants. Seeing other children's happy and healthy life, he is very sad, and wonders when his illness can be cured so that he can live a healthy life as other children.



Smile – High Inspiration (Study 3)

Jim was born in January 2010. When he was two years old, he was diagnosed with a severe form of leukemia. But he has been a very sensible boy since a young age and stays strong in adversity. He also often encourages his parents to be optimistic about the future. In order to treat his disease, his family has not only sold the house but also spent all of their savings. But Jim has never given up on himself. He and his parents recycle products from garbage bins on the streets and save every penny that they made from it. Whenever they have saved enough money to continue the treatment, Jim would go to the hospital for the treatment. He strongly believes he can be healthy one day.



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