Promoting Help For Victims of Child Abuse: Using Positive Or Negative, Certain Or Uncertain Emotions?

Tineke Faseur, Ghent University, Belgium
Maggie Geuens, Ghent University, Belgium
Leen Adams, Ghent University, Belgium

This study investigated the effectiveness of two cognitive appraisal dimensions of emotions, valence and certainty, in advertisements promoting a socially oriented organization. Furthermore, the moderating impact of showing multiple unidentified victims versus showing one identified victim and donation history of the respondents was investigated in 239 adult citizens. Certain emotions proved to be more effective (compatible) than uncertain ones for (with) advertisements with multiple unidentified victims and regular donors, whereas the opposite holds true for advertisements with one identified victim and non-regular donors. Surprisingly, positive emotions were found to be more or equally effective than negative ones under all conditions.

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Tine Faseur, Ghent University, Belgium
Maggie Geuens, Ghent University and Vlerick Leuven Ghent Management School, Belgium
Leen Adams, Ghent University, Belgium

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Nonprofit marketers face an ongoing challenge to persuade as many people as possible to donate as much money as possible to their organization. It has already been shown that emotional advertisements can serve as strong persuaders to motivate people to help others in need (e.g., Bagozzi and Moore 1994). It is intuitively clear, however, that not all emotions will be equally effective in motivating all kinds of people to donate money to all kinds of good causes. One element that is expected to influence the impact of different kinds of ad-evoked emotions is the compatibility of these emotions with the ad appeal. According to MacInnis and Park (1991), advertisements will be most effective when the different executional elements of the advertisement show a “fit”. When different ad cues are complementary, they reinforce the basic message. Furthermore, emotions also need to be compatible with the characteristics of the perceiver of the ad. Several researchers have shown that personal characteristics and people’s personality can moderate the effectiveness of advertisements evoking different emotions (e.g., Bosmans and Baumgartner, 2005; Chang, 2006).

The emotions that people experience in a particular situation (e.g., when reading an advertisement) are based on a personal interpretation (appraisal) of the situation on several cognitive dimensions (e.g., the cognitive appraisal theory, Smith and Ellsworth 1985). When investigating the effect of different ad-evoked emotions on ad effectiveness and helping intentions, one should therefore examine the contribution of the cognitive appraisal dimensions underlying these emotions. In this study, the focus is on two dimensions that seem highly relevant in a social marketing context: the valence dimension and the certainty dimension. Furthermore, we hypothesize that the effect of positive versus negative and of certain versus uncertain ad-evoked emotions will depend on their compatibility with (a) the ad appeal: advertisements showing one identified victim versus a group of unidentified victims and (b) the characteristics of regular and non-regular donors.

With regard to the valence dimension of emotions, Obermiller (1995) indicates that positive ad-evoked emotions stress the significance of an individual donor action, increasing the perceived consumer effectiveness, whereas negative ad-evoked emotions concentrate more on the severity of the problem, making it more salient. Concerning the certainty dimension of emotions, it has been shown that people who feel uncertain (certain) about a situation are highly unconfident (confident), express pessimistic (optimistic) risk perceptions and are more risk-avoiding (seeking) in their actions (Lerner & Keltner 2001; Raghunathan & Pham 1999; Tiedens & Linton, 2001).

Concerning the ad appeal, we expect that when an advertisement shows a single identified victim (versus many unidentified victims), the problem will be perceived as more vivid and familiar (Schelling, 1968), concern for the problem will increase, and people will care more about the problem (Small and Loewenstein, 2005). This is expected to make the risks (for the needy people) appear to be more proximal and concrete. Therefore negative (high concern) and uncertain (high risk) emotions are hypothesized to be more compatible with a single victim appeal (high concern and risk), leading to higher ad evaluations and helping intentions. Positive (lower severity) and certain (low risk) emotions, on the other hand, will be more appropriate for advertisements portraying multiple unidentified victims (lower risk and concern).

Regarding the people’s donation history, regular as opposed to non-regular donors are expected to be more interested in and concerned with the problems of other people. Furthermore, they are expected to trust nonprofit organizations and have confidence that the organizations will help the people in need (Sargeant, Ford, and West, 2006). Therefore, negative (low concern) and uncertain (low confidence) emotions are expected to be more compatible with non-regular donors (low concern and confidence), and positive (high concern) and certain (high confidence) emotions are expected to be more compatible with regular donors (high concern and confidence), with compatibility leading to higher ad attitudes and helping intentions.

To test the hypotheses, advertisements were created to promote a fictitious confidence centre that helps victims of child abuse. For each of the two appeals (one identified victim versus multiple unidentified victims), four advertisements were created that were intended to evoke a positive certain, a positive uncertain, a negative certain, and a negative uncertain emotion. A web-based questionnaire was set up, using the program “The Websurveyor”. The questionnaire was sent to 2000 people. Data were collected from 239 adult respondents, divided equally into women and men, from 30 to 60 years, randomly assigned to one of the eight advertisements. Participants were asked to carefully read the test ad, to score the emotions evoked by the ad on the valence and the certainty dimension, to indicate their ad and organizational attitude and their helping intentions (Aad, Aorg and HI), and to indicate to what extent they were a regular donor.

Hypotheses were tested using multiple regression analyses. Based on the idea that the experience of emotions depends on individuals’ ratings of the stimulus on different appraisal dimensions, respondents’ ratings on the valence and the certainty dimensions were used as independent variables rather than categorical variables.

Results indicated that the impact of the certainty dimension of emotions was moderated by ad appeal and donation history in the expected direction. Concerning the interaction effects between the valence dimension of the emotions and the moderators, the expectations of this study were only partially confirmed. Positive emotions were more or equally effective than negative ones under all conditions, probably, because a negative emotion overemphasized the severity of the child abuse problem (Obermiller, 1995).

References

Bosmans, Anick and Hans Baumgartner (2005), “Goal-relevant emotional information: when extraneous affect leads to persuasion and when it does not,” Journal of Consumer Research, 32 (3), 424-34.


