All Charity Advertisements Are Not Created Equal: Influences of Message Framing, Vividness Valence, and Number Size Framing

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This research tests the idea that responses to charitable appeals could be influenced by message framing and presentations of vivid pictures and stories, and determines whether different statistical information described in a message would modify framing effects. Child poverty, a pressing social policy issue of the 21st century in the US and elsewhere, is adopted as a charitable context in the present study. Results of the experiments indicate that vividness valence enhances framing effects on advertising effectiveness when vivid elements (i.e., photographs or stories) to the framed message are congruent, especially when both are presented negatively. A three-way interaction of message framing, vividness valence, and number size framing is observed. When the donation message is framed negatively with the negative vivid presentation, statistics with a small number size arouse stronger behavioral intention to donate than those with a large one. Nevertheless, when the positively framed message is accompanied by the positive vivid presentation, opposite results are obtained.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Framing is one of the frequent communication strategies used by marketing campaigners. Labeling a glass of water “half-empty” or “half-full” is an illustration of message framing, as each label presents only one side of the information (Martin, 1995). The way information is labeled or framed may significantly influence consumers’ judgments and decisions (see Levin, Schneider and Gaeth (1998) for a review). Researchers endeavor to adopt framing concepts in public matter promotion (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Price and Tewksbury, 1997). Iyengar and Kinder (1987) indicate that people’s knowledge and justification about public affairs might be substantially shaped by the selection and presentation of information. Charitable donation can be promoted through positively framed messages (e.g., “With your help, an unfortunate child can have an opportunity for a bright future”) or negatively framed ones (e.g., “Without your help, an unfortunate child will remain living in the dark”) with the same goal (i.e., donation behavior promotion). This article applies framing concepts in promoting charitable campaigns to demonstrate that message framing might not be equally persuasive in all conditions, and could be moderated by two communication format factors: vividness valence and number size framing. How should advertisers frame a message for promoting a charitable donation? Should they emphasize potential gains resulting from the donation or the negative consequences of not making the donation? Will effects of vivid presentations always be positive in framing effectiveness? How should advertisers frame the statistics regarding the charitable issue? Will different information presentations on a charitable issue influence consumer attitudes toward donation promotion and induce compliance with a request?

Child poverty, a pressing social policy issue of the 21st century in the USA and elsewhere, was adopted as charitable promotion in the present research. In Study 1, moderating roles of vividness valence and number size framing on framing effectiveness were explored in a 2 (message framing: positive vs. negative) X 2 (vividness valence: positive photograph vs. negative photograph) X 2 (statistical framing: small number size vs. large number size) factorial design. A combination of messages, photographs, and statistical framing yielded eight versions of ads. The experiment was a between-subjects design and was conducted through the Internet. Two hundred and twenty-eight adults (126 males and 102 females) participated in the experiment. Study 2 was undertaken to test the robustness of vividness valence and number size framing with different manipulations. Case studies are recognized as a popular alternative to create vividness effects (e.g., Rook, 1986 and 1987). Different from temporal framing in Study 1, number size framing was operationalized through frequency information with different sizes of numerators (e.g., Chang, 2006). An experiment of 2 (message framing: positive vs. negative) X 3 (vividness valence: positive story vs. negative story vs. neutral statement) X 2 (statistical framing: large size of numerator vs. small size of numerator) factorial design was developed. Participants consisted of 708 part-time undergraduate students (369 males and 339 females) from ten evening courses across various disciplines (i.e., language-related, business, engineering, humanity, and social work) from four large universities.

Results of the two studies support the general proposal that the sum of advertising effectiveness depends on complicated interrelationships among message framing, vividness valence, and number size framing. Applying framing in the charitable promotion business, the results show that framing a charitable message negatively leads to higher persuasion than framing it positively. The negative image seems to boost the persuasiveness of negative message in the experiment, which is consistent with previous findings that negative images increase the persuasive appeals in promoting donations for animal shelters (Pratkanis and Aronson, 1992) and world hunger (Thornton et al., 1991).

In addition to message framing, vividness valence should be considered in charity advertising. A two-way interaction between vividness valence and message framing is found to act similarly in two presented formats: photographic display and story portrayal. A pictorial image corresponding to the message is shown to increase the impact of message framing, especially when both are presented negatively. A vivid story could elicit higher advertising persuasion in a framed message, which parallels the findings of Small and Loewenstein (2003) that specific victims of misfortune often draw extraordinary attention and resources. Identifiable victims communicated in a story may stimulate a more powerful response than do those of neutral description. The results of Study 1 and 2 echo what Smith and Shaffer (2000) find that vividness may undermine or enhance message effectiveness. Congruence between framing style and vividness valence could be an important contingency variable in the framing-vividness relationship.

Statistical evidence illustrating the seriousness of social issues (i.e., long temporal frame or large numerator) can be a plus in communication with the public. Illusion of large numbers over a time period could increase the salience of the promoted issue. Previous studies of the base-rate neglect focus on areas including public health communication (Yamagishi, 1997) and consumer product promotion (Chang, 2006; Wong and Kwong, 2005). In the current research, the concept is utilized in the field of social welfare promotion (e.g., charitable donation). Statistics with a large number size could enhance the influences of negativity bias, and thus facilitate the effects of negative framing. However, we find that advantageous effects of large number size may not always occur. Our experimental results show that effects of base-rate neglect may become limited when the framed message and the vivid element (i.e., photograph or story) are negative. Statistics framed with a large number size could have the exaggerating effects on the severity of the charitable issue and backfire on potential donors’ intention to donate when people already see the issue pessimistically. Using statistics with a small number size can avoid such boomerang effects and maintain a balance between perceived severity and intention to help.

This article makes theoretical contributions to charity advertising, information processing, and decision-making and practice. It integrates message framing, negativity bias, vividness valence, message congruency, and base-rate neglect literature to examine the effects of framing heuristics on individuals’ responses to persuasive ads promoting charitable donations. In addition to going beyond simple demonstrations of message effectiveness, the article attempts to and clarifies when framing effects are likely to be
observed, reversed, or eliminated with considerations of factors from pictorial display, story description, and statistical presentation. Understanding the importance of advertising framing is extended by providing evidence that information formats can affect advertising effectiveness in different ways.

References