The “I” of the Beholder: the Impacts of Gender Differences and Self-Referencing on Charity Advertising

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This research investigates gender differences in terms of the response to altruistic and egoistic charitable appeals, and demonstrates how self-referencing can influence advertising processing under different viewing situations. Different from previous studies, self-referencing is operationalized in perceived nature of a non-profit organization. An experiment is conducted through the Internet. When self-referencing is high, female participants tend to be more responsive to the altruistic appeal and male counterparts are more likely to be persuaded by the egoistic appeal. The results also indicate that lower self-referencing may reduce the aforementioned effects of charity framing appeals. Compared with the altruistic appeal, the egoistic appeal is more effective for women viewing the NPO with low perceived self-referencing. In contrast, men viewing the same NPO are more persuaded by the altruistic appeal than the egoistic one. Implications of the current findings for existing theory are discussed along with directions for future research.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

With decreasing governmental support for social services, requests for charitable donations have become more frequent over the past decade. How to maximize the responses among public contributors is an important arena in the marketing of non-profit organizations (NPOs) especially when the fund-raising competitions among NPOs are fierce. To date, research has attempted to better elucidate the relationship between charity promotion and donation behavior has focused largely on cognitive mechanisms to increase compliance rates of donation solicitation. The researched mechanisms include foot-in-the-door techniques, visual aids, and request size. Less attention is directed toward examining how to frame charity messages effectively.

Charitable donations can be promoted through altruistic-value framed messages (e.g., “As a caring person, you are going to do something good to others in need”) or egoistic-value framed ones (e.g., “As a successful person, you are going to do something good to protect your future”) with the same goal (i.e., donation behavior promotion). Framing messages with these two main motives (altruistic and egoistic) for helping can be different between men and women. This article contributes to this evolving stream of research by applying 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 variables in social psychology: gender role and self-referencing. Gender roles can be an important determinant of reactions to charitable appeals that indicate donations either helps oneself (i.e., egoistic advantages) or someone else (i.e., altruistic benefits). How individuals process information by relating to the self-concept, is also relevant for charity advertising research. The current research tests the idea that responses to charitable appeals could be influenced by gender differences, and examines whether charitable information differently framed in a message would modify the effects of gender differences. How should advertisers frame a message for promoting a charitable donation? Should they frame the donation message as egoistic or altruistic appeals? Will self-referencing affect responses to egoistic versus altruistic appeals? Are the impacts of gender differences and self-referencing additive or multiplicative in influencing consumer attitudes toward donation promotion and inducing compliance with a request?

Influences of self-referencing in the relation between gender differences and charity framing appeal on advertising effectiveness were explored in a 2 (gender: female vs. male) X 2 (charity framing appeal: egoistic vs. altruistic) X 2 (self-referencing: low vs. high) factorial design. Self-referencing was manipulated through the nature of a NPO. The experiment was conducted through the Internet. Potential participants received an email invitation to participate in the study through a highlighted hyperlink to instantly access the designed website. Respondents were informed to evaluate a poster that would be launched for a forthcoming charitable campaign regarding the importance of making personal donations. They were then randomly exposed to one of the four treatment versions by viewing a designed poster. Finally, respondents continued to complete a questionnaire containing post-manipulation measures and manipulation checks, and clicked the “submit” button.

After successful manipulation checks, a series of analysis of variance were conducted to examine proposed hypotheses. The results support the general proposal that advertising effectiveness depends on complicated interrelationships among gender differences, charity framing appeal, and self-referencing. Specifically, the altruistic appeal results in more favorable intention than the egoistic appeal for the female audience, with the results reverses for the male counterparts. This lends qualified support to the phenomenon of value congruity (Bruneel and Nelson, 2000; Supphellen and Nelson, 2001) in a charitable communication context. Contradictory to conventional wisdom (e.g., Block, 2005; Meyers-Levy and Peracchio, 1996; Shavitt and Brock, 1986), high self-referencing is not found to be always prevailing. The results further suggest that compared with women, men are more likely to be influenced by self-referencing. Self-referencing has a multiplicative impact on consumer attitudes toward donation promotion and behavioral intention when gender differences are considered.

Most importantly, we find that the interaction effect of gender differences and charity framing appeal can be attributed to and are moderated by different degrees of self-referencing. When the values delivered in the ad are accessible and easily activated by self-referencing techniques and match well with message claims, women are expected to resonate with altruistic claims that label them as caring because of socialization forces that encourage women to focus on others’ welfare, and men are expected to resonate with egoistic claims that label themselves as successful because of the traditional male role. It appears that if the charity framing appeal fits the social role of audience member, it should motivate that person to behave in an appeal-consistent manner. As such, self-referencing can be an explicit form of conveying values in terms of gender differences if they match with the social nature of the audience member. The results reflect previous studies in that when activated values are self-relevant, assimilation effects may occur in line with gender expectations (Aaker and Williams, 1998; Nelson et al., 2006). However, our research challenges these views and shows that the effects of value congruity do not always have a positive impact. In fact, the opposite could occur in the absence of self-referencing. When self-referencing is low, the congruence between gender and charity framing appeal may cause a boomerang effect on advertising persuasion of charity message. This is true for both women and men encountering a donation solicitation by a NPO which is perceived as a charity providing low self-referencing needs. The altruistic appeal becomes more effective to men, but the egoistic appeal is more effective to women. It could be due to that people rely on the heuristic cue in information processing when self-referencing is low. The framing appeal depicting the opposite traditional gender social role could catch more attention in serving a heuristic cue.

This study provides important insights into social psychological influences of gender differences and self-referencing that occur when charitable donation messages are pitched to the public. How an individual being socially perceived, and how he/she perceives a NPO would determine the effectiveness of two major framing appeals. Different types of NPOs should employ appropriate framing appeals, depending on the audience member’s gender. When individuals perceive a NPO as having a higher level of self-referencing, the effects of the “I” of the beholder (i.e., congruence between the gender and the message theme) may facilitate advertising
persuasion. Conversely, when facing a NPO with a lower level of self-referencing, the “I” may be determined by how a charity message is framed (egoistic vs. altruistic). In short, incongruity between the gender and message theme lead to higher advertising effectiveness.

REFERENCES