Inspire Me to Donate: the Use of Mixed Emotions in Public Service Announcements

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In this research we propose an “inspiration-helping” hypothesis, and find that a mixture of positive (e.g., strong) and negative (e.g., sad) emotions can inspire people to donate. We show that using mixed emotions is more effective as a means of persuading people to donate than using exclusively negative emotions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
For decades researchers and marketers in charity organizations have tried to find out what persuades people to donate. Answers to this question would enable charity organizations to design more effective and persuasive appeals in their public service announcements (PSAs). One common practice used in PSAs is to emphasize the unfortunate situations facing the donation target, for example, flood victims losing their homes, to convey negative emotions such as sadness, fear and tension (Bagozzi and Moore 1994). These negative emotions are said to make people more empathetic towards the target’s plight and to increase their tendency to donate (Bagozzi and Moore 1994; Fisher, Vandenbosch, and Antia 2008).

In contrast to this focus on the use of negative emotions in PSAs, there has been little research examining the effectiveness of using positive emotions in PSAs. Even less attention has been paid to the effects of using mixed emotions (e.g., both positive and negative). Although negative emotions are more common and easier to convey in PSAs soliciting donations, it is undeniable that positive emotions such as strength and determination can also be induced. Yet little research has examined the effectiveness of using positive or mixed emotions.

In this research we focus on PSAs that request donations for victims of unfortunate situations such as floods, earthquakes and endemic poverty. As there is bound to be negative emotions in such PSAs, our main objective is to examine the impact of using mixed emotions, both positive and negative, as a means of soliciting donations.

Study 1
The purpose of study 1 was to test the proposed inspiration-helping hypothesis on PSA evaluation. Eighty-one undergraduate students (53.1% males) at a large public university in China participated in the study for partial course credit. The study employed a 2 x 1 between-subject design (emotion: negative vs. mixed). Based on focus group (n=20) discussions, emotion was manipulated by using a PSA appealing for aid to a Young Children Education Foundation. This ad showed the face of a young child with text descriptions. In the negative emotion condition, the PSA text described the sadness of the situation facing the child (e.g., disability, poverty, lack of education opportunity). In the mixed emotion condition, the text described both the sadness of the situation and the strength, perseverance and self-reliance shown by the child dealing with the situation. After viewing the PSA, the participants were asked to respond to questions measuring inspiration, empathy, and PSA evaluation.

Results
The result of a factor analysis showed that the empathy scale had one convergent factor (factor loading from .72 to .89) with a Cronbach’s alpha of .87. The inspiration scale also had only one convergent factor (factor loading from .85 to .92) with a Cronbach’s alpha of .94. The results of varimax rotation indicated that empathy and inspiration are separate constructs. We then tested the mediation effect of empathy and inspiration on the impact of different emotions on PSA evaluation. We ran the mediation analysis following the procedure used by Baron and Kenny (1986) (see Table for mediation analysis results). We found that inspiration had a full mediation effect between emotion and attitude, but empathy did not. In particular, including inspiration (β=.30, SE=.08, p<.05) as a covariate in the PSA regression, the effect of emotion (β=.19, SE=.28, p>.13) became insignificant. However, including empathy (β=.11, SE=.10, p>.30) as a covariate, the effect of emotion (β=.33, SE=.25, p>.005) was still significant. Moreover, including both inspiration and empathy as covariates, inspiration was still significant (β=.29, SE=.08, p>.05) but the effect of emotion (β=.18, SE=.28, p>.14) and empathy (β=.04, SE=.10, p>.73) became insignificant. These results support the inspiration-helping hypothesis that mixed emotion leads to a more positive attitude towards a PSA than negative emotion due to a higher level of inspiration in the former condition.

Interestingly, we found that empathy (β=.39, SE=.15, p<.001) had a significant positive effect on inspiration, indicating that empathy could contribute to inspiration. Sobel test also found that inspiration mediated the effects of emotion (t=2.10, SE=.17, p<.05) and empathy (t=1.94, SE=.05, p>.05) on attitude. Therefore, empathy-helping hypothesis and inspiration-helping hypothesis may not be mutually exclusive but rather complementary propositions.

Study 2
In study 1, we show that mixed emotions can lead to more positive PSA evaluations than negative emotions. In study 2, we examine whether mixed emotions can affect not only PSA evaluations but also people’s actual donation behaviors. In addition, we examine whether the effects of mixed emotions vary in strength among different types of message recipients. For example, previous research has shown that using mixed emotions is more effective among people who are more receptive to the duality of emotions (Williams and Aaker 2002). In the context of this research, we expect that female (vs. male) message recipients who have a more interdependent (vs. independent) self-construal are more likely to respond positively to using mixed emotions in a PSA. This is because women (vs. men) are in general more other-focused and sensitive to the expression of different types of emotions (Danner and Swaminathan 2013; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Pilavlin and Charrng 1990; Winterich, Mittal, and Ross 2009). Thus female (vs. male) message recipients may be more likely to feel the mixed emotions in a PSA. Also, other-focused, interdependent (vs. independent) selves are said to be more likely to experience and tolerate ambivalence in emotions than self-focused, independent selves (Markus and Kitayama 1991).

Eighty-three undergraduate students (44.6% males) at a large public university in China participated in the study for partial course credit. The study employed the same between-subjects design (emotion: negative vs. mixed) using the same stimuli as study 1, with the additional measure of self-construal. The participants were first asked to complete an unrelated study and paid cash as the compensation (10 RMB in 1 RMB notes). After a 90-minute class, another experimenter came in and provided each participant with one of the two PSA stimuli (mixed vs. negative emotion conditions). Each participant who wished to donate was given an envelope to put in any amount of money he or she felt comfortable with, and asked to drop the envelope in a box in an adjacent classroom one by one. Each envelope was pre-marked in order to match the participant’s answers to a questionnaire after the donation. Participants who did not wish to donate could simply take a break outside the classroom. Communications between participants were not allowed during the
study. This procedure was used to minimize the peer influence on the participants’ donation behavior. Finally, all participants were asked to go back to the original classroom to complete a questionnaire on manipulation checks, demographics, and self-construal (12 items from Gudykunst et al. 1996).

Results

We performed the same mediation analyses as study 1 to test the empathy-helping and inspiration-helping hypotheses. We found that the inspiration index ($α= .91$) had a full mediation effect between emotion and donation likelihood, but had no direct mediation effect on the two-way interaction between emotion and self-construal, and on the three-way interaction between emotion, self-construal and gender. Specifically, only emotion ($β=.67$, $SE=.41$, $p<.001$) had a significant main effect on inspiration. Including inspiration as a covariate in the logistic regression on donation likelihood, inspiration ($β=.56$, $SE=.23$, $p<.05$) became insignificant, while the two-way interaction of emotion and self-construal ($β=20.04$, $SE=13.86$, $p<.15$), and the three-way interaction of emotion, gender, and self-construal ($β=29.88$, $SE=20.71$, $p>.15$) remained insignificant. Sobel test indicated that inspiration mediated the effect of emotion ($t=2.21$, $SE=1.02$, $p>.05$), but not the two-way ($t=1.31$, $SE=3.79$, $p>.19$) and three-way ($t=-1.28$, $SE=4.91$, $p>.20$) interactions. We also found that empathy ($α=.83$) did not have the mediation effect between emotion and donation likelihood. Specifically, emotion did not have a main effect on empathy ($β=.18$, $SE=.33$, $p>.21$), and after including empathy ($β=.56$, $SE=.33$, $p>.10$) as a covariate, the effect of emotion ($β=1.49$, $SE=.90$, $p<.10$) on donation likelihood remained significant. Sobel test provided the same result for the mediation effect of empathy ($t=1.01$, $SE=.23$, $p>.31$).

Interestingly, same as study 1, we found that empathy ($β=.40$, $SE=.14$, $p<.001$) had a significant positive effect on inspiration. Furthermore, including both inspiration and empathy ($β=.25$, $SE=.35$, $p>.49$) as covariates in the logistic regression on donation likelihood, only inspiration was significant ($β=.48$, $SE=.26$, $p>.06$). Sobel test indicated that inspiration mediated the effects of empathy ($t=1.68$, $SE=.17$, $p>.09$). These results suggest that empathy could positively contribute to inspiration, which subsequently influence donation likelihood. Acknowledgement: The authors acknowledge financial support from National Natural Science Foundation of China Research Grant for Young Researchers (71102099, 71202164), a Sun Yat-sen University “100 Talents Program” Research Grant (National “985 Project”) (14000-3181301), and a Start-up Grant from Sun Yat-sen Business School (1132012).

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