

# Inspirational Appeals Are More Effective: The Influence of Strength Emotions on Persuasion and Donation

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## *Abstract*

*It is well acknowledged that people are more likely to donate when they feel sad about the victim of an unfortunate situation and empathize with the victim. Although earlier research shows that depicting positive emotions such as happiness in a donation advertisement can make people less empathetic with the victim and thus less likely to donate, this study finds that combining the positive emotion of strength and the negative emotion of sadness in a donation ad can inspire people, resulting in a more positive evaluation and more donations than an ad that depicts either emotion alone.*

Jane is a communications officer in a not-for-profit organization and is responsible for designing an advertisement to encourage donations for homeless people. Initially, she was planning to focus the ad's message on the sadness and misfortune of homeless people to induce feelings of empathy from the public. After in-depth interaction with homeless people, she realized that despite being in an unfortunate situation, many homeless people were determined to stay strong to strive for a better future. She is now deciding between three different ad designs: (1) tell a sad story about the donation target, (2) tell a positive story about the target, and (3) tell a story

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about how the target is unfortunate yet strong in facing his/her situation. She wonders which design would have the best donation outcome.

This scenario is not unusual for marketers in charity organizations who often need to design campaign messages to encourage donations for victims of unfortunate situations. The common practice is to portray the sadness of the person in need, which is expected to make the audience empathetic toward the victim and thus more likely to donate.<sup>1</sup> Research shows that positive emotions such as happiness can decrease the effectiveness of a donation appeal because they reduce feelings of empathy toward the victim.<sup>2</sup> However, research also shows that different emotions can have different or even opposite effects.<sup>3</sup> For example, there are many cases where victims of an unfortunate situation did not succumb to the sadness, but rather stayed strong and were determined to fight for a better future. It is therefore interesting to examine whether and how advertisements that combine positive emotions such as feelings of strength with the negative emotion of sadness result in better donation outcomes than advertisements that depict either emotion alone.<sup>4</sup>

### **Insight #1: The Positive Emotion of Strength Can Be Persuasive and Effective**

Suppose Jane runs a trial test involving two versions of a donation advertisement about a poor disabled and homeless child. One version describes the unfortunate situation of the child, and the other describes both his unfortunate situation and his efforts to stay strong to fight for a better life. Prior research suggests that participants may be persuaded by the former version because they feel predominately sad and thus empathetic toward the child, which may encourage a favorable evaluation of the donation appeal.<sup>5</sup> However, in the present study, participants preferred the second ad much more, as they felt both the negative emotion of sadness and the positive emotion of strength. This result indicates that the positive emotion of strength can affect donation appeals in a different way compared with the positive emotion of happiness examined in earlier research.

To further test the effectiveness of the positive emotion of strength in a different context using a measure of actual donation behavior, suppose Jane runs another trial test involving three different donation advertisements about a poor child diagnosed with a severe form of leukemia. The first two versions are similar to those in the first trial test. The third focuses on the child's strength and courage in fighting the illness. It turns out that participants felt predominately sad when they encountered the first version, predominately felt strength when encountering the last version, and felt a combination of sadness and strength when encountering the second version.

The results show that participants made more donations to the child when they felt both sadness and strength (the second donation appeal) than they did in the other two conditions. Therefore, the positive emotion of strength can be persuasive and effective in donation appeals when it is combined with the negative emotion of sadness.

*Implication #1: Design donation appeals that can elicit sadness and strength emotions to the same extent whenever possible, as such appeals can have a greater effect than those encouraging either emotion alone.*

### **Insight #2: Inspire Consumers to Donate**

Researchers have conceptualized inspiration as a psychological process that motivates and directs our behavior.<sup>6,7</sup> For example, we are inspired by great ideas we have and the extraordinary achievements of role models and heroes. Once inspired, we may feel energized to actualize our ideas and personal goals. In the donation advertisement context, when we see the courage and competence of homeless or disabled people fighting for better lives, the positive emotion of strength evokes feelings of inspiration. The motivational property of inspiration then stimulates more favorable evaluations or higher donation amounts. This finding should encourage marketers in charity organizations to think about different ways to inspire consumers to become more prosocial. This study is a first step toward exploring one way (the positive emotion of strength) to inspire consumers to donate.

*Implication #2: Inspire consumers in donation appeals. Donation appeals that combine sadness and strength emotions can be more effective than those predominately featuring the sadness emotion, as consumers are more inspired by the first type of appeal.*

### **Insight #3: People Make Inferences from Emotions**

People can make inferences from the valence of emotions (positive or negative) or from specific emotions.<sup>8,9</sup> For instance, the specific emotion of fear can make people infer that their situation/circumstance is uncertain or unsafe. Research has found that emotions can serve as informational input for cognitive inferences, which influence people's reactions and behavior toward the emotion-induced object.<sup>10</sup> In the donation ad context, a dominant feeling of strength may make people infer that the donation target is capable of escaping from the unfortunate situation by himself/herself, and thus consider it less necessary to donate. This study finds evidence that the eliciting the strength-dominating emotion can lead to not only a higher

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inspiration that increases the donation (as discussed in Insight #2), but also a higher capacity inference that decreases the donation, resulting in a similar donation amount to the sadness-dominating condition. Therefore, charity organizations should strategically design their communications for donations.

*Implication #3: Donation advertisements eliciting strength-dominating emotions can not only inspire donors, but also lead to inference about the target's self-help capacity, which may decrease donation behavior.*

Consumers are influenced by emotional and cognitive responses to donation advertisements. Prior research examines how specific negative emotions such as sadness are more effective than specific positive emotions such as happiness because they elicit different levels of empathy.<sup>11</sup> The current study provides another perspective on how positive emotions of strength can inspire consumers to donate, and how marketers can use positive and negative emotions effectively in donation advertisements.

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### **Endnotes**

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