



Facial Emotion in Charity Ads: How Sympathy and Perceived Manipulation Shape Giving

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How do facial expressions in charitable ads affect donations and campaign attitudes, not only from a sympathy but also from a manipulative-intent standpoint?

This research reveals that, while the use of sorrowful facial expressions in charity marketing evokes a compassionate response, they also trigger concerns for manipulative influence tactics.

More specifically, while sad-faced images increase sympathy and perceived manipulation, these two opposing forces result in a null effect on donations. However, the perception of manipulation dominates the impact on campaign attitudes, leading to a net negative evaluation of the advertising campaign by viewers.

[#CharitableGiving](#) [#FacialExpressions](#) [#ManipulativeIntent](#)
[#CauseRelatedMarketing](#) [#CampaignAttitude](#)

Background

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Context



- The notion of **emotional contagion encapsulates** how viewing a distressed face in an advertisement automatically triggers similar emotions in the viewer, leading to **increased feelings of sympathy** and concern for the victim.
- Increased **sympathy** is a well-established **motivator** of prosocial behaviour. Individuals often donate to **alleviate the distress** of the person they perceive to be in need.
- Meanwhile, consumers **are also highly attuned to persuasive intent**. Using their existing knowledge of marketing tactics to evaluate ads, they may interpret strong emotional appeals as **intentional attempts to manipulate** (and not just persuade) their feelings for the organisation's gain.
- Aiming to evoke **negative emotions comes at a cost**. When viewers feel they are being forced to experience negative emotions, like sadness or guilt, they infer **manipulative intent**, which creates a psychological barrier to supporting the cause of a charitable organisation.

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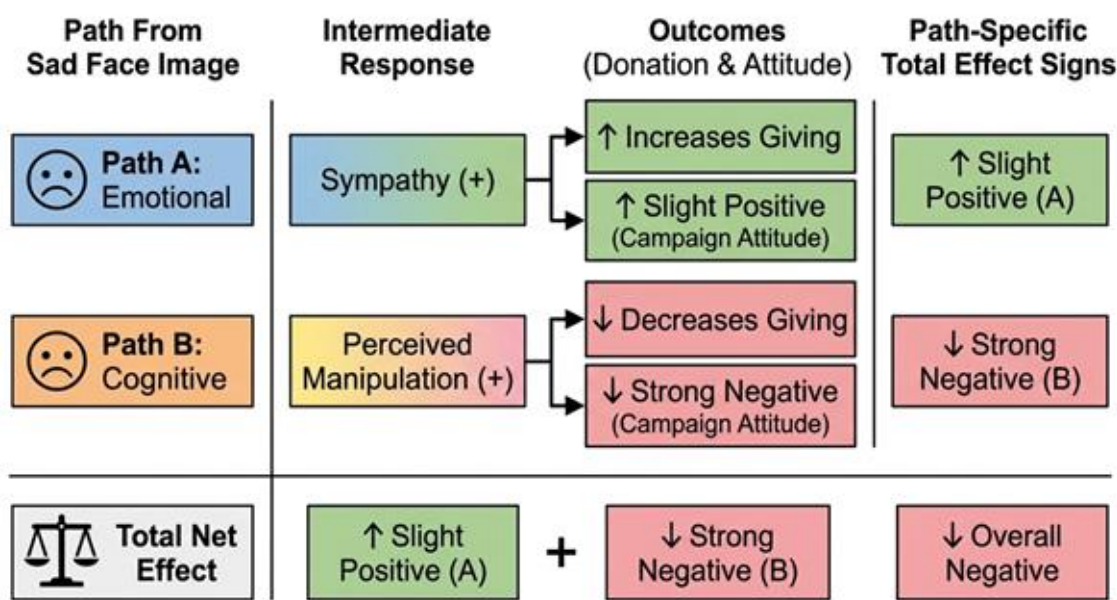
Academic articles on philanthropy through a practitioner lens

Take aways & Learnings



- Across multiple studies, distressed facial expressions did not significantly increase giving, compared to happy or neutral faces. The sympathy they generate is cancelled out by the feelings of being manipulated.
- Manipulation concerns damage brand perception. Using sad-faced images consistently leads to a **more negative attitude toward the advertising campaign**. The audience feels the tactic is "unfair" or "inappropriate", even when the cause is noble.
- Positioning influences the backlash. The negative effect on campaign attitude is **mitigated when the featured sorrowful image is less dominant** in the ad.
- The same findings hold true both for traditional charity solicitations and **cause-related marketing (CRM)**, where for-profit brands link a purchase to a donation.
- Charities should balance the need to evoke sympathy with the risk of appearing manipulative. Highlighting **positive outcomes or neutral expressions in advertising** may protect the organisation's long-term reputation without necessarily reducing immediate giving.

Figure: The Opposing Impact of Emotional Appeals on Donor Behaviour
(own visualisation)



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