Emotion Regulation: Cognitive and Affective Consequences for Fund-Raising Advertisements

Nonprofit organizations are seen as warm, whereas for-profit organizations are perceived as highly competent. This research proposed that inducing people to think about warmth-related stereotypes of nonprofit organizations activates an affective mind-set. However, inducing people to think about competence-related stereotypes of for-profit organizations activates a cognitive mind-set. These mind-sets have an impact on choices of emotion regulation strategy. When an affective mind-set is activated in the nonprofit domain, people are more likely to regulate their emotions toward high emotion-eliciting situations (e.g., multiple sad-faced victims) than low emotion-soliciting situations (e.g., a single sad-faced victim) by means of reappraisal. In contrast, when a cognitive mind-set is activated in the for-profit domain, people are more likely to inhibit their ongoing emotions by means of suppression, and they are largely insensitive to variations in the number of victims. Since tendencies to suppress emotional responses consume a continual outlay of attentional resources from working memory, people engaged in feeling suppression in the for-profit domain are less to recall information about a fund-raising advertisement than those who regulate their emotions by forms of reappraisal, and consequent decreases in the effectiveness of the CSR strategy in corporate image building.

Keywords: emotion regulation, corporate social responsibility, stereotype, warm, competent
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Nonprofit and for-profit organizations engage in charity fund-raising campaigns in various forms and for different reasons. While consumers may perceive fund-raising campaigns organized by nonprofit organizations as warm and altruistic, they may attribute at least some intent of for-profits engaged in fund-raising campaigns to corporate self-interest, such as generating a positive corporate image by communicating itself as socially responsible (Dean, 2004; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). These stereotypes about nonprofit and for-profit organizations lead to an important question: Do people experience different emotions when viewing fund-raising advertisements of nonprofit versus for-profit organizations? If so, how would such emotions influence people to construe the fund-raising information? Furthermore, what are the likely downstream consequences on corporate image building?

Emotion Regulation

The literature on emotion regulation provides important insights into responses to fund-raising advertisements launched by nonprofit and for-profit organizations. Fund-raising advertisements display photographs of sad-faced victims to evoke the sympathy and compassion that engender giving. Interestingly, recent research on emotion regulation has demonstrated that people do not necessarily display more compassion or give more to charity when the number of sad-faced victims shown in the fund-raising advertisement increases (Cameron & Payne, 2011; Kogut & Ritov, 2005; Slovic, 2007). The reason is that people very often seek to control, avoid, and even redirect unwanted emotions to prevent being overwhelmed emotionally (Koole, 2009). Helping multiple sad-faced victims is anticipated to be more costly than helping a single sad-faced victim, thus spontaneously leading individuals to regulate their emotions in response to multiple sad-faced victims. However, what remains unknown is how the number of sad-faced victims displayed in fund-raising advertisements works, particularly in the nonprofit and for-profit domains.

Affective and Cognitive Mind-sets

This research examines how stereotypes about nonprofit and for-profit organizations influence the ways in which consumers construe imagery of sad-faced victims. In particular, we propose that stereotypes about nonprofit and for-profit organization give rise to two types of mind-set: affective and cognitive. We argue that because viewing fund-raising advertisements of nonprofit organization increases the accessibility of affective-related stereotypes, such as “altruistic” and “warm” associated with nonprofit organization (Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010), consumers are more likely to rely on spontaneous affective reactions as a basis of judgment, giving rise to an affective mind-set. However, fund-raising advertisements of for-profit organizations closely tied to corporate self-interest may cue the retrieval of concepts such as “profit-making” and “competent” (Aaker et al., 2010). Consumers may easily refute the validity of the solicitations and calculate the expected
benefits of their donation, thus giving rise to a cognitive mind-set (Xu & Wyer, 2008).

**Affective and Cognitive Consequences**

We postulate that the existence of an affective (cognitive) mind-set, once activated in the course of viewing fund-raising information in a nonprofit (for-profit) domain, persists to influence use of emotion regulation strategies when viewing photographs of sad-faced victims. When an affective mind-set is activated in the nonprofit domain, people are highly sensitive with regard to emotion. To avoid becoming emotionally overwhelmed, individuals who are expected to view imagery of multiple sad-faced victims may reappraise the situation by quickly shifting attention away from the upsetting fund-raising advertisement, thus leading to a decrease in their emotional experience.

When a cognitive mind-set is activated in the for-profit domain, people wish to function at their best cognitively; therefore, though anticipating that viewing imagery of multiple sad-faced victims will be emotion-eliciting, emotion regulation occurs only after an emotion has been generated. In other words, consumers regulate their emotions by means of suppression to preserve cognitive functioning. The major difference between the two emotion regulation strategies is that reappraisal is an antecedent-focused strategy, and people attempt to divert their attention away from an emotion-arousing stimulus before the emotion response tendencies have become fully activated. In contrast, suppression is considered a response-focused strategy (Gross 1998a, 1998b). However, regulating emotions by suppression at the same time requires continual self-monitoring, which depletes the cognitive resources available for careful processing of fund-raising information (Gross, 2002; Qiu, Lee, & Yeung, 2009; Richards & Gross, 2000). If this is the case, we expected that consumers who suppress their negative emotion when that emotion is already underway in the for-profit domain experience no difference in negative emotion for multiple victims compared to a single victim, but actually impair their ability to recall details of the for-profit fund-raising advertisement.

**Methodology**

We plan to recruit 100 undergraduate students for this study. Participants will be assigned to one of the four donation conditions, comprising the 2 (number of victims: one vs. eight) x 2 (type of organization: nonprofit vs. for-profit) between-subjects design. Participants will receive a folder containing a fund-raising advertisement and the measures. In the fund-raising advertisement, half the participants will be told that a nonprofit organization is the fund-raiser for a children’s cancer fund-raising project; the other half will be told that an investment corporation is the fund-raiser. Next, participants will view an image of one child in the single victim condition and eight separate child images in the multiple children condition. Before viewing the image, participants will be warned that they will be viewing an image of a single (multiple) sad-faced victims and asked to rate their emotions toward the child (children).

**Expected Findings**

We expect that participants in the nonprofit condition will report greater compassion
toward a single victim than toward multiple victims, whereas the number of victims should have no significant impact for participants in the for-profit condition. To provide further evidence for the emotion regulation mechanism, we will perform a memory check on participants’ ability to recall advertisement information. Prior research has demonstrated that suppression indeed impairs memory (Gross, 2002; Richards & Gross, 2000). When viewing the fund-raising advertisement of a for-profit organization, suppression participants should exhibit a poorer memory of the advertisement than those who engage in reappraisal when viewing the fund-raising advertisement of a nonprofit organization.

Theoretical Contributions

The first contribution of this research is to specify that the relationship between the number of victims and people’s emotional reactions depends on the type of organization soliciting support. We postulate that viewing fund-raising advertisements of nonprofit organizations activates an affective mind-set, whereas those for for-profit organizations activate a cognitive mind-set. Consequently, once consumers foresee an emotion-eliciting situation (viewing multiple photographs of sad-faced victims), an affective mind-set triggers them to regulate their emotions by reappraisal so as to avoid being emotionally overwhelmed. However, when a cognitive mind-set is activated, consumers are more likely to rely on situational information rather than affective reactions in making judgments. This leads them to contend with the emotions by means of suppression. To our knowledge, this research is the first to demonstrate that activating the stereotypes of nonprofit and for-profit organizations will heighten the accessibility of an affective and a cognitive mind-set, which influences the subsequent emotion regulation strategies that people choose to use in a later stage.

The second contribution is to advanced the literature on emotion regulation by examining what determines how people regulate their emotion when viewing images of sad-faced victims in fund-raising advertisements. More importantly, when will it lead to reappraisal and suppression? Previous research on emotion regulation has shown that individuals differ in their use of two common emotion regulation strategies: reappraisal and suppression (Gross & John, 2003). Although research has identified that reappraisal may successfully down-regulate negative emotion and suppression may not be helpful in decreasing negative emotional experience, the relevant studies do not paint a clear picture of when these efforts lead consumers to reappraise and suppress their negative emotion (Gross, 1998a, 1998b; Gross & John, 2003; Sheppes, Scheibe, Suri, & Gross, 2011).
References


