

## **Appealing to Moral Emotions: Examining Donor Responses to Fundraising Ads Through a Dictator Game Experiment.**

Moral emotions are the particular subset of emotions recognised in psychology to motivate pro-social tendencies. Both positive and negative emotions are used in charitable appeals, although evidence on their relative effectiveness is mixed and there is no previous scholarship that demonstrates how appeals that evoke different types of moral emotions influence donors who are repeatedly exposed to the appeal. In this paper we focus on the positive moral emotion of elevation and the negative moral emotion of guilt to study their respective effects on giving. The study uses a dictator game experiment. Participants are shown images of needy children in third world countries, which were designed to induce either elevation or guilt and pre-tests carried out to verify their effects. Following exposure to the stimuli, participants play the dictator game. Subjects in the control treatment only play the dictator game. In keeping with the images, we identify an international aid charity as the receiving party. Subjects in each treatment play five rounds of the game in order to investigate which emotion has a more sustainable appeal. The research findings reveal significant differences between the treatments for initial giving, but convergence with repeated exposure.

# **Appealing to Moral Emotions: Examining Donor Responses to Fundraising Ads Through a Dictator Game Experiment.**

## **Introduction**

The majority of donations to charity are made in response to solicitations (Bryant et al., 2003; Bekkers, 2005a). So it is crucial for charities to understanding donor motives and how to trigger giving. Both individual charities and the sector more widely also need to know how donors respond over time as they are repeatedly exposed to the types of appeals used by charities; do charity appeals contribute to ‘donor fatigue’ or help to surmount it?

There is a considerable body of scholarship on the motives that lie behind helping behaviour and philanthropy more specifically (Bekkers and Wiepking, 2007), but little research into the effectiveness of appeals that evoke moral emotions associated with these motives (Fisher et al., 2008). The purpose of this paper is to examine individuals’ responses to two prominent types of emotional fundraising appeal. One appeal focuses on the negative moral emotion of guilt, which is evoked when people violate moral standards and stimulates giving due to people’s desire to avoid this feeling-based punishment. The second appeal evokes the positive moral emotion of elevation, which people experience when they witness virtuous acts and triggers giving through people’s desire to emulate the esteemed behaviour. Our findings, based on a dictator game experiment, reveal that individuals exposed to either an elevation or guilt appeal donate more than those in the control condition. The results also show that guilt appeals attract a higher level of giving than elevation appeals and are better able to sustain giving over time as people are repeatedly exposed to the ads.

## **Soliciting Donations by Triggering Moral Emotions**

Motives for philanthropy include the reinforcement of altruistic and moral self identity (Reed II, Aquino and Levy, 2007; Shang, Reed II and Croson, 2008) and personal and political values (Bekkers, 2005b; Supphellen and Nelson, 2001; Todd and Lawson, 1999), social approval and reputation (Fisher & Ackerman 1998) and personal gain (Wright, 2001). These philanthropic motives create a general disposition towards charitable giving while the act of giving is often stimulated by emotional arousal and the overarching psychological mood benefits. Bekker and Wiepking (2007) suggest that donor responses are an almost automatic

reaction driven by the impulse to attain a positive mood, avoid guilty feelings and reduce aversive arousal.

Charities have a long history of using emotive appeals to trigger giving, arousing negative emotions such as guilt and shame or, on the positive side, love and warm, uplifting feelings. Traditionally, charities favoured negative emotional appeals designed to encourage sympathetic responses. But, beneficiaries in some domains objected to this practice because it contributes to their stigmatization and disadvantage (Harris and Harris, 1977). Donors also oppose the use of negative appeals when they feel that they are used by charities to manipulate their donation decisions (Hibbert et al., 2007). In response, charities have shifted to using more positive emotional appeals and there is now a balance between the two approaches. In 2007, 53% of the charity advertisements that appeared in the Guardian presented a positive aspect and 47% presented a negative aspect, although the balance depends on the type of charity. Yet there is limited research that investigates which type of appeal is more effective and no previous scholarship that demonstrates how donors respond to appeals that evoke moral emotions when subject to repeated exposure.

The few studies that have compared positive and negative emotional fundraising appeals have produced mixed results. A study by Eayrs and Ellis (1990) found that the response to a door-to-door appeal was lower when pictures of an overtly disabled child were used to solicit help. This contrasts with other research that has found no difference between positive and negative appeals. Alder et al. (1991) compared patterns of donation behaviour when beneficiaries were portrayed as succumbing to and coping with their condition and found that there was no impact, while Brolley and Anderson (1986) and Feldman and Feldman (1985) reported that portrayals of beneficiaries in negative circumstances do evoke feelings of sympathy, pity and guilt, but that this does not necessarily result in increased donor compliance. Yet another different outcome has emerged in recent research which found that negative appeals were more effective than positive appeals in a fundraising drive for a public television station (Fisher et al., 2008).

In part, progress in understanding the effects of emotional fundraising appeals has been hindered by inadequate theoretical development. Fisher et al (2008) provide a useful starting point by adopting the empathy-helping hypothesis to explain why people respond to positive and negative emotional appeals. This theory suggests that people are motivated to help others

by the promise of positive emotional rewards that follow helping. Conversely, people help to eliminate or avoid negative emotions experienced upon witnessing another person’s distress or the negative emotions that they feel when they failing to comply with a social obligation to help. Here we draw on the moral emotions literature as the theoretical anchor, as this scholarship distinguishes the causes and action tendencies of specific emotional states (Tracy and Robins, 2004), enabling a more nuanced conceptualisation of emotional fundraising appeals.

Much research on morality, initially in moral philosophy and more recently in moral psychology, has focused on moral reasoning to the neglect of moral emotions (Haidt, 2003). But recent scholarship on moral emotions has burgeoned. Indeed, theorists have even begun to claim that the emotions are in fact “in charge of the temple of morality” and that “moral reasoning is really just a servant masquerading as the high priest” (Haidt, 2001; Wilson, 1993). Moral emotions are those “that are linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent” (Haidt, 2003: 276). While research initially focused on empathy and guilt scholars have now categorised types of moral emotions based on their causes and the action-tendencies that they stimulate. Figure 1 depicts four types of moral emotions based on whether they are produced by appraisal (Lazarus 1991; Roseman 1991; Smith and Ellsworth 1985) of oneself or others and whether the evaluation is critical or favourable.

**Figure 1: Types of Moral Emotions**

	Other appraisal	Self appraisal
Condemning	Contempt Anger Disgust	Embarrassment Guilt Shame
Praising	Awe Elevation Gratitude	Pride

Source: developed by the authors, drawing on Haidt (2003) and Tangney et al (2007)

Of these moral emotions, we suggest that fundraising appeals most typically seek to arouse guilt, pride or elevation in order to trigger giving. Negative emotional fundraising appeals tend to be guilt appeals. Scholarship has shown that guilt is the only self-condemning negative emotion that directly promotes helping behaviour (Bennett, 1998; Haidt, 2003). Guilt is caused by the violation of moral rules, particularly when the behaviour threatens to cause harm or distress. Guilt is most widely experienced and is most intense when the violation threatens a person's relationship with the victim (e.g. forgetting a birthday) (Baumeister et al. 1994), but it can be experienced in relation to more distal social relations (e.g. failing to help someone in need, even though they are unknown to the helper). The action tendency stimulated by guilt is to seek reparation. In the context of philanthropy, there is reasonable evidence that guilt-evoking fundraising ads positively influence charitable giving (Basil et al. 2006; 2008; Hibbert et al., 2007). Although charities have been using positive emotional appeals for many years, there is very little research into the specific positive emotions that trigger giving. Two types of positive emotional appeal might be used by charities depending on whether the content of the communications focuses on the donor or the beneficiary. Appeals that focus on the donor might seek to arouse the pride that an individual will feel by supporting the charity. However, in most fundraising appeals (approximately two thirds in print media) the content directs attention to the beneficiary, portraying the achievements of the charity or of the beneficiaries given the charity's support. These appeals evoke emotions elevation, which people feel when they appraise others acts as virtuous or kind and triggers giving through a desire to emulate the esteemed behaviour and improve oneself.

While prior research offers some insights into the relative effectiveness of positive and negative emotional appeals for fundraising, there is no scholarship on how they influence giving over time. Advertising research has shown that the duration of attention to ads in general declines significantly with repeated exposure (50% from 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> exposure, 75% decrease in length of attention to body text) (Pieters et al., 1999) and that behavioural response to ads declines with repetition (Tellis et al., 2005). This is consistent with behavioural economics research that has found that people are less incline to behave in ways that deliver social benefits with each repetition of a task. On the positive side, classical conditioning continues with repeat exposure and brand attitude continues to improve with repetition of positive emotional appeals. Also, wear out (attitude towards the ad, attitude towards the brand and purchase intentions) for positive emotional appeals is slower than for

rational appeals (Pechmann & Stewart, 1989). However, these findings about consumer responses to repeated ad exposure may not be transferable to the charity context given the peculiar objectives of the advertising and the motives that drive giving.

Given that previous literature comparing emotional fundraising appeals and examining the impact of repeated exposure is limited or inconclusive, we advance the following research propositions for our study.

- ▶ P1: Emotional fundraising appeals are more effective in soliciting donations than a non-emotional request for funds.
- ▶ P2: Guilt and elevation fundraising appeals differ in the degree to which they are effective in soliciting donations.
- ▶ P3: Guilt and elevation fundraising appeals are subject to wear out of emotional and behavioural responses but to different degrees.

## **Method**

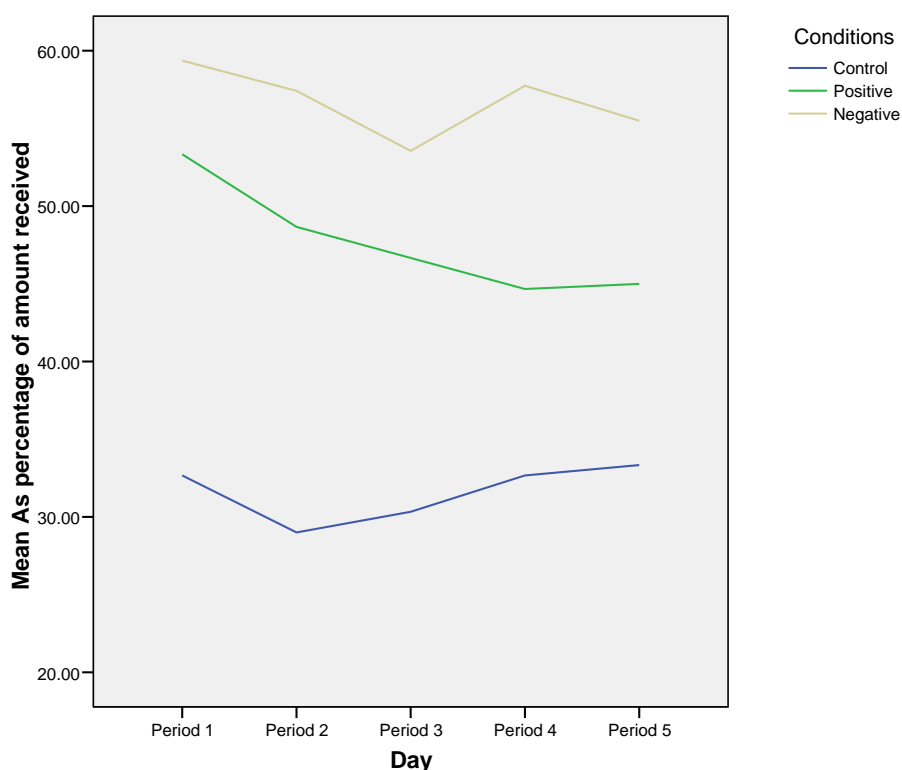
The study used a dictator game experiment run with three conditions, each including 30 participants. The sample was recruited via a snowballing approach and represented a range of socio-demographic backgrounds. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions. The game was run via the Internet and participants earned £5 for each repetition of the game. Participants were sent a daily email prompting them to open a link to an online questionnaire. They were given written instructions and were shown fundraising ads designed to induce either elevation or guilt (pre-tests were carried out to verify that the ads evoked the relevant emotion at a moderate level of intensity). The ads featured images of children in third world countries, headline and body text promoting the charity, reinforcing the emotional appeal and requesting a donation. An international aid charity was identified as the receiving party. Following exposure to the stimuli, participants played the dictator game and indicated the degree to which the ad had evoked guilt or elevation emotions on multi-item Likert scales. Subjects in the control treatment only play the dictator game. Subjects in each treatment played five rounds of the game in order to investigate which emotion has a more sustainable appeal. All participants were paid privately, in cash at the end of the experiment. The amount that participants donated to charity was given to an actual international aid charity, of which details were available upon request when the experiment was finished.

## Results

In this section we present evidence that participants in the experiment gave more generously when faced with a moral emotional appeal, and that the guilt appeal was most effective in soliciting donations.

Figure 1 depicts the average donation (as a percentage of the money earned) for each round of the game for all three conditions and illustrates that people exposed to the guilt appeal gave the greatest amount while participants in the control condition gave the least.

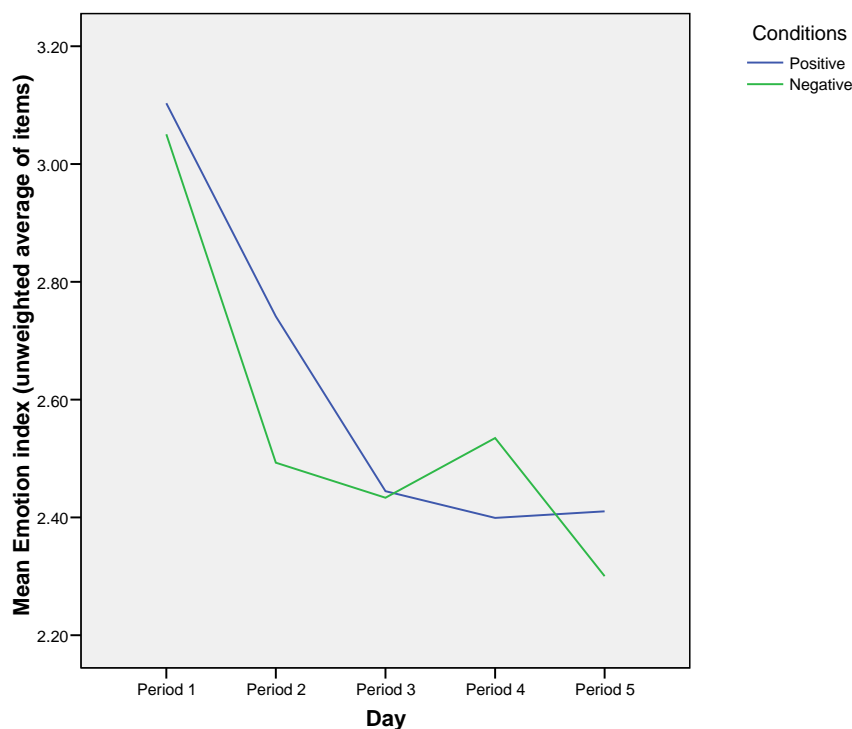
**Figure 1: Average Donation by Round for Guilt, Elevation and Control Condition**



Kruskal-Wallis tests, used to make an initial multiple comparisons of the three conditions, revealed significant differences at the 0.05 level for rounds one and two of the game (i.e. the first two days on which the experiment was run) and at the 0.10 level for the third and fourth round, while the degree of difference had diminished by the final round of the game such to a non-significant level. However, post hoc Mann-Whitney tests, which are used to compare each pair of conditions in turn and are less subject to errors in inference with small samples, showed that there were significant differences between the guilt treatment and the control condition at the 0.05 level for all five rounds of the game and significant differences between

the elevation treatment and the control condition at the 0.10 level for all but the final round of the game. These findings provide partial support for P1; both types of emotional appeal triggered more giving than a simple request for a donation, although the effectiveness of the guilt appeal was can be asserted with greater confidence. P2 was not supported as the guilt and elevation appeals did not differ significantly in their capacity to solicit donations. There is limited support for P3. While Figure 1 illustrates that emotional appeals are subject to behavioural wear out and giving declines to only a limited degree with repeated exposure. Figure 2 illustrates how the intensity of emotions aroused changed over the rounds of the game. It shows the sharp decline in both evoked guilt and elevation following the first exposure, on day one of the experiment, after which the intensity of emotions experienced continues to decline but at a more moderate rate.

**Figure 2: Average Intensity of Emotion Evoked by Round for Guilt and Elevation**



## Conclusions

This study provides evidence that moral emotional fundraising appeals are effective in soliciting donations, revealing that both guilt and elevation appeals trigger philanthropic behaviour. The guilt appeal was found to trigger more giving than the elevation appeal, in line with previous research that has shown negative appeals to be more effective (Fisher et al, 2008). However, the difference between the guilt and elevation appeal was not significant, which is consistent with those studies that have reported no difference between positive and

negative emotional appeals (Alder et al., 1991; Brolley and Anderson, 1986; Feldman and Feldman, 1985). Both the guilt and elevation appeal suffer wear out both of the intensity of emotions that they evoke and the philanthropic response, although behavioural wear out is very limited.

While this research demonstrates the positive response of donors to moral emotional appeals, there is wide scope to extend this stream of research. Issues that merit further research attention include inquiry into framing effects, the ways in which ad content that combines positive and negative images and text affects giving, whether changes to emotional appeals are effective in reinvigorating donor responses and how ad content and context that introduces social influence interacts with moral emotional appeals. Additionally, the way in which personal characteristics (e.g. guilt proneness) interact with these variables is worthy of further investigation. Alternative methodological approaches, particularly the use brain imaging, also promise to provide important new insights into how moral emotional appeals trigger giving.

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