The Effects of Emotional Appeals in Charity Sporting Event Advertisements on Intention to Participate: Examining the Roles of Sympathy, Empathy, and Personal Involvement

Meungguk Park, Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Taeho Yoh, Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Paul Pedersen, Indiana University

Marketing Thursday, June 2, 2016 20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2016-079 4:25 PM (Forum West 3)

Charity sporting events (CSEs) have become one of the most popular and effective fundraising tools for nonprofit organizations (NPOs) in many countries (Filo, Funk, & O’Brien, 2011). In recent years, however, many NPOs have experienced serious financial problems. For example, the total amount of funds raised from the American Cancer Society’s (ACS) Relay-For-Life events, which have been considered as the most successful CSEs, has decreased considerably over the last five years (ACS, 2014). Such a trend is mainly because of the increased competition for funds among charities. According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics (2015), there are more than one million charitable organizations in the United States, and these NPOs compete for limited donations. As a result, large NPOs spend a significant amount of money on marketing to increase charitable donations (Watson, 2006). Small and Verrochi (2009) noted the need for understanding the effectiveness and impact of such marketing programs.

Due to the importance of charitable donations, scholars in the field of marketing and psychology have paid considerable attention to psychological factors and processes that provoke sympathy and encourage behavior in charitable appeals (e.g., Cryder, Loewenstein, & Seltman, 2013; Escalas & Stern, 2003; Small & Verrochi, 2009). Studies have been carried out to present the psychological mechanisms or models explaining the relationships among factors affecting behavior in charitable promotions. Examples include a theoretical perspective on sympathy and aid (Lowwenstein & O’Donoghue, 2006), the role of negative emotions and empathic responses (Bagozzi & Moore, 1994), message framing (Burnkrant & Sawyer, 1983), the vividness of congruency (Slovic, 2007), the identified victim effects (Schelling, 1968), and the perceived impact (Karlan & List, 2007). These studies have consistently attempted to explain the psychological mechanisms underlying the persuasive effects of charity appeals. From a practical standpoint, it is important for NPOs to develop persuasive advertising messages that evoke sympathy, empathy, and prosocial behavior for their causes. In order to develop effective messages, personnel who are in charge of promoting CSEs should have insights into the psychological processes that audiences experience when exposed to charity advertisements.

To advance knowledge on the role of CSEs in enhancing public awareness and donations for NPOs, sport-related empirical studies (e.g., Bennett, Mousley, Kitchin, & Ali-Choudhury, 2007; Filo, Funk & O’Brien, 2014; Filo, Spence, & Sparvero, 2013) have been conducted to examine various issues related to CSEs. While the majority of these studies have focused on sport consumer behavior in CSEs (e.g., motivation among CSE participants), there has been a dearth of studies on advertising strategies for CSEs. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of emotional advertisements on intention to participate in a charity sporting event. More specifically, this study examined the influence of messages framing (i.e., positive vs. negative framing messages) in charity advertisements on study participants’ behavioral intentions. In addition, this study investigated the mediating roles of sympathy and empathy as well as a moderating role of personal involvement in the relationship between exposure to the advertisements and behavioral intention.

Data were collected from a total of 281 college students from a major Midwestern university. A 2 (Message framing: negative vs. positive) X 2 (Personal involvement: high vs. low) X 2 (Gender: male vs. female) factorial design was selected for this study. The negative and positive appeal advertisements were professionally produced, which contained a picture of a child and information about her serious health conditions. Prior to the main experiment, pretests were conducted on a sample of 61 students as a manipulation check. The message framing manipulation check was successful. In the main experiment, each participant was randomly assigned to one of the two treatment groups: (1) negative emotional appeal and (2) positive emotional appeal. Next, the participants in each cell were...
divided into two groups (i.e., high and low personal involvement) based on their scores from the revised involvement scale (Quick & Michael, 2007).

The results of a two-way ANOVA for the effect of advertising message framing (i.e., negative versus positive) and gender on behavioral intention revealed that there was a main significant effect for message framing (F(1, 273) = 5.23, p < .05). The study participants in the negatively framed ad condition (M = 4.00, SD = 1.74) reported a higher level of behavioral intentions than those in the positively framed ad condition (M = 3.62, SD = 1.53). Gender was only marginally significant (F(1, 273) = 3.31, p = .07). Concerning the impact of message framing on sympathy, a two-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for message framing (F(1, 248) = 24.35, p < .001). Participants in the negatively framed ad condition (M = 4.90, SD = 1.19) reported a higher level of sympathy than those in the positively framed ad condition (M = 4.11, SD = 1.31).

To test the mediating role of sympathy, the researchers used the four steps suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). The results showed that sympathy fully mediated the impact of message framing on empathy. Specifically, the beta value for message framing dropped from .28 to .08 when sympathy was included in the regression model, and the p-value rose to nonsignificance (p = .08). This full mediation was supported by the Sobel (1988) test which was significant (z = 4.71, p < .001). In addition, a series of multiple regression models revealed that empathy significantly mediated the relationship between sympathy and behavioral intention. The beta value for sympathy dropped from .36 to .01, when empathy was included in the regression model, and the p-value rose to nonsignificance (p = .93). The Sobel test was also significant (z = 8.21, p < .001), which supported the full mediation.

In order to examine the relationship between message framing, personal involvement, and gender on behavioral intention, a 2 (negative vs. positive framing) X 2 (high vs. low involvement) X 2 (male vs. female) ANOVA was employed. The main effects for all of the three independent variables were significant: Message framing (F(1, 267) = 6.95, p < .01), personal involvement (F(1, 267) = 15.90, p < .001), and gender (F(1, 267) = 10.18, p < .001). Furthermore, there was a significant two-way interaction between personal involvement and gender (F(1, 267) = 4.37, p < .05) and between message framing and personal involvement (F(1, 267) = 3.87, p = .05). Importantly, there was a statistically significant three-way interaction between message framing, personal involvement, and gender (F(1, 267) = 4.73, p < .05).

The main finding of this study suggested that the negatively framed ad was more effective in enhancing helping behavior than the positively framed ad. Sympathy was found to influence empathy responses that in turn led to behavioral intention. This study contributed to the body of research on advertisement in sport by presenting the relationships among factors influencing behavior in charitable promotions related to CSEs, a segment which is often ignored by sport management researchers. In addition, this study extended the existing research on public service advertising by including both sympathy and empathy in emotional responses to charity advertisements. Concerning practical implications, the study can provide marketing practitioners working for CSEs with insights into how to develop persuasive advertising messages to appeal to the hearts and minds of potential donors in the competitive arena of charitable fundraising.