The more tangible the better? Assessing the different forms of tangibility on donations

Research on pro-social behavior suggests that tangibility increases effectiveness in donation requests. However, there are different elements (i.e. who needs the donation, what will be done with the money, how needy the victims are, and what they expect from the donor) that can increase tangibility in solicitation messages. It is still unclear if all these factors equally increase effectiveness in donation requests and, if not, which is the most important. Using an experimental approach with conjoint analysis, we found that all factors that increase tangibility also increases donation intentions but showing how needy the victims are was the most important. Our results suggest that practitioners should incorporate all elements that make a message tangible to make it more persuasive.

Keywords: tangibility, donations, conjoint analysis

Research on pro-social behavior suggests that tangibility increases effectiveness in donation requests (Cryder, Loewenstein & Scheines, 2013; Bachke, Alfnes & Wik, 2017). People prefer to donate when they have tangible information about what will be done with their money (Aknin et al., 2013; Bachke, Alfnes & Wik, 2017), who will receive the donation (Kogut and Ritov 2005a; Cryder, Loewenstein & Scheines, 2013), how much the victim needs the donation (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Althoff, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil & Jurafsky, 2014), and what kind of help they need to give (Wenham, Stephens & Hardy, 2003).

However, there are different elements (i.e. who needs the donation, what will be done with the money, how needy the victims are, and what they expect from the donor) that can increase tangibility in solicitation messages. It is still unclear if all these factors equally increase effectiveness in donation requests and, if not, which is the most important.

We propose that different combinations of advertising elements that increase tangibility may lead to different outcomes in terms of donation ad effectiveness, since the information given though the advertising may receive distinct loads when consumers evaluate if they would like to donate. For example, giving information about an identifiable victim may have a higher or lower impact on the likelihood of donating than information about how the donated money will be used, even though both elements increase the message's tangibility and, therefore, should influence the willingness to donate (Small, Loewenstein and Slovic, 2007; Bachke, Alfnes & Wik, 2017).

To fill this gap, we created different versions of ads integrating the different elements that influence charitable giving, in order to experimentally explore the differentiating impact of these elements. Using an experimental approach with conjoint analysis, we found that all factors that increase tangibility also increases donation intentions but showing how needy the victims are was the most important. Our results suggest that practitioners should incorporate all elements that make a message tangible to make it more persuasive.

Tangibility in Donation Requests

Tangible information is specific and concrete, as opposed to general and abstract (Cryder and Loewenstein, 2010; Bachke, Alfnes & Wik, 2017). Research has rather consistently shown that donors prefer to help when solicitations are tangible (for a review, read Cryder and Loewenstein, 2010). Tangibility operates by increasing the feeling that one's contribution will make a difference and by intensifying emotions (Cryder and Loewenstein, 2010).

In our literature review, we found that there are four main pieces of information that donation requests often use that can vary in tangibility: (1) what will be done with the money; (2) who will receive the donation; (3) how much the victim needs the donation, and (4) what kind of help potential donors need to give.

In the first, many studies found that people donate more when they receive specific information about what is going to happen with their money (Cryder, Loewenstein, & Scheines, 2013; Bachke, Alfnes & Wik, 2017). Donors want the money to directly help those in need and they tend to avoid overhead (Gneezy, Keenan & Gneezy, 2014). The reason for this effect is that tangible information about what is going to happen with the funds raised increases the perceived impact of the act of donating. For example, Aknin et al. (2013) found that giving money to charity led to higher levels of happiness only when participants gave to causes that explained how these funds are used to make a difference in the life of a recipient.

The second aspect is the tangibility about who will receive the donation, that happens when there is an identifiable victim (Cryder, Loewenstein, & Scheines, 2013). Schelling (1968) demonstrated that an individual life described in detail creates more emotional reactions and willingness to help than an equivalent life described as a statistic. The identifiable victim effect refers to people's preference to help victims about whom they have some information (Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997, Bohnet & Frey, 1999; Small, Loewenstein & Slovic, 2007; Sah & Loewenstein, 2012). This effect holds even when minor information, such as age, name, or picture is given (Friedrich & McGuire, 2010; Kogut & Ritov, 2005a, 2005b; Small et al., 2007). For example, Kogut and Ritov (2005a) show that when asked to donate for sick children in need of treatment, participants were more willing to donate to a single child identified by age, name, and picture than to a single unidentified child or a group of unidentified children.

Further, research has explored some mechanisms that makes the identifiable victim a successful tactic, which are: sympathy, distress, perceived impact, or perceived responsibility (Erlandsson, Björklund, & Bäckström, 2015; Friedrich & McGuire, 2010). Given that people recognize the emotions a victim's face displayed in pictures (Small & Verrochi, 2009), the victim's facial expression of emotion (e.g., happy, sad, or neutral emotional expression) may influence people's emotional reactions and desire to help.

This leads to our third aspect: tangible information increases the awareness of need. Potential donors are more likely to give their contribution when there is evidence that recipients are really in need (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Althoff et al., 2014). The literature on helping behavior suggests that urgent requests are met more frequently than non-urgent requests (Yinon & Dovrat, 1987; Shotland & Stebbins, 1983).

Finally, the message can be tangible in explaining what kind of help potential donors need to give. Asking explicitly people to donate tends to increase helpfulness when compared to messages that do not include a specific request (Wenham, Stephens & Hardy, 2003). For example, Guidry, Waters and Saxton (2014) found that messages focusing on calls-to-action generated a high number of retweets and Twitter conversation, although, they were not often used by nonprofit organizations. Many nonprofit organizations still do not include a "call to action" in their messages, which may mean that they are losing opportunities to raise more funds (Waters & Jones, 2011; Guidry, Waters & Saxton, 2014).

From the literature review, it is reasonable to assume that the more tangible a donation request is, the better. However, it is still unclear if all these four dimensions of tangibility equally increase effectiveness in donation requests and, if not, which is the most important. To address this issue, we conducted an experimental study using conjoint analysis.

Method

The main advantage of using conjoint analysis is to define the relative prominence consumers allocate to various characteristics such as size, color, shape, and brand (Rao, 2014), while typical experimental designs tend to focus on a small set of factors. Given that we want to see the importance of each element in a more realistic and holistic way, we chose conjoint analysis because it offers this type of comparative analysis.

We created ads to raise funds for a fictitious NGO against child abuse. We manipulated the four main elements that increase tangibility to create advertisings for donations: (1) what will be done with the money; (2) who will receive the donation; (3) how much the victim needs the donation, and (4) what kind of help potential donors need to give. These factors were given at three levels each (see Appendix 1).

We manipulated what will be done with the money by saying either that "your donation will be used to pay for medical expenses" (very tangible), "your donation will be used to address child abuse" (less tangible), or nothing (control – not tangible). We manipulate who will receive the donation by saying either "Ana" (identifiable - very tangible), "200 children" (statistical – less tangible), or nothing (control – not tangible). We manipulated how much the victim needs the donation by using pictures from Dolma (2015), in which there is a girl's face with either no bruises (control – not tangible), some bruises (small need – less tangible), or a lot of bruises (high need – very tangible). To make sure we are manipulating tangibility, not the presence of a picture, all ads contained a picture. Finally, we manipulated what kind of help potential donors need to give by saying either "Donate Now!" (very tangible), "I want to help" (less tangible), or nothing (control – not tangible).

These attributes' levels were orthogonally combined to form the nine descriptions presented to each respondent. To create a full factorial design (all possible combinations of the four elements, three levels each), we would need 81 profiles. However, using a fractional orthogonal design (Rao, 2014), the minimum profile number needed to study each factor's main effects is 8.

Participants and Procedures

The sample consisted of 100 US participants recruited through Amazon MTurk. Because of the within-subjects design (each participant rated nine different profiles), this number of participants delivered a total of 900 observations. Participants were 60% male, with an average age of 33.65 years (SD = 10.62), and 40% of them reported having at least a college degree.

Participants were provided a term of informed consent explaining the study's purpose, that their participation was anonymous, and that they could withdraw their participation at any time. Participants were then told that they would be exposed to different ads related to charitable giving, each one presenting a different combination of the four elements of the advertisings. After seeing each ad, they were asked how effective they believe each ad would be, ranging from 0 (I would definitively not donate) to 100 (I would definitively donate). Lastly, we asked participants about their demographics.

Results

The effects were estimated using a linear mixed model fit by maximum likelihood because of the within-subjects design. The dependent variable was the score ascribed to each ad, and the independent variables were the attributes. The absolute values of attributes' coefficients were used to calculate their relative importance. Table 1 shows the results.

Table 1

Attributes' effects and relative importance estimates on perception of effectiveness

Variables	**β**	**SE**	**p-value**
Image with bruises	9.41	2.22	0.000
Image with a lot of bruises	10.23	3.20	0.002
Statistical victim	3.46	1.30	0.009

Identifiable victim	2.81	1.09	0.010
I want to help	2.13	1.03	0.039
Call to action	2.88	1.03	0.005
Medical expenses	7.52	1.03	0.000
Child abuse	7.99	1.03	0.000
Controls		Yes	

Our results support the idea that the more tangible, the better: all the four variables have a significant impact on donation intention. Showing how much the victim needs the donation has the highest impact, followed by information about what will be done with the money. The impact of these two variables vary across individual respondents, showing that the effect is not uniform.

Both information about who will receive the donation and what kind of help potential donors need to give have significant impact on donation intention, but the effect size is smaller. Also, there is no evidence supporting that the impact of these variables is dependent on individual respondents. Finally, the control variables (age, gender, and education) are not significant, and will not be further discussed.

Discussion

Research suggests that tangibility increases effectiveness in donation requests. However, it is not clear if all elements that increase tangibility are equally effective. Our study suggests that while the more tangible the better, showing how much the victim needs the donation, followed by information about what will be done with the money are the two factors that have the highest impact. The impact of these two variables vary across individual respondents, while the impact of the other two is smaller, but is constant across individuals.

This study offers an important contribution to the literature: it expands previous findings of the effect of tangibility on donation by showing that different elements have different impact. It also shows that different aspects are not rivals but can be aggregated into one single message.

Finally, this study contributes to the practice of funding raising by recommending that practitioners should incorporate different elements that make the donation request more tangible into a single advertisement. If for any reason, they have to make a choice, this study suggests that people prefer tangible information about how much the recipient needs the donation.

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Appendix

Ads created for the experimental study.




HELP KIDS HEAL
200 CHILDREN NEED YOUR HELP
I WANT TO HELP
YOUR DONATION WILL BE USED
TO ADDRESS CHILD ABUSE
www.helpchildren.org


HELP KIDS HEAL
www.helpchildren.org


HELP KIDS HEAL
200 CHILDREN NEED YOUR HELP
YOUR DONATION WILL BE USED TO
PAY FOR MEDICAL EXPENSES
www.helpchildren.org


HELP KIDS HEAL
ANA NEEDS YOUR HELP
I WANT TO HELP
www.helpchildren.org
www.helpchildren.org


HELP KIDS HEAL
DONATE NOW!
YOUR DONATION WILL BE USED
TO ADDRESS CHILD ABUSE
www.helpchildren.org


HELP KIDS HEAL
200 CHILDREN NEED YOUR HELP
DONATE NOW!
www.helpchildren.org
www.helpchildren.org


HELP KIDS HEAL
ANA NEEDS YOUR HELP
YOUR DONATION WILL BE USED
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