

DONATE TO MY FRIEND'S POSTING: THE ROLE OF INCIDENTAL SIMILARITY ON HEURISTIC PROCESSING OF DONATIONS IN NONPROFIT SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract:

Asking for resources can be an uncomfortable task for nonprofits, especially during times of economic recession and anytime as an increasing number of organizations compete for charitable donations, volunteers, and other scarce philanthropic revenues. At this purpose, Social Networking Sites (SNSs) offer nonprofits a valuable and cost-effective way to engage audiences and promote causes.

On the above basis, this paper explores the reasons what drive individuals to donate their money to charity, and how donors choose among competing causes within the context of SNSs. Finally, a donation heuristic model is suggested to explain individuals' behaviour based on their perceived similarities.

Keywords: *individuals' behaviour; nonprofit social media; Social Networking Sites (SNSs); heuristic models*

DONAR AL POST DE MI AMIGO: EL PAPEL DE LA SIMILITUD INCIDENTAL EN EL PROCESAMIENTO HEURÍSTICO DE LAS DONACIONES EN LOS MEDIOS SOCIALES NO LUCRATIVOS

Resumen:

Buscar recursos puede resultar una tarea incómoda para las entidades no lucrativas, especialmente en tiempos de recesión económica y en cualquier momento, ya que un creciente número de organizaciones compiten por donaciones, voluntarios y otros escasos medios filantrópicos. A tal propósito, las redes sociales proporcionan a las entidades sin fines de lucro una forma valiosa y rentable de atraer audiencias y promover causas.

Sobre la base anterior, este artículo explora las razones que empujan a los individuos a donar su dinero a la caridad, y cómo los donantes escogen entre causas concurrentes en el contexto de las redes sociales. Por último, se sugiere un modelo heurístico de donación para explicar el comportamiento de los individuos en base a las similitudes percibidas.

Palabras clave: *comportamiento de los individuos; medios sociales no lucrativos; redes sociales; modelos heurísticos*

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1. Introduction

There are an increasing number of nonprofit organizations competing with each other for charitable donations, volunteers, and other scarce philanthropic revenues. Asking for a donation can be an uncomfortable task, especially during times of economic recession. Mark Kuraish, president of Global Giving Foundation, notes that utilizing online social networking sites can be a great way to reach out to new donors and evoke public interests (Storm 2009). Not only does it help seek funds and resources, but it also provides a means through which “like-minded individuals similar goals or aspiration can connect” (Klingsheim 2010).

Two thirds of the world’s Internet population visit a Social Networking Site (SNS) and the time spent on SNS accounting nearly double on any other online activity (Nielsen 2009). The nature of SNSs allows them to be an important social platform for connecting individuals and sharing information. According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), individuals have a strong motivation to form and maintain social bonds, although the intensity of desire varies among individuals.

Boudreau (2009) defined people as being a “sympathetic bunch who when given the opportunity to lend a hand, will extend one”. According to this author, and given the strong motivation to connect and the popularity of social media, just one post about someone in need, a cause, or a foundation seeking help, really can go a long way and “go viral”.

Another feature of SNSs is that they are driven by user-participation and user-generated content (Tredinnick 2006). In turn, individuals create and share their own content in their everyday communicative, creative, and any type of social activities to fulfil their social interaction needs (Shao 2009).

Not only Internet users generate contents to interact with others, but they also perceive user-generated contents are more credible and trustworthy. A great number of studies in marketing, tourism and political science have shown how individuals consider user-generated contents wherein product-review websites and online forums. Park et al. (2007) noted that online consumer reviews are often identified more trustworthy than information generated by suppliers of products and services because consumers are considered to provide more honest information.

In this sense, Johnson and Kayne (2004) stated user-generated contents are “not bound by standards of objectivity; most have strong views that they express openly” Therefore, in this line of understanding, there is no question that SNS has transformed the nonprofit world, offering a valuable and cost-effective way to engage audiences and promote an organization’s cause (Kante 2009). Despite the immediate benefits of SNS, many nonprofit organizations are still not fully utilizing its features are failing to promote the interactive functions of SNS, which could potentially cultivate connectedness and relationships (Waters 2009; Waters et al. 2009).

Why some nonprofit organizations are more successful in enhancing public interests by using SNSs than others? It is important to understand the rationale behind why individuals decide to donate based on the information and interactivity of SNSs among competitive organizations. The main purpose of this paper is to discuss what drives individuals to donate their money to charity, and how donors choose among competing causes within the context of SNSs.

2. Theoretical background

In a recent research study on prosocial behaviour, Aaker and Akutsu (2009) found that individuals make more monetary donations based on a range of emotional factors, such as: i) guilt; ii) sympathy and empathy; or iii) happiness. However, in spite of the progress that has been made in understanding “why people give”, fewer studies have focused on “how people have chosen beneficiaries based on these affective factors”.

Emotional arousal is a motivator for prosocial behaviour (Eisenberg and Fabes 1990). Batson and Berkowitz (1987) noted that feeling empathy towards the person needing aid increases the likelihood that the help will be provided. This empathy for the other individual is characterized by feelings of compassion and sympathy. Thus, numerous charity advertisements often try to evoke sympathy by displaying photographs of the individuals who are in need. Multiple experiments on charity advertisement, –specifically Small and Verrochi (2009)– explored how participants felt sadder when

seeing a sad-faced victim (use “solicitors” interchangeably) who suffered from misfortune in a charity appeal. They also explored how their own sadness mediated the effect of emotion expression on sympathy.

Importantly, an individual feels sympathy when he or she shares a personal relationship with a victim and that this greater sympathy is eventually transferred to a prosocial behaviour (Small and Simonson 2008). Moreover, individuals are more sympathetic toward victims who belong to their in-group rather than their out-group (Flippen et al. 1996; Dovidio et al. 1997), who are similar to them (Krebs 1975), or who have a special interest in a cause (Ratner and Miller 2001). Therefore, understanding when people feel the close relationship with a solicitor is of considerable importance to this current study.

One way to find out when people feel closeness to others is by the degree of similarity. For example, Burger et al. (2004) demonstrated that undergraduate students who believed they shared birthday, first name, or finger print similarities with a confederate were more likely to consent with a request from the confederate. Moreover, these authors explained the compliance consequences in their experiments with a heuristic processing.

Years before Chaiken (1980) had distinguished between a systematic and a heuristic view of persuasion. At this purpose she defined a systematic view as exerting cognitive effort in performing a task. In contrast, in a heuristic view of persuasion, recipients employ comparatively little effort in judging the validity of a message. For instance, we often encounter someone who asks for a small favour, sells us a product, or seeks our compliance to a request; however, we seldom critically think before complying with the requests.

A growing body of research has found that people generally take a cognitively efficient approach and heuristics to direct their response rather than considering the costs and benefits or analyzing the requester's arguments (Cialdini 2000; Burger et al. 2004). In addition, this heuristic processing can lead to increase in compliance when receiver perceives salient cues such as sharing similarities with the requester (Burger et al. 2004), finding physical attractiveness of solicitors (Reingen and Kernan 1993) or facial similarity of candidates in an election (Bailenson et al. 2008).

In most of these cases, people were asked to make snap judgments of competence based on a one-second exposure to stimuli of requests (Bailenson et al. 2008). Thus, to the extent that people rarely respond to these requests with thoughtful, reasoned and systematic decisions, research about charitable behaviour as a heuristic processing is significantly considerable. For example, when we are asked to donate money to nonprofit organizations which help children in Africa, the decision to donate depends on appeal messages in a solicitor email, mail or phone fundraising. Due to limited information about requestors as well as the cognitive efficient approach or speed, we often take mental short cuts, namely heuristics which reduce cognitive burden associated with decision making (Shah and Oppenheimer 2008).

Presumably, for this reason, we can posit that potential donor who shares similarities with identifiable victims have a reduced feeling of distance and increased association with the victim. Moreover, this feeling of having a close relationship tends to promote sympathy and helping behaviour because of the heuristic view of similarity.

Based on this preliminary evidence that similarity creates attraction because people feel sense of connection from others who share commonalities, we aim to better understand the psychological processes supporting this pattern of charitable decisions. Moreover, it is possible to provide an explanation for how and why the perceived similarity can have a persuasive influence in a charity appeal context, more specifically charitable social networking sites. This applies not only nonprofit organizations that create contents or appeal message to increase perceived similarity from potential donors (users), but also how users share and disseminate charitable information in their “friends” list because SNSs posting have been generated and utilized by users themselves. A twenty-two percent of global Internet users stated they would buy from a brand if they saw that a friend liked or followed the brand on a SNS (Haider 2012).

Another recent study about SNS demonstrated that SNS positively affects how people feel about themselves and their well-being. Moreover, a study about positive influences on SNS also concluded that social media leads to increased prosocial behaviours (Stephan and Galak 2012).

3. Experimental design and preliminary findings

Therefore, consistent with this line of research, we propose that individuals who perceived similarities with solicitors (victims in a charity appeal) or friends who share charitable information in the SNS environments feel greater sympathy to the solicitors or friends who ask for donation rather than individuals who are less perceived similarities with solicitors or friends in networks. The support for this hypothesis is based on the heuristic processing of persuasion because of previous findings that people who were more likely to engage in effortful thinking used SNS less often (Zhong et al. 2011).

Although there are a few research studies regarding the association between people who are intrinsically interested in analyzing and processing information about user generated content websites and their attitudes based on cognition, the effect of heuristic processing of persuasion has yet to be investigated. Therefore, this study contributes to literature of the nonprofit and public sector marketing in several ways to find what type of individual users are persuaded by heuristic cues. For example, sharing the same first initial, birth date or hometown is a heuristic cue of perceiving incidental similarities with solicitors. Since people tend to form positive associations with themselves, other people who correspond to these cues are also perceived favourably which has been referred to as “implicit egotism”.

Individuals’ emotional response to charitable appeals from a nonprofit organization SNS or charitable postings from friends list on SNSs is expected to be mediated by this implicit egotism and sense of belonging to others. In other words, no matter how individuals emotionally respond to a charitable message, the emotional response is mediated by the perceived similarities. For instance, an individual feels negative emotion toward a charitable appeal message from a nonprofit organization SNS posting; however, the person identifies the solicitor as being from the same hometown.

Due to individual’s innate tendency to make positive associations with him/herself and the sense of connection towards the solicitor, any initial negative feelings toward the charitable appeal may mitigate. And the weakened emotion may even turn to sympathy after perceiving the incidental similarity. Since sympathy is a vital factor in enhancing prosocial behaviour, the evoked sympathy from the initial negative feeling toward the appeal leads one to take charitable action. This logic applies to a friend’s posting on SNSs. Given that an individual is motivated by connection and belonging to others, especially in public forums such as social networking sites such as Tweeter and Facebook, he or she values how other friends in the list positively view him or herself. In other words, SNSs lead individuals to do good deeds in the context of charitable behaviour.

We therefore hypothesize that a charitable appeal message from nonprofit organization SNS or postings among friend networks will evoke emotional response. This emotional response will be mediated by incidental similarity cues such as sharing the same first initial, hometown, or eye colour. The emotional response which is mediated by the implicit egotism and a sense of belonging is either elicited to sympathy or not. Finally, greater feeling of sympathy leads a charitable behaviour.

To support these hypotheses, three experiments were conducted at a midsize university located in the Midwest, US. A total of 230 undergraduate business students participated in the first experiment by completing an online survey at a computer lab that was under certain controlled conditions. To be precise, participants were randomly assigned to different manipulations were asked to read four fictional scenarios about individuals experiencing misfortune:

- a) positive emotion framed messages with a self (donor) focus;
- b) positive emotion framed messages with others (victims or solicitors) as the focus;
- c) negative emotion framed message with a self-focus; and
- d) negative emotion framed message with others as the focus.

The negative emotion framed message appeal described a man who had lost his vision while using a “weed-eater” is suffering both financially and physically.

In the negative message, participants will observe various desperate and negative words that follow the descriptions. For example, following the accident, the man lost his job and family, leaving him to feel desperate and miserable. In contrast, the positive framed message displayed a bright future after receiving financial aid from the nonprofit organization.

Results demonstrated that participants in different conditions will respond differently. In other words, there was a significant difference between the four groups.

A second study (involving 130 college students) measured how different emotional responses are mediated by perceived similarity. As it was posited in our hypothesis, one's negative feelings will somewhat decrease after knowing that the unfortunate person in the scenario shares same first initial with the subject him/herself. However, there was not much difference for participants who received the positive emotion framed message with others as the focus.

The third experiment (involving 150 college students) measured participants' sense of connection and implicit egotism in the heuristic processing of persuasion. Most individuals associate positively with themselves and thus tend to prefer things connected to themselves. This tendency referred to as implicit egotism (Pelham et. al. 2002). To measure these innate traits, the Need for Cognition (NFC) Scale (Cacioppo and Petty 1982), the Self Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965) and the Social Connectedness Scale (Lee and Robbins 1995) had been used.

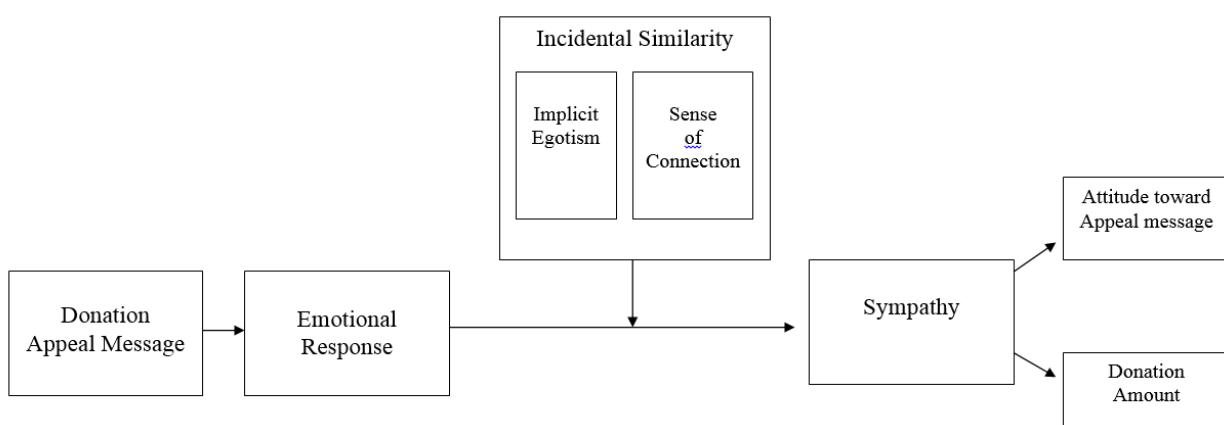
4. Conclusions and final remarks

According to the above findings a donation heuristic model can be suggested explaining individuals' behaviour on the basis of their perceived similarities (see Figure 1).

However, further research is required in order to generalize our results. What is more, future studies may also want to examine how an individual's innate traits such as, social connectedness and need for cognition, associate with social networking activity in a charitable domain.

In this sense, we posit that high self-esteem individuals spend more time on SNSs and more sensitively respond to charitable appeal which includes incidental similarity. Moreover, it is also proposed that individual with high NFC spend less time on SNS and will be less sensitive to incidental cue on a charitable message.

Figure 1. Similarity as a donation heuristic model



Source: own elaboration

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