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Should donation ads include happy victim images? The moderating role of regulatory focus

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Abstract

We examine how victim imagery interacts with ad messaging's regulatory focus to determine the effectiveness of donation appeals. We predict and show that ads that combine a happy victim image with a promotion-focused message uniquely increase donation intentions. We demonstrate that this occurs because the combination of promotion-focused messaging, which makes gain goals salient, and a happy victim image, which signals gains are occurring, increases consumers' perceived response efficacy. Four studies test the interaction of victim imagery and regulatory focus showing the predicted effect. We also test the mediating role of perceived response efficacy and rule out several alternative explanations. Our findings extend prior work which has overlooked the interactive effects of victim imagery and ad messaging and the effects of victim imagery on perceived response efficacy. By exploring these dimensions, we offer marketers and consumers guidance on how to construct effective fundraising ads.

Keywords

Introduction

        The nonprofit sector is the fastest growing sector in the U.S. (Bloomberg View 2012). With the number of charitable organizations constantly growing, the need to construct effective donation requests is more critical than ever. Prior work has examined how including happy (vs. sad) victim images in donation appeals impacts their effectiveness. While some research suggests sad images are more effective (Small and Verrochi 2009), other work indicates happy images have the upper hand (Genevsky and Knutson 2015). We reexamine these conflicting findings by introducing regulatory focus as a moderator of the effects of victim imagery. Though research has examined how ads' regulatory focus can affect donation behavior (Cao 2016), the interactive effects of victim imagery and regulatory focus remain unexplored. We extend prior work to examine the inter- section of happy (vs. sad) victim imagery and regulatory focus. We also identify a new mechanism for the effects of victim imagery: perceived response efficacy.

        Specifically, ad messaging can be either promotion-focused (e.g., Bmake children healthy^) or prevention-focused (e.g., Bavoid child illness^; Lee and Aaker 2004). A promotion-focused message activates gain-attainment goals (Higgins 2000), and happy victim images signal that gains are being attained (Lyubomirsky et al. 2005). Thus, we propose that the combination of a promotion-focused message and a happy victim image will increase consumers' perception that their donation is likely to effectively help the victim, that is, will increase perceived response efficacy. This will lead to increased donation intentions (Sharma and Morwitz 2016).

        We further propose that perceived response efficacy will not increase when a happy victim image is combined with a prevention-focused message. A prevention-focused message highlights losses (Higgins 2000), whereas a happy image signals gains (Lyubomirsky et al. 2005), making the image's signaling less relevant (Yan et al. 2010). Moreover, we predict that because a sad victim image signals losses are occurring (Reed and DeScioli 2017), it suggests that neither promotion nor prevention goals are being attained, leading to lower perceived response efficacy and lower donation intentions regardless of the ad's regulatory focus. Our theory and findings contribute to research and practice in several important ways. First, we examine, for the first time, victim imagery and messaging's regulatory focus jointly, providing new insights regarding the interactive

effect of these key visual and verbal ad characteristics, which help reconcile past conflicting results in the literature. Second, while prior work has focused on the role of victim imagery in signaling severity of need (Bhati and Eikenberry 2016) or increasing sympathy (Small and Verrochi 2009), we propose a new mechanism via which victim imagery can affect consumers: perceived response efficacy. Third, we focus on a new dimension of perceived response efficacy. Whereas prior work focused on consumers' perceptions of their own efficacy (Sharma and Morwitz 2016), we focus on consumers' perceptions of the charitable organization's efficacy, and its ability to produce positive outcomes for its beneficiaries. This is an important dimension in consumers' charitable behavior (Harvey 1990).

Practically, our findings apply to both nonprofit marketing managers and layperson crowd-funders. We offer these stakeholders practical guidance on how to combine victim images and ad messaging to increase donation appeals' effectiveness.

Conceptual development
Sad versus happy victims and donation behavior

Some prior work suggests that sad victim images can cause consumers to non-consciously share in the victim's pain (Small and Verrochi 2009), or can convey a greater charitable need (Bhati and Eikenberry 2016), leading to increased sympathy and donations. How- ever, other work suggests that seeing sad victims can lead to negative attitudes towards the ad (Van Kleef et al. 2015) and activate negative emotional reactions (e.g., loneliness; Choi et al. 2016), leading to reduced donations (Dyck and Coldevin 1992). Moreover, recent work suggests happy victim images are more effective for soliciting donations, because they increase trust (Ravaja et al. 2004) and lead to positive arousal, improving ad evaluations and increasing donations (Genevsky and Knutson 2015).

It is possible that prior mixed findings occurred because researchers varied not only the victim's facial expression, but also other image characteristics (e.g., attractiveness, cleanliness; Cao and Jia 2017). Here, we control for these characteristics, and suggest that perhaps prior mixed findings emerged, in part, from the interactive effects of imagery and verbal content. Although stimuli in prior work often included verbal content, no systematic attention was given to how this content may have

interacted with victim imagery. We predict that the regulatory focus of the ad's verbal message will moderate the effects of the ad's victim imagery.

Consistent with recent work, we anticipate an upper hand for ads that feature happy victim images. However, we extend prior work to propose that the effectiveness of happy victim images will be moderated by the ad's regulatory focus due to effects on consumers' perceived response efficacy, as discussed next.

Victim imagery, regulatory focus, and perceived response efficacy

Happiness is associated with the occurrence of positive events and happy facial expressions signal well-being (Lyubomirsky et al. 2005). Thus, happy victim images signal that gains are occurring (Dyck and Coldevin 1992). We propose this can indicate that prior efforts of the charitable organization have been effective at aiding victims. In contrast, sadness is associated with negative events, specifically losses. Thus, sad facial expressions signal ongoing losses (Reed and DeScioli 2017) and may suggest that despite prior efforts, the charitable need has not been successfully met. In sum, we posit that victim imagery can affect perceived response efficacy, that is, perceptions of the charitable organization's ability to apply skills and resources to produce positive outcomes. Critically, we propose that these effects will be moderated by the ad message's regulatory focus.

As noted earlier, ads can be either promotion-focused (e.g., Bmake children healthy^) or prevention-focused (e.g., Bavoid child illness^). Promotion-focused messaging makes salient gain-attainment goals (Higgins 2000). Per above, happy victim images signal that gain goals are being achieved. Thus, the combination of a happy victim image and a promotion-focused message should make salient gain-attainment goals, while signaling such goals are achievable. We propose this will increase consumers' perceived response efficacy (of the charitable organization), leading to increased donation intentions.

In contrast, we propose no such increase will occur when a happy victim image is paired with a prevention-focused message. Prevention-focused messaging makes salient loss-avoidance goals (Higgins 2000), and happiness is related to gain (not loss) goals (Yan et al. 2010). Thus, combining a happy victim with a prevention-focused

message is expected to be less effective. In addition, since sadness signals losses (per above), it suggests that neither prevention nor promotion goals are being attained. Thus, when an ad features a sad victim image, we predict consumers' perceived response efficacy will be relatively low, regardless of the ad's regulatory focus, resulting in lower donation intentions (see Fig. 1).
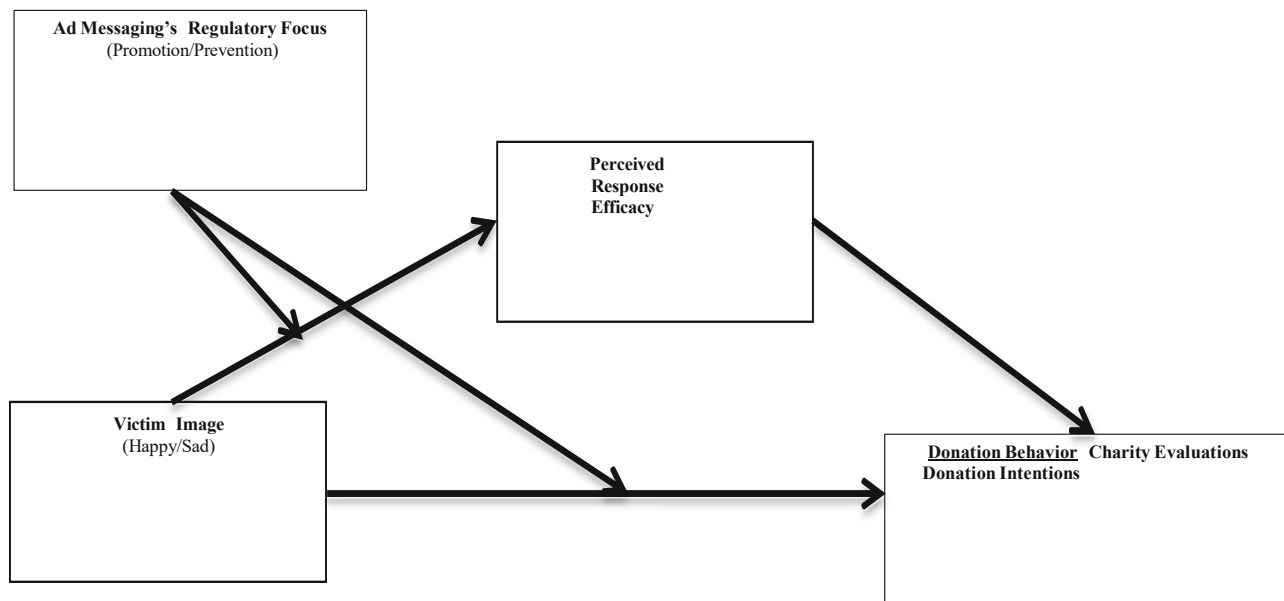

Fig. 1 Theoretical model

Demonstrating these patterns extends prior theorizing in several ways. First, we add to prior work on perceived response efficacy by identifying victim imagery as a new antecedent. Moreover, whereas prior work has focused on consumers' self-efficacy as a determinant of perceived response efficacy (Sharma and Morwitz 2016), we focus on consumers' perceptions that the charitable organization is able to effectively aid victims. This dimension of perceived response efficacy is important because consumers' donation behavior is impacted by how effectively they think donated funds will be utilized (Bendapudi et al. 1996; Harvey 1990).

Second, we add to prior work on regulatory focus. Such work has accounted for donors' susceptibility to the charitable need (Cao 2016), donors' self-presentation concerns (Pfattheicher 2015), and local versus global message framing (Mukherjee et al. 2014), but has not examined the role of ad imagery. We explore, for the first time, the

intersection between regulatory focus and victim imagery. Moreover, prior work suggests that when multiple dimensions of an ad have the same regulatory focus, regulatory fit occurs (Higgins 2000). In the present context, combining a sad victim with prevention- focused message would be expected to create fit (both elements are loss-based), leading to increased donation intentions. Instead, we propose that because sad victims signal losses are occurring, low perceived response efficacy will occur, regardless of the ad's regulatory focus. Thus, our process goes beyond an explanation based on regulatory fit.

Summary of hypotheses and overview of studies

Formally stated, the theorizing above suggests a two-way interaction between the victim's image (happy vs. sad) and the regulatory focus of the ad's message (promotion vs. prevention), such that:

H1A: When the ad features a happy victim, it will lead to higher donation intentions when the ad's message is promotion- (vs. prevention-) focused.

H1B: When the ad features a sad victim, it will lead to similarly low donation intentions regardless of the ad message's regulatory focus.

These predictions suggest that ads featuring happy victims will have the upper hand, but only when the ad's message is promotion-focused. Critically, these predictions rely on differences in perceived response efficacy of the charitable organization:

H2: Increased donation intentions in response to ads combining a happy victim and a promotion-focused message will be driven by increased perceived response efficacy (of the charitable organization).

We test these predictions in four studies. In study 1, we test the effect of happy versus sad victim images and the message's regulatory focus on donation intentions; we include a neutral condition for comparison. In studies 2A–2B, we replicate our key findings using another dependent measure (charity evaluations) and a different

donation context (crowdfunding). In study 3, we test the mediating role of perceived response efficacy. Across studies, we rule out alternative explanations based on need severity, authenticity, victim attractiveness, sympathy, and elaboration.

Study 1: The interaction effect

The purpose of study 1 was to test H1A-B using a measure of donation intentions. We also measured perceived need severity (Batson et al. 2005; Bhati and Eikenberry 2016) and perceived authenticity of the victim's facial expression (Greenaway et al. 2018). Consistent with prior work, we expected sad faces to signal greater need than happy ones (Bhati and Eikenberry 2016). However, we expected no interaction effects of victim imagery and regulatory focus on perceptions of need severity or authenticity, ruling out these alternative explanations. In addition, we included a neutral image condition. Our theorizing suggests that the combination of a happy victim with a promotion- focused message *increases* donation behavior. The neutral condition enables us to test if such an increase occurs or if an alternative possibility, that the sad victim image has a negative impact (Van Kleef et al. 2015), is at play.

Method

Participants (MTurk; $N = 332$; $M_{age} = 37.03$, 50% female) completed a 3 (victim image: happy/sad/neutral) by 2 (regulatory focus: promotion/prevention) between-subjects study. Participants imagined that they received an email from a charitable organization. The email contained an ad with an image of a happy, sad, or neutral victim, combined with either a promotion-focused (e.g., "Help Children be Happier & Healthier") or prevention-focused message (e.g., "Help Children Avoid Sickness & Hunger"; see online appendix for complete stimuli). After viewing the ad, participants were asked: "How likely are you to donate to the charity?" (1 = Very Unlikely, 7 = Very Likely). To rule out alternative explanations, we measured need severity (3 items; adapted from Batson et al. 2005) and authenticity (3 items; Greenaway et al. 2018). Complete measure details and results of manipulation checks for the victim images (in all studies) are provided in the online appendix.

Results

Alternative explanations We conducted an ANOVA using image condition, regulatory focus condition, and their interaction to predict need severity ($\alpha = .94$) and authenticity ($\alpha = .70$). As predicted, the sad condition led to higher perceived need ($M = 4.55$; $ps < .01$) than the other two conditions (which did not differ: $M_{happy} = 3.82$; $M_{neutral} = 3.96$; $p > .50$). As further predicted, all other main (ps .28–.94) or interaction effects (ps .50–.95) were non-significant for both measures.

Donation intentions We conducted a similar ANOVA using donation intentions as the dependent measure. We found the predicted interaction of victim image by regulatory focus ($F(1,326) = 3.06$, $p < .05$). Planned contrasts revealed that, consistent with H1A, when the victim's image was happy, participants were more likely to donate when the ad was promotion-focused ($M = 4.87$) than prevention- focused ($M = 4.08$, $F(1,326) = 4.68$, $p < .05$). Consistent with H1B, when the victim's image was sad, participants were similarly likely to donate regardless of the ad's regulatory focus ($M_{promotion} = 4.26$, $M_{prevention} = 4.36$, $F(1,326) = .09$, $p > .76$). Regulatory focus also had no effect in the neutral image condition ($M_{promotion} = 3.74$, $M_{prevention} = 4.16$, $F(1,326) = 1.45$, $p > .22$). Importantly, consistent with our theorizing, when the ad was promotion-focused, a happy victim image increased donation intentions relative to a neutral victim image ($F(1,326) = 10.45$, $p < .005$), and there was no negative effect of a sad versus neutral image ($F(1,326) = 2.27$, $p > .13$; see Fig. 2).

Discussion

Study 1 demonstrated the predicted interaction of victim image by regulatory focus, supporting H1A-B. The data showed that combining a happy victim with a promotion-focused message increased donation intention relative to a happy victim with a prevention-focused message (H1A). Further consistent with our theorizing, it was the happy victim image (in the promotion-focused condition) that *increased* donation intentions (relative to a neutral victim), and not the sad victim image that reduced donation intentions. Study 1 also ruled out alternative explanations based on need severity and authenticity, as neither measure was affected by the interaction of victim imagery and regulatory focus, while donation intentions were.
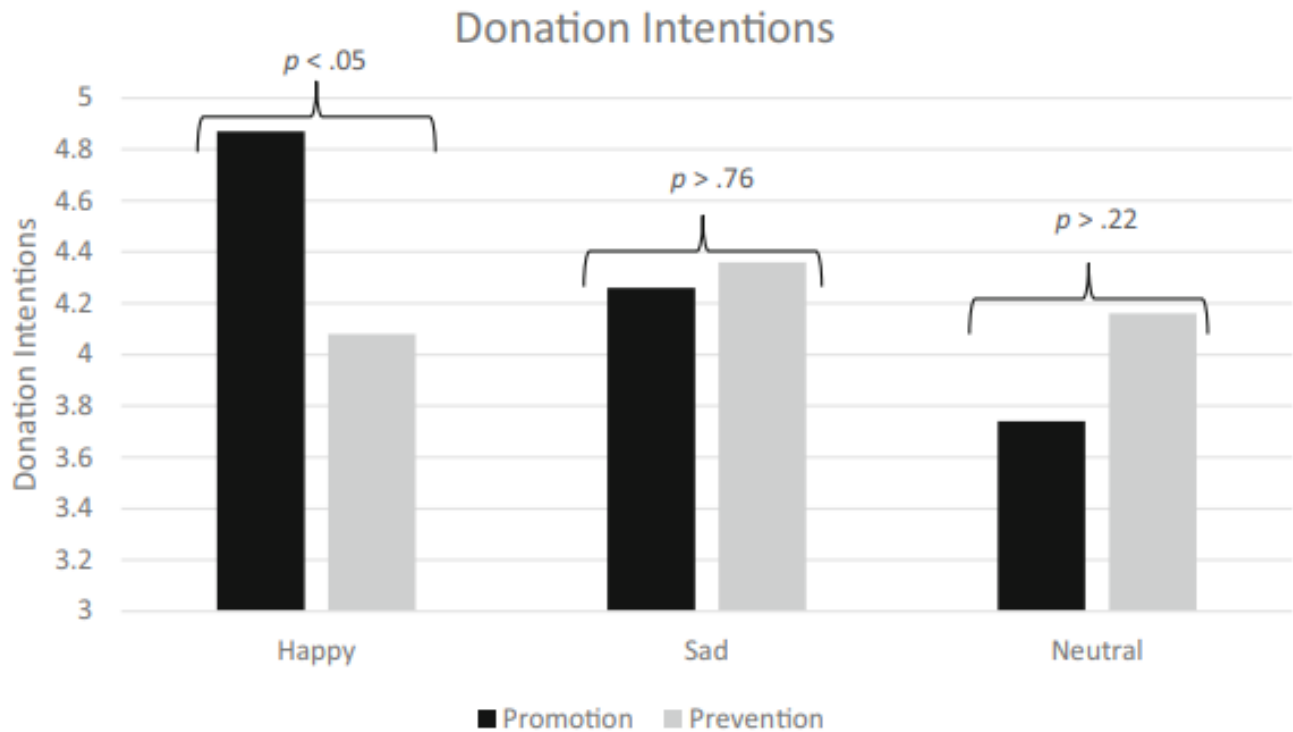
Fig. 2 Study 1 results: victim image by regulatory focus

Studies 2A–2B: Replication and extension

Studies 2A–2B aimed to replicate the findings of study 1, while extending them to include a different dependent measure (charity evaluations; study 2A), and a different donation context (crowdfunding; study 2B). We also sought to rule out alternative explanations based on victim attractiveness (Ueda et al. 2016) or sympathy towards the victim (Small and Verrochi 2009).

Study 2A

Participants (undergraduates; $N = 321$, $M_{age} = 21.62$, 49% female) completed a 2 (victim image: happy/sad) by 2 (regulatory focus: promotion/prevention) between-subjects study using the images from study 1. We used charity evaluations (3 items; unfavorable/favorable, bad/good, negative/positive; Zemack-Rugar et al. 2017) as our dependent measure. We also measured victim attractiveness (3 items; unattractive/attractive, not pretty/pretty, not cute/cute). These measures used seven-point bipolar scales. Finally, we measured sympathy towards the victim (6 items; sympathetic, warm, compassionate, soft-hearted, tender, moved; 1 = Not At All, 7 = Very

Much So; Small and Verrochi 2009).

We conducted an ANOVA using victim image, regulatory focus, and their interaction to predict charity evaluations ($\alpha = .91$). We found the predicted inter- action of victim image by regulatory focus ($F(1,317) = 4.48$, $p < .05$). Planned contrasts showed that when the victim was happy, participants evaluated the charity more positively when the ad was promotion- ($M = 5.91$) than prevention- focused ($M = 5.38$, $F(1,317) = 6.22$, $p < .05$). There was no effect of regulatory focus when the victim was sad ($M_{promotion} = 5.04$, $M_{prevention} = 5.14$, $F(1,317) = .23$, $p > .62$; see Fig. 3). Analyzed a different way, when the ad was promotion- focused, charity evaluations were higher when the victim's image was happy than sad ($F(1,317) = 17.28$, $p < .0001$). When the ad was prevention-focused, the victim's image had no significant effect ($F(1,317) = 1.30$, $p > .25$). Furthermore, there were no significant main (ps .50–.90) or interaction effects (ps .21–.39) on the attractiveness ($\alpha = .89$) and sympathy measures ($\alpha = .94$), ruling out these alternative explanations.

Study 2B

Using the conditions from study 2A, participants (undergraduates; $N = 205$, $M_{age} = 22.41$, 50% female) completed a between-subjects study. We increased generalizability by using a different donation context: a crowdfunding post (see online appendix). Participants imagined that while browsing online, they saw the crowdfunding page and indicated their donation intentions (as in study 1) and charity evaluations (as in study 2A). We further ruled out any role of victim attractiveness by using the same victim in all ads. Still, we measured attractiveness as in study 2A, with the addition of young/old.

We conducted an ANOVA using victim image, regulatory focus, and their interaction to predict charity evaluations ($\alpha = .90$) and donation intentions (separately). Each revealed the predicted interaction of image condition by regulatory focus (evaluations: $F(1,201) = 5.70$, $p < .05$; intentions: $F(1,201) = 3.45$, $p = .06$). When the victim's image was happy, participants' charity evaluations were higher when the ad was promotion- ($M = 5.89$) versus prevention- focused ($M = 5.23$, $F(1,201) = 5.94$, $p < .05$). The same was true of donation intentions ($M_{promotion} = 3.98$, $M_{prevention}$
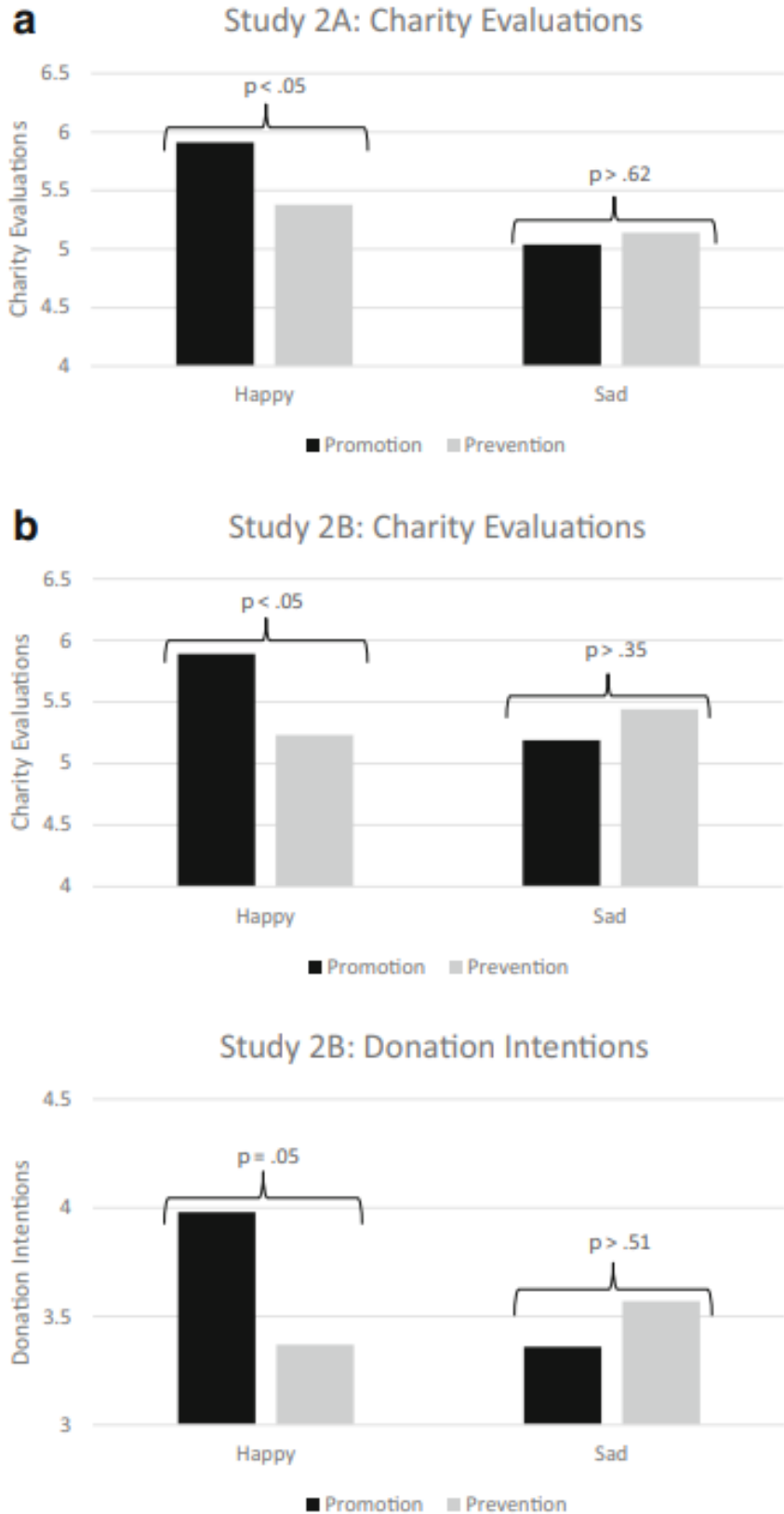
Fig. 3 Studies 2A–2B results: victim image by regulatory focus

= 3.37, $F(1,201) = 3.85$, $p = .05$). When the victim's image was sad, there was no effect of regulatory focus (evalua- tions: $M_{promotion} = 5.19$, $M_{prevention} = 5.44$, $F(1,201) = .88$, $p > .35$; intentions: $M_{promotion} = 3.36$, $M_{prevention} = 3.57$, $F(1,201) = .43$, $p > .51$; see Fig. 3). Analyzed differently, when the ad was promotion-focused, a happy victim increased charity evaluations ($F(1,201) = 6.68$, $p < .05$) and donation intentions ($F(1,201) = 3.98$, $p < .05$) relative to a sad victim. When the ad was prevention-focused, there was no effect of victim image ($ps > .42$). Finally, there were no significant main (ps .27–.76) or interaction effects (ps .84–.97) for the attractiveness measures.

Discussion

Studies 2A–2B further supported H1A-B by demonstrating again the interactive effect of victim image by regulatory focus, using both a charity ad and a crowdfunding post, and measures of charity evaluations and donation intentions. Having demonstrated the robustness of the key effect, we turn to examine the role of perceived response efficacy as the underlying mechanism.

Study 3: The role of perceived response efficacy

The goal of study 3 was to examine the mediating role of perceived response efficacy. We also added a measure of elaboration. Specifically, regulatory fit can increase cognitive processing and elaboration (Higgins 2000), suggesting increased elaboration in both the happy/promotion-focused and sad/prevention- focused ad conditions. In contrast, we predicted no interactive effect of victim imagery by regulatory focus on elaboration. Instead, we anticipated that differences in perceived response efficacy would mediate donation intentions, per H2.

Method

Participants (MTurk; $N = 258$, $M_{age} = 36.42$, 52% female) completed a 2 (victim image: happy/sad) by 2 (regulatory focus: promotion/prevention) between-subjects study. We utilized the ads from study 1 with the images from study 2B. Participants indicated their donation intentions, as in studies 1 and 2B.

To measure perceived response efficacy, participants indicated the degree to which they felt their donation would (1) meaningfully support the cause, (2) make a difference, and (3) be unlikely to help (reversed; adapted from Sharma and Morwitz 2016). We again tested for sympathy using the measures from study 2A. To test for differences in elaboration, participants indicated the degree to which they were thorough, careful, distracted (reversed), thoughtful, involved, and interested while viewing the ad (1 = Not At All, 7 = Very Much So; Wan et al. 2010).

Results

Alternative explanations We conducted an ANOVA using victim image, regulatory focus, and their interaction to predict sympathy (α = .95) and elaboration (α = .87). All main (ps .10–.89) and interaction effects (ps .14–.79) were non- significant.

Donation intentions We conducted a similar ANOVA to predict donation intentions. We found a significant main effect of victim image condition ($F(1,254) = 5.67$, $p < .05$) and regulatory focus ($F(1,254) = 6.27$, $p < .01$), both qualified by the predicted victim image by regulatory focus interaction ($F(1,254) = 4.57$, $p < .05$). Planned contrasts revealed that when the victim's image was happy, participants indicated greater donation intentions in the promotion ($M = 4.61$) than prevention condition ($M = 3.56$, $F(1,254) = 10.87$, $p < .005$). When the victim's image was sad, participants indicated similarly low donation intentions, regardless of the ad's regulatory focus ($M_{promotion} = 3.59$, $M_{prevention} = 3.51$, $F(1,254) = .07$, $p > .70$; see Fig. 4). Analyzed differently, when the ad was promotion-focused, participants in the happy victim condition indicated higher donation intentions than those in the sad condition ($F(1,254) = 10.05$, $p < .01$). When the ad was prevention-focused, victim image had no effect on donation intentions ($F(1,254) = .03$, $p > .86$).

Perceived response efficacy A similar ANOVA was conducted using perceived response efficacy (α = .87) as the dependent measure. We found a significant main effect of victim image condition (one missing value; $F(1,253) = 4.21$, $p < .05$), qualified by the predicted interaction of victim image by regulatory focus ($F(1,253) = 7.01$, $p < .01$). Planned contrasts revealed that, as predicted, when the victim was happy, participants' perceived response efficacy was greater when the ad was

promotion-focused ($M = 5.12$) than when it was prevention-focused ($M = 4.31$, $F(1,253)$ = 7.91, $p < .01$). As further predicted, when the victim was sad, participants reported similarly low perceived response efficacy, regardless of the ad's regulatory focus ($M_{promotion} = 4.16$, $M_{prevention} = 4.43$, $F(1,253) = .88$, $p > .30$; see Fig. 4).
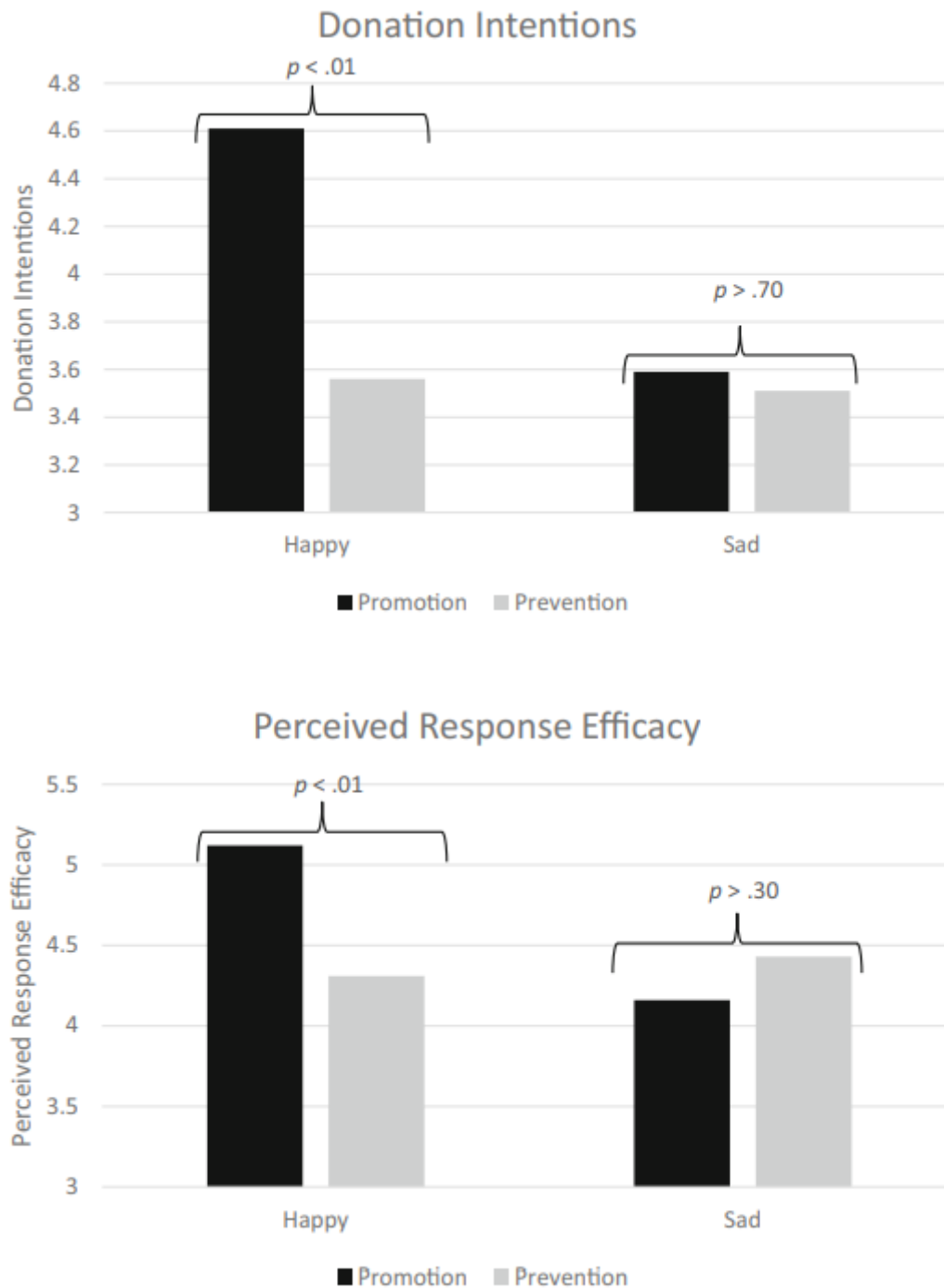

Fig. 4 Study 3 results: victim image by regulatory focus

Mediation To test H2, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis (per Fig. 1), using PROCESS (model 8; Hayes 2013). Results showed a significant indirect effect of perceived response efficacy (95% CI .17, 1.23). Moreover, when perceived response efficacy was included in the ANOVA, the interaction of victim image by regulatory focus became non-significant ($F(1,252) = .40$, $p > .50$), while perceived response efficacy remained significant ($F(1,252) = 124.52$, $p < .0001$), indicating full mediation. Finally, neither sympathy (95% CI − .65, .47) nor elaboration (95% CI − .42, .009) played a mediating role.

Discussion

The data once again showed an interactive effect of victim image by regulatory focus, supporting H1A-B. Consistent with H2, this interaction pattern was mediated by perceived response efficacy. The theoretical and practical implications of our findings are discussed next.

General discussion

As competition for donation dollars increases, charitable organizations are turning to expensive marketing consultancies for help (Schaffer 2017). Further, as the popularity of donation crowdfunding increases (Giorgianni 2017), consumers crave information on how to design effective appeals. The present work provides both types of fundraisers guidance on how to effectively structure donation appeals by revealing the interactive effects of donation appeals' imagery and verbal components. We predict and show that happy victim images offer fundraisers an advantage, but only when paired with a promotion-focused message. We demonstrate that this effect is driven by perceived response efficacy. These findings provide several theoretical contributions.

First, prior donation research proposed that victims' facial expressions affect behavior by impacting need severity or increasing sympathy. In the present context, we find that these mechanisms, as well as authenticity and attractiveness, do not play a role. Instead, we show that victims' facial expressions can signal whether the charitable need is being effectively met. Consumers place importance on the ability of charities to appropriately utilize donations to ensure effective aid (Bendapudi et al. 1996; Harvey

1990). We reveal how victim imagery and regulatory focus combine to affect perceptions of these abilities. This provides a focus on a new dimension of efficacy. Whereas prior work demonstrated the importance of consumers' self-efficacy, we demonstrate a role for perceived efficacy of the charitable organization.

Second, we systematically explore, for the first time, the interaction between victim imagery and regulatory focus. By doing so, we add to the literature on victim imagery, which has largely overlooked the possible moderating role of verbal ad content. We also add to work on regulatory focus, which has not explored the impact of victim imagery.

Our findings also provide several important practical insights. First, our findings suggest that fundraisers would be wise to combine happy victim images with promotion-focused messaging. Second, we reveal response efficacy signaling as a process through which victim imagery operates, indicating the importance of accounting for this dimension when creating ad content. Finally, our work encourages fundraisers to consider the cross-modality effects of various communication characteristics, by showing that ad imagery and wording interact to determine communication outcomes.

Our work also opens the door for future research on both victim imagery and verbal ad content. Prior findings on victim imagery are mixed. Though some studies find positive effects of sad imagery (Small and Verrochi 2009), other work finds negative effects (Choi et al. 2016; Dyck and Coldevin 1992), and recent research shows positive effects of happy victim imagery (Genevsky and Knutson 2015). Here, we echo these recent findings, showing positive effects of happy victim imagery. Though our focus was not on the main effects of sad versus happy imagery, our findings contribute to the ongoing debate in the literature by highlighting the importance of accounting for systematic effects of ad verbiage, which have been largely overlooked. Future work could continue to explore other dimensions of ad verbiage (e.g., assertiveness, construal level) or of ad imagery (e.g., esthetics). Much remains to be learned in this important domain.

Here, we focus on the interaction of victim imagery and regulatory focus, providing advice to marketers, fundraising consumers, and crowdfunding websites on how to effectively combine victim imagery and message verbiage to maximize donation intentions.

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