The Effects of Construal Levels to Charity Retailing Communication

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Abstract

Purpose: Traditional charity retail needs to change its communication in the online environment. This article examines the effectiveness of communication by online charity organizations in terms of the type of messages being delivered. **Research design, data and methodology:** Study 1 based on a sample of 120 Korean adults, we investigated whether charity asking messages for domestic people, compared to those for foreign people, prompt more favorable evaluations when framed with low (vs. high) construal levels. In Study 2, with 120 Korean adults sample, we tested whether emotional message appeals prompt a more favorable response than rational messages when framed in a socially close. **Results:** According to the result of Study 1, for the domestic recipients, donation messages situated in the near, compared to the distant, future induced more favorable reactions from potential donors. Moreover, in Study 2, emotional (vs. rational) message appeals generated more positive donation intentions when they were framed in the socially close situation. **Conclusions:** This research contributes that differing consumer construal have important implications for how marketing communication might best gain charitable support. This suggests that marketers who design a donation message should consider message's appeal and type to activate the potential donors' willingness to participate in the campaign.

1. Introduction

With the rise of ESG, charity organizations face challenges that weren't imaginable decades ago. Even after a decade of cuts and immense social and environmental disruptions charities are still fighting to maintain business as usual. There are some positive changes such as the rise of ESG and people's re-attention to the charity. For example, on December 1, 2015, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and his wife Priscilla Chan announced that they will give away Ninety-nine% of their Facebook shares,

then valued at Forty-five billion dollars, in the course of their lifetimes. Their pledge signals the emergence of a new generation of philanthropists, as young entrepreneurs look to make an impact early on in their careers (Zhao & Dale, 2019). There are an estimated 1.3 million registered public charities in the United States. The economic downturn of 2008 caused contributions to decrease over the past few years; thus, raising money has become more challenging for charitable organizations (Ein-Gar & Levontin, 2013). Charity retailing can be another way to raise money. Since the early 1980s and the beginning of charity retail boom, many charities are either too small and lack the resources to the changes.

Given the recent importance of the online charity environment, it is surprising that they have not received more research attention. A charity shop is a retail establishment run by a charitable organization. These shops usually sell products mainly used goods. A charitable organization can use these retail shops as a way of communication with donors.

For example, The Korean representative charity retailing company, "Beautiful Store" is a chain of charity

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shops promoting recycling and sharing. This company has started in Seoul in 2002. The Beautiful Store foundation opened more than 120 stores in 16 cities across Korea. One of its goals is to serve as local meeting places and bring about positive changes in their local communities. Interestingly, you can find that this organization has started various charity projects in Korea and in abroad. It also sponsors not only domestic people but also other countries' people who need its help. But it needs to understand the donors' minds and which condition is better to bring this help.

Therefore, it is important to find an appropriate method of communicating with donors. Lenders appear to also favor borrowers who are needier, honest and are more creditworthy (Jenq, Pan, & Theseira, 2015). We seek to find if there are any other unintended preferences in donors' charitable behavior.

This research aims to explore donation giving to charitable organizations in the online environment. The online international donors comprise a growing and influential share of the overall charitable markets; for example, KIVA facilitates the transfer of funds from charitable lenders in developed countries to microfinance recipients in less developed countries. When a suitable borrower or group of borrowers is identified, KIVA works with the microfinance institutions to create a loan profile on the KIVA internet platform. Online giving in particular has grown more rapidly than traditional forms of giving in recent years (Groyum & Flandez, 2013). Online giving often departs from traditional giving by allowing donors to give directly to a particular individual, group, or project instead of having their giving distributed by a non-profit organization or government. Many charitable organizations choose to focus on identifiable recipients under assumption that people donate more to an identified individual in need (Ein-Gar & Levontin, 2013). Thus, they can select a specific person to help. This means that the recipients' characteristics can influence the donors' decisions. Previous research has been based on experiments conducted on laboratory participants, consumer research panels, and actual data from institutions; however, their findings did not clarify how donors and their recipients' characteristics can be related to charity giving. Jenq, Pan, and Theseira (2015) examined how donor-perceived attractiveness, weight, skin color, and other characteristics affect charitable giving decisions. The growth of online directed giving matters when the exhibited preferences or biases of individual donors differ significantly from those of institutions and governments and when such preferences have an impact on social outcomes. Our research endeavors to solve the causes of exhibited individual donor preferences. The direct giving context on crowdfunding means that our study captures the determinants of funding

decisions from donors who are interested in making a specific impact with their gifts. We suggest that in certain circumstances donors' intention will be different when potential donors are socially close (distant) from the recipients in need.

2. Literature Review ad Hypothesis

2.1. Charitable Behavior and Construal Level Theory

Charitable giving is an essential element of today's way of life. Between Sixty% and Eighty% U.S. households donate to more than one million charitable organizations in the United States (Ein-Gar & Levontin, 2013). There are many studies on how to enhance consumers' participation in charitable giving. For example, Rabinovich, Morton, Postmes, and Verplanken (2009) mentioned that goal-related behavior was maximized when participants focused on an abstract goal with a specific mindset. Fajardo, Townsend, and Bolander (2018) insisted that donor-related appeals have a greater effect on donation choice, whereas organization-related appeals have a greater effect on the donation amount. MacDonnel and White (2015) adopted construal theory to demonstrate how donors consider money and time donation. For this research, we adopted construal level theory (CLT), which explains how people vary their interpretation levels of certain actions on a basis of their psychological distance (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). According to this theory, receivers' levels of interpretation are dependent on the psychological distance between the source and a target object, which affects the receiver's attitudes and decision-making toward the message. It has demonstrated that a psychologically distant mindset is associated with a more abstract level of interpretation (high construal level), whereas a psychologically near mindset is associated with a more concrete level of interpretation (low construal level) (Liberman & Trope, 1998). For our research, we adopted social distance theory in exploring the willingness of potential donors' charity giving. Individuals' perception of social distance can be driven by comparison of oneself to the other, by taking a first-person perspective versus a third-person perspective. Liberman and Trope (1998) revealed that socially distant events or objects are associated with greater psychological distance and prompt high levels of construal during information processing. Thus, we predicted that prompt responses and decisions would be made when there was a close match between psychological distance and level of interpretation. Some researchers have attempted to adopt CLT to study charity-giving behavior. Fujita et al. (2008) found that an appeal to help a specifically identified target was more

effective when the donation was temporally proximal (i.e., closer in time), whereas an appeal to help a more general target was effective when the donation was temporally distant (i.e., away in time). Hong and Lee (2010) demonstrated that people who construe information at lower, more concrete levels have a less favorable attitude toward a charitable appeal that evoked mixed emotions. Another study indicated that individuals were found to have stronger intentions to donate blood in the distant future rather than in the near future (Choi, Park, & Oh, 2012).

2.2. Concrete or Abstract Message and Donations

This study focused on social distances based on individuals' perceptions. It has been demonstrated that people construe out-group members as more abstract (Liviatan, Trope, & Liberman, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2003). Individuals can have different levels of expectations about charity activities, which influence the individuals' specific actions. Thus, we predicted that the greater the social distance of an individual from an event, the more distant and more abstract it would appear to him/her. Specifically, we compared a domestic organization versus a foreign one based on level of social distance (Liviatan et al., 2008), to elucidate whether people who intend to donate to foreign charity (i.e., who are socially distant) than those who intend to donate to domestic charity donation intended (i.e., who are socially near). Fujita et al. (2008) provide evidence that alignment of a construal domain with a concretely (vs. abstractly) framed message was particularly effective in getting support for positive intentions and behaviors. Macdonnell and White (2015) found that when the concrete (vs. abstract) consumer mindset was activated, a request for concrete resource yielded more generous charitable giving intentions and behaviors. We expected that charity seeking to help domestic people would elicit more favorable evaluations when framed by low construal levels, whereas charity seeking to help foreign people would elicit more favorable evaluations when framed with high construal levels. Thus, we formed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. When described as concrete versus abstract, domestic recipient will get more favorable donation intention than will those described as a foreign recipient.

It is noteworthy that this prediction extends past research. Prior research supports an "identifiable victim effect," which means that the portrayal of a specific victim has been demonstrated to increase donor intentions and behaviors (Kogut and Ritov, 2005; Loewenstein and Small, 2007). Therefore, more concrete description will be most effective in gaining donor support. This work, however,

reveals that the alignment of message description (concrete versus abstract) could result in different responses for different recipients.

2.3. CLT and Message Appeals

Message appeal is a means of attracting consumers' attention toward a certain brand's products or services by appealing to either their emotion or their reason (Moriarty, Mitchell, & Wells, 2012). Recent studies of CLT have been focused on the matching of various components, to determine which produce more effective results (Giacomantonio, De Dreu, Shalvi, Sligte, & Leder, 2010; White, MacDonnell, & Dahl, 2011). Thus, this study investigated the interaction between donors' construal levels and charity-giving message appeals (emotional vs. rational). Recent findings indicate that a vivid display of a single person in need increases donations, because such appeals are emotionally engaging and trigger empathy toward the victim (Loewenstein & Small, 2007). Choi, Rangan, and Singh (2016) mentioned that a negative emotional charity appeal tends to be effective because it evokes sympathy.

One of the most important consequences of being in a psychologically distant mindset is reduced affective concern (Williams, Stein, & Galguera, 2014); this implies that consumers exhibit weaker emotional responses to the focal stimuli as their psychological distance increases. Accordingly, we proposed that when a charity organization intend for addressing foreign countries hunger (vs. domestic hunger), consumers will be more likely to process the information when the message's appeal is rational than when it is emotional. Therefore, the message regarding charity-giving activities is likely to derive more favorable responses from consumers when the activities that are likely to address global hunger (vs. domestic hunger) are described using rational (vs. emotional) appeal. Thus, we formed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. When the social distance is framed in the socially close (vs. distant), emotional message appeals for charity seeking will prompt more favorable charity-giving intention than will rational message appeals for charity seeking.

3. Study 1

3.1. Procedure

In Study 1, we investigated whether charity asking messages for domestic people, compared to those for foreign people, prompt more favorable evaluations when framed with low (vs. high) construal levels (Hypothesis 1).

Therefore, we compared Korean responses to charity asking messages for Korean humanitarian organizations and Yemen humanitarian organizations. The manipulation of construal levels was performed using concrete (low-construal) or abstract (high-construal) message descriptions (Tsai & McGill, 2011). The possible confounding effects of prior attitude toward donation and involvement were also examined.

We used a 2 (social distance: Korea (near) vs. Yemen (distant)) × 2 (message description: concrete vs. abstract) between-subject study design, wherein participants were randomly assigned to one of the four groups. Participants were One hundred twenty Korean adults (Sixty-eight women and Fifty-two men; Mage = 21.32 years, SD = 3.22), who were undergraduate students in Seoul.

In Study 1, participants were asked to log on to the online experimental site SurveyMonkey and read the brief cover story regarding a fictitious non-profit organization's Help Hunger) story. Participants got $5 as a token of gratitude for test participation. The cover story contained manipulations of social distance and message description. Regarding the manipulation of social distance, the recipients were introduced as Korean (near) or Yemen (distant). Regarding the manipulation of message description, the donation target was described as either "A boy named Cabin: 9 years old but acts like a grown-up. Your donation will be used to serve 500 cal breakfast at the school for 5 days in a week so kid do not stay in school hungry" (concrete) or "Children: 2 million children who are so acutely malnourished. Your donation will be used to address hunger so kids do not feel hungry" (abstract). To ensure that the sentences used in the message construal differed significantly on concreteness (vs. abstraction), a pretest was conducted on the message. Participants had to read construal manipulation of the two messages' and then evaluate how concrete or abstract each message was. After reading the cover story, participants responded to a series of items concerning two dependent measures, the manipulation check, and two control variables (prior attitude toward the cause and cause involvement), as well as demographic information.

3.2. Measurement Instruments

Donation intention and attitude toward a recipient w as assessed on three five-point rating scales. The manip ulations of social distance were checked using a Likert scale. Message description was also checked using two seven-point Likert scales(Appendix 1). Cause involveme nt and prior attitude toward the cause were finally asses sed to serve as control variables. We used SPSS version 23 to performed ANCOVA and logit analyses of the d ata.

3.3. Result

Results of a 2 (social distance) × 2 (message description) ANCOVA of the manipulation check for social distance, with cause involvement and prior attitude toward the cause as covariates, revealed that the cover story regarding donation for a Korean target was perceived as having a closer social distance than that of the story discussing a Yemen donation target (MKorea = 3.21, MYemen = 1.67; F(1, 104) = 7.27, p < .01, η2 = .21; all other effects, Fs < 1.0, ps > .30). Analogous ANCOVAs of message description (α = .84) also supported the effectiveness of the manipulation (Mconcrete = 4.31, Mabstract = 2.47; F(1, 104) = 5.32, p < .01, η2 = .02; all other effects, Fs < 1.0, ps > .27). Additionally, the 2 (social distance) × 2 (message description) ANCOVA of age and occupation indicated no interaction effects, eliminating the possibility of treatment effects, F < 1.95, p > .20; Wald χ2s < 1.0, ps > .40.
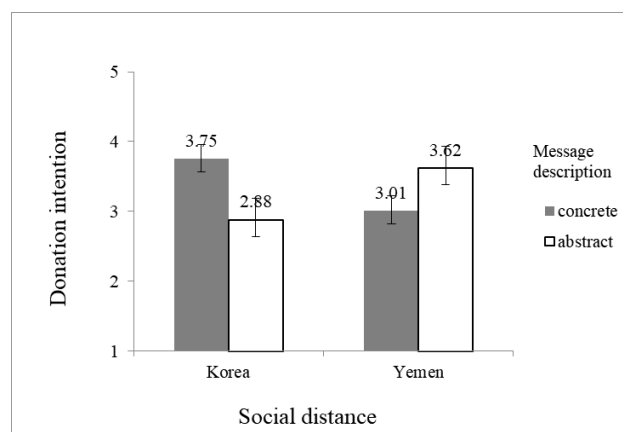

Figure 1: Donation Intention as a Function of Social Distance and Message Description

We conducted a 2 (social distance) × 2 (message description) ANCOVA of donation intention (α = .85), treating cause involvement and prior attitude toward the cause as covariates. As predicted, this yielded a significant interaction between social distance and message description (F(1, 104) = 13.95, p < .01, η2 = .11). Furthermore, planned contrast tests revealed that participants exposed to a story about a Korean recipient target reported significantly higher donation intentions when the story was described concretely than when it was described abstractly (Mconcrete = 3.75, Mabstract = 2.88; F(1, 104) = 19.16, p < .01, η2 = .17), whereas those exposed to a story about a foreign recipient target reported the opposite (Mconcrete = 3.01, Mabstract = 3.62; F(1, 104) = 8.58, p < .01, η2 = .08) (see Figure 2). Again, no other effects were significant, including the main effects of

social distance and message description (Fs < 2.50, ps > .10).

3.4. Discussion

Our findings in Study 1 confirm that when exposed to concrete versus abstract donation messages, Korean consumers respond more favorably to messages for a Korean recipient target than to those for a Yemen recipient target, thus supporting Hypothesis 1. This result implies that the congruence between social distance and message description serves to enhance consumers' motivation for charity. Thus, we established a clear relationship between social distance and message description.

4. Study 2

4.1. Procedure

In study 2, we tested whether emotional message appeals prompt a more favorable response than rational messages when framed in a socially close. Participants were recruited through SurveyMonkey to take part in a 2 (message appeal: emotional vs. rational) × 2 (social distance: Korea (close) vs. Yemen (distant)) factorial between-subjects experiment. We recruited people through a Korean research company. Participants got $5 mobile coupon as a token of gratitude. The sample comprised One hundred twenty Korean adults (73 women and 49 men; Mage = 27.48 years, SD = 5.22), of whom 44 were undergraduate students, 25 were graduate students, and 53 were nonstudent adults. University students could be an appropriate sample group because we needed to target people who were interested in social marketing, and millennials are typically interested in cause-related marketing.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions and asked to read the cover story of a fictitious KUVA microfinancing company, KUVA, which facilitates the transfer of funds from charitable lenders in Korea to microfinance recipients in people all over the world. A description of this fictitious organization and its activities appeared in the introduction of the questionnaire. The cover story contained manipulations of message appeals (emotional vs. rational) and social distance (close vs. distant). To manipulate message appeals, the challenges confronting the recipients were described either sentimentally (emotional) or in a neutral tone (rational). For the neutral tone, we tried to use statistics as evidence. Rational appeals contain the copy "Save the children. Over Twenty- million Yemen children struggle with hunger. Every dollar you give can help provide seven meals for

these hungry children. Don't you want to help in the fight against hunger?" For the emotional tone, we tried to use emotional words. "Save the Yemen children. Just look into the eyes of the children. They are suffering from malnutrition and have a high mortality rate. But they do not have to fight it alone. Don't you want to help them smile again?". We copied these words from previous research (Kim, 2016). To manipulate social distance, the recipients were described as suffering from hunger in Yemen (distant) or in Korea (close). After reading the cover story, participants then rated a series of items regarding charity-giving intention, manipulation checks, and involvement with charity giving, as well as demographic information.

4.2. Measurement Instruments

Like in Study 1, the manipulation of message appeals (emotional vs. rational) was checked with a single five-point scale item. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS version Twenty-three by applying analyses of covariance (ANCOVA).

4.3. Result

Results of a 2 (message appeal: emotional vs. rational) × 2 (social distance: close vs. distant) ANCOVA, with cause involvement as a covariate, revealed that the message used in the emotional condition was perceived as more emotional than the message used in the rational condition (Memotional = 3.56, Mrational = 2.41; $F(1, 104)$ = 14.11, $p < .01$, $\eta2 = .16$; all other effects: Fs < 1.0, ps > .30). An analogous ANCOVA also indicated that socially close framing aligned more closely with low (vs. high) social distance than did socially distant framing (Mclose = 1.80, Mdistant = 3.71; $F(1, 104) = 16.53$, $p < .01$, $\eta2 = .18$; all other effects: Fs < 0.15, ps > .70). Separate ANOVAs of gender, age, and occupation then indicated no significant interaction effects, eliminating the possibility of treatment effects (Fs < 1.20, ps > .25; Wald $\chi2$s < 1.00, ps > .25).

Results of a 2 (message appeal) × 2 (social distance) ANCOVA run on donation intention ($\alpha = .86$), with cause involvement as a covariate, revealed a significant main effect of social distance ($F(1, 104) = 16.22$, $p < .01$, $\eta2 = .17$), indicating that socially close framing prompted more favorable attitudes than socially distant framing did (Mclose = 3.56, Mdistant = 3.10). This effect was then qualified by a significant interaction between message appeal and psychological distance ($F(1, 104) = 5.43$, $p < .05$, $\eta2 = .07$). Simple contrast analysis indicated that the emotional message appeal prompted more favorable donation intention when framed in the close (vs. distant) future (Mclose = 3.71, Mdistant = 3.03; $F(1, 104) = 21.61$, $p < .05$, $\eta2 = .15$). However, the rational message appeal

did not vary as a function of social distance (Mclose = 3.38, Mdistant = 3.12; F(1, 104) = 2.35, p > .10, η2 = .05) (see Figure 1). No other effects were significant (Fs < 1.0, ps > .37).
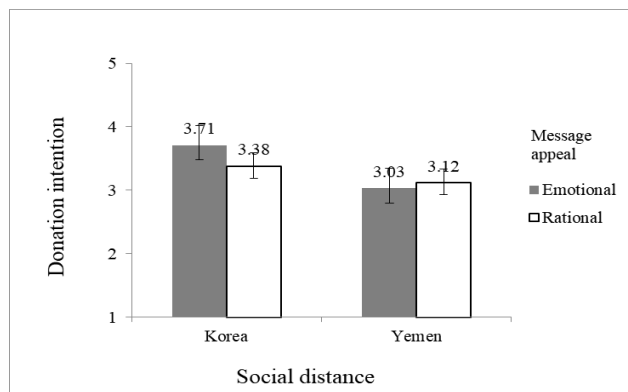

Figure 2 : Donation Intention as a Function of Social Distance and Message Appeal

4.4. Discussion

Hypothesis 2. Social distance, as framed in an emotional appeal for charity-seeking, prompts more favorable charity-giving intention. Hypothesis 2 was partially supported by the result; however, some alternative explanations remain. First, donors' prior attitudes toward a cause may have confounded the observed interaction, such that, when exposed to emotional message appeals, participants who had positive attitudes toward donation to solve the hunger problems responded more favorably to the stimulus message, regardless of their construal levels (Erb, Bohner, Rank, & Einwiller, 2002). Moreover, low donation involvement may have increased the participants' sensitivity to the manipulation of construal levels when message appeals were matched with psychological distance (i.e., emotional–Korean, rational–Yemen) because uninvolved audiences are inclined to attend more selectively to matched (vs. mismatched) information Hence, this result indicates that an emotional appeal can be more effective in a socially close relationship than in a socially distant one, but it is difficult to say that a rational appeal influences audiences' donation intention according to social distance.

5. General Discussion

5.1. Findings

Across two studies, we found evidence for our proposition that psychological distance of the construal level can affect the behavioral processes that cause responses of consumers to charity intention. According to the result of Study 1, for the domestic recipients, donation messages situated in the near, compared to the distant, future induced more favorable reactions from potential donors. Moreover, in Study 2, emotional (vs. rational) message appeals generated more positive donation intentions when they were framed in the socially close situation. We can think that marketers need to use different message approaches to different potential donors based on different recipients. In addition, this result also matches that of previous research, that willingness to donate to a specific person in need is higher when donors are temporally or socially close to the donation target (Ein-Gar & Levontin, 2013). The results obtained in the studies indicated that construal level can be used to explain how consumers make decisions of donation. These results confirm that congruence between social distance and message description can be more persuasive in influencing donors to be willing to donate to a specific donation target.

The ability to increase donations without highlighting a specific person is also important to charitable organizations. With this study, we can understand the condition under which a more abstractly framed cause can be effective at getting financial contributions. This research contributes that these differing consumer construals have important implications for how marketing communication might best gain charitable support. This research uncovered matching effects in charitable giving based on the construal level. It demonstrates that aligning the source with the construal level of the appeal can lead to positive charitable intentions and behaviors.

There are examples when an organization might prefer to frame its message as abstract (e.g., addressing the general issue of poverty) rather than concrete (e.g., provide meals to starved kids) when calling for monetary donation. This research indicates that if an organization attempts to help kids from foreign countries kids who suffer from poverty, it would be better to use an abstract framed message to gain more support.

5.2. Implications

The results of this research make a few key contributions. The first clear implication is that charity retail organizations should use the right communication method beyond traditional charity shops. We should use effective mixed online and offline communication. Retailers should align the target with the construal level communicated in the delivering message. If the recipients are foreign people, then positioning the cause more abstract terms is possible to be more effective than framing the message in concrete terms. Conversely, for the domestic

people, is advisable for the marketer to use the message in concrete terms (as opposed to abstract terms). Few studies tested the interaction effect of psychological distance and donation recipients. Kogut and Ritov (2007) demonstrated that when donors' psychological distance is large, donors exhibit no preference in terms of money donations, Ein-gar and Kevontin (2013) demonstrated that there is a basic difference between donating to an abstract entity and to a group of victims.

5.3. Limitation

Some questions raised in the current research remain to be addressed in future work. First, contrary to the results obtained in previous research on CLT, we did not do research on whether other construal levels (temporal distance, spatial distance, and hypotheticality) affect peoples' intention. We followed the method used by Williams et al. (2014), but future researchers could investigate the link between donation intention and other construal theory factors. Second, researchers could further examine whether psychological distances have a distinct effect on donation communication, in relation to the effect of word of mouth. Last, we focused on a psychological distance of global hunger and domestic hunger, but people can feel different distances even among recipients from different domestic backgrounds. We can analyze distance in detail. Future researchers may conduct comparisons of diverse potential donation groups or the targets of donation activities.

6. Conclusions

This research explores an important but overlooked aspect in the field of differences for charitable giving and indicates conditions that can yield more donations for each organization in need. Instead, of focusing on donations to a victim versus to an entity, this research focuses on donation to a global victim/entity and a domestic victim/entity.

In conclusion, this research suggests that marketers who design a donation appeal should consider their donation message's appeal and type by attempting to activate the potential donors' corresponding psychological mindset to match donation appeal.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1: Measurements of Variables

Variables	Scale items
Message appeal (emotional/rational) (Willliams & Galguera, 2014)	The above story appeals (1 = "primarily rationally," 5 = "primarily emotionally") to me.
Message concreteness (Chandran, Sucharita & Geeta Menon, 2004)	Ability to generate a mental picture of the information contained in the persuasive message Thoughts on the article were hazy and indistinct(reverse coded) (1 = "Strongly disagree", 7 = "Strongly agree")
Social distance (Liberman & Förster, 2009)	How close do you feel toward the above people who need help? (1 = "not very close," 5 = "very close")
Cause involvement (Diamond & Gooding-Williams 2009; Smith, Menon, & Sivakumar, 2005)	Usually, how concerned are you about helping the people who need? (1 = "not concerned at all," 5 = "very concerned")