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THE IMPACT OF BRAND COOLNESS ON COMPASSIONATE RESPONSES IN CHARITY SHOCK ADVERTISING

Brito, B., & Loureiro, S. M. C. (2025). The impact of brand coolness on compassionate responses in charity shock advertising. In Demetris Vrontis, Yaakov Weber, & Evangelos Tsoukatos (Eds.), *Conference book proceedings of **18th Annual Conference** of the EuroMed Academy of Business: Exploring New Horizons in Business and Management* (pp. 982-985). Porto, Portugal: EuroMed Press. September 10–12, 2025.

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Track N.º 30: Marketing

Extended abstract

Social marketing is fundamental for nonprofits to promote their causes and generate charitable donations and volunteering (Kemp, 2025). Social media has become a central pillar for not-for-profit organizations to expand their supporter base and cultivate stronger consumer-brand relationships through constant communication (Werke and Bogale, 2023). Charities tend to focus their emotional-based campaigns on negative stimuli, especially through shock advertising (Cockrill and Parsonage, 2016); yet the plausibility of such campaigns has been questioned, because they might risk the charities' reputation and market positioning (Allred and Amos,

2018). Thereafter, employing positive stimuli in advertising has garnered attention among marketers (Kemp, 2025), particularly with the emotion of compassion as a potential catalyst for philanthropy (Septianto and Tjiptono, 2019). However, the phenomenon of compassion fatigue may be contributing to the ineffectiveness of these social media advertisements (Cockrill and Parsonage, 2016). Thus, it is essential to investigate how charity shock advertising influences the emotion of compassion in two distinct social contexts: human cost of war and animal welfare; as well as comprehending how the brand behind the advertising affects these constructs, by examining the impact of brand coolness in charity shock advertising and compassion.

Initially, compassion is an altruistic emotion that etymologically combines feelings of empathy and action, by motivating one to alleviate others' suffering (Kim and Kim, 2024). In the context of human-cost-of-war charities, as the media is often depicting children as the faces of need (Fisher & Ma, 2014), the content is highly shared on social media, which in turn may decrease compassionate responses. In contrast, animal welfare charities have not been overexposed to social media users, and Lim *et al.* (2019) discovered that sad imagery of animals leads to positive charitable actions. So, it is postulated that shocking human-cost-of-war campaigns negatively impact compassion (H1), while shocking animal welfare campaigns positively affect compassion (H2).

Furthermore, socially conscious brands often fall within the spectrum of coolness, an emotional and mentally driven brand assessment (Loureiro *et al.*, 2023). Indeed, one of the characteristics of the coolness concept within the social marketing scope is its pro-social nature, as promoting social change deviates from socio-cultural norms, hence being cool in nature (Mohiuddin *et al.*, 2016). While there are no studies exploring other-focused (altruistic) nonprofits being considered cool, hedonic brands were greatly impacted by brand coolness compared to utilitarian firms (Loureiro *et al.*, 2023). Hence, altruist charities may be considered cool due to their hedonic and pro-social status, suggesting that brand coolness may positively influence charity shock advertising (H3) and compassion (H4).

Methodology

A structured questionnaire was created to test the hypothesis. Prior to publishing the survey, a pretest with 64 participants was conducted to choose the adequate stimuli. The images were partially manipulated by placing a different branding on the original Instagram charity posts. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four charities: two reputable charities, UNICEF and ASPCA, representing the human-cost-of-war and animal welfare contexts, respectively, and two fictional counterparts. The survey was distributed on Prolific, and it was targeted at citizens of the United States of America who were social media users and were aged between 18 and 59.

Respondents were informed that their participation was voluntary and anonymous, and warned that the stimuli might evoke discomfort.

A final valid sample of 390 participants was considered for analysis. The sample was balanced in terms of age, with 71 people (18.2%) between 18 and 28 years old, 111 participants (28.5%) between 29 and 37, and 130 respondents (33.3%) were in the 38 to 49 age group. The remaining 78 participants (20%) were aged between 50 and 59. Also, regarding social media usage, more than 88% of participants mentioned being active on social media more than once a day.

Results and Implications

The analysis was divided between the two social contexts to test the hypothesis and was evaluated through SmartPLS4. Considering the bootstrapping results, the relationship between charity shock advertising and compassion was supported for the animal welfare category (H2), in opposition to the human-cost-of-war context, which was not statistically supported (H1). Brand coolness had a significant impact on charity shock advertising (H3) and compassion (H4) in both social contexts.

Firstly, the results showcase the rising trend of compassion fatigue for human-cost-of-war charities, specifically those focused on children (H1). While animal welfare charities can benefit from compassionate responses to negative stimuli on social media to appeal to donors (H2), human-cost-of-war nonprofits should be aware of the tendency of social media users to lack of compassion, due to the constant exposure to children as the face of need. Secondly, the results substantiate the role of brand coolness in contributing positively to charity shock advertising (H3) and to compassionate responses (H4) in altruistic charities. Usefulness and authenticity, characteristics of niche cool brands, appear to be the most influential dimensions for nonprofits, implying that social marketers can use these attributes to cater to social media users.

Lastly, managers and social marketers should tailor their communication strategies on social media to guarantee promotional success and positive brand associations, as the effectiveness of shock advertising is unpredictable and highly dependent on the social context. When users have a positive mental and emotional representation of a charity, the likelihood of enjoying the advertising and feel compassionate toward the victims is higher, as brand coolness positively impacted these constructs. Additionally, in contrast with human-cost-of-war charities which are advised against using shocking appeals, animal welfare charities may use them in a proportionate manner, with the intention of not overwhelming donors, to avoid compassion fatigue in this not-for-profit sector.

Further research could explore the impact of shock advertising on compassion in other social causes, as well as consider factors such as storytelling and color scheme of the social media

campaigns. Also, social marketeers should further understand the impacts of brand coolness in altruistic charities, as it appears to be a promising area for broaden managerial development.

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