

When Negative Appeals Beat Positive: How Emotional Appeals Drive NGO Engagement on Instagram

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Abstract

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) increasingly depend on Instagram to reach their audiences and often rely on emotional appeals (positive, negative, or neutral). Yet, it remains unclear whether such appeals effectively drive engagement in real-world contexts and how they operate within feeds that are themselves emotionally charged. Study 1 analyzed 1,084 Instagram posts from 123 NGOs to assess the effectiveness of positive, neutral, and negative appeals. Negative appeals consistently increased engagement (likes, comments), whereas positive and neutral appeals were less effective. Moreover, emotional appeals had limited influence on comment sentiment. Study 2 (in preparation) extends the analysis to contextual brand safety risks by testing how feed valence moderates the effects of emotional appeals. Together, the studies clarify when emotional appeals enhance or undermine NGO ad effectiveness in emotionally charged social media environments.

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