Responding to Emotions

1 Idea

A consequence of being human is that, whether conscious or not, emotions are inextricably linked to decision-making. Theoretical and empirical work in decision theory and psychological game theory has explored several channels through which emotions can impact an individual’s decision process. This large and growing body of research has focused almost exclusively on the emotions felt by the decision maker. In contrast, we seek to study how the emotional content of a message received by a decision maker impacts their choices and the degree to which differences can be attributed to emotional contagion.

Embedding requests with emotional content is common in practice. Charities tend to use collaborative messaging with undertones of sadness and pleading. Politicians often use a mix of collaborative and competitive messaging when campaigning or promoting policies, and incite action by delivering such messages with emotional tones, sometimes chosen strategically.

In 2008, CEO of Maple Leaf Foods Michael McCain issued an apology for health standard failures that lead to listeriosis outbreaks causing 23 deaths and approximately 4,000 illnesses. Despite this failure, customers remained loyal to Maple Leaf Foods, with credit often going to the sincerity of the apology and the personal accountability expressed therein. Would the same message delivered in a neutral or angry tone have had a similar impact?

2 Simple Example

Consider a donation campaign seeking to raise funds for a local public good. A public relations team produces a video requesting donations, freely choosing the tone of their communicator. Suppose they settle on ”we need your help” as the message. How do contributions differ when this is asked with anger, sadness, or indifference?

3 Research Questions

• How does the emotional content of a request impact action related to that request?

• Does the impact from the emotional delivery of a request depend on the nature of the request (competitive, collaborative, neutral)?

• Does the degree of emotional contagion matter, or only the requester’s emotion?

4 Motivation and Literature

Lots of literature. Motivation with respect to literature is the gap in looking at responding to emotions rather than emotional decision making.

5 Experimental Design

Our goal with this experiment is to study how the emotional content of a request affects donations. We design an experiment that separately identifies the effects of the emotional content of the request from the emotions of the decision maker. We do this by eliciting baseline behavior in a neutrally framed donation game and comparing it to emotionally framed donation levels. We control for the decision maker’s emotions using a facial recognition tool that measures emotional changes between the neutral frame and emotional frames. We quantify emotional contagion as the magnitude change from the neutral frame toward the emotion used in the emotional frame. Low contagion is evidence that the emotional content of the request itself causes changes in behavior, while high degrees of contagion are evidence that the emotional tone of the request induces a similar emotion, thereby driving actions through the decision makers own emotions. In other words, our design identifies changes in donation behavior, separating whether donations increase because of the requester’s emotions or the decision maker’s.

By using three types of requests (collaborative, competitive, combative(?) or neutral) and three emotional tones (happy(?), angry, sad, neutral), we are also able to identify whether appeals for donations respond differentially to different emotional tones and under different economic environments. For example, consider the following statements:

• (Competitive) Our community has been consistently underfunded, while other regions receive upgrades and expansions. Consider donating to our schools.

• (Collaborative) Investing in our community is a shared responsibility and provides the help our students need. Consider donating to our schools.

• (Neutral) Our community is requesting funds for projects. Consider donating to our schools.

Each of these three statements is to be read by each of the three different emotional tones for a 3 *×* 3 design.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Competitive | Collaborative | Neutral | Total |
| Angry | *x*1 | *x*2 | *x*3 | X |
| Sad | *y*1 | *y*2 | *y*3 | Y |
| Neutral | *z*1 | *z*2 | *z*3 | Z |
| Total | A | B | C | T |

Table 1: Total Donations by Treatment

6 Hypotheses

* Requests read with angry tone are better for competitive requests.
* Requests read with pleading tone are better for collaborative requests.
* Requests read with either emotional tone are better than neutral tone.
* Emotional contagion is significant and large.