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Summer 5-28-2023

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Recommended Citation

Shen, Xiaojin; Wu, Yi; and Wang, Xiaopan, "How does cover content matter for online medical crowdfunding? An emotion appeal perspective" (2023). *WHICEB 2023 Proceedings* . 14.
<https://aisel.aisnet.org/whiceb2023/14>

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How does cover content matter for online medical crowdfunding? An emotion appeal perspective

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1. INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Unaffordable out-of-pocket health expenditures has become one of the main causes of personal poverty^[1]. Medical crowdfunding, as a form of charitable crowdfunding, has been pioneering in alleviating such poverty problems^[1]. However, it is still challengeable for project creators of medical crowdfunding to gain the attention of donors on the information-overload network environment. On medical crowdfunding platforms, donors often first encounter the project cover content before entering the project details page. Prior research has found that cover content is critical for initial item selection^[2]. However, the research on crowdfunding have mainly focused on the information on the project details page, few scholars have paid attention to the information on project cover. For instance, previous research found that projects with emotional images and infectious text are more likely to attract potential supporters in the details page^[3-4], and the congruency effect of image emotion and text emotion is conducive to fundraising success in project details^[5].

Cover content includes an image and project title in online medical crowdfunding. Specifically, the cover image is usually an image of the patient in healthy or unhealthy status. The presence of beneficiary images has been demonstrated as an efficient way to induce donor's emotional responses and prosocial behavior^[6]. In this study, we use the image of the patient in healthy status to represent positive emotions, while the image of the patient in unhealthy status to represent negative emotions. In addition, the importance of stimulus congruity between verbal and visual information has been widely mentioned in prior advertising research^[7]. Considering donation and sharing behavior are both important in the context of online medical crowdfunding, this study explores the following research questions: 1) What are the impacts of the emotions of cover image on the donor's donation and sharing behavior? 2) What are the interaction effects of the emotions of cover image and project title on the donor's donation and sharing behavior?

2. THEORY AND RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Donation behavior is altruistic, and sharing behavior is egoistic. Drawing on emotion regulation models and the model of attention capture and transfer, we developed the research hypothesis.

Our dataset includes 1,350 projects from a representative medical crowdfunding platform in China. The projects were retrieved from November 2018 to March 2019, 303 projects' cover image with patients in healthy status among them. We use the number of donations (donorNum) and the number of shares (shareNum) as dependent variables. Three independent variables were considered in our research model. Image category (*cover_isHealth*), when the image of the patient in healthy status was coded as 1, otherwise 0. The positive emotional intensity of the title (*title_posemo*) and the negative emotional intensity of the title (*title_negemo*) by the analysis of the LIWC. We considered a range of control variables that may affect supporter behavior. All continuous variables were operationalized by the logarithm of their values plus one in order to avoid zeros, except for the emotional intensity and the number of images. We conducted linear regressions to test the hypotheses.

3. RESULTS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

This study observed some valuable and interesting findings: (1) Cover image with positive emotions (i.e., the patient in healthy status) leads to a high level of support behaviors (i.e., donation and sharing behavior) in medical crowdfunding

compared with the cover image with negative emotions (i.e., the patient in unhealthy status). Furthermore, the positive impact of positive sentiment resided in image rather than text, as positive title did not influence supporters' behavior. (2) There is an interaction effect between the cover image and a negative project title, whereas a positive title did not. A plausible explanation is the primacy effect^[8]. If a person resists negative emotions, when the first exposure is negative image or text, whether the other part of the cover is positive or not will not change the first impression. Besides, the negative impression is hard to change, but it will deepen, so the emotion enhancement plays a role in the cover content. Moreover, it indicates that the emotion regulation model may not act between cover content, but with other content unrelated to the project.

4. CONTRIBUTIONS

This study examines the effect of emotions in cover content on donation and sharing behaviors in medical crowdfunding. Drawing on emotion regulation models and the model of attention capture and transfer, this study enriches the understanding of emotions in cover content of medical crowdfunding. In addition, this study enhances the medical crowdfunding literature by demonstrating how emotions in cover content influences supporter behavioral decisions. Past research has shown that charity crowdfunding projects should resonate with the messages of sadness^[6], but our research found that positive content is more available for project cover content in medical crowdfunding. To our knowledge, this study is one of the first to examine the effect of emotions in cover image on medical crowdfunding fundraising outcomes. Our study provides important theoretical and practical implications for online crowdfunding.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors appreciate the constructive comments and suggestions provided to us by the review team. The authors also wish to acknowledge the National Natural Science Foundation of China (72172103, 72231004) for financial support. Xiaopan Wang is the corresponding author of this work.

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