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## Experiments on the effectiveness of marketing communications tactics to support 'unappealing' animals

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# Experiments on the effectiveness of marketing communications tactics to support ‘unappealing’ animals

## Abstract:

This study was designed for investigating how effective different marketing communications tactics are at influencing donations to animal conservation campaigns featuring ‘unappealing’ (non-flagship) species. Experiments were executed to evaluate the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements, anthropomorphism, message framing, and personal incentives in fictitious animal conservation adverts. Results showed that urgent message tone was not successful at gaining support for non-flagship campaigns but combining anthropomorphism with positive message did increase support for nonflagship causes. Celebrity endorsements were shown to be successful at influencing willingness to donate, provided that the celebrity is highly credible in the world of animal conservation. Offering personal incentives to influence donations achieved its purpose when used in campaigns featuring ‘popular’ animals, but it was not a successful marketing tactic when used to promote ‘undesirable’ animals. Interestingly, the results revealed that participants were strongly influenced to donate to a non-flagship campaign when they believed that it would result in wider environmental benefits that would also be beneficial to humans. Overall, a participant’s prior knowledge or preference for a specific species had a great influence over donation choice. However, this study has revealed that through effective marketing participants can be swayed to support ‘undesirable’ animals instead of typically ‘preferred’ species.

*Keywords: endorsement, anthropomorphism, rewarding*

*Track: Public Sector and Non-profit Marketing*

## 1. Introduction of Paper

Various NPOs have their primary objectives of sustaining financial aids to achieve their non-profit objectives such as supporting vulnerable community or saving endangered animals via commercial techniques. Raising public donations is a challenge for a number of reasons. The charity sector is fiercely competitive: in the UK alone, there is an estimated 356 wildlife conservation charities (CharityChoice, 2018). However, influencing donation behaviour is not an easy task, so conservationists need to think carefully about what approaches they should take in their advertising campaigns to achieve maximum conversions and engagement (Qirko, 2017).

The aim of this study is to gain an insight into what marketing communications tactics are most effective at influencing participants to donate to animal conservation campaigns featuring ‘unappealing’ species. This paper assembles three typical factors ranging from content, marketing communication, to customer relationship management strategies, to find out the best match between the testable set of variables for marketing actions. In particular, some actional variables inclusive of anthropomorphised operation of the animal donation campaign, types of endorsers, messaging tones and customer incentives, are intensively discussed and tested on different types of animal (flagship vs non-flagship species) with a control of participant’s preference of the animal. This study has helped to gain some useful insights into which marketing tactics are the most successful at influencing donation behaviour, especially for nonflagship campaigns.

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1 Animal Typicality in Campaign*

#### 2.1.1 Flagship vs non-flagship species

One of the most effective approaches used by animal conservation organisations to influence public support, and ultimately prompt donations, is to feature ‘flagship species’ in marketing campaigns (Colléony et al. 2017). The term ‘flagship species’ refers to charismatic, medium to big-bodied mammals that are well-known and well liked across the globe (Curtin and Papworth 2018). This includes visually appealing species, such as polar bears, tigers and pandas (Veríssimo et al. 2017). Many of the world’s most endangered animals are not considered ‘charismatic’ and these non-flagship species are often neglected by donors (Curtin and Papworth 2018). These species include reptiles, amphibians, insects and other animals that are not aesthetically pleasing or have negative connotations in certain cultures and societies, such as bats and sharks (Curtin and Papworth 2018). Organisations looking to preserve non-flagship animals therefore need to consider alternative marketing tactics to influence public support.

Verissimo *et al* (Veríssimo et al. 2017) studied whether donors on the WWF US website and the Zoological Society of London's EDGE of Existence (EDGE) website were influenced to donate to campaigns based on the ‘appeal’ of certain species (including how popular, big-bodied, or stereotypically ‘cute’ they were) or whether they were influenced by promotional marketing tactics. The WWF website features mainly flagship species, so it was hardly

surprising that donors opted for appealing animals, regardless of what promotional tactics were used in the campaigns. The EDGE website, on the other hand, features a wide variety of flagship and non-flagship species. This is because EDGE focuses on promoting the most endangered animals in the world, regardless of whether or not they are considered ‘appealing’. It’s found that donors gave almost as much to well-marketed campaigns (featuring unappealing species) as they did to campaigns featuring flagship species (Verissimo et al. 2017). These results show that through effective marketing, it is possible to influence the public to give to less popular species.

### 2.1.2 Endangered status of animal

Colléony *et al* carried out a study on animal adoption schemes run by a zoo’s conservation programme (Colléony *et al.* 2017). The study looked at whether people would be more inclined to adopt charismatic animals than those with a higher endangered status. Participants were able to choose how much money they would like to donate. It’s found that the majority of donors did not chose to preserve animals with a higher endangered status. In fact, endangered status had very little effect on a participant’s donation decisions. Based on previous research, it is unsurprising that species preference for flagship animals was the key driver of donation choice. However, some researchers have found that donation choice can be influenced by the endangered status of animals. Researchers also studied donor behaviour in online conservation campaigns and found that willingness to donate to certain causes was positively influenced by the endangered status of the animal featured (Tisdell 2006).

## 2.2 Animal Conservation Communication Techniques

According to Merchant et al (Merchant, Ford and Sargeant 2010), charitable organisations frequently use storytelling in their marketing communications to evoke a mixture of negative and positive emotions. For example, a headline could state that an animal is in trouble, which prompts a negative emotional response, including anger or sadness. This is then followed by information about how members of the public can help to make a difference, which prompts a positive emotional response. Storytelling is an effective way for brands to engage the public because it conveys information in an interesting way. It’s therefore advised that NPOs adopt storytelling in their marketing communications because it gives members of the public an opportunity to become actively involved in the story and help create a ‘happy ending’ through their donation (Merchant et al. 2010).

### 2.2.1 Altruism and Empathy

Pure altruism can be described as somebody giving to others at their own expense, without gaining any personal benefit from doing so (Echazu and Nocetti 2015). The general consensus amongst scientists and psychologists is that true altruism does not exist (Golman 2016). From an evolutionary perspective, it would not make sense for an individual to give to others at a personal cost to themselves, unless those who are benefitting from it are close relatives or kin. However, some researchers believe that charitable giving can be explained by altruism to a certain extent (Echazu and Nocetti 2015). For example, feelings of empathy may prompt an individual to give to charity, and the satisfactory feeling or ‘warm glow’ an individual may experience after giving could act as a motivation (Verhaert and Van den Poel 2011). As previously discussed, individuals may experience negative mood states, such as sadness, after seeing charitable appeals (Merchant et al. 2010). In this case, giving to a cause enables an individual to overcome those negative feelings and regain a positive mood set. Therefore, the donor is still personally benefitting, on an emotional level, by donating to a cause. If a person feels personally connected to a cause and has a strong desire to make social or environmental changes, or even feels obligated to from a moral standpoint, this desire can lead them to perform seemingly altruistic acts (Echazu and Nocetti 2015).

Doncaster et al (Doncaster, Jackson and Watson 2013) goes one step further and suggests that ‘parasitic acts’ can drive donation behaviour, rather than any form of altruism. This refers to situations where the beneficiary ‘forces’ the donor into behaving altruistically by giving to an NPO. In other words, charitable organisations can manipulate donors into giving when they may not have done so otherwise. This brings the evolutionary theory of altruism into question by looking at who is ultimately driving the act of charitable giving – the donor or the organisation for manipulating the donor’s actions.

Echazu and Nocetti (Echazu and Nocetti 2015) suggest that people are more likely to donate to a charitable cause if there are a large number of beneficiaries, especially if the personal cost of helping is small. This theory is known as ‘effective altruism’ and according to Berman et al (2018), it predicts that individuals “apply expected value maximization” when deciding where to donate money. However, there is no real evidence to support this claim. In fact, Berman et al (2018) recently did a study that revealed the opposite to be true. After presenting participants with a number of charitable causes and asking which they would rather donate to, the majority of participants in Berman’s study did not choose causes with large numbers of

beneficiaries. Instead, the majority of participants chose causes that they had a personal preference for (Berman et al, 2018).

### 2.2.2 Anthropomorphism

Qirko (Qirko 2017) suggested that people are more likely to want to preserve animals that are similar to humans, such as other primate species. This goes back to the evolutionary theory of altruism, stating that one would be more likely to give at a personal cost to themselves if it meant helping their own kin (Qirko 2017). Even though Qirko's theory that people would rather conserve primates is not backed up by research, it is true that anthropomorphism is a popular and affective marketing tactic in animal conservation campaigns (Wright et al. 2015).

Another way that conservationists incorporate anthropomorphism into their marketing campaigns is to give animals 'cute' or human-like names (Wright et al. 2015). Scott and Parsons (2014) carried out an experiment to find out whether the name of an animal, featured in a fictitious campaign, had an effect on participants' willingness to donate. This indicates that giving unpopular species appealing names in marketing campaigns could increase public support and help to raise funds (Wright et al. 2015).

### 2.3 *Content Management and Message Framing*

Visual content has become increasingly popular over the years, prompting an increase in the use of image-based social media platforms, such as Instagram and Snapchat (Goransson and Fagerholm 2018). Other studies have also highlighted the importance of 'message framing' or 'tone of message' in animal conservation adverts, and what affect this has on attitudes and donation behaviour. For example, Weinstein et al (Weinstein et al. 2015) found that the tone of message used in conservation campaigns can positively or negatively affect public support. Their research carried out an experiment on the effectiveness of 'threatening', 'connecting' and 'neutral' messages when it comes to encouraging donation behaviour. Participants viewed identical conservation videos, but each contained either a threatening, connecting or neutral message. Threatening a similar experiment, Brennan and Binney (Brennan and Binney 2010), found that adverts using fear appeal in an attempt to persuade participants to donate to a cause or voluntarily comply with certain projects, resulted in negative attitudes towards the campaign. Their results found that after viewing social marketing campaigns with negative message framing, participants on low incomes in particular were unwilling to support the cause. According to Thaler and Helmig's research, social framing is most effective when

messages focus on individual benefits. However, they did also observe an increase in participants' willingness to donate amongst those who viewed campaigns that advertised wider social or environmental benefits. This revealed that participants were willing to donate to campaigns that offered both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits.

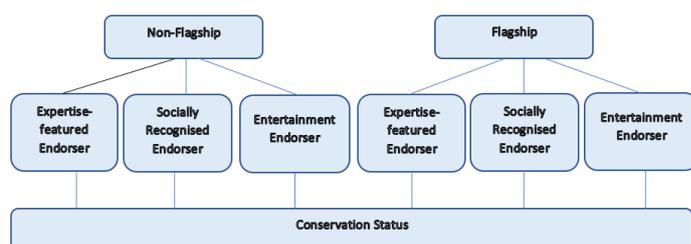
### 3. Experiments

Three controlled experiments were carried out using a causal experimental approach. By looking at overall percentages of participants who selected certain campaigns, direct comparisons could be made between groups. In each experiment, participants were presented with one pair of adverts at random and were required to select which campaign they would rather donate to, based on the content of the adverts. By only viewing only one pair of images each, participants were not exposed to any reoccurring themes, controls or patterns between different sets of images, reducing the chance of bias and increasing reliability.

#### 3.1 Study 1 - Celebrity Endorsement and Advert Choice

The aim of the experiment is to find out whether the presence of a celebrity is enough to persuade participants to choose the non-flagship (less popular) species. This also takes the credibility of each celebrity into consideration. Hence the celebrities only feature in non-flagship campaigns. Participants were presented with one pair of images out of a possible three pairs. Each pair contained three experimental groups (with a specific type of celebrity endorsement presented for a non-flagship animal) and three control groups (with a specific type of celebrity endorsement presented for a flagship animal). The three celebrities featured in these adverts have a different level of credibility when it comes to their involvement in animal conservation: high (based on animal specialised expertise), medium (based on social influence of philanthropy) and low (based on entertainment recognition).

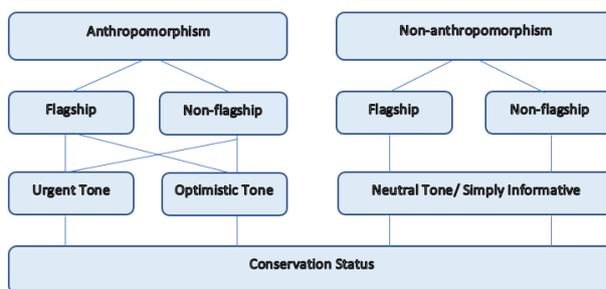
Figure 1. Description of Study 1



### 3.2 Study 2 - Anthropomorphism and Advert Choice

In this experiment, participants were presented with one pair of images randomised from a set of combination of features as indicated in Figure 2. Each pair contained an experimental group (an advert that anthropomorphised the animal) and a control group (an advert that did not anthropomorphise the animal). The experimental groups in category 1 and 2 feature a flagship species and the other groups 3 and 4 feature a non-flagship species. The experimental groups have not only been manipulated and controlled for anthropomorphised names but also includes a specific ‘tone’, as seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Description of Study 2



### 3.3 Study 3 - Personal Incentives and Advert Choice

Participants were presented with one of two pairs of images. Both pairs contained an experimental group (an advert featuring a personal ‘incentive’) and a control group (an advert with no personal incentive). The experimental group in category 1 features a flagship species. The experimental group in category 2 features a non-flagship species. Ultimately, it considers what intrinsic or extrinsic value is associated with donating from an individual’s perspective. It looks at whether offering incentives is enough to persuade participants to choose the non-flagship (least popular) species.

Figure 3. Description of Study 3



## 7. Findings

### 7.1 Preference on animal

When asked why they chose to donate to a certain campaign, participants referred to marketing tactics as one of the top three reasons for advert choice overall, regardless of whether they opted for a flagship or non-flagship campaign. However, species preference was the main reason for advert choice overall. A majority of participants indicated that they preferred animals that were featured in flagship campaigns. Based on previous findings, this was the expected outcome. Alongside with it, there were other popular reasons for donating to marketing communications campaigns, including endangered status and familiarity with the animal that was featured.

### *7.2 Endangered status*

Endangered status did not have a significant effect on advert choice overall. This supports previous research by Colléony *et al* (2016), who found that people were more likely to be influenced by animal preference than endangered status. However, Colléony *et al* (2016) found that endangered status had little to no influence on donation behaviour. In contrast, this study found that endangered status did have an influence on donation decisions in certain cases. For example, the majority of participants who viewed celebrity endorsement campaigns featuring celebrities with high credibility indicated that the endangered status of the animal is what influenced their decision. Between 70-75% of participants in the high to medium credibility groups also accurately recalled that the non-flagship animal was the most endangered. Only 55% of participants who viewed an advert featuring a celebrity with low credibility correctly identified that the non-flagship animal was more endangered, and only 6% (compared to 32%) said they chose the non-flagship campaign because the animal was more endangered. This very clearly indicates that participants were more likely to take notice of an animal's endangered status, and chose a campaign based on the endangered status of an animal, when there was a credible celebrity featured.

### *7.3 Celebrity endorsement*

In the celebrity endorsement experiment, the results showed that overall, participants did donate to animal conservation campaigns that featured flagship species more frequently than campaigns featuring non-flagship species. Participants will donate to animal conservation campaigns featuring flagship species more frequently. However, it depended on whether they were part of the high, medium or low credibility group. Species preference was also the main reason for advert choice overall.

With regards to the effect that celebrity endorsements had on advert choice, participants said they would rather donate to marketing communications campaigns that featured credible celebrities. 36% of participants overall said that their choice of advert was influenced by the presence of a celebrity. This included those who said the celebrity added credibility, and those who purposely chose an advert that did not feature a celebrity because they disliked the endorsement.

#### *7.4 Anthropomorphised name and message tone*

Participants did donate to animal conservation campaigns featuring flagship species more frequently than campaigns featuring non-flagship species. Again, this meant that species preference was also the main reason for advert choice overall, as predicted. However, species preference was not the main reason in all four categories; advert choice was also influenced by marketing tactics and endangered status. Prior knowledge of the animals featured in campaigns also influenced advert choice to some degree.

Non-flagship campaigns that were anthropomorphised were selected more frequently than non-flagship campaigns that were not anthropomorphised. This suggests that anthropomorphising non-flagship marketing communications campaigns would result in increased support for non-flagship causes. It was also predicted that urgent message tones would have a significant effect on advert choice. From the other side, the majority of participants did not take an animal's endangered status into consideration when deciding on which marketing communications campaign they would rather donate to.

#### *7.5 Personal motivation*

In the personal incentives experiment, the results showed that overall, participants did donate to animal conservation campaigns featuring flagship species more frequently than campaigns featuring non-flagship species, but only by a slight majority of 8%. It is important to note that most participants in the non-flagship incentive did actually opt for the non-flagship campaign.

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