Helping in the Frame: How Helper–Victim Co-Presence Shapes Social Media Engagement

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Abstract

Visual images play a central role in nonprofit social media communication, where organizations rely on emotionally engaging content to capture attention and foster social media engagement. While prior research highlights the persuasive role of identifiable victims in charity advertising, little is known about how the visual configuration of actors in charity imagery influences audience responses. This research examines how the visual co-presence of beneficiaries and humanitarian operators affects engagement with nonprofit social media posts. Drawing on research on identifiable victims and diffusion of responsibility, we propose that the visibility of beneficiary 'face increases engagement by strengthening viewers' emotional connection, but that this effect weakens when beneficiaries appear together with an operator. Through a field study and a controlled experiment, this research shows that beneficiary facial visibility increases engagement when the beneficiary appears alone, but this positive effect is attenuated when the beneficiary appears together with a humanitarian operator.

Keywords: Charity Advertising; Social Media Engagement; Persuasion; Digital Communication; Visual Co-Presence.