Special Session Summary    Feeling Badly Helps: Negative Affect and Giving Behavior

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The objective of this session is to explore the powerful influence of negative affect on prosocial or giving behavior in various marketing contexts. Each day, consumers contribute to charitable organizations, donate blood, and even risk their own life for the good of others. Such charitable behavior, we hypothesize, is often driven by negative affect. This session examines how empathic distress and guilt urge consumers to give. Empathic distress (Hoffman 2000) refers to negatively valenced empathy, which has shown a robust effect on motivating prosocial behavior (Batson 1991). Guilt, as a consequence of injustice perceptions, has been identified as an important factor in helping behavior (Blader and Tyler 2002).

The papers in this session demonstrate how these different types of negative affect influence consumer behavior, and suggest strategies that can be used to moderate that influence. Specifically, this session presents evidence of conditions under which giving behavior is strengthened by empathy or guilt, and examines alternative explanations for the phenomena described. All three papers illustrate that consumers often resort to giving behavior to reduce the aforementioned negative emotions. Collectively, the research in this session contributes to a better understanding of how negative affect involving others can be managed and provides practical implications to enhance marketing strategies.

Each paper in the session examines a unique facet of the relationship between negative affect and giving behavior. The first paper demonstrates how empathy can drive giving behavior. Small and Loewenstein, in a laboratory study and a field study, consistently show that mere identifiability of a victim can increase caring and donations to charity, via increased empathy. They further show that empathy exerts its influence on punitive behavior—people choose to punish those who do not give to others. The second and third papers focus on the influence of guilt. Strahilevitz shows that consumers feel guiltier about taking money back from a charity (even if they had not chosen to make the donation in the first place) than initially refusing to contribute to that same charity. Her research also examines the effect of whether or not the charity was initially chosen by the donor, and shows that the influence of guilt exists independently from the influence of status-quo bias. Lee and Corfman start from the assumption that hedonic purchases for purchasers themselves result in high guilt about spending money, and show how promotional strategies that restore equity can alleviate such guilt, such as including a free gift of a similar hedonic nature that will be given to someone other than the purchaser.

Whereas the first two presenters discuss how their results can be directly used to improve social marketing practices, the final paper focuses on how marketers can help alleviate consumer guilt in hedonic consumption by providing opportunities for them to give to others.

This session appeals to researchers interested in consumer decision making, charitable giving, promotional incentives, gift giving, and the causes and effects of experiencing and avoiding negative affect in consumer behavior.

REFERENCES