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Audience Reception of Charity Advertising:

Making Sense, Interpreting and Decoding Advertisements That Focus on Human Suffering

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MSc in Media and Communications (Governance)

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ABSTRACT

This study constitutes an examination of the sense-making process of charity advertisements. Its purpose is to shed light on an area that is still under-examined in media and charity advertising research: audience's perceptions of such campaigns. Rather than examining representations of suffering or measuring the effects and effectiveness of charity campaigns, this project suggests for a more qualitative approach, and it is based on the assumption of an 'active audience', that makes alternative interpretations of the media texts. It also presumes that these advertisements are never decoded outside of the broader media context, identifying the significance of the viewing framework and the social and individual characteristics of the audience.

The method used is individual interviewing and findings descend from the audience's own thoughts, experiences and emotions. Main results indicate that when examining audience's reactions towards advertisements that focus on human suffering, there is a 'two-sided effect', with compassion and proximity on the one hand and distantiation on the other. Distrust towards the advertisements and aid organisations, as well as compassion fatigue are the main causes of the second reaction. Findings show that the dominant, emotion-oriented appeals used in charity campaigns, are perceived as mere marketing techniques, and therefore the audience opts to decode them in resisting ways. This signals a need on the part of charity campaigns to depart from traditional 'moral mechanisms' and adopt a discourse of 'action' and 'results' so as to gain the trust and attention of an 'active audience'. Questions of how audience groups with different characteristics react to these advertisements and the changes that occur in their content over time need to be addressed with further empirical research.

INTRODUCTION

On March 5, 2012 Invisible Children's 'Kony 2012' campaign was released. The campaign was part of an attempt to raise awareness of the human rights infractions and genocide conducted by Kony (Jenkins, 2012). As a result of its almost excessive visibility, the campaign was subjected to intensive debate: to some it was just a marketing ploy, to others a genius campaign that could lead to broader social change. The 'Kony 2012' campaign is one example of many. People in western countries are bombarded on a daily basis with television advertisements, internet campaigns, posters and radio announcements on human suffering, asking for their help.

Charity advertising has often been characterized as the 'old devil' that no one can avoid (Chang & Lee, 2009). Its apparent omnipresence in contemporary society is what makes it so important on a wide variety of levels. First as part of the broader media context. Robins (1994:141) writes that 'to watch television in our culture is to be exposed to violence, suffering and death'. Although a clear overstatement this view highlights a morose truth: a significant part of the way in which 'the globe appears to the world's screens' is through scenes of suffering and tragedy (Silverstone, 2007: 10). Respectively charity advertisements use particular images of suffering in order to generate feelings of compassion and pity (Small & Verrochi, 2009). The exploitation of spectators' feelings renders these advertisements a personal experience for everybody, while the respective appeals are becoming invasive and unforgettable, hence important to everybody.

The complex contemporary socioeconomic conditions render charity advertisements the most significant tool in raising financial aid and thus in supporting aid agencies to fulfill their purpose (Das, Kerkhof & Kuiper, 2008). Statistical evidence indicates that although charitable giving increased in 2011 compared to the previous year (Dobbs, Jochum, Wilding, Lipscomb, Smith & Harrison, 2011), there is a negative trend in the fundraising arena. Significant cuts in most governments' expenditures are accompanied by a dramatic increase in the number of aid agencies, creating a greater need for individual donations (Herzer & Nunnenkamp, 2012; Stroup, 2012). Although more than 75% of charitable giving in 2011 came from individuals, the current economic situation makes it particularly difficult for the latter to keep up with the growing need for private donations (Burton, Gore & Sturgeon, 2012: 354). In the light of this situation, aid organisations appear to consider campaigning as the most valuable asset for their survival, increasing their overall advertising expenditure (Burt, 2012; Herzer & Nunnenkamp, 2012).

Charity campaigns have been studied from different disciplines and a wide variety of perspectives. A vast body of literature, mainly from the marketing field, concentrates on the psychological aspects that may interfere with the audience's prosocial reactions to charity appeals, such as the effectiveness of charity motivations in promoting different issues (e.g. Bagozzi & Moore, 1994; Homer & Yoon, 1992) and the importance of social desirability factors, when designing the content of charity campaigns (e.g. Louie & Obermiller, 2000). A different area of research explores diverse marketing 'approach techniques' (e.g. Basil, Ridgeway & Basil, 2008; Weyant, 1997), while more recent work focuses on the use of images in campaigning (e.g. Burt & Strongman, 2005; Sciulli, Bhagat & Bebeko, 2012).

Theorists from the fields of sociology and media communications, examine a totally different aspect of these advertisements. Drawing on textual and visual analysis of the respective texts they concentrate on issues such as the relationship between aid agencies and the audience highlighting the problematic of institutional (Cottle & Nolan, 2007) and textual reflexivity (Chouliaraki, 2008; Vestergaard, 2008), and the necessity of challenging representations of distant sufferers as helpless victims (Dogra, 2006; Malkki, 1996; Smith & Yanacopoulos, 2004).

What is critically absent in this context, is the study of these campaigns from an audience perspective. Arguably, there is very limited empirical research on the way in which the audience decodes and interprets texts of distant suffering (e.g. Høijer, 2004; Kyriakidou, 2008). Although in this piece of research findings from a few such studies have been examined, the latter particularly aims at investigating how the audience makes sense of this somewhat unique kind of advertising in their everyday life and within the wider media context.

This is not a study of representations or a measurement of the advertisements' effectiveness in getting people to donate to charity; it is a qualitative research that seeks for an in-depth examination of the active engagement and different interpretations of the audience. In particular it focuses on how these interconnect and can be affected by the audience's individual characteristics, their involvement with wider media representations of distant suffering, and their interaction with charity advertisements as texts open for interpretation. Placing the audience into the spotlight, so as to gain a better understanding of their standpoint when receiving and decoding these texts, this study suggests for a more qualitative approach when examining charity advertisements.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The first section of this project is a critical review of the related literature followed by the conceptual framework and a denotation of the research's objectives. Theories and concepts examined in this context, even though they do not cover all the relevant literature, are the ones used to structure the research question and those selected for the reason that they - somehow- defy, support or validate the researcher's own hypotheses, results and standpoints.

Mediation and suffering: Guiding audience's actions

Taking the process of mediation as a starting point, authors such as Boltanski (1999), Chouliaraki (2006) and Silverstone (2007), vitally argue that it is through the media, as institutions and as representations, that proximity (or distance) with the distant sufferer is settled and the potential of compassion and action is established.

Far from assuming the existence of a passive audience, in studies of representation there is an implied suggestion of a significant relationship between audience's knowledge and action. Chouliaraki (2008: 837) observed audiences by examining the connection between media representations and public action in a framework where mediation is considered to be a kind of 'moral education'. Mediation as moral education is connected to the performative capacity of representation, which constitutes the media's ability not to merely represent the world, but mainly to suggest how people should feel and think about the world. Charity advertisements in this framework heavily thrive on this performative capacity of representation to promote the audience's reaction.

Media texts can be considered to have an imaginary addressee with specific values and common-sense understandings (Höijer, 2010). In this context, the producer of the message is positioned in the powerful place to attribute particular attitudes to the audience. In turn the audience is called to attribute a particular meaning to these representations by making moral judgments (Silverstone, 2007), which at a later point determine its subsequent actions.

The two sides of mediation: Creating a "global village" or enabling compassion fatigue?

Taking into consideration the performative dimension of mediated discourse (Chouliaraki, 2008), humanitarian communication is highly connected to and dependent on media as the

means by which the suffering of people outside of our environment of contact is brought to audience's attention (Tomlinson, 1999).

On the one hand, humanitarian dispositions are presented as primarily based on shared humanity. Silverstone(2007) notes that since media use representations of people that are different from the viewers so as to offer an orientation to the wider world, they allow for reflexivity on the behalf of the viewers who may begin to think and speak regarding situations beyond their immediate environment. In other words, the constant flow of images and information, expands the local world of the spectator to the sight of non-local experiences, enabling the reflexive procedure by which the viewer begins to relate to the other, and thus begins to act (Giddens 1990, Thompson 1995, Tomlinson 1999). In a similar vein, Levinas(1969) explains how proximity can be extended beyond the local community, noting that people feel compassion towards those in need without knowing whether the latter will retaliate. Hence, Levinas suggests that people subject to the other without knowing the result.

A particularly important aspect of proximity is the one related to 'similar possibility' (Nussbaum, 1996: 35). The latter can generate compassion by placing the spectator in the process of thinking: *How likely is this to happen to me?* Nussbaum argues that in order for the spectators to feel compassion, it is necessary to consider themselves as potential sufferers, in other words to identify with the victim. For example a mother watching a charity advertisement may feel compassion by identifying with the mother on television whose child is sick. Although the author carefully notes that the identification with the sufferer is temporary and in no case does the viewer believe that the sufferer's pain is her own pain, she highlights that there has to be an approximation of the spectator's experience to the sufferer's life. Proximity –as described above- is crucial in this context since it can create both physical and social approximation (Höijer & Olausson, 2010).

However not all narratives are so optimistic. More pessimistic narratives confront the connecting ability of mediation as illusion, asserting that media representations of suffering do not always generate compassion or pity (Moeller, 1999; Robins, 1994; Sontag, 2003; Tester, 2001). Tester highlights the imbalance in the relationship between the audiences that make use of the media and the sufferers *in* the media, where the position of the former is of relative safety, while the latter is in a situation of destitution. This discontinuity of experience puts less pressure on the viewer's moral sensibilities than events in his/her immediate environment. Here, inaction is located in the moral constitution of the public per se. Boltanski(1999), pointing to the distrust ensuing from skepticism of representation, diagnoses contemporary culture with what he calls Crisis of Pity. In this case, the skepticism

of representation significantly pertains to the truth and appropriateness of communication, when suffering is presented through media.

Very close to these arguments, are the ones about compassion fatigue. Ong(2008: 3) defines compassion fatigue as the idea that ‘audiences become passive and desensitised to the repetitive shuffle of suffering and disaster’, while he usefully adds that ‘individuals have a wide and complex range of emotional responses when confronted with appeals ‘to do something’ about human rights atrocities’. This approach refers to the numbing effect of incessant media exposure (Moeller, 1999; Tester, 2001). Here, the overload of misfortune sets suffering insignificant, while each story of human pain is yet another story with no further importance. In the same vein Downs (1972: 47) argued that ‘even the most powerful symbols lose their impact if they are constantly repeated’, since ‘the piteous sight of a dead soldier pales after it has been viewed even a dozen times’. Boltanski(1999) locates the source of compassion fatigue in the nature of representation, instead of in the moral constitution of the public per se. Arguably, this slightly different interpretation has the crucial insinuation of preserving a space of possibility for humanitarian action.

Charity advertisements: An understanding of advertising content

The ideal victims

Charity campaigns constitute a very unique type of advertising, since they attempt to generate action on the behalf of the sufferers (Doddington, Jones, & Miller, 1994; Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998). In order to serve this cause, these texts attempt to manipulate the audience’s internal emotions and intend to generate responsibility and feelings of compassion or sympathy using images of suffering others (Basil et al., 2008; Small & Verrochi, 2009).

According to Kinsey(1987) advertisers have a longstanding awareness of the fact that images of particular sufferers can be especially effective in getting audience’s attention (as cited in Tester, 2001: 32). Taking into consideration the fact that the proximity created by the media constitutes both social and physical approximation (Höjjer & Olausson, 2010), and donating is a form of pro-social behaviour (Basil et al., 2008; Bell, Cholerton, Fraczek & Rohlf, 1994), spectators may feel more inclined to donate when particular sufferers are presented. Christie(1996: 384) defines the ‘ideal victim’ as a ‘person or a category of individual who-when hit by crime- most readily is given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim’. Höjjer(2004: 517) notes that in general, children, mothers and the elderly are more suitable as ideal victims than men, since solely in the case that victims are identified as ‘bona fide’,

and thus are connected with innocence, they comprise candidates for compassion (Burnett & Wood, 1988; Moeller, 1999: 107; Smolej, 2010).

Negative versus Positive Appeals

Whether an appeal should have a positive or negative standpoint and how this affects the effectiveness of the advertisements, is an issue heavily discussed in the literature. A considerable number of consumer research studies agree that negative information and images are more attention-grabbing and convincing than positive communication efforts, especially when consumers process information systematically (Bagozzi & Moore, 1994; Homer & Yoon, 1992; Huhmann & Brotherton, 1997). The effectiveness of negative appeals is mainly attributed to the fact that they are more likely to breach spectator's expectations, by moving beyond messages that are framed in a positive way, thus generating greater scrutiny (Chang & Lee, 2009; Levin, Schneider & Gaeth, 1998).

Moreover, these appeals render the viewer a witness of the horror of suffering (Chouliaraki, 2010: 111). In this context, different studies have shown that when people are confronted with threats of undesirable future social alterations, they tend to adjust their behavior in an attempt to deter the threat, which most of the times leads them to support the cause of the charity (Griffin, Babin, Attaway & Darden, 1993; Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007; Supphellen & Nelson, 2001). On the other hand, the use of negative appeals has been the subject of severe criticism. At the center of these critiques is the argument that these images, by dehumanizing the sufferers, are for the most part responsible for causing sentiments of compassion fatigue to the audience (Cohen, 2001; Moeller, 1999). However, despite criticisms against them, evidence suggests that this is still the most efficient way of appealing for imperative action – hence its long-lasting existence in the public communication of suffering (Chang & Lee, 2009; Chouliaraki, 2010).

Developing in a responsive relation to 'negative appeal' campaigns, 'positive appeal' ones reject the representation of sufferers as helpless victims and focus on their agency and dignity. Homer and Barta (1994) suggest that advertisements incorporating positive messages are more effective since they result in the spectator feeling more favourable towards their subject (see also Shiv, Edell & Payne, 1997). Moreover positive appeal images offer the spectators the opportunity to watch the results of their actions. Getting to see that their actions can actually lead to substantial change in the sufferers' lives, highly motivates viewers to undertake the actions suggested by the advertisements (Shiv et al., 1997). However 'positive appeals' approach is not without disadvantages. It has been argued that these images as well, generate

–a different type of-compassion fatigue. Showing smiling faces of children, creates an impression that ‘everything is already taken care for’ (Small, 1997: 581-593), while these images may ultimately lead to inaction based on the assumption that ‘these are not really people in need’ (Cohen, 2001: 183-84).

Type of action

Most times charity advertisements request for monetary donations so as to fund the work of NGOs. These requests can be segmented into requests regarding a specified amount, requests for an unspecified amount, requests for a bequest etc. There are different theories in the literature regarding the effectiveness of each of these requests.

Sargeant (1999) describes donations as either gifts of cash, time or kind, while Sargeant and McKenzie (1998) suggest that loyal donors that develop long term relations with aid organisations are more likely to respond positively to any type of request, than those who are uncommitted. Finally Weyant and Smith (1987) and Desmet (1999) found that requests for money that do not specify the amount are less likely to generate positive responses, since donors consider them as less concrete and trustworthy.

Boltanski’s (1999) view on the type of request, takes this issue a step further, highlighting the insufficiency of mere monetary requests. The author asserts that there are actually two choices for action: donations and speech. Although monetary donations are crucial for the survival and function of humanitarian organisations, they constitute a problematic and limited response to other’s misfortune from the donor’s standpoint. When the donor is only given the opportunity to respond to suffering by offering money, this could impede his/her moral response. While from this point of view the alternative choice, namely speech, could prove to be more valuable, the author notes that in order for it to comprise a valid alternative, it has to be effective speech. In other words, the speech must include an explicit intention to minimize suffering, involve the sacrifice of other principles and attest to a commitment.

The issues discussed above, are particularly important in the framework of charity campaigning. However they only remain unresolved debates, since they have mainly been examined in terms of effects and effectiveness. Arguably it would be quite challenging to examine these matters from the standpoint of the audience.

The branding of suffering

As argued above, humanitarian communication constitutes a field of longstanding debates. The ‘threat of delegitimization’ is constant in this field where the reality of suffering attempts to generate diverse feelings, however without always managing to depict suffering as the reason of legitimate action (Chouliaraki, 2010: 114).

In this context the exploration of an emergent style of humanitarian appeal that moves beyond the traditional registers of pity (guilt, empathy) as drives for action, is necessary (Vestergaard, 2008). These appeals depart from the ‘moral mechanism’ of negative and positive appeals where one thing, namely the reality of suffering, is hypothesized to lead to a different thing, namely action. What is communicated in this case is mainly the brand of the organisation.

Branding, is regarded as departing from the verbalisation of an argument and focusing on the “aura of the brand”, which retains the relation between the consumer and the company (Arvidsson, 2006: 73-94). Hence, the ‘branding of suffering’ moves beyond visual representation, emotional appeals, and the question of ‘why’, letting media-savvy spectators themselves to relate with brand associations of care, and act as the sole creators of brand meaning (Chouliaraki, 2010: 118; Vestergaard, 2008; Vestergaard, 2009).

On the other hand, it has been argued that the branding of suffering actually constitutes a crisis of institutional reflexivity (Cottle & Nolan, 2007). The authors assert that the ‘branding of suffering’ does not only constitute a strategy to move beyond the dominant charitable appeals but actually demonstrates a desire on the part of the organisations to align with today’s pervasive ‘media logic’. However advertising as part of the emerging media logic is not concerned with the issues of global humanitarianism as traditionally promoted by humanitarian agencies. Instead the former constitutes an enunciation of broader corporate interests and evolving media environments, and thus it can have a harmful impact on the principles and ethos of humanitarianism (Aiken, 2005; Stride, 2006). According to Aiken(2005), media logic, has the ability to deplete the main messages and meanings of global humanitarianism, and replace the interaction between the media, the human misfortune and the audience, with something far less important.

Audience and mediated texts

‘Placing emphasis on the ways in which meaning is made and experimented by viewers, reception analysis necessarily develops an account of interpretation and its variables, which is in some tension with the conventional ideas of influence and effects’ (Corner, 1999: 80).

The above quote demonstrates the approach taken in this project regarding audience’s role in understanding and interpreting charity advertisements. The main purpose of this project is to examine the sense-making process of an ‘active audience’. The notion of the ‘active audience’ was initiated to replace early understandings of audiences as passive decoders of information which, as argued above, prevailed in early charity advertisements studies of ‘effects’ (Hibbert, Smith, Davies & Ireland, 2007).

According to McQuail (1997: 19) in the context of ‘culturalist (reception) tradition of audience research’, media use is a particularly important part of everyday life and audience interpretations and readings of the texts are diverse, including ‘resistance’ as well as ‘compliance’ with dominant meanings. Stuart Hall’s (1980) work, appears to be particularly influential here, offering a better understanding of the diverse interpretations the decoding of texts may generate, depending on different contextual factors. Hall asserts that every text and its meaning are ‘encoded’ in the form of meaningful discourse, while in a subsequent step, it is ‘decoded’ by the audience, so as to generate particular effects: to affect, convince and create emotional, ideological and behavioural resultants on the audience.

Though, the two processes may not be symmetrical. According to Hall, there are three types of reading: the dominant (refers to the decoding of the preferred meanings, which have the prevailing order embodied in them), the negotiated (a combination of processes of compliance and opposition) and the oppositional (the spectator recognizes the connotative inflection, however chooses to decode the text in the opposite way). Although Hall understands the process of encoding as ‘more powerful’ than the one of decoding, Fiske(1987) highlights the pleasure to the audience that comes with creating meanings that are purposely different from those intended by the text.

Particularly significant to the issue of audience’s reaction to humanitarian appeals is Cohen’s research on denial (Cohen, 2001; Cohen & Seu, 2002). Taking a different approach, Cohen focuses on what he calls the ‘black hole of the mind, a blind zone of blocked attention and self-deception’ (Cohen 2001: 6), referring to the different ways of avoidance people use to shelter

themselves from unpleasant realities and their responsibility towards the sufferers. Following Van Dijk (1992), Cohen crucially asserts that denial may appear in different forms: from defensive strategy to a strategy of normalisation and neutralisation.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This research is mainly framed by the reception approach of the audience; in investigating the reception of charity advertisements, the audience is put into the centre of the focus and, instead of examining representations of suffering or measuring (quantitatively) for 'effects', the audience's engagement with charity advertising material will be investigated.

The main assumption is that of an active audience that understands, interprets and decodes texts in different manners, while the project assumes that charity advertisements are never received and decoded in isolation from the wider media context, taking into account the importance of the process of 'mediation' and the performative nature of the texts.

This topic is worthwhile for the advancements it offers mainly to empirical literature. Many authors have examined the gap between 'knowledge and action' when the audience is informed about other people's suffering. However, the conceptualisation of this gap in the singular constitutes an oversimplification of what actually is a complex body of interconnected instances, taking place in not one but three –associated yet- distinct gaps (Seu, 2010).

The first gap, which has been the focus of media and communications, sociology and of humanitarian debate, investigates what takes place between misfortune and its representation, drawing assumptions on audience's reactions based on textual and visual exploration of texts (see Chouliaraki, 2006; Vestergaard, 2008). The third gap, which is mainly the focus of consumer psychology studies, is that between audience's reception and action (see Basil et al., 2008; Bagozzi & Moore, 1994; Shiv et al., 1997). Here, the analysis is based on surveys and experiments and has mainly shed light on the direct relation between feelings and behavioural reactions, considering the audience as 'inactive decoders' (Hibbert et al., 2007: 5).

Very little empirical research has been conducted into the second gap, on how audiences perceive communication on distant suffering. However, in a charity framework, the audience

constitutes a crucial aspect that ‘interrelates diverse societal constituencies such as the humanitarian organisations, the media and the policy makers’ (Höijer, 2004: 518).

Using the notion of ‘active audience’ in relation to the notion of ‘proximity’- as used by Silverstone (2007) and Levinas (1969) to refer to mediation’s ability to offer orientation to the wider world- this project will try to examine the ways in which the audience relates to images of distant sufferers in the media and particularly in charity advertisements, as well as how this relationship is perceived. It will also be a challenge to examine whether the mediation of misfortune fosters responsibility or moral apathy and passivity to the audience- thus verifying the claims made by several authors about ‘compassion fatigue’. By examining this long-standing debate in the context of audience’s perception of charity advertising, this project is contributing to discussions around social responsibility and distant suffering, compassion fatigue and mediation in general.

Theories of different charitable appeals will be used in association with the notion of the ‘active audience’ so as to examine how the latter not only decodes but also reacts to the different images and requests used in charity campaigns, thus wishing to shed light on unresolved debates regarding the usefulness of different appeals in charity advertisements. In this way this project is contributing to marketing work, studying the important elements that comprise charity campaigns not from an ‘effects’ perspective, but from the part of the audience.

Drawing on the former, the research question of this project will be: **‘How does the audience make sense of charity advertisements?’** This general question can be further deconstructed to the sub-questions that constitute part of it and which are:

⇒ Can this kind of humanitarian communication generate compassion through proximity? How does the audience perceive its relationship with suffering people from other countries? In what ways does the audience empathise and identify with distant sufferers?

⇒ How does the audience particularly process this kind of advertisements as part of the wider media context? Are there signs of distantiation (instead of approximation), and compassion fatigue?

⇒ How does the audience process emotionally different charitable appeals (negative vs positive)? Is monetary support an adequate response to human suffering? How does the audience perceive of the branding of suffering?

This research has no intention of generalising findings to the population. It is a qualitative study of the sense-making process of a specific part of the population.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The following section will compare qualitative interviewing and thematic analysis to alternative potential methods, and thus point their appropriateness for the current study. Twelve individual interviews with six male and six female respondents, were carried out.

Justification for methodological choice: Individual interviewing and thematic analysis

‘The understanding of the life worlds of the respondents and specified social groupings is the sine qua non of qualitative interviewing’ (Gaskell, 2000: 39).

In order to examine the feelings, perception, and sense-making process of the audience, qualitative interviewing is arguably the optimal method of data collection. A considerable number of researches especially from the media and communications field have used visual and textual analysis in order to examine audience’s reactions, based on representations. Although no one can question the importance of these researches in order to generate assumptions regarding particular characteristics of the texts (Seu, 2010), arguably if one presumes the results of the texts to the audience from a careful examination of these texts rather than a dialogue with the audience, one perpetrates what Thompson (1990: 496) calls a ‘fallacy of internalism’. Thus, due to their detachment from the real thoughts and feelings of the audience, these methods were rejected.

In the field of charity advertising, the most commonly used method that involves audience participation, is quantitative survey (Hibbert et al., 2007). While quantitative methods, such as survey, can offer an insight into the effectiveness of different techniques used in the framework of these campaigns, and allow for a significantly greater number of respondents and thus generalisation of the results (Burns & Grove, 1987; Duffy, 1987), when wishing to explore the sense making process of the audience, qualitative research becomes imperative (McQuail, 1997: 19). Moreover, the survey/questionnaire method limits the participants to a particular body of given responses which can by no means be successfully utilised to depict feelings, receptions and experiences. In a similar vein Gaskell (2000: 45) asserts that surveys do not allow for the use of ‘more targeted questioning’ in order for the researcher to clarify the most interesting points. Since the survey/questionnaire method would not allow participants to express themselves freely, the method was not selected.

‘The versatility and values of qualitative interviewing is evidenced in its widespread use in many of the social scientific disciplines and in commercial social research. In the areas of media audience research public relations and advertising’ (Gaskell, 2000: 39).

In general, interviewing is the method most often used for generating in-depth personal reports, comprehending the personal framework and examining different issues in more detail (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003: 61). One-to-one in-depth interviews permit the use of open answer queries that- although can place greater demand upon the interviewees and are more difficult to summarise and analyse- let the participants present their responses in their own terms, providing richer answers and thus more complete insights into their personal standpoints (Deacon, Pickering, Golding & Murdock, 1999: 79).

In the context of audience qualitative research, there is a longstanding debate regarding when group discussions are more appropriate than individual interviews. Personal interviews are probably the most frequently used method in terms of qualitative research and as Ritchie and Lewis(2003: 36) highlight ‘their key feature is to provide an undiluted focus on the individual’. Similarly, Gaskell (2000) and Kvale (1996) assert that individual interviews are more preferable to group discussions since they are more useful in accessing detailed personal standpoints. As Gaskell (2000: 48) writes ‘with the single respondent, far richer detail about personal experiences, decisions and action sequences can be elicited’. Thus, while focus groups can be particularly useful in enabling creative thinking in a social framework and demonstrating diversities within the group (Flick, 2009; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003), taking into consideration the purpose of the particular research- to illuminate the sense making process of the audience- focus groups were rejected due to their propensity to be affected by lack of detail (Gaskell, 2000).

However, this is not to say that individual interviewing is without limitations. Holstein and Gubrium (1997: 113) argue that ‘the interview conversation is...a potential source of bias, error, misunderstanding or misdirection, a persistent set of problems to be controlled’, while Burton (2000) asserts that even the mere presence of the interviewer can influence the responses. Qualitative interviewing arguably constitutes a logical examination of prejudiced reality, and thus the information that emerges cannot be unbiased. Another important limitation is that the small number of participants, does not allow for generalisations to the population (Berger, 1998), while the open-ended nature of the answers places more difficulty both on the respondent and the researcher- in terms of the interpretation of the results (Burton, 2000). Taken these limitations into consideration, every attempt was made by the researcher to be constantly reflexive and recognize the potential results of particular options,

setting, and framework on the research. Thus the topic guide's questions were formulated in a way that encouraged detailed responses and allowed controlling for dispositions. However, having a completely independent and objective 'view' of data is never totally viable, even for the most conscientious and experienced researcher.

After examining discourse analysis (Gill, 2000), content analysis and grounded theory analysis, it became obvious that thematic analysis was the most appropriate method in order to analyse the interview transcripts. Since this research focuses on analysing the mechanism of the perception of charity advertisements, and not the sociolinguistic patterns that demonstrate a person's subjective reality (Gill, 2000), discourse analysis was rejected. Furthermore, while content analysis has many merits, thematic analysis offers additional capabilities that are crucial for this study. While the former uses specific and mutually exclusive classes (Subvista Consultancy, 2010), the latter wishes to locate any existing patterns, without restrictive categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis constitutes a removal from the descriptive (e.g. summarising what the interviewee says in a series of themes) to the explanatory (an effort to understand what it all signifies) (Larkin, 2004). In a similar vein Braun and Clarke (2006: 15) note that thematic analysis constitutes a mixture of analytical precision and interpretative pliability. These characteristics demonstrate thematic analysis' superiority in uncovering the beliefs, thoughts, attitudes, feelings and experiences this project wishes to examine. This is not to say that thematic analysis is without limitations. Boyatzis (1998: vii) notes that, 'a researcher's personal projections can colour the thematic process', especially if there are high levels of familiarity with the dataset (i.e. the participants). It was thus helpful that in this project the vast majority of the interviewees were personally unknown to the researcher.

Sampling strategy

The recruitment of the participants was a demanding task. The initial intention was to obtain information from the audience targeted by charity campaigns. Bruce (1994) asserts that charity advertisements mainly target adults between 25 and 50 years, and many previous quantitative studies have focused on the particular age group (see for example Hibbert et al., 2007).

However for this project, people included in the sample were adults ranging from 25 to 35 years of age all working or studying in London. This choice was not merely an issue of convenience. Arguably this age group constitutes a separate category that needs further

investigation. Bruce and Chew(2011), characterise this group as ‘media savvy’, noting that they have been exposed to significantly more charity campaigns than previous generations.

In sum twelve interviews were conducted, averaging approximately forty minutes each. The number of the participants depicted the balance of the sampling strategy: six of the respondents were male and six were female. The balance between male and female participants is particularly important in the framework of the particular project. In one of the limited studies on audience perception of media images of suffering, Höjjer (2004: 519) noticed that men and women react differently to images of distant sufferers, noting that women react with compassion more often than men. Hence, it would be interesting to examine whether these findings are valid in the context of the sense making process of charity advertisements, as well.

All the participants were approached using the snowballing technique. The interviews started with two participants -members of the researcher’s immediate social environment. The latter were asked to recommend other individuals, within the age group of interest for this research and also willing to participate. Although very useful, this technique is not without limitations. Snowballing can be characterised as ‘self- selecting’ and cannot always guarantee ‘maximum range of opinions available on the topic’ (Gaskell, 2000: 42).

Topic guide

All interviews were semi-structured, meaning that they followed a pre-determined topic guide (Lindlof, 1995). Gaskell(2000: 40) notes that ‘a good topic guide will create...a logical and plausible progression through issues in focus’. This insight highly affected both the meaning and the progression of the queries.

The topic guide was created after two revisions of an initial topic guide; the first one was determined after two pilot interviews, conducted one month prior to the original research project, and the second after the first interview. During the revisions, the wording of some questions that seemed to lead to particular answers changed, while two questions were excluded, as they generated answers too similar to those of other questions. As a result, the flow of the rest of the interviews was significantly facilitated.

The guide was designed to be flexible, with the potential of adjustments for each interviewee. For instance, some participants addressed issues that were planned to be covered later on in the interview quite early, while some queries were answered before even posed; however,

none of the interviewees were interrupted, unless their response began to depart from the discussion subject. Finally, interviews would start with easy-to-reply questions and progress into more demanding concepts. This strategy helped both the participants to answer more freely and the interviewer to lead the conversation and check for dispositions.

The guide was divided into five main sections. The first one included the welcoming of the respondents, an epigrammatic explanation of the subject and a description of the reason why the interviews were carried out. The three subsequent sections were designed based on the literature review and the research objective and intended to examine audience's general attitude towards aid organisations, audience's perception of charity advertisements as part of the wider media context, and audience's perception of particular appeals, respectively. The initial intention, in the context of the latter section, was to concentrate the discussion on one particular campaign-without including any images. However, from piloting the method, it was revealed that no campaign had been seen by all the participants, making it difficult to maintain the discussion on one particular campaign for long. Thus, two different images (one with negative and one with positive appeals) of posters used in different charity campaigns were utilised as visual stimuli, in order to facilitate the conversation, and for the respondents to comment upon. The purpose of this choice of images was to examine the respondents' reaction towards the two dominant charitable appeals. Assuming no prior experience on the part of the respondents, in some cases prompts were used, so as to facilitate the conversation. In the final part the interviewees could add further comments.

Operationalisation and ethics

All the interviews were conducted in person. The place and time of the meetings were determined by the interviewees, in order for them to feel more comfortable. The respondents were only asked to select a relatively quiet place so that the recordings could take place without interference. Thus the majority of the interviews took place at libraries and quite coffee shops. All participants were asked for their permission to record the conversation. The discussions were transcribed together with the notes and observations made during the interviews.

Participants were informed at the beginning of the interviews that their identities would remain confidential, any of their responses could be redacted from the recording and they could leave the interview at any point. Since a probable weakness of any individual interview is that the interviewees may attempt to provide responses they believe the researcher is looking for (Kvale, 1996), the researcher highlighted at the beginning of each discussion, that

there were no right or wrong answers, all opinions were welcome and any of their statements could remain confidential. Of course, it was not easy to control for this completely. The respondents were also asked to sign a consent form.

The flow of the interviews was very natural while the presence of the researcher as a masters student did not appear to constitute a barrier to the conversation (see also 'Self-critical assessment',p.37). The ethical and strategic factors analysed above protected the interviewees, creating a more comfortable environment and facilitating an honest and detailed discussion.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

In this section the main findings of the project will be presented and discussed in detail. The results indicate outcomes that confirm or challenge the arguments presented in the literature review. The section is organized in three parts. The first presents a brief overview of the process of thematic analysis, demonstrating how the main themes emerged. The second offers a detailed examination of the main themes illustrating them with examples from the interview data and contrasting them with the theories and concepts presented in the literature review. Finally the third part includes a self-critical appraisal.

Thematic analysis

'A theme is a pattern in the information that at minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon' (Boyatzis, 1998: 161).

As a first step all the transcripts from the interviews were read carefully, while subtitles and comments of interest were noted during the process. After re-reading the data several times, the notes and subtitles were used so as to form general categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A detailed exploration of these categories in relation to the theory and the research objective, led to the creation of more particular categories of the patterns detected in the interview data. Parts of the text were placed in to these larger, more specific categories, and assigned to nine preliminary sub-themes -or thematic codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For added detail, please refer to Appendix B where the sub-themes are presented along with a mapping of their interrelations.

After re-examining the data the nine sub-themes were compiled into three distinct, major themes (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). The themes were inductively drawn from the data instead of deductively unfolded from theory or previous studies, however as Joffe and Yardley(2004: 58) correctly note no theme can be completely inductive since ‘the researcher’s knowledge and preconceptions will inevitably influence the identification of the themes’ .

In sum three major themes emerged: 1. Charity advertisements and representations of suffering: Compassion through proximity, 2. Turning one’s back on advertisements focusing on human suffering: Unresponsiveness and distantiating and 3. Making sense of charitable appeals and type of action: The branding of suffering? Arguably, these themes locate and summarise the experiences, motivations and understanding of this project’s respondents (Leininger, 1985).

Charity advertisements and representations of suffering: Compassion through proximity

All interviewees recognised the usefulness and necessity of charity advertisements; when asked, all respondents agreed that they totally comprehend and appreciate their ground of existence for ‘raising awareness’ among the audience (they used the words ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘our’ to refer to the audience) and perceive them as a ‘fair effort’ on the part of aid organisations (they used the words ‘them’ and ‘they; to refer to the organisations).

As Tamara said:

‘Of course these ads are useful and necessary, and they definitely should exist. In this way the organisations open our eyes...they present a different reality...that’s very important because they make us think of people that we wouldn’t otherwise consider.’

Similarly Alexander commented:

‘Usually advertisements and in general television programmes, are all about what we should wear, what we should eat, what we should drink, etc....at least these campaigns show a concern about other lives, about those in need.’

Feroza noted:

‘Not only do they bring to our attention and inform us of a reality different from the one we are used to, but they may also influence people to care and help and make a real contribution to the lives of people that suffer.’

A particularly interesting finding was that the thoughts the audience expressed regarding distant sufferers, was in direct relation to the images presented to them through charity advertisements and the media in general. When asked about their impulsive impressions of the people that constitute the main recipients of aid by humanitarian organisations, the vast majority of respondents started to talk about the images they see in these advertisements, placing particular emphasis on the penetrative force of the latter:

‘It is these images of young, helpless children that cry and seem desperate that come to my mind when I think about people in need...these images that are brought to us mainly through these advertisements...they are most of the times really sad...’ (Mary)

‘My impression of these people is to a significant degree formed by what I see in these ads...I don’t know if this is good or bad, but the first images that come to my mind when you ask me that are images of people who are sick and desperate...’ (John)

‘I think that the first think that comes to my mind is the picture of a sick child crying and asking for help...I see this image in these ads, in the news, in the internet...these images have certainly affected my perception (if I can use this word) of these people...’ (Christopher)

One could argue that the impact of these images is not least due to the usefulness and importance attributed to charity campaigns, since the latter are perceived as offering a direct access to the reality of distant sufferers. This relation between the thoughts of the audience and the images shown in charity advertisements, relate back to what different authors have highlighted: the ‘performative nature’ of media texts.

In direct relation to the performative nature of images, respondents also seem to understand distant suffering from a perspective of proximity, since most of them made empathetic interpretations of these texts focusing on the human situation behind the image. As Høijer (2004) predicted, the vast majority of female respondents showed signs of identification with the situation of the sufferers, while few of them went so far as to imagine themselves in this situation:

‘It breaks my heart to know that there are people at this situation...when I see them I think how difficult it must be for them...not having what to eat...things we take for granted...’ (Alex)

‘I am really moved especially when I see mothers who cannot protect their kids...being a mother myself I know that this is very harsh.’ (Antonia)

‘Imagine seeing your kids crying and asking for food and clean water...things that are so simple but you can’t give them to your kids...I would be devastated’ (Mary)

‘I have a younger brother and I imagine him being poor and skinny and so unhappy...it’s horrible!’ (Tamara)

Confirming in a way the position taken by the optimistic narratives on the mediation of suffering, respondents appear to feel compassion and empathise with sufferers by viewing images that expose them to situations beyond their immediate environment. Understanding distant suffering from the standpoint of proximity, respondents reduce the cognitive distance and relate to the distant sufferers. Although Nussbaum (1996) asserts that spectators can never imagine that the sufferer’s pain is their own pain, the findings here indicate that participants-and especially women- not only can feel approximation to the sufferers, but, depending on the experiences they share with them, they can imagine being at their position and feel the exact same distress.

Importantly the findings demonstrate that all respondents (both male and female) feel more moved by images of children and women, indicating that compassion depends on ideal victims images. It seems that all respondents consent the prevalent ‘victim code’ of the media in general and charity advertisements in particular, perceiving children and women as victims deserving for their compassion, which relates back to the literature review and the arguments presented by Höjjer (2004). The results suggest that these pictures can generate compassion for two reasons: these victims are perceived as more vulnerable by respondents and thus deserve their help, or respondents may feel more compassionate about these sufferers through their own experience of being more open or vulnerable.

‘I have children, and I feel more moved when I see them on the screen...when I see children or women at these ads I instantly think that I want to do something, probably because I know from my personal experience how it feels to be helpless...’ (Joanna)

‘Of course when I see children I feel moved, more motivated you know...a grown man can take care of himself, but a child or a woman, especially in these countries can’t...’ (Alexander)

‘I feel so terribly sorry for them. . . . seeing these children. Sometimes they are so exhausted that they can barely walk.’ (Anastasia)

In sum, the usefulness of these texts in the wider media context was recognised by all respondents, while the initial assumption of the performative nature of images was confirmed. Most grandly the findings indicate that the vast majority of respondents, and especially women, perceive distant suffering from the perspective of proximity expanding their worldview beyond their immediate environment empathising and indentifying with distant sufferers. Thus pictures in charity advertisements –and particularly images of children and women- may actually encourage the audience to feel moral compassion at a distance.

Turning one's back on advertisements focusing on human suffering: Unresponsiveness and distantiation

Apart from feeling compassion towards distant sufferers, the analysis showed that there are also manners of turning one's back on the suffering of others. In other words, instead of approximation, these texts can also generate distantiation. The findings indicate that the moment of truth, the moment participants are called to respond positively to charity advertisements and offer their help to those in need, they do not always do so. The analysis identified three strategies of distantiation: the most common one is related to the perceived manipulative function of the advertising message per se, the second reveals distrust towards aid organisations and charities in general, while the third-most common among the male respondents- is to become numb to distant suffering.

The first strategy of distantiation indicates a surprising inconsistency between campaigns' intentions and audience's interpretation of the message. The vast majority of respondents placed themselves as 'savvy' media consumers, who are able to identify the manipulative intent of the text:

'It's very clever what they do...I mean I said before that I feel compassion about these people in general, but I know that these advertisements are showing these images in order for us to do what they ask for...these ads are supposedly used in order to raise awareness and motivate us to help. Instead what I see is these ads using celebrities and atmospheric images, like in the movies, so as to persuade us...it's like we are being emotionally blackmailed.' (Feroza)

'The way they are designed from the beginning to the end is about making you do what they want they are using aggressive marketing techniques, as if they are selling a product...the black and white background, the music...everything!' (Vlad)

‘I really can’t think of campaigns that are not using stories like that...personally I do feel responsible, I do want to help, but after one point you start questioning, because it’s always the same old recipe...’ (George)

Arguably, the assumption of an active audience that makes alternative interpretations of the texts was confirmed. The participants far from being passive recipients of these advertisements position themselves as critical media consumers, who use their analytical abilities to judge and question the legitimacy of these campaigns. Although most of the respondents highlighted the fact that they do feel compassionate towards the distant sufferers, they were also eager to say that they understand that the purpose of these advertisements is to generate these particular feelings in order to make people spend their money on a worthy cause. Moreover, it seems that to some point the audience perceives these advertisements as a sign that aid organisations are departing from their initial ‘sacred purpose’ and becoming part of the pervasive ‘media logic’, (‘instead what I see is these ads using celebrities and atmospheric images like in the movies so as to persuade us’). By interpreting this type of advertising as using aggressive marketing techniques, the audience sometimes decodes these campaigns as not being concerned with the issues of global humanitarianism as traditionally promoted by humanitarian agencies. This advocates that more thought should be given to how audiences’ reactions to distant suffering are affected by audiences’ relations to the media and advertising in general, somehow verifying the concerns about problems of institutional reflexivity in the communication between aid organizations and their audience (see Cottle & Nolan, 2007).

Apart from being critical towards advertisements, a significant number of participants also appeared to question the trustworthiness of aid organisations and charities in general. Here, unresponsiveness is justified by the fact that there are trust issues with the sender of the message and particularly the aid organisations. Hence, one could argue that the impact of the appeal is weakened by undermining the messenger’s integrity. In this case respondents do not solely make alternative interpretations of the texts, but show signs of moral passivity and denial. More particularly, here, aid organisations are positioned as manipulative and respondents are perceived as the ‘victims’, while the moral imperative coming of this strategy is the validation of skepticism.

‘The problem is that all these advertisements ask you for money...money you don’t know where it actually goes. I believe that these organisations don’t use all the money for the purpose they claim they need it...I don’t know how they operate and I am not sure if I can trust them, and if I can’t trust the organisation, I am definitely not going to donate money.’ (Feroza)

‘There is no guarantee that these organisations actually help people in need, even the big ones...how do I know that the money doesn’t end up in someone’s pocket? I don’t remember seeing any ads that actually describe what the organisation does or how it operates...it actually makes me think: sorry but I won’t send money to make you richer!’ (Anastasia)

‘They show these images, they expose us to this situation, but they never say what exactly they are planning to do...how they are going to help. So how can I trust their word that they are really helping and they are not just another business?’ (John)

In the minds of a significant number of respondents aid organisations are positioned as manipulative and self serving. As Cohen (2001) and Van Dijk (1992) would have predicted, the respondents are moving their focus from a moral to a consumerist discourse so as to justify their skepticism as a way to avoid being taken advantage of. Arguably, in this case audience’s moral passivity is not directed towards the sufferers and their situation, but instead it constitutes a practice of power which enables the ‘savvy’ media consumer to evaluate and critique both the advertisement and the trustworthiness of the messenger.

The third-less common-way to create distance is to become numb to images of distant sufferers (both happy and sad). As described in the literature review, and as was expected, this reaction is more commonly observed among male respondents.

‘I cannot engage in it any more...the same stereotypical images again, and again, and again...At first I have to admit these images really moved me, but not anymore.’ (Vlad)

‘I think that I am kind of desensitised now...whenever I see these images I change the channel...I see no point in keep seeing these images since I know nothing substantial about these people and their story...it’s just the images but no real background.’ (George)

‘I’m tired of the stereotypical images used in these ads...I definitely feel sorry about these people but the image of a crying kid no longer touches me.’(Christopher)

These findings indicate that pity and compassion for the distant sufferers can decrease over time. The endless number of sufferers, the difficulty of releasing the victims’ situation and the incapacity of these campaigns to offer a more detailed background, appear to make the audience less interested or even immune. As Downs (1972) described: even the most powerful images lose their power over the hearts of the people if continuously repeated. However, the findings also show that one does not have to be cynical or indifferent towards other people’s

pain – for instance as Moeller (1999) asserts- in order for one to be fatigued ('I definitely feel sorry about these people...'). In other words, when respondents appear to be immune, this reaction is not directed towards the sufferers and their situation, but instead it could be argued that in this case compassion fatigue appears as coming from the nature of the representation and not the moral constitution of the audience per se. This finding is particularly important since it demonstrates that there still is a space for possibility for humanitarian action, on the part of the audience.

Making sense of charitable appeals and type of action: The branding of suffering?

Although respondents develop different strategies to distance themselves from human suffering as presented at charity advertisements, the latter can also invite the audience to experience emotions of compassion and pity, while they are also perceived as a necessary part of the wider media context. At the same time the literature is filled with debates regarding the effectiveness of particular charitable appeals (i.e. negative vs. positive appeals and different types of requested action). While the fact that charity advertisements should continue to exist is undeniable, the main question that emerges is: 'Should charity advertisements continue to exist in the same form?', in other words 'are the charitable appeals used in most charity advertisements effective?' The findings indicate that the answer to both of these questions is negative.

Even in the case that the respondents *did* trust the advertisements (did not perceive them as manipulative) and the producers of the message (the aid organisations), the emotions experienced by them while decoding texts using particular appeals, were always different from the ones encoded in (intended) by the appeal makers. During the interviews, the respondents were shown two images (one sad and one optimistic) used in the framework of two different charity campaigns. When they were explicitly asked whether the advertisements made them feel guilt or gratitude/tender-heartedness (the emotions intended by the two advertisements respectively) they almost all answered they did not. Conversely, other emotions like sadness, anger, disgust, anxiety or even indifference (in the case of the positive appeal) were the ones most interviewees mentioned.

For the 'negative appeals' image:

'Guilt...no! I feel terribly sorry about this kid and his situation, but I certainly don't feel guilty.'
(Antonia)

‘No, definitely not guilt. I feel very upset because this kid is in this condition and it is not his fault, but it is not my fault either...plus, I see this same image on tv, on the internet, on posters in the street...you can’t feel guilty every single time!’ (Tamara)

For the ‘positive appeals’ image:

‘Well it’s just a happy child like the ones you see when you go out for a walk...I don’t feel that she is in need or that it is necessary for me to help her...’ (Vlad)

‘This could be an advertisement for toothpaste (laughter)! That girl is happy, but it doesn’t make me feel the same, probably because I don’t know exactly why she is happy...’ (Chrostopher)

‘Well, is the ‘either-or’ depiction, right (laughter)? At first they were only showing sad images, now they are showing more optimistic images, but sometimes these images (the optimistic) don’t have a point...I don’t feel gratitude or heart-tenderness...actually I feel nothing when I see this image...’ (Joanna)

The evidence indicate that the decoding of these appeals and the emotions involved in the procedure were quite different from those intended by the text, and can be interpreted as a kind of ‘negotiated’ or ‘oppositional’ reading (as Hall’s (1980) model would characterise it) of these particular appeals. Respondents once again seem to understand the purpose of these appeals, but opt to interpret them differently. The findings also relate back to the literature review and the critiques towards the use of ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ appeals, in order for the advertisements to generate particular emotions, that appear to have a strong base. More specifically, due to the fact that negative appeals are the most common form of framing for charity advertisements, they are being perceived as techniques by the ‘savvy’ media consumers, who in purpose opt alternative interpretations. On the other hand ‘positive appeal’ images fail in the sense Small (1997) has described: participants do not perceive these images as the result of one particular action, namely money donation, but instead they assume that there is not really a need to help.

In depicting sufferers as passive, helpless victims (negative appeals) or as ‘distinguished individuals’ (positive appeals), the advertisements shown to the respondents attempt to generate either a ‘discourse of justice’, using negative emotions and mainly guilt, or a ‘discourse of empathy’ using positive emotions. However the findings indicate that neither of these two alternatives finally succeeds to generate and maintain a justifiable claim to action on suffering, verifying the concerns expressed by various authors (i.e. Chouliaraki, 2010;

Vestergaard, 2009). It is quite striking that when participants were asked to indicate to which of the two advertisements (negative or positive) they were more likely to respond positively they all answered 'to none'.

A very interesting finding was that the action recommended by most charity advertisements- financial support- is regarded as problematic by the vast majority of the respondents. The issue of the inadequacy of the recommended action was mentioned by almost all the participants, before they were even asked. The characterization on the part of the audience of the proposed action as inadequate does not constitute a justification for inaction and unresponsiveness, as opposed to the issues described in the context of the previous theme. In other words, although respondents regard money donations as a problematic response to suffering, they do not consider this issue as serious enough to justify inaction towards the advertisement. However, the interviewees' statements indicate that mere money donations are perceived as unfulfilling and deemed to be failing:

'Solely giving money I believe is like trying to cure the symptoms, but not the disease...it might make you feel a little better but it is not going to change the situation...I am not saying that they should stop asking for money, but they should not restrict the alternatives for action to that.' (Alex)

'I don't think it's enough...I mean I understand that it is necessary for the organisations to gather money in order to survive, but to simply donate money won't make me personally feel that I am actually offering my help...I'd rather be personally involved, in a meaningful way, for example to do some voluntary work, or at least I'd like to be given more options to help.' (Mary)

'Of course giving money is the most convenient solution, but it is not the best solution...I'd rather do some voluntary work for example so as to feel that I really made the difference in these people's life...by simply donating money I think you can't make a real difference...that's the minimum you can do...it's too superficial solution if you ask me...'
(Tamara)

The evidence indicate that while financial support is perceived as vital in order for aid organisations to survive, and the most convenient way in order for the donors to offer their help, it is also regarded as a problematic and incomplete response to suffering. Far from rejecting theories that support the effectiveness of financial requests, one could argue-taking Boltanski's (1999) view into account-that the findings suggest a need on the part of aid organisations in general, and charity advertisements in particular, to incorporate some kind of invitation for action that goes beyond mere donation. It is quite striking that, all

respondents contrasted what they perceive as real, deep-reaching action (i.e. volunteering) with the inadequate, idealistic and superficial solutions offered to them demonstrating a desire to be presented options that could actually facilitate their moral response ('I'd rather be personally involved in a meaningful way').

The findings presented above indicate a need for charity advertisements to depart from the dominant charitable appeals (both in terms of the representation of the sufferers and the suggested action). Thus, it is particularly interesting that when explicitly asked how they would design a charity advertisement, all but one respondent seemed to subconsciously share this view, and agreed that they would adopt a different approach in which they would place the aid organisations and their work at the center of the campaigns:

'Well, I would use images of people who suffer, in order to briefly present the situation, but I would definitely not focus on them...I would focus on what the particular organisation could do in order to change that situation...in other words I would focus on the organisations' vision and work...not on images that try to make me feel in a particular way that will eventually make me donate money...' (Feroza)

'I guess I would use images of sad and happy people, and especially children, but just in order to show the before/after situation...I could even replace these images with statistics that present the situation...what really matters is to present the situation in a different way that people will really appreciate...however, the main focus would be on action, on how the particular organisations operate, how they use their resources to help those in need, and how the viewers can contribute.' (Alexander)

'I would present action, not simply passive victims as happens in the ads we see all the time...we all know this situation, what we don't know is what exactly is being done to change it.' (Antonia)

While it would be premature to presume that this is evidence upholding the theories regarding the de-legitimization of the humanitarian communication field, on an incremental level, these findings suggest that the audience 'demands' for charity advertisements and the respective organisations, to place the rationale behind their cause out of the current realm. The respondents' statements indicate that instead of addressing the problematic by placing responsibility, guilt, shame, empathy and gratitude on the spectators, the focus of these advertisements should be on 'action' and 'possibility', thus presenting a reality that departs from mere representations of distant sufferers ('I could even replace these images with statistics that present the situation').

Being tired of appeals that create a link between viewing suffering and feeling for the sufferer, in an attempt to generate particular action ('I would not focus on images that try to make me feel in particular way that will eventually make me donate money'), respondents arguably locate in the framework of humanitarian communication, what Boltanski (1999) calls the 'Crisis of Pity'. As a result, they seem to prefer the use of appeals that are not emotion-oriented and avoid 'telling' the audience what they should feel, focusing instead on communicating the well-built 'brand equity' of aid agencies, which is their solid image and work. Thus, one could argue that somehow the audience 'legitimizes' what Chouliaraki (2010) and Vestergaard (2008) describe as the new trend in the field of humanitarian communication, namely the 'branding of suffering'.

Self-critical assessment

The above results need to be regarded in the light of the limitations involved. First, respondents were all adults that live or work in the area of London hence the findings may or may not be procuratorial of the general understanding of the target audience of these advertisements. Moreover, barring the gender, other social and cultural characteristics like class, education, and ethnicity (not all participants were British), were not taken into account. Nonetheless, it would be particularly interesting, if not necessary, for these variables to be taken into consideration in similar future research-for instance Kyriakidou (2008) notes the importance of the social status and lifestyle to expressions of compassion.

Additionally, individual interviewing proved to be a quite demanding task. This combined with the researcher's inexperience could have affected the above findings to some extent. On the other hand, the fact that every attempt was made in order for the respondents to feel comfortable-for instance the place and time of the interviews were chosen by them-, the interview guide was reflexive with questions that progressed from easy-to-answer to more demanding, and the participants were not personal acquaintances of the researcher-thus did not put too much effort in providing the data they believed the researcher was looking for-really helped the flow of the interviews. While no problems with the researcher's age and ethnicity occurred during the interviews, the fact that the researcher was female could be considered to be a barrier with some male respondents, who rarely made eye-contact. With the benefit of hindsight, the researcher would have also conducted some follow-up interviews, so as to get more feedback, enrich, corroborate or challenge the results from the interviews that have already been carried out, and check for inconsistencies in the respondents' answers.

The analysis of the findings proved to be more difficult than thought in the beginning. Here, researcher's creativity is particularly important since it can generate unconventional and intriguing data, nonetheless it always produces a feeling of uncertainty to the researcher. In this framework, the mind-map that was used in order to systematise the analysis was particularly beneficial. Finally, due to constraints placed upon this project, and mainly time, an exploration of the advertisements themselves was not included. However it would be really worthy to analyze the texts as well, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, so that both 'media material' and audience reception are explored.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has attempted to explore a broadly researched area and a particularly contemporary media and social issue, namely charity advertising, taking a completely different perspective. Departing from visual and textual analysis that draw assumptions on audience's reactions based on representations, as well as quantitative measurements of the effects and effectiveness of these advertisements, this piece of research adapts a more qualitative approach. Having as its base the assumption of an 'active audience', it concentrates on audience's perceptions, experiences and interpretations, aiming to understand how the latter engages with and makes sense of these unique media texts.

For the project twelve individual interviews were conducted. The data were especially rich however they can be summarised in the following conclusions. First, images in charity advertisements have a potent appeal for the audience and particularly the female audience, and invite the spectators to feel compassion about or even identify with distant sufferers (especially children and women). Second, there is also another reaction towards charity advertisements, namely distantiation and unresponsiveness. The findings show that there are three main causes of distantiation: the perceived manipulated intent of the text (problem with the message), the distrust towards aid organisations as the senders of the message (problem with the messenger) and the repetitive and stereotyped nature of the representations of the sufferers (unresponsiveness due to compassion fatigue). Third, the results indicate that the dominant emotion-oriented charitable appeals do not succeed in generating and maintaining a justifiable claim to action on suffering, while the predominant recommended type of action (financial support) is regarded as impeding the respondents' moral response.

It becomes apparent that when examining audience's reactions to advertisements that focus on human suffering, it is vital not to simplify the conversation. The audience should not be idealised, believing that compassion can be generated merely by exposing people to images of suffering. Neither the audience should be stigmatised as mainly turning in cynicism and compassion fatigue. There is a 'two-sided effect', of proximity and compassion on the one hand, and distantiation on the other. However, as indicated above there are diverse types of compassion and distantiation. Importantly, aid organisations need to adjust their communication efforts to the characteristics of an 'active audience' and move beyond 'moral mechanisms' and passive representations. In order to gain the trust and attention of the audience these campaigns have to focus on 'action' and 'possibility', presenting the organisations and their work as part of their 'brand equity', while offering more meaningful alternatives for action on suffering, rather than mere financial support.

Already there is literature emerging to explore this new form of charity campaigning- that departs from moral mechanisms and focuses on organisations as brands. One could argue that research here, should avoid the same trap of ignoring audience's perception in favour of an examination of representations and effectiveness. Moreover, it would be useful to validate the results by carrying out interviews among a similar set of respondents or using different age groups so as to examine discrepancies and resemblances with regards to age. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods, advertisements themselves should also be examined, so that insightful contrasts could be made between texts and audience reception from different nations, in order to obtain a better understanding of the cultural implications included in the interpretation of these.

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