

THE MEDIATING ROLE OF CLICK-THROUGH RATE IN EMOTIONAL APPEAL COPYWRITING AND ROAS PERFORMANCE: EVIDENCE FROM A CROWDFUNDING PLATFORM



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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of emotional appeal dimensions in digital copywriting, specifically the Identifiable Victim effect, Narrative Structure, and Transformational Diction, on the financial performance (Return on Ad Spend/ROAS) of digital campaigns on the Indonesian crowdfunding platform Raihmimpi.id. Addressing the challenges of the modern attention economy and content clutter, this research examines the mediating role of Click-Through Rate (CTR) using a quantitative panel data approach comprising 490 observations from 49 active advertisements. Data were analyzed using Hayes' PROCESS Macro v4.2 with 5,000 bootstrapping iterations. The empirical findings reveal that the Identifiable Victim effect successfully drives initial audience engagement and fully mediates ROAS, confirming the efficiency of visual-centric peripheral cues. Conversely, traditional Narrative Structure fails to significantly impact either CTR or ROAS, highlighting the detrimental effects of high cognitive load and ad avoidance in fast-paced digital environments. Intriguingly, Transformational Diction fails to generate clicks, likely due to the activation of consumers' Persuasion Knowledge and skepticism, yet it maintains a significant direct effect on ROAS. This anomaly suggests a behavioral bypass where emotionally charged language influences financial contributions through subconscious affective priming, circumventing mechanical engagement metrics. The study extends the application of the Elaboration Likelihood Model and Persuasion Knowledge Model to digital philanthropy, providing actionable managerial strategies for optimizing advertising cost efficiency.

Keywords: Copywriting, Emotional Appeal, Crowdfunding, Return on Ad Spend (ROAS), Click-Through Rate (CTR), Mediation Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has fundamentally changed human communication, enabling faster, borderless fundraising interactions in philanthropy and crowdfunding (Salido Andres et al., 2021). Digital marketing dynamics have shifted toward an "attention economy," where audiences hold absolute control over filtering information and selecting campaigns that resonate with their preferences (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Consequently, non-profit organizations must focus on message quality to cut through content clutter.

Marketing communication quality is crucial for a donation platform's fundraising strategy. Mitigating digital advertising cost inefficiencies is a top priority to maintain "social profitability" (Hossain & Islam, 2019). Social crowdfunding platforms, such as Raihmimpi.id, must optimize advertising narratives to attract and retain donors. According to Gleasure & Feller (2016), building long-term relationships between campaign initiators and donors depends heavily on creating optimal empathy resonance during initial interactions.

Conceptually, "emotional appeal" in copywriting encompasses linguistic and visual strategies designed to reduce cognitive resistance, where narrative persuasion significantly influences conversion rates (Escalas, 2004). Interacting through social media advertising directly enhances a campaign's financial performance (Tussifah & Insirah, 2025). This success is tangibly measured by Return on Ad Spend (ROAS), reflecting marketing investment efficiency Farris et al. (2016). Without adequate ROAS, social campaigns struggle to maximize philanthropic impact due to operational fund erosion.

Persuasive communication studies identify message quality dimensions such as the "identifiable victim" effect, "narrative structure," and "transformational diction" (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Small & Loewenstein, 2003). However, previous studies yield varied results regarding their effectiveness on advertising performance metrics. While prior research found a positive correlation between narrative communication and funding success through empirical platform data Zhou et al. (2016), studies examining direct impacts on actual behavioral data in the form of financial efficiency (ROAS) remain highly limited.

This study addresses this empirical gap by comprehensively analyzing the influence of the identifiable victim, narrative structure, and transformational diction on the ROAS of Raihmimpi.id digital campaigns. Understanding these persuasive dynamics allows digital marketers to develop adaptive copywriting strategies for the attention economy, a matter of increasing relevance amidst the digital transformation of the philanthropy industry (Solihat & Ismail, 2025).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Massive digital transformation has shifted the interaction paradigm between campaign initiators and donors, creating a necessity for a deeper understanding of the role of emotional appeal in shaping donation decisions amidst content clutter. The "Identifiable Victim Effect," as proposed by Small & Loewenstein (2003), constitutes a fundamental element in prosocial communication. Their study found that integrating visual elements and a specific identity for a single individual significantly increases empathy responses and stimulates donor affection compared to an abstract statistical approach.

The aspect of "Narrative Structure" in copywriting has undergone significant evolution. According to the theory of "Narrative Transportation" Escalas (2004), supported by empirical

findings from Mollick (2014), well-structured narratives establish trust during a campaign's early stages. A study by Zhou et al. (2016) demonstrated that narrative storytelling possesses a strong positive correlation with the amount of funds collected. Emphasizing linguistic style, Kaminski & Hopp (2019) identified that "Transformational Diction" significantly impacts campaign outcomes. Through a Natural Language Processing approach, they revealed that linguistic styles containing specific emotions and psychological urgency are highly accurate in predicting funding success.

Message effectiveness cannot be decoupled from multi-channel distribution. Research conducted by Salido Andres et al. (2021) revealed that crowdfunding success is highly dependent on transparency and message spreadability. This aligns with findings from Tussifah & Insirah (2025) and Ladyaningtin & Soepatini (2025), proving that marketing strategies capable of triggering virality significantly reduce cognitive resistance. Furthermore, the humanistic values inherent in digital interaction are vital; Gleasure & Feller (2016) affirmed that empathy and altruism act as "Anchor Values," binding interactions between donors and campaign initiators.

Cultural, demographic, and ethical boundaries play a pivotal role in executing emotional appeals, particularly within Islamic philanthropy in Indonesia. Research by Solihat & Ismail (2025) highlights that the predominant demographic of digital donors, Muslim Generation Z, prioritizes rapid access, efficiency, and perceived utility. This validates the constraints of the attention economy, suggesting that overly complex narrative structures may fail to retain the focus of young, efficiency-driven donors. Furthermore, emotional marketing strategies within Sharia-compliant institutions must strictly avoid *gharar* (deception or manipulation) (Syamlan et al., 2025). Therefore, the implementation of 'Transformational Diction' must remain transparent and grounded in factual integrity to avoid exploitative manipulation while maintaining optimal ROAS (Hossain & Islam, 2019).

To comprehensively understand how digital audiences process these emotional dimensions, it is imperative to utilize established psychological persuasion frameworks. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) proposed by Petty & Cacioppo (1986) suggests that emotional cues operate via the peripheral route to persuasion, triggering behavioral shifts without deep cognitive elaboration. However, the effectiveness of such appeals is simultaneously constrained by the audience's Persuasion Knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Overtly manipulative messaging can activate cognitive coping mechanisms, breeding skepticism and prompting ad avoidance. To navigate this paradox, Zajonc (1980) theory of affective priming posits that emotional reactions frequently precede mechanical cognitive evaluations. The intersection of these theories forms the analytical foundation of this study to evaluate why specific copywriting dimensions succeed or fail in converting attention into actual financial performance.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study implements a quantitative approach using quantitative content analysis as the primary data collection instrument, grounded in the positivistic paradigm of social research. The research population encompasses digital social campaign advertisements on the social crowdfunding platform *raihmimpi.id*. A purposive sampling technique was adopted based on specific criteria regarding the availability of complete financial metrics,

resulting in a panel data structure comprising 490 observations (49 active advertisements observed over a 10-day period).

Table 1
Identifiable Victim (X1)
(Small & Loewenstein, 2003)

Score	Holistic Assessment Criteria
1	Very Low (Statistical/Abstract): No human visuals (only graphics/text/logos) or exclusively displays mass statistical data.
2	Low: Features crowds or groups of people where faces are not clearly visible (blurry/distant). No specific names are mentioned.
3	Moderate: Features a small group (2-3 people) or one person, but the face is unfocused or inexpressive. Identity is mentioned in general terms (e.g., "Orphan").
4	High: Features one main character. The face is clearly visible, and a specific nickname or given name is provided.
5	Very High (Vivid Individual): Complete focus on a single individual with highly expressive close-up visuals (e.g., crying or suffering). Accompanied by a complete and highly personal identity (Name, Age, Origin).

Table 2
Narative Structure (X2)
(Escalas, 2004)

Score	Holistic Assessment Criteria
1	Very Low (Informational): No story element. The text only contains program information, cost data, and a direct call-to-action (hard selling) for donations.
2	Low: Contains a brief introductory sentence but does not form a storyline. Jumps straight into the core problem without providing context.
3	Moderate (Descriptive): Describes the current state flatly. Explains "what is happening" without detailing the backstory or "how it started".
4	High: Possesses a clear cause-and-effect storyline. Contrasts past conditions with present ones. Uses a third-person perspective (e.g., "He/She").
5	Very High (Dramatic Narrative): A complete story utilizing a structured plot: Beginning (Normal Life) - Conflict (Disaster/Illness) - Climax/Hope. Uses a first-person perspective ("I") or a dramatic narrative that fully immerses the reader.

Table 3
Transformational Diction (X3)

(Kotler & Keller, 2016)

Score	Holistic Assessment Criteria
1	Very Low (Neutral/Factual): Highly standardized, formal, and objective language, resembling a medical report or newspaper article. No emotional adjectives are used.
2	Low: Uses polite, standard language. Contains 1-2 common adjectives (e.g., "Sick," "Needs help").
3	Moderate: Begins to incorporate heart-touching words (e.g., "Pitiful," "Sad," "Concerning") but at a reasonable frequency.
4	High: Frequently utilizes strong emotional adjectives (e.g., "Devastated," "Critical," "Threatened"). The writing tone conveys a sense of urgency.
5	Very High (High Intensity/Dramatic): Dominated by hyperbolic or highly dramatic diction specifically aimed at stirring emotions to an extreme degree (e.g., "Howling in pain," "Skin and bones," "Screaming in agony," "Life on the line").

The data collection instrument utilized holistic coding guidelines on a scale of 1 to 5, which were evaluated by two independent coders to ensure measurement replicability and minimize subjective bias (Krippendorff, 2013; Neuendorf, 2002). Construct validity and evaluative objectivity were verified using Inter-Coder Reliability through the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) as a robust indicator of internal consistency (Koo & Li, 2016). The empirical analysis demonstrated excellent inter-rater reliability across all constructs, with average measure ICC scores of .910 for Identifiable Victim (X1), .803 for Narrative Structure (X2), and .882 for Transformational Diction (X3). These coefficients substantially exceed the standard acceptable reliability threshold of .75, confirming a highly consistent and objective coding process between the independent evaluators. Advertising performance data focused on two primary metrics: Click-Through Rate (CTR) as the mediating variable and Return On Ad Spend (ROAS) as the dependent variable. To stabilize variance and mitigate extreme volatility inherent in financial metrics, the ROAS data underwent a natural logarithmic transformation (LN_ROAS). The independent variables consist of identifiable victim, narrative structure, and transformational diction.

Data analysis utilized mediation analysis techniques to test the indirect and direct effects of the independent variables on ROAS through CTR. Recognizing that digital advertising metrics rarely adhere to a normal distribution, statistical data processing was performed using the PROCESS Macro v4.2 by Andrew F. Hayes in SPSS software. A non-parametric bootstrapping approach with 5,000 iterations was employed to generate robust Confidence Intervals (CI) for testing the mediation effects, successfully overriding the normality assumption constraints. The interpretation of results considers both statistical and practical significance, aiming to provide a profound understanding of digital donor behavior

dynamics across the engagement funnel.

Research Hypotheses

This study aims to analyze the mediating role of Click-Through Rate (CTR) in the relationship between copywriting dimensions (identifiable victim, narrative structure, and transformational diction) and the Return On Ad Spend (ROAS) of Raihmimpi.id's digital campaigns. Based on the literature review and synthesis of the digital marketing funnel, the hypotheses proposed in this study are formulated as follows:

- **H1:** The dimension of Identifiable Victim in copywriting has a significant positive direct effect on the Click-Through Rate (CTR).
- **H2:** The dimension of Narrative Structure in copywriting has a significant positive direct effect on the Click-Through Rate (CTR).
- **H3:** The dimension of Transformational Diction in copywriting has a significant positive direct effect on the Click-Through Rate (CTR).
- **H4:** Click-Through Rate (CTR) has a significant positive direct effect on Return On Ad Spend (ROAS).
- **H5:** Click-Through Rate (CTR) significantly mediates the influence of the Identifiable Victim dimension on Return On Ad Spend (ROAS).
- **H6:** Click-Through Rate (CTR) significantly mediates the influence of the Narrative Structure dimension on Return On Ad Spend (ROAS).
- **H7:** Click-Through Rate (CTR) significantly mediates the influence of the Transformational Diction dimension on Return On Ad Spend (ROAS).

Research Model

The research model illustrates the hypothesized causal pathways between the independent variables (identifiable victim, narrative structure, and transformational diction), the mediating variable (Click-Through Rate / CTR), and the dependent variable (Return On Ad Spend / ROAS):

This conceptual framework indicates that the three independent variables are hypothesized to influence advertising performance efficiency (ROAS) indirectly through behavioral engagement (CTR). Implementing a quantitative approach with a panel data structure, the statistical analysis focuses on determining the direct effects (Paths a and b) and the indirect mediation effects using a bootstrapping method. The findings are expected to provide profound insights for crowdfunding platforms to optimize their creative strategies by leveraging victim identifiability, narrative flow, and emotional diction to capture audience attention (clicks) and ultimately enhance advertising cost efficiency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

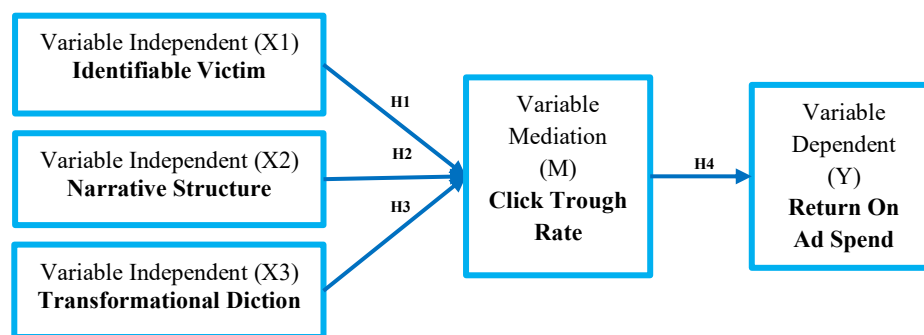


Figure 1

Research Model: Mediation Analysis Framework

Note: Solid arrows represent the hypothesized direct pathways between variables (H1-H4). The mediation hypotheses (H5-H7) test the indirect effect of the independent variables (X1, X2, X3) on the dependent variable (ROAS) via the mediating variable (CTR). Dotted arrows (optional) represent the direct effects of X on Y (Path c') controlling for the mediator.

The dataset utilized in this study comprises a panel data structure consisting of 49 active advertisements observed over a 10-day tracking period, resulting in a total of 490 observations ($N = 490$). To address violations of normality inherent in real-world financial performance metrics, the Return on Ad Spend (Y) variable was transformed using a natural logarithm (LN_ROAS). The mediation analysis was executed using the PROCESS Macro v4.2 for SPSS. A non-parametric bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 iterations was applied to generate 95% Confidence Intervals (CI), providing a robust estimation of mediation effects despite the non-normal distribution of the data.

Table 4
Consolidated Model Summary Statistics for X1, X2, and X3

MODEL VARIABLE	OUTCOM E	R ²	F	DF	P- VALUE
IDENTIFIABLE VICTIM (X1)	CTR	0.0191	9.493	(1,488)	0.002
	LN_ROAS	0.0452	11.532	(1,487)	< 0.001
NARRATIVE STRUCTURE (X2)	CTR	0.0029	1.435	(1,488)	0.231
	LN_ROAS	0.0385	9.742	(1,487)	< 0.001
TRANSFORMATIONAL DICTION (X3)	CTR	0.0002	0.112	(1,488)	0.738
	LN ROAS	0.0418	10.615	(1,487)	< 0.001

Table 5
Direct Effects of Copywriting Dimensions on CTR and ROAS

PATH	RELATIONSHIP	COEFFICIE NT (B)	SE	T- VALUE	P- VALUE	STATUS
MODEL 1 (X1: IDENTIFIABLE VICTIM)						
a (H1)	X1 → CTR	0.174	0.057	3.081	0.002	Significant
b (H4)	CTR → ROAS	0.127	0.031	4.119	< 0.001	Significant

c'	X1 → ROAS (Direct)	-0.031	0.03 9	-0.798	0.425	Not Sig.
MODEL 2 (X2: NARRATIVE STRUCTURE)						
a (H2)	X2 → CTR	0.074	0.06 2	1.198	0.231	Not Sig.
b (H4)	CTR → ROAS	0.122	0.03 1	3.982	< 0.001	Significant
c'	X2 → ROAS (Direct)	0.048	0.04 2	1.141	0.254	Not Sig.
MODEL 3 (X3: TRANSFORMATIONAL DICTION)						
a (H3)	X3 → CTR	-0.019	0.05 7	-0.335	0.738	Not Sig.
b (H4)	CTR → ROAS	0.125	0.03 0	4.094	< 0.001	Significant
c'	X3 → ROAS (Direct)	0.079	0.03 8	2.080	0.038	Significant

Table 6
Bootstrapped Indirect Effects and Mediation Results

HYPOTHE SIS	PATH (X → M → Y)	EFFE CT	BOO T SE	BOOT LLCI	BOO T ULCI	CONCLUSIO N
H5	X1 → CTR → ROAS	0.022	0.009	0.006	0.041	Significant
H6	X2 → CTR → ROAS	0.009	0.008	-0.005	0.027	Not Significant
H7	X3 → CTR → ROAS	-0.002	0.007	-0.015	0.012	Not Significant

Note: N = 490. Bootstrap Sample Size = 5,000. Llci = Lower Level Confidence Interval; Ulci = Upper Level Confidence Interval.

Direct Effects Analysis (Paths a, b, and c')

As detailed in Table 1, the Click-Through Rate (Path b) consistently and significantly predicted ROAS across all three analytical models ($p < 0.001$), solidifying its validity as a robust intermediary performance metric in digital advertising. Among the primary independent variables, Identifiable Victim (X1) demonstrated a significant direct effect on CTR ($b = 0.174, p = 0.002$). Transformational Diction (X3) did not significantly impact CTR ($p = 0.738$) but exhibited a significant direct influence on ROAS ($b = 0.079, p = 0.038$). Narrative Structure (X2) failed to yield any significant direct effects on either CTR or ROAS.

Furthermore, the coefficient of determination (R^2) values across the models indicate that the investigated copywriting dimensions explain a modest proportion of the variance in the dependent variables. Specifically, the models account for approximately 3.8% to 4.5% of the variance in ROAS (R^2 ranging from 0.038 to 0.045) and up to 1.9% of the variance in CTR. Despite the relatively low R^2 values, the overall models predicting ROAS remain statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), confirming the validity of the structural paths.

Finally, it is important to note that the relatively low R^2 values observed in this study (ranging from 0.019 to 0.045) indicate that the emotional appeal dimensions of copywriting

account for only a modest portion of the total variance in CTR and ROAS. However, this finding is highly consistent with the complexity of real-world digital advertising ecosystems. In programmatic and social media advertising, campaign performance is heavily dictated by algorithmic feed mechanics, dynamic budget allocation, and audience targeting precision. These technical parameters collectively exert a substantial influence on advertising efficiency that operates independently of the creative message content itself (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Therefore, while emotional copywriting dimensions remain a crucial qualitative catalyst for donation conversion, they operate within a broader, algorithmically driven marketing matrix.

The Mediating Role of the Identifiable Victim Effect

The empirical results (Table 2) demonstrate that Click-Through Rate (CTR) fully mediates the relationship between the Identifiable Victim dimension and Return on Ad Spend (ROAS), with an indirect effect of 0.022 (95% CI: 0.006, 0.041). This indicates that presenting a specific, identifiable victim in social campaigns successfully captures audience attention, leading to immediate behavioral engagement (clicks) and subsequent financial conversion. Research conducted by Pieters & Wedel (2004) supports this finding, establishing that pictorial and visual elements possess a superior capacity to capture baseline attention rapidly and almost automatically, independent of other factors. In the context of digital philanthropy, the clear visual identity of a victim serves as a powerful stimulus that effortlessly cuts through content clutter, validating its role as a primary driver of initial engagement.

The Ineffectiveness of Narrative Structure

Contrary to traditional marketing assumptions, Narrative Structure failed to significantly impact CTR or mediate ROAS. While structured storytelling is often deemed essential, its failure in this digital context can be explained through the lens of the attention economy. Research by Teixeira (2014) highlights that the cost of consumer attention is rising while the quality and duration of that attention are drastically decreasing. Digital audiences process information rapidly; thus, a complete narrative structure imposes a high cognitive load. Furthermore, Green & Brock (2000) demonstrated that "narrative transportation", the process by which a reader becomes completely absorbed in a story, requires sustained attentional focus and immersion. In a fast-paced social media environment, this level of immersion is rarely achieved. Consequently, lengthy narratives may be perceived as a hindrance. Cho & Cheon (2004) confirm this by concluding that perceived goal impediment on the internet strongly drives advertising avoidance. When a philanthropic narrative is perceived as impeding a user's primary browsing goals, it triggers ad avoidance behavior rather than active engagement.

The Direct Impact of Transformational Diction: Bypassing the Engagement Funnel

Perhaps the most intriguing finding is that Transformational Diction failed to generate clicks (CTR) but maintained a significant direct effect on financial efficiency (ROAS). The inability of dramatic diction to elicit clicks can be attributed to consumer skepticism. Friestad & Wright (1994) articulated in the Persuasion Knowledge Model that consumers actively develop coping mechanisms to identify and resist persuasion attempts. Highly dramatic language likely activates this persuasion knowledge, making the audience acutely aware that they are being targeted. Furthermore, research by Coulter & Pinto (1995) confirms that while moderate guilt appeals can be persuasive, high-intensity guilt appeals often elicit feelings of

anger and irritation. This emotional reactance, combined with the phenomenon of "compassion fatigue" towards pervasive social problems identified by Kinnick et al. (1996), explains why users actively avoid clicking on the advertisement to protect themselves from emotional distress.

Despite this avoidance of technical engagement, the dramatic diction still directly influences donations (ROAS). This anomaly is elegantly explained by Zajonc (1980), who posited that affective reactions (feelings) are primary, instantaneous, and can occur with minimal to no cognitive processing. The emotional weight of transformational diction penetrates the audience's subconscious, creating an affective imprint that circumvents the need for mechanical engagement (clicking). According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model proposed by Petty & Cacioppo (1986), such emotional cues operate via the peripheral route to persuasion, capable of inducing behavioral shifts without requiring deep argument scrutiny. Finally, Mollick (2014) observed that crowdfunding dynamics are highly responsive to underlying signals of quality and emotional resonance. Thus, while the audience may skip the ad to avoid immediate emotional discomfort, the affective priming successfully drives them to contribute financially through alternative or delayed organic pathways.

CONCLUSION

This study provides critical insights into the dynamics of persuasive communication within the digital crowdfunding ecosystem. The findings demonstrate that the effectiveness of emotional appeals is highly nuanced and challenges several conventional marketing assumptions. The *Identifiable Victim* dimension emerged as the most potent strategy, successfully driving both audience engagement (CTR) and financial conversion (ROAS) through a full mediation process. Conversely, the traditional *Narrative Structure* proved ineffective in the fast-paced digital attention economy, failing to generate significant clicks or donations due to the high cognitive load it imposes. Most notably, *Transformational Diction* exhibited a unique behavioral bypass; while it failed to stimulate mechanical engagement (clicks) due to ad avoidance and persuasion knowledge activation, it significantly and directly influenced donor contributions (ROAS) through subconscious affective priming.

Theoretically, this research extends the application of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) into the realm of digital philanthropy. It provides empirical evidence that cognitive engagement (CTR) and affective conversion (ROAS) can operate on divergent pathways. Practically, these findings offer actionable strategies for digital marketers and crowdfunding platforms like Raihmimpi.id. To maximize advertising cost efficiency and ROAS, social campaigns should prioritize clear, visually identifiable victim profiles to capture immediate baseline attention. Marketers should avoid lengthy, structured narratives in feed-based digital ads to prevent goal impediment and ad avoidance. Furthermore, while emotionally charged diction can effectively stimulate donations, it must be utilized strategically to persuade the audience subconsciously without triggering overt skepticism or compassion fatigue.

While this study offers robust findings through panel data and bootstrapping analysis, it is not without limitations. First, the data is restricted to campaigns within a single crowdfunding platform (raihmimpi.id) over a 10-day observation period, which may limit

the generalizability of the results to other platforms or longer campaign lifecycles. Second, the reliance on CTR and ROAS metrics, while objective, does not capture the physiological attentional processes of the donors. Future research should consider employing neuro-marketing techniques, such as eye-tracking, to validate the exact moment of attention capture and transfer. Additionally, comparative studies across different cultural contexts or utilizing A/B testing on various social media channels (e.g., Instagram vs. TikTok) would further enrich the understanding of how emotional appeals function across diverse digital ecosystems.

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