

Child Propaganda and Emotional Appeals to the U.S. Public: A Public Relations Case of Illegal Immigrant Coalition for Latin Americans in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how a propagandistic purpose is embodied with use of children in a form of public relations stunts while adopting persuasive communication techniques such as Donald Trump's rhetoric, dramatization of public event, appeals to emotion with use of a child, and effectiveness of public relations stunt which is enhanced by media coverage. This study focuses on demonstrating emotional interactions among people in the United States, especially for a group of illegal immigrants and the American public, with a particular encounter that took place between Pope Francis and a five-year-old child in Washington, D.C.

Keywords: *Pope, child propaganda, public relations stunt, emotion, pathos, illegal immigration*

INTRODUCTION

U.S. President Donald Trump had launched his presidential bid in 2015 at his Trump Tower office building in Manhattan, claiming that most Mexicans immigrants who came to the United States were drug dealers and rapists. Trump's controversial remarks succeeded in preoccupying the media attention for free publicity over other Republican nominees such as Ted Cruz and Jeb Bush, and his constant series of provocative speeches dominated the 24/7 news cycle. Quoted in an article of the *Washington Post*, a college professor said, "[Trump's] comments sound to me like Germany in the 1930s, when they made Jews responsible for everything that was happening" (Partlow, 2015, para.7). Whether Trump intended such responses, he capitalized on the fears of Republican voters who would view the immigration issue as a dominant-hitting-a-nerve-political topic in the 21st century of America (Riccardi & Barrow, 2016).

Since Trump's announcement for presidential bid, U.S. political and social debates have revolved around the Mexican immigration issue and even expanded to the ban on Muslim refugees entering the United States. Pew Research Center (2015) found Americans largely split on views of immigrants. More specifically, Americans had mixed views about the impact immigrants have had on American

society with 45% saying they are making society better in the long run and 37% saying they are making it worse. When it comes to a matter of ethnicity, the American public had mostly positive or neutral views of Asian and European immigrants in comparison to those from Latin America. A majority of Republicans believed that Latin American immigrants would negatively affect society, compared with 23% of Democrats (Pew Center, 2015). Regardless of their political affiliation, the strong majority of American public believed "the U.S. immigration system is broken" (2015, para 11). Trump's political strategy of exploiting the immigrations issue – more relevant to Mexican immigrants – resulted in creating a massive number of online and offline public debate forums in the United States. In a nut shell, Trump popularized and sensationalized the American debate on Hispanic immigrants. What he focused on was the negative portrayal of them. As a result, a poll found 80% of likely Republic voters agreed with Trump on the deportation of all illegal immigrants (Jesse, 2015).

The Hispanic community in the United States had to take a stand either for or against Trump. For example, one Mexican-American said, "I like that he's not afraid to speak the truth," while another who is of Hispanic heritage said hate speech would not be presidential (Conroy, 2015, para.7).

A *Washington Post*/ABC News poll released in early September of 2015 found that Trump was viewed unfavorably by 82% of Hispanics, with 68% feeling “strongly so,” and just 15% of those surveyed view Trump favorably (2015). In short, Hispanic voters were not happy with the highly politicized messages of Trump, and they organized protests and held rallies in cities where Trump were scheduled to visit for his presidential speeches. The Dallas protest was one of them. Hundreds of Hispanic people held an anti-Donald Trump protest in downtown Dallas, Texas in September during Trump’s speech in front of more than 17,000 people. The protesters held a simple message picket: “#Dump Trump” (Grobmeier, 2015, para.1). Organizers of the protest argued that Hispanic voters and others shocked by “the racist and anti-immigrant rhetoric of Trump” (RT News, 2015, para.5). A variety of groups and activists became involved in such events of anti-Trump action as Trump was taking the lead in national polls. Among the anti-Trump events the most controversial one was the Sophie Cruz’s appearance in a public event. One compelling reason that the Cruz’s appearance was identified as a historic event is that Cruz is a five-year-old girl who was deliberately used by an immigration rights organization in pursuit of sentimentalizing the anti-Trump action. Furthermore, the event aimed at obtaining more American public support for illegal immigrants was successfully orchestrated in hopes of emotionally dramatizing Pope Francis’s holiness attention.

Departing from a comprehensive rhetoric approach, this study aiming to critically analyze an exploitation of children for a propagandistic purpose adopts Trump’s rhetoric, dramatization of public event, appeals to emotion with use of children, and effectiveness of public relations stunts. As a result, this study expects to offer an in-depth understanding of how rhetoric, emotion, public event, and public relations are inextricably intertwined in terms of meeting a propagandistic goal for interest groups, including human rights organizations. In light of the heated public debate on immigration policies among American voters and presidential hopefuls, this study explores the negative or positive or neutral public relations impact, which is solely linked to a particular publicity stunt. The public stunt, conducted alone by the five-year-old girl, turns out to be more complicated than it appeared. Rather than being a simply pure and touching episode that

encouraged the America public to form a generous attitude toward illegal immigrants and their communities, it was sophisticatedly orchestrated and implemented by professional organizers working at interest groups. Hence, this study first of all is designed to explain the whole process of the entire publicity stunt. Second, it demonstrates how a publicity stunt can be theoretically and epistemologically analyzed from a public relations perspective. Third, it aims to evaluate an emotional effectiveness of public opinion as a result of intense media coverage of the pope. In order to achieve the three objectivities, this study asks the following questions:

1. What impact do emotions have on publics who are exposed to a public relations stunt?
2. Why does an organization prefer to have children involved in a public relations stunt?
3. How effective and influential is rhetoric in terms of impressing publics from a public relations perspective?
4. How does the public response change before and after they are informed of the truth about a public relations stunt?

THEORETICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION

In order for this study to conduct critical and textual analysis of a public stunt that aimed to appeal to public sentiment and emotion, three theoretical concepts are adopted: rhetoric, child propaganda, and Cartesian doubt. Such concepts offer influential perspectives that epistemologically explain the process of conveyance and impact of information. These concepts, as explained in detail below, provide fundamental mechanisms of propagandistic appeals.

Rhetoric as an Appeal to Emotion

As Greek philosopher Aristotle defined, rhetoric is “the ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion” (Rhetoric I.2, 1355b). Greer (2011) defined Aristotle’s system of persuasion, including the three forms of appeal to the audience: reason (logos), the speaker’s authority (ethos), and emotion (pathos). Logos was the most important strategy for Aristotle to make a rational appeal or the argument itself, but he highly valued ethos and pathos as inevitable elements of achieving communication goals (Bizzell & Herzberg 2001). Logos is an appeal to logic and rationality. Aristotle directed those who wish to

become persuasive communicators to consider the common topics to determine “the most appropriate form of appeal (e.g., cause and effect or compare and contrast) with which to convince an audience” (Greer, 2011, p. 579). However, Bizzell and Herzberg (2001) pointed out that rational strategies in classical invention could not be equivalent to scientific demonstration; rather rhetoric and the use of logos as explained by Aristotle allowed communicators to convey a “probable truth” or message to an audience (Rhetoric I.2, 1356a).

Ethos is defined as an appeal to credibility or trustworthiness. Aristotle emphasized the importance of persuading an audience with credible messages, as well as understood the audience’s tendency of accepting a message originated from a speech that reflected on the trustable character of the speaker or the author of the speech in public. In addition, Aristotle found ethos especially important in situations where exact certainty was impossible, and opinions were divided (Rhetoric II, 1356a). In this vein, ethos is referred to as a speaker’s trustworthy perspective. If the speaker succeeded in demonstrating his or her character through the message, the audience would be likely to act on the message with less doubt. Ethical behavior of the speaker recognized by the audience strengthens the process of building credibility.

A classical rhetorical approach to emotion falls into the category of pathos, although the approach is not easily defined and can lead to many different overlapping meanings (Greer, 2011). Such meanings depend on a given classical scholar’s attitude toward both language and the use of language to persuade publics (2011). However, the *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric* gives a clear definition of pathos as the term *pathos* is “allied with the Greek verb *paskhein*, to undergo, experience, suffer, or more generally, to be in a state or condition, and the Greek noun *pathos* preserves this range of meaning” (2001, p.555). Another source, the *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, defines pathos as “an argumentative/persuasive appeal to the emotions of the audience” (1996, p.492). Pathos, based on the primary concept of an appeal to emotion, can be understood as a more distinctive aspect than ethos and logos. Aristotle used pathos in *Book 2 of the Rhetoric* as a motive for judgment, delineating 16 pathos which were considered all kinds of emotions that human beings were supposed to feel. The 16 pathos Aristotle identified are anger,

mildness, friendliness, hatred, fear, confidence, shame, shamelessness, gratitude, ingratitude, pity, indignation, satisfaction, envy, rivalry, and disdain (1378a, p.1-5). Aristotle believed pathos was based on unreflective beliefs about what would bring pleasure or pain. For example, the focus on fear by a human being is a pain caused by what appears to be a personal emotion in which a social situation functions as the original source for the specific pathos. In a similar way, satisfaction is a pleasure caused by what appears to be a personal relief. In other words, all of the pathos would distinctively reflect emotional distinctions with which human beings were innately born. The distinctions are both psychological and physiological insistence human beings carry until their death.

This study employees the four specific emotions – anger, hatred, fear, and pity – to develop a theoretical foundation to answer the four research questions. According to the *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric* (2001, p. 558-9), Aristotle defined the four emotions as: Anger – pain at the appearance of undeserved slight to oneself; Hatred – absence of the pleasure of friendliness; Fear – pain at the appearance of imminent evil to oneself, and Pity – pain at the appearance of another person’s undeserved bad fortune. They are based on the pain of pathos and generate pathetic appeals of an underlying individual belief.

Pathetic Appeals

The concept of pathetic appeals dates back to the Roman Empire. It is worth noting that the term *pathetic* is very different from our usual understanding of today’s use of “pathetic.” Williams (2009) argued pathos was used to describe the rhetorician’s strategy to appeal to an audience’s sense of understanding, their self-interest, and their emotions. For example, if the rhetorician created a common sense of understanding with the audience, he would be regarded as a facilitator of pathetic appeals. Pathetic appeals are enriched by strategic practice of the four emotions of anger, hatred, fear, and pity. An animal shelter manager for example can strategize to make pathetic appeals to an audience’s four emotions: Anger will be felt if the audience realizes how many dogs have been abandoned.; Hatred will be felt if the audience is informed of sufferings of abused dogs; Fear will be felt if the audience is made to imagine what they would feel like in the shelter’s cage; and Pity will be felt if the plight

of abused dogs is made vivid through visual materials.

Roman rhetorician Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE) developed a practical system of pathos, seeking to generate emotions of merits, especially a pathetic appeal. Cicero's emotions were "disturbance and movement of the soul" (Encyclopedia of Rhetoric, 2001, p.560). Myers (2007) explained that Cicero significantly developed the idea of a pathetic appeal by reinforcing the importance of Aristotle's audience analysis. Aristotle and Cicero understood that emotions were based on underlying beliefs of the audience so persuasive communicators must feel the emotion in way that the audience feels. Cicero recommended a persuasive communicator instruct the audience, gain their goodwill, and arouse their emotions. He keenly understood that the importance of analyzing the audience and its susceptibility to pathetic appeals (Myers, 2007). The pathetic appeal is of significant influence in the construction of the speech's persuasive power. Corbett and Connors in *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* argued since emotions had a powerful influence on the consequences of audience actions, many of actions were prompted by the stimulus of their emotions (1973). As a result, pathetic appeals have the power of pushing people into action, more likely for a social cause. The Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s represent such a cause, sparked by activists who knew how to strategize pathetic appeals to motivate their audiences (Myers, 2007).

In a modern rhetoric fashion, the term *pathetic* is defined as "causing or evoking pity" in today's dictionaries. Departing from the definition, the feeling of being pathetic is closely associated with the emotion of pity. In fact, Aristotle also defined pity:

A feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours, and moreover to befall us soon (Roberts, 1954, p.113).

It is important to note that pity is caused by sympathetic sadness or sorrow in human's mind. It has a strong impact on human feelings which lead to actions. Such actions can be embodied as donation, voluntary work, and humanitarian aid. In other words, human beings tend to feel pity for those who are the victims of sad and

unexpected affairs such as injuries, diseases, and disasters. When they suffer, others are hit by the emotion of pity which would motivate actions of humanitarian work.

Child Propaganda

For more forceful impact, persuasive communicators place children at the center of message dissemination to communicate with an audience. Acquired by the association with Nazism, the term *propaganda* comes to negative connotations from a neutral term when Pope Gregory XV in 1622 created the Congregation the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. Throughout world history, Adolf Hitler can be classified as a master of using children for his propagandistic purposes. Hitler aiming for reshaping German minds and portraying himself as a symbol of the Father Land in the 1930s developed youth programs with ideas about racial purity, Arian supremacy, and future military conquests (Alpha History, n.d.). For his Nazi government, Hitler organized German youth groups to inspire patriotism to all German citizens. He distributed photos of himself with a young member of Nazi youth group in military uniforms. The young boy was assigned to send the message of embracing "the same Nazi symbols and culture in the name of nationalism" (Alpha History, para.4). Young girls aged six to 10 were also used to circulate Nazi ideology in Hitler's youth posters (Alpha History, para.8).

For the Nazi government, children were not only propaganda targets but also propaganda tools. In a similar way, the United States was not ashamed of using children as propagandists to spread government ideology (Collins, 2011). Collins pointed out that elementary school children during World War I were recruited by their teachers to spread patriotic messages in a form of propagandistic displays of preparedness for the war. Children were directed to tell their parents to buy a war bond and register for public services (2011). More recently, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, better known as ISIS, released a video featuring "a child shooting a man whom the extremist group claimed was an Israeli spy" (CNN, 2015, para.1). Another video ISIS released focused on portraying young boys as fighters, and it attempted to spread messages that even 10-year-old boys could be heroes for "holy battles" (CNN, para 5). Such videos were produced to lure more young boys to join ISIS, which both used children and seduced children to further their aims of terrorism (Mullen, 2015).

There are three reasons children are used for propaganda. First, Collins explained that children were malleable and easily persuaded by authorities (2011). If authorities strategized to inspire children with emotion and excitement, children would tend to give in to emotional appeals. In other words, children are vulnerable to every form of excitement and emotion (Collins, 2011). In this situation, children are likely to function as propagandistic messengers. Second, images of children are a great weapon for propaganda. Haworth pointed out that psychologically adults would view children as an innocent object closer to nature (1995). Images of children in propaganda are likely to present childhood as innocent, spontaneous and in need of nurturance and protection (Haworth, 1995). Images of powerlessness, dependency, loss, and vulnerability can be expressed through children who have a right to receive help from adults in society (1995). In this situation, nothing can be more persuasive than images of suffering children in desperate need. Third, children are conceivable in terms of burying a true purpose. Colly (2015) argued that propaganda could be only effective if the propagandist concealed its true purpose. The propagandist disseminates messages in a narrative form, more likely stories of children. For example, non-profit organizations feature stories of children in charity appeals to provide “a rich source of culturally available meanings precisely by virtue of its elliptical and idealized nature” (Haworth, 1995, p.170). Therefore, adults are encouraged to see their past, present, and future in parallel with children who serve as their mirror.

Cartesian Doubt

Cartesian doubt, also known as Cartesian skepticism, is “a way of searching for certainty by systematically though tentatively doubting everything” (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d., para.1). According to the *Dictionary of Philosophy*, Cartesian doubt is a methodological thinking theory suggesting that some empirical proposition cannot be known because people might be deceived. René Descartes, the creator of the theory, recommended humans establish the automatic habit of placing all beliefs, ideas, and thoughts in doubt. Descartes investigated an epistemological need for reasonable humans “to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations” (as cited in Stanford Encyclopedia, 1997, para.22). Descartes added,

Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions

which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false. So, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt (para.23).

The purpose the theory is to use human doubt as a means of seeking certain knowledge which could not be doubted. Hence, everything can and should be doubted except for the person’s own conclusion to existence. For example, if a person drives a truck while talking to his wife on the phone, clear evidence exists to realize that his driving and speaking represents reality. Therefore, the reality as existing evidence demonstrates the opposite. In a similar vein, if a communicator uses the media to spread a message designed to advocate his organizational goal, the media and publics should not accept the message as acting guidance and emotional existence until they epistemologically scrutinize and acknowledge that the message is acceptable. Soffer (2007) pointed out that the essence of the theory is skepticism against an omnipotent deceiver or evil genius. Such skepticism leads to validity on “clear and distinct ideas” (2007, p.661).

METHODOLOGY

The theoretical and textual approach this study uses is a form of discourse analysis (Haworth, 1995). This approach includes both images published by the media and written commentary by the audience to investigate meanings of what organizers for public relations stunts intend and expect. Haworth argued material produced for such stunts provides “a rich source of culturally available meanings” (1995, p.171). In particular, to address the four research questions this study focused on analyzing the content presented by public stunt organizers, in addition to mainstream news outlets and other online sources. In so doing, this research method aimed to examine threefold:

1. How a public relations stunt case would or would not be considered successful, based on the evaluation of emotional persuasion
2. how the audience would react to the stunt case, based on their emotional acceptance with the fact that the stunt was sophisticatedly orchestrated by interest groups
3. how the audience would change their attitudes toward a child-involved stunt

To make this study more valid with its academic findings, an informal case study was added as another method. This method allows researchers to systematically use a predefined set of procedures to answer the questions, to produce findings that were not determined in advance, and to produce findings that are applicable beyond the immediate boundaries of the study (Mack et al., 2005). More importantly, this method with a mixture of the theoretical and textual approach provides not only complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue but also information about the “human” side of an issue – that is, the often contradictory behaviors, beliefs, opinions, emotions, and relationships of individuals (2005). Mack et al. argued gaining a rich and complex understanding of a specific social phenomenon typically “takes precedence over eliciting data that can be generalized to other geographical areas or populations” (2005, p.2). Regarding data collection, this study used purposive sampling that gathered samples depending on the resources and time available.

One specific case was selected for this study, and departing from the case, this study developed and built a solid methodological ground in hopes of contributing to the method of epistemological discourse analysis. The size of this study’s sampling relies on the basis of theoretical saturation – the point in data collection when “new data no longer bring additional insights to the research questions” (2005, p.5). By applying the purposive sampling collection, this study collected the audience’s reactions from online comment sections as well as their reactions in the media, including interviews. It is important to note that the main purpose of this study was to explore comprehensive results of emotions, child propaganda, image making, and attitude formation in a public relations stunt.

CASE DISCUSSION

For this study, a public stunt case is presented in a narrative form. The selected case occurred in Washington D.C., September 2015, as Pope Francis motorcaded the area. His visit to the United States was a national event, and the media followed the pope’s every step and covered every word of his. His popularity with the media fulfilled a dream of capturing media attention for an immigration organization that produced a dramatic stunt, led by a young child. Three entities played an important role in

creating the public relations stunt: the pope, five-year-old child, and immigration organization.

Pope Francis

On September 22, 2015, Pope Francis arrived in Washington, D.C., making his first-ever trip to the United States as Holy Father. He was greeted by President Obama and the First Lady, including the president’s daughters. Such excellent greeting figures signified the popularity of the pope among the American public. A poll conducted a few weeks before his arrival showed that 66% of Americans have either a “favorable” or “very favorable” view of the pope (Time, 2015). The pope’s popularity crossed wide swaths of American society, according to *Time* magazine (2015). The pope even built a phenomenon of fandom in the United States. The poll found that 87% of Catholics were fans of the pope; 61% of Protestants and 63% of people who follow “no religion” counted themselves as Francis fans (2015).

Thanks to his popularity, the pope’s schedules for the U.S. visit were tightly managed until September 27 when he would depart for return to Rome. He attended the White House welcoming ceremony, several papal motorcades, and meetings with politicians while giving speeches to Congress and the United Nations. He also celebrated several Masses in D.C., New York, and Philadelphia. Wherever he went, he received overwhelming welcome from the American public, including even a prison visit. After addressing a joint session of Congress at the Capitol on early September 24, he chose to visit a shelter giving free food for the homeless in D.C., instead of accepting the invitation to dine with politicians. The media praised his benevolent action: “The symbolic move was evidence of Francis’ desire to reach out to the margins and care for the poor” (Kuruvilla, 2015, para.7). Not surprisingly, his every move and word were covered by the media in a positive light, which led to an increase in his already-high favorability ratings with most American public. A survey conducted after his departure found a snapshot of his impact: “Four times as many U.S. adults say their opinion of the Catholic Church is better now because of Pope Francis as people who say their impression has gotten worse” (Grossmann, 2015, para.3). His first visit to the United States left nothing but a more positive view of the church.

Five-Year-Old Girl

Sophie Cruz, the daughter of two undocumented immigrants from Mexico, was living in Los Angeles. She and her sister unlike her parents were American citizens, so she always felt scared of her parents being deported. She saw her family “get separated,” and her parents always told her “the truth when she asks why” (Hernández, 2015, para.4). Her family traveled to Washington D.C. to see the pope like other millions of people who hoped to spot His Holiness appearances on public motorcades. On September 23, the pope made an open car parade from the White House to St. Matthew’s Cathedral along the National Mall, which was “one of the largest mobilizations of security officers in American history” (Schmidt & Yardley, 2015, para.6). The officers elected large holding barricades along the route where the pope was scheduled to appear for onlookers who would be subject to screening for weapons and explosive, including no allowance for selfie sticks (2015, para.7). Even under such a historically tight security detail, a security breach turned out to be inevitable when an innocent-looking girl vied for the pope’s attention.

The five-year-old child made her way past the barricades as the pope was waving his hand to the onlookers in the D.C. Street. Cruz succeeded in catching the pope’s attention when her father lifted her over the barricade. The pope stopped the parade and asked the security officers to let her approach. It was a historical moment a child thwarted the ever-tight security. Capturing his attention in which the moment seemed a spontaneous event, the child personally handed the pope a T-shirt and a letter. In return, the pope bestowed upon her a blessing and a hug.

By thwarting the papal security entourage, capturing His Holiness’s attention, and bounding up to hand him a gift and a hand-written letter, the five-year-old child had endeared herself to the nation. In response to her seemingly spontaneous gesture with the pope’s blessing, the *New York Times* described the moment as “When Pope Francis stopped the motorcade to embrace Sophie, who was dressed in traditional costume, it was a touching moment of unrehearsed graciousness” (Downes, 2015, para.3). In addition, the *Times* identified the child as “a harmless, lovely little girl” who got to the heart of power and influence (2015, para.8). Her moment with the pope was captured on live television, and the photo the child being

greeted by His Holiness was spread all around the world through the Internet. The photo was an “amazing image ... A little Latina girl in pigtails and sneakers braves the barricades and the black suits to deliver a hug, a T-shirt and a letter to Pope Francis” (2015, para.5). In other words, the photo was more than enough in drawing heartstrings. The T-shirt carrying a message advocating Obama’s executive actions on immigration to stop her parents from deportation explained the child’s primary intention to meet the pope. In addition, the letter given by the child demonstrated a clearer message targeting U.S. immigration laws. Part of the letter read:

Pope Francis, I want to tell you that my heart is very sad, because I’m scared that one day ICE is going to deport my parents. I have a right to live with my parents. I have a right to be happy. My dad works very hard in a factory *galvanizing* [emphasis added] metals. Immigrants like my dad feed this country. They therefore deserve to live with *dignity* [emphasis added] they deserve to be respected, they deserve immigration reform, because it would be beneficial to my country, and because they have earned it working very hard, picking oranges, onions, watermelons, spinach, lettuce, and many other vegetables (as cited in *Slate*, 2015).

According to her parents and their friends, the five-year-old child crafted the letter all by herself from her own heart with such words of “galvanizing” and “dignity” (Gross, 2015). Media coverage of the child propelled by the pope’s heartfelt blessing would be aimed to generate positive emotional feelings for her and her family. The child’s father, Raul, said that he was “surprised and happy” that his daughter was able to get so close to the pope (CBS News, 2015, para.9).

Full Rights for Immigrants Coalition

The five-year-old girl’s seemingly spontaneous encounter with the pope functioned as a powerful appeal to emotion for most American publics. For example, online comments on the *New York Times* article read (2015): “A beautiful moment... such a brave, articulate little girl, and the pope was very gracious, too” (X.Y. as online I.D.); “I see Pope Francis, President Obama and Sophie Cruz and my heart sings with joy and pride as an American and human

being” (John as online I.D.); “Watching & listening to this little girl makes me feel ashamed about our political discourse about immigrants & the poor” (June as online I.D.); and so on. Such comments toward the plight of the child and her family positively demonstrated the effectiveness of emotional persuasion, especially for the pathetic appeals. However, the pity emotion in less than 24 hours shifted to an appeal to emotions of anger and hatred toward the child and her family due to a news expose.

Two days after the emotional encounter of the pope and the child, Associated Press (AP) reporter Alicia Caldwell broke a story behind the scene. Simply put, the five-year-old girl and the pope were used by other entities to create the emotional moment. According to the news story, the scene was scripted by members of a coalition of Los Angeles-based immigration rights groups, mostly from the Full Rights for Immigrants Coalition. A director of the coalition admitted that they planned the encounter from the moment they learned about the pope’s visit to the United States, hoping to sensitize the American public dealing with immigration. In fact, Pope Francis had been known as a strong supporter of immigrants and refugees. To achieve a fruitful outcome, the coalition cherry-picked the five-year-old girl to represent their stance for U.S. immigration reform in favor of illegal or undocumented immigrants. The director, Juan Jose Gutierrez, said, “We have been looking for children to make the case that we as adults have been making for years” to deliver the message in the form of a little girl” (Caldwell, 2015, para.4).

It turned out that members of the coalition traveled to Washington with the child and her family, and the child had been trained and cultivated to accomplish the mission of creating the emotional scene. The pope was taken advantage of by the coalition and the child, and the media almost fell for the thoroughly orchestrated public relations stunt. If the child’s stunt had failed in D.C., the coalition would have driven her to New York and Philadelphia where the pope was scheduled to hold public motorcades. Questioned about the coalition’s manipulative stunt orchestration regarding using a child, the director was quoted as saying, the child “spoke from her heart. It all came from her ... She didn’t have anyone coaching her” (2015, para.10).

It turned out that this was not the organization’s first stunt orchestration in using a child. In

March 2014, it implemented another public relations stunt in Rome after training the 10-year-old girl, Jersey Vargas. The child traveled to Rome from Los Angeles. She waiting for the pope in a Vatican grandstand succeeded in being approached by the pope behind the fence. She didn’t miss the chance by giving the pope a handkerchief embroidered with the Spanish words ‘nido de amor’ or ‘nest of love’ in English and telling him to help her father who was facing deportation in a detention facility in Louisiana (Farberov, 2014). The 10-year-old girl’s encounter with the pope dramatically occurred just one day before President Obama was scheduled to meet the pope at the Vatican. The pope promised her that he would talk to Obama about her father. A few days later after the pope’s meeting with the president, the child’s illegal immigrant father, who was convicted of driving under the influence, was freed from detention “after relatives posted a \$5,000 bond” (Murphy, 2014, para.6). The organization deliberately orchestrated the public relations stunt in Rome. Gutierrez said, “The archdiocese of Los Angeles helped get the group a key spot so they could speak with Pope Francis amid the crowds” (2014, para.13). Before her flight back to Los Angeles, the child expressed her excitement, saying she would be reunited with her father.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This study analyzed the sentimental story from a public relations perspective. The story turned out to be beyond innocence of the child, meaning that it is worth being investigated further. Departing from the method of discourse analysis on an informal case study, this study focused on evaluating the outcomes of public stunt and public sentiment.

5.1. Publicity Stunt

The five-year-old girl pleased her parents and the stunt organizers who longed for prime coverage of the media. When the media reported a specific story, aimed at spreading goal-oriented messages with stunning or heartfelt images, it could be defined as a publicity stunt, considered one of the public relations field tactics. Horton (n.a.) suggested that a publicity stunt is derived from “humans’ natural tendency of showing off as an effective form of message delivery” with which every public relations practitioner is familiar (p.2). One big challenge of any publicity stunt is to preserve the message contained within it . In essence, successful

publicity stunts are associated with such elements of visual aids, extraordinary story lines, and the media’s willingness to cover. When publicity stunts are embedded into dramatic, graphic, and humanitarian stories with a feature of struggling or adorable human beings, they are unlikely to be neglected by the media. More important, stories of struggling children connected to important figures are a goldmine for the media and public relations practitioners in terms of publicity for mutual benefits; the practitioners serve as a source for a news story, and the media use it for coverage.

The seemingly spontaneous encounter with the pope from Vatican and a child of Mexican illegal immigrant parents living in the United States contained the perfect elements of a publicity stunt, bound to be a success. The child’s stroke of luck in catching the pope’s attention was the hardest part of the stunt orchestration. The pope saw her, and the thoroughly orchestrated stunt paid off. The photo images of the child being greeted by the pope became a sensational icon of distributing the message, aimed at signaling an embracement for more illegal immigrants into the nation, established by immigrants a long time ago. The stunt organizer confessed his intention of taking advantage of the pope’s personality of loving

Table 1. *Comments and Categories of Emotions*

	Number of Comments	One Phrase Representing the Emotion
Anger	84	They have all free stuff from our tax money
Pity	0	Our ancestors were immigrants
Fear	15	Anchor babies are used for illegal immigrants
Hatred	32	The girl and family should be deported
Irrelevance	23	Vatican should invite them; the media failed

More than majority of the comments (N= 84, 55%) were tied to the emotion of anger against the illegal immigrants. Online commentators who expressed anger pointed out illegal immigrants get jobs that pay under the table and they don’t pay any taxes, while they are using government-funded welfare services such as food stamps and Medicaid. The commentators argued that the U.S. economy is weak in trillion dollars of debt so the country should focus on taking care of its own citizens, rather than illegal immigrants who take lower skilled jobs from Americans. One exemplary comment is posted by pennylane in online I.D:

One is too many. No immigrant, legal or illegal, should receive government assistance. We have too many American citizens out of work, too many veterans

children, saying, “When he [the pope] saw this little girl, he had to have known in his heart that this was another important message in the form of a little girl” (CBS News, 2015, para.10).

Public Sentiment to the Stunt

The sentimental, empathetic, and compassionate public attitudes toward the plight of five-year-old Sophie Cruz, her family, and other illegal immigrant families changed dramatically right after the AP news story in the headline of “Immigration group planned girl’s pope encounter for a year” broke out on *Yahoo! News* website on September 25, 2015 (visit <https://www.yahoo.com/news/la-immigration-group-center-girls-encounter-pope-080344753--politics.html?ref=gs>). A total of 154 comments (including replies to comments) were posted from the same day to September 29, 2015 when the last comment was analyzed as convenient sampling. This study looked into all of the comments and sorted out the comments into the categories of emotional reactions to feelings toward Latin American illegal immigrants living in the United States (see Table 1). The categories, based on Aristotle’s four emotions of pathetic appeals, were anger, pity, fear, and hatred. In addition, another category of irrelevance was added for comments not related to the direct issue of illegal immigrants.

not receiving the care they need, and the unemployment rate among blacks especially is outrageous.

Next mostly expressed emotion was hatred. Thirty-two comments (20%) functioned as an outlet for the emotion of hatred. The comments were supportive of deportation. Their main point can be summarized: If the five-year-old-girl wants to live with her parents, she should either be deported or go to Mexico with her parents. Such commentators argued that illegal immigrants instead of trying to live in the United States in the shadow should go back to their countries with no fear of being deported. One comment was posted by Donlee in online I.D.:

“She can easily live with her family even if they are deported - by going to Mexico with her parents!”

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Fifteen comments (10%) were concerned about children who were born to illegal immigrant parents in the United States. Such commentators pointed out that illegal immigrants exploit the law of birthright citizenship, which guarantees U.S. citizenship to a new born baby. For example, a baby was born to a woman who illegally swam across the Rio Grande River and gave birth to the baby in a Texas hospital. The baby is identified as “an anchor baby” that is expected to give his or her illegal parent(s) grounds “to come and stay in the US and become eligible for government benefits” (Urban Dictionary). According to *Top Right News*, an online news agency, “Medicaid alone paid \$2.2 billion last year to partially reimburse hospitals for unpaid illegal alien delivery bills” (2015, para.4). One comment by Taxpayer in online I.D. read:

This is the way of the illegal aliens to use children to stay in this country, this is an anchor baby, they are exploiting children. What about the American families that don't have jobs?

No one expressed the emotion of pity for illegal immigrants, because all comments were posted after the online users read the expose article. As mentioned, many people expressed their passionate and sympathetic feelings for illegal immigrants by sharing the plight of the five-year-old girl before the AP news article. However, the feelings turned to hostility with the fact that the child was used for the propagandistic purpose of the coalition in a manipulative fashion.

One interesting aspect with these comments was about the pope and media. Thirteen comments (15%) were directly linked to the pope's behavior and media's coverage style. One day after the stunt the pope made a nearly hour-long speech “before Congress calling for the U.S. to display greater openness to immigrants as well as refugees” (Gross, 2015, para.5). Two comments were about the media in favor of staged events. Eleven comments were of criticizing the pope and Vatican that pressured the United States to accept illegal immigrants. Such commentators asked why the pope would do the same push to Vatican or himself. One comment by online I.D. of DTS 623 noted:

The Catholic Church is one of the wealthiest entities on the planet. There is a massive wall surrounding the Vatican

and they have armed guards protecting the wall,,,,,should we not have the same right?

As the majority of comments demonstrated, the emotions of anger, fear, and hatred dominated those commentators' feelings (N=131, 85%). Simply put, the flawlessly performed stunt was short lived and backfired although the coalition at least fulfilled its goal of media publicity that led to form positive public sentiment.

The media did their job to report the stunt, containing the news elements of prominence with the pope and novelty with the five-year-old child. The American public responded to the heartfelt story and images in an empathetic manner. The media reported what messages were embedded in the T-shirt and letter, given to the pope by the child. The media portrayed the encounter as a beautiful and adorable event for the pope and a child of illegal immigrant parents. The encounter could not find any better social surroundings regarding spreading the coalition's messages to support President Obama's stalled program: Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Legal Permanent Residents. The surroundings included Donald Trump's rhetoric against illegal immigrants from Mexico, the popular pope's visit to the United States, the refugee crisis in Europe, and the heated social debate for immigration reform. The stunt occurred in the right place at the right time. It was just perfect timing to raise public awareness of the issue and to stir public emotion in creating favorable public opinion.

The American public as an audience in the stunt was almost persuaded to have a pitiful feeling toward the child and illegal immigrants, as opposed to Donald Trump's rhetoric which ignited an appeal to the emotion of fear. Trump's rhetoric signaled the criminal impression of illegal immigrants who would bring drugs and crime to the United States. Some of Americans who agree with Trump's view on illegal immigrants are likely to be affected by the fear appeal. Trump was effective in attracting media and public attention by bringing the national immigration issue to American voters. Coincidentally the immigration issue became a world issue in line with the Syrian refugee crisis in Europe. Furthermore, the pope's visit kept the issue revolving around the pivotal social and political issue in the United States. All circumstances were cordial and canny for the coalition and the child from a propaganda perspective. As Colly argued (2015),

propaganda can be effective if the propagandist conceals its true purpose. The coalition had concealed its purpose while executing the stunt until the AP article revealed the purpose. It effectively propagandized the moment of the encounter by placing the five-year-old child. The images of the pope and child generated positive emotions for illegal immigrants to the American public. The strategy to spark an emotional appeal to the American public was simply perfect.

As the *New York Times* article and other news articles showed, the media and public responded to the encounter with one of the pathetic appeals – mostly with pity. As the coalition’s director confessed, the encounter was sophisticatedly planned and implemented. The core of planning was choosing an idealistic child who could execute the plan to maximize an outcome depending on an appeal to emotion. The concept of child propaganda suggests that an idealistic child should be flexible in operating a mission, be filled with an image of innocence closer to nature, and be feasible in following an order (Collins, 2011). Five-year-old Sophie Cruz turned out to be a perfect performer serving as the vehicle for spreading propagandistic messages. The child demonstrated how images of children can influence the manner in which the media and the public receive and interpret propagandistic messages. The child successfully played a lead role in a heart wrenching public relations stunt, supported by the coalition and her father. The pope unintentionally played a supporting role for the stunt, which at first was effective in forming emotional public attitudes influenced by the child propaganda tactics and pathetic appeal.

CONCLUSION

Although an appeal to emotion is a powerful weapon to persuade an audience, not every audience is influenced by emotional appeals when they facilitate Cartesian skepticism or doubt. People learn that what they are told or see or hear or feel cannot be always correct. That should make them wonder about whether any phenomenon can be misunderstood. This study explored a sentimental story, orchestrated in a form of public relations stunt. It is a fact that organizations plan and execute media stunts for free publicity by aiming to raise public awareness. The media respond to such news worthy events with coverage. The five-year-old child and the pope were a perfect match for free

publicity by the media. The public was touched by the story and images of the stunt, expressing their emotional support for illegal immigrants. This study analyzed such emotions, using Greek philosopher Aristotle’s rhetoric of pathetic appeals.

The stunt suffered a public backlash with the expose. The emotional public sentiment for the child turned to the feeling of hostility against illegal immigrants. This study adopted the Cartesian doubt to evaluate the dramatic shift of feelings. The theory of Cartesian doubt suggests people adopt a critical method that leads to a means of avoiding an error by tracing what they know back to a firm foundation of indubitable beliefs (Descartes, 1641, as cited in Tamu.edu). The theory emphasizes that people cannot be certain of when their senses are correctly feeling the way things really are or are not. Therefore, doubting things is justified as a human activity. At the time of the five-year-old child’s encounter being revealed as a stunt, the American public turned to Cartesian skepticism in evaluating the plight of illegal immigrants. The senses of the public focused statistical and scientific facts on evaluating the stunt. They expressed their emotions of anger and hatred toward the coalition and illegal immigrants who cost Americans jobs and social services. Their emotion of pity was replaced with emotions of hatred and anger. Their emotion of fear functioned as a tool to attack anchor babies in the United States like the five-year-old girl. In short, Cartesian skepticism brought the American public to the method of questionable doubt for reality from emotional images of the stunt of child propaganda.

Based on the case of a public relations stunt, this study explored a methodological and theoretical analysis on emotional appeals aimed at distributing sentimental messages to an audience in hopes of changing their attitudes, public opinion, and further policies. This study showed why a public relations stunt could be effective, how it could be planned and orchestrated, and what factors could be adopted for such a stunt. The case of five-year-old Sophie Cruz with Pope Francis represents comprehensive strategies and procedures of a public relations stunt, strongly associated with persuasive communication in theory and practice.

This study has several limitations as with all research. It is hard to generalize that all public relations stunts are manipulative and twisted as this study appears to shed light on the negative

sentiment of the public toward illegal immigrants. In contrast, public relations stunts do not have to acquire negative connotations like the term *propaganda* if they are used properly in pursuit of raising public awareness for products and services of organizations, including government. Second, this study lacked the ability of exploring other current cases of child propaganda, including ISIS. For future research, more cases of child propaganda need to be investigated in the 2000s.

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