

The Common Donor's Motive: An Online Field Experiment

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ABSTRACT

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many organizations came forward to alleviate the sudden financial and primary needs of the dependent and disadvantaged population via online fundraisers; where the appeal is crucial in encouraging people to engage in prosocial behavior. Studies about social responsibility norm and the Empathy Joy hypothesis provisionally prove their role in enhancing prosocial behavior. We studied the difference in online donating behavior as a function of the motive through a field experiment. We circulated three kinds of messages on social media: 1- appealing to egoistic motive 2- appealing to social responsibility 3- information only appeal (control) to evaluate their comparative effect on donating. The data suggests that underlying motivation had no influence on the choice of donation or the amount donated. The paper provides suggestions for organizers of fundraising campaigns based on past research findings and results of the current study.

Keywords: COVID-19, Prosocial Behaviour, Donating, Crowd Fundraising, Fundraiser Appeal, Social Responsibility, Egoistic Motivation, Persuasion

The period from January 15 to February 28, 2021 saw a nation-wide 'Shri Ram Mandir Nidhi Samarpan Abhiyan' which gathered over INR 2,000 crores in 44 days. The campaign combined both physical and online modes of fundraising. Crowd funding is a longstanding tradition in India. Non-governmental organizations have been collecting 'varganī' - door to door voluntary contributions in India for decades. Many urban public schools hold drives for the Armed Forces Flag Day Fund where students go around collecting money and writing receipts for the donors. Volunteers standing at public places and securing donors were a common sight.

Even so, modern crowd fundraising via online crowd funding platforms is relatively new and the causes are diversifying to raising money for business ventures, medical operations for the underprivileged, as well as pressing social issues like the 2020 migrant exodus.

During the pandemic, many organizations started fundraising campaigns addressing financial & primary needs of the dependent populations through digital advertising. As the number of appeals for funds increased, with limited interaction, it became harder to capture

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donors' attention and secure the required help - the impact of the appeal decided the success of the campaign. The current study was a field experiment to analyze prosocial behavior as a function of underlying motives. We analyzed voluntary donations to a crowd fundraiser for adolescent mental health in response to appeals invoking either social responsibility, egoistic motivation or neither of the two.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Crowd funding is an emerging process for fueling social initiatives. Factors contributing to fundraisers' successes can be grouped under four categories - beneficiary characteristics, message characteristics, credibility and clarity, & scale and reach of the campaign (Degaspero & Mainardes, 2017; Salido-Andres et al, 2019).

Prosocial Behavior (**PSB**) refers to "voluntary actions that are intended to help or benefit another individual or group of individuals" (Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989). When organizations ask for donations, they need to arouse prosocial intentions. These intentions can be motivated egotistically, altruistically, using both or neither (Batson & Shaw, 1991).

Egoistic motivation (**EM**) models like Empathy Joy hypothesis (Smith, Keating and Stotland, 1989) and competitive altruism rely on the actor's self-serving intentions that result in prosocial behavior.

Problem Awareness → Cost-Benefit Analysis →
Receiver's Feedback → Prosocial Intention/ Behavior

Altruistically motivated prosocial actors act solely in the interest of others.

Problem Awareness → Empathy → Prosocial Intentions/ Behavior

Motivation can also concern benefits to both - self and others. The normative motive of social responsibility (**SR**) is a helping principle of social behaviour that a person should give aid to dependent others who need assistance, without the expectation of future returns. Schwartz's Norm Activation Model Mediator (1977) presents the following path for eliciting PSB.

The Norm Activation (Mediator Model): Problem Awareness → Ascription of Responsibility →
Personal Norms → Prosocial Intentions/ Behavior

holding society together (Krishnan & Manoj, 2006). The SR motivation therefore views the benefits to the self and society as interconnected.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting crisis had generated feelings of distress as well as responsibility. An increasing number of individuals empathized and identified with the financial and emotional problems. Prima facie, people demonstrated willingness to help those in distress. Knowing that they made a difference, however minuscule, helped to elevate their mood. Feelings of responsibility towards society also played a role. Considering these factors, the current study was undertaken to understand whether there is a difference in the prosocial behaviour expressed in response to social responsibility, egoistic motive as compared to the control condition.'

METHODOLOGY

The following hypotheses were tested-

Hypothesis 1: “There will be no significant difference in the number of people who donate to a fundraiser as a function of the motive primed via social media appeals.”

Hypothesis 2: “There will be no significant difference in the mean amount donated to the fundraiser as a function of the motive primed via social media appeals.”

Method

To test the hypothesis a field experiment was undertaken.

Variables

The independent variable i.e., underlying motive was introduced in the social media appeals - both graphic and textual, structured using a standard template (Table 1).

Table 1: Structuring the appeals circulated on social media

(I.V.) Message →			
Experimental Condition ↓	Cause	Beneficiary	Why Donate?
Information-only	✓	✓	-
SR	✓	✓	You are a responsible member of society and every little bit counts!
EM	✓	✓	Your donation will bring a smile to a child's face, and what better way than that to increase your happiness!

Dependent Variable

Prosocial behaviour was measured in terms of the number of people who donated and the amount donated.

Sampling

The study utilized snowball sampling on social media

Procedure

In the field study, a fundraiser for a Mumbai-based NGO was created on an online platform for the cause of adolescent mental health. The underlying motive was introduced in the social media appeals - both graphic and textual. The message was linked to a google form which collected demographic details, relevant data and showed a short video to strengthen the appeal. A manipulation check showed that only the SR appeal was successful ($p < .01$). The link to the fundraiser was given on submission of the form. The frequency and magnitude of donations were recorded in each condition.

Chi square was used to compare the number of participants who donated in the three groups of the experiment and one-way ANOVA was used to compare the amount donated.

RESULTS

In all there were 78 participants. 54 (69%) Females and 24 (30.7%) Males responded to the appeal. Majority of them (65, 83%) were college students.

Table No.2 No. of people who donated and the mean amount donated in the three conditions

	Reach (no. of clicks on the link)	No. of responses on the form (N)	No. of people who donated	Total Amount Donated (INR)	Mean Amount Donated (INR)	Standard Deviation (σ)
Social Responsibility (SR)	97	26	13	5292	203.54	367.13
Egoistic Motive (EM)	76	26	6	1400	53.85	151.61
Control	76	26	6	2512	96.62	246.08
Total	249	78	25	8589		

Hypothesis 1: $X^2(2, N = 78) = 5.77$ (n.s.)

Hypothesis 2: $F(2, 75) = 2.12$ (n.s.)

The underlying motivation had no influence on the choice of donation or the amount donated.

The donors in each condition were also analyzed by gender (Espinosa et al., 2015) and earning status at the time of the experiment - to check if the two variables influenced their choice of donating. At the time of data collection, 15 of the 78 participants were earning. There was no significant difference in the number of participants who donated in the three groups ($X^2(2) = 5.77$ n.s.) as well as the amount donated by participants in the three groups $F(2, 75) = 2.12$ (n.s.)

DISCUSSION

There was no significant difference in the number of donations in experimental conditions as compared to the control condition, suggesting that a well-reasoned and structured appeal is enough to draw donors to the campaign. Some participants viewed the EM as a blatant marketing strategy (implying a negative connotation) and were dissuaded from donating. Explicitly self-serving motives should therefore be avoided or used with caution.

India is a collectivist culture that values individual contributions that strengthen social initiatives. This culture is now internalized and materializes in our daily actions. Although not counterproductive, SR does not work more effectively than a simple, informative appeal. Respecting the donor's time, organizations should focus on raising awareness of the problem and highlight ways in which the community can help.

The 'logos' element of persuasion is arguably effective as it adopts the central route and creates a convincing foundation. The appeal in all three conditions included graphic

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representations of the problems that adolescents face, objective ways in which the program would help & its per student cost.

The participants were all educated members of the society. Research backs the notion that educated individuals are more likely to be persuaded by reason than by emotion. In a situation where the necessity of community participation is obvious, they are able to recognize and address this need according to their capacity without any prompting. Among the 53 who refrained from donating in the current study, some reported that they had already donated to various causes, some expressed their current incapacity and a few reported that they were volunteering their time.

For the unresponsive sample, it is possible that they did not identify with the cause. The low response rate reflected limits of the digital medium where such appeals are easily ignored. In the online campaigns where interaction is minimal, organizers can try to build up to the cause by regularly posting relevant information, facts, how the cause affects society and what they are doing to address the issue. This logical build-up coupled with audience engagement will provide a strong base for the subsequent fundraising campaign and will also establish credibility.

Beyond SR and EM, the study observed an overarching factor that influenced the participants' choice of donating - trust. Although the fundraising appeal reached a wide, diverse, international audience through shares on social media, the people who donated in all 3 conditions were individuals in the researcher's immediate social circles. Although strangers showed symbolic support to the initiative through shares and reposts, only friends and relatives contributed monetarily. In the current study, the NGO was unknown to the participants. This indicates that even when people identify the cause as deserving, monetary contribution through fundraisers requires trust in the organizer as well as in the beneficiary of the aid. Past research supports this finding. Carattini and Roesti (2020) demonstrated that high-level trust is associated with PSB and collective action.

Further research can evaluate donations vary by cause, process or the mode of helping, i.e., money, kind, or time with a more representative sample.

CONCLUSION

The results indicated that prosocial spending does not vary as a function of the underlying motive. The study was undertaken at a time when the hardworking population of Mumbai and their families had become dependent on the population that was relatively financially secure. While a majority of the participants identified with the cause, trust evidently played a major role in determining whether intent translated into action. Adam Smith claimed that actors collectively working with selfish motives will ultimately benefit society. Human nature continues to reflect a complex interplay of societal membership and selfish motives. As the results of this study demonstrate, neither can be denied, and both influence everyday decisions to varying degrees. Advertising for fundraisers will be most effective if it's based on reason and builds on trust.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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