

Research finds 'charity beauty premium' influences donor decisions

November 29 2016, by Erika Ebsworth-Goold

On Giving Tuesday, holiday donation campaigns launch into high gear, with various year-end appeals supporting a whole array of causes. But how do people decide where to donate their money? They know that they should give to the neediest cases, but new research from Washington University in St. Louis's Olin Business School shows the donation decision often comes down to something called a "charity beauty premium."

"We observed that donors often favor beautiful, but less needy charity recipients," said Cynthia Cryder, associate professor of marketing at Olin.

Cryder and her co-authors—Simona Botti, associate professor of marketing at the London Business School, and Yvetta Simonyan, lecturer at the University of Birmingham—conducted eight different studies involving thousands of in-person and online participants. They showed them multiple photos of actual charity recipients and observed how participants responded. The bottom line: Beauty prevailed when it came to making intuitive choices on where, how much, and to whom to donate.

"There seems to be a very basic automatic preference for beauty," Cryder said. In one study, a significantly greater percentage of participants chose to sponsor a giraffe or zebra (both rated as highly beautiful) rather than a penguin or orangutan (rated as less beautiful), despite correctly perceiving the latter two animals as more severely

endangered. "If you're asking people to make quick decisions based on intuition, then a preference for beautiful recipients emerges. However, visual judgments of neediness and beauty are negatively correlated, which means when donors are choosing the beautiful recipients, they are overlooking the needy ones, who are the ones they say they should give to."

Although participants chose beautiful recipients when deciding quickly and intuitively, when participants were asked to carefully consider charitable recipients, there was a shift. When encouraged to deliberate, participants opted to donate to those recipients they knew they should (the needier recipient) instead of those they wanted to give to (the more beautiful recipient).

"We found when we asked [participants](#) to make very thoughtful and well-reasoned decisions, then a preference for needier recipients emerged," Cryder said.

So where does this leave organizations looking to boost their bottom lines via charitable donations? Cryder found that because many decisions are intuitive, they should focus on the donor's experience during the act of giving to be more successful.

"The most effective charities, who do the most good in terms of serving the neediest recipients and serving them well, should be the savviest about potentially highlighting the most aesthetically pleasing causes that they have," Cryder said.

"More broadly, they should be very attuned to allowing their donors to feel good about their donation. If a charitable organization is able to affirm to people that they are doing a good thing, and also ensure that donors are feeling good about giving, they might be more successful long-term."

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

Citation: Research finds 'charity beauty premium' influences donor decisions (2016, November 29) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-11-charity-beauty-premium-donor-decisions.html>

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