

# Virtual reality can motivate people to donate to refugee crises regardless of politics

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Political conservatives who watched a documentary on Syrian refugees with a virtual reality headset had far more sympathy for the people depicted in the film than those who viewed the same film on a two-

dimensional computer screen.

Higher sympathy levels among the conservatives who watched the VR version of the documentary, "Clouds over Sidra," resulted in a greater willingness to donate to the crisis, according to a study on the research [published](#) in *New Media & Society*.

Liberal participants in the study reported high levels of sympathy and intention to donate after watching both versions of the documentary. The Washington State University-led analysis suggests that by offering a unique and [immersive experience](#), VR technology may have the ability to bridge the gap between different ideological perspectives and influence the attitudes of audiences to show more sympathy and generosity towards refugees. The results of the study could have implications for organizations trying to mobilize action on human suffering.

"We wanted to see if people's political views would play a role in how they responded emotionally to VR as this has not been heavily studied," said Porismita Borah, a professor in the Edward R. Murrow College of Education and lead author of the study. "We found that irrespective of [political ideology](#), people in the VR condition felt more sympathy towards refugees and were more inclined toward donating."

For the study, Borah and colleagues from WSU, Texas Tech University and Purdue University set out to investigate the impact of VR technology on a politically diverse group of people's empathy and sympathy towards refugees. They also looked at VR technology's influence on the study participants' willingness to donate to relief organizations.

More than 200 college-aged individuals participated in two experiments, a [pilot study](#) in fall 2019 and the main study in fall 2021. In both studies,

participants self-reported their political affiliation and were divided into VR and non-VR groups to watch "Clouds Over Sidra," a United Nations documentary portraying the life of a 12-year-old Syrian girl in a Jordanian refugee camp. Before and after watching the documentary, both groups were surveyed on their levels of empathy, sympathy and intention to donate to various humanitarian aid organizations.

While VR technology was found to enhance both sympathy and empathy overall toward the plight of refugees, its effects varied when political ideology entered the equation.

Notably, conservatives reported much higher increases in sympathy after experiencing VR content than they did after watching the documentary in a traditional video format. This increase in sympathy led conservatives to indicate a greater willingness to donate to relief organizations than when they watched the [documentary](#) in two dimensions on a computer screen. On the other hand, liberals who participated in the study had higher levels of sympathy toward refugees to begin with and indicated a willingness to donate after watching both versions of the video.

The researchers acknowledge that there are some limitations to their work. The study gauged people's emotional responses to only one crisis and all the participants were college-aged.

Nevertheless, the work highlights the emerging potential of VR to influence political attitudes and engagement with humanitarian issues, with implications for both theory and practice.

"Understanding how political ideology can interact with the VR experience is crucial and shows that emerging technologies might be able to interact with predispositions such as ideology," Borah said. "I think this work may have practical applications for NGOs and other organizations striving to find innovative ways to engage the public about

refugee crises and other humanitarian disasters."

Co-authors include Bimbisar Irom, Yoon Joo Lee, Danielle Ka Lai Lee, Di Mu and Ron Price from WSU as well as Anastasia Vishnevskaya from Texas Tech University and Eylul Yel from Purdue University.

**More information:** Porismita Borah et al, VR technology and humanitarian crisis: Political ideology and the intention to donate in the case of the Syrian refugee crisis, *New Media & Society* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/14614448241247209](https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448241247209)

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