

Would You Donate to a Researcher at an Amusement Park? The backfiring role of incongruent background in a charity appeal

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Although various studies have investigated the factors contributing to a successful donation appeal, most have only focused on the characteristics of the donation recipient. For instance, emotional expressions and identifiable victims can increase generosity. The role of background in shaping donation decisions remains instead mostly underexplored. Understanding how visual context influences donation is critical, as background elements can enhance perceived impact, a key driver of prosocial behavior. This research addresses this gap by investigating whether the congruence of the background in charity appeals affects motivation to donate through perceived impact and congruence. Across two pre-registered, experimental studies (Study 1, N = 168; Study 2, N = 197), participants were randomly assigned between-subject to view a charity appeal showing a researcher with a congruent background (a scientific lab), an incongruent background (an amusement park), or no background. The results showed that participants exposed to an incongruent background reported a lower perceived impact of the donation and lower motivation to donate than those exposed to no background or a congruent one (highest perceived impact). Structural equation models showed that the effect of the background (congruent vs. both incongruent and no background) on motivation to donate was serially mediated by perceived background congruence and perceived impact in both studies. Additionally, we developed and validated a “Congruency Index” to measure how well the background of a charity appeal aligns with the cause’s message. Our findings can help to design more effective charity campaigns, highlighting the importance of visual alignment in enhancing donations.

If you’re submitting a symposium talk, what’s the symposium title?

If you’re submitting a symposium, or a talk that is part of a symposium, is this a junior symposium?

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