The Reparation Effect: Indulgent Consumption Increases Donation Behavior

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The biggest challenge faced by non-profit organizations is encouraging donors to donate. Thus, the question of when and where to target an altruistic appeal is of tremendous practical importance. This research finds that people donate more money to charity just after they have consumed an indulgent food (e.g. ice-cream or chocolates) compared to when they have consumed a non-indulgent food (sandwiches). We call the phenomenon the “reparation effect”, in which prior consumption of an indulgent option produces guilt, and as reparation for the act of consumption, people engage in charitable activities to alleviate their guilt. Across two field studies and one behavioral experiment, the reparation effect is demonstrated and the underlying psychological mechanism is explained.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15034/volumes/v37/NA-37

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Donations from the public constitute more than 75% of charitable contributions and thus are a major source of funds for charitable organizations (Giving USA 2007). Several ways have been researched to encourage charitable donations (Aunel and Basil 1994; Cialdini and Ascani 1976; Reingen 1978; Weyant and Smith 1987). This article proposes an unlikely prior act—food consumption—that could influence people’s donation behavior. Specifically, we propose and find evidence that people who consumed an indulgent food (e.g., ice cream or chocolates, which are often considered vices) donate more money to charitable causes than those who consumed a non-indulgent food (e.g., sandwiches).

In this research, we posit that the guilt originating from indulgent consumption increases subsequent acts of donation. Contributing to a charitable cause provides people a means to alleviate their guilt. Therefore, people are likely to donate more money after consuming an indulgent food option than after consuming a non-indulgent food option. We call the phenomenon the “reparation effect”, in which prior consumption of an indulgent option produces guilt, and as reparation for the act of consumption, people engage in charitable activities to alleviate their guilt.

In the first study, we approached people exiting eateries which specialized in either chicken sandwiches or ice creams at a large public university campus for filling up questionnaires in lieu of a chance to win a coupon for free ice cream or chicken sandwich depending on the location of the encounter. After several filler questions, we informed the participant about the activities of Red Cross and asked them to indicate the amount of money they would be willing to donate. In a subsequent unrelated questionnaire, participants were asked questions intended to measure consumption guilt. The results of study 1 demonstrated that participants were willing to donate more money after indulgent consumption than after non-indulgent consumption, thereby demonstrating the reparation effect. Also, it generated support for our claim that guilt mediated this willingness to donate.

Study 2 had two objectives. The first was to use a choice versus no-choice task to provide further support for the proposed guilt-based mechanism underlying the reparation effect. The second objective was to rule out a demand artifact explanation (i.e., the possibility that the results of the previous studies may be explained by a self-selection procedure). A poster was put up which described that participation in a research study would enable the participants to get a meal coupon. One hundred and nineteen participants approached the table where one of the authors and two research assistants sat. The participants were told that they had to participate in a short survey and as a token of appreciation they would get a meal coupon. This survey took place in two stages; one part of the questionnaire was completed before consuming food and the other part after consuming. The participants were informed that there were two conditions in the survey, one where the participant gets to choose what to eat and the other where the experimenter decides what they should eat. If allocated the choice condition the participants will have to choose between an ice-cream coupon and a chicken sandwich coupon, otherwise the experimenter would determine whether participant receives an ice-cream or a sandwich coupon. The logic behind such a procedure was that participants who were in the experimenter allocated ice-cream condition could have a justifiable reason for external attribution of indulgent consumption. We then randomly divided the participants into two groups. The participants in one group (choice group) were allowed to choose between two coupons entitling them to either a chicken sandwich or an ice-cream. The participants in the other group (no-choice group) were randomly allotted either the chicken sandwich or the ice-cream coupons. The participants then filled up the first part of the questionnaire which contained the demographic details and a question to assess their hunger state. The participants were then handed the coupons and proceeded with the research assistant to redeem their coupons. Once the participants had redeemed their coupons and consumed the product, immediately the research assistant then asked them to fill up the final part of the questionnaire which contained questions previously described in study 1. The results of study 2 replicate the findings of the reparation effect and also rule out self-selection bias as an alternate account since we randomly allocated participants to the ice-cream and chicken sandwich conditions. The results also find support for the proposed guilt-based mechanism.

In study 3, we wanted to lessen the impact of extraneous influences prevalent in field studies 1 and 2 by examining the reparation effect in a lab setting. Another objective was to investigate the influence of the quantity consumed on the reparation effect. If our conceptualization is true, then greater consumption of the indulgent food option should result in greater guilt and hence higher donation amounts. A final objective was to ensure that there were no differential influences due to the food items. It could be argued that ice cream and chicken sandwiches have different qualities (e.g., sugar vs. no sugar) and may be more or less filling. In order to address this concern we used the same chocolates for participant consumption but defined them as indulgent or non-indulgent. Participants were then asked to indicate the amount of money they would be willing to donate to such charitable institutions. The results of this study replicated the reparation effect and provided further evidence for our suggested account. We found an increased engagement in charity for those in the indulgent description condition compared to those in the non-indulgent description condition. Moreover, the effect was pronounced for those who consumed a higher number of indulgent chocolates.

The charity market is intensely competitive and guilt-appeals for donations are ubiquitous. Our findings suggest that charitable organizations will have a higher efficacy with donation appeals if they target post-indulgent behavior. Thus, the place at which an appeal is made is equally as important as when it is made.

REFERENCES


