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Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

## **Aesthetic Contrast Motivates Prosocial Behavior**

Amir Grinstein, Northeastern University, USA & VU Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Henrik Hagtvedt, Boston College, USA

Ann Kronrod, Michigan State University, USA & Northeastern University, USA

How can aesthetic experience motivate prosocial behavior? We demonstrate that aesthetic contrast (an aesthetically pleasing object within a displeasing group) increases prosocial behavior. The effect is driven by empathy and its two antecedents: identification with and perceived need of the focal group.

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# Aesthetic Contrast Motivates Prosocial Behavior

Amir Grinstein, Northeastern University, USA & VU Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Henrik Hagtvedt, Boston College, USA

Ann Kronrod, Michigan State University, USA & Northeastern University, USA

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Society is facing and increasingly addressing environmental and social problems such as pollution, malnutrition, and poverty. However, research and practice reveal that motivating people to behave in a socially responsible manner can be challenging and prosocial marketing campaigns are often ineffective (Duclos and Barasch 2014; Evans 2006; Kristofferson, White, and Peloza 2014). This highlights the need to examine motivations of prosocial behavior and communication approaches that are effective in encouraging such behavior. The focus of the current research is on visual images, which are typical in prosocial marketing communication. Specifically, we focus on the aesthetic nature of the visuals and its influence on prosocial behavior.

In a consumption context, aesthetic appeal (the degree to which an object is pleasing to the eye) has a favorable influence on consumer evaluations of ads, products, and brands (Bloch, Brunel, and Arnold 2003; Hoegg, Alba, and Dahl 2010). It is therefore unsurprising that marketers often incorporate aesthetic elements into commercial marketing communications. But what is the role of aesthetics in non-commercial contexts, such as communication designed to encourage prosocial behavior? The main goal of prosocial marketing is not to enhance evaluations or engender product desire but to persuade people to help others. An important notion is that pleasure is not the inevitable or only outcome of aesthetic experience; notably, a long tradition of aesthetics theory highlights empathy as a central component of aesthetic experience (Dissanayake 1992). Empathy is a central mechanism that drives helping behavior (Bagozzi and Moore 1994), so visuals that evoke empathy may be effective in prosocial communication. In light of this, is it beneficial to use aesthetic appeals as a means of elevating empathy and encouraging prosocial behavior?

There is mixed evidence for the persuasiveness of aesthetics in prosocial contexts (Eagly et al. 1991; Fisher and Ma 2014). On the one hand, people often afford attractive individuals more attention and better treatment, which in our view suggests that aesthetics can motivate prosocial behavior via a physical attractiveness stereotype, in line with the beauty-is-good effect (Langlois et al. 2000; Middlewood and Gasper 2014). On the other hand, Fisher and Ma (2014) find that favorable characteristics associated with aesthetic appeal (e.g., attractive children in need) may sometimes *reduce* empathy because the positive attributions make aesthetic individuals and objects appear less needy. Further, depiction of poverty, which is not aesthetically pleasing, may enhance empathy (Nickols and Nielsen 2011), and disfigured faces can evoke both disgust and empathy (Stone and Potton 2014). Thus, aesthetically displeasing appeals may also prompt helping behavior.

What, then, is the optimal use of aesthetics to motivate prosocial behavior? Prior literature indicates that both pleasing and displeasing visuals can evoke empathy and motivate helping behavior, and we therefore suggest that the optimal visual draws on both these elements, in what we term *aesthetic contrast*. Aesthetic contrast refers to a visual in which the aesthetically pleasing is juxtaposed with the aesthetically displeasing. In the following sections, we will argue that a particularly favorable response in terms of empathy and resulting mobilization for prosocial action arises from a visual with an aesthetically pleasing individual among a displeasing group. We further

argue that empathy is driven by two antecedents: (1) identification with the target of the prosocial cause (encouraged by the pleasing individual object) and (2) a sense of the need of that target (encouraged by the displeasing group of objects).

Specifically, we put forth the following set of hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1: A visual image featuring an aesthetically pleasing individual among an aesthetically displeasing group has a more favorable influence on prosocial behavior than does a visual featuring an aesthetically displeasing individual among an aesthetically pleasing group, an aesthetically pleasing individual among an aesthetically displeasing individual among an aesthetically displeasing group.*

*Hypothesis 2: The favorable influence of the visual on prosocial behavior is mediated by empathy toward the target of the prosocial cause.*

*Hypothesis 3: The influence of the visual on empathy is mediated by identification with and perceived need of the target of the prosocial cause.*

We test our hypotheses through 5 experiments (in the field, lab, and online) that focus on different prosocial contexts. Study 1a is a field experiment designed to investigate the influence of a visual with aesthetic contrast on donation behavior in a retail setting. Study 1b provides further evidence that the effect relies on aesthetic contrast; color contrast or an attractive object alone do not produce the same effect. Study 2 demonstrates the mediating role of empathy. Study 3 provides evidence for the full underlying process, including the antecedents of empathy: identification and perceived need. It also rules out an alternative explanation, namely, that our findings are not driven by aesthetic contrast but by perceived functionality. Finally, study 4 tests a boundary condition by investigating the moderating role of category similarity.

Overall, this research offers multiple key contributions. First, it is one of very few investigations focused on aesthetics in a prosocial marketing context. We shed light on prior findings regarding the impact of aesthetic appeal in prosocial marketing communication and to some extent also resolve apparent conflicts between these findings. Second, we introduce and demonstrate the role of aesthetic contrast in promoting prosocial behavior. Third, we implicate empathy as the mechanism underlying the influence of aesthetic contrast on prosocial behavior, while also demonstrating the roles of identification and perceived need in encouraging empathy. Fourth, whereas previous research has focused on human attractiveness as the source of aesthetic pleasure, we demonstrate our hypothesized effects with both human and non-human aesthetic appeals. Finally, the reported findings are not only relevant from psychological and consumer research points of view, but they are also of practical importance, considering the challenges involved in motivating prosocial behavior.

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