Consumer Donations: the Roles of Implicit Theories and Appeal Types

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The current research suggests that consumers’ implicit theory orientation may affect their prosocial behavior. Results of three studies show that incremental theorists donate more to cancer (obesity) charities if they use other (self) benefit appeals, whereas entity theorists donate more to cancer (obesity) charities regardless of benefit appeals.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Giving USA 2015 reports show that Americans contributed 358.38 billion dollars to charities in 2014. Existing literature has examined the impact of sympathy and empathy (Rick, Cruder, and Loewenstein 2008), guilt (Strahilevitz and Myers 1998), happiness (Liu and Aaker 2008), social identity (Aaker and Akutsu 2009), and awareness about one’s mortality (Cai and Wyer Jr 2015) on prosocial behavior. However, studies linking personality traits to charitable donations have been limited. The current research suggests that an individual’s implicit theory may affect that person’s likelihood to donate money to charities.

Entity theorists believe that characteristics are definite and unchangeable; whereas incremental theorists perceive them in a more dynamic and flexible way (Plaks, Grant, and Dweck 2005). When analyzing others’ behaviors, entity theorists focus their attention on personal and psychological traits without taking situational factors into account. However, incremental theorists interpret others’ actions based on changing situations (Levy, Stroessner, and Dweck, 1998). The primary focus of the current article is to understand how entity and incremental theorists differ in terms of their donations to charities, especially to those that fight health problems caused by personality traits, as in lifestyle diseases such as obesity, versus charities that fight health problems which mostly occur due to situational factors such as cancer. We expect that entity theorists would be more likely to donate to a cancer (vs. obesity) charity that helps those who suffer due to inevitable/situational (vs. controllable/personality) factors for which they cannot (vs. can) be held responsible. However, since incremental theorists usually take both situational and personality factors into account and do not judge others based on their personality traits only, they would be equally likely to donate to both charity types.

Research has shown that charities may use two types of appeals (White and Peloa 2009). A self-benefit appeal emphasizes how people’s donation will enhance their own life and make them feel that they are good citizens, whereas an other-benefit appeal emphasizes how their donation will enhance the lives of those who suffer. Current research explores under which conditions these appeals are more effective for each type of implicit theorists. For cancer charities that fight health problems which occur due to situational factors, we show that incremental theorists are more persuaded by other-benefit (vs. self-benefits) appeals. For obesity charities that fight problems caused by controllable factors/personality traits, incremental theorists are more persuaded by self-benefit (vs. other-benefits) appeals. However, results show that entity theorists are more persuaded by the cancer (vs. obesity) charity ads, regardless of appeal type.

In our first study, implicit theory was manipulated by presenting participants with three proverbs that either supported entity (You cannot teach an old dog new tricks) or incremental theory (It is never too late to learn; Poon and Koehler 2006). Participants were then presented with one of the two charity ads fighting against obesity or cancer and were asked to indicate their likelihood to donate money and recommend the charity to others. The results revealed that entity theorists were significantly more likely to donate to the cancer (vs. obesity) charity; however charity type did not impact incremental theorists’ donation likelihood.

In Study 2, we sought to examine what would influence incremental theorists to donate more to charities via self-benefit versus other-benefit appeals. Implicit theory was manipulated by presenting articles emphasizing change versus no change (Levy et al. 1998) followed by an ad for a cancer charity. In the self-benefit (vs. other-benefit) condition, the ad ended with the tagline “Just imagine how your donation will enhance your life and make you feel (vs. enhance lives of those affected by cancer).” We found that incremental theorists were more likely to donate when the ad used other-benefit (vs. self-benefit) appeals. However, appeal type did not impact the donation likelihood for entity theorists.

Study 3, with a 2 (implicit theory: entity vs. incremental) x 2 (charity type: obesity vs. cancer) x 2 (appeal type: self-benefit vs. other-benefit) between-subjects design, not only showed differential effects of charity and appeal types, but also examined their subsequent outcomes on additional measures. After implicit theory manipulations (as in Study 1), participants evaluated the charity ad, indicated attitudes towards the charity, and likelihood of donating money to the charity, recommending it to others, and finding more about the charity. The results revealed that incremental theorists had more positive attitudes towards the ad if the obesity charity used self-benefit (vs. other-benefit) appeals. However, they had more positive attitudes towards the ad if the cancer charity used other-benefit (vs. self-benefit) appeals. Also, they preferred other-benefit appeals more if a cancer (vs. obesity) charity was using them. A similar pattern was observed with attitudes towards the charity if the obesity charity used self-benefit (vs. other-benefit) appeals, and if the cancer charity used other-benefit (vs. self-benefit) appeals. Moreover, incremental theorists’ donation likelihood was greater if the obesity charity used self-benefit (vs. other-benefit) appeals, and if the cancer charity used other-benefit (vs. self-benefit) appeals. On the other hand, entity theorists had more positive attitudes towards a cancer (vs. obesity) charity ad, had more positive attitudes towards a cancer (vs. obesity) charity and were more likely to donate to a cancer (vs. obesity) charity, regardless of appeal type.

Current research contributes to literatures on donations, implicit theory, and advertising by suggesting that entity theorists are more likely to donate to cancer charities (situational factors) regardless of the benefit appeals used in ads, whereas incremental theorists prefer other-benefit appeals in this case. Conversely, obesity charities (personality traits) may benefit more from using self-benefit appeals since incremental theorists are more likely to be persuaded and entity theorists would be indifferent. In future, we aim to explore processes for these effects, such as whether consumers believe that it would be too selfish (irritating) to use self-benefit appeals that stress how good the giver would feel after donating to a cancer charity.

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