Advance Gratitude Expressions As a Prosocial Appeal

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Across three studies, we show that a simple expression of advance gratitude enhances consumers’ moral awareness and increases prosocial behaviour, in the form of financial donations and volunteering to charitable organisations. We further demonstrate that the direction of the effect is moderated by connectedness to the cause.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Each day, millions of people worldwide rely on the kindness of others for their basic well-being, and charities are experiencing growing difficulty attracting sufficient support. The current debate thus revolves around how best to appeal to potential donors for help (YouGov, 2012). We introduce the novel concept of an advance gratitude expression as a prosocial appeal and we demonstrate how a simple: “Thank you in advance for your support” embedded in marketing materials can increase prosocial behaviour, by awakening the donor’s “sleepy moral self” (studies 1 and 3). We further elucidate upon the mechanism by demonstrating that perceived connectedness to the cause moderates the effect, by showing that under conditions of low connectedness, advanced expressions of gratitude can backfire (study 2).

Gratitude is expressed when altruistic benefits are received. By expressing gratitude one recognises that the benefactor has acted with fairness and justice, in considering and responding to the welfare needs of others, and so gratitude goes hand in hand with an increased moral awareness (Emmons and McCullough, 2004). Past research has examined the consequences of expressing gratitude after some prosocial act had already been conducted (Raggio & Folse, 2011; Grant & Gino, 2010). What remains unexplored is whether (and if so, why), “an advance expression of gratitude”, a term we coin to denote instances in which gratitude is conveyed to prospective benefactors prior to them providing or agreeing to provide assistance, can persuade these to act benevolently. While donating may be generally regarded as a moral act, this is not always the case, people can refuse others help when it is not apparent that is it the right thing to do (Lee et al., 2014). We propose that advance expressions of gratitude can signal something about the request itself, by rendering potential benefactors more aware of its moral significance. This proposition is based on the growing evidence showing that ethical judgements can be malleable when individuals face subtle cues that non-consciously activate the moral self. (Leavitt et al., 2015 Reynolds, Leavitt & Decelles, 2010). Because of the moral nature of gratitude (Haidt, 2003) we posit that an advance gratitude expression will trigger one’s moral identity. In turn, this will increase moral awareness, defined as a person’s determination that a situation contains moral content (Reynolds, 2006), and translate into greater prosocial behaviour. More formally:

Hypothesis 1: Advance gratitude expressions result in increased prosocial behaviour.

Hypothesis 2: The effect of advance gratitude expressions on prosocial behaviour is mediated by moral awareness.

Gratitude is also an other-focused emotion (Tangney et al., 2007) and prior research has found that people are more receptive to other-focused emotional appeals when connectedness to others is high (Aaker & Williams, 1998). Connectedness to others can be conceptualised through the lens of self-construal theory. Self-construal (independent vs. interdependent) represents an individual’s general predisposition to identify with others. Interdependents view themselves as fundamentally connected to others, whereas, independents are concerned with keeping their distance and not being influenced (Singelis, 1994). We postulate that when connectedness to others is high (i.e. interdependent) individuals will be more receptive and responsive to advance gratitude expressions resulting in increased prosocial behaviour (H3a). However, when connectedness is low (i.e. independents), we expect an advance expression of gratitude to backfire (H3b) because independent self-construal individuals wish to keep their distance, and would therefore likely view the expression as manipulative.

Study 1 (N=50) was a main effect field study, with a real behavioural outcome. Passers-by were invited to partake in a marketing research study conducted on behalf of The British Columbia Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Participants were randomly assigned to evaluate either an “advance gratitude expression” or a control poster advertisement. The advance gratitude poster condition additionally included the following: “Thank you in advance for your support.” In the advance gratitude condition average donations were higher ($1 (49) = 8.323, p=0.006, M=52.83 vs. M=2.08). Moral awareness was also measured with two items ($=0.764$). Increased moral awareness fully mediated the relationship between advance gratitude on donation amount. 95% CI, [b=0.2739, C=0.0368, 0.6946]. We measured “norms of reciprocity” as a competing mechanism, but no mediation was found (b=0.0312, C=0.0331, 0.2910). Therefore, Study 1 supports H1 and H2.

Study 2 sought to exclude competing explanations, by examining a theoretically relevant moderator- the ethical or moral nature of the request. It is plausible that an advance gratitude expression arouses empathic concern or as already noted, taps into implicit norms of reciprocity. If these alternative explanations held, then advance gratitude should increase compliance also under morally dubious circumstances (albeit perhaps to a lesser extent). Yet, if the moral awareness explanation is valid, one would predict a backfiring effect when the request made is morally dubious. We manipulated the ethical credibility of the charity making the request by assigning high vs. low scores on three ethically relevant criteria. N=408 (recruited online), partook in the 2 (advance gratitude: yes vs no) x 2 (ethical credibility of the charity: high vs low) between subjects randomised factorial design. The advance gratitude condition charity advert additionally included: “Thank you in advance for supporting a puppy in training.” The ethical credibility x advance gratitude interaction on donation intention was significant (F (1,407) = 7.3, p=0.007), such that, when the request for support came from the “unethical” charity, expressing advance gratitude reduced donation intentions (M=3.8 vs. M=3.4 F(1,407) = 3.5, p=0.06). Whereas, the opposite applied when the expression came from a charity with morally sound credentials, M=4.6 vs. M=5.1 F(1,407) = 3.7, p=0.05, providing further support that moral awareness is the underlying mechanism (H2).

Study 3 tested the effect of connectedness to others by manipulating participants’ self construal. 206 M-Turkers, partook in the 2 (self-construal: independent vs. interdependent) x 2 (advance gratitude: present vs absent) x 2 (ethical credibility: high vs low) between subjects randomised factorial design. The advance gratitude condition charity advert additionally included: “Thank you in advance for supporting a puppy in training.” The ethical credibility x advance gratitude interaction on donation intention was significant (F (1,204) = 7.07, p=0.003), such that, when the request for support came from the “unethical” charity, expressing advance gratitude reduced donation intentions (M=3.8 vs. M=3.4 F(1,204) = 3.5, p=0.06). Whereas, the opposite applied when the expression came from a charity with morally sound credentials, M=4.6 vs. M=5.1 F(1,204) = 3.7, p=0.05, providing further support that moral awareness is the underlying mechanism (H2).

1 “Contributing to the BC SPCA cause has moral implications”, “Contributing to the BC SPCA is the “right” thing to do”.

2 “Others expect me to donate”
tude expression: yes vs. no), between subjects factorial design study. Self-construal was manipulated via a short story exercise (Garner et al., 1999). Participants were subsequently exposed to an advertisement of a food bank charity requesting donations on behalf of the Roberts family (pictured). The advance gratitude condition also included “Thank you in advance for your support from the Roberts Family.” An interaction of self-construal*advance gratitude on volunteering intention reached significance: $F(1,202) = 11.04$, $p=0.001$. For interdependently primed individuals receiving the advance gratitude expression increased volunteering intention, $F(1,202) = 7.5$, $p=0.007$ ($M_{nogratitude}=3.9$ vs $M_{gratitude}=5.1$). Whereas, in the independent condition, advance gratitude backfired $F(1,202) = 3.9$, $p=0.051$ ($M_{nogratitude}=5.6$ vs. $M_{gratitude}=4.7$). Thus H3a and H3b are both supported.

Our results suggest that a simple expression of advance gratitude can help charities gain important scarce resources, without additional costs. Yet, advance gratitude expressions are not a blunt tool and attention must be paid to ensuring the target audience perceives a connection with the cause, or the effect can be counterproductive. From a theoretical perspective, we introduce the novel concept of advance gratitude expressions and show that these can give rise to a process of moralisation, thus making contributions to both the gratitude and morality literatures.

**REFERENCES**


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