

# Prosocial consumer behavior

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Prosocial consumer behavior refers to purchase behavior involving self-sacrifice for the good of others or of society. The research builds off both classic social psychology research on helping and research from the judgment and decision making literature on factors that distort optimal decision making. The research highlights the myriad types of motivation that induce prosocial behavior, including extrinsic rewards, reputational benefits, the pursuit of pleasure, and the avoidance of distress. In this article, we review recent findings in this area and we discuss two emerging topics: firstly, how consumers judge themselves and others who behave prosocially and secondly, how consumers respond to corporate partnerships with charity.

## Addresses

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Consumer behavior is typically considered to be a self-interested pursuit. Put simply, a consumer purchases goods or services expecting to benefit. Sometimes, however, consumers purchase with the goal of benefitting others rather than just the self. In recent years, the field of consumer behavior has increased focus on studying purchase behavior involving self-sacrifice for the good of others or society.

## Historical context

Prosocial<sup>1</sup> consumer behavior research builds on decades of social psychology literature about helping [1–3], which

sought to understand situational and personality factors that influence whether individuals help others within in-person situations. For example, in one classic study, subway passengers witnessed a bogus crisis where another passenger appeared to collapse, with blood trickling out of his mouth. Researchers examined whether passengers intervened and helped as a function of whether bystanders who could also help were present or not [4].

By contrast, recent prosocial consumer behavior research examines the factors that encourage or discourage consumers from helping anonymous and often abstract groups of beneficiaries — usually represented by charitable organizations. In these cases, individuals rarely come into contact with beneficiaries. Instead, their actions depend on information presented in charity advertisements [5–7], their relationship to a cause or organization [8], their sense of responsibility to potential recipients [9,10], and other factors.

Prosocial consumer behavior research also builds off of the heuristics and biases tradition in decision making research [11,12]. Behavioral decision research often starts by asking whether people behave according to normative rules, and then examines systematic choice biases. Much research in prosocial consumer behavior follows this general approach, but rather than looking at choices involving one's own welfare, asks whether choices involving others' welfare are biased such that aid could have been allocated better elsewhere [13–15].

## What motivates consumers to behave prosocially?

The question of what motivates prosocial behavior has been of interest to philosophers and social scientists for centuries (see [16,17] for reviews). Scholars have long debated whether there exists a pure motive of altruism, and in its absence, what else might motivate people to sacrifice for strangers' needs.

Although it remains disputed whether motives are ever purely altruistic, anecdotal and experimental evidence point to impressive acts of generosity. For example, studies using the dictator game demonstrate that many individuals give money to another anonymous participant

<sup>1</sup> The term 'prosocial' is not always used consistently. We use it to refer to donations of time, money, and effort to help other anonymous individuals and/or greater society. The prototypical behavior is a monetary donation to charity but volunteering time and engaging in pro-environmental behavior are also of interest. We do not include gift-giving, favor-giving and other acts of kindness within personal relationships as part of this construct, which entail expectations of reciprocity and/or deepened quality of personal relationships. We also do not discuss attitudes and behavior toward ethical products, which remained outside of the scope of this (brief) article.

in a study even when decisions are private and have no possible repercussions (see [18]).

### Self-interested motives

Nevertheless, consumers sometimes give for clearly self-interested reasons. For example, the U.S. government incentivizes charitable giving by providing tax breaks, and the annual end of year ‘giving bump’ suggests that these incentives are effective. Offering direct financial incentives for prosocial behavior also increases giving, at least in instances where giving decisions are private [19•].

Rewards for giving are not limited to material incentives. Individuals gain status and respect by being perceived as generous [20] and conspicuous charitable giving is widespread: Fundraisers sell naming rights to buildings and parks so that philanthropists can advertise their large donations. Individual consumers often donate publicly, post about their donations on social media, and wear clothing and accessories that signal their generosity to others.

### Self perception

Despite multiple instances in which extrinsic incentives increase generosity, donors often believe that their altruistic acts *should* be purely motivated, leading to counter-intuitive effects. Because self-interest and altruism are viewed as incompatible, individuals can actually behave less generously, rather than more so, when incentivized to give [21–23]. This phenomenon, known as ‘crowding out’ of intrinsic motivation, has been demonstrated across a wide range of prosocial behaviors including blood donation [24] and volunteering [25]. These crowding out effects occur because the introduction of an incentive shifts a donation’s meaning from an act performed out of caring to one performed in exchange for payment, sometimes lessening its value to the consumer [26].

Consumers often feel a need to demonstrate their own ‘goodness’ to themselves. For example, public observation of giving can at times actually reduce generosity, presumably because reputational benefits from giving compromise consumers’ ability to see themselves as truly kind [27,28]. Consumers also sometimes give more when donating is difficult, or even physically painful, due to the extra meaning and self-sacrifice that can be inferred from arduous donations [29•].

Indeed, it seems that donors often seek ways to determine whether they have sacrificed enough. Social norms serve as one influential signal of appropriate giving levels; when consumers believe others give more, they give more as well [30]. However, when consumers learn that others gave less than they anticipated, they adjust giving levels lower to match the social norm [31•]. Consumers also even opt out of purchase opportunities that have potential

to make them feel like they contributed too little to a cause [28].

### Hedonic benefits

Self-reputational benefits serve as one input into broader intrapsychic, or hedonic, benefits resulting from generous acts. Across a variety of domains, research shows that consumers derive pleasure from being generous [32,33•,34].<sup>2</sup> Neuroscientific evidence linking charitable behavior with pleasure centers of the brain corroborates this phenomenon [35,36].

What are the sources of donation pleasure? One source seems to be the ability to think of oneself as a good person, as described earlier. An additional factor appears to be a donor’s sense that they have made a tangible impact [38–40]. For example, donors give significantly more when they receive tangible details about what their donation will accomplish [41•], when their contribution helps a larger proportion of the problem [42,43], and when their donation is doubled by an outside source [44] allowing it to feel more influential.

Interestingly, one particular line item that perennially fails to elicit perceptions of impact is overhead costs. Consumers are markedly averse to funding overhead costs [45]. More specifically, although donors accept that others’ donations fund overhead costs, they are averse to *their own* donations covering these costs because such expenditures do not provide a sense of personal impact [46•].

### Empathy and sympathy

Although feeling like a generous person who has made a tangible impact allows donors to feel pleasure, sometimes donors are motivated to not seek pleasure per se, but instead, out of sympathy. As previously noted, evidence often suggests that people fail to maximize social utility when choosing where to allocate scarce resources. One key distorting factor is sympathy; people tend to give with their hearts, rather than their heads [14,47,48].

The identifiable victim effect is one result of people’s sensitivity to sympathy [49–51]. The identifiable victim effect refers to donors’ tendency to disproportionately allocate resources to save an identified life than to save a statistical life [52]. Research demonstrates that consumers feel a stronger emotional connection to a single, identified victim than they do to groups or abstract statistics [49].

<sup>2</sup> Dunn *et al.* [32] argue that spending on others leads to greater happiness than spending on oneself. However, they define spending on others to include small gifts for friends (e.g. coffee) and thus the findings do not reveal that giving to charity leads to greater happiness than self-interested purchasing (see also [37]).

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