

Pictures of Donation Recipients Engaged in Physical Self-Help Enhance Readiness to act and Donations intentions

Gadi Buskila

Bar-Ilan

Dikla Perez

Bar Ilan University

Nira Munichor

Bar-Ilan University

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1. Abstract

Many charity organizations raise money through crowdfunding platforms, in which donors choose among large numbers of projects that compete for funds. Fundraising platforms encourage project owners to use photos to stand out. Prior research suggests that the content of such photos can substantially affect donation behavior. The current study identifies a novel feature of campaign imagery that influences the donation decision: portrayal of prospective donation-recipients (victims) engaged in different types of “self-help” actions aimed at overcoming unfortunate circumstances. This study explores the influence of a single photo reflecting physical self-help (e.g., physically repairing a building), non-physical self-help (e.g., studying blueprints), or no self-help on donation behavior. Field data from a crowdfunding platform show that donors contribute more funds to campaigns that show victims engaged in physical self-help than to campaigns portraying victims engaged in non-physical self-help or no self-help. Three controlled experiments suggest that donation intentions may increase because observing a victim engaged in physical self-help makes prospective donors more ready to take action themselves. Moreover, the effect is less likely to occur when the self-help behavior is perceived as unacceptable (e.g., forbidden by authorities).

Keywords: *Donation behavior, Self-help, campaign imagery*

Track: *Advertising & Marketing Communications*

2. Introduction

Crowdfunding platforms present donors with a large variety of charitable projects to choose from. Campaign owners thus must maximize their chances of attracting donors' limited funds, for example, by using visual imagery. Indeed, visual images featured in charitable appeals can substantially affect individuals' donation decisions (Small and Loewenstein 2003). Donors contribute more to campaigns that include photos than to campaigns that do not (Perrine and Heather 2000), particularly when such photos feature child victims (Burt and Strongman 2005) and when they reflect sadness rather than happiness (Small and Verrochi 2009). The current study delves further into the role of campaign photographs. We suggest and show that donation decisions are affected by the portrayal of the actions carried out by the victims in campaign photos—namely, whether these actions reflect “self-help”, defined as actions aimed at finding solutions for an unfortunate situation.

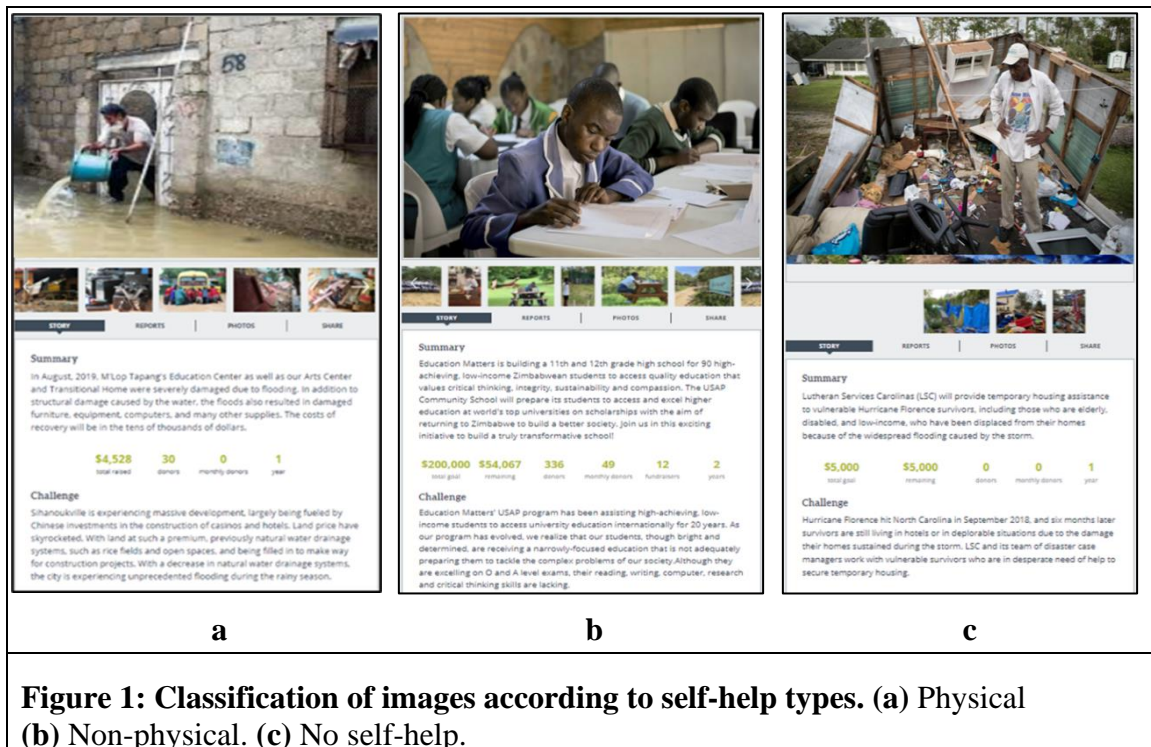
Our focus on self-help is motivated by prior research that suggests that donation decisions are influenced by donors' perceptions of victims' actions with regard to their unfortunate circumstances. Many studies in this vein have focused on donors' negative responses to victims whom they perceive as being to blame for bringing about their own misfortune (Harper et al. 1990; Campbell et al. 2001; Kogut 2011). Yet, herein, we propose that donation decisions may also be positively influenced by donors' perceptions that victims are taking action to overcome their difficult circumstances. Thus, our basic premise is that, compared with campaign photos that do not clearly portray acts of self-help, campaign photos featuring victims clearly helping themselves may enhance donors' propensity to donate to the associated charity project.

Specifically, we suggest that the strength of this effect may vary across different types of self-help actions that are portrayed in campaign photos. We suggest that images portraying *physical* acts of self-help, such as bailing water out of a flooded house (see, e.g., Figure 1a), can be easily captured in visual imagery, and are relatively straightforward to interpret. Thus, images portraying physical self-help are more likely to enhance donations. In comparison, non-physical actions (i.e., mental actions), such as planning or learning (see, e.g., Figure 1b), are not as obviously manifested in outward behavior (Pezzulo et al. 2018),

despite the fact that they might be more efficient in achieving desired outcomes (Gollwitzer, Fujita, and Oettingen 2004). Thus, images portraying *non-physical* acts of self-help and images portraying taking no clear action, such as standing amid the wreckage of a house (see, e.g., Figure 1c), are less likely to be interpreted as reflecting self-help and affect donations. Formally put, we hypothesize that:

H1: Photos in which the victim is portrayed as being engaged in physical self-help will foster donation behavior compared with photos in which the victim is portrayed as being engaged in non-physical self-help or not engaged in self-help.

Figure 1:



We further identify a mechanism for the proposed effects: namely, the impact of the imagery on prospective donors' readiness to take action themselves. Prior research has shown that observing the actions of others may cause a person to act in a similar way (Wheeler 1966; Cialdini and Goldstein 2004; Chartrand and Lakin 2013) and to adopt the goal that presumably underlies the observed actions (Aarts, Gollwitzer, and Hassin 2004). In line with this research, we expect that viewing a charity campaign photo that features a

victim clearly acting to resolve an unfortunate situation may make the prospective donor more ready to act, as well. We therefore predict that:

H2a: Photos in which the victim is portrayed as being engaged in physical self-help will enhance donors' readiness to act, as compared with photos in which the victim is portrayed as being engaged in non-physical self-help or not engaged in self-help.

H2b: Donors' readiness to act will mediate the effect of perceived victim self-help behavior (as portrayed in campaign photos) on donation behavior.

Finally, we propose a possible contingency for our effect. Prior research suggests that people are more inclined to adopt others' goals and actions when those actions are appropriate for the situation at hand (Aarts, Gollwitzer and Hassin 2004). Applying this reasoning to our context, a prospective donor who perceives a victim's self-help behavior as being unacceptable (e.g., forbidden by the authorities) may be unlikely to wish to emulate these behaviors. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H3: Perceived acceptability of the victim's self-help behavior will moderate the effect of self-help type (as portrayed in campaign photos) on donation behavior, such that only when the self-help actions are acceptable (but not when they are unacceptable) will physical self-help (vs. non-physical self-help) increase donations.

3. Study 1: Field data analysis of the relationship between victim self-help type and donation

Study 1 provide field evidence of the association between charitable crowdfunding donations and donors' exposure to campaign photos featuring a victim who can be perceived as engaging in physical self-help, engaging in non-physical self-help or not engaging in self-help.

3.1 Method

We systematically downloaded the main featured photo of 200 charity giving projects that were launched on GlobalGiving.org between December 2018 and December 2019. For each project, we also collected the funding goal (in USD), the sum of donations achieved (in USD), project duration, and number of donors. We calculated the percentage

of the funding goal achieved and the average donation per month. Then we presented the 200 pictures to two independent judges, who classified the pictures into three main groups: *physical self-help*, *non-physical self-help*, *non-self-help* projects, and an additional group of *ambiguous* pictures (we excluded the latter from our analysis).

3.2 Results

ANOVAs revealed a significant effect of a project's classification on the average sum of donations ($F_{(2,171)} = 3.131, p = .046, \eta^2_P = .036$) and average donation per donor ($F_{(2,171)} = 8.314, p < .001, \eta^2_P = .094$). In the physical-self-help group, both the sum of donations ($M = \$7,985.75, SD = \$13,210.77$) and the average donation ($M = \$183.17, SD = \226.11) were higher than in the non-physical-self-help group (sum of donations: $M = \$5,042.86, SD = \$8,365.60, p = .047$; average donation: $M = \$84.04, SD = \$62.4, p < .001$) and in the non-self-help group (sum of donations: $M = \$3,864, SD = \$6,312.41, p = .015$; average donation: $M = \$106.93, SD = \$108.52, p = .002$). No significant difference was found between projects in the non-self-help group and projects in the non-physical-self-help group (both $ps > .2$).

4. Study 2 – Self-help type, the donor's action readiness, and donation behavior

Study 2 provide support for our proposed account (H2a and H2b) by examining whether the type of self-help carried out by a victim in a charity campaign photo affects how ready to act prospective donors feel (Study 2a) and whether this action readiness, in turn, affects donation decisions (Study 2b).

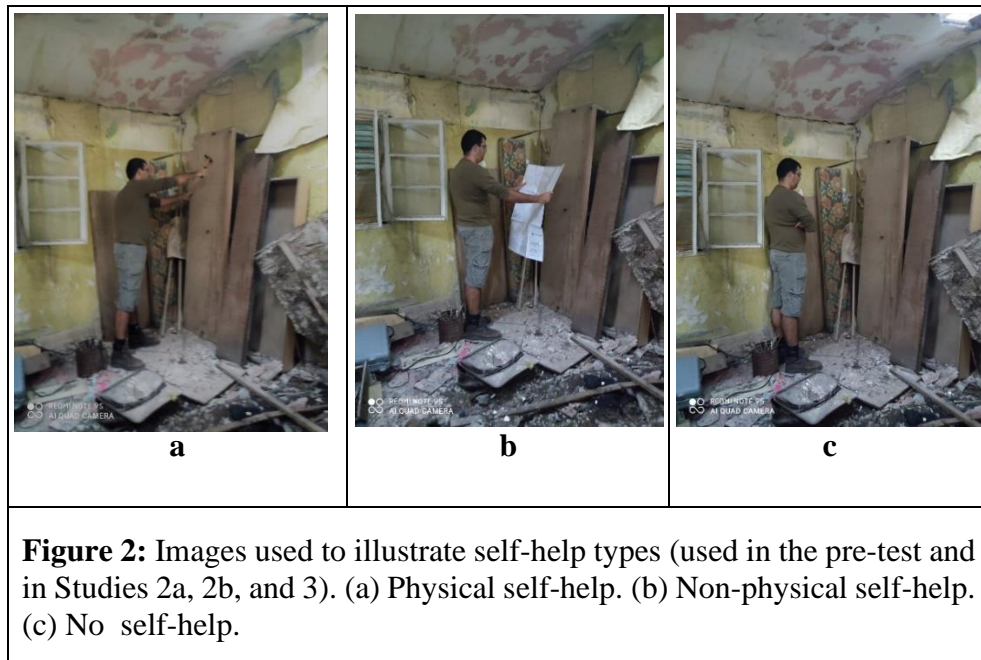
4.1 Study 2a - Self-help type affects donor action readiness

4.1.1 Method

One hundred fourteen student participants were presented with the same fundraising project aimed to raise money for victims of a fire. The features of the project were identical for all participants, with the exception that the activity performed by the victim in the associated image differed between conditions. Participants in the physical self-help condition were shown a picture of a victim hammering a piece of wood in the ruins of a

house (Figure 2a), participants in the non-physical-self-help condition were presented with the same victim holding a blueprint in the same house (Figure 2b), and participants in the no-self-help condition were presented with the same victim located in the same house in a position that did not reflect taking any action (Figure 2c). Then participants indicated their action readiness on a 5-point scale how inspired, determined, and active they felt (Cronbach's $\alpha = .812$). To check our manipulations, participants also indicated on a 7-point scale the extent to which they perceived the victim in the photo as helping himself and engaged in a physical action.

Figure 2:



4.1.2 Results

Two one-way ANOVAs confirmed the expected effects of the experimental conditions on participants' perceptions of the victim's level of engagement in self-help ($F_{(2,111)} = 15.60, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .219$) and action physicality ($F_{(2,111)} = 24.36, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .305$). A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of self-help-type condition on participants' action readiness ($F_{(2, 111)} = 8.39, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .131$). Participants who viewed a photo of a victim engaged in physical self-help reported significantly higher levels of action readiness ($M = 2.94, SD = 1.07$) than did participants who viewed a photo

of a victim engaged in non-physical self-help ($M = 2.40$ $SD = 1.01$, $p < .020$) or who viewed a photo of a victim not engaged in self-help ($M = 2.04$, $SD = .84$, $p = .001$). No significant differences in action readiness were observed between participants in the non-physical-self-help condition and participants in the no-self-help condition ($p = .12$).

4.2 Study 2b - Action readiness as a mediator in the relationship between victim self-help type and donation behavior

Study 2b examined action readiness as a mediator of this effect (H2b). We predicted that a photo featuring a victim engaged in physical self-help would elicit a greater sense of action readiness in prospective donors, and that this enhanced action readiness would influence donors' donation intentions.

4.2.1 Method

One hundred ninety-nine participants went through a procedure similar to that of Study 2a, with the exception that the text of the appeal was modified to indicate that the fire had taken place in a different country, to allow for generalizability of our previous results. Then participants indicated the sum of money (in USD) they would donate to the victims and their readiness to act (Cronbach's $\alpha = .803$) as in Study 2a.

4.2.2 Results

A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of self-help-type condition on the sum of money participants were willing to donate ($F_{(2, 196)} = 6.78$, $p = .025$, $\eta_p^2 = .037$). Participants who viewed a photo of a victim engaged in physical self-help were willing to donate more money ($M = \$80.05$, $SD = \$165.84$) than were participants who viewed a photo of a victim engaged in non-physical self-help ($M = \$42.18$, $SD = \$74.59$, $p = .044$) or who viewed a photo of a victim not engaged in self-help ($M = \$30.15$, $SD = \$37.56$, $p = .010$). No significant differences in intended donation amount were observed between participants in the non-physical-self-help condition and participants in the no-self-help condition ($p = .53$). In line with the results of Study 2a, a one-way ANOVA also revealed a significant effect of self-help type on donors' readiness to act ($F_{(2, 196)} = 6.91$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .066$).

Mediation analysis using the PROCESS bootstrapping method confirmed the mediating role of prospective donors' reported readiness to act in the effect of self-help type on the amount of the intended donation. In this analysis, the relative indirect effects of the *physical-self-help* condition versus the *non-physical-self-help* condition on the donation amount through the donor's readiness to act was significant ($b = -15.07$, $SE = 6.46$, 95% CI [-29.277 to -3.890]), and so was the indirect effect of the *physical-self-help* condition versus the *no-self-help* condition ($b = -9.49$, $SE = 5.60$, 95% CI [-22.507 to -.513]). Additional analysis with the no-self-help condition serving as the reference category revealed no significant relative indirect effect of the *no-self-help* condition versus the *non-physical-self-help* condition ($b = -5.59$, $SE = 5.03$, 95% CI [-17.079 to 2.825]).

5. Study 3 - Self-help acceptability as a moderator

Study 3 tested our hypothesis that the differential effect of physical and non-physical self-help on donation behavior is contingent on donors' perception that the self-help actions portrayed in campaign photos are acceptable (H3).

5.1 Method

Three hundred thirty participants were assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (self-help type: physical self-help vs. non-physical self-help) \times 2 (self-help acceptability: more acceptable vs. less acceptable) between-subjects design. They were presented with the fundraising project described in Study 2a. We manipulated self-help acceptability through the textual description of the project. Participants in the more-acceptable self-help condition read that the authorities allowed the residents to repair the damaged houses. Participants in the less-acceptable self-help condition read that the authorities forbade the residents to repair the damaged houses. Then participants indicated the sum of money they would donate, as in Study 2b.

5.2 Results

A 2 (self-help type: physical vs. non-physical) \times 2 (self-help acceptability: more acceptable vs. less acceptable) ANOVA on the sum of money participants reported they would donate revealed no significant main effect of self-help type ($p = .142$) and no

significant main effect of self-help acceptability ($p = .484$). Of interest, however, and as predicted by H3, the analysis revealed a significant interaction effect ($F_{(1,326)} = 4.14, p = .043, \eta_p^2 = .013$). Among participants who were told that renovations were allowed (more-acceptable condition), those in the physical-self-help condition reported higher intended donation amounts ($M = \$62.32, SD = \161.94) than those in the non-physical-self-help condition ($M = \$25.07, SD = \$35.96, p = .016$). In contrast, among participants who were told that renovations were forbidden (less-acceptable condition), self-help-type did not affect the intended donation amount ($M_{physical} = \$33.25, SD_{physical} = \65.48 vs. $M_{non-physical} = \$39.25, SD_{non-physical} = \$66.55, p = .68$).

6. General discussion

Our analysis of field data revealed that donors who are exposed to photos of victims engaged in physical self-help tend to donate larger amounts of money to the corresponding crowdfunding projects, compared with donors who are exposed to photos of victims engaged in non-physical self-help or activities that are unlikely to be perceived as self-help. The results Studies 2a and 2b provided further support to this effect and showed that the effect of self-help type on donation intentions is mediated by action readiness. Finally, Study 3 showed that when donors perceive victims' self-help actions as being unacceptable, the effect of self-help type on donation intentions is eliminated.

This study contributes to current knowledge on features of the presentation of charitable campaigns that influence donation decisions, and specifically, features related to campaign imagery. This research is the first to distinguish between different types of self-help behavior, and by doing so, it illuminates a positive effect of victims' perceived responsibility on donors' behavior. Our research is also the first to identify the influence that photos have on the extent to which donors are willing to take an action, and it expands our understanding of imagery factors that might influence action readiness. Notably, our finding regarding the positive effect of physical self-help imagery on donations is somewhat counterintuitive, given that a person who appears to be helping himself might also be perceived as less in need of aid. We would welcome future research to identify the specific conditions under which each of the considerations comes into play.

Our findings have clear practical implications for charity organizations and for decision makers who wish to raise money through crowdfunding, and potentially through other means as well. Specifically, we suggest that to enhance the action readiness and consequent donation behavior of potential donors it is preferable to feature an image in which a victim is engaged in physical self-help.

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