

Does Giving Really Make Us Happier? A Meta-Analysis and Multi-Study Reassessment

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Cite as:

Fernandes Daniel, Demczuk Rafael, Gladstone Joe (2026), Does Giving Really Make Us Happier? A Meta-Analysis and Multi-Study Reassessment. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 55th, (134261)

Paper from the 55th Annual EMAC Conference, Bath, United Kingdom, June 2-5, 2026



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Abstract

Prior research claims that spending money on others enhances well-being, but the existing evidence relies on small samples, heterogeneous measures, and publication bias. We evaluate three competing accounts: prosocial spending enhances well-being universally; effects reflect methodological artifacts; or benefits emerge only when giving minimizes psychological distance. In a meta-analysis and six empirical tests, initial positive associations ($r=.070$ to $.079$) disappear after bias correction. RoBMA yields null effects ($p=-.004$ to $.003$). Within-person, instrumental variable, and machine learning tests confirm negligible causal relationships. However, modest benefits emerged for tangible donations to identifiable, high-need recipients. These findings suggest prosocial spending's emotional rewards are more limited and emerge only in specific conditions, providing implications for decision-making, charitable appeals, and theoretical understanding of generosity's psychological consequences.

Track: Consumer Behaviour