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Does Emotional Connection Matter? The Effect of the Nature of Gifts on the Donation

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Abstract. This study aims to explore the impact of the nature of gifts in charitable donations on donors' behavior regarding repeat giving. We use a questionnaire survey randomly assigning 270 participants into two groups: one receives handmade toys as thank-you gifts and the other receives manufactured toys. By comparing the reactions of the two groups, we analyze the influence of different gift types on donation behavior. The results demonstrate that handmade gifts show significant advantages in improving the willingness of donors to donate again, the amount of donation, and the frequency of donation. Moreover, demographic factors such as gender, age, and income level influence donation behavior. In conclusion, this study concludes that handmade gifts significantly outperform manufactured gifts in stimulating emotional responses and enhancing the likelihood of repeat donations among donors. These main results imply that charities should provide more handmade gifts to express gratitude to donors, thereby fostering long-term donor relationships.

Keywords: charitable giving, thank-you gifts, emotional connection

1. Introduction

Making donations to charitable causes is a fundamental aspect of philanthropic activities [1], as it provides the financial resources necessary for most nonprofit organizations and charities [2]. One of the principal challenges in this field is to guarantee the continuity of donors to ensure the sustained provision of regular contributions over time [3]. In previous studies conducted in psychology, economics, business, and politics, researchers have primarily concentrated on the factors that either increase or decrease the level or frequency of donations. However, there is a lack of articles examining the impact of the potential emotional connection of different gifts on donation.

In this paper, we aim to explore how the nature of gifts—whether handmade or manufactured—affects the continuity of charitable donations. We consider that when people get handcrafted toys as a gift, they might see it as more special and be more likely to donate again than if they got something made in a factory, which could seem less personal. To investigate it, we use a survey methodology, which is designed to gather data on donor preferences and perceptions regarding

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thank-you gifts, specifically comparing handmade toys with manufactured ones. The participants are asked about their attitudes toward receiving thank-you gifts and the likelihood of continuing to donate based on the type of gift received. Furthermore, at the end of the questionnaire, the participants are asked for their basic information, such as age, gender, annual income, etc. This approach allows the acquisition of insights into the motivational factors underlying donor engagement and the prospective role of gift personalization in cultivating long-term donor relationships.

By analyzing the responses, we find the following results. First, handmade toy has a greater impact on donation behaviors including the willingness to donate again, the amount of money donated, and the frequency of donation. The biggest difference is the willingness to donate again. Handmade toys have an effect size of 0.849 while manufactured toys have an effect size of 0.333. Our data also shows the main population that participated in this survey. 82% of them are young under 20 with nearly 80% of them earning less than ¥50000 each year. Besides, most of them had donated once and their frequency of donation is about once a month. Lastly, we focus on the gender difference, and we gain highly different data. Females are more willing to donate again after receiving handmade or manufactured toys. However, the most willing to donate is when females get handmade toys (1.033, $p<0.01$).

2. Literature review

An increasing body of literature examines the impact of diverse strategies, including the use of thank-you gifts, on donor behavior. The practice of sending thank-you gifts as a form of appreciation and incentive for donations is a common one. However, the efficacy and ethical implications of these gifts remain a matter of contention. Previous experiments, in both the field and laboratory, indicate that offering thank-you gifts has a positive effect on the act of giving [4-7]. However, more recent studies also demonstrate that this practice can, in certain circumstances, have a detrimental impact [8-10]. This may be due to the phenomenon of the crowding-out effect [9-12], whereby the act of giving is replaced by a desire to reciprocate, rather than being driven by altruistic motives [13].

Falk argues that including small gifts in solicitation letters increased both the frequency and amount of donations. This finding suggests that gift exchange plays a crucial role in charitable giving, alongside the warm-glow motive that drives donors [6]. Nevertheless, Chao indicates that thank-you gifts can sometimes reduce donation rates. This happens because the gift might shift the donor’s focus from intrinsic motives, like altruism, to a more cost-benefit mindset, making them less likely to donate [9]. Subsequently, Chao and Fisher expand on this idea that thank-you gifts have a mixed effect. While these gifts might boost donations to unfamiliar or low-rated charities, they often have no impact, or even a negative impact, on charities that donors already support. The presence of a gift can shift donors from a prosocial mindset to a more self-interested one, changing their donation behavior [10].

A detailed examination of the studies revealed a significant distinction: in Falk's experiment, the gifts are handmade postcards created by children; however, the gifts are manufactured items such as mugs or tote bags. We consider that this difference may account for the disparate outcomes. As a result, our research focuses on this distinction between handmade and manufactured gifts. We contend that handmade items, which often carry more emotional value, are more likely to evoke a strong emotional response from donors, thereby encouraging them to give. Conversely, manufactured products may be perceived as more commercial and less personal, which could diminish the donor's motivation.

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To further support this assertion, Fuchs et al. explore the relationship between love and the handmade. The findings of this study indicate that handmade items make people feel more love, joy, pride, and truthfulness. This backs up our idea that the kind of gift can change how donors feel [14]. We believe charities can create a stronger emotional bond with potential donors, which could lead to more frequent and larger donations. Thus, we develop an experiment that will compare the effects of handmade versus manufactured gifts on charitable giving.

3. The experiment and the data collected

3.1. Experiment

We design a survey to investigate the different impacts of handmade toys and manufactured toys on donor behavior. The sample for this analysis is derived from a questionnaire. The sample includes 270 respondents categorized into two groups: donors receiving handmade toys and donors receiving manufactured toys.

The questionnaire begins with a hypothetical premise, assuming the existence of a famous local welfare house in need of financial assistance. Participants are asked to imagine they have already donated ¥100 to this welfare house and are then presented with a series of questions designed to gauge their reaction to two types of thank-you gifts: a hand-made gift by the children from the welfare house and a manufactured gift from a company.

There are three parts to our survey: the first part is about the person's usual donation behavior, with neither manufactured nor handmade gifts. Participants are asked if they would consider donating again to the welfare house, without any mention of a gift. The second part is the donation behavior after receiving manufactured or handmade gifts. Participants are divided into two groups. The first group is presented with a scenario where they receive a hand-made gift as a thank-you gift, while the second group is told they receive a manufactured gift. After each gift scenario, participants are asked about their likelihood of donating again and whether they would increase or decrease their donation amount compared to the initial ¥100. Additionally, participants are then asked to select the frequency of their future donations from options ranging from once a week to never again. The last part includes some personal information such as gender, age, annual income, and experience with donations.

3.2. Descriptive statistic

Before performing the regression analysis, we perform a descriptive statistical analysis for all the variables. Table 1 provides descriptive statistical data on the willingness to donate again, the amount of money donated again, and the frequency of donations for two treatment groups (handmade toy group and manufactured toy group) as well as the overall sample. We can see that the two treatment groups (handmade toy group and manufactured toy group) have similar distributions in terms of age, annual income, and donation frequency. This suggests that the two groups are well-matched in these fundamental demographic characteristics, which ensures the consistency of these key variables between the two groups. In this way, we can continue to assess the impact of different types of thank-you gifts.

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Table 1. Variable definitions, means, and standard deviations

	Mean (1)	St. Dev. (2)	Min (3)	Max (4)	Obs. (5)
Panel A:Treatment Group (handmade toy)					
Age (below 20)	0.82	0.03	0	1	201
Annual income (Less than ¥50,000)	0.70	0.03	0	1	201
Times of donation (at least once)	0.79	0.03	0	1	201
Willingness to donate again	3.63	0.09	1	5	201
The amount of money donated again	3.24	0.08	1	5	201
Frequency of donations	1.65	0.05	0	3	201
Panel B:Treatment Group (manufactured toy)					
Age (below 20)	0.83	0.03	0	1	204
Annual income (Less than ¥50,000)	0.71	0.03	0	1	204
Times of donation (at least once)	0.78	0.03	0	1	204
Willingness to donate again	3.46	0.09	1	5	204
The amount of money donated again	3.20	0.08	1	5	204
Frequency of donations	1.60	0.05	0	3	204
Panel C:Overall					
Age (below 20)	0.82	0.02	0	1	270
Annual income (Less than ¥50,000)	0.70	0.03	0	1	270
Times of donation (at least once)	0.79	0.03	0	1	270
Willingness to donate again	3.64	0.08	1	5	270
The amount of money donated again	3.26	0.07	1	5	270
Frequency of donations	1.65	0.04	0	3	270

Panel A focuses on the handmade toy group and the data reveals the donation behaviors of 201 respondents. These respondents are asked about their willingness to donate again, with scores ranging from 1, indicating very unwilling, to 5, indicating very willing. The group's average score is 3.63, with a standard deviation of 0.09. When it comes to the amount of money they are willing to donate again, the score range is averaging at 3.24 with a standard deviation of 0.08. Regarding the frequency of donations, scores range from 0 to 3. The average score is 1.65, with a standard deviation of 0.05.

Panel B represents the manufactured toy group, the data reveals the donation behaviors of 204 respondents. This group shows a slightly lower score for willingness to donate again, which is 3.46. When considering the amount of money, they are willing to donate again, the group's average score is 3.20, also slightly lower than the handmade toy group. Additionally, the mean score for the frequency of donations is 1.60, indicating a slightly less frequent pattern of donations compared to the handmade toy group.

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4. Main results

4.1. Overall impact of handmade vs. manufactured toys

The data in Table 2 shows that handmade toys have an effect size of 0.849 on the willingness to donate again, which is highly significant ($p < 0.01$). In contrast, manufactured toys have a smaller effect size of 0.333 and are only marginally significant ($p < 0.1$), suggesting a weaker motivational effect. As for the amount of money donated again, handmade toys also show a positive impact (0.321, $p < 0.1$), while manufactured toys have a smaller, non-significant effect (0.186,). In terms of donation frequency, handmade toys once again outperform with a significant effect size of 0.225 ($p < 0.05$). Manufactured toys, on the other hand, have a negligible impact on donation frequency (0.074). People's willingness to donate has a size of 3.641 on average. Moreover, the amount of money they tend to donate again has a quite significant size (3.260) on average. The frequency of donations will increase to 1.652 on average, which is an obvious increase compared to 0.225 and 0.074.

Table 2. Impact of toy type on donation behavior

Dependent variable:	Willingness to donate again	The amount of money donated again	Frequency of donations
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Handmade toy	0.849***	0.321*	0.225**
	(0.181)	(0.167)	(0.098)
Manufactured toy	0.333*	0.186	0.074
	(0.178)	(0.165)	(0.096)
Mean	3.641	3.26	1.652
N	270	270	270
R-sq	0.076	0.015	0.02

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; *** P<0.01, ** P<0.05, * P<0.1; Participants were asked to rate the likelihood/willingness to donate on a scale from 1-5, 1 refers to no/less, 5 refers to yes/more.

4.2. Influence of demographic factors

Table 3 shows how demographic factors influence donation behaviors. There are no significant differences between the handmade toy group and the manufactured group. Among all the donors, 0.82 of them are young under 20. Most people in both two groups have an annual income of less than ￥50000 on average (0.70). A large number of donors have at least donated once, since the mean is 0.79. Besides, all donors have a high willingness to donate again (3.64). The average of their amount of money donated again is 3.26. At last, their average frequency of donations is 1.65.

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Table 3. Impact of demographics factors on donation behavior

Dependent variable:	Willingness to donate again	The amount of money donated again	Frequency of donations
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Handmade toy	0.851***	0.328*	0.224**
	(0.180)	(0.167)	(0.097)
Manufactured toy	0.331*	0.179	0.075
	(0.178)	(0.164)	(0.096)
Age (below 20)	0.021	0.325*	-0.138
	(0.203)	(0.188)	(0.109)
Annual income (less than ¥50,000)	0.350**	0.012	0.229**
	(0.171)	(0.158)	(0.092)
Times of donation (at least once)	0.212	-0.143	-0.070
	(0.180)	(0.166)	(0.097)
N	270	270	270
R-sq	0.096	0.031	0.046

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; *** P<0.01, ** P<0.05, * P<0.1; Participants were asked to rate the likelihood/willingness to donate on a scale from 1-5, 1 refers to no/less, 5 refers to yes/more.

4.3. Gender differences

We mainly focused on the gender difference instead of other demographic factors in donation behavior. The data in Table 4 shows that there is an obvious difference between males and females. The willingness for females to donate again after receiving handmade toys is excessively big (1.033, $p<0.01$). However, males only tend to donate again at a size of 0.348. There is the same tendency in the influence of manufactured toys. Males only tend to donate at a size of 0.214 and females tend to donate at a size of 0.326 ($p<0.1$). Annual income is a significant difference between males and females. A size of 1.705 ($p<0.01$) males earn less than ￥50000 and females have a size of 0.309. Times of donation for males is exceedingly small compared to females (0.069 for males and 0.362, $p<0.01$ for females).

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Table 4. Impact of gender on donation behavior

Dependent Variable: Willingness to donate again		
	(1)	(2)
	Male	Female
Handmade toy	0.348	1.033***
	(0.555)	(0.194)
Manufactured toy	0.214	0.326*
	(0.445)	(0.195)
Age (below 20)	-0.544	0.068
	(0.519)	(0.224)
Annual income (less than ¥50,000)	1.705***	0.309
	(0.501)	(0.189)
Times of donation (at least once)	0.069	0.362*
	(0.457)	(0.202)
N	38	202
R-sq	0.277	0.148

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; *** P<0.01, ** P<0.05, * P<0.1; Participants were asked to rate the likelihood/willingness to donate on a scale from 1-5, 1 refers to no/less, 5 refers to yes/more.

5. Discussion

5.1. Main analysis

Through applying the data analysis tool in Excel (Table 2), we can identify that compared to the control group, the engagement of handmade toys has a significant impact (P<0.01) on participants' willingness to donate again. This allows us to reject the null hypothesis confidently and say that the handmade toys have a positive impact on participants' willingness to donate again in our experiment. In comparison, the manufactured toys also show an improvement in willingness to donate again, but with a much lower P-value (P<0.1). By comparing these two results, the handmade toys show a much stronger impact on people's willingness to donate again, which is positive to our hypothesis that different types of thank-you gifts have different effects on future donations. At the same time, there is also a relatively significant improvement (P<0.05) in the frequency of donation and a less significant impact (P<0.1) on the amount of money donated again when handmade toy is involved. Meanwhile, the inclusion of manufactured toys does not have a notable impact on either of these two variables.

Based on the findings above, we believe that using handmade toys will strongly improve donors' willingness to donate again, is highly likely to increase donors' frequency of donation, and is likely to increase the amount of money the donors donate the next time. Using the manufactured toys is likely to improve donors' willingness to donate again but has no significant impact on the amount and frequency of donations. Therefore, handmade toys outperform manufactured toys as a thank-you gift by generating a more positive impact on donation activities.

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5.2. Suggestion & policy implication

Without 'the spirit of the gift', things circulate without any binding or connection. Without spirit, there is no gift [15]. As mentioned in the paper based on our experiment, gifts can bring positive effects to people, among which handmade gifts will help the donation behavior, in its policy on donor organizations, the government can encourage organizations to create such feedback mechanisms to improve social well-being, but more is to be done by the donors themselves. To get more donations, the charity can ask the beneficiaries to make handmade products. For example, in the case of the welfare home for hearing-impaired children, the organization can organize the children to make hand-written cards or handmade toys for the donors at fixed times or festivals after receiving the donations.

5.3. Outside variables analysis

5.3.1. Age, annual income, and times of donation

Building on the findings above, we have some further considerations on the constitute of our experiment participants and the possible impact of outside variables on our results. Individual difference factors that have been demonstrated to influence acts of altruism include age, religion, education, and socialization [16].

One of the potential problems of our experiment is that we have a substantial proportion of low-age group participants (below 20) which covers over 80% of our experimental subjects (Table 5). This unusual condition is because the questionnaire is spread out by the young research team members, causing a significantly high number of teenage participants. Both laboratory-based studies [17,18]and experimental research [19] suggest an age-related increase in charitable contributions. Furthermore, when inducing empathy into participants serving in the dictator role, older adults give significantly more than younger adults [20]. Their previous studies stress the important effect of age in charitable activities, which emphasizes the importance of examining the influence of age factors in our experiment.

Table 5. Age distribution of participants

Age Group	Number of participants	Percentage
Below 20	112	82.35%
20 - 30	18	13.24%
31 - 40	2	1.47%
41 - 50	0	0%
Above 50	4	2.94%
Total	136	100%

By examining the impact of age below 20 on our Y variables, we can tell that participants below 20 are more likely to increase their amount of money donated again ($P<0.1$), and generally show a lower frequency of donation (Table 3). As the biggest age group does not lead to significant impacts, this experiment's data and results are still assumed to be valid. However, for more accurate and responsible research, we should better increase the proportion of other groups and increase the number of participants.

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Another potential problem is that nearly 70% of our experimental subjects have an annual income of less than ¥50,000 (Table 6). Research shows that the average size of donations has a positive correlation to the total voluntary income [21]. This is most likely to be relevant to the fact that over 80% of our participants were aged below 20. This group of participants show a stronger willingness to donate again and a higher frequency of donations, which does not fit with the previous research, thus it is important to check the influence of income in this experiment and make further improvements by including more older generations. However, research also suggests that the giving behavior of low-income people differed according to the educational level of the person [22]. And because the majority of our participants are students --- educated, this may be the reason they show a more positive reaction to donation than expected.

Table 6. Income distribution of participants

Income	Number of participants	Percentage
Less than ¥50,000	95	69.85%
¥50,000 - ¥100,000	12	8.82%
¥100,000 - ¥200,000	11	8.09%
¥200,000 - ¥400,000	6	4.41%
Over ¥400,000	12	8.82%
Total	136	100%

We also consider that the participants' donation habits may influence their decision-making; thus, the times of donation factor is also introduced. However, no significant impact is found in the examination of this factor.

Overall, we have very low-aged participants who are still students, which may lead to overly optimistic results in willingness to donate again and the frequency of donations. To improve this, we need to balance the portion of different age groups by involving more participants from older age groups.

5.3.2. Gender

The other important outside factor that needs consideration is the gender of our participants. Donation is driven by empathic concern, a psychological mechanism that drives giving [23,24]. Women, at the same time, are found to be more selfless, empathetic and generous than man [25-37]. The existence of gender differences in charitable giving is also supported by previous research [38-47]. Even after marriage, compared to male-headed householders, female-headed householders are more likely to give and give more across all charitable subsectors and income levels [48]. Therefore, gender is a crucial factor to consider in our experiment.

Table 7 shows that at least three-quarters of our participants were female. According to previous research, this high proportion of female samples may lead to overly optimistic results because women are more likely to donate and are more empathetic.

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Table 7. Gender distribution of participants

Gender	Number of participants	Percentage
Male	19	13.97%
Female	102	75%
Prefer not to say	15	11.03%
Total	136	100%

In fact, from Table 4 we can see that female shows a highly significant impact ($P<0.01$) on the willingness to donate again when receiving handmade toys and a relatively small impact when receiving manufactured toys. In comparison, the gender of the male does not have a significant impact on the willingness to donate again when receiving either gift (Table 4). This outcome supports that females are more likely to be touched and empathetic, so the emotional bond that handmade toys generate has a bigger effect on female donors. Therefore, this experiment outcome is not completely reliable because of the highly uneven gender distribution in our participants and the significant impact of gender on the response to gifts. To make our findings more accurate, we need to find more male participants and get a relatively even gender distribution in our samples.

6. Conclusion

Finally, our experiment found that in the donation behavior, people are more inclined to donate money to donation institutions that have gift returns, especially handmade gifts. Therefore, the behavior of giving handmade gifts will have a positive impact. At the same time, it can be seen from the experiment that most people who have donated in the past will continue to donate money. Among them, we also found that in the experiment, the gender of the volunteers had a certain impact on the experimental results. In the same case, female volunteers would be more influenced by handmade gifts and donate again.

However, the number of samples in this experiment is insufficient, and the experimental conclusion is only a one-sided estimate. It needs to use a larger number of samples, invest more energy, and provide more a professional experimental design.

In practice, these findings can contribute to the amount of donations a charity receives, suggesting that reciprocating with handmade gifts is a good strategy for motivating donors to give.

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Qianyi Xie and Peiyu Ma contributed equally to this work and should be considered co-first authors.

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