

Karma or Altruism? Donor Motives and the Power of Recipient Identity in Charitable Giving

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Abstract

Discussions on the motives for making financial donations to charitable organizations sometimes arise regarding the contrasting notions of karma and altruism. While there are individuals who believe that donors are mainly motivated by altruistic motives, an alternative perspective suggests that people may also be influenced by the concept of karma, which believes that charitable acts lead to beneficial consequences for oneself. The objective of this research is to examine how contributors' intentions, which may be categorized as either karma or altruism, influence their distribution of money towards charities. Furthermore, the present research investigates the influence of identified victims on individuals' giving behavior. A laboratory study was conducted, including a total of 242 people who were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: a control group, an altruism framing group with a recipient who was identified, and a karma framing group. We presented persuasive messages to the participants, aiming to persuade them to contribute to underprivileged students. The results showed that donors who knew the organization's name and the recipient's identity donated more. Furthermore, the study found that karma framing would encourage participants to donate more when compared to those who received only the recipients' identities. In addition to karma framing, various motives behind karma, which involved people pursuing favorable outcomes for themselves, had an important effect on donation behavior. This study ultimately enhances our awareness of the details associated with donation behavior and identifies ways to persuade people to support charitable organizations.

Keywords: altruism, karma, donations behavior, identified victims, laboratory experiment

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Introduction

The failure of the government to fulfill public demands led to the emergence of non-profit organizations, which have no obligation to provide any kind of public service. Money contributions play a crucial role in addressing significant socioeconomic issues, particularly among children with limited resources. The significance of these provides cannot be overstated (Verhaert & Van Den Poel, 2011). That's why it was important for philanthropic organizations and policymakers who want to increase donations and have a big impact on social progress to understand the varied reasons people gave money. This includes examining intentions that motivate people to donate more, especially believing in karma (Kulow & Krämer, 2016) and moral altruism (Verhaert & Van Den Poel, 2011; Ye et al., 2015) that motivate people to donate their money in several previous studies. Thus, knowing the complex motivations driving philanthropy is both strategic. If we wish to better society and make change, it was important to understand how our vibes and intentions can affect positive energy.

The belief in karma is deeply rooted in many cultures and religions around the world. In popular usage, the term karma often refers to the idea that what goes around comes around and that good deeds will be rewarded while bad deeds will be punished. Furthermore, one's actions, whether good or bad, will have consequences in the future. So, this notion can influence individuals to consider the potential karmic outcomes of their actions. They may choose to act kindly or avoid harmful behavior that could lead to negative karma (Converse et al., 2012; White et al., 2018; White & Norenzayan, 2019). Over the past decade, there has been an increasing emphasis on promoting prosocial behavior such as assisting, sharing, cooperating, and financial donations. Kulow and Krämer (2016) conducted an online experiment to determine whether consumers who believe in karma would donate more to the Skin Cancer Foundation, although only voluntary their time would be given to other beneficiaries. Furthermore, numerous previous studies clearly demonstrated the existence of karma and its potential to influence individuals' long-term perspective (Chen et al., 2019). Additionally, individuals tend to place their trust in karma when confronted with uncertain situations, as they anticipate a favorable outcome that will be reacted (Converse et al., 2012).

However, the idea of altruism, which is rooted in the altruistic regard for the welfare of others, is evident in the intention to donate. Altruism contains a positive energy that serves as a motivating factor for individuals to allocate their resources towards others (Chen et al., 2021; Otto & Bolle, 2011). Altruism is a powerful force that drives positive change through voluntary donations, whether financial, material, or time. While it has been observed that altruism is mainly driven by a genuine concern for the well-being of others, some studies have revealed that individuals exhibit complex thinking when engaging in philanthropic activities, especially in terms of financial donations. This act of generosity can also be seen in medical research (such as blood donation; Otto & Bolle, 2011) or education.

Based on the existing studies, it is evident that the concepts of karma and altruism serve as motivators for individuals to engage in greater financial donation. However, the present study reveals that these two concepts have distinct intentions in individuals' thoughts. The notion of karma states that individuals will experience consequences of their actions, like the saying that what goes around comes around. This suggests that individuals should prioritize the outcomes of their activities over the individuals who will gain from them. On the other hand, altruism pertains to instances of kindness or generosity that are driven, to some extent, by self-interest. Although an altruistic deed might at first benefit others, the underlying mixed

reasons can influence their emotions at that moment. However, the concept of karma and altruism can be likened to the behavior of encouraging individuals to donate. In our perspective, individuals who prioritize karma seek to observe the enduring consequences of their actions, whether they occur in the present life or in the next incarnations. Conversely, individuals who prioritize altruism seek sole fulfillment upon completion of their acts. Hence, based on the concept that individuals have diverse intentions to contribute, the primary objective of this study is to fill the existing research void by examining the distinct impact of karma and altruism on individuals' financial contributions to philanthropic organizations.

To achieve the researcher's objective, a laboratory experiment was conducted to find out if the concept of karma and altruism may motivate individuals to engage in acts of kindness. Particularly, those who were exposed to a presentation of altruism along with a defined recipient to convince them to donate, compared to those who do receive nothing (Treatment 1). In addition, those who were exposed to a karma framing to encourage them to donate, rather than to those who get nothing (Treatment 2), demonstrate that the impact of belief and altruism on their attitude towards monetary contribution differs. This study seeks to offer significant insights for charities and nonprofit organizations aiming at enhancing their efforts to raise funds by examining the distinct influences of altruism and karma on contribution behavior. Moreover, a greater awareness of these motives might guide governmental policies designed to encourage charity and cultivate a culture of giving.

Theoretical Background

The Power of Identity Recipient on Monetary Donation

The act of donating has been affected by moral, ethical, or warm-hearted motivations. However, individuals often experience conflicting thoughts that limit their giving, particularly when it comes to financial contributions (Genevsky et al., 2013; Rubaltelli & Agnoli, 2012). Previous studies have demonstrated that to extend the limitations of their resources and enhance the level of donation, they exert pressure on the “identified victim” who is the beneficiary of their actions.

Research indicates that individuals are more inclined to allocate resources to identifiable beneficiaries rather than to unidentified ones. Studies have shown that people are more willing to donate when they can see specific recipients (Genevsky et al., 2013; Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997; Rubaltelli & Agnoli, 2012). For example, Rubaltelli and Agnoli (2012) found that donors were more likely to contribute to a single recognized woman than to a group of three women, highlighting a preference for individual recognition. Additionally, Genevsky et al. (2013) demonstrated that individuals are more generous towards beneficiaries presented with a photo and name compared to those identified only by a silhouette or name. This suggests that the visibility of recipients significantly impacts donation behavior. Consequently, this study incorporates identifiable victims to illustrate that individuals' altruism is heightened when they perceive a specific beneficiary rather than an unidentified one.

The Intentionality of Monetary Donation

Altruism and Charitable Appeals

Altruism, which means caring about the well-being of others without expecting anything in return, has been studied for a long time in psychology, economics, and society. For example, Otto and Bolle (2011) examined the effect of altruism in blood donation and found that important predictors of donation behavior were altruistic motives, such as a desire to serve others or for the greater good. Research indicates that feelings of self-worth and social honor can influence the sincerity and magnitude of these acts (Cappellari et al., 2011; Ottoni-Wilhelm et al., 2017). In the same way, Chen et al. (2021) investigated the impact of altruism on people's propensity to allocate resources to charitable causes and discovered that altruistic people were more likely to give money or their time to assist charitable causes.

Karmic Belief and Charitable Appeals

Many people around the world believe that a person's previous good and bad behaviors may be traced back to the causes of good and bad deeds (White et al., 2018; White & Norenzayan, 2019). Although karma was mentioned in Eastern philosophy, psychological researchers used the concept of karma in Western philosophy, as well as the phrases "you reap what you sow" or "what goes around comes around" (Kulow & Krämer, 2016). Moreover, most people in this world believe in religion, in which the prophets of each religion adopt the law of the universe to instruct their followers (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). Buddhists in Western cultures, for example, are taught by their prophet that "the volition as karma" means that good deeds cause good things to happen and bad deeds cause terrible things to happen, regardless of verbal, physical, or mental (thoughts) (Ghose, 2007; White et al., 2018).

Several previous studies, embracing both marketing and psychological studies, have observed the utilization of the concept of karma along with giving. In their study, Kulow and Krämer (2016) examined the impact of charitable appeals on donations for the Skin Cancer Foundation. The findings showed that individuals with strong karmic beliefs were more likely to donate their time to others compared to those with weak karmic beliefs. Additionally, within the context of financial contributions, individuals who conform to karma beliefs may view charitable giving as an opportunity to invest in their future welfare, particularly when confronted with uncertain situations, with the expectation of receiving positive outcomes in the form of karmic rewards if they do a good deed (Converse et al., 2012). Prior research indicates that belief in karma can shape individuals' attitudes and behaviors towards charitable contributions. This evaluation will explore the role of altruism in charitable organizations with specific goals, differentiating it from the notion of karma.

The study examines the effects of karma framing, which emphasizes the outcomes of one's actions, and altruism framing, which focuses on the enjoyment derived from helping others, on motivating charitable donations. Research indicates a significant overlap between these two concepts. It is important to note that the impact of contributions cannot be definitively attributed to a specific source, as it may be intentionally shaped. The aim is to determine whether karma and altruism influence people's perceptions of philanthropy differently. Furthermore, individuals who prioritize their own consequences over those of others tend to be more inclined to donate when the needs or outcomes are concrete.

Methodology

Testing the research questions listed below, I offer the experiments. According to the first research question, people are more likely to give when they fully understand the path of their action. I conducted a laboratory experiment to investigate this issue. The second research question is whether karma framing causes people to choose their personal gain from their deeds rather than doing good deeds for others. We tested this hypothesis using the experiment.

Procedure

The experiment was conducted in a controlled laboratory at Khon Kaen University, adhering to ethical standards for studies involving human subjects. A total of 242 undergraduate students were recruited via social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Participants were randomly divided into three groups: a control group with 80 participants, treatment group 1 with 80 participants, and treatment group 2 with 82 participants. Each participant received 100 Baht (2.9 USD) as compensation for their participation depends on allocation for donations or keep for themselves during the experiment.

The experiment was organized into sessions, each comprising 10-15 participants from the same group. It began with a welcome and a presentation of a video which informed participants about the organization's efforts to support underprivileged children without explicit donation prompts. After viewing the video, participants expressed their educational perspectives. They were then asked to contribute their funds to the organization, called individually by their group. Finally, participants completed a questionnaire that included demographic information and assessed their beliefs, happiness, and stress levels on a Likert scale from 1 to 5. Each group followed the same procedure but received different persuasive messages before deciding on their contributions.

For the control group, participants were asked to design how much they would like to donate based on that information developed form which developed from Ein-gar and Levontin (2013), and Sharma (2021) as presented by figure 1 below.

Figure 1

The Piece of Paper to Ask Them to Allocate Their Money to Our Project for Control Group



In treatment group 1, the impact of identifying receivers was tested by using a different message compared to the control group. The message contained information. The participants were given details on identifying their desired contribution amount. In addition, I have identified the recipients of the benefits, who are students funded by the UNICEF foundation, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

The Piece of Paper to Ask Them to Allocate Their Money to Our Project for Treatment 1



To examine the impact of karma on their decision-making process. Participants assigned to treatment 2 will be presented with the karma text before seeing the UNICEF video to assess their level of belief in karma, based on by Chen et al. (2019).

These stories were about:

A young man who donates blood every four months throughout the year. One day, he had an accident and was in a serious state. He needed blood to support his treatment, and it was delivered to him in a timely manner. When he comes to terms with the horrible incident, he believes that his ability to donate blood saved him from dying.

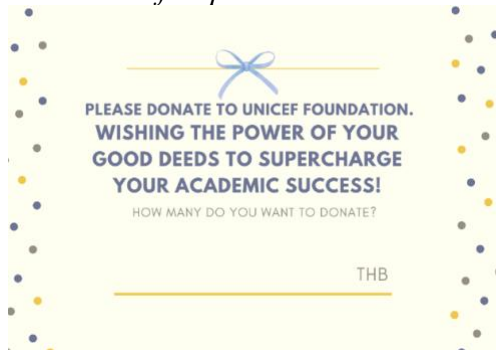
And the second story:

One day, a young girl was waiting for a green traffic light to cross the street to another side of the street. In her limited time to cross the street, she saw the elder woman. She was trying to cross the street, but she carried both her stuff and her cane. A young girl will decide to help the elder cross. In the evening, a girl was crossing the crosswalk, and a motorcycle came to the field, and she survived, so she thought it was because she saved an old woman in the morning. She was safe from this accident.

To prove that karma exists. Following that, participants were asked to assign a 7-point scale weight to two items based on their belief in the story and its reasonableness. Subsequently, participants will be provided with the same information shown in figure 3. This information will point out that they are the individuals who will reap the advantages of their activities.

Figure 3

The Piece of Paper to Ask Them to Allocate Their Money to Our Project for Treatment 2



Participants were separated during the activities by a distance at each table to ensure privacy. Moreover, participants were asked about their individual demographics and their level of belief in karma, religions, and supernatural which inspired by Kopelle et al. (2010), Roy et al. (2019), and Chen et al. (2019). To evaluate the impact of an intervention on the value of donation for a philanthropic organization, we employ multiple regression analysis with final payment amounts as dependent variables.

Results

Descriptive

The experiment occurred and proceeded successfully according to the planned plan. The research design contains three distinct experimental groups, including Treatment 1 Altruism Framing, Treatment 2 Karma Framing, and a control group. All two hundred and forty-two individuals were assigned randomly to one of three groups. While its outcome is evident as a numerical value in Table 1.

Table 1

Balance Test: The Randomization Checks for Demographic and Level of Their Believing

	Experimental Group		
	Control (N = 80)	Treatment 1 (N = 80)	Treatment 2 (N = 82)
Gender	0.775 (0.047)	0.675 (0.052)	0.719 (0.049)
Age	20.662 ^{A***} (0.170)	19.525 ^{C***} (0.141)	20.817 (0.085)
Faculty	0.363 ^{A***} (0.054)	0.687 ^{C***} (0.052)	0.280 (0.05)
Religious	0.925 ^{B***} (0.030)	0.913 ^{C***} (0.032)	0.731 (0.049)
Income	7,497.5 (477.374)	6,635 ^{C***} (313.903)	8,126.829 (448.672)
Believe in Karma	3.051 (0.091)	2.969 (0.085)	3.011 (0.084)
Believe in Religious	2.500 (0.109)	2.434 (0.089)	2.530 (0.101)
Believe in God	2.056 (0.098)	2.131 (0.103)	2.183 (0.092)
Believe in Supernatural	3.004 (0.123)	3.001 (0.111)	2.984 (0.103)
Happiness	3.500 (0.083)	3.550 (0.081)	3.573 (0.085)
Stress	3.488 ^{B**} (0.102)	3.562 ^{C**} (0.083)	3.817 (0.778)

Note: Note: Standard errors are in parentheses. ***, **, and * are significant level at 1%, 5% and 10%, respectively. The comparison among the two experimental conditions is “A” for Control and Treatment 1, “B” for Control and Treatment 2, “C” for Treatment 1 and Treatment 2.

Table 1 presents the demographic details for 242 individuals, categorized by the experimental group. The female in the samples is 72 percent, and there is no statistically significant

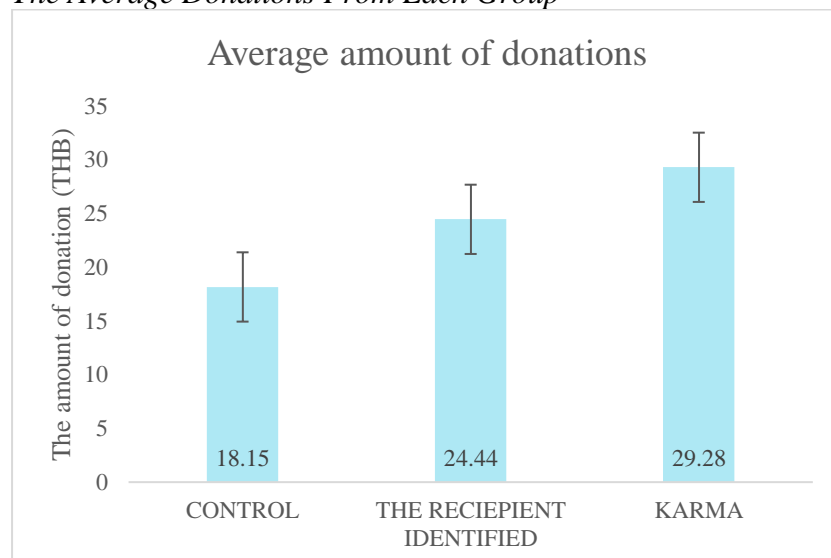
difference ($P\text{-value} > 0.1$) observed in the groups. The age limit for participation is limited to those who are studying undergraduate studies at Khon Kaen University. Ranging from 19 to 25 years. The table shows that there is a significant difference in the age of participants in the control group compared to treatment 1 ($P\text{-value} < 0.01$), as well as a significant difference in the age of participants in treatment 1 compared to treatment 2 ($P\text{-value} < 0.01$). The control group demonstrated a statistically significant difference compared to treatment 1 in terms of the majority of economics faculty members ($P\text{-value} < 0.01$). In the control group, there was a significant difference between the most religious belief and treatment 2 ($P\text{-value} < 0.01$). Furthermore, treatment 1 presented significant differences from treatment 2 ($P\text{-value} < 0.01$). However, there is a significant difference in the income of individuals in treatment 1 compared to treatment 2 ($P\text{-value} < 0.01$). Furthermore, this questionnaire includes the individual's level of belief. The control group's belief in karma does not show a statistically significant difference when compared to the other group ($P\text{-value} > 0.1$). There is an important difference in the stress levels of participants between the control group and treatment 2 ($P\text{-value} < 0.05$). Additionally, there is a significant difference between treatment 1 and treatment 2 between the groups ($P\text{-value} < 0.05$). As a result, we incorporated variable variations into a model to achieve optimal control.

Main Results

I evaluated the average amount of donations in each group, which provided different information. Figure 4 shows the average amount of donations for each treatment. The average amount of donations of subjects in control group in the control group who did not get anything was approximately 18.15 THB and lower than the average amount of donations received by others. The number of participants in treatment 1 is 24.44, which is smaller than the number of participants in treatment 2 (29.28).

Figure 4

The Average Donations From Each Group



To test the two hypotheses, we show the estimation outcomes gathered from all participants, covering individuals at all educational levels. Table 2 provides the outcomes of all samples analyzed using two models: one that just shows the effects of the treatment and another that includes full models separated by each treatment group. Both models use the provided control group as a reference group.

To explain each model. Regarding the treatment effect model, our focus is just on the impact of each treatment on the amount of donation. This is followed by the framing of the message before participants make decisions. The control group (18.15 THB, P-value < 0.01) is considered a reference group, indicating that individuals have a baseline donation amount of approximately 18.15 THB. In addition, the significance of treatment 1 is based on the fact that the framing of altruism influences participants to donate approximately 6.28 THB (P-value < 0.05). It means that when individuals are exposed to an altruistic message, their donation amount increases by around 6.28 THB, which results in a total gift of 24.44 THB. The model shows a significant effect in treatment 2, where the use of karma framing persuades participants to donate around 11.13 THB. The P-value is less than 0.01, indicating that when individuals receive access to a karma message, their donation amount increases by around 11.13 THB, resulting in a total gift of 29.28 THB.

In the full model, our analysis of the balance test revealed that several variables have a significant impact on individuals' perceptions of financial donations; thus, we included more control variables to test the effect on donation. According to the full model in Table 2, treatments 1 (altruism framing) and 2 (karma framing) showed statistically significant impacts, as shown by their respective P-values of 0.05 and 0.01. Furthermore, the control variables, such as stress, have a favorable impact on people's decision-making (P-value < 0.01). Particularly when individuals experience just one level of stress, their contribution amount increases by 4.19 THB. Furthermore, to check the collinearity in every control variable, especially each level of belief, I conclude that there is no collinearity.

Discussion and Conclusion

Altruism is a pervasive concept. This is particularly evident when individuals are driven by the impending donation of resources (Chen et al., 2021; Otto & Bolle, 2011). Despite having outstanding intentions, this phenomenon may not always occur if individuals prioritize their own self-interest. They present an overwhelming feeling of hope and are motivated to improve their decision-making to gain back the positive outcomes.

In the initial phase of my research, I conducted how recipients perceive donations, which are often driven by kindness. Thus, to determine whether beneficiaries can be identified in messages to inspire donors. The control group that will get nothing compared to treatment 1. Participants, including the students in the UNICEF organization who received help from their resources, will receive a persuasive message. As the results, the identity recipients experiment demonstrated that individuals were more inclined to donate when they were aware of the recipient's identity. Specially, the control group, which consisted of unidentified beneficiaries, revealed that participants in the unidentified group exhibited lower donation levels compared who were aware of and understood the journey of their resource. Thus, our propositions confirm that individuals who have experienced clear victimization tend to be more kind towards others, suggesting that making the recipient feel special enhances emotional connections and encourages generosity.

In the second part, I'll be aware that participants prioritize altruism as a motive prior to engaging in contributions. To verify their ability for empathy. Or are they self-interest? Do contributions have varying effects? To assess participants' empathy (altruism) and self-interest (karma), I will use different messages to convince them. In treatment 1, participants will only get a message highlighting the beneficiaries of their acts, namely UNICEF. Conversely, in treatment 2, participants will receive a karma message emphasizing that they

themselves would experience positive consequences as the beneficiaries of their deeds. Therefore, it was found that karma framing had a significant impact on donations, beyond the results resulting from only altruistic framing. Because of these results, I can better understand the psychological reasons behind charitable giving. It seems that both selfless and selfish motivation can be used to get more people to donate to charities.

In the end, this study helps us understand how people donate more deeply and gives us useful tips for improving our fundraising efforts. However, this might not always happen if people thought about how, it would help them, which they do with good goals as well. They have something to look forward to, which makes them want to do better.

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