An Exploration Of Conspicuous And Non-Conspicuous Donation Behavior Based On Consumer Characteristics

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Abstract

This paper explores the conceptualization of what we term "conspicuous donation behavior" and "non-conspicuous donation behavior" and provides initial insight into their relationships with involvement, self-monitoring, age and gender. The results indicate that involvement, age and gender have significant relationships with "conspicuous donation behavior", whereas only involvement exhibits a significant relationship with "non-conspicuous donation behavior". The results provide a number of theoretical and practical implications and suggests new avenues for future research.

Conspicuous Donation Behavior

The motivational aspects of donation behavior has been well researched and there appears to be considerable consensus that individuals are motivated to donate by the anticipation of intrinsic benefits, such as increased self-esteem, public gratification, satisfaction and fulfilment through meetings one's obligation (Dawson, 1988; Guy and Patton, 1989; Bruce, 1994; Hibbert and Horne, 1996). This view has been taken to the extreme by West (2004, p. 1) who argues that, in fact, modern compassion is all "about feeling good, not doing good, and illustrates not how altruistic we have become, but how selfish". Thus, he coins the phrase "conspicuous compassion" (West, 2004, p. 1).

Drawing an analogy with Veblen's (1912) theory of conspicuous consumption, West (2004) advocates that there is little difference between conspicuous consumption and conspicuous compassion given that the former promotes the visible consumption of goods as a mechanism to enhance one's social standing, while the latter promotes the visible display of compassion to achieve the same end. While some may argue the cynicism of West's (2004) overall notion of modern day compassion, it may well have merit in the context of donation behavior given the proliferation of empathy ribbons (eg. pink ribbons for the Cancer Council), and the like (eg. red noses for SIDS), in recent years. Further, given that visibility is the key to conspicuousness and that empathy ribbons provide visibility in terms of donation-related behavior, it may be that conspicuous compassion is truly manifested through the purchase and, more particularly, the wearing of empathy ribbons or similar. Furthermore, it may be that particular individuals lend themselves to this type of conspicuous donation behavior as has been found to be the case with conspicuous (or status) consumption behavior (eg., Chung and Fischer, 2001; Wong and Ahuvia, 1998; Prendergast and Wong, 2003; Piacentini and Mailer, 2004).

Previous research has examined the characteristics of individuals who practise specific types of donation behavior. For example, on a micro-level, Schlegelmilch et al (1997a) examined donation behavior relating to specific collection methods such as door-to-door collection, raffle tickets, shop counter collections or mail, to name just a few. As a result, they identify donor profiles over nine different types of appeals and concluded that different individuals do, indeed, respond to different charitable appeals. This being the case, we propose that, on a broader macro-level, different types of individuals with different motivations will practise

different types of donation behaviors (eg. conspicuous versus non-conspicuous donation behavior). As such, we define conspicuous donation behavior as "an individual's show of support to charitable causes through the purchase of merchandise that is overtly displayed on the individual's person or possessions (eg. the wearing of empathy ribbons, red noses etc.)". On the other hand, non-conspicuous donation behavior is defined as "an individual's show of support to charitable causes through means that are not explicitly obvious to others (mailing donations, purchasing raffle tickets etc.)". The key to both of these definitions resides within the presence or absence of the conspicuousness regarding the behavior. For example, individuals purchasing an empathy ribbon, but not wearing it, would be engaging in non-conspicuous donation behavior. Hence, simply purchasing an empathy ribbon, or the like, does not imply conspicuous behavior.

Involvement

We take the view that donating to charities will be influenced by an individual's involvement defined as "... the perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values and interests" (Zaichkowsky, 1985, p. 342). However, it should be noted that it is the individual who is involved with respect to object, and it is their involvement that determines how they respond to that stimuli (Andrews, Durvasula and Akhter, 1990). Thus, the more one views donating to charities as meaningful or important in one's life, the more one is involved (O'Cass, 2000). This means that those individuals who are highly involved will perceive donating to charities as important or personally relevant, whereas, those who are not involved may have an indifferent or uncaring view.

However, in the case of conspicuous donation behavior, the effect of involvement may not be as strong. This is so because individuals who expect personal gain in the form of self-esteem and status through giving are less motivated to help and less involved in helping others (Guy and Patton, 1989). On this basis, it could be expected that an individual's level of involvement with charities may be different for those who practice conspicuous as opposed to non-conspicuous donation behavior. As such, we begin our exploration of this issue by posing the following research questions.

RQ1: To what extent does involvement affect conspicuous donation behavior? RQ2: To what extent does involvement affect non-conspicuous donation behavior?

Self-Monitoring

Various personality traits have been linked to consumer behavior, one of which is self-monitoring (Browne and Kaldenberg, 1997). Self-monitoring relates to self-presentation and reflects the degree to which one adjusts one's behavior according to social cues (Snyder, 1974). Whereas some people adjust their behavior according to the particular social situation, others will tend to disregard social cues and display behavior that is more consistent with their internal values (Snyder and Gangestad, 1986). Individuals can be classified into two groups with reference to their level of self-monitoring. High self-monitors are particularly sensitive to the surrounding social cues and use those cues for monitoring their behavior, low self-monitors tend to be less sensitive to social cues and maintain a consistent self-presentation across situations. Becherer and Richard (1978) found that low self-monitors displayed similar consumption behavior for social and non-social products; whereas, high self-monitors' consumption behavior was more influenced by the social aspects of the product. In a similar vein, O'Cass (2000) indicated that the ability to modify behavior was significant for high-self monitors for the purchasing and wearing of fashion clothing because

of a concern for one's image. This point may have particular relevance to the wearing of empathy ribbons given high-self monitors' concern for self-image. Thus, it is valid to argue that self-monitoring may influence donation behavior in general. However, more particularly, we argue, here, it may be likely that high self-monitors will engage in conspicuous donation behavior, over and above non-conspicuous donation behavior, because of the visibility of this behavior. As such, we explore this issue and pose the following research questions.

RQ3: To what extent does self-monitoring affect conspicuous donation behavior?

RQ4: To what extent does self-monitoring affect non-conspicuous donation behavior?

Age and Gender

Gender has often been found to be a worthy variable of interest within the realms of consumer behavior (Schiffman et al, 2004). However, in terms of philanthropic behavior, "the results of studies which have included gender as a variable have tended to be inconsistent" (Schlegelmilch et. al., 1997a; 1997b). While the assumption, based on some studies, is that females are more altruistic than males, this is not necessarily the case in specific circumstances. For example, Schlegelmilch et al (1997) found that males give more than females through raffle ticket sales and shop counter collections. As such, given the two opposing types of donation behavior (conspicuous and non-conspicuous) of interest here, the examination of gender within these behaviors may well be warranted. Therefore, we propose the following research questions:

RQ5: To what extent does gender affect conspicuous donation behavior.

RQ6: To what extent does gender affect non-conspicuous donation behavior.

Similarly, age has also been examined within the realms of donation behavior, with slightly more conclusive results. For example, it has been found that the degree of donation behavior does increase to the age of 65, at which point a decrease is evident (Danko and Stanley; 1986; Schlegelmilch, 1997b; Schlegelmilch and Tynan, 1989). However, interestingly, when Schlegelmilch et al., (1997) examined age across different charitable appeals, age of respondents was not significant in any donation situation. This being the case, it may be that age, when examined across conspicuous and non-conspicuous behavior, could provide results that may well deviate from the norm. In order to investigate this, we propose the following research questions:

RQ7: To what extent does age affect conspicuous donation behavior.

RQ8: To what extent does age affect non-conspicuous donation behavior.

Methodology

A self-administered survey was developed and administered to 269 undergraduate and postgraduate students at a large Australian university. The use of a student sample was deemed appropriate as it is argued that, universities generally contain a balanced mix of students from different social, economic and political backgrounds and, therefore, provide a reasonable representation of the general public (Bennett, 1997). Furthermore, as recommended by Louie and Obermiller (2000), in order to reduce social desirability bias, which is particularly relevant in the study of donation behavior, responses were anonymous and this was clearly communicated to potential participants. The items to measure involvement were adapted from Mittal's (1995) 5-item measure that taps the degree to which donating to charities is important, matters to, means a lot, significant and is of concern to respondents. Self-monitoring was measured by six items provided by O'Cass (2000). As there were no pre-existing measures available, four items were generated to measure

conspicuous donation behaviour (e.g. Wearing the yellow ribbon would make me feel good about myself) and four items for non-conspicuous donation behaviour (e.g. I would make a donation to this charity).

Results

Demographic information reported on the survey indicated that female respondents represented 57% of the sample. Ages ranged from 18 to 56 years with a mean age of 22 years. Factor analysis revealed that all scales were unidimensional with eigenvalues greater than 1, factor loadings ranged from .61 to .93, which were above the recommended level of .50 (Shi and Wright, 2001) and Cronbach's Alpha estimates ranged from .73 to .95, thus, indicating internal consistency of the scales (Hair et al, 1998). This being the case, the data was deemed appropriate for the computation of mean values to form composite variables for each of the constructs. In order to address the research questions, regression analysis was conducted to examine the effect of the independent variables (involvement, self-monitoring, age and gender) on the dependent variables (conspicuous donation behavior, nonconspicuous donation behavior). The results presented in Table 1 indicate that 40% of the variance in conspicuous donation behavior is accounted for by the independent variables (F statistic of 12.48, p < .001). The results indicate that involvement had a significant positive effect on conspicuous donation behavior with a beta weight of .28 (p < .05), as did gender with a beta weight of .21 (p < .05) and age had a negative positive effect with a beta weight of -.15 (p < .05). However, self-monitoring was not significant. Therefore, the results indicate that individuals who are involved with the charity, are female and/or are younger, are more likely to engage in conspicuous donation behavior. In terms of non-conspicuous donation behavior, regression analysis revealed that the independent variables explained 58% of the variance in non-conspicuous donation behavior (F statistic of 33.96, p < .001). Individually, involvement was the only variable to be significant and positive with a beta weight of .58 (p < .05). Self-monitoring, age and gender were not significant.

Table 1 Results of Regression Analysis

Dependent	Independent Variables	Beta	Sig.	R^2	F-	Sig.
Variable					statistic	
Conspicuous	(RQ1) Involvement	.28	.001	.40	12.48	.001
Donation	(RQ3) Self-monitoring	.01	ns			
Behaviour	(RQ5) Gender	.21	.001			
	(RQ7) Age	15	.008			
Non-conspicuous	(RQ2) Involvement	.58	.001	.58	33.96	.001
Donation	(RQ4) Self-monitoring	.08	ns			
Behaviour	(RQ6) Gender	02	ns			
	(RQ8) Age	03	ns			

Discussion

The findings that an individual's involvement is a significant factor that influences donation behavior underscores the importance for charities to find ways to encourage that involvement. Importantly, this influence was seen for both conspicuous and non-conspicuous donation behavior suggesting that both groups take the view that donating to charities has a degree of meaning and importance in their lives (O'Cass, 2000). In terms of non-profit marketing, this is a significant finding as it highlights the motivational aspect of involvement in understanding consumers' donation behavior. However, the influence of involvement was

found to be stronger for non-conspicuous behavior suggesting that involvement in this context is not aligned with the displaying of an empathy ribbon. From the perspective of non-profit marketing developing different marketing strategies for different segments, this finding provides insights into the characteristics that differentiate types of donation behavior.

In terms of self-monitoring, the results were surprising given that it has been shown to be significant for consumer behaviors that are concerned with image, such as the purchasing and wearing of fashion clothing (O'Cass, 2000). In addition, the lack of significance is further surprising given that involvement was found to be significant for both conspicuous and non-conspicuous donation behavior and that self-monitoring and involvement have been previously linked (Browne and Kaldenberg, 1997). Given that empathy ribbons are conspicuous, and as such, may be thought of as social products, it would seem logical to expect that self-monitoring would influence donation behavior. However, as indicated by the finding this was not the case. In view of this, it shows that an individual's conspicuous donation behavior (and the wearing of empathy ribbons) is not concerned with self-presentation, thus, it seems there may be other factors at play here. For example, it may be that the wearing of empathy ribbons as a conspicuous symbol of donation contributes to our 'social image' based on our concern of how we are perceived by others (Blackwell, Miniard and Engel, 2001), rather than one's self-image.

Although there are inconsistent findings on age and gender for donation behavior this study may provide some insight because it examines these variables in terms of the two different donation behaviors. For example, age and gender was not a factor for non-conspicuous donation behavior. In contrast, both age and gender had a significant influence in that being young and/or female was more likely to translate into exhibiting conspicuous donation behavior. As such, the findings, regarding conspicuous donation behavior, are inconsistent with previous findings regarding age and donation behavior in general (eg. Danko and Stanley; 1986; Schlegelmilch, 1997b; Schlegelmilch and Tynan, 1989) in that we found that the younger the individual, the more likely they were to donate, albeit in a conspicuous fashion. Thus, it may be that the 'being seen' or the 'attracting of attention' of the empathy ribbons may be the distinguishing factor that attracts one who is young and/or female.

Implications & Future Research

We believe it is the first study to explore the concept of conspicuous donation behavior and, given the trend of using 'conspicuous' appeals such as empathy ribbons as a marketing strategy for non-profit organisations, this study makes an incremental contribution. From a theoretical perspective, it demonstrates that involvement is an integral factor in donation behavior in general. From a practical perspective it demonstrates that individuals may be segmented via their donation behaviors, thus, marketing appeals can be accordingly designed. However, the limitations of this study are noted, for example, our operationalisation of conspicuous and non-conspicuous donation behaviour may be problematic. Notwithstanding this limitation we believe that there is considerable scope in the exploration of conspicuous donation behavior, beginning with further work to operationalize this construct and the examination of such with consumer-related variables (eg. personality, motivations, decision-making). It may be that a new kind of donor will emerge, one who is more likely to donate from a perspective of ostentatious caring, rather than the notion of actively wanting to help those in need. Whichever it is, this is a domain that may prove a rich domain of research in the consumer behavior discipline.

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