

Rapid Communication

Solidarity.com: Is There a Link between Offline Behavior and Online Donations?

Anja Eller, Ph.D.

Abstract

Solidarity websites, such as The Hunger Site, where people can donate food at no financial cost and minimal effort, have become immensely popular and effective since 1999. These new forms of philanthropy are characterized by wide participation and direct assistance and feedback. The present longitudinal, quasi-experimental study aimed to examine whether online solidarity can be predicted by offline contact with, attitudes about, and altruistic behavior tendencies towards a population in need, asylum seekers. Fifty-seven university students completed two surveys, separated by 1 year. Prior to *T1*, only 9% of respondents had visited solidarity websites, while at *T2* 47% reported clicking. Multiple regression analysis showed that *T2* visits to solidarity websites were (negatively) predicted by *T1* quantity of contact, and marginally, by *T1* general evaluation of asylum seekers. These long-term, offline-to-online effects are intriguing, although there were no effects of offline contact quality and altruistic behavior tendencies. Future research should further investigate the causal direction between offline and online behavior and the factors that might influence the link between offline and online attitudes and behavior.

SOLIDARITY WEBSITES, SUCH AS THE HUNGER SITE (www.thehungersite.com), where people can donate food at no financial cost and minimal effort, have become immensely popular and effective since 1999.^{1,2} The site claims that up to now, over 200 million visitors have resulted in the donation of more than 300 million cups of staple food. Ram³ conducted interviews among solidarity website users and found that altruism was the primary motivation for clicking. Altruism is defined as "a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another's welfare."^{4(p6)} In the case of online donations, this motivational state might be triggered by the first-world donors' feelings of responsibility for the plight of third-world recipients and a sense of moral obligation to help, particularly when the effort is so minimal.

The purpose of the present study was to test if British university students' real-world experiences (i.e., contact) with, attitudes, and altruistic behavior towards a local population in need, asylum seekers, can predict online solidarity towards the needy of the world. To my knowledge, this offline-online link in terms of attitudes and behavior has not been investigated before. Why would there be such a connection? The answer can be found in the nature of new, web-based forms of charity, called *e-philanthropy*.² Jillbert² compared traditional charity with *e-philanthropy*, finding that the former is characterized by wealthy donors who donate

money through large, centralized organizations because of their broad, humanitarian goals. The result is impersonal aid, which benefits people the donors never meet. In contrast, *e-philanthropy* entails the participation of (potentially) everyone (not only the wealthy), investing not only money, but also time and skills. The donation happens directly with people in need and is characterized by personal projects, with direct feedback. This shows that the types of (personalized) interactions and altruistic behaviors—offline and local versus online and global—are quite compatible and comparable. Also, personal (positive) experiences and active engagement on a local level may have a direct effect on philanthropic acts on a global level, rendering them more likely to happen.

Over 50 years of research into the intergroup contact theory⁵ have shown that contact (e.g., of British nationals with asylum seekers) can reduce prejudice, improve intergroup relations, and promote helping behavior if it is qualified by certain conditions, such as equality of status and friendship potential.⁶ Mere quantity of contact, on the other hand, often has no effects, or sometimes even detrimental effects, for intergroup relations.⁷ I hypothesize that higher frequency of visiting solidarity websites at *T2* will be predicted by higher-quality (but not higher-quantity) contact with asylum seekers, more positive general evaluation, and stronger inten-

tions to engage in altruistic actions towards asylum seekers at T1.

Method

Participants

Participants at Time 1 (T1) were 146 (128 women, 18 men) British university students. At T2, 1 year later, $N = 57$ (49 women, 8 men). Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 50 years (mean = 20.3 years at T1 and 20.8 years at T2). Questionnaires were sent and received via e-mail. Students received course credit for participation and could participate in a lottery draw of £20 at T2. At the end of the longitudinal study, participants were debriefed and thanked.

Pilot study

A pilot study, embedded in a number of other scales, revealed that 63.2% of respondents had never heard of solidarity websites, such as The Hunger Site, while 91.2% never used them (only 8.8% of the total sample ever visited them).

Measures and procedure

At T1, using 7-point Likert-type scales, participants reported their amount of contact in daily life with asylum seekers (three items⁷; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.70$), the quality of this contact (four items, e.g., positivity, cooperativeness⁸; $\alpha = 0.69$), and their intentions to act altruistically (four items, e.g., "If you had some spare money, would you be interested in donating it to an organization that aims to help asylum seekers?"; $\alpha = 0.83$). Participants also completed Wright and colleagues⁹ general evaluation scale, which uses semantic differentials, such as cold-warm, friendly-hostile (7-point scales; $\alpha = 0.89$). An email was sent to thank participants after T1 and the signature line read "Click on The Hunger Site: www.thehungersite.com" (quasi-experimental design). At T2 participants were asked how often they visited solidarity websites (5-point scale, *never* to *daily or almost daily*) and 47.4% reported clicking at least occasionally.

Results

Panel attrition and comparison of participants

A MANOVA across the set of measures at T1 revealed that there were no significant differences between the people who later dropped out of the study and those who stayed in the sample, multivariate $F(4, 98) = 0.19$, $p = 0.95$.

Longitudinal regression analysis

Multiple regression analysis was used to examine whether the frequency of clicking on solidarity websites at T2 can be predicted by offline behavior and attitudes at T1. T2 frequency of clicking on solidarity websites was the DV and T1 quantity and quality of contact, intentions to act altruistically, and general evaluation of asylum seekers were Ivs. I also controlled for pre-T1 frequency of clicking. No multicollinearity or nonindependence was detected. T2 visits to solidarity websites were (negatively) predicted by T1 quantity of contact, $\beta = -0.44$, $t = -2.98$, $p = 0.005$, and marginally, by general evaluation of asylum seekers, $\beta = 0.40$, $t = 1.93$, $p = 0.06$. Thus, the more contact participants had with

asylum seekers at T1, the less they clicked on solidarity websites at T2, and the more positive their general evaluation of asylum seekers at T1, they more likely they were to click on solidarity websites at T2. Pre-T1 frequency of clicking (pilot study), was not significantly related to frequency of clicking at T2. Together, all variables accounted for 33% of variance in T2 clicking, $R = 0.33$, $F(5, 31) = 3.12$, $p = 0.02$.

Discussion

It is surprising that offline quality of contact and altruistic behavioral tendencies at T1 did not predict online solidarity at T2. At the same time, the effects of quantity of contact and general evaluations are impressive because (a) they happened over an extended period of time, and (b) they predicted *online* behavior from *offline* attitudes and experiences. So even though T1 offline altruism did not significantly predict T2 online donations, positive attitudes (general evaluation) towards a population in need seem to have predisposed participants to engage in higher levels of e-philanthropy over the course of the study. The negative effect of quantity of contact with asylum seekers on online solidarity was not directly predicted, but is in line with contact theory.⁷ This effect also demonstrates that contact effects can be generalized to outgroups not directly involved in the contact situation, which is particularly valuable when the effects are positive.¹⁰

The current research is limited in that it examined intentions to behave altruistically towards asylum seekers, not actual behavior. Similarly, frequency of visiting solidarity websites was measured via self-report, not actual statistics. Participants might have been motivated by social desirability concerns to report more clicking than they actually engaged in. However, the quite substantial T1–T2 difference in clicking speaks against this possibility. These limitations notwithstanding, this research enriches the field by showing a link between offline experiences, attitudes, and behavior, and online behavior, focusing on the phenomenon of solidarity. The study revealed that online solidarity with the world's needy can be instigated at a local, offline level.

Future research should investigate whether this offline-online link can be causally reversed (i.e., whether online altruistic actions might spur offline philanthropic behavior). Moreover, the factors that might influence the link between offline and online solidarity should be elucidated. One such factor might be the creation of a common ingroup, such as being part of a particular (virtual or actual) community or seeing oneself as part of humanity. Being part of a common ingroup has been shown to promote helping behavior on an offline, local level.¹¹

Acknowledgment

This research was supported by a British Academy Post-Doctoral Fellowship.

Disclosure Statement

The author has no conflict of interest.

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Address reprint requests to:

Dr. Anja Eller
School of Psychology
St. Mary's College
South Street
University of St. Andrews
St. Andrews KY16 9JP
United Kingdom

E-mail: Anja.Eller@st-andrews.ac.uk

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