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## **In Pursuit of Good Karma: When Charitable Appeals to Do Right Go Wrong**

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This research examines the implications of consumers' strength of belief in karma in the context of prosocial behavior. Although, intuitively, believing in karma should result in greater volunteer intentions, three studies show that this effect appears limited to contexts in which the prosocial behaviors are based on selfless motives.

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# In Pursuit of Good Karma: When Charitable Appeals to Do Right Go Wrong

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The saying “you reap what you sow” embodies a guiding principle of the karmic doctrine, suggesting that one’s current actions have future consequences (Krishan 1997). Intuitively, individuals who strongly believe in karma should be more likely to engage in good deeds, such as volunteering, resulting in karmic rewards. However, we propose that it is not the virtue of the prosocial behavior per se, but the altruistic versus egoistic motivation driving it that determines the impact of karmic beliefs on responses to charitable appeals. Since karmic rewards accrue to those who do good deeds to benefit others (rather than themselves), individuals who believe in karma should respond more favorably only to those charitable appeals that highlight other-benefits compared to self-benefits.

Karma claims that current actions will affect future outcomes, which supports the importance of committing righteous acts. However, good deeds can be engaged in for either altruistic (Batson 1991; Krebs 1970) or egoistic (Campbell 1975) motivations. Since motivations to engage in prosocial acts are not always selfless, we argue this can have implications for individuals who strongly believe in karma because interpretations of the karmic doctrine take into consideration the individual’s motivation behind committing a particular action (Ghose 2007; Reichenbach 1998). We contend that charitable appeals framed as self-benefit (vs. other-benefit) will moderate the relationship between strength of belief in karma and propensity to engage in prosocial acts.

Study 1 investigates the moderating role of framing charitable appeals as self-benefit (vs. other-benefit) on propensities to engage in prosocial acts among individuals who strongly believe in karma. One hundred and forty-one individuals participated in a 2 (prime: karma vs. control)  $\times$  2 (charitable appeal: self-benefit vs. other-benefit) between-subjects study. First, participants in the believe in karma condition read a passage highlighting the central tenants of karma, while the participants in the control condition read a passage about routine activities (see Kopalle et al. 2010). Participants evaluated a fictitious charitable appeal, where those in the self-benefit (vs. other-benefit) condition read a charitable appeal that focused on donating to protect you (others). The dependent variable was likelihood of volunteering for the charity. Participants completed the Belief in Karma Scale (Kopalle et al. 2010,  $\alpha = .71$ ) and Belief in a Just World Scale (Dalbert 1999,  $\alpha = .91$ ). An ANCOVA yielded a main effect of belief in karma ( $F(1,135) = 4.18, p < .05$ ) and hypothesized belief in karma by charitable appeal type interaction;  $F(1, 135) = 4.53, p < .05$ . In particular, only participants primed with karmic beliefs expressed greater volunteer intentions following the other-benefit appeal ( $M = 6.16$ ) compared to the self-benefit appeal ( $M = 5.57$ );  $F(1, 54) = 5.89, p < .05$ .

Study 2 operationalizes self-benefit versus other-benefit charitable appeals through the presence (vs. absence) of incentives for donation. Sixty-two English-speaking female individuals participated in the study that consisted of 1 manipulated factor (incentive: present vs. absent) and 1 measured factor (belief in karma, continuous). Participants evaluated a fictitious charitable appeal for Planned Parenthood, which was consistent across conditions, except the incentives present appeal highlighted the chance to be entered into a drawing for a gift card conditional upon donating. The dependent variable was likelihood of volunteering. Participants completed the Belief in Karma Scale (Kopalle et al. 2010,  $\alpha = .64$ ), the Religious Commit-

ment Inventory-10 (Worthington et al. 2003,  $\alpha = .97$ ), involvement and frequency of volunteering.

Regression analysis found a main effect of belief in karma ( $\beta = .44, t(57) = 2.58, p < .05$ ), and a significant incentive and belief in karma interaction ( $\beta = -.43, t(57) = -2.53, p < .05$ ). A spotlight analysis one standard deviation above the mean of belief in karma showed a significant difference such that individuals with strong beliefs in karma indicated greater donation intentions when incentives were absent (vs. present);  $\beta = -.35, t(57) = -2.05, p < .05$  (Aiken and West 1991). There was no difference between incentive conditions for those with low levels of belief in karma;  $\beta = .34, t(57) = 1.75, p < .05$ .

Study 3 operationalizes self-benefit versus other-benefit charitable appeals through varying levels of identification. Two hundred and ninety-four respondents participated in a study that consisted of one manipulated factor (gender identity salience: high vs. low) and one measured factor (belief in karma, continuous). The gender identity salience manipulation consisted of a low versus high identification condition, following prior research (Puntoni and colleagues 2010). The dependent variable was likelihood of volunteering with the charity. Participants rated the degree to which their donation decisions were influenced by thoughts of themselves (vs. others), the Belief in Karma scale (Kopalle et al. 2010,  $\alpha = .75$ ), and familiarity with the disease.

A regression with analysis yielded a significant interaction between gender identity salience and belief in karma ( $\beta = -.21, t(290) = -2.39, p < .05$ ). Spotlight analysis showed a significant difference such that individuals with strong beliefs in karma indicated greater donation intentions when gender identity was not salient (vs. salient);  $\beta = -.16, t(289) = -1.97, p = .05$  (Aiken and West 1991). There was no difference between gender identity salience conditions for those with low levels of belief in karma;  $\beta = .13, t(289) = 1.60, p > .05$ .

To examine if other-focus mediated the interactive effect of beliefs in karma and the incentive conditions on volunteer intentions when gender identity was salient, we employed the bootstrapping approach to derive confidence intervals, using the SPSS-macro syntax developed by Hayes (2012, model 8) with 5,000 resamples. Analysis showed that the indirect effect of the highest order interaction was negative and significant (95% CI: -.3064, -.0164).

This research adds to the peculiar beliefs literature by showing that belief in karma manifests a causal link of current actions resulting in either future rewards or consequences that ultimately impact consumers’ behaviors. It also contributes to the literature on charitable appeals by providing evidence that the framing of an appeal as a self-benefit (vs. other-benefit) moderates the relationship between an individual’s belief in karma and propensity to engage in prosocial acts.

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