

# ***Cuteness Catalyst: Fostering Pro-Social Motivation and Enhancing Donating Behaviors***

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**Abstract:** This study investigated the impact of product characteristics, specifically cuteness, on consumer pro-social motivation and donating behaviours. I predict that cute product would elicit consumer's pro-social motivations and thus increase their willingness to donate. To test these hypotheses, I conducted an experiment, in which participants were presents with a scenario involving the sale of cakes for fundraising. Participants were randomly presented with either a cute cake or an ordinary cake and were asked to indicate their pro-social motivation and their willingness to buy (donate). Results indicate the cute products can evoke pro-social motivation, thereby enhancing donating behaviour. This research provides valuable insights into the dynamics of consumer donating behaviour, specifically elucidating the role of product characteristics, such as cuteness, in fostering pro-social responses.

**Keywords:** Cute Product, Pro-social motivation, Donating behaviour

## **1. Introduction**

Engaging in donations not only brings about considerable benefits to society but also yields numerous advantages for individuals, encompassing enhanced mental and physical well-being. Research has consistently highlighted the positive correlation between charitable actions and improved health outcomes [1-3]. Numerous charitable organizations grapple with the task of selecting an appealing product that resonates with potential donors. In this context, strategic marketing and product design play pivotal roles. Studies by Peterson and Smith underscore the importance of creating a connection between the charitable product and the target audience's values and preferences. Tailoring the product's appearance to align with these factors significantly enhances its appeal and drives increased donations.

One of the prominent product attributes is "cuteness." The phenomenon known as the "cuteness factor" has garnered significant attention in recent academic discourse. Researchers (have demonstrated that products featuring adorable or endearing elements not only capture attention but also evoke positive emotions [4,5]. When people see a baby, their facial muscles associated with positive emotions are automatically activated, and similar emotional responses occur when people see cute animals or even inanimate object. Hence impulsive spending behavior. Consumers get the product not only for its functional benefit, but also for the emotional experience that is integrated with the product [6]. These experiences may be related to the emotional bonding between some of the physical features of the product and its consumer. Past research found that product that can elicit

positive emotions will encourage donating behavior [7]. Therefore, in this study, we propose that cute product can increase donating behavior.

To test this hypothesis and explore the mechanism, we conducted an experiment. Participants were randomly allocated to a 2 by 2 (High vs. Low price & Cute vs. Ordinary product) experiment design. Participants were shown a cake and then we measured participants' pro-social motivation. At the end, they expressed their willingness to donate. We found that cute products can elicit pro-social motivation, and thus increase donating behaviour.

The findings of this research yield multifaceted contributions to the existing literature. Firstly, it unveils the pivotal role of product characteristics, particularly cuteness, in eliciting pro-social motivation among consumers. This sheds light on the potential of visually pleasing elements to serve as catalysts for heightened pro-social behaviors in charitable contexts. Secondly, the study advances our understanding of the interplay between product pricing and consumer donating behavior. By exploring the impact of different price points on consumers' decisions to contribute, the research provides insights into the economic considerations influencing charitable actions. Collectively, these contributions enhance our comprehension of consumer behavior in the realm of charitable giving and offer practical implications for organizations seeking to optimize fundraising strategies.

## **2. Theory and Hypotheses**

### **2.1. Cute product and prosocial motivation**

We argue that exposure to cute product will increase consumers' prosocial motivation with the two reasons as follow. First, cuteness is associated with a more other-directed focus [8]. This orientation towards others cultivates a greater likelihood of developing sympathy. Pro-social behavior, encompassing actions that alleviate another's needs or enhance their well-being [9], is thereby stimulated.

Second, the perception of cuteness would elicit a mental representation of fun. When people have positive affect, they are more likely to do good for others. Positive affect, as established in prior research on the perception-behavior link, correlates with an increased likelihood of altruistic action [10]. Cuteness is proposed to activate brain networks associated with emotion and pleasure, triggering empathy and compassion [11]. The positive affect derived from the perception of fun aligns with a rich body of literature over the past three decades, illustrating that positive feelings foster helpful and generous behaviors, such as charitable donations and volunteering [12].

Therefore, we propose through the prosocial motivation consumers would like to consume more cute product for helping others in the society.

H1: Exposure to cute product increase consumers' prosocial motivation.

### **2.2. Cute product and willingness to donate**

Exposure to cute products amplifies consumers' inclination to donate, driven by two key factors. Firstly, product attributes serve as activators of perceptions that significantly influence subsequent behaviour. In this study, particular emphasis is placed on cute products, which evoke a perception of vulnerability. The observation of vulnerability naturally triggers donating behaviour, as evidenced by the well-established phenomenon where advertisements featuring vulnerability prompt increased donations to charities. Hence, the presence of cute products correlates with heightened donating behaviours among customers.

Secondly, cute products serve as primers for a mental representation imbued with fun and playfulness. Research by Dunn et al. demonstrates that experiences of fun and playfulness increase the likelihood of individuals spending money on others [13]. Such expenditures, in turn, induce happiness, creating a positive spiral effect. Furthermore, customers derive enjoyment not only from

the act of giving but also from the satisfaction of their own needs, such as indulging in the delightful experience of consuming the cake. This reinforcement of positive affect during decision-making contributes to a lasting positive disposition towards charitable actions. Therefore, we propose:

H2: Exposure to cute product increase consumers' willingness to donate.

The mediation role of prosocial motivation

Prosocial motivation—the desire to protect and promote the well-being of others—is distinct from altruism and independent of self-interested motivations. Pro-social motivation serves as a cognitive and emotional mechanism that bridges the gap between the perception of cuteness and the subsequent decision to contribute to a charitable cause. In essence, the positive and empathetic responses evoked by cute products create a motivational impetus, compelling individuals to act in ways that benefit others, manifesting in an increased willingness to donate. Combining Hypotheses 1 and 2, we propose:

H3: Exposure to cute product increase consumers' willingness to donate and prosocial motivation will mediate the relationship between cuteness and willingness to donate.

### 3. Method and Results

To test the hypotheses, we conducted a 2(Cute vs. Ordinary)×2 (High price vs. Low Price) between-subject design. Participants were randomly allocated to one condition and they were instructed to read scenarios and make purchasing decisions.

#### 3.1. Participants and Procedure

We recruited 180 participants (59.4% female) from Credemo, a Chinese data platform that is similar to Prolific. Among them 68.9% get the Bachelor's degree. The average age was 29.61 years, the standard deviation was 7.47 years.

First, participants were informed that we represent a charitable organization dedicated to aiding those affected by COVID-19 and raising funds through cake sales. Then, they were presented with either a cute cake or an ordinary cake associated with a specific price, depending on the randomly allocated conditions. Then, they were instructed to express their willing to buy the cake. Finally, they indicated their pro-social motivation and demographic details.

#### 3.2. Measures

Cuteness manipulation. Participants viewed either the cute or ordinary cake and rated the extent to which the cakes were cute. The item was measured on a 7-point scale (1: not cute at all, 7: very cute). The manipulation was successful. Participants who viewed the cute cake ( $M_{\text{cute}} = 5.42$ ,  $SD_{\text{cute}} = 1.62$ ) rated significantly higher than those who viewed the neutral cake ( $M_{\text{neutral}} = 3.73$ ,  $SD_{\text{neutral}} = 1.32$ ,  $t(178) = 7.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Expensiveness manipulation. After participants rated the cuteness of the cakes, they will be asking the question: "To what extent this cake is expensive". The size of this cake is 6 inches and the price is 240 rmb (80 rmb in the cheap condition). The item was measured on a 7-point scale (1: not expensive, 7: very expensive). The manipulation was successful. Participants who viewed the expensive cake ( $M_{\text{expensive}} = 5.62$ ,  $SD_{\text{expensive}} = 1.00$ ) rated the manipulation check question significantly higher than those who viewed the cheap cake ( $M_{\text{cheap}} = 4.72$ ,  $SD_{\text{cheap}} = 1.33$ ,  $t(178) = 5.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Pro-social motivation. We adapted Grant & Berry's scale to measure pro-social motivation of donating behaviour [14]. The scale included 4 items. The sample item was "I want to purchase the cake to benefit others.". The items were rated on a 5-point scale (1: Do not agree at all; 5: Definitely agree). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.91.

Willingness to buy(donate). We asked participants to what extent they are willing to buy the cake, which will be donated to the charity. The item was measured on a 7-point scale (1: never want to buy, 7: very willing to buy). We also asked about how many cakes they are willing to buy (range: 1-10 or more than 10 cakes).

### 3.3. Results

We provide descriptive statistics in Table 1.

Table 1: Univariate and Bivariate Statistics for Key Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Condition: Cuteness	4.58	1.71						
2. Condition: Expensiveness	5.17	1.26	-.26**					
3. Prosocial motivation	3.82	0.98	.42**	-.32**				
4. Donation	4.38	1.61	.50**	-.49**	.73**			
5. Age	29.6	7.47	.08	-.09	.13	.24**		
6. Gender	0.59	0.49	-.24**	.14	-.15*	-.25**	-.05	
12.Income <sup>a</sup>	12.86	10.02	.07	-.16*	.15*	.21**	.03	-.12

Note. N = 180. \*p <.05 \*\*p <.01. a thousand yuan.

Cuteness and prosocial motivation. We ran an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) on the prosocial motivation, with age, income, and gender as covariates. Analysis revealed that participants who were given the cute cake showed higher level of pro-social motivation (M<sub>cute</sub> = 3.95, SD<sub>cute</sub> = 0.87) than those who were given the normal cake (M<sub>ordinary</sub> = 3.69, SD<sub>ordinary</sub> = 1.06; F(1, 173) = 2.82, p = .095). The covariates showed a marginally significant effect. These results demonstrate that exposure to cute products has increased the customers' prosocial motivation, which partially supports Hypothesis 1. The data is Shown in Figure 1.

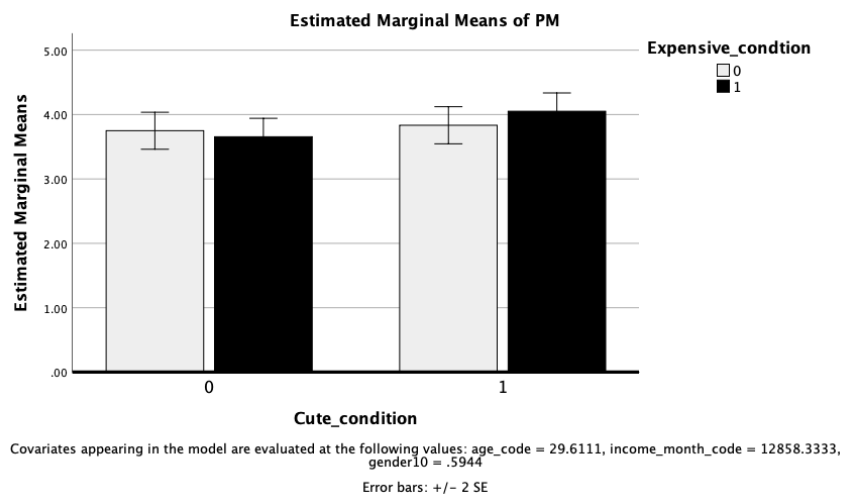


Figure 1: The effect of Cuteness and Expensiveness on Prosocial Motivation

Note: For the Cute\_Condition, “0” means normal product; “1” means cute product. For Expensiveness\_condition, “0” means the price is low; “1” means the price is high.

Cuteness and willingness to donate. We also ran an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) on the willingness to donate, with age, income, and gender as covariates. Analysis revealed that participants who were given the cute cake are more willing to donate ( $M_{cute} = 4.62$ ,  $SD_{cute} = 1.48$ ) than those who were given the normal cake ( $M_{normal} = 4.13$ ,  $SD_{normal} = 1.71$ ;  $F(1, 173) = 3.65$ ,  $p = .058$ ). The covariates showed a marginally significant effect. These results demonstrate that exposure to cute products has increased the customers' willingness to donate, which supports Hypothesis 2. The data is shown in Figure 2.

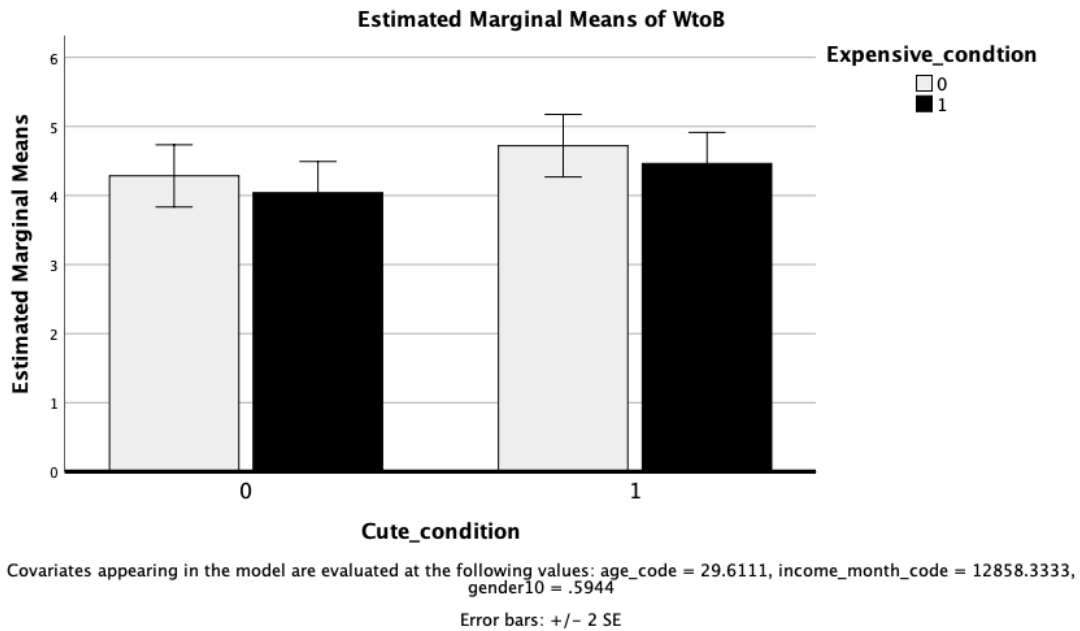


Figure 2: The effect of Cuteness and Expensiveness on Willingness to Donate

Note: For the Cute\_Condition, "0" means normal product; "1" means cute product. For Expensiveness\_condition, "0" means the price is low; "1" means the price is high.

Mediation model. We used PROCESS to test the mediation model using a bootstrap estimation approach with 5000 samples [15,16]. The results indicate the indirect coefficient was significant ( $b = .22$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $95\% \text{ CI} = [.14, .33]$ ) We found that the cuteness of product positively related with the willingness to buy (donate) and prosocial motivation mediated the relationship, which supports Hypothesis 3.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The research in this article found that consumers are more willing to spend money on cute products than ordinary products through one experiment. The results indicate that regardless of price, people are more likely to donate when they find the product is cute, underscoring the unique appeal of cuteness in consumer choices. This research highlights that the impact of cute products on pro-social motivation.

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in its illumination of the impact of cute products on consumer behavior, particularly in the context of charitable contributions. By conducting a singular experiment, the study establishes a compelling link between consumers' heightened willingness to spend on cute products compared to ordinary ones. Significantly, the findings reveal that this preference for cuteness transcends price considerations, as individuals are more inclined to donate when the product is perceived as cute.

The research enriches existing theoretical frameworks by emphasizing the role of cuteness in stimulating pro-social motivation. The observed phenomenon underscores that the aesthetic appeal of cute products serves as a powerful motivator for individuals to engage in altruistic actions, such as making donations. This contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between product characteristics, emotional responses, and pro-social behavior.

In essence, this study extends the theory by elucidating how cuteness functions as a unique and potent factor in shaping consumer choices and, more notably, influencing pro-social motivations. The identified link between cuteness and heightened pro-social behavior provides a valuable theoretical foundation for future research exploring the psychological mechanisms underlying consumer preferences and charitable actions.

Therefore, in conclusion, consumers' donation behavior can be achieved through the cute appearance of the product, the consumer's prosocial motivation, and the consumer's empathy.

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