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The Logic of Negative Appeals: Graphic Imagery, Affective Empathy, and Foreign Development Aid

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Citation

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The use of negative visual imagery of the poor to conjure feelings of pity, guilt, and empathy (also called "poverty porn") is premised on an emotional mechanism that is supposed to elicit compassion and giving behavior, and yet the very emotional nature of the response to this kind of negative imagery can have the exact opposite effect by evoking compassion fatigue and psychological numbing. Our study interrogates this puzzle. Leveraging original data from survey experiments, we show that exposure to negative and personalized images of aid recipients in despair actually increases support for foreign development aid. In contrast, descriptive statistical information about global poverty moves people very little, or not at all. Our findings have implications for understanding the role imagery plays in shaping public opinion on foreign aid and for development communication. This study builds a bridge between research on foreign aid and humanitarian communication.

L'utilisation d'une imagerie visuelle négative des pauvres pour faire apparaître des sentiments de pitié, de culpabilité et d'empathie (aussi appelée « pornographie de la misère ») est basée sur un mécanisme émotionnel qui est supposé susciter la compassion et un comportement généreux, et pourtant, la nature très émotionnelle de la réponse à ce type d'imagerie négative peut avoir l'effet exactement inverse en provoquant une fatigue de compassion et un engourdissement psychologique. Notre étude s'interroge sur ce casse-tête. Nous tirons parti de données originales issues d'expériences d'enquête et montrons que l'exposition à des images négatives et personnalisées de bénéficiaires d'aide dans le désespoir accroît en réalité le soutien à l'aide au développement étranger. À l'inverse, les informations statistiques descriptives sur la pauvreté mondiale n'émeuvent que très peu, voire pas du tout, la population. Nos conclusions ont des implications pour la compréhension du rôle que l'imagerie joue dans le façonnement de l'opinion publique sur l'aide internationale et pour la communication du développement. Cette étude établit un pont entre les recherches sur l'aide étrangère et les recherches sur les images en communication humanitaire.

El uso de imágenes visuales negativas de los pobres para evocar sentimientos de lástima, culpa y empatía (también llamado "pornografía de la pobreza") se basa en un mecanismo emocional que se supone que provoca compasión y generosidad y, sin embargo, la propia naturaleza emocional de la respuesta a este tipo de imágenes negativas puede tener el efecto exactamente opuesto provocando fatiga por compasión e insensibilidad psicológica. Nuestro estudio cuestiona este enigma. Si aprovechamos la información original de los experimentos de encuestas, mostramos que la exposición a imágenes negativas y personalizadas de beneficiarios de ayuda desesperados en realidad aumenta el apoyo a la ayuda exterior para el desarrollo. En contraste, la información estadística descriptiva sobre la pobreza global conmueve muy poco a las personas o no las conmueve en lo absoluto. Nuestros resultados tienen implicaciones para comprender el papel que desempeñan las imágenes en la formación de la opinión pública sobre la ayuda exterior y la comunicación para el desarrollo. Este estudio construye un puente entre la investigación sobre la ayuda exterior y la investigación sobre las imágenes en la comunicación humanitaria.

Introduction

At least since the 1980s, representations of malnourished children with bloated bellies and flies buzzing around them have become iconic and ubiquitous in development appeals along with poignant political and ethical criticism raised against them (Lissner 1981; Boltanski 1999; Chouliaraki 2010; Plewes and Stuart 2007). The use of graphic negative imagery depicting the recipients of development aid, often Black ones, as stereotypically helpless, desperate, and devoid of agency, in order to elicit public support for development aid by arousing guilt, shame, and pity has been described as the pornography of poverty or "poverty porn" (Plewes and Stuart 2007; Cameron and Haanstra 2008).[1]

On the one hand, the logic behind such negative and stereotypical appeals may seem straightforward: when they see helpless recipients, individuals are "expected to respond as good citizens with compassion and rational commitment" in order to alleviate the suffering of the have-nots (Höijer 2004). As Paddy Coulter, a critic of such approaches argues, "The wide-eyed child, smiling or starving, is the most powerful fundraiser for aid agencies. But no matter how effective the image, the message can be very destructive" (Coulter 1989). On the other hand, it is not at all clear that such negative appeals have the desired effect. First, from a pecuniary perspective, poverty porn may paradoxically *decrease* donor publics' support for development aid and individuals' overall engagement with global poverty because it creates the impression that global poverty cannot be alleviated, thus reducing the public's sense of efficacy. This is often referred to as "compassion fatigue" (Dyck and Coldevin 1992; Moeller

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[1] For the purposes of this project, we conceptualize graphic negative appeals as visual media that exploits despondent aspects of the poor to elicit giving behaviors.

2002). Second, some scholars have noted that exposure to extreme suffering can lead to "psychological numbing," or desensitization to suffering because the emotional burden of seeing gut-wrenching images and exposure to extreme desperation can make appeals based on poverty porn ineffective (Cameron and Haanstra 2008). Further, some scholars remain skeptical that individuals can adequately empathize or sympathize with anonymous strangers in foreign lands. If pro-social giving behaviors require empathizing with the recipient, then in many cases the so-called "empathy gap" may well be a non-bridgeable one (Trout 2009). Finally, some scholars argue that negative appeals that exploit the recipients of aid are often imbued with racism and paternalism that can make them backfire in some segments of donor publics (Forje 1989; Nathanson 2013)

All this points to a paradox. Negative imagery appeals are premised on an emotional mechanism that is supposed to elicit compassion and giving behavior, and yet paradoxically the very emotional nature of the response to such negative imagery may have the exact opposite effect, engendering retrenchment. Our study interrogates this puzzle. Do these negative appeals ("poverty porn") *actually* work in eliciting support for foreign development aid?

While International Relations (IR) scholars are increasingly interested in public opinion on foreign development aid and have identified a number of factors that affect public support for or opposition to aid (Paxton and Knack 2012; Bayram 2017; Bayram and Holmes 2020; Bayram and Thomson 2021; Milner and Tingley 2011, 2013), little has been done to explicitly examine whether negative visual appeals influence public opinion on foreign development aid. In fact, only a handful of studies to date have investigated whether information of any kind affects donor publics' views on foreign aid (Baker 2015; Hurst, Tidwell and Hawkins 2017; Hudson et al. 2019).

In interrogating the impact of pornography of poverty on public support for foreign development aid, we engage research on humanitarian communication, image studies, philanthropy, and development ethics. Important works in the field of humanitarian communication have addressed the morals and politics of help and aid pleas (e.g., Chouliaraki 2010). There is also a growing body of literature that analyzes the use of images in humanitarianism (e.g., Bleiker et al. 2013; Hutchison, Bleiker, and Campbell 2014; Fehrenbach and Rodogno 2015; Bleiker and Hutchison 2019; Callahan 2020) that parallels the renewed interest in IR on images, emotions, and discourses (e.g., Bush et al. 2016; Koschut et al. 2017; Adler-Nissen et al. 2020). Finally, charitable appeals specifically, and philanthropy more generally, have been the subject of attention as charitable organizations seek to better understand mechanisms of giving behaviors (e.g., Katz 1999 for an excellent review). Our work is situated at the intersection of these scholarships.

In this paper, we develop a theoretical argument based on the identifiable victim effect (IVE) to explain why aid appeals using poverty porn that highlight a negative image of an individual person move the public more than descriptive statistical information about millions of people. The ability to identify a particular victim removes the anonymity of the enterprise, providing a personalized face that makes empathizing easier. This empathy, which is affective and emotional, rather than cognitive in nature, generates pro-social giving behavior tendencies and thus increases public support for foreign aid.

To test our argument, we fielded an MTurk survey experiment with American adults (n = 1020) and replicated it with a convenience sample of undergraduate students at an American research university (n = 219). We find that exposure to negative personalized images of aid recipients in utter despair increases support for development aid. In contrast, descriptive statistical information about global poverty moves people very little, or not at all.

These findings have implications for nongovernmental and governmental organizations, activists, and scholars interested in understanding how representations of poverty and suffering shape public opinion and action on international development cooperation. By showing that a single picture of a helpless starving child can greatly motivate individuals to support aid, our study suggests that instead of contributing to the collapse of compassion or psychological numbing, poverty porn motivates helping behavior in the context of foreign aid. To borrow from Nathanson (2013:106), poverty porn is "no accident."

One major implication of our results is that it is imperative to sever the connection in donor publics' minds between foreign aid and stereotypical, racist, and paternalistic images of aid recipients in the global south. Broadly, we make two distinct contributions to the existing literature. To date, few of the insights offered by studies of humanitarian communication and images have been extended to the study of public opinion on foreign aid. By specifically examining whether negative visual appeals affect public opinion on foreign development aid, our study builds a long overdue bridge between research on aid policy, humanitarian communication, and development ethics. Second, by interrogating the *psychological* mechanism by which negative graphic appeals influence (or do not) public opinion on foreign development aid, our study adds political psychology to the growing literatures on messages and images in humanitarian communication.

The Emotional Logic of Negative Appeals

We argue that the paradox in negative and pity-evoking appeals is often resolved in favor of increased support for foreign aid, not decreased support. Our argument has three components. First, negative visual appeals are premised on "the belief that negative emotions often induce action by stimulating a desire to reduce the tension they generate" (Dyck and Coldevin 1992; Small and Loewenstein 2003). We expect pornography of poverty to lead to increased support for foreign development aid because graphic visual imagery representing the poor as desperate and begging conjures up negative emotions, such as distress, and even physiological agony. When individuals view a starving child, they do not necessarily put themselves in the shoes of that child (an exercise of cognitive empathy), but rather feel the child's anguish (an exercise of affective or emotional empathy). This deep sense of affective empathy can promote action (Holmes and Traven 2015). Our claim parallels the insights of philanthropy and marketing researchers, who have documented that there is a close link between emotions and giving behavior (Yoo and MacInnis 2005; Fisher, Vandenbosch, and Kersi 2008; Zhang et al. 2014; Bail, Brown, and Mann 2017; Paxton, Velasco, and Ressler 2020). Indeed, a number of works have shown that negative appeals for charity affect donation behavior precisely because of the nature of emotional valence (e.g., Erlandsson et al. 2018; Xu and Huang 2020).

Second, these negative emotions such as distress and agony are particularly acute when identifiable victims, such as a single starving child or a starving child/mother combination, are present. The identifiable victim effect (IVE)

refers to individuals' willingness to help identified victims rather than non-visible or abstract statistical victims (Small and Loewenstein 2003; Kogut and Ritov 2005a; 2005b; Slovic 2007; Slovic et al. 2017). Studies in IVE suggest that it is easier to feel psychological proximity to identifiable victims than anonymous victims, and this sense of closeness contributes to individuals' support for development aid. In fact, one study by Bleiker et al. (2013) showed that by depicting asylum seekers as groups rather than as recognizable individuals, the media has diminished the likelihood of a compassionate political response. These findings on IVE largely map onto the observations of scholars researching charitable giving suggesting that concrete anecdotes rather than scientific or statistical information are more likely to motivate giving (e.g., Das, Kerkhof, Kuiper 2008; Chang and Lee 2010; DellaVigna, List, and Malmendier 2012; Karlan and Wood 2017; Berman et al. 2018).

Finally, to alleviate the negative emotions and anguish created by negative graphic and pity-evoking images, individuals may pursue foreign development and humanitarian aid policies, when given the option. Existing studies suggest that pro-social behaviors may generate positive emotions that help to overcome negative emotions (Dickert, Sagara, Slovic 2011; Aknin, Van de Vondervoort, and Hamlin 2018). As Daniel Batson, a leading social psychologist, puts it, "feeling other-oriented emotion elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of another person in need... produces a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing that person's welfare by having the empathy-inducing need removed (i.e., altruistic motivation)" (2011: 29). Put a slightly different way, feeling for a particular identifiable victim motivates individuals to pursue behaviors that will reduce or eliminate these negative emotions by helping the victim in need. This would suggest that changing the television channel or flipping to another magazine page when confronted with an emotionally-laden identifiable victim will not be enough, but rather prosocial behavior is required to reduce the negative mental state.

Experimental Intervention

To test our argument, we conducted a randomized between-subject survey experiment.[2] Figure 1 demonstrates the design of our experiment.[3]

All participants saw the following introductory preamble about global poverty and the income gap between poor and rich countries in the world: *We would like to get your thoughts on global income inequality. According to the United Nations and the World Bank, there is a vast income gap between rich and poor countries in the world.* In both studies we randomly assigned respondents to one of three possible conditions: negative emotional imagery, statistical descriptive information, or control. The negative imagery treatment presented respondents an image of a severely malnourished black child held by her mother. The information condition provided descriptive information about global poverty specifically indicating that the combined incomes of the 50 poorest countries in the world does not even equal half of the income of a single rich country such as the United States and about 800 million people in the developing world live in abject poverty, representing 13.5 percent, or one in eight,

Figure 1. Graphical representation of the experimental design.

of the population of developing counties. Participants assigned to the control condition neither received an image nor statistical facts but were simply told that we would like to learn about their thoughts on global income disparity.

Our outcome variable measures support for foreign development assistance. To reduce potential response bias, we started with a statement that portrayed both supporting and opposing foreign development aid as acceptable policy choices. We told participants: *People feel differently about how far the U.S. government should go to help poor countries. Some people feel that the U.S. government should make a much greater effort to reduce global inequality by giving more economic development and humanitarian aid to poor countries. Other people feel that the U.S. should not make any special effort to reduce global inequality because it has its own domestic problems.* We then asked respondents to express their position by placing themselves anywhere on a 6-point scale, anchored by "The U.S. government should not make any special effort to give aid (1)" and "The U.S. government should make a much greater effort to give more aid (6)."

Results

Both the MTurk and the undergraduate student sample reveal similar findings and provide strong support for our claim. As can be seen in Figure 2 and supported by an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test ($F(2,1017) = 31.36$, $p = 0.000$, $\eta^2 = 0.060$) participants assigned to the negative image treatment condition showing a starving black child were more supportive of aid than those assigned to the statistical information or the control conditions in the MTurk sample.

As hypothesized, in the MTurk sample, mean support for foreign development aid is higher in the negative image ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 1.54$) condition than it is in the information ($M = 3.30$; $SD = 1.46$) and control ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.39$) conditions.[4] Bonferroni corrected post-hoc mean comparisons further indicate that the difference between the negative imagery and information conditions is 0.70 ($SE = 0.11$, $p = 0.000$) and the difference between the negative imagery and control conditions is 0.82 ($SE = 0.11$, $p = 0.000$). There was no statistically significant difference between the control and information conditions.

These findings are replicated in our convenience sample. Figure 3 displays the distribution of support for aid by experimental condition in the student convenience sample.

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[2] As we discuss in the online appendix, research has shown that MTurk samples are more representative of the general population compared to other convenience samples and results of nationally-representative samples can be replicated using MTurk participants.

[3] More information on the design of the experiment and the treatment conditions as well as the recruitment of MTurk participants can be found in the online appendix.
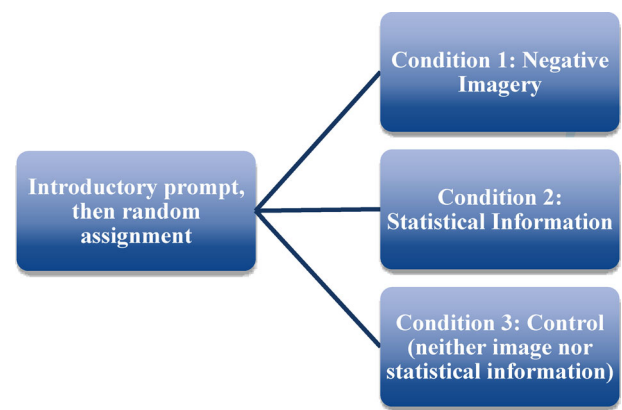
[4] In the online appendix, we provide the graphs for the average treatment effects.
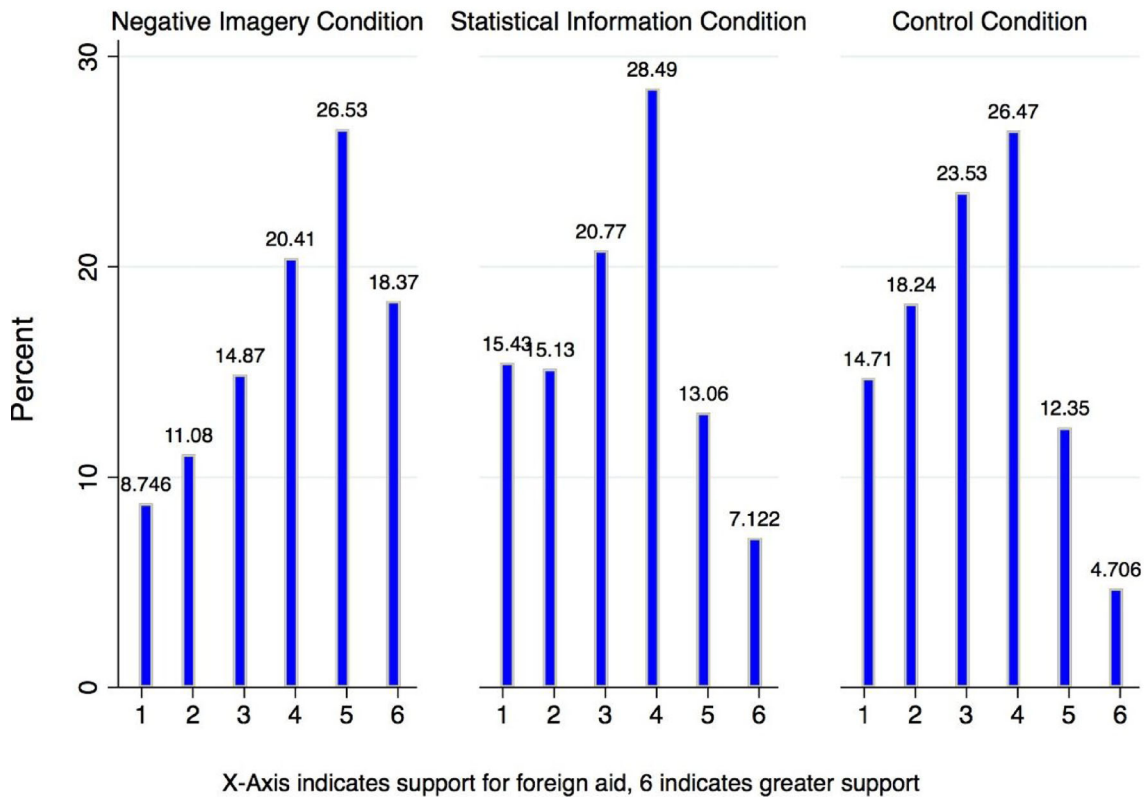
Figure 2. Distribution of support for foreign aid by experimental condition-MTurk Sample.

In our student sample, we again observe that mean support for foreign development assistance is higher in the negative image group (M = 4.24.22, SD = 1.10) than it is in the statistical information (M = 3.77, SD = 1.3) and control (M = 3.43, SD = 1.14) conditions. ANOVA results, similarly, show that negative emotional imagery depicting a starving black child resulted in a statistically significant increase in support for foreign development assistance (F(2,216) = 9.40, p = 0.0001, η^2 = 0.080).

Having found support for our core claim, we next estimate regression models as robustness checks. Here we only present the regression results for the MTurk sample. Provided in the online appendix, regression results for the student sample parallel the findings presented here. As shown in the first-left column of Table 1, results from Model 1, which regresses support for aid onto the experimental conditions, replicate our previous finding and show that exposure to poverty porn results in about a 0.65 unit increase in support for aid. This is a substantively large increase. In Model 2, we control for support for domestic social welfare, isolationist foreign policy preference, cosmopolitanism, nationalism, generalized trust, and social dominance orientation. Previous scholarship has identified these factors as important predictors that shape individuals' support for foreign aid (Paxton and Knack 2012; Milner and Tingley 2013; Bayram 2017). Our findings indicate that the strong effect of negative imagery on support for foreign development assistance remains highly robust. Again, there is a 0.66 unit increase in support for aid when participants are exposed to poverty porn. Paralleling the findings of existing studies, individuals who are generally in favor of domestic welfare, trusting of other people, and identify as cosmopolitan world citizens are more supportive of providing of foreign aid whereas those who prefer the United States to focus on its own domestic affairs are less supportive. We did not find any statistically significant effects for nationalism and social dominance orientation.

In Model 3 we add the variables for respondent's ideology, party identification and in Model 4 we control for standard socio-economic and demographic factors. We find that individuals who lean liberal, identify as a Democrat, and are younger are more supportive of foreign aid. Crucially, negative imagery has the largest impact in all our estimations compared to these factors, supporting our argument, and showing that our results are unchanged across different model specifications.

Policy Implications, Limitations, and Extensions

Returning to the puzzle that motivates this project, our findings suggest that the strategy of using negative appeals can pay off. In each of our analyses, the positive and statistically significant effect of negative imagery remained robust and consistent across different model specifications.

Understanding how negative images using poverty porn impact public support for foreign development aid matters. As Paul Collier (2007: 183) has famously noted that "the key obstacle to reforming aid is public opinion in donor countries." And the importance of public opinion on foreign aid is rising as populist governments in North America and Europe continue to advocate decreasing aid spending.

In showing that negative appeals are an effective means of increasing public opinion on foreign aid, our findings have important implications for political and theoretical discussions on what kinds of messages best shape public opinion on foreign development aid and for normative discussions
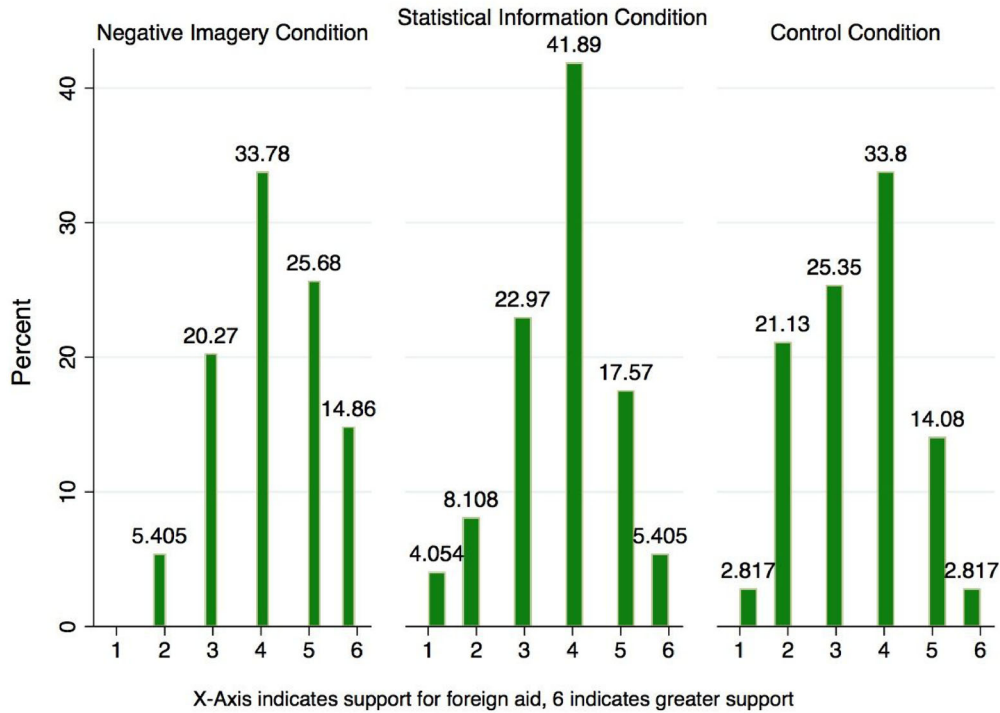
Figure 3. Distribution of support for foreign aid by experimental condition-Student Sample.

Table 1. Negative Images Result in Increased Support for Aid-MTurk Sample

Variable	Model 1 Coeff.	Model 1 R. SE	Model 2 Coeff.	Model 2 R. SE	Model 3 Coeff.	Model 3 R. SE	Model 4 Coeff.	Model 4 R. SE
Negative imagery	0.6490***	0.1157	0.6640***	0.0925	0.6707***	0.0936	0.6706***	0.0936
Statistical information	0.0436	0 0.1125	0.0884	0.0913	0.0705	0.0925	0.0694	0.0927
Support for domestic welfare programs			−0.1654***	0.0256	−0.128***	0.0278	−0.128***	0.0284
Isolationism			−0.3852***	0.0405	−0.362***	0.0410	−0.352***	0.0412
Cosmopolitanism			0.4032***	0.0415	0.3732***	0.0447	0.3698***	0.0456
Nationalism			−0.0341	0.0402	−0.1240	0.0780	−0.0028	0.0445
Generalized trust			0.2301**	0.0776	0.2502**	0.0790	0.2581**	0.0802
Social dominance orientation			−0.0216	0.0406	−0.0168	0.0420	−0.0450	0. 0441
Ideology					0.0785*	0.0403	0.0732*	0.0406
Democrat					0.2000**	1.0810	0.2066**	0.107
Republican					0.1021	0.1278	0.1175	0.128
Family Income							0.0340	0.0417
Female							0.060	0.0815
Age							−0.009**	0.0036
Constant	3.2485	0.07,752	3.6102	0.2897	2.9638	0.3816	3.1951	0.4239
R²	0.0380	0.3810	0.3910	0.3977				
Observations	998	988	948	939				

*** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.05, p < 0.10 Asterisks indicate coefficient significance level (2-tailed)
Cell values represent ordinal least squares regression coefficients with robust standard errors. Independent is the reference group for party identification variable and male is the reference group for the female variable.

on the implications of communicating poverty to donor publics.

Our results show that instead of leading to the collapse of compassion or psychological numbing, poverty porn actually encourages giving. One major policy implication of this finding is that *emotions* rather than information is what drives support for alleviating global poverty. One picture of a starving child conveys more information than statistics about millions of people because people are emotional beings. This suggests that traditional information based public engagement campaigns will likely fail because they do not reach donors at an emotional level.

Our findings also point to a dilemma that has practical ramifications. The emotional exploitation of poor people in pornography of poverty is offensive, normatively undesirable, and philosophically unjustifiable from a deontological perspective. However, because it draws material support for alleviating poverty, it is not surprising that it

is still being used to justify the means from a utilitarian perspective. The question then is what can be done to break this cycle?

We make two conjectures. First, it is critical to decouple foreign development aid from helplessness and desperation in donor publics' minds. Doing so requires changing the image of aid recipients in peoples' minds and destroying the harmful stories about the global south. Instead of characterizing the recipients of aid as poor, corrupt, disease-ridden, and desperate waiting to be "saved" by -often white- donors, governmental and non-governmental aid agencies and advocacy groups need to make a conscious effort to show the power, agency, and voice of aid recipients.

Second, to confront the power of negative appeals, it might be useful to switch from an aid narrative to a global solidarity narrative that elevates recipients to the level of full participants and redefines resource flows to the global south no longer as aid but as investments for "a world in common" to borrow from the 2018–2022 Strategy of the French Development Agency.[5] When a new mindset of participatory investment takes hold, pornography of poverty will be less likely to motivate helping behavior.

The present study contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between negative images, emotions, and foreign aid, yet there are some limitations and opportunities for extensions. First, our study did not include a direct test of the causal mechanisms. Second, our design did not include a behavioral dependent variable, for example, offering five dollars for participation in the study and then asking whether the respondent will give that money to the government for development aid. Third, our study is cross-sectional and therefore tests impulses at a moment in time rather than the longevity of negative appeals over time.

Our study opens a host of avenues for future research. First, we have posited a psychological mechanism that is testable. Affective empathy has been investigated in laboratory and field contexts and can be measured through a variety of strategies, including physiological response. Some studies (e.g., Cameron et al. 2019) have found that when given a choice, individuals prefer to *avoid* empathy, due to its cognitive costs. If the affective empathy mechanism is right, then it may mean that the IVE is particularly powerful, as it compels giving behaviors *despite* empathy being difficult. Future research can test the affective empathy mechanism, the extent to which outcomes change if individuals are given agency to choose whether to empathize, as well as heterogenous effects that may imply both that some individuals are more likely to choose to empathize and that negative appeals are particularly powerful for certain groups of people. Another interesting direction of research will be to compare how the identifiability of victims operates across negative and positive images in global giving. For example, is the IVE attenuated or strengthened when the victims are represented without using despair-evoking images? Exploring individual differences in response to victim images, including psychological traits and cultural background, might also allow for more specific and targeted fundraising strategies. Field experiments that take our design or a similar one the real world and examine individuals' actual donation behavior will also be invaluable. In the same vein, our understanding of global giving will be greatly advanced by testing the causal mechanisms discussed in this research. Focus groups that test to the extent to which an empathic connection is created with recipients as a result of IVE and similar appeals will be particularly useful for this purpose. Focus groups will also be beneficial to gain a clearer understanding of what

kinds of images are regarded as negative and, stereotypical or positive and empowering. Scholars can also explore the generalizability of our results to major donor populations other than the American population. Longitudinal designs will help examine whether certain types of appeals are more or less transient. We are cognizant of the fact that we are only scratching the surface of a big question with serious political and normative implications. Our hope is to inspire further interdisciplinary dialogue and new inquiries.

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