

Do online tools change online behaviour?

October 21 2016, by Anne Beston

Do we behave better online if we think someone is watching?

A new study shows that, at least when it comes to charitable behaviour, traditional factors such as age or culture are more influential than whether or not we think we might be being watched.

Using the Amazon Mechanical Turk database to recruit 1535 online survey participants from three different global regions – India, the United States and Asia – a research team from the University of Auckland's School of Psychology tested whether a range of images and photos had an effect on charitable giving.

The images included the [human face](#) in various forms, from angry to neutral to sad, with both male and female characteristics, and including images of groups of faces or a pair of eyes only.

The images were present on a web page as survey participants were given the choice of whether or not to donate a small amount of money to charity.

Study co-author Associate Professor Quentin Atkinson says none of the 'monitoring cues' such as human faces or simply a pair of watching eyes, worked to increase donations.

"The findings suggest it's not so easy to increase good behaviour using online cues such as images, and that's an interesting finding given the level of interest in looking at how we behave online and what might

influence online behaviour," he says.

"This study suggests that traditional factors, such as age, culture or ethnicity, and in particular a past history of giving to charity, have a greater effect on how altruistic we choose to be."

Study co-author Dr Alex Taylor, also from the University's School of Psychology, says dozens of different cues were used to test people's response including more abstract images of the human face. The findings were then tested against a control group.

"In some previous studies a pair of watching eyes have promoted cooperation," he says, "but our study suggests that the effect of monitoring cues may be relatively weak or non-existent in an online environment."

The research was published in *Royal Society Open Science*.

More information: Timothy J. Saunders et al. No evidence that a range of artificial monitoring cues influence online donations to charity in an MTurk sample, *Royal Society Open Science* (2016). [DOI: 10.1098/rsos.150710](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.150710)

Provided by University of Auckland

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