

The Role of Social Connectedness and Social Assurance in Prosocial Consumption: The Mediating Importance of Attitudes Toward Charity

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Abstract

This research addresses the underexplored nexus between social connectedness, belongingness, and prosocial consumption, focusing on their collective impact on individuals' intentions to engage in products that support charitable causes. Recognizing people's innate preference for interpersonal closeness, we investigate the pivotal roles of social connectedness and social assurance as indicators of belongingness in driving consumer choices that contribute to charitable objectives. A total of 242 participants completed a survey designed to assess their sense of belongingness, purchase intentions, and attitudes toward charitable activities. Our findings underscore the mediating effect of attitudes toward charity in predicting the inclination to participate in prosocial consumption. This mediation elucidates the mechanism through which social connectedness and the assurance of belongingness influence individuals to align their purchasing decisions with products that benefit charities, thereby aiding these organizations in achieving their social support targets. Our study contributes to the understanding of the psychological underpinnings of consumer behavior in the context of philanthropy. By elucidating the intricate interplay between social connectedness, belongingness, and charitable attitudes, we provide valuable insights for both scholars and practitioners seeking to comprehend and leverage the factors that drive consumers to make choices aligned with social responsibility. This research offers a clear and solid foundation for the relevance of our study and constructs, emphasizing their significance in shaping the landscape of consumer purchases involving philanthropy.

Keywords: belongingness, prosocial, consumption, charity

1. Introduction

Seeking closeness with others is a fundamental human inclination. Conversely, experiencing exclusion has been identified as a significant impediment to various facets of an individual's life (Baumeister & Leary, 2017). For instance, the absence of meaningful connections can result in adverse psychological and social repercussions, such as heightened needs for belongingness and diminished self-esteem (Leary, 1990). However, studies indicate that individuals who feel excluded tend to experience feelings of sadness or guilt, prompting them to actively seek reconnection through prosocial behavior, as highlighted by Williams (2007). Prosocial behavior, characterized by actions aimed at benefiting others, manifests in diverse ways. This may involve providing financial assistance through direct donations to charitable organizations or making purchases where a portion or the entirety of the proceeds contribute to non-profit endeavors.

A crucial facet of prosocial behavior involves online purchases where a portion of the proceeds contributes to a social cause. Appreciating this specific type of behavior holds significance for marketers, social work managers, and various stakeholders (Penner et al., 2005). This behavior essentially represents an intersection of both donation and consumerism, where the customer not only acquires a product but also intends to support others through their payment (Sandovici & Davis, 2010). A comprehensive understanding of this behavior is instrumental in tailoring products and services that are both consumable and profitable. This synergy ensures a substantial income stream for charities, allowing them to allocate resources effectively toward the objectives of their social work initiatives.

Exploring prosocial consumption behavior entails multiple avenues of investigation. One approach involves scrutinizing it from the customer's perspective, delving into the psychological and social factors that either motivate or impede individuals from embracing such behavior. Alternatively, it can be examined from a

managerial standpoint, focusing on the strategies employed by managers to cultivate positive attitudes toward their organizations. The present study endeavors to bridge these research streams, seeking to address the intersectionality of these perspectives. More specifically, the study aims to respond to the following inquiries:

RQ1: what is effect of felt belongingness of customers on purchase intention of prosocial products.

RQ2: what is effect of felt belongingness of customers on attitudes toward a charity that offers such products.

RQ3: what is effect of attitudes toward a charity on purchase intention of prosocial products.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 *The Need to Belong and Social Connection*

The intrinsic need for belongingness among individuals is considered fundamental (Twenge et al., 2007). Consequently, people are driven to initiate and sustain positive social connections with others (Baumeister & Leary, 2017). The desire to belong signifies a yearning for acceptance and inclusion. The theory of the need to belong posits that individuals with a heightened need for belongingness are inclined to cultivate more relationships and are attuned to others' perceptions of them (Leary et al., 2007). Satisfying the need to belong necessitates ongoing social interactions and the establishment of enduring relationships (Hall & Davis, 2017).

The need to belong is not uniform; rather, it varies across individuals, influencing the connections they forge (Greenwood & Long, 2011). Individuals undertake diverse actions in both the physical and virtual realms, such as social media, to fulfill their need for belongingness. Consumers actively establish connections and engage with celebrities on social media platforms as a means to satisfy their belongingness needs (Greenwood & Long, 2011). Consequently, those with a higher need to belong and a lower level of existing social connections tend to be more immersed in social media interactions. This heightened involvement facilitates the development of social connections with individuals in the realm of social media (Leary et al., 2007). Conversely, consumers with a lower need to belong may not feel compelled to initiate social interactions with individuals in the realm of social media.

The innate need to belong compels individuals to undertake various actions aimed at enhancing feelings of belongingness (Walasek, Matthews, & Rakow, 2015). Activities that enrich social lives and foster a sense of connection are almost certain to contribute positively to individuals' well-being. Notably, experiential purchases have been identified as catalysts for advancing these feelings (Chan & Mogilner, 2017; Howell & Hill, 2009). Experiences, unlike material goods, are more frequently shared with others (Caprariello & Reis, 2013). Presenting a material possession as an experience increases the likelihood of individuals discussing it (Gallo et al., 2019). Similarly, framing a material possession as a means of social connection has the potential to alter consumption perceptions and intentions.

Social connection represents a potent and pervasive sense of security, encapsulating the feeling of being interconnected with others (Twenge et al., 2007). Comparable to the necessity of food, social connection stands out as one of the fundamental needs of humans. The absence of social connection gives rise to feelings of loneliness, defined as a distressing sensation wherein an individual's yearning for social bonds remains unfulfilled, fostering a perception of social isolation (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010). The repercussions of lacking connections with others are substantial, contributing to conditions such as depression (Weeks et al., 1980) and diminished happiness (Schumaker et al., 1993). Moreover, loneliness can precipitate various health issues, exerting a tangible impact on an individual's physical well-being (Caspi et al., 2006; House et al., 1988; Twenge et al., 2007).

Individuals possessing robust social connections tend to exhibit a predisposition to feel linked with others who are perceived as similar. Social support encompasses a collective of individuals, not necessarily confined to specific social categories such as gender or ethnicity. Parents, family members, partners, and friends may all be integral members of one's social support network, transcending distinct social categories (Cohen & McKay, 2020).

Lee and Robbins (1995) propose a comprehensive model of belongingness, encompassing three essential facets: companionship, affiliation, and connectedness. Companionship, an integral component from early infancy through adulthood, has been identified as a predictor of social satisfaction and overall well-being. Notably, it serves to alleviate loneliness and enhance positive experiences (Baldassare et al., 1984; Rook, 1987).

Affiliation, or the sense of twinship, assumes significance during the transition from childhood to adolescence. Research indicates that affiliation with peers significantly correlates with adolescent self-esteem and mood, facilitating the development of social interactions, friendships, and stress reduction (Brown et al., 1986; Brown

& Lohr, 1987).

The feeling of connectedness emerges prominently during adolescence and persists throughout adulthood. This dimension enables individuals to maintain a sense of being “human among humans,” fostering identification with various social roles, including marital partners and those in need (Kohut, 1966, p. 200). Connectedness has been linked to bolstering self-esteem and providing a sense of security (Marcia, 1980). Collectively, the interplay of these three elements—companionship, affiliation, and connectedness—constitutes the broader constructs of social connectedness and social assurance, which offer more nuanced insights into the overarching concept of belongingness.

2.2 Social Connectedness

Social connectedness, a gauge of an individual's social network quality and a precursor to social capital as proposed by Putnam (2000), has been conceptualized as a form of social support (Barrera, 1986). According to Lee and Robbins (1996), social connectedness is integral to the efficacy of social support, functioning as a conduit for providing this support. Moreover, it plays a pivotal role in linking social support to psychological well-being (Brunsting et al., 2021).

Individuals with a heightened sense of social connectedness are more inclined to partake in social behaviors to affirm their sense of belonging, thereby contributing to enhanced psychological well-being. Notably, the influence of social connectedness persists even in the absence of specific social groups (Pryce et al., 2019). This concept offers a comprehensive perspective, encompassing experiences with individual people, peers, and larger social groups.

Social connectedness aligns with the aspects of belongingness described by Kohut (1984) as an “intense and pervasive sense of security” and a feeling of being “human among humans” (p. 200). It signifies a global emotional connection and distance between oneself and others. Furthermore, it correlates with one's self-opinion in relation to others. A low score on this scale indicates potential frustration stemming from a lack of appropriate sympathy or understanding from peers or society (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Such individuals may be grappling with narcissistic personality disorders or traits (Post, 1993) and might encounter challenges in maintaining social connections, despite possessing adequate social skills for sustaining intimate relationships within society.

2.3 Social Assurance

Social assurance is characterized by the inclination to rely on others for affiliation and companionship as a means of nurturing a sense of belonging, as defined by Lee and Robbins (1995). This aspect of belongingness appears closely linked to an individual's dependency on others. Social assurance delves into how the utilization of skills and talents hinges on the reassurance received from others, aligning with Kohut's (1984) depiction of a child gaining a sense of belongingness by being “a cook next to a cook or a craftsman next to a craftsman” (p. 200). It emanates from both the companionship and affiliation dimensions, portraying a need for reassurance from at least one or more individuals for a sustained sense of belongingness (Lee & Robbins, 1995).

Individuals high in social assurance may find themselves frustrated by a lack of support from significant individuals or peers, potentially lacking the developed social skills and confidence necessary for independent functioning in the world. Such individuals could be characterized as having a personality hungry for an alter ego (Kohut, 1966; Post, 1993).

2.4 Prosocial Consumption

Prosocial behavior encompasses actions intended to benefit a noble cause, including acts of assistance, generosity, interpersonal understanding, and monetary donations. This facet has garnered attention from consumer researchers (Agrawal et al., 2007; Cavanaugh et al., 2015). Various emotions and motives have been identified as catalysts for triggering prosocial behaviors (van Kleef & Lelieveld, 2022). Notably, emotions like love, hope, and compassion wield significant influence over consumers and are frequently employed in marketing appeals within prosocial consumption and charitable giving contexts (Cavanaugh et al., 2015; MacInnis & de Mello, 2005; Small & Verrochi, 2009).

Moreover, research indicates that social behavior serves as a means of connecting with others (Williams, 2007). The act of consumption, according to Mead et al. (2011), is driven not by a desire to stand out but rather to foster a sense of belonging. Positive emotions propel consumers to be more inclined to assist individuals who are psychologically closer to them, such as relatives, neighbors, or members of the local community (Waugh & Fredrickson, 2006).

The sense of belongingness has the potential to foster a greater willingness in individuals to participate in

prosocial behavior, as indicated by research (Twenge et al., 2007). This inclination arises from the notion that engaging in prosocial acts establishes a connection between the individual and the person or group being assisted. In situations where individuals feel excluded, their spending habits may vary as they seek to secure affiliation. This modulation in spending serves as an attempt to attain a sense of connection. It is noteworthy that excluded individuals may refrain from such consumption behavior unless the excluding party is aware of it and, consequently, may include them.

Consumers characterized by a high need to belong are prone to actively seek ways to fulfill their affiliation needs (Escalas & Bettman, 2017). The imperative need to belong can drive individuals to place a heightened focus on social cues and make inferences based on these cues (Pickett et al., 2004).

H1: the higher someone is in social connectedness, the higher the intention to engage in prosocial consumption.

H2: the higher someone is in social assurance, the higher the intention to engage in prosocial consumption.

2.5 The Effect of Attitudes Toward Charity

The act of engaging in prosocial consumption, where products support a particular group, is positively correlated with the perceived connection to that group (Winterich et al., 2009; Erlandsson, Nilsson, & Västfjäll, 2018) and the intention to contribute to the group's well-being (Cavanaugh et al., 2015). In essence, the stronger an individual's sense of belonging to a group, the greater the likelihood of them choosing products that contribute to the group's welfare, thereby fortifying their psychological bond with the group (Escalas & Bettman, 2017). Consequently, we anticipate that individuals with a heightened sense of connectedness are more likely to exhibit a stronger identification with a brand or a charity, as examined in our study.

The evaluation of a charity is anticipated to play a pivotal role in fostering collaboration with its initiatives (Erlandsson et al., 2018). More precisely, researchers have identified various factors that can elucidate why individuals participate in social behaviors, specifically concerning their engagement with the organization itself (Ellemers & Boezeman, 2010). Psychological engagement with a charity is demonstrated to not only enhance but also sustain motivation for behavioral engagement, encompassing activities such as volunteering or making donations (Yousef, Dietrich, Rundle - Thiele, & Alhabash, 2022). This psychological engagement, in turn, exerts an influence on factors such as satisfaction, organizational commitment, and attraction to the organization.

Furthermore, psychological engagement is integral in gauging the willingness to participate and the intention to remain committed, serving as key indicators of behavioral engagement with a volunteer organization. Notably, emotions such as pride and respect have demonstrated the potential to initiate psychological engagement, subsequently leading to active behavioral engagement with the organization (Tyler, 1999; Tyler & Blader, 2003).

Social Identity Theory, proposed by Tajfel et al. (1979), posits that psychological considerations, such as evaluations of status and the subjective assessment of group-based identities, can significantly influence individual behavior within groups and organizations. Consequently, organizational attributes that are positively esteemed have the potential to contribute to a favorable social identity, instigating feelings of enhanced self-esteem and self-worth. Moreover, the theory suggests that individuals typically find it appealing to be associated with groups and organizations that positively contribute to their social identity (Ellemers et al., 2004; Haslam & Ellemers, 2011).

Volunteer organizations, with their primary mission of aiding society and its members through service, align with the principles of this theory. Notably, a charity's ability to help a donor foster a sense of closeness and assistance toward those in need is expected to receive higher evaluations, particularly when the donor exhibits high levels of social connectedness and assurance.

H3: the higher someone is in social connectedness, the higher the attitudes toward charity.

H4: the higher someone is in social assurance, the higher the higher the attitudes toward charity.

H5: attitudes toward charity will positively influence purchase intention.

H6a: attitudes toward charity will mediate the relationship between social connectedness and intention to engage in prosocial consumption.

H6b: attitudes toward charity will mediate the relationship between social connectedness and intention to engage in prosocial consumption.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample and Procedure

242 students participated in an online survey for a grade incentive. Data collection took place in a behavioral lab

of a large U.S. university. The population of the study was the business students in the university. The reason behind choosing a sample from this population is that students are engaged in online purchasing. Online donations is also part of their life. Because of that, choosing a sample from this population is meaningful to the decision makers to improve the probability of making donations online.

Female respondents composed the majority of the responses at 73%, male respondents composed 27%. Furthermore, the majority of respondents were between 18 and 21 years of age (62%), followed by 22–26 (19%), 27–30 (5%), and finally, 30 and above (5%). Regarding the ethnicity of respondents, most respondents were Hispanic (70%), followed by white (15%), Black/ African American (7%), and Asian American (5%). Table 1 presents the demographics of the sample.

Participants began the survey with the welcome message. After that, the picture of the product was presented along with the prosocial message (The money from this purchase will go to the American Cancer Society).

Table 1. Sample demographics

n = 242	
Gender	
Female	73%
Male	27%
Age	
18–21	62%
22–26	19%
27–30	5%
31 and above	5%
Ethnicity	
Hispanic	70%
White	15%
Black American	7%
Asian American	5%
Other	3%

Feeling thirsty?

The money from your purchase of this insulated stainless steel travel thermos will be donated to the



**AMERICAN
CANCER
SOCIETY**



Be part of the next breakthrough cancer treatment

Buy Yours Now

Figure 2. Survey ad

3.2 Measures

The survey is composed of different measures. The independent variables, social connectedness and social assurance, were adopted from (Lee & Robins, 1995). The dependent variable is a measure of purchase intention of a product that its revenue will be donated to a charity. The mediator variable is a measure of attitudes toward the charity. Table 2 presents the constructs, their items and the chronbach alpha results.

Table 2. Constructs

Construct	Items	Reliability
Social connectedness 7 points scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 7= Strongly Agree)	1. I feel disconnected from the world around me.	$\alpha = 0.94$
	2. Even around people I know, I don't feel that I really belong.	
	3. I feel so distant from people.	
	4. I have no sense of togetherness with my peers.	
	5. I don't feel related to anyone.	
	6. I catch myself losing all sense of connectedness with society.	
	7. Even among my friends, there is no sense of brother/sisterhood.	
	8. I don't feel I participate with anyone or any group.	
Social assurance 7 points scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 7= Strongly Agree)	1. I feel more comfortable when someone is constantly with me.	$\alpha = 0.86$
	2. I'm more at ease doing things together with other people.	
	3. Working side by side with others is more comfortable than working alone.	
	4. My life is incomplete without a buddy beside me.	
	5. It's hard for me to use my skills and talents without someone beside me.	
	6. I stick to my friends like glue.	
	7. I join groups more for the friendship than the activity itself.	
	8. I wish to find someone who can be with me all the time.	
Purchase intention 7 points scale	How interested are you in purchasing the insulated stainless steel travel thermos? Not at all Completely uninterested Would definitely not purchase	$\alpha = 0.94$
	Very much so completely interested Definitely would purchase	
Attitudes toward charity 7 points scale	My opinion of the American Cancer Association is: Very negative Very unfavorable	$\alpha = 0.43$
	Very positive Very favorable	

3.3 Method

To test the study model, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to estimate the path coefficients and associated t-values, which provided evidence for the structural parameters. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed using the maximum likelihood of estimation to assess the psychometric properties of each measurement model. The model shows good fit in terms of the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA): $\chi^2 (133) = 370.932 (133)$; CFI = 0.930; TLI = 0.889; RMSEA = 0.086; SRMR = 0.061.

4. Results and Discussion

The results show that social connectedness negatively influences purchase intention ($b = 0.070$; $p = 0.566$), and social assurance positively influence purchase intention ($b = 0.079$; $p = 0.416$). However, both relationships were not significant. Thus, H1 and H2 are not supported.

In regard to the impact of social connectedness on attitudes toward charity, the results suggest that (1) social connectedness significantly influence attitudes toward charity ($b = 0.305$; $p < 0.000$) (supporting H3); (2) social assurance significantly influence attitudes toward charity ($b = 0.155$; $p < 0.01$) (supporting H4); and (3) attitudes toward charity significantly influence purchase intention ($b = 0.594$; $p < 0.05$) (supporting H5).

The mediation analysis reveals that attitudes toward charity significantly mediates the relationship between social connectedness ($b = 0.181$, $p < 0.05$) (supporting H6a) but did not significantly mediate the relationship between social assurance and purchase intention ($b = 0.092$, $p = 0.09$) (not supporting H6b). Table 3 presents the correlation matrix and Table 4 presents the path coefficients and the results of hypotheses testing. Discussion of these results will be in the next section.

Table 3. Correlation Matrix

	Purchase Intention	Social Connectedness	Social Assurance	Attitudes toward charity
Purchase Intention	1.000			
Social Connectedness	0.139*	1.000		
Social Assurance	0.102	-0.246***	1.000	
Attitudes toward charity	0.220***	0.288***	0.100	1.000
Mean	3.701	5.506	3.223	1.777
Standard deviation	1.769	1.432	1.217	1.018

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 4. Path Coefficients

Hypothesis	Path	Path coefficient	Lower CI	Upper CI	p-value	Result
H1	Social Connectedness → Purchase Intention	0.070	-0.168	0.307	0.566	Not supported
H2	Social Assurance → Purchase Intention	0.079	-0.111	0.269	0.416	Not supported
H3	Social Connectedness → Attitudes toward charity	0.305	0.190	0.420	0.000	Supported
H4	Social Assurance → Attitudes toward charity	0.155	0.042	0.267	0.007	Supported
H5	Attitudes toward charity → Purchase Intention	0.594	0.025	1.164	0.041	Supported
H6a	Social Connectedness → Attitudes toward charity → Purchase Intention	0.181	0.003	0.360	0.046	Supported
H6b	Social Assurance → Attitudes toward charity → Purchase Intention	0.092	-0.015	0.199	0.091	Not supported

4.1 Discussion

The objective of this study is to explore the interplay between social connectedness, social assurance, attitudes toward charity, and their impact on the purchase intention of prosocial products. Specifically, this research employs attitudes toward charity as a clarifying mechanism to understand how individuals, varying in levels of social connectedness and social assurance, engage in prosocial consumption behavior.

Utilizing structural equation modeling, our hypotheses were tested, revealing that there is no direct effect of social connectedness and social assurance on purchase intention (H1 and H2). However, when analyzing the model without incorporating attitudes toward charity, both social connectedness and social assurance significantly predicted purchase intention (social connectedness: $b = 0.263$, $p < 0.01$; social assurance: $b = 0.193$, $p < 0.05$). The inclusion of attitudes toward charity highlighted its superior predictive power in prosocial consumption, contributing theoretical value to existing literature.

Additionally, we found a robust impact of social connectedness and social assurance on attitudes toward charity (H3 and H4). Individuals with stronger social connections exhibit more favorable attitudes toward charities offering prosocial products. Furthermore, attitudes toward charity emerge as a crucial predictor of the purchase intention of prosocial products (H5). Regarding mediation, attitudes toward charity only mediated the effect of social connectedness (H6a), not social assurance (H6b).

These findings offer valuable insights for managers aiming to enhance marketing and promotional campaigns for prosocial products. Targeting customers who exhibit a higher preference for social connectedness can improve purchase intentions. However, it is crucial for managers to consider customers' attitudes toward the charity, as cultivating positive attitudes is pivotal for increasing revenue.

In fostering a mutually beneficial relationship between charities and customers, it is essential for charity managers to ensure that customers perceive value in their donation efforts. Aligning products and services with customer interests can create a win-win scenario, enhancing the perceived value for both parties.

Despite these contributions, the study has some limitations. The sample primarily consists of undergraduate students, limiting external validity. Future studies should explore diverse samples, employ field studies for broader applicability, and investigate various types of charities for a comprehensive understanding. Additionally, research can delve into real-world applications, exploring how variables operate across different customer segments and cultures. Examining moderating variables, such as family life cycle stages, and boundary conditions for the willingness to pay for prosocial products can provide richer insights.

In conclusion, charities can benefit from innovative strategies that consider psychological, social, and managerial variables. This study serves as a step toward empowering charities to improve their practices and foster stronger relations with customers.

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