

# From Warm Glow to Cold Chill: Choice Avoidance in Charitable Donations



PRESENTER:

Ilana Brody



**BACKGROUND:** Asking people to choose between two donation options may present a costly tradeoff. While choice in donation can induce a “warm glow”, a tradeoff between two recipient populations may instead elicit a “cold chill”, freezing the likelihood of making a donation decision at all.

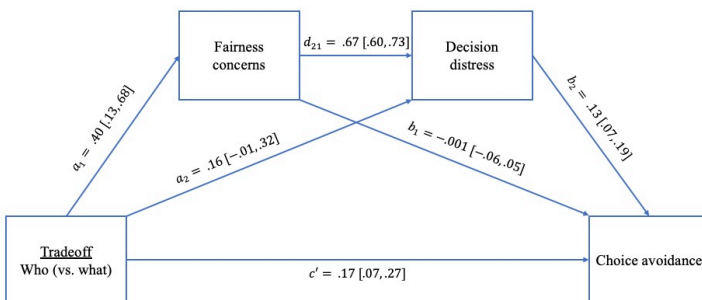
## METHODS

We conducted four pre-registered studies (N=25,067) in the field and lab. See the center fold and right sidebar for the field and online study stimuli.

1. Field study (N=23,834): Tested the effect of “who” (vs. “what” and vs. no-choice control) on email click-through rates in a charity campaign among those who opened the email (the emails had identical subject lines and there were no differences in the open rates).
2. MTurk study (N=201): Tested the effect of “who” (vs. “what”) on choice avoidance—avoid making a choice between the gifts by choosing both or neither—through decision distress (\$30 gifts).
3. MTurk study (N=682): Tested the same effect over different gift costs (low \$30 vs. high \$165).
4. MTurk study (N=359): Tested the same effect through fairness concerns and decision distress (\$165 gifts).

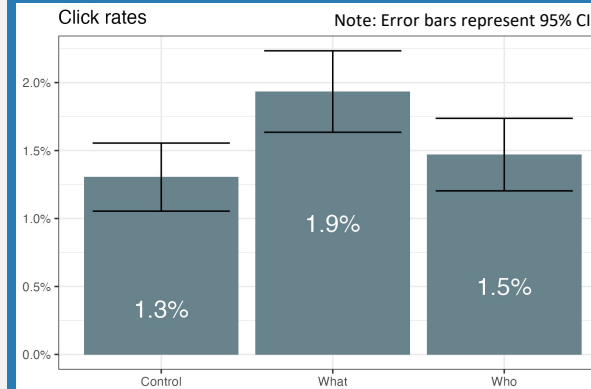
## RESULTS

Across one field and three online studies, a *who* (vs. *what*) choice increased choice avoidance. In the field, this manifests as lower email click-through rates in the email. Online, participants opted to choose both gifts or neither gift more in the *who* (vs. *what*) condition. This holds across hypothetical cost levels. This effect was mediated by decision distress induced from fairness concerns.

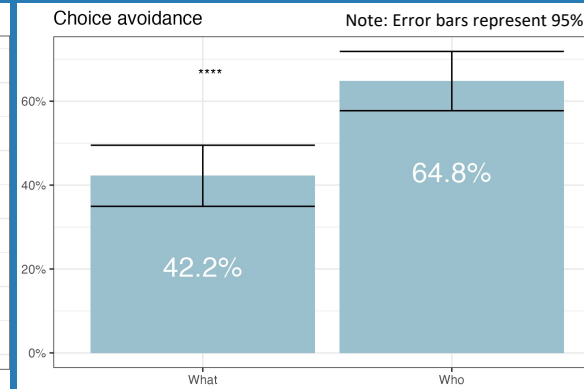


$$\text{indirect effect } (a_1 + d_{21} * b_2) = .03 \text{ [.01, .07]}$$

# A choice framed as *who* to donate for (vs. *what* to donate) increased choice avoidance, due to the decision distress induced by fairness concerns.

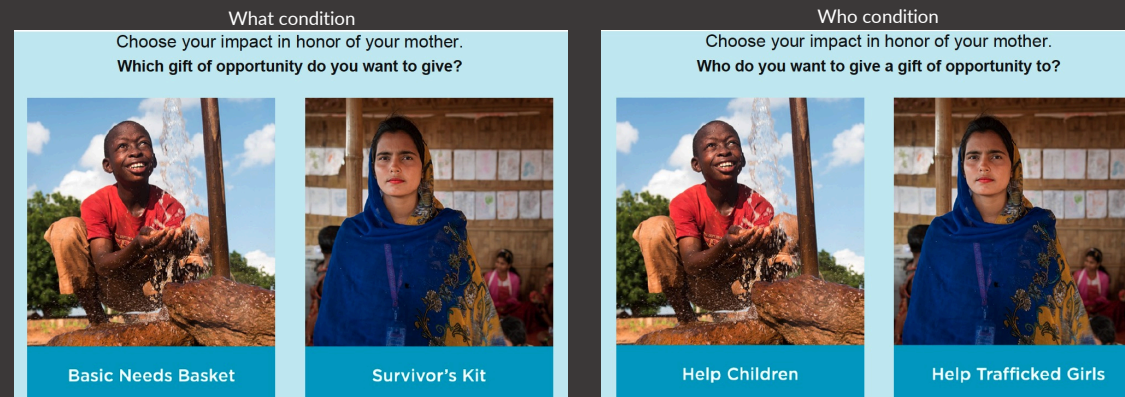


Field study: Click-through rates were significantly lower in the “who” condition than in the “what” condition ( $p=.024$ ), and no different from the no-choice “control”. This evidence suggests that choice framed as a “what” tradeoff may increase donation interest—consistent with prior literature on choice in donation settings. However, a “who” tradeoff may mitigate any potential benefits of choice in donation contexts.



Online study 4: Choice avoidance—opting to choose both gifts or neither gift and thus avoiding a tradeoff—was significantly greater in the “who” vs. “what” condition ( $p<.001$ ). These conditions had equivalent item descriptions (see “Online Stimuli” section in the right sidebar), where the only distinguishing factor was the button content.

**FIELD STUDY STIMULI:** A Mother’s Day-themed donation campaign sent to 89,459 individuals (26.64% open rate).



## SCALES

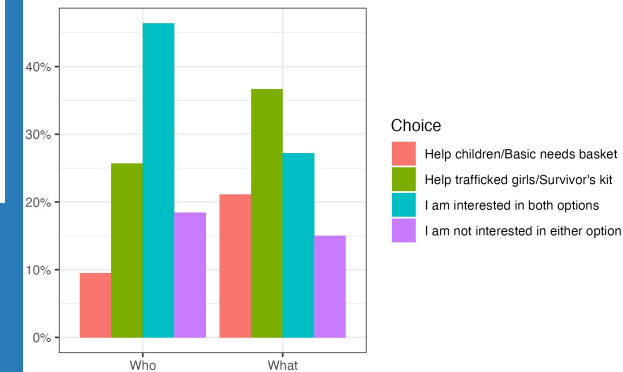
Decision distress measure (each on a 6-point scale)  
 $\alpha=.89$

- How **easy** or **difficult** was it [would it be] for you to choose between these two options?
- To what extent did [would] you find it **pleasant** or **agonizing** to make this decision?
- How **guilty** did [would] you feel about choosing one option and not the other?
- How **badly** did [would] you feel about choosing one option and not the other?

Fairness concerns measure (6-point scale)

- How **fair** or **unfair** did [would] it feel to choose between the two options?

## Choice selections



## ONLINE STIMULI

WHO: Choose who you want to give opportunity to:  
Help children | Help trafficked girls

WHAT: Choose what opportunity you want to give:  
Basic needs basket | Survivor's kit

## EQUIVALENT DESCRIPTIONS:

- \$165 Basic needs basket includes farm tools, a back-to-school kit, and a hand-washing station for children
- \$165 Survivor's kit includes food, medicine, clothing, and hygiene items for trafficked girls

All online donation opportunities were hypothetical. There were no images used in the online context.

Ilana Brody, Hengchen Dai, and Jana Gallus  
UCLA Anderson School of Management

UCLA Anderson School of Management

DonorVoice

