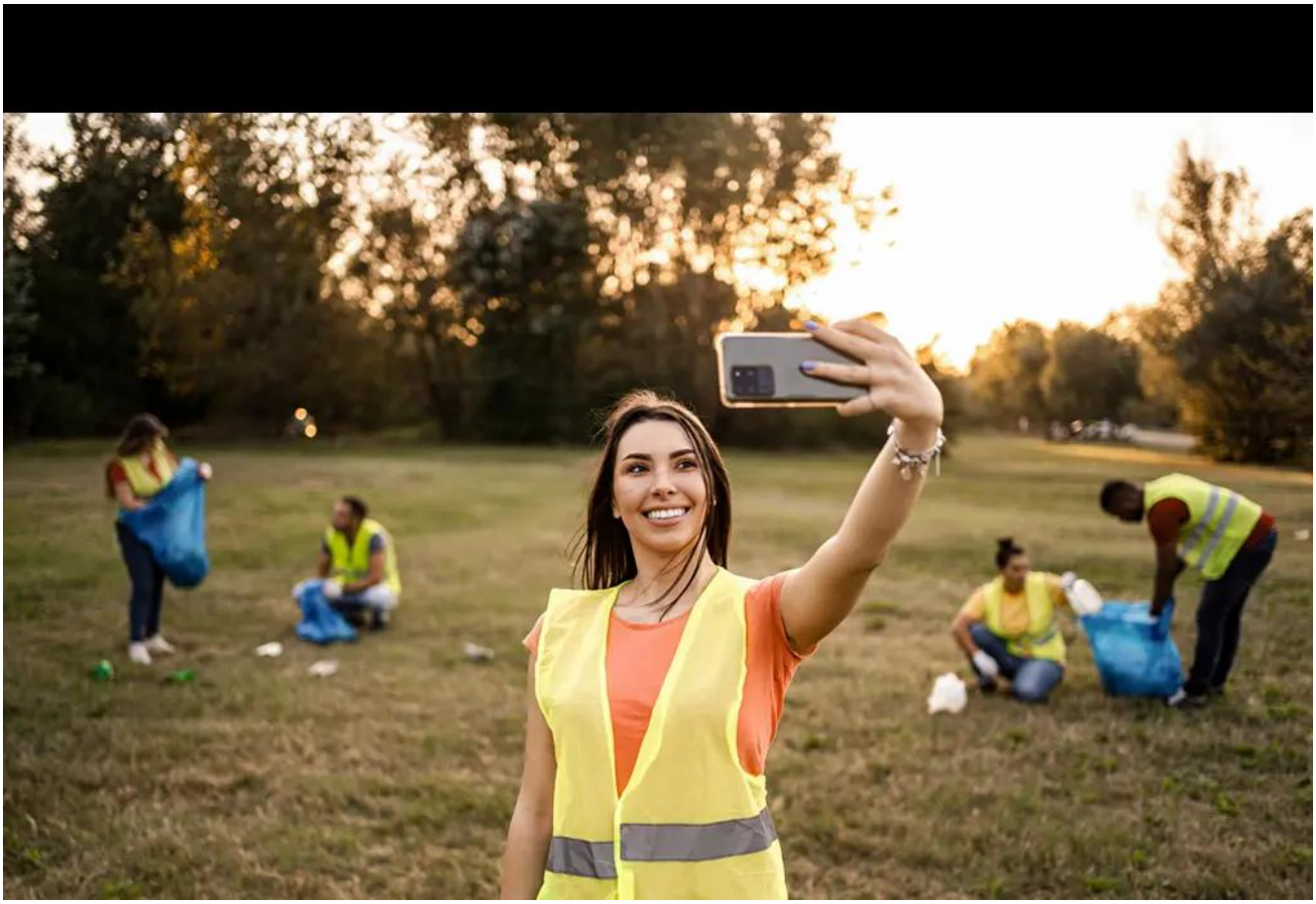
Good deeds, bad optics: telling people about your charity can backfire

How social media, self-interest and moral backlash shape our view of public generosity.



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Every year-end, social media fill with tales of corporate donations, volunteer outings, charity galas and feel-good moments of “giving back.” For many, sharing these moments is a way to

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spread positivity, inspire others and celebrate generosity.

But research suggests that sharing your good deeds might not always land the way you expect it to. In fact, shouting about altruism — especially if there's a benefit involved for you — may cause people to judge you more, not less.

Some celebrities have experienced public backlash for just this practice in recent years. Once hailed as a "model" CEO after announcing his company's $70,000 minimum wage, Gravity Payments' former CEO Dan Price was dragged through the mud when it was alleged his generosity was a cover for dubious personal behavior, from driving under the influence to sexual assault. Meanwhile, Jeff Bezos commits billions to his causes, but people know it's pocket change for him in comparison to his great wealth. The kind of philanthropy that seems impressive but doesn't cost the giver is often seen as a strategy for social approval and reputation management — and can result in neither.

Why "selfish altruism" can look worse than selfishness

IESE's Sebastian Hafenbrädl knows all about the "tainted altruism" effect — when we judge canny altruists more than those who never try to do good at all.

His social rewards protection theory digs into the phenomenon.

Across six experiments with more than 4,700 participants, the research found that:

- People believe social rewards — praise, admiration, status and trust — should be given to those who pay a personal cost to help others.
- When a giver benefits personally from their own good deed, observers assume they are claiming social rewards without earning them.
- This triggers moral condemnation because it feels like cheating.

Social media make charity highly visible, but bring significant perception risks. Posting about it can be seen as self-promotion, sponsoring feel-good brand partnerships may appear as profiting from generosity, donating large sums can be interpreted as public relations maneuvers and emotional videos can seem exploitative rather than inspirational. Because social media deliver rewards through likes and public recognition, viewers often scrutinize whether the giver has earned them.

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But all is not lost in the altruism space. The research also shows that when businesses and individuals are transparent about their motives and acknowledge their personal benefits, negative judgments fall. They may not be seen as the new Jonas Salk — who developed the polio vaccine and gave it away for free — but they aren't condemned either.

In other words, the problem isn't helping others. It isn't even benefiting from it. The problem is pretending to be purer than you are.

How to give without the backlash

- **Manage visibility.** High-profile or celebrity-backed efforts attract intense scrutiny, so make sure that publicity clearly serves the cause rather than *you*.
- **Demonstrate real personal cost or commitment.** People react negatively when a giver appears to collect social rewards without sacrifice. Give genuine effort, time or personal investment.
- **Prioritize transparency and governance.** Clear accounting, strong oversight and open communication about where money goes are essential.
- **Protect the broader ecosystem of trust.** A single scandal can damage public confidence in philanthropy more generally. Act in ways that reinforce trust in your project and the charitable sector more broadly.
- **Acknowledge nuance and be ready for different interpretations.** Public judgment can be volatile, and not all controversies are straightforward. Be prepared to communicate openly, correct misinformation and engage with critics.

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