

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

WILEY

# Self-serving perception of charitable donation request: An effective cognitive strategy to boost benefits and reduce drawbacks

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## Abstract

The psychological consequences of prosocial behavior depend on people's perceptions of their own volition. Building on this, we hypothesized that people who donate increase their volition and the benefits of donations by judging donation requests as polite (non-coercive), whereas non-donors reduce their volition and the drawback of refusing to donate by judging the request as less polite (too coercive). Three weeks after providing baseline politeness judgments about a fundraising request, participants re-evaluated the same request as potential donors (experimental group) or observers (control group) and reported how they felt ( $N_{time1} = 605$ ,  $N_{time2} = 294$ ). Relative to past perceptions, donors judged the request as more polite than control participants. Non-donors redefined the request as less polite than donors, but not less than control participants. Both donors and non-donors benefited from redefining the request as *more* polite. We discuss how altering one's perception of a request is a multi-purpose self-serving cognition.

## KEYWORDS

charity, donation, guilt, happiness, philanthropy, self-serving cognition

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Globally, philanthropic donations totaled £182 billion in 2021 (National Philanthropic Trust UK, 2023) and most of these donations were prompted by fundraising appeals (Gunstone & Ellison, 2017). Simply asking is a simple yet powerful mobilizing fundraising strategy (Andreoni et al., 2017; Castillo et al., 2014). It is a tenet of positive psychology that people who respond positively to prosocial requests, such as charitable donations, reap psychological benefits (Curry et al., 2018; Roposa et al., 2015). The darker side of prosocial requests is that they come at a cost too: those who do not answer positively incur negative feelings such as guilt (Burgoyne et al., 2005; Cain et al., 2014; O'Keefe & Figgé, 1999). However, the reality of those

effects is not so clear-cut: donors do not always benefit from donating and people who refuse may find strategies to avoid feeling guilty too. In the present paper, we explore a rationalization process that could explain why saying "no" to a prosocial request does not always have to come at a cost and why responding positively is not always beneficial. The consequences of one's actions indeed hinge on the personal volition of the agent in the decision. In a motivated cognition account, we hypothesized that people could cognitively tilt the balance of their volition in their decision to reduce costs and increase benefits. More specifically, we propose that non-donors could evaluate a request as too assertive to reduce their volition and avoid feeling guilty, whereas donors would evaluate it as more polite to increase their own volition and maximize benefits.

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## 1.1 | “Polite wiggle room” could shield non-donors from the “cold gloom” of refusal

Some aspects of the costs and benefits of charitable donations that predict the decision to donate appear to be tangible and concrete, such as the material loss for the donor and the gain for the recipient – but how those are perceived by the donor and the emotion they might cause are not as straightforward (Rubaltelli et al., 2020). In fact, the reputational and emotional consequences of charitable donations are not clear-cut and depend on several contextual parameters. For example, people who donate for personal gains, such as tax rebates, are judged as less charitable than people who get no material or emotional benefit from donating (Carlson & Zaki, 2018) and people who are personally responsible for taking action might experience more anticipated guilt (Erlandsson et al., 2016). Beyond the actual context and objective reasons behind a donation decision, could people use cognitive strategies to tilt the balance of the emotional consequence of their decision in their favor, to avoid feeling guilty for refusing to donate or feel happier from donating?

Albeit it is not commonly advertised, prosocial requests do come at a cost – and this does not refer to the material cost of a donation – but the mere psychological cost of being asked to donate. This is an under-studied phenomenon since most studies on charitable donations do not have an option to say “no” (e.g., money spent for the self vs. others), and/or focus exclusively on positives, do not include a control group, and consider that not being asked to donate is similar to refusing to do so (as noted by Aknin et al., 2017). However, research on the door-in-the-face technique (consisting of a costly request followed by a less costly one), showed that people felt guilty when refusing to comply with a request (O’Keefe & Figgé, 1999) and focus groups have documented that people feel bad about being asked to donate and refusing to do so (Burgoyne et al., 2005). Finally, it is well known that one’s feelings of anticipated guilt from not donating (and expected happiness from donating) predict the intention to donate (Basil et al., 2008; Erlandsson et al., 2016). People partly decide to donate to alleviate the feeling of guilt the request has triggered – meaning that those who refuse to donate have to cope with the guilt in a different way. Economic games consistently show that participants who shared less of their endowment with co-players in a dictator game felt less happy and more shame (Dunn et al., 2010).

The emotional impact of a charitable appeal (before one has decided to donate or not) tends to be negative (Baberini et al., 2015); however, the level of negative emotions experienced might depend on the way the appeal is framed. Appeals that use negative framing (e.g., showing a child in need) tend to elicit more negative emotions than those using positive framing (e.g., showing a child who receives support). Negative framings are more effective at eliciting donations (Erlandsson et al., 2018) but might come at a heightened cost for recipients who refuse to comply.

To reduce the psychological costs of their refusal, people might try to rationalize their decision. For example, people will devalue their ability to contribute (Liu & Lin, 2018) or focus on other personal

charitable acts that they have done in the past (Merritt et al., 2010), or might do in the future (Khan & Dhar, 2006). People can also devalue the charity (Exley, 2015, 2019) or consider that it does not need their help. Along the same line, having an excuse to refuse to volunteer for a charity made people feel more moral than those who did not have an excuse (Lin et al., 2017). Some rationalization might be suggested by the context. For example, if asked to choose to donate between two charities (rather than to donate to a single one), people would explain their decision by claiming that it is unfair to donate to one but not the other (Ein-Gar, & Give’on, 2022). All of those strategies have one thing in common: they seek to explain away one’s decision not to give, to avoid perceiving themselves as ungenerous – in effect, the strategies help reduce the agency of the decision-maker, so that their decision is not indicative of who they are.

Polite wiggle room is yet another strategy that non-donors might use to reduce their own volition and avoid feeling negatively (Juanchich et al., 2019). According to the polite wiggle room hypothesis, people who refuse to donate to a charity, position the solicitation as being less polite: too coercive, intrusive, or even manipulative; in essence, reframing the fundraiser as responsible for them not being more generous and, in this way, absolving themselves of guilt (Juanchich et al., 2019). Correlational studies showed that non-donors perceive the donation request as less polite than donors – over and above the actual level of politeness of the request (Juanchich et al., 2019). In the same article, an experimental study with an induced memory of donation further supports the effect. Participants were induced to “misremember” whether they had donated or not. Regardless of whether participants actually donated or not, those who were told that they had refused, judged the request as less polite than those who were made to believe that they had donated (Juanchich et al., 2019). Evidence suggests that indeed finding an appeal inappropriate might have a protective role, since appeals perceived as more (emotionally) manipulative were associated with lower feelings of guilt (Cotte et al., 2005). Hence, research suggest that non-donors resort to politeness redefinition. We contribute by furthering the polite wiggle room hypothesis by testing if it is effective in protecting one’s feeling and by testing whether donors too might succumb.

## 1.2 | Polite wiggle room could boost the warm glow of donating

Most studies suggest that charitable actions lead to positive outcomes, such as lower stress (Raposa et al., 2015), decreased depression (Musick & Wilson, 2003), better health (Yörük, 2014), reduced mortality (Brown et al., 2003), and of course a boost in positive emotions often described as a warm glow (see meta-analysis by Curry et al., 2018). Other studies, however, add some nuance to the warm glow hypothesis and suggest that people do not always reap the benefits of donating (Aknin, Dunn, Sandstrom, & Norton, 2013; Aknin, Dunn, Whillans, et al., 2013; Aknin et al., 2017; Morelli et al., 2015; Vecina & Fernando, 2013). The positive consequences of donations are only accessible to those who donate for so called “pure motives”:

because they want to be generous and kind – and there are many situations where one donates without this particular moral drive.

One situation where donations are not considered generous is when they are associated with personal gains (Carlson & Zaki, 2018; Newman & Cain, 2014; Zlatev & Miller, 2016). For example, making a donation to obtain a tax credit is not considered positive (Carlson & Zaki, 2018) and to sustain feeling good, people tend to forget how often they failed to be generous in the past (Carlson et al., 2020). An alternative situation where one might donate without feeling generous is when they feel constrained by the situation and do not have a personal sense of agency in their decision. Giving because one “has to” undermines personal motivation and hence yield less positive outcomes than giving because “we want to” (Pavey et al., 2012; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). For example, in the study of Berman and Small (2012), participants were all given a \$5 voucher, but some were told that the money was theirs to keep, while others were told that the voucher was for a charity (forced donation), and others were given the choice to donate it or to use it for themselves. As expected, based on models where agency is necessary for prosocial behaviour to be beneficial, participants who *chose* to donate experienced more happiness than those who did not donate, but more importantly, people who were “forced” to donate reported happiness levels similar or lower to those who had refused to donate (Berman & Small, 2012). In line with this, testimonials indicate that “giving in” rather than “giving to” has negative psychological consequences (Felten, 2010). Half of the charitable donations are believed to be the results of people “caving in” because of feeling pressurized rather than freely donating (see also Cain et al., 2014 for a review; DellaVigna et al., 2012). Donating in response to an assertive/impolite request would undermine the donor's sense of agency, whereas donating to a gentle and polite request would leave the recipient free to donate – and to experience the warm glow from being generous. Hence, donors might too adapt the way they perceive the politeness of a donation request to suit their needs.

### 1.3 | The present study

This work builds on previous studies on prosocial behaviour, and answers two novel research questions:

**Research question 1.** : Who uses politeness redefinition – donors or non-donors (relative to control participants)?

**Research question 2.** : Is this politeness redefinition an effective strategy to boost positive emotion in donors and to shield non-donors against negative emotions?

To answer these questions, we first test the polite wiggle room hypothesis (that people redefine how polite a fundraising request is based on their decision to donate or not) and compare this redefinition with a control group without incentive to redefine the request

(people who evaluate the request as observers). Then, we assess whether the politeness redefinition is effective in reducing the negative consequences of not donating and boosting the positive psychological consequences of donating. We measured the emotional consequence of the donation decision by examining the difference in emotion before and after the donation decision – where participants themselves serve as control so that we can account for their baseline emotion and the role it might play in donation decision.

We expected to replicate past findings that non-donors would perceive the request more negatively than donors (Juanchich et al., 2019) (H1), but we expected that this could be because either donors or non-donors resorted to politeness redefinition relative to control participants (H2a and H2b). Furthermore, we expected that this redefinition could boost the positive effect of donating and reduce the negative effect of refusing to donate (H3: effect of donation on emotion, H4: boost of the effect of the decision via politeness redefinition).

## 2 | METHOD

### 2.1 | Open science method statement

The hypotheses, design and analyses were pre-registered. The pre-registration protocol, the materials and the data are available on the Open Science Framework: [https://osf.io/2m6tf/?view\\_only=None](https://osf.io/2m6tf/?view_only=None). We report here all measures, manipulations and exclusions. The study received ethical approval from the institution of the first author.

#### 2.1.1 | Design

As summarized in Table 1, participants were allocated from the start to either a control group or an experimental group. Twenty five percent of participants were randomly selected to join the control group and assessed the politeness of the request as passive observers twice, in the pretest survey and in the retest survey; 75% of the participants were allocated to the experimental group, and assessed first the donation request as passive observers in the pretest and then as a decision-maker in the Retest survey. In the Retest Survey, the request was preceded and followed by measures of emotions.

#### 2.1.2 | Participants

Participants were Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) workers living in the United States (US) who had a task completion success rate of over 80%. We determined our sample size a-priori: we aimed to collect data from 600 participants in our pretest survey to achieve a final analytical sample of 396 participants who completed the pretest and the retest surveys. Participants were allocated to the control and experimental conditions based on a 1:3 ratio and around 40% of participants were expected to donate in the experimental group. From this, we

**TABLE 1** Overview of research design.

		Control group (n = 107)	Experimental group (n = 187)
Time points	T1	Pretest > Donation request • Measure: <u>Baseline neutral</u> politeness perception • Role: Passive observer	Pretest > Donation request • Measure: <u>Baseline neutral</u> politeness perception • Role: Passive observer
	T2	Retest > Donation request • Measure: <u>Retest neutral</u> politeness perception • Role: Passive observer	Retest > Donation request • Measure: <u>Retest motivated</u> politeness perception • Role: Decision-maker (yes/no)

expected to have 99 participants in the control group and 297 for the experimental group, of which 40% of donors (119 donors and 178 non-donors). Such sample size would enable to detect the critical effect of the donation decision on politeness perception estimated conservatively as a medium-effect of Cohen's  $d = 0.35$  (assuming  $\alpha = .05$ , power = .90), smaller than those observed in past research (Cohen's  $d = 0.71$ – $1.41$  in Juanchich et al., 2019).

Based on an initial sample of 605 respondents, we obtained an analytical sample of 294 participants who completed the pretest and retest surveys (as shown in Figure 1). Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 71 years ( $M = 39.2$ ,  $SD = 11.6$  years). Despite slightly lower numbers than expected, the sample provides enough sensitivity to detect a medium effect of the donation decision on politeness of Cohen's  $d = 0.44$  (i.e., around 50% smaller to the one observed in previous studies). This sample was composed of 53% women (46% men, 1% gender variant or other), and 78% White Caucasian (10% African American, 9% Asian). Overall, 83% of the participants had a job (12% unemployed, 3% retired, 1% student). Education ranged from less than high school (1%) to doctoral degree (1%), with 32% completing high school, 14% completing a 2-year college degree and 39% a 4-year college degree. Political orientation was also fairly diverse, with 44% being Democrats, 27% Republican and 26% Independent.

### 2.1.3 | Materials and procedure

The study is based on a pretest–retest structure with a gap of approximately four weeks in between T1 and T2. We first describe the Pretest survey that provided baseline measures of politeness perception and then the Retest Survey that provided the retest measures of politeness and the measures of emotions.

#### 2.1.4 | Pretest survey (T1)

In the pretest survey, participants assessed the politeness of a request to donate to a charity called “Children in Crisis” from an observer's perspective—when the request was addressed to a third party. In other words, participants were passive observers and imagined how the recipient would judge the request. Participants imagined that they

witnessed someone called B (of the same gender as them), receiving a donation request as a part of an online survey:

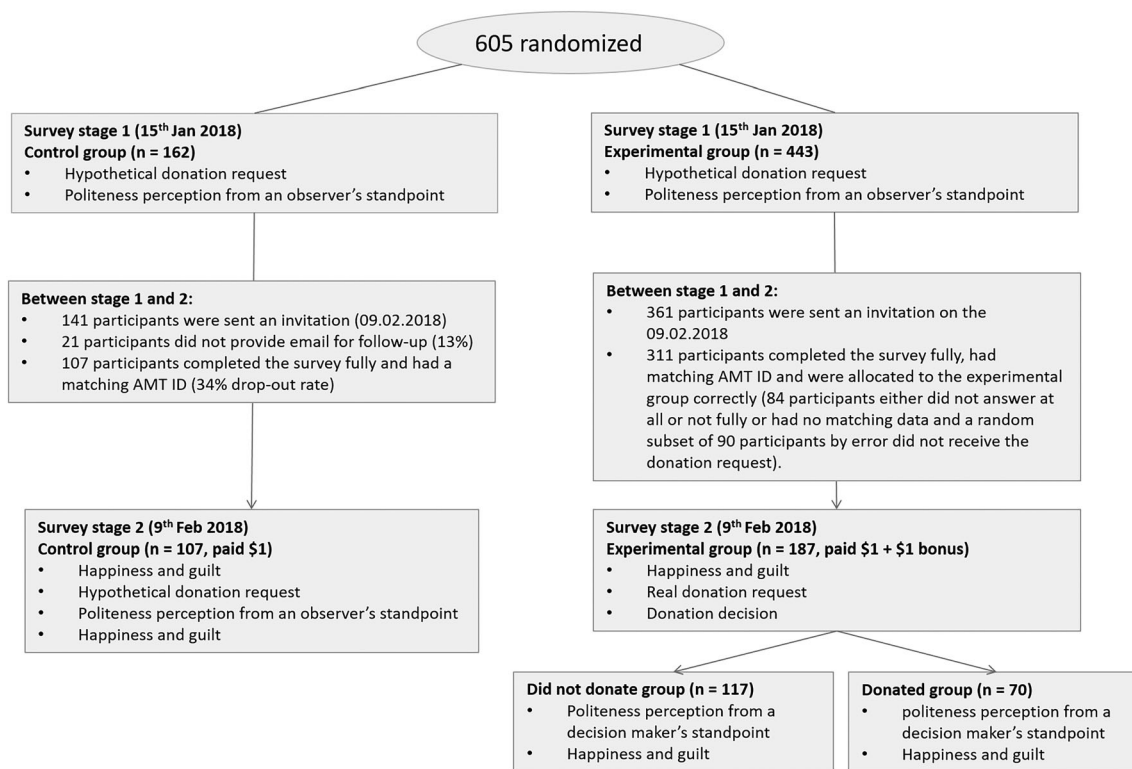
“Imagine that B is answering an online survey. On the next survey page B reads the following:

B is then asked to donate to a charity as follows:

- “Please donate to Children in Crisis”

Baseline politeness perception was measured on a five point scale (1–5) with a 22-item scale adapted from Juanchich et al. (2019): “Based on your experience, how would B feel about this donation request? Rate how much you agree/disagree with the statements below.” The scale included 14 items measuring positive and negative politeness according to the politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and eight items that assessed feelings of coercion (reverse coded); five items of a persuasion awareness scale (Feiler et al., 2012) and three items from a psychological reactance scale (Jonason & Knowles, 2006). Positive politeness items evaluated how much the request made the recipient feel valued (e.g., *B feels good about himself/herself*; *B feels guilty [r]*) and negative politeness evaluated how much the requests limited the freedom of the recipient (e.g., *The request leaves B free to do what he/she wants. The request is quite direct*). The coercion items tapped into the feeling that someone is infringing on one's autonomy, which is also associated with positive politeness (e.g., *B feels that someone is intruding on his/her beliefs*; *B feels that the donation request is coercive*). The scale had an overall good internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .87) and we computed mean politeness scores. From participants as observers, the politeness of the request was moderate, neither very polite nor very assertive (range: 2.18–4.95,  $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ).

To evaluate whether the participants believed “Children in Crisis” to be a worthy cause, they evaluated how well five adjectives described the work of the charity on a 5-point scale ranging from 1: *Strongly disagree* to 5: *Strongly agree* (“The work of Children in Crisis is ... important/essential/valuable/interesting/significant”). Answers showed that participants did believe that the work of the charity was important ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ; Cronbach's alpha = .93). We tested for possible differences in baseline (time 1) responses in importance



**FIGURE 1** Study flow and participants allocation in the Control and Experimental Group in the Pretest and Retest surveys.

of the cause between the participants allocated to the control and the experimental condition at time 2 and found no differences (Supporting Information S1).

After completing some sociodemographic questions (e.g., age, gender), participants were informed that they could take part in a follow-up survey rewarded \$1 and provided their email if they wished to participate. Out of 605 participants, 502 provided their email (83%).

### 2.1.5 | Retest survey (T2)

Four weeks after the pretest, we sent the invitation to complete the Retest Survey to the 502 participants who had signed up. Participants received a \$1 participation payment and those in the experimental group also received a \$1 bonus. Participants first answered questions measuring state happiness and guilt (separate pages and randomized ordered). Participants' state happiness was assessed using the 10 positive items of the PANAS (Watson et al., 1988) with one extra item focusing on happiness, as in Aknin et al. (2017). Participants judged “How do you feel right now?” and rated how much they experienced the 10 following feelings at that moment: enthusiastic, interested, determined, excited, inspired, alert, active, strong, proud, attentive, and happy. The scale assessing state guilt featured 15 items developed by Marschall et al. (1994). For example, participants rated the extent to which they felt at that very moment: “I want to sink into the floor and disappear” and “I feel like I am a bad person”. For both

measures, the response scale ranged from 1: *Not at all* to 5: *Extremely* and the scales had a good reliability (Pre-donation request: Cronbach's alpha<sub>happiness</sub> = .93, Cronbach's alpha<sub>guilt</sub> = 93).

Then, the participants in the control condition imagined that someone received a donation request “Please donate to Children in Crisis”. They evaluated the politeness of the donation request from an observer's perspective using the same questions as in the Pretest survey. In the experimental group, participants were given a real donation request with the option to donate none, some, or all of their bonus (up to \$1). The wording of the request was the same as in the baseline survey at T1, except that it was presented as a real request to participants and included information about the charity:

The psychology Department of the University is currently working with Children in Crisis. Children in Crisis was established in 1993 in the UK to give children in some of the world's poorest countries the education they need to help transform their lives.

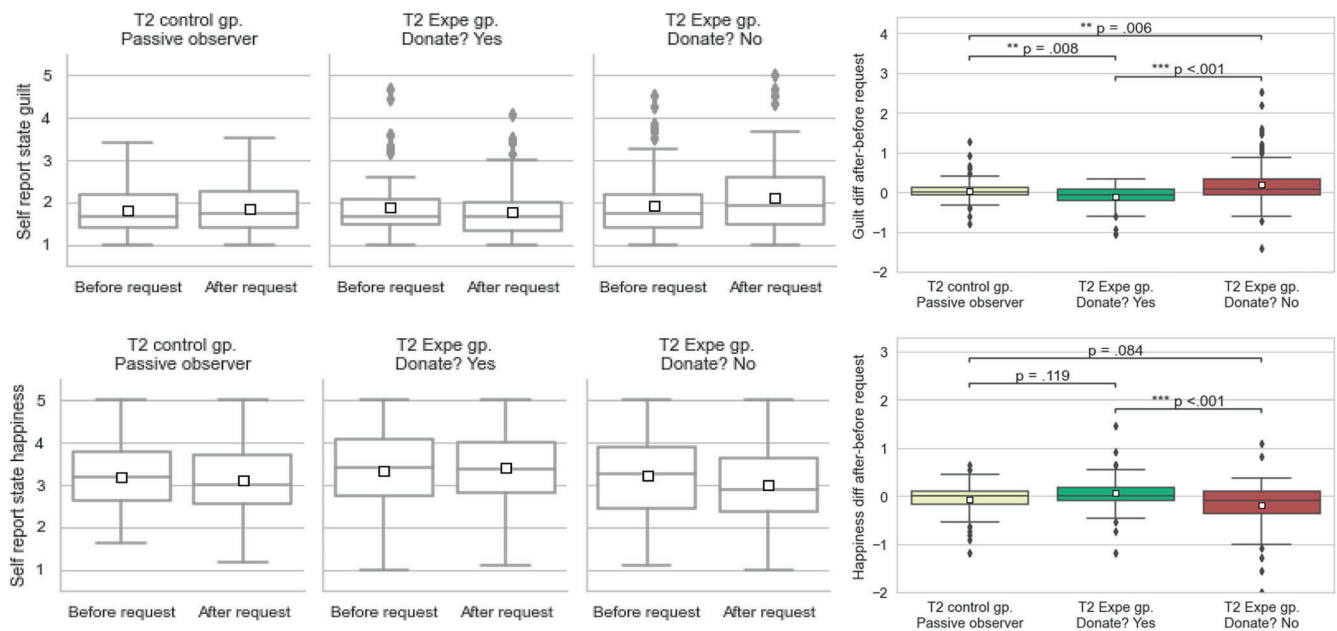
**Please donate to Children in Crisis**

You can donate up to \$1

I do not want to donate  I would like to donate some of my bonus

After deciding to donate or not, participants who received the real donation request assessed the politeness of the request with similar items as in the control group, but focusing on their personal perception: (e.g., positive politeness: *The donation request made me feel*





**FIGURE 2** Participants' state guilt and happiness before and after receiving the donation request in the control and the experimental conditions. The mean emotions show that refusing to donate (vs. donating) was associated with an increase in guilt and a decrease in happiness while donating was associated with an increase in happiness (all measured at Time 2). Note: The small white square shows the mean in each condition, the horizontal line in the box shows the median, the box shows the interquartile range with whiskers showing minimal and maximal values, and outliers are shown as diamonds (more/less than 3/2 times of the quartile).  $p$  values are the output of the pairwise comparison and were adjusted using the Tukey method for multiple comparisons.

good about myself; negative politeness: *The donation request left me free to do what I wanted.; I felt that someone was intruding on my beliefs [r]*). In this second survey, the politeness scale also had a good reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .89).

Finally, all the participants answered the questions that measured their state happiness and guilt again (post-donation request Cronbach's alpha<sub>happiness</sub> = .94 and alpha<sub>guilt</sub> = .92). As before, the questions focus on their feelings at that very moment.

### 2.1.6 | Variable computation: politeness redefinition and emotion change before–after the request

To evaluate politeness redefinition, we took away politeness perception reported as mere observers in the pretest survey at Time 1 from politeness perception in the retest survey at Time 2, when participants saw the request as either observers (control group) or potential donors (experimental group). To test the effect of donation decision on emotion, we computed change in positive emotion (hereafter described as happiness) and guilt by taking away the reported state emotions after donation decision from their emotion before. For both politeness redefinition and emotion difference scores, negative scores reflected a decreasing trend.<sup>1</sup>

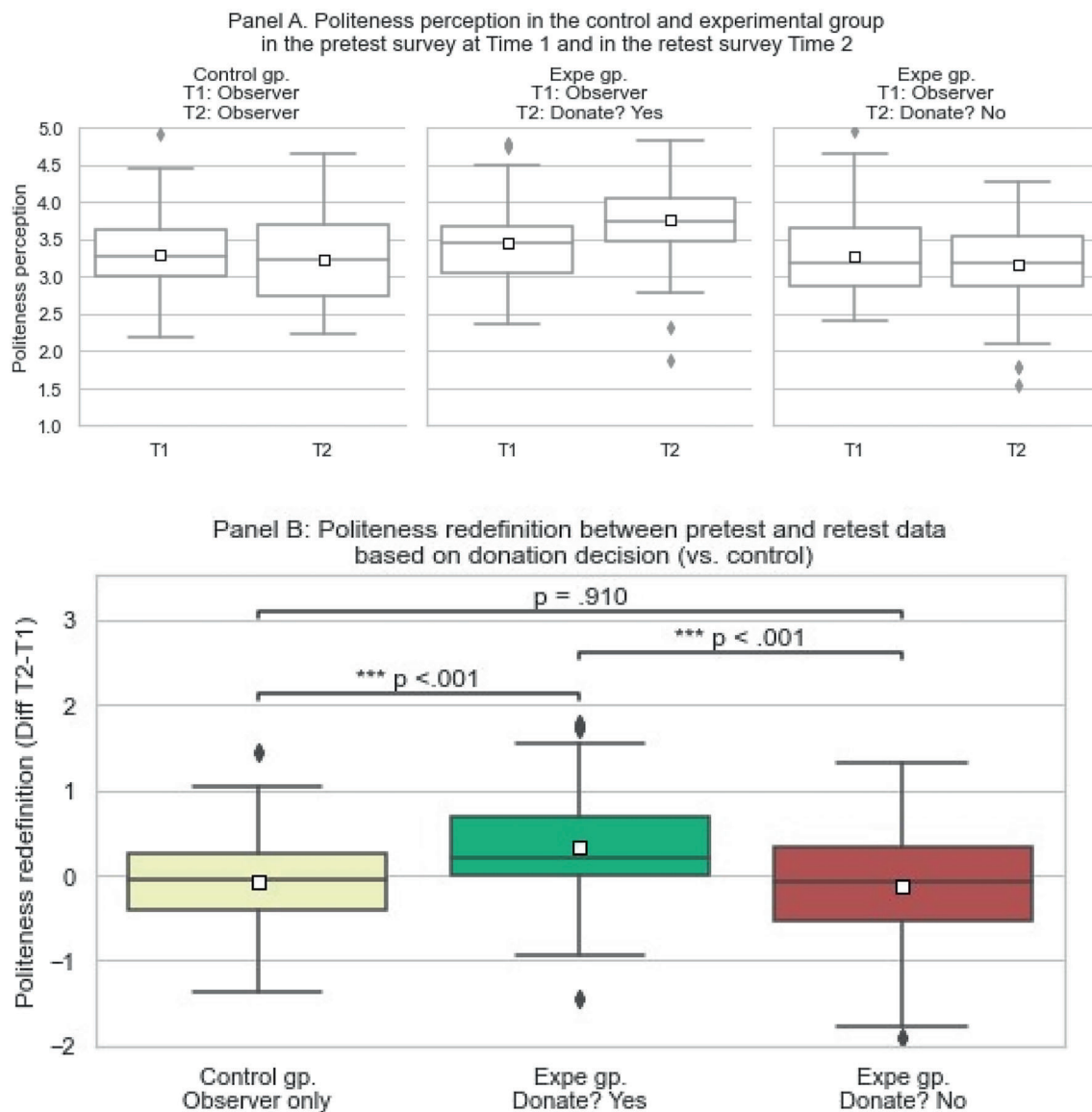
<sup>1</sup>Note that the difference variables were kurtosed (around 0, kurtosis  $\approx 10$ ). Non-parametric analyses testing hypotheses 1–3 showed the same results as the registered variance analyses; for simplicity we report here the preregistered variance analysis.

## 3 | RESULTS

### 3.1 | Emotional costs and benefits of donation decisions

We first aimed to assess the link between donation and emotion. We first checked whether participants in the control condition and participants in the experimental condition experienced similar emotions before reading the donation request. Descriptive statistics show little differences (refer to the first three panels of Figure 2) and an analysis of variance comparing participants in the control group, those who donated, and those who did not, showed no main effect on pre-request guilt and happiness,  $F_{guilt}(1, 293) = 0.47, p = .627, \eta_p^2 < .01$  and  $F_{happiness}(1, 293) = 0.69, p = .627, \eta_p^2 < .01$ . Comparing more specifically donors and non-donors' self-reported emotion before receiving the donation request showed again no statistically significant differences for guilt and happiness,  $t(185) = -0.14, p = .886, Cohen's d = 0.76$  and,  $t(185) = -0.95, p = .342, Cohen's d = 0.96$ .

Second, we evaluated the effect of the donation decision by comparing how participants' state emotion evolved *after* reading the donation request – in other words, by comparing difference scores ( $Diff\ score = after - before$ ). Relative to their pre request emotion, donors experienced an increase in happiness and a decrease in guilt, whereas non-donors experienced a decrease in happiness and an increase in guilt (right hand side of Figure 2). A variance analysis comparing donors, non-donors and control participants showed that the groups experienced different changes in happiness and guilt after



**FIGURE 3** Politeness perception of a charitable request in the control and experimental groups in the pretest survey at time 1 and in the retest survey at time 2. Perceptions show that donors redefined their perception of the request more positively than non-donors and control participants. Panel a shows participants' average politeness perception at time 1 and time 2 and panel B shows the redefinition scores (difference time 2 – time 1). *Note.* The horizontal lines show the median, white squares the mean, boxes the interquartile range, and whiskers the range without outliers. (Outliers: 1.5 IQR below/above the first/fourth quartile). The *p* values shown are for pairwise post-hoc tests with Tukey adjustment. Politeness redefinition values greater than 0 indicate that the request was perceived as more polite in the retest (Time 2) than in the pretest (Time 1), whereas redefinition values below 0 indicate that the request was perceived as less polite in the retest than in the pretest.

receiving the request,  $F(2, 293) = 7.82, p = .001, \eta^2_p = .05$ , and  $F(2, 293) = 14.26, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .09$ . Donors experienced a more positive change in happiness than non-donors,  $Mdiff = 0.26, 95\% CI [0.10, 0.41], p < .001$ ,<sup>2</sup> but, the differences between donors and control participants, and between non-donors and control participants were not statistically significant after applying a Tukey adjustment for multiple comparisons,  $Mdiff = 0.13, CI [-0.03, 0.29], p = .119$  and  $Mdiff = -0.12, CI [-0.26, 0.01], p = .084$ . For guilt, pairwise comparisons showed that participants who chose *not* to donate felt more

guilty after their decision compared with donors, and compared with control participants, while donors felt less guilty than control participants,  $Mdiff = 0.31, CI [0.17, 0.46], p < .001, Mdiff = 0.16, CI [0.04, 0.29], p = .006, Mdiff = -0.15, CI [-0.29, -0.01], p = .008$ .

### 3.2 | Motivated politeness redefinition

As shown in Panel A of Figure 3, politeness perception was similar for control and experimental participants in the pretest survey,  $t(292) = -0.55, p = .583, Cohen's d = 0.52$ . In the retest survey, participants

<sup>2</sup>All pairwise comparisons with Tukey's adjustments.

who chose to donate in response to the charitable request perceived the request as more polite than participants in the control condition as well as participants who chose not to donate,  $F(2, 293) = 31.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .18$ ,  $Mdiff = 0.55$ ,  $CI[0.35, 0.74]$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $Mdiff = 0.62$ ,  $CI[0.42, 0.81]$ ,  $p < .001$ . Participants who chose not to donate had a similar politeness perception as participants of the control group  $Mdiff = -0.07$ ,  $CI[-0.24, 0.10]$ ,  $p = .615$ .

We controlled for politeness perception at time 1 using a politeness redefinition score for which we subtracted the retest politeness perception from the pretest politeness perception. Using the politeness redefinition score, we found that the donation decision differed across groups, albeit not quite as expected,  $F(2, 293) = 14.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .09$  (refer to Figure 3, Panel B). Donors redefined the request the most, and they did so more positively than control participants and non-donors, whereas the redefinition of non-donors was similar to that of control participants, respectively,  $Mdiff = 0.40$ , 95%  $CI[0.19, 0.61]$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $Mdiff = 0.44$ ,  $CI[0.23, 0.64]$ ,  $p < .001$  and  $Mdiff = -0.03$ , 95%  $CI[-0.21, 0.15]$ ,  $p = .910$ . When we categorized the politeness perception as going up, down, or staying the same, we found that 73% of the donors redefined the request positively and 54% of the non-donors redefined the request negatively. In the control condition, 42% redefined the request positively and 52% negatively. So, three-quarters of donors engaged in positive politeness redefinition following their donation and about half of the non-donors engaged in negative politeness redefinition.

### 3.3 | Does politeness redefinition benefit decision-makers?

We expected politeness redefinition to serve the emotional needs of donors and non-donors. Figure 4 shows the spread in politeness redefinition and how the redefinition was related to guilt and happiness in donors and non-donors. As shown in the figure, politeness redefinition was an effective strategy for both donors and non-donors albeit not always in the expected direction. For donors, the results are consistent with our expectation. A positive politeness redefinition was positively associated with happiness but not with a reduction in guilt,  $\rho = .23$ ,  $p = .056$  and  $\rho = -.03$ ,  $p = .825$ .<sup>3</sup> For non-donors, redefining the request as more polite was associated with a reduction in guilt but not with a change in happiness,  $\rho = -.20$ ,  $p = .033$ ,  $\rho = .14$ ,  $p = .140$ .

Redefining the request as more polite (e.g., less coercive) was, as expected, an effective strategy to boost happiness in donors, and it was also effective to reduce guilt in non-donors, albeit in an unexpected way. We expected, but did not find, that for non-donors a

negative redefinition of the politeness would reduce their feeling of guilt – by recasting the responsibility of the refusal onto the request; instead, we found that it was redefining the request as more polite (less coercive), which was effective at reducing the guilt of people who refused to donate. People who refused to donate and judged the request as more polite than when they judged it as a third party – experienced less guilt.

To explore the overall effect of politeness redefinition (between donors and non-donors) and its mediating role between donation decision and emotion, we conducted a mediation analysis<sup>4</sup> using the PROCESS macro in SPSS, including the decision to donate as the independent variable (no = 0, yes = 1), the difference scores of happiness and guilt (after minus before donating) as the dependent variables, and the politeness redefinition as the mediator (refer to Figure 5). The analyses showed that the decision to donate was positively related with politeness redefinition (redefining the request as more polite) and that this was positively related with happiness and negatively related with guilt. The effect of the donation decision on happiness and guilt were both mediated by politeness redefinition (noted by the ab paths in Figure 5). Note that the effect of donation decision remained statistically significant nevertheless, indicating that it still explained some variance, even after we controlled for politeness redefinition.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

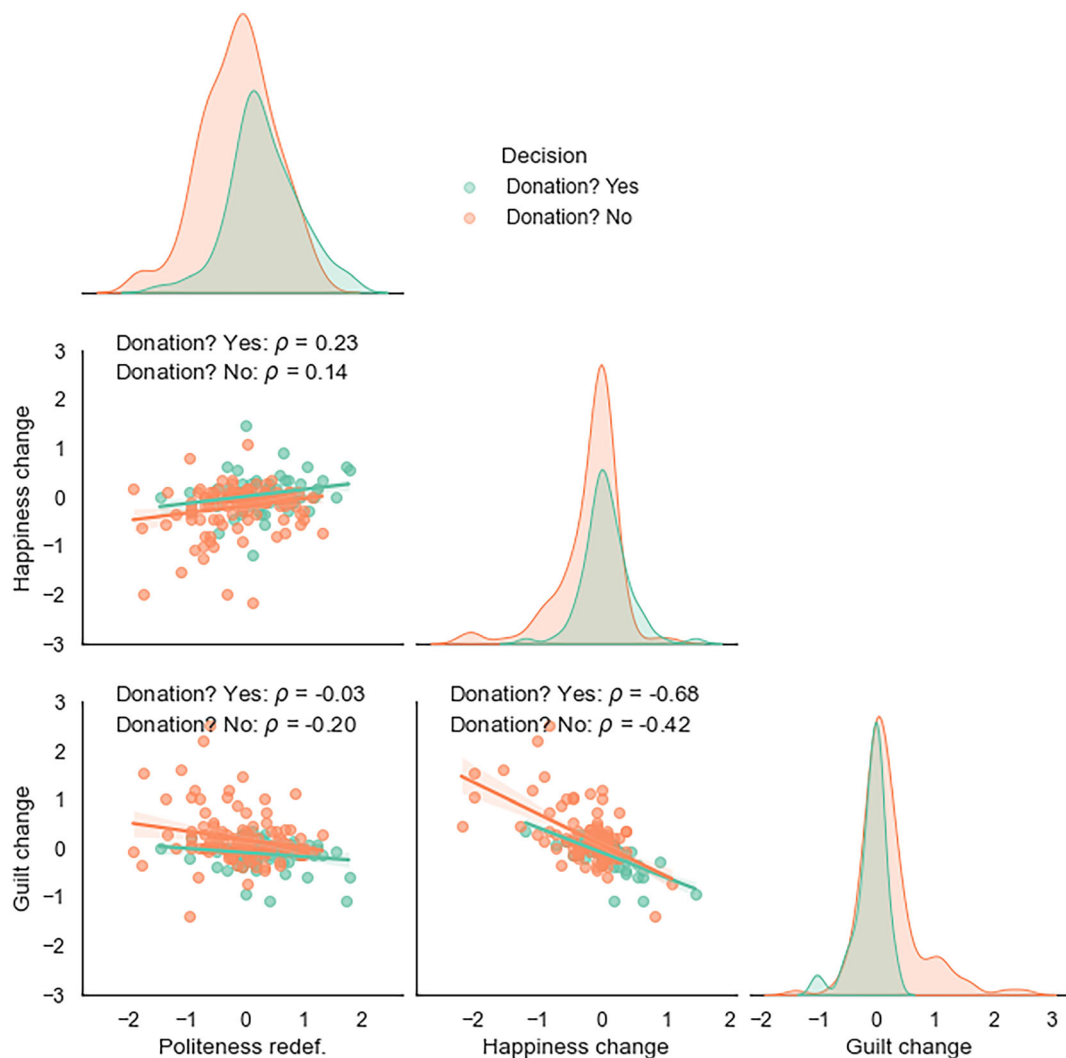
Donating to a charity is often depicted as a means to feel happy and avoid guilt, but data show that this is not always the case. In our work, we ask the question: Could a specific cognitive strategy help people maximize the benefits of donating and minimize the costs of refusal? Past work shows that a sense of agency is key in how we feel about our donation decisions (Pavey et al., 2012; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). We posited that when receiving a donation request, people could strategically adjust their politeness perception of the request to modulate their sense of agency and maximize the benefits of agreeing to donate (e.g., “I do not feel pressured; I donate because I want to”) and minimize the costs of refusing to donate (e.g., “I do not donate because the request was rude”).

We consistently found that donors recast donation requests as more polite, and that this positive politeness redefinition was related with an increased warm glow (“I am a good person; I feel happy”). We also expected – but did not find – that non-donors would recast the request as less polite/more assertive and that this would be related to lower feelings of guilt. While about half of the non-donors did redefine their politeness negatively, they did not do so more often than control participants. Moreover, redefining the request as less polite did not shield non-donors from feeling guilty. In fact, the opposite occurred, perceiving the request as more polite was associated with feeling less guilt.

<sup>4</sup>We preregistered a moderation analysis but deemed it not adequate given that we expected donation to have an effect on politeness redefinition and emotions to be linked to that redefinition.

<sup>3</sup>The positive politeness measure included some questions regarding emotion (e.g., the request makes me feel valued), which could explain its link to post donation measures of emotion. To assess whether this might be the case, we also tested our hypotheses with the different facets of politeness separately and found the same results across facets (Supplementary materials). Changes in positive politeness (the request made me feel valued), negative politeness (The donation request was quite direct) and persuasion awareness (e.g., I felt that the donation request was coercive) were related to participants' decision and with changes in reported happiness and guilt along the same pattern.





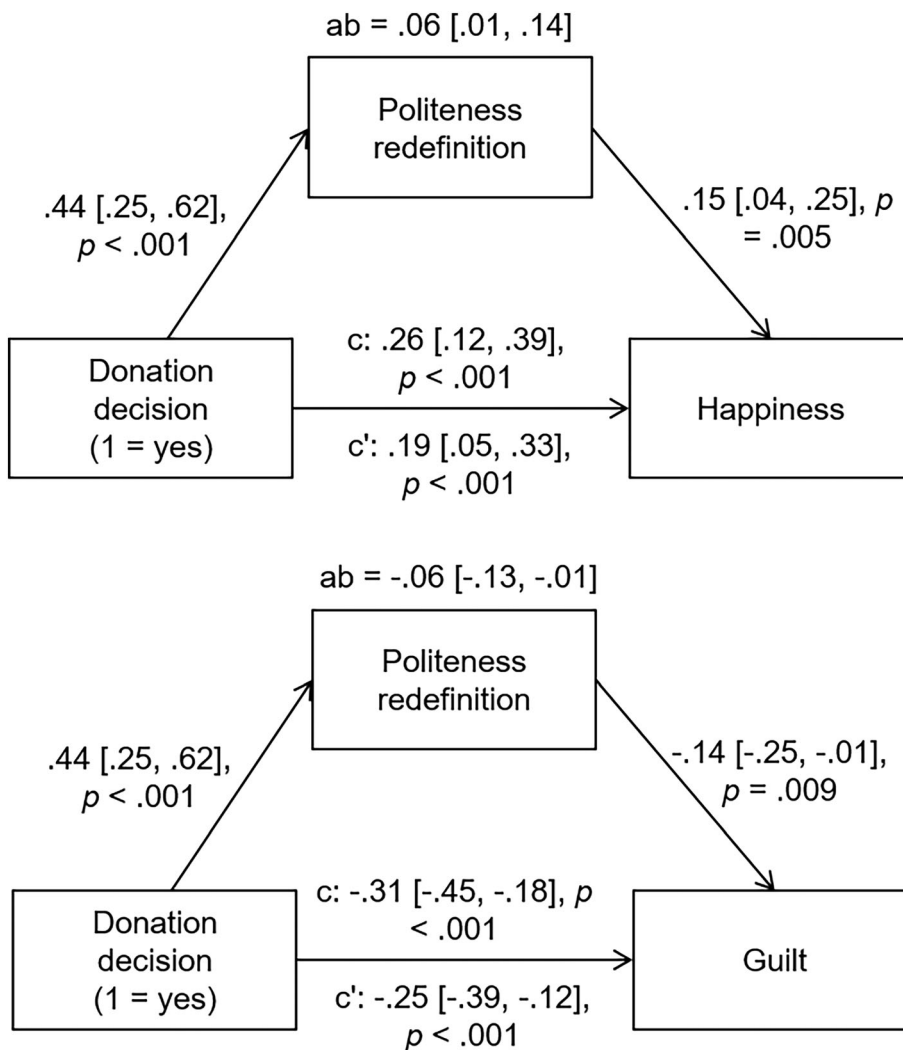
**FIGURE 4** Relationship between politeness redefinition and change in happiness and guilt as a function of whether participants donated ( $n = 70$ ) or not ( $n = 117$ ) (post-pre-donation happiness/guilt). Note: Positive politeness redefinition means that participants judged the request as more polite after being asked to donate relative to when judging the statement from an observer perspective. For happiness and guilt, a positive change value indicates cases where participants reported more of the emotion after making the decision.

#### 4.1 | Mixed evidence about the emotional consequences of donation requests and decisions

When we compared donors and non-donors, we found the classical results that donors are happier than non-donors (Aknin et al., 2012; Curry et al., 2018; Dunn et al., 2014, 2010). However, such a difference might be caused by a decrement in happiness in non-donors or an increase in donors (or both). In our study, donors were on average happier than control participants, but not statistically significantly so because the effect was rather small. Importantly, deciding not to donate led non-donors to feel more guilty than donors and control participants. The conclusion one can draw is that the effect of the decision to donate (vs. control) on positive emotion was smaller (*Cohen's d* = 0.33) than the effect of refusing to donate (vs control) on negative emotion (*Cohen's d* = 0.56). Our findings are consistent with recent failures to replicate the happiness boost (Kim et al., 2022). Yet,

this does not mean that donating does *not* make people happier. Future studies that aim to identify the positive effects of donating should have been powered to detect smaller effects. This is also in line with past work on charitable appeal perception, showing that although negative appeals might be more effective (Erlandsson et al., 2018), they also come at an emotional cost for recipients and can trigger negative emotions (Baberini et al., 2015).

It is important to highlight this nuanced contribution to the extant literature because most studies do not discriminate between participants who are asked and refuse and those who are simply not asked (as noted by Aknin et al., 2017). In this way, the differences in positive emotion between donors and non-donors may have been misrepresented as a boost in happiness because of behaving prosocially, discounting the fact that the positive feelings of non-donors took a dip. In our study, the positive consequences of donating did not offset the negative consequences of not donating, in contrast with findings from



**FIGURE 5** Politeness redefinition mediated the effect of the donation decision (yes/no) on guilt and happiness.

Aknin et al. (2017). The mixed psychological consequences of donation decisions highlight the need for strategies to boost potential benefits and mitigate drawbacks. The fact that we did not find evidence that donating increased happiness indicates that the benefits of donating may be contingent on a certain motivational framing as found in the past: I donate “because I want to”, not simply because I was asked (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010).

It might be interesting to investigate how anticipated guilt and happiness weight on people's decision and whether this would be subject to some form of asymmetric trade-off – in the same way that donating (i.e., losing money) might weigh more heavily on people than the benefits of helping (e.g., saving people's lives) – especially when it is to a high level (Rubaltelli et al., 2020).

#### 4.2 | Donors adjusted their perception of the request in a way that emphasized personal volition and boosted positive emotion

Three-quarters of donors boosted their personal volition by judging that the request was more polite than when they judged it as mere

observers (73% vs. 42% in the control condition). After donating, those participants claimed more ownership of their decision by believing more that the request left them “free to donate”. Our findings build on the work of Juanchich et al. (2019) and show that, contrary to their initial assumption that non-donors would be more likely to engage in politeness redefinition, it was actually donors who were more likely to redefine their perception of the requests (compared with a control group with no vested interest in redefining the request). This particular finding is to be taken cautiously because it could be limited to a specific study design. In the second survey, participants who received a real request also received a short presentation of the charity to give credibility to the request and foster trust that the money would be given to a real charity. This text may have raised the politeness perception of the request, by acting as a form of justification (Brown & Levinson, 1987), which might explain why the non-donors did not redefine the request as negatively as expected. However, control participants did not see that justification and yet judged the request similarly to participants in the non-donors group.

When we compared the politeness redefinition of donors and non-donors (who saw exactly the same request), we found that the difference in politeness perception was linked with the emotions felt

by decision-makers following their decisions (but not before). Redefining the request as more polite was related to improved psychological outcomes. We hypothesized that this would be the case for donors because redefining the request as more polite emphasizes the personal agency of donors. Donors who redefined the request as more polite (e.g., “leaving them free to say no”) reported more positive changes in happiness following the donation. This is consistent with research showing that intrinsic motivation to help unlocks and magnifies the positive psychological outcomes of prosocial behaviors (Berman & Small, 2012; Pavey et al., 2012; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010).

The positive role of politeness redefinition for donors is in line with theories and findings about motivation to be prosocial, where polite requests leave more room for personal volition, and hence generate more positive emotion, but these theories do not explain that more positive politeness redefinition was also connected with non-donors feeling better. If politeness redefinition (only) increased personal volition, we would have expected this to make non-donors feel more guilty, but we observed the opposite.

### 4.3 | The (unexpected) benefits of feeling free to say “no” to donation requests

Past work on prosocial behaviour has shown that people go to great lengths to avoid being asked to donate (Andreoni et al., 2017; Dana et al., 2006; Knutsson et al., 2013; Lin et al., 2016) and will attempt to find excuses for their refusal (Exley, 2015, 2019; Khan & Dhar, 2006; Liu & Lin, 2018; Merritt et al., 2010). We expected that people would use the request being “rude” as an excuse not to donate, as it was suggested in past research (Juanchich et al., 2019). Yet, in our work, non-donors did not rely massively on a negative politeness redefinition: 54% redefined the request negatively and 42% redefined it positively (4% gave exactly the same evaluations twice). Most importantly, this redefinition rate was similar to control participants who were not asked to donate, with 52% negative redefinition, 42% positive, and 6% exactly the same. Respondents who refused to donate to a valued charity did not choose to blame the request or the requester for their decision. This was possibly to avoid committing two “negative” behaviors in a row: refusing to donate and blaming the request for it. Tied to this point, it would be interesting to assess whether the politeness redefinition is conscious or not, which would potentially open new avenues of investigation. If respondents used the technique “consciously”, they could simply be asked how and why they did so.

Despite being adopted by only half of the respondents, we still expected that people who did redefine the request as less polite (i.e., a negative redefinition) would feel less guilt for refusing to be prosocial. The rationale for that hypothesis was that finding the request rude or too assertive could explain away the decisions not to donate (i.e., reduce the volition of non-donors) (Juanchich et al., 2019). However, we found the opposite. Finding the request less polite led to *more* guilt, and finding the request more polite led to *less* guilt. Despite being unexpected, the positive nature of this relationship has a clear rationale when we consider the role of politeness

in conversations. In our study, politeness might have accomplished its traditional function to protect people's emotional wellbeing (Langlotz & Locher, 2017). Indeed, when making a request, politeness is used to soften the edges of the ask, to reduce the social costs of difficult conversations (e.g., please, thank you, may you, maybe) (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Holtgraves & Yang, 1990). Politeness perception is closely related to one's emotions as markers of politeness in a conversation can fulfill the need for autonomy and even respect of the conversational partner. Receiving a request that feels polite (i.e., making the person feel valued and respected), might have hence generated some positive emotion that counteracted, or at least attenuated, the negative effect of refusing to comply with that request. In our work, we find that whether politeness perception is “honest” or “strategically” redefined, it does help people to cope better with difficult decisions. The “emotional well-being” function of politeness could also explain the positive effect of the decision to donate on happiness. In that case, the positive effect of the polite interaction could have been additive to the positive effect of the donation decision, making the effect of the decision appear larger. Research should be conducted to establish how the politeness perception of a request might increase or decrease negative feelings. For instance, it might increase negative feelings because it is harder to say “no” to a kind request, but it might also decrease negative feelings because of feeling valued and respected.

It was suggested that a range of strategies could be used to refuse to be prosocial without feeling guilty about it (Carlson et al., 2020; Exley, 2015, 2019; Khan & Dhar, 2006; Lin et al., 2017; Liu & Lin, 2018; Merritt et al., 2010), but the efficacy of these strategies remained to be evaluated. Our finding provides evidence that both donors and non-donors resort to post-hoc justification to improve their wellbeing and that these cognitive adjustments can be effective. This finding complements evidence focusing on unethical behaviour showing that cognitive justifications are effective in reducing feeling of guilt (e.g., “I am not the only one who benefited from it”; Gino et al., 2013) and evidence of cognitive biases aimed at feeling more generous (e.g., misremembering how often we donated in the past) (Carlson et al., 2020).

We believe that other factors that affect our sense of generosity may be cognitively distorted to suit our needs in situations where donating is not readily associated with being generous – such as when altruism is ‘tainted’ by personal gains (Carlson & Zaki, 2018; Newman & Cain, 2014). In those cases, people might alter their perception of the reason why they donate, for example by downplaying the importance of the material reward (e.g., downplaying the value of tax rebates). Yet another strategy could be for donors to have a greater perception of the importance of the cause or the value of their donation, something likely to boost the warm glow of donation – while devaluing the importance of a charity/a charitable behaviour has been shown to be used by those who refuse to donate (presumably to explain away their decision) (Exley, 2019). This line of work on the role of post-decision rationalization complements research on the explicit justifications that people give for their decision (Erlandsson et al., 2017).

#### 4.4 | Limitations and future directions

As with many studies on charitable behaviour, it is important to discuss causality: is happiness making people donate more, or is it the donation that make people happier? The question is the same for politeness perception: Is it a higher politeness perception that makes people donate? Or is it their decision that actually lead to a redefinition of their politeness perception? In our study, to evaluate whether the donation decision affected both positive and negative emotions (and not the reverse), we measured participants' happiness and guilt before and after their donations, and compared this variation with the changes in emotion of participants in the control group (who did not make any donation decision). Hence, we controlled for people's baseline level of happiness and guilt prior to their donation decision and assessed how much it changed following their decision. However, this may not have been needed as our data suggest that participants' emotion prior to their decision was not related with their choice.

To test whether the donation decision impacted participants' politeness perception of the request (and not the other way around), we measured participants' politeness perception of the request first, at a time when they acted as mere observers, and compared that with their politeness perception as recipients of the donation request to obtain a redefinition score. This is in itself informative, but the key comparison was between this redefinition score in decision-makers (donors and non-donors) to that of a control group where participants assessed the donation request twice as observers. Comparing decision-makers with control participants helped identify the direction of the effect and the net consequence of accepting or refusing to donate to a charitable solicitation, but the comparison of donors and non-donors is also relevant to measure the relative effect of the decision.

Focusing on differences between test–retest measures helped to identify how decisions shaped psychological outcomes over and above individual differences – but it also likely made the study goals more transparent (Birnbau, 1999). Admittedly, further research could expand the time lag between test–retest measures of emotion and distinguish between different facets of affect (e.g., by measuring a broader range of baseline emotion longer before the donation decision and the post decision emotion measures).

In our study, a key methodological aspect that deserves consideration was the donation request – we presented a donation request that was fairly simple and fairly neutral (“Please donate to Children in Crisis”). That request was not designed to especially elicit hope or guilt, and that may have mitigated the effect of the decision to donate or not on emotion. In real life, donation requests often pull on our heartstrings, especially our guilt (e.g., showing a child in need) making people more likely to donate (Erlandsson et al., 2015, 2018). In addition to influencing how receivers feel when they receive the request, the emotional nature of a request might also shape the emotional consequences of recipients' decision. For example, people donating to a ‘guilt trip’ appeal might be more likely to reluctantly acquiesce and less likely to feel the warm glow of their decision, since donating

because of being pressured is associated with more negative feelings than donating for pleasure (Gebauer et al., 2008).

Another important aspect of the context of our study is that we focused on anonymous online donation decisions, hence it is important to note that our effects only speak to situations where decisions do not signal one's value to others but to the self only. In real life, the emotional and social costs of refusing to donate may be particularly heftier because of the presence of at least one person (the requester), which might increase the perceived threat and reliance on politeness redefinition. Future experimental fieldwork could evaluate the magnitude of the emotional consequences of donation requests and the level of endorsement of strategies to buffer those. New data collection settings could also involve assessing the role of politeness redefinition when choosing between different charities, and one might observe spillover effects of the decision to donate to one charity over the perception of the requests of the other charities.

#### 4.5 | Applied implications

Although disseminating mass fundraising requests may be a good way for charities and NGOs to raise funds, exposure to repeated charitable appeals might cause a compassion fade (Slovic, 2007; Västfjäll et al., 2014). Here, we show that in addition to a compassion fade, the repeated exposure to donation appeals might directly raise negative feelings in the form of guilt. Polite request might not lead to more donation decisions (Juanchich et al., 2019), but might reduce the feeling of guilt from not giving and also boosts feelings of happiness from donating. Hence, charities should formulate requests as politely as possible to alleviate the psychological costs of requests in non-donors and boost happiness in donors. In digital communications (e.g., emails, texts), adjusting the wording of the potential response might also help to alleviate the negative consequences of refusing to donate by providing a positive way out of donating (e.g., “No, maybe later” instead of “No”). Future research ought to explore how more polite charitable requests and answering options could maximize long-term philanthropy by boosting the warm glow in donors while facilitating guilt-free refusal.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the Open Science Framework at [https://osf.io/2m6tf/?view\\_only=None](https://osf.io/2m6tf/?view_only=None). The page is currently anonymized for peer reviewers, and will be made fully public on publication acceptance.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

**How to cite this article:** Juanchich, M., Whiley, L. A., & Sirota, M. (2024). Self-serving perception of charitable donation request: An effective cognitive strategy to boost benefits and reduce drawbacks. *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, 37(1), e2366. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bdm.2366>