

Watching Eyes and Cooperation: Does the Attractiveness or Gender of Watching Eyes Increase Donations?

Contact: Eve Rose*, Annika Gaiani, Dr Gilbert Roberts, 120161452, C800 Psychology, e.c.rose@newcastle.ac.uk

Introduction

Previous research by Bateson, Nettle and Roberts (2006) found that people in a university coffee room paid almost three times as much money into an honesty box for their drinks when images of eyes were displayed compared to flowers. Research by Ernest-Jones, Nettle and Bateson (2011) also found that displaying eye images made people more likely to remove litter from tables in a self-clearing cafeteria. This as well as a wealth of other research claiming similar cooperative behaviour as a result of eye images being displayed provided the inspiration to investigate specific features of the eyes.

Attractiveness and gender of eyes were varied to see if certain features were more effective at eliciting cooperative behaviour. This was measured as the total number of donations made in the collection boxes at The Great North Museum: Hancock. In addition, the overall effectiveness of eye images in general, compared with flower images in increasing cooperative behaviour was also investigated.

Hypothesis: Images of watching eyes will enhance people's pro-social behaviour compared to the flower images.

Prediction 1: Attractive eye images will be more effective in increasing the amount of people donating compared to the unattractive eye images and the control images.

Prediction 2: Eyes of the opposite gender to the visitor will be more likely to increase the chances of donating compared to the same-gender eyes.

Method

- Attractiveness ratings of eye images were obtained
- There were 20 different stimuli: 4 attractive eyes, 4 unattractive eyes, 4 male eyes, 4 female eyes and 4 flower images
- Eye images were displayed on 5 donation boxes close to the money slot
- Each stimulus was presented twice in total; once in a morning observation (1100-1200) and once in an afternoon observation (1400-1500)
- Observations took place over 20 days (40 observations in total)
- Observers recorded the gender of the museum visitor and whether they donated or not upon their exit

Results

Analysis was conducted using a general linear model.

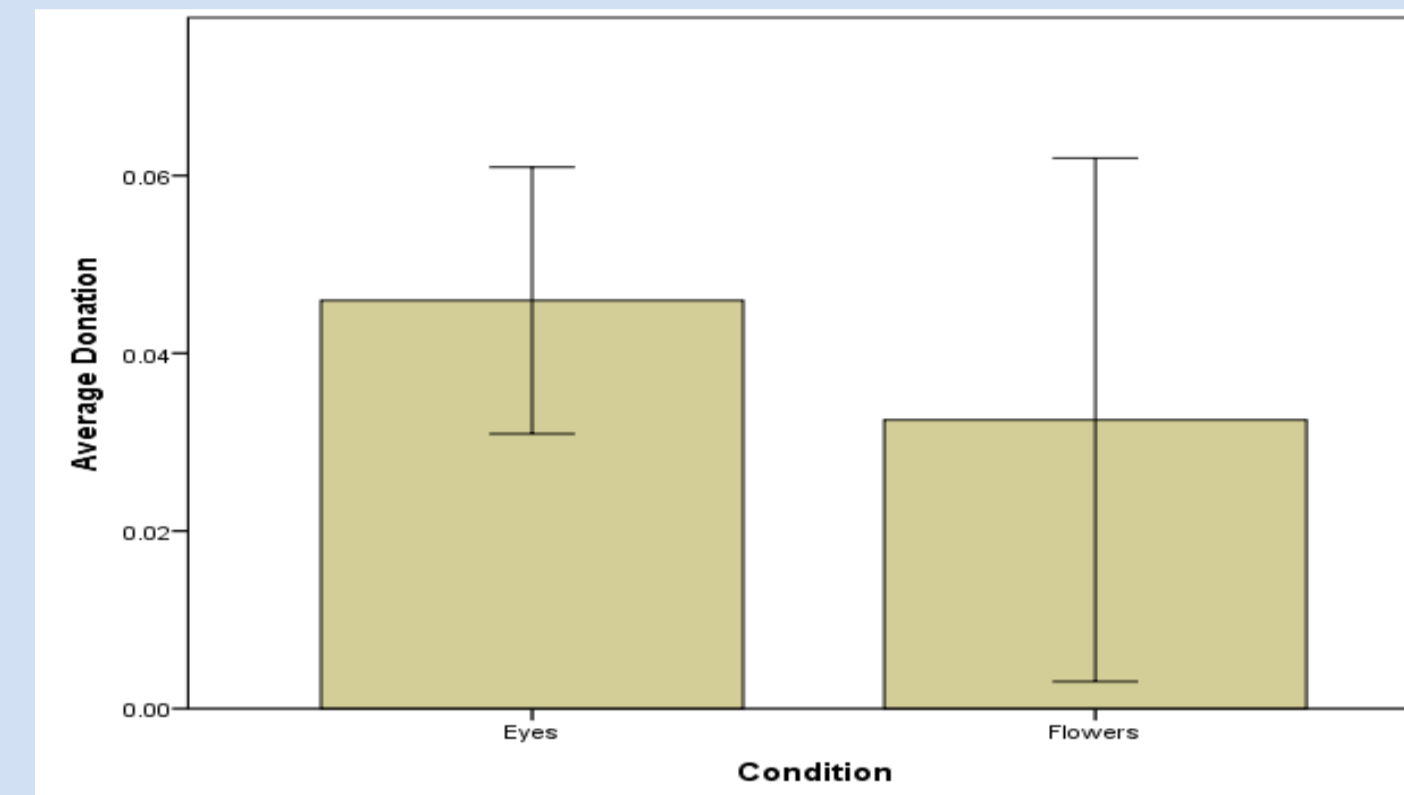


Figure 1. Eye conditions had a higher average donation compared to flower conditions as predicted, although this was not statistically significant.

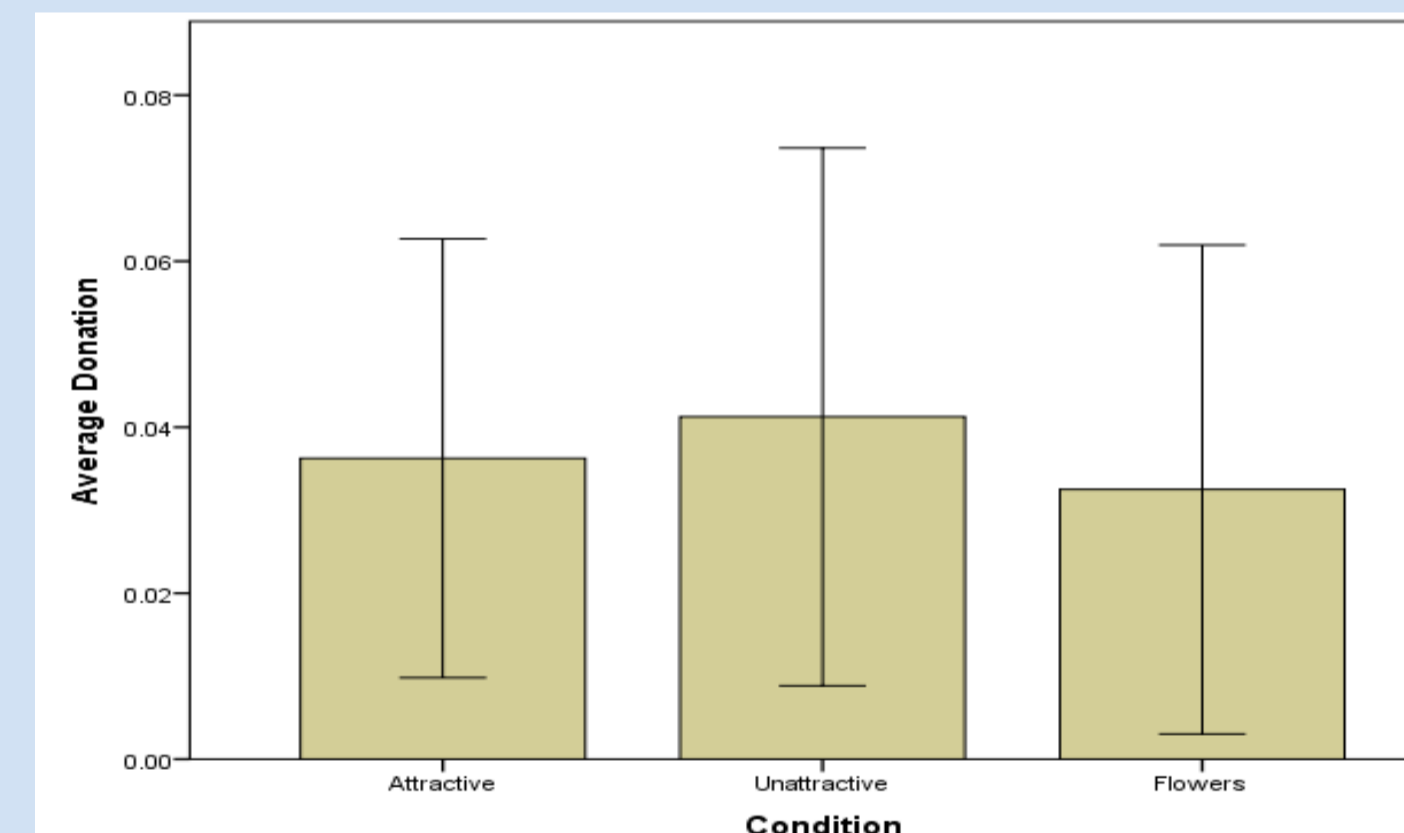


Figure 2. Unattractive eye conditions had a higher average donation compared to attractive eye and flower conditions however this was not statistically significant. This trend was not in line with the predictions.

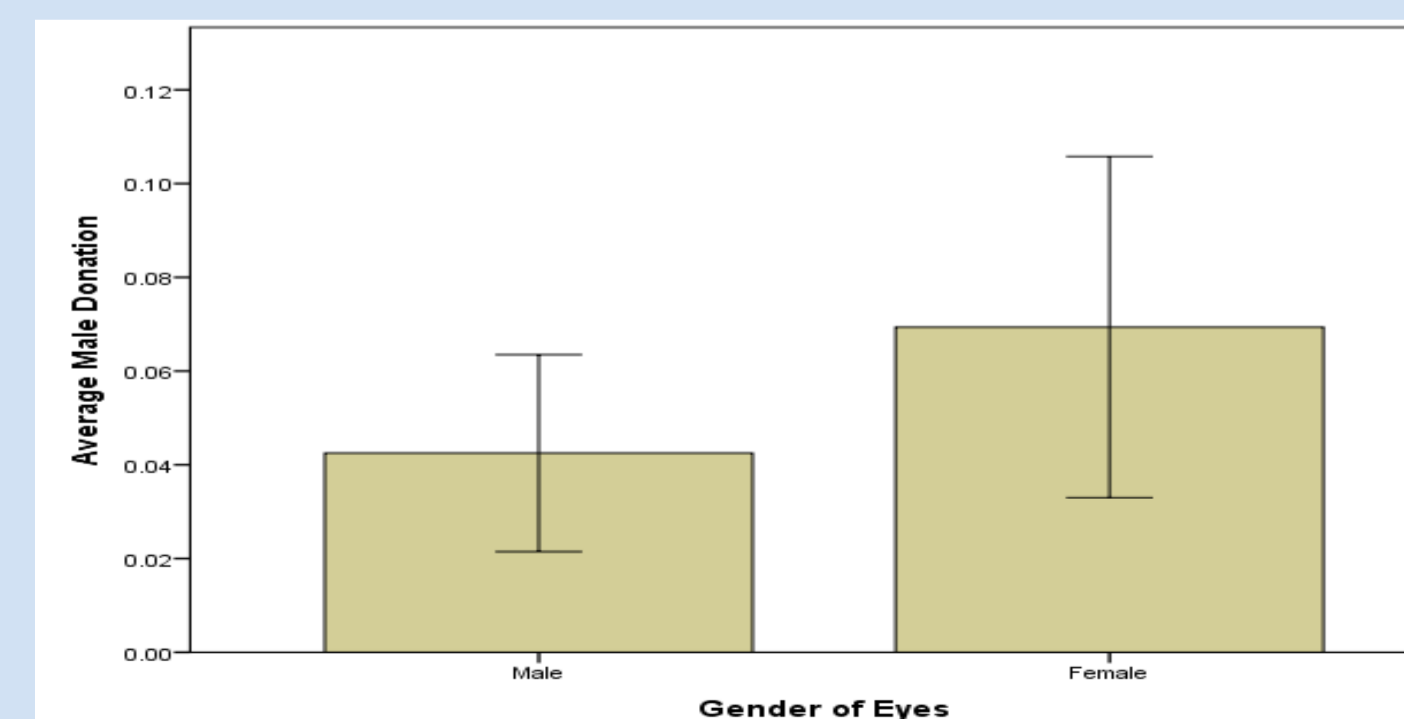


Figure 3. Female eye conditions had a higher male donation compared to the male eye conditions as predicted however, however analyses run did not find any significant differences between the stimuli.



Figure 4. Museum donation boxes displaying eye images.

Conclusions

Although results were not found to be significant, some promising trends were found in the directions predicted:

- Images of watching eyes enhanced people's pro-social behaviour compared to the flower images
- Female eyes were more likely to increase male donations compared to male eyes

Further replications of this method over a longer period of time may find statistically significant results. In addition, the environment in which the watching eye effect is investigated could be responsible for the stimuli not being seen as increased noise may act as a distraction (Ekström, 2012).

Implications include the increase of public cooperative behaviour with the potential to improve many aspects of society such as crime reduction and generosity.

References

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- Ernest-Jones, M., Nettle, D., & Bateson, M. (2011). Effects of eye images on everyday cooperative behavior: a field experiment. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 32(3), 172-178
- Eye Images: Professor Ian Penton Voak, Bristol University
- Flower Image: http://www.desktopc.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/flowers_lagrpictures_pictures_photos_1920X1080_images_download_id_33332.jpg
- Donation box images: created by Eve Rose