

TALK

THE PROSOCIAL EFFECTS OF WATCHING EYES EXTEND TO SHOPPING CART RETURN BEHAVIOR

Francesca Messina, Nathan Boone*, Maria Fragoso Caldaza, Shairy Jimenez-Delgado, Rayann Elka Medina, Ryan Bish, David Harris, Alice Zhang, Amanda Hahn

Cal Poly Humboldt, Arcata, USA

[*nb155@humboldt.edu](mailto:nb155@humboldt.edu)

ABSTRACT

Watching eyes are powerful stimuli—they quickly capture attention and evoke physiological arousal. Humans are particularly adept at perceiving another’s gaze, and can even be affected by watching eyes that they are not consciously aware of. Recent research suggests that watching eye cues can promote a variety of low-cost prosocial behaviors, inside and outside lab settings. The presence of eye images may alter behavior by reducing feelings of anonymity and cueing reputation maintenance concerns. The current study investigated whether the presence of watching-eye images affected how frequently shoppers returned carts to designated return areas. A poster stand displaying images of watching eyes (or a control image of shopping carts) was placed just outside the exit of a local grocery store, and the frequency of shopping cart returns was observed and recorded. The results demonstrate that shoppers ($N = 409$) were significantly more likely to return their carts when the eye image was displayed, in comparison to the control image. Shoppers returned their carts about 64% of the time when the control image was displayed, compared to 78% when the eye image was displayed. These results support the external validity of watching-eye cues when applied to a commonplace behavior such as returning a shopping cart.