

How MrBeast Is Redefining Social Entrepreneurship Through the Creator Economy

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Abstract

The growth of the creator economy has created several new opportunities to integrate commercial activity with social impact. This paper specifically examines the extent to which MrBeast has redefined social entrepreneurship by embedding philanthropy directly within the mechanisms of digital content creation. Drawing on theories including social entrepreneurship, shared value, the attention economy, creator economics and consumer psychology. The study analyses how MrBeast generates audience attention and then converts it into advertising revenue, commercial ventures and philanthropic activity. It proposes an attention-to-impact flywheel in which audience engagement generates revenue that finances increasingly ambitious content and social initiatives, which can subsequently reinforce audience trust and attention. The paper finds that this model produces substantial commercial and philanthropic outcomes while demonstrating an innovative relationship between entertainment and social impact. That said, ethical concerns surrounding the commodification of philanthropy and significant barriers to replicability suggest that MrBeast represents an influential but exceptional model of contemporary social entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Creator Economy; Social Entrepreneurship; Digital Philanthropy; Attention Economy; MrBeast

Introduction

In one video, ten million dollars is given away, the largest cash prize in the history of reality television. In another, a thousand people receive free cataract surgery and entire villages gain access to clean water for the first time. Behind each of these videos is Jimmy Donaldson, known online as MrBeast (Glas, 2023) and the most striking part of his story is not the generosity itself, but the fact that this generosity is also his business strategy. Nearly every dollar his channels earn is reinvested into the next video, funding even larger giveaways, a pattern that has helped make him the most-subscribed creator on YouTube with 500 million+ subscribers (Cowen, 2026), despite his claim that he sometimes lacks enough personal cash to buy breakfast (Burleigh, 2026). His situation reflects a much larger shift taking place across the internet. Digital platforms have turned ordinary users into genuine entrepreneurs, people who generate income through advertising, sponsorships, merchandise and their own companies, often starting with nothing more than a camera and an idea (Griffin, 2026). A creator's audience is no longer simply a group of fans; it now functions more like a market. At the same time, businesses face growing pressure to offer more than profit and to create real benefits for society, a trend reflected in concepts such as social entrepreneurship and shared value creation (Hult News, 2014). MrBeast sits at the intersection of these two shifts.

This is what makes him a compelling subject of study. His network of channels, which includes a separate nonprofit organization called ‘Beast Philanthropy’, has funded several projects (Glas, 2023). What sets his approach apart from earlier celebrity philanthropy is that the giving is not separate from the content; it is the content. A giveaway video draws enormous attention; that attention generates advertising revenue and sponsorship deals and that revenue funds an even larger giveaway in the next video. Traditional charities rely mainly on people choosing to donate. MrBeast reversed that process: he uses philanthropy to build his audience, then earns money from the audience. Researchers have already begun to question whether this represents genuine generosity or a highly effective content strategy presented as generosity (Davies, 2024). This tension forms the basis of the research question guiding this paper: **to what extent has MrBeast redefined social entrepreneurship by integrating philanthropy directly into the mechanics of the creator economy?**

This paper argues that MrBeast represents a new form of social entrepreneurship, in which attention itself functions as a currency that can be converted into both profit and genuine social impact. Using theories of social entrepreneurship, shared values, the attention economy, Creator economics and consumer psychology, this paper examines whether MrBeast’s model offers a sustainable, scalable approach to philanthropy in the digital age or whether it instead reveals a deeper tension between profit-driven strategy and the ethics of turning generosity into entertainment.

Theoretical Framework

Social entrepreneurship is usually defined by what a business must do at the same time: earn enough money to survive while producing a real, measurable social outcome. J.Gregory Dees, whose 1998 paper is still one of the field’s most frequently cited definitions, laid out five specific behaviours that separate a true social entrepreneur from someone who simply runs a good charity: adopting a mission to create and sustain social value rather than private wealth, relentlessly pursuing new opportunities that serve that mission, engaging in continuous innovation and adaptation instead of repeating the same fixed model, acting boldly without waiting until every resource is already in hand and holding themselves to a higher standard of accountability for the actual outcomes produced, not just the effort put in (Gregory, 2001).

Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank, built on this by defining what he called a “social business”, which he split into two categories. A type 1 social business is a non-dividend company whose entire purpose is to solve a social problem, meaning any profit it earns is reinvested back into that mission instead of being paid out to owners. A type 2 social business can generate profit and pay dividends, but only if it is owned by the poor or disadvantaged people it is meant to help (HEC, 2022). Both versions reject a basic assumption behind traditional charity: that solving a social problem and generating income have to be two separate activities.

‘Shared Value Theory’, developed by Michael Porter and Mark Kramer, describes three specific ways a company can turn a social problem into a source of profit instead of a cost. Porter and Kramer (2011) argue this can happen by redesigning products and markets to meet an unmet social need, redefining how a company’s supply chain operates to be more efficient and less exploitative and investing in the industry clusters and local infrastructure surrounding a company’s operations. This clearly breaks from how corporate social responsibility usually works, where a company earns profit through normal operations and then donates a portion of that profit separately, often through a foundation with little connection to what the company actually sells. Shared value theory removes that separation entirely: social impact is not funded by profit; it drives profit.

Another relevant idea is the Attention Economy, first described by economist and Nobel laureate Herbert Simon in 1971 (Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019). Simon pointed out that as the amount of available information grows, attention becomes the limiting factor rather than the information itself, since a person's capacity to process content stays fixed no matter how much content exists to consume. Unlike money, attention cannot be saved, borrowed or created. Once a person's viewing time is spent, it is gone, which is a part of why platforms compete so intensely to capture it in the first place. This scarcity makes Creator Economics a field worth studying, since it examines how individual creators convert that limited attention into income. Creators typically do this through several channels running at the same time: a share of platform advertising revenue, paid brand sponsorships placed inside content, merchandise and product sales, licensing agreements and affiliate commissions (Yuan, 2024).

'Stakeholder theory' was developed by R. Edward Freeman in 1984. Freeman defined a stakeholder as any group or individual who can affect or is affected by an organization's decisions and argued that a company's long-term success depends on creating value for all of these groups at once, rather than prioritizing shareholders above everyone else (Freeman et al., 2010). In most applications of this theory, the relevant groups include employees, customers, suppliers, local communities, and, particularly in digital or creative industries, the platforms and audiences that make a business model possible in the first place.

Together, these five ideas - social entrepreneurship, shared value theory, the attention economy, creator economics and stakeholder theory - supply the specific definitions and mechanisms used to analyze whether digital philanthropy can actually function as a business model.

Understanding Why MrBeast's Content Generates Extraordinary Attention

MrBeast's channels are not built around one type of video. His giveaways hand out cars, houses and life-changing sums of cash to strangers. His survival competitions place contestants in extreme situations, like being buried alone or surviving alone in an abandoned building, with large cash rewards depending on how long they last. His transformation videos follow people receiving free surgery, homes or education. His philanthropic projects run partly through the separate Beast Philanthropy channel, funding cataract surgeries, wells and food banks. Despite covering such different ground, these videos are not random. Donaldson himself has pointed to a small number of deliberate choices behind the video's popularity: they are expensive, hard to replicate, ideas that feel genuinely original rather than copied from other creators and a refusal to release anything that does not meet a very high production bar (Whateley, 2025).

Across many categories, several patterns repeat. Each video is built around high stakes, whether that is a large sum of money, a person's physical safety or long-term wellbeing. Each has a clear, simple objective the viewer can grasp within seconds, like 'win the game' or 'survive the challenge'. Each leans on emotional storytelling and visual transformation, letting the viewer watch someone's circumstances change in real time rather than simply hearing about it. Suspense also plays a direct role: as a contestant pushes toward a goal, viewers learn about their life and motivations along the way, a technique researchers call narrative transportation, in which the audience mentally enters the world the story creates and stays invested until it resolves (Camilleri, 2024). Rapid pacing and a satisfying ending complete the formula, giving the viewer a clean payoff rather than an open-ended or uncertain ending.

These production choices are not accidental; they relate to well-documented ideas in consumer psychology. Watching a contestant's face light up after winning triggers something close to emotional contagion, defined by psychologists Elaine Hatfield, John Cacioppo and Richard Rapson (1993) as the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize expressions, postures and movements with those of another person and consequently to converge emotionally with them, so that watching someone else's joy produces a real and physical trace of the same joy in the viewer.

A related but distinct effect is a vicarious reward. Neuroimaging studies show that the brain's own reward circuitry activates not only when a person receives something good themselves, but also, to a lesser degree, when they simply watch someone else receive it, particularly if the viewer feels some closeness or similarities to that person. This helps explain why audiences report genuine satisfaction from giveaways they have no personal stake in.

Other concepts from social psychology also help explain this. The warm glow effect, first modeled by economist James Andreoni (1990), describes the private sense of joy and satisfaction people feel simply from 'doing their part' to help others, a satisfaction that exists independent of any material benefit to themselves and can be triggered even in a viewer who has only watched someone else give, rather than given anything personally. Reciprocity and social proof, two of the main principles of persuasion identified by Robert Cialdini, also apply. Reciprocity describes the sense of obligation people feel to give something back after receiving something, while social proof describes how people look to the behavior of others, especially people similar to themselves, to decide how they should feel or act (ASU, 2007).

In MrBeast's case, thousands of viewers celebrating a giveaway in the comments work as social proof that the content is worth watching and the frequency and personal tone of his uploads build a parasocial relationship: a one-sided bond where a viewer feels they know a media figure personally, built through repeated exposure, even though the creator has no awareness of them individually (Mohn, 2021). Over hundreds of videos, this builds trust in Donaldson as both entertainer and philanthropist, making each new video easier to click.

This connects back to the Attention Economy, as attention is not a by-product of MrBeast's content; it is the resource his business runs on. Donaldson notes that his charity videos, such as one helping 2000 people walk again, consistently draw fewer views than his purely entertainment-driven content, even though they still perform extremely well by ordinary standards (Upton-Clark, 2025).

Analyzing How Attention Becomes a Sustainable Business and Philanthropic Model

Once a MrBeast video accumulates millions of views, that attention converts directly into money. Digital platforms allow creators to generate income through advertising, sponsorships, merchandise and their own companies and MrBeast's channels sit at the extreme end of that model, drawing brand partnerships and ad revenue on nearly every upload. (Griffin, 2026) That revenue does not simply sit as profit. MrBeast has said he reinvests almost everything back into the business rather than paying himself, to the point that he keeps less than a million dollars in his own bank account despite running a company worth billions (CNBC, 2024). That reinvestment funds two things at once: growing Beast Philanthropy and commercial ventures such as the chocolate brand Feastables, now one of his largest revenue sources.

This is where Shared Value Theory becomes useful. Rather than treating giving and business as separate, Beast Industries' leadership has described the goal explicitly: combining capitalism and altruism, running as a for-profit company that is also genuinely altruistic and asking whether the two can be a "win-win" (Fore, 2025). Judged against Porter and Kramer's definition, this looks less like traditional corporate philanthropy, where profit funds a separate donation and more like an attempt to build social impact into the operating model itself, since the videos that build the audience are the same videos that deliver the impact. Whether this fully counts as authentic shared value or whether the philanthropy persists mainly because it performs well commercially is a tension this paper returns to later.

This dynamic can be described as an Attention-to-Impact Flywheel (Figure 1). Attention generates advertising and sponsorship revenue; that revenue funds philanthropic initiatives such as Team Trees, which raised over \$20 million to plant trees; Team Seas, which raised over \$30 million to remove ocean plastic; and Team Water, which raised more than \$40 million for clean drinking water. Each of these campaigns, along with Beast Philanthropy's ongoing work, strengthens audience trust and emotional attachment to MrBeast as both entertainer and philanthropist (Faris, 2025). That same cycle - attention feeding revenue, revenue feeding giveaways and giveaways feeding attention - is the mechanism University of Kent researchers identify as central to his content model (Pullig, 2023). The stronger that trust grows, the more reliably each new video, whether a giveaway, a philanthropic campaign or a Feastables launch, draws the next wave of attention, restarting the cycle.

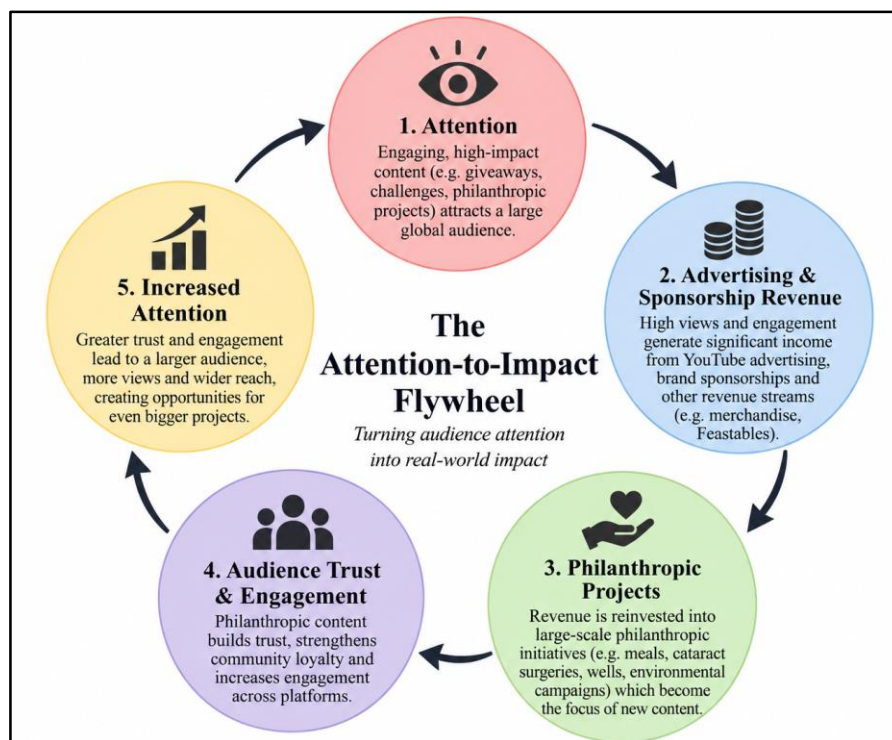


Figure 1. The Attention-to-Impact Flywheel underlying MrBeast's creator-led philanthropic model

Evaluating the Future of Creator-Led Philanthropy

The effectiveness of MrBeast's model can be assessed through both its commercial sustainability and its measurable social impact. On the business side, its scale is exceptional. By June 2026, MrBeast channels collectively had more than 640 million subscribers and generated over 5 billion views annually, while Beast Industries had reportedly attracted investment at a valuation of approximately \$5 billion (Forbes, 2026). Most

importantly, the model has also diversified beyond advertising and sponsorships. Feastables generated around \$250 million in sales in 2024 and more than \$20 million in profit (Shaw & Counts, 2025), showing that audience attention can translate into commercial businesses that generate revenue independent of individual YouTube videos. This diversification strengthens the attention-to-impact flywheel because philanthropic activity no longer depends on a single revenue stream.

The social outcomes are similarly substantial. As per Beast Philanthropy (2026), it has delivered more than 46.5 million meals and fed over 8.1 million individuals. Other projects have funded treatment restoring sight to 1,000 people (Sottile, 2023) and constructed 100 wells in Africa.



Figure 2: One of Beast Philanthropy's clean-water initiatives undertaken as part of its 100 Wells project in Africa.

Creator-led environmental campaigns have extended this impact even further: TeamSeas removed more than 34 million pounds of waste (Callas, 2024). These outcomes suggest that attention can function as a genuine philanthropic resource rather than simply a marketing device. However, commercial scale should not automatically equal philanthropic effectiveness. A highly viewed intervention may produce immediate and measurable benefits without necessarily addressing the structural causes of poverty, inadequate healthcare or environmental degradation.

This distinction matters most when philanthropy becomes entertainment. Davies (2024) argues that MrBeast's model creates an unusual system in which viewers contribute primarily through their attention rather than direct donations. This democratizes participation because millions can indirectly support charitable activity simply by watching content. Yet the same mechanism creates an ethical tension: philanthropy must remain sufficiently dramatic and emotionally engaging to attract views. Recipients can therefore risk becoming part of a spectacle in which illness, poverty or disadvantage provides the narrative material required to generate engagement. Davies (2024) also raises concerns about the power imbalance between creator and recipient, particularly when the creator controls how beneficiaries are represented. Consequently, highly visible interventions such as surgeries, wells and dramatic transformations may fit the economics of online attention better than less visual but equally important forms of long-term social investment.

Replicability is another significant limitation. Miller and Hogg (2023) argue that Beast Philanthropy depends upon a distinctive relationship between creator, audience and advertisers in which audience engagement acquires monetary value that can then finance charitable activity. In principle, other creators could adopt this mechanism. In practice, however, MrBeast's enormous audience, production resources, commercial partnerships and capacity to reinvest substantial sums create conditions that very few creators can reproduce. His model therefore represents a genuine innovation in social entrepreneurship, but not necessarily a universally scalable template. MrBeast has demonstrated that digital attention can be converted into both economic and social value; the greater significance of his model may lie in establishing this possibility rather than providing a formula that other creators can simply replicate.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper explored the extent to which MrBeast has redefined social entrepreneurship by combining philanthropy with the creator economy. The research shows that he has changed how social impact can be created online to a large extent. Rather than keeping business and charity separate, MrBeast has built a system in which entertainment, revenue and philanthropy are closely connected. At the same time, this model is not straightforward, because it also raises questions about whether charitable acts become more commercial when used as content.

The theories discussed in this paper help explain why his model works. Dees's and Yunus's ideas of social entrepreneurship show that social goals and financial sustainability can coexist, as seen in how MrBeast combines his content, businesses and nonprofit work. Porter and Kramer's Shared Value Theory is also relevant because the social impact is often built into the content itself rather than being something added after profits are made. The Attention Economy and Creator Economics further explain how MrBeast first attracts millions of viewers and then turns that attention into revenue through advertisements, sponsorships and businesses such as Feastables.

The Attention-to-Impact Flywheel developed in this paper shows how these different parts connect. More attention creates more revenue, which can then fund larger projects and charitable work. These projects can create stronger emotional connections with viewers through ideas such as the warm glow effect and parasocial relationships, which may then lead to even more attention and support. This makes the model capable of sustaining repeated philanthropic activity rather than relying on one-off acts of charity, although its dependence on MrBeast's exceptional audience scale and resources may limit its replicability among other creators.

Overall, MrBeast has expanded the traditional idea of social entrepreneurship by showing that online attention itself can serve as a resource for social impact. His model is not free from criticism, especially because philanthropy can also increase views, revenue and brand value. However, its scale and effectiveness show that the creator economy can combine commercial success with social impact in a way very different from traditional philanthropy.

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