



Do Charities Optimize Donor Behavior? A Review of Prior Methods

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Abstract

Past research has shown that there are a multitude of factors that affect donor behaviors in the field of charitable giving. However, despite previous papers analyzing the effect of specific factors on donative behaviors, very little has been stated on the practicality of the research in charity advertising. In this paper, I have summarized and analyzed many of the key factors that have an influence on the likelihood of becoming a donor and the individual donation amount. I also discuss the significance of charitable giving on the economy, and how charities can use past research to increase their donation amount or obtain specific goals.

1. Introduction

Charitable giving and all subsequent forms of it make up the voluntary sector, one of the three key sectors in the economy, which also includes the private and public sectors. Research has indicated that since 2013, rates of charitable giving have decreased in the US. Especially after 2018, charitable giving has decreased from 90% to 50% for the highest income group. Lesser subsequent decreases for lower income groups were found around the same time (Smith, 2024). However, although there may be research regarding the trends of the voluntary sector, understanding how the voluntary sector works is also very important, especially how it solicits donations.

Although there has been a lot of research regarding how many different factors affect each individual's willingness to donate and how much they do donate, there hasn't been much research regarding the practicality of charity advertising methods as a whole. Instead, research usually only factors in a few variables and studies how they affect donor behavior rather than exploring the whole and how it pertains to charity advertising. For example, while one research paper may have found the ideal matching threshold to maximize donations (Castillo & Petrie, 2020), if charities advertise using the same methods mentioned in the paper, they forgo the opportunity to advertise using another method of matching, contingent matching, which may be more favorable in the long-term (Anik, Norton & Ariely, 2014). Considering that charities play a significant role in the economy in both fighting poverty (Parsell, Clarke, & Perales, 2021) and research (Gomes & Stavropoulou, 2019), it is crucial to examine the existing research regarding how different donors behave in the presence of different charity advertising methods and other factors that play a role in determining donor behavior. In this paper, I conduct a literature review examining how many different factors affect one of two key components of donor behavior: the likelihood of becoming a donor and individual donation amounts.

2. The Significance of Charity

Before analyzing how charities increase their donations, it's important to understand how charities impact the economy. Research has shown that, despite charitable giving only making up about 1% or 2% of a country's GDP in the UK and US, respectively (Wright, 2002), it still has a significant impact on other areas, such as research and development (Gomes & Stavropoulou, 2019) and poverty (Parsell, Clarke, & Perales, 2021). A study conducted in the UK concerning medical research and development found that for every 1 pound in charitable donations, private R&D would contribute 0.94 pounds (Sussex, et al., 2016). Similarly, a more recent paper summarizing prior research on the impact of charitable and public donations on health research in the UK also found that increased public funding significantly benefited research outcomes (Parsell, Clarke, & Perales, 2021). However, it was also noted that of the 13 papers analyzed, only one paper had a low risk of bias, while 6 papers had a medium and high risk of bias, respectively, indicating that further research in the field is required.

A key limitation of these papers is that both analyzed the health and medical research in the UK; however, the external validity may be different outside of the UK or in other sectors of the economy. Outside of research and development, charities have also significantly helped reduce poverty, and research has shown that governments have increasingly started to rely on charities to help relieve the issue of poverty in their country to become more ethical and promote giving (Parsell, Clarke, & Perales 2019), implying that charities are taking a greater role in alleviating poverty over time. Another study corroborates this, finding that traditional charity cash transfers to the poor are just as good or even better than donating or using the money through other means (Blattman, & Niehaus, 2014). However, the benefits of donating to charity compared to other means of poverty alleviation continue to be mixed because despite some research indicating that charity cash transfers are some of the most efficient forms

of poverty alleviation (Blattman, & Niehaus, 2014), other papers indicate that charities have many downsides, including increasing power asymmetry, stigmatization of charity relief, obscuring institutions in areas with poverty, and changing the perspective of poverty from a social issue to a personal one (Parsell, Clarke, & Perales, 2019). Nevertheless, although the effectiveness of charity may not be as clear, the importance of it in our current and future economy remains unchallenged.

3. Factors that affect the likelihood of becoming a donor

This section details the many factors that change the likelihood of a person becoming a charity donor.

3.1 The Target Audience

Research has shown that impersonal soliciting, especially by mail, is highly ineffective towards high-capacity donors (Alston, Eckel, Meer, & Zhan, 2018). Given that only more personal forms of soliciting will be able to attract the attention of high-capacity donors, often with a limited fundraising budget, impersonal forms of soliciting is not effective in attracting high-capacity donors, especially as incentives to participate are extremely low. On the other hand, research has also found that locations in which there is less religious and ethnic diversity, especially in those with higher incomes, have, on average, higher rates of charitable giving (Andreoni, Smith, Payne, & Karp, 2016). Specifically, the effects of ethnic diversity are more prominent in higher-income, lower-education neighborhoods, while the effects of religious diversity are more prominent in higher-income, higher-education neighborhoods instead. This means that charities should oftentimes target more ethnically and religiously homogeneous areas to find more people willing to donate. However, given that a limitation of the study was the definition of a “charity,” it is possible that these effects may not apply universally. It may be that the religious effect only exists because of giving to one’s church rather than a non-profit or other organization.

Similar research has found that those of the same race are more willing to donate to charities if they advertise helping those of the same race (Fong & Luttmer, 2009). However, in the paper, a key limitation proposed was how when multiple experiments were done between different periods, the impact of race seemed to diminish over time. The existing theory was that the increasingly multicultural landscape of the United States had played a role in lowering this effect. However, this was proven inaccurate in a more recent study, in which it was found that the impact of race on beliefs of deservingness, especially in the case of supporting government action, is significant (Gross & Wronski, 2019). This also means that, if applicable, a charity helping a certain race should target the same race to earn more donations.

Similar behavior can be found in political affiliation, where it was found that those who are seen as political outsiders in their own communities were significantly less likely to give blood donations. One possibility is that the large difference in political affiliation acts as a social tax to out-partisans (Kim & Pelc, 2024). However, given the specified nature of blood donations, it is still unknown whether this applies to the larger charitable giving sector. Further research should be done on the topic of in-group affiliation promoting donative behavior among those of the same group, as similar effects are seemingly occurring relating to the increasing polarization of the US and political donations to partisan groups.

A similar relationship cannot be said for the locality of charities. It was found that the locality of a charity has little to no impact on a donor’s choice of choosing a charity. Instead, it was found that the type of charity can have a significant influence on charity choice. Donors particularly preferred animal and food security charities. However, this research remains largely inconclusive as it only has four types of charities as choices. However, the same study found that third-party ratings of charities did have a conclusive and significant effect on charity choice, though the paper did not examine how it affected the

amount contributed (Brown, Meer, & Williams, 2014). As a result, charities should not prioritize fundraising in local areas and they should prioritize focusing on other factors that can have a much more significant impact on obtaining donors. Moreover, further research is necessary to understand the impact of the destination of charity funds on the likelihood of becoming a donor.

3.2 A Sense of Community

A sense of community benefits charities that want more potential donors. Research has found that in the case of college alumni charities, those who participate in a majority culture and those who obtain achievements in college are strongly incentivized to donate (Meer & Rosen, 2018). Although this study was made with only college alumni, a similar result was found in a paper detailing the general trends of charitable giving over time, in which it was found that those who have already volunteered for charities have a significantly higher likelihood to donate (Smith, 2024). They also highlight in the same paper that while donors of less than \$500 have donated less over time in recent years, the number of donors and number of donations of more than \$500 have remained constant. All of this implies that promoting more volunteering and higher donations as well as constant monetary donations over time, as one's time and monetary donation behavior depend on other charitable behaviors as well. A sense of community can also significantly reduce donor attrition, where previous donors no longer stay donors. However, a limitation of this research was that the definitions of a "charity" differed slightly between the two datasets used, possibly influencing the result. Research has shown that those who have helped fundraise with the charity, those who fundraisers within the charity recommended, and those who have received "Thank you" feedback have significantly reduced donor attrition and are much more likely to return and donate again (Xiao & Yue, 2020). The study also finds that more impersonal and material forms of charity feedback, such as gift exchanges and gift cards, may increase the number of people willing to donate but will also significantly increase donor attrition as well, implying that a more personal connection that creates a sense of community is significant to donors' future willingness to donate. However, this study was primarily on the effects it would have on online donations, and it may have a diminished or negligible effect on other channels of giving.

3.3 Decreasing avoidance

Another key way charities can find more people to donate is by decreasing avoidance and increasing interaction. More specifically, research has shown that loudly and publicly fundraising for a charity can actually drive away possible donors when there is the option to avoid interacting entirely. The research showed that when a charity stand was set up near one of two supermarket entrances, ringing a bell and pre-emptively promoting interactions actually drove a significant percentage of people away from entering through the door near the charity stand, and many opted to use the door without the charity stand instead. This same phenomenon was not discovered when the charity stand waited for donors to come up to the stand rather than loudly fundraising (Andreoni, Rao, & Trachtman, 2011). This means that charities won't want to make themselves too known when fundraising via intervening when people are trying to obtain another good or service, as it drives away traffic and hence possible donors. However, in a separate study, it was found that in the case of door-to-door fundraising, fundraising in which a charity representative was involved significantly increased the number of donors in comparison to similar forms of fundraising such as direct mail fundraising (Dellavigna, List, & Malmendier, 2009). This is corroborated by the previous research paper as well, as when one of two entrances had a loud fundraising charity stand, although there was greater avoidance due to loud fundraising, it also significantly increased the likelihood of becoming a donor for those who did not avoid the entrance. Similarly, when both entrances had loud fundraising, the likelihood of donating doubled (Andreoni, Rao, & Trachtman, 2011). This means that there is a difference between people avoiding giving and people who say "no" to giving,

as many will avoid when given the chance, but will agree to give when there is no such chance. As for charities, it also means that when given enough resources to make sure people are unable to avoid interacting with them, it is more worth fundraising as much as possible rather than keeping quiet.

Another way to decrease avoidance of charitable donation is by increasing the timeframe in which they decide to donate and in which they commit to the donation; a research paper studying donors' time-inconsistent charitable giving found that the likelihood of becoming a donor increases by 50% when donors are asked to donate one-week after they decide to donate, decreasing their temptation to keep in the short-term, as well as increasing the warm glow effect, the utility a donor receives from giving, they receive when they decide to donate and when they donate (Andreoni & Serra-Garcia, 2019). Although this was largely done in a laboratory setting and not a field setting, using this strategy, charities will likely be able to find more people willing to donate, increasing their donation amount even if the effect is reduced in the field.

3.4 The effect of reciprocity

Even though donations are meant to transfer money without any exchange of goods or services, reciprocity is still significant in increasing the likelihood of becoming a donor. In the case of college donations, it was found that the likelihood of college alumni becoming a donor significantly increases when the children of the alumni are about to or have been accepted into the college, and the likelihood of becoming a donor significantly decreases when the children of the alumni have been rejected from the college (Meer & Rosen, 2018). In another study, it was also found that college alumni were more likely to donate when colleges sent a high-quality gift in addition to a fundraising request; however, a promise of a gift in return for a donation did not increase the likelihood of becoming a donor, nor did an unconditional low-quality gift (Eckel, Herberich, & Meer, 2016). Although both of these studies were conducted on college alumni, a separate field study also found the same effect with a charity for orphans (Deng, Liu, Pan, & Xiao, 2023). While gift exchanges will be very costly for many charities that don't have the budget to do so, it would still largely benefit charities that have the budget and have a small enough target audience that it would be feasible and create a net gain, such as college alumni.

Gift exchanges aren't the only form of reciprocity that takes place in charitable donations; tax returns matter as well. A study found that, in the UK, greater tax returns have yielded a higher likelihood to donate among lower-income donors and higher donation amounts among higher-income donors (Almunia, Lockwood, & Scharf, 2017). Although the study was conducted solely in the UK, the same was found in the US, where changing tax codes in 2018 had disincentivized donors to donate, implying that the effect is largely universal (Smith, 2024). Given that tax codes differ in different regions, more lenient tax codes that allow for more tax returns will likely be a better audience for many charities looking for more people willing to donate.

4. Factors that affect individual donation amount(s)

This section will detail the many different factors that affect how much an individual may contribute to the charity.

4.1 Finding the best donors

Contrary to previous research, recent work shows that by using more precise datasets, accounting for outliers, and using better controls, there is a significant positive relationship between income and donation amount (Meer & Priday, 2020). The same study also clarified that there are several significant outliers, primarily consisting of seniors with low income but high wealth, who donate much more. This outlier group was the main cause of previous research indicating a U-shaped giving curve, in which it was found that the middle class donated the least while the lower and higher-income groups donated more.

Thus, although fundraising using labor may take more resources if a charity has the resources to do so, the returns from higher-income donors will be much greater than the returns of other forms of advertising to lower-income donors. Similarly, charities can do a little research beforehand to locate and advertise to the outlier groups to increase the effectiveness of their fundraising campaign.

4.2 Quality and Transparency

The perceived quality of a charity or good tied to a charity significantly changes the amount that donors are willing to donate. It was found that when governments donate to charities in an effort to boost the output of charities, donors perceive the charity as having a higher quality, and although the charities fundraise less, the amount that each individual who has donated to the charity has significantly increased (Andreoni & James, 2019). Thus, finding government grants can be extremely beneficial to a charity and they're fundraising effectiveness. Furthermore, the perception of quality does not only apply to charities but also to goods tied to charities. In a separate study that compared goods sold on eBay to other goods sold on eBay with charity tie-ins, it was found that the goods with charity tie-ins often had both a higher number of bidders and higher overall bids than their non-charity tied counterparts, indicating that consumers found charity tie-ins to be a signal of higher quality (Elfenbein, et al., 2009). Charity tie-ins with certain products, especially newer products where customers may not have information on the quality of the product, can be extremely beneficial to all parties involved. Improvement in a certain aspect of perceived quality can also increase the donation potential of individuals. More specifically, increasing charity transparency can significantly increase the donation amount, such as by creating work updates and obtaining certification. These are ways to increase operational and conventional transparency, respectively. However, this has mainly been tested only on emergency response situations and not all scenarios (Mejia, Urrea, & Pedraza-Martinez, 2019). Another form of increasing transparency is directed giving, in which donors can direct their funds to certain aspects that the charity can allocate funds to, and it was found that it significantly increases the amount that individuals donate, even if very few people utilize the directed funds (Eckel, Herberich, & Meer, 2014), implying that charities that allow for these to be visible to donors can significantly increase the amount of donations they receive.

4.3 Minimizing costs of donations

Not all donations provide a benefit to the organization collecting the donations; oftentimes, donations can create significant harm to the organization. Certain donations, such as in-kind donations, which are donations of products and services instead of money, often are useless and have to be discarded, costing valuable time and money for the charities. While in-kind donations have the opportunity to be essential to many charities and non-profit organizations (Stötzer & Kaltenbrunner, 2023), they can also cause extreme harm in many circumstances, especially during disaster relief (Islam, 2013). A field research study demonstrated that interventions were able to eliminate some of the harm from in-kind donations and that while the already standard use of information disclosure was ineffective at attempting to reduce harmful donations, using social norm interventions was much more successful in increasing the quality of in-kind donations, reducing the cost for charity organizations even across multiple time periods (Pacheco, Eftekhar, & Wu, 2023).

4.4 Using matching to promote donations

Another key way of increasing the amount of money individuals donate is by using matching schemes. Research has found that linear matching, the most common form of matching in which donors are linearly matched a certain amount of money for the amount that they give, has always had a positive effect on the aggregate sum of donations that charities receive, as they decrease the cost of giving and can even act as a signal of quality among many other factors. Even with a failed matching campaign, the effect of matching will be non-negative as the effect of crowding out is minimal (Epperson & Reif, 2019).

The same paper found that although linear matching has extremely positive short-term effects, it creates mixed long-term effects in terms of donor attrition and donation amounts. In contrast, contingent matching, in which donors are matched only if 75% of other donors agree to recurring donations, can increase the amount of money donated by significantly decreasing donor attrition by implying that many others are willing to donate recurrently and by setting a low enough target for people to believe that it is feasible (Anik, Norton, & Ariely, 2014). This study implies that if charities are looking to maximize long-term donations and charity longevity, contingent matching can be extremely successful at helping charities reach their donation goals and keep a large donor base, and it is certainly not costly nor harmful to implement in the short term either.

Alternatively, in the case of maximizing short-term donations, a field study found that threshold matching, in which donors will only be matched after reaching a donation threshold of \$2000, will be able to maximize donations by incentivizing higher-capacity donors as opposed to lower-capacity donors (Castillo & Petrie, 2020). A limitation of this study was that it did not study the long-term effects of threshold matching, unlike that of contingent matching. A similar study found that in the case of online fundraising, while using a threshold-based matching system in which donors were able to pool their resources to reach a matching threshold or eventually pull back their donations to pool elsewhere, there was a much higher incentive to donate (Meer, 2017). All of this implies that, due to better-existing alternatives to help charities be more successful, the standard norm for linear matching is not optimal. Instead, it would be advantageous for charities to promote alternative donation matching methods that prioritize short-run donation maximization or long-run longevity.

5. External Validity of Findings in Varying Cultures

Many of these studies have primarily focused on the overall impact certain factors would have on the western world, such as the US or the UK. However, given the very nature of human behavior, many of these effects may deviate from the studies in different cultural contexts. This section details some of the ways cultural differences can alter donor behavior, and the external validity of many of these studies.

5.1 Cultural Tightness and Looseness

The tightness of a culture, or the importance of social norms within a culture, can play a significant effect on donor behavior. A study conducted comparing the effectiveness of different charity advertising strategies in South Korean and the United States found that the South Korea, a “tight” culture who places a strong importance on social norms, often had donors donate similar amounts no matter if observed, the United States, a “loose” culture open to deviance from norms, often involved individuals who donated much more if observed (Siemens, et al., 2020). This implies that preventing avoidance, or creating social pressure, is a much bigger factor in donor behavior in looser cultures than in tighter cultures as individuals in tighter cultures already have been influenced by social pressure. However, in a separate study on cultural tightness within the United States, it was found that trying to frame questions to take advantage of the tightness or looseness of a culture failed to have an impact on the amount donated (Wu, 2019). Given these two findings, the effect of cultural tightness and looseness may purely be confined to avoidance, which is sensible considering avoidance occurs as an attempt to deviate from the social norm, while tightness and looseness is considering how likely individuals are to follow the social norms within cultures. Thus, the external validity of these studies are primarily upheld.

5.2 Collectivism and Individualism

The collectivism of a culture also vary in terms of factors that influence donor behavior. One study conducted between collectivist cultures, which prioritizes groups over individuals, and individualist cultures, who prioritize individuals over groups, found that the effect of reciprocity was much more

significant in individualist cultures, compared to collectivist cultures (Ye, et al., 2015). Alternatively, the study suggests that reciprocity towards a greater group of individuals not involving the donor invokes greater donation amounts within collectivist cultures, prompting them to donate more (Ye, et al., 2015). This might suggest that many other factors that influence individual donation amounts may be stronger within these collectivist cultures (e.g. transparency, quality, matching, etc.) because they directly influence how much the donor perceives as going towards the cause. Another study conducted between Chinese individuals, who are more collectivistic, and American individuals, who are more individualistic, found different levels of effectiveness of the identified victim effect, where individuals have a stronger emotional reaction and are more willing to donate when shown a specific individual under hardship. American individuals, preferred identified victims over unidentified victims with little preference of group size. Meanwhile, Chinese individuals preferred donating to larger groups over smaller groups, with little preference of the identifiability of a victim (Wang, Tang, & Wang, 2015). Using the identifiability of a victim as proxy for identifiable attributes of victims overall, we find that, charities will find differing effectivenesses of targeting specific people to become potential donors when regarding the collectiveness of a culture. More specifically, that targeting individuals of the same race, religion, ethnicity, or political affiliation may have a much lower effect on collectivist cultures than on individualist cultures.

Overall, however, the collectivism and individualism of a culture may have little impact on donor behavior and the factors that influence it. A study conducted across five separate countries regarding generosity and moral cognition found that it was very difficult to categorize a country as collectivist and individualist, and the development of generosity and moral cognition remained extremely variable within both sets of countries even after categorization (Cowell, et al., 2017) Thus, despite cultural differences somewhat altering the effectiveness of different factors that influence donor behavior, it has a minimal one, and the external validity of these studies remain upheld.

5.3 Egalitarian and Hierarchical Societies

Research has also found that the external validity to many of these studies can also be greatly influenced by the degree of egalitarianism, or social equality, a culture or society has. A study in 25 separate countries found that the effectiveness of directed giving has a significantly lower effect in more egalitarian societies compared to hierarchical ones (Fuchs, de Jong, & Schreier, 2019). However, it only lowers the effect of directed giving on donation potential, while the effect of directed giving on donation amounts remain unchanged (Fuchs, de Jong, & Schreier, 2019). Despite showing a relatively strong effect on certain aspects of directed giving, the effects of egalitarian and hierarchical societies on overall donor behavior and the factors that influence it need further research, especially. Nevertheless, the effect remains to be somewhat minimal even on directed giving, and there are very little documented effects on other aspects of donor behavior.

6. Summary and Analysis

The previous papers discussed many separate factors that affect donors' behavior when deciding whether or not to donate and how much to donate. Similarly, there are several ways that charities can utilize their resources to try to increase their revenue.

6.1 Likelihood to Donate and Individual Donation Amount

One very interesting relationship in the research is the relationship between the likelihood of becoming a donor and the individual donation amount, or rather the lack of one. Although the two may seem closely related, many of the factors that affect the likelihood of donating (e.g., race, avoidance, high income, gift exchanges) have nearly zero impact on how much money each individual eventually donates. Similarly, many of the factors that affect the individual donation potential (e.g., quality, transparency,

income, and wealth) have little to no effect on how often people donate, though the effect is greater in this direction (e.g., online charity tie-ins). The only exception to this is matching grants, which see a significant impact either way, though it may be due to the many separate factors that matching schemes influence (e.g., the cost of giving, a signal of quality, social expectations).

6.2 Limitations

A limitation of this study is that it focuses on several separate topics all at once. This means that while there may be multiple cited papers per subsection regarding the topic, much of it cannot go in-depth. Given a limited amount of time to research the topics, many of the studies cited consist of a few newer papers that may not represent the entire field. Another limitation of this paper is that it primarily focuses on monetary donations, while other forms of donations can also be exceptionally valuable to charities. Donations of time make up a large portion of charities and are also advertised by charities, but several differences between donations of time and donations of money greatly affect this paper's validity when concerning volunteering. One other limitation of this paper is that given the multiple separate research papers and datasets used to find these relationships, the definition of a "charity" varies among the papers cited. This is particularly important as the status of political contributions and church contributions as "charity" are often varied, and certain relationships may only be caused by these contributions.

6.3 Further Research

There is significant potential for future research regarding charitable giving and donor behavior as it applies to different advertising techniques. In particular, future research is necessary to understand relationships between multiple factors that are exclusive from each other. For example, further research regarding contingent matching and threshold matching would be able to better understand the efficiency of both the long-term and short-term, as well as the drawbacks of choosing one or the other.

Similarly, further research is necessary to understand how the intersectionality between donor characteristics, such as race or political affiliation, may affect the efficiency of charity advertising and the longevity of certain charities with certain characteristics. There may be a mismatch between charity characteristics and the intersectionality between donor demographics. These research topics may also help formulate a utility-maximizing model for the average donor to better understand if donor behavior is a key driver of charity survival.

7. Conclusion

There are a number of factors that affect the likelihood of becoming a donor and the individual donation amount, but the vast majority of research in the field of charitable giving focuses on how specific independent factors influence donor behavior rather than the practicality of implementing them in charity outreach behavior. In this paper, I have summarized and analyzed many of the key factors that have a significant influence on donor behavior and how each factor plays a separate role in determining the likelihood of becoming a donor and the individual donation amount. However, to fully address the effectiveness of charity outreach behavior, further research is necessary to understand how charities utilize their money to effectively reach their goals.

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