

**When Social Influence Works in Charitable Giving: The Role of Affinity with Cause and Past Giving Behavior**

Ana Minguez – PhD student

Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zaragoza, Gran Vía 2, 50005 Zaragoza, Spain

E-mail address: [aminguez@unizar.es](mailto:aminguez@unizar.es)

F. Javier Sese – Associate Professor of Marketing

Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zaragoza, C/ Maria de Luna s/n, 50018 Zaragoza, Spain

E-mail address: [javisese@unizar.es](mailto:javisese@unizar.es)

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### **Abstract**

Nonprofit organizations today face the challenges in terms of not only attracting the largest number of donors, but also developing effective strategies capable of targeting the right audience. To do so, social fundraising campaigns increasingly rely on social influence to encourage individuals to donate. However, current understanding of how these appeals work, and, especially, for which individuals, remains rather limited. This study aims to analyze the impact of social influence by using descriptive and injunctive social norms on the intention to donate, considering also the central roles that two personal characteristics—i.e., affinity with the social cause and past giving behavior—can play as moderators. The study findings enable us to provide both theoretical and practical implications.

### **Keywords**

Social influence, charitable giving, affinity with the cause, past giving behavior.

## Introduction

One of the most important challenges facing nonprofit organizations today is the complexity of the third sector which is composed largely of multiple organizations providing similar services (Helmig and Thaler 2010). The strong competition among them increases the need to develop effective communication strategies that help attract the greatest number of donors (Krupka and Croson 2016). Social influence has been widely used in social fundraising campaigns with the goal of engaging individuals in a particular responsible behavior (White, Habib and Hardisty 2019). These organizations have realized the importance of spreading successful social fundraising messages by creating favorable environments in which potential donors are exposed to the influence of others (American Red Cross 2019). Making other people's contributions visible is being used as a tool that is showing positive benefits in fundraising (Charity: water 2019).

Despite the prevalence of this practice, the current evidence regarding its effectiveness is mixed (Krupka and Croson 2016). A number of studies have demonstrated the positive effects of social influence. For example, Sasaki (2019) found that social influence through the exposure of charitable contributions from previous donors encourages the participation of other donors. Another field experiment also revealed the relevant effects of this influence on behavior, and its positive impact on charitable donations (Shang and Croson 2009). On the other hand, there is also evidence pointing to the detrimental effects that social influence can have on some individuals and their giving behavior (DellaVigna, List and Malmendier 2012). This work has suggested that social pressure can have adverse effects on the welfare of donors, leading some individuals to act contrary to current or future fundraising requests. The contradictory evidence suggests that the impact of social influence on donations is heterogeneous. This is partly because previous studies have frequently applied their effects by treating all potential donors similarly, thus ignoring the presence of individual-level factors that may lead to different individual reactions (Krupka and Croson 2016). Therefore, the need to identify the characteristics of potential donors and to create appropriate messages, including important information for them, is indispensable for maximizing the effectiveness of the campaign and ensuring the campaign attracts the greatest number of motivated donors who are willing to contribute (Shang and Croson 2009).

Previous research has emphasized the importance of two personal aspects in the context of charitable giving: affinity for a cause, and previous donation behaviors (Kristofferson, White and Peloza 2014; Shang and Croson 2009). Related personal values and affinity with the social cause have been demonstrated to influence the way in which communication strategies involve people to provide support for a cause (DellaVigna et al. 2012). Similarly, differences in previous experiences of donating can be important to explain individuals' decisions about contributing to charitable causes (Adena and Huck 2019). Shang and Croson (2009) also found that social information can positively influence donations when donors are new (it is the first time they have contributed to the organization), compared with members who have previously contributed to the same organization. This is important, since past giving behavior can be a contributing factor to engage people in a similar subsequent behavior (Adena and Huck 2019).

To enhance knowledge on the use of social influence in nonprofit organizations, this study considers the circumstances that explain the effectiveness of social influence on charitable giving, taking into account the donor's characteristics—specifically their affinity with the social cause and previous giving behavior. To this end, we conducted an experiment in which social influence was considered through social (i.e., descriptive and injunctive) norms within

a social fundraising campaign, also taking into account the individuals' affinity to the cause and their previous donation behavior.

## **Hypotheses development**

### ***Effects of social influence on intention to donate***

The tool of providing individuals with social information has been used by organizations either to bring about a change in people's behavior or to facilitate the formation of a habit (White et al. 2019). Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) suggested that people attend to social influence mainly because they need to form an idea of reality as accurate as possible, develop relationships with others, and maintain a favorable self-concept. Thus, individuals seek some form of compensation when they act in accordance with established social guidelines. In the context of charitable giving, the research has only addressed the effect of messages that include descriptive norms (appeals of contributions of others), which has been shown to result in a positive influence by encouraging donations (Shang & Croson, 2009). However, messages that contain suggestions about what behavior is considered appropriate (injunctive norms) could also have a positive influence, as these suggestions would serve to satisfy some of the needs mentioned above. Therefore, we expect that both types of social norm will positively affect intention to donate. Formally:

*H1. Social influence through descriptive norms will positively impact intention to donate.*

*H2. Social influence through injunctive norms will positively impact intention to donate.*

### ***Main effect of affinity with the social cause on intention to donate***

Preferences for or divergence from a social cause serve as explanations for why individuals can differ in their helping behavior (Mainardes, Laurett, Degasperi and Lasso 2017). In line with Kristofferson et al. (2014), the affinity that individuals hold for a social cause is relevant to the reasoning that they develop in the search for motives to contribute for the benefit of that social cause. Therefore, greater participation rates in donation campaigns are expected when affinity with the social cause is high. Correspondingly, when individuals' affinity is low, it is expected that their intentions to donate will also be lower. Thus:

*H3. Intentions to donate will be greater when individuals show higher affinity with the social cause as compared to those who show low affinity.*

### ***Moderating effect of affinity with the social cause on the relation between social influence and intention to donate***

Nolan, Schultz, Cialdini, Goldstein and Griskevicius (2008) stated that when people are faced with messages containing social information, social influence is strong. However, when a person feels a high affinity for a specific social cause, this is likely to increase their likelihood of supporting the organization, partly due to the intrinsic motivation it incites (Bennett 2003). Therefore, the effect of social information may be weaker on behavior in this case, since the effect of affinity seems to be sufficiently effective. For individuals with low affinity, social information can offer a frame of reference and a guide on which to base future behavior (Cialdini, Reno and Kallgren, 1990). When people know about others' contributions, they can feel more motivated to do so (Wiepking and Heijnen, 2011) by taking others' actions as a signal that they have confidence in the organization. Similarly, when it is the organization that suggests a particular behavior, individuals may take this request as important and

necessary (Soule and Madrigal, 2015). Therefore, messages that allow individuals to understand how people do and should behave (Cialdini et al. 1990) might work well in inducing people with low affinity to contribute more. Thus:

*H4. The positive impact on intention to donate of solicitations that include social information, as opposed to those that do not include social information, will be greater in people with low affinity to the cause.*

#### ***Main effect of past giving behavior on intention to donate***

Another relevant antecedent of charitable donations is the giving behavior of individuals in previous situations (De Oliveira, Croson and Eckel 2011). While some research has noted that having previously contributed to an organization leads to subsequent contributions to the same organization (Adena and Huck 2019), other research has indicated that past giving behavior is a good driver for responding to requests from other organizations (Bennet 2003; De Oliveira et al. 2011). On the other hand, individuals who do not have experience with donating will tend to act in line with this nonactive behavior, and therefore present low intention to donate in any case. Thus:

*H5. Intention to donate will be greater when individuals have engaged in past giving behavior, compared to those who have not engaged in past giving behavior.*

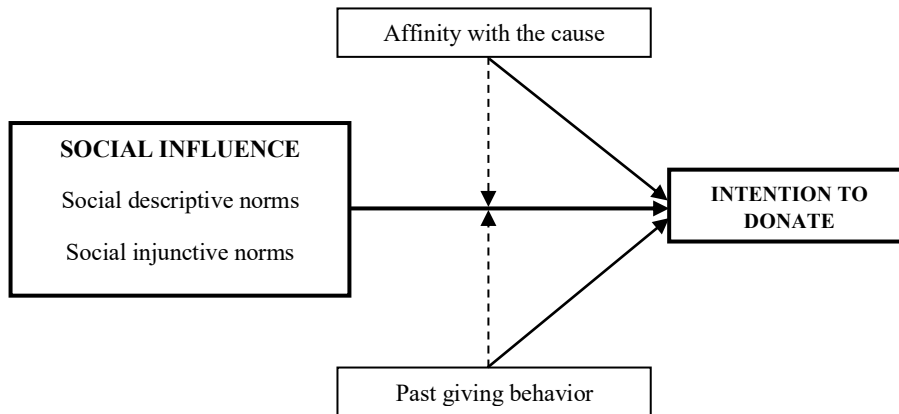
#### ***Moderating effect of past giving behavior on the relation between social influence and intention to donate***

Social information, nevertheless, is also useful when people have no experience with something. Frey and Meier (2004b) noted the significant positive effect that knowing how others behave has on people who experience uncertainty in unknown situations. It is interesting to consider that individuals who have not previously contributed have several reasons for not doing so (e.g., there has been no opportunity to donate, or not enough information to elicit a donation); therefore, social information could be particularly effective with regard to inexperienced people (Uetake and Yang 2019). Nevertheless, people who have engaged in past giving behavior might be more concerned about the benefits of giving to charities and helping others, and therefore participate again in donations, driven in particular by the need for consistency with their own identity, which is reinforced through new yet similar behaviors (Forehand, Deshpandé, and Reed 2002). This idea could mean that in the face of social information messages, people with experience of donating are influenced by this information, but not as strongly compared to individuals who have not previously donated. Therefore:

*H6. The positive impact on intention to donate of solicitations that include social information, as opposed to those that do not include social information, will be greater in people who have not engaged in past giving behavior.*

Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of the model and the proposed hypotheses.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model



## Method

To test the proposed hypotheses, we conducted an experimental design with 261 undergraduate students from a European university, of which 62.7% were female, with a mean age of 20.80 years ( $SD = 2.64$ ; range 18–49). First, all participants received the same information about one (fictitious) NGO that wanted to raise funds through a new campaign to combat a dangerous disease that was currently affecting children in a small region of the southern Pacific Ocean. Second, participants were randomly assigned to one type of solicitation of the three different available, which were manipulated as follows. For solicitations with messages that included social information we used two types of social norms—those appealing for donations made by previous donors in past similar campaigns (i.e., descriptive social norm), and those appealing for donations that the organization considered appropriate for the present campaign (i.e., injunctive social norm). Solicitations without social information messages did not include any type of social norm.

After reading the proposed campaign, participants had to complete a questionnaire indicating whether they would be willing to donate (0 = No; 1 = Yes). They were then presented with questions about their level of affinity with the social cause (e.g., children’s health in underdeveloped countries) and their past giving behavior. To measure the first aspect, we used an existing scale from the Kristofferson et al. (2014): “This cause reflects my values”; “My personal values are aligned with this organization’s values”; and “I feel a personal connection to this cause.” Here, participants had to indicate, on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = “Totally disagree”; 7 = “Totally agree”), their degree of agreement with these statements. This scale was found to be reliable, with Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .834$ . Past giving behavior was determined through a dichotomous question, “Have you ever contributed to a similar campaign?” to which participants could answer “Yes” or “No.”

## Results

Descriptive analyses showed that 66.7% (174) of the participants were willing to donate to the campaign. To test the effects of affinity, we first segmented participants into two groups. Those who scored below the mean ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ , range 1–7) were classified as having low affinity and those who scored above the mean were classified as having high affinity. Under the influence of messages that contained social information, participants showed greater intentions to donate compared to those who were exposed to messages with no social norm ( $\chi^2(2, N = 261) = 7.33$ ;  $p < .03$ ). Both descriptive and injunctive norms indicated a strong impact on intentions, since 70% and 73.6% of participants, respectively, showed intention to donate. Thus, H1 and H2 were supported. We conducted a general linear model for a factorial design of interacting factors, which allowed us to include in the same analysis the main and the moderation effects on intention donate. By analyzing the effects individually, we found that affinity with the cause considerably influenced participants' intention to donate ( $F(1, 260) = 28.214$ ;  $p = .000$ ). The results indicate that a high affinity leads to greater intentions to donate ( $Aff_{Low} = 52.6\%$ ;  $Aff_{High} = 81.8\%$ ;  $SE = .055$ ;  $p = .000$ ), in support of H3. The results indicate that the main effect of having previously contributed to other campaigns has strong impact on intention to contribute again ( $F(1, 257) = 12.518$ ;  $p = .000$ ), which supports H5. This intention was considerably lower when participants had not engaged in past giving behavior ( $Past_{NoGiv} = 54.8\%$ ;  $Past_{Giv} = 75.2\%$ ;  $SE = .058$ ;  $p = .000$ ).

An additional chi-square analysis was performed by dividing the total sample between people with high affinity and people with low affinity. This analysis revealed that social information messages in solicitations work in a stronger way when participants feel low affinity with the cause, leading them to show greater intention to donate compared to when they see messages that do not contain social information ( $\chi^2(2, N = 261) = 8.930$ ,  $p = .012$ ); this supports H4. This strong impact of social information only had a significant effect in that particular group of individuals, since those with high scores for affinity did not show differences in intention to donate, regardless of whether they were exposed to social information ( $\chi^2(2, N = 261) = .061$ ,  $p = .970$ ). Thus, having a high affinity led to greater intentions to donate.

To obtain more details about the moderation effects of past giving behavior, an additional chi-square analysis was conducted by dividing all participants into two groups (as in the case of affinity): people who have engaged in past giving behavior and people who have not. The analysis indicated that social information messages in solicitations could exert a greater impact on donations in participants who have never previously contributed to campaigns, as opposed to those solicitations without social information, which led to lower intentions to donate in these individuals ( $\chi^2(2, N = 261) = 12.302$ ,  $p = .002$ ). Thus, H6 was supported. The results for those with past giving behavior do not show significant differences ( $\chi^2(2, N = 261) = .567$ ,  $p = .753$ ); therefore, the use of social information has a strong effect only in those who have not engaged in past giving behavior.

## Discussion

### *Theoretical implications*

This study contributes to the previous literature on understanding the effects of social influence on charitable giving (Shang and Croson 2009; Helmig and Thaler 2010). Although existing research has addressed this influence, most such studies have failed to consider that the strength of its impact may depend on certain factors that are inherent to each individual (Bennett 2003). This study reveals that, although social influence has a considerable impact

on the behavior of most potential donors (by increasing their intention to donate), the strength with which messages that provide information about the behavior of previous donors, or suggest appropriate behavior, influence the willingness to donate depending on the level of affinity that individuals feel towards the social cause. Those with a high affinity are hardly affected by social influence, though their intention to contribute remains, given their personal interest in the social cause (Kristofferson et al. 2014). On the other hand, the use of both norms on those who feel low affinity with the cause leads them to increase their predisposition to contribute. The effect of information about the majority behavior among a group of people, as well as the knowledge about the most appropriate behavior in a given situation, can help individuals to become aware that there is really a need to help (Bekkers and Wiepking 2011).

Having given in the past is also a determinant factor that moderates the relationship between social influence and charitable giving. This study contributes to the literature in this regard by showing that people who have donated in the past to other social fundraising campaigns are more likely to donate again to other campaigns. These findings are in line with previous research, which has indicated that individuals who have previously donated to one organization are quite likely to do so to others (De Oliveira et al. 2011). Our findings also reveal that those who have never donated show low intentions to contribute. This behavior may be due in part to the need to maintain consistency between past and future actions, as individuals tend to maintain similar behaviors over time (De Oliveira et al. 2011). However, this study contributes to the research by demonstrating that social influence can promote greater participation in these individuals, as opposed to Frey and Meier's (2004b) results, which suggested that individuals may be insensitive to the behavior of others because individuals tend to keep their behavior fixed.

This study also provides some explanations for this strong positive impact on these individuals. First, providing social information to them can provide a point of reference on which to base future behaviors (Uetake and Yang 2019), given that these individuals have no experience with donating. Second, according to Bekkers and Wiepking (2011), feeling socially included may also be a factor in the development of donor behaviors, which may wish to be in line with the behavior of other donor groups. Finally, this increased willingness to contribute may be motivated by the individual's concern to avoid feeling guilty, which could damage the social image he or she projects to others, or even to him-/herself (Bekkers and Wiepking 2011).

### ***Practical implications***

This study also has some implications for nonprofit organizations and for the managerial practices of those responsible for developing effective communication strategies. First, our findings reveal the need to include motivational elements in the messages of social fundraising campaigns. As previous research has suggested in relation to encouraging individuals to perform prosocial behaviors (White et al. 2009), this study recommends that social influence through social information be used as a mechanism to promote charitable donations. Since a request is normally the precedent for most donations (Bekkers and Wiepking 2011), this type of demand, which appeals to social norms, can considerably increase participation rates among potential donors.

Second, it is important for the organization to understand its potential donors better in order to create an effective message that is capable of positively influencing the behavior of each donor. Our study contributes in this regard by revealing important findings that can help organizations to develop appropriate and specific actions for the different types of people it



targets. For this reason, and given the moderating effect found via affinity with the social cause, those responsible for managing communication strategies should introduce social information in their campaign messages, since in this way they can increase intention to contribute, especially in those who may not feel greatly attracted to the social cause. Identification of potential donors could be driven by observing their preferences—e.g., the type of cause in which they participate most, or the comments they post on social networks. Those who have, at some point, already collaborated with the organization—and thereby form part of the donors’ database—by participating in previous campaigns or taking part in other actions, such as volunteering, can also be segmented according to their preferences. Periodic follow-up through surveys on preferences, satisfaction with the organization, or expected personal benefits (Woodyard and Grable 2014) could provide very useful information that would contribute to the development of effective campaigns.

Finally, and in a similar vein, organizations could consider ensuring that their messages inform about the donation behavior of others when they approach potential donors who have never contributed before to a social cause. This could help to develop in these potential donors a sense of concern and empathy for helping others (Bekkers and Wiepking 2011). In addition, as our results reveal, using the organization as an entity that suggests enacting a specific behavior is an element that, although hardly used in practice, could also drive an increase in the participation rates of new donors. With this type of solicitation, individuals may feel they must give because they perceive greater responsibility to collaborate with the organization and will experience negative emotions if they do not collaborate. If organizations are able to encourage these behaviors, the social impact will be considerably greater given that the increase in funds raised, and the organization’s reach, will be wider.

### **Limitations and further research**

This study has a number of limitations. First, prosocial behaviors such as charitable giving lack the tangibility component (White et al. 2019). The social outcomes of these prosocial behaviors are thus often imperceptible, adding complexity to the role played by organizations and the way they communicate with individuals. Furthermore, perception of these problems by most of society is somewhat weak, as individuals’ knowledge of different social problems and causes is often quite limited (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004). However, our study tries to shed some light on this point and suggests using powerful mechanisms of influence that allow individuals to be provided with a certain level of information, which is often enough to increase participation rates. Second, our study uses a sample that, while including an adequate number of individuals, comprises characteristics (student sample) that call for future studies to confirm our findings. Nevertheless, the findings support our hypotheses and emphasize the need to include personal factors (such as affinity with the social cause or past giving behavior) when measuring the real effectiveness of the communication messages of nonprofit organizations. In addition, our study shows a clear trend of the positive effect of social influence on members of the public who are potentially more sensitive to this information.

Finally, considering the effect that each type of social norm has on behavior, this study shows that both descriptive and injunctive norms exert a positive social influence on potential donors, particularly on those who do not feel great affinity with the cause or who do not have experience with donating. However, which norm has the greatest effect on behavior remains unclear. Although injunctive norms have a greater impact, this effect is not excessively superior. Future work could try to identify differences between the two types of norms and

find out which type promotes greater participation depending on the types of individuals being targeted.

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