What motivates online charitable giving among unaware and not-so-involved publics?

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Abstract

We investigated whether providing social information, recommended contribution level, statement about gift impact, mission, and financial disclosure information influences unaware or not-so-involved college students' online charitable-giving. An experiment was conducted with 224 college students. The findings suggested that providing information on gift-impact and organization's mission statement had the most significant impact on latent publics' willingness to donate online.

Keywords: Online charitable-giving, gift impact, mission, latent public

Introduction

Online charitable giving has increased dramatically in the last decade. For example, online donations increased by 14% in 2011, compared to 2010 donations when overall charitable giving grew only by 5% (Blackbaud, 2012). The data from 1,560 American nonprofit organizations (NPOs) showed that a total of $5.1 billion in funds raised online in 2011 and the donations received online accounted for approximately 6.3% of total contributions received. The Chronicle of Philanthropy reports that in 2013 alone, the top 100 largest charities received 13% more in online donations and 25 of them received more than $10 million each from online.

A majority of online gifts are small gifts: Approximately 46% of online gifts were less than $1,000 and 89% of online gifts were less than $5,000 (The Blackbaud report, 2012). With the emergence of social media, NPOs can reach broader publics than ever before and online charitable giving becomes relatively quick and easy for the publics to contribute. In particular, this is the case for the younger generation where the use of technology is on their fingertips. For example, according to a survey of the charitable giving of American Millennials (ages 20 to 35), 75% of young adults who donated in 2011 did so online (Grossnickle & Associates, 2012). Therefore, effective tactics for motivating individuals to donate online call for further investigation.

In this study, based on the Situational Theory of Publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) and the Elaboration-Likelihood Model of persuasion (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), we investigated whether previously identified potential factors from a website/social media site influences individuals' willingness to donate online. We were particularly interested in a latent public who has low levels of problem recognition and involvement. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of five factors previously identified from an online site (i.e. social information such as the number of individuals who donated, recommended contribution levels, gift impact, the NPO's financial disclosure information, and the NPO's clear mission statement that can affect a latent public (i.e. college students) on their willingness to donate in an online-fundraising setting.

Situational Theory of Publics and Elaboration Likelihood Model

According to the Situational Theory of Publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), individuals' perception of a situation determines their willingness to act. The theory provides three predictor variables: level of involvement, problem recognition, and constraint recognition. Accordingly, publics can be divided into four groups by these three variables: a) active public, which has high levels of involvement and problem recognition and a low level of constraint recognition; b) aware public, which has high levels of problem recognition, involvement, and constraint recognition; c) latent public, which has a low level of problem recognition and involvement, and has not thought about constraints; and d) nonpublic, which has neither involvement nor problem recognition (Grunig, 1997).

Grunig and Hunt (1984) suggested that for any given topic, one third of the population is the latent public. Some argued that segmenting publics by their active engagement with an issue benefits message development and campaign design (e.g. Werder, 2005). In the field of fundraising, though some scholars have broadly segmented donors into major and annual gift donors (Kelly, 1998) and have distinguished some channels for communicating with them, there is rarely any discussion about reaching out to latent publics for fundraising purposes. However, some advocated that this segment of the public needs to be better understood and reached since they are a large number of the potential donors who could exercise a greater influence in an aggregated form (Hallahan, 2000). The main challenge is how to motivate them to act (i.e. charitable giving).

One useful theoretical model that might shed light on involving latent publics is the Elaboration-Likelihood Model of persuasion (ELM). ELM suggests that individuals with lower involvement follow a peripheral route processing to develop their attitudes as a result of paying more attention to peripheral cues, such as the source of the message or the situation in which they receive the message, rather than the content of the message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Therefore, the "processing route, in turn, determines the type of message appeal that is maximally effective in a particular context" (Perloff, 2010, p. 152). Thus, if we understand the factors impacting a group of individuals who are not quite involved in the given topic to act, we should be able to find ways to increase online giving by even simple modifications of online sites that ask for charitable giving. According to ELM, effective online fundraising strategies or tactics for communicating with latent publics should be based on peripheral cues online since the members of latent publics have low involvement with an issue.

The Effects of Social Norms on Charitable-Giving

The influence of other people's behavior can be discussed within a framework of social norms, particularly in the context of charitable-giving. The social-norms approach states that emphasizing descriptive social norms, individuals' perceptions of what others actually do, can increase the likelihood that a person's behaviors will become consistent with these social norms (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990).

Descriptive social norms in a fundraising setting refer to "the individual donor's belief of what others are contributing" (Croson, Handy & Shang, 2009). It was found that descriptive social norms serve to increase both the participation rate of donation and the amount of donation in offline settings (Frey & Meier, 2004; Croson, Handy & Shang, 2009; Shang & Croson, 2009) and these perceived descriptive social norms are much more effective on new donors than on previous donors.

According to previous research, individuals are more likely to be affected by descriptive social norms when two conditions are met. First, there is an ambiguous perception about what should be done (Crutchfield, 1955), and second, the given descriptive social norms are perceived as relevant and appropriate (Cialdini, 1998). Approaching latent publics online for charitable giving seems to satisfy these two conditions relatively well. Therefore, we suspected that when the members of the latent public are exposed to online solicitations, social information about the number of individuals who have already donated could serve as a peripheral cue to reduce their uncertainty and help them make a decision. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H1: Providing social information about the number of individuals who have donated will increase a latent public's perceived descriptive social norms (H1a) and willingness to make a gift online (H1b).

Recommended Contributions and Charitable Giving

According to the ELM, individuals with low involvement have little motivation to focus on message arguments (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Such individuals can be "cognitive misers," who look for mental shortcuts to help them decide whether to accept the communicator's position (Taylor, 1981). Recommended contributions could be a mental shortcut for the members of a latent public, who have a low level of involvement.

Previous research found that making a request for a smaller and specific amount increased the likelihood that a gift would be made in various offline settings (Weyant & Smith, 1987; Fraser et al., 1988; Brockner et al., 1984; Croson & Marks, 2001). One of the factors that could influence the impact of recommended contributions is the perceived cost of a donation, the "psychological price of giving" (Wiepking & Breeze, 2012, p. 13). In offline settings, it was found that as the amount requested was increased, donors declined the request when the amount

was perceived as excessive (Doob & McLaughlin, 1989). When the perceived cost of a donation decreased, the amount given increased (Eckel & Grossman, 2004; Karlan & List, 2006). Therefore, we suspect that providing options for recommended contributions would help a latent public to choose an option that they feel most comfortable with. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Providing a choice of recommended contributions will increase a latent public's likelihood of making a gift online.

Outcome Efficacy and Charitable Giving

According to the Situational Theory of Publics, constraint recognition, to the extent to which individuals feel their abilities can impact the problem, influences individuals' behavior (Grunig & Repper, 1992). In a fundraising context, Kelly (1998) suggested that a constraint that needs to be cleared is the impact of a donor's gift. The influence of the impact of contributions on giving behavior can be discussed through the framework of Self-Efficacy Theory. According to Self-Efficacy Theory, an individual's expectations of personal mastery and success are the underlying mechanism of all forms of psychotherapy and behavioral change (Bandura, 1997, 1982). Cheung and Chen (2000) found that this outcome efficacy, the expectancy that certain behaviors could result in certain outcomes, for donating to an international relief organization had a significant impact on intention to donate. Sargeant et al. (2001) also found that "the strongest indicator of donor value is the extent to which an individual believes that their gift made a difference" (p. 422).

Usually, potential donors have little knowledge about how their contributions can impact the organization's mission, particularly in online settings. Grunig and Hunt (1984) states, "Donors won't contribute to a fundraising campaign if they don't think their donation will make much difference" (p. 358). Thus, to increase the outcome efficacy of potential donors, it is necessary to provide information about how their gifts can make a difference, especially when potential donors are young adults. According to a survey about the charitable giving of American Millennials (ages 20 to 35), the issue they cared about most was information about how their gifts would make a difference (Grossnickle & Associates, 2012). Therefore, we tested whether information about the impact of gifts would influence a latent public's intention to donate online. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:
H3: Providing information about how their gifts can make a difference will increase outcome efficacy of a latent public (H3a) and the likelihood of making a gift (H3b).

NPOs' Accountability and Charitable Giving

It is known that NPOs' accountability is a factor affecting donors' behavior. For example, Sloan (2009) found that a "pass" rating by the Better Business Bureau's Wise Giving Alliance had a significant effect on the contributions received. NPOs' accountability can affect donors' decisions because it can enhance the public's trust in NPOs and in turn, the trust can enhance public support. Research has shown that trust can increase public funding for private organizations (Mazzola et al., 2006) as well as NPOs (Cordery & Basherville, 2011). For example, Bekkers (2003) found that individuals who trust NPOs contributed more.
Trust relationships are built on a high degree of transparency. Transparency refers not only to access to NPOs' information, intentions, and behaviors, but also to the voluntary disclosure of

the same (Turilli & Floridi, 2009). Greater transparency would "enable the public to decide whether their support for and trust in a particular organization is justified" (NCVO, 2004, p. 9). Trustworthiness can be gained through transparency. A good way for NPOs to show their accountability is through voluntary disclosures. The Internet has been regarded as a tool to enhance information transparency (Gálvez Rodríguez, Caba Pérez & López Godoy, 2012). Saxton and Guo (2011) proposed that there are two dimensions to NPOs' online accountability practices: disclosure and dialogue. Disclosure can refer to the disclosure of financial information as well as an organization's institutional philosophy and goals. In this study, we focused on an NPO's financial disclosure and mission statement and suspected that these factors could serve as peripheral cues for a latent public. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: Providing an NPO's financial disclosure information will increase the trust of a latent public (H4a) and the likelihood of making a gift (H4b).

H5a: Providing an NPO's mission statement will increase the trust of a latent public (H5a) and the likelihood of making a contribution online (H5b).

Method

Participants

Out of initial 278 undergraduate students at a large U.S. public university, 250 participants successfully completed the questionnaires. After excluding 26 participants who did not pass the manipulation check, a total of 224 participants were used for the final analysis. Participants were comprised of 28% ($n = 63$) males and 72% ($n = 161$) females, ages from 18 to 23 years old. Regarding giving history, 220 participants have donated to other causes before.

Independent Variables

In this study, the independent variables are five types of peripheral cues: (a) social information about the number of individuals who have donated; (b) recommended contribution levels; (c) gift impact; (d) an NPO's financial information disclosure; and (e) an NPO's mission statement. These five peripheral cues were manipulated through verbiage in a mock charity appeal for a charity. The number given, of individuals who have contributed to the charity, was varied for the social-norms manipulation. Information about the impact of the gifts was varied for outcome-efficacy manipulations. According to Saxton and Guo (2011), in the online environment, information on administrative costs for fundraising is a part of an NPO's financial disclosure content. For this study, the financial disclosure content was presented through an NPO's expense-located charts, which presented a cost-benefit ratio, detailing the relationship between fundraising costs and the amount received by the organization's beneficiaries. In addition, the organization's mission statement was considered as a potential peripheral cue that helps college students' willingness to donate online.

We also collected the information about household income, gender, race, and past donation behavior that may have significant effects on the intention to donate since past studies have shown these factors contribute to donations and guide behavior (Lammers, 1991; Midlarsky & Hannah, 1989).

Dependent Variables and Measures

Donation Intention. To measure donation intention, two items were adapted from the study of Basil et al. (2008) on guilt and giving: 1) I would like to make a donation to this organization; and 2) After seeing this web page, I want to make a donation. The reliability of items was 0.84 ($\alpha = 0.84$).

Perceived Social Norms. To measure the perceived descriptive social norms, four items were developed based on the study by Croson et al. (2009) about the relationship of perceived descriptive social norms and charitable giving: 1) A majority of people who viewed the page support the cause, 2) More people will support the cause in the near future, 3) A majority of people who viewed the page contributed to the cause, and 4) More people will contribute to the cause in the near future.

Outcome Efficacy. Five items were adapted from a study investigating self-efficacy toward service and business students' civic participation (Weber, et al., 2004) to measure outcome efficacy: 1) My contribution can have a positive impact on the cause, 2) My contribution can help children in this situation, 3) I am confident that my contribution can help these children, 4) My contribution can make a difference in the cause, and 5) Each of these contributions can make a difference in the cause. The reliability of the items was 0.80 ($\alpha = 0.80$).

Trust in Nonprofit Organizations. Four items were adapted from a study by Sargeant et al. (2006) on perceptual determinants of nonprofit giving behavior: 1) I would trust this NPO to act in the best interest of the cause, 2) I would trust this NPO to conduct its operations ethically, 3) I would trust this NPO to use donated funds appropriately, and 4) I would trust this NPO not to exploit its donors. The reliability of items was 0.94 ($\alpha = 0.94$). A 7-point Likert-type scale (1= strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree) was attached to each statement.

Stimuli

Two rounds of pretests were conducted to select a cause for which most American college students are not aware or have low levels of involvement as a latent public. A total of 14 different types of charitable causes were tested. The topic of "Implement a fruit-tree-planting program in the Tansa Valley in India" was chosen to be the fundraising cause in the experiment due to its low involvement score in that 85.7% of the participants said they were not involved in the issue as well as a low level of problem recognition (76.2% of the participants said no) and a low level of constraint recognition of the issue (95.2% of the participants said no). No significant gender differences were found regarding this topic.

To confirm that the participants of the experiment were the latent public of the cause, six items used in the second-round of pretest were adapted to test participants' interests in the cause. The results, based on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1= strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree), indicated that participants had a low involvement level (M = 3.07, SD = 1.29), a low level of constraint recognition (M = 3.85, SD = .95), and a medium level of problem recognition (M = 4.15, SD = 1.27). Although the score for problem recognition was slightly higher than 4 on the 7-point scale in the experiment, it was considered to be relatively low in comparison with the other topics. Therefore, the participants in this study were considered as the latent public of the cause.

Procedure

This experiment included six conditions: An NPO web-donation page that included all five manipulated peripheral cues, and five NPO web-donation pages that included only one of five manipulated cues. Each participant saw only one appeal. A control group was also included. A link to the experiment generated by the Qualtrics software was sent to the students. The Qualtrics software randomly assigned them to one of six experiment conditions and a control group. The mock web-donation pages varied across conditions only in terms of the manipulated independent variables, to ensure that differences were due to the independent-variable manipulations.

Manipulation Check and the Success of the Random-Assignment

Out of the original 278 participants, 250 participants have successfully completed the experiment. However, 26 cases were eliminated from the data set due to an unsuccessful manipulation check, leaving a valid sample totaling 224 participants. To test the success of the random assignment, a one-way ANOVA test was employed. The results indicated a successful random assignment in that there was no significant difference among the conditions for problem recognition, $p = .57$; for level of involvement, $p = .76$; for constraint recognition, $p = .21$.

Results

H1a predicted that in online fundraising contexts, social information about the number of individuals who have donated will increase the perceived descriptive social norms of latent public college students. An Independent-Samples T test was conducted, and a significant difference was found, $t (60) = 2.61$, $p < .05$, Cohen's $d = 0.66$. The participants exposed to the condition with social information revealed a higher level of perceived descriptive social norms ($M = 4.29$, $SD = .92$) than the control group ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.04$). Therefore, H1a was supported. Furthermore, we also predicted that the likelihood of latent public college students making a gift to an organization would be increased by providing social information about the number of individuals who had made contributions, but no significance effect was found, $t (60) = .87$, $p = .20$. Therefore, H1b was not supported.

H2 predicted that in online fundraising contexts, the likelihood of latent public college students making a gift to an organization would be increased by providing options for recommended contributions. No significant effect was found, $t (61) = -.01$, $p = .50$. Therefore, H2 was not supported.

H3a predicted that in online fundraising contexts, information about how their gifts can make a difference would increase the outcome efficacy of the latent publics. An Independent-Samples T test was conducted, and found a significant result, $t (63) = 1.98$, $p < .05$, Cohen's $d = 0.49$. The latent public college students who were exposed to information about gift impact demonstrated a higher level of outcome efficacy ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.08$) than did those in the control group ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.26$). Therefore, H3a was supported. We also predicted that the likelihood of latent public college students making a gift to an organization would be increased by the exposure of information about how their gift impact (H3b). An Independent-Samples T test found a significant difference, $t (63) = 1.82$, $p < .05$, Cohen's $d = 0.45$. Participants who were exposed to gift-impact information demonstrated a higher level of donation intention ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.18$) than did participants in the control group ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.07$). H3b was supported.

H4a predicted that in online fundraising contexts, an NPO's financial disclosure information would increase the trust of latent public college students. However, no significant effect was found, t (62) = .96, p = .17. Therefore, H4a was not supported. Similarly, no significant effect of the financial disclosure information was found on the likelihood of latent public college students making a gift to an organization (H4b), t (62) = .62, p = .27. Therefore, H4b was not supported.

Table 1. *Results of Hypotheses*

Dependent Variable	Condition	M	SD	Sig.
Perceived descriptive social norms	Social information	4.29	.92	<.05*
	Control group	3.64	1.04	
Donation intention	Social information	2.69	1.02	.20
	Control group	2.46	1.07	
Donation intention	Recommended contribution levels	2.46	1.07	.50
	Control group	2.46	1.07	
Outcome efficacy	Gift impact	5.02	1.08	<.05*
	Control group	4.44	1.26	
Donation intention	Gift impact	2.97	1.18	<.05*
	Control group	2.46	1.07	
Trust in the nonprofit organization	Financial transparency	3.94	1.07	.17
	Control group	3.64	1.33	
Donation intention	Financial transparency	2.63	1.16	.27
	Control group	2.46	1.06	
Trust in the nonprofit organization	Mission Statement	3.64	1.49	.49
	Control group	3.64	1.33	
Donation intention	Mission Statement	2.96	1.30	<.05*
	Control group	2.46	1.07	

Note: Significant at p<0.05 level.

H5a predicted that in online fundraising contexts, information demonstrating an NPO's mission statement would increase the trust of latent public college students, but we found no significant effect, t (61) = -.03, p = .49. Therefore, H5a was not supported. However, in terms of the likelihood of latent public college students making a gift to an organization (H5b), a significant result was found, t (61) = 1.67, p < .05, Cohen's d = 0.41. Participants' donation intention in the condition with the organization's mission statement (M = 2.95, *SD* = 1.30) was higher than that of participants in the control group (M = 2.46, *SD* = 1.07). Therefore, H5b was supported (Table 1).

Discussion

We found that providing a statement about gift-impact and a mission statement had a significant impact on the donation intention of a latent public. These findings are somewhat consistent with the previous survey findings about the charitable-giving of American Millennials. For example, a survey found that gift-impact information was the most important factor to donors who are from ages 20 to 35 (Grossnicle & Associates, 2012). The survey further found that 9 out of 10 participants would go first to the page that describes the mission of the organization. Our study confirmed that providing one's mission statement, as well as a gift impact statement, is a factor that increases a latent public's donation intention. Therefore, we conclude that providing a statement about gift-impacts as well as an NPO's mission statement can serve as a peripheral cue to increase online donation among latent publics.

Several relationships were explored in this study. The first relationship examined was whether providing social information, such as the number of individuals who have donated, would increase a latent public's perceived descriptive social norms. Although previous studies have found that social information about others' donation behavior can influence individuals' donation intention and donation amount (Frey & Meier, 2004; Croson, Handy & Shang, 2009; Shang & Croson, 2009), we did not find a significant impact of providing social information on a latent public's donation intention in an online giving setting.

Second, we tested whether demonstrating the impact of the gift in advance would increase outcome efficacy and found that, in an online fundraising context, gift-impact information increases the outcome efficacy of a latent public and thus increases the donation intention.

Third, we examined whether demonstrating an NPO's transparency (i.e. financial disclosure information) would increase individuals' trust in the organization which in turn would increase individuals' donation intention. Although previous studies have found a positive relationship between these two variables (Sloan, 2009; Bekkers, 2003), we did not find any significant link between the NPO's financial disclosure information and their levels of trust in the NPO in this experiment. Perhaps, in an online fundraising setting, latent publics are less concerned about an organization's financial transparency and more interested in knowing about the mission of the organization and their gift impacts than their counterparts in general.

Furthermore, we did not find that providing recommended contribution levels significantly influenced any dependent variables. These findings could also be explained by a survey finding of American Millennials' charitable giving in that young donors do not like NPOs to tell them how much to give (Grossnicle & Associates, 2012).

This study contributed to fundraising literature by providing a new method to approach to the publics in online fundraising contexts and applied the ELM to develop strategies to engage

latent publics, particularly college students. With the emergence of social media, fundraisers can reach and communicate with a broader public. In such an environment, publics can be reached more widely than ever before so that effective strategies may be developed to better communicate with publics.

We explored this area and focused on the latent public of a campaign topic, a group rarely discussed previously and deserving of better understanding because of its large number (Hallahan, 2000). For practitioners, the present study provided what factors impacting latent public college students, and provided data on how they react to factors traditionally used in persuasive messages in fundraising campaigns. Based on these findings, practitioners have a better chance of designing a donation site that will target a broader range of publics including latent publics in an online context.

There are several limitations that need to be considered carefully. First, in this study, an NPO's financial disclosure information was shown in expense pie charts, but this might not have sufficiently represented an NPO's transparency. Second, the experimental environment could have influenced participants' level of attention: They probably gave more attention to the site in this experimental setting than otherwise in reality. Third, we only measure the participants' intention to donate rather than their actual behaviors based on self-reports. Lastly, we used college students as participants in this experiment. Although several interesting findings emerged in this study and a non-representative sample does not present any methodological problems in an experimental design, the unique characteristics of college students might have influenced the outcomes. For example, college students are known to express their willingness to donate for a cause more than non-collegiate populations. This might have augmented the magnitude of the results. Therefore, future studies should be designed to address these limitations.

As online charitable giving rapidly increases, specific strategies/tactics to attract new potential donors need to be developed. In this study, based on the Situational Theory of Publics and ELM, we tested what would motivate online charitable giving among those who are either unaware or uninvolved, known as a latent public (i.e. college students) in the context of online charitable giving. Providing an NPO's mission statement as well as a statement of gift impact increased ones' intention to donate and their trust for the organization even though the public was either unaware about or uninvolved with its particular cause. These findings provide some practical implications to those who are interested in casting their net to wider pools of new donor base, but how to propagate solicitations online as well as how to facilitate these potential one time donors to turn into repeat donors need further systematic investigation.

The emergence of Web 2.0 technology brought a new wave of communication channels like social media that are changing the landscapes of online charitable giving. Due to its advantages such as cost, access, reach, speed, and engagement (CARSE) (Fletcher & Lee, 2012), social media emerged as effective tools not only to increase the awareness of an NPO and its cause(s), but also to solicit charitable giving in a timely and cost-efficient manner, beyond the scope and reach that the NPO used to have. The quest to reach out to the wider pools and effectively engage potential donors should continue.

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