



# Why do you want a relationship, anyway? Consent to receive marketing communications and donors' willingness to engage with nonprofits

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## ABSTRACT

Relationship marketing has been key to developing stronger relationships and promoting donor continuity in nonprofit organizations. However, it is not clear whether these efforts are effective for all individuals who choose to financially support an organization. Taking a relationship orientation approach, this study investigates the effect of consenting to direct marketing on occasional donors' decisions to become members (i.e., contributing through membership programs), and analyzes the moderating role of past donation behavior (i.e., frequency and amount). The results reveal that occasional donors who consent to direct marketing are more likely to develop a long-term relationship as members. This effect is reinforced when donors have contributed greater amounts in the past. The findings also demonstrate that, through their membership, donors consenting to direct marketing provide greater financial support on an ongoing basis. This study offers novel insights into the relationship marketing literature and provides contributions to fundraising managers.

## 1. Introduction

Over the past few years, a managerial approach that considers member relationships as key organizational assets has become increasingly dominant in the priorities and practices of many nonprofit organizations (Khodakarami et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2021a). As a result, nonprofits have embraced relationship marketing and invested heavily in activities directed at satisfying donor demands and expectations, as well as in building strong relationships with donors (Boenigk and Helmig, 2013; Drollinger, 2018; Khodakarami et al., 2015). Relationship marketing has been postulated as an important approach through which marketing managers can achieve customer engagement and higher levels of loyalty (Beckers et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2021b), as well as maintain or increase funds collected (Zogaj et al., 2021). Fundraisers leverage customer relationships to obtain major gifts, enhance funding, increase participation in giving programs, and cultivate regular donors (Faulkner et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2015; Waters, 2011). With relationship marketing programs, nonprofits also improve communication with their members by facilitating interactions and touchpoints that enable participation, user-generated content, information sharing, and dialogue between the organization and its donors, all under the assumption that these relational mechanisms will encourage behaviors

that are aligned with the organization's values and objectives (Drollinger, 2018; Faulkner et al., 2016).

However, previous evidence has shown that not every individual is willing to form close or enduring relationships with organizations (Bowden et al., 2015; Dalziel et al., 2011; Dwyer et al., 1987; Parish and Holloway, 2010), with many preferring instead to develop more functional or transactional exchanges (Caliskan, 2019; Dalziel et al., 2011; Palmatier et al., 2006). In the case of nonprofit organizations, some reports have pointed to individuals' increasing reluctance to engage with charities. For example, "Giving in the Netherlands 2020," a report by Bekkers, Gouwenberg, and Schuyt (2020), showed that a substantial number of people tend to donate only once, or for a short period of time, to a specific charity (78% of individuals belonging to Generation Y and 70% for older generations). It is only a minority who prefer to maintain long-term relationships with these organizations (22% among Generation Y and 30% among older generations). Prior work has suggested that the relationship orientation of individuals falls along a continuum, from a strong inclination to develop close and intimate relationships with firms to a desire to engage in purely functional transaction-focused exchanges (Dalziel et al., 2011; Dwyer et al., 1987; Palmatier et al., 2006; Witell et al., 2020). The literature has devoted significant attention to demonstrating the positive impact of developing strong relationships

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with customers (Arlí et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2021b) and identifying the elements that lead to the formation and development of customer–firm relationships, including trust, commitment, relational benefits, relationship stage, service quality, interactions, and personal connection (Dalziel et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2021b). However, little is known about the differences between consumers who want to form relationships with organizations and those who are reluctant to do so.

Given individuals' varying preferences for relational orientations (Caliskan, 2019; Waters, 2009), it is important to consider and address how nonprofits identify each type of donor—those who seek a closer relationship versus those who do not—and develop appropriate strategies for them. With nonprofit organizations making major investments in relationship marketing initiatives, it is essential for them to obtain a better understanding of which individuals they are most likely to form relationships with. Some past work examines the role of relationship marketing in these organizations (Khodakarami et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2021a; MacMillan et al., 2005), as well as the determinants that lead donors to offer future support by contributing through membership programs for long periods of time, such as psychological involvement, commitment, trust, satisfaction (Drollinger, 2018), personal links, shared values, service, and relationship quality or relationship investment (Bennett and Barkensjo, 2005; van Dijk et al., 2019). Despite this, there is a void of research regarding the factors that indicate which individuals are more likely to become regular donors; such insights could help nonprofits develop relational or transactional marketing actions in a more meaningful way (Sargeant & Lee, 2004).

In addressing these gaps, this study has two main goals. First, it aims to examine whether an occasional donor (i.e., a noncommitted donor giving one-time donations) may want to develop a relationship with a nonprofit organization by becoming a member (i.e., a donor who provides regular funding through a membership program; Kim et al., 2021a; Thomas et al., 2015). In doing so, this work focuses on the effect of consenting to direct marketing and analyzes the extent to which individuals' willingness to share their data with the nonprofit can affect whether they will engage in an enduring relationship with it. This factor is an important indicator through which individuals show higher levels of commitment and trust (Mazurek & Malagocka, 2019), a tendency toward participative behavior, and a greater interest in continuing the relationship (Ashley et al., 2011; Brodie et al., 2015; Smit et al., 2007). In addition, this study considers past giving behavior (i.e., frequency and monetary value) as a key moderating factor that may help to better understand the circumstances under which consenting to direct marketing communications leads donors to want to establish a longer and more stable relationship with the organization. Second, this study investigates the donation amounts of the individuals who decide to become members of the nonprofit during the first year of their membership, as well as whether their consenting to the direct marketing played a role in driving these amounts. We intend to accomplish our goals using a longitudinal study design with a sample of 1,719 occasional donors of a nonprofit organization over a seven-year period (2013–2019).

This study and its results offer contributions to both research and practice. First, it contributes to a better understanding of the diversity of relational approaches that individuals consider (Caliskan, 2019; Dwyer et al., 1987; Palmatier et al., 2006). Our findings provide the relationship management literature with new insights on segmentation strategies that consider consumers' inclinations to form relationships with firms. This research favors the study of the drivers that promote the decision to donate by participating in membership programs and enduring relationships (Kim et al., 2021a; Rupp et al., 2014; Verhaert and Van den Poel, 2012), and encourage greater financial support of those who commit to the long term (Arnett et al., 2003; Fang et al., 2021). Second, this study addresses overlooked research on relationship marketing in the nonprofit field and explores the effect of gaining consent for personal communications, which is highly influential in explaining an individual's decision to become a member of a nonprofit. Third, this study helps organizations by facilitating the identification of individuals who are predisposed to form stable relationships with organizations, as well as the creation of more effective relationship

marketing campaigns (Fang et al., 2021). Finally, as today's nonprofits increasingly take responsibility for providing many important public services, they have taken on an essential role in society. With our results, we contribute to the maintenance and improvement of the donor portfolio of these organizations, as nonprofits need to have the resources necessary to carry out their daily activities. Moreover, we provide a useful guide for fundraisers to manage consent marketing more effectively in an attempt to form better relationships and promote more donations.

## 2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

This study develops a theoretical framework built on the literature on relationship marketing and social exchange theory (Bowden et al., 2015; Dwyer et al., 1987; Johnson and Selnes, 2004; Kim et al., 2021b; Palmatier et al., 2006), and contributes to an understanding of when nonprofit service organizations should grow relationships with their donors. Specifically, we analyze the impact that consenting to direct marketing communications has on the predisposition of occasional donors to become members of a nonprofit organization. *Consenting to direct marketing* refers to individuals' agreement to share contact information (e.g., personal email address) with the organization and to receive direct marketing communications (Bennett & Barkensjo, 2005). *Occasional donors* are noncommitted donors who contribute sporadically, with one-time donations to the nonprofit organization, and *members* are donors who commit to the organization on a medium to long-term basis and make regular donations through membership (Kim et al., 2021a; Thomas et al., 2015). In addition to studying the main impact of consenting to direct marketing on the likelihood that individuals will become members, we consider the moderating role that past giving behavior exerts on the proposed relationship. We try to understand for which donors, according to the frequency (i.e., number of donations) and amount of their donations in previous periods, consenting to direct marketing has a greater impact on their willingness to become members. Importantly, this study also aims to provide a better understanding of the donation amounts provided by these regular donors, once they decide to engage in this type of relationship with the organization, and analyzes whether their consenting to the direct marketing played a role in driving these amounts. Fig. 1 shows a graphical representation of the proposed conceptual model.

Researchers have recognized that customer relationships vary across a spectrum from transactional to relational orientations (Dalziel et al., 2011; Palmatier et al., 2006; Witell et al., 2020), where exchange relationships span a continuum from short-term discrete exchanges to long-term relational exchanges (Taylor, Donovan, & Ishida, 2014). While discrete exchanges are characterized by very limited communications and narrow content, relational exchanges involve collaborative behaviors that contribute to building and strengthening customer relationships, and favor cost reduction, increased value, and the achievement of mutual benefits (Beckers et al., 2018; Dwyer et al., 1987; MacMillan et al., 2005).

As noted by Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987), the basis for individuals' future collaboration may also be supported by implicit and explicit assumptions, trust, and planning. As previous research notes, the expectations donors form about the benefits they receive from their relationship with the organization (whether they are more transactional or relational), as well as their personal reciprocity or relationship proneness (Ashley et al., 2011; Odekerken-Schröder et al., 2003; Witell et al., 2020), are both fundamental elements of relationship development between individuals (donors) and the organization (Dalziel, Harris, & Laing, 2011).

The relationship marketing literature has clearly noted the importance of a multidimensional understanding of the types of relationships that individuals can establish with organizations and service providers (Palmatier et al., 2006), as well as the need to develop strategies for each segment of individuals according to their relational expectations (Dalziel, Harris, & Laing, 2011). When individuals develop a desire to maintain a closer relationship with the organization, both parties' internalized beliefs and expectations about the balance of obligations

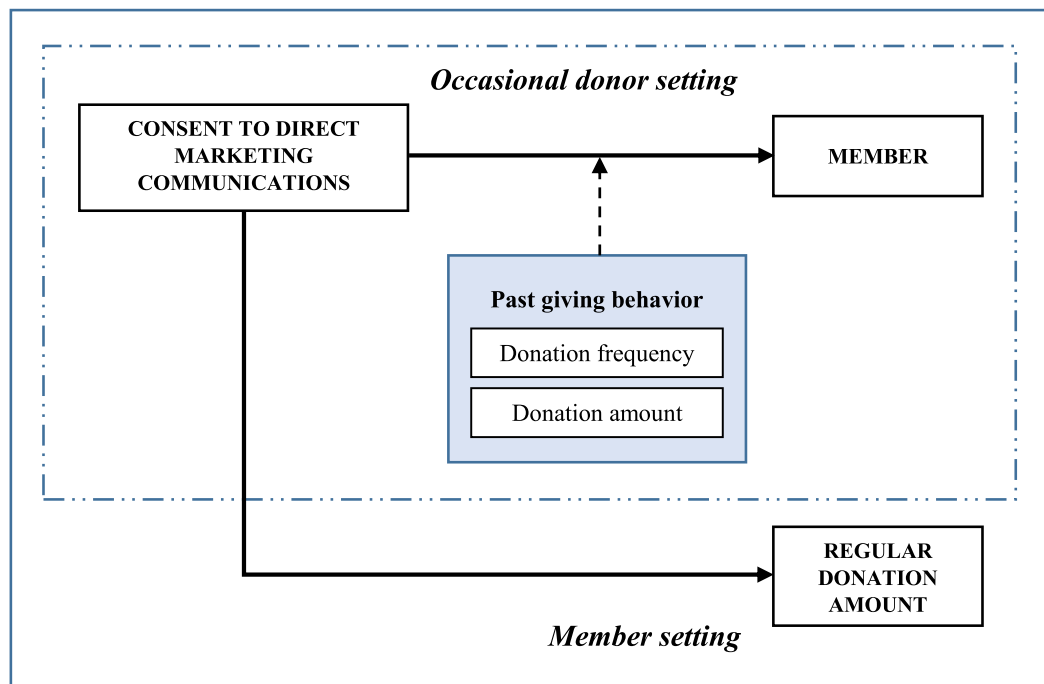


Fig. 1. Conceptual model. Note: The dotted lines in the first part of the model indicate the effects proposed in the occasional donor setting. The solid line refers to the member setting.

and benefits become more latent (Ashley et al., 2011; Drollinger, 2018; Waters, 2011). When this occurs, it is natural to believe that the relationship is a reciprocal commitment built on mutual trust (Palmatier, 2008). Individuals who experience personal reciprocity are more likely to establish a reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship with the organization (Drollinger, 2018). In addition, other work has suggested the application of this multidimensional approach based on the premise that transactional or relational marketing strategies should depend on the customer's relationship orientation (Ashley et al., 2011; Parish and Holloway, 2010). Individuals' relationship orientations can be identified by their predisposition to participate and cooperate. In turn, both participation and cooperation necessarily need to consider other elements that characterize the nature of the relationship, such as trust, reliability, support, and commitment (Mazurek and Malagočka, 2019; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Palmatier et al., 2006).

In relation to this, some work has postulated that the participation of individuals in relationship marketing programs is a cooperative and collaborative behavior, and has the potential to generate significant benefits for the organization and create mutual economic value (Mollen and Wilson, 2010; Noble and Phillips, 2004). Through these programs, individuals can receive ongoing communications in exchange for sharing their personal information, such as by signing up to an organization's mailing list. Gaining individuals' permission to access their data becomes critical for managers, since interactive communication allows them to understand preferences and develop better and more profitable relationships (Caliskan, 2019; Ponder et al., 2016). Moreover, researchers agree that individuals who consent to direct marketing and the disclosure of personal information are expressing a willingness to communicate openly and form social ties with the service provider, which crucially depends on prior trust-building and the development of commitment (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002; Mazurek and Malagočka, 2019; Ponder et al., 2016). In the nonprofit context, obtaining donor consent to receive communications is a major issue (Ashley et al., 2011; Waters, 2008). Any form of donor–nonprofit interaction has the potential to foster greater donor knowledge about the organization and its work, cultivate greater levels of trust and commitment, and reduce uncertainty generated by not knowing where and how donors' gifts are

allocated (Carroll and Kachersky, 2019; Waters, 2009, 2011).

### 2.1. Consenting to direct marketing and its influence on long-term relationships

Communication between exchange partners requires both organizations and individuals to exchange information (Ashley et al., 2011; Bruneau et al., 2018). Relationships are formed and continued if individuals want to interact and are willing to share personal information (Smit et al., 2007). When deciding to consent to direct marketing, individuals know that they have to disclose personal contact information, and that they are giving permission for managers to send them marketing communications (Chang et al., 2013). Individuals who form expectations about the relationship in terms of future obligations and mutual reciprocity are also those who show a greater need to communicate with the organization by consenting to receive information from it (Bruneau et al., 2018). Signing up to an organization's mailing list has been proposed as an element capable of capturing the individual's desire to engage in relationship marketing activities (Ashley et al., 2011) and therefore, it can help identify those who might want to develop a stronger relationship with the organization. One reason why individuals consent to direct marketing communications is that the provider can offer them a service that meets their relational expectations (Dalziel et al., 2011) and needs (Mazurek and Malagočka, 2019; Smit et al., 2007). By consenting to direct marketing, individuals may perceive greater value in the communications they receive (Ashley et al., 2011) and consider it as a source of useful and beneficial information, which in turn allows them to learn about new opportunities for cooperation with the organization (Connors et al., 2021; Reimer et al., 2014). These individuals tend to perceive greater gains from ongoing communications and interactions with an organization that allows them to participate in joint activities (Bennet, 2013) and thus reinforces their connection with the organization.

In the context of donor–nonprofit relationships, these aspects become even more important, as charities are usually required to be more transparent and thus need these communication tools to demonstrate responsibility and accountability to their supporters (Blouin et al.,

2018; Waters, 2009). In addition, the intangible nature of their services underscores the importance of communication activities, which requires that both parties agree to share information (Bennett, 2013; Bennett and Barkensjo, 2005; Jones et al., 2015). Previous research has suggested that donors who engage in relationship marketing activities are those most likely to form expectations of continuity (Ashley et al., 2011; Smit et al., 2007), and to show a greater interest in the organization's performance (Sargeant and Lee, 2004; Waters, 2009). These donors also tend to develop higher levels of commitment and the need for greater reciprocity, with which they seek a balance between "giving" and "receiving" (Drollinger, 2018; Fournier et al., 1998; Sargeant et al., 2006). Likewise, nonprofits have several activities that together make it possible to fulfill the social objective for which they were created. These activities are communicated to donors who subscribe to the organization's mailing list. Signing up to an organization's mailing list therefore helps to distinguish between the donors who show a desire to support and participate in the organization's direct marketing programs and a willingness to invest in maintaining a relationship with the organization (Bennet, 2013; Bennett and Barkensjo, 2005; Pressgrove and McKeever, 2016; Waters, 2011), and those who do not.

Based on this discussion, we expect that consenting to direct marketing reveals a donor's desire to engage in communications, as well as in a longer-term relationship, with the organization. Moreover, we expect that these donors will show a higher predisposition to committing, such as by becoming members. Hence,

**H1.** Occasional donors who consent to direct marketing communications will be more likely to become members.

## 2.2. The moderating effect of past giving behavior

In performing segmentation strategies, managers also need to consider other behaviors that will allow them to identify those individuals that may want to develop stronger relationships with the organization (Lin, Boh, & Goh, 2014). Previous work has suggested donation behavior as one of the most relevant factors reflecting heterogeneous motivation for charitable giving (Zhong & Lin, 2018). Research has also noted that individuals' behavior is largely shaped by previous experiences and past behavior (De Bruyn and Prokopec, 2013; Verhaert and Vanden Poel, 2012). Based on these premises, research analyzing the most effective strategies for influencing donors' behavior has suggested that in practice, an organization should differentiate its communication by considering the behavior of its donors (Karlan & Wood, 2017; Rupp et al., 2014). Accordingly, retention strategies have been recommended for those individuals who have shown signs of loyalty in the past through a higher donation frequency and greater donation amounts. Donation frequency refers to the number of times that a donor made a donation during a period (i.e., the number of gifts per year; Rupp et al., 2014; Shen and Tsai, 2010). Donation amount refers to the total monetary amount contributed over a period (i.e., the annual amount given by a donor in previous periods; Shen & Tsai, 2010).

### 2.2.1. Donation frequency

Prior evidence has shown that individuals with more activity in the organization—through higher-frequency purchases or service usage—are those who are expected to stay longer in the organization (Faulkner et al., 2016). Those who interact more frequently feel closer to the organization, and therefore are more receptive to the relationship marketing programs that allow them to derive more value from their interactions (Ashley et al., 2011; Bruneau et al., 2018). Waters (2008) also suggested that donors who give multiple gifts to an organization may assign greater value to their relationship with it. Donors who have donated frequently are individuals who demonstrate a high degree of participation in activities, as well as active, regular giving behavior (Zhong & Lin, 2018). Through marketing communications, these donors may engage in the nonprofit's new programs and activities, increasing

their incidence of giving (Bennet, 2013; Thomas et al., 2015). Thus, giving consent to direct marketing is expected to be more effective for these individuals and to lead to a greater willingness to establish a more lasting relationship with the organization. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H2.** The positive impact of giving consent to direct marketing communications on the likelihood of becoming a member is stronger for occasional donors who have donated more frequently in previous periods.

### 2.2.2. Donation amount

The amount donated by a donor in previous periods also provides a signal to fundraisers about the concern a donor shows for supporting the organization (Karlan & Wood, 2017; Verhaert and Van den Poel, 2012). Waters (2008) demonstrated that major gift donors (those who provide the largest donations) evaluate the relationship as being more communal—where organizations and individuals provide benefits to each other because they are concerned for the common well-being (Waters, 2008). For these donors, receiving communications from the organization could mean knowing more about its operations and needs, and the effectiveness of its programs (Karlan & Wood, 2017; Waters, 2009), or even receiving recognition for their financial effort as donors. These communications can generate greater value for the donors, increasing their satisfaction and thus their commitment to continuing the relationship (Ashley et al., 2011; Bolton et al., 2004; Thomas et al., 2015). Therefore, consenting to direct marketing is expected to be more effective in these individuals, leading to a greater predisposition to establish a more lasting relationship with the organization. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H3.** The positive impact of giving consent to direct marketing communications on the likelihood of becoming a member is stronger for occasional donors who have donated higher amounts in previous periods.

## 2.3. Consent to direct marketing communications and its influence on the nonprofit's success: Future monetary donations

Studies recognize that the success of a nonprofit organization is based on obtaining significant financial resources from its supporters, so that it can execute its projects and fulfill its mission (Bennett and Barkensjo, 2005; Drollinger, 2018). Being motivated to maintain a relationship with an organization suggests the existence of involvement with the service provider, and receptivity toward the organization's relationship marketing programs and activities (Ashley et al., 2011; Bruneau et al., 2018). Furthermore, when an individual identifies with the organization, a deep, committed, and meaningful relationship can exist (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Fang et al., 2021). This leads to a stronger willingness to invest effort in maintaining the relationship, greater feelings of affiliation (Lee et al., 2015; Morgan and Hunt, 1994), and greater interest in personalized interactions (Chen et al., 2021). As a result, nonprofits can obtain greater funding due to increased financial resources provided by their committed supporters, thus contributing to the success of the organization (Arnett et al., 2003; Fang et al., 2021).

Supporting this, some studies have noted the significant positive relationship between the possibility of members obtaining information—which facilitates knowledge about the organization's objectives, values, and culture—and the affective psychological attachment that a member develops toward the organization, leading to higher levels of member participation (Bruneau et al., 2018; Gruen et al., 2000). For members who value the organization's communication, having access to content and information is one of the most significant reasons for joining the organization (Waltham, 2008). Likewise, those who appreciate regular communications, find organizational messages useful, and assign high value to the service offered by the organization are those who show a greater willingness to share personal information and who tend to buy more frequently and spend more (Karlan & Wood, 2017;



Leppäniemi et al., 2017). Thus, it is expected that donors who have consented to direct marketing communications will offer greater financial support to the organization once they become members. Accordingly, we hypothesized:

**H4.** Members who had previously consented to direct marketing communications when they were occasional donors will contribute greater donation amounts to the organization.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Research context

The research context is a major charitable organization in a Western European country. This organization operates nationally and internationally through initiatives aimed at improving the situation of poverty and social exclusion of the most vulnerable groups in society and providing assistance to promote social development in those disadvantaged regions. This study builds on the idea that, despite the predominance of a relationship marketing approach in the customer portfolio management of most organizations, many individuals do not want to establish relationships with them and, therefore, relational tactics can be ineffective. Given the focus on donors of a charitable organization in a Western European country, cultural factors can be an important aspect in explaining the willingness to develop relationships with charities. Predominant factors in Western cultures, such as individualism, may significantly influence their giving behavior, as well as their tendency to form long-term relationships with charitable organizations, differing significantly from the behaviors of individuals from Eastern cultures, who are more collectivistic (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). Individualism and collectivism, moreover, may affect the way people assess information and how they interpret and respond to relationship marketing activities (Samaha, Beck, & Palmatier, 2014). Therefore, in Western countries, compared to Eastern cultures, the efficacy of marketing actions emphasizing long-term relationships and dependence may be lower (Samaha, Beck, & Palmatier, 2014). We focus on this context to empirically test our conjectures, and in the discussion section we discuss the implications of our findings in terms of the cultural values dominating in our specific context.

#### 3.2. Sample data

The organization has a database of occasional donors who contribute sporadically through monetary contributions. This database contains longitudinal information for a period of seven years starting on January 1, 2013 and ending on December 31, 2019. The information includes behavioral aspects (i.e., donation frequency and amount donated), relational factors (i.e., date of first donation, years donating, and contact information), and membership registration information for those who registered during the studied period (i.e., registration date, registration channel, donation periodicity, and periodic membership fee), as well as sociodemographic characteristics (i.e., gender and type of residential area) and socioeconomic factors (i.e., income). The sample consists of 1,719 occasional donors (some of whom became members during the studied period). For the selection of this sample, we excluded the observations of anonymous donors, as well as those who contributed extremely high amounts during this period.

In doing so, we applied the median plus 2.5 times the median absolute deviation (MAD)<sup>1</sup> method for outlier detection. We selected the threshold of 2.5, which is considered moderately conservative, as being a reasonable choice for rejecting a value (Miller, 1991).

<sup>1</sup> MAD is a measure strongly recommended for outlier detection (Leys et al., 2013). Unlike other indicators, MAD has several advantages (e.g., it is totally immune to the sample size, it can be easily calculated in statistical software, and it is one of the most robust dispersion measures in the presence of outliers).

#### 3.3. Variable operationalization

We now explain in detail the operationalization of the focal variables of our study.

**Membership.** This binary variable captures the decision of the occasional donor  $i$  to register as a member of the organization (*Membership*) in year  $t$ , taking the value 1 if registered, and 0 if not.

**Consenting to direct marketing.** This study distinguishes between donors based on their willingness to consent to direct email marketing communications from the organization (*CDM*). This variable is measured through a binary variable that takes the value 1 if the occasional donor  $i$  provides their email to the organization for marketing communications purposes, and 0 otherwise.

**Donation frequency.** We consider this variable (*Frequency*) as a continuous variable that captures the average frequency used to donate by donor  $i$  in the previous periods ( $t-1 \dots t-n$ ).

**Donation amount.** The donation amount is measured as the annual average of all contributions made by occasional donor  $i$  in the previous periods ( $t-1 \dots t-n$ ). Amount variables do not frequently follow a normal distribution (Rifkin, Du, & Berger, 2021), as individuals are very heterogeneous in their giving behavior, thus causing this variable to be potentially skewed.

A Kolmogorov–Smirnov (K–S) normality test<sup>2</sup> showed that the donation amount was not normally distributed (skewness = 3.30; SE = 0.04;  $p < .001$ ). We then log-transformed this variable (*lnAmount*). The logarithmic transformation of the dependent variable ameliorates the potential non-normality and heteroskedasticity of the error terms (Yen & Rosinski, 2008).

**Regular donation amount (MemberFee).** This variable captures the annual amount given by donor  $i$  in the first year of membership. We also log-transformed this variable (*lnMemberFee*), given that it was also positively skewed (skewness = 4.65; SE = 0.08;  $p < .001$ ).

The operationalization of all variables of the study is detailed in Table 1. We also conduct additional preliminary analyses on the descriptive statistics and correlations of the variables studied (Table 2).

#### 3.4. Modeling approach

Based on the preceding discussion, our main purpose is to analyze the influence of consenting to direct marketing communications, as well as the interaction of this behavior with past donation behaviors (donation frequency and amount donated in previous periods), on the probability of occasional donors registering as members in the organization. Another important goal is to test the role played by consenting to direct marketing in driving the regular donation amount contributed by individuals who decide to become members of the nonprofit during their first year of membership.

Given that this study analyzes two decisions in which one, the amount donated as a member during the first year (*MemberFee*), is conditional upon the other, the decision to become a member of the organization (*Membership*), simultaneous modeling that takes into account the nature of this conditional relationship is necessary. Because occasional donors may or may not become members, selection bias may occur. Therefore, we turned to statistical techniques to correct bias from incidentally truncated dependent variables by employing Heckman's (1979) two-stage correction approach. In the first-stage model, we used a probit regression in which the dependent variable was *Membership*

<sup>2</sup> K–S is extended to discrete distributions and to censored and grouped data and is one of the most commonly used tests when large samples are studied. We acknowledge that there are other tests, such as the Shapiro–Wilk W test, that may provide a generally superior omnibus measure of non-normality (Shapiro, Wilk, & Chen, 1968). Instead, K–S can be more insensitive. However, the Shapiro–Wilk W test can only be used from 4 to 2,000 observations (Royston, 1982), thus limiting its use in our study.

**Table 1**  
Variable operationalization.

Variable	Operationalization
Membership	Dummy variable: 1 if occasional donor <i>i</i> registers as a member of the organization in year <i>t</i> ; 0 if not.
Consent direct marketing	Dummy variable: 1 if occasional donor <i>i</i> provides an email contact to the organization to be reached with marketing communications; 0 otherwise.
Donation frequency	Total average frequency used to donate by donor <i>i</i> in the previous periods ( <i>t</i> -1 ... <i>t</i> - <i>n</i> ).
Donation amount	Total average of all contributions made by occasional donor <i>i</i> in the previous periods ( <i>t</i> -1, ... <i>t</i> - <i>n</i> ). We include the log-transformed value of this variable in our models.
Regular donation amount (Membership Fee)	Total annual amount given by donor <i>i</i> in the first year of her membership. We include the log-transformed value of this variable in our models.
Gender	Dummy variable: 1 if donor <i>i</i> is female (0 if male).
Income	Disposable income per capita in the residential area of donor <i>i</i> in year <i>t</i> . We include the log-transformed value of this variable in our models.
NGOs' negative news	Total number of negative news about NGOs in the country of donor <i>i</i> .

**Table 2**  
Descriptive statistics and correlations.

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Membership	0.25	0.43	1							
2 Membership Fee	505.70	739.56	N.A.	1						
3 Consent direct marketing	0.13	0.33	0.337*	0.141*	1					
4 Frequency	2.24	2.57	-0.171*	0.220*	-0.131*	1				
5 Donation amount	601.70	877.97	-0.248*	0.560*	-0.105*	0.227*	1			
6 Gender	0.49	0.50	-0.012	-0.045	-0.076*	-0.002	-0.004	1		
7 Income	15,044.88	4,464.65	-0.049*	0.229*	0.002	0.033*	0.289*	0.019	1	
8 NGOs' negative news	5.98	4.14	-0.323*	0.004	-0.081*	0.079*	0.126*	0.006	0.174*	1

**Notes:** \* = Correlation coefficients significant at the 5% level. N.A. = Not applicable.

(capturing the decision of the occasional donor *i* to register as a member of the organization in year *t*, taking the value 1 if registered, and 0 if not). From this probit, we used the estimated parameters to calculate the inverse Mills ratio (IMR), which is the ratio of the probability density function to the cumulative distribution function of the distribution. To achieve identification in this first stage, we used the number of negative news items about non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (*NegativeNews*) in the donor's country<sup>3</sup>. For the first-stage model, we estimated the following equation:

$$Membership_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 CDM_{it} + \beta_2 Frequency_{it} + \beta_3 \ln Amount_{it} + \beta_4 CDM_{it} X Frequency_{it} + \beta_5 CDM_{it} X \ln Amount_{it} + \beta_6 Gender_{it} + \beta_7 Income_{it} + \beta_8 NegativeNews_{it} + \varepsilon_i \tag{1}$$

where *CDM<sub>it</sub>* is the dummy variable capturing the willingness of donors to consent to direct marketing communications. *Frequency<sub>it</sub>* and *lnAmount<sub>it</sub>* are, respectively, the past donation frequency and the amount donated in previous periods; *CDM<sub>it</sub> X Frequency<sub>it</sub>* and *CDM<sub>it</sub> X lnAmount<sub>it</sub>* are the interaction terms between the willingness to consent

$$\ln(MemberFee_{it}) = \alpha_0 + \beta_1 CDM_{it} + \beta_2 Frequency_{it} + \beta_3 \ln Amount_{it} + \beta_4 CDM_{it} X Frequency_{it} + \beta_5 CDM_{it} X \ln Amount_{it} + \beta_6 Gender_{it} + \beta_7 Income_{it} + \beta_8 (IMR_i) + \varepsilon_{it} \tag{2}$$

<sup>3</sup> Gaining legitimacy with its financial supporters is an important aspect of increasing a nonprofit organization's chances of survival (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The number of negative news items about organizations in the nonprofit sector may be a relevant factor influencing individuals' decision to support a nonprofit (Boenigk & Becker, 2016).

to direct marketing communications and, respectively, donation frequency and the amount donated in previous periods; *Gender<sub>it</sub>* and *Income<sub>it</sub>* are control variables referring to the respective demographic and socioeconomic personal characteristics; *NegativeNews<sub>it</sub>* is a control variable referring to external factors such as the number of negative news stories about NGOs in the country of donor *i* in year *t*; and  $\varepsilon_i$  is the error term.

For the second stage—the regular donation amount model—the IMR is incorporated as an additional independent variable in the truncated ordinary least squares (OLS) model estimation. The statistical signifi-

cance of the IMR in the model indicates the existence of a sample selection bias, and the Heckman two-stage approach is believed to be an appropriate procedure (Heckman, 1979). Below, we estimated the following second-stage model equation:

where  $\ln(MemberFee_{it})$ , the dependent variable, is the total amount donated through the membership fee of member *i* in the first year of their membership (log-transformed). *CDM<sub>it</sub>*, *Frequency<sub>it</sub>* and *lnAmount<sub>it</sub>*, *CDM<sub>it</sub> X Frequency<sub>it</sub>* and *CDM<sub>it</sub> X lnAmount<sub>it</sub>*, and *Gender<sub>it</sub>*, and *Income<sub>it</sub>* are respectively the focal variables, the interaction terms, and the control variables, all of which were explained in the above stage. *IMR<sub>i</sub>* is the IMR from the first-stage selection model and  $\varepsilon_i$  is the error term.

We computed the variance inflation factor (VIF) in this second stage. VIF scores range between 1.27 and 2.58, thus indicating that each main independent variable is not highly correlated with the other predictors and therefore ensuring the reliability of the regression results (multicollinearity is not an issue). To control for heteroskedasticity we used White’s (1980) standard error method and estimated an auxiliary regression model with squared residuals as the dependent variable and initial regressors and their squares and cross-products as covariates. Computing the test by SPSS, we decided not to reject the null hypothesis of homoskedasticity in the model ( $W = 6.29$ ;  $p = .0721$ ), thus ensuring the variance of the errors in the regression model is constant.

4. Estimation results

4.1. Main study

Of the 1,719 occasional donors in the sample, 990 (57.6%) experienced the event of interest during the study period, and 350 (20.4%) shared their email addresses with the organization. Among those who shared their contact information, 316 (90.3%) had registered as members at some point in time. In total, 674 of the donors who did not share their email addresses (49.3%) registered as members.

We then performed the estimation of Heckman’s model as described in the previous section, and estimated the following three models sequentially: (i) a base model (Model 1) that analyzes the impact of the control variables on the probability of becoming a member; (ii) a model (Model 2) that, in addition to the control variables, includes the main effects of consenting to direct marketing communications and of past donation behavior (through frequency and donation amount in previous periods); and (iii) a full model (Model 3) that considers the interaction terms between consenting to direct marketing and past donation behavior.

The estimation results in Table 3 reveal that consenting to direct marketing communications significantly influences the probability that an individual will register as a member ( $\beta = 1.083$ ;  $p < .001$ ). This finding supports hypothesis H1. Our data also show that donors who donated more frequently and in larger amounts in the past are less likely to become members ( $\beta = -0.058$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $\beta = -0.197$ ;  $p < .001$ , respectively). In terms of the moderating effects of past donation behavior, our results show that obtaining consent for direct marketing communications could be more effective, and thus could increase the probability of occasional donors becoming members, for donors who had donated more frequently and in greater amounts in previous periods. However, these interaction effects are not significant.

In Table 3, we also report the coefficient estimates for the results from the second-stage model of the truncated OLS estimation. Our data

indicate a positive main effect of consenting to direct marketing on the amount donated by members ( $\beta = 0.764$ ;  $p < .001$ ). In addition, members who donated with higher frequencies and greater amounts contribute greater membership fees ( $\beta = 0.089$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $\beta = 0.482$ ;  $p < .001$ , respectively). However, the findings also reveal that those consenting to marketing communications who contributed higher donation amounts in the past contribute lower amounts as members ( $\beta = -0.099$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

4.2. Alternative model specification

In our study, the information is measured at discrete time intervals (years), and we observe a series of longitudinal binary responses denoting whether the donor becomes a member of the organization at some point in time. To test the robustness of the first-stage model—the decision to become a member—we turned to survival analysis techniques, which enable us to model the timing and occurrence of the event of interest, registering as a member (*Membership*). Survival analysis is used to study random variables that represent the time of the event of interest. A feature of these analyses is that survival times can be censored, implying that time-to-event information is incomplete for some individuals, and thus only partial information is collected (Jenkins, 2005). In survival analysis, the response variable is discrete when the event occurs at specific times ( $t_0, t_1 \dots, t_n$ ). We therefore use discrete time duration models to approach our main analysis.

Let  $T$  denote a discrete random variable indicating the time of an event occurrence. Events are observed at discretely defined points in time,  $t_i$ . The unconditional probability of an event occurring at time  $t_i$  is given by the following probability mass function:

$$f(t) = Pr(T = t_i) \tag{3}$$

The probability of an event not occurring beyond time  $t_i$ , expressed as the survivor function, is:

$$S(t) = Pr(T \geq t_i) = \sum_{j > i} f(t_j) \tag{4}$$

where  $j$  denotes an occurrence time.

The hazard rate is:

$$h(t) = f(t)/S(t) \tag{5}$$

which demonstrates that the risk of an event occurrence is equivalent to the ratio of the probability of failure to the probability of survival. This ratio can be expressed as the conditional probability of failure, given survival up until that point in time (note that we can talk of the hazard rate in terms of probability in the discrete time case). Thus, the hazard probability for the discrete time case is:

Table 3  
Estimation results of the Heckman’s model (two stage correction approach).

	Probit Model (first stage) Membership			OLS Model (second stage) Membership Fee		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	-1.260	-1.879**	-1.852**	3.512***	-1.716*	-1.867*
Consent direct marketing		1.291***	1.083***		0.248***	0.764***
Past behavior						
Frequency		-0.057***	-0.058***		0.089***	0.089***
Amount		-0.192***	-0.197***		0.446***	0.482***
Interactions						
Frequency*Consent direct marketing			0.018			-0.016
Amount*Consent direct marketing			0.034			-0.099**
Controls						
Female	-0.059	0.055	0.056	-0.059	-0.030	-0.034
Income	0.967**	0.381***	0.381***	0.967***	0.514***	0.513***
NGOs’ negative news	-0.236***	-0.263***	-0.262***			
IMR				-0.172*	-0.165**	-0.191**

Notes: \*\*\*p < .01; \*\*p < .05; \*p < .10. IMR = Inverse Mills ratio. Akaike information criterion (AIC) of Model 3 = 5559.49; Bayesian information criterion (BIC) of Model 3 = 5675.95. Number of observations = 3,395; Censored observations = 2,405; Uncensored observations = 990.

$$h(t) = Pr(T = t_i | T, t_i) \tag{6}$$

The parametric form used in this study is the complementary log log (*cloglog*) model. Following Singer, Willett, and Willett (2003), we assume that: (1) for each combination of predictor values, there is a postulated *cloglog* hazard function; (2) each of these *cloglog* hazard functions has an identical shape, and (3) the distance between them is identical in every time period. Then, using *cloglog*, maximum likelihood estimators of the parameters of discrete models can be obtained by using logistic regression methods. The *cloglog* hazard function is represented in the following equation (Equation (7)).

$$hi(t) = 1 - \exp[- \exp[\beta_0 + \beta_1 CDM_{it} + \beta_2 Frequency_{it} + \beta_3 \ln Amount_{it} + \beta_4 CDM_{it} \times Frequency_{it} + \beta_5 CDM_{it} \times \ln Amount_{it} + \beta_6 Gender_{it} + \beta_7 Income_{it} + \beta_8 NegativeNews_{it}]] \tag{7}$$

To derive the parameters of interest ( $\beta_1$ ,  $\beta_4$ , and  $\beta_5$ ), we employ the estimation command *cloglog* using STATA 16.1. In addition, to support the choice of a *cloglog* link function, we fit an additional discrete-time hazard model with a logit link. As numerical similarity of the parameter estimates is common when fitting identical models with both functions (*logit* and *cloglog*), we compared the deviance and the fitted baseline hazard functions for both models. We found that the *cloglog* model fits better, since the deviance for the logistic model (1.44) is higher than the deviance for the *cloglog* model (0.99). This change is also evident by conducting both models and comparing their Akaike information criterion (AIC) (3378.50 and 3374.44 respectively) and Bayesian information criterion (BIC) values (3528.38 and 3522.71). These results indicate a better fit of the *cloglog* model in our study, supporting, therefore, the choice of this link function.

In Table 4, the estimation results reveal that consenting to direct marketing communications positively influences the probability of individuals registering as members ( $\beta = 0.621$ ;  $p < .10$ ). This finding supports hypothesis H1. Our data also show that when donors have made more frequent donations in the past or have donated larger amounts, they are less likely to become members ( $\beta = -0.122$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $\beta = -0.233$ ;  $p < .001$ , respectively). Regarding the moderating effects of past donation behavior, we find that consenting to direct marketing communications could be more effective in those who have donated greater amounts in previous periods ( $\beta = 0.115$ ;  $p < .10$ ) and may lead those donors to become members. These results provide support for hypothesis H3. In our data, we do not find support for the effect of the interaction between consenting to direct marketing and past donation frequency. Therefore, hypothesis H2 is not supported.

### 5. Discussion

Over the past few years, there has been a growing interest among

**Table 4**  
Alternative model specification results with complementary log log model (*cloglog*).

Dependent variable: Membership	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	1.020	-1.236	-0.979
Consent direct marketing		1.332***	0.621*
Past behavior			
Frequency		-0.116***	-0.122***
Amount		-0.211***	-0.233***
Interactions			
Frequency*Consent direct marketing			0.072
Amount*Consent direct marketing			0.115*
Controls			
Female	-0.041	0.049	0.045
Income	0.055	0.385***	0.371***
NGOs' negative news	-0.547***	-0.505***	-0.502***

**Note:** Significant parameters: \*\*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \* $p < 0.10$ . Akaike information criterion (AIC) of Model 3 = 3374.44; Bayesian information criterion (BIC) of Model 3 = 3522.71.

nonprofits in building long and stable relationships with their donors (Drollinger, 2018; Faulkner et al., 2016; Khodakarami et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2015). Although the use of relationship marketing techniques has been key to developing higher levels of trust and commitment and to promoting donor continuity in the organization, it is not clear whether efforts to develop relationship marketing strategies are effective for all individuals who choose to financially support a nonprofit. A key goal of this study is to investigate the effects of consenting to direct marketing communications—as an instrument reflecting an individual’s orientation to establishing long-term relationships with service providers (Ashley et al., 2011; Brodie et al., 2013; Smit et al., 2007)—and the moderating role of past giving behavior (frequency and amount donated) on an occasional donor’s decision to become a member. Furthermore, this study aims to demonstrate the influence that consenting to direct marketing communications has on the total amount donated by a donor who engages in a long-term relationship with the organization. The findings from this study offer several important contributions to relationship marketing management research, as well as to nonprofit managers.

#### 5.1. Theoretical implications

The extant literature recognizes that consumer–organization relationships span a continuum from short-term discrete exchanges to long-term relational exchanges (Dalziel et al., 2011; Dwyer et al., 1987; Palmatier et al., 2006; Witell et al., 2020). Research has noted that the level of commitment consumers develop toward the organization and their intention to continue the relationship are usually explained by the nature of the service offered (Palmatier et al., 2006), the orientation and attitudes toward relationships with organizations (Bowden et al., 2015; Dwyer et al., 1987; Parish and Holloway, 2010), and the receptiveness to relationship marketing and information exchange (Ashley et al., 2011; Bruneau et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2015). However, little evidence has been found on the underlying mechanisms that influence individuals’ decisions to start closer and more stable relationships in the context of service providers, specifically in the nonprofit sector. Similarly, research also notes the lack of contributions that consider the evolution of customer–firm relationships—through their relational stages—and how these are fundamental to understanding the effectiveness of relationship marketing strategies and their implications for the formation of stable and lasting relationships (Kim et al., 2021b). This study provides insights into the influence of consenting to direct marketing communications on an occasional donor’s predisposition to become a member of the organization. In doing so, we contribute to existing research that points to the importance of taking a multidimensional approach to the types of relationships consumers may establish with service providers and developing segmentation strategies based on these consumers’ relational expectations (Dalziel et al., 2011; Mazurek and Malagocka, 2019; Palmatier et al., 2006). We also heed the call for more research on the effect of receptiveness to relationship marketing on the actual behavior of individuals (Ashley et al., 2011; Bruneau et al., 2018). By identifying and testing this factor, we make a significant contribution by proving that those donors who give consent to direct marketing communications—with a more relational orientation—are those more likely to develop a long-term relationship as members and collaborate with the organization.

Another contribution of this study is the moderating role of past giving behavior in the building of customer–organization relationships. Our results show that a higher frequency of giving, as well as higher amounts donated, does not always lead donors to want to make a long-term commitment, be more loyal, or stay for longer periods of time in the organization, a result that differs from the suggestions made by previous studies (Verhaert & Van den Poel, 2012). However, by examining how these past behavioral factors interact with an individual’s relational orientation, this study provides a better explanation as to why some donors, despite their giving behavior, do not want to engage with the



organization. Recent research persuasively suggested that consumer engagement should be measured from a behavioral perspective, but it is essential to also take it into account from an attitudinal approach—based on the consumer's feelings toward the organization (Petzer & Van Tonder, 2019). Donors can demonstrate positive behavior toward the organization through high donation frequencies or large sums of money and yet have a negative attitude toward direct marketing communications, or in general to relationship marketing (Jones et al., 2015). Our results reveal that donors, who contributed significantly during past periods and show receptiveness to relationship marketing—they consent to receive direct marketing communications and share their contact information with the organization—are those who tend to be part of the organization's membership portfolio. This study converges with previous research suggesting that donors follow different longitudinal patterns, and that those more active in giving (either by giving a greater number of gifts per year or larger sums of money) may be more responsive to marketing communications and solicitations from the nonprofit (Shen & Tsai, 2010). This result underscores the importance of taking into account factors other than giving behavior when explaining donor loyalty and commitment to nonprofit organizations.

Importantly, our results extend those of previous studies concerned with nonprofits' performances through member donations and provide insights into the significant link between individuals' relationship orientations and their donation amounts. Specifically, our findings reveal that members who consent to direct marketing communications not only show greater interest in interactions with fundraising managers (Ashley et al., 2011; Bruneau et al., 2018) but also support the organization financially in a remarkable way (Karlan & Wood, 2017). Some factors that can contribute to organizational success include valuing regular communications as a source of useful information (Leppäniemi, Karjaluoto, & Saarijärvi, 2017), facilitating members' desire to participate (Bruneau, Swaen, & Zidda, 2018), and expanding members' knowledge about the organization's goals, values, and culture (Gruen, Summers, & Acito, 2000). We show that when members consent to direct marketing communications, they are exposed to these elements, giving rise to an easily identifiable variable in research on member and donor portfolio relationship management, as well as on relationship management with other organizational stakeholders (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Fang et al., 2021).

Finally, this study offers novel insights into the dynamics underlying donor engagement and the building of strong and stable relationships with customers and members (Ashley et al., 2011; Bruneau et al., 2018; MacMillan et al., 2005). As noted, the research context of this study is a Western European country, where the role of cultural factors is decisive in explaining people's relational behaviors in the long term. Individualism, a predominant key factor in Western cultures, considerably influences individuals' tendency to develop long-term social bonds and therefore, their propensity to form relationships with organizations (Samaha, Beck, & Palmatier, 2014). Given their lower sense of affiliation, compared to more collectivistic cultures, individualistic people are less receptive to information about existing relationships, as well as less likely to put effort into investing in exchange relationships (Hofstede et al., 2010; Singh, 1990). Nevertheless, our theoretical framework allows us to conceptualize and understand the different types of relational orientations that individuals develop in a Western culture, as well as the interactions between both these orientations and the behaviors within the organization that lead to higher retention rates and better organizational outcomes in the long run. Through analyzing the impact of behavioral factors over time, this study provides further knowledge into the process of transitioning from an occasional donor (or sporadic product or service user) to a member or regular consumer.

## 5.2. Practical implications

Implementing relationship marketing contributes to the better organizational and fundraising performance of nonprofit organizations.

However, one of the major challenges for fundraising managers is the lack of knowledge in the use of marketing techniques, thus making relationship marketing research in the nonprofit field necessary (Lee & Markham, 2018). This study makes several contributions with managerial implications. Specifically, the findings highlight the need for nonprofits to recognize that there are different reasons why their donors financially support social causes, and that not everyone wants to form strong and close relationships with the organization. On the one hand, there is a significant portion of donors whose primary purpose is to help through their gifts but who do not wish to engage collaboratively with organizations (Bennett and Barkensjo, 2005; Parish and Holloway, 2010). This is a sizable segment: 70% of donors according to Bekkers, Gouwenberg, and Schuyt (2020), and 45% according to our study (which considers a much wider time horizon). On the other hand, there are donors who, in addition to their donations, want to feel close to the organization and engage with it more intensively, through multiple interactions and information exchanges (Bennett & Barkensjo, 2005). For fundraising managers, therefore, it is imperative to design effective marketing strategies by targeting donors according to their relational orientations. Nonprofits usually have a large donor portfolio, therefore they may need to offer multiple communication options to ensure contact with most of their donors, depending on their behaviors and attitudes toward the organization and relationship marketing. For example, fundraising managers should offer different types of information that donors may be willing to receive and include opt-in and opt-out options, thus helping to provide personalized offers based on their relational expectations with the organization.

This research finds that donors, who show interest in sharing personal information in exchange for receiving direct marketing communications, are more likely to become ongoing supporters, as they typically engage in regular donations over long periods of time. For donors with positive attitudes toward relationship marketing, fundraisers should communicate special services aimed at increasing satisfaction and generating greater levels of engagement (e.g., invitations to participate in talks and charity auctions) and design social media channels that allow interactive relationships and interpersonal communication with the organization and other donors (Boenigk & Helmig, 2013). Additionally, fundraisers can offer different types of communications (e.g., news, periodic newsletters, course offerings, or volunteer activities) and the frequency with which they send these communications. By doing this, managers will be able to collect the responses from their donors in their database systems and use them as key criteria to profile and segment their donor groups. In this way, managers will be able to efficiently apply more transactional or relational marketing strategies.

This study also presents interesting implications for fundraising managers regarding the role of past giving behavior and its impact on the formation of long-term relationships with the organization. First, the results reveal that those occasional donors who donated larger amounts in previous periods and those who donate more frequently are less likely to become members. Although these donors may be less likely to engage in relational behaviors with the nonprofit, they may simply be concerned about the social cause they support and thus only want to focus on contributing in a meaningful way, i.e., by giving substantial amounts of money (Palmatier et al., 2006). This suggests that some donors may be more profitable—that is, give larger amounts—as transactional donors (e.g., as occasional donors) than as relational donors. Managers can thus know in advance that for these individuals, relational marketing strategies may not be appropriate, and that they may respond better to transactional marketing strategies. Fundraisers can develop actions aimed at promoting interest in donating to multiple causes by offering these donors the opportunity to choose the destination of their funds at the time they provide their gifts. Donors may also be interested in obtaining advantages for donating, thus reducing the perceived cost of their donations. By providing information at the moment of donation about the tax benefits donors can obtain by supporting a charity,

managers can encourage donors to contribute larger amounts.

Second, our findings tested the moderating role of past giving behavior and suggest that donors who give larger amounts and who have simultaneously consented to receive direct marketing communications are more likely to become members of the organization. Managers should note these simultaneous behaviors of their donors and accordingly develop strategies that accommodate giving behaviors. Some interesting communications that fundraisers can send to promote more collaborative behavior in these donors include requests for regular financial support (i.e., registration as a member). Taking advantage of the fact that these donors can offer large financial support, fundraisers should use direct marketing to communicate opportunities to engage in habit-based loyalty programs (Henderson, Beck, & Palmatier, 2011), so that in the long term they continue to give large gifts. This donor (member) relationship strategy can implement various levels of giving with increasing benefits, an approach aligned with the idea of building strong and trusting relationships with donors, and in turn allows for the gathering of data to identify the most valuable supporters (Boenigk & Scherhag, 2014). Alternatively, fundraising managers can communicate other opportunities to donate and encourage donation variety among donors. For example, sending information soliciting support for multiple initiatives. By allocating donations to different social causes donors perceive that they have a personal role in helping the organization and are more likely to maintain their financial support and provide larger gifts (Khodakarami, Petersen, & Venkatesan, 2015).

Finally, our findings provide important insights for nonprofit practitioners who seek member loyalty and the maintenance of good and profitable relationships. The results indicate that once donors have decided to commit to frequent donations to the organization, those who share personal information in exchange for marketing communications are more profitable for the organization (they donate greater sums of money). Maintaining the loyalty of these major donors becomes one of the most important challenges for fundraisers (Drollinger, 2018; Waters, 2008), who should be able to achieve high levels of satisfaction and trust among these donors (Ashley et al., 2011; Ponder et al., 2016). Thus, as previous research points out, relationship marketing becomes critical for fundraisers, since interactive communication allows them to understand donor preferences and thus develop better and more profitable relationships with donors (Ponder, Holloway, & Hansen, 2016). When a donor engages with the organization, trust is one of the most important factors in the relationship (Waters, 2009). To maintain or increase this level of trust, managers must turn to relationship marketing tools to provide relevant information that reflects accountability (Waters, 2009, 2011). Long-term financial supporters can demand greater transparency and up-to-date information on the organization's work and results in order to verify the effectiveness of its activities. Similarly, another important factor is the concern donors have about how the organization utilizes their gifts (Waters, 2009). Strategies aimed at promoting joint collaboration between donor and organization (e.g., meetings with managers for value co-creation purposes that favor the activity carried out by the organization), in addition to reporting on the fulfillment of their objectives and the interventions performed (Carroll & Kachersky, 2019), contribute to the formation of a closer relationship and allow for a better understanding of the organization. Since maintaining regular donors also entails significant costs, it is imperative that the communications they receive include content that is interesting and attractive to them. By regularly updating their systems to include the type of communication their donors want to receive, nonprofits can achieve higher levels of donor satisfaction (Ashley et al., 2011; Bolton et al., 2004) and consequently, can increase the likelihood of donor retention and achieve better financial results. Therefore, fundraising managers should strive to gain donors' consent to receive direct marketing communications and permission to access their data, so that they can provide appropriate information and thus ensure successful relationships.

## 6. Limitations and directions for further research

We have identified four particular limitations in our study, which in turn offer fruitful avenues for further research. First, through this study, we provide a key factor for facilitating the identification of individuals who are more receptive to relationship marketing communications and whom managers can therefore classify as potential long-term donors. Future research may examine additional variables that can be easily identified when individuals provide their contact information, such as the type of communications they wish to receive (e.g., informational, transactional, or collaborative) or the frequency with which they wish to receive them (Zhang, Kumar, & Cosguner, 2017). Interestingly, these variables can be interrelated with personal factors that are possible barriers or facilitators of relationship marketing effectiveness (e.g., individual differences in the use and adoption of new technologies).

Second, while secondary data on actual behavior (e.g., donor membership, consent to direct marketing communications, frequency, and amounts contributed) is key to testing the generalizability of the findings to real-world settings, it is also important to carry out additional research analyzing the underlying factors based on altruistic motives and attitudes toward engaging in philanthropic behavior. Altruistic people often choose to donate to more than one organization, and as a result, they tend not to formally commit to a single organization (Farmer, Kidwell, & Hardesty, 2020). In addition, marketing communications are often perceived as intrusive by many individuals (Jones et al., 2015). Future research can investigate the different needs (e.g., those of self or others) or motivations (altruistic or egoistic) of donors, and additionally test their attitudes toward engaging in different relational tactics (e.g., measuring the preferences for receiving marketing communications, sharing personal information, participating in multiple activities, or the use of different communication channels). These aspects may allow for the evaluation of alternative direct marketing schedules aimed at effectively engaging the entire donor portfolio.

Third, the interaction between an individual's past donation frequency and whether they consent to direct marketing communications—an interaction that was considered especially important from a conceptual perspective—does not empirically appear to be significant. However, the results suggest that past donation behavior is potentially important and therefore deserves further investigation. In our study, we considered the most-used past behavioral variables—frequency and monetary value—that have been shown to have the greatest impact on donation behavior (De Bruyn and Prokopec, 2013; Rupp et al., 2014). Nevertheless, researchers can go further and test our proposal by considering other interesting behavioral variables, such as the recency of past donations and the number of years a donor has been donating (Verhaert & Van den Poel, 2012). The findings of this study suggest that some donors may be very profitable for organizational performance as occasional donors, rather than adhering to a membership. This implies that it may be useful to analyze the effect of past behavioral factors on the contributions of occasional donors and how this contributes to the total funds raised.

Fourth, we recognize that this study was conducted with a single charitable organization in a Western European country and thus subject to cultural factors that may potentially limit its generalizability. A direction for future research would be to look into how the influence of cultural traits affects donor behavior. Donation frequencies, amounts donated, or the tendency to adhere to memberships may signal the donor's concern about whether to help a larger number of people or instead to help specific groups (in-group vs. out-group members). These behaviors may be determined by each individual's understanding of society and how it functions (e.g., political orientation; Farmer, Kidwell, & Hardesty, 2020). Cultural factors also involve changes in the environment that influence preferences for transactional or relational marketing (Rezaei & Elahi Rad, 2007). As noted, cultural frameworks can also be used to explain cross-cultural differences in orientation toward long-term relationships with organizations (Samaha, Beck, & Palmatier,

2014). We encourage future studies to identify the underlying factors determining cross-cultural differences and similarities related to personal data sharing and consent to receive direct marketing communications, and how they affect individuals' subsequent behavior. Hedonism, social status and prestige, and benevolence or collectivism vs. individualism are some of the personal factors that could be used as boundary conditions of the variables mentioned above (Chen et al., 2021; Samaha et al., 2014).

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Ana Minguez:** Writing – original draft, Software, Methodology, Conceptualization. **F. Javier Sese:** Writing – original draft, Software, Methodology, Conceptualization.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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