

Social Norms and Fundraising:
The Trade-Off between Enhanced Donations and Donor Identity Esteem

By

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ABSTRACT (150 words)

The academic literature in fundraising has focused primarily on understanding the drivers for giving. For example, past research shows the proper use of *social information* (i.e. perception about the amount of another individual's giving) can increase the amount of a focal donor's contribution by more than 10% without additional fundraising cost. It does so because people use another person's giving to estimate how much on average others give and they then conform to that social norm. This paper studies the degree to which one's perception of a *social norm* associates not with how much they give, but with how good they feel. More specifically we show that there is a trade-off between how high a perceived social norm is and how good donors feel about themselves. In particular, perceiving others giving at a relatively high level is associated negatively with *donors' identity membership esteem*. The implications for self-based theory development and the enhancement of fundraising practice are explored.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 30 years, giving and fundraising have been studied by researchers working in fields as diverse as economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, marketing and management (for reviews see Burnett and Wood, 1988, Sargeant and Woodliffe, 2007, Bekkers and Wiepking, 2011). This work has served to enhance our understanding of who gives, how they give, under what circumstances they give and what their underlying motives might be. This paper examines a relatively understudied topic in giving research, namely *whether social information, a psychological factor that has been shown to increase giving, associates negatively with how people feel about being a donor.*

James Andreoni's seminal work on warm-glow explains that people give to nonprofit organizations because (at least partially) they feel good about giving (Andreoni, 1990). This research builds on Andreoni's work in two ways. First, it asks whether the same factor that motivates people to give, also has the potential to make them feel bad. Second, it explores how good people feel about being a donor, not how good they feel about their giving. In particular, it studies how donors' perception of social information associates with their collective self-esteem (Luhtanen and Crocker, 1992).

Collective self-esteem describes how good people feel about their *association with a collective*. The collective can be a group (e.g. graduates of class 2015'), an organization (e.g. an NGO) or a social category (e.g. gender). Collective self-esteem is different from how good people feel about themselves – personal self-esteem (e.g. being smart, good looking and rich) or how good people feel about giving – their warm glow. In the domain of giving, people build an association with an organization through donating money. The collective identity of interest here

is hence termed donor identity and how good people feel about their donor identity is termed donor identity esteem.

This topic is theoretically important to study because it connects Andreoni's original warm-glow research in economics with modern identity research in marketing (Reed et al, 2012). The latter literature shows that what motivates giving and how people feel about being a giver are distinctive psychological processes. What increases giving does not always enhance one's feeling about being a donor. The direction of change is determined by both individual and situational factors. In this research, we unpick the complexity involved in how one's perceived social norms of giving, which have been shown to increase giving (Shang and Sargeant, 2012), relate to how donors' feel about being a donor.

This research also adds precision in our understanding. It delineates the precise nature of how perceived social norms relate to the four sub-constructs of donor identity esteem. These four sub-constructs are:

- 1) Donor Identity Membership Esteem, which assesses an individual's judgments of how worthy they are as members of their associative organization;
- 2) Importance of Donor Identity, which assesses the importance of one's donor identity to one's self-concept;
- 3) Private Donor Esteem Associated with the Organization, which measures personal judgments of how good one's associative organization is; and
- 4) Public Donor Identity Esteem, which assesses one's perceptions of how positively other people evaluate one's donor identity.

It is important to theoretically differentiate these relationships, because previous research has shown that these sub-constructs are determined by different behaviors in a giving context

(Sargeant and Shang, 2012). No research however has indicated how they relate to perceived social norms. Ours will be the first.

A better understanding of this topic is practically important because recently, practitioners have urged charitable organizations to shift focus from pure economic revenue generation to a fund-raising approach more centered on individual donors (Sargeant and Shang 2011 a&b). Our research will allow US nonprofits, who collect over \$240 billion individual donations a year and facilitate giving from 4 out of 5 of Americans (Giving USA Foundation, 2014), to balance the financial benefit accruing to the organization with the psychological benefit accruing to donors. We will review the literature and motivate our hypotheses before we detail the results.

Social Information Influences Giving

Social information has been used to describe the behavior of one (Shang and Croson, 2009) or a group of others (Croson, Handy and Shang, 2009a). When used to describe the average behavior of a group, it is termed a norm (Croson, Handy and Shang, 2009a). Past research in fundraising shows that the effect that another's behavior might have on giving can be optimized by picking the 'right' amount to tell a person that someone else has just given. The 90th-95th percentile of previous giving to a similar campaign, or ideally by a specific segment of donors, would appear to be optimal (Shang and Croson, 2006). Social information has been shown to increase contributions by an average of 12% in the most effective condition (Shang and Croson, 2009).

This stream of research argues that the upward influence of social information is due to changing donors' beliefs about the appropriate amount to give (i.e. norms). In all of this work, however, the authors have been squarely focused on the impact of social information on giving –

thus enhancing the benefit to the focal nonprofit. No work has yet been published on the topic of how the provision of social information might impact the donor. This paper will focus on understanding how norms might correlate with donor identity membership esteem. We will do so in the context of National Public Radio

National Public Radio:

National Public Radio is a network of 900 local stations spread around the United States. One third of the revenue for these stations comes from individual donations. The key outcome delivered by one's donation is NPR's programming. Audience research (Audience 2000) shows that listeners of NPR typically become donors after they have listened for at least a year and a typical donor listens to their local station at least 3 times a week. In this sense all NPR donors personally experience the impact of their own donation. But only about half of NPR's cash donors give more than 2 gifts. That is they are experienced listeners who understand how good NPR stations are but they are not 'experienced' NPR donors who give regularly and therefore experience little ambiguity about how good they feel about being a donor. It is in this context that we explore how social norms relate to donors' identity esteem.

Norms and Giving

We propose that the perceived social norm of how much others give associates with donors' membership identity esteem, but not the other three sub-constructs of donor identity esteem. This is because donors' membership identity esteem is the only sub-construct that fits the conditions described by Festinger's social comparison theories (1954) in which social norms are seen as

likely to have an effect on collective self-esteem.

Social comparison theory suggests that how good people feel about themselves depends first on their own behavior. It is only when one's own behavior does not eliminate ambiguity in their judgment that they look for information about others (Festinger, 1954). Past research in giving has shown that Public Donor Identity Esteem and Importance of Donor Identity are not associated with one's own giving (Sargeant and Shang, 2012). Festinger's theory says that if how good people feel about being a donor is not related to their own giving behavior, then how much they think others give is not likely to be relevant. The same research showed that the level of one's own giving is positively correlated with one's Private Donor Esteem associated with the Organization and Donor Identity Membership Esteem.

Festinger's social comparison (1954) theory also tells us that the more ambiguous one feels about a judgment, the more likely it is they will rely on others for information. What this implies is that the more limited information donors have about how good their organization is, the more likely they are to rely on social norms to help make that determination. However in giving situations where extensive information is available to donors about how good their organization is, they do not rely on social information to make that judgment. Giving to hospitals, arts organizations, museums and public radio stations all fits into this category. This is because donors are also likely to be beneficiaries of the organization. In these giving situations, perceived social norms should not be associated with the Private Donor Esteem associated with the organization. Rather, in the context of public radio, one's own listening habit should. This is indeed what our research will show.

Similar to the donor profile of other Public Radio stations, the donors in our research are mostly new donors so social norms are more likely to be related to their Donor Identity

Membership Esteem. This is because donors' personal giving experiences do not yet create clarity in respect of how they feel about being a donor. Yes, people do rely on the amount of their own giving to determine how good they feel about being a donor (Sargeant and Shang, 2012) but given their own giving experience is quite limited (on average about 1-2 donations per person to the nonprofit), they experience ambiguity in how they feel about being a donor. Therefore they rely on perceived social norms to make such a judgment. We thus hypothesize that

H1: Perceived social norms will be correlated with donor identity membership esteem, not with other donor identity esteem sub-constructs.

In addition, we hypothesize the direction of this association should be

H2: Perceived social norms will be negatively correlated with donor identity membership esteem.

This is because when donors are new into a particular role (in this case membership), they experience high ambiguity as to what they should do in this new role. In this scenario people are likely to observe others who are good members in order to judge what to do themselves. The same perception however can hurt how good they feel about their own membership (Brown et al, 2007).

FIELD SURVEY

Sample and Procedure

We sent out 25,895 one-page, two-sided donor surveys during a randomly selected fundraising campaign for a National Public Radio station in a large metropolitan city on the East

Coast of America. A pre-addressed envelope for returning surveys to the researchers (*not* to the radio station) was also included to reduce the possibility of social desirability bias. To encourage participation, the survey instructions stated that the research team would donate \$5 to the station for each of the first 200 completed surveys. (This \$1,000 was indeed donated.) We received 983 completed surveys (3.8% response rate) linkable to the station's database through a donor number printed at the bottom of each questionnaire¹.

¹ This seemingly low response rate is caused by the fact that we use a fluent donor ID to link survey responses to station's database. The response rate (about 15%) for the actual number of surveys returned is comparable to other surveys of a similar nature (Croson, Handy and Shang, 2009). Please see Limitations and Future Discussion sections for more detail.

Table 1 illustrates the profile of our survey respondents.

[Insert Table 1 Near Here]

Variables of Interest

Independent variables: In reporting the findings, we focus on donor perceptions of how much other station members were contributing. This was measured in the question ‘What is your closest estimate of the average contribution of STATION_NAME members?’

Dependent variables: Our dependent variables are the four types of donor identity esteem. We modified Luhtanen and Crocker’s (1992)² original 16-item scale for this purpose. Participants were asked to rate the items on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Table 2 shows the content and descriptive analysis results of these items.

[Insert Table 2 Near Here]

Control Variables: In order to test the effect of donors’ estimates of others’ donation on their

² Luhtanen and Crocker’s (1992) scale achieved all required Goodness of Fit Indexes on a University student sample. All later work applying this scale followed the convention of calculating the average score for the four factors, with the exception of Utsey and Constantine (2006) and Yousaf and Li (2015). Our Confirmatory Factor Analysis shows comparable results to previous research, i.e. a Four-Factor Correlated Factor Structure is superior to a One-Factor Model (Chi-square Difference $p < .001$). This analysis is available upon request. To confirm to the customary practice of the majority of applications of Luhtanen and Crocker’s scale, we treated the four sub-constructs as observed variables and used the average scores of the four items per sub-constructs in our follow-up analysis. Please see Footnote 5 for more detail.

donor identity esteem, we need to control for their own past giving behavior. For this purpose, we controlled for

- Average Historic Giving: How much each donor had given in the past.
- Total Number of Donations: How many donations a donor had given in the past.

In addition, we need to control for socio-economic and demographic variables, including gender, age, education, race and marital status. Due to data limitations, we use age, education, and donors' self-reported giving for two other charities as proxy variables for income (Pharoah and Tanner, 1997; Schervish *et al.*, 2006). These are our primary set of control variables.

In addition, we controlled for other sources of possible influence on donor identity esteem. People derive their overall sense of self-esteem from different areas of their organizational lives (Ferris *et al.*, 2009), from significant others (Horberg and Chen, 2010) and from their social context (Stinson *et al.*, 2010). Such sources may influence one's sense of esteem both transiently (Klimstra *et al.*, 2010) and over an extended period of time (Orth *et al.*, 2010).

In the context of public radio donations, we control for people's level of giving to other organizations, the duration of their membership, their listening habits and their satisfaction with all areas of the station's operations (Sargeant and Shang, 2012). Table 1 indicates the complete list of these variables, their interpretations, and the descriptive statistics relating to each.

These control variables are not hypothesized as mediators or moderators in our research. As an anonymous reviewer correctly pointed out, the inclusion of control variables does not contribute to theory building per se. They are merely included to show that our key finding is invariant to the inclusion of control variables that have been shown in the past to relate to why people give and how much they give.

Results

We examine perceptions of the giving of others on all four types of donor identity self-esteem using multivariate regression. Our primary model controls for donors' past giving behavior and their demographics. Table 3 shows that our findings are invariant to the inclusion of additional control variables.³ Perceived social norms are only negatively correlated with Donor Identity Membership Esteem.

Consistent with previous research, we found the amount of one's own giving is positively correlated with one's Donor Identity Membership Esteem and Private Donor Esteem Associated with the Organization.

Consistent with our theorizing, we found that the hours that participants listen to the radio station every week is positively correlated with both constructs as well. This means that people do indeed use their own listening experience to inform how good they think the organization is and how good they feel about being a donor. Perceived social norms however are only effective in areas that people experience the highest ambiguity, i.e. how good they feel about being a donor, *not* how good they think the radio station is.

³ Additional analyses with each set of additional control variables are available upon request. They show identical patterns as the ones we report in the paper. We also conducted Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modeling where we treat the four donor identity esteem factors as latent variables (Hair et al, 2014). The analyses shows the same results: perceived social norm negatively correlates with donor identity membership esteem, but does not correlate with other identity esteem sub-constructs. To conform to the customary practice of the majority of applications of Luhtanen and Crocker's scale, we reported only the multivariate regression results. The Covariance-based Structural Equation Modeling results may be obtained from the authors.

[Insert Table 3 Near Here]

DISCUSSION

In the context of giving to public radio, donors' perceptions of social norms do not appear to correlate with how they feel about the importance of their donor identity or how good they themselves (or others) think about the organization they support. The same perception of social norms is however negatively correlated with how good people think about themselves as members of the organization.

This finding has significant theoretical implications, because it links the warm-glow literature in economics (Andreoni, 1990) with the identity and consumption literature in marketing (Reed et al, 2012). It reveals the complexity in how people experience the warm-glow in giving. It is not just the warm-glow that associates with the act of giving, but also the warm-glow that associates with being a donor that theorists should be concerned with whenever they try to understand what motivates giving and how best to increase it. Perceived social norms have been shown repeatedly to increase individual giving, but this is the only study where the flip-side of perceived social norms has been documented. It is then up to the practitioners to decide whether such a trade-off is acceptable.

This study will also help practitioners to quantify the trade-off. We recall that social information has been shown to increase contributions by an average of 12% in the most effective condition (Shang and Croson, 2009). When the value contained in the social information is \$300 for example, average gift size increases from about \$100 to about \$110. Suppose originally, the

same donor believed the social norm for giving was only \$100 and now this same donor believes that the social norm is instead \$300. An increase of \$200 reduces their donor identity esteem by .2. The mean donor identity membership esteem experienced by our participants is 5.15. So this is a decrease of 3.8%. So the trade-off that nonprofits face is between a 10% increase in revenue and a 3.8% decrease in donor identity membership esteem. Since our findings are correlational in nature, it does not mean that changing donors' perception of social norms will necessarily reduce donors' membership esteem. It does, however, indicate that such a practice might harm donors. This is the first time, to our knowledge, the degree of this harm has been documented or quantified in the literature and fundraisers should be cognizant of the association.

Limitations and Further Research

Our donor identity esteem measurements were closely adopted from Luhtanen and Crocker's (1992) original measurement of collective self-esteem. This is only one example of how one may study how people feel about being a donor. Other identity constructs such as moral identity, identity centrality and identity regulation (Reed et al , 2012) can also have potentially significant theoretical implications to help us understand marketing and fundraising in the nonprofit domain. This is an area of research that requires a great deal more attention by academic researchers.

The method through which we collected our data is based on self-reported surveys. Therefore, the donor identity esteem that we measure is explicit in nature. Future research could investigate the effect that social norms might have on implicit identity esteem (Buhrmester *et al.*, 2011).

Finally, the donors in our study are primarily new donors. So a high quality longitudinal dataset collected from repeat donors might be created to study whether the relationship we

reveal in this paper changes as people gain more and more experience in what it means to be a good donor.

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Table 1: Survey variables and descriptive characteristics of the survey respondents.

		Interpretation	Value Meaning	Descriptive Statistics		
				Mean and Percentages	SD	Median
Norms						
Average Others' Giving	What is your closest estimate of the average contribution of STATION_NAME members?	Continuous Variable	\$97.45	60.23	\$87	
Total Giving						
Total Donation	Retrieved from donation database	Continuous Variable	\$120.84	102.95	\$100.00	
Total Number of Donations	Retrieved from donation database	Continuous Variable	1.32	0.73	1	
Demographic Variables						
Sex	Sex of the Donor	Female = 1, Male = 0	65.01%			
Age	Age of the Donor	Continuous Variable	50 years	13.28	50	
AdvancedDegree	Whether the donor has an advanced/graduate level degree	Advanced Degree = 1, Otherwise = 0	62.36%			
CollegeEducation	Whether the donor has a college level degree	College Degree = 1, Otherwise = 0	32.25%			
Caucasian	Whether the donor is a Caucasian	Caucasian = 1, Otherwise = 0	93.79%			
Married	Whether the donor is currently married	Married = 1, Otherwise = 0	66.43%			

Next Year Giving to A Second Charity	Self-reported giving to another charity in the next year	Continuous Variable	\$623	2687.16	\$120
Next Year Giving to A Third Charity	Self-reported giving to a second charity in the next year	Continuous Variable	\$382.94	1956.28	\$100
Membership Variables					
MembershipStatus	Whether the donor is a current donor or lapsed Donor	Current Donor = 0, Lapsed Donor = 1	17.09%		
Listening Habit Variables					
YearsListening	Number of years the donor has been listening to the station	Continuous Variable	15 years	9.14	15
HoursListening	On average, the number of hours the donor has been listening to the station every week in the past year	Continuous Variable	13 hours	15.63	10
NumberOfStations	The number of other stations the donor has been listening to in the past year.	Continuous Variable	2	1.05	3
Satisfaction					
Satisfaction	How satisfied the donor is with all areas of the station's operation (quality of the station, its programming, its member services and its fundraising).	Continuous Variable (average score of four items measured on a 1-9 point likert scale).	7.06	0.97	7

Table 2: Donor Identity Esteem items and descriptive analysis:

Identity Esteem Items	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max	Sample Size
Identity Esteem	4.98	0.72	2.53	7	983
Donor identity membership esteem:	5.15	0.90	2	7	983
1) I often feel I'm not a very supportive member of STATION_NAME	2.69	1.448	1	7	980
2) I am a worthy member of STATION_NAME.	4.93	1.289	1	7	944
3) I feel I don't have much to offer to STATION_NAME.	3.47	1.463	1	7	955
4) I am a supportive listener of STATION_NAME.	5.8	1.062	2	7	972
Importance of donor identity to self-concept:	3.46	1.28	1	7	983
1) Overall, my STATION_NAME membership has very little to do with how I feel about myself	4.96	1.789	1	7	974
2) The STATION_NAME community I belong to is an important reflection of who I am	3.82	1.76	1	7	975
3) The STATION_NAME community I belong to is unimportant to my sense of what kind of person I am	4.24	1.852	1	7	969
4) In general, belonging to STATION_NAME is an important part of my self image.	3.21	1.704	1	7	970
Private donor identity esteem associated with the organization:	6.08	0.88	2	7	983
1) I never regret that I belong to STATION_NAME	6.4	1.159	1	7	979
2) In general, I'm glad to be a member of STATION_NAME	6.35	0.94	1	7	978
3) I often feel that being a member of STATION_NAME is worthwhile	5.64	1.376	1	7	981
4) I feel good about STATION_NAME	5.93	1.119	1	7	973
Public donor identity esteem:	5.22	0.93	2	7	983
1) Overall, STATION_NAME is considered good by others	5.99	1.028	1	7	978
2) Most people consider STATION_NAME to be highly effective	5.29	1.186	1	7	970
3) In general, others respect STATION_NAME members	4.34	1.421	1	7	963
4) In general, others think that STATION_NAME is worthy	5.22	1.232	1	7	958

Table 3: Norms negatively correlate with Donor Identity Membership Esteem, but not other Identity Measures

		FULL MODEL			
		Donor Identity Membership Esteem	Importance of Donor Identity	Private Donor Esteem associated with the organization	Public Donor Identity Esteem
Constant		5.407 (3.723)	-8.125 (5.386)	-9.042 (3.372)	-1.840 (3.680)
Norms					
	Average Others' Giving	-.001* (.000)	.001 (.001)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)
Donation Behavior					
	Total Donation	1.829 (.335)	-.079 (.485)	.570 (.303)	-.401 (.331)
	Total Number of Donations	-.065 (.047)	.124 (.068)	-.029 (.042)	.049 (.046)
Social Economic Variables					
	Sex	-.051 (.058)	.086 (.084)	.173 (.052)	.152 (.057)
	Age	.002 (.002)	.007 (.003)	-.000 (.002)	-.005 (.002)
	AdvancedDegree	-.307 (.123)	-.157 (.178)	-.209 (.111)	.042 (.122)
	CollegeEducation	-.159 (.127)	-.116 (.184)	-.174 (.115)	.052 (.126)
	Caucasian	.023 (.112)	.275 (.162)	-.119 (.102)	-.066 (.111)

	Married	-.057 (.058)	.022 (.084)	.075 (.053)	-.072 (.058)
	Next Year Giving to A Second Charity	-.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)
	Next Year Giving to A Third Charity	-.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)
Membership Variables					
	MembershipStatus	-.140 (.072)	.102 (.104)	.056 (.065)	.135 (.071)
Listening Habit Variables					
	YearsListening	.015 (.003)	-.001 (.005)	.005 (.003)	.005 (.004)
	HoursListening	.003 (.002)	.003 (.003)	.003 (.002)	.004 (.002)
	NumberOfStations	-.034 (.026)	-.066 (.038)	-.001 (.024)	-.059 (.026)
Satisfaction					
	Satisfaction	.478 (.550)	-.819 (.794)	-1.339 (.497)	-.239 (.549)
	Satisfaction ^ .5	-1.301 2.858	6.256 (4.136)	9.242 (2.589)	3.288 (2.826)
<hr/>					
	N	983	983	983	983
	R-Squared	.137	.118	.268	.212
	F	9.045	7.564	20.780	15.261
	Root Mean Square Error (RMSE)	.840	1.214	.760	.830
	** p<.01				
	* P<.05				

Table 3 (continued): Norms negatively correlate with Donor Identity Membership Esteem, but not other Identity Measures

		NO ADDITIONAL CONTROLS			
		Donor Identity Membership Esteem	Importance of Donor Identity	Private Donor Esteem associated with the organization	Public Donor Identity Esteem
Constant		5.036 (.213)	2.6449 (.310)	6.047 (.212)	5.215 (.224)
Norms					
	Average Others' Giving	-.001* (.000)	.001 (.001)	.000 (.000)	.001 (.000)
Donation Behavior					
	Total Donation	1.874 (.348)	-.017 (.506)	.607 (.346)	-.317 (.365)
	Total Number of Donations	-.050 (.049)	.141 (.701)	-.015 (.048)	.061 (.051)
Social Economic Variables					
	Sex	.007 (.059)	.189 (.086)	.265 (.059)	.259 (.062)
	Age	.007 (.002)	.006 (.003)	.001 (.002)	-.003 (.002)
	AdvancedDegree	-.329 (.127)	-.243 (.185)	-.304 (.127)	-.043 (.133)
	CollegeEducation	-.188 (.132)	-.186 (.192)	-.244 (.131)	-.020 (.138)
	Caucasian	.044 (.117)	.307 (.169)	-.066 (.116)	-.029 (.122)

Married	-.059	-.002	.065	-.088
	(.060)	(.088)	(.060)	(.063)
Next Year Giving to A Second Charity	-.000	-.000	-.000	-.000
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
Next Year Giving to A Third Charity	-.000	.000	-.000	.000
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
<hr/>				
N	983	983	983	983
R-Squared	.059	.025	.033	.031
F	5.553	2.294	3.026	2.816
Root Mean Square Error (RMSE)	.875	1.272	.871	.918
** p<.01				
* P<.05				