



THE GIVING ENVIRONMENT:

Understanding Drivers for Donor Engagement

*Experimental Research
on US Donor Participation*

JANUARY 2022

Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy

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Introduction

In 2000, 55 percent of American households donated to nonprofit organizations (not including religious congregations; 66 percent of households donated overall). However, the percentage of donating households began to drop during the Great Recession, having declined to around 42 percent in 2018 (50 percent of households donated overall) just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, 2021). Despite record highs in the aggregate amount of donations by households—just under \$200 billion (Giving USA Foundation, 2021), nonprofits are concerned that the large decrease in the percentage of American households who donate will eventually reduce their funding (*The NonProfit Times*, 2020). This concern may be well-warranted, as the decrease is strongest among younger generations (Rooney, Wang, & Ottoni-Wilhelm, 2018). Equally important, the declining donor rate indicates that philanthropy is becoming less inclusive (The Faculty of the IU Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, 2020).

In addition to the current concern about declining donor rates, there is a gap between academic research investigating people's underlying motivations to donate and the messages fundraisers routinely design to encourage everyday people to voluntarily donate (Vesterlund, 2017; Ottoni-Wilhelm & Vesterlund, 2021). Therefore, the present research reports the results of an experiment designed to determine the relative effectiveness of fundraising messages in their ability to build a connection to potential everyday donors. This report is the fourth in a series of research reports, *The Giving Environment*, which explore various aspects of giving behavior.

This study aimed to better understand the impacts of fundraising messages and communications. The experiment focused on people who were likely unfamiliar with the nonprofit that designed the fundraising messages. As part of the experimental design, participants were recruited from the states immediately surrounding the state where the nonprofit is located. Therefore, all participants did not live in the same locality as the nonprofit, and the vast majority of the participants had never heard of this organization before they participated in the experiment. Hence, from the perspective of the nonprofit, it is the first attempt to connect with a majority of the participants. Previous research has shown that, compared to maintaining relationships with existing donors, it is much more difficult to connect to new donors (Barbe & Levis, 2013). However, nearly four out of ten people are amenable to donating but donate only once-in-a-while (Rooney, Ottoni-Wilhelm, Wang, & Han, 2021), suggesting that although difficult, establishing a connection to donors "new" to a nonprofit is feasible.

Because establishing a new connection is difficult, following the fundraising message, the experiment investigates people's response to a "small" request: sign-up for the nonprofit's e-newsletter, make a one-time \$5 donation, or make a monthly \$5 donation. We investigated a small request because a common persuasion technique is to begin a connection with a small request, the so-called "foot-in-the-door" technique. People who have agreed to a small request are more likely to agree to a larger request in the future (Freedman & Fraser, 1966). This is a common technique that fundraisers use when cultivating major donors (Worth, 2016), and research has also found that it can be effective in soliciting donations from everyday donors (Fennis, Janssen, & Vohs, 2009; Weyant, 1996; Guéguen & Jacob, 2001).

As stated above, the objective of this research is to determine the relative effectiveness of fundraising messages in building connection to new, everyday donors. In short, which messages connect? The second objective is to investigate why a fundraising message works. To achieve this second objective, the study measured emotional and moral responses to the fundraising message.



Research Questions

This study answers three research questions:

1. How effective are naturally-designed fundraising messages in establishing a connection to new donors?
2. What emotional and moral responses do fundraising messages induce?
3. Are fundraising messages equally effective in connecting to women and men? Are women's and men's emotional and moral responses to fundraising messages the same?

Significance

The significance of the study is that it determines the effectiveness of naturally-designed messages in terms of whether they induce a connection to people previously not familiar with the nonprofit—86 percent had not previously heard about the organization. The study is also significant because it provides theoretically-informed measurement of the emotional and moral responses to fundraising messages. Finally, the study was designed to detect differences in how women and men respond to the messages.

Overview of the Experiment

The experiment investigates fundraising messages intended to connect people to a local nonprofit. The nonprofit supports the emotional wellbeing of children hospitalized with serious illnesses. The fundraising messages have been used by the nonprofit during past fundraising campaigns. The study randomly assigned each participant to receive one of two fundraising messages, or a third brief, three-sentence narrative description of the work done by the nonprofit—the participants assigned to read the brief narrative are the control group. One of the two fundraising messages was a video lasting one minute and 43 seconds that showed the nonprofit in action, doing its work to improve the emotional well-being of ill children. The other message was a fundraising email that described the unfairness of a child being seriously ill, and the hardship experienced by the child and their family.

After receiving the messages, participants self-reported their emotional and moral responses. Then they completed a ten-minute survey. At the end of the survey, they were given the opportunity to connect to the nonprofit by signing up for the e-newsletter or making a \$5 donation.

Key Findings

The experiment found that the video was more effective than a brief narrative in establishing a connection with potential donors. Not only was the video effective for people who had not heard of the nonprofit prior to the experiment, it was also effective for people who reported no donating behavior to any nonprofits in the previous 12 months.

There is evidence that the video was effective because it induced an empathic and/or a moral principle of care response, without simultaneously inducing strong negative feelings of distress, sadness, and/or guilt.



However, the video was effective among women but not among men. The evidence suggests that this was because, although the video did not increase women's negative feelings, it did increase men's negative feelings (in addition to increasing empathic responses among both women and men).

Specific findings are summarized below.

1. Fundraising messages and connections with the nonprofit:

- A video that shows the nonprofit's work-in-progress improving the emotional well-being of seriously ill children increased participants' connections with the nonprofit (a 43 percent increase in the connection rate).
- The video caused this increase even among participants who indicated that they had not made a donation to any charitable cause in the last 12 months.

2. Fundraising messages and immediate emotional and moral responses:

- Compared to a brief narrative, the video and the email both induced participants' empathy by a large amount and in equal measure.
- The email induced participants' negative feelings (distress, sadness, and guilt) by a large amount. The video did so as well, but much less strongly.
- The video induced the participants to think about the moral principle of care—an internalized moral value that one should help those in need (Bekkers & Ottoni-Wilhelm, 2016). The email did so as well, but much less strongly.

3. Gender differences:

- The causal effect of the video on connections to the nonprofit was mainly driven by women.
- Women's and men's increased empathic response to the video and email were similar. Likewise, women's and men's increased moral responses to the video and email were similar.
- However, women's and men's negative feelings responded differently. The video did not induce negative feelings among women but did among men. (The email induced negative feelings in both women and men.)



Details of the Experiment

In this study, an experiment was conducted to explore the immediate emotional and moral responses aroused by different types of fundraising messages and whether these fundraising messages lead to connections with a nonprofit organization. The connections were measured by three actions: subscribing to the nonprofit's e-newsletter, making a one-time \$5 donation to the nonprofit, or making a monthly \$5 donation to the nonprofit.

In the experiment, participants were randomized into one of three conditions—watching a short video, reading a fundraising email, or reading a short description. All three types of messages featured a program of a local nonprofit that works to improve the emotional well-being of children who are seriously ill.

- Video condition: Participants were first provided with a short narrative about this well-being program, and then were shown a short video (1 minute and 43 seconds) that explained the objective of the program. There are many scenes of the program in action, showing it helps seriously ill children by bringing moments of playful happiness and lifting their spirits.
- Email condition: Participants were provided with the same short description about the program, followed by a fundraising email that contained text and a picture. This email described the difficulty and needs of seriously ill children and their families and explained how donations to this program can help.
- Narrative condition: Participants were given only the same short narrative about the program, without the video or email. The narrative condition serves as a control group.

Both the video and the email used in the two treatment conditions were pilot tested and were selected specifically because they had been shown to affect people's emotional responses.

Participants were recruited using the Qualtrics research market panel. A total of 1,545 American adults completed the experiment and a post-experiment survey in November 2021. Quotas were set for age (stratified by generation) and gender.¹ About 40 percent of participants were Millennials or younger, one-quarter (25%) were Gen Xers, and slightly over a-third (35%) were Boomers or older. Half of the participants were females. Approximately three-fifth (62%) of all participants reported donating to a charitable cause in the past 12 months. See Table 1 for the summary statistics of all participants.

¹ Quotas were set so that neither males nor females made up more than 50 percent of the sample, but actual percentages could be lower due to the inclusion of participants who do not identify as male and/or female.



Table 1. Summary statistics of experiment participants

	# of Participants	% of Participants
All participants	1,545	
Gender		
Female	779	50%
Male	757	49%
Other	7	0%
Refused	2	0%
Age		
Generation Z (age 18-24)	175	11%
Millennials (age 25-40)	442	29%
Generation X (age 41-56)	384	25%
Boomers (age 57-75)	426	28%
Silent Generation (age 76 or above)	118	8%
Race/Ethnicity		
Black	147	10%
Hispanic	75	5%
Non-hispanic white	1,246	81%
Other	73	5%
Unknown	4	0%
Education		
High school graduate or less	436	28%
Some college/Associate degree	603	39%
Bachelor's degree or above	506	33%
Donated to any causes in the past 12 months	963	62%



Results

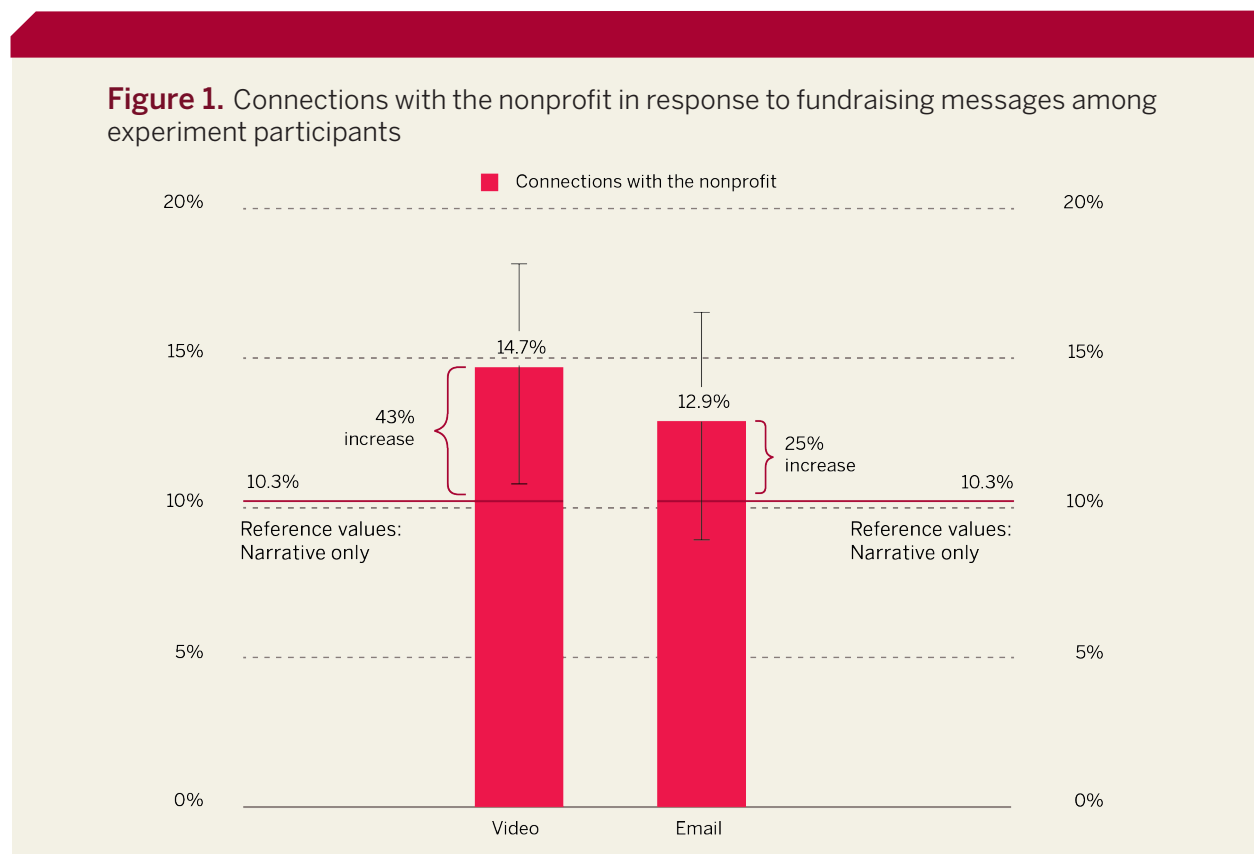
We discuss results on the connection to the nonprofit from the experiment first, and then discuss findings about emotional and moral responses to fundraising.

Connections with the nonprofit in response to fundraising media

The results indicate that the video increased connections to the nonprofit. Among participants in the control group who were given a brief narrative only, 10.3 percent made a connection to the nonprofit. However, among participants viewing the video, the connection rate was 14.7 percent. The 4.4 percentage point difference is large in practical terms—4.4/10.3 is a 43 percent increase in the connection rate—and is larger than the margin of error (which is four percentage points). The video increased connections to the nonprofit (by 4.3 percentage points) even among participants who indicated that they had not made a donation to any charitable cause in the last 12 months.

The email also increased the connection rate, but by a smaller 2.6 percentage points. Although this represents a 25 percent increase in the connection rate compared to the narrative-only condition, the 2.6 percentage points is within the margin of error.

Most of the connections were participants signing up to receive the e-newsletter. There were no statistically significant differences in the increase of one-time donations or monthly donations between the two types of fundraising messages and control group.



Note: The black bars are 95% confidence intervals showing the margin-of-error for the difference in connections caused by each message relative to the control group/narrative.



Emotional and moral responses to fundraising media

The study also measured two types of emotional responses that may be induced by fundraising messages—empathy and negative feelings (distress, sadness, and guilt). Empathy, distress, and sadness were measured by self-reported feeling-adjectives in the Emotional Response Scale: six adjectives for empathic state (such as sympathetic, tender), eight adjectives for distress state (such as distressed, upset), and four adjectives for negative state (such as sad, low-spirited) (see Batson, 1987; Batson & Coke, 1981). Self-reported feelings of guilt were measured by three adjectives (guilty, ashamed, blameworthy) drawn from the PANAS-X (Watson & Clark, 1999). In the analysis, distress, sadness, and guilt were combined into a single measure of negative feelings.

In addition, participants self-reported how much they were thinking about 11 moral principles (such as responsibility, commitment, justice; Verkaik, Bekkers, & Ottoni-Wilhelm, 2015). The eight positive valence items form a measure of how much the participant is currently thinking about a moral principle of care.

For each adjective, participants were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely) the extent that they were experiencing each emotion and thinking about the principles, while reading the fundraising message that was randomly assigned to them. Figure 2 presents the average values of emotional and moral responses induced by the three types of fundraising messages.

The results indicate that both the video and the email induced an empathic emotional response. Among participants in the brief narrative control group, the empathy level was 2.8 (recall: a seven-point scale). However, among participants viewing the video or reading the email, the empathic response was either 0.9 or 0.8 standard deviations larger.

Although the empathic responses to the video and email were similar, the negative feeling responses were different. Negative feelings among participants viewing the video increased (compared to control) by only 0.2 standard deviations, whereas among participants reading the email, negative feelings increased by 0.6 standard deviations—a three-times stronger response.

There were also differences in moral responses. Participants viewing the video were thinking about moral principles 0.4 standard deviations more than the 2.7 level among participants in the control group. In contrast, participants reading the email were thinking about moral principles only 0.2 standard deviations more (than the control group)—a 50 percent weaker response.



Figure 2. Emotional and moral responses to fundraising messages among experiment participants

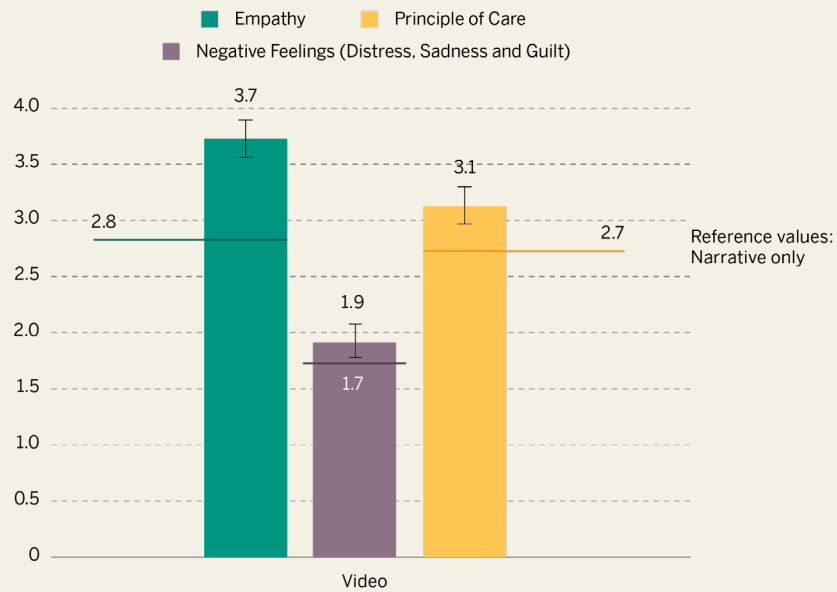
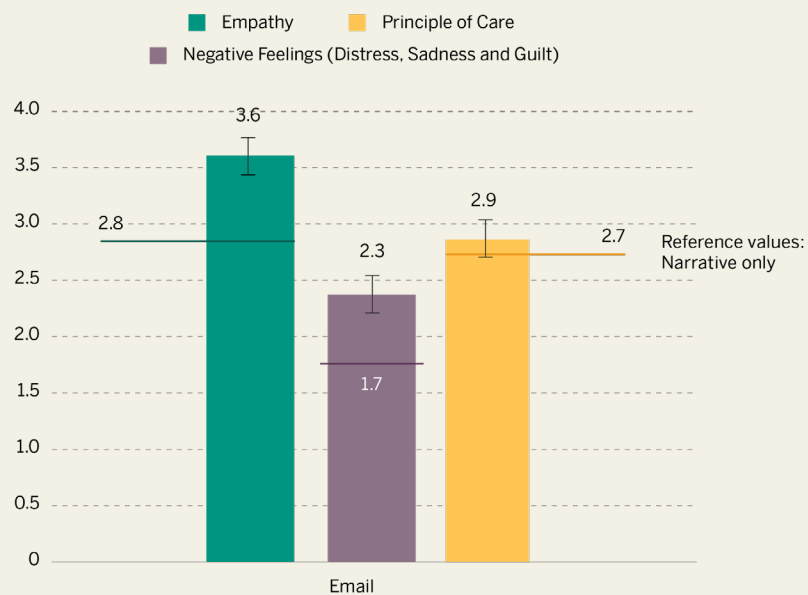


Figure 2. Emotional and moral responses to fundraising messages among experiment participants, cont'd



Note: The black bars are 95% confidence intervals showing the margin-of-error for the difference in emotional responses (green and purple bars) and moral responses (yellow bars) caused by each message relative to the control group/narrative.



Gender Differences

The causal effect of the video on connections to the nonprofit was mainly driven by women. Among the women in the control group, 8.3 percent made a connection to the nonprofit. However, among women viewing the video, the connection rate was 14.8 percent. The 6.5 percentage point difference is very large in practical terms—6.5/8.3 is a 78 percent increase in the connection rate (the margin of error is 5.5 percentage points). Women reading the email also connected more, but by a smaller 3.9 percentage points. For men, the increase in connection rates was much smaller: 2.1 and 1.6 percentage points (for video and email, respectively).²

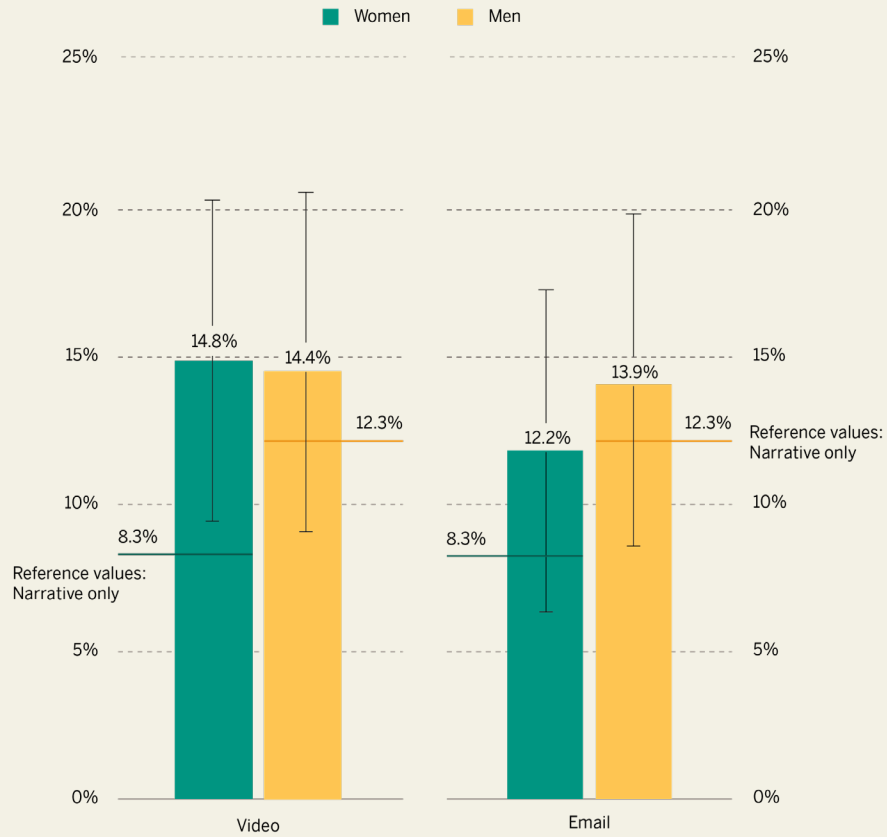
Women's and men's empathic response to the video and email were similar: for the video it was 0.9 standard deviations (for both women and men) and for the email it was 0.8 standard deviations. Likewise, women's and men's moral responses to the video (0.4) and the email (0.15 and 0.20; women and men, respectively) were similar.

However, women's and men's negative feelings responded differently to the video. The video induced a zero increase in negative feelings among women, but men's negative feelings were increased by 0.35 standard deviations. In contrast, the email induced similar negative feeling responses (0.6 and 0.7 standard deviations) among women and men.

² The connection rate among men in the control group was 12.2 percent, much larger than the 8.3 percent connection rate among women in the control group.



Figure 3. Connections with the nonprofit in response to fundraising messages among experiment participants, by gender



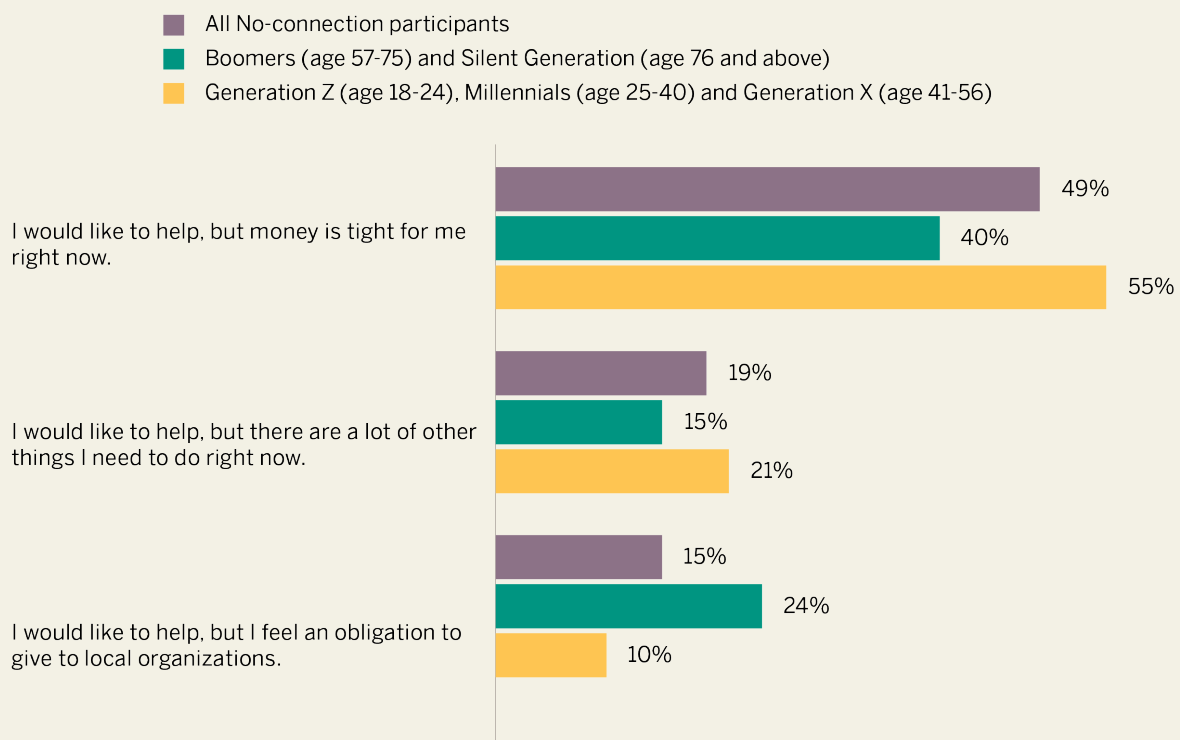
Note: The black bars are 95% confidence intervals showing the margin-of-error for the difference in connections caused by each message relative to the control group/narrative.



Reasons for not choosing any connections with the nonprofit

In the experiment, 1,351 participants chose not to be connected to the nonprofit. Nearly half (49%) of these participants indicated that limited financial resources was the main reason why they did not select any forms of connections. Fewer than one-fifth of these participants shared that they had many other things to do (19%) or they felt an obligation to give locally (15%). Although limited financial resources was the top reason chosen by participants of all ages, Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen Xers were 15 percentage points more likely than Boomers and the Silent Generation to say this. Boomers and the Silent Generation were more than twice as likely to report feeling an obligation to give locally.

Figure 4. Top 3 reasons why participants chose not to be connected, by generation



Discussion and Implications

This study determined whether different types of fundraising messages cause people to connect with a nonprofit. The result was that a video that shows the nonprofit in action, doing its work to support of the wellbeing of ill children, causes people to want to connect. An email fundraising message describing the hardship faced by ill children and their families and explaining how the nonprofit helps causes fewer people to want to connect than the video did.

The two messages induced a different pattern of emotional and moral responses. The video induced a very strong empathic response, a very small increase in negative feelings, and increased thoughts about moral principles. The email also induced a very strong empathic response, but a very large increase in negative feelings, as well as a much smaller increase in thoughts about moral principles.

These patterns suggest that the increased empathy, and perhaps also increased thoughts about moral principles, could be the mechanism through which the video worked to increase connections. Although both the video and the email increased empathy, only the video increased connections. In other words, the increase in empathy in the email is counterbalanced by the increase in negative feelings induced by the email. That did not happen with the video because the negative feeling response was very small. In addition, the increase in thoughts about moral principles was larger in video than it was with the email; thus, increased thoughts about moral principles may be part of the mechanism through which the video caused more connections.

The results also indicated that the video increased connections to the nonprofit among women but not among men. That the video's increase in induced negative feelings among women was a flat zero (but that the empathic and moral-principle responses of women and men were similar) adds further credence to the causal argument in the previous paragraph: only men responded to the video with increased negative feelings and only for men did the video not cause a large increase in connections.

There are limitations to this study. First, results about connections and induced emotional and moral responses may well be different for nonprofits whose work is less emotionally evocative or for whom moral principles have less clear implications. However, for nonprofits whose work is similar to that of the nonprofit in this study (some examples may include health-related, hunger-relief, and disaster response nonprofits), the results of this study suggest that nonprofits should design messages intended to induce empathy and thoughts about moral principles, without inadvertently inducing negative feelings. To understand how a nonprofit's fundraising messages affect feelings, they should be tested with a randomized control trial, as exemplified in this study. Furthermore, the recommendation to test, including the measurement of emotional and moral responses, applies to all nonprofits, even those dissimilar to the nonprofit in the present study.

A second limitation is that emotional and moral responses are the first part of the causal mechanism. The study did not directly measure the objectives of the participants that led them to connect. There is much evidence from laboratory experiments (Batson, 2011), using a very different design from that used in the present study, that indicate that inducing empathy does not evoke self-oriented objectives, thereby suggesting that an altruistic objective was evoked. And there is some correlational evidence (lab-based, but with a design similar to the present study) that indicates that people with a self-reported tendency to react empathically also are more likely to have altruistic objectives (Ottoni-Wilhelm & Vesterlund, 2021). All of this suggests that it is plausible to think that the empathy induced by the video evoked altruistic motivation, but providing evidence to that effect awaits future research.



However, what is clear from the present research is that a message that shows the impact of a nonprofit's work draws people in and causes them to want to connect. Importantly, showing the impact was also effective for people who indicated that they had not made a donation to any charitable cause in the last 12 months. And one message is not likely to work for all people: in the present study, women and men responded very differently. In short, expect heterogeneous responses.

Implications

The main takeaway from this research is that it is important for nonprofits to test how their fundraising messages affect donors and potential donors. Formal testing, including randomized-control trials with a control group, will give nonprofits the best information on the effects of their messages and may allow organizations to understand the pathway through which their messages influence behavior. However, many nonprofits may lack the capacity and/or funding to do this type of formal, rigorous testing. In such cases it may be possible for a nonprofit to form a partnership with academic research teams who, having the capacity and sometimes the funding, are eager to partner. Other formal (e.g., focus groups) and informal methods (e.g., circulating a piece of communication among volunteers, staff, and board members) of testing can result in insightful feedback. Nonprofits can listen for emotional and moral response themes among those who have chosen to have a relationship with the organization.

Nonprofits can also learn valuable lessons from data that they have already collected. For example, nonprofits can examine how different groups of individuals behave in response to a fundraising message. If data are tracked and coded in a database such as a customer relationship management (CRM) system, it is possible to compare the outcomes of fundraising messages by geography, gender, direct communication medium, gift amount, number of contacts, etc. Typically, existing data won't include direct measurements of emotional and moral responses, but nonprofits could do content analyses on their messages. They could rate them on the emotional and moral response dimensions and line up the results with the previously tracked data.

Finally, it is important to take into account the diversity of the team who designs fundraising messages, specifically focusing on the heterogeneity among the people with whom it is trying to connect. Furthermore, the likelihood of heterogeneous responses amplifies the need for nonprofits to conduct the kind of testing of its messages that was done in the present study. It is necessary for nonprofits to measure the emotional and moral responses induced by their messages in order to understand what messages build connections, and why.



Conclusion

In this study, all three messages included a three-sentence description: what work the nonprofit does, why that work is important, and what the potential donor could do to help. To that, the email added more detail about the hardship faced by children who are seriously ill and their families—including detail about a specific illness, the overall objective of the nonprofit, and a request for a donation. To the three-sentence description, the video added a more detailed, though still brief, explanation of the work done by the nonprofit, while at the same time visually showing what work being done and the positive impact it was making in the lives of children. The video shows children having fun. Therefore, it is possible that participants were left with a stronger impression of the improved wellbeing of children after watching the video—a stronger impression of the impact of the nonprofit—whereas participants who read the email were left with a stronger impression of the hardships faced by ill children. This difference would help to explain the stronger negative feelings induced among participants who read the email.

Communicating the needs nonprofits work to address may unintentionally cause potential donors to feel distress, sadness, and/or guilt. These are natural human emotional reactions to seeing someone in serious need. However, the inducement of negative feelings may paradoxically undercut the ability to connect with potential donors, many of whom will choose not to connect to the nonprofit in order to avoid continued negative feelings.

In addition to clearly communicating the mission of the nonprofit and specific objectives, showing the “impact” and inviting a potential donor to “own” a share of that impact may sidestep the inducement of negative emotional responses and successfully establish a connection. Audio-visual media permit a light-touch, implicit communication of the need while simultaneously showing a heavier-touch moving picture of how the nonprofit is having impact by successfully addressing the need. Such an approach mitigates negative feelings that may be unintentionally induced when the need is heavier-touch and the impact lighter-touch. Future research should examine the effects of new messages that implicitly communicate need, and more actively communicate impact.



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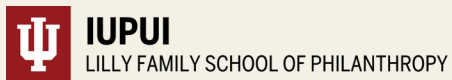
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