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## Nonprofit Fundraising and Social Identity

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#### EDITORIAL NOTE

In this critically appraised topic, Jeff Gold contributes a study of the management practices that frame potential donors for non-profit organizations with their social identity. He identifies six empirical studies published since 2014 that indicate the importance of elements of donor social identity, such as demographics, motivation, and the nature of the donation itself. He concludes that social identity theory is a fine lens for management of donor information. This evidence is important because maintaining donor relations is usually a top priority for nonprofit organizations. Gold discovers evidence in the sciences of management that supports specific recommendations for nonprofit practice, such as keenly tracking: donor profiles, donor segments, and bonding opportunities with donors.

## Nonprofit Fundraising and Social Identity

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#### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this topic paper is to determine whether nonprofits can increase their fundraising capabilities by better managing their donors' social identities. The nonprofit sector in the United States generated nearly \$1.9 trillion in gross output, is estimated to contribute 5.6% toward the country's \$25.5 trillion in gross domestic product (GDP), and contributes immeasurable benefits to society. The industry continues to face challenges as the demand for services has increased and fundraising difficulties persist. This article analyzes peer-reviewed articles focused on nonprofit fundraising using a systematic approach. My findings suggest that one of the keys to effective nonprofit fundraising is the management of information on donors' social identity. Appropriately, social identity theory is seen as an effective lens with which to meet this challenge. Several essential aspects of donor identities emerge from the research, including their demographic profiles and their motivations to give. In addition, how donors choose to give, what they actually give, and why they select one cause over another are key considerations that contribute to social identity.

Key Words: Nonprofit, fundraising, philanthropy, donors, social identity

## RESEARCH QUESTION

The question guiding this study is: “Does managing donor social identity increase nonprofit fundraising capabilities?” The Population-Intervention-Comparison-Outcome-Context (PICOC) construct addresses its key characteristics (see Table 1).

**Table 1. PICOC for Research Question**

PICOC Element	PICOC Question	Application to Review Question
Population	Who is affected by the outcome?	Those impacted are nonprofits that are focused on increasing fundraising and revenues to support their respective causes.
Intervention	What is the technique, process, or independent variable that will drive the desired behaviors?	The interventions are activities that nonprofits undertake to better understand the elements of their donors' social identities – including capturing donor profile data and motivations for giving – and the subsequent actions that better management makes possible.
Comparison	How do we measure success?	Comparisons should be made to historical results and/or to the status quo, meaning how performance would have been if no intervention focused on understanding donors' social identity had been implemented.
Outcome	What are we trying to accomplish, fix, or improve?	The ultimate goal is to increase fundraising revenues and to maintain and/or enhance nonprofit financial security.
Context	What type of organizations will be affected and under what circumstances?	The nonprofit sector is assessed with a focus on circumstances where firms experience financial challenges as a result of pandemics, wars, weather-related disasters, economic recessions, or simply shifts in social priorities. However, the findings could also be applicable to nonprofits that are not struggling financially because gaining a better understanding of donors should reap benefits to them as well.

## BACKGROUND

In 2016 approximately 1.8 million U.S. nonprofits spent nearly \$2 trillion, employed 12 million people, paid \$670 billion in wages, and accounted for 5.6% of the U.S. gross domestic product (GDP) (Molk & Sokol, 2021). The sector delivers a broad array of services to communities around the world and requires significant financial resources to remain solvent. Although some individual nonprofits may not be economically viable, their survival and growth can generate positive societal value. Many nonprofits have a long history of public service, responding to social, environmental, and economic inequalities.

Nonprofit funding originates from various sources, including fees for services, events, government grants, and individual and corporate donations (Faulk et al., 2021). Although donations increased by 5.1% in 2020, to \$471 billion, this growth does not reflect an improvement in the sector's health because fees from services declined by 30% as a result of COVID-19 (Faulk et al., 2021). The demand for nonprofit-provided services tends to grow and financial challenges tend to increase after such catastrophic events. A prime example is the nearly \$900 million raised in Ukrainian humanitarian aid between February 28, 2022 (four days after Russia's invasion) and April 14, 2022 (Taylor, 2022). In addition to pandemics, wars, and weather-related disasters, financial challenges for this sector also can be driven by economic recessions or shifts in social priorities.

Financial shortfalls experienced by nonprofits can be partially offset in three ways: 1) by drawing on financial reserves; 2) by borrowing against lines of credit; and 3) by reducing employee benefits. In addition, during COVID-19, programs like the U.S. government-sponsored Paycheck Protection Program and similar initiatives in Canada and Great Britain covered nonprofit payroll expenses and prevented the need to lay off workers (Faulk et al., 2021; Olawoye-Mann, 2021; Wiggan & Grover, 2022). However, Astrup (2021) reported that 94% of United Kingdom-based charities still

reported financial stress and that 10% were projected to face bankruptcy. Hence, what these firms and government entities can do to ensure the financial health of this sector has limits. The urgency of successful fundraising is underscored by Searing (2018), who asserts that thousands of nonprofits close annually because of financial difficulties that are caused by local, national, or global events. Embracing social identity theory in the management of their donors can help nonprofits avoid insolvency.

Social identity theory states that individuals strive to achieve positive social identities in three ways: social categorization, social identity, and social comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In one empirical study, when subjects were asked to allocate money to groups, they showed a bias toward donating to their "in-groups," defined as members of the same social category, compared to their "out-groups" (Tajfel, 1978). This connection is applicable to philanthropic endeavors.

## SEARCH STRATEGY AND FLOW OF DISCOVERY

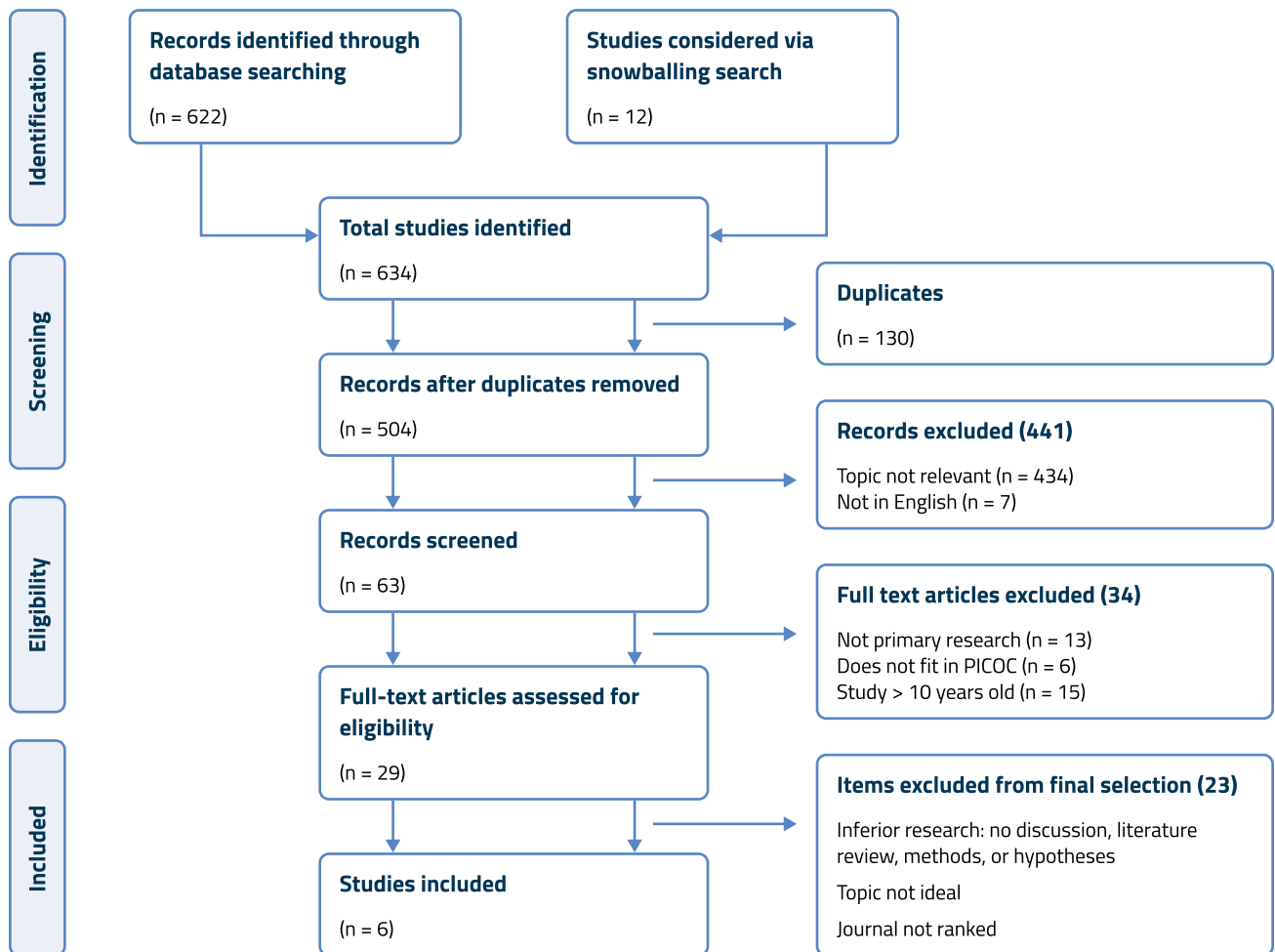
To initiate the research process, I searched for relevant articles in three different databases: Business Source Complete, ProQuest ABI/Inform Collection, and Scopus. Key words for my Boolean searches included “nonprofit,” “fundraising,” “philanthropy,” “identity,” and “theory.” I limited the searches to “peer-reviewed” and “scholarly journals,” and the initial queries resulted in 634 articles: 373 from the Business Source Complete database, 231 from the ProQuest ABI/Inform Collection database, and 18 from Scopus. I identified an additional 12 potential articles through snowballing.

I eliminated articles that were duplicates, were not available in the English language, or were published prior to 2012. I then eliminated articles based on their relevance after reviewing their titles and their abstracts. The remaining 63 articles were screened for four elements: the specific concepts related to the research question, whether the authors performed primary research, whether the authors included a literature review and discussion section, and if appropriate, whether they included a logical method section with hypotheses. Finally, I considered the quality of the journal based on its overall ranking. The final

sample included six articles that were most relevant to the research question: two from the Business Source Complete database, one each from the ProQuest ABI/Inform Collection and Scopus databases, and two identified via snowballing. The flow chart from the original 634 down to the final 6 is shown in Figure 1.

Of the six articles selected, five were quantitative and one was qualitative. The quantitative studies were based in the United States, and the qualitative study was conducted in the United Kingdom. Citations for the six articles are provided in Table 2.

Figure 1. PRISMA Diagram



**Table 2. Search Results**

1	Altamuro, J., Bierstaker, J., Huajing Chen, L., & Harris, E. (2020). Does it pay to pray? Religious nonprofits and funding. <i>Journal of Accounting and Public Policy</i> , 41, 1–19.
2	Anglin, A., Courtney, C., & Allison, T. (2022). Venturing for others, subject to role expectations? A role congruity theory approach to social venture crowd funding. <i>Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice</i> , 46(2), 421–448.
3	Drezner, N. (2018). Philanthropic mirroring: Exploring identity-based fundraising in higher education. <i>Journal of Higher Education</i> , 89(3), 261–293.
4	Karlan, D., & McConnell, M. (2014). Hey look at me: The effect of giving circles on giving. <i>Journal of Economic Behavior &amp; Organization</i> , 106, 402–412.
5	Maclean, M., Harvey, C., Gordon, J., & Shaw, E. (2015). Identity, storytelling, and the philanthropic journey. <i>Human Relations Journal</i> , 68(10), 1623–1652.
6	Touré-Tillery, M., & Fishbach, A. (2017). Too far to help: The effect of perceived distance on the expected impact and likelihood of charitable action. <i>Journal of Personality and Social Psychology</i> , 112(6), 860–876.

## RESULTS

Altamuro et al. (2020) used IRS financial data to assess whether religious nonprofits were more successful than non-religious entities and how the role of donor affiliation, religious identity, and stewardship affected fundraising. Anglin et al. (2022) compared crowdfunding campaigns for social vs. commercial/entrepreneurial ventures and looked at whether donor's identity and experiences as part of a social group (specifically, groups classifying people by gender or race) affected philanthropic actions. Drezner (2018) assessed whether university alumni engagement increased when social identity was mirrored in targeted solicitation efforts. Karlan and McConnell (2014) studied how image, social standing, and public recognition influenced donors' philanthropy in university giving circles. Maclean et al. (2015) analyzed the philanthropic transformation of successful entrepreneurs via their identity narratives. Touré-Tillery and Fishbach (2017) evaluated the effect of perceived distance on pro-social behaviors, self-image, and philanthropy. Table 3 provides further details on each study's research approach, empirical basis, analysis method, and overall validity.

The three main findings that emerged from this research on nonprofit fundraising and social identity all related to better management of different aspects of the donor community. First, the studies indicate a need to

use the demographic profiles of donors and potential donors in fundraising initiatives. Second, incorporating what motivates people to donate in these initiatives is important. Third, fundraisers need to consider the specifics (i.e., what, how, and why) of donor giving. Each of these aspects is part of the donors' social identity, which can be a key driver in philanthropic decisions.

### Managing Demographic Profiles of Donors

Anglin et al. (2022) assessed crowdfunding as a means to evaluate how gender and race identity can influence philanthropy. The study concluded that women are more likely to donate to social causes than to commercial/for-profit initiatives. That effect is even greater when race is considered because women of color are the most philanthropic based on the authors' statistical analysis. Meanwhile, men of color tend to donate more to commercial ventures over social ventures, whereby differences in white male philanthropy between commercial and social ventures were not found to be statistically significant. These examples of demographic information provide a foundation for understanding social identity that nonprofits can leverage to grow their fundraising campaigns.

As part of their analyses, Maclean et al. (2015) posed a range of profile questions to successful U.K. entrepreneurs relating to family, education, and careers. The authors tried to correlate the demographic information gathered with the charitable interests identified by this group to create individual philanthropic journeys. Such data can encompass a wide range of attributes that may shape donors' social identity and ultimately drive their philanthropy.

Touré-Tillery and Fishbach (2017) also recognized the importance of demographics and social identity in the analysis of nonprofit fundraising. The authors ran regressions to control for several different variables, including age, income, graduation year, degree or major, and whether the donor's spouse was a current or former student of a specific university. Altamuro et al. (2020) based their research on the religious affiliation or identity of donors and potential donors. Because of the nature of the study, other demographic information was not available. The authors acknowledged the lack of such data as a shortcoming and recommended including details about donors in future research. Hence, capturing donors' fundamental profiles establishes the basis of their social identities, is common in the research, and can be useful for nonprofits as they develop their fundraising strategies.

**Table 3. Evaluation of Overall Validity**

Study #	Research Approach	Empirical Basis	Analysis Method	Overall Validity
1. Altamuro et al. (2020)	Quantitative	IRS data for religious vs. non-religious groups	Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression techniques used for statistical inference	Conclusions drawn from the data with no apparent bias
2. Anglin et al. (2022)	Quantitative	Data from 2009 Kickstarter campaigns	Multi-level modeling used for statistical inference because the characteristics selected as variables may not always be independent of each other	Conclusions drawn from the data with no apparent bias except that analysis of results between races was limited to "White" vs. "Non-White" and didn't account for differences within the non-white category
3. Drezner (2018)	Quantitative based on an experiment using four different solicitation letters	Participants in a college alumni donation study	Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models to assess perceived importance of fundraising solicitation on selected variables. Multinomial logistic regression to assess propensity to give to fundraising solicitation	Conclusions drawn from the data with no apparent bias. The solicitation letters randomly varied the gender, race/ethnicity, and names of the student that would benefit from the donation
4. Karlan & McConnell (2014)	Quantitative via a randomized field experiment and a laboratory study	Yale University donors	Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression techniques used for statistical inference	Conclusions drawn from the data with no apparent bias via random assignment of volunteers to phone different tiers of donors and the use of a control group
5. Maclean et al. (2015)	Qualitative life history interviews	Wealthy and super-wealthy UK entrepreneurs	Theoretical inference	Conclusions drawn from interview results but limited to wealthy individuals in the U.K.
6. Touré-Tillery & Fishbach (2017)	Quantitative based on six studies - both lab and field experiments - and secondary data from fundraising campaigns	Alumni of a private US university	For the six studies, the following statistical techniques were used: ANOVA, standard regression, logistic regression, Poisson regression, binary logistic regression	Conclusions drawn from the data with no apparent bias using different methods to control perceived distance

**Incorporating What Motivates People to Donate**

Maclean et al. (2015), after studying the motivations behind the philanthropic activities of the U.K. entrepreneurs, concluded that generosity is either socially-oriented or self-oriented. The authors described social orientation as "helping others help themselves" and "making a difference." Self-orientation was characterized by either: 1) personal fulfillment, which Andreoni (1990) called the "warm glow theory" or "impure altruism," or 2) identity transition, which was portrayed either as being part of something larger than oneself or as creating a legacy.

This type of information – what motivates donors to establish or reestablish their identities – can also be incorporated into nonprofits' fundraising strategies.

Altamuro et al. (2020) used nonprofit mission statements to codify whether the nonprofits in their research were religious or non-religious. The authors used a list consisting of more than 200 keywords that could add specificity to the firm's *raison d'être* (reason for being). They concluded that this clarity of purpose comes across to potential donors, who are then motivated to contribute if a nonprofit's mission

is consistent with their individual identities, objectives, and interests.

Drezner (2018) used an identity-based motivation model to develop a philanthropic mirroring framework. The research emphasized connections between social identity and philanthropy. Looking at university alumni engagement, the author found that solicitation initiatives used mirroring to motivate charitable giving. Alumni who had some common identity with students profiled in fundraising solicitations were likely to make larger donations. However, Drezner (2018) also found that social identity, while

necessary, was not sufficient; social distance also was a factor in philanthropic decisions.

Similarly, Touré-Tillery and Fishbach (2017) stressed the importance of distance and perceived distance in philanthropy. The authors conducted experiments on direct appeals to potential donors using a letter to university alumni that delivered different messages concerning distance. Their conclusion was that donations to prosocial causes that have *visible* effects are powerful motivators. Thus, potential donors are more motivated to take action to help nearby (vs. faraway) causes. However, the authors also established that the motivation for giving could be genuinely altruistic or driven by what they called “signaling,” which is more related to social identity.

### Considering the Specifics of Donor Giving

There are additional aspects of social identity and philanthropy to consider with respect to the specifics of the actual donation. Clearly, money is the more prominent type of donation in the nonprofit world, and it appears in all of the studies included in this review (Altamuro et al., 2020; Anglin et al., 2022; Drezner, 2018; Karlan & McConnell, 2014; Maclean et al., 2015; Touré-Tillery & Fishbach, 2017). Although monetary donations are common and levels of giving may be part of one’s social identity, volunteering time and expertise also may be a part of the identity equation. Donating time is prevalent in Karlan and McConnell (2014), where volunteers participated in phone-a-thons. In Maclean et al. (2015), the engagement in volunteer activities was shown to be a key part of the entrepreneurs’ journeys to self-fulfillment. Touré-Tillery and Fishbach (2017) also acknowledged the profound effect that volunteering time and energy can have on local communities and society as a whole. Shehu et al. (2015) stressed the importance of considering “what” is being donated – money, time, or even blood – because it can have a bearing on a nonprofit’s fundraising strategy.

Similarly, the articles convey nuances in how donations are made. Altamuro et al. (2020) differentiated between restricted gifts and unrestricted gifts, concluding that those who identified and were affiliated with religious institutions were more likely to donate to such institutions without imposing restrictions. In contrast, donors of restricted gifts specifically designate how funds are to be used, and these donations perhaps are even more strongly connected with a donor’s individual interests and identity. Drezner (2018) noted that university solicitations often request semi-restricted funds that are awarded to students to offset tuition. Such solicitations relied on identity-based messaging that focused on the donor’s interest in either supporting financial need or merit. Finally, Karlan and McConnell (2014) examined giving circles as a means to raise funds by assessing three tiers of donors: friends (\$100–\$500), benefactors (\$500–\$1000), and patrons (more than \$1000). Establishing these recognition levels proved to be successful because individuals were driven by the public identity of their giving, as well as by the opportunity to influence or inspire their peers to contribute. These specific examples indicate that people donate to influence their social identity and that such factors should be considered in how nonprofits address fundraising.

The research also explores why people select certain nonprofits over others. Altamuro et al. (2020) concluded that good stewardship is a prime consideration in the philanthropic decision. A donor’s desire to be associated with organizations that are perceived as ethical and trustworthy (e.g., some religious institutions) is logical and consistent with social identity theory. One of the conclusions by Touré-Tillery and Fishbach (2017) in their research on philanthropy, proximity, and signaling was that individuals may select one charity over another to boost their self-image or social standing. Supphellen and Nelson (2001) also explored why people select certain nonprofits over others. Among their findings was the need for shared values, which often is linked with social identity. Table 4 summarizes details of the key findings extracted from each of the articles.

## CONCLUSION

Successful for-profit businesses make it a priority to develop a keen awareness of their customers. Similarly, nonprofits need to make management of donor information a top priority. Social identity theory provides an applicable lens for this undertaking. Collecting and analyzing demographic profiles creates a knowledge base, and capturing donor motivations builds on this foundation. Assessing what, how, and why people contribute to specific causes rounds out this intelligence. If these elements of donor social identity can be effectively synthesized, nonprofits will be able to optimize their fundraising capabilities.

## LIMITATIONS

Although this research has allowed findings and recommendations to emerge, the approach has some limitations. First, the number of relevant articles for this review was limited. A more intense systematic review would include more evidence that would minimize selection bias as well as any reliability or validity issues. A broader literature review might have incorporated a more diverse population of nonprofits and donors, thus resulting in different findings and conclusions. Second, the usefulness of the specific recommendations drawn from this more limited literature review also may be limited for smaller nonprofits (especially) because they may have neither the funding nor the expertise to capture a comprehensive profile of their donors. Third, the world is not static; donor demographics change, sometimes gradually and sometimes quickly. Fundraising strategies need to be dynamic as well. The hope is that even partial implementation of the recommendations offered here can generate some benefit for nonprofits to support their mission.



**Table 4. Key Findings and Translation**

Study #	Finding 1 (Donor Profiles)	Finding 2 (Donor Motivations)	Finding 3 (Donation Specifics)
1. Altamuro et al. (2020)	Research focused on religion and religious institutions, which was a key demographic aspect of donors and potential donors. The authors recommended that future research include additional demographic factors.	Donors are motivated to support nonprofit (religious) causes if there is a clarity of purpose that is consistent with their individual beliefs and objectives.	Research focused on solely monetary donations. Data was obtained from the nonprofits' IRS filings – specifically, their Form 990s, which include (among other things) how much is received in donations.
2. Anglin et al. (2022)	Research focused on the effects of race and gender on crowdfunding for social vs. commercial endeavors.	Main research didn't focus on motivation, but future research recommendations included studying the motives of social entrepreneurs.	Research focused on monetary donations to social vs. entrepreneurial ventures.
3. Drezner (2018)		Research emphasized connections between identity and philanthropy. University alumni engagement and solicitation initiatives used mirroring of common identity to motivate giving.	Research focused on monetary donations to universities but differentiated between restricted, unrestricted, and semi-restricted donations. There was also mention of enlisting alumni to volunteer their time to annual campaigns.
4. Karlan & McConnell (2014)	Research considered gender, age, and marital status.	Research focused on social image as one of the principal motivators for giving publicly to charities.	Research explored cash donations made via giving circles that incorporated recognition levels.
5. Maclean et al. (2015)	The profiles of successful U.K. entrepreneurs included information on families, education, and careers. Non-demographic characteristics were included in the stories that they related concerning their philanthropic journeys.	The study differentiated socially oriented ("helping others help themselves") vs. self oriented motivation ("impure altruism") for donating to nonprofits.	Individuals donated not just money but also time and expertise to causes they believed in.
6. Touré-Tillery & Fishbach (2017)	The researchers recognized how demographics can influence propensity to donate by running regressions on the following donor profile factors: age, income, graduation year, degree/major, and whether the alumnus's/alumna's spouse was a current or former student of the university.	Research explored direct appeals to potential university donors that used different messages concerning distance to determine its influence as a motivator. Findings concluded that appeals that were more specific rather than general were usually more effective in motivating donors. Authors also differentiated motivation for giving between altruism vs. "signaling," which is related to social identity.	Research focused on monetary donations, assessing how distance affected the likelihood of donating to nearby vs. faraway causes.
Translation	Demographic information is a key building block in creating donor profiles that can establish social identity.	Motivation for giving is also a component of information that helps nonprofits better understand their donors.	Different elements of the actual donation are also a key consideration that can help define social identity.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Although nonprofits face tremendous challenges in fulfilling their missions, they can take several actions to improve their financial position to support their work. The following recommendations can enhance their fundraising capabilities by leveraging different aspects of donor social identity:

*Develop and maintain comprehensive donor profiles.* This need is most apparent in the research of Anglin et al. (2022), which shows the success that social ventures experienced by focusing on gender and race. However, different donor aspects appear in several of the studies, including: 1) religion (Altamuro et al., 2020); 2) gender, age, and marital status (Karlan & McConnell, 2014); and 3) families, education, and careers (Maclean et al., 2015). Several commercial software tools are available that facilitate the management of such data. For example, Donorperfect, a customer relations management (CRM) tool that allows firms to store donor and prospective donor contact information and manage fundraising campaigns, was created specifically for nonprofits.

*Use donor segmentation.* The importance of such strategies was evident in several of the articles reviewed. In Altamuro et al. (2020), segmentation was apparent in terms of religious affiliation, while Karlan and McConnell (2014) segmented by donors' level of giving. Maclean et al. (2015) segmented by philanthropic interest, while Touré-Tillery and Fishbach (2017) studied distance and perceived distance as a form of segmentation. Jungbok (2015) recommended the use of for-profit techniques for nonprofit marketing, including segmenting donors by personality, attitudes, and socioeconomic characteristics.

*Identify opportunities that can bond donors with specific nonprofits or specific initiatives.* Two of the studies focused their research on universities and their alumni – a context that already entails, in most cases, an inherent bond (Drezner, 2018; Touré-Tillery & Fishbach, 2017). Similarly, commonality in terms of religious beliefs can create an intrinsic bond (Altamuro et al., 2020). Those

who lead fundraising campaigns need to identify additional bonds and also need to fully leverage them.

### Recommendations for Future Research

This topic review points to one area where the research was not conclusive: whether distance is an obstacle to philanthropy that potentially negates the advantages of a common social identity. Toure-Tillery and Fishbach (2017) found that people were more willing to support nearby causes rather than distant ones. However, Drezner's (2018) discussion of "social closeness" and "affective distance" indicates that empathy and mirroring can create "nearness" and overcome the absence of proximity. The humanitarian aid raised for Ukraine from all over the world might be evidence that distance does not always matter. Hence, future research may be warranted to address potentially conflicting evidence related social identity, philanthropy, and social distance.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Jeff Gold** is an Adjunct Professor at the University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC) where he teaches several courses in Finance and Economics. He combines years of financial, strategic planning, engineering, and operations expertise with leadership success to illuminate practical experiences with his students. While employed by Verizon, Jeff was involved in groundbreaking network transformation initiatives for which he was granted two U.S. patents. Skills honed in the corporate world are now being applied to the non-profit sector as Jeff also serves as the Vice President-Finance for a local non-profit. Jeff holds a BA in Economics and Business Administration from Rutgers University and an MBA from the University of Maryland Smith School of Business. He is currently a Doctor of Business Administration candidate at UMGC where one of his areas of research is the intersection of environmental initiatives and the economy.