



Original Article

Factors affecting customers' willingness to donate in online nonprofit communities

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Abstract: Online nonprofit communities have increasingly become crucial platforms for fostering customer engagement, providing support, and encouraging collective action. In the context of digital environments, customer engagement—comprising cognitive, emotional, and activating elements—plays a pivotal role in producing several outcomes, including willingness to donate. While prior studies have explored customer engagement in online brand communities, research in the nonprofit sector—where engaged communities willingly contribute their time, finances, and effort toward a shared mission—is still scant. This study applies Social Identity Theory (SIT) to investigate how customer engagement and sense of belonging impact willingness to donate in online nonprofit communities. Data were primarily collected through an online survey questionnaire targeting customers in nonprofit organizations communities. Results indicate that customer engagement significantly influences willingness to donate in this context. Moreover, the study identifies that sense of belonging also plays a critical role in enhancing willingness to donate among participants.

Keywords: Engagement, nonprofit, sense of belonging, willingness to donate.

1. Introduction

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) often focus on dealing with social, environmental, or cultural issues that may be overlooked by government or for-profit sectors, therefore filling service gaps and advocating for sidelined or diminished communities. Nonprofits unite individuals around common goals and causes, promoting a sense of community and collective

action (Astikainen, 2006). According to Pope et al. (2009), in the context of NPOs, nonprofit customers typically categorize into three groups: donors, clients, and volunteers. Clients benefit directly from services, volunteers work for meaningful experiences and opportunities to contribute, while donors emphasize efficient resource allocation (Keating & Frumkin, 2003). As digital platforms have evolved to facilitate interaction, collaboration, and resource

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utilization, online nonprofit communities have become instrumental in connecting and engaging nonprofits with their customers (Suh, 2022). These communities rely heavily on fundraising and donations to sustain their operations effectively (Seitel, 2011). Consequently, nonprofit organizations (NPOs) face growing pressure to innovate their fundraising methods to address unmet needs. Utilizing online communities to seek donations from the public, both locally and globally, has emerged as a popular and cost-effective approach for NPOs to secure essential resources. Understanding the factors influencing individuals' willingness to donate in online communities can hold significant implications for nonprofit sectors worldwide.

Research about NPOs has explored social factors that influence individuals' willingness to donate. Studies indicate that peer pressure, social norms, and connections within social networks can significantly affect donation behaviors (Wan et al., 2016; Sura et al., 2017). Members who join and follow online nonprofit communities can view posts and engage with them through actions like liking, sharing, and commenting (Araujo & Neijens, 2012). Each interaction has the potential to spread information in customers' networks. Customers may adopt valuable information and enhance its impact by sharing and creating derivative content (Harmeling et al., 2017). This behavior can distinguish an organization's efforts and needs, especially considering that potential donors typically experience a decision-making process to select which NPO to support, often influenced by interactions and clear information availability (Alves et al., 2016). However, extant literature about under which conditions willingness to donate is facilitated in the context of NPO online communities has shown inconsistent findings. Therefore, there is a need for empirical investigation into the diverse motivations for customers' willingness to donate in online nonprofit communities.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT), introduced by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979), is a

psychological framework aiming to explain intergroup behavior. It explores how social identities shape both individual and collective actions, offering valuable insights into addressing societal issues, promoting harmony between groups, and nurturing inclusive communities. Tajfel and Turner (1979) propose that individuals define themselves in relation to social groups, and these identifications play a crucial role in shaping and enhancing self-identity. They argue that human relationships extend in a continuum from purely personal to entirely collective, where interactions within group contexts diminish individual uniqueness. This shift from interpersonal to intergroup dynamics alters personal perceptions of self and others. Additionally, SIT explains that people participate in online communities primarily for social motives such as friendship, emotional support, and expression of thoughts and feelings (Park et al., 2009). The theory emphasizes the importance of "desire to belong", suggesting that group identifications significantly contribute to individuals' self-esteem and social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

2.2. Customers' willingness to donate in online nonprofit communities

Research about financial donations has primarily focused on reward-based funding, where individuals contribute small amounts to projects in exchange for rewards. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are crucial factors influencing donors' decisions in this context (Ryu & Kim, 2016). Extrinsic motivations, particularly related to the rewards offered, have been found to positively influence investment decisions (Zhang et al., 2019). However, in the case of NPOs, donors do not receive tangible returns, and economic incentives are unlikely to be the primary motivator. Intrinsic motivations such as interest, enjoyment, altruism, and a sense of belonging have been extensively discussed in the literature on reward-based crowdfunding, but there is limited empirical evidence (Zhang & Chen, 2019). Studies have presented conflicting findings regarding the impact of intrinsic motivations on donation decisions across different projects. While Bretschneider and Leimeister (2017) found that altruism does not

significantly predict donation intentions, Ryu et al. (2020) reported contradictory results.

Previous studies have explored various factors that influence willingness to donate (WTD) in the nonprofit context. Sura et al. (2017) and Li et al. (2018) investigated how external factors such as project and platform characteristics impact donation intentions, not mentioning individual motivations. Meanwhile, Liu et al. (2018), Wang et al. (2019), and Chen et al. (2019) examined the effects of personal factors such as trust, empathy, identity, and norms on donation behaviors. Prior literature indicates that donors are inclined to support organizations they have trust in and are dedicated to (Muller et al., 2014). Similarly, Brady et al. (2002) demonstrated that individuals contribute to causes or organizations due to their emotional connection or attachment.

2.3. Customer engagement in online nonprofit communities

Recently, customer engagement (CE) has gained a lot of attention from scholars in business administration and marketing for its significance as a key construct in customer-brand relationships (Dwivedi, 2015). Unlike other forms of customer engagement with an organization or service, customer engagement in the context of an online community provides detailed insights into how customers interact vigorously with a focal brand (van Doorn et al., 2010; Brodie et al., 2011). This concept applies a brand-centric perspective, emphasizing how individual customers engage with brands as the central "object" of their engagement (Hollebeek, 2011). Existing literature shows that customer engagement has been approached from various perspectives: as an emotional state (Brodie et al., 2011), a behavioral experience (Hollebeek et al., 2017), and a mental process (Bowden, 2009). Despite these different viewpoints, a number of researchers agree that the customer is multidimensional, involving cognitive process, emotional, and behavioral dimensions (Wirtz et al., 2013). Accordingly, CE is denoted as customers' positively valenced cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activities during or related to brand interactions, which are expressed through cognitive processing, affection, and activation (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

Customers who are actively engaged in online nonprofit communities can contribute to NPOs directly by their subsequent behaviors and indirectly through positive word-of-mouth (Algharabat et al., 2018). Customers' behavioral intentions suggest their willingness to engage in activities that are beneficial to the company and to explore other brand-related experiences (Santini et al., 2020). Customer engagement and perceived personal relevance play significant roles in stimulating behavioral intentions and actions, such as willingness to donate or value co-creation (Algharabat et al., 2018; Matos & Fernandes, 2021), which contribute to the organizational performance of the NPOs. Moreover, customers' engagement predictably utilize online nonprofit communities and electronic WOM to spread favorable information and share their experiences (Chu and Kim, 2011), thus creating value for NPOs (Vivek et al., 2012).

2.3. Sense of belonging to a community

Maslow (1954) characterized belonging as a fundamental human necessity while Anant (1966) defines belonging as the feeling of personal involvement within a social system, where individuals perceive themselves as critical and integral parts of that system. On this ground, Davila and Garcia (2012) outline key factors in fostering a sense of belonging, including feeling valued, needed, and accepted by others, groups, or environments, as well as perceiving that one's attributes align with or complement those of others in the system. This implies experiencing a sense of relevance or analogy through shared or complementary characteristics. The fundamental aspect of the need for belonging is the psychological feeling of being connected with others or feeling secure within a unit (Ryan & Deci, 2004). Humans inherently seek to live in a community and be part of groups that provide a sense of identity and social reference. The desire for belonging is a primary motivation for forming groups, communities, and societies. Essentially, all individuals experience a common need to belong and identify themselves through shared identification (Peter et al. 2015).

Sense of belonging to a community refers to the perception of being part of a collective that provides security and support (Newbrough &

Chavis, 1986). This concept comprises several components: emotional safety and acceptance (spirit), reciprocal influence and trust among individuals and the community (influence and trust), fulfillment of needs through shared values (integration of fulfillment of needs), and an emotional connection derived from shared community experiences and history (shared emotional connection) (McMillan, 2011). Individuals who identify with communal values also tend to feel a strong sense of belonging to their community and are likely to participate actively in activities aimed at its improvement (Perkins & Long, 2002). Research indicates that those who feel a strong community belongingness often believe that the community bears responsibility for meeting its members' social needs (Cicognani et al., 2008), fostering greater community involvement based on these sentiments and beliefs (Boyd et al., 2016).

3. Hypothesis development and research model

Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) confirmed that different levels of customer engagement affect the resources necessary for organizational operations, such as funding or donations. In the context of funding resources, stimulating emotional responses through customer engagement is applied to generate customers' empathy and willingness to donate (Herzenstein et al., 2011). Cognitive and affective dimensions of customer engagement can be triggered through an organization's social media posts, particularly when these demonstrate value and relevance to their audience. Nonprofit customer engagement can lead to behavioral outcomes, since customers' interaction in the online nonprofit community posts results in donations. According to Nafidzah (2020), there is a relationship between emotional attachment and the decision to donate, highlighting how customer engagement influences donation willingness. Taufiqurohman's study (2022) suggests that willingness to donate correlates with customer engagement, where customers who feel a sense of involvement and trust in an organization are more inclined to donate. Additionally, Azizah (2021) notes that trust in an organization impacts individuals' decisions to

donate, indicating that customer engagement influences donation intentions. This finding suggests that initial customer involvement can lead to appreciation of services or other factors that gain their attention and trust, finally ending in donating decisions (Dinda & Alisa, 2023). Thus, this study proposes the hypothesis as below:

H1: There is a positive relationship between customer engagement and willingness to donate in the context of online nonprofit communities.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) posits that individuals categorize themselves and others into different social groups, deriving their sense of identity and self-esteem from these group memberships. People form their identities in relation to these social groups, and these identifications are crucial for developing and maintaining their self-identity. This theory emphasizes the importance of belongingness to groups, where members feel interconnected and valued, and share the belief that their needs will be met through their collective commitment (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This sense of belonging motivates members to advocate for their community, support its objectives, and attract resources, including financial and volunteer contributions, which are vital for non-profit organizations (Lee & Shon, 2023). Prior research indicates that higher levels of community belongingness correlate with increased participation in activities aimed at improving the community (Perkins & Long, 2002). Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: There is a positive relationship between sense of belonging and willingness to donate in online nonprofit communities.

Based on the above discussion, the research model in this study is proposed as follows:

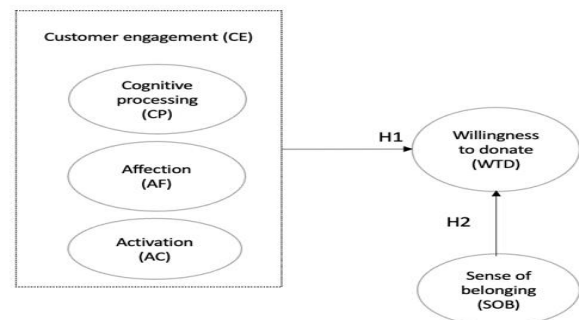


Figure 1: The research model

Source: Authors.

4. Research method

A quantitative survey was conducted in May 2024, to gather data for empirically testing the research framework in online communities of NPOs. All survey items were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The targeted sample size for the study was approximately 360 respondents, to ensure 20 cases per observable independent variable (Hair et al., 2018). Consequently, 504 valid responses were collected from individuals in Vietnam who follow Facebook pages of NPOs focusing on charity activities and fundraising.

Statista (2024) reports that Facebook is the most popular platform among Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z, thus this study focused on Facebook pages as the primary engagement tool for NPOs. Respondents were filtered based on their frequency of following news feeds from their favorite NPO's Facebook page. Those who

confirmed regular engagement were directed to consider their most preferred NPO's page, with the organization's specific name automatically applied throughout the survey questionnaire.

Demographically, the sample comprised 42.5% males (214 individuals) and 55.8% females (281 individuals). The age distribution showed 62.3% of respondents were aged 18-30 years, with 29.4% aged 31-50 years. Students represented the largest occupational group at 48%, followed by officers (8.1%) and business people (11.1%). Geographically, participants hailed from various regions including Hanoi (58.9%), Da Nang (5.8%), Ho Chi Minh City (20.6%), and other provinces (14.7%). This diverse demographic profile provides comprehensive insights into the behavior of different segments of NPO followers online in Vietnam. Measurement items used in the study were adapted from previous research, detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Measurement scales

Construct	Authors
CE "cognitive processing" (CP1-CP3)	
CP1: Following its Facebook page gets me to think about [Non-profit organization X].	Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie (2014)
CP2: I think about [Non-profit organization X] a lot when I'm following its Facebook page.	
CP3: Following its Facebook page stimulates my interest in learning more about [Non-profit organization X].	
CE "affection" factor (AF1-AF4)	
AF1: I feel very positive when I follow [Non-profit organization X].	Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie (2014)
AF2: Following [Non-profit organization X] makes me happy.	
AF3: I feel good when I follow [Non-profit organization X].	
AF4: I'm proud to follow [Non-profit organization X].	
CE "activation" factor (AC1-AC3)	
AC1: I spend a lot of time following [Non-profit organization X] compared to other non-profit organizations.	Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie (2014)
AC2: Whenever I'm following my non-profit social networking sites, I usually follow [Non-profit organization X].	
AC3: I follow [Non-profit organization X] the most.	
Willingness to donate (WTD1- WTD3)	
WTD1: I would donate to [Non-profit organization X].	Algharabat et al (2018)
WTD2: I would recommend donating to the cause of [Non-profit organization X].	
WTD3: [Non-profit organization X] will be my first choice to donate to in the future.	
Sense of belonging (SOB1-SOB4)	
SOB1: I feel a strong sense of belonging to the [Non-profit organization X] online community.	Zhao et al (2012)
SOB2: I feel I am a member of the [Non-profit organization X] online community.	
SOB3: I feel other [Non-profit organization X] online community members are my close friends.	
SOB4: I like other members of the [Non-profit organization X] online community.	

Source: Authors.

4. Findings

The researchers utilized SPSS and AMOS software to analyze both the measurement model (confirmatory factor analyses) and the structural model (the proposed conceptual model and hypotheses). Cronbach’s Alpha for Cognitive processing, Affection, Activation, Sense of Belonging and Willingness to donate were 0.801, 0.858, 0.818, 0.805, and 0.850 respectively, indicating the measures high reliability. In terms of Exploratory Factor Analysis, the KMO coefficient was 0.848 and the Barlett’s test is statistically significant at 0.000 (sig. < .05), indicating that the EFA is appropriate. At an eigenvalue of 1.136, five factors were identified from 17 observed variables, collectively explaining 71.056% of the total variance (> 50%). There were no additional factors beyond those initially hypothesized in the theoretical framework. Each observed variable exhibited factor loading coefficients exceeding 0.5, with each item loading exclusively on one factor. None of the variable items were excluded during this stage. Thus, these 17 observed items satisfied the criteria for Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), confirming adequate convergent and discriminant validity.

Customer engagement (CE) was measured as a second-order construct, and the model fit

was evaluated. The results indicate an adequate fit of the model, supported by all indices falling within acceptable thresholds ($\chi^2 = 58.712$, $df = 31$; and $\chi^2/df = 1.894$), $CFI = 0.987$, $GFI = 0.977$, $TLI = 0.982$, and $RMSEA = 0.042$ (see Figure 2 and Table 2). The first-order constructs (CP, AF, AC) showed significant coefficients with CE as the second-order construct. Discriminant validity was confirmed in Table 3 through Pearson correlations between constructs and the square roots of average variance extracted, all of which were satisfactory.

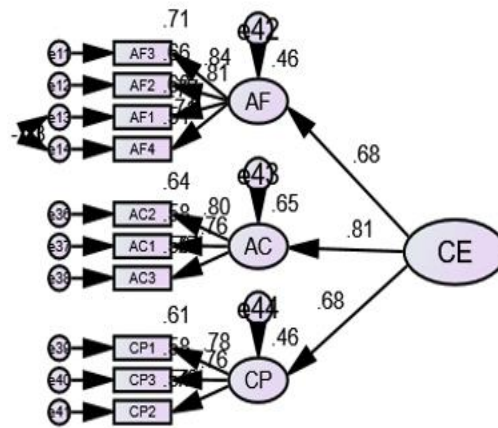


Figure 1: The research model
Source: Authors.

Table 2: Results of the CFA: Using a second-order conceptualization of CE

Construct to Item	Standardized Loading	SE	t-value	P
CP1 <--- CP	0.781			
CP2 <--- CP	0.732	0.07	14.67	***
CP3 <--- CP	0.762	0.07	15.03	***
AF1 <--- AF	0.774	0.05	18.45	***
AF2 <--- AF	0.809	0.05	20.3	***
AF3 <--- AF	0.841			
AF4 <--- AF	0.715	0.06	16.59	***
AC1 <--- AC	0.763	0.06	16.24	***
AC2 <--- AC	0.803			
AC3 <--- AC	0.765	0.06	16.28	***

Source: Authors.

Table 3: Discriminant validity of CE

Construct	AF	AC	CP
AF	0.786		
AC	0.547***	0.777	
CP	0.461***	0.549***	0.758

Source: Authors.

Table 4: Results of the CFA for all constructs

Construct to Item	Standardized Loading	SE	t-value	P
AF1 <--- AF	.768			
AF2 <--- AF	.809	.055	18.159	***
AF3 <--- AF	.840	.056	18.829	***
AF4 <--- AF	.706	.061	15.698	***
SOB1 <--- SOB	.785			
SOB2 <--- SOB	.744	.068	14.895	***
SOB3 <--- SOB	.677	.075	13.806	***
SOB4 <--- SOB	.654	.062	13.373	***
WTD1 <--- WTD	.821			
WTD2 <--- WTD	.840	.051	19.030	***
WTD3 <--- WTD	.768	.051	17.750	***
AC1 <--- AC	.762			
AC2 <--- AC	.802	.060	16.268	***
AC3 <--- AC	.766	.064	15.804	***
CP1 <--- CP	.786			
CP2 <--- CP	.727	.066	14.760	***
CP3 <--- CP	.761	.064	15.198	***

Source: Authors .

The fit indices for the measurement model were all within recommended thresholds ($\chi^2 = 201.727$, $df = 109$, $\chi^2/df = 1.851$, CFI = 0.975, GFI = 0.954, TLI = 0.969, and RMSEA = 0.041) (Hu & Bentler, 1999). These results suggest that the measurement model adequately fits the observed data.

Structural equation modeling was conducted to test the hypotheses proposed in the research model (see Figure 3).

The findings indicate that all constructs exhibit Cronbach's alpha coefficients greater than 0.70. Additionally, the observed items significantly loaded onto their respective constructs with standardized values exceeding 0.60 (Hair et al., 2009). All fit indices associated with the measurement model were found to be within the recommended range ($\chi^2 = 232.124$, $df = 113$, $\chi^2/df = 2.054$, CFI = 0.968, GFI = 0.949, TLI = 0.961, and RMSEA = 0.046) (Hu and Bentler,

1999). These results suggest that the measurement model adequately fits the observed data.

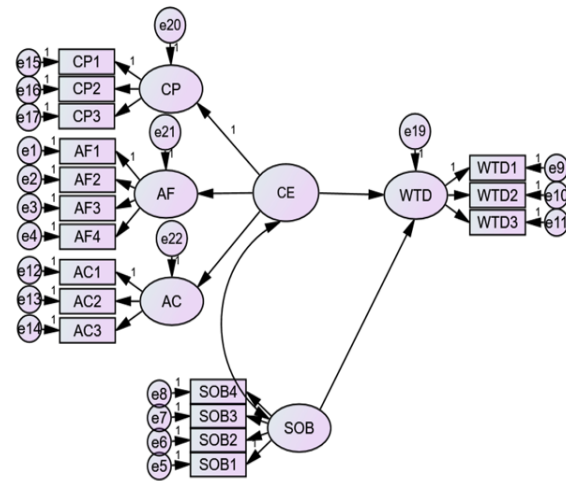


Figure 3: Structural Equation Modeling
Source: Authors.

Table 5: Results of Structural Equation Model

	Direction	Estimate	t-value	P	Result
H1	WTD <--- CE	0.610	8.267	***	Supported
H2	WTD <--- SOB	0.261	5.100	***	Supported

Source: Authors.

The findings from hypothesis testing confirm the proposed paths for H1 and H2. In the context of online nonprofit communities,

Customer engagement creates a stronger influence on Willingness to donate, with $\gamma_{WTD < CE} = 0.610$; $t\text{-value} = 8.267$.

Additionally, Sense of belonging has an impact on WTD with $\gamma_{\text{WTD} \leftarrow \text{SOB}} = 0.261$; t-value = 5.100.

6. Discussion, conclusion and recommendation

Our study contributes significantly to the existing literature in two key points. Firstly, it responds to scholars' call to investigate the circumstances in online nonprofit communities where customer engagement leads to behavioral outcomes (Brian et al., 2020). Customer engagement in our research is examined as a multidimensional factor, adopted from Hollebeek et al.'s (2014) scale. Therefore, the customer engagement scale, comprising three dimensions: cognitive processing, affection, and activation, is examined as a second-order construct in this study. It is suggested that these dimensions enhance customer engagement in NPOs' social media pages by providing relevant information about their activities, fostering positive emotions, and motivating donations to the nonprofits. Secondly, by applying Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), the authors have confirmed the influence of the sense of belonging on customers' willingness to donate in the context of online nonprofit communities. This finding further highlights the influential power of belongingness on social media (Gruss et al., 2020). Our findings that sense of belonging can enhance the impact of customers' behavioral intentions in online nonprofit environments are aligned with prior empirical studies that explore the role of belongingness in various contexts such as positive student development (Ngo & Chase, 2021), team dynamics (Hoogervorst et al., 2012), and employees' pro-organizational behaviors (Dou et al., 2019). This current study has limitations that provides opportunities for future research. First, the cross-sectional design was conducted in this research, providing only an evaluation of customer-NPO engagement at a single point in time. As customer engagement may develop over time, future research could explore this concept using a longitudinal questionnaire design to capture its development across different phases. Second, the convenience sampling method was applied in this study. To achieve a broader overview across various

customer groups in NPOs, future research should consider alternative sampling methods. Systematic random sampling of NPO customers, including donors, volunteers, and clients registered in NPO databases, could be utilized to achieve a more representative sample. Third, the percentage of students in the respondents is quite high. Nevertheless, we have included participants from different regions of Vietnam. Further research could include other groups and to verify the impact of different demographic factors.

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