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What do you value? Examining gendered responses to appeal letters

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Abstract

This study builds on previous inductive analysis of fundraising professionals' choices in writing acquisition letters. Fundraisers often write in a way that aligns with one of two personal values, either foregrounding aspects of self-transcendent Universalism values (an appreciation for community and the welfare of all people) or of conservation Security values (those of personal safety and stability for close others). Previous research also indicates that while women and men have different donation styles, targeted motivating language has yet to be explored. Using a national sample, this research tests public response to letters written for a fictional children's charity using content aligned with each option separately, and combined, compared to a control version. Using an experimental dictator game, Universalism values are found to be negatively related to giving across the board as compared to the valueless treatment. We find no statistically significant improvement in donor responses to acquisition appeals that choose to highlight either Universalism or Security values between men and women, although men were marginally less responsive to Universal, self-transcendent values language. The discussion attempts to make sense of these results and the possible complications of running a donor acquisition campaign in the time of COVID-19.

KEYWORDS

acquisition letters, experiment, fundraising, gender, personal values, women's philanthropy

Practitioner Notes

What is currently known about the subject matter?
- Fundraisers frame their appeals letters using different values language, particularly that of security-focused language or universalist, community-focused language.
- While literature studies how fundraisers write these letters, it is not known which of these value frames is more effective in raising funds from acquisition letters.
- The demographics of the recipient may alter how they interpret and respond to the acquisition letter, particularly the potential donor's gender.

What our paper adds to this

- This article uses previous literature on the security and universalism values frames to experimentally test whether exposure to one, both, or neither receives more donations.
- This research also experimentally tests through a dictator game how much money would be raised based upon exposure to values language.
- Hypotheses based upon gender role theory are presented, with women being hypothesized to give more to universalism messages and men to security messages.

Implications of our study findings for practitioners

- The security values language was most effective across the board for both men and women, indicating that this may be something for fundraisers to incorporate.
- This experimental survey asked about giving to a children's cancer hospital and was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic while there were no vaccines for children. These contextual factors may have increased response to the security values language.
- When writing an initial acquisition letter to an unknown population, the mere act of reaching out with a good introduction may be more important than incorporating a specific value within the letters.

1 | INTRODUCTION

While there is robust literature on donor motivations, many researchers know little about fundraising practice. As a result, research tends to draw on the substantial "gray literature"—that is, the numerous "how to" books written typically by fundraising consultants. While these often draw on substantial professional experience by the authors, they generally focus on what fundraisers *ought* to do, rather than necessarily reflecting what fundraisers *actually* do. The current study addresses this gap by testing an inductive study that identified writing choices made by practicing fundraisers to emphasize messages aligned with personal values of Universalism, a self-transcendent value, on the one hand, or of Security, a conservation value, on the other (Hansen, 2020). These values are presented to the public to test the effects of those choices upon groups of self-identified men and women.

Variation in values and motivations for giving have also been tied to gender, highlighting the need to identify the efficacy of these targeted messaging practices (Mesch et al., 2011). Women's philanthropy research has expanded over the past decade, but as of yet has done little to investigate the impact of values language in appeals. This project also investigates empirically whether one value set encourages a particular gender to give more than another.

The project addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the effect of incorporating a value of Universalism in an appeal letter, compared to the effect of incorporating a value of Security?
2. Can the benefits of grounding an appeal letter in personal values be stacked by incorporating both?
3. Does gender identification affect the reader's response to appeal letters grounded in different values?

Through reviewing previous literature and research on fundraising language and gendered giving motivations, this article develops six hypotheses. Using analysis of variance (ANOVA), logistic, and negative binomial regressions, these hypotheses are tested and presented in the findings. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of what our results mean for practitioners and researchers of fundraising motivations and appeals letters.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

Many individual level traits have been associated with philanthropic engagement, such as income, age, gender, and marital status (e.g., Schlegelmilch et al., 1997; Wiepking & Bekkers, 2012). In this section, we will focus on two types of individual differences with regard to giving: gender, and personal values. Then, recognizing that being asked to donate is a key explanatory factor in giving decisions (Neumayr & Handy, 2019), we will review research on how fundraising appeals interact with the ideas of gender and values.

2.1 | Gender and giving

The act of donating itself is a form of prosocial behavior, emphasizing helping someone outside of the individual. Men and women have been found to engage in differing forms of prosocial behaviors, with women generally focused more on communal behaviors than men, who display agentic behaviors (Eagly, 2009; Eagly & Koenig, 2006; Mesch et al., 2011). Men are generally motivated less by empathy and more by self-interest, perhaps alluding to possessing social roles less aligned with values focused on helping the community at large than women (Author, 2020; Mesch et al., 2011; Willer et al., 2015). Feminist theory on gendered social roles would predict that appealing to

TABLE 1 Categories of basic values in Schwartz's theory of basic values

Self-enhancement	Openness to change	Self-transcendence	Conservation
• Achievement	• Hedonism	• Universalism	• Security
• Power	• Stimulation	• Benevolence	• Tradition
	• Self-direction		• Conformity

Note: Adapted by the authors from Schwartz (2012).

broader community-focused values in fundraising would trigger socialized helping behaviors in women (Eagly, 2009; Rand et al., 2016; Simmons & Emanuele, 2007; Willer et al., 2015). In a meta-analysis of donating literature, Wiepking and Bekkers (2012) find in a majority of studies that women are more likely to give to charity than men.

Bekkers and Wiepking (2011) provide eight mechanisms as to why people give to charity. Mesch et al. (2011) analyze two of these mechanisms as to why women would give—"empathic concern and a moral principle to care about others" (p. 344). Their principle of care questions align with concepts of helping the broader community. This study aligns these values to "universalism"—helping people less fortunate or in trouble, and a need to care for others. Mesch et al. (2011) find that women scored significantly higher than men on these principles indicating that universalist themes may be influential in women's donation decision making.

Finally, in a recent study using a similar research design as this research, women Mechanical Turk workers were again found to give to charity more frequently than men (Brañas-Garza et al., 2018). However that study focuses more on amounts and expectations of giving rather than the value statements presented in each ask. While previous research identifies women's pro-social tendencies, it has yet to test them empirically in donation decision-making.

2.2 | Personal values and giving

Interviews with donors reveal the role of strong personal motivations for making philanthropic gifts (e.g., Bennett, 2003; Breeze, 2013; Jones & Routley, 2022). Often the choice of charities to which one donates is a key to these studies (Bennett, 2003; Breeze, 2013; Chapman et al., 2020). Individual-level traits such as subjective dispositions (in Neumayr & Handy, 2019 these include empathic concern, trust, and religiosity) have been found to correlate with incidence of giving.

There has been less scholarly attention to personal values with respect to giving. Personal values indicate individuals' priorities, and serve as goals that motivate behavior (Schwartz, 1992; Sneddon et al., 2020). Schwartz (1992, 2012) identifies 10 basic values placed into four main categories: Self-Enhancement; Openness to Change; Self-Transcendence; and Conservation. Table 1 lists the basic values included within each category. The self-transcendent values of have been linked to prosocial behavior, including donations to cancer research (Maio & Olson, 1995; Sneddon et al., 2020).

Schwartz found that the four categories of values differed along two significant axes: that of personal (self) focus versus social (other) focus, and that of anxiety-based versus anxiety-free values (see Figure 1, below).

Referring to Schwartz's (1992, 2012) theory of basic values (see Figure 1, above), self-transcendent and conservation values both share a social focus, in terms of a self/other dimension. People with a social focus consider their relationship to others in society, and are motivated by these concerns. However, people motivated by self-transcendent "Universalism" values tend to prioritize growth and expansion, while those motivated by "Security" conservation values prioritize self-protection and loss prevention. These values are often found within fundraising appeal letters.

2.3 | Fundraising appeal letters

Despite the entry and development of internet-based donor communications, direct mail appeals remain an important part of charitable fundraising (Nonprofit Research Collaborative, 2019). Direct mail is important both for immediate financial return and for developing a longer-term constituency of supporters (Worth, 2016). While opinions and practice differ on the preferred length of appeal letters, Warwick (2008) notes that donor acquisition letters, which introduce a charity to a prospective donor for the first time, tend to be longer than other appeal letters.

Much of the research examining people's responses to fundraising choices focuses on direct mail (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Bhati & Hansen, 2020). Both laboratory and field experiments have studied responses to: positive and negative framing, use of an emotional message and use of statistical information (Das et al., 2008); the "identified victim effect" (e.g., Dickert et al., 2016; Erlandsson et al., 2015); setting a suggested ask amount (e.g., Edwards & List, 2014) and including a range of suggestions (e.g., Goswami & Urminsky, 2016). Research questions and designs are generally informed by the "gray literature" produced to help fundraising professionals improve their practice and most do not use a gendered lens (for exceptions see Chang & Lee, 2011; Hornikx et al., 2010).

Only recently have scholars begun to recognize how the choices of fundraising professionals affect the process of bringing about voluntary donations (e.g., Alborough, 2017; Hansen, 2020; Chapman et al., 2022). In a recent study in which fundraising professionals wrote donor acquisition appeal letters in response to a prompt, exploratory factor analysis was used to identify patterns within the writing (Hansen, 2020). Fundraisers incorporated personal values in their letters: two of the six factors identified in the analysis indicated ideas consistent with Schwartz's (1992, 2012) personal values of Universalism, a self-transcendent value, and Security, a conservation value. In Hansen (2020), the Universalism and Security factors together explained 30% of the variance between letters written,

suggesting that further exploration is warranted. Universalism, the most commonly occurring of the six factors identified within the appeal letters, incorporates ideas of "understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature" (Caprara et al., 2006, p. 7; Schwartz, 1992, p. 12). Other letters incorporated a value of Security, which incorporates ideas of "safety, harmony, and stability of society, of relationships, and of self" (Caprara et al., 2006, p. 7; Schwarz, 1992, p. 9). People who share conservation values respond to a sense of belonging, the presence of a social order, a safe environment, and reciprocating favors.

As noted above in Figure 1, Security is an anxiety-based value, focused on protection against threat and prevention of loss. In contrast, Universalism is relatively anxiety-free, focusing on growth and opportunities. In a 1995 study examining posters encouraging charitable donations to cancer research, those that included the phrase "help others live" was more successful than posters that urged readers to "protect your future," suggesting a focus on opportunities outperformed a focus on loss prevention. The "help others live" treatment was especially powerful among those who indicated self-transcendent personal values of universalism or benevolence (Maio & Olson, 1995, p. 275).

The current study extends an inductive study of writing choices made by practicing fundraisers to emphasize messages aligned with personal values of Universalism or Security (Hansen, 2020), then presenting these practice patterns to the public to test their responses. Particularly, it further examines the effect of gender in those responses, as theory posits differing values would appeal more to the social roles of women or men.

Based upon this literature, we posit

Hypothesis 1. Based on social role theory and previous fundraising research, we expect more women than men to agree to donate to the described charity, regardless of treatment.

Hypothesis 2. Given previous giving research, we expect women to give larger sums of money than men, regardless of treatment.

Hypothesis 3. Women are more likely to donate and will donate larger sums of money to the described charity when exposed to the Universalism values treatment rather than the Security treatment.

Hypothesis 4. Men are more likely to donate and will donate more money when exposed to the Security treatment rather than the Universalism treatment.

Hypothesis 5. Men and women will donate at the same level as Security or Universalism values treatment respectively when exposed to the combined values treatment.

Hypothesis 6. Fewer individuals overall will choose to donate at all when exposed to the valueless treatment.

After reviewing our data collection and survey instrument development, key findings will be presented and discussed addressing these hypotheses.

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN

The key dependent variables in this study are collected through an experimental survey dictator game. This is used to identify how much of a designated amount of money an individual would choose to keep versus give to a second party, in this case a charity (Cartwright & Thompson, 2022). This method has been effective in experimentally identifying levels of generosity through exposure to interventions, in
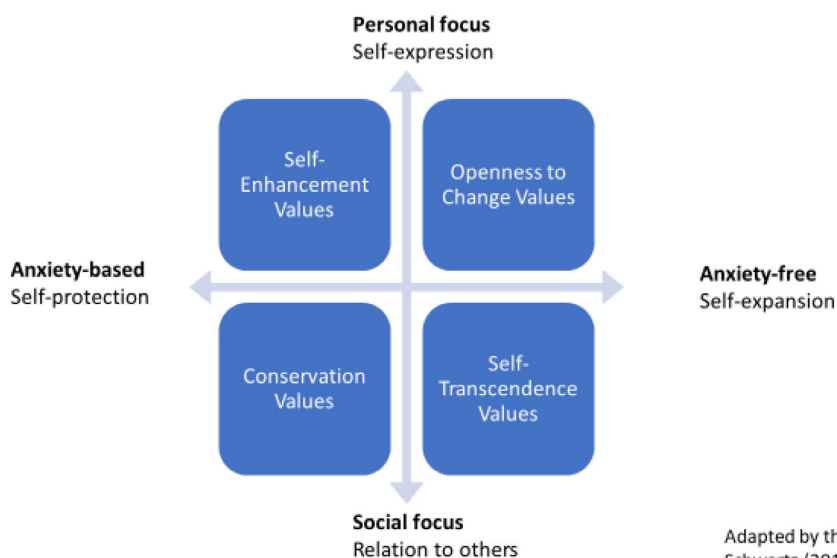
FIGURE 1 Personal/social focus and protection/expansion focus in Schwartz's theory of basic values

Adapted by the authors from Schwartz (2012)

this case acquisition letters using varying values language. This provides an externally valid measure of the two basic research questions: does exposure to one value change the likelihood of choosing to donate to a cause versus non-exposure, and is exposure to a particular value related to donating more money to said cause versus non-exposure.

This study enacts this research design via Qualtrics using survey instruments launched using the third-party research platform CloudResearch. The CloudResearch platform provided an MTurk Toolkit which was used to collect data through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) from September 9 through September 15, 2021. Mechanical Turk allows scholars (*requesters)* to recruit survey participants (*workers)* for survey research or other human subjects tasks, aptly named Human Intelligence Tasks, or HITs. Parameters for participation may be set by requesters, such as particular demographics. In this case, two separate identical surveys were run requesting gender parameters. When a worker fits a particular parameter, they may choose to participate in the HIT (Stritch et al., 2017). Workers are financially compensated for the completion of the HIT. All respondents were compensated $3 for their participation, a larger than average MTurk payment, providing an additional motivation to take the survey.

Two surveys were administered in order to acquire a sample of 700 self-identified women and 700 self-identified men. Surveys were identical and the treatment letters were randomly assigned by Qualtrics. A baseline categorical logistic regression was run on the treatment groups to observe whether randomization was successful. There are no statistically significant differences in the composition of the treatment groups as compared to the control group, allowing for basic tests of means. Additionally, demographic data is included in the logistic and negative binomial tests, controlling for any possible group variation.

The surveys were listed on MTurk with the title "Donor Response to Appeals (∼27 minutes)." This title included an estimated completion time provided by a Qualtrics estimation tool. In actuality, the average amount of time a respondent needed to complete the survey was slightly more than 12 min.

There are benefits and limitations to using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform. MTurk is a popular survey platform in the fields of economics, political science, and psychology, and has been found to be a good resource for public administration and management research, providing the ability to launch experimental survey designs as used in this article (Paolacci & Chandler, 2014; Stritch et al., 2017). However, survey respondents, or *workers*, opt into taking the survey which can lead to skewed demographics and bias. Inattention is another limitation. However, based upon the consistent average time it took workers to complete the survey and the thorough completion of questions bode well for this sample. And as per Hussein and James (2021), inattention would lead to conservative effects of experimental treatment phrases.

Appeals were written for support of a fictional children's cancer support group. Children and cancer charities are among the beneficiary groups commonly mentioned by donors as groups to which they give (Breeze, 2013; Chapman et al., 2022), and are not associated with any one political affiliation. In a study testing correlations between donors' personal values and their giving behavior, health charities were neutral among US donors for the value messages we tested (Sneddon et al., 2020).[1]

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three values treatments or the valueless control group. The treatments used written choices derived from the inductive analysis of fundraising acquisition letters guided by previous factor analysis (Author, 2020), to focus on patterns that aligned with Universalism only, Security only, a combination of the two, or neither (the control group). For those treatments in which an individual child was described, the gender of the child was also randomly assigned, with half of the respondents within a values treatment reading about a boy, and half reading about a girl. For the current analysis, only the reader's gender is considered as an independent variable. Table 2 given below describe the values associated and used with each treatment.

The Universalism and Security solicitation letters are included in Appendix A.

In order to conduct a basic manipulation check, responses were analyzed by treatment. The following survey question was posed: "What messages in this letter motivated or unmotivated you to give?" The message motivator questions were reviewed based upon the treatment to which the respondent was exposed. The Universal treatment motivators scored on average higher for respondents exposed to the Universal treatment, as were Safety scores for those in the Safety treatment. However, one limitation is that some respondents did say they were motivated by messages not in their treatment, indicating that they responded based on their general feelings toward particular messages rather than their exposure.[2] While this gave us rich feedback on elements of letters that motivated giving, it is tempered by the respondents interpretation of the questions.

Statistical analysis includes ANOVA tests across experimental treatments, as well as logistic regression on our binary "yes/no" variable of whether the individual would give to the organization. A negative binomial regression is used for the analysis of the amounts given to the charity. This method was selected due to the fact the response was a count variable with a maximum of $100 and the conditional variance exceeds the conditional mean (Negative Binomial Regression, 2021). The dependent variable is also over-dispersed, tested using the method from Cameron and Trivedi (2010), which can be addressed through a negative binomial approach.

4 | DATA AND VARIABLES

Of the two samples, the men sample includes all self-identified men and transgender men, and the women sample includes all self-identified women and transgender women. Non-binary and genderqueer individuals were excluded from these analyses due to the small number of respondents so identifying. All participants were English speaking and reside in the United States. Data from each survey were combined to reach a final sample of 1392 responses after removing missing data on key dependent variables.

TABLE 2 Elements of values incorporated, by treatment group

	Universalism treatment	Security treatment	Both	Neither
Elements correlated with Universalism (Hansen, 2020)				
Individual other—Unrelated	X			
Story	X		X	
Transformation	X		X	
Client worthiness	X		X	
Empowerment	X		X	
Lonely	X		X	
Social support	X		X	
Elements correlated with Security (Hansen, 2020)				
Close other		X	X	
Community benefit (Negatively correlated with Security)	X			X
Material benefit		X	X	
Risk mitigation		X	X	
Elements uncorrelated with either Universalism or Security (Hansen, 2020)				
Collective other	X	X	X	X
Positive frame	X	X	X	X
Organizational quality	X	X	X	X
Reader characteristics	X	X	X	X
Emotional benefits	X	X	X	X
Statistics	X	X	X	X
Events—COVID complications	X	X	X	X

TABLE 3 Descriptive statistics of sample

Sample snapshot		
	Freq	Percentage
Treatments		
Universal	395	28.38
Security	399	28.66
Both	398	28.59
Neither	200	14.37
Gender		
Man	693	49.79
Woman	682	48.99
Transgender woman	3	0.22
Transgender man	2	0.14
Gender non-binary/Genderqueer	12	0.86
Race/Ethnicity		
White	1047	75.22
Black or African American	119	8.55
Hispanic or Latina/Latino	70	5.03
Asian or Asian-American	107	7.69
Native American	3	0.22
Middle Eastern	2	0.14
Two or more races	41	2.95
N/A	3	0.22
Political views		
Conservative	402	28.92
Moderate	257	18.49
Liberal	731	52.59
Household income		
Less than $25 K	204	14.73
$25 K–$34.9 K	155	11.19
$35 K–$49.9 K	244	17.62
$50 K–$74.9 K	300	21.66
$75 K–$99.9 K	222	16.03
$100 K–$149.9 K	159	11.48
$150 K+	101	7.29
Age		
18–23	46	3.3
24–29	218	15.66
30–39	486	34.91
40–49	287	20.62
50–59	176	12.64
60–64	97	6.97
65+	82	5.89

Demographics are one major concern on MTurk, however. While we controlled for gender, we did not control for further demographics. Seventy-five percentage of this sample's population is White, which is on par with the US average (US Census, 2019). The majority of survey respondents were also near the US median of 38 years old (35%). However, 43% of this sample have a household income below the national median of $62,521 as of 2020. The political leanings of this sample also skewed liberal. Nearly 52.6% of this sample rated themselves as moderately to very liberal, while only 25% of surveyed United States residents affiliated with the label "liberal" in a 2020 Gallup poll (Saad, 2021). A breakdown of the variables used in this study are found in Table 3. To confirm random assignment of treatments, chi2 tests found no statistically significant difference across exposure to treatments across control demographics for the women's sample. One limitation is that household income was slightly lower for the men exposed to the Neither and Universalism treatment, but the chi2 tests were still relatively low.

TABLE 4 Descriptive results

Donated by gender and treatment		Neither (91%)	Universal (87%)	Security (90%)	Both (88%)
Women (Cis & Trans)	Percentage who gave	93%	89.2%	93.3%	90.5%
	Average donation amount	$52.96	$45.96	$55.66	$50.44
Men (Cis & Trans)	Percentage who gave	89.1%	84.3%	87%	85.8%
	Average donation amount	$39.83	$42.99	$44.14	$46.42

TABLE 5 ANOVA

	Summary of amount willing to donate out of $100		
Treatment by values only	**Mean**	**SD**	**Freq.**
Neither	46.315	34.819	200
Universalism	44.75	36.1	395
Security	49.346	35.662	399
Both	48.45	35.874	398
Total	47.351	35.74	1392

	Analysis of variance				
Source	**SS**	**df**	**MS**	**F**	**Prob > F**
Between groups	4951.31	3	1650.44	1.29	0.275
Within groups	1771851.61	1388	1276.55		
Total	1776802.92	1391	1277.357		
Bartlett's test for equal variances:		chi2(3) = 0.361	Prob > chi2 = 0.948		

The two dependent variables were established through a dictator game. The first question was: "Based on this fundraising letter, would you donate to this charity? (yes/no)." This provided a binary result for each completed response. 88.6% of respondents indicated that they would donate to the charity described in the acquisition letter they read. The second question read: "If given $100 to donate or keep, using the slider, select how much of the $100 you would you give to this charity based on the letter you read? (slider, $0-$100)." The average amount donated was $47.35 including zeros. It has been commonly found through other dictator game studies that the "dictator" splits the donation amount and keeps a sum (Cartwright & Thompson, 2022). Our analysis and findings reveal some surprising results, particularly for our preconceived notions of charity motivations and giving.

5 | ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Strictly descriptively, the Universalism treatment was the least popular with both men and women. Women on average gave the most money to appeals using Security values, but interestingly the second most went to those letters devoid of Security and Universal values treatments. Men gave the most frequently to letters devoid of values treatments, but gave on average the smallest donation size at $39.83. Both men and women gave the least frequently when exposed to letters using the Universal values statements, with women surprisingly also giving the least amount to those letters at an average of $45.96. Descriptive results are shown below, in Table 4.

Initial hypotheses tests were run to identify any statistically significant difference of means between treatment groups versus the control group. Using a one-way ANOVA to observe treatment effects on the count dependent variable of Donate Amount, there are no significant differences between the three treatments and the control group (Table 5). No particular treatment language alone shows a direct effect on the amount donated despite previous theory and research on values language in solicitation letters.

Pairwise comparisons across all treatments show no statistically different relationships when analyzing treatments exclusively.

To analyze the treatments more in-depth, each dependent variable was run independently along with demographic control variables. First, a binary logistical regression using demographic controls was run to discover any treatment effects on the likelihood to donate any amount. Findings indicate a statistically significant relationship between the likelihood of giving and the Universalism values treatment versus the control group, as detailed in Table 6. However, controlling for key demographics, we observe a decrease in the log-odds of overall donating if respondents are exposed to the Universalism treatment language versus exposure to a solicitation letter devoid of any values treatment language. The odds-ratio of giving to the Universalism solicitation is 0.78 of the likelihood of giving based on no exposure to any key values.

We observe positive, statistically significant relationships among some demographic controls such as household income, race, and political views on the likelihood of donating. As per Hypothesis 2, women are also more likely to donate overall.

A negative binomial regression is used to analyze the amount respondents said they would donate out of $100 based upon the solicitation letter they received. The donor can give all, some, or none of the $100 they are given. The findings are found in Table 7.

TABLE 6 Logistic regression on whether the respondent would donate

Logistic regression	Donate
Treatment	
Universalism	−0.690*
	(0.313)
Security	−0.327
	(0.324)
Both	−0.593+
	(0.315)
Demographic controls	
Gender	
Women	0.530**
	(0.184)
Transgender woman	−1.397
	(1.256)
Transgender man	−2.091
	(1.465)
Genderqueer/Non-binary	−0.196
	(0.831)
Race/ethnicity	
Black or African American	1.648**
	(0.601)
Hispanic or Latina/Latino	0.974+
	(0.537)
Asian or Asian-American	0.205
	(0.346)
Native American	-
	-
Middle Eastern	−1.876
	(1.487)
Two or more races	−0.424
	(0.481)
Political views	
Moderate	0.517+
	(0.266)
Liberal	0.496*
	(0.201)
Household income	
$25,000–$34,999	0.749*
	(0.335)
$35,000–$49,999	0.976**
	(0.298)
$50,000–$74,999	0.931***
	(0.277)
$75,000–$99,999	0.916**
	(0.306)
$100,000–$149,999	1.007**

TABLE 6 (Continued)

Logistic regression	Donate
	(0.343)
$150,000+	0.159
	(0.331)
Age group	
24–29	−0.707
	(0.650)
30–39	−0.849
	(0.630)
40–49	0.111
	(0.662)
50–59	−0.472
	(0.663)
60–64	−0.457
	(0.701)
65+	−0.189
	(0.732)
Constant	1.713*
	(0.703)
Pseudo R^2	0.08
Observations	1380

Note: *SE*s in parentheses.
***$p < 0.001$. **$p < 0.01$. *$p < 0.05$. +$p < 0.1$.

No treatment is found to have a statistically significant relationship with the amount donated, though interestingly the Security treatment is the only one with a positive coefficient versus the control group.

Hypotheses 1 and 2 are both supported, regardless of treatment. Being a woman is found to be statistically related to the increased likelihood of giving and the amount donated versus men. Over the entire sample, 91.4% of women responded that they would donate compared to 86.3% of men. Women's gifts averaged $56.00 across all treatments versus $51.10 by men.

This study also seeks to identify whether men and women respond differently to various writing choices that invoke different personal values. Both the logistic regression and negative binominal regression were run on the split samples of men and women. The relationships for particular gender groups focusing on treatment type are similar to each other in that no treatment increased the likelihood of giving. The results are found in Tables 8 and 9 below.

When it comes to the likelihood of donating across genders, as per Table 8, the Universalism treatment is mildly statistically related to a decrease in the likelihood of giving among men versus the control group. Household income, liberal political views, and being Black or African American are all related to an increase in the likelihood of giving among men, while there are no significant control variables or treatments explaining variation in giving tendencies among women. Hypothesis 3 regarding women being more likely to donate when exposed to

TABLE 7 Negative binomial regression on the amount a respondent would donate

Negative binomial regression	Donated amount out of $100
Treatment	
Universalism	−0.0724
	(0.0965)
Security	0.0299
	(0.0967)
Both	−0.0144
	(0.0961)
Demographic controls	
Gender	
Women	0.147*
	(0.0597)
Transgender woman	−0.798
	(0.645)
Transgender man	−2.782**
	(0.888)
Genderqueer/Non-binary	0.148
	(0.322)
Race/ethnicity	
Black or African American	0.158
	(0.108)
Hispanic or Latina/Latino	0.183
	(0.136)
Asian or Asian-American	−0.00318
	(0.113)
Native American	0.312
	(0.632)
Middle Eastern	−2.155**
	(0.836)
Two or more races	0.131
	(0.179)
Political views	
Moderate	−0.00734
	(0.0889)
Liberal	0.0241
	(0.0698)
Household income	
$25,000–$34,999	0.0602
	(0.117)
$35,000–$49,999	0.232*
	(0.105)
$50,000–$74,999	0.237*
	(0.101)
$75,000–$99,999	0.182+
	(0.108)
$100–$149,999	0.286*
	(0.117)

(Continues)

TABLE 7 (Continued)

Negative binomial regression	Donated amount out of $100
$150,000+	0.135
	(0.136)
Age group	
24–29	−0.0387
	(0.180)
30–39	0.000968
	(0.172)
40–49	0.215
	(0.177)
50–59	0.222
	(0.184)
60–64	0.281
	(0.200)
65+	0.356+
	(0.205)
Inalpha	0.140***
	(0.0390)
Constant	3.474***
	(0.200)
Observations	1383

Note: SEs in parentheses.
***$p < 0.001$. **$p < 0.01$. *$p < 0.05$. +$p < 0.1$.

the Universalism treatment is not supported. Hypothesis 4 that men will give more to Security focused appeals letters is not directly supported, but men are less likely to give when exposed to the Universalism treatment over the Security treatment. However, Hypothesis 5 is supported in that there was no difference between the combined treatment and either Universalism for women and Security for men.

Hypotheses 3, 4, and 5 were not statistically supported regarding how much women and men decided to donate. No values treatment was statistically related to the donation amount women or men chose. The results of the binomial regressions by gender are in Table 9 above.

Finally, based upon all analyses, Hypothesis 6, which states fewer individuals will donate when exposed to the valueless treatment, is not supported. Reviewing these results, our discussion highlights the key findings and what they may mean for practitioners when developing targeted solicitation letters in today's environment.

6 | DISCUSSION

6.1 | What is the effect of incorporating a value of Universalism in an appeal letter, compared to the effect of incorporating a value of Security?

We did not observe strong differences in the amount given in response to different treatments based on incorporating constructs aligned with personal values of Universalism and Security. We did

TABLE 8   Logistic regression on decision to donate by gender

	Donate yes	
Logistic regression	Women	Men
Treatment		
Universalism	−0.439	−0.734[+]
	(0.475)	(0.411)
Security	0.0665	−0.429
	(0.502)	(0.422)
Both	−0.312	−0.599
	(0.474)	(0.417)
Demographic controls		
Race/Ethnicity		
Black or African American	1.883[+]	1.541[*]
	(1.026)	(0.749)
Hispanic or Latina/Latino	1.105	1.015
	(1.039)	(0.640)
Asian or Asian-American	0.150	0.137
	(0.646)	(0.417)
Native American	-	-
	-	-
Middle Eastern	-	-
	-	-
Two or more races	−0.0830	−0.507
	(0.784)	(0.696)
Political views		
Moderate	0.445	0.625[+]
	(0.455)	(0.341)
Liberal	0.359	0.616[*]
	(0.315)	(0.270)
Household income		
$25,000–$34,999	0.218	1.157[*]
	(0.494)	(0.477)
$35,000–$49,999	0.705	1.126[**]
	(0.503)	(0.378)
$50,000–$74,999	0.668	1.089[**]
	(0.462)	(0.357)
$75,000–$99,999	0.424	1.408[**]
	(0.469)	(0.433)
$100,000–$149,999	0.768	1.121[*]
	(0.535)	(0.457)
$150,000[+]	−0.133	0.363
	(0.589)	(0.409)
Age group		
24–29	−0.895	−0.524
	(1.115)	(0.812)
30–39	−0.714	−0.731
	(1.084)	(0.785)
40–49	−0.407	0.644

TABLE 8   (Continued)

	Donate yes	
Logistic regression	Women	Men
	(1.099)	(0.850)
50–59	−0.795	−0.0179
	(1.104)	(0.855)
60–64	−0.283	−0.403
	(1.185)	(0.884)
65[+]	−0.778	0.828
	(1.167)	(1.070)
Constant	2.436[*]	1.262
	(1.183)	(0.869)
Observations	679	688

Note: *SE*s in parentheses.
***p < 0.001. **p < 0.01. *p < 0.05. [+]p < 0.1.

TABLE 9   Negative binomial regression on amount donated by gender

	Donation amount out of $100	
Negative binomial regression	Women	Men
Treatment		
Universalism	−0.156	0.0420
	(0.124)	(0.148)
Security	0.0380	0.0537
	(0.123)	(0.150)
Both	−0.0977	0.104
	(0.123)	(0.148)
Demographic controls		
Race/Ethnicity		
Black or African American	0.0891	0.234
	(0.135)	(0.172)
Hispanic or Latina/Latino	0.210	0.184
	(0.182)	(0.201)
Asian or Asian-American	−0.0610	0.0444
	(0.169)	(0.159)
Native American	−0.0676	0.953
	(0.981)	(1.188)
Middle Eastern	−1.573	−20.65
	(1.032)	(3963)
Two or more races	0.0920	0.334
	(0.221)	(0.308)
Political views		
Moderate	0.0350	−0.0588
	(0.119)	(0.136)
Liberal	0.00257	0.0220
	(0.0887)	(0.110)

TABLE 9 (Continued)

Negative binomial regression	Donation amount out of $100	
	Women	Men
Household income		
$25,000–$34,999	−0.0386	0.180
	(0.144)	(0.193)
$35,000–$49,999	0.147	0.388*
	(0.136)	(0.162)
$50,000–$74,999	0.0198	0.495**
	(0.128)	(0.159)
$75,000–$99,999	−0.0538	0.500**
	(0.134)	(0.173)
$100,000–$149,999	0.0374	0.596**
	(0.145)	(0.190)
$150,000+	−0.0518	0.403*
	(0.188)	(0.201)
Age group		
24–29	0.113	−0.281
	(0.249)	(0.272)
30–39	0.237	−0.258
	(0.239)	(0.258)
40–49	0.364	0.0278
	(0.242)	(0.270)
50–59	0.387	0.0196
	(0.248)	(0.285)
60–64	0.371	0.172
	(0.265)	(0.308)
65+	0.501+	0.282
	(0.273)	(0.321)
lnalpha	−0.0844	0.313***
	(0.0558)	(0.0553)
Constant	3.656***	3.392***
	(0.270)	(0.296)
Observations	681	690

Note: *SE*s in parentheses.
***$p < 0.001$. **$p < 0.01$. *$p < 0.05$. +$p < 0.1$.

note that a Universalism message resulted in lower likelihood of giving compared to the control group, with about four people giving in response to a Universalism message out of every five who chose to give to an appeal letter devoid of our key values language. Yet previous research showed that, among factors differentiating appeal tactics, an appeal to Universalism values was a leading choice among fundraisers, explaining about 21% of differences in letters written (Hansen, 2020). We did not note any statistically significant benefits to incorporating a Security message compared to the control group, however strictly descriptively, both men and women gave more frequently and more money when exposed to a Security treatment.

6.2 | Can the benefits of grounding an appeal letter in personal values be stacked by incorporating both?

As conceptualized by Schwartz (1992, 2012), the personal values of Security and Universalism share a focus on social context—how one is related to and affected by others. It is possible that including elements of both values might underscore that message. Or, it might be that including elements of both values would act to reduce the strength of each, "muddying the waters." Our findings show that incorporating aspects of both resulted in a marginally significant lower likelihood of giving compared to the control group, but less so than the Universalism treatment. This suggests that "stacking" the values of Universalism and Security did result in a response in between the two as "pure" types, in this case mitigating negative response to Universalism.

6.3 | Does gender identification affect the reader's response to appeal letters grounded in different values?

Consistent with existing research, women gave more often and more generously regardless of treatment. However, in terms of interaction with the different values in the appeal letters, the only marginally significant result was a lower likelihood among men of giving when exposed to the Universalism treatment compared to the control group. This counters the expectation found in previous research that women are more likely to be motivated by pro-social community-minded Universalism values, and men by Security values. While men were less likely to give based on exposure to Universalism values, there was no countering increase based on exposure to the Security value. And as mentioned above, both men and women gave on average more frequently and more money to the Security message though it did not meet the statistical significance range acceptable here. While fundraisers may promote Universalism values, they may not appeal more to either men or women.

6.4 | What is going on?

These results generally run contrary to hypotheses. It is important to note that these treatments tested constructs observed in analyzing acquisition letters written by fundraisers, giving members of the general public an opportunity to respond. It is possible that values among fundraisers as a population are different than values among the general public, or among new donors.

The timing of the study may also have produced results that are strongly influenced by situational context. The study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic while no vaccines were available for children, which may have heightened anxiety when reading a solicitation letter about ill children. This situational context may have been strong enough to diminish the effect of other dynamics, and possibly increase response to the Security (anxiety/ risk-reduction) values. The US-based

Fundraising Effectiveness Project, which analyzes data from the Growth in Giving database, calls 2020 "a highly anomalous year," with sector-wide results that "were not the best indication of what was typical" (Giving Tuesday, 2021). While an early report finds that spontaneous giving in Sweden was unaffected by COVID (Erlandsson et al., 2022), philanthropic patterns vary across country contexts (Sneddon et al., 2020; Wiepking & Handy, 2015). It is too soon to analyze full results from 2021, but it is entirely possible that the dynamics resulting in 2020's volatility have not yet settled, resulting in observed outcomes that may not generalize well to more settled contexts. While we tried to avoid selecting a cause that is highly politicized or only appeals to a small group, we do not yet fully understand how the period in which we collected data affected giving decisions. However, we do note the distinguishing factors of a worldwide pandemic (COVID) and of continued (overdue) attention to issues of racial injustice. For example, one popular article advised people in summer of 2020 that giving to charity may help "alleviate [personal] stress and anxiety" (Epperson & Posse, 2020) perhaps recognizing heightened anxiety in the current era of COVID, and a corresponding increased sensitivity to messages that emphasize protection and loss prevention.

6.5 | Implications for practice

Fundraisers know less about the people in acquisition mailings than about established donors. We must remember that the general public may not have the same day-to-day values and experiences as people working at the charity, including fundraisers. While we are in an anxiety-producing situation, it seems including Security values (focused on risk reduction) may resonate with readers.

Established donors have a closer relationship to the charity and to the fundraising staff. If fundraisers think there are members of the donor audience who will respond well to a Universalism message and others who likely value Security, they can mix elements of both. But the main take-away is that, at least for mass mailings to undeveloped and unknown audiences, a strong letter is important generally, and avoiding a Universalism message currently may lead to better results.

6.6 | Limitations

Following many experimental studies of fundraising, we focus on one manipulation, with a single organization as beneficiary and potential new donors (Bhati & Hansen, 2020). Thus, we do not address interests in different types of organizations, nor are we measuring the personal values of respondents. Instead, we are interested in testing how a sample of possible new donors will respond to an acquisition letter using strategies to appeal to different kinds of value priorities. We used a US sample; respondents in other cultural or other policy settings may have different philanthropic impulses (Hornikx et al., 2010; Wiepking & Handy, 2015). Finally, the analysis of fundraising communication strategies (Hansen, 2018) relied on data collected prior to the pandemic and significant incidents highlighting racial injustices in the United States, and the present analysis relies on data collected while

those significant incidents were in the public eye. We are not aware of any other benchmark for how fundraisers incorporate values into their fundraising messaging; but it is possible that their use may change in the face of significant environmental challenges.

Using the MTurk workers is another possible limitation in that survey participants are not randomly drawn from the United States population, but have chosen to sign up for and take surveys in exchange for small amounts of compensation on the platform. There will be some self-selection into this group. According to CloudResearch, there is an estimated "100,000 Mechanical Turk workers who participate in academic studies each year" (Litman, 2020, para. 6). As we stated, while much of our sample's demographics line up with the general US population, it is still a limited pool of participants. Our payment of $3 is a large incentive to choose our HIT given many MTurk studies pay less. However, these are not generally respondents new to taking academic surveys and may have previous experience with questions about charity and giving, making them "non-naïve" respondents. We also use an experimental question in which the respondent reports on their giving intentions, which are hypothetical, rather than actual choices to donate real money. The literature has been inconsistent in the effect of using hypothetical money, or stated intentions, compared to using real money, typically provided as a payment for participation. Some find no differences between the two methods (e.g., Carlsson & Martinsson, 2001), while others find that respondents are more likely to contribute in a hypothetical situation than a real one (e.g., Ajzen et al., 2004). Smith and McSweeney (2007) find that intention to donate is significantly correlated with donation behavior. Several studies of giving behavior do use giving intentions in an experimental setting rather than using real money (e.g., Cao & Jia, 2017; Chou & Murnighan, 2013; Das et al., 2008; Feiler et al., 2012). While asking people to consider donating a portion of a payment has real financial consequences to the participant, it also typically is a small amount of money, that is also received as a windfall for the participant rather than coming from their existing account. The choice to grant all recipients a hypothetical $100 that is available to give or keep has no real risk for participants, but it also allows respondents a wider span of choices to indicate their relative willingness to support the (in this case, also hypothetical) charity. Without a true risk, results may be positively skewed. Future research could align with behavioral economics studies and offer a true donation amount to be donated or rewarded to the respondent, but this would require further funding and lab development.

7 | CONCLUSION

Compared to donor motivation and response, actual fundraising practice is underexamined and undertheorized. Kelly (1998) advised that, in order to understand how fundraising works, we must consider the professional discretion of fundraisers themselves. In this study, we make a start in this vein by testing writing patterns identified inductively through an exploratory factor analysis of appeal letters practicing fundraisers wrote in response to a prompt.

As an experiment with random assignment, the study controls for confounding variables to provide evidence of causality. That is, we can

be reasonably certain that significant differences among the treatment groups are due to the different ways in which the appeal are written.

We tested donor responses to constructs of two different personal values, Universalism and Security, which were both identified through analysis of practitioner behavior. This gives us feedback that can help us intentionally structure appeal letters, especially those written to the general public for mass appeals. This study also further examines the theoretical role gender social roles play in evaluating fundraising appeals, and conversely, in approaching new potential donors.

Yet these results, many of which did not support the hypotheses grounded in previous studies, also raise further questions. While the reported intent to support the charity was quite high across the board, why was there such a difference between fundraisers' tendency to include a Universalistic aspect in acquisition letters, and respondents' preferences given the different treatments? Are respondents' behavioral intentions, as evidenced by response to treatments, aligned with their self-reports of what messages they found motivating in the letters? Do reports of political leanings correlate with the responses to personal values? Did the uncertainties of the COVID pandemic serve to heighten anxiety, and make messages of risk reduction more salient to readers than in previous years? Future research should continue to critically observe and analyze practical choices made by fundraising professionals, and systematically test those choices with the public to help us better understand the dynamics of how fundraisers develop donors, how donors of all genders respond, and what additional factors affect the layers of perception and decision making involved in choosing to voluntarily support causes and organizations.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study conforms to standards regarding ethical treatment of human research participants, and was approved by IRB at University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, IRB-FY2020-2021-127. The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Among US donors, those with a refined version of Universalism that focuses on empathic concern for animal welfare were less likely to give to health charities. However, that is not an aspect of Universalism included in the messages we tested. Sneddon et al. (2020) do find that individuals prioritizing aspects of Security and of Conformity are more likely to give to health charities among Australian donors, but this does not hold for their US sample.

[2] Mechanical Turk allows survey respondents to email the survey contact directly. It is interesting to note that some survey respondents read the survey so closely they emailed to provide their opinions on solicitation letters in general, their pleasure at seeing us focus on children's cancer charities, and to provide tips on what messages would additionally motivate them to give.

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