

From Charity to Empowerment: Nonprofit Discourses and Practices Shaped by Generational and Income-based Perceptions of Philanthropy

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Abstract. How can nonprofit organizations better frame their mission and present their projects to garner more support from donors and engagement from their audience? Based on existing frameworks of sociological demands and business strategies, this paper argues that the discourses of their approach, charity or empowerment, can make a crucial difference. Extant empirical research shows that younger generation and high-income groups prefer the empowerment narrative, seeking to resolve more structural social problems, while senior and low- or middle- income donors prioritize providing immediate help for the vulnerable population. Through comparing cases of nonprofit organizations developing their brand and strategy to earn support for their work, this paper also explores how nonprofit organizations in reality frame their mission and project for better communication with their audience and provide recommendations.

Keywords: Nonprofit organizations, Donor engagement, Mission framing, Empowerment narrative

1. Introduction

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) have relied heavily on advocacy and discourse to earn public support for their charitable activities. In today's world, nonprofit work is no longer simply about giving money. The ways people donate to and engage with non-profit social endeavors have changed significantly. Donors are not only increasingly considering the projects they support, but also seeking projects they value based on their identity and background. Their perception of social projects often shapes their support for NPOs and their projects. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the preference and perceptions of different demographic groups regarding social endeavors, to design the communication and discourse strategies of NPOs that earn them more support.

There are two common narratives to introduce nonprofit work: “charity (or philanthropy)” and “empowerment”. Philanthropy emphasizes immediate relief to offer tangible and visible outcomes that communicate urgency and compassion. In contrast, empowerment emphasizes long-term change through capacity building and systemic reforms for long-term changes. While both rhetorics are necessary, they appeal to donors from different backgrounds. Drawing from extant generational and income-based differences of charitable preferences, I argue that young and high-income donors tend

to be drawn toward empowerment-oriented discourse because they seek structural change and participation in diverse ways, while senior donors and those from lower or middle-income backgrounds often prefer philanthropic discourse, as they value security and resonate with appeals that show concrete results. This article contributes to the literature by adopting a cross-disciplinary approach to study these dynamics. While there are sociological studies revealing how class and generation shape social values and business research on nonprofit branding strategies, these findings have yet to be connected. Through integrating these theories with extant empirical evidence, I offer a new framework for understanding how nonprofits can align their discourse with donor preferences for broader support.

2. Analytical framework: sociology and business models

To begin with, I draw on three key sociological theories for analyzing nonprofit discourse and its impact on public engagement. First, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital explains how class shapes "taste" in giving [1]. High-income individuals, with more education and cultural resources, often pay more attention to concepts such as dignity, independence, and empowerment, whereas working-class donors may resonate more with messages that emphasize compassion and immediate assistance. Second, Inglehart's theory of postmaterialism argues that as societies become wealthier, younger generations shift from prioritizing material security to emphasizing self-expression, fairness, and civic engagement [2]. Third, Swidler's cultural toolkit concept suggests that people draw on different cultural repertoires when interpreting appeals [3]. For example, job training may symbolize dignity and self-sufficiency for one donor but seems slow or disconnected from urgent need for another. Together, these perspectives highlight how class, generation, and culture jointly shape donor preferences.

Taken together, these three perspectives suggest that class, generation, and culture all influence how people think differently about nonprofit practices. This helps explain why certain messages work for some people but not others, and why nonprofits need to tailor their communications to different audiences. While sociology helps understand how people's backgrounds and social identities influence giving behavior, business studies also provide useful frameworks for understanding how nonprofits use discourse as part of their branding strategies. Models such as Segmentation, Targeting, and Positioning (STP) emphasize the need to identify distinct donor groups and craft messages customized to their preferences [4]. The AIDA model (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) explains how communication strategies move individuals from awareness to engagement [5]. Nonprofits, like businesses, must brand themselves strategically to signal identity, build trust, and differentiate them from competitors.

In this paper, I first build on the sociological perspectives and introduce empirical studies to examine the charitable preferences of different social groups. Then I borrow from business models to show how nonprofits can operationalize this knowledge by segmenting audiences and designing messages that resonate, and provide recommendations for practitioners.

3. Empirical findings on charitable preferences

While there is a growing body of empirical studies that has documented generational and income-based differences in philanthropy, few research has examined the discursive tastes of donors in different age and income levels reacting to different ways of NPOs describing their mission. Extant findings, however, offer insights to analyze such preferences based on the perceptions and values held by different groups.

First, income level is a major determinant of donors' perception of charitable activities. As pointed out by Bourdieu, class and cultural capital guide our "taste" for certain messages. Klebl et al. find that high-income donors often view the goal of non-profit work as a systemic solution to societal issues rather than giving alms [6]. High-income donors often prefer structural reforms and seek to fund projects that address the underlying causes of social problems. This is related to the positional concern and value of social capital that motivate their charitable engagement [7]. As a result, high-income donors are more attracted to empowerment discourse because it promises sustainable results [8]. Low- and middle-income donors, on the other hand, are often drawn to projects with immediate and visible impact. Veit et al. show that lower-class consumers prefer to donate to urgent causes, such as alleviating hunger and homelessness, compared to non-urgent causes [9]. Due to their material concerns, expressions of rescue, care and compassion resonate more with their emotional needs. Such findings support Swidler's statement that people interpret the same appeal through different life scripts, which is why the same narrative of a NPO may be appealing for one group but out of reach for another.

Second, generational differences on philanthropic values are even more noticeable. Millennials and Generation Z embrace charitable activities through diverse modes of participation. A survey run by the Foundation Source shows that apart from a high proportion of donations, 54% Millennial respondents volunteer, 30% assist in fundraising, and 25% share their expertise. Moreover, they prefer to be called "donors," "advocates," or "changemakers" rather than "philanthropists" [10]. The proactive attitude and faith to advocacy accounts for their preference for projects where they can participate and build solutions, rather than simply donate. As a result, younger generations are more attracted to the empowerment narrative, which emphasizes autonomy and engagement [11]. Seniors, by contrast, are more likely to support traditional causes, such as religion, and this is closely tied to their historical experience and values. Generations like baby boomers tend to prioritize security and stability, which accounts for their viewing donations as moral duty and prefer the philanthropy message [12]. This is consistent with Inglehart's theory that economic development leads to a generational shift from materialist values that explains distinct preferences of non-profit work.

4. Cases of NPOs leveraging their discourses

Next I delve into case studies to show how discourse plays out in action. While the sectors such as unemployment assistance and child support differ in their overall narratives, there are also substantial differences within each category, shaped by their donor bases, target populations, and established values. Put together, these cases illustrate how social problems can be framed in very different approaches to win support and wide engagement, either through philanthropy focusing on temporary relief, or through empowerment aiming for systemic change.

Unemployment is a pressing challenge where NPOs have developed divergent strategies. Charity programs focus on providing emergency food, temporary housing, or direct financial support to ease immediate stress and insecurity. For example, the Bread Project in Berkeley focuses on offering immediate training so that low/no-income residents can be quickly prepared for work to pay rent and buy food, as implied by their name. Meanwhile, empowerment programs take a different approach and focus on job training, career counseling, and educational support. While these measures won't produce immediate results, their capacity building facilitates long-term and sustainable employment in the future. The New York-based Doe Fund, for instance, runs the "Ready, Willing & Able" program to break cycles of homelessness and recidivism, known for its emphasis on dignity, independence, and long-term stability. Compared to traditional food banks and short-term relief funds, NPOs today are overall transitioning to the empowerment approach to boost engagement of

their target audience, young generations. The Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator in South Africa innovatively technology-driven employer matching system to solve youth unemployment through partnerships.

Child support is another area where the distinction is stark. Philanthropy-oriented programs like Save the Children emphasize urgency with messages such as “Children need your help to survive and thrive,” highlighting demand for food, clothing, and school supplies. Child Rescue Nepal similarly pledges “We will not stop until every child is free”, emphasizing immediate relief and safety. These campaigns appeal to donors’ compassion and ask for support to bring quick and tangible results. Empowerment programs, by contrast, focus on future opportunities. promoted by Raising Voices, focus on structural change, such as training teachers, improving school safety, and addressing inequality. Their message emphasizes dignity, thriving, and long-term development. The motto of Raising Voices, “All women and children can flourish”, are demonstrated through their signature Good School Toolkit which focuses on reducing school violence to improve learning experience and address inequality [13]. Its language emphasizes dignity, thriving, and long-term change. As children are often regarded as a vulnerable population, charity narrative is still the mainstream among NPOs to guarantee wide support, yet a substantial number of NPOs are also turning to the empowerment approach to create lasting impacts.

These examples also suggest that philanthropy and empowerment are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary strategies, each with its own strengths. While the philanthropy approach focuses on immediate problems and might be preferred by seniors and low-income donors, the empowerment narrative attracts young generations and potentially high-income donors who seek long-lasting changes. In the next section, I discuss how NPOs can choose one approach the other, or a combination of both, depending on their goals and audience.

5. Recommendations

This analysis offers two key lessons for NPOs. First, they must understand their audiences. Given the above discussion of charitable preferences of different generations and age groups, nonprofits can identify which audiences align most closely with their mission, and then target them with messages designed to resonate. If the majority of donors are young or high-income, organizations should emphasize its empowerment mission and long-term impact, as suggested by the STP model. Accordingly, their campaigns should also offer multiple avenues for involvement, from volunteering to advocacy, aligning with young donors’ desire for participation. On the other hand, if NPOs require to engage with senior and low- or middle-income groups, then their programs should highlight urgency, compassion, and visible outcomes to speak to their emotional demand, as revealed by the Jobs to Be Done Theory [14]. Storytelling that shows immediate beneficiaries is a particularly effective strategy for philanthropic discourse that fosters connection and trust.

Second, NPOs should use discourse as a strategic resource, not merely a choice of words. Branding for NPOs is not only about its slogan and mission, but how organizations position themselves in the minds of donors and the wider public. By choosing the appropriate discourse of who they are, what they do and what they seek, NPOs can establish their identity and build stronger relationships with donors. Based on the AIDA model, NPOs need more specific strategies in different stages of their program to eventually win support. Younger, higher-income donors may be drawn in by narratives of equity and empowerment that capture their attention, and then their desire to contribute would be activated by diverse forms of action such as volunteering or skills-sharing. Older or less affluent donors, however, would show interest in emotionally direct appeals that feature visible results, moving them more quickly to actions of donation. In both cases, branding

strategies around discourse is not just about communication but about persistent interactions with donors, aligning organizational identity with audience expectations, and ensuring sustained support.

6. Conclusion

Discourse is more than communication for NPOs - it is a strategy that should be embedded across different stages of nonprofit programs. The comparison between charity and empowerment narrative highlights how NPOs can frame their missions, communicate donors, and signal their values to win financial support and boost public engagement.

Generational and income differences shape which discourse resonates effectively. Young and high-income donors are drawn to empowerment messages that speak to structural change, while senior and low-income donors prefer philanthropy and immediate relief. By integrating extant knowledge from sociology and business strategy, NPOs can better understand these dynamics and align their messages with donor preferences to attract more support. NPOs can also design programs that combine philanthropy and empowerment, to provide both short-term help and long-term impact. The future of nonprofit support will depend not only on what NPOs do, but also on how they describe what they do and how well that resonates with the audience they seek to appeal to.

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