

**Student perceptions and experiences of charity on social media: the authenticity of offline networks in online giving**

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## **Introduction**

It is a widely held concern that the voluntary sector has been slow to take advantage of the development of new technologies (CAF, 2014; HM Government, 2018). The Charity Digital Skills Report 2019 (Skills Platform, 2019) showed that of 540 UK charities sampled a majority do not have a digital strategy, despite two-thirds thinking that the sector will change as a result of digital adoption and the same proportion believing better digital proficiency would increase fundraising. Charities note a lack of available funding for digital development, a lack of skills for digital progression, and that they are 'behind the trend' as they lack the cultural agility required to adapt to digital. Such slowness is detrimental to efforts to engage younger people in charities and becoming donors. People aged 16-25 are the largest user group of social media, but the least likely to donate to charity (Gunstone and Pinkney, 2016), and are frequently shown to find much charitable action 'uncool' (Davies, 2018). Despite some breakthrough high-profile social media-led charity campaigns, such as the ALS ice bucket challenge and #nomakeupselfie, charities are struggling to keep pace with how young people engage with messages online (CAF, 2012, 2017; Harden, Jukes and Joyce, 2015; Charity Commission, 2017) with it found that the majority of fundraising efforts are optimised for targeting older donors than younger ones (Bhagat, Loeb and Rovner, 2010). Young people are at the forefront of emerging technologies (Lange, 2014; Loader, Vromen and Xenos, 2015) and should be a key area of focus for charities seeking to create a sustainable environment for donations, encouraging lifelong giving habits (CAF, 2014; Dean, 2016). Research is needed to understand and theorise young people's digital relationship with charity in order to tackle the problem of how to reach young people 'on their own terms' in order to 'avoid being left behind' (Gunstone and Pinkney, 2016).

Much of the research in this field however relies on surveys and social network analysis to examine the relationship between young people and digital giving. Rarely are the views of

this cohort examined qualitatively. Contributing new evidence to this debate therefore, this article presents data from a series of focus groups where university students and recent graduates were invited to discuss their opinions on and experiences of charity online with a focus on experiences on social media. These focus groups included an innovative digital element, where participants were given a tablet computer with a sample Twitter feed displaying various tweeted charity messages to explore how they interacted with the data 'live' (Back and Puwar, 2012). Overall, analysis of the drivers of young people's giving decisions reveals that causes and requests for donations that come through family and friends are still the main drivers of these students' engagement with charity on social media, echoing some previous sector research (such as Bhagat, Loeb and Rovner, 2010; Meer, 2011; Payne, Scharf and Smith, 2014). Data reveal a continuing importance in focusing on fundraising through existing offline networks despite the supposed global connectivity and awareness social media platforms offer, but that the right celebrity or organisational backing of a message can help it cut through. The conclusion therefore notes the potential limitations of the drive to digital for charities, given the importance of existing local offline networks, as opposed to global online ones.

### **Young people's charitable giving and social media**

In 2016, £9.7 billion was donated to UK charities (CAF, 2017): young people (aged 16-24) however were much less likely to donate money than older people, and gave less when they donated. Research in this field has shown that those aged 25 and over give nearly double what those aged under 25 give, and that 17.3% of 15-24 year olds give to charity once a month, and 50.7% donate 'every now and then' (52.2% and 30.4% respectively for the 25 and over group): 11.3% of 15-24 year olds said they never give to charity; none of the older cohort fell into this category (Harden, Jukes and Joyce, 2015). However, 16-24 year olds are more likely to volunteer, sign petitions and participate in public demonstrations and protests

(CAF 2017; NCVO, 2018). These differences between the age groups in part reflect the unique pressures and opportunities of different life stages - students, for example, often have less money but more free-time than older people. When they give, young people are most likely to give to physical and mental health charities, homeless people, housing and refuge centres, animal charities, and educational and child-focused causes (CAF 2017; Harden, Jukes and Joyce, 2015). Young people have also been shown to be significantly more likely to trust charities than older people (CAF, 2017), and are the age group most likely to have personally used a charity service in the previous month (Charity Today, 2017: 12).

Serious concern has been expressed about these generational differences in charitable giving. A joint CAF-University of Bristol study found a widening 'generosity gap', with the over-60s more than six times more generous than the under-30s in 2010, compared to less than three times more generous thirty years earlier (CAF, 2012: 4). This report informed the work of the Growing Giving Parliamentary Inquiry, which published its conclusions in June 2014. The report made a number of recommendations aimed at increasing the participation of young people in charities and charitable giving including: the inclusion of space in UCAS forms for young people to 'demonstrate their commitment to social action'; a call for Students' Unions to commit to increasing their volunteering programmes; and more opportunities for young people to participate in leadership roles in charities, such as sitting on boards of trustees (CAF, 2014: 8-9). The report also noted how mechanisms for charitable giving have not kept pace with technological developments and called upon the government to establish a taskforce with representatives from the world of technology and social media to 'drive developments in digital giving' (CAF, 2014: 10). It has been argued that charities should recruit a millennial volunteer to strengthen their capacity in social media proficiency (Nahai, 2014). This echoes recent research from the Charity Commission (2017) which showed how charity trustees in the UK are drawn from a very shallow pool of the population:

overwhelmingly white, male, middle-class, and aged over 55 (for similar findings from the US, see Ostrower, 2013), and cautioned that charities were at risk of missing out on the widest range of skills, experience and perspectives as a result of this lack of diversity and poor engagement with youth at a governance level.

It seems that young people *want* such opportunities. A 2014 Demos report challenged stereotypes of young people as apathetic, selfish and narcissistic by illustrating teenagers' engagement with social issues and pro-social behaviour (Birdwell and Bani, 2014: 13), finding that, far from being disengaged or lacking in compassion, young people simply think and act differently, partly due to changing technologies. The report indicated that young people are more interested in social issues than previous generations: 59% of teachers thought that teenagers were as likely or more likely to sign a political petition or participate in a boycott than previous generations, while 88% believed they were as likely or more likely to volunteer for good causes (Birdwell and Bani, 2014: 58). Such commitments occur within a context where those aged 16-25 are seen as less likely to draw a distinction between online and offline worlds (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013). Therefore charities need to make better use of technology and social media in order to harness the potential of young people's charitable impulses. A survey of British adults found considerable appetite amongst 18-34 year olds for using contactless cards to give (with which the sector is starting to engage but is lagging behind on [Kay, 2018]) and being given the opportunity by online retailers to round-up the cost of their purchases, with the additional money going to charity (the 'small change initiative') (Gunstone and Pinkney, 2016: 12-3) as a form of digital ethical consumerism. Evidence that digital offers a more suitable realm for young people to engage with charity is demonstrated by the 34% of 18-34 year olds who had given an 'ad hoc' donation online (compared to just 17% of over-65s), with the proportion of young people who said they had

'followed or supported a charity on social media in the last 12 months' considerably higher than for other age groups (Gunstone and Pinkney, 2016: 5, 7).

### ***The social network effect***

Digital *is* changing how both charities and (potential) donors act, but research also leads us to theorise that moves to digital are not revolutionising giving behaviours in the ways hoped for by those seeking a 'new giving age'. For example, Payne, Scharf and Smith (2014) show that most people who give through online fundraising pages are already likely to be part of the fundraiser's existing social networks - requests are more likely to come from existing networks and these are more likely to be responded to positively through pledges. Personal asks, based on existing relationships are more likely to be successful (Meer, 2011; Eng, Liu and Sekhon, 2012), supporting previous analysis from Bhagat, Loeb and Rovner (2010) who found that younger donors especially were much more likely to define themselves as 'peer motivated' when giving, and more likely to support a cause when asked by friends or family when compared to older givers. As younger people had yet to define their personal giving preferences, the authors reason that charities could target younger potential donors, but that such targeting was more likely to be effective when going through friends and family. Saxton and Wang's (2014) study of large US non-profits, utilizing data from the Facebook Causes platform and IRS returns, found that the traditional economic model of giving - where charities are seen as private providers of public goods and donations are seen as a proxy for demand for their service to benefit society - did not explain donating behaviour in the world of social media. Instead, they suggest that 'attention-getting projects, social pressures, and "casual" and "impulse donating" are driving contributions more than "rational" concerns over efficiency' (Saxton and Wang 2014: 851-52). The authors identify a strong 'social network effect' between the size of an organisation's social network and its receipt of charitable donations. Members of an organisation's online network might not only act as direct donors

but as 'volunteer fundraisers' who can spread the message of the organisation via 'word-of-mouth' (Saxton and Wang 2014: 860). This macro-quantitative analysis provides an excellent broad picture of people's giving. But the realities of how charity messages are received on social media needs to be addressed qualitatively so we can understand what (young) people are thinking as such messages appear on their feeds, with only Dalton et al's (2008) small study currently focused in this regard. Therefore, given these changing social pressures, the emergence of digital as a primary site for young people's social interaction, and concern about the necessity of embedding giving behaviours in young people, studying how young people view the relationship between themselves, charity and social media is crucial for understanding debates around the sustainability of the sector. This study starts that process.

## **Methods**

In order to explore how young people perceive and experience charity on social media, a series of eight semi-structured focus groups were conducted, with participants consisting of 33 students, 2 recent graduates, and 2 university staff members, all aged 18-25. Recruited through general emails, participants were asked basic demographic, education, and employment details, and also to list which social media sites they belonged to and used regularly (but not specifically how much they used each one). Demographically the sample consisted of 20 female and 17 male participants; in terms of ethnicity, 32 identified as White British, three were White Eastern European, and two were British Asian. The mean age was 20.5 years old. As Table 1 shows, Facebook was used by all of the focus group participants, with Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube used by over three-quarters of participants, Twitter and WhatsApp used by two-thirds of participants, with some other sites used by a few individuals.

[Table 1]

Focus groups started with a general discussion of charity on social media, prompted by questions exploring what sort of charity activity participants had seen and engaged with online, and how; whether they had ever asked for support for charitable causes through social media, or if they had been asked to support charitable activity online by others, and if so who and what; and a discussion of whether participants were aware of recent campaigns such as #nomakeupselfie and the Ice Bucket Challenge and whether they had participated. Following these semi-structured discussion, participants were each given a tablet computer, on which was access to a 'manufactured' sample Twitter feed. This feed was put together by the author, and consisted of a series of tweets of charity news stories, fundraising campaigns, videos of charitable activity such as the Ice Bucket Challenge, infographics from charities, and other similar content. The page can be viewed here: <https://twitter.com/digicharityshu>, and a sample image from the page can be seen in Figure 1. Participants were given five minutes to scroll through the feed, and were invited to click on links, read stories, look at videos, and interact with the material as they would if it were their own social media feed. Participants were then asked what particularly stood out to them, what they felt worked and did not, and for their reflections on any wider issues or ideas. A Twitter feed was chosen both because it is a very common medium for charities to use, but also because (after testing the approach with Facebook and Instagram pages) it was found to be the most suitable platform through which to curate a set of content independently. Space does not allow for a full discussion of the benefits and drawbacks of the sample Twitter feed provided to participants. Technological issues, a lack of certainty from participants about how to use it, and the difficulty of recreating a participant's own personal feed, were all challenges faced by this innovative elicitative method. Academic methodological analysis will be published elsewhere to give guidance to researchers who wish to replicate such methods in future.

[Figure 1]



Focus groups allow researchers to create a quasi-realistic social environment where participants present their thoughts and views in relation to others, allowing them to 'bounce' off each other, particularly useful when the subject matter is one only infrequently considered. Focus groups were deployed in a similar way by Dalton et al (2008) in their research on student views of charity and aid, where, as with this study, it was found insight can be heightened, and contradictions and challenges more likely to be displayed as a result of answering questions in a group conversation (Litosseliti, 2003): in the present study, the discussion of the gender politics of the #nomakeupselfie campaign became quite emotive at times for instance, demonstrating participants' willingness to challenge each other and the diversity of their views. Further, it was felt engaging with such technology as a group was likely to be more comfortable for participants. These focus groups lasted approximately 60 minutes each and were transcribed professionally before being coded and thematically analysed, first using Nvivo and then manually. The research was approved by the internal ethics committee and adhered to ethical guidance (BSA, 2017). Participants were provided with information about the study, gave written consent to participate, and were given a £10 voucher for taking part. All participants have been anonymised.

### ***Limitations***

In terms of representativeness, the limitations of the sample for making definitive claims about student perceptions and experiences of charity online are recognised, as is extrapolating from an almost wholly student sample to young people more generally, when only 33.3% of 18 year olds in England enter university (UCAS, 2017: 10). Two participants had completed A-levels/GNVQs (post-16 education) and were now in full-time employment in a university, meaning that none of the participants were currently not in education, employment or training. 16 participants worked part-time and six worked full-time. Drawing only from a sample of student research participants, and seeing them as emblematic of the wider pool of potential

student donors, raises questions about class dynamics and the wider generalisability of findings. While specific class and background data was not collected from participants, Sheffield Hallam University, as a former polytechnic university in the north of England, recruits students who would traditionally be thought of as upper working-class/lower middle-class, with internal university data showing 40% of students are from NS-SEC social classes 4-7, with 97% of students educated at state schools or colleges. Undertaking this project with a wider range of young participants, in particular those who were not students, recent graduates or working in a university, would in all likelihood produce different responses, with, potentially, non-student participants having a different style of engagement with charity on social media, or different social media usage habits.

In a further limitation, all of the participants were aged 18 or over, and younger youth may provide different insights, especially given indications that younger youth are moving away from sites like Facebook (used by all of this sample) because it is associated with their parents (Sweney and De Liz, 2018). Further study is required on the views of younger youth towards charity and social media.

### **The genuineness of the charity of friends and family**

This section presents findings from the research focusing on the situated role of friends and family in young people's giving decisions, despite the growth of social media, and the role of notions of trust, genuineness, and connection that makes charitable activity authentic for young people. The findings demonstrate that charity, rather being an individual moral decision, is perhaps best thought of as another behaviour part of the process of 'doing family' (Morgan, 2011; Holmes, 2019), perhaps best exemplified by Simon (age 20, gender male), who said:

It's only if it's family [that] you have to [donate].

Parental role-modelling and conversations about charitable giving and volunteering are strong predictors of children's giving (Ottoni-Wilhelm, Estell and Perdue, 2014). The principal theme of the data relates to the role of family and friends in how young people make giving decisions on social media: in general, having a personal connection to the person sharing a charitable act or cause increased participants' inclination to give. In a number of cases the 'closeness' of the charitable cause was a significant influence on giving. Participants explained how specific medical issues experienced by their family or friends increased both familiarity with, and donations to, the charity:

It's a no-brainer when it's somebody you know or somebody you're close to because you know it's something that means a lot to them...usually they have a connection with the charity that they're raising money for due to personal circumstances...bringing that personal touch to it. (Natasha, 21, F)

Personal experiences and preferences are generally considered key in charitable giving. Giving is a social, contextually-driven practice and that it is unsurprising that we are inspired by and connected to the causes that we are already close to, through the medium of those closest to us, and we give to those who we respect and who ask appropriately. Participants described the individual nature of preferences and interests for charitable donations arguing that 'everyone has what they see as their priority in terms of charity' (Harriet, 22, F), and 'I guess everyone has their own thing' (Yelena, 21, F). Participants were heavily influenced by their family and friends, using emotional terms such as care and empathy (Helen, 20, F), inspiring (Irma, 21, F), passionate (Andi, 21, F), and trust (Michael, 21, M) in situating why they would prioritise giving online to someone close to them. For one participant donating to charity was part of a family routine which they had carried through to adulthood:

We've always sponsored animals, and I think my sister adopted a panda, so we do it regularly. (Evy, 23, F)

One participant said he wanted to support a particular charity because his 'grandparents also do' (Ally, 18, M). Family members and friends therefore act as role models and influential when it comes to giving to charity. Linked to this is a perceived higher value when a friend or family member is involved, for example:

the fact that she was my friend made me give a whole lot more.  
(Michael, 21, M)

I knew that the most likely people to donate would be my friends.  
(Luke, 20, M)

When coded, the data shows the importance of friends and family when talking about their giving and their asks: personal connection to the person or cause drives giving decisions. Many participants agreed that they prioritise giving to family and friends, and group discussions revealed a widespread cynicism about the 'system' or 'machine' of large charities.

I would donate purely on the basis of family connections. (Ally, 18, M)

So my Race for Life, I...So the JustGiving page, you have an option to join it as a group of people so it's not just your own, so then that means that technically, you're reaching more people...So I used that for mine and just contacting every single family member I've ever known I've had. (Rebecca, 22, F)

[Scandals are] the kind of thing that puts me off giving to charities.

That's why I would support friends rather than the charity alone.

(Annika, 21, F)

This comment from Annika, alongside other focus group discussions, revealed participants' deep, but frequently unspecific, concerns about trust and authenticity regarding charity, echoing Dalton et al's (2008) findings that young people are worried about being 'manipulated' by charity advertising, a worry reduced through the genuineness of friends and family. The focus groups reveal that participants were so used to scrolling endlessly through social media feeds, and dismissing huge swathes of content, they found messages required offline personal connections for them to stick. The issue of trust, or the lack of it, related to both individuals and to organisations. The presence of a personal connection increased trust and authenticity, especially compared to the suspicion of anonymous, big, corporate charitable organisations. For example, Michael (21, M) specifically emphasises the dichotomous relationship between 'genuine' giving, and giving 'through' a large charity:

It was genuine. It wasn't going through a big corporate machine.

Similarly Simon, (20, M) also found 'big marketing' campaigns a turn-off:

If you know that person, or even if you know of them, I'm more likely to give than I am to a big marketing campaign to get people to give.

Larger charities and campaigns were frequently discussed as making unreasonable, inauthentic, low quality asks. Clearly and unsurprisingly, even in a globally connected, celebrity-driven social media world, it was still the messages from family and friends which were more trusted when it came to donating for our participants, generally because of the strong offline connection rather than to distant organisations. These findings support those

found in the previously outlined research showing 'relationally embedded network ties' (Eng, Liu and Sekhon 2012) continue to be deeply linked to donor support

Building on this, and linked to having a personal connection to the asker, was the actual 'form' of the connection. There was a key role for being 'directly connected to' and 'seeing' the person asking for donations. Commenting on how he had given to the charity of one of his friends' brothers, who had lost a kidney, Sid (19, M) said:

Because one of my friends from school, his younger brother only had one kidney, and so it felt like, obviously, you're giving to him, and he's really grateful for it. Whereas if he's just giving to a large organisation, he doesn't really have a connection with it, then I'd be less sort of inclined to give...so he would put stuff online, and then because you saw him, and you knew that it would affect him, if you gave him that fiver, it would go straight to this cause. So I felt a lot happier giving him the money.

The 'closeness' of the person asking for donations influenced how their request was received. Participant's made subjective assessments of which charity to prioritise, a strategy which sometimes included making social comparisons. If a cause was personally relatable and close to home, something they had experienced or witnessed first-hand, they were more likely to donate, and Sid (19, M) drew a distinction in this case, making a comparison to causes in developing countries:

I think there's a selfish aspect to it...you can't imagine what his family will be going through...it would be devastating, so let's give to him. Whereas you see a hungry child in Africa, you think, 'is my money

really going to affect them?' I mean, because you don't know them directly.

This is critical insight into the competition for support between different charitable causes or industries, revealing how personal experiences, practices and decisions made in everyday life all impact the choice of which charities to prioritise, supporting the work of Chapman, Masser and Louis (2019) who agree that not only are donors more likely to give because of a connection to the fundraiser, but that such connected fundraisers are well-placed to explain to their friends and family *why* a cause is important to them.

Some individuals did take a more individualist approach than discussed above, arguing it was more important to find 'charities which support your cause the most and give to them' (Havel, 18, M), rather than giving just because you were asked by someone you know, but such comments were rare. Participants were aware of the social (media) milieu in which their decisions were made and their actions (potentially) judged, revealing pressures to give. There was an assumption that you 'have to' (Simon, 20, M) donate if its family, whereas Rebecca (22, F) reported how social media enabled her to take an indiscriminate and bombastic approach to fundraising for a sponsored run by 'just contacting every single family member I've ever known I've had.' The swirl of social media, and the constant reappearance of certain messages and issues on one's wall or feed, meant that friendship was tied up with a pressure to donate:

If it's something that was going round, say, your friends, and literally it was so popular and everyone was donating to this person, you'd be like 'Well, I'm going to do it now. Everyone else is. I probably should.'  
(Yelena, 21, F)

Social ties are a strong causal factor in decisions to donate, with peer pressure a key factors (Meer, 2011), because people want to maintain their 'valuation' and social standing within a network (Eranti and Lonkila, 2015).

There were clear differences in the role of different social media sites as communication tools. Twitter was viewed as covering more 'national' issues (Luke, 20, M) and TV and YouTube were viewed as 'commercial' (Nelson, 22, M). Facebook and WhatsApp were the preference for engaging with family and friends, considered 'more from the bottom up and kind of organic...closer to home' (Simon, 20, M). This highlights the role of Facebook in rendering a familiar community of people who are more likely to donate to each other due to personal connections, known as the 'Facebook village, Twitter city' thesis (Binns, 2014). This allows Facebook to be 'the easiest way to get through to [friends]' (Luke, 20, M) because Facebook includes people you already know and 'so you're more likely to give, rather than just through a sponsorship on a YouTube advert' (Helen, 20, F), showing the importance of a personal touch when asking for donations (Chapman, Masser and Louis, 2019). Some felt that being asked face-to-face to donate was awkward - '[it] wouldn't be something you'd bring up in conversation' (Harriet, 22, F) - therefore Facebook was seen as the most appropriate platform to mediate asks. However some participants did caution that fundraising on social media was impersonal, expressing a clear preference for a direct message or face-to-face contact for this form of communication:

If I'm going to sponsor you, you can ask me in person, because that means that we're on a day-to-day basis and I can actually sponsor you. Otherwise, I don't know you, and I'm not going to sponsor you, because I don't know what you're going to do with the money... if you're asking for money then it has to be in person. (Abrielle, 21, F)



This reveals that social media such as Facebook is not a guaranteed platform for increasing donations between family and friends but it does harbour a community based on personal connections. Overall we can see the importance of family routines and traditions in influencing charitable giving as well as the significance of trust in and closeness of the cause. The issue of trust and authenticity was vital when discussions widened out into how young people view the role of celebrity backers for charitable messages online.

### **Celebrities, connections and authenticity**

...it all depends on who fronts it. (Liam, 21, M).

The role of celebrity in charity (Bennett, 2014; Brockington and Henson, 2015) was a dominant feature of the data. Many participants discussed celebrities as their 'role models' (Lester, 19, M) or 'idols' (Lucy, 18, F) which influenced inclinations to donate or to pay attention to an issue:

I will watch and I will listen to them [celebrities], as opposed to a sombre sounding voiceover over a crying kid. These are people that I like and respect. These are people who are role models, who have an influence. They're not a faceless charity, they're a face. (Lester, 19, M)

Other participants used the term 'respect' with regard to celebrities and used this as a reason to listen to them about charitable causes, because 'if it's someone you respect you're probably more likely to take on what they're telling you' (Isobel, 21, F) and you 'feel more obliged to [donate]' (Ally, 18, M). Participants frequently used terms like 'inspirational' and 'passionate' when discussing the celebrities they follow on social media, and talked about how celebrities could be useful vessels for getting key messages to a high number of followers:

I follow Lily Allen and she's absolutely constantly on Twitter, constantly trying to raise awareness of this, that and the other. (Annika, 21, F)

This demonstrates how certain celebrities are in a powerful position to raise awareness (Moore, 2008). The interaction between fan and celebrity is relational where familiarity with, and emotions for, the celebrity play a key part in the decision to donate:

You relate to them more. And therefore, you're more likely to give, because you see it, rather than just watch it. (Abrielle, 21, F)

This links to the importance of family and friends, where 'seeing' the person asking for donations, and having a tangible connection to them, plays a crucial role, with obvious differences and limitations caused by the operation of an often solely digital intimacy. This was highlighted in research by Bennett (2014) who found Lady Gaga's use of social media created a sense of intimacy with the fans by tweeting seemingly ordinary and personal tweets. This increased the fan's personal connection to Lady Gaga which was associated with direct action for civic and political engagement. Authenticity was a key issue in how young people conceptualised celebrities' charitable actions and messages, with celebrities 'judged' (Eddy, 23, M) on whether their involvement in charity was convincing and read as 'real' or not, a judgement usually based on their emotional response to situations. Such judgements had an impact on whether participants thought the celebrities were being genuine influencing their decision to donate or not. For example, in a comment about the singer Ed Sheeran giving money to fund a home for abused Liberian boys after visiting the country for Comic Relief, Helen (20, F) said:

He gave so much money on that day to these boys and it made you think 'Yes, they're in a really bad situation' because he felt upset about it.

Bennett (2014:147) also found fans perceived Lady Gaga as 'genuine' because she empowered them to take direct action, and her activity on social media made some fans 'treat her like I do my friends'. This can therefore blur the line between family, and friends and celebrities.

By contrast, there were some instances where an interaction between a celebrity and a fan base did not always lead to a donation. Several participants became more aware of charities and campaigns through celebrities and organisations but they admitted that this did not necessarily lead to donating or taking further action:

I don't know if it's made me give more to charity but it's made me more aware of charities because celebrities that I admire...do charity work. (Helen, 20, F)

Several participants discussed the tactics employed by charity actors through social media, especially how organisations like Comic Relief or football clubs would build up pressure on followers to give by repeating calls for donations or requests to spread information. This relentless nature of spreading messages on social media demonstrates the role a social network plays in charitable giving. But these tactics were also described as 'annoying' (Mary, 19, F) and 'hypocritical' (Helen, 20, F) especially because celebrities have 'got all that money themselves' (Evy, 23, F). The ability of social media to constantly target fans and supporters for charitable activities mirrored traditional complaints about charities' other fundraising strategies using old media such as leaflets, where feelings of regret may follow a participants' previous donation because they were pressured to donate again in the future:

I've given to Greenpeace before but I kind of regret it now because they ring you all the time. (Helen, 20, F)

There was some acknowledgement that this related to control and power, with descriptions of celebrities 'telling you' (Erica, 21, F) what to do:

Someone I look up to...you end up sharing it, just because they said... they sort of tried to persuade more people to do it, just because they've got that influence on them, like the viewers or readers. (Harpreet, 18, F)

Personal preferences and experiences influence decisions to donate or not. Many celebrities are viewed as role models and are respected, meaning they are effective at raising awareness of issues, but participants indicate this did not always translate into further actions. Data highlights that the different strategies employed by celebrities or organisations can have varying impacts on charitable giving and that these nuances should be considered when developing social media campaigns aimed at young people, because, as Yelena (21, F) put it, 'I feel like I pay more attention *depending* on who has retweeted it.' So a theory of social network-driven giving also extends to the world of celebrities, where it is those appeals that use celebrities with a connection to a cause, and who have moral authority on an issue, are the most successful (Wilson, 2015). Any preference for donating to those one is already close to can be cut across if the right celebrity is supporting the right cause. Given the near-impossibility of tuning such a system for each individual potential donor (although the big data and micro-targeted advertising of the large social media companies may make it easier), such an approach is beyond the practical reach of most charities. This finding offers some support to the research of Brockington and Henson (2015) who found that most people

support certain charities because of 'personal connections in their lives and families' which made these causes important, and not because of the attachment of a celebrity.

## **Conclusions**

This exploratory research has explored the dominant themes and messages that emerge from discussions with students about their experiences and perceptions of charity and social media. Despite some limitations with the sample of students who participated in this research, and the method's obvious separateness from young people's actual lived experience of using social media, some initial and clear conclusions can be drawn. The most clear is that the voluntary sector needs to be aware that young people frequently have a social media-led way of engaging with friends and family. This qualitative study supports the survey findings of Bhagat, Loeb and Rovner (2010) who found that younger donors were much more likely to define themselves as 'peer motivated' in their giving, much more likely to support a cause when asked by friends or family than older givers. The authors found that charities could target younger potential donors, as they had yet to define their personal giving preferences, but that such targeting was more likely to be effective when going through friends and family. It also supports the findings of Payne, Scharf and Smith (2014) that online donations are driven by existing offline social relationships and Meer's (2011) research showing that asks are more successful when building on existing relationships. Friends and family are often the mediator between young people and charitable messages and calls for donations. There are obvious examples which cut through - organisations that young people previously know from offline worlds, messages emerging from traditional media, and some dominant social media campaigns such as the Ice Bucket Challenge - but in general the experiences of the young people who participated in this research were driven by close relationships. Therefore, we should caution against locating a 'silver bullet' for charities in engaging with social media and there is no guarantee as to what the 'next Ice Bucket Challenge' will be. A final key reflection

taken from the data collection is that these students are intensely wary of messages they receive online: they have grown up being told not to believe everything they read on social media, and are keenly aware of attempts to manipulate them. Charities should be wary of adding to such scepticism. Clear and authentic messaging is vital to engaging this group, if embedding giving behaviours for when young people *do* have disposable income is a social priority (if not one for individual charity fundraisers with fewer immediate structural concerns).

While the technological developments of digital globalisation enable engaged young people to communicate across borders and oceans, this does not translate into communities of space. In the vast majority of cases, charity action happens, and actors act, locally in the space and networks that mean most to them on a day to day basis. As the historian Tony Judt (2010: 121) states, 'real-time access to likeminded fellows half a world away is no substitute.' Instead, close community connections continue to drive the giving behaviours of digitally-engaged young people, who despite their connectivity, and perhaps because of their limited disposable income ('If I had quite a bit of disposable income I definitely would [give more], but just the fact that I have to budget quite a lot more now...' [Betty, 22, F]), do charity not as an identity-driver but as part of a more mundane process of 'doing family' (Morgan, 2011; Holmes, 2019). This study also offers some evidence that builds on Saxton and Wang's (2014) conclusions that offline and online fundraising need to be thought of as connected and that any 'move to digital' will create winners and losers. There remains a social network effect, and trusted messages are shared by 'word-of-mouth', but existing offline relationships still drive what young people think about when considering their experiences of charity online. Charities have to avoid making assumptions about young people's use of social networking sites (Henderson and Bowley, 2010), and charity campaigners and fundraisers should not assume they understand how young people interact with social media. This article shows that

young people are frequently more influenced by friends and family than large scale celebrities and gimmicks. Charities should commit to working with young people themselves to design charity and fundraising campaigns (Bennett and Savani, 2011; Nahai, 2014) to avoid building campaigns based on misunderstandings about how young people engage online.

### ***Further research***

Firstly, this research should be repeated with those groups of young people not represented by this almost exclusively student sample, as discussed in the above methodology. More fundamentally, there is a strong argument for more micro-level, interactionist studies of charity in the digital realm that can assess the quality and depth of engagements as opposed to large scale quantitative studies where each click or share is often considered of the same value. As a fundraising technique, social media requests for donations or awareness are shallow (as opposed to deep) interventions, spread thinly among potential donors, and are hoping for impulsively given gifts. Because impulse donations are by their very nature hard to predict, and what works about them is hard to record, it is therefore crucial to understand the social context and individual experiences of giving, even in the more abstract world of social media, and examine people's preferences for social media-driven charitable giving to inform future campaigns. This article shows that students do occasionally give to random charitable causes online or engage in celebrity-driven giving opportunities; but that it is the fundraising they have done themselves or the giving to friends and family that are their most significant experiences. What we require is more research that unpicks the 'black box' of charitable giving and fundraising - real-time, 'live' methods (Back and Puwar, 2012) that truly understand how people give in a live digital situation rather than research that asks people to reflect on their giving afterwards.

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