UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE.

Exploring retention strategies:

A study on the use of online and offline communication channels and various donation solicitation appeals on donor retention.

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1. Abstract

Nonprofits face ongoing challenges in effectively engaging and retaining donors, yet research often falls short in providing guidance on communication strategies. While previous studies have explored factors influencing repeat donations, there is a lack of focus on how donation solicitation appeals are used to support donor retention. Furthermore, much of the existing literature concentrates on single communication channels, overlooking the potential benefits of integrating multiple channels to strengthen donor relationships.

This study explores the usage of on- and offline communication channels as well as various donation appeals in the context of donor retention. This qualitative study, based on semi-structured interviews with 16 representatives from 14 nonprofits across sectors like animal welfare, health, and education, explores how communication strategies are used throughout the donor journey.

The findings revealed that NPOs employ a balanced approach, using digital platforms for engaging donors, while traditional offline mediums sustain donor relationships. Value-driven messaging and storytelling emerged as crucial elements in engaging donors to create a sense of shared purpose. Furthermore, results indicated that most nonprofits prioritise donor-related appeals throughout the donor journey. The study found that combining donation appeals in a single campaign is rare, although possible when the impact is specific and clear.

This study explored the strategic use of communication channels and donation appeals to foster long-term donor relationships. Applying these insights enables nonprofits to optimise donor retention strategies.

Keywords: donor journey, communication channels, donation appeals, donor retention, nonprofit organisations.

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3. Introduction

Nonprofit organisations (NPOs) play a vital role in addressing societal needs and advancing the common good. However, their ability to fulfil their missions relies heavily on the support of individual donors, who contribute approximately 70-80% of total donations (Nonprofits Source, 2023). Without the financial contributions of individual donors, NPOs would be unable to fulfil their purposes. As a result, nonprofits are consistently challenged to attract donors and secure their ongoing support (Beldad et al., 2024).

Strategically, retaining regular donors is more cost-effective than acquiring new ones, as attracting new donors involves higher marketing expenses. Consequently, there is a growing imperative to develop consistent revenue streams and maintain strong relationships with donors (Saxton et al., 2014). However, existing research has not thoroughly explored the marketing communication strategies that influence donor retention (Kumar & Chakrabarti, 2021). Understanding the donor journey – the process through which individuals engage with and support NPOs – is paramount for fostering long-term donor relationships (Lee et al., 2020a). Drawing on existing literature, the donor journey can be said to comprise of five distinct stages: initiation, interaction, retention, upgrading, and reactivation. While research suggests that individuals who make initial donations are likely to contribute again, many NPOs experience a significant loss (30%) of donors after the initial contribution (*Online Giving Trends - Blackbaud Institute*, 2023). As building and maintaining donor-NPO relationships are critical for ensuring the longevity of nonprofits, this study focuses on the retention and reactivation stages of the donor journey.

Drawing from interpersonal communication theories, this study explores the usage of communication strategies on donor retention, particularly focusing on communication channels and solicitation appeals. It seeks to explore the application of donation solicitation appeals for donor satisfaction, loyalty, and long-term engagement. While existing literature (Fajardo et al., 2018; Van Dijk et al., 2019; Zogaj et al., 2020)

has examined determinants and factors impacting repeat donations and regular donation behaviour, there remains a gap in understanding the specific donation appeals used in marketing communication with repeat donor behaviour. In other words, the focus has primarily been on factors influencing repeat donor behaviour from the perspective of individual donors, rather than on how nonprofits incorporate these factors into their marketing communication strategies. Consequently, the usage of donor-related and organisation-related donation appeals as well as the combination thereof on donor retention is researched.

The relationship between nonprofits and individual donors develops through various mediums and points of contact. Nowadays, nonprofit organisations have incorporated multiple on- and offline channels into their marketing communication strategies. However, many NPOs face challenges in fully leveraging online platforms to build, sustain, and nurture donor relationships (Pressrove & Pardun, 2016). Existing literature often focuses on outcomes related to online interactivity rather than on concrete organisational support in the form of donations. Furthermore, current literature often highlights the benefits of single communication channels rather than how to manage multiple channels simultaneously to improve stakeholder connections (Mato-Santiso et al., 2021). As a result, there is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding the exploration of how different on- and offline mediums can be effectively combined as the donor-NPO relationship evolves. By exploring the application of various communication channels at different stages of the donor journey, this study provides insights that can contribute to the development of lasting donor relationships.

The central question that is addressed is as follows:

 "How do nonprofit organisations manage donor retention through the use of online and offline communication channels and various donation appeals?"

As a result, this study contributes to the stream of donor journey and repeat donations research. Specifically, this research delves into donor retention strategies,

focusing on various donation appeals as well as the role of communication channels. By researching the usage of various communication strategies for repeat donor behaviour, this study provides insights that contribute to increasing donor satisfaction, loyalty, and long-term engagement. Additionally, this study provides actionable insights for nonprofit organisations aiming to strengthen their donor-NPO relationship and increase donor lifetime value. The strategic integration of specific donation appeals and communication channels maximises donor engagement and long-term commitment.

The remainder of this thesis is as follows: First, the theoretical framework provides a foundation for understanding repeat donor behaviour and evaluating communication strategies in nonprofit contexts. Second, the research design and methodology outline how data was collected and analysed to explore the usage of various communication approaches and strategies. Next, the results from the data analysis uncover insights into the application of online and offline channels, as well as the usage of donation appeals. Finally, the discussion and conclusion integrate these findings, offering implications for nonprofits and suggesting areas for future research to optimise donor retention strategies to maintain donor-nonprofit relationships.

4. Theoretical framework

This chapter presents the theoretical framework for this study. The first section explores individual donations to nonprofit organisations, discussing their significance and impact on the sustainability of NPOs. The second section delves into the stages of the donor journey, highlighting the importance of focusing on long-term donor engagement. Next, donation solicitation appeals are examined, categorising them into donor-related and organisation-related appeals. Furthermore, the use of both online and offline communication channels is explored, evaluating their roles in engaging and retaining donors. In the final section, factors influencing repeat donations are connected to specific solicitation appeals, exploring their role in the retention and reactivation stages of the donor journey.

4.1 Individual donations to nonprofit organisations

A nonprofit organisation, also referred to as a not-for-profit or NPO, is an entity primarily dedicated to serving social objectives rather than pursuing profits for its owners or shareholders. Consequently, these organisations rely on sources of revenue beyond customer transactions, such as contributions, grants, and various funding channels, to sustain their operations (Moore, 2000). In general, contributions to nonprofits are made by making monetary donations, proving in-kind gifts, or volunteering time. The main sources of such contributions are individuals, foundations, bequests, and corporations (Nonprofits Source, 2023). Notably, the largest share of contributions comes from individuals, comprising approximately 70-80%. Individual donations can be made through various channels, including online platforms, fundraising events, and planned giving (Ibrisevic, 2024). This study primarily focuses on monetary donations from individual donors.

Without the resources donated by individual donors, NPOs would be unable to carry out their purposes of addressing social needs and advancing the common good. Therefore, nonprofits are consistently pressed to attract first-time donors and secure

their continued support (Beldad et al., 2024). Strategically, it is more cost-effective for these organisations to retain regular donors than to attract new ones, due to the higher marketing costs associated with acquiring new donors. Yet, a lack of communication can negatively affect donors' perceptions of an organisation, leading to donor attrition. According to Water (2010), effective communication strategies can improve relationships between donors and nonprofits, leading to increased donor retention rates. Consequently, understanding marketing communication strategies on donor retention is crucial for NPOs seeking to effectively engage with and retain individual donors.

4.2 Stages of the donor journey

By their marketing communications, NPOs attempt to assist people on a "donor journey" in order to achieve monetary donations (Lee et al., 2020a). According to Lee et al. (2020a), the well-known "customer journey" is not directly applicable to the nonprofit sector, as there is a distinction between buying and donating in behaviour. Accordingly, the donor journey can be defined as "the content and mediums of communication that a donor engages with prior to making a donation" (Lee et al., 2020b, p.368). This journey comprises a series of chronological interactions between constituents and nonprofits (Lee et al., 2023). Nonprofit organisations aim to optimise the donor journey by executing appropriate actions at strategic times to maximise the lifetime value (LTV) of donors. This optimisation entails not only increasing donations but also minimising costs and donor fatigue (Lee et al., 2023).

Maintaining a good relationship between the individual donor and nonprofit organisation is essential to improve donor loyalty and satisfaction. Consequently, it is imperative for NPOs to develop a blueprint of the donor journey after the initial donation to understand how to foster long-term relationships (Kumar & Chakrabarti, 2021). However, existing literature lacks a precise demarcation of the stages comprising the entire donor journey. Consequently, this study delineates these stages based on insights

from various research papers in the nonprofit sector that delve into repeat donations, donor commitment, and donor-NPO relationships.

Drawing on existing literature, the donor journey can be said to consist of five distinct stages: initiation, interaction, retention, upgrading, and reactivation. These distinct stages are referred to in Figure 1, which has been created by the researcher as part of this study. In this research, these stages of the donor journey were further examined as experienced by various nonprofit organisations.

Figure 1

Stages of the donor journey
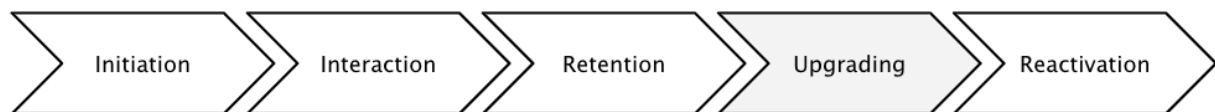
The first stage of the donor journey, initiation, refers to the discovery and connection of individual donors towards a specific cause and NPO (Van Dijk et al., 2019). Specifically, the relationship between a donor and nonprofit is characterised by the creation of value by both the donor and the NPO together. Research conducted by Bennett & Ali-Choudhury (2008), suggests that individuals who make their first donation are likely to contribute again. However, many nonprofit organisations experience a 30% loss of donors after their initial contribution (*Online Giving Trends - Blackbaud Institute*, 2023). Furthermore, cross-charity giving poses a challenge for NPOs. Specifically, it is observed that many new donors to specific charities do not make subsequent donations to the same nonprofit organisation that initially recruited them (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2008; Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007). This highlights the importance of this relationship between the NPO and the individual donor, which is emphasised in the interaction stage of the donor journey. In this stage, value congruity between the donor and the NPO is crucial, as alignment of values enhances donor engagement and commitment, thereby contributing to worth co-creation for both parties (Van Dijk et al., 2019).

Next, the retention stage occurs when donors transition to repeat donations after making the initial donation. More specifically, it is connected to active commitment of individual donors for the work that the NPO is trying to achieve (Sargeant, 2013). Furthermore, donors could decide to increase monthly contributions, which is delineated in the upgrading stage of the donor journey. (Squires, 1994). Despite efforts to maintain donor relationships, attrition rates remain high in subsequent years (Sergeant & Woodliffe, 2007). Active commitment to an NPO is influenced by an individual's alignment with the organisation's beliefs, as well as factors such as trust, perceived service quality, and perceived risk to the beneficiary group when withdrawing a donation (Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007; Beldad et al., 2014). In the reactivation stage, efforts are made to re-engage donors who have lapsed in their contributions, aiming to reignite their support and involvement with nonprofits (Nathan & Hallam, 2009).

It is crucial for nonprofit organisations to allocate resources to building and maintaining relationships with donors to ensure their longevity. Therefore, understanding the donor journey is important because it enables NPOs to strategically engage and nurture relationships with donors, ensuring timely and appropriate actions that maximise donor lifetime value (Lee et al., 2023). Drawing from interpersonal communication theories, Hon and Grunig (1999) propose that relationships between nonprofit organisations and donors are evaluated based on levels of trust, commitment, satisfaction, and power dynamics. Existing literature further supports this notion by validating these factors, demonstrating their impact on repeated donor behaviour and donor commitment (Beldad et al. 2014; Boenigk & Helmig, 2013; Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007). However, it remains unclear how these factors are considered in communication strategies. Exploring different communication strategies at various stages of the donor journey is essential for NPOs to increase donor satisfaction, loyalty, and long-term engagement (Lee et al., 2023). Therefore, this study explores the communication strategies of nonprofits in the retention and reactivation stages of the donor journey, recognising their significance in repeat donations.

4.3 Donor-related and organisation-related appeals

Nurturing donor-NPO relationships is a continuous process that encompasses maintaining communication with donors beyond solicitation. This includes psychological involvement, such as sending acknowledgments and thank-you notes for donations, and inviting donors to sponsored events (Bennett et al., 2008). In addition to their routine communication with donors, nonprofits often send targeted solicitation appeals to encourage increased or repeat contributions. These appeals may aim to upgrade the amount of regular donations or to request a one-time donation in addition to the donor's ongoing support (Kumar & Chakrabarti, 2021). Based on multiple studies (Fajardo et al., 2018; Ranganathan & Henley, 2007; Van Dijk et al., 2019), donation solicitations can be categorised into two main clusters: donor-related and organisation-related appeals.

4.3.1 Donor-related appeals

One common approach used by nonprofit organisations to promote their cause involves utilising emotional appeals in their marketing communications. Such donation appeals often tap into the concept of personal values, as outlined by Schwartz (1992) theory of human values. Existing literature indicates that universalism values are most positively related to the likelihood of making a monetary donation to any NPO compared with other personal values (Van Dijk et al., 2019; Sneddon et al., 2020). Specifically, universalism refers to the concern for all people, whether known or unknown to the individual donor.

Consequently, there is a growing body of literature exploring the efficiency of positive emotional appeals motivating donor behaviour. For example, Greenpeace aligns with universalism values, but focusing on hope and pride in donation appeals helps reduce perceived negative consequences of supporting this NPO by people who prioritise the opposing achievement values (Sneddon et al., 2020). According to Septianto and Tjiptono (2019), positive emotions like pride and compassion have positive effects on donation behaviour, depending on the performance of nonprofit

organisations. In detail, when an NPOs current performance is better (worse) compared to the previous year, indicating positive (negative) performance, pride (compassion) is more effective. In contrast, negative emotional appeals (e.g., guilt, anger, and sadness) are also frequently employed in driving donation behaviour. However, when negative emotional appeals are being overused by NPOs, such negative feelings can intensify. This leads to reduced sympathy and even unfavourable donor evaluations of the nonprofit (Septianto & Tjiptono, 2019).

Furthermore, the importance of personal motivations in the act of donating is acknowledged by the research of Fajardo et al. (2018). In their study, it is revealed that donor-related information appeals (e.g., moral identity and self-proximity) significantly impacts the general decision to donate. These donor-related factors are delineated from the research of Sargeant et al. (2006) and involve the intrinsic characteristics of the donor and his or her self-perception. Therefore, it is suggested that individual donors seek information related to the self-relevance of a potential donation when they are considering whether or not to make a contribution (Fajardo et al., 2018).

Existing literature primarily examined the influence of such donor-related appeals on donor behaviour concerning the initial donation. However, these studies do not consider the effect of such solicitation appeals on donor behaviour when the relationship between nonprofit organisations and individual donors progresses, thus overlooking the LTV perspective. While emotional appeals may successfully motivate a one-time donation, the sustainability of donor support over time requires further exploration. Therefore, this research considered the implications of donor-related appeals on the long-term relationship between donors and nonprofit organisations, emphasising the importance of donor retention.

4.3.2 Organisation-related appeals

While several studies explore donors' general inclination to give, this may not always correlate with the specific characteristics of nonprofit organisations. The research of Ranganathan and Henley (2007) has distinguished between individuals'

attitudes towards aiding others and their attitudes towards nonprofit organisations. Simply having an altruistic mindset does not always lead to donations; they need to be targeted with an appropriate marketing communication message. Additionally, favourable attitudes toward both nonprofit organisation and the solicitation appeal itself are crucial. This concept of value congruence is related to the similarity-attraction theory (Zhang & Bloemer, 2008). Particularly, it suggests that individuals are more inclined to respond positively to others who share similar characteristics.

In the context of nonprofit organisations, donors are more likely to donate to NPOs that align with their own values (Van Dijk et al., 2019). This aligns with the findings of Fajardo et al. (2018) regarding organisation-related appeals. These appeals focus on the characteristics of the NPO and the cause it represents, independent of the donor's self-perception. Examples of organisation-related appeals include the severity of victimisation and organisational effectiveness. Such appeals not only highlight the impact of donations but also influence decisions regarding the amount of donation (Fajardo et al., 2018).

The long-term relationship between donors and nonprofit organisations involves continued trust, communication, and alignment of values (Beldad et al., 2014). While previous studies investigated how these factors influence initial donations through organisation-related appeals, their use for repeat donations has not been thoroughly explored. Without exploring how these factors and appeals are applied to donor retention, nonprofit organisations may find it challenging to maximise the lifetime value (LTV) of donors. To address this gap, this study investigated the application of organisation-related appeals in the retention and reactivation stages. By exploring these interactions on donor satisfaction, loyalty, and long-term engagement, this research delved deeper into the donor journey, encompassing multiple touchpoints and interactions.

4.4 Online vs. offline communication channels

Due to limited budgets, reduced staffing, reliance on donors and volunteers for mission fulfilment, and increased competition, nonprofits are seeking better ways to engage and maintain relationships (Pressrove & Pardun, 2016). However, research in this area often fails to provide clear answers on what strategies work best. The relationship between nonprofits and individual donors evolves through various mediums and points of contact. Therefore, an environment of open and diverse communication is needed to foster and manage relationships (Hussain et al., 2014). Nowadays, nonprofits have integrated various digital tools into their marketing communication strategies to convey important messages, engage stakeholders, and solicit contributions. For example, nonprofit organisations use social media to reach new audiences and inspire people to take action (Milde & Yawson, 2017). However, many NPOs struggle to fully harness the potential of online platforms for building, sustaining, and nurturing relationships (Pressrove & Pardun, 2016). Specifically, existing literature tends to emphasise outcomes related to interactivity (e.g., retweets, likes, comments) rather than tangible organisational support in the form of donations. Similarly, email marketing is commonly used to convert one-time donors into recurring contributors, but there's limited research on mailing strategies to improve donor retention and commitment (Minguez & Sesé, 2023; Thomas et al., 2015).

Apart from using online channels for marketing communication, nonprofits also continue using offline channels (Mato-Santiso et al., 2021). Examples of such channels are door-to-door solicitation, standard mail, press, other offline media such as TV, radio, and posters. These offline channels and traditional media are still being used by nonprofit organisations to initiate and maintain donor behaviour. Based on the literature review conducted by Mato-Santiso et al. (2021), the different types of channels are complementary to one another when it comes to building and managing nonprofit-stakeholder relationships. According to Pressrove and Pardun (2016), there is a significant impact on stakeholders in the offline community and their intentions to donate when stakeholders maintain a personal connection with NPOs through online

channels. Online channels do not replace offline channels; it strengthens NPOs' sustainability and vitality through social activities and may encourage the growth of individual donors (Eimhjellen, 2013). Yet, rather than discussing how to manage several channels simultaneously with a shared approach to improve the connections with various stakeholders, the literature focuses more on the benefits or utility of a single channel (Mato-Santiso et al., 2021). Therefore, this study explored the combined usage of online and offline communication channels throughout the donor journey.

4.5 Donation appeals on donor retention

The primary goal for non-profit organisations is to maximise the value they create for their stakeholders and society. However, with the wide array of nonprofit organisations available, donors have numerous options to choose from when deciding where to allocate their support. According to Hussain et al. (2014), this competitive landscape underscores the importance of building stakeholder-relationships as a means of gaining a competitive advantage. Therefore, it becomes crucial for NPOs to employ effective strategies and tactics to build long-term relationships with individual donors. This highlights the necessity for nonprofits to establish and sustain relationships with their stakeholders by employing effective communication techniques (Hussain et al., 2014).

Existing literature focuses on determinants and other factors impacting repeat donations and regular donation behaviour. However, they do not focus on the actual donation solicitation appeals used in marketing communication that incorporate these factors. Consequently, this study examined the usage of these appeals for donor satisfaction, loyalty, and long-term engagement. In doing so, the focus of this research is on the retention and reactivation stages of the donor journey.

4.5.1 Donation appeals for the retention stage of the donor journey

In the retention stage, NPOs preserve and deepen donor connections by using effective methods and appeals. According to Sargeant (2013), an emphasis on donor

retention is essential for NPOs because it reduces costs and improves efficiency. Moreover, it provides opportunities for increased revenue, valuable feedback, and positive word-of-mouth promotion, all of which contribute to the long-term sustainability and success of nonprofit organisations. However, the overall retention rate of online donations is only 23% (*Online Giving Trends - Blackbaud Institute*, 2023). Thus, it is essential to investigate which appeals positively affect donation behaviour during the retention stage of the donor journey.

The retention stage is connected to active commitment of individual donors, which is defined as "a genuine passion for the future of the organisation and the work it is trying to achieve" (Sargeant, 2013, p. 8). Particularly, this type of commitment is fostered by building trust, enhancing two-way interactions, and developing shared values between donor and organisation. In addition, it is important to highlight risk perception and trust in the NPO's ability to deliver on its promises. In the research conducted by Sargeant and Woodliffe (2007), two primary categories of factors affecting donor commitment and loyalty were identified. Firstly, there are predisposing factors that influence donors' commitment from the beginning of their engagement, such as personal connections to the cause and alignment with the beliefs of the NPO. Manipulating these factors post hoc to foster commitment proves challenging for nonprofits. Conversely, factors like trust, service quality, and perceptions of risk to the beneficiary group can be directly influenced through marketing communication efforts (Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007). Furthermore, these implications are corroborated by the study conducted by Boenigk and Helmig (2013), which examined the application of the most important relationship drivers of purchase behaviour - orientation, satisfaction, and loyalty - in the context of nonprofit organisations. Their key findings reveal that donor-nonprofit identification and donor identity are distinct constructs and that both explain donor loyalty, which significantly impacts monetary donations. In alignment with these findings, Beldad et al. (2014) also studied the determinants of repeat donation intentions. Their research revealed that factors like high levels of trust, affinity with the

cause, and the perceived effectiveness of one's contribution positively influence intentions for repeat monetary donations (Beldad et al., 2014).

According to Shen (2016), individual donors decided about longevity of their contribution when being recruited and the majority (56%) of first-time donors lapse within one year as they intended. Organisation-related appeals constructed by Fajardo et al. (2018) highlight the impact and effectiveness of the nonprofit organisation's work and are likely to foster feelings of trust and commitment among donors. By emphasising the positive outcomes achieved by the nonprofit organisation, such as the alleviation of suffering or the advancement of a cause, these appeals reinforce donors' belief in the NPO's ability to fulfil its promises and achieve its mission. As a result, donors may feel a greater sense of satisfaction and connection to the NPO, leading to increased likelihood of continued support and donation in the retention stage of the donor journey. This aligns with the findings of previous research, which suggest that factors related to the organisation itself, such as trust and perceived impact, play a significant role in influencing donor commitment and loyalty (Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007; Boenigk and Helmig, 2013; Beldad et al., 2014). Therefore, the role of organisation-related donation appeals in encouraging donor retention and long-term engagement with the nonprofit organisation were explored in this study.

In light of the existing literature and research findings, a conceptual framework is established. Figure 2 summarised the key factors considered when crafting organisation-related appeals aimed at encouraging repeat donor behaviour.

Figure 2

Conceptual model for the retention stage of the donor journey
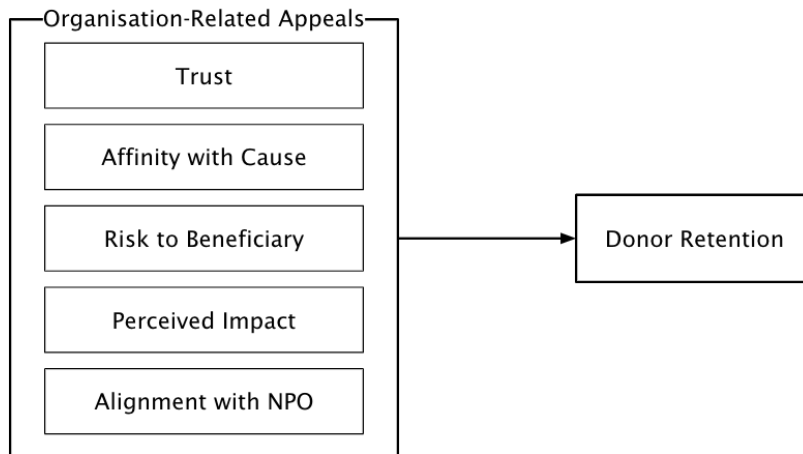
4.5.2 *Donation appeals for the reactivation stage of the donor journey*

In the reactivation stage, nonprofit organisations re-engage lapsed or dormant individual donors who have previously supported the NPO but have discontinued their contributions. From a strategic perspective, it is more cost-effective for NPOs to retain existing donors than to acquire new ones, given the expenses associated with attracting new supporters. For regular donors, it is common to observe attrition rates of approximately 30% annually (Nonprofits Source, 2023). Attrition is often influenced by passive commitment, where donors lack a strong desire to maintain the relationship with the nonprofit organisation. Over time, the most common reason for discontinued commitment of individual donors is that they believe that other causes are more, or possibly equally, deserving (Sargeant, 2001; Shen, 2016).

Nathan and Hallam (2009) identify a primary factor contributing to the lapse of longer-term donors as the absence of donor engagement, which impacts their connection to the cause. Therefore, the role that donor-related appeals play in encouraging donor reactivation and long-term engagement is considered by this research. Specifically, donor-related appeals constructed by Fajardo et al. (2018) highlight the intrinsic characteristics and self-perception of the donor and are likely to influence feelings of donation self-relevance. By talking about the donor and what they

have done, NPOs pull donors towards their cause and organisation. Subsequently, such communication boosts pleasurable emotions that result from helping deserving causes called "Helper's High" (Dossey, 2018). Existing literature indicates that donors stay motivated by evidence that their donations make a difference and nonprofit organisations are grateful (Nathan & Hallam, 2009; Waters, 2010). Therefore, marketing communications should be geared towards showing donors what they are achieving instead of reminding them of all the problems the NPO would like to solve. This way, donors are given a sense of status and value (Nathan & Hallam, 2009).

The significance of donor self-perception and donation self-relevance in reactivating lapsed donors aligns with the findings of Zogaj et al. (2020) regarding the association of self-congruence with donor loyalty. Specifically, when the personalities and self-concept of donors align with those of the nonprofit organisation, the relationship is strengthened. Additionally, Zogaj et al. (2020) explore the concept of functional congruence, representing donors' expectations and satisfaction regarding an NPO's performance. This aligns with the relevance of NPO performance highlighted by Sargeant et al. (2006), who demonstrated its positive effect on donor behaviour, particularly trust and commitment. The findings of Zogaj et al. (2020) further indicate that functional congruence predicts donor loyalty. Subsequently, this corroborates and extends the results of Sargeant et al. (2006), who revealed that an organisation's performance indirectly influences giving behaviour via trust and commitment. Moreover, another body of literature suggests a link between perceived risk, trust, reputation, and reluctance to continue donating to a charitable organisation (Sargeant, 2013; Beldad et al., 2012). Therefore, this study explored how organisation-related donation appeals are used to positively impact the reactivation of latent donors.

The findings of Zogaj et al. (2020) suggest that both self-congruence and functional congruence contribute to donor loyalty. Donors seek to support nonprofit organisations that align with their self-concept and demonstrate high organisational performance, utilising donations efficiently to achieve their stated goals. Fajardo et al. (2018) highlighted the potential challenges associated with information overload and

increased complexity in marketing communication when utilising combined donation appeals. However, these concerns might be less significant in the reactivation stage of the donor journey as individual donors are already familiar with the cause and the nonprofit organisation. Hence, this study explored the application of a combined solicitation appeal addressing both clusters regarding the reactivation of lapsed individual donors.

Building on existing literature, a conceptual framework has been developed. Figure 3 outlines the key factors taken into account when designing donor-related and organisation-related appeals to reactivate lapsed donors.

Figure 3

Conceptual model for the reactivation stage of the donor Journey
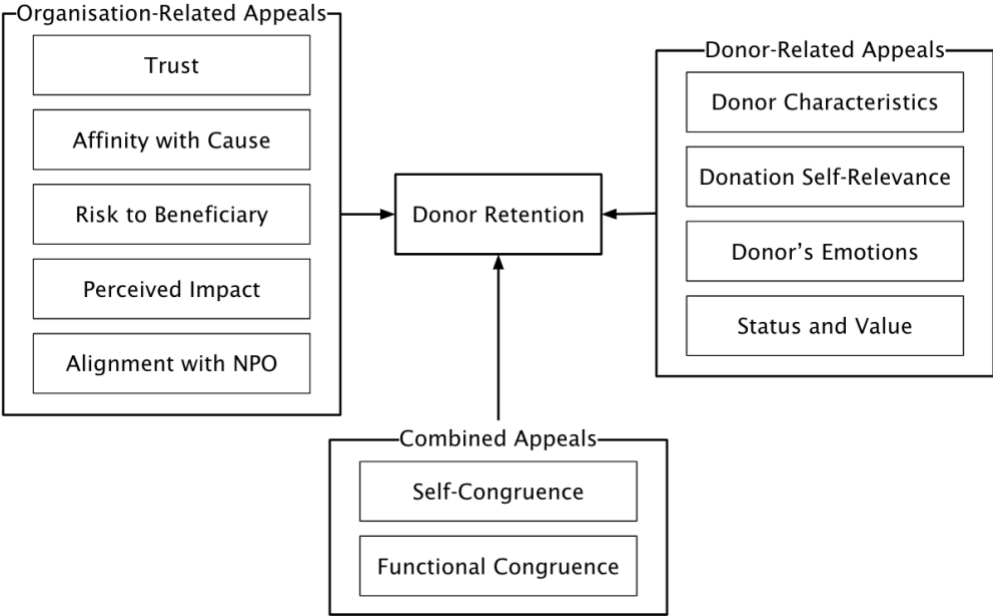
5. Research design and methodology

In the methodology section, the strategies and protocols used to gather data through interviews for this study are explained. Additionally, it describes how the interview data was analysed. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and viewpoints, a qualitative research approach was adopted, specifically utilising a phenomenological research approach. The methodology section provides a detailed account of the participants involved and how they were interviewed using semi-structured open questions. For data analysis, a thematic analysis was applied to identify and analyse themes or patterns within the data.

5.1 Research design

The purpose of this study is to explore the usage of on- and offline communication channels and donation appeals on donor retention. To achieve this, the research design implemented in this study is qualitative, specifically employing semi-structured interviews. Qualitative research is designed to answer "what" and "why" questions through in-depth exploration, providing a deep understanding of the phenomena under study (Fusch & Ness, 2015). This method was appropriate for this study because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the communication strategies that nonprofit organisations use to retain donors, offering valuable insights into donor retention in the nonprofit sector. Moreover, the use of semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility and openness in capturing participants' unique insights and understanding the complex factors that shape their attitudes and actions (Bryman, 2016).

The intention of this research was to explore the relationship between NPOs and individual donors and how different communication strategies play a role in this. By applying a qualitative research method, the limitations of relying solely on self-reported data in existing literature was addressed (Zogaj et al. 2020). Conversely, this study shifts its focus from examining the factors that influence repeat donor behaviour at an

individual level to exploring how nonprofits integrate these factors into their marketing communication strategies. Therefore, the aim of this research was on gaining insights into the characteristics of their donors, touchpoints of the donor journey, online and offline communication channels, and current challenges to retain donors. Furthermore, the interviews explored whether NPOs employ organisation-related appeals, donor-related appeals, or a combination of both in their communication strategies.

Regarding ethical considerations, this study underwent the review process by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioural, Management, and Social Sciences at the University of Twente. The study received ethical approval (Requestnr. 240979), ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of the study participants and the nonprofit organisations involved.

5.2 Method of data collection

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method of data collection because they enabled the researcher to gain a rich and detailed understanding of the participants' experiences, allowing for the collection of data that is contextually rich and meaningful (Bryman, 2016). Additionally, semi-structured interviews offered the flexibility to follow up on topics that arise during the interview, allowing for a more in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences and perspectives.

Over a period of seven weeks, semi-structured interviews were conducted either in-person or via video conferencing, depending on the preferences of the participants. Open-ended questions were incorporated to allow participants to share their experiences and perspectives in their own words (Bryman, 2016). The primary objective of these interview questions was to collect comprehensive data on the relationship between NPOs and individual donors. Therefore, the interview guide was carefully crafted based on a thorough literature review to ensure its relevance to the study's focus on marketing communication strategies for donor retention. It was crucial to align the interview questions with the specific constructs and topics of the theory to ensure adequate coverage of the themes being explored. An extract of the adopted required

information and questions is shown in Table 1. Furthermore, the alignment of all interview questions with the theory's constructs and topics is detailed in appendix A.

Table 1

Overview of required information and questions by topics of study

Topics of the study	Required Information	Examples of questions
Characteristics of individual donors	Description of NPO, typical donor profiles, motivation	"Can you describe the typical profile of individual donors who support your nonprofit organisation?"
Touchpoints of the donor journey	Donor journey stages, key touchpoints, strategies	"What are the key touchpoints or interactions donors have with your NPO from initial awareness to ongoing support?"
Communication channels	Online and offline channels, performance	"How does your NPO utilise on- and offline channels to engage with donors?"
Retention and reactivation	Avg. retention and attrition rates, strategies	"What strategies does your NPO employ to retain donors and prevent donor attrition?"
Donation appeals	Donor and organisation related appeals, combination thereof	"How does your NPO convey its goals, mission, and impact to donors through its appeals?"

5.3 Population and sampling

The population for this qualitative study consisted of 16 representatives from 14 nonprofits dedicated to various causes such as animal welfare, health and education. The roles of the participants spanned a diverse range including fundraisers, data analysts, and marketers. As a result, the participants possessed first-hand experience with the effects of different strategies on the relationship between NPOs and individual

donors. Additionally, the respondents had generally worked at their respective NPOs for several years, offering a well-rounded overview of their marketing communication efforts.

By utilising purposeful sampling, 12 initial participants were identified through the researcher's personal and professional network. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select individuals who are particularly knowledgeable about the subject matter, ensuring that the data collected is rich and relevant (Bryman, 2016). However, this method might have excluded potentially valuable perspectives from those not identified by the initial selection of participants.

By leveraging the connections established during these interviews, four additional contacts within other nonprofit organisations were obtained, expanding the pool of interviewees to 16 in total. This snowball sampling technique facilitated access to a wider range of representatives from different NPOs which enriched the insights gathered during the interviews. Even though participants may refer individuals from NPOs who are similar to themselves, leading to a less diverse sample and potential bias (Bryman, 2016), this was not the case in this study.

Theoretical saturation is reached when additional data no longer brings new insights or adds significant information to the existing themes (Bryman, 2016). For this study, theoretical saturation was achieved through a comprehensive and iterative process involving 16 in-depth interviews with representatives from various nonprofit organisations. In detail, the iterative process of analysing each interview immediately after its completion allowed the researcher to identify recurring themes and refine subsequent interview questions to explore these themes further. When the last few interviews provided information that fit neatly into the existing themes and patterns without introducing new ones, it was evident that theoretical saturation had been achieved.

As a result, 16 interviews were conducted, each lasting 60 minutes and featuring open-ended questions to gather perceptions and experiences. Before each interview started, participants provided their oral consent and permission to be audio recorded.

All interviews were conducted via video conferencing, following the interview scheme referred to in appendix B. Next, the interviews were transcribed and member checked to verify the validity and accuracy of the transcriptions. After transcription, each interviewee was provided with a preliminary analysis of the transcripts to confirm the analysis and understanding, ensuring data correctness.

5.4 Interview pre-test

Prior to the main data collection for this study, a pre-test of the interview guide was conducted to ensure clarity and appropriateness of the questions. Since all questions were sourced from English literature, each statement was translated to ensure accurate interpretation by the participants. The accuracy was verified through back-to-back translations. Subsequently, the pre-test involved five independent respondents who were asked to read and answer the questions aloud, sharing their thoughts in the process. Using the plus-minus method, respondents indicated the difficulty and clarity of each statement (Bryman, 2016). Based on the feedback gathered from all respondents, the interview guide was refined by reformulating certain questions. This pre-test process ensured the questions were clear and relevant before the main study. All adjustments made based on the pre-test are detailed in appendix C.

5.5 Method of data analysis

For this study, thematic analysis was selected as the method of data analysis. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), is a commonly used approach in qualitative research. Its goal is to identify and analyse themes or patterns within the data. This method is well-suited for exploring complex experiences, perspectives, and behaviours, which aligns with the research question of this study regarding the usage of on- and offline communication channels and solicitation appeals for donor retention. In particular, a deductive method is used. This entails approaching the data with certain predefined themes from the theoretical framework. Moreover, a semantic approach was applied in the data analysis to examine the explicit content of

the data, concentrating on the surface meanings of the terms and phrases that the participants used (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

A codebook was developed to guide the coding process and ensure a systematic approach to thematic analysis. Initially, interview transcripts and other relevant data sources were thoroughly reviewed to identify recurring themes. Specifically, a theme captures significant elements of the data that relate to the research question and represents a pattern of response or meaning within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following this, the process of open coding was employed. Open coding involves breaking down the data into discrete parts, closely examining these parts, and comparing them for similarities and differences (Bryman, 2016). This process yields concepts that are subsequently grouped into categories.

By utilising ATLAS.ti, text segments were highlighted and assigned to these initial codes, which were then grouped into broader categories or themes. In detail, the online tool provides a robust platform to explore and analyse the qualitative data collected from the interviews. Furthermore, the software's data management and analysis features were utilised to organise and analyse the data, providing support for interpretations and drawing conclusions. Additionally, examples from the data were included to illustrate the application of each code. This comprehensive codebook was then applied in the full analysis, enhancing the reliability and validity of the study's findings. The complete codebook can be found in Appendix D.

6. Results from the data analysis

The research analysis involved using an online transcription tool to transcribe the audio files of the interviews. Following a thorough review of every interview, each participant's comments were coded into different code groups. The participants in this study are not only representatives of nonprofit organisations but are also closely involved with their marketing communication efforts. Their roles span a diverse range, including fundraisers, data analysts, and marketers, providing a comprehensive perspective on the strategies and tactics used within their organisations.

The nonprofit organisations represented in this study span a wide array of verticals, showcasing the sector's diverse nature. Accordingly, these nonprofits focus on various areas, including international affairs and public safety, education, healthcare, and animal welfare. Figure 4 presents the division of these NPOs along these verticals. As a result, this diversity ensures that the study's findings are robust and reflect the different approaches and challenges faced across the nonprofit sector.

Figure 4

Distribution of nonprofits by vertical
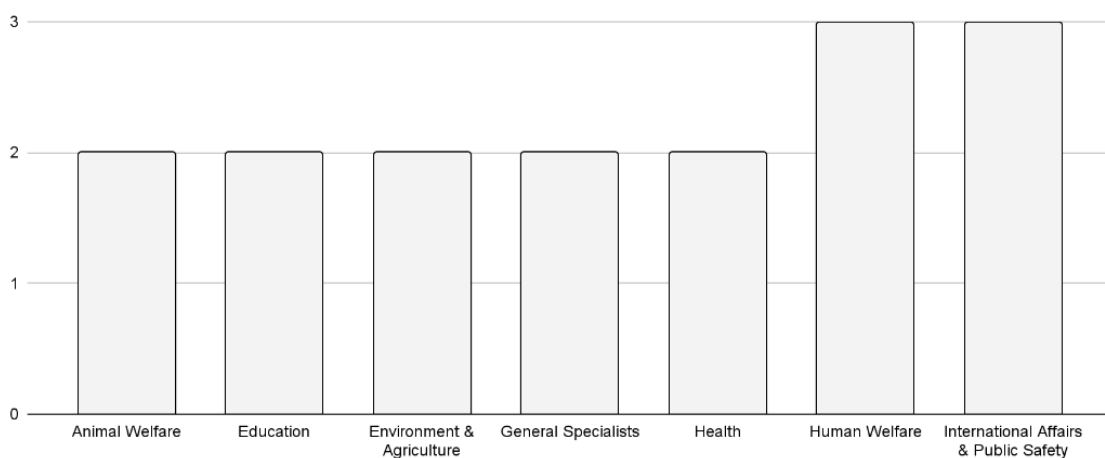
6.1 Characteristics of individual donors

The first theme explored characteristics of individual donors. In each interview, representatives from NPOs were asked to describe to typical profile of donors. The findings from the interviews indicated that a significant portion of donors are older, in the 55-70 age range. In addition, many donors are highly educated and have higher incomes. Donors often reside in urban areas and major cities. Some donors have specific regional ties due to the link to a place where the NPO is active. Respondent 9 mentioned "*Our donors have an affinity with the university, they positively look back at their time of being a student here*".

Subsequently, participants were asked what generally motivates individuals to donate to their nonprofit organisation. It was emphasised that these older donors feel a sense of social responsibility and altruism, wanting to give back to society and support the less fortunate. Frequently, it is the case that donors are driven by a passion for specific causes, such as environmental conservation, animal welfare, or healthcare. For example, participant 12 remarked: "*In 80% of the cases, donors have a heart for nature. People are concerned about the loss of biodiversity*". Furthermore, many donors are motivated by a desire to contribute to meaningful change and to support causes they believe will have a lasting impact.

6.2 Touchpoints of the donor journey

The touchpoints of the donor journey were researched in the following theme. In each interview, respondents were asked to describe the typical donor journey for individuals engaging with their nonprofits. The goal was to identify the specific strategies and initiatives employed to guide donors through this journey of ongoing support. Many respondents emphasised the importance of a welcome journey, where new donors are greeted and introduced to the NPO's mission and activities. This often involves a series of emails explaining the organisation's goals, key projects, and impact areas. While the initial welcome is generally standardised, there is some personalisation based on how the donor first engaged (e.g., signing a petition, making a one-time

donation, becoming a monthly donor). For instance, respondent 1 shared: "*We have a welcome journey in which we really just welcome everyone in any way new to us. We don't personalise a lot in that, except how that person comes in*".

Monthly newsletters and regular emails are commonly used to keep donors informed about ongoing projects, achievements, and upcoming events. These communications serve both to update donors and to solicit further support. More specifically, sharing success stories, impact reports, and personal anecdotes from beneficiaries helps maintain donor interest and demonstrate the tangible effects of their contributions. For example, participant 2 highlighted the topics of their newsletters: "*It contains all kinds of information. That could be about the research we have conducted, events we have organised, but also information about what we do with the money and if there have been any breakthroughs*".

Participants were also questioned how they tailor their communication strategies to address different donor segments. For example, do they address donors with a high lifetime vale differently? The results showed that nonprofit organisations employ diverse communication strategies to effectively engage with different donor segments. These strategies are primarily based on donor behaviour, donation amount, geographic location, and demographic profiles. Respondent 2 shared that they link geotypes to donor segments to get extra insights: "*We create segments with age group, independence, income class, and level of education. As a result, we use this for segmentation, but also in predictive models regarding topics like periodic donations*".

In some cases, personas are established as donor segments. For example, participant 6 mentioned that their personas are based on norms and values: "*Does this group of donors give because they think they should? Or are they more critical and want to know exactly what happens to their money? In other words, is giving based on trust or the impact we make?*". Accordingly, nonprofits aspire to tailor messages to align with donor preferences and motivations. However, most NPOs are not at the stage to actually realise this yet. For example, respondent 13 remarked: "*We strive to further segment*

into interests. Only we are not quite there yet, even though we have the data to base it on".

6.3 Communication channels

In the third theme of this study, it was reviewed which on- and offline channels nonprofit organisations use to connect and engage with donors. Consequently, this study aims to explore the online and offline communication channels used throughout the donor journey. Most frequently, social media channels like Facebook and Instagram were mentioned by NPO representatives. Respondent 5 noted that Facebook is often used for brand awareness and fundraising: "*Although Facebook is a bit old-fashioned, the platform just works well. People just find it easy to share. It is also much easier for an organisation to share links on Facebook*". However, most online donations are actually made via the website of NPOs. Correspondingly, individuals who choose to donate through online platforms are more loyal. Respondent 10 stated: "*People who become a donor online, they deliberately and consciously make that decision*".

Findings of these interviews indicated that traditional channels are still heavily used by nonprofit organisations. In detail, channels like television, radio and face-to-face marketing are mainly used for branding and fundraising. Especially television is efficient for more donations. For example, participant 2 shared: "*We had a yearly television show where patients tell their story while our website and phone number were being displayed. This yielded many new donors who have been very loyal*".

Another frequently used channel for multiple purposes is telemarketing. In many cases, telemarketing is used to convert one-time donors to sustainers. To illustrate, respondent 16 shared: "*Suppose they have donated online once or only signed the petition, we also call them to ask if they want to become a donor*". Moreover, NPOs contact regular donors when aiming to increase their donation amounts, discuss bequests, or as a strategy to win back lapsing donors.

6.4 Retention and reactivation

The retention rate refers to the active commitment of individual donors, not only to the cause but also the nonprofit organisation. During the interview with a general specialist in the nonprofit industry, it was shared that the guideline is a 50% retention rate. More specifically, respondent 8 stated: "*The benchmark retention rate is 50%. So, that is the guideline to become a healthy organisation*". During other interviews, most representatives from NPOs were unable to provide a specific retention rate. Some participants were not at liberty to disclose these percentages, while for others it was unclear because of lacking data. From the respondents who did provide a retention rate, the percentage ranged from 1.5% to 25%. The effectiveness of campaigns also varies significantly. Respondent 7 indicated: "*One of our campaigns has consistently generated a high number of one-time donations and has a reasonable conversion rate to recurring donors. Conversely, another campaign attracted fewer donors but had a relatively high conversion rate to structural donations*". This demonstrated that different campaigns could impact both the immediate response and long-term donor engagement.

The attrition rate refers to the number of donors who have previously supported the NPO but have discontinued their contributions. Generally, annual attrition rates among existing donors were generally around 5-7%. This rate has remained relatively stable over recent years for many nonprofits. Moreover, nonprofits see a significant drop in outflow after the initial year, with long-term donors showing greater loyalty. To clarify, respondent 14 noted: "*The attrition rate improves a lot after the first year. There is the strongest outflow and then we see it flattening*". Overall, participants state that annual attrition rates are relatively stable, although some nonprofits report a gradual decline in donor numbers, prompting a renewed focus on retention strategies.

To prevent attrition and maintain donor loyalty, some nonprofits utilise structured retention programs. Specifically, it has been shared during the interviews that personal and emotional appeals are effective to reactivate lapsing donors. For instance, participant 3 commented: "*We use an email series that is designed to look like it is coming from a real person, so no graphics. We mention that we miss the donor, and*

they could help to make a difference again". In addition, a combination of personalised communication and appreciation initiatives is often used is used to prevent outflow. Examples are postcards during Christmas, New Year or at anniversaries. Conversely, some nonprofits also organise specific events for their structural donors. Respondent 11 shared: "*We always invite everyone who has donated in the past 5 years to the annual gathering for donors*".

Not all nonprofits from the interviews have a win-back strategy in place, or at least not structural. When this is the case, most lapse strategies include targeted telemarketing when possible. Specifically, respondent 4 stated: "*Calling lapsed donors is most effective. But you do not always have a phone number, so a combination with an email or a letter has to be in place*". During such phone calls, nonprofits focus on the impact donors make with their donations. Whether the individual donor chooses to lapse or stay, NPOs keep focusing on their appreciation. In detail, participant 9 mentioned: "*If it does not work out and donors decide to quit their support, we thank them for what they gave and give them a warm goodbye*".

6.5 Donation solicitation appeals

Nonprofit organisations strive to connect with donors on a personal level by aligning their communication strategies with the values and motivations. Regarding value-driven messaging, NPOs create a sense if shared purpose and mission. For example, environmental nonprofits highlighted the importance of nature and collective action, while health-related NPOs focused on improving lives and managing chronic conditions. In addition, nonprofits frequently use personal stories to engage donors. More specifically, these stories often feature real individuals who have benefited from the organisation's work, showcasing the direct impact of donations. For example, participant 12 stated: "*We mainly use personal stories. These are real stories of children, what they have been through and why they need support*". Correspondingly, many nonprofits emphasise positive outcomes and empowerment instead of focusing solely on problems.

In some cases, nonprofits employ strategies that cater to different personality types, often utilising a colour-based framework. This system categorises individual donors into four primary types: Red, Green, Blue, and Yellow (Verhoog, 2023). Consequently, this approach helps tailor messages to resonate more deeply with individual donors, enhancing engagement and support. In detail, respondent 8, who is a specialist on this method, explained: "*Actually, the types are a tool to reverse communication, aimed at the donors themselves. The message is the same for everyone, only how you address them is different*". By experimenting with different messages, images, and tones, NPOs determine what resonates best with their audience. For example, participant 5 shared: "*Some types want to read more before making a decision. That is why we must always ensure that your website and your means of communication are also clear about the expenditure. Where's the money going?*".

Nonprofit organisations communicate their goals, mission, and impact through a strategic mix of content across multiple channels. Generally, the focus is less on data-centred content like reports and statistics to show progress and outcomes. In contrast, NPOs convey their goals and impact by specific cases and stories to illustrate the direct benefits of donations. In detail, respondent 3 clarified: "*I've seen other organisations struggle by trying to explain everything in one message, making it too broad and overwhelming. People can't act on that, which is why we use specific cases*". In other words, the key focus is on storytelling and presenting shared values. Ultimately, donation behaviour is driven by irrational and emotional factors. Statistics and numbers are available for those who seek them, such as in the annual reports.

Universally, nonprofits do not combine donor-related and organisation-related appeals in one campaign or message, not even to retain or reactivate donors. Conversely, NPOs strategically use different combinations of donation appeals depending on the campaign's objectives and the donor's journey stage. For example, participant 15 shared: "*In our mailings, we emphasise the problem at hand. If we show too much of the solution, people naturally feel less compelled to support*". However, during the interviews some NPOs indicated that a combination of solicitation appeals is

possible when the impact of one's donation is very specific. More specifically, respondent 14 explained: "*What we - and other nonprofits - want to do is show the impact at an individual donor level. For example, if someone donates € 5 per month, we actually want to be able to see what we have been able to do with your total amount after a year*".

6.6 Summary of the findings

The study explored several key themes related to communication strategies used by NPOs as their relationship with individual donor progresses. As a result, these findings provide insights into the characteristics of individual donors, the touchpoints of the donor journey, the communication channels employed by NPOs, retention and reactivation strategies, and the use of donation appeals. Table 2 provides a concise overview of the main findings from the study. Specifically, this table serves as a quick reference to understand how NPOs engage with their donors at different stages of the donor journey and the specific strategies employed to maintain these relationships.

Table 2

Overview of main Findings per topic

Topics of the study	Key Findings
Characteristics of individual donors	Older, educated, higher income, urban residents, motivated by social responsibility, personal connection to cause
Touchpoints of the donor journey	Welcome journeys, regular updates via newsletters/emails, some personalisation based on donor segments
Communication channels	Mix of social media (Facebook, Instagram), traditional channels (TV, radio, telemarketing), online donors more loyal
Retention and reactivation	Structured retention programs, use of personalised and emotional appeals, telemarketing effective for reactivation
Donation appeals	Storytelling and value-driven messaging, focus on specific cases, exploration of combined appeals when impact is demonstrable

7. Discussion & Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the usage of on- and offline communication channels and various donation solicitation appeals on donor retention. By inquiring about communication strategies at different stages of the donor journey, this study has provided insights that can contribute to the development of lasting donor relationships. Through an exploration of both online and offline communication channels, this research also shed light on the multifaceted nature of donor engagement and offered practical implications for NPOs seeking to optimise donor engagement. By doing so, this study contributed to the stream of donor journey and repeat donations research.

7.1 Discussion of the findings

The study explored the characteristics, touchpoints, communication channels, retention strategies, and donation appeals within donor-nonprofit relationships. Findings revealed that typical donors are often older, well-educated, and financially stable. These donors frequently have specific regional ties and are motivated by a sense of social responsibility, altruism, and a passion for particular causes such as environmental conservation or healthcare. Additionally, many are driven by the desire to contribute to meaningful change and support causes with lasting impacts.

The research identified several key touchpoints in the donor journey. Generally, nonprofits use welcome journeys to introduce new donors to their mission, employing standardised but occasionally personalised emails. Furthermore, monthly newsletters and regular emails keep donors informed and engaged, sharing success stories, impact reports, and personal anecdotes. Communication strategies are tailored based on donor segments, including behaviour, donation amount, and demographic profiles. In contrast, some NPOs establish donor personas to align messages with donor preferences and motivations, though many are still developing these capabilities.

Nonprofit organisations use a mix of online and offline communication channels to engage donors. Social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram are popular for

brand awareness and fundraising, while most online donations are made via NPO websites. Traditional channels - such as television and telemarketing - remain effective, particularly for branding and fundraising. Telemarketing is also used to convert one-time donors to sustainers and to increase donation amounts.

The study indicated that retention rates among nonprofits vary, with a general guideline of 50%. Conversely, attrition rates are relatively stable, with a significant drop after the first year of donation. Structured retention programs - including personal and emotional appeals - are used to maintain donor loyalty and reactivate lapsed donors. In order to prevent attrition, some nonprofits utilise personalised communication and appreciation initiatives.

The analysis supported that nonprofits strive to connect with donors on a personal level through value-driven messaging and storytelling. Emotional and personal stories are frequently used to engage donors, often highlighting positive outcomes and empowerment. In addition, some nonprofits use personality-based frameworks to tailor their messages. While NPOs typically do not combine donor-related and organisation-related appeals in one campaign, they strategically use different combinations of donation appeals based on the campaign's objectives and the donor's journey stage.

7.2 Academic and practical implications

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributed to the stream of donor journey and repeat donations research. By researching the usage of various communication strategies at different stages of the donor journey, this study provided insights that contribute to the development of lasting donor relationships. Specifically, existing literature indicates that nonprofit-donor relationships are evaluated based on factors like trust, commitment, and satisfaction (Beldad et al., 2014; Boenigk & Helmig, 2013; Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007). However, how NPO's marketing communication influenced these factors remained unclear. Additionally, multiple studies primarily examined the influence of donation appeals on donor behaviour concerning the initial donation without considering donor lifetime value (Fajardo et al., 2018; Ranganathan &

Henley, 2007; Van Dijk et al., 2019). Consequently, the findings indicate that donor-related appeals - which focus on the donor's intrinsic characteristics and self-perception – are prioritised by nonprofits to maintain and reactivate donors. This staged approach to analysing donor behaviour provides a robust framework for future research to build upon.

Currently, NPOs have incorporated a variety of online and offline channels into their marketing communication strategies to engage donors. While literature focuses more on the benefits or utility of a single channel (Mato-Santiso et al., 2021), this study explored the use of online and offline communication channels throughout the donor journey. As a result, the findings underscored the importance of a balanced approach to incorporating online and offline communication channels. Nonprofits should not view these channels as mutually exclusive but rather as complementary tools that can enhance donor engagement when used strategically. For instance, while social media and email campaigns can effectively attract and engage donors initially, traditional offline methods such as direct mail and in-person events can help sustain these relationships. Moreover, results revealed that donors respond differently to communication methods at various stages of their journey, suggesting that a multichannel strategy can address diverse donor preferences and behaviours.

From a practical perspective, this study provided actionable insights for nonprofit organisations aiming to strengthen their donor-NPO relationship and increase donor lifetime value. By exploring the specific donation appeals that resonate at each stage of the donor journey, NPOs can tailor their communication strategies more effectively. For example, during the initiation stage, NPOs should focus on creating value-aligned messaging that attracts new donors. In the retention stage, highlighting the NPO's impact and effectiveness can foster deeper trust and commitment, encouraging continued support. Furthermore, emphasising the donor's past contributions and how they can make difference again can reignite their engagement in the reactivation stage.

Moreover, the findings highlighted the importance of a balanced approach to using online and offline communication channels. Nonprofits should view these

channels as complementary tools that, when used strategically, can enhance donor engagement. Practically, this means that nonprofits should deploy social media and email campaigns to effectively attract and engage donors initially. Next, newsletters and regular emails are commonly used to keep donors informed about ongoing projects and achievements. Once donors are engaged, traditional offline methods such as direct mail and in-person events should be utilised to sustain and deepen these relationships over time. This strategic integration ensures that nonprofits can leverage the strengths of each channel to maximise donor engagement and long-term commitment.

7.3 Limitations of the study

While this research provided valuable insights into the on- and offline dynamics of the donor journey and the impact of donation appeals on donor behaviour, it is important to acknowledge its explorative and broad nature as a limitation. The study attempted to cover a wide range of factors, which has resulted in a shallower exploration of each individual factor. Consequently, this potentially limited the depth of analysis and the specificity of findings. Future research could benefit from narrowing the focus to specific themes affecting donor-nonprofit relationships and donor lifetime value. This will allow for more detailed examination and nuanced understanding of the mechanisms influencing donor behaviour. By delving deeper into specific aspects, future studies could uncover more precise strategies and recommendations for nonprofit organisations aiming to enhance donor engagement and retention effectively.

In this exploratory study, purposeful and snowball sampling were utilised which could have led to the potential for bias in participant selection. By relying initially on purposeful sampling through personal and professional networks, the study may have unintentionally excluded perspectives from nonprofit organisations not directly connected to the researcher's network. As a result, this could limit the diversity of experiences and viewpoints represented in the study. Moreover, not including nonprofits from all verticals introduces a limitation. Nonprofits operating in different verticals (such as faith based or arts and culture) may have unique dynamics in their donor

relationships influenced by specific contextual factors and organisational missions. Without representation from a broader spectrum of NPOs, the study's findings may not have fully been captured the range of challenges and strategies related to donation appeals across different types of nonprofits.

While the participants in this study offered a comprehensive perspective due to their roles encompassing fundraising, data analysis, and marketing within nonprofits, their insights are primarily based on subjective perceptions rather than quantitative analysis. This reliance on qualitative information may limit the generalisability of the findings to broader contexts. Additionally, the focus on perceptions and experiences means that objective measurements of the effectiveness of various marketing communication strategies is not fully captured. Therefore, future research could address these limitations by incorporating quantitative methods to evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches. Moreover, including diverse perspectives from donors themselves could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the most effective strategies for building long-term donor relationships.

7.4 Conclusion

This research delved into donor retention strategies, focusing on various donation appeals as well as the role of communication channels. The findings highlighted the importance of a balanced approach in using both online and offline strategies to engage donors effectively. While digital platforms like social media and email campaigns are instrumental in attracting and initially engaging donors, traditional offline methods such as direct mail and in-person events play a crucial role in deepening these relationships. Additionally, the research underscored the significance of value-driven messaging and storytelling in creating a sense of shared purpose and mission. NPOs successfully engage donors by highlighting positive outcomes, empowerment, and personal stories that demonstrate the direct impact of donations. Furthermore, the study revealed that nonprofits strategically tailor their communication to cater to different personality types, enhancing donor engagement and support. By combining

these insights, NPOs can optimise their donor retention strategies, ensuring a comprehensive and emotionally resonant approach that fosters long-term donor relationships and sustains their missions.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview questions with the theory's constructs and topics

Construct/ Topic	Interview Question	Adapted from
Characteristics of Individual Donors	Can you describe the typical profile of individual donors who support your nonprofit organisation?	Sargeant et al. (2006)
	What demographic characteristics do they typically have?	Bennet & Ali Choudhury (2008)
	How do they usually become aware of your nonprofit organisation and its mission?	Van Dijk et al. (2019)
Touchpoints of Donor Journey	Can you walk me through the typical journey a donor takes when engaging with your nonprofit organisation?	Kumar & Chakrabarti, 2021
	What are the key touchpoints or interactions donors have with your NPO from initial awareness to ongoing support?	Lee et al. (2020b)
	Are there specific strategies or initiatives in place to guide donors through this journey?	Lee et al. (2020b)
Online vs Offline	How does your NPO utilise online channels (e.g., website, social media) to engage with donors?	Pressrove & Pardun (2016)
	In what ways do offline channels (e.g., events, direct mail) complement your online efforts in donor engagement?	Pressrove & Pardun (2016)
	Have you noticed any differences in donor behaviour between online and offline channels?	Pressrove & Pardun (2016)
Retention and Attrition rates	What is the average donor retention rate?	Sargeant & Woodliffe (2007)

	What is the average attrition rate?	Sargeant & Woodliffe (2007)
	What strategies does your NPO employ to retain donors and prevent donor attrition?	Nathan & Hallam (2009)
Current Challenges	What are the current challenges or obstacles your nonprofit organisation encounters in donor retention and attrition?	Nathan & Hallam (2009)
	Are there any emerging trends or shifts in donor behaviour that your nonprofit organisation is responding to?	Campos et al. (2023)
Donor-Related Appeals	How do you tailor your communication strategies to appeal to different donor segments or preferences?	Sargeant et al. (2006)
	How does your NPO communicate its cause to donors through its appeals?	Zogaj et al. (2020)
	How does your NPO communicate the personality of donors through its appeals?	Zogaj et al. (2020)
Organisation-Related Appeals	Do you incorporate storytelling or other techniques to highlight the effectiveness of your nonprofit organisation's programs?	Septiano & Tjiptono
	How does your NPO convey its mission and impact to donors through its appeals?	Zogaj et al. (2020)
Combined Donation Appeals	How do you balance highlighting the needs of the cause with emphasising the benefits of supporting your NPO specifically?	Fajardo et al. (2018)
	Have you experimented with combinations of appeals, and if so, what have been the outcomes?	Fajardo et al. (2018)

Appendix B

Interview scheme

Introduction of the interview:
1. Introduction of the interviewer and explanation of the purpose of the interview.
2. Explanation to the interviewee that participation is voluntary and can be withdrawn; the interview can be stopped at any time; and all this will not have any negative consequences for the participants.
3. Explanation to the interviewee that the interview will be recorded by an audio device for evaluation purposes, that the recordings will be stored inaccessible to third parties, and that the anonymity of the participants will be guaranteed.
4. The recording will be start when the interviewee gives their oral consent to participate and to be recorded, any initial questions will be clarified.

Main questions of the interview:
1. Can you describe the nonprofit organisation where you work, and can you explain your role within the non-profit?
2. What is the typical profile of individual donors who support your nonprofit organisation?
3. What generally motivates donors to choose your non-profit?
4. What is the typical 'donor journey' of a donor when they get involved with your nonprofit organisation?
5. Which on- and offline marketing channels does the non-profit use to connect with and engage donors?
6. Do you have specific strategies or initiatives to guide donors through this journey?
7. What is the average retention rate of (one-time) donors? How has this changed over the past few years, and why?
8. What is the average attrition rate of recurring/structural donors? How has this changed over the past few years, and why?
9. What strategies does the non-profit organisation use to retain donors and prevent attrition?
10. How do you tailor your communication strategies to address different donor segments or preferences?
    o Do you address donors with a higher lifetime value (LTV) differently?
11. How does the non-profit communicate its missions, goals, and impact to donors through marketing communication?
12. How does the non-profit address the personality/values of donors through marketing communication?

13. How do you balance emphasising the needs of the cause with highlighting the benefits of specifically supporting your non-profit?
14. Have you tried using different combinations of donation appeals, and if so, what were the outcomes?

Conclusion of the interview:
1. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding the on- and offline dynamics of your donor journey and the donation appeals your nonprofit organisation utilises?
2. Thanking the interviewee for their participation and time.
3. Offering further information about the study or contact details for queries.
4. Ensure that all the interviewee's questions have been answered.

Appendix C

Adjustments through pre-tests

Interview Question	Problem Detected	Solution
Kun je de non-profitorganisatie waar je werkt beschrijven, en kun je jouw rol binnen de non-profit toelichten?	Go deeper to link their mission and values to "long-term relationships"	Add optional extra question for clarity
Wat zijn de typische eigenschappen van individuele donateurs die jullie non-profitorganisatie ondersteunen?	Delve into donor's values and motivations	Add optional extra question for clarity
Welke demografische kenmerken hebben zij meestal?	Does this really add value to your study?	Deleted from interview scheme
Wat is de typische 'donor journey' van een donateur wanneer hij/zij betrokken raakt bij jullie non-profitorganisatie?		
Hebben jullie specifieke strategieën of initiatieven om donateurs door deze reis te begeleiden?	Also interesting how effectiveness is measured	Add extra question for more context
Van welke on- en offline marketing kanalen maakt de non-profit gebruik om met donateurs in contact te komen en te blijven?	Ask about the different channels before the strategy	Move the question above two positions below
Wat is het gemiddelde retentiepercentage van (eenmalige) donateurs?	Ask how this has changed over time	Add extra question for more context
Wat is het gemiddelde uitstroompercentage (=attrition rate) van structurele donateurs?	Ask how this has changed over time	Add extra question for more context
Welke strategieën gebruikt de non-profitorganisatie om donateurs te behouden en uitstroom (=attrition) te voorkomen?	Additional feedback for examples or best practices	Add optional extra question for more context
Hoe passen jullie de communicatiestrategieën aan om verschillende donateur-segmenten of voorkeuren aan te spreken?		

Hoe communiceert de non-profit haar doel, missie en impact aan donateurs via marketingcommunicatie?	Do you also want to know the type of content?	Add optional extra question for more context
Hoe spreekt de non-profit de persoonlijkheid/waarden van donateurs aan via marketingcommunicatie?	Do you also want to know the type of content?	Add optional extra question for more context
Hoe balanceren jullie het benadrukken van de behoeften van het doel met het benadrukken van de voordelen van het specifiek ondersteunen van jullie non-profit?		
Hebben jullie geëxperimenteerd met combinaties van donatie benaderingen, en zo ja, wat waren de uitkomsten?	Experiments? Like testing?	Reply "experiment" with "tried to use"

Appendix D

Codebook with example quotes and frequencies

Code Group	Code	Definition	Example
Characteristics of individual donors	Donor Profile (36)	Descriptions of typical donor characteristics, including demographics and motivations.	"Our structural donors in general are mostly around 65-70 years old. Most often they are higher educated with a high income. Their motivation to donate relates to their willingness to give back to society."
Touchpoints of the donor journey	Donor Journey (33)	Stages and key touchpoints in the donor's engagement with the NPO.	"Our general donor journey starts with a welcome message. This is followed by an email flow and telemarketing if possible. After the first donation, we ask for a small recurring donations within 3 to 5 months. Once donor have issued an authorisation, we call them after 9 to 12 months to ask if they want to convert to a structural periodic donation agreement."
Communication Channels	Channels (54)	Use of on- and offline channels for donor engagement and communication.	"The on- and offline channels we use for fundraising and retaining donors are social media, online advertisement, telemarketing, face-to-face, email, and the website."
Retention and reactivation	Retention Rate (9)	Rate of converting one-time donors to regular donors.	"Around 1,5% of one-time donations is converted to structural donors."
Retention and reactivation	Attrition Rate (19)	Rate of donors lapsing from on-going support.	"The average attrition rate is 2% in the first months of becoming a structural donor, and 10% each year".

Retention and reactivation	Lapse Strategy (22)	Strategies and efforts aimed at retaining donors and preventing attrition.	"We don't have a win-back flow or campaign yet, for example by using telemarketing. Right now, we just communicate that we're sorry to see them leave."
Touchpoints of the donor journey	Donor Segment (28)	Communication strategy to address different donor segments.	"We developed 4 personas last year. So, we looked at our database and found out what the different type of donors are. Based on that, we will communicate with donors changing the tone-of-voice or subject."
Donation Appeals	Donor Related Appeals (19)	Types of donation appeals focused on the motivation of donors.	"We often appeal to donors about their motivation, that it's important and we are strong together. That is something we often announce with gratitude."
Donation Appeals	Organisation Related Appeals (19)	Types of donation appeals focused on the impact of the nonprofit organisation.	"Previously, we though that we mostly dealt with rational donors who want to be convinced by number and facts rather than emotion. In the meantime, we have completely changed our strategy by communicating our mission with stories behind the facts. The exact numbers they can look up in the annual report."
Donation Appeals	NPO Benefits (17)	Balancing need of the cause with NPO benefits	"We have established a brand passport in which we state very clearly; this is us as a brand and this is what we stand for. We also determined the way we communicate, which is always positive, hopeful, and focused on impact".
Donation Appeals	Combination of Appeals (11)	Types of appeals combining both donation appeals.	"I believe you should split those two approaches as much as possible. Each campaign should have one main goal. So, we have a separation between a communication campaign and a fundraising campaign."