

# Being seen to care: The relationship between self-presentation and contributions to online pro-social crowdfunding campaigns

Cox, J., Nguyen, T., Thorpe, A., Ishizaka, A., Chakhar, S. & Meech, L.

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## **Being seen to care: The relationship between self-presentation and contributions to online pro-social crowdfunding campaigns**

**Dr Joe Cox**, University of Portsmouth Business School, Richmond Building, Portland Street, Portsmouth, Hampshire, PO1 3DE, UK; +44 (0)2392 844723; joe.cox@port.ac.uk.

Dr. Joe Cox is a Principal Lecturer at the University of Portsmouth Business School. His research interests relate to the digital economy and areas such as crowdsourcing, crowdfunding, digital piracy and video games. He is also lead academic investigator on research projects funded by the EPSRC and Innovate UK.

**Dr Thang Nguyen**, University of Portsmouth Business School, Richmond Building, Portland Street, Portsmouth, Hampshire, PO1 3DE, UK; +44 (0)2392 844130; thang.nguyen@port.ac.uk.

Dr Thang Nguyen is a Research Fellow at the University of Portsmouth Business School. His research expertise relates to crowdfunding and fin-tech innovations, as well as having extensive experience in manipulating and analysing big datasets.

**Professor Andy Thorpe**, University of Portsmouth Business School, Richmond Building, Portland Street, Portsmouth, Hampshire, PO1 3DE, UK; +44 (0)2392 844251; andy.thorpe@port.ac.uk.

Professor Andy Thorpe is a Professor of Development Economics at the University of Portsmouth Business School. He has published in internationally renowned journals such as World Development, the African Development Review and Defence and Peace Economics.

**Professor Alessio Ishizaka**, University of Portsmouth Business School, Richmond Building, Portland Street, Portsmouth, Hampshire, PO1 3DE, UK; +44 (0)2392 844171; alessio.ishizaka@port.ac.uk.

Professor Alessio Sihizaka is a Professor in Decision Analysis at the University of Portsmouth Business School. His expertise includes decision making, supply chain management, outsourcing and innovation management.

**Dr Salem Chakhar**, University of Portsmouth Business School, Richmond Building, Portland Street, Portsmouth, Hampshire, PO1 3DE, UK; +44 (0)2392 844622; salem.chakhar@port.ac.uk.

Dr Salem Chakhar is a Research Fellow at the University of Portsmouth Business School. His areas of expertise include multicriteria analysis, group decision making, decision support systems, geographical information science and systems, spatial modelling and analysis, database and information systems, web services, fuzzy theory and applications, and knowledge management.

**Liz Meech**, University of Portsmouth Business School, Richmond Building, Portland Street, Portsmouth, Hampshire, PO1 3DE, UK; +44 (0)2392 848484; liz.meech@port.ac.uk

Liz Meech is a Lecturer at the University of Portsmouth Business School. Her research interests include ageing consumers and online consumer behavior, and the role of digital technologies in sales management.

### ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether self-presentation leads to variations in behavior among contributors to online pro-social crowdfunding campaigns. We present an analysis of data from the Internet crowdfunding platform ‘Lendwithcare’, which combines survey results with recorded patterns of actual funding activity. By using the presence of a public profile as a proxy for image consciousness, we hypothesize that self-presenting funders increase levels of visible activity (number of projects supported), but do not vary levels of non-visible activity (monetary amounts contributed to each project) relative to funders that do not self-present. We find empirical evidence consistent with this hypothesis. These findings are likely to be of interest to both academics and practitioners seeking to better understand funder motivations and prosocial behavior in online settings.

**Keywords:** Self-presentation; Image consciousness; Pro-social behavior; Crowdfunding;  
Online

## I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of digital philanthropy has evolved significantly in recent years due to the growth of the Internet (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008; Abdelkader, 2017). Engaging in such activities in online settings allows individuals to participate in volunteering activities and other ethical or prosocial behaviors without the need to leave their ‘physical’ space (Mano, 2014; Shen *et al.*, 2010). Online volunteerism has many advantages over more traditional offline varieties, particularly in terms of opportunities for training or consultation (Shelley *et al.*, 2015), as well as in cases where anonymity is important, such as alcoholism or other social ills (Pomeroy & Parrish, 2013). In parallel to this trend, charitable and prosocial fundraising over the Internet has become increasingly important for many non-profit organizations (Saxton & Guo, 2011; Reddick & Ponomariov, 2012), with online donations experiencing the largest growth among different fundraising vehicles over recent years (Nonprofit Research Collaborative, 2011). Understanding the motivations and behaviors of online donors is therefore of increasing importance.

A number of prior studies (Lacetera & Macis, 2010; Carpenter & Myers, 2010) in the philanthropy literature have shown that people tend to increase levels of pro-sociality in public rather than private settings due to image consciousness. However, these studies have investigated the issue in exclusively offline settings and have not given due consideration to how concern for one’s social image may affect pro-social activity undertaken via the Internet. Our study fills this gap in the literature by investigating whether and the extent to which self-presentation affects the behavior of donors in the specific context of online prosocial fundraising.

Our specific research question is: *to what extent does self-presentation affect levels of visible and non-visible behavior among online funders?* By investigating levels of user engagement

with a pro-social crowdfunding platform known as ‘Lendwithcare’, we find evidence that self-presentation has a significant impact on the behavior of online contributors. More specifically, self-presenting funders with public profiles whom we identify as being more likely to be image conscious will rationally choose to support a greater number of projects (information on which is publicly reported by the platform) compared with those who do not have profiles. These funders, however, do not vary the value of their monetary contributions towards each project (information on which is not publicly reported by the platform).

Our study significantly contributes to the emerging literature on online charitable giving (e.g., Amichai-Hamburger, 2008; Saxton & Wang, 2014; Reddick & Ponomariov, 2012; among others). Saxton & Wang (2014) find that network effects are important determinants of giving through Facebook, while Reddick & Ponomariov (2012) find that online donations closely relate to levels of engagement with offline organisations and social groups. Ours is the first study to provide novel evidence on the specific effect of image consciousness on the behaviour of online funders.

We also contribute to a recent line of research on strategic self-presentation in Internet environment (Bareket-Bojmel, Moran & Shahr, 2016; Chiang & Suen, 2015; Batenburg & Bartels, 2017; among others). Evidence of self-enhancing strategy is found among users in various online context such as Facebook (Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016) and LinkedIn (Chiang & Suen, 2015). We show novel evidence of strategic self-presentation in unique context of an online prosocial platform.

**Commented [TN1]:** Saxton, G.D., & Wang L. (2014). The social network effect: The determinants of giving through social media. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 43(5), 850-868.  
Reddick, C. G., & Ponomariov, B (2012). The effects of individuals' organization affiliation on their internet donations. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 42(6), 1197-1223.

## II. THE LENDWITHCARE PLATFORM

Our research is conducted in the context of an online pro-social lending crowdfunding platform in the UK known as Lendwithcare, which was established in 2010 by the charity CARE International to help entrepreneurs in developing countries gain access to basic financial services. The platform raises funds from lenders (the crowd) through the Internet and distributes accordingly to entrepreneurs in developing countries using local microfinance institutions as intermediaries. Loans are repaid in instalments in over a typical period of twelve to twenty-four months. Lenders do not receive interest on their loans as CARE international does not charge interest on any of the loans made to entrepreneurs. In many respects, this means that lenders can be thought of as ‘pro-social donors’ who do not receive any financial or material benefits for their participation and bear the risk of losing their principal sum if the entrepreneur is not able to make their repayments.

Two specific features of Lendwithcare allow us to investigate the link between self-presentation and pro-sociality. First, each individual member has the option to display a publicly visible profile which typically contains personal information, a photo and/or a short description about themselves and their reasons for lending. The distinction between funders with and without public profiles can be seen in Figure 1, which contrasts two screen grabs of public profiles taken with permission from Lendwithcare. The profile on the left is an example containing both a photo and personal description, making it possible to identify the lender’s identity and associated funding activities. The right-hand image shows an example of a profile where the lender has not supplied any personal information, receiving instead the default name of ‘Anonymous’ and presenting a generic image to the public.

We contend that the motivation to enhance one’s social image is intrinsically linked with the decision to create a public profile, a phenomenon that has been acknowledged in the marketing

literature as online personal branding (Labrecque *et al.*, 2011). Creating an online profile may also be a way to create a representation of oneself which affirms and is affirmed by one's peers (Livingstone & Brake, 2010). It is widely argued that self-presenting individuals will strategically present themselves on social networking sites to make identity claims (Zhao *et al.*, 2008) and present a positive image to others (Bareket-Bojmel, Moran & Shahrar, 2016; Misoch, 2015). We therefore interpret the lender's creation of an online public profile as a proxy for the extent to which they are likely to be image conscious.

The second specific feature that lends itself to our study is the platform's reporting policy for funding activity, which makes the number of projects supported by a lender visible to the public (as per the 'Who I've lent to' section of the profile visible in Figure 1), while the amount of money contributed in each case is not. Together, these two features allow us to observe the extent to which self-presenting funders behave differently to others with respect to levels of both visible and non-visible activity.

[Figure 1 about here]

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

#### 3.1. Theoretical background.

Online philanthropy can be studied from theoretical background on prosocial behavior motivation which have, for long, been established in different disciplines (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008). Scholars from social psychology establish that "...empathic emotion evokes truly altruistic motivation, motivation with an ultimate goal of benefiting not the self but the person for whom empathy is felt" (Batson & Shaw, 1991) (pp 107)<sup>1</sup>. The altruism motivation of prosocial behavior is also widely studied in economics literature (Andreoni, 2006) with which donors care only about organisation's output or welfare of beneficiaries. Although people may donate purely to support others, theoretical models from different research lines imply that there are also numerous other important motivations for charitable giving activities. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) suggests that people learn about the

<sup>1</sup> For a review of psychology studies on altruism, refer to Batson and Powell (2003).

**Commented [TN2]:** Batson, C. D. & Shaw, L. L. (1991). Evidence for altruism: Toward a pluralism of prosocial motives. *Psychological Inquiry*, 2(2), 107-122.  
Batson, C. D. & Powell, A. A. (2003). Altruism and prosocial behaviour. In T. Millon & M.J. Lerner. *Handbook of psychology* (vol. 5) (pp. 463-484. John Wiley & Sons.

**Commented [TN3]:** Andreoni, J. (2006). Philanthropy. In L.A. Gerard-Varet, S.C. Kolm & J.M Ythier (Eds.), *Handbook of giving, reciprocity and altruism* (pp. 1201-1269). North-Holland: Elsevier.

**Commented [TN4]:** Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

rewards and punishments following (helping or not). Helping others produce positive psychological consequences which is referred as empathic joy (Batson & Shaw, 1991) or warm glow (Andreoni, 1989). Researchers (Basil, Ridgway & Basil, 2006; Wilhelm & Bekkers, 2010) from psychology suggest several reasons for the pleasurable psychological experiences on giving such as feeling good for acting in line with social norm or a specific (prosocial, altruistic) self-image or alleviating feelings of guilt. People also give because of positive social consequences of donations. More specifically, giving is widely viewed as a positive thing to do thus it improves social image of donors. Social reputation is studied extensively in social psychology and economics. The next section will therefore provide further discussions on social image from social psychological and economics point of view.

**Commented [TN5]:** Basil, D. Z., Ridgway, N. M. & Basil, M. D. (2006). Guilt appeals: the mediating effect of responsibility. *Psychology & Marketing*, 23, 1035-1054.  
Wilhelm, M. O. & Bekkers, R. (2010). Helping behaviour, dispositional empathic concern and the principle of care. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 73(1), 1-22.

### 3.1. Self-presentation theory and prosocial behaviour

The role of social image has represented a central issue in the social psychology literature for a considerable period of time (Mosquera *et al.*, 2011). In short, the literature argues that individuals are affected by the way in which they are regarded by others and thus present themselves, as summarized in the seminal work of Goffman, “to convey an impression...which it is in his interests to convey” (Goffman, 1959, p. 4). Thus, individuals may attempt to indicate possession of socially desirable traits or adherence to social norms, such as altruism, honesty or responsibility. Self-presentation theory thereby asserts that individuals can significantly alter their behaviors and decisions in order to influence the perceptions of others (Baumeister, 1982; Leary, 1995, Leary *et al.*, 2011). Given that participating in prosocial activity may help to convey these positive signals, self-presentation theory (Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Bareket-Bojmel *et al.*, 2016) argues that individuals are likely to contribute to charitable fundraising at least partly for the reason of enhancing their social image.

**Commented [TN6]:** Schlenker, B. R., & Leary, M. R. (1982). Audience's reaction to self-enhancing, self-denigrating, and accurate self-presentations. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 18(1), 89-104.

Evidence highlighting the influence of self-presentation on prosocial activity is also widely documented in the public economics literature. For instance, Glazer & Konrad (1996) show that anonymous donations are very rare and charitable organizations thus have a tendency to

make donations publically observable. A number of empirical studies in this field show that individuals tend to behave more prosocially in public rather than private settings. For example, Lacetera & Macis (2010) examine the effect of image concern motivations on blood-donation in Italy where incentives are offered in the form of medals. The study finds evidence that pro-social activity increases dramatically when agents are close to meeting the threshold for receiving a given reward, yet this effect only holds when the medals are awarded publically. In a similar study, Carpenter & Myers (2010) analyze the motivations of volunteer firefighters, identifying groups of agents with image concerns via ownership of vanity license plates. The study shows that image-conscious firefighters significantly increase their levels of visible pro-sociality (turning out for emergency calls) but do not change their levels of non-visible activity (training).

### 3.2. *Self-presentation and prosocial behaviour in online context.*

The above review of theoretical arguments and empirical evidence from the psychology and public economics literature demonstrates that prosocial activity levels might be influenced by their degree of visibility. However, the extent to which this prediction holds in an online environment is less clear. Very early work, such as Short *et al.* (1976), suggest that the lack of cues, particularly visual and audio information, in computer-mediated interactions decreases one's awareness of others. Other studies, such as Kraut *et al.* (1998) and Nie (2001) further argue that online social interactions do not meet the necessary conditions for the development of social capital, while interpersonal trust may not develop in this context due to a decision by many participants to remain anonymous (Blanchard & Horan, 1998). Additionally, geographical diversity and the transient nature of online exchanges may also reduce the likelihood of repeated interaction and reciprocity (Best & Krueger, 2006; Uslander, 2004).

By contrast, a number of studies, such as Douglas & McGarty (2001) and Gonzales & Hancock, (2008), argue that even with the comparative lack of cues in online environments, a minimal amount of visible information (e.g., name and email) can have measurable impacts on one's awareness of others. Research also suggests that online interaction significantly lowers the cost of communication and increases access to information; both of which facilitate increased levels of interpersonal coordination and promote civic and social engagement (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003). Indeed, Garton *et al.* (1997) argues that an online environment allows for a wider expansion of social networks, thus enhancing levels of social capital. The Internet has also been argued to represent an extension of offline activities that supplements existing communication channels rather than replacing them (Ramirez & Broneck, 2009), with many aspects of online prosocial behavior are similar to face-to-face prosocial interactions (Sproull *et al.*, 2005). Additionally, studies such as Stern (2004) and Ellison *et al.* (2007) find evidence of extensive self-presentation in numerous online settings such as personal web pages, dating sites and social media.

*These arguments suggest that image and reputation are likely to be highly valued in an online environment. Indeed, Chiang and Suen (2015) finds evidence of impacts of self-presentation and hiring recommendations in LinkedIn while Kashian, Jang, Shin, Dai & Walther (2017) and Batenburg and Bartels (2017) show that self-disclosure influences respect and likability in various computer-mediated contexts. People are, therefore, likely to employ self-enhancing presentations to make the best impression (Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016).* We further argue that if a desire to enhance image persists in an online setting, it will operate in a similar way to offline environments, i.e. image conscious individuals will tend to increase their publicly visible pro-social behaviors, but not invisible ones. We therefore propose the following intuitive research hypotheses:

**Commented [TN7]:** Chiang, J. K. & Suen, H. (2015). Self-presentation and hiring recommendations in online communities: Lessons from LinkedIn. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 48, 516-524.  
Kashian, N., Jang, J., Shin, S. Y., Dai, Y. & Walther, J. B. (2017). Self-disclosure and liking in computer-mediated communication. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 71, 275-283.  
Batenburg, A. & Bartels, J. (2017). Keeping up online appearances: How self-disclosure on Facebook affects perceived respect and likability in the professional context. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 74, 265-276.

H1: Self-presenting funders (as indicated by their completion of a publicly visible lender profile) are likely to be image conscious and will thus support a greater number of projects compared with those who do not self-present.

H2: Self-presenting funders will not vary the amounts they lend to each entrepreneur compared with those who do not self-present.

The following section outlines the data we collect and the empirical strategy we adopt in order to formally test these hypotheses.

## IV. DATA AND RESEARCH METHOD

### 4.1 Data

Our study analyses a database of lender behavior recorded by the Lendwithcare platform, containing comprehensive information on the activities of each user, including the number of projects supported and amounts contributed to each project. We supplement these data with the results of an online survey distributed by e-mail to the 20,182 registered users of Lendwithcare in September 2014. The survey received 1,736 returns, representing a response rate of just over 9%. After excluding incomplete returns, we construct an unbalanced panel dataset consisting of a total of 5,426 monthly observations of profile status and lending activity covering the 797 individual funders who responded to all of the questions appearing on our survey. In reconciling these two sets of data, we are able to combine both revealed preferences measured by directly observed interactions with the platform, as well as responses to detailed socio demographic, attitudinal and lifestyle questions which could only be collected through a

tailored survey. Our study therefore benefits from the analysis of data based on actual rather than stated patterns of behavior wherever possible.

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1 provides a description of the variables used in the research derived from our sample of survey respondents. It can be shown that funders in our sample support 24 projects on average over the duration of their association with the platform (approximately 3.5 per active month). In terms of public profile, we find that around 24% of respondents choose to upload a photo of themselves, while 29% provide a written statement explaining why they have chosen to lend. Further scrutiny of the survey sample indicates that respondents tend to be employed, reasonably affluent and well-educated; 60% are employed, just over half are educated to a postgraduate level and around a third have household income of more than £55,000 per year. More than one third of respondents are aged 60+, which is somewhat surprising given the likely age profile of users that would be expected to make use of a web-based fundraising platform.

#### *4.2 Empirical Specifications*

Our two dependent variables are the natural logs of the number of different projects supported by each individual lender during a given month and the average monetary amount given to these projects. The key independent variable in relation to our research hypotheses is measure of self-presentation, which we consider a proxy for image consciousness. This is an indicator variable that takes a value equal to one if funders have a public profile (photo and/or personal description) and zero otherwise. Our empirical model also includes a vector of variables which we use to control for individual characteristics of respondents, such as gender, age, ethnicity, household income, employment status and highest educational attainment.

Our dataset also allows us to control for other factors influencing individual levels of pro-social behaviour besides self-presentation image consciousness. These crucially include variations in available time and resources (employment status and income), as well as predisposition to pro-sociality and the proportion of available resources committed to other charitable endeavors (hours spent volunteering and the amount donated to charity in the past year). In particular, the ability to control for employment status is likely to at least partly account for variations in time available to spend online selecting prosocial campaigns to support. Additionally, we compute two factor scores corresponding to the levels of social capital and religiosity of respondents, based on a number of related attitudinal questions measured using a Likert scale. The former is composed of responses to a series of survey questions measuring levels of social trust, membership of clubs and organizations, as well as the number of people the respondent could turn to for a small loan. The latter is composed of responses to questions relating to religious affiliation and the frequency of attendance at formal religious events. This particular set of control variables is consistent with those used by previous studies of pro-sociality such as Bekkers & Wiepking (2011) and Hustinx et al. (2010).

## V. RESULTS

Table 2 reports a series of panel regression results for ten different generalized least squares (GLS) model specifications using random effect estimators. Hausman tests performed for each specification suggest that random effect estimators are preferred to fixed effects. The results from the fixed effect estimators are largely consistent with these reported in Table 2. Each model specification represents a different combination of elements of the respondent's public profile. Although the inclusion of controls for both photo and description at the same time

might be contentious due to the possibility of autocorrelation, the Pearson coefficient for these two variables is actually smaller than might be expected (+0.55). The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) statistics also suggest that the inclusion of both controls is not a cause for concern and indicates that there is an acceptable variation in our sample between respondents with none, one or both of the proxies for image consciousness.

Results relating to the number of projects supported are remarkably consistent and robust across the different specifications, demonstrating that users with public profiles support around 10-12% more projects on average compared to those that do not. This effect holds regardless of whether we control for the presence of a photo, description or both at once. However, the coefficient estimate for the variable controlling for interaction between the two profile elements is not found to be significantly different from zero. This suggests that the observed variation in behavior is adequately captured through controlling for any one element of the public lender profile, with no significant differences observed between those with complete and incomplete profiles. The key coefficient estimates in specifications (vi) – (viii) show that the average loan amount actually falls by about 1% for those with a visible photo, by about 5% for those with text describing why they lend and by about 2% in cases where both elements of the profile are present compared with only one or neither. While all of these coefficient estimates are negative, only the control for the presence of a profile description is statistically different from zero at the 90% confidence level. When we control for the presence of profile elements simultaneously in specifications (ix) – (x), a personal description is shown to associate with a statistically significant reduction in average loan amount of around 7 - 8%, while the coefficient estimates relating to the presence of a lender photo and interaction terms are not found to be significantly different from zero. Overall, we suggest that the model output presented in Table 3 offers strong support for hypothesis H1 and even stronger support for hypothesis H2 given

that our evidence actually points to smaller average monetary contributions among self-presenting funders identified as being image conscious.

[Table 2 about here]

The use of random effects also allows us to explicitly control for a number other lender-specific control variables derived from our survey dataset. Among these, one of the most consistent and significant predictors of the number of projects supported is the amount of self-reported charitable giving, which suggests that pro-social activities conducted online via the Lendwithcare platform appear to be a complement to other forms of charitable donation rather than a substitute. Our results also show that males support around 12% more projects on average compared with females holding all other characteristics constant. A majority of the controls for lender age are also significant at the 95% confidence level and show that younger respondents support significantly more projects than older respondents. By contrast, we find little or no evidence to support the importance of other control variables used elsewhere in the literature in empirical models of pro-social activity. No significant variation in lending activity is observed among respondents according to levels of religiosity or social capital, nor socioeconomic factors such as education or income.

## VI. DISCUSSION

This paper draws upon the rich theory on image enhancement as a motivation for pro-social behaviour and shows evidence that image conscious people increase their publicly visible but not non-visible prosocial activities. An implication from this evidence is that self-presentation incentivizes reductions in non-visible activities in order to increase an individual's capacity to engage in visible activity. The behavior is largely consistent with self-presentation theory and

findings from previous studies (Bareket-Bojmel, Moran & Shahr, 2016; Chiang & Suen, 2015) where people strategically present their self in social media to improve their social image.

The evidence presented by our study further suggests that behaviors of people with concerns about their social image are largely similar in both online and offline environments. Our findings therefore support the argument that online interactions expand and complement, but do not replace, offline social arrangements and behaviors (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008; Mano, 2013). An important implication is that future research in online prosocial activities may be based on theoretical background previously developed

In terms of the managerial and policy relevance for Lendwithcare and other similar organizations, our findings suggest that an environment where only the number of projects supported is publicly reported encourages a non-trivial proportion of contributors to increase levels of visible activity, possibly at the expense of non-visible behaviors. However, even though funders motivated by image may behave differently compared with the rest of the population, the magnitude of our coefficient estimates suggests that the ‘positive’ effect in terms of increasing the number of projects supported is larger in absolute terms than the ‘negative’ effect of smaller average loan amounts. It may therefore be in the best interests of such organizations to encourage self-presentation and increase levels of visibility in the donation process.

Our study is affected by a number of limitations, the most obvious being that we base our analysis around a sample of 797 respondents to a voluntary survey undertaken by the Lendwithcare organisation. This leads to the potential for response bias among our sample and the possibility that behaviours demonstrated by the self-selecting group of respondents are not necessarily indicative of those adopted by the population as a whole. Furthermore, while the

**Commented [TN8]:** Joe, could you add the some discussions on factor analysis as suggested by reviewer 1.

specific combination of public profile creation and unique reporting mechanism for funder behaviours employed by the Lendwithcare platform allows us an opportunity to address our research questions, for obvious reasons it is difficult or impossible to apply the same method to data from other fundraising platforms. As such, while we have no strong reason to believe that individual donor behaviour would differ significantly in other online settings, we equally cannot demonstrate the general applicability of these findings outside of this particular context.

In terms of directions for future research, it would therefore be beneficial to extend upon this particular online setting to investigate variations in donor behaviour on other Internet fundraising platforms, for instance, social networking applications such as Facebook and Twitter. It is of particular interest and importance as raising funds through these online social networks have become increasingly important for non-profit organizations (Saxton and Wang, 2014). If users in these online social networks are more interactive than in the traditional platforms (such as Web) then it is possible that the desire to enhance social image is even higher in this particular environment.

It is also interesting to examine possible changes in donor behaviour under different mechanisms for reporting contributions. Future studies could therefore usefully test the extent to which the theories underpinning our hypotheses is consistent in different settings. For example, platforms that report the monetary amounts contributed by each donor in absolute or categorical terms might encourage larger monetary contributions from more image conscious funders, given that this behaviour is publicly visible.

## VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Using unique data from an online prosocial crowdfunding platform (Lendwithcare), our study presents novel evidence indicating that the behavior of online contributors is influenced by self-presentation and motivations to improve their social image. More specifically, we show that funders with public profiles, who we argue are more likely to be image conscious, will engage in greater levels of visible activity by supporting a greater number of fundraising projects, while at the same time reduce non-visible contributing activities compared to those who are not image conscious. Our paper significantly contribute to the line of research on digital philanthropy (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008; Abdelkader, 2017) and self-presentation in Internet environment (Chiang & Suen, 2015; Batenburg & Bartels, 2017).

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