In Lieu of Gifts: Why Charitable Gift Requests Lead to Less Generous Giving

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Consumer Relevance and Contribution Statement

Consumers are increasingly interested in using celebratory occasions as opportunities to help others in need. Despite clear consumer interest in making charitable gift requests, how givers—the people who fulfill these requests—actually respond remains unexamined. Prior work has examined how norms guide both gift giving (Bulte et al. 2018; Givi et al. 2023; Givi and Galak 2024; Sherry, McGrath, and Levy 1993) and charitable giving (Agerström et al. 2016; Goswami and Urminsky 2016; Moon and VanEpps 2023; van Teunenbroek, Bekkers, and Beersma 2020; White, Starfelt Sutton, and Zhao 2023), yet the intersection of these two forms of prosocial giving is underexplored. This research asks which spending norms win out when a gift is meant to celebrate a specific gift recipient, but instead benefits a charity—gift-giving norms that emphasize generosity (e.g., Flynn and Adams 2009) or charitable-giving norms that deem paltry donations appropriate (Andrews et al. 2008; Brockner et al. 1984; Cialdini and Schroeder 1976)? We find that charitable gift requests, despite being specifically requested as a gift, are not typically considered prototypical gifts because they do not directly benefit the intended recipient. As a result, givers are more likely to rely on their (less generous) spending norms for one-time donations. This difference in generosity is exacerbated for rite-of-passage occasions, for which prototypical gifts emphasize a direct benefit and activate higher spending norms, making a charitable gift request even less prototypical. Critically, we find that to enhance a charitable gift request's prototypicality, and consequently, increase generosity, those creating charitable gift registries can communicate that they will retain a portion of the contributions (relative to donating the entire contribution). Alternatively, requestors can explain how the charitable gift request offers them a direct benefit (e.g., supports a park they enjoy visiting). These insights provide actionable guidance for consumers and the platforms facilitating such requests.

Abstract

Prosocial behavior comes in a variety of forms, each governed by distinct norms. This research investigates the intersection of two such forms: charitable giving and gift giving. People increasingly use special occasions (e.g., weddings, birthdays) to solicit donations to charitable organizations in lieu of more typical gifts. We examine how the norms associated with gift giving versus charitable giving shape responses to such requests. Across an analysis of archival gift registry data (N = 9,458) and five pre-registered experiments (N = 3,976), this research shows that, without intervention, givers are less generous toward charitable gift requests relative to more prototypical cash gift requests. This discrepancy in generosity occurs because charitable gift requests do not directly benefit the intended recipient, thereby activating the spending norms for charitable giving, rather than the typically more generous spending norms associated with gift giving. This difference is amplified in the context of rite-of-passage occasions, such as weddings, where a gift's direct benefit is particularly important, rendering charitable gift requests even less prototypical. We further demonstrate that emphasizing how a recipient might directly benefit from a charitable gift request makes such requests feel more prototypical, leading givers to follow gift (vs. charitable) giving norms.

Keywords: Gift giving, charitable giving, norms, prosocial behavior, rite of passage

Prosocial behaviors, or actions intended to benefit others (Eisenberg and Miller 1987; Staub 1978), can take many different forms. For example, donating to a charitable cause, volunteering one's time, complimenting a stranger (Zhao and Epley 2021), or giving a loved one a gift (Dunn, Aknin, and Norton 2008; Givi and Galak 2020) all fall under the umbrella of prosocial behavior. Situations where multiple forms of prosocial behavior intersect are increasingly common, particularly as socially conscious gift requests have become more popular.

Many people celebrating special occasions like weddings or birthdays are forgoing traditional gift requests that would be personally beneficial in favor of gifts that instead benefit others (Lyon 2025). Specifically, people may request that their loved ones divert funds intended to purchase a typical gift to instead contribute to a charitable organization on their behalf. A survey of 1,000 engaged couples indicated that 66% were considering including a request for their loved ones to donate to charity in lieu of giving a typical wedding gift (PR Newswire 2021). Similarly, Zola, a popular wedding registry website, shared that in 2022 alone, newlyweds raised more than $1.4 million for various charitable causes through their wedding registries—a 237% increase from 2019 to 2022 (Marwan 2022). In 2019, Facebook announced its users had raised over $1 billion for charity through birthday fundraisers (Gleit 2019).

Charitable organizations have, unsurprisingly, embraced this trend by eagerly encouraging supporters to dedicate their special occasions to fundraising. For example, Feeding America invites donors to "bring your special occasion to the table," and to ask loved ones to "donate meals in lieu of gifts." The American Cancer Society and the American Red Cross similarly encourage donors to "donate your day" by asking for donations as gifts for birthdays, weddings, and anniversaries (see Web Appendix A for additional examples).

Despite both celebrants and charitable organizations embracing charitable gift requests, a

critical question remains: how do givers, the people who will actually fulfill the requests, respond? Givers could reasonably construe charitable gift requests as gifts for the gift recipient (i.e., the person requesting the gift) or as charitable donations. Consequently, how givers resolve this ambiguity is likely to shape the generosity of their responses.

Importantly, in this research, across an archival dataset and five experiments, we demonstrate that without intervention, givers contribute less to charitable gift requests relative to cash requests. This occurs because charitable gift requests lack a key feature of prototypical gifts—a direct benefit to the requestor—and thus are insufficiently prototypical to activate gift-giving norms. As a result, givers follow the spending norms for one-time donations, which are typically less generous. This effect is most pronounced for rite-of-passage occasions, for which the preference to give gifts that offer a direct benefit is especially strong, and spending norms are higher. However, when requestors frame the charitable gift in a manner that makes it seem like a more prototypical gift, the effect is attenuated, increasing contribution amounts. We elaborate on these theoretical arguments below.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Norms in Gift Giving and the Role of Occasion Type

Social norms play a critical role in guiding prosocial decisions (Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren 1990; House 2018). These norms can be descriptive (i.e., what others typically do) or injunctive (i.e., what you *should* do), which often reinforce one another (Deutchman et al. 2025; Eriksson, Strimling, and Coultas 2015). Gift-givers typically try to follow social norms when selecting a gift in order to meet recipients' expectations (Givi et al. 2023; Givi and Galak 2024;

Sherry, McGrath, and Levy 1993), and they often experience anxiety about a gift's appropriateness, reflecting their concern with adhering to these norms (Wooten 2000). Norms influence not only the type of gifts givers select, but also how much givers decide to spend. For instance, when deciding how much to spend on a wedding gift, a giver might research expert recommendations online or conform to how much they see their friends spend. This occurs even for birthdays or holidays, where spending norms are less explicit than for weddings. For example, Bulte and colleagues (2018) show that Chinese gift-givers alter their gifting patterns to align with the average gift within their community.

Notably, the spending norms that guide gift giving tend to encourage generosity. First, givers believe the amount they spend reflects the importance of their relationship with the recipient and are thus less price sensitive when purchasing gifts (Choe, Kan, and Polman 2023; Wang and Van Der Lans 2018). Similarly, many givers express anxiety about appearing cheap (Wooten 2000), underscoring expectations that they should spend generously. Finally, givers also believe that more expensive gifts engender greater appreciation (Flynn and Adams 2009). These beliefs all coalesce around the normative expectation that one should spend generously when purchasing a gift for a loved one.

While generosity is encouraged across gifting occasions, the spending norms are likely higher for some occasions than for others. Specifically, rite-of-passage occasions, such as weddings, baby showers, or graduations (Rook 1985; Schwartz 1967; Sherry 1983) represent ritualized celebrations where the gift recipients take on new roles and responsibilities (Appau, Ozanne, and Klein 2020; Schouten 1991; Van Gennep 2022). Accordingly, gifts for rites-of-passage are typically intended to help address needs associated with the new role, such as strollers for expecting parents, or cookware for newlyweds (Finley Wolfinbarger 1990; Sherry

1983). Because such occasions occur less frequently than annual celebrations (e.g., birthdays, anniversaries) and givers are more focused on offering tangible support, they tend to give more generously (Belk 1979). As a result, we expect the spending norms for rite-of-passage occasions to be higher than for non-rite-of-passage occasions.

Social Norms in Charitable Giving

Social norms also play a critical role in charitable giving, dictating decisions about donations of money, time, and even blood (Agerström et al. 2016; Goswami and Urminsky 2016; Moon and VanEpps 2023; van Teunenbroek, Bekkers, and Beersma 2020; White, Starfelt Sutton, and Zhao 2023). For monetary donations specifically, people tend to conform to others' giving habits (Nook et al. 2016). For example, in a field study among university students, highlighting descriptive norms about other students' donations led to significantly higher donation amounts relative to appeals that did not reference this normative information (Agerström et al. 2016). Other research has shown that people donate more when a specific quantity is requested relative to an open-ended request, as these requests signal the donation amount that others typically choose to give (Moon and VanEpps 2023).

Moreover, in contrast to gifting norms, which generally encourage spending generously, charities often emphasize that even small donations (e.g., "just pennies a day") are socially acceptable and that every donation helps (Andrews et al. 2008; Brockner et al. 1984; Cialdini and Schroeder 1976), thereby making smaller donations more normatively appropriate. In support of the argument that gifts are associated with more generous giving norms than charitable donations, Wang and colleagues (2023) find that reframing donation requests as gifts (e.g., give a gift vs. give a donation) increases donation amounts.

This contrast suggests that people may view gifts as warranting greater generosity than charitable donations. To directly test whether normative spending amounts are higher for gifts, and particularly rite-of-passage gifts, we conducted a pretest. Participants (N = 199) reported how much they would spend across six giving situations—two rite-of-passage occasions (a wedding and baby shower gift), two non-rite-of-passage occasions (a birthday and holiday gift), and two fundraisers requesting one-time donations (benefiting a nature preserve and a homeless shelter)—which were presented in a randomized order. Gift amounts were averaged for each type of situation (i.e., rite-of-passage, non-rite-of-passage, charitable donation). Givers reported they would spend the most on gifts for rite-of-passage occasions (M = \$83.92, SD = \$68.18) versus non-rite-of-passage occasions (M = \$71.43, SD = \$87.04, $t(198) = 3.11$, $p = .002$, $d = .22$) or one-time charitable fundraising campaigns (M = \$48.83, SD = \$72.05, $t(198) = 6.61$; $p < .001$, $d = .47$). Consistent with the notion that generosity is higher for gifts, even among non-rite-of-passage occasions, the difference between contributions for the non-rite-of-passage occasion gifts and charitable fundraisers was also significant ($t(198) = 3.64$; $p < .001$, $d = .26$). For full details, see Web Appendix B.

Norm Salience Drives Giving Decisions

Because a charitable gift request can reasonably be construed as either a gift or as a charitable donation, the central question in anticipating a giver's response is which of these norms guides decision-making. Prior research finds that when multiple norms may guide behavior, people typically comply with the norm activated by the particulars of the context (Berkowitz 1972; Cialdini et al. 1990; Jonas et al. 2008). We propose that one factor likely to

influence norm activation in this case is the degree to which givers view the gift as offering a direct benefit to the intended recipient (i.e., the person celebrating the occasion). The direct benefits of most gifts are readily apparent—a gift of cash earmarked for a down payment on a house will help newlyweds begin their life together, and cash gifts to expecting parents will help cover upcoming expenses and needs for the baby. Because offering a direct benefit to the recipient represents an integral attribute of a gift, when requested gifts are seen as directly benefiting the recipient, they should better reflect a prototypical gift. As a result, the gift-giving norms should be activated.

However, if the requested gift does not carry prototypical attributes of a gift, then givers may rely on other relevant norms to guide their giving decisions. Charitable gift requests do not typically offer a direct benefit for the person requesting the gift (i.e., the person(s) celebrating the occasion) and instead directly benefit the charity, offering only indirect benefits to the person making the request. Thus, because charitable donation requests lack a defining feature of prototypical gifts, givers are less likely to view gift-giving norms as the most appropriate to follow. Instead, we expect that charitable gift requests will often make charitable-giving (vs. gift-giving) norms more salient, resulting in less generous gift amounts.

When and Why Generosity Differences are Exacerbated and Attenuated

Critically, our theory also predicts the conditions under which this effect will be exacerbated and attenuated. As mentioned above, while charitable gift requests are unlikely to represent a prototypical gift across any occasion, we predict they are especially atypical for occasions intended to honor major rites of passage, such as weddings, baby showers, or graduations (Rook 1985; Schwartz 1967; Sherry 1983). These occasions come with new roles

and responsibilities (Appau et al. 2020; Schouten 1991; Van Gennep 2022), and gifts for these occasions tend to be especially practical and directly beneficial (Finley Wolfinbarger 1990; Sherry 1983). Further, because these occasions often demarcate significant, once-in-a-lifetime events, the spending norms for rites of passage tend to be higher and even more discrepant from charitable giving norms. We therefore predict the effect will be exacerbated for rite-of-passage gift occasions.

Moreover, our theory also identifies interventions that will increase generosity when fulfilling charitable gift requests. Specifically, if a charitable gift request offers a direct benefit to the recipient, then it should be seen as more prototypical, increasing the likelihood that gift-giving (vs. charitable-giving) norms will be activated, and increasing generosity. For example, if a charitable gift would support a health facility the recipient relies on, or would help install a park in the recipient's neighborhood, then gift-giving (vs. charitable giving) norms would be more likely to guide donations. Similarly, if a gift request states that the recipient of a cash gift will give a portion to charity and keep a portion for themselves, givers should be more likely to view such requests as directly benefiting the recipient, again resulting in normative gift spending.

Overview of Empirical Tests

We provide support for our proposed effects across a secondary dataset and five preregistered experiments. Across all studies, we compare a charitable gift request against requests for a cash gift, in an effort to control for givers' preference for giving material gifts (Waldfogel 2002). In study 1, we use archival data from an online gift registry to show that people give less in response to charitable (vs. cash) gift requests, and that this difference is larger for rite-of-passage occasions. Study 2 experimentally replicates these findings. In study 3, we

assess whether givers view a charitable gift request as less prototypical, and whether prototypicality predicts generosity above and beyond other common gift-giving motivations. In studies 4-6, we provide support for our norms-based account by demonstrating that when charitable gifts offer the recipient a direct benefit and are thus viewed as more prototypical, giving increases, as would be expected if gift-giving (vs. charitable-giving) norms were active.

Survey PDFs, data, and SAS code for studies 2-6 are all available on OSF and are linked in Web Appendix C. The study 1 data agreement with the registry company does not allow sharing in a public repository, but the authors are happy to respond to any questions related to the dataset. Across all experiments, we aimed to collect a minimum of 150 participants per condition in order to have appropriate power to capture a small-to-medium effect. Post-hoc power analyses using G*Power all indicated sufficient power (i.e., >.78) based on the respective sample sizes, effect sizes, and target alpha ($\alpha = .05$) for each study. Finally, all manipulations and measures are reported for each study.

STUDY 1

In Study 1, we sought real-world support for our key predictions that people give more in response to cash gift requests than to charitable gift requests, and that this gap is larger for rite-of-passage occasions. We use data from a registry site that allows recipients to create online gift registries for various occasions, such as weddings, baby showers, and birthdays. Recipients can register for several types of gifts, including cash or gift cards, donations to charity on their behalf, or traditional “boxed” (i.e., material) gifts (see Web Appendix D for examples). We use

this data to compare contributions to requests for cash or cash equivalents (i.e., gift cards) versus charitable gifts, across registries that featured either type of request or both, as we describe next.

Method

The data from the registry website contained two types of registries relevant to the current research: 1) those that included requests for contributions to either charitable *or* cash and cash equivalent (i.e., gift card) gift funds (among other gift requests), but not both, and 2) those that contained contributions to both types of monetary requests within the same registry. We thus created two datasets, and across both datasets we log-transformed the amount given to account for outliers. Using these two datasets allows us to examine whether there is a convergent effect across multiple contexts. First, examining registries that only requested one form of monetary gift—either cash or charitable—allows us to compare responses to cash and charitable gift requests independent of one another. Second, comparing gifts from registries that requested both types of monetary gifts allows us to better account for idiosyncrasies that might exist between people who only request a cash gift, relative to those who only request a charitable gift.

Registries Requesting Either Cash or Charitable Gift. Within this dataset, we only examined gifts for occasions that were clearly identified (i.e., we removed registries with unclear occasion tags like ‘ongoing’ and ‘other’). We also removed gifts for occasions where the sample size for either gift type (i.e., cash or charitable) was zero. In total, the dataset contained observations (N = 9,548) from six occasions: three rite-of-passage occasions (baby showers, bride/groom showers, and weddings) and three non-rite-of-passage occasions (anniversaries, birthdays, and general holidays).

Registries Containing Both Cash and Charitable Gift Requests. To complement the first dataset, we also analyzed gifts to registries that requested both cash and charitable gifts (N = 429). The vast majority of these registries were for weddings (94.6%), thus we do not delineate by occasion within this dataset. For each registry, we calculated an average amount for cash and charitable contributions and log-transformed them, respectively.

Results

Our first dataset contained registries across all six occasions; however, the sample sizes within each occasion varied dramatically, as did the average gift amounts. Please see Table 1 for cell sizes and winsorized means for each occasion, by gift request. Factorial ANOVAs are particularly sensitive to uneven cell sizes and large differences in variance between conditions (Wickens and Keppel 2004). To address this issue, we conducted two analyses: 1) a one-way ANOVA controlling for the specific occasion to examine the impact of gift request type (cash/cash equivalent, charity) on logged contribution amount across all gifts, and 2) a one-way between-subjects ANOVA for each occasion to test the impact of gift request type on logged contribution amount within each occasion.

TABLE 1: CELL SIZES AND WINSORIZED MEANS BY OCCASION

		Cash Request			Charitable Request		
	Occasion	N	*Wins. Mean*	*Wins.* SD	N	*Wins. Mean*	*Wins.* SD
Rites of Passage	Wedding*	5,141	*$108.78*	*$110.37*	1,811	*$92.08*	*$97.64*
	Baby Shower*	1,802	*$82.52*	*$96.68*	127	*$60.99*	*$89.81*
	Bride/Groom Shower †	44	*$101.14*	*$106.24*	6	*$30.00*	*$35.50*
Non-Rites of Passage	Birthday	342	*$51.08*	*$58.97*	79	*$46.86*	*$36.07*
	General Holiday *	139	*$62.78*	*$76.85*	25	*$32.28*	*$16.87*
	Anniversary	8	*$50.00*	*$47.20*	24	*$42.50*	*$25.15*

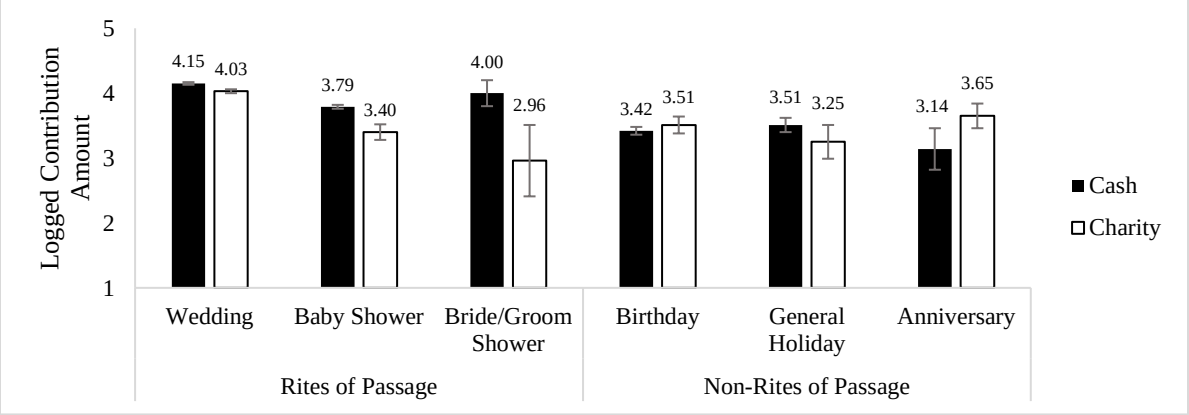
Note: Data is winsorized at the 99th and 1st percentile. The analyses reported in the paper use log-transformed data. Winsorized means are reported here for ease of interpretation. Analyses of the winsorized data are reported in Web Appendix E.
* Winsorized difference between cash and charitable registries ≤ .05
† Winsorized difference between cash and charitable registries ≤ .11

As predicted, a one-way ANOVA controlling for occasion indicated an effect of gift type, with givers giving less to charity than cash gift requests ($M_{Charity}$ = 3.60, SD = 1.22, M_{Cash} = 3.73, SD = 1.39 [log-transformed means]; $F(1, 9541) = 14.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$). Next, we created separate datasets containing registries for the focal occasion. We then conducted a one-way ANOVA to examine the impact of gift type on gift amount for each of the six occasions. Notably, it is important to again acknowledge that the sample size limits the interpretation of some of these comparisons (see Table 1).

Starting with the rite-of-passage occasions, as predicted, people contributed significantly more to cash (vs. charitable) gift requests for weddings (M_{Cash} = 4.15, SD = 1.38, $M_{Charity}$ = 4.03, SD = 1.21, $F(1, 6{,}950) = 9.66$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$) and baby showers (M_{Cash} = 3.79, SD = 1.39, $M_{Charity}$ = 3.40, SD = 1.37, $F(1, 1{,}927) = 9.22$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .005$). The difference in contributions within the bride/groom shower was directionally consistent, but marginal (M_{Cash} = 4.00, SD = 1.39, $M_{Charity}$ = 2.96, SD = 1.06, $F(1, 48) = 3.10$, $p = .085$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$), likely due to its very small cell sizes (N = 6 for the charitable request condition). Conversely, for the non-rite-of-passage occasions, there was no difference between gift contribution amounts for any of the

occasions—birthdays (M_{Cash} = 3.42, SD = 1.22, $M_{Charity}$ = 3.51, SD = 1.04, $F(1, 419) = .37$, p = .542), general holidays (M_{Cash} = 3.51, SD = 1.33, $M_{Charity}$ = 3.25, SD = .92, $F(1, 162) = .83$, p = .364), or anniversaries (M_{Cash} = 3.14, SD = 1.68, $M_{Charity}$ = 3.65, SD = .47, $F(1, 30) = 1.92$, p = .176). See Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: STUDY 1 CONTRIBUTION AMOUNT BY REQUEST AND OCCASION



Note: The figure above shows the log-transformed contribution amounts to cash and charitable gifts, by occasion. The error bars represent +/- the standard error.

For robustness, we conducted three additional analyses: 1) Mann-Whitney U tests, which compare mean ranks, reducing the impact of extreme outliers and allowing us to examine uncorrected data, 2) results with data winsorized to the 1st and 99th percentile, and 3) results using a mixed model with fixed effects for whether the registry also included requests for a (non-monetary) material gift and the number of gifts on the registry, and random effects for the specific registry and specific gift. Results are reported in full in Web Appendix E, and in what follows, we summarize the findings. The Mann-Whitney U tests (MacFarland and Yates 2016), used when the assumptions of an independent t-test may be violated, replicate all the results reported above, in both direction and significance. The winsorized results replicate all results reported above, with the exception of the results for general holidays, which revealed a significant difference between contribution amounts (M_{Cash} = \$62.78, SD = \$76.85, $M_{Charity}$ =

$32.28, SD = $16.87, $F(1, 162) = 3.88$, $p = .050$). For the mixed model, the results for weddings, baby showers, birthdays, and anniversaries all replicated the results reported above. However, for bride/groom showers, the difference between cash and charitable gifts was no longer significant, likely due to the additional degrees of freedom required for the additional fixed and random effects ($M_{Cash} = 3.62$, $SE = .36$, $M_{Charity} = 3.06$, $SE = .92$, $F(1, 16) = .36$, $p = .558$). Additionally, similar to the winsorized data, there was a marginal difference between general holidays ($M_{Cash} = 3.63$, $SE = .13$, $M_{Charity} = 3.07$, $SE = .30$, $F(1, 51) = 3.01$, $p = .089$).

Finally, we examined our second dataset, containing registries that requested both cash and charitable gifts. Givers were again less generous when donating to charity on behalf of the couple ($M_{Charity} = 3.90$, SD = .91) than when giving directly to the couple ($M_{Cash} = 4.48$, SD = .89; $F(1, 428) = 83.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .16$). This pattern also held when the data were winsorized ($M_{Cash} = $113.10, SD = $83.09, $M_{Cash} = $64.39, SD = $47.28; $F(1, 428) = 139.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .25$). The consistency of these results with the results for gifts from registries containing either cash or charitable gift requests suggests that this effect is robust across multiple contexts.

Discussion

Using real-world data, we found that givers were more generous toward cash versus charity gift requests, and that this difference was most pronounced for rite-of-passage occasions. These results are consistent with our argument that givers are relying on distinct giving norms depending on the requested gift. Although the differences in sample sizes across other occasions make it difficult to make strong claims, the pattern of results for non-rite-of-passage occasions suggests an attenuated effect for these occasions, and the pattern for rites-of-passage supports our

theorizing that these norms are more generous. Further, when both cash and charity requests are listed together, givers continue to be more generous toward cash (vs. charitable) requests.

Despite the advantage of showing our effect with real registries and giving behavior, using secondary data introduces concerns of selection bias. Moreover, the differences in sample sizes across conditions necessitate a more rigorous testing paradigm. Thus, in study 2, we conduct a controlled experiment, which serves as a conceptual replication of these effects.

STUDY 2

Study 2 (preregistered; https://aspredicted.org/B64_MWY) aims to experimentally replicate the differences in generosity observed in study 1 by manipulating both the occasion and the type of gift requested. Study 2 further examines whether charitable gifts are perceived as offering less of a direct benefit to the gift recipient—an attribute we contend is central to determining a gift's prototypicality, and hence the spending norms that guide giver behavior.

Method

One thousand seventeen Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) participants recruited via Cloud Research (M_{Age} = 42.3; 49.4% male, with 15 participants not disclosing their age, and 19 not disclosing their gender) participated in a 2 (occasion: rite of passage, non-rite of passage) x 2 (gift request: cash, charity) between-subjects experiment. Ten participants did not respond to our focal dependent variables and were excluded. A co-ed baby shower served as the rite-of-passage occasion, while a 25th birthday served as the non-rite-of-passage condition (See Web Appendix F for stimuli). We chose to compare a baby shower to a 25th birthday to capture a similar age range

for the recipient, as well as test our effect using a milestone birthday—though one not generally considered a rite of passage—which should offer a conservative test of our prediction.

All participants read that they were excited to attend either the shower or the birthday party of a friend, and that they planned to give a gift. To determine what to give, participants asked the recipient's sister, the party host, what gift their friend might enjoy. In the cash condition, the sister replied that the friend would appreciate cash to help with upcoming expenses, while in the charity condition, she responded that the recipient would appreciate a donation to a favorite charity on their behalf. We then asked participants to enter the amount ($0-$250, open response) they would give to their friend (gift condition) or donate on their friend's behalf (charity condition), as our measure of generosity.

Next, to ensure the two requests differed in perceived direct benefit as theorized, we measured the extent to which the gift request offered the recipient (i.e., their friend) a direct benefit using four items: 1) To what extent would a gift to this registry take your friend's needs into account? 2) To what extent would a gift to this registry be useful to your friend? 3) To what extent would a gift to this registry be practical for your friend? 4) To what extent would a gift to this registry support your friend in their new life stage? (all 1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much so; α = .93). We note that in this and subsequent studies, these direct benefit items were pre-registered as a mechanism, rather than a manipulation check. Although the pre-registered model was empirically supported, we later concluded that theoretically, these items more directly reflect the manipulation and are therefore better classified as a manipulation check. As a manipulation check for the occasion type, participants responded to the question, "To what extent would you consider your friend's [party type] as a rite of passage (i.e., an occasion that marks or celebrates the gift recipient's transition from one life stage to another)?" (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much so).

Participants completed attention checks and demographic measures (see Web Appendix C). We report attention checks for this and the remaining experiments in Web Appendix G.

Results

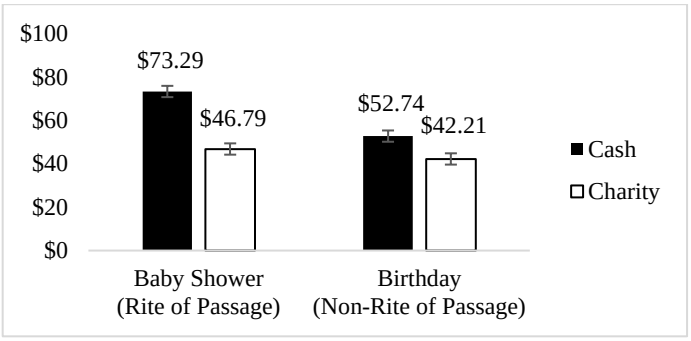
Direct benefit manipulation check. We have argued that a key characteristic of a prototypical gift is its ability to provide a direct benefit to the recipient. A two-way ANOVA on direct benefit indicated significant main effects of both occasion ($F(1, 1003) = 5.31$, $p = .022$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$) and gift request ($F(1, 1003) = 468.71$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .32$). Importantly, it also revealed the predicted gift request by occasion interaction ($F(1, 1003) = 7.10$, $p = .008$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$). For the baby shower, givers perceived the cash gift to offer a significantly greater direct benefit to the recipient ($M = 5.93$, SD = 1.23) than the charitable request ($M = 3.66$, SD = 1.78; $F(1, 1003) = 291.84$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .23$). For the 25th birthday, although there was also an increase in perceptions of the direct benefit of the cash ($M = 5.90$, SD = 1.36) versus charitable gift ($M = 4.12$, SD = 1.50; $F(1, 1003) = 182.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$), this difference was attenuated.

Rite of passage manipulation check. A two-way ANOVA with occasion type and gift request as the IVs indicated the predicted main effect of occasion type, such that the baby shower was perceived as significantly more of a rite of passage than the 25th birthday ($M_{\text{Baby Shower}} = 5.65$, SD = 1.50, $M_{\text{Birthday}} = 4.05$, SD = 1.73; $F(1, 1000) = 246.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .20$). Additionally, the results indicated a significant effect of gift request ($M_{\text{Cash}} = 4.97$, SD = 1.77, $M_{\text{Charity}} = 4.72$, SD = 1.84; $F(1, 1000) = 5.65$, $p = .018$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$). The interaction was not significant ($p = .981$).

Contribution amount. A two-way ANOVA on contribution amount also indicated significant main effects of both occasion ($F(1, 1003) = 23.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$) and gift request ($F(1, 1003) = 50.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$), which were qualified by an occasion by gift request interaction ($F(1, 1003) = 9.31$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$; see Figure 2). For the baby shower, participants were willing to give significantly more to the cash request (M = \$73.29, SD = \$54.63) versus the charitable request (M = \$46.79, SD = \$38.99; $F(1, 1003) = 50.59$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$). For the 25th birthday, the difference between amounts given for cash (M = \$52.74, SD = \$35.87) and charitable requests (M = \$42.21, SD = \$33.74; $F(1, 1003) = 8.19$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$) was also significant, albeit attenuated.

We also tested our assertion that givers are more generous for rites of passage versus non-rites of passage. Comparing the two cash conditions, participants gave significantly more to the cash request for a baby shower compared to the birthday party cash request, replicating introductory findings that givers are more generous for rites of passage ($F(1, 1003) = 30.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$). Notably, the two charitable gifting conditions showed no significant differences ($p = .216$), suggesting that, regardless of occasion, givers appear to spend a consistent amount, as we would expect if givers adhered to charitable-giving norms in these conditions.

FIGURE 2: STUDY 2 CONTRIBUTION AMOUNTS AS A FUNCTION OF GIFT REQUEST AND OCCASION



Note: Bars represent the mean amount contributed to the respective gift request. Error bars represent the standard errors. The generosity gap is larger for a baby shower (rite of passage) than a birthday (non-rite of passage).

Discussion

This study replicates the effects observed in our real-world data and supports the notion that charitable gifts offer less of a direct benefit to the recipient. We argue that this difference is a critical aspect of why givers view such requests as less prototypical of a gift and give amounts more consistent with a one-time charitable donation norm. We test this relationship more explicitly in study 3. Notably, unlike in study 1, in study 2, we observed a difference in generosity between the cash and charitable gift, even for the non-rite-of-passage occasion. This finding is consistent with our theorizing that charitable gift requests are less prototypical across all occasions (i.e., it is always typical to give a gift that directly benefits the recipient), but the resulting difference in generosity will be most pronounced for occasions where direct benefit is more critical, and spending norms are more generous. As mentioned in the discussion of study 1, it is certainly possible that the difference in generosity for non-rites of passage was more difficult to observe in our secondary data due to the limited sample sizes combined with external factors that we are unable to account for. Given the evidence from study 1 and study 2 that the

generosity gap is substantially larger for rite-of-passage occasions, we situate our remaining experiments within the domain of rites of passage, where those requesting charitable gifts have the greatest opportunity to raise more for causes they care about.

STUDY 3

The primary goal of study 3 (preregistered; https://aspredicted.org/43m9-qfp4.pdf) is to support our proposal that gifts lacking a direct benefit, such as charitable gifts, will be perceived as less prototypical, and that prototypicality is a key predictor of contribution amounts. To do so, study 3 measures the gift's prototypicality, as well as five other potential alternative explanations for why givers may be less generous toward charitable gift requests.

Method

Three hundred ninety-nine U.S. Connect (i.e., Cloud Research's platform) participants (M_{Age} = 42.0; 53.6% male, 45.1% female, 1.3% non-binary or other identity; 65.7% White, 11.3% Black or African American, 10.8% Asian) completed a 2 condition (gift request: cash, charity) between-subjects experiment. We asked participants to imagine they were attending the wedding of a close friend and decided to check the registry information. Participants were then directed to a screen designed to replicate the appearance of either a cash or charity registry website (see Web Appendix F). On that screen, participants in the cash condition were asked to contribute to a kitchen renovation fund for the couple's home, while those in the charity condition were asked to contribute to a kitchen renovation fund benefitting the couple's local homeless shelter. Participants then viewed a second screen, asking them how much they would

like to contribute to the requested fund. Participants could enter an amount up to $200 into an open-ended numerical response box. Participants then rated, in a randomized order, items assessing the gift's direct benefit, prototypicality, and several alternative mechanisms, which are detailed below.

Participants completed the four measures of direct benefit from study 2, with three additional measures to more broadly capture the gift's direct benefit: 1) To what extent would this gift personally benefit your friends?, 2) To what extent would this gift directly benefit your friends?, and 3) To what extent would your friends consume, keep, or experience this gift themselves? (All 1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much, $\alpha = .97$). All seven items loaded on one factor.

Participants then responded to five measures to assess the extent to which their gift was prototypical for the occasion: 1) To what extent does this type of gift reflect your beliefs about what a gift for this occasion should be? 2) To what extent does this gift align with your understanding of the type of gift one typically gives for this occasion? 3) To what extent is this type of gift consistent with what one should give for this occasion? 4) To what extent would you identify this contribution as a gift? 5) To what extent would it feel like you were giving a gift? (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much; $\alpha = .90$).[1] An exploratory factor analysis showed that these items load on a separate factor from the direct benefit items. See Web Appendix H.

We also acknowledge that, beyond a gift's prototypicality, there are several potential reasons why people give more generously to a cash gift request. Specifically, we considered how much the giver enjoyed giving the gift (Galak, Givi, and Williams 2016), reciprocity expectations (Giesler 2006; Givi et al. 2023), diffusion of responsibility (i.e., the expectation that a larger population would be contributing to the gift, and thus individual contributions matter

[1] Across our pre-registrations, we note that the gift's prototypicality was named 'schema congruency.' During manuscript preparation, the author team decided that prototypicality better captured this construct.

less) (Bennett, Kim, and Loken 2013; Wiesenthal and Silverman 1983), perceptions of the recipients' financial need (Brañas-Garza 2006), and the extent to which the recipient is identifiable (Jenni and Loewenstein 1997). Although each plays a role in prosocial giving, given the extent to which givers strive to give the appropriate gift for an occasion (Sherry et al. 1993; Wooten 2000), we predict these measures will not explain the effect of gift request type on giving amount beyond the gift's prototypicality.

We measured each alternative mechanism using seven-point scales (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much). To assess giver enjoyment, participants rated the extent to which they would 1) enjoy giving this gift and 2) be happy to give this gift (r = .88). To assess reciprocity expectations, participants rated the extent to which they considered 1) how much they hoped their friends would spend on a future gift for them and 2) how their gift will be reciprocated in the future (r = .82). To assess diffusion of responsibility, participants rated the extent to which 1) they expected that people not attending the wedding would contribute to the gift request and 2) that other people are already contributing to this request (r = .45).[2] To examine perceptions of financial need, participants rated the extent to which their friends 1) had significant financial needs and 2) were in need of financial support (r = .92). Participants also rated the extent to which 1) they were able to identify the person or people who will use the gift and 2) the gift recipient is clearly identifiable (r = .85).

Results

Direct benefit manipulation check. A one-way ANOVA indicated a significant effect of

[2] This correlation was lower than anticipated, so we report both the index and each individual item in our results.

gift request on perceptions of the gift's direct benefit ($F(1, 397) = 789.15$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .66$), wherein participants felt the cash request ($M = 6.18$, SD = .91) offered a greater direct benefit relative to the charitable request ($M = 2.64$, SD = 1.53).

Contribution amount. Replicating prior studies, the same analysis revealed a significant effect of gift request on contribution amount ($F(1, 397) = 27.42$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$); participants gave more to a cash request (M = \$95.53, SD = \$61.88) compared to a charitable request (M = \$65.70, SD = \$51.39).

Prototypicality. Similarly, a one-way ANOVA indicated a significant effect of gift request on prototypicality ($F(1, 397) = 42.08$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$), such that participants felt the cash request ($M = 5.00$, SD = 1.39) was more prototypical for the occasion than the charitable request ($M = 4.03$, SD = 1.60).

Alternative explanations. When examining the alternative explanations, the same analysis did not indicate an effect of gift request on the giver's enjoyment ($M_{Cash} = 4.98$, SD = 1.75, $M_{Charity} = 5.06$, SD = 1.70, $F(1, 397) = .23$, $p = .632$), or reciprocity expectations ($M_{Cash} = 2.35$, SD = 1.76, $M_{Charity} = 2.27$, SD = 1.71, $F(1, 397) = .22$, $p = .641$). For diffusion of responsibility, the index did not indicate a difference between the two conditions ($M_{Cash} = 4.65$, SD = 1.30, $M_{Charity} = 4.51$, SD = 1.31, $F(1, 397) = 1.10$, $p = .295$), nor did the first item on its own (M_{Cash} = 4.27 SD = 1.73, $M_{Charity} = 4.22$, SD = 1.72, $F(1, 397) = .08$, $p = .777$). The second item showed a marginal difference between conditions, whereby participants believed more people had already contributed to the cash request (M_{Cash} = 5.03 SD = 1.36, $M_{Charity} = 4.80$, SD = 1.31, $F(1, 397)$ = 2.86, $p = .092$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$). However, participants did view their friends as having significantly more financial need when they requested a cash gift ($M_{Cash} = 4.63$, SD = 1.54, $M_{Charity} = 2.60$, SD = 1.59, $F(1, 397) = 167.0$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .30$), and perceived the recipient to be more identifiable

in the cash condition (M_{Cash} = 5.96, SD = 1.38, $M_{Charity}$ = 3.65, SD = 1.91, $F(1, 397) = 191.6$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .33$).

Mediation. To assess whether the gift's prototypicality drove the relationship between gift request and contribution amount relative to the alternative accounts, we conducted a mediation analysis (Model 4, Hayes 2017), with request type as the independent variable (cash = 0, charity = 1), the gift's prototypicality, the recipient's financial need, and the recipient's identifiability as competing mechanisms, and contribution amount as the dependent variable. As predicted, the gift's prototypicality mediated the relationship between request and contribution amount ($ab_{\text{indirect effect}}$ = -6.11, 95% CI[-10.44, -2.11]). Conversely, neither the recipient's financial need ($ab_{\text{indirect effect}}$ = 2.94, 95% CI[-3.95, 10.10]) nor identifiability ($ab_{\text{indirect effect}}$ = -1.19, 95% CI[-9.30, 6.66]) mediated the relationship.

Discussion

Study 3 explicitly tested the role of a gift's prototypicality in driving generosity. Given that people adhere to the norms that are most salient at the time (Berkowitz 1972; Cialdini et al. 1990; Jonas et al. 2008), the more prototypical a gift request, the more likely givers should be to spend a normative gift amount. We also measured several potential alternative explanations to ensure the gift's prototypicality plays the primary role in driving generosity, above and beyond other gift-giving motivations. In addition to the alternatives examined in study 3, in a separate preregistered study (https://aspredicted.org/J31_SP9), we examined whether thoughtfulness, relational closeness, and anticipated gratitude differed between the two requests, but did not find evidence that any of these alternatives varied by request type (see Web Appendix I). Notably, identifying the role of gift prototypicality highlights an opportunity to shift giving behaviors:

framing a charitable request to resemble a traditional gift request should be more likely to activate gift-giving rather than charitable-giving norms. As a result, people should give more generously to such requests. We investigate this potential in the remaining studies.

STUDY 4

We proposed that givers are less generous when presented with charitable gift requests because these gifts lack a direct benefit to the recipient, resulting in such gifts being perceived as less prototypical. From this perspective, increasing the perception that a charitable gift provides a direct benefit should increase its prototypicality. Consequently, givers should be more likely to lean on gift-giving norms to dictate their generosity, rather than charitable-giving norms. Study 4 (preregistered; https://aspredicted.org/s7hh-s49c.pdf) examines one strategy that requestors of charitable gifts might employ to enhance the gift's direct benefit. Specifically, using the same charitable request, we propose that if recipients state that a portion (vs. 100%) of givers' contribution will be given to charity, givers are more likely to see the contribution as directly benefiting the recipient, who will be keeping some of the contribution, increasing prototypicality and activating gift-giving norms.

Method

Nine hundred three U.S. Connect participants (M_{age} = 40.31; 47.9% male, 51.00% female, .6% non-binary, 70.6% White, 11.8% Black or African American, 7.1% Asian, 3, 8, and 3 participants chose not to disclose their age, gender, and race, respectively) who completed this study were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (gift request: cash, control charity,

"portion to" charity). We asked participants to imagine that a close friend was having a baby, and that they had been invited to a co-ed baby shower for the parents-to-be. Participants in the cash condition read that the couple already had a lot of the "basics" and would be moving relatively soon, so they created a cash registry for those who wanted to give something. Participants in both charity conditions read the same information as the cash condition, but were further told that the couple announced that they would give either 100% (control charity condition) or a portion ("portion to" charity condition) of the cash they received to the United Way's early childhood development and education initiatives, a cause they care a lot about (see Web Appendix F for stimuli). The exact amount contributed to United Way in the "portion to" charity condition was intentionally left ambiguous, to offer flexibility to gift recipients to donate as much of the contributions as they would like. We expected this language to help increase the perceived direct benefit of the request, making it more prototypical.

After reading the scenario, participants entered the amount (up to $200) they would contribute (open-ended response). They then rated the same direct benefit (α = .97) and prototypicality (α = .92) measures as in study 3, with these scales presented in random order. Finally, as an exploratory measure, participants in the portion condition estimated the percentage they believed the couple would donate to the United Way and completed demographic questions.

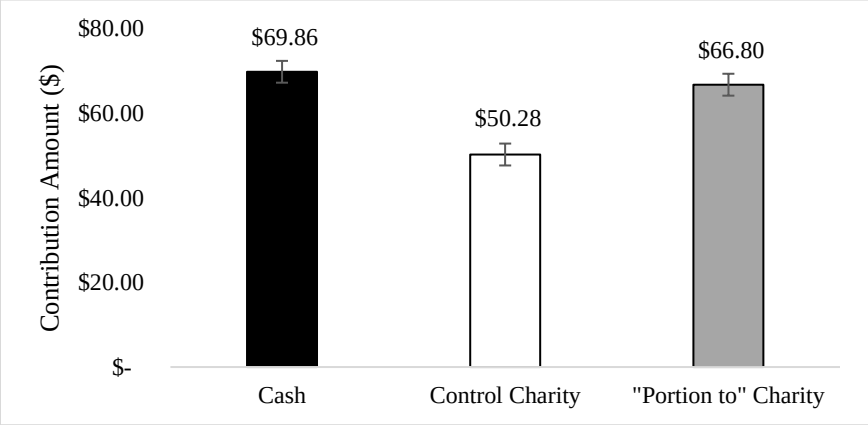
Results

Direct benefit manipulation check. A one-way ANOVA showed an effect of request type on the extent to which the gift offered a direct benefit to the couple ($F(2, 900) = 453.9$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .50$). Participants reported that the cash request ($M = 6.01$, SD = 1.00) offered a greater

direct benefit to the couple compared to the control charity request (M = 2.55, SD = 1.49; F(1, 900) = 898.97, p < .001, η_p^2 = .50). However, this effect was attenuated when comparing the cash request to the "portion to" charity request condition (M = 4.58, SD = 1.68); while the direct benefit of the "portion to" condition did differ from the cash condition (F(1, 900) = 153.03, p < .001, η_p^2 = .15), it was still perceived as offering a significantly greater direct benefit than the control charity condition (F(1, 900) = 308.80, p < .001, η_p^2 = .26). These results support the effectiveness of our manipulation intended to enhance the charitable gift request's direct benefit.

Contribution amount. The same analysis revealed an effect of request type on contribution amount (F(2, 900) = 16.60, p < .001, η_p^2 = .04). Participants reported they would contribute more to the cash request (M = $69.86, SD = $44.80) compared to the control charity request, where 100% of the contribution would be given to the United Way (M = $50.28, SD = $42.18; F(1, 900) = 28.71, p < .001, η_p^2 = .03), replicating our prior studies. However, this effect was attenuated when comparing the cash request to the "portion to" charity request condition (M = $66.80, SD = $47.47). This condition did not significantly differ from the cash condition (F(1, 900) = .70, p = .403). Moreover, participants in the "portion to" condition contributed significantly more than those in the control charity condition (F(1, 900) = 20.37, p < .001, η_p^2 = .02). See Figure 3.

FIGURE 3: STUDY 4 CONTRIBUTION AMOUNT BY REQUEST



Note: Bars represent the mean amount contributed to the respective gift request. Error bars represent standard errors. The difference in generosity between cash and charitable gifts is attenuated in the "portion to" condition.

We found a similar pattern of results for prototypicality. A one-way ANOVA revealed an effect of request type on the extent to which the gift was perceived as prototypical ($F(2, 900) = 76.62$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$). Participants reported that the cash request ($M = 5.14$, SD = 1.22) was more prototypical than the control charity request ($M = 3.67$, SD = 1.64; $F(1, 900) = 151.42$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$). This effect was also attenuated when comparing the cash request to the "portion to" charity request condition ($M = 4.55$, SD = 1.51); while the portion was still viewed as less prototypical than the cash condition ($F(1, 900) = 24.71$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$), it was perceived as more prototypical than the control charity condition ($F(1, 900) = 53.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$). It is also worth noting that the mean prototypicality for the "portion to" condition was significantly greater than the scale midpoint of 4 ($t(299) = 6.25$, $p < .001$), indicating that it was seen as relatively prototypical.

Mediation. To assess whether the gift's prototypicality drove the relationship between gift request and contribution amount, we conducted a multi-categorical mediation analysis, where request type was entered as the independent variable, prototypicality as the mediator, and

contribution amount as the dependent variable (Model 4, Hayes 2017). We used dummy coding, with cash as the reference condition. As predicted, when comparing the cash request to the control charity condition, the gift's prototypicality mediated the relationship between the request and contribution amount ($ab_{\text{indirect effect}}$ = -12.67, 95% CI [-16.30, -9.40]). When comparing the cash request to the "portion to" charity condition, request type similarly predicted generosity through prototypicality, albeit with a smaller effect (*ab* = -5.12, 95% CI [-7.43, -3.05]).

Discussion

Study 4 provides additional support for the role of a gift's prototypicality in driving generosity, while also examining an easily implementable intervention for those requesting charitable gifts. Of note, while the "portion to" charity condition was still perceived as offering less of a direct benefit and being less prototypical than the cash request, our norms account does not rely on a charitable gift being seen as equivalently prototypical. The request simply needs to be prototypical enough to make the norms associated with gift giving more salient, relative to charitable giving, and thus more likely to be followed. The full attenuation between the cash and "portion to" charity conditions on contribution amount supports the notion that participants adhered to the gift (vs. charitable) giving norms. This result suggests that allocating a portion of the gift to the couple made the gift sufficiently prototypical to activate gift-giving norms.

Based on the results of this study, if participants in the "portion to" condition contributed more than 75% of contributions to their fund, they would have a similar or greater impact on the charitable organization than they might if they instead stated that 100% of contributions would be given to charity. Of course, those requesting charitable gifts need to consider the potential repercussions of stating that an ambiguous amount will be given to charity. In our final two

studies, we test a potential intervention that does not require such ambiguity: explicitly highlighting how the charitable gift would directly benefit those requesting the gift.

STUDY 5

In study 5 (preregistered; https://aspredicted.org/y79s-4c4c.pdf), we test an intervention that offers both theoretical support for our process and practical advice for consumers developing their charitable gift requests. Specifically, study 5 examines how givers respond when a recipient requests gifts for a charity that offers a direct benefit to them because they will benefit from the charity's community development.

Method

Four hundred fifty-seven U.S. Prolific participants (M_{age} = 33.2; 48.5% male, ten and nine participants chose not to disclose their age and gender, respectively) were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (gift request: cash, control charity, direct benefit charity). One participant did not respond to any of the focal dependent variables and was excluded. The control charity represented a standard charitable gift request, while the direct benefit charity represented an option that would directly benefit the couple.

Participants were asked to imagine that a close friend was having a baby, and they had been invited to a co-ed baby shower for the parents-to-be. Those in the cash condition read that the couple requested cash gifts to assist with purchasing a play set for their backyard. Participants in the control charity condition read that in lieu of other gifts, the couple had requested charitable contributions for a non-profit that builds parks with playgrounds throughout

the country. The funds collected would be given to the organization, which had plans to build within the couple's state. Participants in the direct benefit charity condition received similar information about the organization but were told the organization had plans to build a park with a playground in the couple's neighborhood and that it would be open by the time their child was old enough to enjoy it (see Web Appendix F for stimuli). After reading the scenario, participants entered the amount (up to $150) they would like to contribute (open-ended response). Next, to ensure our manipulation of direct benefit was effective, participants responded to the direct benefit measures from study 2 (α = .92). Finally, participants responded to an attention check, exploratory, and demographic measures (See Web Appendix C).

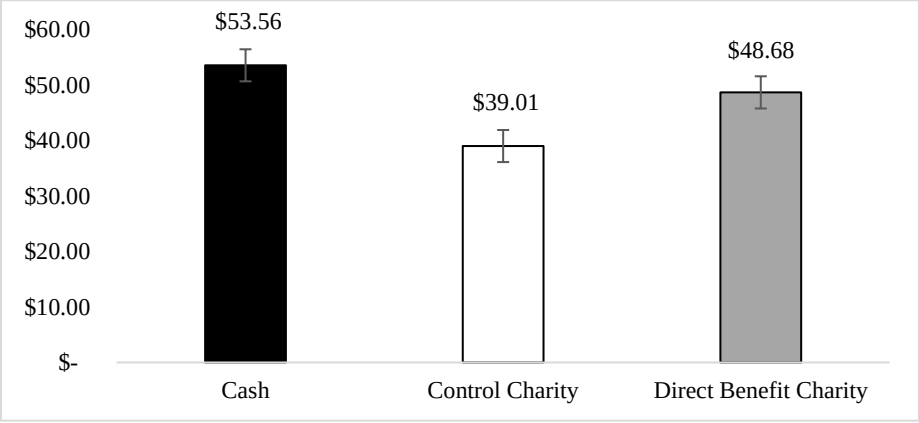
Results

Direct benefit manipulation check. A one-way ANOVA revealed an effect of request type on perceived direct benefit ($F(2, 453) = 80.46$, $p < .0001$, $\eta_p^2 = .26$)—participants rated the cash request ($M = 5.53$, SD = 1.24) as offering a greater direct benefit than the control charity request ($M = 3.54$, SD = 1.58; $F(1, 453) = 146.10$, $p < .0001$, $\eta_p^2 = .24$). Givers also viewed the cash request as offering a more direct benefit than the direct benefit charity request ($M = 5.09$, SD = 1.48; $F(1, 453) = 7.16$, $p = .008$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$), though to a lesser extent. Importantly, participants rated the direct benefit charity request as offering a more direct benefit than the control charity request ($F(1, 453) = 87.91$, $p < .0001$, $\eta_p^2 = .16$).

Contribution amount. A one-way ANOVA revealed an effect of request type on contribution amount ($F(2, 453) = 6.56$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$). Participants reported they would contribute more to the cash request ($M = $53.56, SD = $34.97) compared to the control charity

request, which did not directly benefit the couple (M = \$39.01, SD = \$33.07; $F(1, 453) = 12.68$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$), replicating the findings of our previous studies. However, this effect was attenuated when comparing the cash request to the direct benefit charity request condition, in which the couple explicitly benefited from the charity (M = \$48.68, SD = \$38.82). In this condition, the charitable contribution did not differ from the cash condition ($F(1, 453) = 1.42$, $p = .233$). Moreover, participants in the direct benefit charity request condition contributed more than those in the control charity condition ($F(1, 453) = 5.56$, $p = .019$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$). See Figure 4.

FIGURE 4: STUDY 5 CONTRIBUTION AMOUNT BY REQUEST



Note: Bars represent the mean amount contributed to the respective gift request. Error bars represent +/- the standard error. The generosity gap is reduced when a charitable gift request practically benefits the recipient.

Discussion

Study 5 offers additional support for our theoretical account, while also providing practical guidance for individuals hoping to leverage their special occasions to benefit others. Specifically, we found that when the charitable gift request offers a direct benefit to the recipient, it is perceived as more prototypical, and as a result, givers contribute the same amount as they would to a cash request. While this study examined how a public good (i.e., a park) can be

perceived as offering a direct benefit to the requestor, in our final study, we examine a second context to increase the generalizability of our findings.

STUDY 6

In our final study (preregistered; https://aspredicted.org/m2k5-vvmf.pdf), we test another context where the person requesting the charitable gift would directly benefit from the funds provided to the charitable organization. For broader generalizability, we shift contexts to test donations to a cancer treatment center, a medical issue that roughly 2 million Americans are diagnosed with each year (National Cancer Institute 2025). Additionally, in this study, we compare whether givers would respond more generously to a charitable gift request focusing on the gift's direct benefit to the recipient or to a request focusing on the importance of the cause to the recipient, using language commonly recommended in current charitable appeals.

Method

One thousand two hundred six U.S. Connect participants (M_{age} = 39.8; 46.4% male, 52.1% female, 1.2% non-binary; 70.4% White, 14.4% Black or African American, 5.7% Asian; 2, 4, and 2 participants chose not to disclose their age, gender, and race, respectively) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions (gift request: cash, control charity, direct benefit charity, mission importance charity). We asked participants to imagine they were attending the wedding of their close friends, Jake and Amy. Importantly, across all conditions, participants read that the bride, Amy, had recently recovered from cancer. They were further told that she was in complete remission and cancer-free but still had regular check-ups. Next, participants

imagined checking the registry information and were directed to a screen replicating the appearance of a registry landing page (see Web Appendix F).

On that screen, participants in the cash condition were asked to contribute to the couple's cash registry, which would go toward upcoming expenses. In the control charity condition, participants read that the couple created a charity registry where contributions would go to the couple's local cancer treatment center. In the direct benefit condition, participants read that contributions to the charity registry would directly benefit the couple by ensuring that the center always had the latest equipment and most up-to-date tests available, which were critical for Amy's continued care. Finally, in the mission importance condition, participants read that the cancer center's mission was to advance cancer discovery and care, save lives, and fight for a world without cancer. Additionally, participants in this condition were reminded that, given Amy's battle with cancer, the charity meant a lot to her. This language was based on appeals recommended by charitable organizations for occasion-based fundraisers (e.g., for copy from American Cancer Society, see https://raiseyourway.donordrive.com/campaign/test123456). All participants then viewed a second screen, asking how much they would like to contribute to the requested fund. Participants could enter up to $200 into an open-ended numerical response box. As a manipulation check, participants rated the gift's direct benefit to the couple using the measures from studies 3 and 4 (α = .95). Participants then responded to demographic measures.

Results

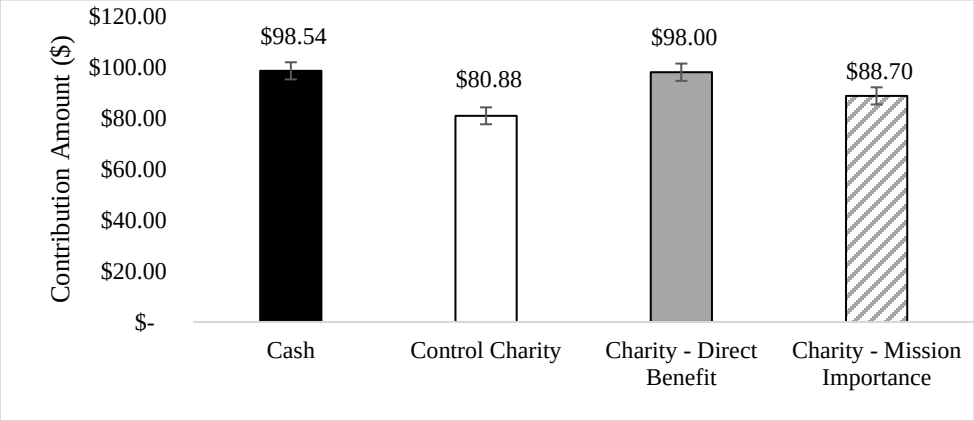
Direct benefit manipulation check. A one-way ANOVA revealed an effect of request type on perceptions of direct benefit ($F(3, 1200) = 202.52$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .34$). Participants perceived

significantly greater direct benefit after viewing the cash request (M = 6.15, SD = 1.04) compared to the control charity request, (M = 3.66, SD = 1.64; F(1, 1200) = 466.72, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .28$) and the mission importance condition (M = 3.72, SD = 1.54; F(1, 1200) = 437.57, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .27$). While still significant, this effect was attenuated when comparing the cash request to the direct benefit charity request condition (M = 4.73, SD = 1.39; F(1, 1200) = 148.74, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$). Moreover, participants in the direct benefit charity request condition perceived the request as having significantly greater direct benefit relative to the control charity condition (F(1, 1200) = 85.66, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$) and the mission importance condition (F(1, 1200) = 74.86, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$). There was no difference in perception of direct benefit between the control charity and mission importance conditions (F(1, 1200) = .30, $p = .583$).

Contribution amount. A one-way ANOVA revealed an effect of request type on contribution amount ($F(3, 1202) = 6.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$). Participants reported they would contribute more to the cash request (M = \$98.54, SD = \$59.55) compared to the control charity request (M = \$80.88, SD = \$53.43; $F(1, 1202) = 13.89$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$), replicating previous studies. However, this effect was attenuated when comparing the cash request to the direct benefit charity request condition (M = \$98.00, SD = \$59.21), which did not differ from the cash condition ($F(1, 1202) = .01$, $p = .910$). Moreover, participants in the direct benefit charity request condition contributed more than those in the control charity condition ($F(1, 1202) = 13.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$). Conversely, participants in the mission importance charity condition (M = \$88.70, SD = \$61.11) contributed less relative to the cash condition ($F(1, 1202) = 4.27$, $p = .039$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$), and marginally less relative to the direct benefit charity condition ($F(1, 1202) = 3.78$, $p = .052$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$). However, these participants did give marginally more than participants in

the control charity condition ($F(1, 1202) = 2.74$, $p = .098$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$). See Figure 5.

FIGURE 5: STUDY 6 CONTRIBUTION AMOUNT RESULTS



Note: Bars represent the mean amount contributed to the respective gift request. Error bars represent standard errors. The difference in generosity between cash and charitable gifts is fully attenuated only in the direct benefit condition.

Discussion

Study 6 again shows that a gift's direct benefit shapes whether givers rely on gift-giving or charitable-giving norms, as gifts offering a direct benefit to the recipient are more prototypical of a gift. Replicating study 5, we found that when a charitable gift offers a direct benefit to the recipient, givers are as generous toward such requests as they are toward a cash request. Importantly, in study 6, we also compared the effectiveness of highlighting a gift's direct benefit against language often recommended by charities on the importance of the cause and the personal meaningfulness of the gift. While such language marginally increased contribution amounts relative to the control charitable request, consistent with our norms account, focusing on the gift's direct benefit led to larger contributions.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The current research adds to the literature on prosocial behavior by examining the intersection of gift giving and charitable giving. We examined when gift versus charitable norms will be relied on by givers responding to charitable gift requests, and how individuals who wish to request charitable gifts can leverage gift-giving norms to increase givers' generosity. Specifically, without intervention, givers are more generous toward cash gift requests relative to charitable gift requests, an effect that is more pronounced among gifts for rite-of-passage occasions. Further, this research demonstrates that to increase adherence to gift-giving norms, a charitable gift request should be framed as offering a benefit to the individual(s) celebrating a special occasion, enhancing the perception that the gift is prototypical.

Our research makes several contributions. Theoretically, the current research contributes to the small but growing body of work examining the intersection of gift giving and charitable giving (e.g., Cavanaugh et al. 2015; Gershon and Cryder 2018; Wang et al. 2023). While prior work has focused on the semantic framing of a charitable donation as a gift (Gershon and Cryder 2018; Wang et al. 2023) or unsolicited charitable gifts (Cavanaugh et al. 2015), we instead examine requests for a donation intended as an actual gift for a loved one. We show that, despite being requested explicitly as a gift, givers do not perceive such requests as prototypical enough to activate their norms for gift-giving.

Further, this research adds to previous work examining the norms that surround rite-of-passage occasions. We build on research describing how rite-of-passage occasions represent significant life transitions and often require new possessions (Appau, Ozanne, and Klein 2020; Van Gennep 2022; Schouten 1991; Turner 2017) to explain why the generosity gap is

exacerbated for such occasions. Finally, we build on research examining when and why consumers engage in suboptimal gift giving (Baskin et al. 2014; Galak et al. 2016; Steffel and Le Boeuf 2014; Ward and Broniarczyk 2016)—in this case, being less generous when giving requested charitable gifts.

With respect to the charitable giving literature, scant marketing research has examined the efficacy of individual-organized fundraising on behalf of a charity, as opposed to campaigns driven directly by a charitable organization. We focus on a prominent category of individual-driven fundraisers—occasion-based fundraisers—and identify their unique challenges. While traditionally, one of the most effective strategies to increase charitable giving is to focus on the victim or beneficiary who a donation will positively impact (Jenni and Loewenstein 1997; Small and Loewenstein 2003), in the context of occasion-based fundraising, we find that it is instead crucial to communicate how a donation provides utility for the person hosting the fundraiser.

This research also provides important practical implications for consumers hoping to use their occasion to raise funds for a cause they care about. Specifically, we find that many of the occasions suggested for occasion-based fundraisers (e.g., weddings, baby showers) elicit the largest difference between cash and charitable gift requests. Givers are willing to spend more on cash gifts for these occasions, but this generosity does not inherently carry over to charitable gift requests. We identified two strategies that can easily be employed by consumers to encourage their loved ones to give as generously to a charitable gift request as they would to other gifts. First, consumers creating a charitable wedding registry could consider using "portion of" language, so that givers can more readily perceive the direct benefit of the gift. Second, consumers should consider, perhaps counterintuitively, focusing on the benefit the gift has to *themselves,* rather than the benefit to the charitable organization. We tested this strategy across

both a medical and a public good context, but there may be additional ways to similarly express how a charitable gift has a higher practical benefit for the recipient. For example, 79% of volunteers for a charitable organization also financially support the organization (Falvo 2018). These supporters could discuss how the donations would provide very direct aid in their personal volunteer work. This type of framing would help givers more easily construe a gift as having a more direct benefit to the recipient.

We also recognize that our research has limitations, though we believe these offer opportunities for future research. While we focused on monetary gifts, which are increasingly popular and offer the most parallel comparison (i.e., two monetary gift requests), many gifts for special occasions often come in the form of a boxed gift. We expect that our conceptual framework would also apply to any gifts given directly to the recipients (vs. to charity). An initial experiment we conducted supports this notion. Participants (N = 852) were asked to imagine attending a wedding that featured two registries—one where the gifts would go directly to the couple, and a second where gifts would go to a charitable organization. We manipulated whether the registries requested cash or household items (e.g., cookware for the home vs. for a homeless shelter), and participants indicated how much they would plan to spend on a gift. A 2 (gift type: cash, household item; between) x 2 (gift request: direct, charitable; within) mixed design study indicated a significant main effect of gift request ($p < .001$), but no gift type by gift request interaction ($p = .277$). In other words, givers were significantly more generous towards gifts given directly to the recipient compared to charitable gifts, regardless of whether a household item or cash gift was requested (the differences between cash and charitable requests for both gift types were $p < .001$).

Still, despite these initial results, it is possible that the relationship between boxed, cash, and charitable gift requests may be more nuanced and deserving of further attention. For example, although prior research posits that cash is the most practical gift (Camerer 1988), givers may not encode it as offering a greater direct benefit than other gifts, which could impact givers' decision-making. Additionally, there may be gifts that offer a direct benefit, but violate other important gift attributes that would impact the norms that givers rely on (e.g., a gaming console for a baby shower registry). Further, the perceptual differences between such gifts should be considered. From a charitable giving perspective, donations of goods (vs. cash) lead to higher status and greater reputational benefits, particularly for donors who are low in warmth (Gershon and Cryder 2018). Examining these relationships offers a fruitful path for future work.

In conclusion, although givers are less generous when presented with a charitable gift request compared to cash gift requests, there are norms-based interventions that can increase the effectiveness of charitable gift requests. We hope our findings offer insights into how norms can be leveraged and applied to this relatively new phenomenon, while also offering guidance to individuals who want to use their special occasions as an opportunity to support causes they care about. In deciding to request charitable gifts, gift registrants and recipients might do well to bear in mind that it is both the thought and the benefit that count.

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