

# Avengers assemble: Avenger philanthropy as the new gift opportunity for nonprofit organizations

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## Abstract

This conceptual paper extends theories of gift giving behavior through identifying and defining the emerging phenomenon of Avenger Philanthropy. This manifests when people make individual monetary donations to nonprofit organizations (NPOs) to achieve a collective sense of moral grandstanding, usually underpinned by humor. For the first time, the paper makes sense of this phenomenon theoretically through drawing on a wide range of literature including gift giving, game theory and consumer psychology, and as a result, identifies seven distinctive hallmarks. The paper maps the importance of public expression of personal values, amplified through social media, together with risks for the NPO that benefits from the donations. Emotion underpins the giving behavior, both moral outrage and humor. This investigation contributes to the gift giving literature by identifying, mapping and anchoring current actions that potentially have far reaching consequences for future research and for nonprofit practice.

## KEYWORDS

charity, consumer psychology, gift giving, humor, nonprofit organization, philanthropy, prosocial behavior, social practice

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Why people give to nonprofit organizations (NPOs) has been identified as a gift giving behavior that is poorly understood (Chapman et al., 2020). Barman (2017) argues that while there has been significant discussion of the micro-level characteristics and roles of actors, and meso-level understanding of changing social relationships, what is missing and needs further development is the macro-level understanding of “*broader societal configurations that encourage or constrain charitable giving*” (Barman, 2017, pp. 280). In particular, a focus of gift giving research has been the evaluation of giver and recipient reactions to a gift (Givi & Mu, 2023; Ruth et al., 2004), as well as the characteristics that make people generous (Chapman

et al., 2020). This conceptual paper identifies an emerging phenomenon of philanthropic giving where the gift to the NPO is a by-product, an unsolicited donation made in reaction to something entirely out of the NPO's control.

Philanthropy has been identified as a contested social practice (Von Schnurbein et al., 2021). Therefore, this paper draws on social practice theory to move beyond studying individuals and their background towards a deeper understanding of context and the social practice they are engaging in (Dreier, 2009; Holland & Lave, 2009). It traces pathways of participation across varied contexts to better understand “*the motivation or values behind the act of giving than with the gift itself*” (Herzog et al., 2020, p. 464). It follows the advice of Givi et al. (2023, p. 541) that “*the multifaceted*

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nature of gift-giving and the importance of context are research opportunities at the intersection of gift-giving and contemporary issues.”

The paper makes two important contributions. First, it identifies a disconnect between observation of a gifting phenomenon within practice and the conceptualization of gift giving within theory. Specifically, it identifies the behavior of direct philanthropic gift giving to a NPO (the beneficiary) by a protagonist as a mechanism of response to the perceived unjust values, attitudes, or actions of a third party (the antagonist). In doing so it adopts the advice of van Heerde et al. (2021) in looking to “in real life” phenomenon (IRL), observed through the interaction of marketing actors, systems, and processes and call for academic exploration to be anchored in ecological value, defined as “the degree to which research reflects and is relevant to marketing as it exists and evolves among marketing stakeholders and marketing ecosystems” (van Heerde et al., 2021, p. 1). Second, in defining the new phenomenon of Avenger Philanthropy and its seven distinctive hallmarks, the paper presents a rich springboard for future research, particularly anchored in consumer psychology. The paper begins by gathering emerging evidence of related practice, IRL and the arts, and early attempts by a range of commentators to define similar incidents of giving behavior motivated by “paying someone back.” It then draws on theories of direct and indirect reciprocity to better understand the emerging phenomenon of Avenger Philanthropy. It concludes with implications for consumer psychology theory and nonprofit practice.

## 2 | OBSERVATION OF PRACTICE

In describing what they observe in practice, commentators have employed a range of terminology. In an article for the Chronicle of Philanthropy website, Witkowski (2021) describes Spite Philanthropy as behavior to reject someone's legacy, and argues it is distinct from Rage Philanthropy which he sees as a politics through another means—such as donating to civil rights groups, immigration, or environmental causes; all of which he believed were under threat by policy changes. For example, supporting Planned Parenthood<sup>1</sup> in response to a specific threat felt by people from the abortion policies of President Trump has been defined as Rage Philanthropy. Using different terminology for the same behavior, Dubofsky, in a 2014 article for the Billfold website, described Revenge Giving as donating money to a cause you know a person would hate, and doing it in their name, effectively using the gift as a “mechanism of action” (Dubofsky, 2014). Beyond the family context, the blogger Swistle talks about her “very pleasing and successful concept of Spite Charity”: a way of redressing the balance towards causes and issues the person cares about when someone annoys them/is negative about the issue. She identifies the emotional benefit in “feeling ... you are funding the armies of goodness and righteousness” (Swistle, 2012). However,

<sup>1</sup>Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Inc is a nonprofit organization that “delivers vital reproductive health care, sex education, and information to millions of people worldwide.” It is also well known for providing abortion services.

Witkowski (2021) would argue this is Rage Philanthropy. Within theory, the constructs of rage, revenge, and spite hold distinctive meaning, but their popular use illustrates how these boundaries get blurred.

The idea of charity gift giving as a weapon resonates with the Gawker example (Sorkin, 2016), in which PayPal billionaire Peter Thiel funded multiple lawsuits, including the high profile Hulk Hogan case, against the gossip website Gawker arguing it was “one of my greater philanthropic things that I've done”. Labeling this observation of practice is interesting. On one hand, commentators have identified it as personal revenge due to Gawker outing Thiel as gay in 2007. However, Thiel has denied this, arguing “I can defend myself. Most of the people they [Gawker] attack are not people in my category. They usually attack less prominent, far less wealthy people that simply can't defend themselves ... It's less about revenge and more about specific deterrence” (Sorkin, 2016). He argues his behavior is philanthropic as it is in the public interest.

An indicator of an emerging phenomenon is representation through the arts. In 2021, in the popular TV series Succession, a wealthy grandfather leaves his entire fortune to environmental charity Greenpeace to spite his grandson (Wall, 2021). As an illustration of the cycle of reality informing the arts informing reality, after the screening over 20,000 people subsequently searched the Greenpeace website for information on how to make a legacy bequest. Despite being beyond their control, the charity then built on the social aspect of charitable giving to “payback” a third party through their own social media campaign and press statements.

This resonates with Witkowski's description of Spite Philanthropy not being in response to a specific threat but fueled by a “scornful approach,” particularly to reject someone's legacy after they have passed (Witkowski, 2021). The specific IRL example he employs as illustration was Planned Parenthood being the ultimate beneficiary of a \$100 donation by Tommy Marcus in 2021 following the death of anti-abortionist Rush Limbaugh. Limbaugh was infamous for his use of mockery in his criticism of birth control and feminism. Marcus turned his Instagram post sharing the ‘hilarious’ news of his donation into a fundraising campaign in Limbaugh's name: raising over \$1.2 million from 44,000 donors who supported his perspective (Craver, 2021). This use of humor, or at least irony, as well as the galvanizing public nature of the action, is what takes this behavior beyond an act of spite or rage, over and above the importance of the issue to both sides of the debate. Likewise, when a campaign for Planned Parenthood emerged in protest at Vice-President Mike Pence's opposition to abortion (Agerholm, 2016), 160,000 people donated, of which 20,000 specifically named Evangelical Christian Pence as the donor (Malo, 2016), so he would receive official thanks from the charity. As one supporter commented “You should donate no matter what but omg this is genius” (Agerholm, 2016). The presence of humor with the act of giving combines perceived social justice with positive emotional reward for the donor, amplified through collective response via social media.

Within the UK context, in 2021 British politician and broadcaster Nigel Farage<sup>2</sup> criticized the charity RNLI,<sup>3</sup> describing it as a “taxi service for illegal immigration” for rescuing people attempting to cross the channel from France to England (Cooney, 2021). In response, Simon Harris campaigned to fund a new lifeboat, to be called the “Flying Farage.” Over 8200 people donated, raising £119,000 in a month. This event had three interesting characteristics. It was external to, and out of the control of, the NPO: effectively a bonus fundraiser for the charity developed by someone outside the organization. Second, it was underpinned by emotion. In this case, Harris was motivated through humor rather than rage, wanting to get back at Farage and his well-known opinions on race, through a “piss-take” (Harris, 2021) campaign. It was purposefully ironic, with the focal object, a lifeboat that could save more migrant lives, the mechanism through which the payback is achieved. Finally, through launching a crowdfunding campaign, rather than making a quiet private gift, it was deliberately a social phenomenon enabled through the speed and reach of digital media channels.

More recently, British Home Secretary Suella Braverman raised the issue of homeless people living in tents, arguing “we cannot allow our streets to be taken over by rows of tents occupied by people, many of them from abroad, living on the streets as a lifestyle choice” (Otte, 2023). The public outcry that followed included comedian Joe Lycett posting a humorous picture of what he considered a lifestyle choice, a wooden potpourri bowl, to raise money for homeless charity Crisis. The target of £50,000 was reached in 3 days and generated significant publicity (Levison, 2023).

These observations of similar practice IRL and in the arts highlight an emerging chasm between the practice of philanthropic giving in the modern age and our current theoretical understanding (Chapman et al., 2020; von Schnurbein et al., 2021). What unites these examples is that the direct gift giving to the NPO beneficiary is motivated as a direct emotional response to the attitudes and actions of the antagonist, the perceived villain of the story, but the behavioral mechanism for achieving that is indirect. However, the examples differ in characteristics such as individual gift/collective action, living antagonist/damaging a legacy, and the presence/absence of humor or irony (Table 1).

The purpose of this paper is to conceptualize the observed emerging phenomenon through anchoring it in theory. Academic exploration of prosocial giving has been seen through a plethora of academic perspectives including evolutionary biology, economics, anthropology, and especially consumer psychology. This conceptualization draws upon the direct/indirect and reciprocal/nonreciprocal dimensions of gift theory but also draws on the role of social networks and presence of humor in stimulating collective action.

<sup>2</sup>Former leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and European Member of Parliament.

<sup>3</sup>RNLI is the brand name of the Royal National Lifeboat Institute: a charity that saves lives at sea.

**TABLE 1** Mapping observations of practice.

Related practice	Harris crowdfunding campaign against Nigel Farage (UK)	Campaign against Limbaugh following death (USA)	Supporting anti-abortion NPOs to balance Trump administration policies (USA)	Thiel funding lawsuits against Gawker (USA)	Succession storyline (USA)	Lycett crowdfunding campaign against Suella Braverman (UK)
In Real Life (IRL) or in the arts?	IRL	IRL	IRL	IRL	Arts	IRL
Individual gift or fundraising campaign?	Campaign	Campaign	Campaign	Individual	Individual	Campaign
Donor living?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No: Legacy	Yes
Indirect recipient living?	Yes: individual (no connection)	No: revenge on legacy	Yes: Vice President Pence + Government	Yes: organization	Yes: known individuals	Yes
Recipient charity named?	Yes: RNLI	Yes: Planned Parenthood	Yes: Planned Parenthood	No: Funding legal fees	Yes: Greenpeace	Yes: Crisis UK
Presence of humor?	Yes: Lead emotion	Yes: Lead emotion	Yes: Lead emotion	No	Yes: Ironic	Yes: Lead emotion

## 3 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 3.1 | Reciprocal direct relationships

Consumer psychology literature on gift giving has focused on the role of emotions (Ruth et al., 2004), gift giving motivations (Belk & Coon, 1993), the gift giving process (Sherry, Jr., 1983), gift exchange roles (Otnes et al., 1993), and the impact of gifts on interpersonal relationships (Ruth et al., 1999). Gift theory has been anchored in the broader context of helping behavior (Givi et al., 2023), a common form of prosocial behavior (Givi & Galak, 2020).

Helping behavior is traditionally conceptualized as a dyadic, direct relationship between the donor and the recipient. Bshary and Bergmüller (2008) identify four helping behaviors based on Lehmann and Keller (2006) definition of helping as behavior that increases the direct fitness of another individual. They map the theoretical evolution of helping behavior, drawing on social evolution theory, ecological approaches, game theoretics, and social science. Across these four disciplines they map differences with respect to the mechanisms and conditions within helping behavior (Bshary & Bergmüller, 2008). In particular, they identify social behaviors that influence the fitness of the donor and the recipient, the social interaction between the two and subsequent impact on their fitness and their social behaviors with respect to any potential co-operation between the two. The four helping behaviors that emerge reflect differences between whether they help or harm (+/-) the donor and/or the recipient, and are selfishness, co-operation, altruism, and spite.

There is an argument that making a philanthropic gift to “pay someone back” can be labeled as spite, harming the donor through financial outlay but also harming the indirect recipient (the antagonist against whom the gift behavior is motivated) through a public campaign that challenges their values and beliefs, rather than the direct beneficiary (the NPO). However, this overlooks the potential benefit for the protagonist donor: that is the positive emotion gained through enacting their personal values or resonating with their self-perception as a person who stands up for what they believe in, consistent with self-identity theory (Hogg et al., 1995). Therefore, in contrast to theoretical definitions of spite, an observed distinctive hallmark (DHx) of the phenomenon is the net positive valence for the donor despite the financial outlay.

DH1: There is a net positive value to the protagonist through the gift giving behavior as the emotional benefits gained outweigh the negative impact on fitness through cost spent.

Additionally, in the nonprofit context, humor has been found to positively predict compassionate altruism (Dargan & Schermer, 2022), and Slattery et al. (2021) found that online prosocial behavior worked most effectively when strength of argument (head) was combined with affect (heart) components: likewise with the negative end of the emotional spectrum; indignation through to outrage.

DH2: The gift giving behavior harnesses emotion, both positive (humor) and negative (outrage) at someone else's expense.

In his extensive study of the spite construct, McCarthy-Jones (2021) focuses on these dyadic relationships: that is the binary interaction between donor and recipient, but extends theory to consider both direct or indirect dyadic interaction. This is consistent with game theoretics and the significant body of literature developing ultimatum game scenarios (Henrich et al., 2001; Thaler, 1988). The payoff from the interaction depends on the behavior of the donor but also the behavior of the other player (recipient). Interestingly, co-operative behavior can exist even without direct co-operative interaction between the two (Belk, 2010; Bergmüller et al., 2007; Dugatkin, 1997). Patterns of reciprocity emerge where “we owe others certain things because of what they have previously done for us” (Gouldner, 1960, p. 171). However, with this phenomenon, the interaction between protagonist donor and direct recipient, that is the gift of money to the NPO, is not the driver of the helping behavior. The action is motivated by the donor in response to the *indirect* antagonist in whose name the donation is made or against whose values or beliefs the donation will support. Therefore, a third hallmark of the phenomenon can be expressed:

DH3: The gift giving behavior is motivated as a response to an indirect antagonist rather than the direct NPO beneficiary to whom the gift is given.

Scholars have extended the direct and indirect dyadic constructs to direct triadic relationships in two distinct ways. First, within the charitable giving context Chapman et al. (2022) present Charitable Triad Theory as the relationship between donors, beneficiaries and fundraisers. They argue it is the interactive relationships between this triad of actors that determines charitable choices, in particular highlighting the role of the beneficiary and the sometimes hidden role of the fundraiser in influencing the decision. Second, more broadly within gift theory, the direct triadic relationship between donor, recipient and the gift itself has been of research interest (Davies et al., 2010; Sherry, Jr., 1983), including the moderating role of the absolute value of the gift, the desirability of the gift to the donor, and the value of the gift in relation to the wealth of the recipient. However, essentially both of these theoretical extensions remain direct exchange-based relationships.

Within the observations of practice, it could be argued there is a triad of actors: the protagonist making the gift, the beneficiary NPO, and the antagonist whose views and actions motivated the response from the protagonist. However, this is not a direct relationship. The protagonist (donor) does not require or seek the response of the indirect target (Belk, 2010; Sargeant, 1999): it is a one-way transaction with respect to the antagonist. It is questionable whether the villain in the piece is actually harmed by the publicity. There is no evidence that such an online campaign would change their behavior or attitude (Ruth et al., 2004). Therefore, this cannot be labeled as revenge which would require directly harming or hurting someone.

Nor is there a direct relationship between the antagonist and the beneficiary (NPO). Quite the opposite: the cause that is supported by the protagonist's campaign is counter to the values and beliefs of the antagonist. In a few observed situations, the antagonist, or target, might make a public statement about the campaign in their name, as Nigel Farage did when asked by journalists, but this is not a direct response to the donor and, therefore, does not constitute a social or exchange-based relationship.

DH4: There is no direct relationship between the protagonist and the antagonist: that is, the gift is made without expectation of a response.

### 3.2 | Nonreciprocal direct relationships

Traditional dyadic models of giving behavior have also evolved to reflect unidirectional gift-based relationships between two actors, essentially nonreciprocal giving behavior, echoed in the work of Derrida (1992) which argues that "genuine" gifts can only be based on nonreciprocal giving. For example, agapic giving describes the situation where no reciprocity is expected or desired from the recipient due to the loving nature of their relationship, such as between dating couples (Belk & Coon, 1993) or within families (Belk, 1976). An agapic gift has been described as "the perfect gift" (Belk, 1996), as it has the needs and desires of the recipient at its core, and is motivated by emotional expression.

Within the charitable giving context, Derrida (1992) and others see "*the non-reciprocity condition as the acid test of philanthropic activity*" (Godfrey, 2005, p. 778). It can be argued this nonreciprocal act is one of altruism, the act of doing something for others without anticipating any reward in return. Interestingly, altruistic behavior has been identified in e-word of mouth contexts: sharing social media content to help other or inform others without expectation of behavior in return (Whiting et al., 2019). It is the value contributed to the community that motivates them. However, this is in contrast to the many scholars of Maussian theory who argue gift giving is always underpinned an obligation to give, receive, and reciprocate (Panoff, 1970; Viana, 2020), and Blau who argues gift giving is anchored in social exchange based on reciprocity, where people are motivated to give "*by the returns they are expected to bring and typically do in fact bring from others*" (Blau, 1964, p. 91). The social exchange model assumes the primary motivation for the gift is as an expression of social connections (Klein et al., 2015). Likewise, André et al. (2017) in their research on the European crowdfunding platform Ulule, which includes fundraising for both for-profit and nonprofit initiatives, also draw on Maussian theory to argue the crowdfunding relationship does rely on reciprocal giving.

Specifically, with this observed phenomenon, the initial act of donation and subsequent publicizing of the rationale within their personal social network is more commonly a one-off, rather than being motivated by an expectation of ongoing reciprocity.

### 3.3 | Reciprocal indirect relationships

An alternative theoretical frame for understanding the observed phenomenon is one of indirect reciprocity (Alexander, 1987), popular in the evolutionary biology theory, where large scale co-operation in society is seen as resulting from a series of networks where one person helps another who helps another. The social norm of helping behavior creates a moral frame through which, eventually, the first donor expects indirect reciprocity, that is to be "paid back" by someone else within the community (Boyd & Richerson, 1989). In addition, particularly in the charitable giving context, there is motivation to "pay forward," either donating to causes whose services the donor or their family might realistically need in the future (Small & Cryder, 2016), a belief underpinned by faith that reward will come in the afterlife (Jamal et al., 2019; Willard et al., 2020), to encourage others to donate (Caviola & Greene, 2023), or motivation from a philosophical mantra that an act of kindness does not go unrepaired (Iwamoto et al., 2020).

Hollenbeck et al. (2006) identified a particular paradigm of gift giving communities, for example, communal networks amongst friends, family members, neighbors, or employees. Individual actors support each other through symbolic gestures, often anchored in common characteristics such as shared rituals, values, and responsibilities. A specific form of community-based giving is giving circles, originating in the United States (Eikenberry, 2006) but now found internationally (Eikenberry & Breeze, 2018). Beyond simply a fundraising mechanism, these communities of givers build social capital bonds through sharing information on issues, providing social opportunities and encouraging voluntary action. They remain independent from any particular charity. Although the funding flows are one way, the benefits received represent indirect reciprocity.

Within the indirect reciprocity literature (Wedekind & Milinski, 2000), and informed by game theory (Suzuki & Akiyama, 2007), is the idea that people act in a co-operative way, that is exhibiting prosocial behavior, to "image-score," either to enhance how they are viewed by the group or as an investment in personal reputation. Indirect reciprocity has also been identified within online communities where the "*feelings of mutual identification and unwritten social norms of (specific and generalized) reciprocity build social capital relations among platform members, leading them to show support to other members*" (Cordova et al., 2015, p. 76). This resonates with the study of psychological types behind charitable donation behavior by Le et al. (2021). The authors identify that promotion-focused donors look for opportunities for positive self-enhancement (Baumeister, 2010; Higgins et al., 1997) and self-verification (Leary, 2007) but in other donation contexts "*social information about the behavior of other people typically works as social proof of behavioral norms, which in turn guides decisions and behavior*" (Le et al., 2021, p. 120). Therefore, these two dimensions of the relationship between personal values and self-identity co-exist within gift giving literature. The act of giving has been identified as being intertwined with the beliefs and values regarding a person's self-image (Weisfeld-Spolter et al., 2015). However, a secondary effect arises from the collective



response to the public sharing by the protagonist of their personal values. This in turn strengthens the self and social identity of the protagonist (Mitchell & Clark, 2019; Mitchell, 2021), through a perception of social proof.

DH5: Collective support for the gift increases the emotional and cognitive benefits received by the protagonist (donor) in terms of self and social identity.

### 3.4 | Nonreciprocal indirect relationships

In their metareview of philanthropic activity, Bekkers and Wiepking (2011) identified eight core mechanisms of giving behavior. This observed phenomenon resonates with three of these in particular—where behavior is anchored in personal values, the psychological benefit of feeling good to express a point of view, and where the act of giving is seen socially as a positive thing to do. It is this latter characteristic, in particular, that makes the observed phenomenon distinct, where individual protagonists publicly give, and then publicize that gift through social media to galvanize others to give to avenge their sense of social injustice. Their behavior has a positive effect on their identity as an advocate for a cause within their wider social network, again consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel et al., 1971). Body and Breeze (2021) identify the importance of the social construction of sympathy and draw on Fiske et al.'s (2002) four quadrants of moral evaluation, which identifies one behavioral pattern as a social reference group, full of 'people like us'.

This resonates with recent literature on direct and indirect revenge taken by customers against an organization postcomplaint (Bechwati & Morrin, 2003; Grégoire et al., 2018). It is empirically distinct from studies of consumer subversion (Wilson et al., 2022) in which individuals focus on inhibiting organizational marketing capability, ranging from ad blocking to deliberate sabotage. With postcomplaint behavior, when initial attempts to resolve an issue fail, the customer seeks revenge as the only option to restore social justice. Grégoire et al. (2018) argue it is this violation of the justice norm which leads customers to engage in revenge behaviors. "Direct avengers" are motivated to see personal justice restored in the form of compensation (direct, reciprocal). "Indirect avengers" are motivated to damage the organization over time through galvanizing collective outrage (indirect, nonreciprocal). However, again, avenge and revenge have distinct meaning in language, they are not synonyms. Studies highlight difference in the underpinning motivation for posting about organizations on social media (Whiting et al., 2019), including an altruistic desire for others not to suffer the same fate as they had with a specific organization: they feel they are adding value to their community through their online contributions. Given the rapid development in the speed, reach, and low entry cost of social media engagement, online customer revenge campaigns post a real risk of value co-destruction for organizations (Bechwati & Morrin, 2003; Obeidat et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2018).

However, this postcomplaint behavior does harm or hurt the focal organization through negative word of mouth and reputation damage. Therefore, it can be classified as revenge unlike the observed phenomenon of giving to a NPO in response to the attitudes or behaviors of a third party. Rather than against organizations, this behavior is motivated against individuals, particularly the high profile elite such as politicians or sports personalities. Despite not soliciting a response from the antagonist (indirect recipient), the response that the donor is expecting is from their social network through social media (Hale, 2007). So, it can be argued that one of the underpinning motivations of the phenomenon is the fact that it is public, that the action of the donor is broadcast through social media within their social network (Martínez-López et al., 2020). This type of philanthropy is therefore the public expression of personal values, in contrast to traditional definitions of philanthropy as public expression of private values.

DH6: The personal values and beliefs that motivate the giving behavior are consciously made public by sharing through online social networks.

Supportive collective behaviors include: also making a donation thus adding to the impact, sharing the campaign to their personal social network thus widening the reach, and commenting positively thus becoming a campaign advocate. These supportive behaviors come from people who make a connection between their personal values/self-identity and the publicly shared values of the campaign in a way that "is more likely to influence action and meaning-making" (Oyserman & Schwarz, 2017, p. 535). Through aligning themselves to a public campaign, a collective identity, they in turn benefit individually through enhanced well-being and a sense of belonging to a campaign community with shared values, albeit for one moment in time (Oyserman, 2009).

These supportive behaviors then lead to cognitive and emotional benefits for the protagonist through three collective responses: the Echo Effect derived from positive endorsement by network of the specific action taken, the Impact Effect that increases the total amount donated to the charity through donations by others, and the Amplification Effect which spreads awareness of the protagonist's gift giving behavior beyond their personal network.

DH7: Supportive behaviors from within the donor's social network increase the impact of the donation behavior.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

The detailed anchoring in gift giving theory, including direct and indirect, reciprocal and nonreciprocal, in relation to emerging social practice has revealed three inter-related elements of the new construct of Avenger Philanthropy. The first is the emotional catalyst that stimulates a response. The second is the emotional response behavior itself. The third is the mechanism of response, the means through which to galvanize collective action, particularly online.

## 4.1 | Emotional catalyst

The trigger for the philanthropic gift to a specific NPO beneficiary is an emotional reaction of the protagonist (donor), in response to the well-publicized behavior or attitude of a well-known third party which challenges what they believe in and therefore, the very identity of who they are. That is, the protagonist sees themselves as the embodiment of a certain set of personal values (Hitlin, 2003): values that are now perceived to be under threat. The sense of moral outrage is underpinned by personal empathy with the cause, particularly on polarizing topics such as birth control, gender rights, or immigration, and a keenly felt sense of injustice. Empathy acts as the enabler that shifts a person from a bystander into becoming an “upstander” (Nardini et al., 2021), that is a person moved to give a prosocial response (Escalas & Stern, 2003; Krishna, 2011). Within consumer psychology, moral outrage has been found to be an emotion that “functions to correct wrongdoing and uphold moral standards” (Tausch et al., 2011, p. 131). In this way, “the macro starts with the micro” (Heath, 2020, p. 236): that is the subsequent collective response begins with the emotional response of an individual.

## 4.2 | Emotional-behavioral response

A range of language is deployed to describe the broad emotional-behavioral response to “make someone pay.” To correctly label the observed phenomenon, related terminology has been explored to better understand the different levels of intensity and role of actors, as summarized in Table 2.

In this case, the emotional-behavioral response has been shown in practice to be a way of redressing the balance, a form of social justice to avenge attitudes or behaviors that are perceived to be out

of line with the personal values of protagonist. It goes beyond the specific meaning of “restorative justice” to a more general desire to see attitudes and behaviors “called out.” This resonates with the psychological construct of attitude certainty, as explained by Rucker et al. (2014, p. 121), “Attitudes held with certainty tend to be resistant, persistent, and influential on people’s thoughts and behavior.” If a person is certain about their attitudes towards an issue, the more likely they are to act on that emotion (Cheatham & Tormala, 2015), for example sharing their ideas online and encourage others to act. As Segev et al. (2012) argue, it is the behavior of making the gift says something about that individual, not simply the initial emotion felt. Consumer psychology literature offers insight into what spurs people into action, including Aaker and Akutsu (2009) who argue that this may not be because the that person thinks of themselves as a “giver” but it is the context of the issue that has spurred them into action: that is, their giving identity with respect this particular catalyst is situationally cued (Aaker & Akutsu, 2009).

## 4.3 | Mechanism for collective response

The emotional-behavior by the protagonist elicits a collective response through two means. First, broadcasting their philanthropic action through social media, effectively a digital megaphone. Social sharing in our digital world is an important way the protagonist signals their values and beliefs. It allows others who identify with those values to form a collective response (Nardini et al., 2021). It also provides an outlet for the moral outrage and frustration of others, enabling them regulate their emotions through this collective action (Berger, 2014). Nardini et al., 2021 study of social movements identified that people who found a sense of belonging through connecting their self-identity to a collective identity demonstrated stronger group engagement and participation. Likewise, moral

**TABLE 2** Review of related terminology.

Terminology	Definition	Common use example
Revenge	Hurting or harming someone in return for an injury or harm that they perpetrated.	A sports team achieving a win against a team they previously suffered a heavy loss from.
Retaliation	The act of revenge driven by emotional need to punish the protagonist personally without a sense of what is proportionate.	Where a person feels unfairly treated and takes matters into their own hands in retaliation.
Retribution	Punishment inflicted on someone in vengeance for a perceived wrongful act.	Backlash towards organizational whistle-blowers.
Reparation	Making amends for damage done, literally ‘making ready again’. Generally enacted by the perpetrator and where the punishment is commensurate to the offense and in line with societal expectations.	Payments made by descendants of slave owners to communities of historic victims.
Restorative justice	Two way communication between victim and perpetrator such as face to face meeting, either directly or indirectly through a facilitator.	Specific process used by police in an attempt to increase the victim’s control over outcomes and reduce perpetrator re-offending rates.
Avenge	To enact satisfaction for a grave insult to people or causes to which you feel loyal.	Feeling vindicated when an injustice has been redressed.



**FIGURE 1** Avenger Philanthropy construct.

outrage has been found to be “one of the strongest predictors of participation in collective protest” (Jost et al., 2012, p. 198)

The second important feature for stimulating the collective response for Avenger Philanthropy is the use of humor. The role of humor as a positive emotion in stimulating response to communication has been widely explored (Eisend, 2018; Paramita et al., 2021; Weinberger & Gulas, 2019), including within social media (Ge & Gretzel, 2018). In particular, comedy has been identified as a driver of social justice (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020) and found to positively predict compassionate altruism (Dargan & Schermer, 2022). Research

that compared the efficacy of public engagement in global poverty through using comedic content compared to “serious” content found the lighter, more entertaining medium resulted in “significantly larger gains in awareness, knowledge, and actions; these effects were mediated by the narrative's relatability, positive emotions, and entertainment value” (Borum Chattoo & Feldman, 2017, p. 678).

Through understanding the relationship between these three elements, a new label for the observed phenomenon emerges: “Avenger Philanthropy.” It is defined as giving to charity when motivated by a sense of moral outrage against the views of an



individual antagonist through a public campaign to restore justice, anchored in humor to galvanize collective action through assembling other avengers online. In this case, the observed examples of practice against Mike Pence, Suella Braverman and Nigel Farage are the closest fit as they combine the public persona, humor in the campaign mechanism, and a collective response. The avengers were assembled. Despite the negative emotion that triggers the action, for both the protagonist conceiving the campaign and their social media supporters, there are positive benefits in terms of enjoyment through humor or irony, social identity for responding with people who hold the same values and beliefs, and self-identify for being known for, and standing up for, their beliefs. For the NPO receiving the gift there is a positive benefit in terms of donations and publicity. The NPO is the direct recipient of the “Avenger Philanthropy” gift but that is a unidirectional relationship, it is not money they have solicited. The seven distinctive hallmarks of Avenger Philanthropy are illustrated in Figure 1.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

### 5.1 | Implications for gift giving theory

This paper contributes to the consumer prosocial literature through witnessing the emerging phenomenon of Avenger Philanthropy IRL and anchoring it in extant theoretical knowledge of gift giving behavior. The identification of seven hallmarks that characterize its distinctiveness are critical. Nonprofit studies are “*relatively young and still seeking common intellectual ground*” (Gazley, 2022, p. 1256) but the topic of philanthropy, encompassing gift giving and prosocial behavior, has attracted scholars from a dizzying array of theoretical perspectives including: consumer psychology, evolutionary biology, economics, and anthropology. In particular, the binary relationships within game theory and the models of direct and indirect cooperation within sociology, inform our understanding of why an actor would reduce their personal fitness, such as through making a financial donation, for the sake of someone else. Through the relationship between the emotional catalyst, the emotional-behavioral response and the mechanism for collective response, namely sharing online, the effect of one person standing up for their personal beliefs is amplified. Importantly, the paper identifies the implications for gift giving theory, drawing on behavior that resonates with personal moral identity shared within a social network, but with potential negative outcomes.

In contrast to studies of social movements (Nardini et al., 2021), acts of Avenger Philanthropy are observed to have a singled named actor as catalyst and a single antagonist to act against: a person not just an issue. Distinct from studies of spite and revenge, Avenger Philanthropy has a net positive value to the donor (protagonist) through benefits of upholding their personal values (self-identity) and social proof from others joining (social identity), despite the financial outlay. It is the amplification by collective response which also takes it beyond game theory. However, this contributes a powerful foundation on which future empirical research can build.

This paper explores Avenger Philanthropy through the role of the protagonist. The other roles, yet to be explored in depth, are those of the antagonist, the beneficiary NPO and the collective, the people who join in the campaign (Otnes et al., 1993). Specifically for the collective response, it would be insightful to understand whether the supportive behavior for this campaign is a one-off or whether it was part of a pattern of similar supportive responses on other issues. Also, it would be interesting to extend this phenomenon to consider social justice contexts, where a cause rather than a specific NPO is the beneficiary. The phenomenon of Avenger Philanthropy in this iteration, where social media plays a powerful role in creating impact, is in its infancy which is a limitation of the paper but there is important work to be done to witness the prevalence of the phenomenon, to empirically test the seven phenomenological hallmarks, and to identify the impact of contextual characteristics such as cause typologies.

### 5.2 | Implications for marketing practice

Understanding the phenomenon of Avenger Philanthropy is important for nonprofit marketers and senior managers. The outcome for the beneficiary NPO can be viewed as positive, increasing funding to enable mission-delivery, but it comes with risks. First, the NPO lacks control over the campaign: it was not something they initiated or are able to influence without risking their credibility. The Avenger Philanthropy behavior is successful, in part, because it is organic, authentically personal, and spontaneous. There is likely to be a disconnect between motivation to “payback” and the values that underpin the charity. However, understanding how effective any instances of one-off “spontaneous” responses by NPOs to the actions of unplanned protagonist campaigns like the Greenpeace one (to the fictional Succession plot line) or the Crisis response to the Joe Lycett campaign (real), will help NPOs be ready. Mapping these instances would also make an interesting area for research on practice also. Second, particularly in the “twittersphere” (Hewett et al., 2016), now X, there is a risk for the NPO that association with extremist views or radical supporters then alienates the larger, potentially more generous, mainstream supporter base. From a research perspective, it would be interesting to work with practitioners to profile current donors against this new supporter base to identify future opportunities. Thirdly, the phenomenon of Avenger Philanthropy illustrates the potential power of engaging humor to unlock nontraditional supporters for an NPO. In an age of pressure on personal income due to the postpandemic economic downturn impacting giving behavior and disrupted patterns of traditional fundraising, such as mass-participation events and thrift shop purchases, NPOs need to think creatively how reach new audiences. Harnessing the power of humor through social media, if communicated in an authentic way that is consistent with organizational values, is one such pathway (Fernandes & Castro, 2020). However, this requires both capability and capacity building in social media communication by the NPO, either internally or with agency support.

The Avenger Philanthropy behavior from which the NPO benefits is a one-off: a moment in time rather than a building a longer term relationship of giving and advocacy. The challenge for the charity is to harness the indirect response from which they have benefitted, to then build a direct relationship based on a deeper ongoing engagement with the cause and organization (Fernandez et al., 2022). This is an indicator of a fundamental underlying challenge for charities; the lack of relationship proximity. As direct mechanisms such as Justgiving, GoFundMe, and Crowdfunding connect supporters/donors directly with a cause without “going through” a charity, the mandate for NPOs as the organizational structure that ‘does good’ in society is potentially undermined (Mitchell & Clark, 2022; van Teunenbroek et al., 2023). NPOs need to understand this changing landscape and ensure their role in society as the change-agents for social good is both clear and well communicated.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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