# RESEARCH PAPER:

# OVERCOMING DONOR FATIGUE

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**CHAPTER 1**

**Introduction**

"Oh no, not this _AGAIN_." Almost everyone in the modern world recognizes this feeling. Each person can immediately think of some person, some thing, or some topic triggering this response. For many people, a politician comes to mind. For others, they think of an annoying commercial. Unfortunately for nonprofit organizations, many people when hearing this statement think of _yet another_ request for money. Still others will call to mind hearing _yet again_ about a societal ill, or a natural disaster negatively impacting their fellow human beings, to which they are expected to respond in a helping manner.

Modern technology and media allows human beings to be more connected to their world than ever before. Undoubtedly, these developments have resulted in many positive benefits. At the same time, side effects can lead to negative consequences. One of these side effects is overexposure. People may sometimes be too plugged in. Their cell phone constantly notifies them through multiple apps and news channels. While this initially seems like a positive benefit to most people, over time they may become fatigued with all of the messages and begin to tune them out (Kinnick, K.; Krugman, D.; Cameron, G., 1996).

In order to survive in this overexposed environment, much of the media seems to rely upon sensationalizing the news. Headlines try to grab attention. Articles tend to focus on outrageous aspects of human existence. Websites and blogs often highlight shocking stories in an apparent effort to draw an audience (Patel, S.; McKeever, B., 2014). In many discussions with friends and peers, I hear of people becoming tired of this cycle.

Compounding the issue of sensational coverage, news media, as well as social media, tends to report "bad news." One personal story, in particular, highlights this problem. I live in a

relatively safe city. In 10 years living in Wichita, Kansas, I never once feared for my life or my safety. Never have I felt threatened or overly worried to let my children play outside or walk to the grocery store or go out with friends. One day while talking with a co-worker, he mentioned his parents considered moving to Wichita to be near him, so he could help take care of them. To my utter surprised, he told me of their deep fear to move to Wichita. I inquired about their concern and found it was entirely based upon the presentation of Wichita on the evening news. My co-worker's parents lived in Western Kansas in a small town. Each night they saw all of the bad things that happened in Wichita that day.

Like any city, Wichita is home to a handful of criminals. Occasionally, a few people who live in Wichita do evil things. Unfortunately, those tragic events disproportionately appear in the news. No news station reported on the man I saw get out of his vehicle at a red light to help a woman who fell at a crosswalk—something I have not seen in another city, but probably does happen there and is also not reported in their news. The news cameras do not appear to film our neighbors helping one another with childcare. They do not film the thousands of parents in the city each night helping their child complete a frustrating math problem. These normal, everyday occurrences—the ones that predominantly happen in Wichita—never appear in the news.

What also infrequently appears in the news? Context for the social problems discussed or possible solutions. These two issues require precious time and in-depth analysis. They can also be controversial to viewers, and media companies do not want to offend their audience and lose their viewership. Maintaining high ratings leads to the all-important advertising dollars, and most media companies exist to make a profit. Thus, little time or effort goes into coverage of the context of a social problem; media companies pay little attention to possible solutions.

This environment leads to some people selectively avoiding news. When they are tired of hearing about a topic, they will ignore it altogether. They will turn off the TV. They will change the radio channel. In today's environment of social media, they may also only follow people and news organizations that report what they want to hear. Altogether, this environment presents challenges to nonprofit organizations as they attempt to communicate their message to donors. As will be highlighted and elaborated upon by the research in this paper, nonprofits' donor audience may become fatigued by the broader media environment. This phenomenon, defined and articulated more fully below, is referred to as donor fatigue. The research and commentary in this paper will explore the interaction between nonprofit organizations and the donor public, as well as the communication of messages between the two, with an aim to help nonprofits understand, mitigate, and overcome donor fatigue.

*Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study is to understand donor fatigue and its impact on nonprofit organizations. In a society with unprecedented media exposure, the importance of understanding donor fatigue, its root causes, and its possible remedies cannot be overstated. At the same time, charitable organizations should be careful not to confuse donor fatigue with other issues such as exchange impact and market saturation. Misdiagnosing these issues as donor fatigue may lead organizations to unrealistic expectations and they may, in turn, waste precious resources or use them inefficiently. Fortunately for nonprofits, studies indicate the problem of donor fatigue may be overcome or minimized. Organizations are not simply "at the mercy" of an unstoppable phenomenon.

*Research Questions*

This research paper focuses on the leading causes of donor fatigue, its impact on nonprofit organizations, and processes organization may implement to help mitigate donor fatigue. The following questions guided the research throughout this research paper.

1. What are the main causes leading to donor fatigue?

2. How does donor fatigue impact donations to nonprofit organizations?

3. How do nonprofit organizations combat donor fatigue?

*Significance of the Study*

Donors need to know about an organization's existence before they are able to donate. A philanthropist needs to hear about the problem before she can commit funds to help resolve it. In an environment where people avoid certain forms or aspects of media, or become easily fatigued due to the presentation of societal problems, nonprofit organizations committed to helping with those problems must find ways to combat or overcome this fatigue.

While recognizing that the phenomenon of donor fatigue negatively impacts nonprofit organizations, this paper will discuss in-depth solutions to help these organizations combat donor fatigue. Organizations that follow the principles outlined as possible solutions, such as the proper framing of the issues and the problems addressed by the entity, will likely benefit and thrive in any environment (Patel, 2014). They will also learn to cultivate stewardship skills leading to a committed and empowered donor base, one that will not be easily fatigued by external factors outside the organization's control (Sargeant, A.; Woodliffe, L., 2007).

*Definition of Terms*

To assist the reader in gaining understanding of various concepts, the following definitions are offered:

Donor  - An individual who has given, or intends to give, a gift to a nonprofit.

Donation – The actual giving away of any item of monetary value, or cash, to a nonprofit.

Donor Fatigue – The declining rate of response from donors and/or the general public to persistent calls for charitable donations (Brown, R.; Leeves, G.; Prayaga, P., 2014).

Compassion Fatigue – Used synonymously throughout this paper with the term donor fatigue, the term "compassion fatigue" first appeared in the vocabulary of the helping professions, but now also applies to philanthropic and fund-raising circles, to describe the numbing of public concern towards social problems (Kinnick, et al, 1996).

Information Overload – A form of donor fatigue that happens when donors grow complacent about an overwhelming number of appeals from charities, and hyperbolic claims so often associated therewith (Brown, P.; Minty, J., 2008).

Affect (or Affective Feelings) – The positive and negative feelings that combine with reasoned analysis to guide our judgments, decision, and actions (Slovic, 2007).

Cognitive Dissonance -  A theory that if an individual feels psychologically uncomfortable, then he or she will be motivated to reduce the feelings of discomfort to restore the mental balance (Waters, 2009).

Nonprofits – Organizations usually designated as 501(c)3's or 501(c)4's by the government (depending on their operating income and obligatory filing requirements).

Avoidance – Selectively ignoring, tuning out, or avoiding media content about an issue causing a person to feel fatigued (Kinnick, et al, 1996).

Exchange Impact – When donors increase their contribution to one cause due to shocks (e.g., natural disasters, terrorist attacks) and/or specific appeals and simultaneously decrease their regular contributions to other causes (Reinstein, 2009).

Framing – Communicating salient aspects of a message to encourage a certain perspective on a particular problem. This approach provides context for an issue through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration of specific topics (Patel, S.; McKeever, B., 2014).

Stewardship – An approach by nonprofit agencies to promote continued donor involvement in the work of their organization. Stewardship encompasses four components: responsibility, reporting, reciprocity, and relationship nurturing (Patel, S.; McKeever, B., 2014).

Seed Money – Donations committed to a project, usually by large donors, prior to a public campaign to raise additional funds for the project (Sargeant, A.; Woodliffe, L. 2007).

**CHAPTER 2**

**A Review of the Literature**

*Introduction*

The purpose of this study is to conduct a comprehensive literature review related to the issue of donor fatigue and how this phenomenon impacts nonprofit organizations and their ability to raise funds. In addition, this paper will address strategies to help overcome donor fatigue. In this second chapter, the focus will be on analyzing the concept of donor fatigue. After discussing the notion of donor fatigue, it will be distinguished from separate, yet often confused and intermingled, concepts of exchange impact and market saturation. The goal of this second chapter is to answer the three research questions: (1) What are the main causes leading to donor fatigue; (2) How does donor fatigue impact donations to nonprofit organizations; and (3) How can nonprofit organizations use strategies to combat or mitigate donor fatigue?

Table 1 below provides an overview of the specific topics addressed in this paper and outlines the corresponding literature that addresses each topic. Following is a detailed discussion of each topic.

**Table 1**
*Literature Review Sources*

**Psychological Issues Leading to Donor/Compassion Fatigue**
>    Cameron, C.; Payne, B., (2011); Eckel, C.; Grossman, P.; Milano, A., (2007); Kinnick, K.; Krugman, D.; Cameron, G., (1996); Markowitz, E.; Slovic, P.; Vastfjall, D.; Hodges, S. (2013); Sargeant, A.; Woodliffe, L., (2007); Slovic, P. (2007); So, J.; Kim, S.; Cohen, H., (2017); Vastfjall, D.; Slovic, P.; Mayorga, M.; Peters, E., (2014); Waters, R. (2009)

**Expenditure Substitution and Saturating the Market**
>    Brown, P., Minty, J (2008); Brown, R.P.C.; Leeves, G.; Prayaga, P. (2014); Reinstein, D. (2009)

**Framing Methods/Strategies to Combat Donor Fatigue**
>    Patel, S.; McKeever, B., (2014); So, J., et al (2017)

**Stewardship Strategies**
>    Kinnick, et al (1996); Markowitz, et al (2013); Patel, S.; McKeever, B., (2014); Sargeant, A.; Woodliffe, L., (2007); Waters, R. (2009)

**Proportion Dominance**
>    Bartels, D. (2006); Erlandsoon, A.; Bjorklund, F.; Backstrom, M. (2017); Kinnick, et al (1996); Kleber, J.; Dickert, S.; Peters, E.; Florack, A. (2013); Markowitz, et al (2013); Slovic, P. (2007)

**In-Group Recognition**
>    Erlandsoon, et al (2017); Kogut, T., Ritov, I. (2007); Ritov, I.; Kogut, T. (2011); Sargeant, A.; Woodliffe, L., (2007)

**Identifying a Single Victim**
>    Eckel, et al (2007); Erlandsoon, et al (2017); Kogut, T., Ritov, I. (2007); Markowitz, et al (2013); Small, D.; Loewenstein, G. Slovic, P. (2007); Vastfjall, et al (2014)

**Fundraising Best Practices**
>    Eckel, et al (2007); Erlandsoon, et al (2017); Kogut, T., Ritov, I. (2007); Sargeant, A.; Woodliffe, L., (2007); Waters, R. (2009)

*Psychological Issues Leading to Donor Fatigue*

A study by Kinnick, et al (1996) serves as a landmark study into the issue of compassion fatigue. The term "compassion fatigue" first appeared in the vocabulary of the helping professions, but now also applies to philanthropic and fund-raising circles, to describe the numbing of public concern towards social problems (Kinnick, et al, 1996). In applying this phenomenon to the field of nonprofit fundraising, the term donor fatigue is used interchangeably with the term compassion fatigue, as the decaying compassion often leads to a decline in donations to nonprofits. A more recent study (Vastfjall, D.; Slovic, P.; Mayorga, M.; Peters, E., 2014) notes that affective feelings such as empathy, sympathy, sadness, and compassion are

often seen as essential for motivating helping. The study further notes that emerging evidence

from neuroscience research supports the notion that affective feelings are integral to charitable

giving.

In general, the term affect relates to the positive and negative feelings that combine with

reasoned analysis to guide our judgments, decision, and actions. Affective responses occur

rapidly and automatically. A study by Slovic (2007) draws from research to show how the

statistics of mass murder or genocide—no matter how large the numbers—fail to convey the true

meaning of such atrocities. As Slovic (2007) explains, affect is a remarkable mechanism that

enabled humans to survive the long course of evolution. Before we could access sophisticated

analytic tools such as probability theory, scientific risk assessment, and cost/benefit analysis,

humans used their sense, honed by experience, to determine whether the animal lurking in the

bushes was safe to approach. Simply put, affective thinking evolved to protect individuals and

their small family and community groups from present, visible, immediate dangers. This

affective system did not evolve to help us respond to distant, mass murder (Slovic, 2007).

Consequently, nonprofit organizations must find ways to overcome this biological quandary,

which will be discussed later in chapter 2. Before that, however, we will continue to discuss

donor fatigue and how it impacts nonprofits.

Studies on compassion fatigue identify an optimal range of empathetic arousal Going

above that optimal range—i.e. arousing too much empathy—can lead people to avoid an issue

altogether. In fact, one study indicated donors will tend to support only those charities that

represent the needy in an acceptable way. Pictures of an overtly handicapped child and a starving

child have both been shown to actually decrease the response to solicitations (Sargeant, A.,

Woodliffe, L., 2007). These findings contradict previous prevailing attitudes among nonprofits that the more media coverage of social problems, the better (Kinnick, et al, 1996).

Prior to Kinnick, et al's (1996) study, the term compassion fatigue appeared only in literature related to burnout in the helping professions (e.g., doctors, nurses, counselors) to describe the apparent loss of compassion towards patients or clients. Kinnick, et al (1996), studied this phenomenon in the context of people's responses to social problems to determine if people became desensitized to, or less interested in, social problems through overexposure to these issues in the media. In essence, they tested a theory that suggested a range of optimal empathetic arousal According to this theory, a "happy medium" needed to be maintained. Too little empathy cannot spur someone into action, but too much will overwhelm them and lead to active avoidance of the issue. According to the authors, at the time of their study, the prevailing public relations and fundraising strategy said: the more media coverage, the better to generate public support (Kinnick, et al, 1996).

Preliminary research began with Kinnick, et al (1996) interviewing 50 undergraduate students about current issues. They compared the responses to Gallup poll data to identify four topics of concern: AIDS, homelessness, violent crime, and child abuse. The study surveyed 316 people by calling 550 residential phone numbers in the Atlanta area. Study participants were surveyed to gauge interest in, emotional arousal towards, information seeking of, and reactions to each issue. Calls focusing on one city produce some limitations to the study. However, subsequent studies on this topic helped verify its findings, as will be discussed in detail below.

The Kinnick, et al (1996) results provide significant insight into the issue of compassion fatigue. First, the study found compassion fatigue clearly extends to social issues, meaning it directly relates to public relations and fundraising efforts of nonprofit organizations. Perhaps

more importantly, the study showed the issue of compassion fatigue does not directly correlate with media exposure the way the authors predicted. Although media consumption significantly correlated with reported fatigue, on one issue (violent crime), heavy media users actually reported less fatigue. The strongest predictor of fatigue was selective avoidance of media users. In this respect, the media cannot necessarily be "blamed" for too much coverage because people likely (or already) fatigued will simply avoid communications related to the issue (Kinnick, et al, 1996).

A more recent study confirms this issue of avoidance due to media coverage (Eckel, C.; Grossman, P.; Milano, A., 2007). Following Hurricane Katrina, Eckel, et al (2007) studied the responses of 265 students to a call for help of hurricane victims. The study surveyed two groups of students: one group from the Dallas-Fort Worth area (an area directly and heavily impacted by hurricane evacuees) and another from St. Cloud, Minnesota (an area not impacted by the hurricane). The findings clearly showed burnout among the students closest to the hurricane, in Dallas-Fort Worth. Part of the reason for burnout was almost certainly the amount of media coverage. Specifically, 1,962 articles in 2005 and 878 in 2006 were written in the Dallas Morning News versus only 186 articles in 2005 and 52 in 2006 in the *St Cloud Times*. Students closest to the epicenter clearly experienced compassion fatigue and tried to avoid the issue of the hurricane victims (Eckel, et al, 2007).

Looking deeper into this issue of avoidance, Kinnick et al's (1996) research indicated the groups showing the most avoidance include: whites, males, college graduates, and those earning more than $50,000 per year. This finding could be problematic for nonprofit fundraising since those earning over $50,000 per year are most likely those having expendable income to donate. Another significant finding of this study: fatigue correlates with hopelessness. Respondents

reported less fatigue, and avoidance behaviors decreased, when communications provided solutions towards the social problems.

As more recent research (Waters, 2009) shows, the issue of avoidance relates to the psychological phenomenon of cognitive dissonance theory. This theory centers on an individual's reaction to inconsistent mental states. Specifically, the theory proposes that if an individual feels psychologically uncomfortable then he or she will be motivated to reduce the feelings of discomfort to restore the mental balance. Additionally, cognitive dissonance theory postulates that individuals will actively avoid situations and information that will continue or increase their dissonance (Waters, 2009).

Waters (2009) tested this theory of cognitive dissonance through surveying 712 Red Cross donors from two Southeastern chapters. His study concluded that donors experience strong feelings of dissonance when learning of crisis situations and that making a donation restores the mental balance. This study also supported the cognitive dissonance theory that individuals would avoid situations that would increase their feelings of dissonance. More specifically, Waters (2009) found that study participants reduced news consumption to avoid seeing repeated footage of natural disasters.

In essence, Kinnick et al's (1996) study identified four primary factors in communication leading to compassion fatigue: (1) an emphasis on the sensational; (2) a preponderance of "bad news"; (3) failure to provide context for social problems; and (4) presentation of the problem(s) with no solutions. These problems inevitably lead to avoidance behaviors (Kinnick, et al, 1996), most likely due to cognitive dissonance (Water, 2009). As we delve more deeply into the research we will examine possible solutions to these problems; in the meantime, we will turn to further discussion related to donor fatigue and its impact on nonprofit organizations.

While Kinnick et al's (1996) study focused on social problems, a more recent study investigating the notion of compassion fatigue examined this phenomenon in relation to environmental crises. Three separate studies by Markowitz, E.; Slovic, P.; Vastfjall, D.; Hodges, S. (2013) found that compassion fatigue exists when dealing with environmental crises similar to its existence in relation to social problems. This study drew on three experiments with students to lend credence to the notion of compassion fatigue. A strength of their study was that in their third and final experiment they gave participants actual money to contribute to causes. In other words, they did not rely solely upon study participants' stated intent, but actually required them "to put their money where their mouth is." Although the dollar amount was small ($5 per participant), they nevertheless could measure what people would do "in the real world." This approach helped them identify several ways of framing charitable causes to help combat compassion fatigue and to help organizations increase the likelihood of donations being made to their respective causes. Those ways of framing charitable efforts will be discussed below. In the meantime, Markowitz, et al (2013) provide important insight into the phenomenon of compassion fatigue.

Markowitz, et al (2013) point to three, somewhat interrelated, reasons for compassion fatigue. The first is that as the proportion of victims helped decreases, so does the feeling of compassion. In other words, people are inclined to dismiss the absolute number of victims helped, instead focusing on the percentage of victims helped. For example, if Organization A can help 100 people out of 10,000 impacted by a crisis (1% of the total population) and Organization B can help 10 people out of 100 impacted (10% of the population), people more likely feel compassion and are inclined to donate to Organization B. While Organization A would help ten times as many people, many donors regularly make irrational decisions based upon psychological biases or emotional decisions. Even though Organization A would help 90 more

people with a donor's contribution, it "feels" more impactful to make a donation to Organization

B since, statistically, they will help a higher percentage of people.

A second reason identified by Markowitz, et al (2013) for compassion fatigue is that as

the number of victims identified increases, compassion decreases. In many respects, this is

related to the first reason cited above. The more victims identified, the lower the proportion of

people a specific donation is likely to help. From a psychological perspective, this phenomenon

is easy to understand. People expect the needs of large groups to be potentially overwhelming,

and, as a result, they engage in emotion regulation to prevent themselves from experiencing

overwhelming levels of emotion (Cameron, C.; Payne, B., 2011). The Cameron, C., Payne, B.

(2011) findings were even more pronounced when the expectation of having to help was

introduced to study participants. Specifically, at the beginning of the study, participants read

about either one or eight children in Darfur. They were then told that later in the experiment,

they would be asked to report either (a) their feelings toward these children or (b) their feelings

toward these children and how much money they would be willing to donate. Cameron, C.,

Payne, B. (2011) noted that when participants were given no expectation to help, they showed

more compassion towards eight victims than one. However, when the expectation to help was

introduced, the participants became emotionally overwhelmed and expressed no more

compassion towards the eight victims than the one.

The third and final reason cited for compassion fatigue by Markowitz, et al (2013) is that

the more a crisis turns into a "statistic," the less compassion people feel. Again, this third point is

somewhat interrelated with the first two reasons identified by the study. Perhaps this third reason

is best summed up by a quote regularly attributed to Joseph Stalin: "When one man dies it is a

tragedy. When thousands die it is a statistic." At a certain level, the human mind cannot

comprehend, or must dismiss, massive tragedies as a coping mechanism. Again, approaches to overcome these limitations leading to compassion fatigue will be presented below. For now, it is important to understand the Markowitz, et al (2013) study corroborates the Kinnick, et al (1996) study and further establishes that compassion fatigue extends beyond humanitarian and/or social crises into the environmental realm.

The Kinnick, et al (1996) and Markowitz, et al (2013) studies do not stand alone among the research establishing the notion of compassion/donor fatigue, especially as it relates to communication and avoidance. A more recent study conducted in the Department of Communications at the University of Georgia focused on the impact of exposure to prolonged, real-life health campaigns to determine the impact of "message fatigue" (So, J.; Kim, S.; Cohen, H., 2017). The idea of "message fatigue" expresses the same reality as compassion/donor fatigue. In fact, the study found several similarities to the Kinnick, et al (1996) study.

Until relatively recently, many experts in communication believed the more communication the better. However, as the authors note, empirical tests show an inverted-U shape relationship in exposure frequency: too little communication and too much communication can have similar effects on whether a person changes their long-term behavior through communication models. The study focused on fatigue towards similar, but not identical, messages (specifically, safe sex and anti-obesity), looking for chronic fatigue from hearing these messages repeatedly over a lifetime (So 2017).

The first part of the study involved 412 students from a large public university who received class credit and fairly represented the US population in terms of demographics such as gender and race. They responded to 16 questions regarding safe-sex messages on a Likert-type scale to determine if, as predicted, a positive association existed with message avoidance and

annoyance; and negative association with further information seeking. The study strongly

verified the predictions (So 2017).

The second portion of the study sought to replicate the results with an anti-obesity

message, but also attempted to verify further predictions that message fatigue would negatively

associate with attention to and message elaboration, and positively associate with desensitization

and counterargument towards the message. This study used a sampling service to identify 396

US adults who were considered to be overweight or obese. The study results strongly confirmed

the predictions (So 2017).

Implication of this study will be discussed in more detail below. In short, however, this

study highlights that a "sweet spot" exists for communication. While too little communication

means potential donors remain unaware of a nonprofit organization or cause, too much

communication may trigger donor fatigue. Taken together, these studies clearly indicate the

concept of donor fatigue exists. Alarmingly, when donors or potential donors become fatigued

for any number of reasons, they experience feelings of annoyance and may even completely

avoid the fatiguing topics. Possible solutions or approaches to this problem will be discussed in

section three. However, before turning our attention to that, we must understand other key

concepts and separate phenomena that nonprofits may misdiagnose as donor fatigue.

*Expenditure Substitution and Saturating the Market*

A study at the University of Essex (Reinstein, 2009) explored the empirical evidence for

an "exchange impact," or expenditure substitution, in relation to charitable donations.

Expenditure substitution essentially means "robbing Peter to pay Paul." In other words, the

theory is that each household has essentially a fixed amount of money they are able and willing

to give to charitable donations. Reinstein (2009) theorizes that when a shock (e.g., natural

disaster, major event like 9/11) occurs that often leads to a flurry of charitable giving, most of this money comes from sources that likely would have gone to other charitable causes.

Reinstein (2009) uses information from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), a well- respected and cited survey, for his sample. He ultimately reviews information for 3,466 households, focusing on year-to-year variations within households, controlling for household-specific effects (e.g., significant increase in income from one year to the next). For the purpose of his study, Reinstein (2009) defines "large givers" as those declaring over $1,000 in total contributions on their tax returns. Although recognizing this amount as fairly arbitrary, Reinstein (2009) notes other (equally arbitrary) values yield similar results.

The results of the study indicate different motivations and impacts of giving between large and small donors. Specifically, large donors seemed to decrease contributions to one cause when they gave more to another. For example, a large donor who regularly gave to a medical cause likely decreased their contribution in one specific year if they gave significantly to a "shock" cause, like Hurricane Katrina. In contrast, small givers likely acted more impulsively, largely or entirely motivated by shocks or specific appeals.

In any case, Reinstein's (2009) results indicate an exchange impact exists between certain sets of charities. This effect can be masked when using a cross-sectional approach to charitable giving. A more detailed analysis, viewing contributions within households, shows this impact more clearly. What might be considered donor fatigue by a nonprofit organization may, in part, be simply expenditure substitution. That is to say, everyone and every society owns limited resources. Households likely "top out" at a certain amount of money given to charitable causes in a calendar year.

Fundraisers and nonprofit executives should carefully consider this possible exchange impact when looking for donor fatigue. In some cases, an exchange impact could be diagnosed as donor fatigue. An incorrect diagnosis, of course, likely leads to the wrong prescription to the problem. In addition, nonprofits should consider the potential impact to their general operating budget when making specific appeals (e.g., will making an appeal for a certain shock ultimately take away contributions from the core mission of the agency?).

One final word of caution as it relates to the concept and use of the term donor fatigue. Unfortunately, this term can take on too broad of a meaning to be useful. Some studies prescribe "donor fatigue" to what really amounts to "market saturation." These two concepts differ entirely, despite the fact that scholars sometimes apply the same vocabulary. An example of this comes from a study by Brown, P., Minty, J (2008). The case study examined the charitable response to the December 26, 2004 tsunami that spread across the Indian Ocean. Nearly 230,000 people were either killed or listed as missing by the United Nations.

To analyze the effect of media coverage of the 2004 tsunami on giving to relief agencies, the authors reviewed daily receipts from online donations made to eight US charities (five of whom form the nation's largest nonprofit groups by private funding) that helped tsunami victims. Online donations closely corresponded with media coverage because the donations were instantaneous (both made and recorded on the same day). Brown, P., Minty, J. (2008) followed donations from January 1, 2005 – April 5, 2005 (100 days).

Brown, P., Minty, J. (2008) measured media coverage of the tsunami by tracking the number of minutes dedicated to such coverage on the nightly news of the three major broadcast networks. In addition, they tracked tsunami-related articles in major newspapers by word count. Newspaper coverage closely mirrored television coverage. When speaking of the decreasing

donations to the tragedy over time, the authors specifically cite donor fatigue, which they define

as the decay of both media coverage and the response of individual donors as time passes, as

images become less shocking, and individuals have less money left to give.

Although this definition of donor fatigue technically could fit in the broad definition of

donor fatigue used in this paper, Brown, P., Minty, J. (2008) seem to be researching a separate

phenomenon. Again, what seems to happen after 100 days with one specific event, is market

saturation rather than donor fatigue. Presumably, when an event receives unprecedented levels of

media coverage, as the authors state about this tsunami, by 100 days virtually all possible donors

heard about the tragedy. Those inclined to donate towards the humanitarian relief efforts most

likely donate an amount they feel comfortable giving. With one-time events like the tsunami, few

donors will donate only part of what they can give and wait to see how recovery efforts succeed

before giving more.

In other words, by studying only one unique event, Brown, P., Minty, J. (2008) examine a

different phenomenon than the one addressed in this paper. For our purposes, a better

understanding of donor fatigue would be to study how much the 2004 tsunami and its media

coverage impacted future responses to hurricanes. The donor fatigue that should concern

nonprofit agencies the most relates to continuous giving. The questions we should ask include:

how much did our response and the media coverage to this tsunami impact future donations? Are

people getting fatigued by hearing repeatedly about social problems our agency addresses? Are

people tired of hearing about our organization? These questions represent the biggest problems

for nonprofit organizations as it relates to donor fatigue. Every individual event or tragedy will

eventually saturate its market. The real problem stems from the fact that another event or tragedy

will happen again later. Another situation will occur highlighting a social ill. When addressing

the phenomenon of donor fatigue, nonprofits must focus on the long-term impact of their approach to ensure donors remain committed to their mission and vision.

Unfortunately, much of the literature on donor fatigue mixes what we identify separately as (a) donor fatigue and (b) expenditure substitution/exchange impact and/or saturating the market. While these two phenomena are closely related and often overlap, we are most interested in examining donor fatigue. With exchange impact, a donor simply "robs Peter to pay Paul." Perhaps a donor who regularly gives to a humanitarian charitable organization will give less one year when a natural disaster strikes near the donor's homeland. In future years, the donor continues giving as before to the first organization. This scenario represents a mere exchange, not an overall fatigue in charitable giving. When the donor becomes tired of constant appeals for money and decides to tune out the message and stop giving, the exchange impact has become a more authentic donor fatigue. The donor is less likely to give in the future, or will give a smaller amount.

Again, donor fatigue and exchange impact often overlap. Interestingly, a study by Brown, et al (2014), identified an exchange impact among migrant communities of Pacific Islanders living in Australia. Although the study primarily identified an exchange impact, some of the important factors they determined leading to higher donations in their study help identify methods to combat donor fatigue.

As economists, Brown, et al (2014) recognized strong sharing norm pressures within the migrant community. Specifically, those migrants doing well economically, who others perceived to have discretionary income/potential savings, felt pressure to share their resources with poorer migrants. Some who sought to escape this pressure moved to more regional locations, away from metropolitan areas. The authors cite several interviews with migrants expressing this reality.

Brown, et al (2014) examined migrant donations to their home country after a cyclone caused significant damage; and if migrants donated, how much they contributed. The study results indicated migrants from Sydney, who constantly faced strong social pressure to remit to the wider migrant community, gave less often than those living in regional areas with less pressure to give regularly to the wider migrant community. However, when those in metropolitan areas did give after this natural disaster, the amount given was comparable to those living in regional areas. In short, Brown, et al (2014) conclude the stronger the regular pressure to give to the community, the weaker the effect of additional pressures to remit. Most importantly for our purposes, Brown, et al (2014) also found four important factors leading to higher contributions: (1) having at least one parent still living in the home country; (2) having hosted a visitor from the home country; (3) intention of returning home; (4) being self-declared as church active (Brown, et al, 2014). Brown, et al (2014) help navigate a path to combat donor fatigue. Corroborating other studies discussed below, Brown, et al (2014) suggest helping possible donors associate themselves with victims, or even identifying a single, named victim, can help combat the effect of donor fatigue.

*Framing Methods/Strategies to Combat Donor Fatigue*

"There is more than one way to skin a cat." This ancient and well-known phrase emphasizes we often have many ways to reach one specific goal. With respect to communication, we should realize it is the core of basic human interaction. Essentially everything we do, and everything we do not do; the way we say something, or exclude it; all of these communicate a message to the hearer. So important and so nuanced are all of these aspects of communication that most universities dedicate entire classes, if not complete programs, in communications. Corporations house entire departments whose sole job encompasses figuring out how best to communicate messages. Marriage counselors spend most of their time helping

couples learn to better communicate with one another. Such is the importance and pervasiveness of communication. With this in mind, nonprofits should place great importance on how best to communicate their mission and vision to those experiencing donor and message fatigue.

Communicating in a media-saturated society no doubt involves complexity. Too little communication is ineffective—people must know about an issue if they are going to contribute to its solution. However, overexposure requires consideration among nonprofits and fundraisers as well. People overexposed to messages likely display fatigue, meaning they will actively avoid or ignore messages, and may become entirely desensitized to the issue over time. Nonprofits need to examine ways to overcome this possible message fatigue in order to continue to actively engage donors and prospective donors (So, 2017).

One of the most effective ways to overcome message or donor fatigue among nonprofits is by properly framing the organization's mission, vision, and goals. As we defined in Chapter One above, "framing" communicates salient aspects of a message to encourage a certain perspective on a particular problem (Patel, S.; McKeever, B., 2014). This approach provides context for an issue through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration of specific topics (Patel, S.; McKeever, B., 2014).

Most people understand framing on the most basic level and can see how it impacts the reception of the same message. For example, I can tell my wife, "I am upset you did not do the dishes after I cooked dinner." Alternatively, I can say, "Honey, when you do not do the dishes after I cook, I feel upset because it makes me feel like you think I should do everything." In both of these approaches, I have done something similar; namely, expressed that I am upset. However, in the first example, I was direct and likely put my wife on the defensive. In the second example, I communicate the exact same message, but I framed it in such a manner as to increase the odds

the message would be better received and a solution would be found to the conflict more easily. Specifically, I began the message by referring to her with a term of endearment. Second, rather than telling her directly, "I am upset," I told her that is how I *feel*. Rational or not, my wife cannot legitimately argue with how I feel. So rather than arguing with that, which would be likely if I just told her I am upset, she will focus on *why* I *feel* upset, and not simply with the fact that I am upset. Again, this increases the chances of an easy solution being found to the conflict (Patel, S.; McKeever, B., 2014).

From these examples, we can see the importance of framing communication in a very general sense. In both examples, I communicated being upset. The second example, however, took advantage of "framing" the message. By framing it, I increased the chances of my wife engaging with me and finding a quick solution to the problem. Nonprofit organizations can also take advantage of framing their message to increase the chances of engagement with a media-saturated society, and likely increase donations as a result.

With respect to framing, we will discuss below several strategies to help nonprofits combat donor fatigue. The four main strategies discussed below include 1) providing a strategic stewardship approach; 2) considering proportion dominance; 3) stressing in-group relationships; 4) providing an identifiable victim. In addition to these framing strategies, incorporating best practices in fundraising appeals helps mitigate donor fatigue. In virtually all cases, nonprofit organizations can use at least one of these approaches. In many cases, organizations can combine multiple approaches to better help combat donor fatigue. Below we discuss each of these concepts in greater detail.

*Stewardship Strategies*

Kinnick, et al's (1996) landmark study concluded that in order to engage or re-engage potential donors, and to mitigate compassion fatigue, framing a social problem in light of its

solution(s) will help with fundraising and issue awareness. This point cannot be overstressed. Consider most fundraising appeals: they tend to "pull on your heart" by stressing the problem. This approach works for some and for a while. However, as discussed, eventually compassion or donor fatigue sets in and people are no longer moved to donate. They simply become overwhelmed with all of the problems in the world. Instead of trying to worry about which one(s) they should solve, they simply tune out and ignore them altogether.

As Kinnick et al (1996) noted, the best way to re-engage those beset with donor fatigue, and the way to engage new donors, is by presenting solutions to the problem. This positive approach offers encouragement and hope to donors. Another study found that perceived effectiveness—the degree to which the organization is seen to achieve its stated goals— positively impacts the number of donors contributing to the organization, the total amount donated, and the lifetime value of individual donors (Sargeant, A., Woodliffe, L., 2007). Furthermore, this positive approach can help to restore consonance when potential donors experience the cognitive dissonance caused by tragic events, as mentioned previously in this chapter (Waters, 2009). Rather than ignoring emotional pleas to help someone with a problem, this approach of highlighting effectiveness offers rational solutions to problems, showing the donors how their contributions help in a meaningful and effective way.

Still, many nonprofit organizations do not take advantage of this simple, positive, solutions-based approached. In a review of nonprofit health organizations, Patel, S.; McKeever, B. (2014) examined the organizations' websites to determine the framing of health problems and their use of stewardship strategies to communicate with donors online. They furthermore studied any correlation between good use of these strategies and higher revenue.

With respect to framing, nearly 40% of text was considered by the scholars as neutral at best, meaning websites offered little proof of the organization's effectiveness in solving problems and focused more on the problem itself. For each of the following, fewer than 15% of organizations' web pages included: (1) their Annual Report; (2) a video featuring their work; (3) YouTube or other social media links highlighting the work of the organization. Organizations who posted these or an online newsletter correlated to higher revenues. The biggest limitation of this finding, and what requires further study, is whether this correlation equals causation. Perhaps these organizations with higher revenues have more resources to focus on framing and stewardship strategies (Patel, S.; McKeever, B., 2014). To help even the smallest organizations overcome compassion fatigue and to generally maintain positive donor relations, Patel, S.; McKeever, B. (2014) advise using four "stewardship strategies," including: (1) responsibility; (2) reporting; (3) reciprocity; and (4) relationship nurturing. Each of these principles is discussed in more depth below.

Patel, S.; McKeever, B. (2014) note that responsibility as a stewardship strategy means keeping promises to donors. This includes using money as advertised and/or as directed by donors. It also includes transparently operating the organization as promoted. The strategy of reporting is informing donors of where money goes. This again requires transparency, most especially in financial reporting, but also in documents like annual reports or any other communications shared with donors. Reciprocity as a stewardship strategy means providing proper acknowledgment and showing appreciation of support (Patel, S.; McKeever, B., 2014). This strategy can really only be properly fulfilled in tandem with the fourth strategy of relationship nurturing.

Relationship nurturing, as Patel, S.; McKeever, B. (2014) note, fosters open and honest communication with donors. Through the use of open and honest communication—which implies an organization is *listening* to its donors and not just *talking* to them—organizations are best able to assess the desired acknowledgment and showing of appreciation to individual donors. While larger organizations may find generic acknowledgments and tokens of appreciation are sufficient for smaller or irregular donors, those same organizations need to cultivate relationships with larger, more regular donors. Each donor has different incentives for giving to an organization and will also likely have different preferences for recognition. On one extreme, a donor may wish to have buildings named after themselves or family members; on the other extreme, a donor may wish to remain anonymous and only receive private acknowledgment and thanksgiving (Patel, S.; McKeever, B., 2014).

Combined with framing problems in light of their solutions, the use of stewardship strategies helps nonprofit organizations combat donor fatigue. While Patel, et al's (2014) study demonstrates most nonprofits do not use these strategies effectively, at least in their online communications, those who do correlate with higher revenues/donations. Nonprofits who adopt these strategies, even if they do not directly lead to increased revenue, will nonetheless appear more professional, which itself may help increase donations. Still, fundraisers would do well to stay focused and remember that, unlike popular misconceptions, fundraising is not primarily concerned with financial contributions. The principal goal of the profession is to build strong relationships by developing trust and communicating honestly with donor publics (Waters, 2009).

Fortunately for nonprofit organizations, the use of stewardship strategies is not the only tool deemed effective in overcoming donor fatigue. As the Markowitz, et al (2013) study

indicated, three reasons leading to compassion fatigue can be minimized by framing. That study identified three main reasons for compassion fatigue: (1) as the proportion of victims helped decreases, so does the feeling of compassion; (2) as the number of victims identified increases, compassion decreases; and (3) the more a crisis turns into a "statistic," the less compassion people feel. The Markowitz, et al (2013) study, taken together with other studies referenced below, provides several methods of framing issues to help organizations address problems with donor fatigue. Here we will discuss three such approaches resulting from those studies. In most cases, all of these types of framing are possible for organizations to use in their promotion and discussion of philanthropic work. The three approaches discussed in detail immediately below include: (1) relying on proportion dominance; (2) stressing in-group connections; and (3) identifying a single victim.

*Proportion Dominance*

Again, the Markowitz, et al (2013) study stressed that as the proportion of victims helped decreases, so does the feeling of compassion. People are inclined to dismiss the absolute number of victims helped, instead focusing on the percentage of victims helped. This phenomenon or bias is referred to as proportion dominance.

Earlier in this chapter, the notion of affect and affective feelings was discussed. As a reminder, the term affect relates to the positive and negative feelings that combine with reasoned analysis to guide our judgments, decision, and actions. Affective feelings and responses occur rapidly and automatically. Because of this affective thinking, the proportion of lives saved often carries more weight than the absolute number of lives saved when potential donors evaluate interventions (Slovic, 2007). This study indicates people contribute more to a cause that saves 150 lives when the campaign is framed as helping a high percentage (e.g., 98%, 90%, or even

85% of a population) versus framing the help as saving an absolute number of 150 lives. An earlier study showed marked sensitivity to relative savings. Interventions were higher when described as helping a larger proportion versus a smaller proportion of a population in need, even when the absolute number of people helped was greater with the smaller proportion (Bartels, 2006).

Perhaps most surprisingly, Kleber, J.; Dickert, S.; Peters, E.; Florack, A. (2013) actually discovered through three separate studies that proportion dominance was most significant among numerate people. Fundraisers should keep this finding in mind since numeracy in the study was defined as the ability to comprehend and apply numerical information (Kleber, et al, 2013). Put simply, those who we might assume have higher intelligence, and would thus understand that more people could be helped even when the percentage of the total population is lower, are actually more inclined to donate to a cause when fewer people are helped, but the proportion of the population of people in need is greater. Several other studies corroborate these findings.

For example, the Markowitz, et al (2013) study, which focused on issues related to environmentalism, surveyed undergraduate students to determine their willingness to help by volunteering either time or money to help restore wood stork breeding platforms. In one survey the population was 1,100 storks, while another included a population of 25,000 storks. The results indicated that compassion faded when the proportion of storks helped decreased. In other words, students were more likely to help the population of 1,100 storks when the same total number of storks were being helped because the proportion being helped by them was greater. Notably, however, this phenomenon only existed among non-environmentalists. Those who self-indicated as environmentalists did not discriminate based upon the proportion of storks helped. This bolsters the previously discussed findings of Kinnick, et al (1996); namely, a core audience

is less likely to experience compassion fatigue. Because of their high interest and association with a cause, the core audience is not impacted by compassion fatigue in the same way as those only loosely identified with the same message. Organizations, therefore, need to distinguish between these two audiences, and should understand their core supporters are likely not indicative of the larger population of donors. Although the core donors may not experience fatigue, the broader audience of donors will, and steps should be taken to minimize that impact.

The Erlandsoon, A.; Bjorklund, F.; Backstrom, M. (2017) study also showed the positive impact of stressing proportion dominance on donations. In surveying participants, this study actually told participants that their selections would lead to real money being donated to the selected cause. This approach leads to even stronger support for proportion dominance than the initial Markowitz, et al (2013) study since it not only measures stated intent, but actual contributions being made. Furthermore, in addition to choosing a project, participants answered questions about why they chose one project versus the other. Study participants were given various scenarios, some including children or seniors, and others including animals. As with the Markowitz, et al (2013) study, Erlandsoon, et al (2017), found the proportion dominance approach led to higher contributions because participants felt they made a bigger impact with their donations to those causes.

Based upon the findings of Slovic (2007), Kinnick, et al (1996), Kleber, et al (2013), Markowitz, et al (2013), and Erlandsoon, et al (2017), organizations should find ways to stress proportion dominance in their approach to fundraising. Too often, organizations think that showing how big a problem is will lead to an emotional response in donors triggering them to donate to their cause. This approach may actually have the opposite effect of that. While a great number of people may initially give rather nominal amounts to large humanitarian crises

receiving significant media coverage (e.g., hurricanes and other natural disasters; 9/11), in most cases donors will choose projects where a large proportion of the people impacted receive help. Similar to the stewardship approach mentioned previously in this chapter, organizations should stress the positive aspect of their message—the number of people helped.

In situations when an organization cannot stress the proportion—e.g., when the known population is large and/or the well-known proportion of those being helped is low— organizations still can help to overcome this proportion dominance bias. Specifically, organizations can point out this bias when meeting with prospective donors and soliciting funds. Bartels (2006) found that those who scored as rational thinkers were more likely to overcome the proportion dominance bias versus those who the study scored as experiential thinkers. While this approach of addressing the proportion dominance bias head-on will not necessarily help overcome that bias with more experiential thinkers, it could nevertheless help in soliciting donations from more rational thinkers when the situation makes it impossible to stress a high proportion of a population being helped.

*In-Group Recognition*

Another approach to framing messages that organizations can use to combat donor fatigue is stressing in-group connections between the people being helped and the donors. Being part of the "in-group" means having similarities with the people being helped, or being in the same "group" as them. Victims who are not members of the donor's in-group, even identified individuals, are likely to be processed at a more abstract level, evoking less empathic emotion (Kogut, T.; Ritov, I., 2007). Consequently, a prospective donor, especially one experiencing donor fatigue, is more likely to contribute to a cause benefitting an in-group member.

Erlandsoon, et al (2017) tested this approach in several ways. For example, the Swedish students surveyed demonstrated an in-group bias towards other Swedish people being helped. When choosing between helping their fellow Swedes versus helping Canadians in a similar situation, they were more likely to help Swedes. Similarly, young people showed a preference towards helping other young people instead of helping the elderly. Moreover, human beings demonstrated more willingness to help fellow human beings rather than animals.

Kogut, T., Ritov, I. (2007) reported similar findings. That study included two experiments involving 235 university students. The first experiment examined the students' willingness to help tsunami victims in a foreign country. Information given to the students included the nationality of those being helped. The second experiment measured the willingness to contribute to life-saving treatment of sick children. As with the first experiment, the nationality of those being helped was known to study participants. Kogut, T., Ritov, I. (2007) found an increased willingness to help identified victims belonging to the respondent's in-group.

The phenomenon of contributing more to one's in-group is not isolated to ethnic or national ties. The strategy applies to other factors, including socio-economic status. In fact, research indicates the extremely wealthy tend to avoid causes involving the overtly poor and are much more likely to patronize organizations from which they, or members of their social class, can draw benefit (Sargeant, A., Woodliffe, L., 2007). In other words, donors are not necessarily as altruistic as we might hope.

While stressing the in-group bias may help mitigate donor fatigue in many situations, one caveat should be mentioned. In three experiments by Ritov, I.; Kogut, T. (2011), study participants were surveyed regarding inter-group conflict situations. For example, their first experiment dealt with the Israel-Palestine conflict. The study findings were clear. In adversarial

inter-group situations, identifying that the victim(s) was part of the adversary group actually increased generosity towards the adversary group, but decreased generosity towards a member of one's own group. This was especially true when the victim was a single, identified adversary. One possible explanation is the desire to appear unprejudiced. While organizations should keep in mind the general principle that in-group connections increase the likelihood and amount of donations, in situations where there is an ongoing conflict, helping an adversary harmed by a donor's in-group may actually be more beneficial.

*Identifying a Single Victim*

The final framing approach that has been shown to be effective in overcoming donor fatigue is identifying a single identified victim. This approach essentially gives a face to the charitable cause. Rather than framing an event or cause as a statistic to be overcome, identifying a single victim personalizes the situation. The approach of identifying a single victim often works because groups of people are perceived as more psychologically distant and are processed at a more abstract level than single individuals (Kogut, T., Ritov, I., 2007). Furthermore, as it relates to the proportion dominance bias discussed immediately above, an identifiable victim represents the highest possible proportion of a reference group (Small, D.; Loewenstein, G. Slovic, P., 2007). Moreover, this framing method may allow an organization to provide greater detail about one person and how much they can be or have been impacted by a charitable donation.

For example, consider a natural disaster such as a hurricane. The approach many organizations take in soliciting funds is to talk about the thousands—or even tens or hundreds of thousands—of people impacted. While this might spur initial donations due to likely news coverage and emotional reactions in donors, compassion fatigue will eventually settle in and

donations will decrease (Eckel, et al, 2007). Over the weeks and months ahead, the hurricane victims become a nebulous group, a statistic. Organizations continuing to work with hurricane victims can help combat donor fatigue by identifying a single victim and speaking about the hurricane's impact on them.

Markowitz, et al (2013) approached this single victim identification framing method in two different ways. The first part of their study surveyed students regarding their willingness to help volunteer either time or money. Participants were given two scenarios. The first group was shown a montage of polar bear pictures and facts about challenges facing their survival. The second group saw a picture of a single bear and the information presented was about that bear, who also received a name. Results indicated participants were more likely to help the single, identified bear more than the population of bears. Significantly, as with the proportion dominance aspect of the Markowitz, et al (2013) study mentioned above, those who self-identified as environmentalists did not statistically differ between their selections of the group versus the individual bear. Again, these results are not surprising since compassion fatigue exists primarily among those who do not intensely identify with a cause.

The second part of the Markowitz, et al (2013) study related to identifying a single victim showed even stronger evidence of the positive impact of this approach. This part of the overall study actually gave participants $5 for helping with the study. The $5 was given in $1 bills so participants could keep the money or contribute to the cause presented to them. Study participants received a letter asking them to contribute either to help: (1) one named panda; (2) two named pandas; (3) eight named pandas. Results of the study showed compassion fatigue as the number of pandas helped increased. The single panda received the most contributions. Yet

again, the study indicated self-identified environmentalists did not have compassion fatigue. This

phenomenon only existed among non-environmentalists.

The approach of identifying a single victim also applies when the victim is a human

being. Vastfjall, et al's (2014) three experiments corroborate the findings of Markowitz, et al

(2013). Specifically, Vastfjall, et al (2014) conducted three experiments. The first study was

broken into two segments: one in which the stated intent to donate was measured and another

when real monetary donations were used. In both cases, donations decreased when the identified

victim(s) went from one victim to two victims.

The second study within this experiment went a step further. Namely, not only did the

study measure the actual contributions to the victim(s), but also measured physiological effects

in the study participants (e.g., activity in the facial Zygomaticus Major). The participants were

able to choose between one, two, or eight victims. As with the first study, Vastfjall, et al (2014)

found a decrease in donations when they identified more than one victim.

In the third and final part of their study, Vastfjall, et al (2014) again compared donations

to a single victim versus multiple victims. In this third and final study, however, participants

were asked to choose to donate between: (1) a single child; (2) two unrelated children; (3) eight

unrelated children; (4) two related children; (5) eight related children. The experiment showed

that while the single identifiable victim still received the most support, donations increased when

multiple children were described as a coherent unit—in this case, as a family. The connection

between an individual and the family helps donors process the situation more concretely, and

less abstractly than if the people are part of a larger, unconnected statistic.

While the notion of identifying a single victim has been shown to be beneficial by

multiple studies, a few brief caveats regarding the framing approach should be mentioned.

Specifically, a study by Kogut, T., Ritov, I. (2007) found an increased willingness to help identified victims is largely confined to situations in which the target of help is a single victim belonging to the respondent's in-group. Furthermore, the more recent Erlandsoon, et al, study (2017) found no statistical significance between participants supporting a cause with a single, identified victim versus a cause not identifying a specific victim. The study authors were surprised by this finding, speculating that when faced with only two competing choices in an artificial environment, participants made a more rational and less emotional decision. This theory regarding an emphasis on more rational thinking makes sense in light of the deflating results of an earlier experiment. Namely, Small, et al (2007) found that rationally informing donors about the bias towards a single identifiable victim caused them to react by decreasing donations to the single victim. Unfortunately, however, in reaction to that decrease, donors did not materially increase their donations to the larger, non-affective target of statistical victims.

While identifying a single victim may help nonprofit organizations in fundraising efforts, the approach should not be overemphasized at the expense of the other framing approaches discussed in this paper. Rather, the approach of identifying a single victim is likely best used as a supplement to the framing methods of in-group identification and the proportion dominance approach (Kogut, T., Ritov, I., 2007) (Erlandsoon, et al, 2017) (Small, et al, 2007).

*Fundraising Best Practices*

In this second chapter different framing approaches have been discussed to help alleviate donor fatigue. While these approaches certainly help organizations combat donor fatigue, nonprofits should not forget to follow some basic best practices. Combined with some of the framing approaches previously mentioned, these best practices of fundraising help insulate nonprofit organizations from the phenomenon of donor fatigue and emphasize the best long-term

strategies to maintaining positive relations with the donor public. Below are four suggestions organizations can use to supplement their stewardship and framing approaches mentioned above (Sargeant, A., Woodliffe, L., 2007).

One best practice is the use of "seed" money. This approach means collecting a percentage of targeted donations (the "seed" money) "behind the scenes." It involves contacting potential big donors, normally with whom an organization already has a relationship, and having a percentage of targeted funds committed before launching a fundraising campaign for the general public. In a large study of nonprofit best practices, increasing seed money from 10% to 67% of the campaign goal produced a nearly sixfold increase in contributions, both through more individuals contributing, and larger sizes of gifts (Sargeant, A., Woodliffe, L., 2007). One likely reason for this impact relates to the proportion dominance bias discussed previously. People want to ensure their donated dollars actually make an impact. When they see a fundraising campaign as being highly successful, they know their money will go to good use. Furthermore, knowledge that others are contributing legitimizes contributions. As Sargeant, et al (2017) found, showing prospective donors a fictitious list of previous donors led to both more frequent and higher donations.

Another best practice is taking advantage of matching contributions (Sargeant, et al, 2017). Using this approach, an organization frequently solicits a commitment from a donor(s) with whom they have a previous relationship. The donor(s) commits a certain amount of money to a fundraising campaign contingent upon the organization collecting the same amount of money (i.e. matching that amount) from the general public. For example, if the organization wants to raise $100,000 for a project, they might find regular donors who commit to $50,000 contingent upon the general public also giving $50,000. Alternatively, the organization may get

that same $50,000 committed and advertise to the general public that their contribution will be

matched dollar-for-dollar *up to* $50,000. Organizations using this approach may stress that a

donation has a double impact because the donated dollar will be matched by others. Finally,

organizations might use this matching contribution approach by noting that many employers

having a matching contribution program and will give a certain percentage of their donated

dollar to any 501(c)3 if they donate through their paycheck from their employer. Eckel, et al

(2007) noted that the presence of a matching contribution increased significantly the probability

of giving. Moreover, as the matching offer increased, so did the probability of giving.

       Yet another best practice used by nonprofits in soliciting donations is to offer refunds

should the fundraising threshold not be met. While refunds do not appear to affect donor

participation rates they do produce significantly larger gift sizes (Sargeant, A., Woodliffe, L.,

2007). Again, people want to ensure their donated dollars actually make an impact. Offering a

refund shows prospective donors that if an organization is not going to be effective—i.e. if their

fundraising goal is unsuccessful—they will return the donors' money so they can allocate it to a

more effective cause. This approach also shows the organization exudes confidence and knows it

can successfully help the cause(s) to which it is committed.

       The final best practice nonprofits should use is emphasizing preferred donation outlets

(Sargeant, A., Woodliffe, L., 2007).  As Waters (2009) stressed, it is important for organizations

to have message points that stress preferred donation outlets and can be tailored to specific

situations. Referencing these channels during media interviews and mentioning them in

organization communications can aid in the success of fundraising relief efforts. This approach is

especially helpful in large nonprofit organizations, in part because it can help donors tailor gifts

that best match their in-group or proportion dominance biases. For example, if an international

humanitarian relief organization offers donors the possibility of directing funds to specific areas

around the globe, they are likely to increase donations. An American with Asian ancestry is more

likely to give and to give a larger dollar amount if they can direct funds to relief efforts in Asia

versus simply giving that money to the organization's general fund (Kogut, T., Ritov, I., 2007)

(Erlandsoon, et al, 2017). Offering these types of options to donors can significantly increase the

total amount donated. When organizations engage in this approach, they must ensure their

internal controls closely monitor the use of funds and that donated dollars are used as directed by

the donors. Again, the four basic approaches outlined in this section are fundraising best

practices and can easily be used along with the more detailed and complex framing approaches

and stewardship strategies outlined in this second chapter.

*Summary*

Research establishes the phenomenon of donor fatigue can negatively impact nonprofit

organizations (Kinnick, et al, 1996). While often confused or intermingled with an expenditure

substitution or market saturation (Reinstein, 2009), donor fatigue itself is real. Complicating the

situation further, studies show the fatigue does not always behave as predicted. As a general rule,

communication about charitable issues follows a U-shaped curve: too little communication

means potential donors remain unaware, but too much communication may lead to donor fatigue

(Kinnick, et al, 1996). However, this general rule should not be viewed as a "one size fits all"

approach. For some of the most intensely-interested donors, heavy media coverage corresponds

with no measurable negative impact (Markowitz, et al, 2013). On the other hand, certain groups

of donors avoid all forms of communications when they report fatigue on a certain issue. No

amount of media coverage will impact them because they avoid it altogether (Kinnick, et al,

1996).

In combatting donor fatigue, nonprofits cannot focus on either extreme. The focus should remain on the largest group, the donors who will change their behaviors and habits of charitable giving based upon an organization's approach. Fortunately for nonprofit organizations, extensive research into donor fatigue indicates several tools can be used to combat the problem. Specifically, donor fatigue may be mitigated by following five framing methods and strategies discussed above: (1) implementing stewardship strategies (Patel, S.; McKeever, B., 2014); (2) taking advantage of the proportion dominance bias (Markowitz, et al, 2013) (Slovic, et al, 2007) (Kleber, et al, 2013) (Kinnick, et al, 1996) (Erlandsoon, et al, 2017); (3) stressing in-group connections (Kogut, T., Ritov, I., 2007) (Erlandsoon, et al, 2017) (Sargeant, A., Woodliffe, L., 2007); (4) identifying a single victim (Kogut, T., Ritov, I., 2007) (Small, et al, 2007) (Markowitz, et al, 2013) (Vastfjall, et al, 2014); and (5) following fundraising best practices (Sargeant, A., Woodliffe, L., 2007) (Eckel, et al, 2007) (Waters, 2009).

## CHAPTER 3

## Synthesis and Discussion

*Synthesis and Key Findings*

The purpose of the study was to conduct a comprehensive literature review examining current research focused on better understanding the phenomenon of donor fatigue and its impact on nonprofit organizations. Furthermore, this study offers suggestions from the literature to help organizations combat and mitigate donor fatigue. This chapter is organized into three main sections, including: 1) a synthesis and key findings, 2) implications for practice, 3) suggestions for future research, and 4) concluding comments.

Donor fatigue can negatively impact nonprofit organizations, but several tools can be used to combat the problem. Specifically, donor fatigue may be mitigated by following five framing methods and strategies: (1) implementing stewardship strategies (Patel, S.; McKeever, B., 2014); (2) framing to take advantage of the proportion dominance bias (Markowitz, et al, 2013) (Slovic, et al, 2007) (Kleber, et al, 2013) (Kinnick, et al, 1996) (Erlandsoon, et al, 2017); (3) framing to stress in-group connections (Kogut, T., Ritov, I., 2007) (Erlandsoon, et al, 2017) (Sargeant, A., Woodliffe, L., 2007); (4) using a single identified victim to frame a situation (Kogut, T., Ritov, I., 2007) (Small, et al, 2007) (Markowitz, et al, 2013) (Vastfjall, et al, 2014); and (5) implementing fundraising best practices (Sargeant, A., Woodliffe, L., 2007) (Eckel, et al, 2007) (Waters, 2009). Below are some practical examples of how an organization might implement these approaches.

*Implications for Practice*

As stated previously in the second chapter, organizations can communicate the same message using different approaches, with varying degrees of effectiveness. Recognizing that

donor fatigue can lead to decreased contributions to their mission, organizations should dedicate time and effort to ensuring they properly frame their communications to minimize or overcome donor fatigue. Moreover, organizations should be sure to develop stewardship strategies and follow fundraising best practices at all times.

Specifically, organizations should:

(1) Develop and communicate key stewardship strategies;

(2) Focus on solutions to the problems they address instead of emphasizing the problems themselves;

(3) Frame their solutions in light of the proportion of victims being helped;

(4) Stress the similarities or interconnectedness (i.e. "in-group") between victims and donors;

(5) Identify a single victim who is being or has been helped by the organization; and

(6) Implement strategies from fundraising best practices (e.g., seed money, refunds).

Any one of these approaches will help organizations combat and mitigate donor fatigue. Ideally, however, nonprofit organizations should combine as many of these framing methods and strategies as possible within their communications and fundraising efforts to minimize the negative impact of donor fatigue. To help with this overarching framing approach and strategy, an example below is provided to illustrate how an organization might operationalize these strategies and best practices.

*Example Scenario*

A hurricane recently hit the Gulf Coast. Organization A, which is known for helping provide relief to families after natural disasters, can plan their approach to this situation using the strategies and tools mentioned above. Organization A should:

(1) Develop and communicate key stewardship strategies.

This first approach should be done *before* the disaster strikes. In other words, it should be an ongoing part of Organization A's strategy. Organization A's website should provide their annual report, detailing success stories and showing donors how money contributed was spent towards the relief efforts previously advertised. Ideally, Organization A should have active accounts on social media, providing videos and interactive media highlighting their positive impact. Furthermore, Organization A should be constantly nurturing relationships with donors. These general strategies lay the groundwork for Organization A's detailed approach to this specific relief effort.

(2) Focus on solutions to the problems they address instead of emphasizing the problems themselves.

In terms of framing their approach to the specific hurricane, Organization A should ensure that all communications emphasize that while the hurricane displaced thousands of residents, their organization will relieve this problem and provide solutions to the victims. Organization A can detail specific and concrete solutions provided. For example, instead of mentioning the victims are temporarily homeless, Organization A simply emphasizes that housing is being provided. Instead of noting victims do not have enough food, Organization A can stress how many meals they are providing. The key in this approach is to provide the donors hope that their contributions are making a difference and avoiding conjuring feelings of hopelessness, or painting the victims as merely a "statistic."

(3) Frame solutions in light of the proportion of victims being helped.

In detailing solutions to the problems caused by the natural disaster, Organization A should stress that they can help a large proportion of the affected population. Specifically, Organization A should frame their solutions in light of the population they can most effectively

help. For example, although the hurricane may have displaced 1 million people in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, Organization A should focus on an area where they are able to help the largest percentage of victims. Assume Organization A focuses on a specific city, Biloxi, Mississippi. Rather than framing the population of hurricane victims as 1 million in total, Organization A should communicate that they can help approximately 90% of the victims in Biloxi, or approximately 90,000 residents of the 100,000 displaced by the hurricane. This framing method leverages the proportion dominance bias shown to impact contributions in studies referenced in the second chapter. Emphasizing a large proportion of a specific population being helped likely increases a donor's willingness to contribute as they naturally feel they are making a larger impact.

For the next portion of this example, two points can be combined.

(4) Stress the similarities or interconnectedness (i.e. "in-group") between victims and donors; and

(5) Identify a single victim who is being or has been helped by the organization.

Organization A should identify a single victim who has been helped by their services. In this respect, Organization A does not necessarily need to focus on a current victim, but could identify a previous hurricane victim helped by them. The identified person should share their success story and speak of the ways Organization A helped them when they were displaced. The victim should be chosen so the most number of people can associate with the victim (i.e. be seen as part of their "in-group"). One example would be a middle-class mother. In a situation such as this, most anyone can identify with the middle-class mom. Even for male donors, they obviously have a mother, so identifying a mother can help combat any compassion fatigue they might feel. The fact that the woman is middle-class will resonate with the largest number of donors as well.

The identification of this middle-class mom fulfills both the identifying a single victim and in-group aspects of the framing approaches most likely to help combat donor fatigue.

As a side note, I have personally experienced the power of identifying individuals as examples. Two examples from my own work in the field of philanthropy highlight this approach. The first example relates to racial prejudice. I have met many people who speak in a prejudicial manner against black people. However, when confronted with an individual black person, these same people treat him or her as an individual, often going out of their way to help the person and speaking positively about their characteristics. The second example relates to homeless people. I have heard people speak negatively about the homeless population as a whole. As with the situation above related to race, however, they treat an individual homeless person with whom they come into contact as an individual. They provide that person with cash or other forms of assistance, speak with them compassionately, and defend them against others who express bias. I share these personal experiences to highlight the notion that dealing with a single, identified person helps human beings show compassion. It is easy for us to vilify a group or stereotype, but we are much more likely to show compassion when we have a single, identified person in front of us.

With respect to framing to stress the in-group connection, many nonprofit organizations will struggle. Local, humanitarian organizations can most easily stress in-group associations because of the interconnectedness and interdependence of local communities. Still, other nonprofits can find in-group connections. Environmental causes, including issues related to animals, can stress how we are all part of this unique planet earth. In the case of providing foreign aid, organizations may stress the common bonds of humanity. If religious, cultural, or linguistic similarities exist between a population being served and donors, organizations should

stress these similarities. The more an organization can do to connect donors and recipients to the same in-group, the more likely they are to overcome the phenomenon of donor fatigue.

(6) Implement strategies from fundraising best practices.

As noted in the second chapter above, several approaches may be taken or combined, including:

(a) "Seed" money. Leveraging the relationships nurtured from following the stewardship strategies outlined above, Organization A can find a lead donor(s) to advertise a high percentage of their desired funds as already committed or collected. For example, the organization may privately approach past large donors and solicit funds from them before advertising the fundraising to the general public. This approach encourages other donors to contribute to a "winning" and successful cause. If the organization can note that over 50% of their target contributions have been pledged prior to the campaign's official kickoff, other donors see incentive to contribute as well.

(b) Matching contribution. As with the seed money, this tactic leverages Organization A's relationships from their stewardship strategies mentioned above. A key donor(s)—someone with whom the organization has a previous relationship and has the ability to be a large donor— may commit to matching contributions, generally up to a certain amount. This helps other donors feel their contribution is being multiplied. In addition, Organization A should stress that donors' employers often match their contribution, again multiplying their own gift.

(c) Offering refunds. This approach assures donors that their contribution will make a positive impact. If the monies collected by Organization A are insufficient to meet their goals, the donor will have the opportunity to contribute to another organization whose efforts will produce the desired results of the donor. For example, if Organization A's fundraising campaign

seeks to raise $100,000, but they only reach $80,000, they can offer to refund donors. While refunds do not necessarily impact donor participation rates, they do produce significantly larger gift sizes (Sargeant, A., Woodliffe, L., 2007). This approach shows the organization exudes confidence and knows it can successfully help the cause to which it is committed.

(d) Preferred donation outlets. This approach allows donors to contribute to more specific causes. Generally, it is used by organizations like Organization A for this specific purpose. In other words, instead of contributing to Organization A's general fund, donors can direct their donations to this specific natural disaster. This often helps with point #4 above—identifying a donor's in-group. Some donors are more likely to give to a domestic relief effort versus an international effort. Allowing donors to contribute to a fund for this specific relief effort provides donors with flexibility for their contribution.

The example above employs all six strategies and framing approaches outlined in the literature review to help combat and mitigate donor fatigue. The example used stewardship strategies, focused on solutions to the problem, stressed the proportion of victims helped, emphasized the similarities between donors and victims, identified a single victim to "put a face" on the tragedy, and implemented fundraising best practices. By using all six of these strategies and framing methods concurrently, Organization A increases their chances of overcoming donor fatigue and successfully fulfilling their mission.

*Suggestions for Future Research*

Future research on the topic of donor fatigue would be helpful to organizations competing for limited philanthropic money in a media-saturated environment. The literature reviewed in this research paper provides a valuable roadmap for organizations to overcome, or at

least mitigate, this problem. However, in reviewing the literature, some major limitations to current research became apparent.

Specifically, current research on the topic of donor fatigue often confuses or intermingles this phenomenon with what was highlighted and separated above in the second chapter as expenditure substitution and/or market saturation. Again, expenditure substitution is essentially "robbing Peter to pay Paul." Each donor has a finite amount of philanthropic money to contribute. In certain cases, a donor may intensely identify with a project and temporarily decrease donations to Organization A in favor of increasing contributions to Organization B, who addresses this favored project. After this contribution, the same donor then returns to Organization A as before.

In this scenario, the donor did not experience fatigue. Rather, they simply substituted their philanthropic expenditure *temporarily*. Based on my review of the literature on donor fatigue, this phenomenon of expenditure substitution deserves more attention, research, and discussion. Organizations may interpret a decrease in donations from donor(s) as donor fatigue when, in fact, the problem is really expenditure substitution. Furthermore, organizations may falsely interpret market saturation with donor fatigue. Namely, an organization will eventually "top out" at a certain level of contributions. It does not mean the organization failed or is experiencing donor fatigue; it simply means funds are naturally limited and an organization cannot continue to grow infinitely. Further research distinguishing between donor fatigue and a saturation of the market would be helpful and beneficial.

In addition, much more research could be done to help segregate how donor fatigue impacts separate populations. For example, more research could be done to determine if men and women respond to donor fatigue differently. Another example would be different responses

based upon a donor's age and/or stage in life. Are older donors impacted differently than younger donors? Moreover, research differentiating between income levels would be helpful. Are high income/high net worth individuals affected similarly or differently than the general public? Finally, donor fatigue and its impact could be studied in more depth cross-culturally.

*Concluding Comments*

While compassion fatigue was first used to explain the declining rate of emotional response to persistent stimuli in the medical or helping professions, the phenomenon has more recently been proven to negatively impact charitable and humanitarian organizations with respect to their donations. Unfortunately, with repeated exposure to social problems, the general public often becomes numb towards helping resolve these issues and may eventually completely "tune out" the message. Fortunately, organizations can overcome this donor fatigue by employing key strategies and framing methods as part of their messaging. As outlined above, organizations adopting the strategies are empowered to reach, engage, and sustain donor contributions and relations. When used simultaneously, these framing approaches and strategies offer organizations an opportunity to defeat donor fatigue, and efficiently and effectively implement their organization's mission.

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