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I give a dime if you do, too! The influence of descriptive norms on perceived impact, personal involvement, and monetary donation intentions

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Abstract

Individual donations are the main source of income for charitable organizations. This study aims to understand whether, when, and how descriptive norms can be used to motivate individual monetary donations. Our findings challenge previous literature about the influence of descriptive norms on donation intentions by shedding light on the process of their influence. Studying 288 respondents, we found that descriptive norms do influence donation intentions and this interaction is mediated by perceived impact as well as personal involvement. Beneficiary responsibility, however, did not emerge as a significant moderator of the process. Our results guide managerial decisions of charitable organizations to inform their professional practice and help them increase individual donations.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the world has faced a range of environmental and refugee crises—further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic—which demonstrated the crucial role and importance of charitable organizations for society. These entities provide relief to geographically displaced populations, minorities and the poor, the disabled, as well as to abandoned adults and children. Charities' actions span a wide range of activities that promote health and education, eliminate animal neglect, cruelty, and abuse, in addition to contributing to easing environmental issues. To fund their work, charitable organizations largely rely on individual donations, representing up to 80% of all giving (e.g., Giving USA, 2018). Therefore, in these uncertain times, when each donation counts more than ever before, it is crucial to make individual donors a central focus for the fundraising efforts and understand their donation intentions and drivers.

Scholars have identified numerous drivers of charitable donations (Smeets et al., 2015). Besides context (Smeets et al., 2015), demographics (gender, age, level of income or educational, cultural

background, etc.) (Wunderink, 2002), and situational characteristics (severity and media coverage of disasters) (Zagefka et al., 2011), one of the most important antecedents of donations are social norms (e.g., Lay et al., 2020; Martin & Randal, 2008; McAuliffe et al., 2017; Shang & Croson, 2009; Siemens et al., 2020). Social norms are group-based situation-specific standards of appropriate attitudes and behaviors (McDonald & Crandall, 2015; Smith et al., 2012). These norms are categorized as injunctive (*what others approve of*) and descriptive (*what others actually do*) (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1990; Manning, 2009; Rimal & Real, 2003). They impose social pressure on potential donors to behave in a certain manner and dictate what kind of attitude and behavior is appropriate (Cialdini et al., 1990).

On the one hand, the influence of injunctive norms on donation behavior has been widely studied (e.g., Clowes & Masser, 2012; Grunert, 2018; McAuliffe et al., 2017; Raihani & McAuliffe, 2014; Wong & Chow, 2018). On the other hand, the effect of the descriptive norms is under-investigated (Agerström et al., 2016). Moreover, the literature that does investigate this construct is inconclusive. Some researchers have found that descriptive norms significantly

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influence donation behavior (e.g., Martin & Randal, 2008; McAuliffe et al., 2017; Shang & Croson, 2009), while others have failed to do so (e.g., Raihani & McAuliffe, 2014; Shang & Croson, 2009; Smith & McSweeney, 2007). Besides, to the best of our knowledge, none of the previous studies have addressed the process through which descriptive norms may influence donation intentions and behavior. Therefore, in this study, we address these gaps by uncovering how descriptive norms influence monetary donation intentions to charitable organizations.

We believe the incongruity of previous literature appeared due to the indirect influence of descriptive norms on donation intentions. In other words, their relationship is likely moderated and/or mediated by other variables. Therefore, the overarching aim of this study is to further investigate the crucial role that descriptive norms play in affecting donation intentions more holistically by considering potential indirect effects. Specifically, we seek to understand not only *whether* descriptive norms matter but also *how* they matter in the charity context. The study thus poses three research questions: (a) whether descriptive norms influence donation intentions; (b) whether perceived impact and personal involvement mediate the influence of descriptive norms on donation intentions; and (c) whether beneficiary responsibility moderates the influence of descriptive norms on donation intentions. The study furthermore aims to clarify the possible reasons for the inconsistency in the current scholarship and bridge the contradicting literature on the influence of descriptive norms on donation intentions. Moreover, findings can guide managers of charitable organizations seeking to increase private donations.

The article is organized as follows. First, the review of the literature on social norms, perceived impact, personal involvement, and beneficiary responsibility will be presented, together with the hypotheses. Then, the methodology of the study will be described, by providing information about the conceptual model, participants, and the measurements. Furthermore, the data will be analyzed using the SPSS PROCESS macro by Andrew F. Hayes (Hayes, 2017; Hong & Li, 2020; Rockwood & Hayes, 2020). Next, the findings will be critically discussed and connected to the previous literature. Finally, the conclusions will be provided, together with the theoretical and practical implications, as well as limitations and future research suggestions.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

This study aims to investigate the crucial role that descriptive norms play in affecting donation intentions, by answering the following research questions: (a) whether descriptive norms influence donation intentions; (b) whether perceived impact and personal involvement mediate the influence of descriptive norms on donation intentions; and (c) whether beneficiary responsibility moderates the influence of descriptive norms on donation intentions. To do that, the review of the literature is presented next and hypotheses are developed.

2.1 | Effect of descriptive norms on donation intentions

The Social Norms Approach (SNA) divides social norms and group-based situation-specific standards (McDonald & Crandall, 2015; Smith et al., 2012), and categorizes them into injunctive and descriptive (Perkins, 2003). Social norms might be favorable, that is, supportive of attitude or behavior, or unfavorable, that is, unsupportive of attitude and behavior. Deutsch and Gerard (1955) explain that individuals conform to norms in order to be accepted by the group (normative social influence) or to receive guidance on a correct course of action (informational social influence). Since injunctive norms describe what other people approve or disapprove of, and impose social pressure to behave or not, they follow the pathway of the normative social influence (Göckeritz et al., 2010). Descriptive norms describe what an individual believes others do in a specific situation and inform about affective or adaptive behavior in a particular context (Cialdini et al., 1990; Smith et al., 2012). Thus, descriptive norms are often used both as normative and informational (Göckeritz et al., 2010). As such, these two sets of norms have independent and distinct influence (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1990; Manning, 2009; Rimal & Real, 2003).

Although researchers have studied the influence of social norms in many different contexts, empirical evidence about the influence of descriptive norms on donation intentions and behavior is still inconclusive. Martin and Randal (2008), for example, show that donation boxes with higher bills already in them harness larger donation amounts. Similarly, Shang and Croson (2009), Croson et al. (2009), and McAuliffe et al. (2017) find that reminding people of past donors' large donations can increase their monetary donation amounts. Contrary to these scholars, Raihani and McAuliffe (2014) found that in Dictator Game,¹ signaling descriptive norms did not change respondents' charitable giving. Furthermore, Shang and Croson (2009) uncovered that descriptive norms only influenced new donors—but not more experienced donors—who learned that the previous donor had contributed an unusually large sum. Finally, Smith and McSweeney (2007) did not find descriptive norms to be predictive of charitable giving intentions.

To sum up, in most cases, descriptive norms do influence donation intentions. However, sometimes, this influence is not there. Thus, we believe the relationship is likely mediated and/or moderated by several other variables. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H1. The more favorable descriptive norms, the higher the donation intentions.

2.2 | The influences of perceived impact and personal involvement

2.2.1 | Perceived impact

The first possible route of descriptive norms' influence on donation intentions is through perceived impact, which represents the

perceptions of positive change that the charitable organizations make for the supported cause. The objective of every charitable organization is to make a difference for its beneficiaries. If the activities of charitable organizations make no impact, it defeats the idea of charity and wastes public donations. Therefore, donors often pay attention to impact when assessing whether the charity used their funds well and if they should continue donating money (Philanthropy Impact, 2021).

Empirical findings, furthermore, support the argument that the higher the perceived impact of their action (i.e., donation), the more likely people are willing to help (Erlandsson et al., 2015). For example, Sargeant and Woodliffe (2007) found that motivation to help is lower when the overhead costs are perceived as high. Also, Cryder, Loewenstein, and Seltman (2013) concluded that when charitable campaigns approach their goals, it increases perceptions of the personal impact that donors make and results in increased donations. In another study, researchers found that receiving detailed information on how public donations are used increases their perceived impact, which ultimately results in higher donations (Cryder, Loewenstein, & Scheines, 2013). By donating to a specific charity and displaying appeals for it on various platforms, people declare trust in a charity and the decisions the organization makes, thus exhibiting descriptive norms. These norms administer informational influence and guide people to behave in the 'right' way in a specific situation (Göckeritz et al., 2010). In other words, friends and family donating to charities suggest to the individual that these people trust the charity to achieve its objective, thus making a real difference for society and increasing the perceived impact that donations make.

Besides, the theory of collective efficacy suggests that people use various sources of information, including descriptive norms, to form perceptions of a groups' capability to accomplish a given task (Goddard, 2001). Thus, it is reasonable to argue that the higher the perceptions of others donating to charitable organizations, the higher the perceptions of the collective efficacy of making an impact on the supported cause. Understanding the relevance of the collective efficacy perceptions, ImpactMatters.org, for example, highlights the collective nature of donating money and shows how many donations of \$25 should be pooled together for them to make a significant impact. In other words, when individuals perceive donation descriptive norms as favorable, it raises the perception that their donation, regardless of its size, will make an impact. In line with these theoretical considerations, we hypothesize the following:

H2. Perceived impact mediates the relationship between descriptive norms and donation intentions.

2.2.2 | Personal involvement

The second possible route of descriptive norms influencing donation intentions is through personal involvement. There are multiple definitions of personal involvement, and scholars use various terms, such as personal involvement (e.g., Prayag & Ryan, 2012), cause involvement (e.g., Bigné-Alcañiz et al., 2010), issue involvement

(e.g., Bae, 2008), and psychological involvement (e.g., Cao & Jia, 2017). However, most researchers agree that involvement is the degree to which individuals find the cause, issue, activity, product, or experience to be personally relevant (Celsi & Olson, 1988; Day et al., 1995; Grau & Folse, 2007).

Highly involved individuals form emotional bonds with the focal entity (Pretty et al., 2003), show attention towards it (Gross & Brown, 2008), and perceive it as important and critical (Thomsen et al., 1995). Moreover, research suggests that highly involved individuals process marketing content more diligently and with increased cognitive elaboration (Broderick et al., 2003; Roy & Cornwell, 2004). Although the application of personal involvement to charity context is rather limited, existing studies indicate that personal involvement leads to more favorable attitudes and higher donations or purchase intentions. For example, Hajjat (2003) found that the level of involvement moderates the effect of marketing content on attitudes and purchase intentions. Bae (2008) also found that issue involvement directly influences the intentions to register as donors. Highly involved individuals also regard their donations as being personally relevant, satisfying, and necessary (Bennett, 2009; Bennett et al., 2007; Bennett & Gabriel, 1999; Diamond & Gooding-Williams, 2002). Finally, Curtis et al. (2014) concluded that highly involved individuals perceive the missions of charities as important and are more likely to contribute than the less involved ones.

Individuals use their social context as a source of information and behavioral cues for evaluating their attitudes about the world around them, especially when the others around them share their beliefs on dimensions relevant to their information search (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). The sense of belonging to such reference groups has been shown to be congruent with people's decision-making (e.g., Bearden et al., 1989; Childers & Rao, 1992). The underlying mechanism that explains this dynamic resides in one's need for the psychological association. This association with a certain reference group is made in two possible ways: the individual either has a sense of kinship or resemblance with the reference group or the individual likes the group or what the group stands for (especially in the case of value expressive reference groups) (Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

Against this backdrop, living in social contexts suggestive of donations to charities, individuals are primed to interpret and think about the phenomenon in a particular way, which changes their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Underlying this influence of social context on attitudes, Forgas and Williams (2001) state that attitudes "can be regarded as social products to the extent that they are likely to be influenced by the norms" (p. 254). Social identification with the group can further reinforce the influence the social group information has on an individual's attitudes (Sherif & Hovland, 1961) and recent research shows that specific social identities influence charitable decisions (Bove et al., 2021; Chapman et al., 2020).

Moreover, according to Kelman's (1961) process of opinion change, as a result of socialization, individuals start developing a psychological need to conform to a set of shared norms and come to

appreciate the norm for its own sake (e.g., Bicchieri & Muldoon, 2014; Hechter & Opp, 2001; Kelman, 1961). Ultimately, social norms become part of the individuals' own value systems (Etzioni, 2000; Kelman, 1961) or personal norms. Based on these notions that descriptive norms may influence attitudes and shape personal norms, it is reasonable to argue that when descriptive norms are suggestive of charitable donations, individuals are likely to recognize the importance of the phenomenon, and seek and consume the information on charities, their work, and issues these organizations work to eliminate. In other words, these individuals become involved with the issue. Thus, we hypothesize:

H3. Personal involvement mediates the relationship between descriptive norms and donation intentions.

2.3 | The influence of beneficiary responsibility

Considering the situational cues, we believe the effect of descriptive norms can vary depending on the nature of charity, and specifically, the responsibility level of the beneficiary it supports. According to the attribution theory, the cause of specific events is attributed to an object, other, or self (Allred et al., 2014). The theory identifies three causal dimensions: locus, stability, and controllability. Locus is concerned with the origin of the cause, which can be internal or external; stability is the duration of a cause: lasting or temporal; while controllability refers to whether the outcome could have been prevented. All of these dimensions have psychological and behavioral consequences (Fishman & Husman, 2017). In the context of charity, for example, donors are more likely to make monetary donations to help the beneficiary if his or her problems are caused by external forces which they are unable to control (Allred et al., 2014). Multiple empirical studies support this phenomenon. Rudolph et al. (2004) found that respondents regard more highly and show more support for the victims who put maximum effort into preventing the negative consequences than the ones who put minimal effort. This ultimately results in helping maximum effort victims more than the minimum-effort ones. Similarly, Allred et al. (2014) found that victim responsibility plays an important part in a volunteer's willingness to help. Specifically, young adults are more likely to volunteer to help preteens who have contracted HIV from their parents rather than teenagers or adults who are likely to be infected with HIV through their intimate encounters. Although all three groups have the same problem, respondents felt less empathetic for those whose outcomes were, at least in large part, due to their own actions. Furthermore, Mulder et al. (2014) checked the helping behavior in a workplace and found that bullying victims held responsible for their plight receive less sympathy and help from their colleagues.

In conclusion, given the extant literature explored, the positive influence of favorable descriptive norms is negatively moderated by the beneficiary's level of responsibility. In other words, (potential) donors who perceive descriptive norms to be favorable and beneficiary responsibility high will have lower donation intentions than the

ones who perceive beneficiary responsibility to be low. Thus, our final hypothesis states:

H4. Beneficiary responsibility negatively moderates the positive relationship between favorable descriptive norms and donation intentions.

The overview of the study's hypotheses is depicted in the conceptual model below (Figure 1).

2.4 | Covariates

When testing our hypotheses, we controlled for two known predictors of donation intentions: attitude towards charitable organizations (Webb et al., 2000) and discretionary funds (Lay et al., 2020). Herzlinger (1996) identified four main categories of problems attributed to nonprofit and governmental organizations, which reduce the trustworthiness of charitable organizations and take a toll on public donations. The influence of attitudes towards charitable organizations on donation intentions and behavior has been empirically proven (e.g., Casidy et al., 2014; Gorczyca & Hartman, 2017; Zboja et al., 2020). In addition, we also expected discretionary funds to influence donation intentions. The influence of income and discretionary funds on charitable giving has also been proven by several studies (e.g., Gordon & Khumawala, 1999; Ostrower, 1997; Schlegelmilch et al., 1997).

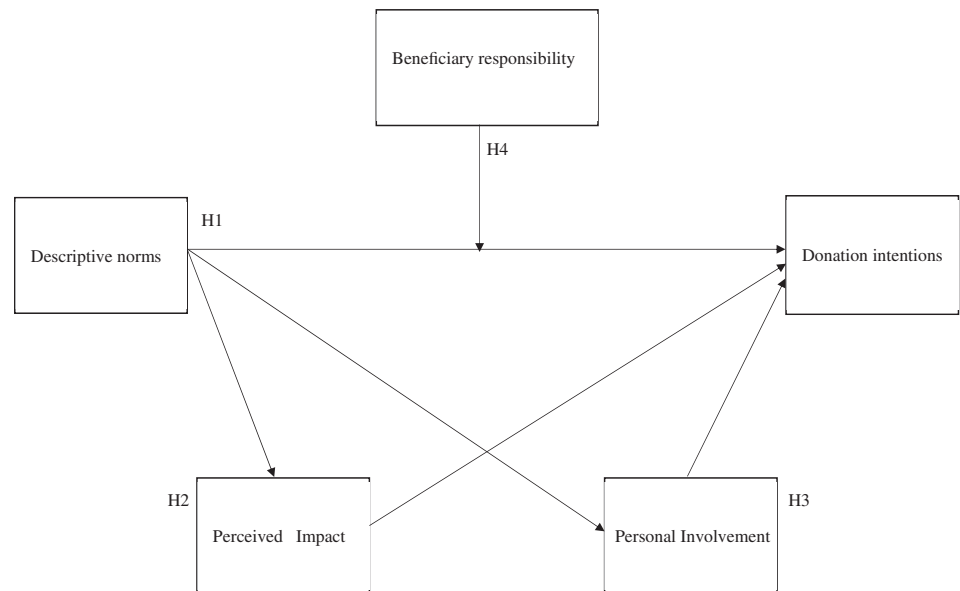
3 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

We conducted an online field study to investigate whether and, if so, how and when descriptive norms matter in the context of charity.

3.1 | Participants and procedure

We set out to empirically test the conceptual model by selecting the representative sample. The setting chosen is the UK, given that alongside Ireland, the UK ranks highest in Europe on the World Giving Index on rates of money donations, volunteering time, and helping strangers (Statista, 2020b). The UK is also ranked the highest in Europe overall in terms of monetary donations alone, with 68% of the population reported having donated to charity within the past 30 days (Charities Aid Foundation, 2018). Given the context of the global pandemic, these donation behaviors have been taken up in the first half of 2020, with £5.4 billion given to charity; that is £800 million more than within the same period in 2019 (Charities Aid Foundation, 2020). Moreover, the issue of homelessness is especially pressing in the UK, with 280,000 homeless in England in 2018/19 (Shelter, 2019), and 10.7 thousand people sleeping rough on a typical night, in London alone (Statista, 2020a). Against this backdrop, we expect to observe

FIGURE 1 Conceptual model of the study



robust results in giving behavior in this context, which we deem suitable to test our hypotheses. An additional advantage of selecting participants from the UK was that no translation of the research instrument was necessary, thus maintaining the validity of our scales by preserving their linguistic, functional, and metric equivalence (Schwartz et al., 2014).

We recruited respondents from the UK through a crowd-working marketplace, www.prolific.co (ProA). Collecting the data through crowd-working platforms, such as ProA, outperforms face-to-face data collection for several reasons. First, they allow speedy and cost-effective (Vargas et al., 2017) collection of high-quality data (Peer et al., 2017). Second, these platforms allow respondents to participate from home, thus eliminating lab- and researcher-related biases (Catania et al., 1996; Davis et al., 2010). Acknowledging these benefits, hundreds of scientific studies have recruited participants through ProA (Prolific, 2021). Finally, the pool of participants was filtered to meet the following specifications: (a) British by nationality; (b) Residing in Great Britain; and (c) Fluent in English. The participants received an hourly compensation of £7.50. The data was collected by using the online survey tool, SurveyMonkey.

3.2 | Measures and variables' operationalization

The questionnaire started with a brief introduction as follows:

Homelessness is a pressing issue in the United Kingdom. The Office of National Statistics UK estimates that there are over 320,000 people living on the streets in the UK in 2020.

Charitable organizations support people in the UK at every step of their recovery from homelessness.

Measurement items were adopted from the related literature and wording was adjusted to fit the context of the present study: descriptive norms (Lay et al., 2020), donation intentions (Ajzen, 2002), perceived

impact (Erlandsson et al., 2015), personal involvement (Göckeritz et al., 2010), beneficiary responsibility (Lee et al., 2014; Sperry & Siegel, 2013), attitude towards charitable organizations (Webb et al., 2000), and disposable funds (Lay et al., 2020), as detailed in Table 2. All constructs were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (i.e., 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Some of the items were negatively worded to prevent response bias. For analysis purposes, the negatively worded items were reverse-coded. Finally, the values of multi-item constructs were averaged to their composite scores.

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Descriptive statistics

Our resulting sample consisted of 288 responses: 70.1% of respondents were female (with two participants opting not to disclose their gender); the average age of our participants was 34.95 (min. = 18; max. = 81; mode = 28; Std. dev. = 13.26). Table 1 depicts the descriptive statistics for donation intentions (DONI), descriptive norms (DESN), perceived impact (PIM), personal involvement (PIN), beneficiary responsibility (BRE), attitude towards charitable organizations (ATC), and disposable funds (DIF).

4.2 | Data screening and assumptions testing

We conducted the outlier detection by using the Mahalanobis, Cook's, and leverage distance values. There were seven respondents identified as outliers by at least two of the markers. While evaluating these respondents, no issues related to data entry, measurement, or sampling were detected. Thus, we deemed them to be a natural variation within the population and decided against removing them from the dataset.

The correlation analysis results in Table 1 show overall mid-range coefficients between variables that are mostly significant. This confirms the additivity assumption. The histogram of standardized residuals and the P–P plot of regression standardized residuals showed that the data were normally distributed. The scatterplot of standardized predicted values revealed that the assumptions of homogeneity of variance and linearity were also met.

Collinearity assumptions testing indicated no multicollinearity concerns given that the variance inflation factors (VIFs) of our predictors were below 2.5 (i.e., DESN VIF = 1.478; PIM VIF = 2.474; PIN VIF = 1.547; BRE VIF = 1.062; ATC VIF = 2.252; DIF VIF = 1.55) (Belsley, 1984). The reliability analyses rendered satisfactory validity levels for all constructs with all scales scoring a Cronbach's alpha in the .745 and .927 range (as per Table 2 below).

4.3 | Analysis

Based on previous literature, we hypothesized that the more favorable DESN, the higher the DONI they leverage (H1). Additionally, we proposed two alternative routes of the DESN influencing DONI, through changing PIM of the donations (H2) and through PIN with a focal issue (H3). Lastly, considering the situational cues, we hypothesized that the influence of DESN on DONI is negatively moderated by BRE (H4). We tested the hypothesized moderations and mediation with the SPSS PROCESS macro version 3.5 (Hayes, 2017; Hong & Li, 2020; Rockwood & Hayes, 2020). The confidence level (CI) we consider in our analyses is 95%. We set the number of bootstrap samples to 50,000 for the percentile bootstrapped CI [there is no consensus as to how many bootstrap samples should be generated, except that more is better (Preacher & Hayes, 2008), to reduce the sampling error in the estimation of the endpoints of the CIs].

For the mediation analyses (H2 and H3), we used Model 4 (Hayes, 2017) (i.e., probing for interactions if $\alpha = .05$) that we specified and tested as a single multiple mediation model. This model specification will allow us to conclude if the pair of mediators (i.e., PIM and PIN) mediates the effect of DESN on DONI, conditional to the input of each mediator in the model thus avoiding biased parameter estimates (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

To empirically assess H2 and H3, we first compute the c path of the total effect on DONI, (whereby $c = c' + ab$), then the path coefficients for the.

a_1 and a_2 paths (i.e., the indirect effect DESN have on PIM and PIN, respectively), then for the b_1 and b_2 paths (i.e., the indirect effect PIM and PIN have respectively on DONI partialling out the effect of DESN), then for the c' path (i.e., the direct effect of DESN on DONI in the presence of the mediators). For the moderation analysis (H4), we used Model 1 (Hayes, 2017). For all four hypotheses, we used ATC and DIF as covariates. Below we present the unstandardized coefficients resulting from interactions for which we probed.

4.4 | Hypotheses testing

The total effect model shows a low overall fit ($F[3, 284] = 34.764$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .269$). The total effect of DESN on DONI (i.e., the c path) is moderate, positive, and significant ($b = 0.447$, $t[284] = 7.398$, $p < .001$). Herewith, we can confirm that H1 is supported. Both covariates show a low but positive and significant effect on DONI (ATC $b = 0.159$, $t[284] = 2.327$, $p = .021$; DIF $b = 0.089$, $t[284] = 2.041$, $p = .042$).

The effect DESN on PIM is very low, albeit significant, given $b = 0.098$, $t[284] = 2.298$, $p = .022$; the a_1 path is therefore significant. Conversely, the ATC covariate has a strong significant positive effect on PIM ($b = 0.708$, $t[284] = 14.644$, $p < .001$); in the case of the effect of DIF, given $b = 0.005$, $t[284] = 0.170$, $p = .865$, we cannot ascertain if the estimate is significantly different from 0 as we cannot reject the null hypothesis.

The effect that DESN have on PIN is moderate and significant given $b = 0.412$, $t[284] = 7.079$, $p < .001$; the a_2 path is therefore also significant. Neither covariates reached significance on this path (ATC $b = 0.080$, $t[284] = 1.221$, $p = .223$; DIF $b = -0.065$, $t[284] = -1.549$, $p = .122$).

The indirect effect model shows a moderate overall fit ($F[5, 282] = 37.916$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .402$). In the case of the indirect effects of PIM and PIN on DONI (controlling for DESN), results show a moderate positive significant relationship on path b_1 ($b = 0.367$, $t[282] = 4.416$, $p < .001$), as well as on path b_2 respectively ($b = 0.258$,

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix

	DONI	DESN	PIM	PIN	BRE	ATC	DIF	Mean	Std. dev.
DONI	1.000							3.51	1.419
DESN	.495**	1.000						3.819	1.335
PIM	.476**	.385**	1.000					4.961	1.235
PIN	.486**	.434**	.461**	1.000				3.707	1.309
BRE	−0.082	−.122*	−0.109	−.219**	1.000			3.34	1.433
ATC	.310**	.415**	.711**	.242**	−.118*	1.000		5.288	1.162
DIF	.193**	.192**	0.059	0.000	0.055	0.046	1.000	2.75	1.692

*Indicates that the correlation coefficient is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

**Indicates that the correlation coefficient is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

TABLE 2 Items measuring key constructs

Variables and items	Cronbach's α	α if item deleted	M	SD
Donation intentions (DONI) (Ajzen, 2002)	.882			
How likely do you think that in the next 4 weeks you will donate money to a charitable organization that helps homeless people?		.843	2.97	1.629
In the next 4 weeks, I will donate money to a charitable organization that helps homeless people.		.832	2.96	1.565
In the next 4 weeks, I would like to donate money to a charitable organization that helps homeless people.		.861	4.18	1.745
In the next 4 weeks, I do not intend to donate money to a charitable organization that helps homeless people. (R)		.91	3.81	1.965
In the next 4 weeks, I intend to donate money to a charitable organization that helps homeless people.		.836	3.26	1.693
Descriptive norms (DESN) (Lay et al., 2020)	.864			
My family members often donate to charitable organizations		.815	4.18	1.946
My family members often donate to homeless people		.830	3.26	1.760
My friends often donate to charitable organizations		.832	3.95	1.633
My friends often donate to homeless people		.828	3.35	1.53
Perceived impact (PIM) (Erlandsson et al., 2015)	.908			
I think by donating to a charitable organization that helps homeless people one can do a lot of good.		.858	5.12	1.309
I think by donating to a charitable organization that helps homeless people it seems possible to make a big difference.		.886	4.66	1.437
I believe the expected consequences of donating to a charitable organization that helps homeless people are very positive.		.862	5.11	1.282
Personal involvement (PIN) (Göckeritz et al., 2010)	.745			
How much do you think about the issue of homelessness in your day to day life?		.577	3.32	1.553
In the past, have you taken personal or political actions to address the issue of homelessness?		.694	2.8	1.886
How much do you care about the issue of homelessness?		.691	5.00	1.340
Beneficiary responsibility (BRE) (Lee et al., 2014; Sperry & Siegel, 2013)				
To what extent do you think homeless people are responsible for their problems?			3.14	1.268
Attitude towards charitable organizations (ATC) (Webb et al., 2000)	.924			
The money given to charities goes to good causes.		.904	5.15	1.273
My image of charitable organizations is positive.		.890	5.16	1.340
Charitable organizations have been quite successful in helping the needy.		.906	5.17	1.255
Charitable organizations perform a useful function for society.		.905	5.67	1.282
Discretionary funds (DIF) (Lay et al., 2020)				
I feel like I have a lot of money to spend each month on what I want.			2.75	1.692

$t[282] = 4.226, p < .001$). In this model, we cannot reject the null hypothesis for the effect the ATC covariate could have on DONI ($b = -0.122, t[282] = -1.449, p = .149$); however, DIF have a low positive significant effect on DONI ($b = 0.103, t[282] = 2.611, p = .010$).

The overall indirect effect of DESN on DONI given the mediator PIM is significant (Indirect PIM = 0.036, SE = 0.017, 95% CI [0.005, 0.073]). Similar results are shown for the indirect effect through the PIN mediator (Indirect PIN = 0.106, SE = 0.035, 95% CI [0.042, 0.180]). Neither CIs include 0, therefore mediation is present for both

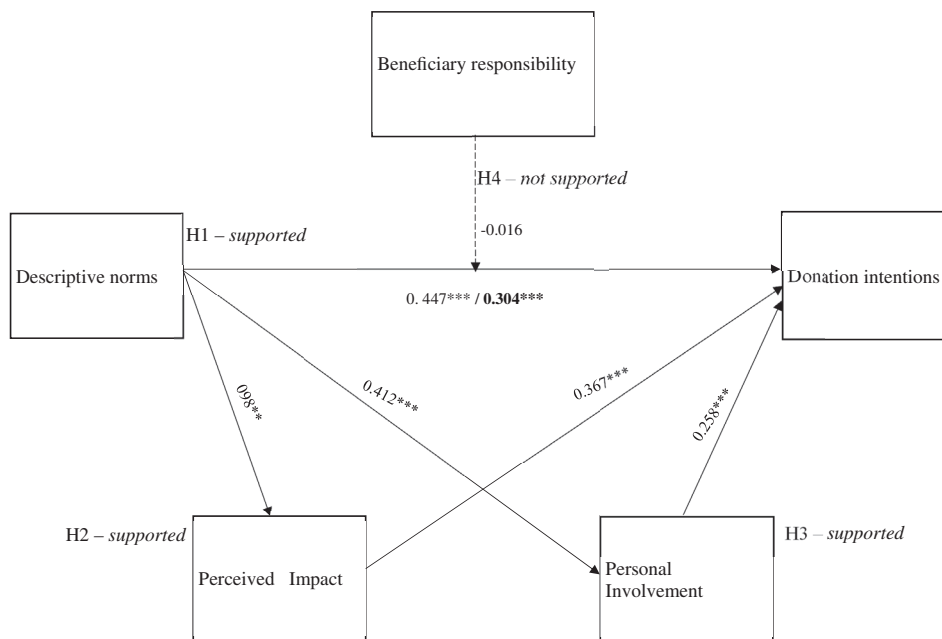


FIGURE 2 Results of the study: Total, direct, and indirect effects

PIM and PIN and both mediators transmit the effect of DESN to DONI.

While controlling for the mediators, the c' path describing the direct effect DESN have on DONI shows a moderate positive significant relationship ($b = 0.304$, $t[284] = 5.115$, $p < .001$).

Given the results above whereby (a) DESN significantly account for the variability in both PIM and PIN, (b) DESN significantly explain the variability in DONI, (c) both mediators significantly explain the variation in DONI while controlling for DESN, and (d) $c > c'$, we can confirm that H2 and H3 were empirically supported. At the same time, since DESN still significantly influenced DONI when controlling for the mediators, we can conclude the partial, rather than full, mediation.

To test the moderating effect BRE has on the relationship between DESN and DONI (H4), we conducted the moderation analysis with the PROCESS macro by using Model 1 (Hayes, 2017). This model shows a moderate overall fit ($F[5, 282] = 20.801$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .269$). As previously indicated, the results of the main effect confirm that DESN is a significant predictor of DONI ($b = 0.491$, $t[282] = 3.688$, $p < .001$), whereas when DESN increase, so do DONI. The interaction, however, is not significant ($b = -0.014$, $t[282] = -0.393$, $p = .820$); as such, we show that BRE does not have a moderation effect on the relationship between DESN and DONI. The covariate ATC shows a low but positive significant effect on DONI ($b = 0.161$, $t[282] = 2.318$, $p = .024$), whereas DIF has as a very low significant effect on DONI ($b = 0.090$, $t[282] = 2.053$, $p = .041$). We can conclude that H4 is not empirically supported.

Figure 2 depicts the resulted model with the total and indirect effects (where *** indicates significant coefficients at $p < .01$ level and ** depicts $p < .05$). The coefficients for H1 shown are the coefficient resulting from the moderation analyses, the first being the total effect, and the second being the direct effect (in bold), respectively.

5 | DISCUSSION

Prior empirical evidence of the link between the descriptive norms and donation intentions (or behavior) is rather shredded. Some researchers uncovered strong evidence of the relationship (e.g., Martin & Randal, 2008; McAuliffe et al., 2017; Shang & Croson, 2009), while others failed to do so (e.g., Raihani & McAuliffe, 2014; Shang & Croson, 2009; Smith & McSweeney, 2007). Our main objective, therefore, was to investigate not only *whether* but also *how* and *when* descriptive norms matter in the context of charity. Gaining a further understanding of the topic was important to bring clarity to the theory on descriptive norms while bridging the literature with contradicting findings.

In this study, we surveyed 288 participants. The results demonstrate a direct effect between descriptive norms and donation intentions ($b = 0.304$, $t[284] = 5.115$, $p < .001$). With every unit increase of descriptive norms, donation intentions increase by 0.304.

Our findings align with some of the previous empirical studies on the topic. For instance, with Martin and Randal's (2008) study, who found that manipulating descriptive norms significantly influenced donation composition, frequency, and value. Moreover, McAuliffe et al. (2017) found a similar pattern in kids, whose donation amounts varied per descriptive and injunctive norms that researchers provided to them. Furthermore, Shang and Croson (2009) found the partial influence of descriptive norms on donation intentions. Specifically, their results showed that descriptive norms only influenced new members, who were informed that the previous donor donated an unusually large sum.

At the same time, our findings contradict some of the previous studies (e.g., Raihani & McAuliffe, 2014; Smith & McSweeney, 2007). We believe the possible explanation could be the differences between the sample characteristics, timing, or the manipulation wording that the

previous researchers used. Raihani and McAuliffe (2014), for example, experimentally manipulated descriptive norms by formulating them using “you ought to” or “you should,” which could have caused the protest in participants, hence generating a counterproductive effect.

To check why descriptive norms sometimes do matter and other times do not, we conducted mediation and moderation analysis. Two alternative routes of influence were uncovered, through perceived impact (PIM) and personal involvement (PIN). Our results suggest that friends' and family members' donation behavior inform people's perceptions of the perceived impact of charitable organizations. Moreover, by observing how others behave, individuals often get involved with an issue themselves. Previous studies have identified perceived impact (e.g., Cryder, Loewenstein, & Scheines, 2013; Cryder, Loewenstein, & Seltman, 2013; Erlandsson et al., 2015; Grant, 2007; Grant et al., 2007; Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007) and personal involvement (e.g., Bae, 2008; Bennett, 2009; Bennett et al., 2007; Bennett & Gabriel, 1999; Curtis et al., 2014; Diamond & Gooding-Williams, 2002; Hajjat, 2003) as important influencers of the donation intentions. However, to the best of our knowledge, our study is the first empirical work that investigated and demonstrated the sizeable mediation effect of these variables between descriptive norms and donation intentions. At the same time, the relationship between descriptive norms and donation intentions was still significant, even after including the mediators in the model. This suggests that perceived impact and personal involvement only partially, rather than fully, mediate the relationship. Another important reason for the results could be the cultural background of the respondents. Taking cultural aspects into account, the UK scores 89 (out of 100) in terms of individualism (Item International, 2016) and 6.9 in terms of cultural tightness-looseness (Gelfand et al., 2011). In individualistic and culturally loose societies, the strength of the social norms is relatively weaker (vs. collectivistic and culturally tight societies) and tolerance of deviance is higher (Gelfand et al., 2011; Item International, 2016). Influence of descriptive norms on perceived impact and personal involvement, thus, may be significantly stronger in collectivistic (e.g., Japan: individualism score-46) (Item International, 2016) and culturally tighter countries than the UK (e.g., Pakistan: tightness score-12.9) (Gelfand et al., 2011).

Finally, we checked whether beneficiary responsibility negatively moderated the relationship between descriptive norms and donation intentions. In other words, whether individuals submit to descriptive norms when deciding to make monetary donations or not, does not change together with the changes in the responsibility levels of the beneficiary. The reason for this could be the cause itself: homelessness. It is possible that the respondents judged homeless people less strictly than they would have judged some other minorities, for example, people living with HIV. Being less judgmental towards respondents could have decreased the respondents' likelihood to use beneficiary responsibility as an excuse for not submitting to normative prescriptions. In addition, taking into account the propensity of donation behavior in the population (i.e., 68% of the population in the United Kingdom reported donation behavior within the past 30 days [Charities Aid

Foundation, 2018]), it could be argued that the tendency to consider BRE as a key negative factor is less salient.

6 | CONCLUSION

6.1 | Theoretical implications

Previous literature on descriptive norms and their influence on charity is limited (Agerström et al., 2016). Existing studies provide contradicting findings, with some supporting the notion that descriptive norms drive charitable donations (e.g., Martin & Randal, 2008; McAuliffe et al., 2017; Shang & Croson, 2009), and others suggesting otherwise (e.g., Raihani & McAuliffe, 2014; Shang & Croson, 2009; Smith & McSweeney, 2007). This study provides further evidence that descriptive norms do influence donation intentions. In addition, previous literature has investigated how perceived impact (e.g., Cryder, Loewenstein, & Scheines, 2013; Grant, 2007; Grant et al., 2007; Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007) and personal involvement (e.g., Bae, 2008; Bennett, 2009; Bennett et al., 2007; Bennett & Gabriel, 1999; Curtis et al., 2014; Diamond & Gooding-Williams, 2002; Hajjat, 2003) motivate donations. However, none of them has studied whether these two concepts can mediate the norm-intention link. Thus, our study is the first empirical investigation of the dynamics between descriptive norms, donation intentions, perceived impact, and personal involvement.

Moreover, we studied whether beneficiary responsibility enhances or mitigates the power of descriptive norms. Although the moderation effect was not found, our study took the first step and created the basis for future studies focusing on the relationship between these concepts.

Furthermore, we analyzed not only *whether* but also *how* descriptive norms influence donation intentions. Therefore, our findings bring a certain level of clarity to the relationship between descriptive norms in the context of charity, their perceived impact, personal involvement, and beneficiary responsibility.

6.2 | Managerial implications

In addition to theoretical contributions, the findings of this study have practical implications. Our study indicates not only that descriptive norms influence donation intentions, but also that they do it through perceived impact and personal involvement. Thus, we believe that charitable organizations should focus more on communicating supportive descriptive norms to the public, as this changes how potential donors perceive the impact of their donations and increases their involvement in the cause.

Specifically, charitable organizations should highlight the information on how many people have already donated, as that will increase the perceived impact of individual donations and ultimately increase donation intentions. One feasible strategy would be to communicate the usual behavior of individuals in the specific area, for

example, “60% of students in this university have supported this fundraising campaign” (Lay et al., 2020, p. 527). Learning that others have donated increases individuals’ perceptions that they are not alone in supporting the cause and that their donations (even minimal ones) will contribute to making an impact for the elimination of the issue at hand.

Our results also suggest the mediating effect of personal involvement. On this end, charitable organizations should encourage their donors to reach out to others and discuss their thoughts about the cause and their personal actions with them. This can be done by providing an opportunity for donors to share information on their donation behaviors through social media. Thus, charitable organizations should consider investing in leveraging social media platforms that are most commonly used by their target audiences and allow donors to share their voices. An example of such a strategy was the world-famous “ice bucket challenge,” which resulted in 2.4 million ice bucket videos on Facebook and 98.2 million dollars in donations for Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis Association (Agerström et al., 2016; Townsend, 2014). Doing so has the potential of bringing the attention of others to the issue and increasing their involvement, which also results in increased donation intentions.

In addition, our study suggests that beneficiary responsibility does not negatively moderate the relationship between descriptive norms and donation intentions. Therefore, charitable organizations could pay less attention to projecting or justifying the responsibility of the beneficiaries they support. Instead, they should focus more on using descriptive norms for motivating donations.

In conclusion, given the increasing number of charitable organizations and pressing social, economic and environmental issues, the results of this study can help managers of charities understand their audience better and create marketing content that is more effective in recruiting donors and increasing donations.

6.3 | Limitations and future research suggestions

Besides implications, this study has some limitations which future research can address.

First, in this study, only British respondents participated. The influence of descriptive norms motivating donation intentions, perceived impact, and personal involvement can significantly vary in regards to the cultural background (individualistic vs. collectivistic and tight vs. loose) (Gelfand et al., 2011; Item International, 2016). Thus, future studies should apply the model to other cultural settings to check whether the relationships presented in the model still hold.

Second, British respondents were deemed to be more suitable for the study as the issue of homelessness is more profound in the UK than in some other European countries. However, the choice of the British respondents could have presented biases as these respondents could have been especially sensitive to the topic and exhibit behavioral intentions that are exclusive to the British people. Thus, studying the respondents from other countries or immigrants in the UK, which

are culturally distant from the UK, such as Finland or Norway, would be beneficial for the further development of the model.

Moreover, we found that perceived impact and personal involvement of donors only partially mediate the relationship between descriptive norms and donation intentions. Thus, we encourage future researchers to investigate the mediation of other variables, which might increase the predictive power of the model.

Furthermore, our study did not find the moderation of beneficiary responsibility. As stated previously, the reason could have been the cause itself. Thus, future studies could check the moderating power of other causes (e.g., HIV or bullying victims) to check whether beneficiary responsibility can be used as an excuse not to conform to the norms. In addition, future research could investigate the boundary condition of this effect as a function of, for instance, age, income, occupation, having attained a certain level of education, etc., as they might provide a level of depth to the overall understanding of beneficiary responsibility.

Finally, our study only used donation intentions. Although intentions often predict actual behaviors (Sheeran & Webb, 2016), there might be a significant gap between them (Ajzen, 1985). Thus, we encourage researchers to examine whether the relationships uncovered in this study hold in the case of actual donation behavior.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

ENDNOTE

¹ An experimental instrument in social psychology and economics used to investigate a decision by a single player: to send money to another or not (Guala & Mittone, 2010).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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