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Online Fundraising and Social Divisions

Abstract: The global village of networked relationships implies the digitalization of community activities. An example of cultural mobilization that has recently migrated to the Internet is fundraising. Contemporary fundraising platforms enable financing usually combined with communication: asynchronous or quasi-synchronous. Supporting specific goals, individuals or groups can be a tool for building a multiplatform social identity—in particular thanks to the possibility of sharing information about fundraising and discussing them in interactive media. Digitalized financing is gaining dynamics, which can become a practice of building social divisions and fueling hatred. Against the background of Social Identity Theory, this article focuses on distortions of fundraising culture. Drawing on examples from Finland and Poland, this article takes up the characteristics of the negative dimension of fundraising.

Keywords: donations, Social Identity Theory (SIT), fundraising, negative fundraising

Introduction

Online fundraising may be individual in nature, but it may also take the form of a kind of “general mobilization” of the community, posing an interesting example of social mobilization. Digitally mediated social relationships can be sustained through the gifting of money when the platform is focused on fundraising or when there are no (or very limited) opportunities for gifting other types of goods in the online community (Skågeby 2010; Harvey et al. 2017).

While generally positive and based on good and selflessness, modern online fundraising may also be used to create situations of conflict and amplify existing ones. The use of online fundraising for strengthening social divisions may derive from the competitiveness, discrimination or aiming at achieving political goals.

The aim of this article is to characterize the problem of using fundraising for fueling antisocial behavior and strengthening social divisions, against the background of the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979). The theory aims to explain social factors that drive intergroup behaviors, particularly those involving prejudice and discrimination. Based on multiple case studies from Finland and Poland, we present three negative effects of fundraising. Two of them are aimed to financially support the beneficiary, third, which we name “negative fundraising” aims at communication value rather than economic value.

Fundraising as Identity Building

Social Identity Theory (SIT), introduced by Tajfel and Turner (1979), suggests that people derive part of their self-concept from the social groups to which they belong. The process starts with social categorization for understanding and identifying groups, which helps to simplify social environments but may lead to bias and prejudice. Then, individuals identify themselves as members of particular groups—one can belong to many different groups. Finally, individuals self-categorized as members of social groups compare their groups to others. At this stage, one's own group is often favored due to the bias. Competing interests, including competing for limited resources, may intensify the feeling of hostility (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Social identity affects and is affected by intergroup relationships (Abrams 2001).

The studies so far have introduced SIT in explaining fundraising effectiveness (Drezner 2018; Maclean et al. 2015; Touré-Tillery and Fishbach 2017). It is proven, that fundraising engagement increases when donors social identity is mirrored in solicitation efforts (Drezner 2018). Synthesizing elements of donors' social identity with the fundraisers is recognized as way to optimize fundraising capabilities (Gold 2023). However, studies so far have focused on positive aspects of fundraising when applying SIT. The bias, prejudice and hostility that can derive from social identity haven't been studied within the field of fundraising so far. This article attempts to fill that gap.

Method

We have conducted a multiple case study. In our research we have adopted definition from Seawright and Gerring (2008), who defined case study as analysis of a small numbers of units, conducted in order to understand a population of cases. We conducted qualitative analysis in our study. The goal to understand a broader set of congruous units makes our multiple case study instrumental (Stake 2005). Following the assumptions of case study approach (De Vaus 2001: 220), in our study the unit of analysis is a decision that caused mobilization on fundraising platforms. Authors have chosen decisions from their countries, as the local context was important for understanding each case. Each author has chosen and initially elaborated several controversial decisions supported and counteracted with online fundraising. At first stage of exclusion, decisions for which fundraisers were no longer available online (even in an archived form) were excluded, in order to provide highest credibility of the study. The remaining cases were then discussed by authors and upon agreement four of them were included for further examination and comparison. Because the study was aimed at distortion of fundraising culture, the inclusion was based on most extreme cases (Seawright and Gerring 2008). Each case was analyzed from the perspective of how it was depicted in the fundraisers (on fundraising platforms), using critical discourse analysis, suitable for analysis of such topics as media discourse, political discourse, racism, nationalism and ethnocentrism (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000; van Dijk 2015). We used bottom-up coding with in vivo codes in first cycle and more abstract categories in second cycle of coding, each author coded material in their native language. The results were then discussed and elaborated in a narrative form.

Further in the text, examples are provided with original spelling (any censorship was original as well) and all translations were made by the authors. Additional references were added in brackets ‘[]’ whenever needed.

To provide better understanding, background is provided for each decision and each case is described along with chosen fundraisers set up for this occasion: their goals, descriptions and donations they gathered. Then, the results of the cross-case analysis are presented.

Case: Women’s Strike in Poland

Background

On October 22th 2020, Polish Constitutional Tribunal has decided that predicted fetus’ disability or incurable illness is not a constitutional reason to permit abortion, due to the constitutional protection of human dignity (*Trybunał Konstytucyjny 2020*). This decision led to massive protests, called the Women’s Strike. Right-wing media reported on the need to protect churches from protesting women.

Fundraisers

In December 2020, the fundraiser “Actions and activities of the Women’s Strike” (*Lempart 2020*) ended, raising over 1.5 million PLN (157% of the intended goal) with 13,627 donations. Donors used the fundraiser to publish their words of support. However, donations were also used to criticize or insult the political and ideological opponents:

“The fight will not end! Get the hell out of here with religious fundamentalism. Freedom of choice is not ‘extreme views,’ imposing your values on someone is an extreme.”

“Fuck these PiS whores”

[PiS is the abbreviation for *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, the Law and Justice party]

Such comments referred not only to the reproductive right but to whole right-wing government:

“Take care, I am always ready to support!!! Together we will chase away this locust—the president [of the party] and his puppets.”

“Let’s not give up! The geezers will lead us out of the EU and into Putin’s hands....”

Comments like these reflect the belief in the division between in-group and out-group. Within the framework of SIT, the term “in-group” denotes the group with which an individual aligns their identity, whereas “out-group” refers to groups with which they do not associate their sense of self (*Tajfel and Turner 1979*). The pursuit of positive self-esteem drives individuals to seek a favorable distinction for their in-group in comparison to relevant out-groups (*Billig and Tajfel 1973; Leonardelli and Toh 2015*).

Some donations referred to other fundraisers (set up by right-wing organizations), criticizing them:

Let the Women's Strike have the necessary resources, and the ONR fundraiser, which Zrzutka.pl does not want to throw out—get lost. And ZERO commission for zrzutka.pl.

Such statements declare that fundraising platform should not get any commission, because it allows for raising money for political opponents. Criticism of the platform for allowing “right-wing” fundraisers also appeared in the described below official appeals to block these fundraisers.

In response to the Women's Strike protests, the Polish right-wing association *Stowarzyszenie Roty Marszu Niepodległości* (2020) started a fundraiser for the National Guard, established to protect churches from protesters. The fundraiser was entitled “Support the defenders of churches against leftist desecration! We are building the National Guard!” and main picture stated: “we defend the values of our civilization.” This fundraiser reached 1157% of the assumed goal (347,259 PLN) thanks to 4424 donors. The description stated that

After the Constitutional Tribunal ruled in favor of unborn children, the far left gone furious. They decided to take their anger out on Christians. [...] We also warn against all kinds of FAKE NEWS generated by the extreme left.

Such description equates the fight for reproductive rights with extremism of views. In the fundraiser, the Catholic Church was portrayed as the one in need, requiring protection. Support for this protection was framed as resulting from values of civilization, attacked by far left. Such framing fits in social categorization and comparison proposed by SIT: in-group (Church) is portrayed in superlatives and out-group is posing a threat to the values. This discourse was also observable in donations.

Donors used both nicks and comments to publish their views. The nicks such as “F..k off the leftists” indicated hate towards people with opposing political views. The nick “Pervert Slayer” is an interesting example of how donating may be a tool for identity building: the protesters of Women's Strike are considered leftists and thus, perverts (perversion is here a departure from the accepted cultural norms—implicitly right-wing: heterosexual and patriarchal) and donor finds themselves the slayer of those perverts, although it is not unequivocal whether donating is perceived as act of slay or it is “additional activity” that slayers do.

People used fundraiser to support its goal, sometimes even pointing out the passivity of the church:

Thanks Guys and Girls! It's good that you are fighting against selfishness, stupidity and stupid madness. If everyone destroys churches, the effect will be that people will kill each other. This is what stupid selfishness and consumerism lead to, thinking only about yourself. It's a shame that priests and bishops don't support you. The Church is dying because of the hypocrisy of believers.

This may suggest that some donors find themselves an active defenders of the Church, while others—passive ones—are accused of hypocrisy. The in-group is then not a Church, but an inner circle.

Donations were also used to indicate the hostility of the out-group, aiming to destroy the identity and values of in-group:

For the sake of freedom and democracy, the values that leftists are trying to destroy, I am donating this symbolic amount. Good luck.

Yet, it is worth noting, that the fundraiser was also used to criticize the initiative of the National Guard:

God will defend himself. And the Police is responsible for protecting monuments, not troglodyte militias.

Therefore, financial support came with written disapproval.

This fundraiser was reported as violating the law. The movement Akcja Demokracja (Action Democracy) appealed to Zrzutka for closing the right-wing fundraiser, stating that:

We believe that the Zrzutka.pl was created to spread goodness, not to create a platform for organizing far-right militias. As we understand it, Zrzutka.pl also does not want to be associated with the promotion of violence and hatred, nor to make money on their promotion. (jk 2020)

Despite request to remove the fundraiser, the platform responded that running a fundraiser does not mean they provide support for the organizer, and that a fundraiser for the National Guard does not violate the law (jk 2020).

Case: Extinguishing Hanukkiah with Fire Extinguisher

Background

On December 12th 2023, member of Polish Sejm (Parliament) Grzegorz Braun used fire extinguisher to extinguish hanukkiah (Hanukkah menorah) in the Sejm's building. In consequence, the Marshal of the Sejm has decided to punish him with withdrawal of half of the salary for three months and the entire allowance for six months.

Fundraisers

In December 2023, after Grzegorz Braun used a fire extinguisher to put out Hanukkah candles, fundraisers for him were created, and people collected over 200,000 PLN (p.mal 2023), although the platform Zrzutka closed the fundraisers, considering them to be in violation of its regulations. In a statement published on Facebook, Zrzutka declared, that closed fundraisers violated the following regulation: „It is unacceptable to organize fundraisers related to praising, supporting or propagating hatred, violence, discrimination, terrorism, fascism or other totalitarian systems, publicly praising crimes or offences or violating the personal rights of third parties” (zrzutka.pl 2023).

One of the main fundraisers, named “Christmas support for the children and wife of Grzegorz Braun!” (Wielgucki 2023), fulfilled its target (50,000 PLN) in 100%, gathering 839 donations and 36 comments. Its description states that the goal of the fundraiser is to provide not for Braun but for his family, called “unwitting victims of political wars and politically correct pressures” (Wielgucki 2023).

Donors used both nicks and comments to state their opinions and support. For example nick “the only Pole in Sejm” may suggest that Grzegorz Braun is considered by the donor as the only true Pole in Sejm, implicitly defining “Polishness” as actions against Judaism. Applying the SIT framework, this could be a hint of how the donor categorized Poles as the in-group, and Jews as the out-group.

One donor named themselves “anti-Roman,” and in Polish cyberspace “Roman” is often used instead of “Jew” to avoid algorithmic overseeing. Other nicks such as “bravo!” or “Merry Christmas” were also reflecting support for Braun and his family. Some nicks also were used to insult Marshal of the Sejm.

Comments were as well used to wish Braun’s family “Merry Christmas,” but also to insult or criticize Zrzutka for blocking previous fundraisers, which was considered as blocking right-wing political views:

“f*** you “zrzutka” for blocking previous fundraisers. I hope your Christmas tree will burn and your wife give birth to a nigger 🇺🇸🇵🇱🇵🇸”

“I would like to thank Mr. Braun for spreading information about what religious ceremonies are taking place in the Sejm. I hope that the zrzutka service will stop blocking alternative political views.”

Donors also communicated the need to save Poland from Judaism:

We will be able to defend our Homeland with Grzegorz Braun. Long live Free Poland!

Such comments reflect the hostility towards categorized out-group of Jews, which are perceived as the threat to Poland.

On the other hand, donations were used to criticize Braun’s actions:

I admire Mr. G. Braun’s erudition, but I do not approve of the action in the Sejm. You can demonstrate your views in a different way so as not to endanger the safety of others. I am convinced that the effect of the demonstration got out of control. I think Mr. Braun will say so.

Again, financial support was given to express dissatisfaction with the actions of the beneficiary.

In retaliation to the fundraisers for Grzegorz Braun, the fundraiser “Let’s light a new Hanukkah candle” ([Fundacja To się uda 2023](#)) was created in December 2023. It only raised 8% of the target, gathering 216 donations. Here as well, donors used nick to manifest they support or criticism. One donor named themselves “patriot” while other—sending smallest possible amount—entered the insult toward organizers in the place for the nick.

The comments section was used by donors to insult Grzegorz Braun. Some suggested, that their donation was given not to support the goal but rather to act against Braun’s supporters:

Just to piss off the braunists.

Therefore, the hostility towards out-group is pointed out as more engaging factor than the favor for in-group.

Beside the fundraisers politically involved, common citizens started their own fundraisers for their own goals, stating that it’s better to provide for them than for politicians. In the descriptions of this fundraisers, organizers convinced that if one has to choose between supporting political manners or helping regular citizens, they should choose to support the latter. One of many examples could be the fundraiser “Not for Braun, Kamiński and Wąsik, better for cows,” which called donating for politically involved fundraisers the “support for

pathology promoted in media” (Poszywała 2024). One donor posted that “Better for cat than for a madman!”, indicating that people should not prioritize economical support for politicians and implicitly suggesting, that engaging in both matters is not an option.

Case: “I do 2013” in Finland

Background

In Finland, Equal Marriage Law came into effect in 2017, making the same-sex marriage possible. This law had been into making for over 10 years. After years of the bill getting repeatedly rejected in the Finnish Parliament, a citizens’ initiative “I do 2013” [orig. name Tahdon 2013] was launched to push the bill through (Finnish Parliament 2006; 2009; Kronman 2015). This gathered more support than any other citizens’ initiative has ever done in Finland and 100,000 signatures was achieved in only one day (the required support for parliamentary consideration was 50,000 signatures). Overall, the initiative gathered over 166,000 signatures, a record that hasn’t been broken yet. (Kansalaisaloite.fi 2013) After massive campaigning, particularly visible in social media, the Equal Marriage Law was finally accepted by Finnish Parliament in December of 2014.

In January of 2015 the “Real marriage” [orig. name Aito avioliitto] association was founded to repeal the new equal marriage law before it was coming to effect. The “Real marriage” association campaigned to overturn the law to keep the marriage traditional, between a man and a woman. They got 106 000 signatures in the six months that they gathered signatures for the citizens’ initiative to repeal the new law. (Aito avioliitto 2015) The counter-initiative was taken into consideration in the Finnish Parliament, but in February of 2017 the counter-initiative was repealed (Tikkala 2017). The new Equal Marriage Law came into effect in March 2017.

Fundraisers

In Finland crowdfunding is only possible for non-profit organizations, associations and foundations, whereas private individuals or businesses can use only small-scale money collection campaigns that require a permit (Police of Finland 2024). An association, “Tasa-arvoinen Suomi Ry” [Translates to “Equal Finland association”] was founded to support the “I do 2013” campaign and initiative. “I do 2013” gathered money for the campaign through the association by collecting membership fees and by selling merchandise, such as t-shirts and canvas bags (Tahdon 2013; 2013a). The campaign used careful branding and productization to make it recognizable and interesting (Järviö 2018: 78). Several businesses and celebrities also supported the campaign and its visibility with creative and playful ideas. Among various events there was for example charity concerts and several restaurants provided signature cocktails and desserts carrying the name of the campaign. A walk-in tattoo day was held where heart tattoos symbolizing the campaign were offered. (e.g. Järviö 2018: 75, 84–87; Tahdon 2013; 2013b; 2013c)

The campaigning was particularly active on social media, especially on their Facebook page, “Tahdon2013”, where updates, information and videos were frequently shared. While

comments have been moderated, traces of arguments and hate speech can still be found. Many of the comments remaining are replies to deleted comments and the tone reveals past conflicts, where the equal marriage is defended from hateful comments, e.g. comparing it to incest or pedophilia:

How does incest have anything to do with this? Is there some weird slippery slope theory that says accepting gay people and their right to get married would also lead to pedophilia, incest, and marrying sheep? (Facebook comment, 25.3.2013)

The debate heated especially in 2015 when “Real marriage” was gathering their support and it collected required signatures for their counter-initiative hoping to overturn the approved law. The controversy over the law was also widely covered in the media (MTV 2015).

The “Real marriage” association also collected money for the campaign through selling memberships and merchandise (Aito avioliitto 2021). Their Facebook site, “Avioliitto on naisen ja miehen välinen liitto” (Marriage is between a man and a woman) contains a lot of discussion over the matter, the page overall seeming less moderated:

“We don’t want this monstrosity in Finland!!! Man and woman, period!!!!” (Facebook comment, 18.6.2015)

“People are accepting all sorts of sicknesses... we should be protecting our children from this, like Russia does at least... the West is way too ‘tolerant’ for allowing stuff like this... disgusting.” (Facebook comment, 14.12.2014)

The tone of the posts was also more aggressive and negative, while “I do 2013” used a positive tone on the campaign and outlets despite the importance and the sensitive nature of the matter. The comments of the “Real marriage” Facebook page often centered on general condemnation of homosexuality. Religious themes were also often present. Considering this discourse through the lenses of SIT, we may notice that donors’ statements reflect the sense of belonging to an in-group and shared values, but also that self-categorization is the source of their self-esteem (Losh and Nzekwe 2017).

Case: “The Right to Be” in Finland

Background

The Finnish transgender law was updated in 2023 to provide more equality for gender minorities, “improving the realization of the right to self-determination, personal integrity, non-discrimination and the right to private life,” as Finnish Government stated in their press release 3.3.2023 (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2023).

The old law was last updated over 20 years prior in 2002 and it was deemed outdated, but the reform of the law got delayed for years. The old law was problematic as it for example required a psychiatric diagnosis before gender minorities could receive legal gender recognition, and it also contained a requirement of sterilization for gender reassignment surgeries. This was widely criticized by human right organizations and the European Court of Human Rights (European Parliament 2017; Amnesty International 2023).

The Government led by Prime Minister Sanna Marin had included the reform of the law in the government program and the reform began in 2020, but due to COVID-19 pandemic it was further delayed (Yle News 2022a).

“The right to be” [orig. name. Oikeus olla] was a citizen’s initiative that was introduced in April 2021 to support the new law’s successful passage and it presented new bill proposals to be included in the new law. Trans ry -association supported and campaigned for the initiative. “The right to be” initiative gathered over 68,000 signatures and was sent into parliamentary consideration in September 2021. While the bill proposals of the initiative were not accepted as presented, the governmental proposal of the law was pushed forward. The most notable change between the bills proposed in the initiative and the final version of the law consisted of children’s rights, as the new, reformed law did exclude children from legal gender recognition. (GenderGP 2023)

“Real marriage” association campaigned against the reformed trans law and sent their opposing statement to be taken into consideration during the process (Aito avioliitto 2022). As with Trans ry, “Real marriage” was also very active on social media. While “Real marriage” shared their arguments against the law on their social media channels, Trans ry also participated in countering these claims and concerns on their own social media accounts.

After first taken the law into consideration in September 2022, parliament accepted it in February 2023 and the law came into effect in April 2023 (Finnish Parliament 2022; Yle News 2022b).

Fundraisers

Trans ry—association was founded in June 2020, its purpose being to support the fundamental rights and human rights of gender minorities (Trans ry 2020). In 2021 Trans ry campaigned for “The right to be” citizens’ initiative, bringing it visibility, updating actively on the progress of the law and participating in societal discussion and defending the law and gender minorities. Trans ry has stated in their bylaws that the association funds its mission with (to name a few examples) donations, public events, membership fees as well as with lotteries and fundraising campaigns. (Trans ry 2020)

“Real marriage” association has collected funds to support their initiatives since their battle against “I do 2013” campaign and the equal marriage law. “Real marriage” association protested against this citizens’ initiative and the reform of the trans law as well. The association fund their work with collecting membership fees, selling merchandise and through fundraising, having received a money collection permit from National Police Board. They’ve collected money with the permit for organizing public events, producing prints, translating writings, articles and videos, communication, campaigning for citizens initiatives and conducting surveys and polls (Police of Finland 2021; Aito avioliitto 2020). On their website the organization has summed up that the money collected will be used to support initiatives and activities advancing the values of the association, as listed in their bylaws:

Rules of the Association, Section 2: Purpose of the Activities:

The purpose of the association is to promote and strengthen the status and significance of marriage between a man and a woman as a genuine, special, natural, and permanent institution in Finnish society and legislation.

Additionally, the association aims to promote the child's right to know both of their parents and to be cared for by them throughout their childhood whenever possible. The association also seeks to support the development of a healthy gender identity in children by encouraging the growth of boys into men and girls into women, reinforcing the natural differences between genders, and ensuring that children have a family model with both a father and a mother, even in adoption situations. (Aito avioliitto 2020)

On their Facebook -page, "Avioliitto on miehen ja naisen välinen liitto," the association has disclosed that their resistance against the new trans law is based on the idea that the new trans law would "weaken the safety of women, equality, women's sports, freedom of speech and to the national defense" (5.1.2023). These were popular arguments used throughout the process in different social media outlets. Trans ry, as well as the official Instagram-site of the initiative "The right to be" frequently countered commonly raised claims and shared fact posts about gender minorities and about the importance of the new law. (e.g. [Transyhdistys 2021](#)). While the initiative was promoted in Facebook and Twitter as well, Instagram was especially actively used by Trans ry and the initiative also had its own Instagram account, "oikeusolla."

The most popular comments of the "Real marriage" supporters that have received most likes on the "Real marriage" Facebook page do not often focus on the law in question, but rather expressing personal opinions about transgender people:

The consequences would truly be harsh 🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄. This should never be accepted, not now, not ever 🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄. A man is a man, period. A boy is a boy, period. A woman is a woman, period. A girl is a girl, period. And that's how it has been and how it will always be, no matter how much those smart-head trans people want to change it... (Facebook comment, 5.1.2023)

Hate speech is very visible in the comments. These comments often deny the existence of gender minorities, portray transgender people as mentally ill, or express "concern" on how everyone will change their gender after the law and how women's locker rooms will fill with perverted men claiming they're women. Transgender people were deemed "unnatural" and "against God" in countless comments, e.g.:

This is against nature, something that God does not approve. (Facebook comment, 13.1.2023)

Let's return to the Bible and study what the Holy Word of God says. Otherwise, all kinds of misleading winds will take over. The Bible is clear: God created man and woman. We should not tamper with God's creation. (Facebook comment, 13.1.2023)

These examples reflect the polarization in society, often linking into a growing divide between conservative and liberal values. Change also almost always includes resistance. Changes can be seen as a threat for own personal and religious beliefs, as well as a threat to societal stability and family structures. Promoting equality and human rights is important to any society and the general support for advancing the rights of sexual- and gender minorities have increased in Finland after the "I do 2013" campaign.

Cross-case analysis: The negative dimensions of fundraising

Social and political divisions—"us vs. them"

Fundraising election campaigns is a trend that has already received a lot of attention in social sciences (e.g. [Corrado 2014](#); [Ellis et al. 2017](#)). However, a relatively new

phenomenon in studied countries is the use of fundraising as a tool for immediate response to current political events. In light of this trend, the term „politicized fundraiser” was coined in Poland (JM 2024).

On regular basis, online fundraising is an act of charity aimed to help someone in need. However, we now face the phenomenon of distortion of the fundraising culture. In a certain small fragment of the digital environment, fundraising campaigns become a tool for reinforcing the “us versus them” divisions—supporting some is not only not supporting others, but often the fundraiser for some is an action against others. This division reflects the SIT in-group/out-group relations, often based on bias and prejudice.

This division is reflected both in the descriptions of fundraisers and in the messages published by donors (including their nicks). Creating a “politicized fundraiser” for the purpose of a specific political or social activist formulates the opposition of the needy-oppressor, in which the beneficiary is presented as the wronged one, while opponents (political or ideological) become the wrongdoers in this narrative. Creating a fundraiser becomes a manifesto of the need for social mobilization in order to oppose the “Other,” who, if threatens the beneficiaries, can also threaten their supporters and “people like them.” Therefore, the out-group is perceived as hostile, which impose hostility towards them.

The socio-political divisions reinforced by fundraising are based on an “us versus them” opposition, where supporting a given person, group or idea is the same as acting against another. In the case of fundraising platforms, a “war on fundraisers” is observed. It is often difficult to assess whether a given initiative is spontaneous or a seemingly spontaneous political action aimed at strengthening social divisions and stirring controversy. After all, achieving the fundraiser goal may be a signal that a given initiative has the support of citizens. Thus, deleting and blocking fundraisers in the discourse of “us versus them” division is presented as an action of censorship by the opponent and an attempt to stop social mobilization.

Discrimination—“them instead of us”

Fundraising can also lead to social divisions based on the “them INSTEAD OF us” principle, which takes into account the limited resources of donors. In this case, fundraisers are not perceived as organized for conflicting purposes, but negative consequences result from the fact that not all goals can be achieved. Meer (2017) found no evidence that giving to a particular charity is reduced by the presence of inducements to give to others, yet his study was based on similar fundraising projects. The “them instead of us” rule applies to projects with little or no similarities. The inability to provide help to everyone in need raises questions about the hierarchy of goals. Social divisions can arise and grow stronger when there is no agreement on this hierarchy. The hostility therefore results from the competition for scarce resources (Ashforth and Mael 1989).

To better illustrate this mechanism, we will use the symbols A and B, where A is a goal considered higher in the hierarchy of values, and B is considered lower. In the face of limited resources of the community that can help achieve the financial goals of fundraisers, some organizers and donors suggest that we should first support the goals that are important to them (A). Thus, anyone who supports collections for other goals (B) becomes a warrior

in a cause that is not the most just, while they could prioritize most valuable goals (A). Such an attitude does not necessarily suggest that others (B) should not be helped (as is the case with political divisions, for example), but helping them should be secondary, e.g. one may support less important goals (B) once most important (A) are achieved. People supporting such collections (B) are sometimes attacked for their hierarchy of values, both in the descriptions of the collections (A) and in the content of the donations (A and, less often, B). In the SIT framework, those with other hierarchy of values are then identified as out-group.

Generalizing on the basis of the analyzed cases, we can state that discrimination can arise with any differences, such as citizenship (helping immigrants instead of compatriots), gender (helping men instead of women or helping trans-women instead of cis-women), family situation (helping the childless instead of families), age (helping the elderly instead of children) or species (helping animals instead of humans). This problem is deeply rooted in the system of values, but it is directly related to economic constraints. This limitation of resources causes a kind of competition among the recipients. The economic nature of this problem minimizes the phenomenon of “negative fundraising” described below, i.e. financing in order to humiliate or criticize the beneficiary—economic value takes precedence over symbolic value due to the fact that money is a scarce resource.

The negative fundraising—communication value over economic value

Contributions do not necessarily mean support. As already mentioned, donations enable literal communication thanks to the possibility of publishing text messages along with the money. Donation can be an opportunity to criticize the fundraiser or make fun of the beneficiaries (Kozyra 2024). In such a case, a donation that would be interpreted as a gesture of support or identification on a symbolic level becomes a tool of mockery and criticism on a literal level. However, regardless of the message sent with the donation, the economic benefit of the recipient is a fact. We name this phenomenon “negative fundraising,” i.e. financial support combined with disapproval. This term is build upon Jas’ (2020) term “negative audience,” coined to explain the phenomenon of livestreaming audience interacting with streamers with disapproval. Although negative audience acts to criticize the streamer, the actions (comments, chats, shares) are in favor for the criticized. The same mechanism comes with “negative fundraising,” which benefits for the fundraising goal, but comes with disapproval or mockery. By using the platform’s tools, the donor incurs a financial cost in order to express criticism or ridicule. In turn, the beneficiary, in exchange for the economic benefit, suffers an image loss associated with the need to accept public criticism or ridicule.

General Discussion

Online fundraising may be conducted not only for good purposes, but can also have an antisocial dimension. This may result, for example, from unawareness of the consequences

(e.g. supporting far-right social initiatives), being manipulated (e.g. by descriptions of fundraising or comments from people and institutions sharing them) or frustration caused by economic constraints.

Fundraising platforms are a space for digital giving. This space is not communicatively hermetic—comments on fundraisers can be published both in the donor’s nick or the content of the donation, but also outside the platforms, whether in professional or social media. Supporting one goal instead of others may be used as a tool to build a social identity and identify the in-group of supporters of common values. Thanks to the multi-platform environment, such identity may be strengthened by sharing fundraisers on one’s profile among different social networking sites.

Starting a fundraiser on a fundraising platform is an act of announcing social mobilization to achieve a common goal. The beneficiary of the fundraiser is therefore indicated as someone in need. In the case of social and political divisions, indicating someone in need also involves indicating those who caused their situation. The growing trend of organizing fundraisers in response to current political events, referred to in this article as the “war on fundraisers,” suggests that fundraising is becoming a political tool, used not only to mobilize the community, but also to frame current events within a specific discourse, indicating which enemy to mobilize against. Shutting down fundraisers by platforms is perceived as an attack on this mobilization and an attempt at censorship, which leads to further misunderstandings and elevates the discussion to a higher level: debates on the freedom to manage one’s own money. More and more often, fundraisers for political and social purposes are accompanied by counter-fundraisers, so that public support can be measured by the amount of money raised. Economic value becomes a symbol of support, in accordance with the principle of “us versus them.”

The exception to this rule is a phenomenon called in the article the “negative fundraising.” Since modern fundraising involves the possibility of (mainly) text communication, fundraising can be a way to verbally express disapproval on the fundraising page by sending a donation. Thus, through economic support, a negative attitude is expressed towards the organizer or beneficiary of the fundraiser (or other supporters). However, regardless of the nature of the message or its absence (messages in donations are optional), the beneficiary always gains an economic benefit.

Negative fundraising places the communication value of a donation above its economic value, and the latter is particularly important in implementing the principle of “them instead of us.”

Conclusion

In the article, we have analyzed extreme cases of fundraisers strengthening social divisions. Using the Social Identity Theory, we have attempted to fill the gap on how social identity may lead to social divisions through fundraising. We have indicated, that fundraising can cause social divisions due to the inability to meet the goals of all fundraisers. Thus, fundraising may become a field for revealing various forms of discrimination, when criticism towards out-group is more important than support towards in group—even at

the cost of financial support for the opponent. Social divisions may also derive from desperation, in the fight for the limited resources of the funding community.

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