

Micro-Influencer-Driven Digital Philanthropy: A Case Study of Micro-Influence for Good in Singapore

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Cite as:

Swiatek Lukasz, Tan Kevin Kok-Yew, Chaidaroon Suwichit (2026), Micro-Influencer-Driven Digital Philanthropy: A Case Study of Micro-Influence for Good in Singapore. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 55th, (133605)

Paper from the 55th Annual EMAC Conference, Bath, United Kingdom, June 2-5, 2026



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Abstract:

Micro-influencer marketing is increasingly visible in digital philanthropy landscapes, yet theoretical understandings of the ways in which they stimulate prosocial engagement for digital fundraising remains limited. This conceptual paper synthesises insights from influencer credibility, moral-emotional framing, social norm theory, and trust formation in non-profit contexts to propose an integrated framework for digital fundraising influence. The model delineates two pathways – micro-influencer signals and message features – and specifies psychological mediators, including trust, perceived impact, and moral obligation, in micro-influencer marketing operations. Singapore serves as the paper’s case study; the country’s sociocultural environment offers analytical value for other Southeast Asian settings with comparable digital infrastructures. The paper concludes with a research agenda to advance knowledge of micro-influencer digital philanthropy.

Keywords: micro-influencers; digital philanthropy; prosociality

Track: Public Sector & Non-Profit Marketing

1. Introduction

Digital philanthropy has expanded rapidly worldwide, driven by high social media penetration, widespread mobile payments, and a maturing non-profit sector (Tham, 2023). Charities, social enterprises, and volunteer organisations increasingly rely on micro-influencers. Despite this growing reliance, theoretical understandings of how micro-influencers stimulate prosocial engagement remains limited.

Existing research treats influencer persuasion and charitable giving as largely separate domains. While influencer-marketing studies have focused on commercial objectives like purchase intention, authenticity and engagement (Chen et al., 2024; Lou & Lee, 2022), charity and non-profit marketing research has emphasised donor motivations, trust and giving behaviour (e.g., Schwartz & Howard, 1981) with little explicit attention to influencer-driven mechanisms. Only recently have cause-related influencer contexts begun to emerge (Lou, Zhou & Xu, 2024; Quach et al., 2024), leaving a gap in understanding exactly how micro-influencers catalyse prosocial outcomes, particularly in digitally mature societies.

This paper develops an integrative conceptual model explaining micro-influencers' driving of digital philanthropy through two primary pathways – micro-influencer signals and message-based mechanisms – and identifying the psychological mediators that convert exposure into prosocial engagement. Singapore serves as the case study due to its high digital literacy, strong social norms, and trusted institutional environment. These features make Singapore an analytically rich case for understanding prosocial influence in digitally mature societies. The paper contributes to public and non-profit marketing by integrating dispersed research – especially about moral-emotional framing, social norms, and trust formation – into a coherent framework. It also outlines a research agenda for future empirical studies.

2. Literature Review

This literature review broadly canvasses the study's two key areas providing the foundations for the more specific synthesis (outlined later). The review starts by outlining the nature of prosociality. It then notes major social norm ideas (pertaining to prosociality).

2.1 Prosociality

In essence, prosociality can be understood to cover actions that benefit, or provide assistance to, others (Clarke, 2003). These actions include sharing, helping, comforting and

co-operation. Scholarly prosociality inquiries have sought to counter steadily growing concerns about ‘selfish societies’ (Gerhardt, 2010) featuring ‘communities of me’ (Shane, 2001). At its most basic level, prosociality counters anti-social behaviour: that is, acts that “demonstrate a lack of feeling and concern for the welfare of others” (Clarke, 2003, p. 7).

The prosociality scholarship is growing worldwide. Inquiries continue to interrogate prosociality’s grounding in egoism (see, for example, Gelfand & Hartmann, 1982). Ongoing work is also studying the roles played by altruism and empathic concern (see the foundational work of Batson et al., 1981; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). The various characteristics of the needy that foster helping – including deservingness, similarity, and liking – continue to be interrogated (see Amato, 1990; Levine et al., 2005), too.

2.2 Social norms

In general, social norms refer to typical or usual customs, acceptable and unacceptable standards, or “general (normal) expectation[s] regarding some phenomenon” (Chandler & Munday, 2012, p. 298). These norms operate like rules enforced by social disapproval and approval; they cover a range of phenomena, from “core attitudes and beliefs to apparently minor points of etiquette and dress” (Rutherford, 1996, p. 53). Examples of these “learned expectations of behavior or categorization that are deemed desirable” (Shah & Rojas, 2015, p. 45) include norms governing acceptable behaviour in particular places (such as hospitals) and particular situations (such as funerals).

Social norms, the scholarship has noted, play major roles in prosociality. In particular, norms of reciprocity and responsibility help inform responses to the needy (see, for example, Schroeder et al., 1995; Trivers, 1983). Personal norms – that is, individual feelings of moral obligation to perform specific actions – shape helping attitudes and behaviours (see Schwartz & Howard, 1981, 1984). Gender norms also impact prosociality (see Piliavin & Unger, 1985). While the literature has extensively canvassed these sorts of social norm-related contributors to prosociality, it has not examined the roles played by micro-influencers.

3. Methodology and Methods

This paper adopts an integrative conceptual synthesis approach to develop a theoretically robust framework explaining how micro-influencers stimulate prosocial engagement in Singapore’s digital philanthropy landscape. Conceptual papers play a critical role in marketing scholarship by clarifying constructs, integrating fragmented bodies of work,

and offering mechanism-based theoretical explanations that guide cumulative knowledge development (MacInnis, 2011; Yadav, 2010). This approach is especially appropriate when a phenomenon is emergent, multidisciplinary, or insufficiently theorised: conditions that characterise research on influencer-driven digital philanthropy.

3.1 Conceptual Development Approach

Following MacInnis (2011), the paper provides three types of conceptual contribution:

1. integration (bringing together previously separate domains),
2. extension (adapting and extending existing theoretical mechanisms), and
3. re-conceptualisation (proposing new linkages and pathways).

The conceptual approach aligns with guidance from Jaakkola (2020), who argues that conceptual articles should strengthen theoretical coherence, articulate assumptions explicitly, and specify causal mechanisms (rather than rely on empirical demonstration).

3.2 Procedure for Conceptual Synthesis

The conceptual synthesis proceeded through a structured, iterative review of literature across five relevant domains:

1. influencer marketing (including authenticity, parasocial interaction and credibility),
2. prosocial behaviour and moral psychology (including empathy and moral norms),
3. message framing (narrative persuasion and emotional congruence),
4. non-profit trust and giving (donor confidence and social information effects), and
5. cultural and contextual moderators (norm strength and multicultural dynamics).

This approach resembles a focused narrative review (rather than a systematic review), appropriate when the goal is conceptual integration rather than aggregation of effect sizes (Snyder, 2019). The literature was selected based on theoretical relevance, conceptual clarity, and its ability to illuminate mechanisms underlying prosocial engagement.

3.3 Mechanism-Based Theorising

The paper follows Hedström and Ylikoski's (2010) mechanism-based explanation framework, which emphasises specifying how and why a phenomenon occurs by identifying generative social and psychological processes. In this model, micro-influencer signals (e.g., authenticity, homophily and parasociality) and message features (e.g., moral-emotion congruence, narrative framing and social norm cues) operate through such underlying mediators as trust, perceived personal impact, and moral obligation: well-established

mechanisms in prosocial behaviour and charitable giving research. The paper, rather than presenting empirical findings, develops testable theoretical propositions derived deductively from established literature: propositions that can be examined in future empirical work.

3.4 Conceptual Boundary Conditions

Following Whetten's (1989) guidance, the paper explicitly identifies the boundary conditions under which the proposed framework is expected to hold. Singapore is used as the primary analytical context due to its high digital penetration, multicultural social environment, and strong social norm structures. These contextual variables are treated not as limitations, but as theoretically informative moderating conditions.

4. Case Overview: Singapore's Non-Profit and Digital Philanthropy Landscape

Singapore provides a theoretically meaningful context for examining micro-influencers' stimulation of prosocial engagement in digital philanthropy. The country's non-profit sector is extensive and institutionalised, comprising charities across social services, health, education, arts, and community development. According to the Commissioner of Charities, recent national statistics report more than 2,200 registered charities, including Institutions of a Public Character authorised to issue tax-deductible receipts (Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, 2023). This breadth creates a diverse philanthropic ecosystem featuring both grassroots and highly professionalised organisations.

The nation's high level of digital connectivity further enhances its suitability for studying influencer-mediated philanthropy. Nearly all households have internet access, and smartphone ownership stands at 97 per cent, providing a digitally saturated environment for online engagement (Tham, 2023). Social media penetration is correspondingly high, enabling charities and content creators to reach wide audiences and to experiment with new forms of digital outreach, including influencer-led campaigns and peer-to-peer fundraising.

Singapore also features a robust culture of giving. Findings from the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre's (NVPC) Individual Giving Study reveal resilient donation patterns and a diversification of giving modes, including monetary contributions, volunteering, and digital forms of support such as online advocacy and social sharing (NVPC, 2023). The rise in non-traditional forms of giving indicates that Singaporeans increasingly engage in prosocial behaviours through digital channels.

Singapore's philanthropic landscape features growing institutional donors and family-led foundations, contributing to an increasingly sophisticated social-impact ecosystem (Soristic, 2024). This co-existence of institutional philanthropy and digitally active individual donors provides a rich foundation for theorising micro-influencers' catalysing of different forms of prosocial engagement across organisational types, audiences, and digital platforms.

These structural, cultural, and technological characteristics make Singapore a theoretically valuable case. As a digitally mature, multicultural, and tightly governed society, it functions as an analytically informative microcosm for understanding prosocial influence processes in small, highly connected nations. While the conceptual framework developed in this paper is grounded in Singapore, the mechanisms it proposes – authenticity, narrative framing, norm cues, trust, perceived impact, and moral obligation – are likely to hold analytical relevance for other comparable (especially Southeast Asian) settings.

5. Conceptual Findings

Drawing on the integrative synthesis undertaken in this paper, several key theoretical insights emerge regarding micro-influencers' stimulation of prosocial engagement in Singapore's highly connected digital philanthropy environment. These findings do not represent empirical results; rather, they constitute conceptual deductions derived from the cumulative evidence reviewed and the mechanism-based reasoning framework applied.

5.1 Micro-influencer signals function as relational triggers for prosocial engagement

The synthesis suggests that micro-influencers' authenticity, credibility, and parasocial closeness create relational cues that enhance receptivity to prosocial messages. Research on authenticity in influencer contexts indicates that perceived genuineness and self-congruence strengthen trust and persuasive impact (Audrezet et al., 2020). Parasocial interaction likewise functions as a relational cue increasing message acceptance (Bi et al., 2021). Singapore's near-universal digital access (Tham, 2023) means these signals have heightened relevance, positioning micro-influencers as key social referents who can shape emergent giving norms.

5.2 Message characteristics operate through moral-emotional and cognitive pathways

The conceptual integration reveals that narrative framing, moral-emotion congruence, and social norm cues are central message features that can enhance the emotional salience and perceived legitimacy of philanthropic appeals. Theoretical work on moral emotions and

charitable giving suggests that such message qualities elevate perceived personal impact and evoke moral obligation: two well-established antecedents of prosocial action. In a multicultural society like Singapore, where shared norms and collective responsibility are prominent, norm-based cues may be particularly influential.

5.3 Trust emerges as a pivotal mechanism in digital philanthropy

Across the reviewed domains, trust consistently appears as a key mediator linking influencer signals and message features to prosocial outcomes. Singapore's charitable ecosystem – characterised by regulation, transparency expectations, and IPC accreditation – provides a context where trust judgments are salient and consequential. Conceptually, trust in both the *influencer* and the *organisation* strengthens the perceived legitimacy of the call to act, making digital appeals more persuasive.

5.4 Prosocial engagement is shaped by culturally conditioned boundary conditions

The model identifies several Singapore-specific contextual moderators – cultural tightness, social norm strength, ethnic diversity, and high digital literacy – that influence how micro-influencer persuasion unfolds. These factors do not constrain the model's applicability but instead define the *boundary conditions* under which its mechanisms are most likely to operate. For example, a tightly regulated, multicultural environment may heighten sensitivity to social cues and trust signals, amplifying authenticity and norm-based messaging effects.

5.5 Digital prosociality differs meaningfully from traditional giving

The synthesis suggests that digital prosocial action in Singapore – donating through online platforms, sharing cause messages, participating in hashtag campaigns – represents not only a shift in channel, but also a different psychological mode of giving. Digital environments lower participation barriers, increase visibility, and introduce new opportunities for identity signalling. Micro-influencers amplify these dynamics by acting as relational bridges between individual users and causes, highlighting the need for a re-conceptualisation of digital philanthropy beyond offline giving models.

5.6 Integrated mechanisms offer a coherent theoretical account of influencer-led philanthropy

The conceptual synthesis results in a unified framework that links micro-influencer attributes, message-level mechanisms, and prosocial mediators in a cohesive causal sequence. This represents a theoretical advancement over fragmented prior work that examined these

components in isolation. The framework contributes a relational-moral model of digital philanthropy, showing how affective resonance, credibility, trust, and perceived impact converge to shape prosocial behaviour.

6. Discussion

The insights gained through the conceptual findings serve both scholars and practitioners. The expansion of theory connected to micro-influencer marketing, prosociality and social norms fills the previously-noted current gap in the scholarship. The enhanced understanding of digital philanthropy will be particularly beneficial for practice. Despite the benefits provided by the insights, it is also important to remain mindful of influencers' limitations. Influencers' negative impacts – ranging from privacy concerns to deceptive communication – in marketing contexts (Ekinci et al., 2025) need to be borne in mind in both academic and industry contexts.

This conceptual paper serves as a foundation for an empirical research programme in digital philanthropy. In line with Yadav's (2010) recommendations for conceptual scholarship in marketing, the framework is accompanied by a set of propositions that can be tested using:

1. experimental designs (to isolate authenticity, narrative framing or norm cue effects),
2. computational text and sentiment analysis (to examine naturally-occurring philanthropic influencer content in Singapore), and
3. cross-cultural comparative studies (to test moderation by cultural tightness-looseness or collectivism-individualism).

The methodological positioning therefore ensures that the conceptual contribution is both theoretically rigorous and practically actionable for future empirical investigation.

7. Conclusion

This paper, using Singapore as its case study, has an integrative conceptual model explaining micro-influencers' driving of digital philanthropy through two primary pathways – micro-influencer signals and message-based mechanisms – and identifying the psychological mediators that convert exposure into prosocial engagement. The paper has also provided a research agenda to advance empirical research about micro-influencer digital philanthropy.

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