

**Thank You for Donating! How Post-Donation Thank-You  
Notes Impact Charitable Giving**

Perris Adamski

A Thesis in The John Molson School of  
Business Department of Marketing

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Science (Option Marketing)  
at Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

July 2023

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**CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY**  
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By: Perris Adamski

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Signed by the final Examining Committee:

Dr. Kamila Sobol	Chair/Examiner
Dr. Sharlene He	Examiner
Dr. Caroline Roux	Supervisor

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_

Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dean of Faculty

\_\_\_\_\_  
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## Abstract

Thank You for Donating! How Post-Donation Thank-You Notes Impact Charitable Giving

Perris Adamski

Charities depend on individuals' donations as a main source of revenue. Although there is extensive research on one-time donations, there is a lack of research on recurring charitable giving. Since retaining donors is more cost-effective than acquiring new ones, charities would benefit from better understanding tactics that help increase their donors' lifetime value. One such tactic is to express gratitude, by sending thank-you notes to donors. However, the effects of thank-you notes on charitable giving are under-researched. The relationship marketing and the donor retention literature both suggest that donors should respond favourably to receiving a thank-you note, but related empirical evidence has provided mixed results. I investigated the effects of thank-you notes on subsequent donations, including their message content (i.e., includes the direct impact on beneficiaries vs. not) and the medium through which they were sent. I conducted three online experiments where I compared the effects of two types of thank-you notes (i.e., basic vs. detailed messaging) to that of a neutral stimulus (i.e., tax receipt), and of two formats (i.e., letter vs. email). I found that the effects of thank-you notes are complex, as there were no direct effects of thank-you notes on attitudes towards the charity and repeat donation amount, but there were indirect effects through two mediators (i.e., perceived effectiveness of the donation and positive emotions towards donating again). A thank-you note's medium also moderated their effects and had a more consistent impact on attitudes than on donation intentions.

## Acknowledgements

The journey of this master's degree has been long and harrowing, but here I stand at the top of Mount Doom, ready to cast the *precious* (this thesis) into the fire (Concordia's research repository). Like Frodo Baggins, I could not have done this without my own fellowship:

To my wizard, Dr. Caroline Roux, your expertise and guidance in the mystifying realm of academia has been so helpful in developing my skills and knowledge. You have been so kind and understanding, and you have inspired me to pursue my curiosities and never stop learning.

To my fellow hobbits, the friends I made during my time at Concordia, I am so grateful that we shared this experience together and could rely on each other when times were tough and lift each other's spirits with food and laughter.

To my wise elves, my parents, who have supported me and cheered me on throughout my entire education. You have been there every step of the way and encouraged me to do my best.

And last but not least, to my vial of light, my husband, who has never failed in helping me find my way when I get lost in the dark. Your endless optimism and caring are what I needed to succeed.

Thank you all so much for joining me on this adventure.

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## Introduction

Charities are in constant competition with one another to gain attention and donations from the public. In addition, from 2017 to 2021, there has been a 7.1% decrease in the number of donors in Canada (Government of Canada, 2023). While expanding charitable organizations' reach and widening their pool of potential donors is one means of increasing their revenues, another strategy would be to better understand how to retain their current donors and increase recurring donations more effectively. Indeed, it is generally more expensive to acquire new donors than retain their current ones, and higher donor retention rates tend to generate higher revenues for charities (Bennett, 2006; Merchant et al., 2010). In the non-profit sector, using resources as efficiently as possible is important given that revenue is usually based on grants and donations (Ibrisevic, 2020). However, as essential as donor retention can be for charitable organizations, there is a lack of research on this topic. Although there has been much research related to donor acquisition, a different marketing strategy is warranted when targeting existing donors (Sargeant, 2008). It would thus be in charities' best interests to not only understand how to generate new donations, but also how to generate recurring donations by enhancing their donors' loyalty.

Charities can increase donor retention and loyalty in various ways. One of the more common approaches is to send a thank-you note after a donation has been made. Charities can also send thank-you gifts, but these are often offered on the condition of receiving a donation, and they can have mixed effects on charitable giving (Newman & Shen, 2012; Chao & Fisher, 2021). Thank-you notes are a more cost-effective way (e.g., when sent via email) of acknowledging a donor's contribution, which is an important consideration given that people tend to prefer donating to charities that more efficiently use their resources (Tinkelman & Mankaney, 2007). Thank-you notes can play an important role in donor retention, as recognition and thanks can invoke feelings of reciprocity, satisfaction, trust, and commitment which, in turn, can improve the likelihood and size of subsequent donations (Sargeant, 2001; Beldad et al. 2014). The medium of a thank-you note could also impact recipients' responses, as prior research in marketing communications has shown that consumers respond more positively to letters than emails (Yu & Cude, 2009; Elkelä, 2005). However, there is a lack of research on the effects of thank-you notes on donors' attitudes towards the charity and recurring donation behaviour. Therefore, the main goal of



my thesis is to test whether a thank-you note (vs. a neutral stimuli), and the medium used to send it (i.e., letter vs. email), can positively affect donors' attitudes and increase their subsequent donations.

In the remainder of my thesis, I will first review past research on thank-you notes, as well as research on thank-you gifts given the limited research on thank-you notes and discuss how these acts of recognition impact donors' responses. I will also build on this review to develop the hypotheses I tested in my thesis. Next, I will present the results of one pre-test and three studies conducted with participants recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk and using hypothetical donation scenarios. Across the studies, I contrasted the effects of a thank-you note to that of a neutral stimulus (i.e., tax receipt), and tested how it impacted participants' responses following a donation (e.g., emotions, attitudes, intentions). I also tested the effects of different types of thank-you notes (i.e., "basic" vs. adding information related to the value-per-dollar impact of the donation) and media through which thank-you notes can be sent (i.e., letter vs. email). In addition, following the pre-test and Study 1, I will discuss the potential role of positive emotions related to and the perceived effectiveness of a donation in my hypothesized effects, based on what I learned from those studies. Finally, I will discuss the implications of my findings, the limitations of my research, and future research directions about thank-you notes.

## **Literature Review**

Every point of contact that a charity makes with the public, whether intentional or not, impacts its image, and thus its perceived worthiness of receiving donations. Of interest, Sargeant and Jay (2004) argued that one of the reasons why a donor may stop giving to a charity is because they believe the communications they receive from the charity were inappropriate due to either their message content or frequency. Further, Nathan and Hallam (2009; p. 320) state that: "Lapsers [i.e. lapsed donors] are not a type of person. Lapsing is a behavioural response, driven by attitudes and beliefs." It therefore is in a charity's best interest to design and employ the communications they have control over more effectively. Moreover, better understanding of existing donors' motives would allow charities to create better messaging and more efficiently target individuals who may be more likely to donate (again and more). Importantly, charities should differentiate their one-time or occasional

donors from their recurring ones, as repeat donors' accumulated experiences with each donation will impact their future charitable giving (Beldad et al., 2014).

There is limited research on recurring donations and the motivations of repeat donors, but it is arguably just as (if not more) important than research on first-time or one-time donations (Beldad et al., 2014), since attracting new donors is more costly than retaining a charity's current donor base (Barber and Levis, 2013). While there has been extant research related to what motivates people to give to charities (Aaker & Akutsu, 2009; Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Bendapudi et al., 1996; Cheung & Chan, 2000), there now is increased interest in how charities can influence these motivations (Gregory et al., 2019; Chapman et al. 2020). For example, there is growing research on how charities can use relationship marketing strategies with their donors to increase retention, as such strategies have grown in importance in the for-profit sector (Bennett & Barkensjo, 2005).

A common strategy used by charities to increase their donor retention is to recognize their donors (Gaffny, 1996). This can be done in many ways; charities can for instance show gratitude by hosting events for their donors, posting their names in a newsletter, putting their names on a plaque, or dedicating facilities to them, among others (Samek & Sheremeta, 2017). The nature of these gestures can be public or private (Winterich et al., 2013) and typically, donors who give larger donations are more likely to receive more public recognition (Samek & Sheremeta, 2017). However, for donations involving more modest amounts of money, public (vs. private) recognition can decrease people's motivations to donate (Savary & Goldsmith, 2020). Thank-you notes, sent privately to donors via letter or email, can thus be a more effective way to build relationships with the majority of a charity's donor base.

### **The effects of thank-you notes and gifts on charitable giving**

There is limited research on the effect of thank-you notes on charitable giving, and especially on notes that are given unexpectedly or without letting donors know in advance that their donation will be rewarded with a note. I thus expanded the literature review to include research on tangible gifts used to entice donors. Although there are important differences between these two types of recognition, which will be discussed in my review, they both give a better understanding of the complexities charities encounter when trying to privately express gratitude to their donors. Below, I review research related to thank-you

notes and gifts under the assumption that they serve a similar purpose: increasing the likelihood and size of recurring donations.

Prior research has first shown that donor recognition plays an important role in donor retention. For instance, Bennett (2006) found that most of their participants appreciated receiving a formal acknowledgement from a charity, and that their level of appreciation was a strong indicator of whether they would continue to donate. Interestingly, Sargeant and Jay (2004) found that there was a significant difference between active donors and lapsed donors in terms of how much they cared about receiving acknowledgement for their donation, with lapsed donors assigning it higher importance. Nathan and Hallam (2009) qualitatively replicated this finding from interviewing lapsed donors. They found that not being thanked after having a long donation history with a charity was a main reason why donors switched charities (or lapsed).

Multiple factors influence how donors respond to expressions of gratitude from charities. For instance, prior work has found that a donor's age and previous giving history (Quigley et al. 2002), as well as income (Samek & Longfield, 2023), and the value of the gift (Newman & Shen, 2012; Falk, 2007) can all impact the likelihood of making subsequent donations. Additionally, Winterich et al. (2013) found that the effectiveness of recognition in the context of charitable giving is dependent on the influence of two dimensions of moral identity (based on Aquino and Reed's (2002) moral identity model): internalization (self-consistency) and symbolization (social reinforcement). Specifically, donors who are less concerned that their actions align with their self-concept of being a moral person (i.e., low internalization) and who prefer to express their moral actions to others (i.e., high symbolization) are the most likely to positively react to receiving recognition, because it socially reinforces their charitable behavior. Of note, participants in Winterich et al.'s (2013) research were told that they would be receiving a thank-you note if they decided to donate part of their compensation, which raises the question as to whether they would have behaved differently if they had been unaware of that fact.

Tangible gifts differ from thank-you notes because they can be seen as a charity's attempt to increase the perceived benefits of giving, in addition to providing recognition. This type of benefit is self-serving, and can be obtained via tangible goods, services, and/or improved social status (Sargeant et al., 2006). Tangible gifts are also meant to elicit feelings

of reciprocity or obligation to return the gesture with something of equal or greater value (Alpizar Rodriguez et al., 2008; Falk, 2007), but they do not always seem to work as intended. For instance, Quigley et al. (2002) studied the effect of both thank-you letters and small gifts sent to alumni of a college following monetary donations. They found that a standard thank-you letter was positively received by donors and increased the amount they subsequently gave, and a personalized thank-you letter that was signed by a senior faculty member produced an even better result. However, small gifts (i.e., coffee mugs and ballpoint pens) produced the opposite effect. Quigley et al. (2002) speculated that the inexpensive gift was perceived as an insincere way to solicit more donations and did not match the worth of what donors were giving. Newman and Shen (2012), who found similar effects of tangible gifts on charitable giving, directly tested the potential effect of this discrepancy between the value of the gift and the monetary donation by manipulating the gift's value (i.e., cheap plastic vs. well-made metal pen) and found no effect of gift value on donation size. A notable difference between Quigley et al. (2002) and Newman and Shen (2012) is that the former investigated the effects of tangible gifts (among other types of recognition) on recurring donors longitudinally, whereas the latter investigated the effects of tangible gifts on first-time donors and gifts that were conditional on making a donation (i.e., offered as a "reward"). This highlights another complexity of recognition in the context of charitable giving, as conditional gifts can be seen as an attempt to appeal to potential donors' self-interest, which can taint the perceived altruism of the behavior and thus reduce donations (Newman & Shen, 2012). Interestingly, thank-you notes can also backfire, as Bittschi et al. (2021) found that, in the context of recurring donations to a church, thank-you letters for past donations served as a reminder to the highest-paying donors of how costly their donations were, which prompted them to opt-out of giving.

In addition to being offered conditionally on or after making a donation, tangible gifts (e.g., magnets or postcards) can also be offered before or at the same time as an ask for a donation is made (Alpizar Rodriguez et al., 2008; Falk, 2007). Such gifts have been investigated in "pregiving" field experiments and have been shown to be effective (Bell et al., 1994), but Alpizar Rodriguez et al. (2008) found that the slight increase in contributions prompted by the gifts was not enough to recoup the cost of the gifts themselves. Falk (2007) further found that participants who were offered a larger gift (e.g.,

four postcards vs. one postcard) were more likely to donate, but they were also more likely to donate smaller amounts than those in a no gift condition. The effectiveness of tangible gifts on charitable giving thus seems questionable not only for encouraging recurring donations, but also for motivating first-time donations. Overall, Chao and Fisher (2021) found that the popularity, mission, and size of the charity, as well as the desirability of the gift, can impact how donors react to thank-you gifts, which they suggest helps explain the differing results across past research. Further, they found that new donors who do not already favour the charity react more favourably to gifts than existing donors who are attached to the charity, which is consistent with Quigley and colleagues' (2002) findings.

Prior research on the effects of recognition on charitable giving has mostly focused on donation likelihood and size as the main outcomes of interest (Merchant et al., 2010; Newman & Shen, 2012; Simpson et al., 2018), and did not seem to pay as much attention to important related variables such as donors' attitudes towards the charity. For instance, Chao and Fisher (2021) asked participants to rate a list of charities in terms of likability, but they used this likeability rating as a moderator (i.e., baseline likeability of a charity impacts donors' responses to thank-you gifts) rather than looking at the effect of recognition on attitudes towards the charity. It would however be reasonable to assume that if/when recognition (such as thank-you notes) has a positive effect on donation intentions and amount, donor's attitudes towards the charity would also be positively impacted.

Relatedly, trust and commitment have been found to be important mediators when it comes to the donor-charity relationship, as the more a person is committed to a cause and trusts that an organization will deliver on helping those it serves, the more they tend to engage in giving behaviour (Beldad et al., 2014; Sergeant & Lee, 2004; Bennett & Barkensjo, 2005). Trust is directly impacted by the performance of a charity and how it communicates with its donors. Charities thus need to address the element of risk associated with donating money and assure donors that their donation is being put to good use. The perceptions that a donor holds of a particular charity are key to their final decision of whether to donate or not (Sargeant et al., 2006). Naskrent and Siebelt (2011) found that satisfaction has a direct effect on trust and commitment and an indirect effect on donor retention. The more satisfied the donor is with the giving process to a charity, the more likely they are to trust the charity. Given that the charity's public reputation is also an

important factor, having more satisfied donors is beneficial in retaining donors (Beldad et al., 2014).

In sum, thank-you notes can be a valuable tool for charities to provide recognition and build donor loyalty, but there is a lack of research about their effects on donors' responses, especially on outcomes other than donation likelihood and amount. Building on and expanding prior research, I will first investigate the effect of thank-you notes (vs. a neutral stimulus) on both donors' attitudes towards the charity and repeat donation intentions. Specifically, I propose that:

**H1:** Receiving a thank-you note (vs. tax receipt) after making a donation to a charity will positively increase donors' i) attitudes towards the charity and ii) repeat donation amount.

### **The effects of thank-you notes' medium on charitable giving**

Charities can thank their donors in various ways, such as by sending them a letter, an email, or giving them a call. However, there is little research comparing the effectiveness of various media through which donors can be thanked and how they impact charitable giving (e.g., strength of the donor-charity relationship). Of note, Sargeant and Jay (2004) found that one-third of their participants preferred to receive all communications from a charity via email, whereas the majority preferred receiving a mailed letter.

However, the medium through which donors are thanked may not work as well as anticipated when they are put to the test. For instance, although phone calls are beyond the scope of my thesis, Samek and Longfield (2023) showed that they were less effective for donor retention (~31% actual retention) than what had been predicted by fundraising professionals and the general public (~54% predicted retention). In addition, the authors expected phone calls to induce feelings of reciprocity and, consequently, continued donations, but they did not find evidence for their proposed effect. They further found that phone calls had no effect on year-over-year donor retention (Samek & Longfield, 2023). Conversely, Carey et al. (1976) found that thank-you calls had a significant positive effect on recurring sales in the for-profit sector, suggesting that relationship marketing tactics might operate differently in the non-profit sector. It is however important to note that social norms around phone calls have greatly evolved since Carey et al. (1976) conducted their

studies, such that their overall effectiveness may have diminished over time.

Given that thank-you letters and emails are common relationship marketing tactics used by charities, and that there seems to be little research on the topic, my thesis will attempt to provide empirical evidence about the effectiveness of these media for charitable giving. Such comparison is also important because many donors have been concerned about whether their monetary donations are being wasted on things that do not directly benefit the cause (Bennett, 2006), and these commonly used media involve different costs in terms of labour and money. Although (mailed) letters cost more money to print and transport than emails, they are more tangible and the effort that goes into making them can be perceived as a more thoughtful gesture (Slattery, 2023). Letters are also more likely to have the full attention of the recipient, while other things on a screen can distract from an email (Slattery, 2023). Relatedly, Yu and Cude (2009) found that people felt like they were “treated with special care,” if they received a letter (vs. an email) when it comes to personalized marketing campaigns (p. 507). They also found that a letter is significantly less likely to be discarded than an email, which suggests that letters have a more lasting effect on people. In addition, Elkelä (2005) found that an addressed mailed letter was the preferred means of communication for messages regarding customer loyalty, and by those who support non-profit organizations (which is consistent with Sargeant & Jay, 2004). Therefore, I predict that a thank-you note in the form of a letter (vs. email) will generate increased positive attitudes and donation sizes. Stated formally:

**H2a:** Receiving a thank-you note as a letter (vs. email) will increase donors’ i) positive attitudes towards the charity and ii) repeat donation amount.

**H2b:** Receiving a receipt as a letter (vs. email) will have no impact on donors’ i) positive attitudes towards the charity and ii) repeat donation amount.

### **The role of positive emotions and perceived effectiveness in charitable giving**

Given the lack of research on thank-you notes, the emotional utility such notes provide and whether they evoke any feelings of reciprocity or obligation is unclear. Emotional utility considers the act of giving as a means of “personal mood management” (Sargeant et al., 2006, p. 157), as donors can be motivated to give in order to feel positive emotions, such as the “warm glow” (Andreoni, 1989), or to avoid feeling negative emotions, such as guilt or social pressures (Samek & Sheremeta, 2017, Bendapudi et al.,

1996). Prior research on charitable giving would suggest that thank-you notes should impact how donors feel about a charity and/or their donation, but prior research on thank-you gifts and phone calls (discussed above) suggest that intuitions based on prior research do not always transfer to the context of expressions of gratitude from charities. I will thus explore the role of positive emotions in my thesis without formulating specific hypotheses.

In addition, many donors are concerned that their monetary donations are being wasted on things that do not directly benefit the cause (Bennett, 2006), and thus care about the perceived effectiveness of their donation (Carroll & Kachersky, 2019; Naskrent & Siebelt, 2011). Thank-you notes can convey “perceived effectiveness” through their messaging (e.g., information related to the value-per-dollar impact of the donation) and/or their format (e.g., letters are a bigger waste of resources than emails; Slattery, 2023), and their effects on charitable giving may be impacted by whether donors perceive them as being a waste of resources, or as a means to connect with the charity and/or learn more about their donation. I will thus also explore the role of perceived effectiveness in my thesis without formulating specific hypotheses.

### **Overview of the Studies**

This thesis consists of one pre-test and three studies. The goals of the pre-test were to determine the types of causes that Turkers (Amazon Mechanical Turk was the participant pool used for all studies) care most about, what their experiences have been with receiving thank-you notes from charities, and how such notes impacted their likelihood of donating again to those charities. Study 1 tested whether receiving a thank-you note (vs. tax receipt) influenced participants’ willingness-to-donate again, as well as their attitudes towards the charity, their emotions about donating again, and their perceptions of the note (tax receipt). Study 2 extended Study 1’s findings by testing the effects of two types of thank-you notes: a “basic” thank-you note and an “effectiveness” thank-you note that included information related to the impact of the donation (vs. a tax receipt). Participants’ attitudes, emotions, and perceptions were again assessed, in addition to their willingness-to-donate again. Study 3 explored how the medium of the thank-you note (vs. tax receipt) influenced the same dependent variables as in Studies 1 and 2. An email versus a letter was used to test whether the medium impacted participants’



concerns about a charity's efficient use of resources. In addition, Studies 2 and 3 tested additional mediation-related hypotheses that built on the results of Study 1; see Study 2 for a detailed explanation.

### **Pre-test**

Because I planned on collecting data for all my studies using Amazon Mechanical Turk, I first conducted a pre-test to learn more about Turkers' experiences with thank-you notes. The pre-test aimed to identify the types of charities that participants cared most about, whether they had any experience with receiving thank-you notes after making a donation, the format of thank-you notes they have received, how they felt (would feel) about receiving a note, their perceptions of the thank-you note's influence on their responses, and their general attitudes toward donating.

### **Methods**

Two hundred participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk via CloudResearch and were compensated US\$1.20 for an 8-minute study. However, participants who did not pass the attention checks and/or gave unintelligible responses for the open-ended questions were removed from the study. The final sample thus consisted of 185 participants ( $M_{age} = 39.21$ ;  $SD = 10.99$ ; 51.6% female).

Participants first had to provide informed consent, answer attention/comprehension checks (e.g., "A chicken is a type of insect" True/False) and were presented with a short introduction about charitable giving. Participants were then asked to list the charities that they had given to in the past, currently supported, and/or would like to support if they had the resources, which helped me identify the most popular types of charities I should use for the stimuli in future studies. Participants also had to indicate if they had ever received a thank-you note after making a donation (0 = No, 1 = Yes, 9 = Can't remember); 49.5% of participants were able to recall receiving a thank-you note, while 30.4% did not, and 20.1% couldn't remember. Participants who remembered receiving a thank-you note were also asked to describe it (e.g., who sent it to them, its format, whether it was personalized).

Next, participants were presented with several questions related to their reactions to the thank-you note. Those who never received a thank-you note (or could not remember)

were asked in a hypothetical manner about how they would respond, while those who did receive one were asked to recall their actual experience. Participants were presented with questions about how the note made (would make) them feel (1 = Extremely bad, 7 = Extremely good) and if it impacted how they (would have) felt about the charity (1 = Much more negative, 7 = Much more positive). There also were questions about whether they had talked (would talk) about the note to others and if they had ever donated (would ever donate) again to a charity they received a thank-you note from (0 = No, 1 = Yes). If participants had (or would have) donated again to the charity, they were also asked about the extent to which the thank-you note impacted their repeat donation (1 = No impact whatsoever, 4 = Main reason for repeat donation), how often they did (would) donate again (1 = I donated much less often, 5 = I donated much more often) to the charity, and how much they did (would) give (1 = I donated much less, 5 = I donated much more).

Finally, all participants answered questions about whether they thought the format of a thank-you note impacted their repeat donation (1 = Absolutely not, 5 = Absolutely yes), how often they would like to receive one if they were regular donors (1 = Never, 6 = After each donation), and the minimum dollar amount they thought warranted a thank-you note (slider scale anchored from \$0 to \$500). Participants' perceptions of thank-you notes' efficacy, as well as donation-related attitudes and habits were also assessed (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree). Lastly, participants completed standard demographics and data quality (e.g., distractions, technological issues) questions. The full list of pre-test questions can be found in Appendix 1.

## **Results and Discussion**

The most popular types of charities mentioned by participants included those related to animal welfare (e.g., Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, World Wide Fund for Nature), medicine/health (e.g., Doctors Without Borders, American Heart Association, St. Jude's Children Hospital), and general humanitarian causes (e.g., Red Cross, United Way, Salvation Army). Results also suggested that emails and letters were the most common format of thank- you notes, and they were usually personalized with the name of the donor. Considering that half of the respondents were able to recall having received a thank-you note in the past, it is a good indication that i) thank-you notes are a fairly common practice and ii) they have enough impact on a donor to be remembered.

Participants reported feeling moderately good about themselves ( $M = 5.54$ ;  $SD = 1.06$ ) and the charity ( $M = 5.23$ ;  $SD = 1.05$ ) after receiving a note. Only 17.9% of participants told (would tell) others about a thank-you note they received, and 59.2% said they had (would) donate again to a charity that they had received a thank-you note from. The average response for what impact the note had (would have) on their repeat donation was “some impact” ( $M = 2.01$ ;  $SD = 0.77$ ), meaning it was not the main reason for a repeat donation. As for how often and how much they donated (would have donated), participants said that they would donate as often as before ( $M = 3.31$ ;  $SD = 0.56$ ) and the same amount ( $M = 3.24$ ;  $SD = 0.53$ ).

Participants mainly believed that the format of a thank-you note probably did not have an impact on repeat donation ( $M = 2.66$ ;  $SD = 1.16$ ). Results also showed that participants mostly preferred to have a thank-you note sent to them every 6 months to a year ( $M = 3.56$ ;  $SD = 1.64$ ). The average amount of money that participants believed warranted a thank-you note was \$76.44 ( $SD = 109.77$ ). As for the perceptions of thank-you notes, a summary of the responses is presented in Table 1. A reliability analysis was conducted using the first five items in Table 1, as they are measuring the overall perception of thank-you note efficacy, which resulted in a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.92. Overall, participants have moderately favourable perceptions of thank-you notes and how much they influence donors. Participants’ donation-related attitudes and habits can be found in Table 2. Participants on average only moderately identified as donors.

Next, participants who couldn’t remember whether they ever received a thank-you note were removed from the analyses in order to conduct a one-way ANOVA between two groups: participants who did receive a note in the past and answered follow-up questions based on their actual experience, versus those who did not receive one and answered follow-up hypothetical questions. Therefore, the sample size was reduced to 147. There was no significant difference between whether participants responded to follow-up questions based on their actual experience or hypothetically on how receiving a note made participants feel in general ( $F(1, 146) = 0.92, p = 0.34$ ) nor about the charity more specifically ( $F(1, 146) = 0.17, p = 0.68$ ). A chi-square test was then conducted between participants who had versus had not received a note on whether they decided to donate again because of the note. A significant relationship between the two variables was found,

**Table 1. Participants' perceptions of thank-you notes**

<b>Do you believe that thank-you notes from charities...</b>	<b><i>M</i></b>	<b><i>SD</i></b>
Help donors feel more connected to the charity	5.67	1.24
Help donors care more about the charity	5.11	1.43
Improve how donors feel about the charity	5.36	1.28
Improve donors' trust in the charity	5.09	1.50
Increase donor retention	5.23	1.39
Are a waste of a charity's resources	3.05	1.79

**Table 2. Participants' donation-related attitudes and habits**

<b>Question</b>	<b><i>M</i></b>	<b><i>SD</i></b>
I am the kind of person who donates to charities	4.74	1.66
Not donating to charities goes against my principles	3.77	1.83
I regularly donate to charities	4.30	1.84
It is unusual for me to donate to charities	3.01	1.89
Charity organizations perform a useful function for society	5.92	1.38

as participants who had (vs. not) received a note were more likely to donate again ( $P_{Actual} = 81.3\%$ ,  $P_{Hypothetical} = 35.7\%$ ,  $\chi^2(2, N = 147) = 38.23, p < .001$ ).

Similarly, a one-way ANOVA was conducted among the subset of participants who said they did (would) donate again ( $N = 119$ ) after receiving a thank-you note. There were significant differences between whether participants responded to repeat donation questions based on their actual (vs. hypothetical) experience, as participants who actually received one intended to donate lower amounts ( $M_{Actual} = \$3.12, SD = 0.44, M_{Hypothetical} = \$3.33, SD = 0.56, F(1, 118) = 10.84, p = 0.001$ ) and less often ( $M_{Actual} = 3.18, SD = 0.48, M_{Hypothetical} = 3.51, SD = 0.63, F(1,118) = 5.26, p = 0.02$ ). Whether participants' answers were based on actual versus hypothetical experiences with thank-you notes also significantly impacted whether they believed that the note's format affected their future repeat donation, with those in the

hypothetical group believing it would have a stronger impact ( $M_{Actual} = 2.44$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ,  $M_{Hypothetical} = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ,  $F(1, 146) = 5.72$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ). However, no effect was found on how frequently participants desired to receive a note ( $F(1, 146) = 1.84$ ,  $p = 0.18$ ) nor the minimum amount of money donated that they believed warranted a thank-you note ( $F(1,146) = 0.45$ ,  $p = 0.51$ ). Finally, there was no difference in participants' beliefs of the efficacy of thank-you notes (all  $ps \geq 0.40$ ).

## Study 1

The goal of Study 1 was to test whether receiving a thank-you note (vs. tax receipt) after donating to a charity impacts donors' attitudes towards the charity and repeat donation intentions. In addition, building on the pre-test's data, I will explore the role of a charity's perceived use of resources in the effects of thank-you notes (vs. tax receipts) on participants' attitudes and intentions. Specifically, I observed an inconsistency between participants' ratings of whether thank-you notes (vs. tax receipts) are "a waste of a charity's resources," where they slightly disagreed on average, and qualitative comments left by several participants which mentioned that they believed thank-you notes were a waste of a charities' resources.

## Methods

Three hundred fourteen participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk via CloudResearch and were compensated US\$1.00 for a 7-minute study. Thirty-three participants were removed from the analyses due to failing to complete the study, incorrectly filling out the attention/comprehension checks, providing comments that showed strong negative attitudes towards charitable giving or were incoherent (indicating having been distracted while completing the study), and/or asking the researcher to not include their data in the study. The final sample size therefore included 281 participants ( $M_{Age} = 40.10$ ,  $SD = 10.85$ , 39.5% female).

Participants first had to provide informed consent, answer comprehension checks (e.g., "A chicken is a type of insect" True/False) and were presented with a short introduction about charitable giving to provide some context. Participants were then presented with a short excerpt about a fictional charity – "The Global Animal Fund" – that

explained its purpose and function (See Appendix 2). This cause was chosen because it was one of the popular types of charitable causes amongst Turkers according to the pre-test. A fictional charity was preferred over an existing one in order to reduce potential effects due to participants' familiarity with and attitudes towards existing charities. After reading the excerpt, participants were asked to imagine that they had donated \$20 to the Global Animal Fund to support their cause. Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two note type conditions: thank-you note versus tax receipt (control). They were instructed that, a few days later, they received a letter in the mail from the Global Animal Fund containing a thank-you note (vs. tax receipt). See Figure 1 for the stimuli's content.

**Figure 1. Study 1: Stimuli**

Thank-you note	Tax receipt (control)
<p>Dear Donor,            Thank you so much for your donation to the Global Animal Fund.            Support from people like you is vital to helping us take better care of animals across the world.            Your donation will be put to good use toward a better future for wildlife.            Best Wishes!</p>	<p>Official donation receipt for income tax purposes            Global Animal Fund            Receipt No.: W000208050            Date: December 2, 2022            Donation Amount: \$20.00            Eligible amount for tax purposes: \$20.00            Authorized by John Smith</p>

Participants were then asked to complete four items intended to measure their attitudes towards the charity: how much they liked the charitable organization, cared about the cause the charity supported, trusted the charitable organization, and believed the cause the charity supported was important (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree). A factor analysis showed that all four items loaded on one factor (Eigenvalue = 2.95) and a reliability analysis returned a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88, indicating that the four items reliably assessed charity-related attitudes and could be averaged into one "attitudes towards the charity" variable.

Next, participants were asked to imagine that they were to receive a \$10 bonus at the end of the study, and that they were presented with the opportunity to make another donation to the Global Animal Fund. They indicated how much of their bonus they would donate to the Global Animal Fund using a slider scale (anchored from \$0 to \$10; similar to Simpson et al., 2018). Setting a limit helped prevent participants from claiming to intend to

donate extreme amounts due to the hypothetical nature of the study. In addition, measuring willingness-to-donate in this fashion allowed me to expand upon Merchant and colleagues' (2010) work, which only measured donation intention with 5-point Likert scales.

Participants were then asked to indicate whether receiving a thank-you note (tax receipt) from a charity would make them “feel obligated to donate again,” (Beldad et al., 2014) “guilty if they did not donate again,” and “pleased to donate again” to the charity (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree)<sup>1</sup>. The “obligated” and “guilty” items returned a correlation of 0.77 ( $p < 0.001$ ); these items were thus averaged into one “negative emotions towards donating” variable. Participants also rated the extent to which they believed the thank-you note (tax receipt) was credible, believable, genuine, authentic, and a good use of the charity's resources (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree). The first four items served as a manipulation check, to ensure that the note and receipt were not perceived differently by participants and did not affect their responses. A factor analysis showed that these four items loaded onto one factor (Eigenvalue = 3.54), and a reliability analysis returned a Cronbach's alpha of 0.96; they were thus averaged into one “perceived credibility” variable.

Finally, participants were presented with standard demographic questions, and two questions about their habits and general beliefs about charities: “I regularly donate to charities” and “Charity organizations perform a useful function for society” (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree; Webb et al., 2000). These two items were not highly correlated ( $r = 0.35$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), so they were kept separate in the analyses (see Appendix 3 for all of Study 1 measures).

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<sup>1</sup> In Qualtrics, these questions were accidentally created using a 5-point Likert scale for the tax receipt condition and a 7-point Likert scale for the thank-you note condition. The data from the tax receipt condition was thus converted to a 7-point scale using the following formula:  $x_7 = (x_5 - 1)(6/4) + 1$ .

## Results and Discussion

On average, participants scored around the scale's midpoint in terms of donation habits ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ) and they believed that charities perform a useful function for society ( $M = 6.02$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ).

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) first showed that there was no significant effect of note type on attitudes towards the charity ( $M_{Note} = 5.81$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ;  $M_{Receipt} = 5.78$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ;  $F(1, 280) = 0.10$ ,  $p = 0.76$ ). Additional ANOVAs were conducted on the other variables of interest and revealed no significant effect of note type on repeat donation amount, negative emotions towards donating again, feeling pleased about donating again, and credibility perceptions. However, there was a significant effect of note type on participant's beliefs that it was a good use of a charities' resources, where the tax receipt was seen as a better use of resources than the thank-you note. See Table 3 for these analyses.

In addition, one-way analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were conducted to determine whether the effects of note type on select dependent variables of interest (i.e., attitudes towards charity, repeat donation amount, good use of resources) were impacted by the addition of participants' habits and general beliefs about charities to the analyses. The effect of note type on attitudes towards the charity still was non-significant when controlling for participants' habits and beliefs ( $F(1, 277) = 0.25$ ,  $p = 0.62$ ), and the main effects of donation habits ( $F(1, 277) = 3.71$ ,  $p = 0.06$ ) and attitudes ( $F(1, 277) = 91.15$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) were significant. Additional ANCOVAs showed that the effect of note type on repeat donation amount was also still non-significant, and the effect on "good use of resources" was still significant, when controlling for the same covariates. See Appendix 4 for detailed results. Given that there was a significant main effect on "good use of resources," I tested whether it mediated the effect of thank-you notes on attitudes towards the charity and repeat donation amount and found significant mediation effects. However, these effects only arose in Study 1 and will thus not be discussed in the main text; see Appendix 5 for results. In sum, no effects of receiving a thank-you note (vs. receipt) were found on participants' attitudes towards and repeat donation amount to the charity in Study 1.



**Table 3. Study 1: Main effects of note type**

Variable	Thank-you note ( <i>N</i> = 142)	Tax receipt ( <i>N</i> = 139)	ANOVA		
	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Attitudes towards charity	5.81 (0.99)	5.77 (0.88)	0.10	(1,279)	0.76
Repeat donation amount	\$2.99 (3.09)	\$2.91 (2.96)	0.05	(1, 279)	0.83
Negative emotions towards donating again	2.58 (1.64)	2.51 (1.67)	0.13	(1, 279)	0.72
Pleased to donate again	5.20 (1.46)	5.06 (1.52)	0.68	(1, 279)	0.41
Was good use of resources	4.83 (1.60)	5.25 (1.19)	6.24	(1, 279)	0.01
Perceived credibility	5.68 (1.12)	5.82 (0.95)	1.29	(1, 279)	0.26

### Study 2

Although I did not find a main effect of thank-you notes (vs. tax receipt) on charitable giving in Study 1, I uncovered a mediation effect through participants' perceptions of a charities' effective use of their resources, where the thank-you note was seen as more wasteful than the tax receipt. This suggests that perceived effectiveness may play an important role in the effects of thank-you notes. Comments from the open-ended section of the previous studies also suggested that participants felt better when they received a note, suggesting that positive emotions should play a role. Therefore, related measures have been added and/or modified from those used in Study 1 in the current study in order to further explore the potential impact thank-you notes may have on these constructs.

Prior research has shown that charities' competency and efficacy affect donors' attitudes and donation behaviour. For example, Bendapudi et al. (1996) state that people are more inclined to engage in helping behaviour when they see that the charity meets their objectives and that the beneficiaries receive most of the donation. In addition, whether

consumers believe that their donation has a direct impact on the cause has also been shown to influence their attitudes and donation behavior. Naskrent and Siebelt (2011) and Quigley et al. (2002) found that communicating the impact of the donation is effective in retaining donors, and Iyer et al. (2012) found it especially effective when recruiting potential donors. Furthermore, McGrath (1997) believes that in the non-profit sector, where there are so many alternative organizations to give to and a low switching cost between them, a charity can stand out by offering superior service value. This can be done by telling the donor that their money was put to good use in the charity's communications. McGrath (1997) also notes that charities that combine this feedback with appreciation will see increased donor retention. Sargeant's (2001) research supports this as well; he found that the top consideration when it comes to evaluating the service quality of a charity is whether they used the donor's money appropriately. Other important factors include whether the donor believes the charity has an impact on the cause and that the charity keeps the donor informed about how they use the donations (Sargeant, 2001).

Specifically, perceived donation efficacy is defined as how much a donor believes that their monetary donation is successfully being used by the charity to impact the beneficiaries' lives (Carroll & Kachersky, 2019). Perceived donation effectiveness is thus the belief that the charity is spending the donations it receives and other resources mostly on its beneficiaries and not on non-essential expenses, such as excessive wages or administrative costs. As previously discussed, thank-you notes can convey perceived donation effectiveness through their messaging (e.g., information related to the value-per-dollar impact of the donation) and/or their format (e.g., letters are a bigger waste of resources than emails; Slattery, 2023), and their effects may be impacted by whether donors perceive them as being a waste of resources. First, the role of the perceived use (or wastefulness) of a charity's resources will again be explored in Studies 2 and 3 but, as briefly mentioned in Study 1, it did not produce consistent effects across all my studies. Second, the role of the perceived effectiveness of one's donation will also be explored in Studies 2 and 3 by manipulating the messaging of the thank-you note (i.e., describing the value-per-dollar of the donation for the charity's cause vs. the "basic" note used in Study 1), and by measuring whether participants believed their donation was effective. Finally, I will manipulate the medium through which the thank-you note (vs. tax receipt) is sent in

Study 3 to explore the impact of their format.

In addition, although emotional utility has been shown to be an important factor when a donor decides to give to a charity (Sargeant et al., 2006), the thank-you note (vs. tax receipt) had no impact on either positive or negative emotions towards giving again in Study 1. This lack of effect could be due to the coding error encountered when designing Study 1 (see footnote 1), or to the fact that I used too few items (i.e., pleased and obligated/guilty) to measure these emotions. I will thus further explore the effects of positive (and negative) emotions in Studies 2 and 3 given their demonstrated role in charitable giving.

Indeed, rather than being altruistically motivated, a donor may be inclined to donate to a charity in order to feel a “warm glow,” or positive emotions from the act of giving (Andreoni, 1989). Warm glow is closely related to the concept of the “helper’s high,” in that, “[a] predisposition to experience helper’s high is said to be associated with psychologically selfish reasons for giving [...]” (Bennett, 2006). Bennett’s (2006) study found that people who are motivated to give in order to feel good are more likely to keep donating long term. Williamson and Clark (1989) found that the act of helping can improve mood and self-evaluations. They speculated as to why this is, and two of the reasons they proposed are that: i) the actual act of helping feels good, and ii) the donor feels good because they are anticipating being appreciated and viewed positively by the beneficiary. Past research that attempted to manipulate warm glow feelings prior to measuring donation intention has however offered mixed results (Chuan & Samek, 2014; Crumpler & Grossman, 2008).

Because they are expressing appreciation, thank-you notes have been shown to enhance donors’ positive emotions (Merchant et al., 2010). For example, Bittschi et al. (2021) found that when low-paying donors of the church were thanked for their past donations, they felt more positively about continuing to give. Thank-you notes have further been shown to help reduce negative emotions (e.g., guilt, shame, sadness) donors may also experience (Merchant et al., 2010). Studies 2 and 3 will thus more extensively investigate the role of positive and negative emotions towards the charity, recurring donation, and note in the effects of thank-you notes.

## Methods

Five hundred five participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk via CloudResearch and were compensated \$1.00 for a 7-minute study. Thirty-two participants were removed from the analyses using the same exclusion criteria as in Study 1. The final sample included 473 participants ( $M_{Age} = 41.73$ ,  $SD = 11.98$ , 44.0% female).

Study 2 followed a similar procedure as in Study 1, except for a few differences. First, a different fictional charity – “National Food Bank Association” – was used (see Appendix 2 for description), as it was another popular type of charity among Turkers according to the pre-test. Second, an additional note condition was also tested (i.e., tax receipt vs. “basic” note vs. “effectiveness” note). The basic thank-you note and the tax receipt stimuli were the same as in Study 1, but with the charity-specific details changed. The effectiveness note stimulus included additional information about the “value-per-dollar” of the donation (see Figure 2).

### Figure 2. Study 2: Stimuli

Basic [vs. effectiveness] thank-you note
Dear donor, Thank you so much for your donation to the National Food Bank Association. Support from people like you is vital to helping us feed those in need and advocate for a world where no one goes hungry. Your \$20 donation will be put to good use toward a food secure future. [Every \$2 that we receive means that we can distribute enough food for 3 meals within our network of food banks. Thanks to your donation, an additional 30 meals can thus be provided to our partners.] Best Wishes!

Third, the dependent variables and emotions-related measures were presented in a randomized order to test for potential order effects. Specifically, participants were either presented with the emotions-related questions first, or the attitude and willingness-to-donate questions first. Two-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) revealed that there were no main effects of and no interaction effects with the order of presentation for any of the dependent variables (all  $p_s \geq 0.21$ ). Order effects will thus not be further discussed.

Fourth, more emotions-related items were used to further test their potential role. Specifically, negative emotions towards donating again (i.e., obligated, guilty, indebted, pressured to do something in return), positive emotions towards donating again (i.e.,

pleased, feel good, feel happy), and positive emotions towards the note (i.e., thankful, appreciative) were assessed in Study 2 (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree). See Appendix 6 for the list of items. Factor analyses were conducted on the four items measuring negative emotions (Eigenvalue = 2.91) and three items measuring positive emotions (Eigenvalue = 2.50) towards donating again; each set of items loaded on one factor. Reliability analyses confirmed that each set of items were reliable ( $\alpha_{\text{Negative}} = 0.88$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{Positive}} = 0.90$ ), so they were each averaged into one variable. The two items used for measuring positive emotions towards the note were highly correlated ( $r = 0.84$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and were thus also averaged into one variable.

Finally, somewhat different sets of items were used to assess the perceived credibility of the note (i.e., credible, believable, genuine), efficient use of the charity's resources (i.e., good use, efficient use), "worthiness" of the note ("was worth sending to me"), and perceived effectiveness of the donation (i.e., "makes me feel my donation was effective"; 1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree) as compared to Study 1. Factor and reliability analyses were conducted on the first three items and determined that they could be averaged into a "perceived credibility" variable (Eigenvalue = 2.49,  $\alpha = 0.90$ ). A correlation analysis was conducted on the following two items and determined that they could be averaged if an "efficient use of resources" ( $r = 0.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ) variable. A factor analysis was also conducted on the four items measuring attitudes towards the charity, which were the same as in Study 1 (i.e., like, care, trust, important). The items again loaded on one factor (Eigenvalue = 3.11) and were deemed reliable ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ).

## Results and Discussion

On average, participants again scored around the scale's midpoint in terms of donation habits ( $M = 4.41$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ) and believed that charities perform a useful function for society ( $M = 6.11$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) first showed that there was no main effect of note type on participants' negative emotions towards giving again ( $M_{\text{Receipt}} = 2.60$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ,  $M_{\text{Basic}} = 2.70$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ,  $M_{\text{Effectiveness}} = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ;  $F(2, 470) = 0.34$ ,  $p = 0.71$ ). There also was also no main effect of note type on positive emotions towards the note, attitudes towards the charity, repeat donation amount, perceptions of credibility, or worthiness. However, a significant main effect of note type was found on positive emotions towards giving again and perceived donation effectiveness, as well as marginally significant effect on efficient

use of a charity's resources. See Table 4 for all results.

**Table 4. Study 2: ANOVA Results**

Variable	Effectiveness note (N = 158)	Basic note (N = 156)	Tax receipt (N = 159)	ANOVA		
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Negative emotions towards donating again	2.71 (1.34)	2.70 (1.33)	2.60 (1.30)	(2, 470)	0.34	0.71
Positive emotions towards donating again	5.56 (1.23)	5.54 (1.19)	5.27 (1.09)	(2, 470)	3.09	0.05
Positive emotions towards note	5.49 (1.47)	5.56 (1.35)	5.30 (1.35)	(2, 470)	1.49	0.23
Attitudes towards charity	6.00 (0.84)	5.90 (0.95)	5.92 (0.85)	(2, 470)	0.67	0.51
Repeat donation amount	\$3.44 (2.87)	\$3.45 (2.85)	\$3.81 (3.16)	(2, 470)	0.81	0.45
Efficient use of charity's resources	5.11 (1.55)	4.75 (1.52)	5.07 (1.33)	(2, 470)	2.80	0.06
Worth sending to me	5.25 (1.56)	5.03 (1.62)	5.28 (1.49)	(2, 470)	1.15	0.32
Donation was effective	5.72 (1.27)	5.41 (1.34)	5.23 (1.38)	(2, 470)	5.31	0.005
Perceived credibility	5.85 (1.02)	5.82 (1.09)	5.96 (0.80)	(2, 470)	0.91	0.41

Follow-up contrast analyses were conducted on the variables that had a significant main effect of note type. For positive emotions towards donating again, there were significant differences between the tax receipt and the basic note ( $p = 0.04$ ), and the tax receipt and effectiveness note ( $p = 0.03$ ) conditions, where each note was rated higher than the tax receipt. However, there was no significant difference between the two notes conditions ( $p = 0.85$ ). For perceived donation effectiveness, there was no significant difference between the tax receipt and basic note ( $p = 0.24$ ), but there was a significant difference between tax receipt and effectiveness note ( $p < 0.001$ ). There also was a significant difference between the basic note and effectiveness note ( $p = 0.04$ ), which was

to be expected given that the effectiveness note provided the additional related information.

Next, ANCOVAs were conducted to determine whether controlling for participants' habits and general beliefs about charities impacted the results. When these covariates were added to the analyses, there still was no main effect of note type on attitudes towards the charity ( $F(2, 468) = 0.71, p = 0.50$ ). The effect of donation habits was not significant ( $F(1, 468) = 0.51, p = 0.48$ ), but that of beliefs about charities was significant ( $F(1, 468) = 161.72, p < 0.001$ ). Similarly, the main effect of note type on repeat donation amount was still non-significant, while the effects on positive emotions towards donating again and perceived donation effectiveness were still significant when controlling for the same two covariates. See Appendix 4 for detailed results.

Mediation analyses were then conducted, using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2017) to determine whether positive emotions towards giving again and perceived donation effectiveness mediated the effect of note type. A parallel mediation was conducted instead of a serial mediation because the causal relationship between positive emotions and perceived donation effectiveness was unclear. Indeed, although emotions were measured before perceived effectiveness, suggesting that emotions should causally precede perceptions, the perceived effectiveness item focused on the first (and not repeat) donation whereas the positive emotions items focused on the repeat donation, suggesting that perceptions should causally precede emotions. Therefore, instead of assuming the causal relationship between these two variables, a more conservative approach was taken, and the proposed mediators were treated separately.

A mediation analysis was conducted with note type (0 = tax receipt, 1 = basic note, 2 = effectiveness note) as the independent variable, positive emotions towards giving again and perceived effectiveness of donation as parallel mediators, and attitudes towards the charity as the dependent variable. First, there was a significant positive conditional effect of the basic note (vs. tax receipt) on positive emotions ( $\beta = 0.27; SE = 0.13; t = 2.05; p = 0.04$ ), a significant positive conditional effect of the effectiveness note (vs. tax receipt) on positive emotions ( $\beta = 0.30; SE = 0.13; t = 2.24; p = 0.03$ ), and a significant positive effect of positive emotions on attitudes ( $\beta = 0.37; SE = 0.04; t = 10.28; p < 0.001$ ). Second, there was no conditional effect of basic note (vs. tax receipt) on perceived effectiveness ( $\beta = 0.18; SE = 0.15; t = 1.18; p = 0.24$ ), but there was a significant positive conditional effect of

effectiveness note (vs. tax receipt) on perceived effectiveness ( $\beta = 0.48$ ;  $SE = 0.15$ ;  $t = 3.22$ ;  $p < 0.001$ )<sup>2</sup>, and a significant positive effect of perceived effectiveness on attitudes ( $\beta = 0.15$ ;  $SE = 0.03$ ;  $t = 4.69$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Third, the indirect conditional effect of basic note (vs. tax receipt) on attitudes was negative and significant ( $\beta = -0.16$ ;  $SE = 0.08$ ;  $t = -2.09$ ;  $p = 0.04$ )<sup>3</sup>, whereas the indirect conditional effect of effectiveness note (vs. tax receipt) was not ( $\beta = -0.10$ ;  $SE = 0.08$ ;  $t = -1.31$ ;  $p = 0.19$ ). Finally, the mediation effect through positive emotions was significant for both basic note (95% CI = [0.01; 0.20]) and effectiveness note (95% CI = [0.01; 0.22]), as neither of the confidence intervals included 0. The mediation effect through perceived effectiveness was not significant for the basic note (95% CI = [-0.02; 0.08]), but it was significant for the effectiveness note (95% CI = [0.02; 0.13]). See Figure 3 for a visual representation of this mediation analysis.

In sum, positive emotions towards giving again mediated the effect between each note type (vs. tax receipt) and attitudes towards the charity. However, perceived donation effectiveness mediated the effect between effectiveness note (vs. tax receipt) and attitudes, but not that of the basic note (vs. tax receipt). Therefore, a basic note increased participants' positive emotions about giving again which, in turn, increased their positive attitudes towards the charity, but it did not impact the perceived effectiveness of their donation. Conversely, an effectiveness note increased both positive emotions and perceived effectiveness, which positively impacted their attitudes towards the charity.

Another parallel mediation was conducted on repeat donation amount (see Figure 4 and Table 5 for results). Overall, the mediation effect of positive emotions was significant for each type of note (vs. tax receipt; basic note 95% CI = [0.01; 0.41]; effectiveness note 95% CI = [0.03; 0.42]). However, the mediation effect of perceived effectiveness was not significant for both types of note (basic note 95% CI = [-0.03; 0.12]; effectiveness note 95% CI = [-0.04; 0.21]).

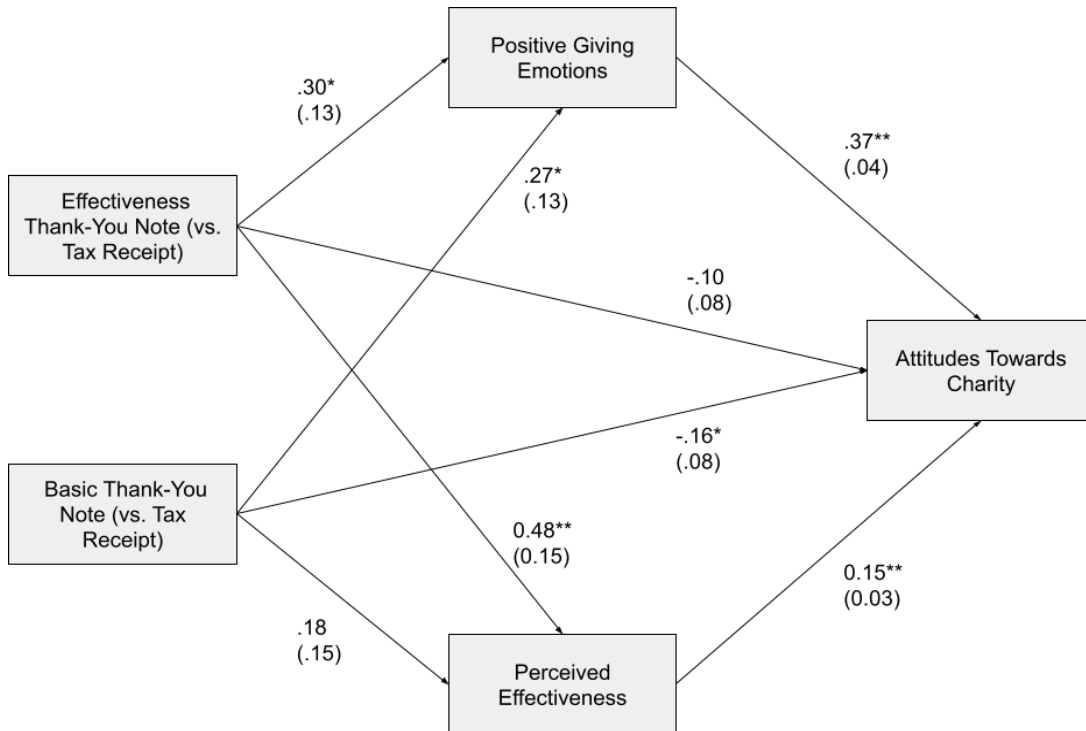
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<sup>2</sup> This significant effect was expected since the effectiveness note explicitly told participants about the value of their donated dollars in terms of meals distributed.

<sup>3</sup> This significant indirect effect suggests partial mediation, such that positive emotions and perceived effectiveness are not the best/only mediators of this relationship.

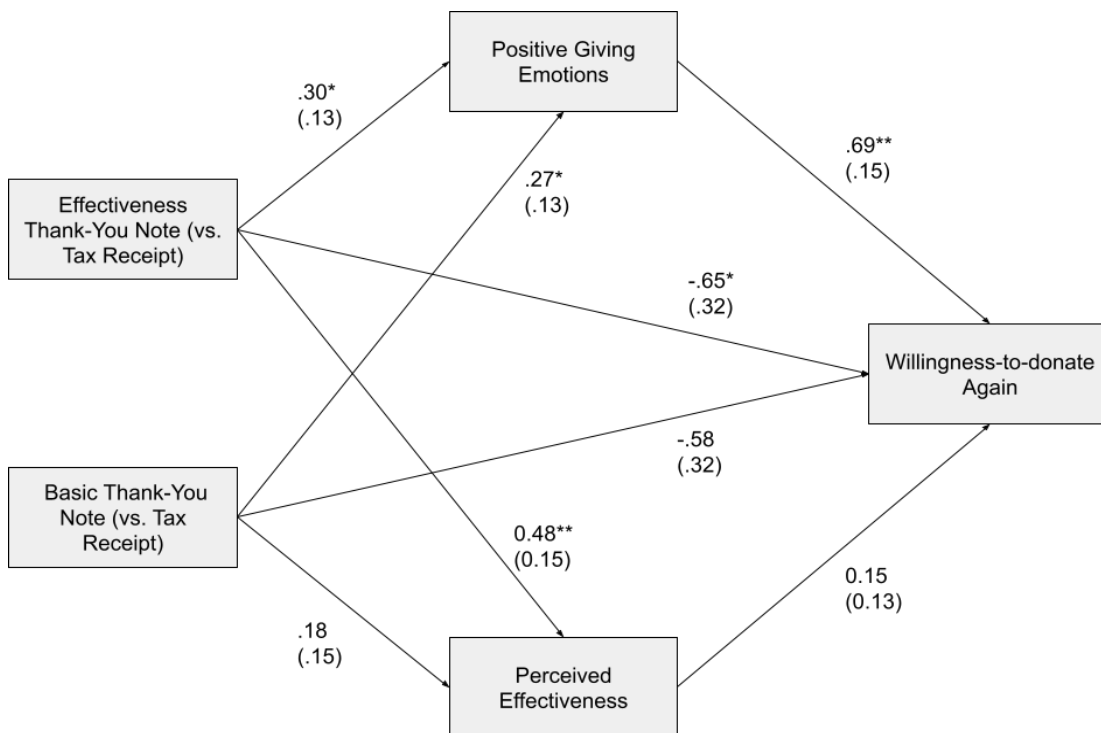


**Figure 3. Study 2: Mediation analysis for attitudes towards the charity**



*Note.* \* Indicates  $p < .05$ , \*\*indicates  $p < .01$ , and no symbol indicates non-significant.

**Figure 4. Study 2: Mediation analysis for repeat donation amount**



*Note.* \* Indicates  $p < .05$ , \*\*indicates  $p < .01$ , and no symbol indicates non-significant.

**Table 5. Study 2. Mediation analysis for repeat donation amount**

Path	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Basic note → Positive emotions	0.27	0.13	2.05	0.04
Effectiveness note → Positive emotions	0.30	0.13	2.24	0.03
Positive emotions → Repeat donation amount	0.69	0.15	4.60	< 0.001
Basic note → Perceived effectiveness	0.18	0.15	1.18	0.24
Effectiveness note → Perceived effectiveness	0.48	0.15	3.22	0.001
Perceived effectiveness → Repeat donation amount	0.15	0.13	1.17	0.24
Basic note → Repeat donation amount (direct effect)	-0.36	0.33	-1.08	0.28
Basic note → Repeat donation amount (indirect effect)	-0.58	0.32	-1.82	0.07
Effectiveness note → Repeat donation amount (direct effect)	-0.37	0.33	-1.11	0.27
Effectiveness note → Repeat donation amount (indirect effect)	-0.65	0.32	-2.04	0.04

Although there are mostly no direct effects of receiving a thank-you note (vs. receipt) on participants' attitudes towards and willingness-to-donate again to the charity, Study 2 revealed indirect effects through participants' positive emotions towards donating again and the perceived effectiveness of their donation. Both a "basic" and an "effectiveness" thank-you note (vs. tax receipt) increased participants' positive emotions towards donating again which, in turn, increased their attitudes towards and willingness-to-donate again to the charity. However, only the effectiveness thank-you note increased participants' perceived effectiveness of their donation, which increased their attitudes towards but not their willingness-to-donate again to the charity.

### Study 3

Study 3 aimed to test whether the medium through which a thank-you note (vs. tax receipt) was sent – i.e., via email or a physical letter – significantly impacted donors’ emotions, perceptions, attitudes, and willingness-to-donate again. I will also try to replicate the mediating effects of positive emotions towards donating again and perceived effectiveness of the donation found in Study 2 in this study.

#### Methods

Five hundred fourteen participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk via CloudResearch and were paid US\$1.00 for a 7-minute study. Twenty-nine participants were removed from the analyses after using the same cleaning criteria as Studies 1 and 2. The final sample size consisted of 485 participants ( $M_{Age} = 42.48$ ,  $SD = 12.85$ , 50.1% female).

Study 3 followed a similar procedure as Study 2, except that only the “effectiveness” thank-you note (vs. tax receipt) stimuli were used (i.e., no basic note condition) and a “medium” condition was added. This study thus used a 2 (note type: tax receipt vs. effectiveness thank-you note) x 2 (medium: email vs. letter) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. They either saw the same tax receipt or effectiveness thank-you note stimuli as in Study 2, which was displayed as either an email or a physical letter (see Appendix 7 for stimuli). The fictional National Food Bank Association was again used as the charity in this study, as in Study 2, to see if the results could be replicated.

Given that no order effect was found in Study 2, the dependent variables and emotions-related measures were not randomized in this study. Dependent variables (i.e., attitudes and willingness-to-donate again) were thus presented first and emotions-related measures were presented second to participants. Participants were asked to rate their agreement with the same statements as in Study 2 (see Appendix 6 for all items), all rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree), and again asked their willingness-to-donate a portion of a hypothetical additional \$10. Factor and reliability analyses were conducted for each of the measures, as well as correlation analyses for the appropriate items; the results can be found in Table 6. All measures were found to load on one factor and proved to be reliable, except for the two items about habits and beliefs

about charities ( $r = 0.32$ ;  $p < .000$ ), which is consistent with Studies 1 and 2. Each respective set of items was averaged to create a variable that represented each measure.

**Table 6. Study 3: Items combined into variables**

Variable (Items)	Eigenvalue	$\alpha$
Attitudes towards charity (like, care, trust, important)	3.08	0.90
Negative emotions towards donating again (obligated, guilty, indebted, pressured)	3.00	0.89
Positive emotions towards donating again (pleased, happy, good)	2.40	0.87
Perceived credibility (credible, believable, genuine)	2.45	0.89
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Positive emotions towards the note (thankful, appreciative)	0.76	<0.00
Efficient use of charity's resources (good use of resources, efficient use of funds)	0.86	<0.00

## Results and Discussion

Participants once again scored around the scale's midpoint in terms of how often they donate ( $M = 4.35$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ), and agreed that charities perform a useful function for society ( $M = 6.17$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ). A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) first showed that there was a significant interaction between note type and medium on participants' attitudes towards the charity ( $F(1, 481) = 5.03$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ). The same analysis was conducted on all dependent variables, as well as perception- and emotions-related variables; the results are found in Tables 7 and 8. Significant interaction effects were found for positive emotions towards donating again, perceived effectiveness of the donation, and perceived credibility of the stimuli<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Specifically, the thank-you note was perceived as more credible as a letter than an email (see Table 8). ANCOVAs (not reported in this thesis) further revealed that the interaction effects of note type and medium on both attitudes towards the charity and willingness-to-donate again were no longer significant when perceived credibility was included as a covariate in the analyses. Exploratory mediation analyses (also not reported in this thesis) showed that perceived credibility mediated the interaction effect of note type and medium on both attitudes and repeated donation. Given that these effects were unexpected and did not arise in Studies 1 and 2, they will not be further discussed here, but will be mentioned in the limitations (see General Discussion).

**Table 7. Study 3: Two-way ANOVA results**

Variable	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Attitudes towards charity	(1, 481)	5.03	0.03
Repeat donation amount	(1, 481)	0.19	0.66
Negative emotions towards donating again	(1, 479)	0.14	0.71
Positive emotions towards note	(1, 479)	0.05	0.83
Positive emotions towards donating again	(1, 479)	5.03	0.03
Efficient use of charity's resources	(1, 481)	0.22	0.64
Worth sending to me	(1, 481)	1.88	0.17
Perceived donation effectiveness	(1, 481)	5.63	0.02
Perceived credibility	(1, 481)	4.77	0.03

**Table 8. Study 3: Means and standard deviations for significant interactions**

Variable	Receipt Mean (SD)		Thank-you note Mean (SD)	
	Email	Letter	Email	Letter
Attitudes towards charity	5.89 (0.92)	5.94 (0.98)	5.80 (0.83) <sup>1</sup>	6.21 (0.69) <sup>1</sup>
Positive emotions towards donating again	5.25 (1.19)	5.30 (1.17)	5.45 (1.02) <sup>1</sup>	5.94 (0.89) <sup>1</sup>
Perceived effectiveness of donation	5.19 (1.37)	4.97 (1.44)	5.83 (1.16) <sup>2</sup>	6.15 (0.93) <sup>2</sup>
Perceived credibility	5.98 (0.89)	6.01 (0.84)	5.74 (1.00) <sup>1</sup>	6.10 (0.72) <sup>1</sup>

*Note.* Superscripts indicate significant differences (within each note type condition) at 1)  $p < .001$  and 2)  $p = 0.05$ . All other pairwise comparisons are not significant.

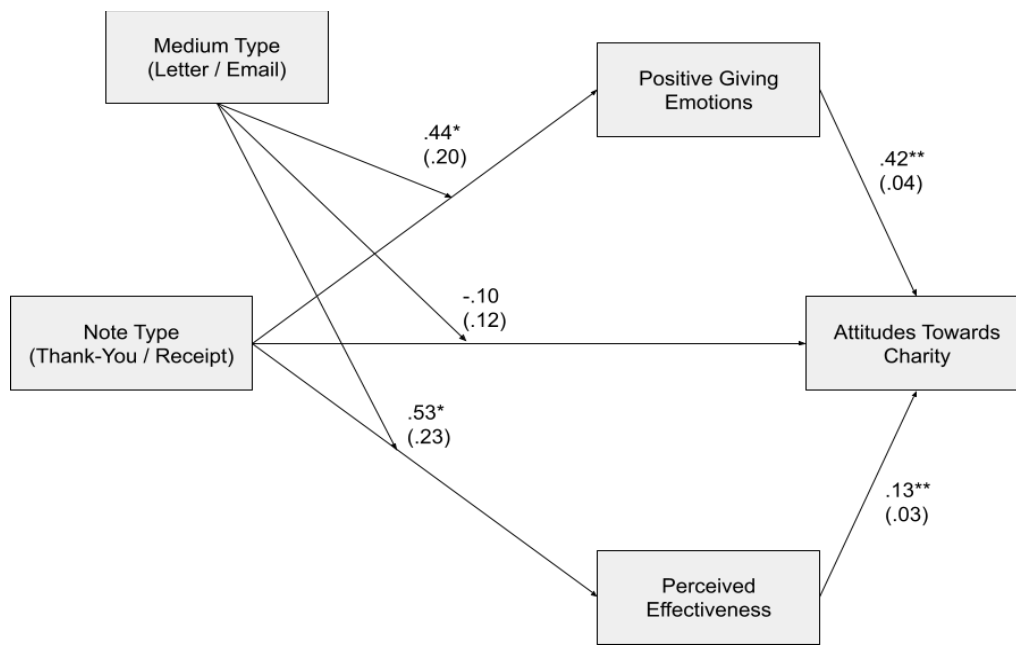
ANCOVAs were conducted to test whether controlling for participants' habits and beliefs about charities impacted the results. First, there was still a significant interaction effect on attitudes towards the charity when these covariates were included in the analyses ( $F(1,479) = 5.40, p = 0.02$ ). Both habits ( $F(1,479) = 3.76, p = 0.05$ ) and beliefs ( $F(1,479) = 176.83, p < .000$ ) had significant effects. Similar analyses were conducted on repeat donation amount, positive emotions towards donating again, and perceived donation effectiveness (see Appendix 4 for results). The interaction effect of note type and medium on repeat donation amount still was non-significant, but the effects on positive emotions and perceived donation effectiveness were still significant when controlling for the covariates.

Next, mediation analyses were conducted using PROCESS Model 8 (Hayes, 2017) and the same two parallel mediators as in Study 2 – i.e., positive emotions towards giving again and perceived donation effectiveness. The independent variables were note type (0 = tax receipt and 1 = thank-you note) and medium type (0 = email and 1 = letter), and the dependent variables were attitudes towards the charity and repeat donation amount. A parallel mediation model was chosen instead of serial mediation for the same reasons as in Study 2.

Starting with attitudes towards the charity, results showed that there was a significant positive interaction effect of note and medium types on positive emotions ( $\beta = 0.44; SE = 0.20; t = 2.24; p = 0.03$ ). However, the main effects of note type ( $\beta = 0.21; SE = 0.14; t = 1.51; p = 0.13$ ) and medium ( $\beta = 0.05; SE = 0.14; t = 0.37; p = 0.71$ ) were both non-significant. In turn, positive emotions had a significant positive effect on attitudes ( $\beta = 0.42; SE = 0.04; t = 11.42; p < .000$ ). In addition, the interaction effect of note type and medium was significant and positive on perceived effectiveness ( $\beta = 0.53; SE = 0.23; t = 2.34; p = 0.02$ ). There also was a significant positive main effect of note type on perceived effectiveness ( $\beta = 0.64; SE = 0.16; t = 4.00; p < .000$ ), but no significant main effect of medium ( $\beta = -0.22; SE = 0.16; t = -1.34; p = 0.18$ ). In turn, perceived effectiveness had a positive significant effect on attitudes ( $\beta = 0.13; SE = 0.03; t = 4.10; p < .000$ ). The interaction effect of note type and medium on attitudes, when controlling for positive emotions and perceived effectiveness, was not significant ( $\beta = -.10; SE = 0.12; t = 0.81; p = 0.42$ ), which suggests full mediation. Further, positive emotions significantly mediated the main effect of note type on attitudes towards the

charity when it was presented as a letter (95% CI = [0.14; 0.41]) but not when it was presented as an email (95% CI = [-0.03; 0.21]). The moderated-mediation through positive emotions was significant, as the 95% confidence interval for the index did not include 0 (95% CI = [0.02; 0.35]). As for perceived effectiveness, it significantly mediated the main effect of note type on attitudes when it was presented as either a letter (95% CI = [0.05; 0.25]) or an email (95% CI = [0.02; 0.16]). The moderated-mediation was also significant, as the 95% confidence interval for the index did not include 0 (95% CI = [0.01; 0.15]). See Figure 5 for a visual representation of this mediation analysis.

**Figure 5. Study 3: Moderated-mediation analysis for attitudes towards the charity**

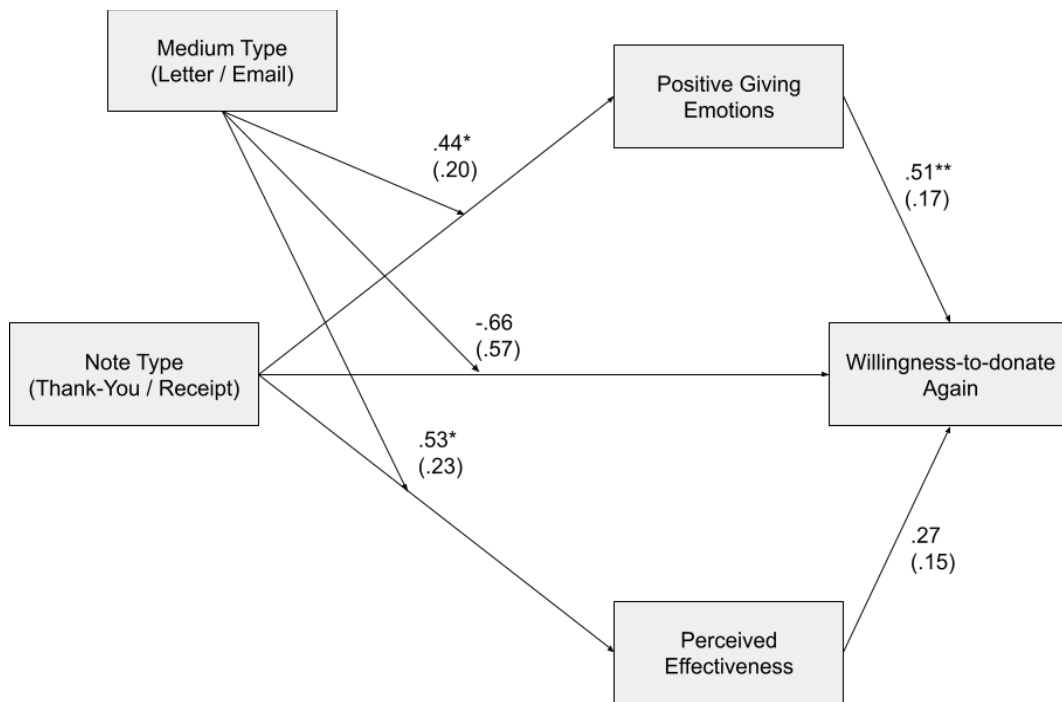


*Note.* Only the coefficients for interaction effects between note and medium types are included in the figure. \* Indicates  $p < .05$ , \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ , and no symbol indicates non-significant.

A similar mediation analysis was conducted on repeat donation amount as the dependent variable; see Figure 6 and Table 9 for results. The results show that there were significant interaction effects of note and medium types on both positive emotions and perceived effectiveness. In turn, positive emotions had a significant positive effect on repeat donation amount, but the effect of perceived effectiveness was not significant. The indirect interaction effect of note type and medium on repeat donation amount, when controlling for positive emotions and perceived effectiveness, was again non-significant. The 95% confidence

intervals for the indirect effects again demonstrated that positive emotions significantly mediated the main effect of note type on repeat donation amount when it was received as a letter (95% CI = [0.10; 0.60]), but not as an email (95% CI = [-0.03; 0.31]). The moderated-mediation through positive emotions also was significant (95% CI = [0.02; 0.50]). Conversely, perceived effectiveness did not mediate the main effects of note type on repeat donation amount for either medium (letter 95% CI = [-0.001; 0.37]; email 95% CI = [-0.002; 0.65]). This resulted in a non-significant moderated-mediation through perceived effectiveness (95% CI = [-0.01; 0.38]).

**Figure 6. Study 3: Moderated-mediation analysis for repeat donation amount**



*Note.* Only the coefficients for interaction effects between note and medium types are included in the figure. \* Indicates  $p < .05$ , \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ , and no symbol indicates non-significant.



**Table 9. Study 3: Mediation analysis for repeat donation amount**

Path	$\beta$	SE	t	p
Note type → Positive emotions	0.21	0.14	1.51	0.13
Medium → Positive emotions	0.05	0.14	0.37	0.71
Note type*Medium → Positive emotions	0.44	0.20	2.24	0.03
Positive emotions → Repeat donation amount	0.51	0.17	2.94	0.004
Note type → Perceived effectiveness	0.64	0.16	4.01	<0.001
Medium → Perceived effectiveness	-0.22	0.16	-1.34	0.18
Note type*Medium → Perceived effectiveness	0.53	0.23	2.34	0.02
Perceived effectiveness → Repeat donation amount (direct effect)	0.27	0.15	1.78	0.08
Note type*Medium → Repeat donation amount (indirect effect)	-0.66	0.57	-1.16	0.25

In sum, Study 3 found significant interaction effects of note (i.e., effectiveness thank-you note vs. tax receipt) and medium (i.e., email vs. letter) types on attitudes and repeat donation amount. In addition, positive emotions towards giving again mediated the effect of note type – when presented as a letter but not as an email – on both attitudes and repeat donation amount, suggesting that the format of a thank-you note matters when trying to influence donors’ attitudes towards the charity. Of note, these effects may have been caused by the unexpected lower perceived credibility of the thank-you email (vs. letter), by the fact that participants genuinely favoured letters over emails (as they tend to be seen as a more genuine gesture of gratitude because of the effort that goes into sending them; Slattery, 2023), or by a combination of both, which is an important limitation of this study. Conversely, although the perceived effectiveness of the donation mediated the main effects of note type (for both medium types) on attitudes, it did not mediate the effects (for both medium types) on repeat donation intentions, suggesting that perceived donation effectiveness may not be as effective for influencing behaviour (vs. attitudes).

## **General Discussion**

My thesis aimed to better understand whether thank-you notes help improve donor retention for charitable organizations and demonstrated that their effects are more complex than anticipated. Study 1 first showed that a thank-you note (vs. tax receipt) did not produce any significant changes in participants' attitudes towards the charity nor the amount they were willing to donate again (i.e., H1 was not supported). However, there was an effect on whether participants thought it was a good use of the charity's resources, with the tax receipt being perceived as a better usage than the thank-you letter, which suggested that perceived donation efficacy may play an important role in the effects of thank-you notes. Next, Study 2 revealed that both a basic thank-you note and one that highlighted the impact of the donation (vs. tax receipt) indirectly increased attitudes towards the charity and willingness-to-donate again through the positive emotions participants experienced towards making a subsequent donation. However, only the more detailed note improved participants' perceived effectiveness of their donation which, in turn, increased the positive attitudes towards the charity but did not impact donation intentions. Finally, Study 3 demonstrated that the medium through which a thank-you note is sent moderates its effects. Specifically, a thank-you note sent as a letter (vs. email) increased participants' positive emotions towards donating again which, in turn, increased attitudes and donation intentions. In addition, a thank-you note sent as a letter (vs. email) increased participants' perceived effectiveness of their donation which, in turn, increased their attitudes towards the charity but not their willingness-to-donate again (i.e. H2a is partially supported). Conversely, medium type did not impact the effects of the tax receipt (i.e. H2b is supported).

## **Theoretical Contributions and Managerial Implications**

My thesis makes several contributions to the literature on thank-you notes in the context of charitable giving in particular, and that of charities' acts of recognition of or expressions of gratitude for their donors more generally. First, prior research on thank-you notes has mostly focused on donation intentions and behavior (e.g., donation likelihood, amount, etc.) as the main outcome of interest (Merchant et al., 2010; Newman & Shen, 2012; Simpson et al., 2018). However, other outcomes, such as attitudes towards the

charity, are also important determinants of donor retention (Sargeant, 2001; Beldad et al. 2014), which can (indirectly in my thesis) be impacted by thank-you notes. Attitudes (and other relevant outcomes) are thus important to also take into consideration because, even if a thank-you note does not manage to consistently increase recurring donation amounts, it can still impact other important aspects of a charity's image and reputation.

Second, although prior research has identified several variables that can impact the effectiveness of thank-you notes – such as the frequency, duration, and size of a donor's relationship with the charity, donors' individual characteristics (e.g., age, income), or a donor's personal ties with the cause (Quigley et al., 2002; Samek & Longfield, 2023; Sargeant et al., 2006) – no prior research on this topic, to my knowledge, investigated the role of potential psychological mechanisms. In my thesis, although I was unable to find direct effects of thank- you notes, I did find indirect effects through donors' positive emotions towards giving again and the perceived effectiveness of their donations, which highlight the importance of considering the role of underlying psychological mechanisms in the effects of thank-you notes.

Third, although prior research on communications from charity to donor has investigated donors' format preferences (i.e., whether they would prefer to receive a mailed letter or an email; Sargeant & Jay, 2004), no prior research has experimentally tested the effectiveness of various medium types of thank-you notes on charitable behaviour. My findings demonstrate the importance of experimentally testing the effects of thank-you notes' format because, even if they were seen as more of a waste of a charity's resources in Study 1, a thank- you note sent as a letter had more positive effects on charitable giving than when sent as an email.

My thesis also offers practical implications for charitable organizations. My findings suggest that whether thank-you notes can be deemed as effective tools for donor retention by charities may depend on the notes' purpose. In other words, charities should clarify what they are attempting to achieve by sending thank-you notes, and what metrics they are trying to impact. For instance, my findings suggest that, even if thank-you notes can impact recurring donations, they seem to impact donors' attitudes more robustly – which can help keep the organization in a favourable position against competing charities, as their (indirect) effects on the latter (vs. the former) were more consistent across my studies. As another

example, the effectiveness of thank-you notes may depend on whether a charity wants to project an image of efficiency (i.e., that they are not wasting their resources on expenses that do not directly benefit the cause's beneficiaries) or improve donors' emotional responses to making subsequent donations. A letter may be more costly to send, but it seems to have a stronger impact on attitudes and donation intentions, whereas an email is a more efficient use of a charity's resources. In addition, including information related to the impacts of a donation in thank-you notes seems to help enhance donors' attitudes towards the charity but not their donation intentions. In sum, the messaging and format of thank-you notes should be adapted to address a charity's specific goal(s) to increase the likelihood that they will positively impact charitable giving and donor retention.

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

My research has several limitations that should be noted by future researchers who wish to replicate and extend its findings. First, all my studies were conducted online with Amazon Mechanical Turk participants using fictional charities and hypothetical scenarios, which may not be ideal when investigating donor retention. Turkers, even if they have been shown to be reliable participants (Goodman & Paolacci, 2017), may however significantly differ from a charity's donor base. Future research should thus conduct similar studies with an actual charity's donors in order to determine the external validity of my findings.

Further, I preferred to use fictional charities over existing ones in my studies to reduce potential effects due to participants' familiarity with and attitudes towards existing charities. However, even if I used charitable causes that Turkers supported (based on the pre-test's results), participants seemed less likely to trust charities they did not know (as many expressed related comments in the open-ended question at the end of my studies), which may have impacted my findings. Indeed, a donor's history and relationship with a charity has been shown to play an important role in recurring charitable giving (Beldad et al. 2014; Sergeant, 2008), which cannot be assessed when using fictional charities. Using fictional global/national charities may also have deterred participants from donating, as some open-ended comments mentioned that they only give to local or grassroots charities, or that they are more skeptical of large charitable organizations. Therefore, future research could attempt to replicate my findings using known and more localized charitable organizations to determine their generalizability. Moreover, I tried to simulate an existing

donor relationship in my studies by having participants imagine that they previously donated a relatively small amount (\$20) once to the charity. However, a one-time prior and/or somewhat small donation (compared to the pre-test results that revealed that donations of at least ~\$75 warranted a thank-you note) may not have been sufficient to prompt the desired sense of relationship with the charity, which may have dampened subsequent donation behavior. Future research could thus test whether using scenarios involving multiple prior donations and/or higher past donation amounts would produce stronger results. In addition, the use of hypothetical scenarios implies some lack of realism that may have impacted my findings. Indeed, participants did not get to experience the thank-you note in letter format, and instead viewed it on a screen, which could have changed how they responded to it. Future research should employ physical stimulus (when relevant) and real donations to determine whether my findings extend to actual behavior and experiences. Further, the subsequent donation occurred right after viewed the thank-you note in my studies, such that I was unable to assess whether positive emotions towards giving again can last until a later time when a subsequent donation would occur or be recalled at that time. Future research could thus test how long the positive emotions prompted by a thank-you note last, and whether they still impact subsequent donations occurring at a later time, using longitudinal data. In sum, future research should ideally conduct experiments in the field with an existing charity in order to more accurately test the effects of thank-you notes on donor retention and recurring donations, but such experiments can be quite complex to set up and analyze and require more resources and time to conduct (Gneezy, 2017).

Second, the indirect-only mediation effects found in Studies 2 and 3 may have occurred because the studies were underpowered, such that the sample size in each study may have been too small to detect the total effects (Galucci, 2023). These studies therefore do not provide enough evidence in support of the effects of thank-you notes on subsequent charitable giving but, if the hypothesized effects are indeed real (and not “flukes”), they are probably due to the intervening effects of perceived donation effectiveness and positive emotions towards giving again, among others (Galucci, 2023). Future research should thus use bigger sample sizes to study the effects of thank-you notes on recurring donation behaviour, as their effects may be relatively small.

Third, in Study 3, the thank-you note presented as an email was seen as significantly less credible than when presented as a letter, while the tax receipt was seen as equally credible no matter its format. This unexpected effect of medium type on the thank-you note's credibility could suggest that there was a flaw in the design of the stimulus (e.g., the email may not have looked realistic enough), or that thank-you emails are seen as less genuine than letters. I went back over participants' qualitative answers to some of the pre-test questions and did find that, although participants recalled receiving thank-you notes from charitable organizations in either email or letter formats in similar proportions, they tended to describe thank-you emails as less genuine (e.g., automates, boilerplate message, etc.) than physical thank-you notes. This speculation is however based on my interpretation of a relatively small number of qualitative answers and would thus warrant to be more formally investigated in future research. Future research could also more directly manipulate thank-you notes' credibility (e.g., presence vs. absence of branding/logos, design professionalism, sender's email) and genuineness (e.g., personalization, rational vs. emotional messaging) to help better understand which aspects of such notes are more (vs. less) likely to impact donor retention.

Fourth, another potential reason why no main effects of thank-you notes were found in the studies could be the study design, as the ask for the second donation came immediately after the manipulation, which may have caused participants to see the thank-you note as a ploy to solicit more money. Several participants mentioned in the open-ended comment section at the end of the studies that they felt charities sent thank-you notes mostly to solicit more money from them (even if the messaging used in all studies never mentioned or requested additional donations), which they seemed put off by. An avenue for future research could thus be to examine the role of persuasion knowledge – or whether donors are aware of persuasion attempts directed at them and how they work (Friestad & Wright, 1994) – in the effects of thank-you notes. Indeed, whether donors believe that thank-you notes are attempts made by charities to persuade or manipulate them (vs. genuinely expressed recognition or gratitude) may be an important individual difference that should be investigated in more depth. Future research could also manipulate persuasion-related cues (e.g., request another donation vs. not) to test the effect of persuasion knowledge more directly.

Finally, in Studies 2 and 3, the “effectiveness” thank-you note provided participants with the value-per-dollar of their donation, in order to increase their perceived donation effectiveness, which is a relatively rational type of information. Future research could test whether such rational versus more emotional messaging (or a combination of both) most effectively enhance the effects of thank-you notes. For example, a more emotional messaging could instead mention how having access to food gives people relief so that they don’t have to choose between having shelter or getting proper nutrition. Moreover, the value-per-dollar messaging used in the studies did not clarify how much of the donated money directly impacted the beneficiaries (e.g., value of the food) versus helped support the charity’s activities (e.g., employee salaries, distribution costs, etc.). Given that the perceived effectiveness of one’s donation is an important factor for charitable giving and donor retention, future research could explore whether including more transparent “effectiveness” messaging (e.g., percentage of donations that goes towards administrative costs versus the beneficiaries) would help assuage people’s skepticism about a charity’s performance and positively impact recurring charitable giving, or backfire by making such costs more salient.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Pre-test materials

Question	Scale/Responses
Please list the charities and/or charitable causes you have supported in the past, currently support, and/or would like to support if you had the resources	Open-ended
Have you ever received a thank-you note from a charity after making a donation?	Yes, No, Can't remember
Please briefly describe the thank-you note(s) you received below.	Open-ended
How did (would) receiving a thank-you note make you feel?	1 = Extremely bad to 7 = Extremely good
How did (would) receiving a thank-you note impact how you felt about the charity that sent it?	1 = Extremely bad to 7 = Extremely good
Have you talked (would you talk) about a thank-you note you received from a charity with others (e.g., tell family/friends)?	Yes, No, Can't remember (Maybe)
Have you donated again to a charity you received a thank-you note from? (Would receiving a thank-you note from a charity make you want to donate again to the charity?)	Yes, No, Can't remember (Maybe)
To what extent do you believe receiving a thank-you note impacted (would impact) your donation?	1 = No impact whatsoever to 4 = Main reason for repeat donation
How often did (would) you donate again to a charity that sent you a thank-you note?	1 = I donated much less often to 5 = I donated much more often
How much did (would) you donate again to a charity that sent you a thank-you note?	1 = I donated much less to 5 = I donated much more
Do you believe that the format of a thank-you note (e.g., handwritten letter, typed letter, email) would impact whether you would again donate to the charity that sent it?	1 = Absolutely not to 5 = Absolutely yes

<p>If you are making (or would make) regular donations to a charity over a long period of time, how often would you prefer to receive a thank-you note for your donations?</p>	<p>1 = Never to 6 = After each donation</p>
<p>What is the minimum donation dollar amount that you believe warrants a thank-you note from a charity?</p>	<p>Slider scale from \$0-\$500 (\$1 increments)</p>
<p>Do you believe that thank-you notes from charities...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Help donors feel more connected to the charity</li> <li>- Help donors care more about the charity</li> <li>- Improve how donors feel about the charity</li> <li>- Improve donors' trust in the charity</li> <li>- Increase donor retention</li> <li>- Are a waste of a charity's resources</li> </ul>	<p>1 = Strongly disagree to 7 = Strongly agree</p>
<p>Please indicate the extent to which you (dis)agree with the following statements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I am the kind of person who donates to charities</li> <li>- Not donating to charities goes against my principles</li> <li>- I regularly donate to charities</li> <li>- It is unusual for me to donate to charities (reversed item)</li> <li>- Charity organizations perform a useful function for society</li> </ul>	<p>1 = Strongly disagree to 7 = Strongly agree</p>

## Appendix 2. Charities descriptions

### Study 1

The Global Animal Fund is a charitable organization that supports the preservation of wildlife across the globe. The charitable organization also financially supports animal shelters and animal rehabilitation centers.

### Studies 2 and 3

The National Food Bank Association is a not-for-profit charitable organization that supports local food banks with financial and physical resources to help with their daily operations, as well as advocate for policies that address food insecurity. The NFBA has been operating for over 30 years in major cities across the country.

### Appendix 3. Study 1 materials

Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about the Global Animal Fund:

(1 = “Strongly disagree” to 7 = “Strongly agree”)

I like this charitable organization.

I care about the cause this charity supports.

I trust this charitable organization.

I believe the cause this charity supports is important.

Imagine that you were to receive a \$10 bonus at the end of this study, and that you were presented with the opportunity to make a donation to the Global Animal Fund.

How much of your bonus would you donate to the Global Animal Fund?

(Slider scale from \$0.00 to \$10.00)

Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

Receiving a thank-you note (tax-receipt) from a charity would make me feel

(1 = “Strongly disagree” to 7 = “Strongly agree”)

Obligated to donate again to the charity.

Guilty if I did not donate again to the charity.

Pleased to donate again to the charity.

Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

The thank you note (tax receipt)...

(1 = “Strongly disagree” to 7 = “Strongly agree”)

Was credible

Was believable

Seemed genuine

Seemed authentic

Was a good use of the charity’s resources

Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

(1 = “Strongly disagree” to 7 = “Strongly agree”)

I regularly donate to charities.

Charity organizations perform a useful function for society.

## Appendix 4. ANCOVA results

### Study 1

<b>Attitudes towards charity</b>	<b><i>df</i></b>	<b><i>F</i></b>	<b><i>p</i></b>
Note type	(1,277)	0.25	0.62
Donation habits	(1,277)	3.71	0.06
Perceived usefulness	(1,277)	91.15	<0.001
<b>Repeat donation amount</b>	<b><i>df</i></b>	<b><i>F</i></b>	<b><i>p</i></b>
Note type	(1,277)	0.01	0.91
Donation habits	(1,277)	8.81	0.003
Perceived usefulness	(1,277)	4.34	0.03
<b>Good use of resources</b>	<b><i>df</i></b>	<b><i>F</i></b>	<b><i>p</i></b>
Note type	(1,277)	9.29	0.003
Donation habits	(1,277)	1.77	0.18
Perceived usefulness	(1,277)	19.77	<0.001



## Study 2

<b>Attitudes towards charity</b>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Note type	(2, 468)	0.71	0.49
Donation habits	(1, 468)	0.51	0.48
Perceived usefulness	(1,468)	161.72	<0.001
<b>Repeat donation amount</b>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Note type	(2, 468)	1.34	0.26
Donation habits	(1, 468)	19.61	<0.001
Perceived usefulness	(1,468)	7.89	0.01
<b>Positive emotions towards giving again</b>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Note type	(2, 468)	3.02	0.05
<i>Donation habits</i>	<i>(1, 468)</i>	<i>3.63</i>	<i>0.06</i>
Perceived usefulness	(1,468)	72.46	<0.001
<b>Perceived donation effectiveness</b>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Note type	(2, 468)	5.29	0.01
Donation habits	(1, 468)	5.16	0.02
Perceived usefulness	(1,468)	18.86	<0.001

<b>Pairwise comparisons</b>	<b>Receipt</b> Mean (SE)	<b>Basic note</b> Mean (SE)	<b>Effectiveness note</b> Mean (SE)
Positive giving emotions	5.29 (0.09) <sup>1,2</sup>	5.53 (0.09) <sup>1</sup>	5.55 (0.09) <sup>2</sup>
Perceived effectiveness	5.25 (0.1) <sup>3</sup>	5.40 (0.1) <sup>4</sup>	5.71 (0.1) <sup>3,4</sup>

*Note.* Superscripts indicate significant differences at 1)  $p = 0.04$ , 2)  $p = 0.03$ , 3)  $p = 0.002$ , and 4)  $p = 0.03$ . All other pairwise comparisons are not significant.

### Study 3

<b>Attitudes towards charity</b>	<b><i>df</i></b>	<b><i>F</i></b>	<b><i>p</i></b>
Note type*Medium	(1, 479)	5.40	0.02
Donation habits	(1, 479)	3.76	0.05
Perceived usefulness	(1, 479)	176.83	<0.001
<b>Repeat donation amount</b>	<b><i>df</i></b>	<b><i>F</i></b>	<b><i>p</i></b>
Note type*Medium	(1, 479)	0.07	0.79
Donation habits	(1, 479)	32.45	<0.001
Perceived usefulness	(1, 479)	5.73	0.02
<b>Positive emotions towards giving again</b>	<b><i>df</i></b>	<b><i>F</i></b>	<b><i>p</i></b>
Note type*Medium	(1, 479)	5.15	0.02
Donation habits	(1, 479)	2.62	0.11
Perceived usefulness	(1, 479)	100.78	<0.001
<b>Perceived donation effectiveness</b>	<b><i>df</i></b>	<b><i>F</i></b>	<b><i>p</i></b>
Note type*Medium	(1, 479)	5.50	0.02
Donation habits	(1, 479)	2.10	0.15
Perceived usefulness	(1, 479)	62.01	<0.001

<b>Pairwise comparisons</b>	<b>Receipt</b> Mean (SE)		<b>Thank-you note</b> Mean (SE)	
	Email	Letter	Email	Letter
Attitudes towards charity	5.89 (0.92)	5.94 (0.98)	5.80 (0.83) <sup>1</sup>	6.21 (0.69) <sup>1</sup>
Positive emotions	5.24 (1.19)	5.30 (1.17)	5.45 (1.02) <sup>2</sup>	5.94 (0.89) <sup>2</sup>
Perceived effectiveness	5.19 (1.37) <sup>3</sup>	4.97 (1.44) <sup>3</sup>	5.83 (1.16)	6.15 (0.93)

Note. Superscripts indicate significant differences (within each note type condition) at 1)  $p = 0.002$ , 2)  $p = 0.003$ , and 3)  $p = 0.05$ . All other pairwise comparisons are not significant.

## Appendix 5. Study 1: Mediation analysis

To explore whether participants' perceptions that the note (vs. tax receipt) was a good use of a charities' resources mediated the effect of note type (0 = tax receipt, 1 = thank-you note) on attitudes towards the charity, I ran a mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2017). The results revealed that note type had a significant negative effect on perceived use of resources ( $\beta = -0.42$ ;  $SE = 0.17$ ;  $t = -2.50$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ) and, in turn, perceived use of resources had significant positive effect on attitudes towards the charity ( $\beta = 0.28$ ;  $SE = 0.04$ ;  $t = 7.59$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). However, the direct effect of note type on attitudes was not significant ( $\beta = 0.03$ ;  $SE = 0.11$ ;  $t = 0.31$ ;  $p = 0.76$ ) nor the indirect effect ( $\beta = 0.15$ ;  $SE = 0.10$ ;  $t = 1.46$ ;  $p = 0.15$ ). Nonetheless, there was a significant indirect-only mediation (Zhao, Lynch, & Chen, 2010), as the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include 0 (95% CI = [-0.22; -0.02]). Therefore, participants saw the thank-you note (vs. receipt) as a worse use of a charities' resources and consequently had a more negative attitude towards the charity.

Another mediation analysis conducted on willingness-to-donate again produced similar findings. There again was a significant negative effect of note type on perceived use of resources ( $\beta = -0.42$ ;  $SE = 0.17$ ;  $t = -2.45$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ) and a significant positive effect of perceptions on repeat donation amount ( $\beta = 0.32$ ;  $SE = 0.13$ ;  $t = 2.53$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ). Also, there again was a non-significant direct effect of note type on repeat donation amount ( $\beta = 0.08$ ;  $SE = 0.36$ ;  $t = 0.22$ ;  $p = 0.83$ ), and a non-significant indirect effect ( $\beta = 0.21$ ;  $SE = 0.36$ ;  $t = 0.59$ ;  $p = 0.56$ ). Nonetheless, there again was a significant indirect-only mediation (95% CI = [-0.31; -0.01]). Therefore, participants again saw the thank-you note (vs. receipt) as a worse use of a charities' resources and consequently expressed a lower willingness-to-donate again to the charity.

In sum, although no direct effects of receiving a thank-you note (vs. receipt) were found on participants' attitudes towards and willingness-to-donate again to the charity, Study 1 revealed indirect effects through participants' perceptions of a charities' effective use of resources. Participants perceived the thank-you note (vs. receipt) as a less effective use of a charities' resources which, in turn, negatively impacted their attitudes towards and willingness- to-donate again to the charity.

## Appendix 6. Studies 2 and 3 measures

Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about the National Food Bank Association:

(1 = “Strongly disagree” to 7 = “Strongly agree”)

I like this charitable organization.

I care about the cause this charity supports.

I trust this charitable organization.

I believe the cause this charity supports is important.

Imagine that you were to receive a \$10 bonus at the end of the study, and that you were presented with the opportunity to make a donation to the National Food Bank Association. How much of your bonus would you donate to the National Food Bank Association?

(Slider scale from \$0.00 to \$10.00)

Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

Receiving a thank-you note (tax receipt) from a charity would make me feel...

(1 = “Strongly disagree” to 7 = “Strongly agree”)

Obligated to donate again to the charity.

Guilty if I did not donate again to the charity.

Indebted to the charity.

Pressure to do something in return for the charity.

Pleased to donate again to the charity.

Thankful for the thank-you note (tax receipt).

Appreciative of the charity sending the note.

Good about making the donation.

Happy with myself that I made the donation.

Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements: The thank-you note (tax receipt)...

Was credible.

Was believable.

Seemed genuine.

Was a good use of the charity’s resources.

Was an efficient use of the charity’s funds.

Makes me feel my donation was effective.

Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

(1 = “Strongly disagree” to 7 = “Strongly agree”)

I regularly donate to charities.

Charity organizations perform a useful function for society.

## Appendix 7. Study 3: Stimuli

