
# BEYOND FUNDS RAISED: HOW PUBLIC DISPLAYS OF COMPASSION MANIFEST IN CROWDFUNDING CAMPAIGNS

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# BEYOND FUNDS RAISED: HOW PUBLIC DISPLAYS OF COMPASSION MANIFEST IN CROWDFUNDING CAMPAIGNS

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**ABSTRACT**

Crowdfunding enables the organizing of support for victims of a tragedy from a wide range of sources. While this support can be financial and non-financial, we know relatively little about the non-financial support donors provide. Donors' words can have substantial positive and negative effects on sufferers; however, donors are also often limited in the extent to which they can provide relevant support due to unfamiliarity with sufferers' lives. Therefore, it is important to investigate the messages donors leave on campaign pages. In this inductive study, we investigate online responses to a school shooting to explain how donors' responses to charitable crowdfunding campaigns manifest. The emergent crowdfunding model of public displays of compassion suggests two core types of responses depending on the nature of the public appeal. Our insights extend the boundaries of the theory on charitable crowdfunding by illustrating the benefits of relaxing implicit assumptions regarding the nature of value creation and the uniformity of donor responses. The study has implications for organization theory on non-monetary value creation in crowdfunding, heterogeneity in crowdfunding responses, and compassion organizing and culture building in organizations.

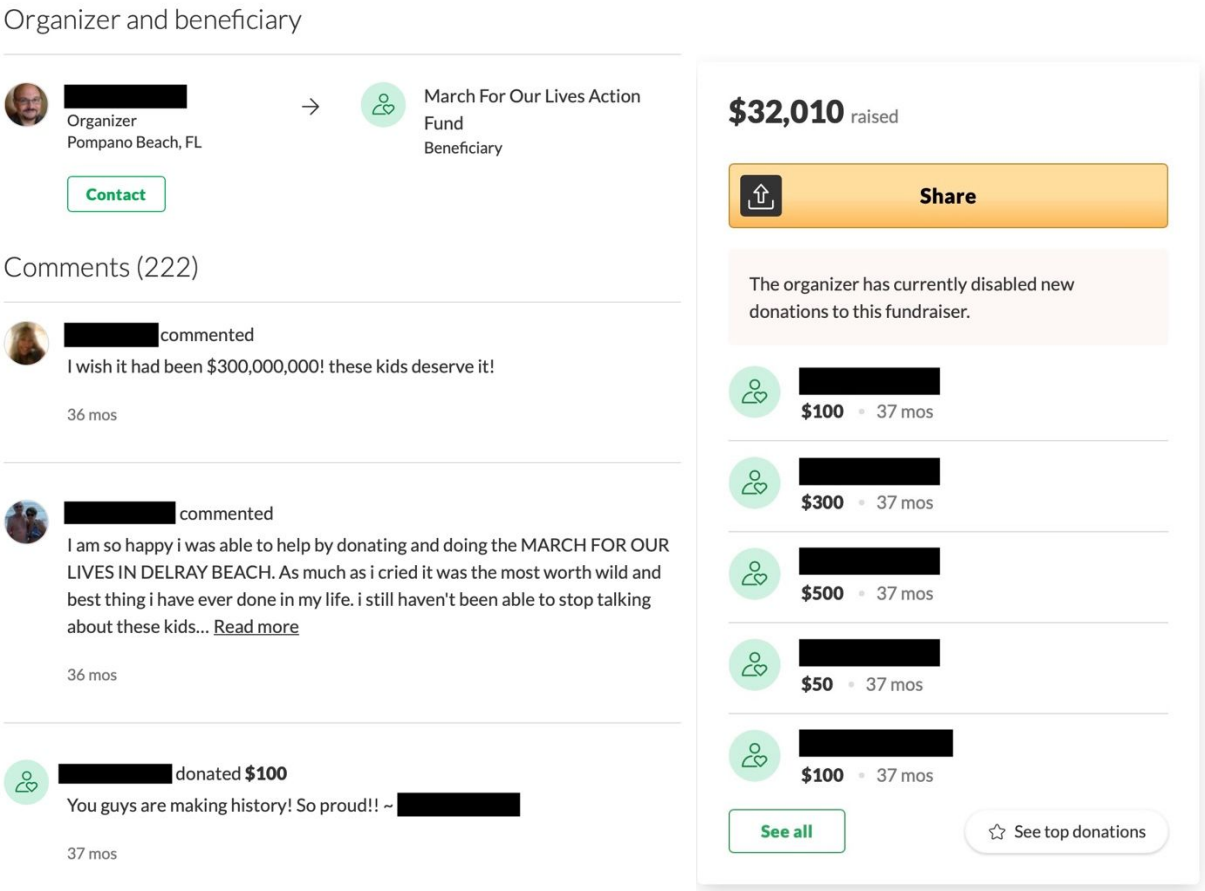
**Keywords**: Compassion, Crowdfunding, Victim Support, Tragedy Response Value Creation

## PROLOGUE

On February 14th, 2018, a quiet suburban community was devasted when a former student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School carried out what would later become known as the 'deadliest high school shooting in US history'. In just six minutes, he killed 17 people, injured another 17, and traumatized many more. The shooter then left the scene by blending in with the crowd of students as they fled, before later being picked up by police.

As news of the tragedy spread, the community rallied around the victims and their families. But the situation also attracted national, rapidly followed by international, attention. People organized online campaigns to help the victims, which donors all around the world quickly funded. Thousands of people, many of them strangers, offered aid to a small community that had experienced an unthinkable tragedy. These organized crowdfunding campaigns successfully paid for funeral expenses, medical expenses, and memorial scholarships. They helped rebuild classrooms and increase safety measures. In an unprecedented outpouring of compassion, multiple crowdfunding campaigns supported the March for Our Lives; a protest in which over a million people demonstrated supporting gun control legislation.


**Students at the White House to protest gun laws © Lorie Shaull**




**Example of GoFundMe campaign comments and donations © March For Our Lives**

While the shooter had initially used a crowd to evade capture, crowds were now organizing to alleviate the suffering of victims and put an end to shootings in schools. What particularly caught our attention was the mobilization of young people, including survivors from the school, who first created the "Never Again" campaign and subsequently planned the March For Our Lives. This student-led demonstration was one of the largest protests in US history and at the time hailed as a possible tipping point for gun control legislation (Petrusich & Peterson, 2018; Reilly, 2018). Believing we might be watching a process of significant social change and feeling great sorrow and empathy for the victims and their families, we followed the organizing activities online, through social and other media. We immediately saw a deep outpouring of compassion

unfolding, which was especially salient to two of us with scholarly interests in compassion processes. Interested in understanding how people make sense of such a tragic event and respond to online organizing of compassion, three of the researchers (one interested in crowdfunding) joined together to investigate the different kinds of responses evoked by the Parkland shooting. Later in the process, we were joined by a fourth researcher interested in community involvement who had been moved by the event's news coverage and wanted to understand the process under study better.


**March for Our Lives © Phil Roeder**

## INTRODUCTION

The organizing of charitable crowdfunding campaigns enables people in need to publicly appeal for help and collect many small contributions from a range of donors (Zhao & Shneor, 2020). Indeed, individuals are increasingly turning to crowdfunding to pay for personal expenses such as medical care (Berliner & Kenworthy, 2017; Martinez, 2019; Young & Scheinberg, 2017), particularly after unexpected and traumatic events (Kneese, 2018). Previous work on charitable crowdfunding has focused on investigating the common elements of successful campaigns (Gleasure & Feller, 2018; Rhue & Robert Jr., 2018; Xu, 2018), the strategies organizers can employ to make their campaigns more persuasive (Althoff & Leskovec, 2015; Chapman, Masser, & Louis, 2019; Tanaka & Voida, 2016), and the essentially altruistic reasons donors choose to give (Andreoni, 1989; Gleasure & Feller, 2016; Zhao & Shneor, 2020). Overall, these studies have revealed a lot about the nature of charitable crowdfunding campaigns, the strategies organizers use to increase support, and donors' motivations. However, we know relatively little about the nature of the non-financial support donors provide.

Indeed, the support donors provide is typically evaluated using quantitative metrics of support (e.g., the total amount raised [Chapman et al., 2019; Sulaeman, 2019] or amount raised per donor [Sasaki, 2019, Scharf & Smith, 2016]). Yet, donors frequently offer support by leaving compassionate comments to campaign organizers on campaign pages (Choy & Schlagwein, 2016). Although most crowdfunding campaigns do not attract much attention (Gleasure & Feller, 2016), and support typically comes from friends and family (Kim et al., 2016; Scharf & Smith, 2016), some campaigns capture the public consciousness and receive wide-spread support (Paynter, 2018; Solomon, 2019). While a sufferer's loved ones are likely to have some insight into how best to support them, many people who donate to popular campaigns have never met the sufferer (Nelson, 2020; Paust, 2020). In such a situation, comments often come from people who

are likely well-intentioned but are not well-placed to know how best to offer support. Indeed, relying on previously unfamiliar connections can result in compassionate responses that are not appropriate for sufferers' needs (Williams & Shepherd, 2018).

Donors might not know the right words to say, but their comments can help alleviate suffering (Gonzalez, Kwon, Lynch, & Fritz, 2018). However, some comments can also cause substantial harm to a campaign's organizers and beneficiaries. For example, one campaigner reported that she was deeply affected by donors' negative comments, saying, "You almost have to struggle to remember the positive comments; I would read a negative comment and my whole day would be ruined" (Tait, 2019). Indeed, charitable organizers are likely to be particularly vulnerable (vis-à-vis entrepreneurial campaign organizers) given the hardships that lead them to launch a campaign. Despite this impact of donors' responses on individuals involved with a crowdfunding campaign, previous research has focused on the vulnerability of donors (e.g., to scammers [Zenone & Snyder, 2019]) and the type of language used by organizers (e.g., emotional delivery [Rhue & Robert Jr., 2018]), rather than the language donors direct at vulnerable people.

Overall, sufferers who organize charitable campaigns can be particularly vulnerable in the wake of the tragedy that triggered their campaign, have the potential to be substantially helped or harmed by online comments by comments from unfamiliar donors whose words reflect a range of content. Therefore, it is essential to understand more about the nature of comments on crowdfunding campaigns for vulnerable people. This study addresses the following question: How do donors' responses to charitable crowdfunding campaigns manifest? To this end, we inductively analyze responses to crowdfunding campaigns organized online related to the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. This event generated widespread public comments to the victims.

Our core contribution is to advance understanding of forms of compassionate responses in charitable crowdfunding campaigns. Previous work suggests that donors' compassionate responses to crowdfunding campaigns are motivated by a hybrid form of altruism in which a dual desire to benefit both the recipient and the donor drive prosocial actions (Bagheri, Chitsazan, & Ebrahimi, 2019; Choy & Schlagwein, 2015; Zhao & Shneor, 2020). We complement these studies explaining *why* people respond compassionately by advancing our understanding of *how* their responses manifest.

Understanding how donors' responses manifest is important for organizations for at least three reasons. First, while there is a robust stream of work illustrating how organizations can facilitate employees' compassionate responses to a crisis (e.g., Dutton et al., 2006; Madden et al., 2012; Tsui, 2013), organizations (such as crowdfunding platforms) can generate new streams of compassion by tapping into the responses of external actors. Second, as illustrated by the March for Our Lives, some donor responses (but not others) can promote the downstream emergence of advocacy organizations (Robinson, 2019). These emergent social organizations build on and amplify the compassionate responses facilitated by the original commercial crowdfunding platform. They represent a pathway through which traditional organizations might promote less traditional forms of organizing (in terms of differences in the division of labor and integration of effort [Puranam, Alexy, & Reitzig, 2014; Wilcox, 2020]). Finally, the heterogeneity in both the types of appeals and donors' responses to those appeals suggests that the strategic use of online platforms could offer an alternative means to facilitate compassionate responding inside organizations in alignment with organizational goals.

Our core contribution to understanding forms of compassionate responses consists of three related extensions of previous crowdfunding work. First, by explaining how public support reflects multiple facets of compassion, we expand the notion of value creation in charitable

crowdfunding (Bagheri et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2016) to include non-monetary forms of support, highlighting different forms of compassionate response. Second, by explaining how donors' compassionate responses reflect cure- or prevention-oriented responding, we advance understanding of how individuals may try to achieve the benefits associated with hybrid altruism (Bagheri et al., 2019; Choy & Schlagwein, 2015; Zhao & Shneor, 2020) in different ways. Finally, by revealing how donors use contextualizing statements, emotional expressions, and positioning proclamations to show compassion for victims, we extend our understanding of the role of actors' language in crowdfunding from organizer-driven narratives (e.g., Rhue & Robert Jr., 2018; Xu, 2018) to donor-driven responses. Overall, these insights extend the boundaries of the theory on charitable crowdfunding by illustrating the benefits of relaxing implicit assumptions regarding the nature of value creation, the directionality of communication, and the uniformity of responses.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

While the data drove our theorizing, and our theorizing drove our literature review, consistent with many other qualitative studies (e.g., Denis, Dompierre, Langley & Rouleau, 2011; Hannah & Eisenhardt, 2018; Nag, Corley & Gioia, 2007), we offer the literature review before the methods and findings as a theoretical background for the reader. We did not force the data to fit the literature but provide relevant background to help place our findings in the broader theoretical context.

### Online Platforms and Tragedy

Previous research on the role of online platforms in organizing responses to tragedies has centered on bereaved individuals' grief processes (Bailey, Bell, & Kennedy, 2014; Carroll & Landry, 2010; Williams & Merten, 2009). For example, social media platforms organize grieving by allowing survivors to write to the deceased in a public forum, helping people maintain

connections to deceased loved ones, and increasing the social support they receive (Carroll & Landry, 2010; Kasket, 2012). Additionally, people use online environments to grieve acts of violence (Miller, 2015; Pearce, 2017), generate and express moral outrage (Lodewijkx, Kersten & van Zomeren, 2008), and identity with victims (Lodewijkx et al., 2008). Overall, previous studies have typically explored the online organizing of people close to the tragedy, such as bereaved parents (Döveling, 2017), friends (Carroll & Landry, 2010), as well as people who did not know the victim personally but had a prior connection to them (e.g., fans [Sanderson & Hope Cheong, 2010]).

However, an emerging stream of literature on organizing charitable crowdfunding offers glimpses into how other people respond compassionately to sufferers. Charitable crowdfunding involves three parties: campaign organizers, potential donors, and an online platform that connects them (Zhao & Shneor, 2020). Compared to traditional fundraising options, organizing through crowdfunding platforms reduces geographical constraints (Agrawal, Catalini, & Goldfarb, 2015), lessens coordination costs for organizers and transaction costs for donors (Choy & Schlagwein, 2016), and reduces reliance on any single donor (Lu, Xie, Kong, & Yu, 2014). Overall, charitable crowdfunding campaigns can facilitate compassionate responses from a range of people.

**Compassionate Responses to Charitable Crowdfunding Campaigns**

Compassion is an active process of noticing, appraising, feeling, and responding to suffering (Atkins & Parker, 2012; Kanov et al., 2004). In the wake of traumatic events, individuals may turn to crowdfunding platforms to provide compassionate responses to sufferers through donations and comments. Organizing online expressions of compassion can help sufferers in a range of ways, such as helping the bereaved cope with loss (Bailey et al., 2014) and enhancing feelings of connection to the deceased (Carroll & Landry, 2010) and others (Williams

& Merten, 2009). While actors who are close to a tragedy tend to benefit from compassion, individuals who are removed from an event may experience negative emotions (Dutton, Workman, & Hardin, 2014), the activation of autonomic and somatic vicarious stress responses (Iacoboni, 2009; Preston & de Waal, 2002), and even suicidal ideation (Bell, Stanley, Mallon, & Manthorpe, 2015; Hollander, 2001), as a result of exposure to information about the trauma and continued engagement with traumatic events and victims.

However, accompanying the rising ubiquity of social platforms connecting individuals, people without any prior connection to a tragedy are increasingly becoming invested in tragic situations. For example, in 2019, when a grieving family shared the story of their 7-year-old daughter's fall from a golf cart and subsequent hospitalization on a public Instagram account, they were inundated with messages from thousands of new followers around the world, and strangers even visited the hospital to show their support. Further, a GoFundMe campaign raised over a quarter of a million dollars for the family (Sherbondy, 2019). Over the months following the tragedy, thousands of people interacted with the family and one another in a vast outpouring of compassion. However, it is unclear why they felt compelled to do so and what form their public expressions of compassion took.

Donors to charitable crowdfunding campaigns tend to be motivated by a hybrid form of altruism (Bagheri et al., 2019; Choy & Schlagwein, 2015; Zhao & Shneor, 2020). *Altruism* refers to "a situation where individuals try to help others, even if it comes at some personal cost" (Andreoni, 1990; Khalil, 2004; Zhao & Shneor, 2020: 150). While *pure altruism* occurs when an individual acts prosocially without thought for themselves, and *warm-glow altruism* occurs when an individual acts prosocially but only because they derive benefit from doing so, *impure altruism* represents a hybrid approach where an individual acts prosocially both to alleviate a victim's suffering and for their own gratification (Andreoni, 1990; Gleasure & Feller, 2016; Zhao

& Shneor, 2020). For example, a donor may be moved by a campaign organizer's heart-wrenching story and want to reduce their pain while also wanting to receive esteem from their peers for their compassionate response or reassure themselves that if something similar ever happened to them, people would help (Benkler, 2011; Zhao & Shneor, 2020). Empirical evidence suggests that donors' motivations for supporting crowdfunding campaigns tend to be complex and most often reflect this hybrid form of altruism in which compassionate responses are intended to benefit both the recipient and the donor (Bagheri et al., 2019; Choy & Schlagwein, 2015; Gerber & Hui, 2013; Zhao & Shneor, 2020).

Although supporters of entrepreneurial crowdfunding campaigns have been known to offer non-monetary support such as valuable feedback on designs, idea validation, and access to networks, in addition to monetary contributions (Allon & Babich, 2020; Da Cruz, 2018; Macht & Chapman, 2019), in charitable crowdfunding campaigns, support is assumed to be largely financial (Bagheri et al., 2019). Previous work suggests that online platforms can organize compassionate responses to tragedy, with many people responding to charitable crowdfunding campaigns to benefit both themselves and victims. However, we know little about the nature of their responses, particularly in crowdfunding campaigns in which donors have little if any previous connection to the organizers.

## METHOD

### Research Context

People often launch charitable crowdfunding campaigns in the wake of tragedy (Kneese, 2018). One such tragic event is the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas (MSD) High School in Parkland, Florida, in 2018. The shooting was one of the world's deadliest school massacres, leaving 17 people dead, 17 wounded, and many more traumatized. In the immediate aftermath, NBCnews.com described the event as follows:

> The first sign that something awful was happening Wednesday came around 2:30 p.m., not long before classes were supposed to have been dismissed, when authorities were called to respond to an active shooter. For more than an hour, the school was at the mercy of a gunman on the loose. "He was outside and inside the school," Israel [Broward County Sheriff] said. Just after 4 p.m., the Broward County Sheriff's Office announced on Twitter that the suspect had been apprehended. Not long after, stunned survivors began sharing their accounts of what happened. Several students told NBC News that the school had gone through a fire drill earlier in the day. They said the fire alarm sounded again just before the shots were heard. Relieved parents like Lisette Rozenblet, whose daughter attends the school, also said she was told that a fire alarm was pulled about the time the shots began. But her daughter's teacher, sensing that it might be a trap, told the students to stay in the classroom, she said. "Her biggest fear is a school shooting," Rozenblet said of her daughter. "She is always begging me to be home-schooled because she was scared of this." Joel Leffler, whose son and daughter attend the school, said both of his kids were safe — but in shock. "My son called me as it was unfolding, running. He had to jump a fence," Leffler said. "My son heard around eight gun shots as he was running out." When he reached his daughter by phone, she was whispering, he said. "My daughter, who was there in the freshman hall where the shooting took place — she's in shock right now, and she's being taken out by SWAT," Leffler said. "She saw multiple dead bodies." (Chuck, Johnson, & Siemaszko, 2018)

In the days following the massacre, individuals across the globe contributed to a range of fundraising initiatives. Indeed, thousands of people congregated on an online crowdfunding platform in response to appeals for help from the victims and their loved ones (Paynter, 2018). GoFundMe—the world's largest online social fundraising platform with $5 billion raised and a community of 50 million donors—acted as a conduit for distant individuals to engage with appeals for help from the MSD victims and others acting on their behalf. For the most part, donors had never met the sufferers (or campaign organizers in cases where the organizer was not immediately affected). For example, many donors made statements similar to the following, "We do not know your family, but we are praying for you. May God give you the strength you need to overcome this tragedy" (James)[1]. Together, these individuals responded to various appeals such as campaigns to help MSD students finish their school year, finance memorial scholarships, and

[1] We assigned pseudonyms to all commenters to protect their privacy.

support the victims' families with medical and funeral expenses. The shooting also galvanized different movements, marches, and campaigns and sparked a nationwide debate over gun laws and violence. Therefore, this context represented an extreme case for theory building (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Crowdfunding platforms such as GoFundMe offer a particularly rich environment to observe the organizing of compassionate responses to tragedy because they facilitate the four components of compassionate responding: noticing, appraising, feeling, and acting (Atkins & Parker, 2012; Kanov et al., 2004). First, crowdfunding platforms organize noticing by providing an architecture that makes individuals accessible to one another, increases the ease with which people can see examples of suffering, and gives individuals a means to share trauma-related news (Kanov et al., 2004). Second, crowdfunding platforms organize individuals with the information needed to appraise both the situation and their ability to respond (i.e., is the sufferer relevant to me and deserving of help? Do I have the personal resources to help at this time?) (Atkins & Parker, 2012). Third, crowdfunding platforms organize feelings by providing an outlet for people to empathize with others' suffering, share those feelings, and appreciate the feelings of others. This social process may intensify participants' emotional experience (Kelly & Barsade, 2001). Finally, crowdfunding platforms organize action by giving individuals a channel through which to direct their compassion and organizing those individual responses into a coherent whole that can address sufferers' stated needs (Kanov, Powley, & Walshe, 2017; Simpson, Clegg, & Pitsis, 2014).

**Reflexivity**

While the whole team was shocked and saddened by the MSD High School shooting tragedy, we responded differently to the event and the material on the crowdfunding platform. Two of the team were living in the US at the time of the shooting. Although the shooting received

considerable international news coverage, the relative geographical proximity of these two authors meant they were particularly exposed to media about the terrible event and its aftermath. These researchers were heartbroken at the number of lives lost (the school shooting had the fourth-highest death toll in American history) and felt despair that such shootings continued to occur in the country where they live and work. Further, one of these US-based researchers is a parent of children in high school, as is one of the Europe-based researchers: their emotional response had a particularly sharp quality, empathizing deeply with the parents of the student victims, all too easily able to imagine the grief, desolation and potential anger at losing a teenager who was simply attending school. Despite having a less immediate connection to the horrific event, the final researcher was greatly moved by the accounts of the tragedy and became increasingly emotionally involved as she worked with the material on the crowdfunding website.

The emotional intensity of working on this project significantly shaped our analytic process as we began to work with the donor responses (Whiteman, 2010). Many of the messages focused on giving care to those who were suffering. Reading these, we were deeply touched by strangers' thoughts and feelings to support the bereaved families, which often revealed the losses and other kinds of tragedy that these donors themselves had experienced. This level of support amplified our awareness of the suffering felt by so many—something that the compassion researchers in the team rediscover each time we engage in our research. The caring messages also led us to feel elevation and hope as we read people's efforts to provide succor and healing (Dutton & Morhart, 2010). Other messages had a different tone, advocating for social change and conveying the donors' anger and outrage about gun control. Their exhortations contained a vitality and action-orientation that felt energizing as we read them, and we viscerally experienced the sense of agency and motivation they sought to imbue in others.

The complex mix of feelings that the data evoked made data analysis and interpretation a complex task (Mohrman, 2010), and one in which we sought to honor those who had suffered so much and do justice in our writing to the care, empathy, and compassion that donors had expressed. This prompted discussion within the team about what to name specific codes, for example, when one member felt a code did not fully capture the nuance of the text (e.g., "elevating" rather than "honoring") or disagreed about the interpretation of some of the more impassioned donor messages (e.g., "recognizing eternal change" or "expressing condolences"). In discussing these differences, we recognized how our backgrounds and life experiences influenced how we saw the data and felt appreciation for the team's heterogeneity and openness, which allowed us to resolve each issue while gaining a greater appreciation for the complexity of the topic and process.

At the same time, we became aware of certain shared beliefs that shaped our analytic process. Reflecting on what we brought with us to this project, we recognized that while two of the authors live in the US, none of the authorship team was born and raised in the US. Not being born and raised in the US enabled the team to interpret the US political system as outsiders rather than fully embedded. However, as outsiders, we still carry with us a set of political beliefs, and one shared belief that was particularly relevant to the study is the belief about guns. We were not raised to believe that people had a right to own guns (consistent with the second amendment of the US constitution), and therefore none of us are passionate about guns nor own guns. Although none of us were born in the USA, one author has lived in the US for twenty-four years and another for six years. This experience provides some cultural insights into the focal phenomena. Still, we realized that we could not identify with or even fully understand some people's passion for guns despite being open to others having different beliefs and passions.

Notwithstanding the heterogeneity of the research team, we were relatively homogenous in our attitudes towards guns. Therefore, we lacked the robust debate that would likely have occurred if a team member was a gun owner and advocate. This shared belief may have affected our interpretation of some of the data, such as seeing a set of the messages as challenging the status quo, rather than, say, "challenging the constitution" or "undermining political stability". However, we believe that our description of these messages as "prevention-oriented"—seeking to prevent more school shootings—is more reflective of the motives repeated many times by these donors than our wishes for societal change.

Working as a team on this emotional project that contained and prompted so many different reactions heightened for us the "involvement paradox" (Langley & Klag, 2019)—the tension many qualitative scholars experience as they gain insight through close involvement with the people and contexts they study, but fear that sharing this involvement in their writing may lead others to question the legitimacy of their account. Our data were textual rather than gathered in person. Therefore, we did not experience the level of emotional involvement we likely would have done had we been doing ethnographic research or conducting interviews with those closely connected to the MSD High School tragedy. Nevertheless, the material we worked with was moving and often quite distressing, especially for those of us "closer" to the event, either geographically or psychologically, as parents of high school students.

In this paper, we have worked to be visible, showing our presence in the analytic process, and acknowledging our positions, or "stance" (Langley & Klag, 2019), concerning the American and high school context, the tragic shooting event, and the kinds of responses shared on the crowdfunding platform. Writing in the first person, we bring our own voices to the description of our methods. Although it is challenging to fully capture the multiple perspectives of a four-person team working on various project elements over an extended period, we acknowledge that we

sometimes saw things differently. We offer in the paper the resolution of discussions about these differences.

**Sample**

We initially sampled all 117 GoFundMe campaigns organized in response to the MSD High School mass shooting. Each campaign organized information about the tragedy, an appeal for help, and responses in comments and donations from people worldwide. We further narrowed our sample to a final subset of 34 campaigns to facilitate parsimonious qualitative analysis while enhancing our findings' transferability (Gehman et al., 2018) and capturing variability (Mathias, Huyghe, Frid, & Galloway, 2017). To achieve this, we coded the 117 campaigns to identify different types of appeals for help. This process produced seven types of appeals (gun control, political marches, victim medical and funeral costs, memorials for victims, recovery/restoration of MSD, scholarships, and improved school safety initiatives). To examine compassionate responding across all appeal types, we selected the top five campaigns in each appeal category (except one category, which only contained four campaigns) that had organized the greatest engagement from the crowd (in terms of the number of posts). This approach led to a sample of 34 campaigns. Table 1 provides detailed information about each campaign, including the campaign title, project owner, campaign description, number of posts, and the type of appeal.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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To provide the reader with an introductory glimpse into these campaigns, we also offer three examples here. First, the family, girlfriend, and friends of Nick Dworet organized a memorial fund in Nick's honor. Nick's parents described Nick in the following way:

> Nick was a wonderful son and brother! He loved his family and it showed in the way he treated everyone. He had special relationships with his parents, his brother Alex, his aunts and uncles, his grandparents, and cousins! Everyone loved Nick for their own reasons! He

> was a genuine person who loved everyone! We are all heartbroken and will miss him every day! We have our memories and use them to get through the days. We use his strength to inspire us (https://nicholasdworetfund.org/).

The mission for the memorial fund is stated as:

> We are a certified 501c(3) nonprofit charity organization focused on helping make the world around us a better, happier place. Our mission is to keep Nick's memory alive by helping kids learn how to be better swimmers! Nick was always helping his friends and teammates be better. He wouldn't have it any other way. We will be hosting swim clinics that will provide FREE instruction to middle and high school aged boys and girls. We also provide financial assistance to needy families that need access to swimming lessons. In addition we plan to provide college scholarships to swimmers at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School as well as other organizations! Our mission is just beginning and plan to add additional programs to help the local swim community in the future. Help us by making a donation or purchasing something TODAY! (https://nicholasdworetfund.org/).

Second, the family of Alex Schachter organized a fund called "Safe Schools for Alex" and described Alex on their website:

> As a freshman, Alex loved the marching band and played the trombone and baritone in the Eagle Regiment Marching band – the top marching band in the state of Florida. He will always be remembered and forever in our hearts. … He is survived by his heartbroken parents, three siblings, grandparents and countless cousins, aunts, uncles and friends (https://safeschoolsforalex.org/).

The mission of the fund is: "to provide the most current school safety best practices and resources to students, parents, school districts and law enforcement so that all children can learn in a safe environment" (https://safeschoolsforalex.org/).

Finally, "Supporting MSD High School's Parent Teacher Student Association" is a fund organized by the members of the Alpha Theta chapter of Delta Sigma Pi at the University of Michigan with the following mission,

> "…raise as much money as possible to donate to Douglas's Parent Teacher Student Association to help the teachers, students, and families navigate this long rebuilding process. In order to reestablish a safe learning environment, we believe the Parent Teacher Student Association will be at the forefront of this process at the high school" (https://www.gofundme.com/f/supporting-msd-high-schools-ptsa).

As these examples illustrate, while the campaigns had varied missions and organizers, they were united by a common desire to ease suffering connected to the shooting by publicly appealing for help. Further, some organizers saw an opportunity to generate positive value out of a tragic situation by organizing lasting change.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

We collected the data for each campaign by downloading it from each of the campaign pages. This process resulted in a single document for each campaign containing a total of 521 pages of single-spaced text representing 6693 comments, all directly related to the MSD shooting.[2] We then imported these documents into NVivo for subsequent analysis, which unfolded in two iterative stages: (1) coding and categorization; and (2) model development.

***Stage 1: Coding and categorization.*** First, we sought to elucidate patterns in the data by identifying first-order codes, aggregating those first-order codes into second-order themes, and developing overarching aggregate dimensions (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). This process involved considerable back-and-forth as patterns emerged and evolved (Grodal, Anteby, & Holm, 2020). Thus, although we present these stages as steps that build upon one another for ease of interpretation by the reader, it is important to note that the process did not unfold linearly but rather involved considerable movement between layers of codes and adjustment as coding progressed.

[2] While respondent validation offers numerous advantages for most qualitative studies (Locke & Velamuri, 2009; e.g., Whiteman & Cooper, 2016), in the current study the quotes came from secondary sources (and not from participants' active engagement in our study). Further, many of the posts were made under one name or anonymously and therefore systematically determining their identity was near impossible. Therefore, consistent with other crowdfunding studies using donors' comments (e.g., Berliner & Kenworthy, 2017; Clauss et al., 2018; Courtney, Dutta, & Li, 2017), we did not engage in respondent validation.

We began by open coding to analyze individuals' expressions. This process involved labeling individuals' statements using their own words where possible, allowing the codes to emerge from the data (Suddaby, 2006). A wide variety of codes initially emerged, including *hopes for a different future, advice for sufferers, personal lessons learned*, and feelings like *sadness* and *love*. As we progressed, we read and re-read the comments and re-labeled the codes multiple times. Specifically, the iterative process of comparing newly analyzed data with previously-coded data allowed us to add new codes (when the newly analyzed data did not fit into an existing code), merge some codes (when the concepts were similar), and delete others (when they appeared idiosyncratic to particular individuals). Labels evolved as we compared units of text to already-coded text, grouped similar expressions, and found greater nuance in the data. For example, we created two new labels when we split an early code *relating* into two new first-order codes *relating [tragedy] to historical events* and *relating [tragedy] to own experiences.* We engaged in several rounds of first-order coding, adding and adjusting codes until no more additions or adjustments appeared appropriate. At that point, we had identified 47 first-order codes.

We then sought to further structure the data by grouping related first-order codes together to form second-order themes. For example, we found that the first-order codes of *heroism during tragedy* and *high potential to change the world* consolidated well into a second-order theme labeled *elevating* because these codes both involved elevating a victim above regular people. Similarly, the first-order codes of *unfathomability of the event, death not in vain,* and *uniquely situated* became part of a higher-order category of *amplifying* statements in which respondents increased the event's significance in relation to other events. As we discovered new relationships throughout the coding process, we continued to refine our first and second-order codes. As this process continued, we noted that particular themes (e.g., *amplifying*) were generally associated

with certain types of campaigns (e.g., campaigns oriented toward addressing the suffering arising from the current tragedy rather than preventing it from happening again).

Finally, we once again abstracted the second-order themes into higher-order aggregate dimensions, repeatedly iterating between the data and the emerging dimensions. For example, we categorized the second-order themes of *amplifying* statements and *paralleling* statements under the broader aggregate dimension of *contextualizing* statements. Respondents attempted to put the tragedy into context by amplifying its significance by illustrating the similarities between the tragedy and other events. This process produced four aggregate dimensions (Figure 1), one relating to the nature of the campaigns and three relating to donors' responses. Further, each of the three donor-level aggregate dimensions comprised two second-order themes, each of which was primarily associated with one of the two second-order themes in the campaign-level dimension. These themes and dimensions served as the building blocks of our model.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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**Stage 2: Model development.** The first step in developing our theoretical model was to consider the types of appeals for help individuals chose to respond to. The previous stage had revealed two broad campaign categories: organizing help to cure the current suffering, and organizing help to prevent a similar tragedy from happening again. Because the campaigns predated any comments, we placed these two broad categories on the left-hand side of the model. Next, we assessed the nature of donors' compassionate responses to each type of organized appeal. To this end, we first put the remaining three aggregate dimensions in the center of the model to illustrate the general manner in which donors respond to crowdfunding campaigns. Then, we arranged their respective second-order themes on each side, depending on their campaign association. Each campaign type (i.e., each type of appeal) was associated with a

different set of three compassionate responses. We labeled the compassionate responses generated by cure-oriented organizing *cure-oriented public displays of compassion* and the responses generated by prevention-oriented organizing *prevention-oriented public displays of compassion.* It is important to note that we do not assume any particular temporal ordering between the elements contained in each public display. We present our crowdfunding model of public displays of compassion in Figure 2.

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Insert Figure 2 about here

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## FINDINGS

Overall, charitable crowdfunding campaigns tend to fall into two organizing categories: cure-oriented campaigns and prevention-oriented campaigns. The middle row of the theoretical model shows the types of public expressions of compassion people tend to make (regardless of whether they're focused on cure or prevention). The top and bottom rows illustrate how these public expressions manifest when people focus on curing current sufferers' pain or preventing the suffering from happening again to others. Put together, these expressions illustrate two alternative ways in which donors tend to respond to organized public appeals for help. As such, social projects organize the opportunity to act—either restoring order by helping the healing process (for those directly affected and society at large) or reclaiming agency in ways oriented toward social change (i.e., gun control in our case).

The data revealed that organizing public help in the form of charitable crowdfunding campaigns consisted of *cure-oriented* and *prevention-oriented organizing*. *Cure-oriented* organizing focused on easing the suffering of those already in pain as a result of the tragedy. This approach involved asking for help with *memorials and scholarships, medical and funeral costs*, and general *MSD recovery.* For example, one cure-oriented campaign was organized to honor the

memory of two of the victims by setting up scholarships in their names. Other appeals sought to cover medical or funeral expenses, while others sought to provide healing in other ways, such as building new classrooms or beautifying the school grounds.

*Prevention-oriented* organizing focused on preventing future suffering by stopping such a tragedy from reoccurring. This approach involved asking for help with *protest marches, school safety,* and *gun violence.* For example, prevention-oriented campaigns sought to mobilize protestors, introduce safety measures such as door-locking devices for classrooms and shooter training programs for schools, and stop gun violence by sending a group of survivors to ask the Senate to reform gun-control legislation. Overall, crowdfunding campaigns allowed potential donors to help alleviate the suffering of current victims or prevent such a tragedy from occurring again. In response to these appeals, donors engaged in a variety of public displays of compassion.

**Public Displays of Compassion**

In the following subsections, we focus on how public expressions manifest differently depending on whether the campaign organizing was cure- or prevention-oriented. However, it is also important to acknowledge similarities in both groups' compassionate expressions. For example, regardless of the type of organizing, people tended to offer spiritual support through statements such as "My prayers are with you" (Maria), and "I pray that God places his loving arms around all of you during this time" (Jeremiah). Similarly, many people offered support through empathetic statements of shared pain, such as, "Though we may never meet, we feel your grief and your loss. We grieve too for all the lives lost in this senseless tragedy" (Gianna), and "Please know that in our hearts we feel such pain and we all mourn the loss of Alyssa" (Andrea).

Additionally, many people commented on the similarities between their loved ones and the victims. For example, Lyanna shared her experience of being the mother of children of a similar age: "There are no words to express my sadness for your family. I am the mother of three

with one still in high school, and I worry daily about the safety of my child while at school". Similarly, Andrew highlighted the resemblance of his granddaughter to one of the victims, saying, "The picture of your daughter instantly reminded me of my granddaughter." Overall, while we hereafter focus on differences to illuminate nuances in the phenomenon of compassion organizing by external actors, we do not mean to suggest that these groups are wholly dissimilar from one another. Indeed, consistent with prior literature (Tsui, 2013), some compassionate activity such as expressing sorrow at another's passing appears to be universal amongst those expressing compassion.

The data revealed that the commenters' compassionate expressions fell into three categories: *contextualizing statements, emotional expressions,* and *positioning proclamations.* First, *contextualizing statements* sought to situate the tragedy within the wider environment by offering *parallels* between the current tragedy and other situations or *amplifying* the tragedy's significance vis-a-vis other events. Second, *emotional expressions* either *reinforce* or *transform* the negative emotional state of the sufferers. Finally, *positioning proclamations* occurred when commenters separated themselves from the sufferers and involved either *elevating* the victims above themselves and others or *condemning the status quo,* which commenters believed had facilitated the tragedy. Overall, although all commenters tended to make one or more of these kinds of public expressions of compassion, their expressions manifested differently in response to organizing focused on curing the suffering compared to organizing focused on preventing it from happening again.

***Cure-oriented public displays of compassion.*** When sufferers organized for help in alleviating their own or others' pain, commenters tended to respond with expressions that amplified the tragedy's significance vis-à-vis other events, reinforced sufferers' emotions, and elevated the victims. *Amplifying* involved articulating the tragedy's enormity and

unfathomability, reassuring that the *deaths would not be in vain*, and characterizing the survivors as being *uniquely situated* to alleviate suffering. For example, concerning the unfathomability of the event, one commenter said,

> Your eulogy brought me to tears. I have three sons, all grown now. The love and pride I feel for them every day are so powerful. I cannot even fathom the amount of grief, frustration and simple disbelief you are experiencing. We have been blessed with two grandsons and to think that they could ever be in this kind of danger scares me and saddens me. (Gabriel)

Many commenters hoped that the sufferers would find comfort in the deceased's legacies, expressing their beliefs that their loved ones had not died in vain. Finally, others sought to reassure those grieving by discussing possible silver linings to such a tragedy. For example, Marla said, "These young people are uniquely situated to effectuate the changes our country needs." In addition to *amplifying* statements, appeals for help to alleviate current pain were also met with *reinforcing* emotional expressions.

Commenters who made *reinforcing* emotional expressions offered comfort by *validating the sufferers' feelings, emphasizing the senselessness* of the event, and *recognizing that the tragedy forever changes sufferers' lives*. For example, Susan validated a grieving family's pain by saying, "I am so sorry to hear of your loss. There are no words that can ease your pain. I am truly sorry and sad for you and your family". In recognition of the senseless of the event, another commenter said, "Though we may never meet, we feel your grief and your loss. We grieve, too, for all the lives lost in this senseless tragedy" (Heidi). Finally, many commenters acknowledged that the sufferers might never fully recover from the tragedy. For example, one woman shared her feelings about the loss of her son years earlier, explaining that while she has learned to live with the tragedy, it is not something she can get over.

In addition to amplifying and reinforcing, commenters also responded to cure-oriented organizing using *positioning* proclamations that elevated the victims above themselves and others. Such elevation tended to center on the *heroism of the victim* during the tragedy and the *potential of the deceased* to make an impact had they lived. For example, many people praised the heroic efforts of a coach who died protecting students from the gunman. In addition to heroism-focused expressions of compassion, other commenters also discussed how the victims could have changed the world if they had had the chance. For example, Graham explained what he had learned about one of the victims, saying,

> The fact that Alex's life will never be able to be lived out makes me sick. I never met him, but I read about him and instantly I could see what a special boy he was. He had goals, ambition, and love. He could have changed the world and instead he was stolen from it. … He deserved more than a moment of silence. He deserved more than someone's hearts and prayers. He deserved more than all of that because he was worth more than that. And his legacy will not die at that school. Because I will tell his story. I will tell of someone who could have changed the world. I will tell of someone who loved music. I will tell of someone who had a rich and amazing destiny locked away so we can only guess of its magnificence, but we all know that it is there. (Graham)

Thus, while reinforcing sufferers' emotions often involved identifying with the victims, many commenters also honored the dead and offered comfort to the living by separating themselves from the victims and elevating them above themselves and others. For additional examples of cure-oriented public expressions of compassion, please see Table 2. Next, we discuss how public expressions of compassion manifest when organizing help centers on preventing the tragedy from happening again.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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***Prevention-oriented public displays of compassion.*** When sufferers organized for help to prevent the tragedy from reoccurring, commenters tended to offer parallels between the current

tragedy and other situations, transform sufferers' emotions to facilitate a shift from sorrow to action, and condemn the status quo to show their support for change. In terms of contextualization, *paralleling* involved relating the tragedy or actions of survivors to *historical events* or events in the commenters' *own lives.* For example, many commenters related activism campaigns to mass protests in their own countries' histories or famous individual acts of protest, such as the man standing in the way of the tank in Tiananmen Square. In drawing parallels between the current situation and previous protests, Jordana offered the following advice, "As an old fart who participated in many '50s/'60s demos in the UK, nothing will change unless you hit the establishments in the wallet. Close down businesses and government with any actions". Similarly, Eddie encouraged the young generation in the following way: "Keep it up. You are our only hope after decades of trying, unsuccessfully, to get weapons of mass murder out of the hands of people who perpetrate these atrocities". At the same time, Orla wrote, "You kids are accomplishing what we adults have been trying to do for years. I'm 72 years old, and I pray that your generation will finally be able to initiate change and make the world a better place".

In addition to offering parallels between current and past events, commenters also offered expressions of compassion that sought to *transform* the sufferer's negative emotional states, encouraging them to take action. Transforming expressions were change-driven and involved increasing the sufferers' strength and encouraging them not to give up through expressions of *love, pride,* and *hope.* For example, Allison said, "My heart is heavy for you and your family. My hope is that you take this platform and move mountains". Similarly, Alex offered the following supportive advice, "Stay strong. Stay loud. Pace yourselves. This will be a marathon, not a sprint. We are here with you all the way. You CAN create change. Thank you for doing what you are doing". Overall, when emotional expressions were oriented at preventing the tragedy from reoccurring, they facilitated a shift from grief to activism. The data also revealed that these types

of paralleling contextualizations and transforming emotional expressions were often accompanied by positioning proclamations condemning the status quo.

*Condemning* the status quo involved assigning blame to entities that commenters believed had caused (in part or in full) the tragedy and decrying current societal conditions. Commenters assigned blame to various entities such as Congress, other elected officials, President Trump, and the National Rifle Association (NRA). For example, Anna urged, "Together we can beat out the NRA from running our country." Similarly, Dan sought to disempower those he blamed for the ongoing adverse events: "#stonemanstrong #neveragain. Standing with you from Massachusetts. If the politicians are going to be NRA's lapdogs, then let's flip the house/senate and bring in anyone (D, R, or I) who can pass sensible gun control legislation". Some individuals contrasted the groups they perceived to be blameworthy against the youth. For example, David blamed the NRA and the government. He saw the solution to gun violence coming from the younger generation: "The outspoken students in Parkland, who are challenging the NRA and our ineffective politicians, are the only light of hope I see that can fix this horrendous situation."

Concerning decrying current societal conditions, Gerry and Amanda offered the following comments,

> We're in our 60s and our biggest fears at school were being caught smoking or ditching class. Assault weapons in school and armed teachers weren't part of our worries and they shouldn't be part of yours. We'll be marching with you. (Gerry)

> Gun control laws in the US are disgraceful. The facts relating to our mass shooting rates in comparison to other countries' mass shooting rates speak for themselves. It is shameful that our elected officials do not have the backbone to do the right thing and pass legislation that makes sense and is appropriate for a modern society. Arguments for lack of gun control that refer back to our founding fathers' times are ludicrous - if such arguments were appropriate, then it would similarly still be appropriate to be arguing for slavery, lack of women's voting rights, child labor and the such. Times have changed and our laws must reflect that. Wake up America and have the backbone to do the right thing. (Amanda)

Overall, the condemnation of the status quo reflected commenters' support for change and their desire to energize the victims and others connected to the tragedy. Although creating groups to blame and vilify is not a practice typically condoned in writings on compassion, our study suggests that such negative comments may, in certain circumstances, serve as an additional driver of compassionate actions directed at changing society for the better. For additional examples of prevention-oriented public expressions of compassion, please see Table 3.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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## DISCUSSION

We began this study seeking to explain how donors' responses to charitable crowdfunding campaigns manifest. In doing so, we respond to calls for additional qualitative explorations of crowdfunding generally and greater consideration of the crowd-side of crowdfunding more specifically (McKenny et al., 2017). Our crowdfunding model of public displays of compassion suggests donors tend to respond to public appeals for help in two distinct ways, depending on the nature of the campaign. As such, our findings advance understanding of forms of compassionate responses in the context of charitable crowdfunding, contributing to the growing body of crowdfunding literature. Our central contribution is to complement existing explanations for *why* people respond compassionately by advancing our understanding of *how* their responses manifest. To this end, our findings hold the following implications for research and practice.

### Implication 1: Non-Monetary Value Creation in Crowdfunding

By explaining how public support reflects multiple facets of compassion, we expand the notion of support in charitable crowdfunding to include non-monetary forms of value creation. Entrepreneurial crowdfunders are known to receive intangible resources from supporters in the form of human, social and psychological capital (Allon & Babich, 2020; Da Cruz, 2018; Macht

& Chapman, 2019). However, in charitable crowdfunding campaigns, support is assumed to be largely financial (Bagheri et al., 2019). Indeed, in addition to attracting scholarly attention, the reification of financial support has been known to lead to discomfort for potential donors and interpersonal problems between themselves and campaign organizers (Kim et al., 2016). For example, Kim and colleagues (2016) found that charitable crowdfunding campaigns related to medical needs tended to emphasize monetary contributions. This emphasis led to distress and conflict within organizers' social groups. In contrast, our findings highlight multiple ways in which donors offer non-financial support, illustrating alternative ways to give (for donors) and receive (for organizers). Overall, this insight is important because it expands notions of organizing crowdfunding to include non-financial contributions.

Previous studies on compassion have typically focused on actors embedded in the situation, such as the individuals experiencing adversity and supporters who are geographically local to victims' suffering (Dutton et al., 2006; Shepherd & Williams, 2014, 2018; Williams & Shepherd, 2016). We extend this stream of research by demonstrating that in addition to individuals situated locally to victims, others' suffering can also prompt compassion responses from people not directly connected geographically with the victims. By highlighting compassionate responses through crowdfunding campaigns, the present study expands notions of who may act to alleviate suffering. Building on our findings regarding response-based differences, we also believe the effectiveness of compassionate responses in alleviating the suffering of both donors and beneficiaries is a topic worthy of future research. In particular, it would be interesting to understand these relationships at both the individual and community levels of analysis and the interplay between them.

Moreover, the mobilizing of non-monetary support suggests a potential mechanism for the evolution of organizing forms. Organizing involves solving the universal problems of dividing

and allocating tasks (i.e., division of labor) and rewarding and informing agents (i.e., integration of effort) (Puranam et al., 2014). To the extent that an organization attempts to solve these problems in new ways while pursuing the same or similar goals, their approach may be considered novel (Puranam et al., 2014). Crowdfunding platforms typically seek to alleviate suffering via economic means using a combination of centralized and decentralized approaches, in which managers direct employees. At the same time, external stakeholders such as donors self-select into projects. Information flows are largely formalized and facilitated by the platform (although campaign organizers will often also use off-platform communication methods such as social media). The system architecture guides the division of tasks.

In contrast, by facilitating some types of on-platform compassionate responses (i.e., prevention-oriented public displays of compassion), the existing crowdfunding platform contributed to the emergence of a new social organization – March For Our Lives. Still guided by the overarching goal to alleviate suffering, the March for our Lives organization took a decentralized grass-roots approach to task division and the integration of effort. The new organization took a different organizing approach to build on and amplify the compassionate responses facilitated by the original commercial crowdfunding platform (Robinson, 2019), suggesting a response-based pathway through which traditional organizations might indirectly enable less traditional forms of organizing.

Finally, inquiry into the temporal dynamics of value creation could provide opportunities to contribute to the crowdfunding literature. Research on crowdfunding suggests that a "point of no return" exists, such that campaigns that do not achieve at least a quarter of their funding goal within the first few days are unlikely to be successful (Localwiki, 2010). This finding suggests that the early days of compassionate responding on online platforms might have an outsize impact on eventual outcomes. This phenomenon indicates that to the extent that donors read at

least some previous comments before leaving their own, campaigns with a high number of early compassionate responses may gain an outpouring of support thanks to that early momentum. Further, the types of compassionate responses (e.g., contextualizing statements, etc.) made during the first few days of a campaign may influence later comments by acting as prototypical responses to be emulated or suggesting gaps in the support offered.

**Implication 2: Heterogeneity in Crowdfunding Responses**

Previous work suggests that donors are motivated to engage with charitable crowdfunding campaigns by a hybrid form of altruism—a dual desire to benefit both the recipient and the donor (Bagheri et al., 2019; Choy & Schlagwein, 2015; Zhao & Shneor, 2020). We extend this work by illuminating different ways donors may try to achieve these goals. Thus, by offering two overarching pathways in which donors' compassion reflects either cure- or prevention-oriented responding, we challenge an implicit assumption regarding the uniformity of donor behavior (Zhao & Shneor, 2020). Indeed, rather than being uniform in nature, compassionate responses to charitable crowdfunding differ from financial support and take multiple forms within their category. This insight is important because it suggests that in addition to deciding whether or not to offer support, potential donors also decide which kind of support they will provide (e.g., financial and/or compassionate), as well as how best to enact a compassionate response if they take that approach (e.g., through contextualizing statements, emotional expressions or positioning proclamations).

Like other studies of crowdfunding campaign comments (e.g., Macht & Chapman, 2019), our design did not enable us to ask donors about their motivations. Based on a stream of research suggesting most charitable crowdfunding is motivated by hybrid altruism (e.g., Bagheri et al., 2019; Choy & Schlagwein, 2015; Zhao & Shneor, 2020), we assumed that donors were motivated to respond compassionately out of a desire to help both themselves and others. However, if this

assumption does not hold, then the relationships in our model may change. For example, some potential donors may be motivated by relational altruism, giving based on a close personal connection to the organizer (Scharf & Smith, 2016). In this case, they are likely to draw on their knowledge of the receiver in crafting their response, meaning their responses may be more customized. However, relational altruism may increase the chances a potential donor will offer support offline instead—in-person or over the phone rather than organized through an online platform.

Finally, by describing heterogeneity in crowdfunding responses, we extend knowledge of the role of actors' language in crowdfunding from organizer-driven narratives to include donor-driven responses. Previous work suggests that campaign organizers can use particular narrative techniques such as emotional appeals to increase interest in their campaigns (Rhue & Robert Jr., 2018; Xu, 2018). We complement these studies by explaining how donors use contextualizing statements, emotional expressions, and positioning proclamations to show compassion for campaign organizers and or/ beneficiaries. This emphasis on the crowd's language use (as opposed to the campaign organizer's language) is important in the context of post-tragedy charitable crowdfunding (vis-à-vis entrepreneurial crowdfunding or charitable crowdfunding that isn't triggered by tragedy) because it highlights an expanded notion of vulnerability in the crowdfunding literature. Previous research also tends to position donors as vulnerable to campaign organizers rather than the reverse (Zenone & Snyder, 2019). However, charitable campaign organizers are particularly vulnerable due to the situations that lead them to launch a campaign. Overall, by highlighting different linguistic aspects of compassionate responding, we take a first step toward facilitating the investigation of how donors' language choices may affect organizers.

**Implication 3: Compassion Organizing and Culture-Building in Organizations**

While we studied donors' compassionate responses on a public crowdfunding platform, our findings also have important implications for the study of compassionate responses in organizations and their impact on organizational members. Previous research has shown how members respond positively to management-led opportunities to alleviate others' suffering (e.g., Lilius et al., 2008; Grant, Dutton & Rosso, 2008; Watkins et al., 2015) and self-organize to provide support and other resources to those in need during times of crisis (Dutton et al., 2006; Madden et al., 2012). Our findings regarding how people use an online platform to express their care, encouragement, prayers, and other forms of support to those in pain suggest the potential value of such a medium to inspire, capture, and curate compassionate responses within organizations. Empirically examining this support would make a novel contribution to the literature with valuable practical implications.

An important avenue for research on compassion organizing (Dutton et al., 2006) involves the potential use of online platforms for facilitating compassionate responses inside organizations. A key quality of such platforms is likely their flexibility, which enables people to respond to others' suffering and do so in various ways. Using such a platform in an organization would permit members to promote and support their chosen causes and do so in their preferred manner. Thus, employees could use a compassion platform to propose various causes about which they feel strongly and respond in various ways to different social issues, both external to the organization and within. Support could be shared in the form of verbal expressions, as in our study, but also include actions such as volunteering time (Rodell et al., 2016), donating unused vacation days to those in need (Grant et al., 2008), or calling for change (Satterstrom et al., 2020). The customization permitted by a crowdfunding approach to compassion in organizations could thus allow members at every level to participate in their chosen way. With the use of guidelines to ensure constructive contributions, we believe both cure- and prevention-oriented responses can

also serve as a valuable form of voice around compassion-related issues (Grant & Patil, 2012). Future research could study how such a compassion platform, with its customized approach, compares to the common organizational practice of focusing on one particular cause chosen by management or employee vote and seeking support in the form of financial donations.

The potential use of online platforms to facilitate compassionate responding inside organizations also has implications for research and practice on the link between compassion and organizational culture. Constructing a compassion platform inside an organization could facilitate members' expression of compassion, alleviate suffering, and serve as a connecting device among employees (Seppala et al., 2013). By linking people from different parts of the organization around heartfelt causes, such a platform could increase their feelings of connection to the organization, help them feel more a part of something meaningful, and strengthen the organizational culture (Barsade & O'Neill, 2014). Previous research has shown that witnessing compassion, and other prosocial behavior within the organization increases members' affective commitment, positive work identity, and sense of belonging (Dutton et al., 2014; Lilius et al., 2008; Moon et al., 2015). With the continued growth of remote working, this may prove particularly important, as organizations struggle to maintain a sense of "who we are" for workers increasingly dispersed from one another and a physical, organizational hub (Howard-Grenville, 2020).

**Limitations**

Compassionate responses to others' suffering are typically assessed in terms of the scale, scope, speed, and customization of response (Dutton et al., 2006; Shepherd & Williams, 2014). Indeed, one of the central challenges of compassionate responding is providing resources that fit sufferers' needs, rather than offering resources that are well-intended but not fit for purpose in terms of the type of resource, quantity, or variety (Shepherd & Williams, 2014; Williams &

Shepherd, 2016, 2021; Worline & Dutton, 2017). However, outside of investigating campaign success, our data did not enable us to assess the effects of donors' responses on organizers or the intended beneficiaries. Because compassion is an active process of noticing, appraising, feeling, and responding to suffering (Atkins & Parker, 2012; Kanov et al., 2004), we are confident in defining these responses as 'compassionate' regardless of their effectiveness. However, future research could assess the extent to which donors' responses effectively alleviated (or perhaps inadvertently increased) suffering and explain variance in effectiveness across organizing efforts and compassionate responses.

Although many aspects of our research context are transferable to a range of charitable crowdfunding contexts, there are also aspects of our context that are idiosyncratic. For example, many tragic events do not have a single focal actor responsible for the suffering. Donors' compassionate response may arise from a range of circumstances such as the natural death of loved ones (Currier, Neimeyer & Berman, 2008; Neimeyer, 2006), poor health (Golden-Kreutz et al., 2005; Park, Edmondson, Fenster, & Blank, 2008), and both human-made disasters (e.g., a refugee tsunami [Mittermaier, Shepherd & Patzelt, 2021]) and natural disasters (e.g., bushfires [Shepherd & Williams, 2014] and earthquakes [Williams & Shepherd, 2016, 2021]). Because some donors' expressions of compassion centered on identifying a target of blame, some expressions may operate differently in a context in which there is no obvious target (e.g., suicide). We hope that future comparative studies will explore this issue.

**Conclusion**

This study suggests two alternative pathways through which donors respond compassionately to organizing online for help in the wake of tragedy. The first path is oriented toward curing current suffering, and the second path is oriented toward preventing it from happening again. While much of the charitable crowdfunding literature assumes that the value

donors create is financial and that compassionate responses tend to be relatively uniform, our crowdfunding model of public displays of compassion illustrates the benefits of relaxing these assumptions, advancing understanding of how compassion manifests in response to organized public appeals for help.

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**Table 1**
**Campaign Descriptions**

| Campaign | Campaign Organizer | Description | Posts | Type |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| March for Our Lives | A student (a survivor. from Douglas High School | Funds collected for "March For Our Lives Action Fund" + cover the costs of victims' family | 1930 | March |
| March for Our Lives - Seattle | A group of students from Seattle | Funds collected to pay for expenditures (permits, security, transportation for youth, promotional materials, voter registration campaign for teens across America. linked to "March For Our Lives" organized in Seattle | 111 | March |
| Parkland March For Our Lives | A student (a survivor. from Douglas High School | Funds collected to organize the "March For Our Lives" in Parkland + for initiatives supporting common-sense gun laws, education, and safety reforms | 97 | March |
| Stoneman Douglas Students' Fund | A group of alumni of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School | Money raised to cover the expenses to get 700 students, teachers, and chaperones to Washington, DC, to attend the March for our Lives | 68 | March |
| March for Our Lives San Jose | A group of high school students from San Jose | Money raised to organize a "March For Our Lives" in San Jose | 53 | March |
| Help the Family of Anthony Borges | Someone from the family | Funds raised to help Anthony Borges (a student who was shot while he was protecting the other students from the shooter. cover the costs of his injuries | 870 | Medical and funeral costs |
| Support for Missy and Maddy | Robert Meaders, a former classmate of Missy Cantrell Wilford (1991), the mother of Maddy, who was wounded during MSD shooting | Money raised to help Maddy recover | 279 | Medical and funeral costs |
| Meadow Pollack Memorial Fund | A friend of the family of Meadow Pollack | Funds collected to cover the costs associated with Meadow's funeral arrangements and for Meadow's mom to obtain the help and long-term counseling she will need | 198 | Medical and funeral costs |
| In Memory Of Cara Loughran | The colleagues of the mother of Cara Loughran | Funds collected to help the family to cover expenses related to Cara Loughran's death | 170 | Medical and funeral costs |
| Nicholas Dworet- Stoneman Douglas | Kathryn Searle, a close friend of the Dworet family | Money raised to help some members of the Dworet family who are in Sweden to fly to the US + a memorial for Nicholas | 170 | Medical and funeral costs |

**Table 1**
**Campaign Descriptions**

| Campaign | Campaign Organizer | Description | Posts | Type |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Orange Ribbons For Jaime | The parents of Jaime Guttenberg | An organization created to support causes important to Jaime Guttenberg in life + causes linked to why her life was cut short (guns' violence) | 550 | Gun violence |
| Send 50 Parkland Students to DC | An external individual | Funds established to fly students to Washington for a face-to-face session with a Senate sub-committee or more of the Senate | 195 | Gun violence |
| The Run for Their Lives | Two brothers (Brothers Isaiah Godby and Jeremiah D Godby) | Money raised to cover the costs linked to the participation of these two brothers in a run organized to support effort toward gun violence | 42 | Gun violence |
| Parkland MSD Benefit Concert | A collective of Musicians from Parkland | Via a music concert, funds collected for the victims' families + for organizations that fight for gun safety and the ending of gun violence | 37 | Gun violence |
| Carmen Schentrup Memorial Fund | Parents of Carmen Schentrup | Money raised to support advocacy and outreach for common-sense gun reform | 25 | Gun violence |
| Gina Montalto Memorial Scholarship | The parents of Gina Rose Montalto (a victim of the shooting) | Money raised to create a scholarship fund to help students with the cost of post-secondary education | 572 | Scholarship |
| For the Hixons | A former athlete and student of Coach Hixon (victim) | Funds raised to create a scholarship fund in Coach Hixon's name | 102 | Scholarship |
| Scott J. Beigel Memorial Fund | The wife of Scott J. Beigel | Scholarship to send children, who could not otherwise afford it, to go to summer camp (Scott J. Beigel was an educator during summer camp) | 92 | Scholarship |
| Alyssa Alhadeff Scholarship Fund | Someone who grew up with Alyssa's dad | Money raised to create a Soccer Scholarship in Alyssa's honor | 28 | Scholarship |
| Buzzards Lacrosse Donation Fund | Members of Lacrosse (two members have been directly affected by the shooting: the parents of 2 victims) | Money raised to create two scholarship funds to honor Meadow Pollack and Nick Dworet | 28 | Scholarship |
| Alex Schachter Scholarship Fund | The father of Alex Schachter (a victim) | Funds to keep Alex's memory alive by raising funds for the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Marching Band + funds to improve school safety | 559 | Memorial |

**Table 1**
**Campaign Descriptions**

| Campaign | Campaign Organizer | Description | Posts | Type |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lei of Aloha for Florida | A group of people from Hawaii | Funds raised to make a Lei of Aloha for the victims of MSD | 93 | Memorial |
| Stoneman Douglas Memorial Fund | Logan Locke (Junior at Stoneman Douglas High School) | Funds raised to construct a memorial dedicated to the victims and families of the shooting | 61 | Memorial |
| Nick Dworet's Memorial Fund | Jesse Friedman, the cousin of Nick Dworet (a victim) | Money raised to create a memorial for Nick Dworet + help Nick's younger brother Alexander, recovering from injuries from the shooting. | 55 | Memorial |
| In Honor of Our Fallen Hero | Members of the MSD Gridiron Club (football club. – Coach Feis (a victim. was a member | Money raised for the Feis Family (to honor his memory and support his wife and daughter) | 19 | Memorial |
| Alyssa's Memorial Fund | A friend of the family of Alyssa Alhadeff (a victim) | Funds raised for a non-profit organization created in Alyssa Alhadeff's name (to make the school safer) | 200 | School safety |
| Ramblewood Elementary Safety Items | Parents, family, and friends of Ramblewood Elementary | Money raised to have Door Buzzer installed in Ramblewood Elementary School | 18 | School safety |
| Safe Schools For Alex | The family of Alex Schachter in Parkland, Florida | Money raised to support the efforts of a nationwide school safety commission spearheaded by Alex's father | 17 | School safety |
| Intruder Locks For MCSD | A group of parents of the Muscatine Community School District | Money raised to outfit the classrooms with intruder locks | 11 | School safety |
| Protecting Our Long Island Schools | A friend of Scott Beigel | Money raised to purchase door lock safety devices for classroom and "Shooter Training" for schools | 6 | School safety |
| Douglas High School Beautification | A mother of a child (who is not a victim. going to Douglas High School | Funds collected for a campus-wide beautification project (to help students come back in a better and improved school environment) | 20 | MSD recovery |
| Supporting MSD High School's PTSA | Brothers of the Alpha Theta chapter of Delta Sigma Phi at the University of Michigan | Money raised to donate to Douglas's PTSA to help the teachers, students, and families navigate the rebuilding process | 9 | MSD recovery |
| Stoneman Douglas HS Art Therapy | Denise Desiderio- an art teacher and a friend of a teacher from MSD | Money raised to purchase art materials for the students of MSD as an outlet upon their return to school | 6 | MSD recovery |
| Marjory Stoneman Douglas HS Funds | A group of franchisees of 7-Eleven in South Florida | Money raised to construct a new building for Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland | 2 | MSD recovery |

**Table 2**
**Additional Examples of Cure-Oriented Public Expressions of Compassion**

| Contextualizing Statements Amplifying | Emotional Expressions Reinforcing | Positioning Proclamations Elevating |
|---|---|---|
| **Unfathomability of event.** I have no words to express my sadness over this horrible tragedy. (Alice) | **Validating feelings.** There are no words that can bring comfort, but please know you have our love and support as you go through this most difficult time. (Kathleen) | **Heroism during tragedy.** The nation will remember you for your selfless act of humanity and love. (Mark) |
| **Death not in vain.** I truly believe he did not die in vain but for a cause greater than any one person. He will be remembered as a hero in the fight against this pestilence. (Jason) | **Emphasizing senselessness**. I send my thoughts to you and your family, as well as the family of every victim affected by this senseless tragedy. (Audrey) | **Heroism during tragedy.** A true hero. Rest in peace. (Elijah) |
| **Uniquely situated.** I'm a high school student in Washington state, even though I am half way across the country from you just know that we are keeping all of you in our hearts and I pray that you all take this horrible experience, that no one should ever have to go through, and use it to do something great and impactful on this country. Stay strong and know that you are all loved. (Rachel) | **Recognizing eternal change.** Words cannot express the hurt in my heart for all the victims and the victims' families whose lives have been forever changed by this act of violence… I will be praying for you all today and in the days to come as this will be something that you will never get over. My thoughts, prayers and deepest sympathies go to you. (Piers) | **High potential to change the world.** She would've changed the world. (Audrey)<br><br>**High potential to change the world.** Although I have never met your daughter or even seen her, I can tell how special and unique she was. Like Miriam, the Jewish leader, Moses sister, who exemplified leadership, wisdom, and courage, so too your daughter takes after. Even I, a stranger, took one look at her face and instantly recognized she was someone extremely special. (Genevieve) |

**Table 3**
**Additional Examples of Prevention-Oriented Public Expressions of Compassion**

| Contextualizing Statements Paralleling | Emotional Expressions Transforming | Positioning Proclamations Condemning |
|---|---|---|
| **Relating to historic events.** [the student activists] are hippies placing flowers in soldiers rifle barrels or the man standing in the way of the tank in Tiananmen Square. (Tom) | **Hope – Force for strength.** I hope knowing that I'm just one of millions who care and have your back provides some comfort that will strengthen you. (Jemma) | **Assigning blame.** We must oust the unconscionable, spineless politicians and jail their briber, the NRA leaders who have hijacked our country's morals and are instrumental in the massacres our kids are now subject to. We have become a country run by liars and criminals. Our kids are speaking up, God bless and protect them from the criminals who are trying their hardest to smear them. (Natalie) |
| **Relating to own experiences.** I'll be marching. With my cane, but marching. Reminds me of my first protests in the 60s. I'm so gratified to see young people acting to make our country better. (Michael) | **Love – Force for strength.** You and your classmates have so much love and support behind you. We are with you 100%. We are all so very sorry it's taken so many lives to get here. Never again!!! (Adele) | |
| **Relating to own experiences.** I grew up in Brazil and when I was in high school, my generation took the streets and marched to call for an impeachment of the President in 1992. It took several months and multiple marches, but it can be done. I've seen it, don't give up. (Leo) | **Pride – Force for change.** So proud to see students organizing such an important event and being a force for change. (Olivia) | **Decrying current societal conditions.** We are all SO ANGRY at the continuous killings in this country. (Rachel) |
| | **Pride – Force for change.** So proud of these young people who are fighting back, in an intelligent way. It is so overdue!!! (Paola) | **Decrying current societal conditions.** As a teacher, my heart aches for the world my students must live in. As a mother, my heart breaks at the thought that they could [have] just as easily fallen victim to such a horrid crime. (Eloise) |

**Figure 1**
**Data Structure**

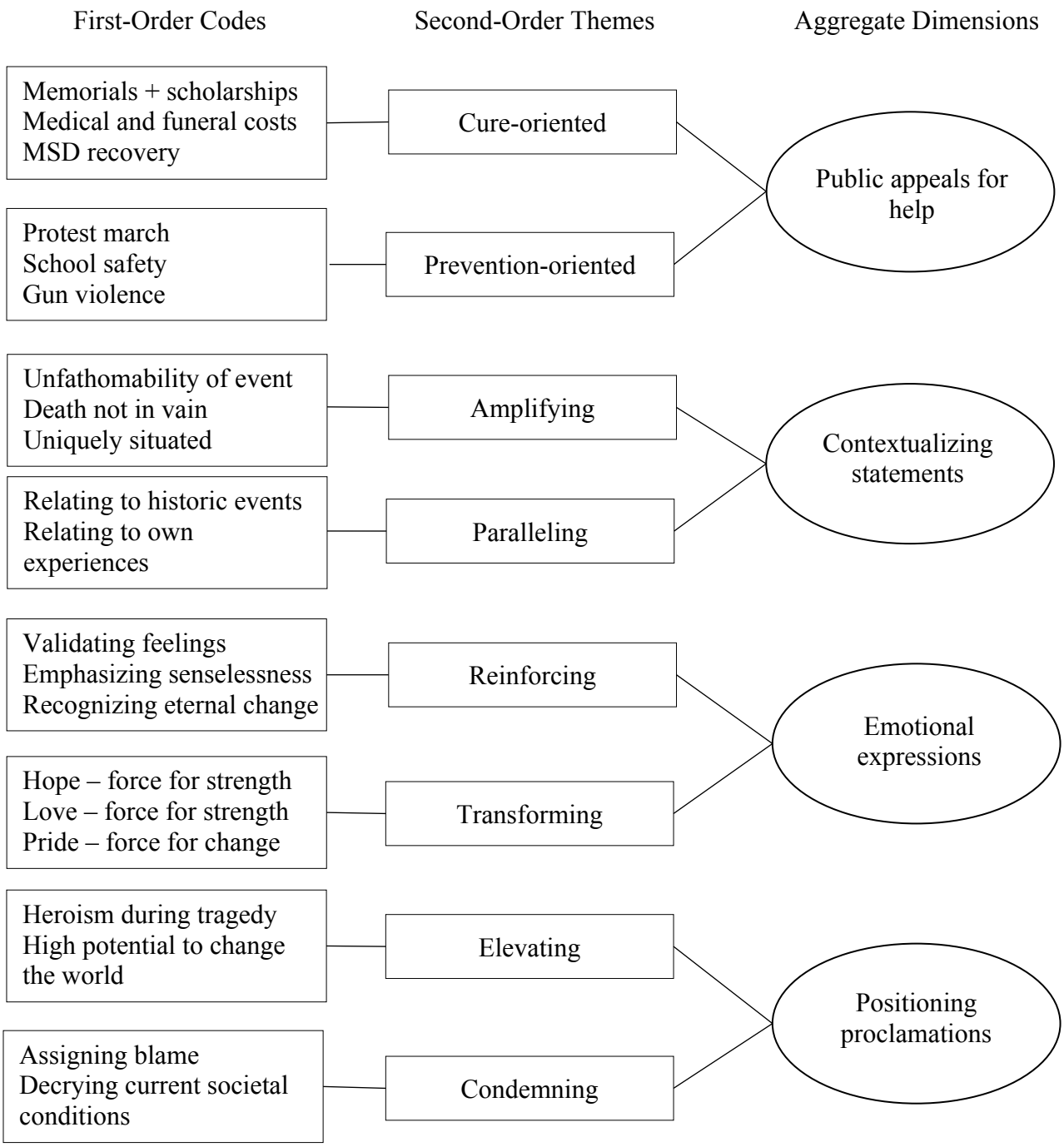

**Figure 2**
**A Crowdfunding Model of Public Displays of Compassion**