

# Generation Z's Philanthropic Engagement in the United States Agrofood Sector: Perceptions, Motivations, And Intentions

Weslee Potts<sup>1</sup>  
Amber H. Rice<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

*This phenomenological study was conducted to ascertain Generation Z's attitudes and perspectives regarding agrofood philanthropy. To effectively engage the upcoming generation as philanthropists, it is necessary to determine how they define philanthropy, what motivates them to give, how they have already participated in philanthropic efforts, and their intentions towards future philanthropy. After interviewing participants, it was found that they were driven by a deep desire to connect with others. Donating time to agricultural, food-focused, or rural-serving organizations allowed them to fulfill that desire, resulting in deep organizational commitment and desire to donate time in the future as a means of community integration. Recommendations for future research include a greater balance of gender perspectives and exploring other philanthropic sectors. Recommendations for practice include providing social opportunities and community to engage Generation Z, surfacing the impact of the organization that aligns with their values, and maintaining a robust online presence.*

## Introduction

Private allocation of time and money to achieve a collective social goal, known as philanthropy, is a source of capital for the benefit of general humanity. It comprises a vital component of the third sector of the global economy, a tertiary socio-economic categorization for the entities that operate on the basis of private, freely chosen actions individually or collectively undertaken for the public good (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2018). The third sector exerts great influence on the world by funneling vast amounts of voluntarily-given resources to various collective ends (Enjolras, 2015). Although in its current form philanthropy is starting to scale up to larger, venture-modeled organizations (Grossman et al., 2013; Harrow, 2010), philanthropy as an act of the individual is still an influential force in the third sector of Western societies. For example, individual donors contribute 68% of total giving to charities in the United States (Giving USA Foundation, 2020).

One specific category of the third sector that currently relies heavily on individual donors is agrofood organizations, defined as entities focused on improving or providing food production and distribution services in response to deficits in the private and public sectors. Agrofood organizations are growing in importance as demands for food from the increasingly numerous and wealthy global population are rising (Alexandratos & Bruinsma, 2012). Governments are not always capable of closing a gap in the provision of goods and services, so pressure is growing on nonprofits as they and the private sector are relied upon to fill the gap (Goodwin, 1998).

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<sup>1</sup> Weslee Potts is a former master's student in Agricultural Education in the Department of Agricultural Education, Technology and Innovation at The University of Arizona, 1110 E South Campus Drive, Tucson, AZ 85721, [wesleekgreen@gmail.com](mailto:wesleekgreen@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Amber H. Rice is an Associate Professor of Agricultural Education in the Department of Agricultural Education, Technology and Innovation at The University of Arizona, 1110 E South Campus Drive, Tucson, AZ 85721, [amrice@arizona.edu](mailto:amrice@arizona.edu)

However, research largely ignores agrofood initiatives when studying philanthropy, despite their global role (Valentinov, 2012). This may be due to the difficulty in determining where current philanthropic engagement stands in relation to agrofood organizations operating in the U.S., where this study is focused, due to the difficulty the U.S. tax system creates through vague categorization. In the United States, agricultural nonprofits are tax-exempt under both 501c(3) and 501c(5) categories, and must choose how to file (Internal Revenue Service, 2021). Independent reports from philanthropic reporting organizations lump food-related organizations into categories with myriad unrelated groups such as sports organizations or make no mention of them (Blackbaud, 2020; NCCS Project Team, 2020; R. Serratos, personal communication, December 15, 2021). Considering the vague nature of this realm of the third sector, all agricultural, food-focused, or rural-serving organizations relying on donors for funding and/or labor will be labeled agrofood entities for the purposes of this study.

One area of neglect has occurred in studying donors and donor behaviors in an agrofood context, as no targeted donor studies have been conducted for agrofood organizations. To ensure persistence and growth within the nonprofit agrofood sector, a full understanding of the available donor base is necessary. This ensures organizations can be specific, efficient, and successful in their recruiting and fundraising efforts. Out of prospective donor groups for the agrofood portion of the third sector, Generation Z is emerging as a potentially powerful philanthropic force. Generation Z, defined as individuals born from 1997 to the present (Parker & Igielnik, 2020), are just reaching adulthood and acquiring resources to give to philanthropic causes. However, there is a lack of research focusing on the perspective of this generation as donors, especially in the realm of agrofood philanthropy.

Current research on Generation Z focuses on education, marketing strategies, technology use, and political perspectives (Iorgulescu, 2016; Parker & Igielnik, 2020; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Turner, 2015; Wood, 2013). Some researchers have noticed trends of emotional underdevelopment and lack of personal connection to others within the generation, attributing this to the cultural shifts towards digital landscapes (Tari, 2011; Twenge, 2017). Simultaneously, Generation Z is highly invested in justice and equity issues, with the same digital landscape fueling their passion (Parker & Igielnik, 2020; Taylor, 2019). While a few researchers find that Generation Z individuals hold strong individual identities (Barhate & Dirani, 2021), marketers have seemed to uncover the presence of collectivist tendencies, causing them to dub the generation “Philanthroteens” (Fromm, 2018). This leads more hopeful perspectives to posit that Generation Z is the next “Greatest Generation” (Masback, 2016).

Generation Z's philanthropic endeavors have remained largely untouched in formal research, apart from preliminary polling. The CASSANDRA report (2015) found that 26% of Generation Z self-reports having participated in fundraising for a cause, and a substantial 49% report volunteering at least once a month. Blackbaud (2018) found that Generation Z are similarly concerned as prior generations with the efficacy and efficiency of their donations, but they prioritize more giving to organizations engaging in activism. They are also more spontaneous in their giving habits and are less concerned with planning regular donations than older generations (Blackbaud, 2018), yet more frugal in their overall spending (Hanbury, 2019). Blackbaud (2018) also notes that Generation Z, more than any generational cohort, values recognition for their giving, which may relate to the fact that this generation overwhelmingly uses the internet to engage in their philanthropic endeavors (Blackbaud, 2018). Finally, there is evidence that Generation Z perceives the ability to engage in philanthropy as a goal to be pursued, since 39% cite it as a measure of success (CASSANDRA, 2015).

Blackbaud (2018) claims that Generation Z will take decades to become a major influence in the world of philanthropy. When one considers that Generation Z only contributes 2% of overall financial giving in the U.S., this claim is plausible (Blackbaud, 2018). However, there is also evidence that Generation Z already holds significant economic sway, considering their relative youth, to the tune of \$143 billion as of 2018 (Barkley, 2018). Still, finances are only a single part of philanthropy, and Generation Z's

passion for activism, combined with their impressive internet presence (Parker & Igielnik, 2020), hints that they may also be major players in the realms of volunteerism and advocacy.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore the upcoming generation of donors to ascertain their attitudes and perspectives regarding agrofood philanthropy. To engage them as philanthropists effectively, it is necessary to determine how they define philanthropy, what motivates them to give, how they have already participated in philanthropic efforts, and their intentions toward future philanthropy. The central research question that guided this study was: what are the experiences of individuals in Generation Z within the United States related to philanthropic efforts within agrofood systems? Additionally, the following sub research questions guided this study:

1. How does Generation Z describe philanthropy within agrofood systems?
2. What motivates Generation Z to participate in philanthropy within agrofood systems?
3. How does Generation Z currently engage with philanthropy within agrofood systems?
4. What are the future philanthropic intentions of Generation Z within agrofood systems?

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

For the purposes of this research, Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958) and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) have been utilized as guiding theoretical frameworks, as they offer complementary explanations for the behaviors of individuals within larger social contexts. Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958) has a substantial precedent of use in analyzing philanthropic behaviors and giving, but supposes humans are primarily individualistic in nature. In light of Generation Z's highly group-oriented yet diverse psychographics (Parker & Igielnik, 2020), Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) has also been integrated, as it accounts for the fact that Generation Z views themselves as components within a complex social whole, and that this self-perception will necessarily inform their philanthropic behavior.

#### **Social Exchange Theory**

George Homans (1958) proposed Social Exchange Theory as the most basic explanation for an individual's motivations in any given social interaction, positing that their actions will always be prompted by the benefits (tangible or intangible) that they receive from others in return for those actions. People subconsciously participate in cost-benefit analyses when considering interactions with others, choosing the option that yields the highest return for their investment (Homans, 1958). Other researchers expanded his theory to other domains. For example, while Homans (1958) was focused on the actions of individuals within dyads, Blau (1964) and Emerson (1962) used Homan's (1958) framework to explain power dynamics among groups within larger societies, proposing that groups are engaging in the same reciprocal interactions with each other as individuals (Cook et al., 2013).

Initially, philanthropy seems to deny the basis of Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958), as donors give to those who cannot reciprocate. However, Blau (1964) argues philanthropic behaviors are a still form of social exchange, as donors give with the expectation of receiving approval from others outside of the philanthropic scenario. Later research confirms donors tend to expect something in return for their gift, whether it be prestige, gratitude, a tax break, promotion of deeply-held values, or simply a continuing positive relationship with the person requesting the donation (Bekkers, 2010; Deutsch & Lamberti, 1986; Sargeant & Woodcliffe, 2007; Shapiro, 1975). In the end, the principles of Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958) are almost universally present in philanthropy.

#### **Social Identity Theory**

Social Identity Theory was developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979) to offer a more complete explanation than existing theories provided of intergroup conflict as the result of individual motivations, proposing that people create groups as a taxonomical means of making sense of society as well as

conceptualizing their identity in relation to others. The theory's premise is that the conceptualization of self is a continuum between one's individuality and one's group belonging (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The individual end consists of one's personal identity, while the group end consists of one's social identity, which they define as "those aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself belonging" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 70). In their theory, a person's behavior in each social interaction will depend upon which part of their identity is most salient in that moment, their social or personal (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). People are always seeking to create a positive self-image, so interactions when the social identity is salient are undertaken to develop or maintain its positive status (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This is achieved by favorable comparisons of themselves to other members of their group, or by perceiving superior differences between themselves and members of other groups. If these comparisons yield a negative social identity for an individual, they will either leave their present group for another group they perceive to be better or strive to improve the status of their present group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

While Tajfel and Turner (1979) were originally focused on describing the phenomenon of inter-group conflict, their theory was useful in explaining other social behaviors (Abrams & Hogg, 1990), including philanthropy. An expansive body of multi-disciplinary research has shown that group affiliation heavily influences prosocial actions, namely that people are more likely to empathize with the struggles of and give to those with whom they share a group identity (Drezner, 2013; Flippen et al., 1996; Small, 2011; Stürmer et al., 2007; Vaes et al., 2002). Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains this investment into one's group as an action to increase its positive comparison with other groups and therefore one's positive social identity.

### **Integration of Frameworks**

The theories of Social Exchange (Homans, 1958) and Social Identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) guided the exploration of Generation Z's motivations for philanthropic actions and offered insight into their definitions of philanthropy and their choices of where and how to engage in philanthropy. This required investigation of each individual's group affiliations and how they perceived the groups towards which their philanthropic actions were oriented. It was beneficial to structure interviews in a way that allowed us to determine which end of the identity continuum was more salient – personal or social- when individuals were engaging in philanthropic actions. Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958) was useful in explaining actions undertaken when the personal identity was salient, while Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) was useful in explaining actions undertaken when social identity was salient.

### **Methods**

I used a phenomenological qualitative research design to guide my exploration of Generation Z's perceptions of philanthropy within agrofood systems. Since philanthropy is an abstract phenomenon that exists as the explicit intentions guiding prosocial actions, any study of philanthropic behavior within a group must focus on their lived experiences of the phenomenon as it manifests within and through them. The systematic yet tailorable nature of Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenological method allowed me to draw out the essence of Generation Z's philanthropic experiences in the agrofood context by gathering their articulated experiences, identifying significant statements, extracting the meanings behind the statements, and compiling rich textual and structural descriptions of the themes found in the meanings.

### **Epistemological Lens and Positionality Statement**

Since the primary tool of phenomenological research is the researcher themselves, it is vital to the integrity of the results for the researcher to self-reflect and identify the aspects of themselves that may tinge their interactions with the data, intentionally setting those aspects aside during the research process. This process is described by Moustakas (1994) as *epoche* and by Creswell (2013) as *bracketing*. Readers can then see for themselves those aspects of the researcher that may influence the data and determine themselves

whether or not those aspects bled through to color the research (Creswell, 2013). In the following paragraphs I will share the aspects of myself that I explored and bracketed for the study, concluding with an explanation of the philosophical presuppositions that guided the research.

Regarding my identity, I am myself a member of Generation Z. Some of my most salient group identities include my religion (evangelical Christian), my gender identity (woman), my home community (Northern Arizonan), my place of employment (The University of Arizona) and my family (defies description). However, I fall strongly on the personal side of the identity continuum. My actions are often taken as an individual, although I recognize that my identity is merely the distinct intersection of my myriad group identities. Regarding my experiences, I made it my intention many years ago to pursue a career in agricultural development with the hope of working within a nonprofit or non-governmental organization to create lasting change in global communities. This goal was developed in part due to my past involvement in philanthropic ventures through the National FFA Organization. Currently, I participate in philanthropy as a volunteer for a nonprofit agrofood organization.

In terms of my worldview, I will be approaching the study with a constructivist lens, which acknowledges that reality itself is actually made up of the myriad realities experienced by individuals (Crotty, 1998). Constructivism posits that any comprehensive grasp of the world is reached through exploring and synthesizing these various experiences, aligning with the goals and presuppositions of the phenomenological method (Creswell, 2013). In my attempt to discern the true nature of philanthropy as expressed by Generation Z in an agrofood context, I will be co-constructing my understanding alongside those who have also experienced its manifestation. The final essence will be an amalgam of multiple diverse, yet equally valid, distinct realities.

### **Participants**

To fully address the research question, it was determined that Generation Z individuals that have engaged in philanthropy within agrofood organizations in the United States should be the target participant pool. To frame this pool, 55 third-sector agrofood organizations from six Western states were contacted and asked to send their donors and volunteers a preliminary survey to identify potential study participants. Agrofood organizations were categorized as 501c(3) agricultural, food-focused, or rural-serving entities in their missions. For participants, inclusion criteria consisted of a birthdate between 1997 and 2003 and a history of giving time or money to an agrofood organization. Out of the respondents to the preliminary survey, 15 were selected to be participants that met the inclusion criteria. This does not quite meet the study size recommendation of 25 offered by Polkinghorne (1989) for quality phenomenological research, but sufficient saturation in data was reached to yield cohesive findings. A participation incentive of a \$15 gift certificate was offered to all participants who completed the interview.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Each participant engaged in a single, one-on-one, semi-structured interview with the researcher, with interviews occurring between January and March of 2022. This interview style best fits the purposes of a phenomenology, since the researcher guided participants via open-ended questioning in a full and rich expression of their experiences that offered a complete picture of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The interview questions were designed to both put participants at ease and activate their memories of engaging in philanthropy. In selecting the questions, emphasis was placed on deriving the participants' perceptions of themselves, their activities, and organization they were serving before, after, and during their philanthropic engagement. An example interview question was: "When you think about your future, what do you want your future donation behavior to look like (if you plan on continuing to donate at all)?" The interviews, each lasting between 30-60 minutes, were administered using Zoom video conferencing software, allowing verbatim transcripts to be recorded from each conversation.

The data collected from each interview were analyzed using the data management tool NVivo 12

and following Moustakas's (1994) methodology. After all of the interviews were conducted, they were horizontalized to pinpoint significant statements. Meaning units were attached to these statements, first inductively to allow divergent ideas to arise, then deductively informed by the framework theories of Social Exchange (Homans, 1958) and Social Identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The meanings were clustered into four overall themes, with nine subthemes. These themes were then recounted in textual and structural descriptions that drew out the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Trustworthiness**

The integrity of this study rests upon the foundation of a few key precautions, one being the deliberate bracketing of my perspective and experiences as the researcher, outlined in my positionality statement. I also incorporated the notion of rigor as described by Tracy (2010), being as careful and complete in the collection and organization of data as I could, ending with the presentation of the data in as full complexity and richness as possible, using participant quotes to ensure their voices were clearly heard. I memoed throughout the research process to check for inherent bias (Creswell, 2013). Finally, I engaged in the confirmation of my results through member-checking as suggested by Moustakas (1994).

### **Findings**

Analysis of the data allowed several themes to emerge in the form of statements participants would share about themselves: "I'm not sure what it means to be a philanthropist", "I am both a giver and a receiver", "I am here to invest in the Other", and "My future is one of service". Theme 1 offered insight into Generation Z's perception of philanthropy, while Theme 2 painted a picture of what their donations looked like in practice. Theme 3 expanded on the previous theme to flesh out the impetus behind participant giving. Theme 4 is the synthesis of participants' philanthropic plans, providing a snapshot of how the generation views their future. Throughout each interview, participants discussed a deep underlying desire for connection, which crosscut all themes, culminating in the essence of the phenomenon.

#### **I'm Not Sure What It Means to Be a Philanthropist**

One of the major themes to arise from the data related to the overall conceptualization of the word philanthropy. Participants spent substantial time exploring their relationship with the word and how it was utilized, leading to a disjointed vision of what it meant to be a philanthropist. The biggest items of contention were articulating the definition of philanthropy and determining whether or not they self-identified as philanthropists, applying thresholds to articulate both ideas. Their hesitations and struggles with semantics are possibly linked with their level of maturity and grasp of the language. However, they may also indicate participants' more complex relationships with individualistic American culture and how it has previously chosen to define the same words.

#### ***Uncertainty Over Verbalizing a Definition of Philanthropy***

Many participants experienced intense indecision over the word philanthropy when asked to define it. The uncertainty came across verbally, but it was also demonstrated through non-verbal cues such as long pauses, head tilting, frowning, and even embarrassed laughter. Participants often did not encounter the term in daily life, expressing that they had a sense of its meaning but not a clear enough conceptualization to provide a personal definition. Annie shared, "It's one of those words where I know I've heard it, and I kind of feel like I know, I should know, what it means, but I don't entirely know what it means."

In contrast, participants who answered without hesitation offered expansive and idealistic explanations. Some emphasized their belief in its universal nature, with Tamara saying, "I describe philanthropy as giving back in any way, in any capacity, that you're able to." Others focused on its impact, noting that it was contributing to the "common good of humanity". Several participants insisted that "true" philanthropy must stem from pure motives. But the term that came up, again and again, was "giving back," demonstrating their conviction that giving emerges from gratitude due to a position of privilege.

### ***Utilizing Thresholds to Describe Philanthropy***

When considering the definitions of both philanthropy and philanthropists, participants continually returned to the idea of thresholds. They differentiated philanthropy and philanthropists from other types of giving and givers by establishing a level to be achieved. Sometimes this level was just the sheer amount of time or money given. A couple of participants specifically stated that money was the only resource that could be linked to philanthropy. Others expressed it as a career or life dedication to a cause. Still others noted that a level of authority or influence within a given organization should be reached before claiming the title of philanthropist. Beth utilized an analogy to justify her threshold concept, "I can go play catch. But that doesn't make me a softball player, it just makes me playing catch. But I guess I would consider somebody a philanthropist if they're doing continuous work of helping other people."

When asked to name individuals who met the philanthropist threshold, some participants named famous figures such as the Gates family or John Green. However, a large ratio named personal connections as philanthropists. These ranged from family members to friends or to actors within organizations in which they served. Some even applied the term to entire career sectors, such as teachers. Indeed, they were much more generous in applying the label to other people (usually personal connections) than to themselves, hinting at a strong group identification.

### ***Hesitancy to Claim the Title of Philanthropist***

There was an overwhelming sense of hesitation to self-identify as a philanthropist. Many participants gave definitions of philanthropy that fit their descriptions of their own activities but still balked at the idea that they themselves were philanthropists. Even those that ended up acknowledging that they could (not necessarily would) call themselves philanthropists saw it as a novel consideration that required careful processing before acceptance.

The concept of thresholds was the most common reason why participants hesitated to refer to themselves as philanthropists. They felt they had not done enough to earn the title. A few felt it would be immodest or "braggy" to take the label. Julia said, "It just feels like a little bit of a snooty label to put on it when it's more like, I just enjoy community service." Alison expressed distaste for the title, as its connotations with power and privilege conflicted with other values she held, saying "...I have an association with philanthropy as this sort of hierarchical thing where there is some sort of entitlement that enables the giving."

This definitional contradiction was present in the reasoning of many participants. They desired to reframe philanthropy to be more expansive and inclusive, yet narrowed the definition down again as soon as they applied it to themselves. Kellie initially defined philanthropy as "any act that gives back to others," but later said, "I would feel weird calling myself a philanthropist." It hints at the participants' simultaneous desires to fit into culturally-agreed norms and to completely reshape them.

### ***I am Both a Giver and a Receiver***

When participants shared what their philanthropic experiences looked like in action, a theme arose that balanced their internal tension between giving and receiving in the experience. Participants focused on what they contributed to the organization as an overflow of their own abundance, and what the organization in turn contributed to the community, utilizing the term "giving back." However, they also described the reciprocal nature of their donation and what they personally received from the experience, leading to a dynamic interplay throughout the conversation of both identities as the giver and recipient of gifts.

### ***A Focus on "Giving Back"***

During interviews, one phrase that continuously surfaced from participants was "giving back." This concept was linked both to the definition of philanthropy and the motivations underlying donation.

Participants felt they possessed excess resources to such an extent that they held an obligation to turn around and give it to others. Gratitude in some form was a strong motivator for much of the participants' giving, either general thankfulness for having an abundance or personal appreciation from having directly benefitted from the organization as a recipient. Linda, who fell into the latter category, stated, "It's kind of what you were given. I'm going to give this back to as many people as I can. Because obviously it changed me as a person, it helped me, and maybe it'll help someone else."

What "giving back" looked like varied widely among participants, depending most upon the nature of the organization in which they served. For organizations such as community gardens or farmers markets, participants most often contributed time through manual labor such as weeding. Other organizations such as food banks or youth organizations saw participants engaging directly with recipients of the services offered. Usually the service was low in skill level, and participants tended to be at the bottom of the hierarchy of the organizations (with the exception of a few that worked up the ranks over time). However, participants did not seem to perceive this as a negative reflection on themselves, acknowledging the usefulness of whatever role they held, no matter how small. Annie shared her perspective on engaging with Pine Market, "I've seen them do it without volunteers, and it's a lot of running around. So they can do it, but it's just that little bit of extra help or another familiar face that people can come up to." Finally, participants overwhelmingly gave back by donating their time, with the few that donated money only giving a few dollars to the organization and volunteering.

### ***Reciprocity as a Positive Factor in Donation***

Despite an overall commitment to purity of intention, participants freely noted all that they personally received in return from their giving. Many found belonging, becoming integrated into a larger community. Others came away from their experiences with expanded perspectives and a sense of personal growth. Almost everyone mentioned receiving positive emotions such as "enjoyment," "having fun," or "feeling good." The reciprocal nature of the participants' giving did not seem to taint the purity of the gift itself in their eyes. Althea summarized, "Philanthropy is something that people do out of the goodness and kindness of their hearts, but sometimes they do receive gifts right back for doing that."

Along with the "goodness and kindness" explanation, the expressed motivations for giving from participants often presented a complex combination of factors. Value alignment, personal investment in the cause, and gratitude were all major inputs. However, more pragmatic influences such as career preparation, social integration, and the promise of novel experiences were also present. Bob's description of his intentions for giving outlined the multi-faceted nature of motivation, "It aligned with my career path and my own personal interest in something that I know I would enjoy too. So yes, giving back to others, but also something I enjoyed that would help me in my future career." The frank acknowledgment of multiple motives showed that participants' idealism combined easily with practical considerations, a synthesis they seemed quite comfortable embodying.

### ***I am Here to Invest in the Other***

One central repeating idea across interviews was investing in others, which is linked closely to donation motivations. Participants were focused on relationships and connections to others, primarily individual others. They shaped their identities around this focus, linking their extent of self-actualization to the extent of their investment in others. This focus on the Other also shaped their values, leading participants to devote themselves to causes they felt had positive impacts on other human beings within the agrofood sector.

### ***Defining Identity as Other-Oriented***

When asked to describe themselves and their identities, participants listed the conventional responses expected from the question: hometown, school, family, career aspirations, and hobbies. However, a few descriptors arose that indicated a deep orientation towards the Other within the group. Many felt that

their relationships with other people defined them, and prided themselves on how well they formed and maintained those relationships. Christie embodied this perspective, sharing “So kind of my relationships to people and that part of my identity is really important. I think that's something I definitely prioritize.”

The focus on the Other was also demonstrated in a commitment to service. Participants grounded themselves in their desire to make the world a better place, and expressed assurance of their ability as individuals to effect positive change. The individual empowerment to contribute to the group was a persistent attitude across interviews. Bob stated, “I'm always trying to be a positive force in every environment that I'm in and be helpful.” This conviction of personal efficacy in service of the Other highlighted the tension between individualistic thinking and collectivist motivation that many interviews presented.

### ***Donation as a Means of Supporting a Cause***

Participants also expressed commitment to particular causes and values. Community building, food security, environmental sustainability, and agricultural literacy were all common causes bound by values of connection and equity. Value alignment was a motive for some to volunteer with a particular organization, and a major influence on their overall donation experience. Christie observed about her organization, “I was passionate about what they were doing, I think it's- I don't have a lot of time. So it's important to me that I use it for something that I am passionate about and I see benefiting people.”

These causes and values aligned with the Other-oriented perspective many participants explicitly expressed as part of their identity. There was underlying conviction that these causes were essential for the common good of humanity, and that devotion to the cause would make a positive impact on others. This rendered even the smallest contribution to an organization influential in the eyes of participants. With remarkable lucidity, most were able to trace their individual donation to the organization's overall impact. Althea shared, “Donating ensures that this, this organization, and the mission stays alive.” The perception of meaningful impact on the organization or community, however indirect, seemed to be a vital component of the overwhelmingly positive experiences participants shared.

### ***My Future is One of Service***

As a whole, participants were quite hopeful about their personal futures related to philanthropic efforts. Most were planning to continue volunteering, viewing service as an opportunity to fully integrate into their communities. Some tied it into their career path, seeing donation as a means of increasing both their impact and connections. Several participants involved their future spouses and children in their plans, seeing donation as a means of developing the values they wish to perpetuate in their families. However, the financial element of philanthropy was present in their responses, with many participants hoping to donate money in the future and continue to contribute their time.

### ***Future Service as Embedding into Society***

Overall, participants were eager to continue volunteering into the future, both as a means of living out their value of service and connecting to their future communities. Kellie said, “In the future, I plan on continuing to make those connections and being involved in the community in any way that I possibly can.” Many participants envisioned this volunteering as a regular investment into a local organization. Christie shared, “I would find an organization that I really like and a group I don't know. Something I'm really passionate about and would be able to go on a regular basis.”

However, several participants also held aspirations of using their future career to serve their communities. This again aligned with Other-oriented identities as well as the values being expressed through current modes of giving. A career devoted to a cause they were passionate about would allow them to live out their identities fully. This would take some participants over the threshold they set for the label philanthropist. Beth noted, “I want my career to focus on helping other people in any way I can, whether it's just helping them learn as a teacher or helping them believe in themselves. I mean, that's the goal, to be

a philanthropist.”

The perception of future service as a means of societal integration came full circle with the dream of building a family. Nearly half of the participants connected their future donation plans to their future spouses and/or children, perceiving giving as a value necessary to pass on to future generations. Christie shared, “It's to me like I want to teach. Like kids that I might have in the future the importance of volunteering and giving back because we're so fortunate.” Beth specifically saw giving as a means of strengthening familial bonds. She shared, “Donation provides connection, and connection to your family and friends is as important as connection to other people. So I think as you value more people, you can value your family more.” She went on to add she desired to make giving, “a family environment.” Such plans indicate how deeply participants held the value of giving, making it part of their shared and individual identities.

### ***Plans to Increase Financial Giving***

Participants wished to continue volunteering into the future, as much as time allowed. However, many participants also expressed a corresponding desire to increase their financial giving as well. Robin said, “Hopefully I'm in a financially stable place so I can donate to causes that I feel passionate about.” Participants that shared these plans clearly expected their financial independence to only increase with time and didn't express concern for their financial future, although neither did they share hopes of wealth.

The desire to increase financial giving wasn't clearly explained, although it seemed in part to be driven by the sense of money providing a different, though perhaps not necessarily greater, value than time. Participants fully recognized their volunteering as important, and many felt it to be a more enriching experience than simply giving money. As Julia shared, “If I were just donating money, I feel like I wouldn't be as involved.” However, she went on to acknowledge that a gift of money could help an organization in more diverse ways, saying, “But whereas with the money, I think you can create a lot more change.” Bob crystalized the comparison of time and money:

I think just because so much can be done with money that can't be done with time? Yes, a bunch of my time can help organizations save money and stuff like that. But there's just some stuff that money does for them...When you get to just give them [food banks] a bunch of cans of SpaghettiOs, yeah, it's helpful, but it's not really what they want. But with financial donations, they can buy exactly what they need for whatever community that they're in. They're not just at the whim of what people give them.

Such an explanation links finances to freedom. Participants with excess wealth could give an organization more than just support, but could offer freedom for it to expand.

### ***Extracting the Essence: Deep Desire for Connection***

Despite the various perceptions, motivations, and intentions at play among the group of participants, the essence of the phenomenon shone forth as an underlying meta-narrative of utilizing philanthropy to develop connection to a greater community. The definition of community seemed to be fluid from participant to participant. Some perceived the organizations themselves to be distinct communities, others saw their cities as communities. A few saw a particular demographic as a community, while others included general humanity in their definition. Regardless of what community meant to participants, they demonstrated a drive to integrate into community and forge a deep connection.

The desire for connection arose first in how participants perceived themselves. Many felt their ability to connect to others to be an integral part of their identities. Beth shared, “I think what comes to mind is like being a learner and a connector, I really value connection.” Some defined themselves by their familial or group affiliations. Christie stated, “That's what I prioritize and being like a good friend and the daughter and a good, just kind of community member. I think that's what I identify with very strongly.” The theme of Other-orientation demonstrated strong group associations, and the drive to build those groups (or

communities, however they should be defined). Overall, despite the highly personalized narratives participants had for their own experiences, they seemed to land more often on the group end of the personality continuum.

Connection motivated several donations, with participants seeing their volunteering to allow them to integrate more fully into their existing community or social network. Some saw the donation as a connection point to their future communities, through career preparation. A significant portion of participants donated through the influence of family, friends, or mentors, showing again the drive to maintain existing connections. This drive was influential in Julia's case, as she elaborated, "It's way more interesting and fun in that decision-making process to do it with someone. So you can enjoy it together and feel that you're giving back to your community together instead of just forcing yourself to go alone."

Most participants noted belonging and community to be benefits of giving, even if they had not necessarily been primary motivators. The organization itself was often the central connection point, with Julia stating, "I honestly probably describe it as a community unto itself." Some even made lifelong friends through their donations. The perception of the organizations as places of connection fueled a sense of trust and devotion in participants that urged them to maintain ties with the organizations, even after moving, as in Althea's case. She shared, "It's a genuine support around economically supporting your neighbors and your local community, but also just strengthening that social relationship and trust because especially since lockdown, I feel like communities don't necessarily feel connected right now."

The pursuit of connection fueled the future plans of most participants, whether it be connection to the future community, connection to similar organizations, or connection to their future families. Participants ultimately wanted to belong to something greater than themselves, and not just as passive members. They wanted to actively contribute and build the communities they joined. Lacy summarized the idea, "For me, it all goes back to community. I see my future as being, wherever I am, as being an active community member who cares about all those who exist within that community through direct service and volunteer opportunities."

Overall, the distillation of the phenomenon of Generation Z's agrofood philanthropy can be expressed as follows. This particular part of the generation values others, not just as other actors to negotiate with, but as fellow group members to be uplifted. This value sparks a drive for connection that moves the participants to invest in the causes they believe will provide this connection. Many found it in the process of donation, fueling a continued passion for giving that will make them lifelong contributors to either the organizations or the cause.

## Discussion

Within the context of the current literature, the findings of this study provide support of what we already know about Generation Z. They are indeed very cause-oriented, devoting themselves to the pursuit of justice and equity on behalf of the Other, traits that have been apparent since early study (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Participants devoted their energy to organizations that they saw fulfilling these values, showing the intense cause commitment revealed by initial studies (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Their descriptions of their service confirmed Blackburn's (2018) finding that there is an emphasis on volunteering as opposed to financial giving, while their expression of their plans for future philanthropy supported CASSANDRA's (2015) initial proposition that Generation Z wants to increase financial giving in the future. However, this study also found that participants wished to continue volunteering in the future as well.

The organizational loyalty shown by participants stemmed from trust in the organizations themselves, aligning with international research on the generation conducted in the realms of marketing, news media, and job seeking. Those seeking to engage Generation Z as consumers have found that the

group is drawn to relational and authentic brands (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Kirnosova, 2021). In terms of news, this desire for authenticity also holds true. Myers (2018) notes that the group is extremely choosy in their media consumption, stating, "Generation Z has the strongest 'BS' filter of any generation." A meta-analysis by Barhate and Dirani (2021) shows that Generation Z's career aspirations involve working for organizations that align with their values, allowing them to achieve self-actualization through their jobs. This commitment to trustworthy organizations carries over to the realm of service, showing that a commitment to authenticity can be defined as a core value of the generation beyond their roles as consumers, voters, or employees.

The essence of the phenomenon illustrates within Generation Z a desire for connection to others, to a greater community, and to a cause beyond themselves, hinting that agrofood philanthropic engagement provided that connection for many participants. This speaks to the conflicting literatures concerning the generation's relational health. Due to their unprecedented online engagement, some have claimed Generation Z is indeed successful in filling its need for connection, touting the group as a highly connected and socially integrated generation (Fromm & Read, 2018; Masback, 2016). However, other literature claims that this generation has become notorious for its apparent lack of genuine connection in comparison to past generations (Tari, 2011; Twenge, 2017). The essence of the phenomenon shows that the particular group studied was mostly effective in fulfilling its drive to connect through service, with many participants establishing fully genuine relationships with individuals and organizations beyond online engagement, against Blackbaud's (2018) prediction that their philanthropy would live online. This difference may be due to the agrofood component of their giving, since engagement in this sector deals with tangible resources and often requires manual physical labor.

When comparing the data with the theoretical frameworks guiding the study, it seems that both Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958) and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provide corresponding explanations for an interesting phenomenon. Participants presented both ends of the identity continuum at different points throughout the conversation, identifying as highly individualistic yet actively embedding themselves into social groups. When asked to identify themselves, most participants appeared to consciously land on the personal end of the identity continuum, and some even explicitly stated their individuality. However, the way in which they talked about themselves was highly group-oriented, with many referencing their families, hometowns, clubs, and schools when explaining their identity. Several identified specifically as Other-oriented, showing highly collectivist tendencies. Such a paradox between personal and group identity orientation has been observed in the generation by other researchers. Barhate and Dirani (2021) note that Generation Z employees highly value relationships with coworkers but are self-reliant when it comes to actual productivity.

When discussing whether they would take the label of philanthropist, personal identity became highly salient. The title was generally considered a positive thing, a symbol of status or goodness received in exchange for engaging in philanthropy (defined by a particular threshold). Some participants accepted the title as an acceptable exchange for their giving, while others felt the exchange was inequitable and refused the title. Regardless, the overall hesitancy showed the focus on fair exchange that aligns with Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958).

In terms of motivation for giving, identity salience seemed to be linked to whatever motivation was primary. A couple participants were seeking skill development and career preparation in return for their giving, aligning more closely with Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958). It should be noted that the traditional motivation social exchange researchers often see present in philanthropy—recognition for giving—was missing from this participant group, despite Blackbaud's claim that it is a primary motivator for Generation Z donors (Blackbaud, 2018). Other participants were seeking to provide for others or integrate more fully within a community, demonstrating more group-oriented behavior that aligns with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The drive for social connection could be argued to land on

either side of the continuum, since social connection is directly beneficial to the recipient and does not inherently advance the group. However, it hints at an underlying drive for group integration that surfaces again in the essence of the phenomenon.

Participants' drive to invest in the Other seemed linked to both personal and group identity, pointing back to the individual-collective paradox. Many identified as connectors or friends, showing that their conceptualization of self was inherently linked to the quality of their interactions within their groups. Interestingly enough, the Other was not always conceptualized as a group, but was rather expressed as an individual. However, the Other was generally still considered to be part of their group, whether it was a peer or a fellow community member. The causes participants chose to support were also other-oriented, focusing on groups perceived to be in need. Participants identified with the groups in need on various levels, sometimes connecting on a personal level, community level, or simply on the basis of humanity. This broad perspective of which individuals can be counted as group members points to the highly diverse and inclusive tendencies already expressed by Generation Z (Parker & Igielnik, 2020).

Participants' plans to give in the future aligned with more group-oriented thinking, as their intentions were means of embedding into society as contributing members, with several even expressing a desire to use their careers to serve. The idea of promoting the family unit through service was the most explicit revelation of group-focused thinking. Other research has noted that Generation Z is already planning ahead for families through seeking financial independence (Barna, 2018). Adding philanthropy to family planning demonstrates the deep conviction that service would effectively promote the overall group to which participants belonged. This hints that philanthropy for participants is seen a tool for group promotion, a notion promoted by Social Exchange Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The essence of the phenomenon reveals the overall collectivist mindset of participants, as it demonstrated their desire to experience belonging by becoming fully embedded within a greater group. Giving through service was a means of fulfilling that desire, allowing participants to embed themselves in groups they identified strongly with in terms of values. The loyalty expressed by participants to the groups they found, often the agrofood organizations themselves, demonstrates a devotion to the groups that would remain despite any personal loss or inconvenience it posed.

However, it must be acknowledged that the drive to connect to agrofood organizations often was led by some expectation of reciprocity. Participants sought connection ultimately to a community that would support them in self-actualization, allowing them to align with their personal values. They identified so strongly with the groups because they felt the groups invested in them. Lifelong friendships were formed, skills were built, experiences were gained. This inexorable entanglement of group promotion and individual reciprocity demonstrates the necessity to incorporate both Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958) and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) when examining this generation as a donor base.

### **Recommendations**

This study's insights have particular limitations that further research could be instrumental in addressing. The most notable is the gender imbalance of participants; the overrepresentation of women could conceivably skew the nature of the responses. It must also be acknowledged that this particular group's characteristics are not necessarily indicative of all Generation Z. Mannheim (1952) noted that no generation is homogenous, and that each generation is best understood divided into subgroups. The agrofood component of the study could also be considered a limiting factor, since the agrofood nature of the organizations appeared to have little impact on participants outside of how well they perceived it to align with their values. It would be interesting to see how this study's findings would map onto, say, the sector of medical philanthropy. Further studies on Generation Z's philanthropic engagement that balance gender perspectives, identify potential subgroups, and explore other philanthropic sectors would all provide

fuller, richer perspectives on the phenomenon.

In terms of industry practice, this study does provide a few insights for agrofood organizations seeking to recruit Generation Z donors. Generation Z's focus on connection requires deep investment into them as donors, and a willingness to fully integrate them into the organization as partners. Providing social opportunities and a community for them to join will ensure donor persistence and may even encourage them to bring others into the organization. It is also important that they understand the role of the organization in the community, allowing them to see the impact it has on the people it serves. They also wish to develop trust in the organization, making it vital to demonstrate full transparency and integrity. Articulating the impact the organization has on issues of justice and equity is vital, as those are the values and causes Generation Z is invested in. A robust online presence will also be beneficial in reaching Gen Z from a recruitment standpoint since many find volunteer opportunities online. As several participants were interested in making a career out of their service, it would be beneficial to target recruitment from schools and university programs in the same disciplinary field as the organization. These strategies will allow not just the recruitment, but the cultivation of the upcoming donor base, allowing Gen Z to fulfill their need for connection in a meaningful and impactful way.

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