Strategic Positioning in UK Charities that Provide Public Services: Implications of a New Integrating Model

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This article explores the implications of a proposed model that integrates the multi-dimensional factors influencing strategic positioning in charities that provide public services. It argues that the existing commercial marketing/strategy interpretations of strategic positioning, such as positioning motives, strategic positioning process and the marketing role in positioning, have limitations when applied to non-profit organizations, such as charities.

This article explores the implications of a new model of strategic positioning developed by the authors for charities* operating in the public service arena. Strategic positioning, as a management planning and marketing tool, has been widely practised in private sector organizations since the 1960s (Chew, 2003). In contrast, charities have only recently begun to recognize the relevance of positioning as a means of differentiating themselves in an increasingly competitive operating environment (Bruce, 2005; Chew, 2006a,b). While there have been initiatives by the UK government to improve the skills, infrastructure and performance of such organizations in public service delivery, there is an urgent need for a good model to help charity managers understand and develop their organization's strategic positions.

The public policy context and wider operating environment in which UK charities operate have become increasingly competitive and challenging in the new millennium (for example Seddon, 2007). Within this changing environment, many charities experience low public awareness levels in the service sectors that they operate. Relevant target audiences often recognize the 'cause', but not the specific charity delivering these services (Bruce, 2005). This makes it harder for charities to differentiate themselves from other organizations offering similar services.

This article presents a model that integrates the multi-dimensional factors influencing the process of strategic positioning and the choice of positioning strategies that charities adopt. While strategic positioning, as a management tool, is increasingly advocated for non-profit and charitable organizations, much of the conceptual depictions of positioning and strategy development for these organizations are similar to those prescribed for private sector ones. Our model is the first attempt to depict the various influences on strategic positioning for charities.

This article begins with a review of the existing literature and an explanation of the research methodology. We then present our model and, finally, consider its implications for charity management.

Strategic Positioning and the Charitable Context

The academic literature reveals a variety of definitions for strategic positioning as it relates to both private sector and non-profit organizations (for example Lovelock and Weinberg, 1989; Andreasen and Kotler, 2003). However, there is no single universally accepted definition of this concept (Kalafatis *et al.*, 2000). This article defines strategic positioning for charities as 'a managerial decision-process to develop an organization-level positioning strategy that aims to effectively differentiate the organization from other service providers'

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*Charities are those voluntary and non-profit organizations in the UK that meet the strict conditions required for charity registration as defined by the Charity Commission for England and Wales. Charities must be established for charitable purposes and for 'public benefit' in accordance with the Charities Act 2006. There were over 189,000 registered charities in the UK at the end of 2006 and an average of 7,000 new charities have been registered each year with the Charity Commission since the mid 1990s (Charity Commission, 2006).

(Chew, 2005, p. 4). Positioning at the organizational level is distinct from, but provides direction for, positioning at the operational (for example product or brand) levels (Hooley *et al.*, 1998a; Fill, 2002). The process of strategic positioning helps to create a distinct 'locus' of the organization and its offerings in the marketplace (Kotler, 1994). The outcome of that process is a positioning strategy, which is the means through which the organization differentiates itself from other organizations offering similar services. The aim is to find a 'fit' between organizational strengths and external opportunities (Johnson *et al.*, 2006).

Strategic positioning is increasingly used in charity management (Hudson, 2002; NCVO, 2004a,b), but the basic theoretical underpinnings have been derived from the study of private sector organizations. Andreasen *et al.* (2005), among others, argue that sectoral differences are potential barriers to transferring marketing concepts in their entirety, including strategic positioning, to charities.

There is an important distinction between the process of developing a positioning strategy in the marketing and strategic management literatures. From a marketing perspective, a positioning strategy is the result of the strategic marketing planning process for charities (for example Andreasen and Kotler, 2003). This aligns organizational goals, internal resource capabilities and external market opportunities (Lovelock *et al.*, 1996; Hooley *et al.*, 1998a; 2001). However, from a strategic management perspective, a positioning strategy is an outcome of a review of the charity's external environmental trends and internal organizational capabilities (Hudson, 2002). The strategic intent for positioning by private sector organizations is often viewed as focusing on adversarial motives and, in particular, to strive for a leadership position by winning over rival providers (Hamel and Prahalad, 1989). However, there is currently a lack of research into understanding the strategic intent for positioning in charities and our model addresses this gap.

Methodology
Our model draws on a three-year study (2004 to 2006) into the positioning activities of British General Welfare and Social Care [GWSC]*

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*We use the Charities Aid Foundation's (2003) classification of general welfare and social care [GWSC] charities, which are categorized as: other general welfare, children, benevolent funds, elderly care, service/ex-service and religious general welfare.

charities that provide public services. We chose this sector because it contains a high proportion of charities engaged in delivering public services in the UK. Because of the paucity of research on this topic, an inductive methodology was adopted in the study. An initial conceptual framework of the factors that could influence the strategic positioning of charities was shaped from a detailed review of the existing literature. This early conceptualization was based on insights from three theoretical perspectives on strategic development/positioning in organizations:

• Competitive forces and market orientation perspective (Porter, 1980, 1985; Hooley *et al.*, 1998a; 2001).
• Resource-based view (Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991; Amit and Schoemaker, 1993; Peteraf, 1993).
• Stakeholder theory and resource-dependence perspective (Clarkson, 1995; Mitchell *et al.*, 1997).

The second stage of our study utilized an exploratory postal survey to map the extent of strategic positioning activities, and the factors that influenced it, in a sample of 95 GWSC charities. The charities were contrasting in terms of their organizational features, histories, type of service provided, and funding mix. Analytic comparison of emerging themes across the cases unveiled similarities and variances in the influencing factors. It depicts factors that were common in both the survey and case studies, but also allowed for other contingent factors to be explained. The use of a multi-methodology approach at different stages of our research provided both data and methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1978) and aimed to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings (Blaikie, 2006). The model developed subsequently was grounded in these empirical results.

An essential starting point in explaining our model is to identify the components of a positioning strategy in charities. Three major inter-related components of this are suggested by our research: the generic or core strategy, the key target audience[s], and the choice of positioning dimensions through which the charity seeks to distinguish itself in support of its core strategy. We found in our case studies that a strong organizational level position created or supported certain core values in the charities. This organizational level strategic position was translated into a distinctive range of services/offerings by the charity and its unique

relationship with other stakeholders (such as users/beneficiaries, donors, and statutory funders). It also serves as a framework for communicating the charity's key strengths and distinctive competencies as manifested in its fundraising and advocacy campaigns. A positioning strategy therefore provides the vehicle through which the charity's desired strategic position is communicated to its external and internal audiences (Chew, 2006a). This model is presented in figure 1.

Key Implications of the Integrating Model
This section explains four elements of our model and their relevance for charities providing public services.

External and Internal Influencing Factors
Our model suggests that a complex combination of external and internal factors interact to influence the strategic positioning in charities. Our findings support the assertion made by other researchers (for example Henderson and Mitchell, 1997; Fahy, 2000), that no one particular perspective can adequately explain all influences on strategy development and choices. Hooley *et al.* (1998a, 2001) suggest that both the competitive industry/market orientation and resource-based perspectives offer important insights into the development of a positioning strategy. The marketing perspective argues that if strategy becomes too embedded in the internal resources of an organization alone, it runs the risk of

Figure 1. Integrating model of factors influencing positioning strategy.
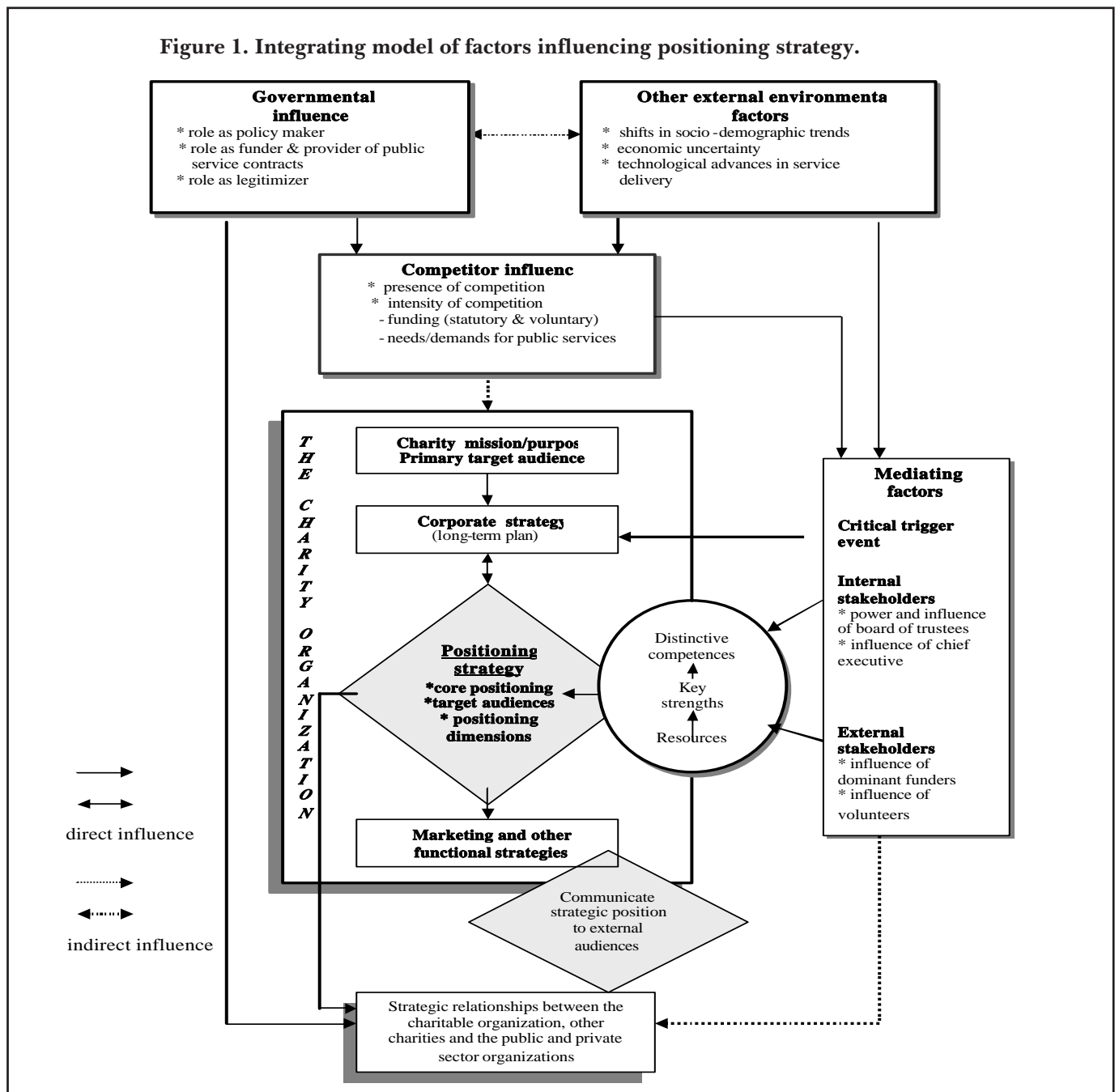
ignoring the demands arising from changing turbulent markets and external environments. On the other hand, the resource-based view argues that marketing strategies are not likely to be effective if they do not exploit the organization's resource endowments and capabilities.

These two perspectives enable us to differentiate between external and internal influences on strategic positioning in charities. A third perspective—the stakeholder/resource dependence perspective—explains other influencing factors. Certain external and internal stakeholders can impose their influence on the charity's strategic direction, and consequently its position, in different ways. For instance, we found that influential internal stakeholders, such as the arrival of a new chairman or chief executive, can trigger a change in the charity's positioning activities or in initiating the process of positioning itself:

> Before our current chairman came on board, there was a lack of structure, lack of process and lack of accountability in the charity. He brought a more professional approach to running our business and redefined our strategic position (head of public relations, children's charity).

A dominant external stakeholder, such as local or central government funding agency, could influence the type of positioning dimensions it uses to differentiate itself from other charities providing similar services. Positioning dimensions are developed based on the organization's key strengths and available resources. The effect of resource dependency on influential external stakeholders could result in the charity developing distinctive capabilities, such as strong organizational culture, expertise in a particular service, or management skills, which are more difficult to imitate (Amit and Schoemaker, 1993; Hall, 1993; Fahy, 2000), as illustrated by the quotation below:

> A high dependency on government contracts and funding may be a major weakness if our organization provides a narrow range of services. But we have developed a versatile range of services in the treatment of drug and alcohol misuse, and our expertise to clients has provided a degree of credibility and legitimacy for our work (branch service manager, drug treatment charity).

Distinctiveness of the Theoretical Model
Second, our model depicts specific factors that we consider to be unique to the charitable context, such as the charity's mission, governmental influences and mediating stakeholders. We argue

that the variations in this context compared to those depicted in the for-profit marketing/strategy literature stem from three fundamentally distinct issues: positioning goals, the process of strategic positioning, and the role of marketing in this process.

Positioning Goals: The motivation for charities engaged in strategic positioning activities was found to be multiple in our research compared to the often singular purpose of gaining competitive advantage attributed to private sector organizations. The marketing literature (for example Lovelock and Weinberg, 1989) suggests that a positioning strategy is a key outcome of the marketing planning process in a charitable organization. This assertion is based on the premise that positioning is used for competitive reasons, as in the commercial marketing literature (for example Hooley *et al.*, 2001). However, we found that charities adopt a particular positioning strategy due to a combination of competitive and co-operative/collaborative motives.

Although there are many different schools of thought on the notion of charitable organizations adopting competitive strategies (for example Courtney, 2002; Bruce, 2005; Pepin, 2006; Williams, 2006), this study found little evidence to suggest that positioning strategies in charities were created or pursued for purely competitive motives. We recognize that it may indeed be difficult to achieve either extremes of a perfectly competitive or truly collaborative strategy. But we argue that in relation to strategic positioning there is a tendency for charities to accentuate co-operative/collaborative motives because of their ingrained, values-driven mission for existence and their legal obligation to maintain their charitable purpose as dictated by UK charity laws:

> Increase in competition from other charities for non-government funding won't be a major influence on our strategic position or mission. If someone out there is able to offer their services better than we can, we are not going to be out of the drug treatment service, we're still going to want to provide that service because of our mission (head of fundraising, drug treatment charity).

The above comment highlights the general perception about charities' fundamental purpose for existence—that is, to exist for their 'cause'. They have adapted to changing environmental conditions, which included positioning themselves in niches to avoid competition or by co-operating with other parties, even would-be competitors in pursuit of their mission. But,

crucially, the central mission of the charity remains a constant.

Interestingly, we also found that charities co-operate with other organizations that are considered their competitors in pursuit of their mission or strategic expansion:

> We are in direct competition with two other non-profit organizations…Despite this, at the corporate level, we have a co-operative partnership with them, for example agreement for them to provide volunteer beach lifeguards on busy weekends and during holidays under our umbrella (lifeguard, sea rescue charity).

Pepin (2006) argues that the particular institutional and policy contexts of British charitable organizations warrant a more co-operative/collaborative strategic approach in working with other organizations in voluntary, public and private sectors. The heterogeneity of potential influences from multiple stakeholders on these organizations would thus preclude their adopting generic competitive strategies, as in the for-profit sector.

Developing a Positioning Strategy: The process of developing an organizational level positioning strategy in charities is more likely to be embedded in their corporate strategy planning system than in the marketing planning process, as suggested in the marketing literature.

The strategic positioning process in charities in our study was also not always a deliberate or pre-planned one, rather, it was a response to external environmental influences and internal organizational change. Such an emergent strategy stimulated organizational learning and paved the way for a more conscious approach to strategy development at a later organizational stage. In larger and more established charities, there were extended periods of learning from experimentation and past experiences in their positioning activities (Brodtrick, 1998). In relatively younger charities, though, this process evolved quite unconsciously—mainly in response to the rapidly changing external environment. This reflects Behn's (1988) concept of innovation by 'groping along', where the organization avoided detailed planning processes but encouraged adaptation and adjustment to their strategic positions over time. Both emergent and deliberate strategies were thus capable of becoming realized ones for the charities in our study:

> There is an emerging process of strategy planning—where there were processes in place previously;

some worked, some did not. The organization learned as it grew and improved on those that worked, and removed those that did not. Management techniques changed as the organization grew and staff changed. That forces some changes on the process of planning and positioning as well. Now, the planning processes are being strengthened; taking the best and putting them together (corporate planning manager, sea rescue charity).

Marketing: Marketing often played a supporting rather than a leading role in the charities' strategic positioning activities, mainly in communicating their positions to the various target audiences to include in our study. The academic literature for charities portrays marketing, in contrast, as playing a dominant role in the strategic positioning process (for example Andreasen and Kotler, 2003). Our charities had begun to develop dedicated marketing functions, but this role appeared to be an operational one in the strategic positioning process—communicating the positioning messages once these were defined by the senior management team and board of trustees:

> Marketing has positive contributions to the changes in the organization, especially in developing consistent external communications, re-branding and fundraising. But these can be better, for example we need to be clearer about the role of marketing for the organization. We need to clarify how marketing links throughout the organization. Also, we need to do more in marketing to our internal audiences about our corporate and strategic plans and how to deliver these well (development director, drug treatment charity).

Mediating Factors

The direct influence of external environmental factors on the charity's strategic position is mediated by the decisions/actions of influential internal stakeholders, such as the board of trustees or the chief executive, and external stakeholders on which it depends for critical resources, such as dominant funders or volunteers. Another mediating influence may come from critical events, such as a sudden change in organizational leadership or an unexpected decline in financial resources. Such factors could trigger a review of the charity's distinctive competences and key strengths and initiate changes to its strategic positioning. The process of identifying and solidifying the charity's strategic position may therefore not always be formalized in the organization until a key decision-maker or a dramatic event triggers that urgency.

Mission

A charity's mission plays a crucial role in the organization's strategic positioning because it acts as both a 'positioning differentiator' and a primary influence on the choice of its positioning strategy. Despite contrasting histories and features, the charities in our study all developed a strong sense of mission, vision and core values, which were communicated to external and internal audiences. These provided the key direction for the development of their strategic positions.

Other research has suggested that a fundamental challenge for charities compared to private sector organizations is the tension between mission and the needs/demands of external stakeholders—and in particular the external stakeholders on which they depend for resources (for example Leat, 1995; Hudson, 2002). In contrast, our study suggests that the primary target stakeholder for positioning by charities is the service user or beneficiary. Donors and funders were considered secondary stakeholders in their strategic positioning activities.

NCVO (2004b) cautions all voluntary organizations that deliver public services that they risk mission drift in their search for funding. It argues that, while they have a wide range of stakeholders, the user/beneficiary should be the most important one driving their work and not the funder or government agency that provides contracts for delivery of public services. While we acknowledge this concern, we found little evidence of such mission drift. The charities we studied have maintained their strategic positions, which were guided by their missions, despite making structural, operational and resource changes over time.

The charity leaders and managers were acutely aware of the potential threats of embarking on strategies that strayed from their mission and strategic position:

> *Our new five-year corporate plan reinforced the organization's core positioning and was done to ensure that the organization, its people and resources are focused in that direction and not straying too much into government funding and services* (grants manager, regional grant-making charity).

Therefore, providing that charities were strongly wedded to their core mission, they could embark on a broad search for funding. They have maintained their focus on serving their key target audience by developing strengths and distinctive competences that are unique to their organization. They had to, however, be flexible in implementing internal operational changes in pursuance of their mission—such as building new or strengthening well-established collaborative links with organizations in other sectors to support their strategic position over time.

Conclusions

This article presents a model that is shaped from empirical evidence from charities and which integrates the various factors that influence strategic positioning in them. It offers fresh insights into these factors by drawing on multi-dimensional theoretical perspectives to explain their significance. While the model and our findings are based on evidence from the UK, both have international relevance. Charity managers could benefit from a better understanding of the particular context within which various factors could influence their organization's strategic positioning and we have drawn out the implications of these findings for such managers.

The components of a positioning strategy can be influenced by a complex combination of organizational , environmental and mediation factors that are unique to the charity context. Variations in these factors in the charity context compared to commercial organizations stem from three distinct differences: positioning goals, the process of strategic positioning, and the role of marketing in strategic positioning. These differences underscore the dangers of uncritically transferring generic marketing/management approaches to the charitable context. We have four key conclusions:

• A combination of perspectives and influencing factors is needed to accommodate the unique context of strategic positioning for charities in practice. Our study has revealed the inadequacy of existing theoretical models and conceptual frameworks. More research is needed to develop management approaches and governance models that are more applicable to charitable organizations.
• A complex combination of collaborative/co-operative and competitive motives underpins strategic positioning in charities. These motives are moulded by the charity's mission, which can enable or constrain strategic choices. In order to avoid mission drift, charity managers need to adopt a strategic position for their organization that best reflects its mission, enables it to effectively differentiate the organization from other

charities, while at the same time deliver a degree of openness to learning from the external environment and from its own experiences.

- The profound changes taking place in the UK public policy context may offer charitable organizations potential opportunities to play a much bigger role in delivering public services for government (NCVO, 2005). This role, according to McLaughlin (2004), could pose a threat to their distinctiveness competencies. An attention to strategic positioning by charities can help them rise to this difficult challenge.

- Little evidence of mission drift was found in the charities that we studied nor was there evidence that their independence to make strategic choices had been eroded. But we recognize that tensions persist in charities in balancing the often conflicting demands from various stakeholders, such as funders and uses/beneficiaries. Blackmore (2004) argues that the crucial issue in this debate is about how charities are able to manage strategic relationships with the various stakeholders, including government funders. While there have been proposals to strengthen the 'Compact' (NCVO, 2005) governing formal relations between the government and voluntary and charitable organizations in both policy design and public service delivery, more needs to be done to enforce this at ground level (NCVO, 2007). These developments have reinforced the importance of embarking on strategic positioning by charities in a way that preserves their charitable values and independence, while enabling them to build strategic relationships between public and private sector organizations in pursuance of their mission (Osborne and McLaughlin, 2002; Chew and Osborne, 2007).

In conclusion, we offer two important caveats about our proposed model. First, we have identified positioning at the organizational level in charities. This is distinct from, but provides direction for, positioning at the operational level. Second, the influencing factors suggested in our model have been generalized from our empirical research. There could be other influencing factors, however, under specific circumstances and our model might not include all factors. Future research is therefore needed to validate the model and its constituents for charities in other organizational and sectoral contexts. ∎

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