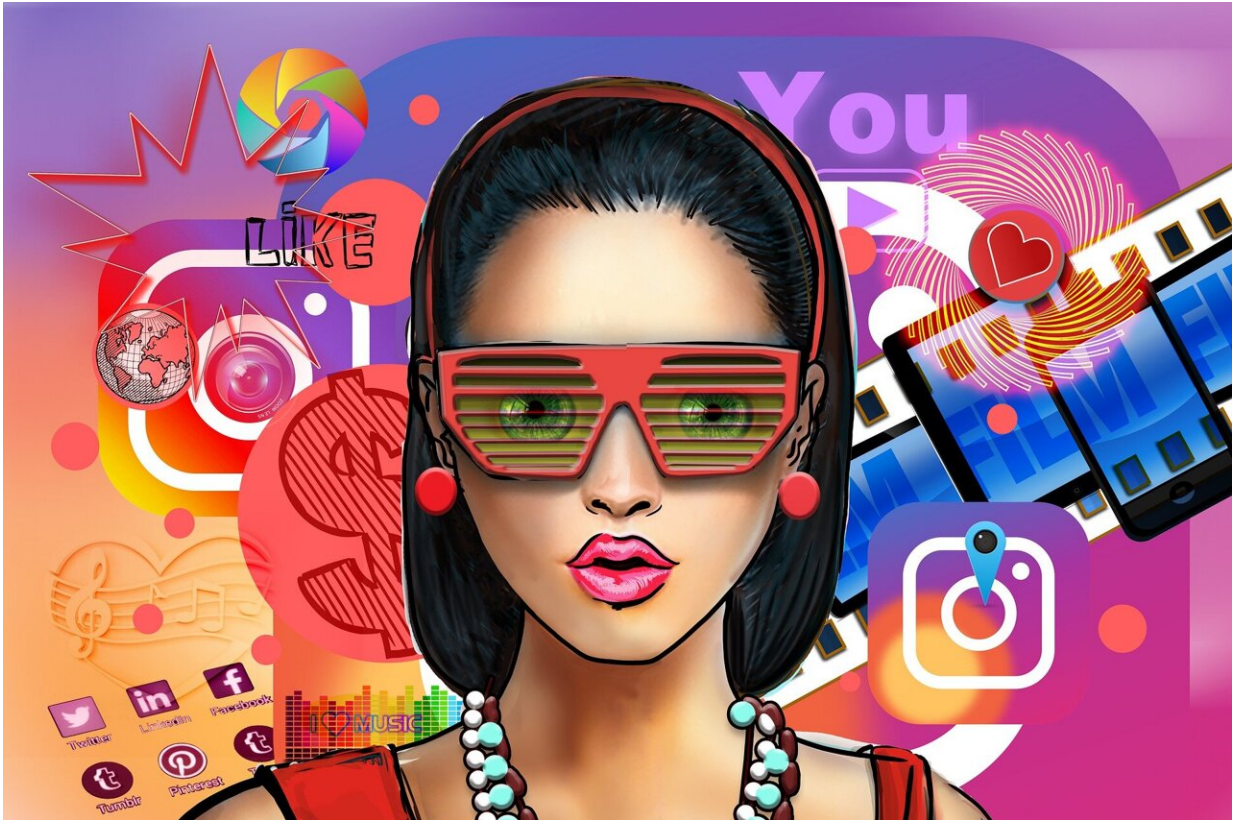# How to harness social influence for good

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Thanks to TikTok, Twitter, Instagram et al, we are living in the age of social influence. But how can influence be harnessed to make the world a better place?

Yun Young Hur, assistant professor of information systems at George

Mason University School of Business, explores that question in a recently published paper in *Information Systems Research* with co-authors Fujie Jin of Indiana University, Xitong Li of HEC Paris, Yuan Cheng of Tsinghua University, and Yu Jeffrey Hu of Georgia Institute of Technology.

They launched a randomized controlled trial (RCT) with a medical crowdfunding platform in China, similar to GoFundMe in the U.S. except that it works entirely through link-sharing on social networks. In order to view a case and donate, users must click on links from their social media timeline or direct messages.

The RCT, which took place over four days in December 2017, was simple. Platform users were split into control and treatment groups. The control group viewed fundraising cases as they normally appeared on the platform, while the treatment group viewed cases as normal with an added sentence explaining that the friend from whom they'd received the link had donated money to the campaign. The final data-set included more than 750,000 pageviews on nearly 16,000 cases.

Overall, Hur and her co-authors found that the extra sentence increased the likelihood of donation by 16 percent. This would seem to be a clear-cut case for social influence as a mighty motivator of altruism.

However, the researchers reasoned that lumping together the entire data-set did not account for qualitative differences. After all, not all cases for funding have equal power to persuade on their own. In a separate online survey, the researchers discovered that cases involving children, severe disease, and lack of health insurance would be most compelling to potential donors. Returning to the RCT data, Hur and her colleagues found that for cases with at least one of these three attributes, the effect of social influence disappeared.

What does all this mean? Hur says that for medical crowdfunding and other charitable ventures, the decision to contribute "is highly informational, not based on herd mentality. We can't rely on 'your friend did it, so you should do it too'. Consumers want to make decisions based on actual information."

Hur also says that her research could help influencers and fundraising professionals apply their skills where they can do the most good. She suggests that social influence is best used as an equalizer that can draw much-needed attention to cases that don't obviously cry out for support. For example, the plight of an older, chronically ailing adult on Medicare would not tick any of the three boxes from Hur's survey. Yet they may be no less desperate and deserving of help than someone who does.

"Not everyone is a number-one marketer, not everyone has an interesting story to tell, but the lack of a good narrative doesn't mean there is no desperation," Hur says. "The addition of social endorsement information can help these cases get noticed and supported. That's something I consider a bigger takeaway from this study."

In addition, Hur says that her study was intended to open new pathways for future research into social influence. Most studies on the topic have focused on relational questions such as who the influencer and influenced are to one another, where they respectively stand within a social network, etc. Few, if any, studies have looked at how social influence stacks up against other sources of information, such as the characteristics of medical crowdfunding cases.

Further research in this vein could be highly relevant to the online world, where social influence often plays a key role in regulating the flow of information.

 More information: Yun Young Hur et al, Does Social Influence

Provided by George Mason University