Analyzing the Narratives of Support Across the Sector:
Comparing Storytelling Practices Between Stakeholders

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Abstract

Storytelling is an essential component of non-profit stakeholder engagement. It is through stories that donors and volunteers feel connected to the mission of an organization and become motivated to get involved. As illustrated by this research through expert interviews and a literature review, storytelling is an important tool in marketing but there is no consensus or awareness of how it is being deployed across audience groups. The research methods of this project sought to discover whether there were specific themes used in both donor and volunteer web page content across the sector as well as if there was more time spent developing stories (word count) across both stakeholder groups. The collected data and analysis revealed that volunteers receive half the word count and therefore have less developed narratives compared to their donor counterparts. This gestures to is a prioritization of donors over volunteers. Another significant finding is that there are distinct themes in the messaging of non-profits unique to each stakeholder group. This suggests a sophisticated approach towards storytelling in which the motivations of each group are deeply considered before developing a narrative. It is essential to consider the implications of these findings due to the fact that it could increase stakeholder engagement. Specifically, the problematic nature of having a hierarchy in stakeholder support. These findings illustrate a great effort on the part of non-profits to develop their capacity as storytellers and increase their reach in the communities they operate in. Despite this, there could be more done in the storytelling practices that would be more effective and impactful. This research concludes with recommendations such as deploying more skilled storytelling tools, such as a greater consideration for the varying motivations of philanthropy, and also the use of the 20 master plots guide as a way to create more compelling stories.

Keywords: Volunteer, Donor, Engagement, Marketing, Storytelling
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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figures</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>8-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 2: Literature Review</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Familiarity</td>
<td>11-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>12-13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Action</td>
<td>13-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deployment of Non-Profit Storytelling</td>
<td>14-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Master Plots</td>
<td>15-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 3: Methods and Approaches</td>
<td>18-26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error! Bookmark not defined.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 4: Data Analysis</td>
<td>26-31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 5: Implications and Recommendations</td>
<td>Error! Bookmark not defined.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>Section 6:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error! Bookmark not defined.</td>
<td>34-35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of References</td>
<td>36-38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error! Bookmark not defined.</td>
<td>Author’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bio</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**List of Tables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1</td>
<td>20 Master Plots</td>
<td>16/17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2</td>
<td>Interview Questions</td>
<td>18/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3</td>
<td>Across Sector Word Counts for Volunteer and Donor Web Page Content</td>
<td>26/27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4</td>
<td>Donor Word Count Compared to Volunteer Word Count</td>
<td>27/28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5</td>
<td>Volunteer Themes Across the Sector</td>
<td>28/29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6</td>
<td>Donor Themes Across the Sector</td>
<td>29/30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7</td>
<td>7 Faces of Philanthropy</td>
<td>32/33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Figure 1: Unicef Donor Storytelling Example page 9
Figure 2: The Children's Network Volunteer Storytelling Example page 10
Figure 3: Narrative Framework page 15
Figure 4: 7 Faces of Philanthropy Giving Breakdown page 33-34
Section 1: Introduction

“Story, as it turns out, was crucial to our evolution -- more so than opposable thumbs. Opposable thumbs let us hang on; stories tell us what to hang on to.” (Lisa Cron). This quote illustrates how profoundly we are shaped by the stories we tell. Our actions are made and justified by choosing the better narrative that suits our understanding of our place in the world. Stories fuel us, they give us something to strive for. We hear stories of someone’s success, and we want to be a part of their narrative. We hear of someone’s struggle and we want to change the perceived outcome. Whatever the story, we are deeply moved to action through them.

Storytelling has been an essential part of our growth as humans and as a society. It is a key instrument for transmitting lessons about every aspect of our lives from our rich history on this planet to deep questions about morality. Stories come to shape our very personhood. It is how we make sense of the world, ourselves and what the relationship between both those things are. It is a way of learning about the world around us. It is how we come to leave our narrow world view in search for a greater appreciation of all the varying life experiences on this planet. When we hear a story our world view is forever changed and impacted. We are challenged to realize that we do not know everything. There is always a great deal more to learn in the narratives woven into the fabric of another’s experience.

Stories are profound because they have the ability to evoke emotions. They make us feel seen and understood in a world that can be unforgiving. We must understand the dynamic of reciprocity that comes with both hearing a story and telling one. Both are extremely cathartic experiences when we search for connection among our peers. It is an active act where through which individuals can relate. We can share both our profound happiness and our deepest sorrow through this malleable medium in the hopes of expressing what someone else can relate to. When people cannot relate to a situation described in a narrative, then an effective story prompts empathy. Stories have the unique ability to put us into someone’s shoes, it allows us to experience someone else’s perspective so that we might learn and see the world in a new light. Without these tales we would not be able to grow into the empathetic, curious, and challenging people we are today.

Stories are often powerful enough to compel action from listeners. When we hear about a great circumstance, we want to get involved. When we hear of a troubling issue, we also want to get involved. Stories propel us forward to act because they leave us asking our role in the situation. Will we be a hero or will our passivity cast us as part of the problem, the villain? This dynamic is why storytelling in organizations like non-profits, is vitally important in motivating people to show their support in whatever capacity they can, whether that be as a donor or volunteer. If you ask most people, it is hearing the stories of how much impact an organization has had on the world that inspires people to give time and money in support. The way in which non-profits address stakeholders should be critically assessed to ensure that the sector is
deploying storytelling in a way that makes a meaningful connection with these stakeholder groups. It is important to continue developing donor and volunteer messaging so that the sector knows how to best expand its reach to each stakeholder type. Storytelling plays a critical role in how to better involve donors and volunteers in this mission driven sector. They inspire and motivate us to work towards a better future for all.

**Figure 1: UNICEF Donor Storytelling Example**

Friend, I’ll never forget the day my life was first touched by war.

I was 12 years old and on the way to a talent show when I learned from people covered in blood-stained clothes, carrying their children’s lifeless bodies, that our village in Sierra Leone had been attacked by rebels.

My family was killed in the war, and I ended up in a military camp, enlisted as a soldier. It was over two years later — and after I’d grown to shoot someone as routinely as drinking a glass of water — that I was finally rescued. With the help of UNICEF, I’ve been able to help other former child soldiers.

But I’m writing to you today because the situation is dire — and getting worse — in many places, with thousands of children living the nightmare that I survived.

Friend, UNICEF is working to raise $50,000 to help children in crisis. Every gift will be matched, dollar for dollar, until midnight Sunday. **Will you donate now to give these children a chance at childhood?**

The above image is an example of how UNICEF, an organization dedicated to helping children refugees, uses storytelling as a tool to motivate their stakeholders, in this case donors, to make a contribution. UNICEF’s narrative paints a gruesome picture of a sad and difficult life. The story is effective in illustrating how the organization fulfilled its mission. They were able to
get an individual child out of a terrible situation of being a child soldier. While this is considered a success, the tone of the story is serious because it asks us to consider the stories not yet told and those that have been told and not yet won. Those children who are still experiencing this harsh reality and require immediate help. An effective story for non-profit organizations invites us into the plot. We are asked to make a donation to help children in crisis. We are given a choice, in action and the story continues down a sad heart wrenching road or action and we make a difference in the lives of children experiencing this trauma. This is an extremely effective form of storytelling. It is compelling and immediately engages the reader.

**Figure 2: The Children’s Network Volunteer Storytelling Example**

The always smiling Stacey Smith is The Children’s Network receptionist. Stacey works full-time for the nonprofit and during her free time she volunteers at our fundraising events. Since starting in her position in 2016, Stacey has logged over 500 volunteer hours.

We’re not finished! Stacey is also the brainchild behind the new Lunchtime Virtual Reading Program which pairs volunteers with children for free online reading lessons.

Thank you, Stacey, for your hard work and commitment to our community!

The Children’s Network
The image above is an example of storytelling in which the volunteer stakeholder group is being targeted. This image is distinctive from Figure 1 because Figure 2 is attempting to solicit volunteer engagement. I will critically assess the variance between narratives across the sector and between these two stakeholder groups further into my research. What is of note here is that they are no longer articulating impact as I were in the previous donor storytelling example but rather the organization is crafting a narrative about the type of character of volunteers. Nonprofits promote her commitment, her positivity and her hard-working nature. Storytelling here is more used as an indication of who she is in the community.

The differences between storytelling in both stakeholder groups are emerging and will be discussed further in the data analysis and implications section. While there might be differences, it is essential to stress that storytelling is effectively used to engage stakeholders. It invites them to get involved and is being used by all organizations to reach their impact.

**Section 2: Literature Review**

A comprehensive literature review of academic sources was conducted to determine the relevance of stories in developing a culture of support within non-profit organizations. Particular attention was paid to sources that articulated how narrative tools are deployed to incite a positive reaction among the general public that leads to meaningful action. Before understanding how non-profits strategically use storytelling in their search for support, we must first understand how narratives function as a familiar medium with recognizable patterns, the impact of storytelling on morality, the impact of storytelling on our emotions and lastly what this means for the sector. This background research will be able to color our understanding of the vital role of storytelling in the non-profit sector. It will also familiarize us with the necessary understanding of how stories are developed. This will aid in allowing us to see where there are gaps in the sectors use of stories and how best we can remedy these issues so as to better engage our communities.

**Narrative Familiarity**

Since our birth, stories have been used to teach us about our role in the world. “Sharing stories connects us to one another. When we convey both information and our personal experiences through storytelling, our listeners begin to connect what they hear to their own lives” (Down, 2014). Storytelling is a way of relating to the world and understanding your place in it. It is a means of expanding your understanding past what you are exposed to in your own life. With
each story, our understanding of narrative and plot devices grow while also expanding our view of the world. “Knowledge is located in a web of narratives” (Von Krogh et al., 2000). Through stories we learn about the complex network of experiences that create society as a whole. Storytelling is ancient but still functions largely in the same way as it did in the past; that is, evoking patterns and archetypes that are recognizable to convey a message about the world we live in. The literature review revealed that there are 5 elements to every story:

1. Characters
2. Setting
3. Conflict
4. Plot
5. Theme

These are the recognizable codes, which is information expressed in an indirect way, that our brains search for in every story and it is what makes them effective in getting across an impression. “Telling a compelling story involves creating convincing characters, using enticing and enthralling plotlines and understanding one’s audience. Stories resonate with audiences because they have narrative fidelity, generate points of identification, and have recognizable story structure: a beginning, middle and end.” (Kent, 2015). This narrative framework ensures that the story is effective in reaching its audience and conveying a message. These patterns are reiterated through our lifetime. From our friends telling us what they did last Friday night to religious texts, there is a structure that is followed by storytellers that make them effective.

When used effectively, narrative patterns have the ability to create a meaningful impact on your intended audience. By noticing how the story script changes depending on the audiences of support we will be able to analyze what is the most effective strategy for engagement. It is vital for anyone trying to reach a specific population through storytelling to tap into the patterns and codes which position the listener to be more receptive to the message. “Storytelling uses language powerfully to evoke the perceived patterns of the world of appearance” (Heron 1992). This quote suggests that by recognizing the patterns within the story, the reader’s mind is trained to search for the relationship this tale has to their own lives. Who the hero is, what the conflict or struggle is and how can the protagonist triumph is a simple example of a narrative pattern that has deep implications in the world of non-profits for reaching their audience. Our minds have been conditioned to follow these codes and if used effectively these codes can bring a reader to take action.

**Emotion**

Stories are not only compelling because of their recognizable structure, but they also havethe ability to evoke emotion making a compelling force towards action. We as people seek to reach positive emotions and distance ourselves from negative. It is a state of conditioning and is ingrained in our biological pleasure seeking makeup. “A story has an unbalanced state. This
reflects a problem or an obstacle to be overcome...this emotionally engages the consumer and makes them relate to the protagonist. Next, the story prompts the consumer to take some action to achieve goals and ease the tension created by the unbalanced state” (Woodside and Chebat, 2001). What this suggests is that stories deployed by non-profits often illustrate a problem that leaves the audience feeling uncomfortable with the state of the world. To offset this tension they are compelled to act and ease their feelings of guilt or complicity in the tale. Through donating, the individual feels as if they have contributed to the positive outcome offered by the non-profit. They can identify as being part of the solution, part of the happy ending they're searching for. Individuals are always seeking an equilibrium in their emotional states, feeling comfortable and at ease. This is a fact that is used by non-profits when they offer a form of action that will restore their pleasant emotional state.

While this imbalance is commonly discussed throughout the range of sources collected for this literature review, another driving emotion discussed heavily is empathy. Empathy is the state of being able to put yourself in someone’s shoes and understand the depth of their experience. “When people feel empathetic, they are likely to selflessly help someone in need” (Eisenberg and Miller 1987). Organizations that tap into this empathy evoked through their charitable materials are more likely to compel people to act. “The stories we tell and consume shape our behavior and our attitudes towards others. Stories force us to think critically about the lives of other people and build in us a sharpened sense of community, empathy, and compassion for people who are different from us” (Nussbaum 2010; Gottschall 2014). Stories are a medium that invite you into the reality of another. Stories are an excellent tool in conveying a sense of understanding of another individual’s plight. What is implied when you empathize with someone is participation. Now that the extent of their situation is known, the audience is invited to help ameliorate the issue at hand. Empathy creates an understanding of the situation and asks us to act in a way that leverages our privileged position to alleviate the struggle of another. By tapping into our empathetic nature non-profits have the ability to increase their reach in the communities they operate in. Not only are people more compelled to act and participate but their view of the world shifts. People are radically changed by empathy. Previous views on society shift to make room for the new lessons they’ve learned through the tale. It is a radically important emotion to evoke.

Moral Actions
In addition to serving as a catalyst for emotions, storytelling is also a way of teaching an audience about morality and ethics. From when we were young, stories taught us about appropriate behavior. The tales of good vs. evil plainly illustrate which values we should honor. Values such as honesty, integrity, justice, kindness have been reiterated in every fairy tale, every myth, and every parable. “Ethics, then, requires and is embedded in stories. We tell stories...about the way things relate in the world, the way the world itself is, such that this or that character or action is right or good” (Hopkins 2015). This quote highlights the importance
of stories in our moral development. Stories allow us to be put into situations and reflect upon the right course of action, the just course, the decision that will lead to the most ethical outcome. It is through this practice that stories allow us to the values that have shaped our morality. Some people value justice over everything and others compassion regardless of moral priorities, stories are a realm of imagination where we are asked to defend our beliefs. “Stories are about world practice, about actions and their contexts, whose agents, the characters of the narrative, are or become the persons they are by virtue of the fact that their actions reveal them as praiseworthy or blameworthy” (Hopkins 2015). This quote illustrates that through stories we practice scenarios and our actions in these contexts reveal our values, our code of ethics.

When we hear a non-profit story attempting to get some sort of reaction or action from the audience what we are being asked is to exercise our belief in our values. If I am to stand behind justice, how can I ignore the injustice that this non-profit is bringing to my attention? Non-profit storytelling is an appeal to morality and ethics through a familiar medium and structure which has been reiterated throughout our lives.

Deployment of Non-profit Storytelling

Storytelling is important because it is a recognizable format through narratives that we’ve grown up with and has been instrumental in our development. As explained earlier it also engages our emotional responses and our empathy while forcing us to stand up for the ethics and morality that we believe in. For these reasons and more, non-profits are engaged in storytelling. “Most non-profits, regardless of mission, are rich with compelling personal narratives that document their human impact, humanize their mission, and make tangible the work of staff members and clients. These narratives can be used for a range of rhetorical objectives, including recruiting clients and staff, demonstrating impact to funders, and motivating potential donors” (Dush 2017). Storytelling is a way for organizations to tap into elements such as narrative familiarity, emotions and ethics in a way that promotes meaningful action for the organization. Whether that prompted action is volunteering or donating or liking a Facebook post, storytelling is a powerful tool for stakeholder engagement. “The Center for Social Impact Communication, for example, reports that reading a story on social media was the primary motivator leading donors and volunteers to offline actions such as giving and volunteering. That is because stories offer organizations seeking social impact the opportunity to build bridges between their cause or mission and their audiences in a compelling, memorable and authentic way” (Dixon 2013). Stories make the operations of the organization meaningful to an audience. The audience is able to see the real-world impact of the non-profits actions and are motivated to get involved.

Figure 3: Narrative Framework
Theis infographic in Figure 3 is an established framework to follow in developing an impactful and engaging non-profit narrative. It begins with considering who the nonprofit is serving. These are the characters of the story that the audience will be asked to identify with. It is essential to establish this so that donors and volunteers know who they are attempting to help. Without a face to the cause, there is less of an emotional and empathetic connection made by the audience, prompting less engagement. It is therefore essential to have a narrative that is clear about who you are serving through the cause. Secondly, the nonprofit must establish a goal. These goals are what the hero of the story is striving for. This is the victory the protagonist, which can be the organization or the individual stakeholder, is embarking on to obtain. Thirdly we must identify the problem. This is central to any plot. What is the conflict that is preventing the organization from reaching its goal? Without a conflict, the story is not compelling enough to prompt action or change. Next, we must identify solutions, these are tangible ways the nonprofit addresses the problem. The solution is essential as it shows another way the story could end if we, lastly, insert a call to action. Arguably, the most important part of any non-profit narrative is the call to action. This is a message woven into the story in which the organization provides an opportunity for the stakeholders to take actions and make a difference. These five narrative steps are all needed to properly reach their audiences.
A subject that came up in my research was the 20 master plots. "The master plots described can be used to explain almost every story ever told, and most have existed for thousands of years" (Kent 2015). It is extremely helpful to understand narratives as reoccurring patterns in stories, should you want to properly deploy them. These plots are reoccurring archetypes that have been around for centuries with slight variations adapted to the specific context.

The master plots have embedded in them the moral values and emotional evocation that make stories effective while also obviously tapping into that narrative familiarity. It is the cornerstone of effective storytelling practices. Well-developed organizations with sophisticated marketing plans use these master plots to their advantage in expanding their reach and impact.

Table 1: 20 Master Plots
Table 1 is an outline of all 20 master plots with a brief summary of the plot in the next column. In my research into the literature on the 20 master plots, it was revealed that certain plots are much more common than others even though all 20 are frequently used. Organizations often deploy the Quest, the Rescue, and the Underdog in their efforts to engage their audiences. It will be interesting to see if and how many non-profits are engaging with the 20 master plots as it has been proven to be an effective tool and marketing strategy.

Section 3: Methods and Approaches
My research was developed using a mixed method approach in which various techniques were used to better ascertain an answer to the research questions leading my inquiry. These methods included primary data collection in the form of expert interviews and web content analysis.

Expert Interviews:

Three expert interviews were conducted with non-profit professionals focusing on storytelling within their organizations. It was important to conduct interviews with professionals in the field because they are on the ground working on stakeholder engagement and are able to provide more perspective in the story development that takes place at their organizations. They are all actively appreciating the importance of storytelling on their impact and recognize that it is essential for the success of their mission. Not only will what they know about the theme I am exploring be useful but also in speaking to them, their gaps in knowledge might lead me to explore areas I hadn’t previously considered. These interviews occurred over the phone and in person. They lasted thirty minutes each. Every interview was recorded with the permission of the interviewee so that an in-depth analysis and reflection after the interview could be performed. The primary form of communication in setting up the interview was email, though two out of three experts were contacted by referral made by colleagues.

In my talks with these sector leaders, I took a semi-structured interview approach. I had a set of questions to ask every individual, but I also delved into themes they would bring up that seemed pertinent to the topic based on my literature review. This provided me with the flexibility to explore ideas that I hadn’t already considered in my research. I asked two types of questions. The first category encompassed a field analysis. These were questions that established the current landscape around storytelling in the sector. The second type of questions reflected more directly my research into narratives of support (donor and volunteer) in the sector.

### Table 2: Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Field Analysis</td>
<td>Why is storytelling important?</td>
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<td>How does your non-profit promote the value of storytelling?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What are the ethical concerns of storytelling?
What makes storytelling a unique tool for non-profits

Research Based: Narratives of Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Based: Narratives of Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do your stories change when addressing volunteers vs. donors?</td>
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<td>How do stories contribute to development/community engagement efforts?</td>
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<td>Do you believe there are trends to storytelling in the sector?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The first individual interviewed was Cliff Mayotte, Education Director from Voice of Witness. This organization seeks to advance human rights by amplifying voices of those who have experienced injustice. The core belief of the organization is that storytelling is transformational and has the ability to make a real impact on our cultural understanding of the world. The non-profit gives individuals who have experienced trauma in their lives a platform for which they can share and express their thoughts. Voice of Witness believes that this is a symbiotic relationship between storyteller and listener. Both are necessary and in participating in the process, regardless of your role, you are connecting with people. Storytelling for Voice of Witness is all about sharing perspectives and making that connection so that people have a wider understanding of the social issues society at large faces, specifically human rights issues.

Cliff Mayotte was an excellent resource not only because his affiliated organization is a non-profit with a focus in the power of storytelling but also because he has a teaching background. Firstly, Mayotte spoke a significant amount on the power of empathy-based listening in communities that are traditionally marginalized. He described empathy as a methodology that all non-profits should adopt. “Empathy is an opportunity to celebrate what connects us as human beings while acknowledging our differences” (Mayotte, personal communication). This stress on empathy was a key theme that kept coming up in my literature review. Storytelling is firmly rooted in empathy and therefore has a transformative power to bring ethical issues to light through human connection.

Mayotte also stressed the ethics of storytelling. It is important to be asking who is telling the stories? Which stories are we prioritizing? Since many non-profits work with the stories of marginalized communities it is important that they approach the narrator with mutual respect, trust, and humility. When non-profits are seeking stories for their impact, they must remember to nurture and maintain the relationships they have with these communities if they are to
respect the narrative being shared. “Storytelling creates an opportunity for a more accurate depiction an issue. Personal narrative is a sacred space.” It was very apparent that respect for the storyteller should be the primary concern for any non-profit. There must be ethical considerations made when promoting storytelling in an organization.

When I asked Mayotte about the trends in the sector, he simply stated that he’s witnessed a move towards a more mindful approach by organizations when storytelling. It is less tokenistic and exploitative than it once was. Organizations are respecting the impact of storytelling and honoring the communities that share their personal narrative. Organizations are making a move from only trauma-based stories to more nuanced narratives. Voice of Witness, in particular, emphasizes stories that move from the trauma to present moment scope. This is an effort to share a full picture of the person. They are not just a victim and their story is not trauma porn.

Lastly, Cliff Mayotte elaborated on the volunteer vs. donor narratives and if storytelling shifted depending on the audience. What he shared was that code switching for different audiences was a common practice. To reach a particular goal with each audience you’ll emphasize certain things over others in your organization. It is essential that whatever message you’re putting out to stakeholders, reiterates the values of the organization. There must be intentionality in the vocabulary you choose. This preserves the authenticity and integrity of the organization.

The second person I had the pleasure of interviewing was Britany Bare, Executive Director of My Life My Stories. My Life My Stories is a non-profit focused on preserving the stories of the elderly and connecting the elderly to younger generations. Once again, this is a non-profit that has storytelling at its center of its mission for creating powerful connections across age, race, and gender. The elderly are a vulnerable population. It is important as a society to treasure the knowledge and wisdom they have and their stories are a record of our progress as a culture.

Bare was very helpful in developing ideas around our ethical obligations as people to remember the stories of older generations. “They have lessons they’ve learned to share so that we don’t make the same mistakes they did. They are an amazing resource which can help guide future generations”. Stories connect us across barriers such as age. They give us a sense of humanities common problems and an eras unique differences. It paints a picture of where we were, where we are now and where we are going. Britany believes that stories the elderly have to share are profoundly powerful in connecting us with the various stages of human life. Empathy is a critical force for this. When one connects to the struggle of another person, we become their advocate and champion their quality of life. This action is precisely why non-profits evoke storytelling. There is a need to see meaningful action that will benefit the organization’s community.
“Storytelling is an act for the elderly to connect and share what they have learned. It is helpful to listen and see that the issues that were of the past are still present in our world. They’ve just taken different forms.” Britany believes that through stories we not only connect with the older generations but also to issues we are currently facing. Reflecting on past strategies and the current situation gives us the perspective to change our future. Therefore, it is an ethical issue and imperative to listen to the stories of others. Through them, we have the potential to discover new information that will shape our understanding of a particular situation.

When I asked Bare whether there were trends in the non-profit field when it came to stories she conceited that there seems to be a prevalence among hero narratives. This is a story where a particular individual comes across a problem and saves the day by getting involved. Often this happens in donor solicitations. Non-profits subtly suggest that you can insert yourself into their story and be the hero of their initiative. This can be used ethically but organizations should be careful. There is a prevalence of “white saviors” in complex international issues which are extremely problematic. Other variations of the hero can cause a problem when the ego of the donor or volunteer is considered more than the community the organization is attempting to help.

Lastly, when I spoke to Bare about the messaging of donors and volunteers by non-profits, she stated that organizations should be focused on releasing a unified message. There should be little to no variance by the organization’s solicitation material. The organization should not be catering to different populations. If the mission is strong and the organization is making a meaningful impact people will see that. There is no need to convince them through marketing that the organization is worth investing in.

For my final expert interview, I interviewed Christian Bevington an urban planner working at AECOM. This is an organization that consults with organizations helping vulnerable communities. Bevington told me that storytelling for non-profits is essential if they want to control the narrative. Often when an organization is working on a particularly pressing issue in society there is a lot of press attention. He stressed the importance of organizations being proactive in sending their message because if they don’t get out their take, eventually someone else’s narrative will develop. This narrative can obscure the objectives of the organization.

Christian was also very adamant about the ethics of storytelling and stressed the importance of community listening. In developing a narrative we can’t make assumptions about the struggles and hopes of a particular community. The organization must always be conscious of how they present the information they gather from these individuals. The story should always benefit the community primarily and we should never prioritize the intentions of the organization’s image over the wellbeing of these marginalized populations.
Lastly Christian acted as a middle ground between my two previous interviewees on the question of whether there should be different messages through stories for different stakeholder groups. He said there should be an acknowledgment of a big story running through all the narratives but the things you will emphasize and the way you talk about the impact will be different. Coding is a natural way of streamlining what each group’s language is most effective for conveying the non-profits information.

What was revealed from these interviews about the field is that non-profits are working with underrepresented, marginalized communities and see storytelling was a vital way of empowering communities. Storytelling has the dual ability to teach the general public while also giving individuals a medium of self-expression. That is why it is so essential as a tool for non-profits, it acts as an invitation for the public to understand an experience that would otherwise be very remote to them. Something that all the interviewees vocalized was that there needs to be ethical considerations when storytelling. As non-profit leaders, we must ask, which voices are being heard? All of the interviewees said they were working on making sure that there was diversity in race, gender, sex, sexuality in storytelling and in ensuring that story diversity is championed. This is to ensure that the broad spectrum of human experience with a particular issue is being addressed. Finally, they also all expressed, similar to the literature review, that storytelling evokes emotions, specifically empathy. Empathy is an excellent tool in not only bringing awareness to a certain topic but also engagement. When we understand the difficulties of someone’s experience through their stories, we are moved to action. Storytelling has the capacity to bring about real change.

Moving on from a general field analysis of the use of storytelling, I asked these sector leaders questions on my specific research project in an attempt to see if, in their positions, they had noticed trends emerging. There seemed to be split opinions on the question. Some people said that the stories between volunteers and donors should remain consistent if it is to be effective in delivering the mission. Another professional said that their narratives differed between audiences because they offer different things to an organization. The way they are targeted must be tailored to what the organization can achieve through their contribution. Everyone agreed that storytelling was a critical part of development and engagement efforts within an organization. However, the interviewees admitted they had not considered before trends across sector concentrations. This gap in knowledge of how the mechanics of storytelling contribute to the goal of the organization is exactly what my research aims to address. There is a clear need delving further into this topic.

Upon reflecting on both the literature review and the expert interviews, it seems like there is no consensus on how to target two different audiences of support (donors and volunteers) effectively. The surface research I have done has not provided any clarity on how best to reach these two stakeholder groups effectively. In response to these gaps in knowledge of the field I have come up with two main research questions that will be at the core of my study:
Research Question 1: Are there different narrative trends between the sector concentrations?

Research Question 2: Are there different trends between volunteer narratives and donor narratives?

These questions aim to show the prevalence of certain narratives across different non-profit focuses and across different audiences, both volunteer and donors. New organizations entering the field will have some indication as to what kind of messaging is effective in reaching donors in their sector concentration. Additionally, this might inspire organizations to become more creative in an attempt to stand out and experiment with new narratives. Lastly, it will demonstrate how we can reach volunteers and donors more effectively.

Sample Selection

To cultivate information across the many different aspects of the non-profit sector, four areas of focus were chosen to get a wide representation of storytelling tactics from a wide range of organizations. These four sectors are youth development, environment, human services, and arts and humanities. I then chose 15 organizations at random for each category to analyze for a total of 60 organizations. While I will acknowledge that these concentrations aren’t exhaustive of the sector, they are extremely different and will provide insights into the possible strategies used in the non-profit landscape. In addition to this, I used GuideStar’s search capabilities to refine my search not only to the categories mentioned above but also to organizations operating only in the state of California. By narrowing the search geographically, we can ensure that the organizations sampled are operating in a similar environment with similar access to resources. I choose to focus on organizations that had received an operational rating from GuideStar of at least a gold rating or higher. This was done to ensure that the organizations chosen were properly managed in addition to success in their impact and reach of supportive audiences.

The following is a list of the organizations chosen for research:

Youth Development:
Future Leaders of America: [http://futureleadersnow.org/](http://futureleadersnow.org/)
Rockside Ranch: [https://rocksideranch.org/](https://rocksideranch.org/)
Children Striving Together: [https://www.childrenstrivingtogether.org/](https://www.childrenstrivingtogether.org/)
Real Options for City Kids: [https://rocksf.org/](https://rocksf.org/)
Los Alamitos Youth Center: [https://www.theyouthcenter.org/](https://www.theyouthcenter.org/)
Fostering Hope LA: [https://www.fosteringhopela.org/volunteer.html](https://www.fosteringhopela.org/volunteer.html)
Youth Mentoring Connection: [https://youthmentoring.org/](https://youthmentoring.org/)
Wise Readers to Leaders: [https://wisereaderstoleaders.org/getinvolved/](https://wisereaderstoleaders.org/getinvolved/)
Girlventures: [https://www.girlventures.org/take-action](https://www.girlventures.org/take-action)
The Literacy Club [http://theliteracyclub.org/](http://theliteracyclub.org/)

**Environmental:**
Cache Creek Conservancy [https://cachecreekconservancy.org/](https://cachecreekconservancy.org/)
ECOLIFE Conservation: [https://www.ecolifeconservation.org/](https://www.ecolifeconservation.org/)
Farm LA: [http://farmla.org/](http://farmla.org/)
Orange County Coast Keeper: [https://www.coastkeeper.org/get-involved/](https://www.coastkeeper.org/get-involved/)
Truckee River Watershed Council: [https://www.truckeeriverwc.org/get-involved/](https://www.truckeeriverwc.org/get-involved/)
Asian Pacific Environmental Network [https://apen4ej.org/get-involved/jobs/](https://apen4ej.org/get-involved/jobs/)
Sierra State Park Foundation [https://sierrastateparks.org/](https://sierrastateparks.org/)
Ecology Action of Santa Cruz [https://ecoact.org/](https://ecoact.org/)
Tri-Valley Conservancy: [http://trivalleyconservancy.org/](http://trivalleyconservancy.org/)
San Dieguito River Valley Land Conservancy: [https://sdrcv.org/](https://sdrcv.org/)
Sacramento Valley Conservancy: [http://www.sacmentovalleyconservancy.org/](http://www.sacmentovalleyconservancy.org/)
Friends of Sausal Creek [https://www.sausalcreek.org/](https://www.sausalcreek.org/)
The Coral Reef Alliance: [https://coral.org/what-you-can-do/volunteer/](https://coral.org/what-you-can-do/volunteer/)

**Human Services**
Homes for Families: https://www.homes4families.org/get-involved-now/
Home Aid: https://www.homeaidoc.org/
Get Together Foundation https://gettogetherfoundation.com/
Ability First: https://www.abilityfirst.org/
Simple Love: https://www.simplelovenow.org/
Children’s Foundation of America https://childrensfoundationofamerica.org/
United Cerebral Palsy Organization of San Diego: https://www.ucpsd.org/
The Foundation for Senior Well Being: https://www.thefoundationforseniorwellbeing.org/
Assistance League of Flinthsills: https://alflintridge.org/
Disability Community Resource Center https://www.dcrc.co/
A Window Between Worlds: https://awbw.org/
Downtown Women’s Center https://www.downtownwomenscenter.org/
Orange County Community Housing Corp: https://www.occhc.org/
Women’s Shelter of Long Beach: https://www.womenshelterlb.org/
Mercy Housing California https://www.mercyhousing.org/california/

Arts and Culture
San Diego Film Festival: https://sdfilmfest.com/
Japanese Friendship Garden of San Diego: http://www.niwa.org/
Voices of Our City Choir: http://www.voicesofourcity.org/home
Planes of Fame Air Museum: https://planesoffame.org/
Riverside Arts Academy: https://www.riversideartsacademy.com/
Choice Group: http://choicegroupinc.org/
Hiller Aviation Museum: https://www.hiller.org/
Northern California Center for the Arts: https://thecenterforthearts.org/
Art with Impact: https://www.artwithimpact.org/
Ruckus Roots: https://ruckusroots.org/
Palm Springs Arts Museum: https://www.psmuseum.org/
Bakersfield Music Theater: https://bmtstars.com/
Once I obtained a random, accessible and equal sample, I narrowed my focus on the two stakeholder groups my research is targeting. The website content for the donor page and the volunteer page for each organization was analyzed. Specifically, each organization’s web pages were reduced to a major theme. The word count on each page was considered as well. These two factors were decided upon to see if there were thematic trends in the sector and to see how much space and effort in developing a story was spent on each page. It was essential to consider both a numerical and contextual value for each donor and volunteer page to get the full picture of the organization’s implementation of storytelling in their search for engagement.

Section 4: Data Analysis

Before diving into the data analysis, I think it would be beneficial to restate the research questions that are guiding our investigation.

Research Question 1: Are there different narrative trends between the sector concentrations?

Research Question 2: Are there different trends between volunteer narratives and donor narratives?

With this in mind, I broke down the data analyzed in a way that directly answered these questions. When looking at the web pages of all four types of non-profit organizations: (1) youth development, (2) environment, (3) human services, and (4) arts and culture, we first looked at the difference in word count between the sector. This was done to see if there was a sector concentration that was investing more time and energy in developing narratives of support in either donor web pages or volunteer web pages. Table 1 b describes the specifics for each sector concentration’s median word count in both types of web pages, donor and volunteer.

TABLE 3: Across Sector Word Counts for Volunteer and Donor Web Page Content
Keeping in mind that the organization 1 is youth development, 2 is environment, 3 is human services and 4 is arts and culture, in both volunteer and donor web pages there was consistency across the sector areas of focus. That is to say that there is no real difference in terms of non-profit concentration having longer or shorter development of stories and narratives in their appeal for support. When you look at the means in both categories, they are consistent within their specific category of volunteer and donor word counts.

However, to attempt to address research question two, which talks about the differences across volunteer and donor narrative development, Table 2 is illustrative of the difference between the two categories.

**TABLE 4: Donor Word Count Compared to Volunteer Word Count**
What this table shows is that the mean donor word count is about 131.6 words across all organizations. However, when you compare that to the volunteer word count which has a mean of 63.3 words, it is very apparent that there is a stark difference. The p-value at the upper right hand corner is less than 0.01 which means that this finding is statistically significant. The volunteer word average word count across all 60 organizations was less than half when compared to the donor word count. The difference between these two web pages (donor and volunteer) are evident and will be thoughtfully considered later in the Implications and Recommendations section of this analysis.

While we have considered the word count which is essential in the development of a narrative that compels these stakeholders to action, I also looked at the most prevalent themes that arose when reading their website appeal for support (both donor and volunteer). Below is Table 5 which shows the prevalence of certain themes in the volunteer web pages of the organizations surveyed.

**TABLE 5: Volunteer Themes Across the Sector**
As this demonstrates in the appeals for volunteers online the major theme that arose was community. This was what was stressed and emphasized in the narratives which soliciting volunteer help. While there are only two themes (community and impact) that arose in the volunteer narratives surveyed, in Table 4 we see the prevalence of three themes in the online donor solicitation narratives.

**TABLE 6: Donor Themes Across the Sector**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Org</th>
<th>Volunteer Theme</th>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Observed</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within row</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Observed</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within row</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Observed</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within row</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Observed</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within row</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Observed</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within row</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There are a couple of major differences between donor themes and volunteer themes. Firstly, there is the presence of a third theme exclusive to donors, the theme of generosity. Generosity was only spoken about in donor web solicitation. The second difference is that while in volunteer narratives the main theme was community, for donors the main theme that was emphasized in their storytelling was impact. The majority of the organization’s donor pages were dedicated to talking about how the funds will generate impact.

Lastly, looking at both Table 5 and Table 6 of my findings, it is evident that there is no significant difference between themes across the sector. The sector concentrations share these themes pretty closely. Youth development, environment, human services, and arts and culture all share these themes with very close frequencies. There was no specific sector that advocated for a specific theme more frequently than another.

These are the findings of my research into the difference of narratives between and across the sector for both volunteer and donor solicitation. What was taken into consideration was exclusively the prevailing theme for each donor and volunteer web page content and the word count on each page for every organization surveyed. Considering both a thematic and numerical approach for this analysis ensured that I could achieve a more complete image of the mechanics of support narratives. The implications of which will be explored in the next section.

### Contingency Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Org</th>
<th>Donor Theme</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>Genorosity</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Observed</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within row</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Observed</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within row</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Observed</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within row</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Observed</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within row</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Observed</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within row</td>
<td>55.0%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section 5: Implications and Recommendations

The findings as described by the data analysis section are compelling to consider. These results are very telling of sector trends and the sector’s relationships with different stakeholder groups.

The first finding that was revealed through my data collection is that there was little to no difference across the sector between word counts in both volunteer web pages and donor web pages. What this means is that there is a general consensus in the sector of the appropriate length in developing effective narratives that are compelling for both stakeholder groups discussed. This is an extremely positive finding since it is illustrative of a recognized standard across the very different sector concentration that is respected by all organizations. I believe this homogeneity in the messaging is an effective tactic as a sector for stakeholders to recognize the established narrative order. As the literature review stated narrative patterns are reiterated throughout our lifetime. The non-profit sector has an established narrative pattern of a certain word length that is then repeated by all other non-profits. By tapping into these repeated codes, we are more predisposed to accept the massaging. It is an established standard length that is obviously working for these GuideStar gold and platinum organizations.

While I do believe there is an established norm of message length for a reason, I think that these well-established non-profits could experiment with creative messaging. Our brain is trained to find familiar patterns, but it also looks for anomalies, and a good way of standing out would be to play with the established norm and explore the potential of storytelling in captivating and motivating stakeholders. Subverting expectations over a specific length could make a difference in creating interest and engagement in the organization’s respective community.

Moving forward, another key finding was that there is a difference between volunteer word count and donor word count. Donor word count is more than double the length of volunteer word count. Donor word count comes in at about 132 and donor averages to about 63 words. I believe this is a negative implication for non-profits because it appears that the sector is prioritizing donors over the time and energy volunteers put in. There is more effort in crafting narratives and reaching donors than there are volunteers. While all organizations need of funding and time is different it is essential to strive to make all stakeholders feel valued and important in the narratives, we craft to address them. It just doesn’t seem like the sector appreciates volunteers as much since they are not spending the needed time developing stories that will lead to their engagement. All stakeholders are equal in their commitment to the organization and should be treated as such.
Non-profits need to spend more time developing narratives that compel volunteers to get involved. Even if what they are searching for is more donor support, oftentimes volunteers make the transition to donors. Therefore, it is essential that we not create a hierarchy in the populations that support our organizations. We should be more conscious in developing stories that are in similar length to donor web page word count for the volunteer population as their work is just as critical to the functioning of the organization. This will display an even-handedness across all stakeholders while also increasing the impact on volunteer recruitment and engagement.

Thirdly, something that came to light in my research and data collection was that there are differences in the major themes for the volunteer and the donor web pages in the organizations surveyed. The major theme for the volunteer web page content was community while the major theme for the donor web page content was impact. There was also the theme of generosity which was exclusive to the donor narratives. This means is that there is specific messaging that is being tailored to each stakeholder group. These themes have been, across the sector, identified as being the most impactful and action driving for both donors and volunteers distinctly. In the literature review, I addressed the importance of stories propelling people into action. Stories are deeply tied to how we see ourselves and the world around us. If a non-profit show us a conflict and proposes a way for us to be part of the solution effectively through their messaging, stakeholders get involved. These themes are effective in speaking to their respective populations. This reveals that the non-profit sector has moved away from a uniform message for all stakeholder groups rather they are tailoring their narratives to each audience. These themes of community and impact are specific enough to be impactful to their intended audience while remaining general enough to still speak to a large group of individuals. This is what makes them effective.

As previously emphasized, it is quite strategic to have different messaging for different stakeholder groups. Despite this, the fact that only three major themes arose when there are so many reasons why people become donors or volunteers shows a lack of recognition of the diversity in motivations when it comes to philanthropy. We should take into consideration the literature present on the 7 faces of philanthropy.

Table 7: 7 Faces of Philanthropy
The above is a chart listing the 7 different types of philanthropic personalities. The far-right column highlights their different motivations. What my findings showed was that there was only a true consideration for one face of philanthropy; the communitarian, someone who does good because it's good for the community. The theme of impact and community truly appeal to this one type of individual and one motivation for giving however it neglects a lot of other motivations.

As the chart below illustrates in the 7 faces of philanthropy, communitarians make up the majority of giving at 26%.

**Figure 4: 7 Faces of Philanthropy Giving Breakdown**
It makes sense that the general appeal for donor and volunteers target this group since it represents the largest segment of non-profit’s system of support. However, we should keep these other groups in mind when crafting narratives. More specific events might entice a specific face of philanthropy. For example, a gala event might need a narrative that speaks to the socialite giver. A memorial run might appeal to a re-payer giver. As non-profit professionals, we must be considerate of the different personalities and motivating factors of the communities that are supporting us. By crafting narratives sensitive to the various types of givers we expand our reach and increase our impact in the communities that support us and the communities we support.

So far all my recommendations have been directed to specific findings that appeared in the data I collected. However, while I was conducting my research I was surprised that there was a gap in storytelling I wasn’t expecting to see. Specifically, I was anticipating the use of the 20 master plots, as described in my literature review. Hardly any non-profit utilized this tool in the development of their narratives of support. This is a huge disadvantage in reaching their target populations, especially when these plots have all the aspects (emotion, morality, and narrative familiarity) that make a successful story. This is definitely a tool that more non-profits need to utilize. The 20 master plots are varied for any fundraising and volunteer engagement situation. There is a lot of potential support that could be unlocked if you know how to craft a message that resonates with your stakeholders. “The master plots serve as a means for organizations to tell their own story, build identification, and connect with others” (Kent 2015).

Section 6: Conclusion
The purpose of this research assignment was to inquire into the storytelling narratives that engage stakeholders, specifically, donors and volunteers. What we were attempting to see was if there were thematic trends across sector concentrations (youth development, environment, human services, arts and culture) as well if there were any differences between the ways organizations addressed volunteers and donors. This research illustrated that there are distinct themes in the messaging directed at donors, whose main theme was impact, and volunteers, whose main theme was community. Non-profits are engaged in coding efforts for different audiences. Another significant finding was that there is an extreme discrepancy between donor and volunteer word counts. Volunteer word count is less than half of the donor word count. This means more effort is being placed on crafting donor narratives than they are volunteer narratives. My recommendation is to make an effort to solve this imbalance by spending more time crafting volunteer narratives. Lastly, there were no significant differences between sector concentrations in terms of themes development or word count. This points to a general agreement across the sector of the development of compelling stories to engage these two distinct supportive populations.

There are a few limitations to my study. I only looked at the organizations' web page content. There is no reflection on how storytelling differs with annual appeals, volunteer newsletters, social media outreach, etc. For storytelling to be effective it must be reiterated and cohesive across all platforms of communication. Another limitation is that I only looked at four sector concentrations. I chose these concentrations based on their encompassing of a variety of different communities and issues. Despite this, there is a lot that was left out, churches, public benefit organizations, and many more were not taken into consideration. Including these organization types in future research may change certain findings.

These findings have the ability to affect how we understand the non-profit sector. It is particularly helpful to uncover conventions that are supported across the sector. This provides a guideline for potential new organizations starting out since these codes have been proven to work. Another area that these findings are helpful, is in showing the dynamic non-profits have with different audiences. Moving forward, there should be more research done on the opportunity that the 20 master plots pose for the sector. It could be transformational in their reach should they tap into this tool.
References


Author’s Bio

Valerie Hasbun is a non-profit professional working in the area of women empowerment. She is a feminist and a passionate mental health advocate. Valerie strongly believes in working with communities toward solutions that express their agency and direct needs. A lot of the professional experience she has is centered around marketing and storytelling. Valerie saw the importance of at risk populations sharing their experiences and knew that she wanted to explore these themes in her research. Through this analysis she hopes to provide tools for non-profits to increase their impact.