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Weighed Altruism: The Construction of Identity and Hidden Motivations in the World of Elite Philanthropy

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Abstract

This study aims to deconstruct the concept of "weighed altruism", a form of negotiated generosity in elite philanthropy where moral claims, strategic interests, and power dynamics are perpetually balanced. Employing a qualitative critical literature review, it synthesizes scholarly discourse, media narratives, and theoretical frameworks from the past two decades, utilizing thematic analysis and theoretical triangulation to examine the performative, motivational, and representational layers of philanthropic practice. The analysis reveals that philanthropic acts by elites are rarely disinterested; they serve as instruments for moral legitimization, corporate reputation management, network expansion, and power consolidation, while simultaneously reproducing structural inequalities, depoliticizing social justice issues, and fostering public skepticism. Against the backdrop of widening socio-economic disparities and increased scrutiny of elite actors, philanthropy has evolved from simple charity to a complex social performance that intertwines virtue with calculation, converting economic capital into symbolic capital within competitive social arenas. The study concludes that elite philanthropy embodies a profound ambivalence, operating as a dual-edged mechanism that channels resources toward public good yet reinforces the very hierarchies it purports to address. Consequently, a paradigm shift is needed in philanthropic studies toward more critical, interdisciplinary, and power-conscious engagements, urging future research to explore transformative philanthropic models that prioritize equity and structural change over symbolic legitimization.

Introduction

In the contemporary era, philanthropy has undergone a significant transformation. Acts of giving are no longer understood merely as expressions of social concern but have become deeply intertwined with the dynamics of identity, moral representation, and even the socio-economic strategies of the elite (Harvey et al., 2021; Long, 2025; Maclean et al., 2021). Philanthropy has evolved

into an arena where the values of generosity intersect with the logic of capitalism, creating an inherent ambiguity between altruism and self-interest (Hsieh & Lin, 2021; Kay & Granfield, 2023; Vearrier, 2020). Within this context, philanthropic activity is no longer neutral but is laden with symbolic meaning and the politics of identity. Numerous studies have shown that social and economic elites use acts of generosity as instruments to reinforce social legitimacy, expand networks of power, and affirm their moral image in the public sphere (Glucksberg & Russell-Prywata, 2022; Maclean et al., 2021). Conversely, the public often perceives philanthropy as a manifestation of sincere morality, without recognizing the representational strategies behind it (Daly, 2023, 2024; Rahwan & Leuker, 2023). This reveals a contradiction between the ethical ideals that philanthropy upholds and the pragmatic practices that underpin it. Hence, the urgency of this study lies in understanding how elite acts of generosity are shaped by the surrounding social, cultural, and ideological constructions. Through this lens, altruism in philanthropy can no longer be seen as spontaneous giving, but as "weighed altruism", a form of negotiated goodness balancing morality, identity, and interest (Lähdesmäki & Takala, 2012; Ricks & Williams, 2005). Thus far, academic discourse on philanthropy has largely focused on the economic and social dimensions of giving, while neglecting its symbolic and cultural layers.

Most previous studies have examined the efficiency of fund distribution, social impacts on beneficiaries, or institutional aspects of philanthropic organizations, without probing the hidden motivations and identity constructions of donors (Jarolimova, 2025; Neya Global & Kazanskaia, 2025). Existing scholarship can be categorized into three tendencies. First, studies emphasizing economic rationality in giving, viewing philanthropy as a social investment to gain future symbolic or material returns (Godfrey, 2005; Harvey et al., 2019; Haydon et al., 2021). Second, research highlighting moral and religious values as motivations for generosity, but often stopping at the normative level (Fernandez et al., 2016; "Religiosity/Spirituality, Affective Moral Reasoning, and Generative Altruism," 2021; Stavrova & Siegers, 2014).Third, works examining the institutionalization of philanthropy within modernization and development frameworks, yet failing to uncover the performative and identity dimensions of elite actors (Neya Global & Kazanskaia, 2025; Roohi, 2018; Wiepking et al., 2021). A shared limitation among these approaches is the absence of a critical reading of how philanthropy functions as a symbolic strategy for constructing image and power. In other words, the relationship between generosity, elite identity, and social structure remains insufficiently explored.

This study seeks to fill that gap by emphasizing the cultural and identity dimensions underlying acts of giving. It focuses on how social elites construct moral narratives and self-images through philanthropic activities, and how these acts are perceived by society and the media. Accordingly, the research addresses three key questions: (1) How is elite philanthropy constructed as a form of performative social identity in the public sphere? (2) What hidden motivations,economic, political, or cultural,accompany such acts of giving? and (3) How are morality and self-interest negotiated within contemporary philanthropic practices? These questions aim to demonstrate that philanthropy is not merely an act of giving, but a social arena where identity, power, and moral symbolism are contested. Understanding these dynamics enriches philanthropic discourse, which has long been dominated by moral and economic narratives, by uncovering the symbolic and relational layers that shape elite generosity.

This study is grounded in the argument that elite philanthropy cannot be separated from social constructions and self-representation strategies. Altruism, in this context, represents a negotiated morality,where goodness coexists with efforts to preserve status, reputation, and social legitimacy. The social elite employs philanthropy as a symbolic instrument to consolidate their position within a competitive social hierarchy. Thus, acts of giving are not solely rooted in moral or religious values but also function as mechanisms for reproducing power and social capital. Meanwhile, society and the media reinforce these constructions through representational practices that portray philanthropists as moral exemplars. By analyzing elite philanthropic practices, narratives, and representations, this study reveals generosity as an ambivalent social practice: oriented toward public good on the one hand, yet driven by image-making and interest on the other. Hence, "weighed altruism" serves as a metaphor for the intricate interplay between morality and power in the contemporary philanthropic landscape.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design centered on a comprehensive literature review to investigate the nuanced construction of identity and motivation in elite philanthropy. As emphasized by Flick (2018), qualitative approaches are particularly suited to exploring the subjective meanings and social processes underlying complex social phenomena. By prioritizing an emic perspective, this methodology seeks to understand philanthropy through the meanings and rationales constructed by the actors themselves, social, economic, and corporate elites, rather than imposing external interpretive frameworks (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research is fundamentally exploratory and

interpretive, examining the practices, narratives, and representations of elite philanthropy through critical analysis of existing scholarly discourse.

Data were systematically gathered from a wide range of credible textual sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and documented media reports, focusing on publications from the last two decades to ensure contemporary relevance. This aligns with the principles of thematic synthesis in qualitative research, where data are organized and interpreted through iterative coding and theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analysis followed a critical and reflexive process, integrating thematic reduction with theoretical triangulation to enhance analytical rigor and validity. Key conceptual lenses, such as "weighed altruism," "strategic philanthropy," and the "aesthetics of generosity", were employed to unpack the negotiation between morality, power, and self-representation. Through this approach, the study moves beyond descriptive accountancy to engage with the values, norms, and social logics that underpin philanthropic performance, offering a contextualized understanding of how elite giving functions as an arena for identity construction and the accumulation of symbolic capital within unequal social structures.

Philanthropy as an Arena of Identity: Between Morality and Self-Representation

Elite philanthropy has evolved into a complex social phenomenon that not only reflects altruistic intentions but also strategic efforts to affirm moral authority and symbolic power in the public sphere. The motivations behind philanthropic acts,especially those undertaken by wealthy individuals and large corporations,often extend beyond mere charitable giving, transforming into performative expressions of social responsibility aimed at enhancing donors' reputations. Evidence suggests that such philanthropic activities function as mechanisms for legitimizing social status and influence. One central aspect of this phenomenon is the notion of plutocratic philanthropy, in which philanthropic acts are shaped more by the interests of the wealthy than by the actual needs of beneficiaries. (Glucksberg & Russell-Prywata, 2022) emphasize that reliance on private wealth for the provision of public goods often leads to inequitable resource distribution, where elite interests overshadow broader social needs. This highlights the performative nature of philanthropy as a tool for maintaining socio-economic dominance rather than addressing structural inequalities. Similarly, Adam Smith's reflections on philanthropy suggest that giving may contain egoistic tendencies, where contributions reflect donors' preferences rather than public needs,reinforcing the argument that elite

philanthropy operates within a framework of social performativity to secure and project moral authority (Leat, 2016).

Furthermore, (Wang et al., 2008) note that corporate philanthropy often mirrors the social networks and norms established within elite philanthropic circles. For corporations, engagement in charitable activities is frequently influenced by institutional pressures and peer behavior, indicating that corporate giving is increasingly seen as a strategic necessity for maintaining competitive advantage and legitimacy in the market. (Kuldova, 2018) similarly argues that philanthropy can serve as a means of reasserting power and influence, functioning as a performative act particularly relevant in an era of declining public trust in institutions. The corporate sector has also shown a growing trend toward strategic philanthropy, wherein charitable actions are aligned with business objectives and stakeholder expectations. Empirical evidence indicates that corporate giving is often used to build moral capital, enhance reputation, and mitigate regulatory risk, thereby reinforcing a company's image as a socially responsible entity (Li & Wang, 2023; Saiia et al., 2003). Organizations engage in such strategic philanthropy to strengthen their public image, as it is believed to increase consumer loyalty and ultimately yield financial benefits (Edukon et al., 2023; Ricks, 2005). Consequently, this business-driven approach integrates philanthropy into broader marketing and communication strategies, further complicating the narrative of altruism.

Political connections also play a crucial role in shaping corporate charitable involvement. In the context of China's 2016 Charity Law, research by (Ji et al., 2024) reveals that political networks significantly influence the rise of corporate philanthropy, raising questions about the performative nature of such acts of giving. These findings underscore a broader theme: philanthropy functions not only as a tool for social development but also as a mechanism for navigating complex political landscapes,revealing an interplay between genuine altruism and calculated social maneuvering. Moreover, conceptualizations of corporate philanthropy extend to its implications for corporate reputation. Evidence shows that increased charitable spending can strengthen a company's standing among stakeholders and shape perceptions of trust and integrity in a complex socio-economic environment (Brammer & Millington, 2005; Gardberg et al., 2019). These dynamics suggest that elite philanthropy is not merely responsive to social needs but is often a carefully calibrated engagement aimed at asserting authority and reinforcing symbolic status in the public sphere. Elite philanthropy serves as a multidimensional intersection of social performativity, moral assertion, and strategic positioning. While ostensibly directed toward addressing social issues, philanthropic practices are frequently intertwined with

efforts to sustain existing power structures and legitimize elite interests. The contemporary landscape of philanthropy thus reveals an urgent need to reexamine its motivations, impacts, and implications within broader socio-economic contexts.

The relationship between elite philanthropy and identity construction is a complex interplay of moral posturing, strategic representation, and socio-economic performance. In the contemporary landscape, philanthropy has evolved beyond mere charitable giving into a potent arena where elites actively negotiate their public persona, legitimize their status, and navigate the dynamics of power. This performative dimension transforms acts of generosity into carefully staged gestures aimed at projecting compassion, securing social legitimacy, and reinforcing existing hierarchies. To systematically deconstruct this phenomenon, the following table synthesizes key empirical and conceptual evidence from the literature, mapping the primary dimensions through which elite philanthropy functions as an arena of identity. It delineates the underlying motivations, the representational strategies employed, and the consequent implications for how elite identity is constructed and perceived in the public sphere, thereby providing a structured overview of the intricate nexus between morality, self-representation, and strategic interest in philanthropic practice.

Table 1

Elite Philanthropy as an Arena of Identity: Evidence & Representational Strategies.

Identity Dimension	Empirical / Conceptual Evidence	Representational Strategy	Implications for Identity Construction
Moral Authority & Legitimacy	- Plutocratic philanthropy tends to prioritize elite interests over public needs (Glucksberg & Russell-Prywata, 2022). - Corporate philanthropy builds moral capital and mitigates regulatory risk (Saiia et al., 2003; Li & Wang, 2023).	- High-visibility, large-scale donations. - Naming institutions (hospitals, libraries). - Public speeches emphasizing humanitarian values.	- Projects an image of the "compassionate philanthropist." - Strengthens moral authority in the public sphere. - Neutralizes social criticism regarding inequality.
Corporate Image & Reputation	- Corporate philanthropy is often influenced by institutional pressures and peer behavior (Wang et al., 2008). - Philanthropic engagement can	- Strategic philanthropy & cause-related marketing. - Transparent social performance reporting. - Integration of CSR	- Builds corporate reputation as a socially responsible entity. - Secures a *social license to operate*. - Differentiates the brand in the market.

	enhance consumer loyalty and competitive advantage (Ricks, 2005; Edukon et al., 2023).	with core business objectives.	
Network Power & Political Influence	- Political networks significantly influence the rise of corporate philanthropy post-2016 Charity Law in China (Ji et al., 2024). - Philanthropy is used to expand access to power circles (Kuldova, 2018).	- Donations through family foundations linked to elite networks. - Sponsorship of state events or specific political agendas.	- Strengthens social and political capital. - Gains political legitimacy. - Secures policy access and influence.
Social Performativity & Media Representation	- Philanthropy functions as a *performative act* in an era of declining public trust (Kuldova, 2018). - Visual representation on social media shapes public perception (Yu, 2020; Persuit, 2017).	- Curated media campaigns (photos, videos, emotional storytelling). - Celebrity ambassadorships. - Philanthropic rituals (e.g., galas with specific dress codes).	- Converts economic wealth into cultural recognition. - Constructs a "civilized class" or "patron of the arts" identity. - Transforms economic into symbolic capital.
Reproduction of Hierarchy & Status Quo	- Plutocratic philanthropy shifts public good provision from the state to private hands (Glucksberg & Russell-Prywata, 2022). - Philanthropy often focuses on charity rather than justice advocacy.	- Emphasis on charitable giving over structural change advocacy. - Programs that do not challenge existing inequality structures.	- Preserves class structure and social hegemony. - Depoliticizes issues of inequality. - Legitimizes the status quo as natural and "assisted."

Source: Developed by the author based on literature synthesis, 2025.

The table above crystallizes the core argument that elite philanthropy is a multifaceted arena for identity construction, where acts of giving are seldom disinterested but are instead deeply embedded in strategies of moral positioning, reputation management, and power consolidation. Each dimension outlined, from the pursuit of moral legitimacy to the reproduction of social hierarchies, demonstrates how philanthropy operates as a form of social performativity. Elites leverage philanthropic engagements not only to address social issues but, more significantly, to craft and project a public identity that aligns with desired perceptions of virtue, responsibility, and authority. The synthesis of evidence reveals a consistent pattern: whether through high-visibility donations, strategic corporate programs, or curated media narratives, philanthropic acts are instrumental in converting economic capital into symbolic and social capital. This conversion reinforces the donors' standing within existing power structures

while often obscuring the structural inequalities that their philanthropy purportedly addresses. The concept of "weighed altruism" is vividly illustrated here, as every category in the table reflects a calculated balance between ethical display and strategic interest.

Ultimately, this structured analysis affirms that philanthropy serves as a critical stage for identity negotiation in the public sphere. It is where elites perform morality, navigate political landscapes, and aestheticize generosity, all while sustaining their socio-economic dominance. Understanding philanthropy through this lens necessitates a shift from viewing it as purely altruistic to recognizing it as a complex cultural and political practice, one that merits continued critical scrutiny, particularly regarding its long-term impact on social equity and democratic accountability.

Hidden Motivations Behind Goodness: Social Strategies and the Symbolic Capital of Elites

The concept of hidden motivation plays a crucial role in understanding the ethical dimensions of professional practice, particularly within the contexts of service provision and power dynamics in institutional settings. These latent motivations often shape the behaviors of health professionals,doctors, nurses, and medical educators alike,ultimately influencing their interactions with patients, colleagues, and institutions. This phenomenon extends beyond personal motives, encompassing values implicitly embedded through education and professional socialization. In this regard, the concept of the hidden curriculum offers a vital lens for examining how unwritten norms, values, and ethical practices influence the formation of professional identity and moral behavior. (Yazdani et al., 2020) highlight that the hidden curriculum significantly shapes the ethical orientation and professional identity of medical students, extending beyond formal instruction.

Thus, hidden motivation is not merely an individual psychological factor but also a product of the broader socio-cultural and institutional systems that govern education and healthcare practice. The hidden curriculum embodies the unspoken lessons absorbed during formal education,how individuals perceive authority, moral responsibility, and power relations. In the medical field, it can be even more influential than formal ethics training, as it operates through role modeling, professional habits, and social norms that are rarely articulated explicitly. (Jafree et al., 2015) demonstrate that senior professionals and trainers play a pivotal role in transmitting moral values through daily practice, inadvertently shaping the ethical orientation of their peers. Ethical dilemmas often emerge within this process,between altruistic intentions to serve patients

and institutional pressures such as efficiency demands, medical hierarchies, and professional incentives. In such contexts, hidden motivation becomes a field of tension between personal integrity and systemic demands, situating healthcare professionals in morally ambivalent positions.

Analysis of elite philanthropy reveals that acts of giving rarely stem from a single, purely altruistic motive. Instead, they are often the product of complex strategic calculations in which morality, personal or corporate interest, and the accumulation of symbolic capital are intricately intertwined. To map this complexity, Table 1 below presents a typology of hidden motivations in elite philanthropy, identifying core objectives, dominant strategies, and the resulting symbolic impacts. This categorization aims to deconstruct philanthropic practice as a social arena where elite identity is fashioned and power legitimacy is negotiated (Maclean et al., 2021; Glucksberg & Russell-Prywata, 2022).

Table 2

Typology of Hidden Motivations in Elite Philanthropy

Motivation Category	Primary Objective	Dominant Strategy	Acquired Symbolic Capital / Impact	Supporting References
Social & Moral Legitimacy	To project an image of compassion and moral responsibility; to neutralize criticism regarding inequality.	High-visibility, large-scale donations; naming institutions (libraries, hospitals); public speeches emphasizing humanitarian values.	**Moral legitimacy**, reputation as a "benevolent philanthropist," reduced social scrutiny, strengthened moral authority in the public sphere.	Maclean et al., 2021; Glucksberg & Russell-Prywata, 2022; Daly, 2023
Business Strategy & Corporate Reputation	To enhance brand value, consumer loyalty, and competitive advantage; to mitigate regulatory risk.	CSR programs integrated with core business; *strategic philanthropy* and *cause-related marketing*; transparent social performance reporting.	**Corporate reputation**, stakeholder trust, *social license to operate*, brand differentiation.	Saiia et al., 2003; Brammer & Millington, 2005; Ricks, 2005; Edukon et al., 2023
Network Consolidation & Political Influence	To expand and strengthen networks with other elites and political authorities; to secure policy access.	Donations through family foundations connected to elite networks; philanthropy aligned with specific political agendas; sponsorship of state events.	**Social and political capital**, access to power circles, influence in policy processes, political legitimacy.	Wang et al., 2008; Kuldova, 2018; Ji et al., 2024
Symbolic Exchange &	To craft a heroic self-narrative	Carefully curated media campaigns (photos, videos); use of	**Symbolic capital**, cultural status,	Persuit, 2017; Yu, 2020; Gao &

| Aesthetics of Generosity | through visual representation; to convert economic wealth into cultural recognition. | celebrities as ambassadors; philanthropic rituals like charity galas with specific dress codes. | recognition as a "patron of the arts/humanity," construction of a *civilized class* identity. | Zhang, 2021; Hookway et al., 2023 |
| Power Reproduction & Status Quo Maintenance | To maintain existing socio-economic hierarchies; to defuse demands for radical structural change. | *Plutocratic philanthropy* that shifts public good provision from the state to private hands; focus on charity over justice advocacy. | **Social hegemony**, preservation of class structure, depoliticization of inequality issues, legitimation of the status quo as natural and "assisted." | Glucksberg & Russell-Prywata, 2022; M |

Source: Developed by the author based on literature synthesis, 2025.

As illustrated in Table 2, elite philanthropy operates according to the logic of "weighed altruism," where every act of giving contains multi-dimensional strategic considerations. These categories are not mutually exclusive; often, a single philanthropic initiative simultaneously aims to enhance corporate reputation, expand political networks, and produce a compelling moral image in the media (Zhang et al., 2020; Li & Wang, 2023). The concept of the hidden curriculum from professional fields (Yazdani et al., 2020; Jafree et al., 2015) finds a potent analogy here: beneath the formal curriculum of "helping others," a hidden lesson for elites exists on how to wield generosity as a tool for social navigation, accumulation of non-economic capital, and reproduction of their dominant position.Therefore, reading philanthropy through the lens of hidden motivations shifts the focus from what is given to why and how the giving is performed. This analysis reveals that the displayed "goodness" is frequently an investment in a moral-symbolic economy, where the acquired cultural and social capital can be reconverted into future influence and material benefit (Sklair & Glucksberg, 2021). Consequently, the philanthropic arena becomes a contested stage where ethics and power are perpetually negotiated, and the elite identity as "philanthropist" is actively constructed and sustained.

In nursing, (Thorkildsen et al., 2015) found that hidden motivations often stem from a profound sense of ethical responsibility and commitment to patient welfare. These motivations forge a deep connection between professional identity and performance. Nurses not only fulfill formal duties but embody a sacrificial ethos,a moral and spiritual expression of empathy at the heart of caregiving ethics. However, this ethos can have complex ethical implications

when entangled with power structures and organizational dynamics. Hidden motivations that compel individuals to exceed formal duties may create inequalities, such as when institutional systems exploit personal dedication to justify excessive workloads without adequate support. Hence, the analysis of hidden motivation illuminates how noble ethical values can be subtly co-opted by institutional power. At the organizational level, hidden motivation underscores how institutional culture and leadership shape ethical behavior. (Karimi et al., 2015) argue that both formal and hidden curricula within clinical environments play central roles in forming practitioners' moral orientations. Understanding the socio-cultural context of healthcare delivery, they suggest, is essential for deepening ethical reflection within professional practice. In hierarchical hospital structures, hidden motivations often manifest as obedience to authority or career-oriented interests that may influence medical decision-making. The tension between personal incentives and patient welfare becomes a recurring ethical dilemma. Therefore, recognizing the dynamics of hidden motivation is key to building organizational cultures that prioritize transparency, fairness, and social responsibility.

Studies on power strategies in relation to hidden motivation provide deeper insights into the ethical balance within medicine. Power imbalances, implicit biases, and informational manipulation frequently obscure the altruistic foundations of the medical profession. (Overgaauw et al., 2012) show that concealed information can distort perceptions and decisions, enabling individuals to exploit others' ignorance for personal or professional gain. As (Reddy & Roy, 2019) note, such behavior blurs the boundaries between ethics and strategy,between the desire to do good and the will to preserve one's position within power hierarchies. Thus, analyzing hidden motivations is not merely a psychological inquiry into personal intent but also a sociological reflection on how power operates beneath ethical practices. Machin and Shardlow (2012) further highlight the ethical dimension of hidden vulnerability in medical research. They warn that research participants often lack full awareness of their involvement in sensitive studies, rendering fundamental principles like informed consent problematic. This opacity reveals that hidden motivation operates not only at the individual level but also institutionally, where asymmetrical power relations between researchers and participants distort ethical frameworks. In such cases, the "act of giving" within research,intended to advance altruism and scientific progress,can transform into a subtle form of injustice driven by concealed interests.

The ethical implications of hidden motivation demand critical awareness across all levels of health and educational systems. When ethical values are

enacted mechanically without reflection on underlying power relations and personal motives, the risk of manipulation escalates. Acknowledging hidden motivation does not negate genuine goodwill; rather, it expands the space for reflection on the complex interplay among ethics, power, and professionalism. As (Yazdani et al., 2020) emphasize, an integrative approach that combines analysis of hidden curriculum, personal motivation, and institutional context can foster ethical resilience within healthcare practice. Ultimately, hidden motivation constitutes the invisible foundation of ethical complexity in the health professions. It reminds us that moral actions do not arise in a vacuum but are produced through the interaction of individuals, institutions, and value systems. In an increasingly efficiency-driven and bureaucratic medical world, understanding hidden motivations is essential to preserving professional integrity. Awareness of these latent dynamics enables healthcare professionals to navigate ethical dilemmas more clearly, build trust-based cultures, and reinforce their commitment to humanistic values. Thus, integrating the concepts of hidden motivation and hidden curriculum enriches theoretical reflection on ethics while offering practical pathways for strengthening ethical governance in modern healthcare institutions.

The Aesthetics of Generosity: Media, Image, and the Politics of Philanthropic Representation

The aesthetics of generosity in the realm of philanthropy has increasingly drawn attention within the fields of visual culture and strategic communication. Philanthropy is no longer perceived merely as the act of giving but as a socially constructed representation shaped by imagery, media, and visual politics. In this context, aesthetics plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of generosity, sincerity, and moral legitimacy. (Maclean et al., 2021) explain that amid growing social inequality, elites and corporations employ philanthropy as a symbolic instrument to affirm moral authority while softening the image of economic dominance. Thus, the aesthetics of generosity is not merely a matter of personal ethics but a component of communication strategy and social performativity that intersects with power discourse. In today's digital landscape, visualization and representation have become central to philanthropic activity. Images produced through social media campaigns, charity videos, and photographs of humanitarian events possess the power to evoke empathy and emotional engagement.

(Yu, 2020) found that visual elements,such as warm lighting, sincere facial expressions, and emotionally resonant storytelling,significantly influence public empathy and willingness to donate. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social

context shifts altered donor behavior, moving from purely altruistic motivations toward more emotionally driven and situational ones, heavily shaped by visual presentation. (Persuit, 2017) notes that social media now functions not only as a promotional platform for philanthropy but also as a moral arena where images of generosity are constructed, contested, and negotiated publicly. Celebrity involvement adds another layer of complexity to the aesthetics of generosity. On one hand, celebrity endorsement amplifies reach and raises awareness of social issues; on the other, it often triggers doubts about the authenticity of philanthropic acts. Gao and (Zhang et al., 2020) reveal that in China, celebrities frequently employ impression management strategies to shape public perception of their philanthropic intentions,projecting empathy, humility, and sincerity to reinforce their moral image. However, when such acts are perceived as performative, public skepticism arises, interpreting charity as self-promotion. The case of actress (Zhang et al., 2020) exemplifies this paradox: when inconsistencies emerged between her pledged and actual donations to Sichuan earthquake victims, public trust plummeted, and her reputation as a "benevolent celebrity" came under scrutiny (Gao & Zhang, 2021). This episode captures the paradox of philanthropic aesthetics,the grander the image constructed, the greater the reputational risk when authenticity is questioned.

Visual representation in philanthropy also carries deep cultural and political dimensions. Images depicting poverty, suffering, or solidarity often embed ideological bias and reproduce stereotypes. (Ademolu, 2023) critiques that global humanitarian narratives frequently portray marginalized communities, particularly in the Global South, as passive objects of compassion rather than active subjects of change. This reinforces a symbolic hierarchy between "givers" and "receivers," "the empowered" and "the powerless." In this sense, the aesthetics of generosity risks reaffirming new forms of colonial power, where moral virtue is constructed through racial and class-based distinctions. Recent research in Nature Humanities and Social Sciences Communications (2025) adds nuance to this analysis, showing that in medical crowdfunding campaigns, photos of patients with warm expressions (smiles, gentle gazes) attract more donations than images depicting extreme suffering. Visuals featuring professional settings such as hospitals or healthcare workers enhance perceptions of competence and credibility, while images of subjects appearing too healthy reduce donation intent, as they seem less "deserving." These findings reveal that the aesthetics of generosity operates within a complex symbolic network, where every visual element,color, expression, background,conveys moral and emotional cues that shape donor behavior.

Another important dimension is institutional reputation management. When corporations or public figures face ethical crises, philanthropy often serves as a vehicle for social legitimacy repair. (Zhang et al., 2020) found that companies accused of environmental or social misconduct significantly increase their charitable activities as a form of reputational compensation. In these cases, media plays a dual role: as a channel for disseminating positive imagery and as a watchdog assessing authenticity. This dynamic underscores that the aesthetics of generosity cannot be separated from the politics of legitimacy and corporate communication strategy. In the digital sphere, new forms of strategic philanthropy emerge, such as NFT-based charitable donations. (Li & Wang, 2023) report that participants who re-list their charity NFTs for sale are perceived as more strategic and less altruistic than those who retain them,illustrating how, in digital philanthropy, generosity is not only visual but performative and economically symbolic. When acts of giving appear overly calculated, the public tends to interpret them as image management rather than genuine compassion.

Beyond the digital and visual, the concept of embodied philanthropy highlights how generosity is materialized through social practices, rituals, and symbolic artifacts. (Hookway et al., 2023) argue that clothing, objects, and spaces in charity events function not just as decoration but as symbolic media that visualize solidarity. Examples include charity runs or benefit concerts, where apparel colors, logos, and slogans become part of a collective narrative of care and social responsibility. Through bodily and material aesthetics, philanthropy becomes a lived and inscribed social experience. Nevertheless, the aesthetics of generosity harbors a fundamental paradox. While it can foster empathy, solidarity, and engagement, it can also obscure underlying motives. (Nielsen, 2017) warns that "new philanthropy" often oscillates between image and reality, turning altruism into a social performance devoid of deep ethical commitment. This calls for critical reflection on how aesthetics shapes public perception of morality and goodness. Three ethical principles must therefore guide philanthropic representation. First, authenticity must remain the foundation of all philanthropic imagery and narratives,media should reflect transparency and social accountability rather than mere promotion. Second, narrative inclusivity should ensure that beneficiaries' voices and dignity are not reduced to objects of pity. Third, evaluation of philanthropy's success should go beyond engagement metrics to include its structural impact on social justice and empowerment.

In essence, the aesthetics of generosity constitutes a symbolic field where power, morality, and social identity are continuously negotiated. In an image-saturated digital era, every act of giving is measured not only by the amount donated but also by how it is visualized and publicly received. The aesthetics of

philanthropy can serve as a bridge between compassion and civic participation,but it can also act as a veil concealing inequality and strategic reputation-building. Thus, studies of philanthropy must move beyond economic and managerial concerns toward a cultural and ethical understanding of how goodness is produced, represented, and circulated. Within this framework, the aesthetics of generosity is not merely a reflection of moral intent but a form of visual politics that shapes collective imaginaries of humanity itself.

Weighed Altruism: Negotiating Between Interest, Ethics, and Power

Philanthropy exists within a complex interplay between altruism and strategic interest, embodying both virtue and tactical maneuvering within the framework of symbolic capitalism. This duality becomes evident as stakeholders navigate between moral imperatives and strategic advantages embedded in acts of giving. In the modern context, philanthropy is no longer viewed solely as a noble moral action but as a socio-economic strategy infused with symbolic value and public image. At its core, philanthropy has evolved to mirror broader social dynamics, particularly as explored in the literature on corporate philanthropy. (Arco-Castro et al., 2020) emphasize that donations often fail to serve as reliable indicators of genuine social commitment, as they depend on managerial discretion and personal motivations that stakeholders may perceive as inconsistent with an organization's long-term social values. This reveals a dissonance between the assumed moral intentions of philanthropic acts and the strategic benefits sought by corporations. (Nielsen, 2017) notes that hybrid organizations in philanthropy frequently experience tension between charitable expectations and business imperatives, showing that giving functions not only as an act of goodwill but also as a calculated effort to strengthen corporate image and preserve a favorable operational environment (Zuluaga & Acosta, 2025a).

Elite philanthropy represents a complex social phenomenon where acts of giving transcend simple charity to become strategic performances in the public sphere. The concept of "weighed altruism" captures this nuanced reality, philanthropy as a calculated form of generosity that negotiates between competing motivations and produces contradictory outcomes. This simplified framework distills the essential dynamics into their most fundamental components, revealing how three primary forces converge to shape philanthropic practice. Rather than viewing elite giving as either purely altruistic or wholly self-serving, this model presents it as a continuous negotiation where moral claims, strategic interests, and power considerations are constantly weighed against one another. The following diagram visualizes this core interplay and its dual consequences.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework: Weighed Altruism
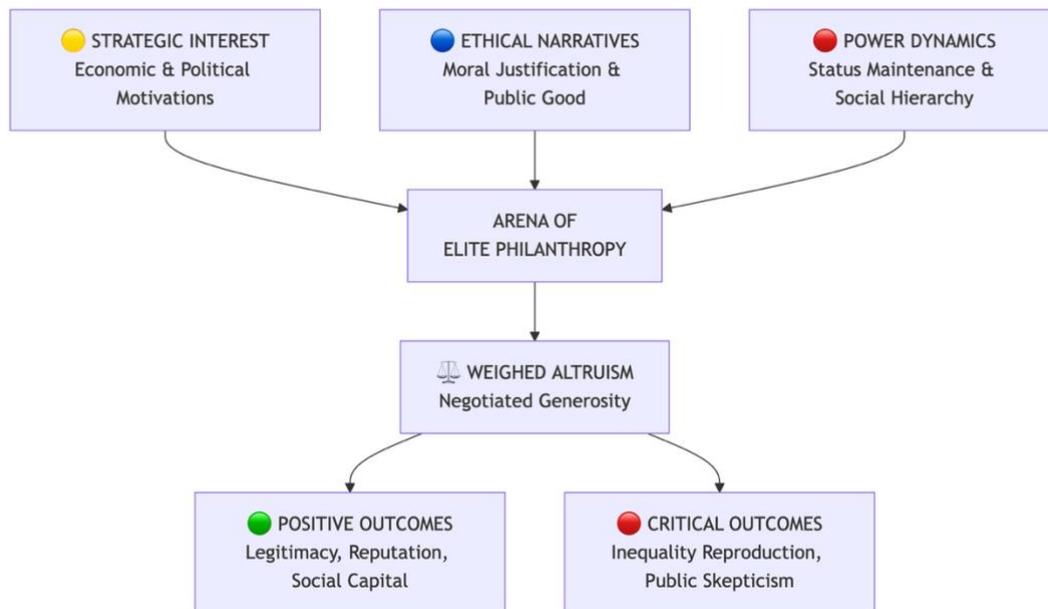
Source: Developed by the author based on literature synthesis, 2025.

This conceptual framework reveals that elite philanthropy operates through a constant negotiation between three primary forces. Strategic interest represents economic and political calculations, ethical narratives provide moral legitimacy, while power dynamics maintain existing social hierarchies. These three elements converge within the philanthropic arena, where acts of giving are transformed into carefully curated public performances. The concept of "weighed altruism" emerges as the outcome of this negotiation, a form of generosity that is continually recalibrated based on context and audience. Each philanthropic action produces two paradoxical outcomes: social legitimacy and reputation enhancement on one hand, and the reproduction of inequality and public skepticism on the other. This ambivalence is the defining characteristic of contemporary philanthropy. This simplified model provides a critical lens for analyzing philanthropic practices without becoming entangled in simplistic dichotomies. By recognizing these three interacting forces, we can evaluate philanthropy not merely by the amount donated, but also by its impact on broader power structures and social justice.

Ultimately, this model provides a critical lens through which to analyze contemporary philanthropy, moving the discourse beyond managerial or economic evaluations toward a deeper understanding of its cultural, political, and ideological dimensions. It affirms that to comprehend the true significance

of elite giving, one must examine not only the amount donated but also the complex interplay of motivations and power relations that give meaning to the act of generosity itself. Furthermore, the evolution of philanthropy in family business contexts, as discussed by (Zuluaga & Acosta, 2025b), illustrates how early philanthropic strategies were closely intertwined with both ethical imperatives and business goals. Historically, philanthropy has served as the foundation for the development of corporate social responsibility (CSR) identity. This aligns with contemporary discourses on strategic philanthropy, in which social good and corporate purpose are consciously and systematically aligned (Kubíčková, 2018).

Such alignment carries significant implications, especially amid criticisms that elite philanthropy often reinforces social inequality. (Maclean et al., 2021) argue that when concentrated in the hands of the wealthy, philanthropy reproduces economic and political hegemony, functioning as a vehicle for moral legitimization of power. The modern philanthropic landscape also exhibits diversification through emerging practices such as data philanthropy and program-related investments (Taddeo, 2016; Weber, 2024). These new forms represent a paradigm shift toward innovative, technology-driven approaches to social problem-solving through socially responsible investment. Yet, such transformation comes with challenges. (Onishi, 2019) highlight tensions between organizational identity and institutional logics within philanthropic practice, often resulting in complications regarding program effectiveness and transparency. Consequently, public skepticism about the long-term impact of philanthropic initiatives has grown (Eyre, 2021). Philanthropy, therefore, has become not merely a channel for giving but an arena of contestation between moral idealism and institutional self-interest.

As philanthropy evolves, public perception plays an increasingly critical role. The social media era complicates the relationship between intent and reception in acts of giving. Studies by (Gong et al., 2021; Kim & Austin, 2019) show that corporate engagement in philanthropy significantly influences brand perception, particularly among younger generations who evaluate companies based on social sensitivity. However, this relationship also raises questions about the authenticity of corporate motives. (Persuit, 2017) observes that philanthropic actions are often perceived skeptically when they appear to serve self-promotion rather than substantive social change. From a sociological perspective, philanthropy operates under the logic of symbolic capitalism, where moral value, image, and symbolic power become exchangeable commodities (Pierre Bourdieu, 2005). Acts of giving thus cease to be pure expressions of empathy or social solidarity and instead become investments in symbolic capital that yield moral

legitimacy in the public sphere. Consequently, corporations and wealthy individuals not only gain social recognition but also reinforce their positions within economic and cultural hierarchies. This explains why philanthropy often manifests as an ambiguous practice,ethical on the surface, yet strategic and performative in nature.

This phenomenon can also be read through the lens of the moral spectacle (Daly, 2023; Sklair & Glucksberg, 2021),wherein philanthropic acts are aesthetically constructed to project an image of goodness in the public domain. Through media narratives, visual storytelling, and humanitarian symbolism, acts of giving become emotionally charged performances that often obscure underlying power relations and systemic inequalities. (Momin et al., 2025; Paarlberg et al., 2022) refers to this as the "veil of philanthropy," a moral curtain that conceals structural failures and social injustices beneath heroic displays of charity. Philanthropy, in this light, functions as a mechanism of depoliticization, reducing systemic social issues to matters of personal empathy and moral expression. In the digital media context, this process becomes even more intricate. The visual representation of generosity,by celebrities, public figures, or corporations,often establishes a fictional pact between philanthropists and audiences, (Hassid & Jeffreys, 2015; Walby & Gumieny, 2020) describes. This narrative constructs an imagined consensus that philanthropic acts are inherently moral and praiseworthy, simultaneously reinforcing social legitimacy for the actors involved. It creates what might be called a moral economy of visibility, in which goodness must not only be done but also seen,and can thereby be capitalized symbolically. From the overall analysis, it can be concluded that the inherent ambivalence of philanthropy reflects a shift from altruistic action toward a complex strategy that fuses moral imperatives with business interests and social imagery. This transformation illustrates how the dynamics of symbolic capitalism profoundly shape the ways organizations and individuals conceptualize and enact philanthropy. Ultimately, the line between giving as virtue and giving as strategy grows increasingly blurred, revealing how morality and strategic calculation now coexist within the architecture of contemporary socio-economic life.

Conclusion

Based on the overall analysis, it can be concluded that elite philanthropy is essentially a practice of "weighed altruism",a form of generosity that is never fully detached from strategic calculation. The key finding of this study reveals that behind the moral narratives and aesthetics of generosity, philanthropy functions as a symbolic instrument for constructing social legitimacy, reinforcing

cultural capital, and reproducing the dominant position of elites within power structures. The main scholarly contribution of this research lies in its effort to deconstruct the false dichotomy between altruism and self-interest, while enriching philanthropic discourse with a critical perspective that situates it as an arena of identity and power contestation,going beyond the conventional economic-managerial approach that has long dominated the field.

However, as an exploratory literature-based study, this research carries limitations in terms of direct empirical verification of the motivations and practices of philanthropic actors in the field. Hence, its position serves as a foundational step toward a more comprehensive understanding. Further research is therefore strongly recommended,particularly ethnographic studies that delve into the logic and lived practices of elite philanthropy in the Indonesian context, investigations into the long-term impacts of strategic philanthropy on social inequality, and analyses of public policy roles in promoting more transformative and equitable forms of generosity. The fundamental question of how to distinguish genuine intention from image-making in modern philanthropy remains a rich and open terrain for future exploration.

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