Rhetorical Theory and User Interfaces: An Analysis of Donate Life CT

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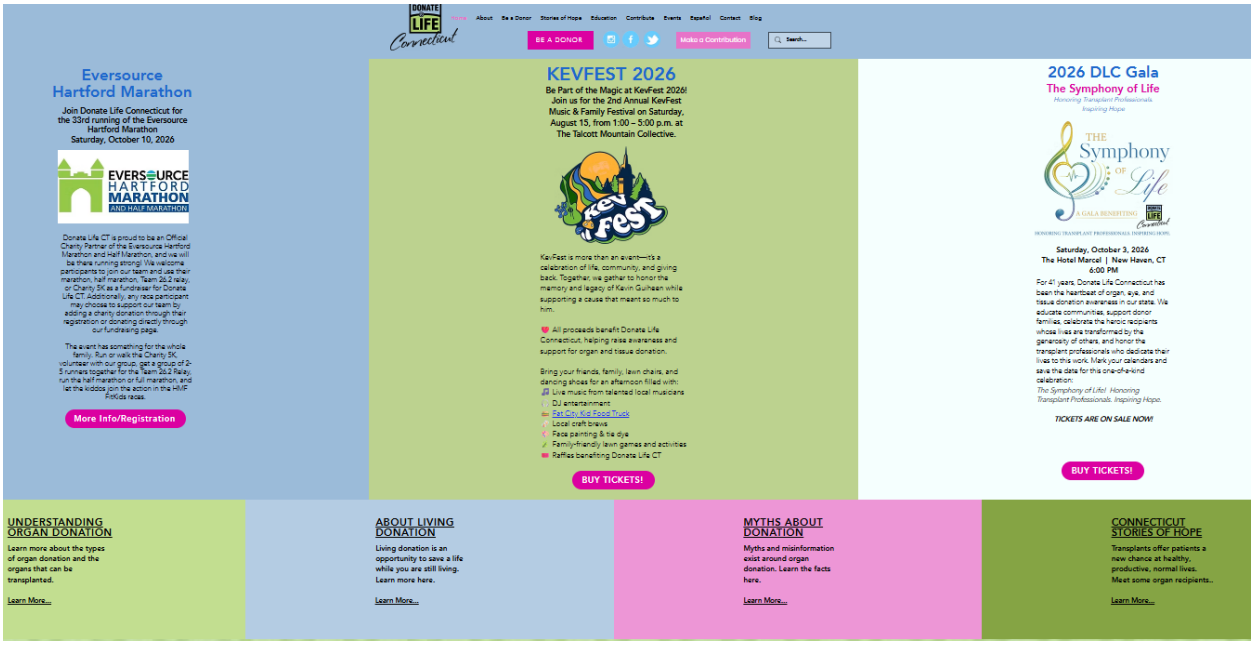
Approximately, every eight minutes another person is added to the national organ transplant list where more than 100,000 people already wait (Donate Life America, 2026b). Because of the overwhelming need for lifesaving organs, non-profits and organ procurement organizations (OPOs) need to heavily promote donation to persuade potential donors to register. In the past, promotion of organ donation "relied on mass mediated (e.g., televised public service announcements) and interpersonal (e.g., peer-to-peer) communication" (Stefanone et al., 2012, p. 168). However, as new modes of communication become available, non-profits and OPOs are branching out by using websites and social media platforms to reach more people. In order to reach these potential donors, websites must be user friendly, accessible, and effectively call potential donors to act by registering themselves. In this paper, we will examine the rhetorical strategies used on the Donate Life Connecticut webpage and explore how the user interface (UI) can be improved for better user experiences.

According to philosopher Aristotle, rhetoric is "the art of finding out the available means of persuasion" (Eyman, 2015, p. 13). It can also be seen as a way to "effectively persuade an audience toward change" (Ball et al., 2018, p. 35). Human communication employs rhetoric to persuade people to feel or act in a certain way. The Donate Life Connecticut webpage uses several rhetorical strategies in an attempt to persuade users toward registering themselves as an organ donor.

The first strategy we will examine is visual rhetoric because most users first notice the visual elements when visiting a site. Webpage designers only have seconds to convince users to stay, therefore the site should be aesthetically appealing (Robins & Holmes, 2006). Grabbing and maintaining a user's attention can be done through visual rhetoric, which is described as "the practice of using images persuasively" (Eyman, 2015, p. 36). Visual elements such as color,

framing, symbols, and font all work together to create an aesthetically pleasing and culturally meaningful experience for a user. The Donate Life Connecticut webpage employs very specific colors. As seen below in Figure 1, blues, greens, white, and pink are used within the design:

Figure 1 *A screen shot of the Donate Life Connecticut homepage*



Note. A screenshot of the color design from the Donate Life Connecticut homepage. From *Donate Life Connecticut*, by Donate Life Connecticut, 2026. https://www.donatelifect.org/.

Color not only commands attention, but conveys meaning (Kimball & Hawkins, 2008). The blocks of color not only pull the user's attention to each different piece of information displayed on the homepage, but the blues and greens also convey a sense of "tranquility and calm" (Donate Life America, 2026a). The colors blue and green are also the official colors of organ donation, which Donate Life Connecticut uses to align themselves with the mission.

As shown above in Figure 1, designers use blocks of color to frame different elements throughout the homepage. This particular design employs a highly segregated framing in which

users can easily see that the information inside of the boxes belong together (Tucker Steffen, n.d., Visual Rhetoric).

Another visual element that is prominently displayed on the webpage is the swirl symbol, which can also be found in the Donate Life Connecticut logo. According to Donate Life America (2026a), the swirl is "the symbol of life." The spiral appears in many cultures as a metaphor for the dynamic cycle of life and death, and it even appears in biological structures such as the double-helix of DNA (Yamada & Kato, 2006). The swirl or spiral symbol is used in this context to represent how life and legacies go on through the gift of organ donation.

Figure 2 *Swirl symbol and Donate Life Connecticut logo.*



Note. A screenshot of the swirl symbol and Donate Life Connecticut's logo. From *Donate Life Connecticut*, by Donate Life Connecticut, 2026. https://www.donatelifect.org/.

The last visual element that will be examined is the font. Throughout the Donate Life Connecticut webpage, a sans serif font is used. Serifs are the "small feet" at the top and bottom of letters (Kimball & Hawkins, 2008, p. 160). A common serif font is Times New Roman. Sans serif fonts such as Veranda do not have the "small feet" (Kimball & Hawkins, 2008, p. 160). Font can be equally as important as other visual rhetorical elements. According to Kimball and Hawkins (2008), fonts are "rhetorically significant" in that it can convey "meta-information" about the text such as tone (p. 157). For instance, users may perceive serif fonts such as Times New Roman as more traditional and conservative while sans serif may be perceived as sleek and modern (Kimball & Hawkins, 2008; Galitz, 2007). Sans serif fonts are also thought to be "visually simple" and make readability from a screen much easier (Galitz, 2007). Many users base whether they'll continue browsing a site and its credibility on its aesthetics (Robins &

Holmes, 2006). “The content with a higher aesthetic treatment [is] judged as having higher credibility” (Robins & Holmes, 2006, p. 386).

Which now brings us to how Donate Life Connecticut employs Aristotle’s three appeals (ethos, logos, and pathos) to assert credibility, provide a logical argument for organ donation, and appeal to the users’ emotions. The webpage asserts credibility or ethos by affiliating itself with Donate Life America, which is the national non-profit organization for the promotion of organ donation. Donate Life Connecticut also proves to be an active entity within the community by organizing and hosting events, engaging in community events, and offering speakers to bring awareness to the cause. The organization also employs highly educated donation professionals who’ve worked with OPOs such as New England Donor Services (NEDS), and those who have a personal connection to organ and tissue donation.

Logos can be described as “the logical or factual information conveyed” (Kimball & Hawkins, 2008, p. 65). Donate Life Connecticut appeals to our sense of logos by providing users with organ donation statistics throughout the years, explaining the different types of donation, and addressing the common myths that stand as a barrier to organ donation. The organization also provides a 12-day curriculum for high school students to explain the importance of donation and allows the community to invite knowledgeable speakers to their events.

Lastly, Donate Life Connecticut appeals to pathos, which is how the webpage “evokes an emotional response from the user” (Kimball & Hawkins, 2008, p. 65). Users are provided with links to personal stories from living donors, donor families, and recipients. On the “Stories of Hope” page, users can access professionally shot YouTube videos of these stories, which may make users feel more emotionally connected to the people and the cause. Hearing how organ

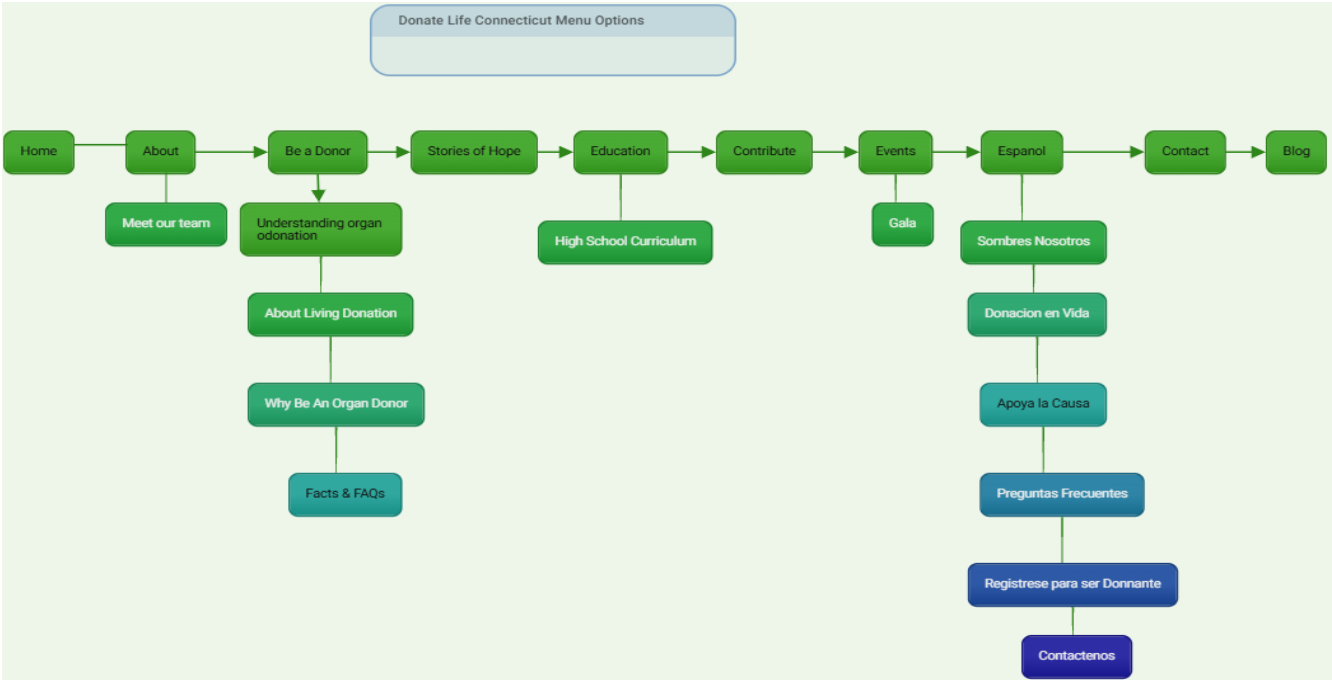
donation impacted or benefitted these people may make users more inclined to register to become an organ donor.

Another rhetorical strategy Donate Life Connecticut uses is Cicero's five cannons of rhetoric. The five cannons are invention, style, memory, delivery, and arrangement. According to Eyman (2015), invention is the most convincing "way to present information and formulate an argument" (p. 14). Invention and Aristotle's three appeals go hand-in-hand in that some of the same things satisfy both strategies. For instance, Donate Life Connecticut presents users with statistics such as how many people are currently waiting for an organ, personal stories, and reasons to become a donor in order to argue that users *should* register to become a donor.

The style of a webpage can be described by many of its visual elements. For instance, color, font, and layout may be included to describe how the webpage is stylized. However, style may also refer to "the use of appropriate and forceful language" (Eyman, 2015, p. 14). Donate Life Connecticut employs both visual and language elements to create a style for the webpage. For instance, the use of color not only calls back to the purpose of the site but contributes to usability by capturing and maintaining users' attention (Tucker Steffen, n.d., 5 Cannons of Rhetoric). Designers also repeatedly use words and phrases such as "lifesaving," "save a life," "be a donor," and "hope" to create a positive and altruistic tone throughout the site. (Donate Life Connecticut, 2026).

Repeating the same words and design elements also creates a sense of memory. The colored blocks may help users remember where information is located. For instance, users may remember that the link for common myths about donation is in a pink box. Also, when users

Figure 3 *Donate Life Connecticut Menu Map*



encounter the same words and phrases, it may help them to remember the purpose of the site: become an organ donor.

Delivery refers to when communication or texts or webpages are "presented effectively" (Eyman, 2015, p. 14). Effective presentation may include visual and language elements. For instance, consistent design choices will help users decide whether to take the organization's call to action or continue to interact with the webpage itself.

Arrangement refers to how information is organized, and how nodes and hyperlinks create connections (Eyman, 2015; Tucker Steffen, n.d., 5 Cannons of Rhetoric). As seen above in Figure 3 is a map of the menu which allows users to create their own narrative and connections while exploring the site. Beyond that, users are able to engage with the community through the events listed below the menu (see Figure 1). Arrangement also presents information in a logical and cohesive order and allows users to see how information fits together. For instance, if

information is close in proximity to other information, a user can assume that it belongs together, or is at least connected (Kimball & Hawkins, 2008).

The last rhetorical strategy that will be examined is the concept of rhetorical ecology. Traditionally, people think of ecology as the biological study in which organisms interact with each other; however, it can also be defined as "an often delicate or intricate system" (Meriam-Webster, n.d.). This theory posits that all of the information, nodes, and hyperlinks are all interconnected to create a cohesive narrative on the webpage. According to Eyman (2015), a rhetor named Fatima Pashaei "redesign[ed] the classic rhetorical triangle as an atom" to show how the rhetorical elements are dynamic rather than static (p. 77). The information within a webpage not only connects but builds off each other to create a relationship with each element on a site.

To see if the rhetorical strategies were effective, users tested the Donate Life Connecticut's original UI. Three users were asked to complete several tasks while explaining their thoughts. The three users came from different career backgrounds. One is an engineer, one is a graphic designer, and the last is a technical writer/document designer. The three tables below outline each task and the users' feedback.

User 1 – Engineer

Task	**User Feedback**
First impression	Complains of no obvious purpose; would not stay on site if not for testing
Find purpose/mission	Frustrated that purpose/mission is at the bottom

Find information that would persuade you to become a donor	Site relies too much on definitions; Frustrated that "Why Become a Donor" page is deep within in the menu instead of on the homepage.
Find the registration links	Clicked "Become a Donor" from menu, advises it's the only place with a call to action. Blinking "Become a donor" button is obnoxious like an ad.
Evaluate colors/images/fonts/layouts	Too much font, not enough images; Font is small and too hard to read. Pink font/hyperlinks are difficult to read.

User 2 – Technical Writer

Task	**User Feedback**
First impression	Feels very simplistic; lacks credibility
Find purpose/mission	Purpose should be at the top, not the bottom
Find information that would persuade you to become a donor	Not enough statistics outside of basic information; may provide enough information for casual browser, but not enough for someone really thinking about donation.
Find the registration links	Flashing "Register to donate" buttons are obtrusive; big obvious button would be more appropriate.
Evaluate colors/images/fonts/layouts	Colors feel "infantile"; "Easter colors" make user feel uneasy like designers are forcing positivity.

User 3 – Graphic Designer

Task	**User Feedback**
First impression	Impossible to navigate; too much info all at once; would not stay on site if it were not for testing
Find purpose/mission	Advertising events for nonprofits in CT that coordinate organ donation? Unsure; not clear.
Find information that would persuade you to become a donor	Nothing on this page would convince the user. If that is the purpose, it should be front and center.
Find the registration links	Registration links are buried in the header and footer; difficult to find.
Evaluate colors/images/fonts/layouts	Color palette extremely disjointed, and layout offers no visual hierarchy; looks incredibly unprofessional. Reminds user of a website built in the late 90s.

The users above pointed out several flaws within the original UI. All users noted that they had a difficult time figuring out the purpose of the site. Users also noted that the original informational hierarchy violated their expectations as they thought that things like the mission or purpose of the site should be easily found upon entering the site. The flaws that the users noted impact usability and readability.

Using the above suggestions, I created a prototype to redesign the UI. Figures 4 and 5 depict the redesign for Donate Life Connecticut.

Figure 4 *Lo-fi prototype*

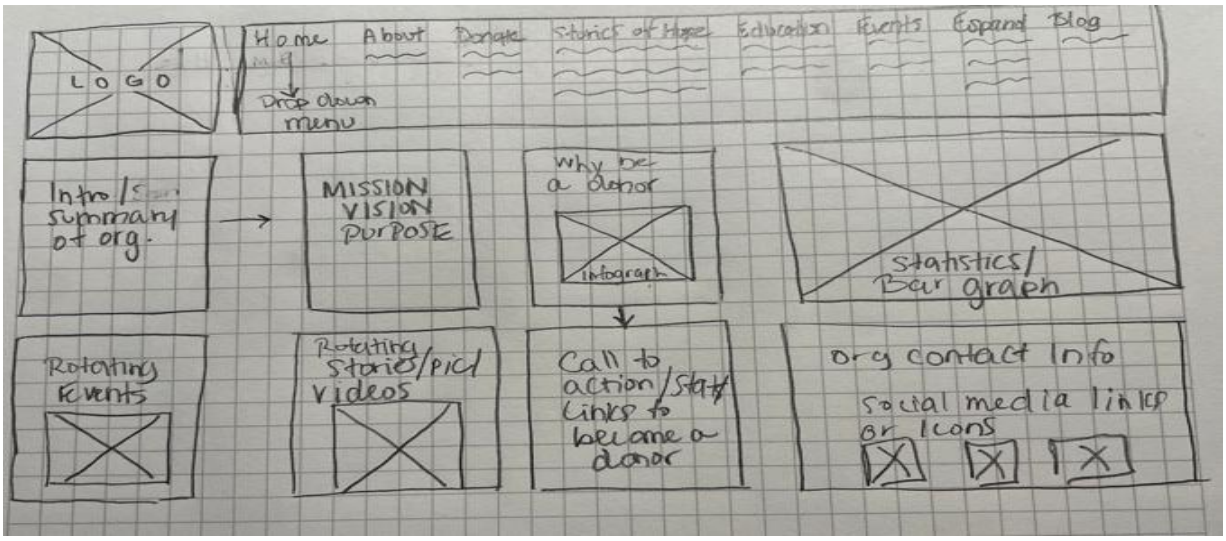
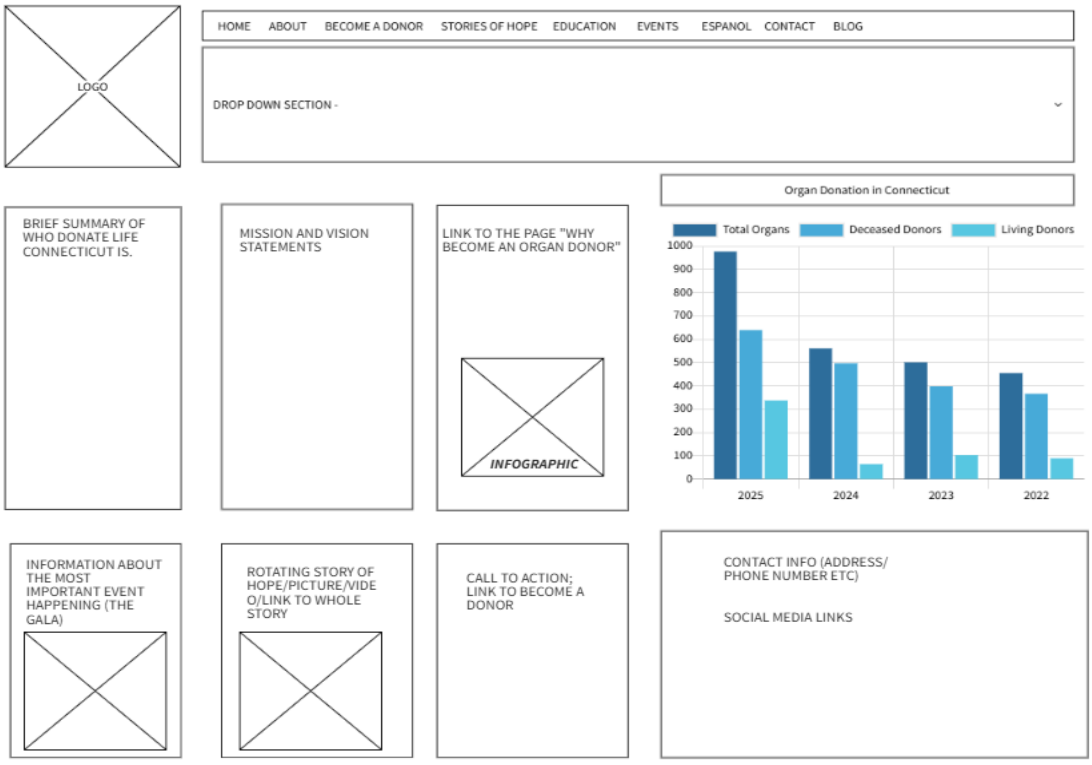


Figure 5 *Wireframe Prototype*



Note. Wireframe prototype of Donate Life Connecticut.
https://app.mockflow.com/wire/Meb736389e77aba729f44c8c5fbede1ba1786759243274

The first design decision that was made was to create a more effective menu. On the original UI, menu options would appear as a little gray box that had initially been mistaken as a description box. For this redesign, I provided users with a single drop-down menu, which is a simple menu that's presented on a "single screen or window" in order to not only provide easier navigation, but to give users more control over what paths they'd like to take throughout the site (Galitz, 2007, p. 308).

Next, the visual and informational hierarchy was redesigned. According to Galitz (2007), there should be "an obvious visual hierarchy" that "establishes a hierarchy of importance of screen elements" (p. 57). Information about the organization, its mission and vision were shifted from the bottom of the screen to the top. This allows users to immediately understand *who* Donate Life Connecticut is, and *what they want*. Information about important upcoming events and rotating personal stories about donation were pushed further toward the bottom as they are connected and rhetorically significant to the messaging but are not as important as the elements that had been shifted upward. The links for "Why Become an Organ Donor" and the call to action/registry are both within close proximity to each other so that users form a connection in their mind.

More visual elements were also added to the redesign. For instance, infographics and other visual media such as pictures or videos were suggested to provide visual aesthetics, "supplement textual content," and "depict relationships among items mentioned in text" (Galitz, 2007, p. 670).

The same users who tested the original UI also tested the prototype. Users thought more favorably of the redesigned UI. For instance, the technical writer thought the addition of infographics would make the site feel more credible. The engineer and the graphic designer

thought that shifting the informational hierarchy made it easier to understand what the purpose was and made for a more coherent narrative about organ donation.

While Donate Life Connecticut attempted to use many rhetorical strategies to inform and persuade donors, users found the UI difficult to navigate as the UI assumed that users knew more about the organization than they actually did. User testing showed that it's important that organizations employ both rhetorical strategies and good design principles to craft an effective webpage that will persuade users to act.

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