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# Media and Funding: A qualitative study of Malaysian Social Welfare NGOs

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the extent of media facilitates Malaysian Social Welfare Non-Governmental Organizations (SWNGOs) to acquire funding. Malaysian SWNGOs rely on external funding to support their operation, but this external funding is uncertain and limited. The number of registered Malaysian NGOs has increased recently. For this reason, acquiring funding has become more challenging for Malaysian SWNGOs. Through semi-structured interviews with 6 Malaysian SWNGOs, the study found that television is a dominant media platform to acquire funding. Also, an official website, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp were prominent platforms for most Malaysian SWNGO to acquire funding.

Keywords: Media; Funding; Malaysian SWNGO

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#### 1.0 Introduction

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) carry out voluntary services and humanitarian activities, being the advocate for justice, a voice out concerns among citizens to the government, organise programmes for societal awareness, and encouraging the government and corporations to work at the community level (United Nations [UN], 2003). The role of NGO is to influence government policy implementation for the betterment (Gemmill & Bamidele-Izu, 2002). For example, *Pertubuhan Jamaah Islah Malaysia* (JIM), a religion-oriented NGO, advocates human rights since the JIM members believe this is an integrated and pertinent aspect of good governance. As a result of their effort, the Internal Security Act (ISA) was abolished and replaced by the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 (Malik, 2014).

NGOs need adequate funding for their survival (Masdar, Kadir & Bahar, 2017). Previous studies have identified some NGO funding alternatives, such as maintaining relationships with donors and collaborating with donors (Avery et al., 2020). Zhong and Lin (2017) highlight that many NGOs use media in their work, but the studies on media use in funding acquisition are limited. Therefore, this study explores the extent of the use of media in acquiring funding among social welfare NGOs (SWNGOs) in Malaysian.

#### 2.0 Literature Review

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Media is a communication tool to convey information (Lovari & Bowen, 2019). There are two categories of media: mass media and social media. Mass media is a conventional approach to disseminate messages to a broader audience via a one-way interaction (Apuke, 2016). In contrast, social media is a modern approach used in this new era. It involves a two-way communication that enables users to create and share information to connect with people worldwide (ibid). It encompasses virtual content transmitted using advanced technologies such as the internet, computer networks, and mobile phones (Appel et al., 2019). Social media has advantages over mass media in terms of how information can be disseminated quickly to the public. In addition, the audience can respond to the information shared through social media faster than the message conveyed via mass media (Odun & Utulu, 2016). Mass media uses newspapers, magazines, television, radio, billboards, banners, and pennants to spread information (Burnett et al., 2017). Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram, WhatsApp, and WeChat are examples of social media (ibid). Suresh, Øyna, and Munim (2020) claimed that today's generation places a higher emphasis on social media to obtain information than mass media.

Media is a platform used to influence public attitude and behaviour to benefit organisations (Girish & Ghosh, 2020). The notion that the media can garner public attention and influence the attitude and behaviour of the public is consistent with the Hypodermic Needle Theory (HNT) (Nwabueze & Okonkwo, 2018). This theory assumes that messages conveyed via media bring impact to the audience who are unaware of the information. Therefore, media can influence the attitude and behaviour of the public to elicit the desired response (ibid). In this study, the purpose of media is to disseminate information to the public to solicit funds. NGOs use emotional photos or videos to influence public perception of the message conveyed (Zhang & Skoric, 2019). The emotional aspect of the photos and videos can influence the public to donate.

Funding for NGOs is uncertain and limited, and donors must engage in specific measures of financial viability to provide funding (United States Aid, 2006). However, funding becomes critical due to the increasing number of NGOs, resulting in greater competition for funding (Boomsma & O'Dwyer, 2018). The financial constraints would affect the NGOs' work, and some NGOs has ceased the operation (Banks, Hulme, & Edwards, 2015). The study found that competition implicitly disrupts NGOs funding activities due to environmental forces. Therefore, Ajina (2019) reported that media is essential to NGOs operations and serves as a platform to acquire funding.

Previous qualitative research focuses on NGO social engagement and accountability for fund sustainability, NGO funding programmes, NGO funding priorities, and NGO funding reporting (Gazzola et al., 2019; Shava, 2020; Chaudhry & Heiss, 2020; Yang & Simnett, 2020). However, qualitative studies on the use of media for funding are limited (Zhang & M. Skoric, 2019). Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap. Additionally, there are 10 registered NGO groups in Malaysia, namely social welfare, social work, religion, youth and sports, culture and arts, human rights, professional, mutual benefit, commerce, and safety (Registrar of Society [ROS], 2020). Social welfare makes up the majority of NGOs to address issues encountered by the vulnerable people, the poor and victims of natural disasters (Islam, 2015). For instance, if studies focus more on religious and human rights NGOs in Malaysia (Malik, Safarudin & Mat, 2018; Selvanathan, Khoo, & Lickel, 2019), then only a few studies focus on SWNGOs through media context (Mohamad Ashray, 2018). Nevertheless, SWNGOs play an important role in resolving the underlying issues in the Malaysian community. Thus, this study does carry much weight to the body of knowledge.

#### 3.0 Methodology

The participants of this study were the decision-makers or executors for funding acquisition and affiliated with registered Malaysian SWNGOs in Selangor. The researcher retrieved the list of Malaysian SWNGOs in Selangor from ROS and approached more than ten SWNGOs in the state for an interview. Only six SWNGO representatives agreed to participate in this study. Of the six participants, two were between 57 and 67 years old, and four were between 30 and 40 years old.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four NGO board members and two staff members. The semi-structured interviews explored the participants' thoughts and experiences concerning the topic studied (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The researcher prepared the pre-determined themes before conducting the interviews. Then, interview questions were developed from the pre-determined themes to guide the participants during the interviews.

Two external experts with experience and knowledge of NGOs and experience in managing and allocating funds validated the predetermined themes. Then, pilot interviews were conducted with three NGO representatives from two social welfare NGOs and one religious NGO in Malaysia for validation. By combining external experts and pilot interviews, well-validated interview questions can be developed to help the researcher obtain rigorous and comprehensive interview data to address the research problem.

The interviews were conducted in two ways: face-to-face with audio recording and online via the Webex application. In addition, the researcher allowed the participants to speak in Malay or English to enhance the connection between the researcher and the participants and understand the topic better. Each interview lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded after the participants had signed an informed consent form. Finally, data were analysed using a thematic analysis technique.

## 4.0 Findings

#### 4.1 Media Types

The findings in Table 1.1 show that the NGOs used five types of media to acquire funding: television (mass media) and official website, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp (social media).

Table 1. Media Types						
NGO	NGO1	NGO2	NGO3	NGO4	NGO5	NGO6
Media types	_					
Television	V	V	V	V	None	V
Official Website	None	√	None	<b>√</b>	V	√
Facebook	None	√	None	<b>√</b>	V	√
Instagram	None	√	None	√	√	√
WhatsApp	None	√	None	<b>√</b>	√	√

The findings show that all the participants used the media in their NGO operations. However, the most frequently used is television. It was also found that the participants frequently used official websites, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Half of the participants used all the media types.

#### 4.2 Media Function

The study found that the function of the media is to disseminate information to the public. All the participants disseminated information about their NGOs' activities and campaigns through the media. For example, the NGO5 representative stated that when the organisation conducts activities such as flood relief missions, promotional posters are created and posted on social media to disseminate information about the mission. NGO6 representative also stated that the NGO broadcasts information on television channels to promote their activities and introduce their products to the public. The information disseminated through the media can attract the public's attention and help in soliciting funds. For example, the participants used Facebook advertising to promote their activities to the public. NGO2 representative informed that Facebook advertising has a section for uploading photos, videos, or articles. NGOs can select the donors by gender, age, and background, making it easier to identify the potential donors. Thus, the information provided through Facebook advertising can attract previous and new donors. In addition, some participants actively used Instagram to attract public attention. NGO2 representative claimed Instagram to be an ideal platform to promote NGO activities. Although only photos and videos can be posted on Instagram, publishing photos can attract public attention and gain donations. Participants also added their official website's uniform resource locators (URL) on Facebook and Instagram. A click on the URL brings visitors to the NGO's website to learn more about the NGO's background and activities. NGO4 representative claimed that the NGO's official website has a professional look to attract viewers and includes a section for donations. The NGOs also used the WhatsApp platform to attract public attention. For example, the NGO5 representative explained that it creates attractive sentences, photos, and colours on flyers and posters and shares them through WhatsApp. The WhatsApp platform is an easy and convenient means to share information or messages with donors or potential donors. making it easier for NGOs to attract public attention and donations. Apart from Facebook, Instagram, the official website, and WhatsApp, television is another type of media that can attract public attention. For example, the NGO2 representative explained that the NGO has advertised on television channels such as AlHijrah and utilised the Bernama TV broadcasting slot. Such an approach allows them to draw people's attention to their activities.

#### 4.3 Media Impact

There are three media impacts on NGOs: increasing their visibility, influencing public perceptions of NGOs, and influencing public action on funding.

#### 4.3.1 Increasing the Visibility of NGOs

The media enhances the visibility of NGOs in the market, where initially, many people ignored the existence of NGOs and the information they provided. For example, the NGO3 informed that after the NGO invited reporters to promote its programmes in the media, people started following the NGO's programmes. Thus, the media does help to increase the visibility of NGOs to the public. In addition, the NGO6 said that:

"We have commercial our campaigns on social media like Facebook, Instagram, and website frequently to attract viewers. We can insert the link for donation on social media platforms. As a result, our NGOs and campaigns are visible to the public and donate."

#### 4.3.2 Influencing Public Perception

The finding reveals that the information disseminated through the media can influence public perceptions of NGOs. For example, the NGOs used photos, videos, and articles to convey emotional messages on their programmes to influence public perception of the NGOs. NGO2 mentioned that:

"We have a content writer who creates sentences related to the programmes, campaigns, and fundraising purpose through media to influence the public perception of NGOs. Otherwise, we have photos or videos to appeal to others' feelings and emotions about the programmes to acquire funds. Thus, using multiple functions in media tools can influence public perception."

This statement implies that the media is a powerful platform for NGOs to influence the public's perception of them.

#### 4.3.3 Influencing Public Action

Surprisingly, the study found that television has a long-term impact on NGOs. The participants informed that based on their experience, television could influence the public to provide continuous funding to NGOs. NGO6 said:

"Currently, there are no campaigns on television. However, we still have donations. Some have donated every month even though we have no programmes!"

This statement shows that the activities promoted on television have a substantial impact on funding. However, some participants had an opposite experience where television had a negative impact on their fund acquisition efforts. NGO1 explained:

"Often, we invite the media to our programmes, but it does not work. For example, recently, we had a programme at the University of Malaya (UM), and we invited the media, but we have to pay for the media."

The participants informed that their NGOs used the official website, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp to influence the public to donate. NGO6 said:

"Nowadays, he [the NGO's director] uses social media to get funding. So when he posted a WhatsApp message, and the message was viral, it appealed for donations. After a few seconds, [MYR] ten thousand was in our account, just through WhatsApp."

Three participants used both mass media and social media platforms to raise funds. NGO6 explained":

"We promoted our programmes through television, and we are active on social media. For example, we always update our official website and update the programme on Facebook and Instagram. So, people can easily allocate funds when we are active on media platforms. Although we have had no programmes on television for a long time because of the Malaysian Government Movement Control Order (MCO), however, we still got funded."

The statement was supported by an NGO4, who stated:

"During MCO, social media is the best platform to get funding."

Based on the interview responses from the participant, both types of media platforms are essential in NGOs' funding activities.

#### 5.0 Discussion

In 2019, 2.95 billion people were active on social media worldwide. Statista (2021) reported that the number is predicted to increase to nearly 3.43 billion by 2023. Facebook is the largest social media in the world. The number of active Facebook users increased to approximately 3 billion in 2021, making it the most popular social media. Apart from Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp are the most popular social media. There are one billion monthly active Instagram users (ibid). WhatsApp is also the leading mobile messaging application compared to WeChat and Telegram. Two billion users access WhatsApp every month.

Ifigeneia and Dimitrios (2018) found that many organisations, including NGOs, actively used Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp for their work. These platforms are used to commercialise products and inform the public about events. In addition, most NGOs also have an official website (ibid). It is a place where viewers can view the organisation's background and activities. It also allows viewers to interact with the organisation and obtain more information about the organisation (Bernal Jurado et al., 2018). Thus, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and the official website are recognised as the frequently used social media platforms in the digital world.

However, this study's findings demonstrate that television is the most frequently used media among Malaysian SWNGOs. Malaysia is a developing country with a high proportion of the middle-income population. While a report by the World Bank (2016) shows that social media is spreading rapidly, nearly 2 billion people in developing countries do not own smartphones or computers. Nearly 60 per cent of the world's population have no access to the internet (ibid). Moreover, Mertzanis and Said (2019) found the technological infrastructure in developing countries moderately developed. Ferri, Grifoni, and Guzzo (2020) argued that access to smartphones and computers is challenging in rural areas of developing countries due to low electricity availability and internet connectivity. Thus, in rural areas, the information conveyed through social media is limited to mass media. It is, therefore, not surprising that television is still relevant in Malaysia.

Furthermore, the findings depend to some extent on the background of the participants. For example, some of the participants are the baby boomer generation. Baby boomers were born between 1946 and 1964 (Towner & Munoz, 2016). These people rely on face-to-face communication where body language and non-verbal cues are essential (Walmsley, 2011). Despite the advent of digital technology, baby boomers are resistant to change (Venter, 2017). However, baby boomers struggle to adapt to technological change, and some do not appreciate the new technology. Towner and Munoz (2016) also found that baby boomers only focus on mass media. Thus, it is not surprising that television is the most popular media in this study.

This study's participants also included Generation Y. Generation Y refers to people born between 1981 and 1999 (Poláková & Klímová, 2019). This generation receives early and frequent exposure to technology (ibid). Some studies found Generation Y to be actively engaged in social media (Bolton et al., 2013). Kinski (2017) found that Generation Y actively contributes content to social media and prefers to stay connected and multitask through technology. Zheng and Cheok (2011) found that 99% of Generation Y has an active profile on social media platforms.

The media is frequently used to promote NGOs' activities. Several empirical studies also support this finding. For example, social media plays a vital role in commercialising NGOs' activities and introducing NGOs to the public, thereby improving the NGOs' image (Akatay et al., 2017). NGOs can also use their websites to state their mission and promote their activities to the public (ibid). Numerous studies have suggested that information disseminated through the media can attract public attention (Zhong & Lin, 2017). For example, text features can appeal to readers' emotions and increase readers' attraction and perception (Singh, 2014).

The findings show that messages disseminated through social media can influence public perception. For example, Bria (2013) asserts that a website enhances the organisation's credibility and looks professional to viewers. Tonetti (2019) found that NGOs publish

articles about their activities, use catchy words, and share emotional photos and videos to influence their public perception through social media. Further, Jang-Jaccard and Nepal (2014) discovered that internet connectivity has significantly increased social media usage, such as WhatsApp. WhatsApp messages concerning NGO activities can be disseminated widely to individuals or particular groups and are also created to influence public perception and deliver messages easily and quickly (Faroog, 2018).

Finally, the findings reveal that the media influences public action by encouraging people to support NGOs financially. This finding is supported by previous research on the influence of media on NGOs. For example, Barnes and Andonian (2011) found Facebook the dominant media for NGOs to raise funds. Bocquet, Cotterlaz-Rannard, and Ferrary (2020) found that the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) raises funds through social media, including its official website and Facebook. WWF has conducted many campaigns through social media and has been successful in fundraising. Some studies have claimed that mass media has little influence on public action (Saxton & Wang, 2014). Many studies have highlighted that mass media is no longer actively used for fundraising with the increasing use of social media (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Body & Breeze, 2016). Among the baby boomers in Malaysia, social media usage is limited compared to mass media (Ting et al., 2018). However, the present study found that television (mass media) predominantly influences donors to donate. This finding is consistent with the proposition by Hackworth and Kunz (2010) that NGOs should consider using the mass media to raise funds through a robust social media presence.

#### 6.0 Conclusion

This study has explored media use in funding acquisition, which has been overlooked by studies on media and funding (Fredheim & Figenschou, 2020). The concept of HNT is appropriate in this study, in which the NGOs' messages disseminated through the media influenced donors' attitudes and behaviour in providing funds. The findings have implications at theoretical, methodological, and practical levels. Theoretically, NGOs employ several alternatives to raise funds, including collaboration and maintaining relationships with donors. However, many NGOs use media for their operations, specifically for fundraising. Therefore, this study provides additional insights to NGOs on media usage in funding acquisition. Methodologically, many empirical studies on NGOs in Malaysia focus on NGOs in general, religion and human rights (Rashid, 2015; Malik, Safarudin, & Mat, 2018). However, few studies have focused on SWNGOs, making it is necessary to study. Practically, mass media and social media should be used to solicit funds. Waters, Tindall and Morton (2010) asserted that NGOs should not only use mass media to access funding. However, social media are not expected to replace mass media in Malaysia. Both platforms co-exist and complement each other in funding acquisition (Salman et al., 2011). This notion is in line with the study of Bria (2013), which found that Greenpeace NGO actively used social media and mass media for its campaigns and appeals for funding.

This study has several limitations. First, the six interview participants represented NGOs that conduct activities for and address the problems of vulnerable groups, particularly elderly citizens, women, and single mothers. However, there are many other vulnerable groups addressed by Malaysian SWNGO. Thus, the findings should be interpreted cautiously, as each SWNGO serves a different function. Next, due to the small number of participants, the findings have limited applicability to the broader Malaysian SWNGOs with different missions, which may take a different stance and solicit funding in their ways. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution.

This study raises the possibility for further funding acquisition research in the future. Future research could focus on other Malaysian SWNGOs that empower other vulnerable groups and nine other types of Malaysian NGOs with different missions. In addition, there are Malaysian NGOs that focus on religious aspects, including Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. It would be interesting to study how Malaysian NGOs use the media to solicit funds for different religions, which may unearth varying funding trends.

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