administrative sciences

Special Issue Reprint

Advancing Nonprofit Management

Innovations, Challenges and Best Practices

Edited by
Mary Tschirhart and Khaldoun AbouAssi

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Advancing Nonprofit Management: Innovations, Challenges and Best Practices

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Guest Editors

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About the Editors

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Preface

This Reprint examines how nonprofit organizations adapt and innovate. Its scope includes leadership, decision-making, resource management, technology adoption, communication strategies, accountability, and approaches to collaboration. The main aim is to advance understanding of how nonprofits experience innovation, whether incremental or radical, or planned or unplanned, and to assess opportunities and risks from such changes. The motivation for this collection stems from the increasing pressures nonprofits face, including financial uncertainty, shifting donor expectations, complex social challenges, partnership dynamics, and technological disruption. By bringing together diverse empirical methods and conceptual lenses, it identifies patterns, offers frameworks, and provides lessons that inform theory and practice. It is addressed to scholars of nonprofit management, public administration, and organizational studies, as well as nonprofit leaders, funders, and policymakers concerned with strengthening the nonprofit sector's capacity to respond effectively to contemporary challenges

Mary Tschirhart and Khaldoun AbouAssi
Guest Editors

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Editorial

Why and How Change? An Introduction to a Special Issue on Advancing Nonprofit Management: Innovations, Challenges and Best Practices

Mary Tschirhart [1,*] and Khaldoun AbouAssi [2]

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When we accepted the invitation to co-edit this Special Issue on innovations in the nonprofit sector in 2023, we did not know how much the world would change in less than two years. By focusing on innovations in the nonprofit sector in this Special Issue, we hope to inspire useful reflections on assumptions about, and options for, change in different types of contexts. Readers may reimagine possibilities and gain deeper understanding of minor and major shifts in how nonprofits operate to pursue missions and visions.

Nonprofits play a variety of roles: some respond to broad public interests and needs while others serve a specific group of individuals. They innovate to find new and better ways to meet the needs of their communities (Jaskyte Bahr, 2019). New and intensified challenges threaten their missions and existence. Sources of resources, power, and influence have shifted. To whom nonprofits are accountable is questioned, and nonprofits may feel pressure to align with others' agendas. Thus, we expect to see innovative activity that deserves scholarly attention.

Some of the innovative approaches currently receiving scholarly attention have placed an emphasis on social entrepreneurship, impact investing to create social value and generate income, new schemes for demonstrating impact, and the use of technology like artificial intelligence and giving platforms. Social entrepreneurs develop innovative solutions to social problems and use business principles to achieve their goals (Lombardi & Costantino, 2020). Impact investing seeks to achieve both financial and social returns (Maier & Meyer, 2017). Data-driven outcome measurement and assessment are integral to the pursuit of some nonprofits' goals, and research on strategies devised in response to donors' and other stakeholders' demands for quantifiable results shows that resource provision can lead to positive change (Ranucci & Lee, 2019). The digital era has ushered in a wave of innovations, resulting in new avenues for fundraising, engagement, and outreach. For example, improvements to online platforms, social media, and crowdfunding increase nonprofits' ability to build and sustain connections to donors, volunteers, and beneficiaries. Data analytics and artificial intelligence enable organizations to harness insights, optimize resource allocation, and better measure impact (Chaanoun et al., 2022; Lecy & Thornton, 2016). Also, innovations like blockchain technology have the potential to enhance transparency and accountability in financial transactions and impact reporting (Svensson et al., 2020).

Our Special Issue includes eight contributions supporting the goal of encouraging reflection on nonprofit change and innovation. Each offers a unique context, focus, and implications.

1. Liu and Altamimi examine organizational and sectoral influences on strategic and reactive use of flexible labor in US arts and cultural organizations. Flexible labor is not just for cost-cutting under conditions of resource scarcity; it is often proactively used by financially stable organizations to enhance resiliency.
2. Heist, Shaker, Sumsion, Tomlison, and Minor offer a new model for the DAF Donor Relationship Management Cycle. Based on input from fundraisers and inspired by the proliferation of these funds, the model suggests how to skillfully pursue and steward gifts from donor-advised funds given the missing information and the need to use intermediaries.
3. Araque uses a participatory autoethnographic approach to reveal and explain changes in volunteer management practices at the Huellas Foundation in Columbia. Innovations emerge from contingent management for and by volunteers who are engaged in self-realization and receive institutional recognition of their contributions and self-development.
4. Doherty, Hoeber, Hoeber, Morrison, and Wolfe look at different types of innovations in community sports organizations in the US. They help us consider how the radicalness (that is, the extent of novelty) of an innovation affects the change's process and outcomes, including those that were unintended as well as planned.
5. Lofthouse and Krahl tackle wicked social problems, using post-disaster recovery and climate change mitigation scenarios as examples. They argue that wicked problems are best addressed using polycentric systems with multiple overlapping decision-making centers. Nonprofits can play important roles and help in avoiding less useful one-size-fits-all approaches.
6. Meyer and Wiley share their research on social media communication related to the 2022 Mpox outbreak. They apply a multi-party framework to understand messy communication patterns with similar and different message focuses depending on the type of actor. They are hopeful that government, nonprofits, and influencers can learn to work together more effectively.
7. Cooley, in a Ukrainian context, conducted research offering insights into the online accountability practices of nonprofits. Using an accountability scoring system, we see that NGOs vary in their online transparency and stakeholder engagement. More innovation is possible to improve website accountability and, ultimately, overall effectiveness.
8. Espejo-Pereda, García-Salirrosas, and Villar-Guevar use survey data from 300 nonprofit workers across nine Latin American countries to show that inclusive leadership (servant, empowering, and shared style) creates a learning culture. This type of culture fuels an organization's dynamic capacity, i.e., its ability to adapt, experiment, and respond to change. Their study suggests that innovation arises from leadership practices that encourage learning, collaboration, and shared responsibility.

Lenses

While each article makes its own contributions, it is useful to consider them as a set. The articles' literature reviews are a diverse resource for building understanding of innovation in the nonprofit sector. The variety of perspectives used in the Special Issue help us see the value of a multi-conceptual approach to understanding nonprofit innovation. Figure 1 illustrates key lenses that emerge from the articles that help us develop a rich picture of nonprofit innovation.

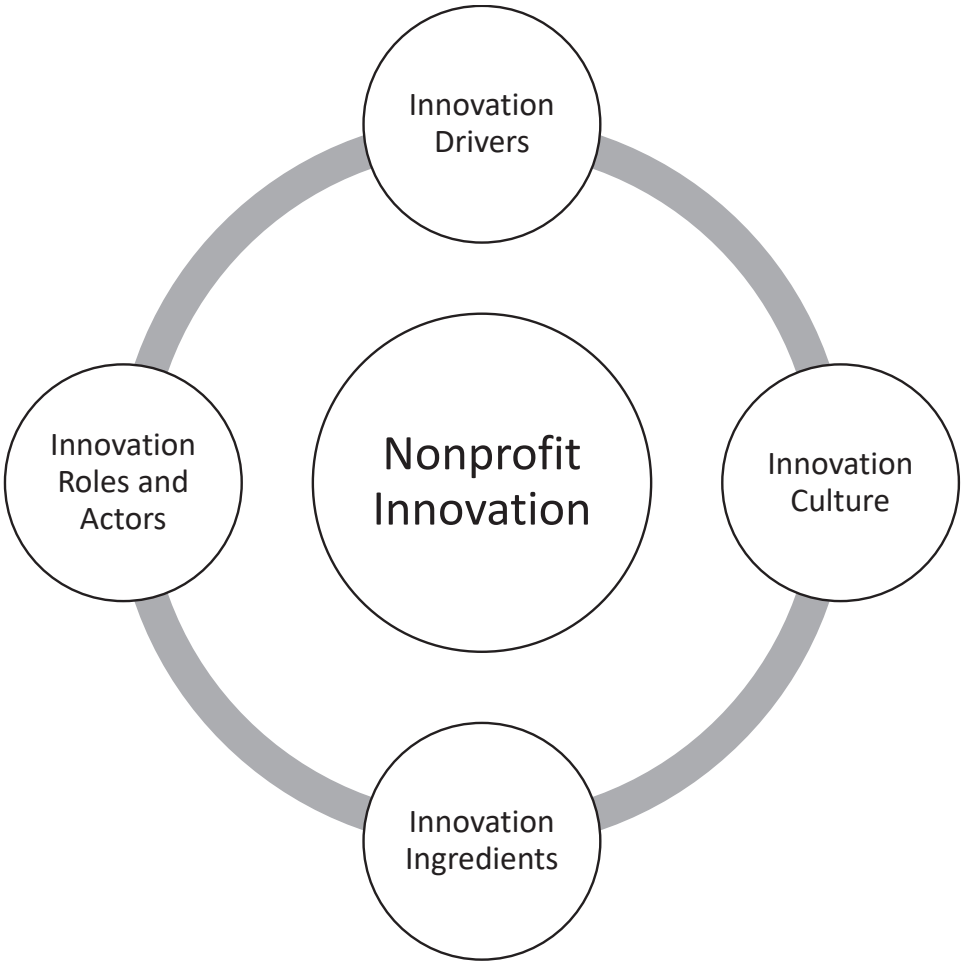

Figure 1. Lenses for examining innovation in nonprofits.

Innovation Drivers: Our first lens to highlight encompasses innovation drivers. Reflecting on what is driving a change can help us better understand the choice behind it and its implementation by nonprofits. Broadly, innovation may be driven by internal and/or external factors. Illustrating this, Doherty and colleagues explain internally planned changes and unintended changes driven by inside and outside forces. They find that the risks associated with change are less related to the radicalness of the change and its drivers than one might suspect. Complementing other articles in this Special Issue, Liu and Altamini show organizational and sectoral drivers of use of flexible work arrangements and find that use of contingent labor and community-based volunteers often are inspired by more than economic value drivers. That there are diverse drivers of innovation and capacity for it is not a new idea. Research suggests that nonprofits face unique constraints—such as mission-driven priorities, resource limitations, and complex stakeholder networks—that both enable and inhibit innovative practices (Dees, 1998; Mulgan, 2007). While some nonprofits demonstrate remarkable capacity for experimentation and adoption of novel approaches, others struggle to innovate, often due to organizational rigidity, risk aversion, or lack of alignment between innovation initiatives and stakeholder expectations (Kanter, 2006). This Special Issue's articles provide nuanced and deeper insights into this.

Innovation Culture: Innovation comes from challenging assumptions and questioning perceptions. In learning cultures, this becomes the norm. Some articles revealed that innovative change was sparked or at least supported when individuals recognized and accepted what they did not know and changed their understanding of what they thought they should and do know. When such examination takes place, it can result in innova-

tion. For example, Heist and co-authors found that what is critical to DAF fundraising success is recognition that knowing donor identities is not important; rather, it is the quality of relationships with intermediaries that is more meaningful. Espejo-Pereda and co-authors emphasize the importance of leadership styles in creating learning environments resulting in innovation. Nonprofits that empower their volunteers and beneficiaries to identify personal and organizational needs and foster change to address those needs can see innovation-related benefits to mission accomplishment. This is shown in sports associations, as revealed by Doherty and co-authors, and in the Huellas Foundation, as discussed by Araque.

Innovation Ingredients: An additional lens found in this Special Issue encompasses the ingredients for successful innovation. Authors find that nonprofit capacity to introduce and manage innovation is critical to innovation outcomes. They highlight what can make successful innovations possible. The insights from Meyer and Wiley's research on social media communication during the 2022 Mpox outbreak shows how innovating with multi-actor involvement can increase capacity for message outreach efforts. Cooley's study of online accountability practices of Ukrainian NGOs highlights the dual role of technology as a tool for improving communication, transparency, and coordination. Cooley also shows the value of strategic management to maintain trust and organizational effectiveness. Lofthouse and Krahl offer a comprehensive argument on why nonprofits should participate in polycentric systems to improve mission-related outcomes. They also suggest useful design features for these polycentric systems. Leveraging differing capacities of partners is helpful for finding new ways to address wicked problems and respond to time-sensitive needs. Also, from the broader literature, we know that, when strategically deployed, technology can enhance operational efficiency, enable data-driven decision-making, and support more targeted fundraising and service delivery strategies (Bryson et al., 2014). AI, for example, can facilitate sophisticated analysis of donor data, enabling nonprofits to optimize development strategies while maintaining personalized engagement.

Innovation Roles and Actors: We know from prior studies that the engagement of diverse stakeholders—including donors, beneficiaries, and volunteers—plays a critical role in shaping the types and extent of innovation pursued, highlighting the relational dimension of change in the nonprofit sector (Barman, 2016). This Special Issue underscores that formally designated nonprofit leaders, executive directors, and board members are not the only ones introducing and managing innovations in nonprofits. Media influencers, funder intermediaries, volunteers pursuing their own self-development, and technical resource providers are a few of the actors who help nonprofits change for the better. Nonprofits' strategic participation in multi-actor collaborations can be more effective in innovatively addressing a social problem than if they were acting individually. For example, Araque's research on Colombia's Huellas Foundation and Doherty et al.'s study on U.S. community sports organizations show that volunteers and community members are not passive recipients of services but rather active co-creators of innovation, with effective management being responsive to their motivations and the dynamic social context. Heist et al.'s model for donor-advised fund (DAF) management shows that innovations in fundraising are increasingly relational and procedural, reflecting the need to strategically manage complex stakeholder networks while maintaining ethical and effective engagement. Lofthouse and Krahl's argument for polycentric systems centers innovation as a crucial approach for tackling complex social challenges, requiring collaboration, decentralization, and systemic thinking.

Looking Ahead and Closing Thoughts

This Special Issue highlights the dynamic landscape of innovation within nonprofit management, a sector increasingly confronted with pressures to adapt and evolve in re-

sponse to shifting social needs, technological advancements, and stakeholder expectations. Taken together, the articles demonstrate that nonprofit innovation is multi-faceted and context-specific, rooted in organizational culture, shaped by stakeholders, affected by technology and perceptions of risk, and may be embedded in systemic approaches. Devising ways to engage with communities can not only facilitate knowledge sharing and collective problem-solving but also lead to innovations that promote mission accomplishment, empowerment of constituencies and beneficiaries, and future adaptability. By embracing innovation, nonprofits can enhance their effectiveness and better fulfill their missions in a complex and ever-changing environment.

Ethical considerations should be central to discussions of innovation. For example, nonprofits must navigate complex questions related to data privacy, security, and responsible use while ensuring that innovation supports inclusive and equitable organizational practices (Fitzgerald & Moon, 2021). The ability to integrate innovative approaches into governance structures and operational processes without compromising stakeholder trust or mission integrity is a challenge that merits sustained scholarly attention. Also, while evaluating the long-term impact of innovation is helpful for organizational learning and accountability, such evaluation needs to be performed responsibly and in ways that do not compromise the nonprofit's mission nor come at an unjustifiable financial cost. For example, Marwell and Mosley (2025) make the case that randomized control trials, as part of assessments, hurt the nonprofit sector. One of the key challenges for nonprofits is ensuring a balance between technological advancement and maintaining the human touch that defines much nonprofit work. The risk of relying too heavily on digital solutions and losing sight of personal connections and empathy is a concern. Additionally, the digital landscape presents cybersecurity threats, demanding robust measures to safeguard sensitive donor information and organizational data. Innovation also reshapes leadership, redefines motivation and satisfaction, and often comes with organizational structure changes (Brimhall, 2021; Ronquillo et al., 2021; Sainger, 2018), all with ethical implications.

Our approach to innovation in this Special Issue has been to not narrowly define it. We have not engaged in debates on definitions and value of the innovation concept (e.g., Fossati et al., 2017). Also, we have not attempted to sort out what in the articles is applicable to nonprofits versus organizations in other sectors. Some researchers argue that nonprofits possess unique characteristics—such as flexibility, a mission-driven purpose, and strong community ties—that enable them to be effective innovators (e.g., Valero-Amaro et al., 2021). Other scholars contend that the nonprofit sector's reliance on restricted funding and a risk-averse culture can stifle innovation. Savoy (2022) identifies several barriers to innovation in nonprofit organizations, including under-resourcing, limited pathways to scale, and a conservative risk appetite among donors. Also, restricted funding often earmarked for specific programs rather than general support can hinder nonprofits' ability to invest in innovation, such as upgrading technology or engaging with communities to define needs and solutions (Nelson & Beck, 2024). Our position is that it is not helpful to rely on generalizations about the sector as a whole and its capacity for innovation. This Special Issue strategically features diverse types of nonprofits with key differences in their funding and human resource structures that might affect innovation options and outcomes. Reflection on the drivers, culture, ingredients, and roles and actors that influence innovation has value without offering cross-sector comparisons.

As nonprofits confront heightened uncertainty, these articles offer both inspiring strategies and cautionary tales. They show that innovation can strengthen resilience, deepen engagement, and enhance accountability, but only when paired with inclusivity, ethical reflection, and a commitment to human connection. We hope this Special Issue

contributes to a richer conversation about how nonprofits can adapt creatively while staying true to their values and communities.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Article

Leadership Styles and Their Influence on Learning Culture and Dynamic Capacity in Nonprofit Organizations

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Abstract: Leadership is a key element in diverse working environments, contributing to the construction of more competitive and efficient institutions. Its impact transcends different sectors, including non-profit organizations, where it is essential to improve management and achieve institutional objectives. This research aimed to analyze whether leadership styles influence learning culture and dynamic capacity. An explanatory study was carried out involving 300 workers from nine Latin American countries who declared that they carried out work activities in a non-profit institution, aged between 19 and 68 years old (M = 34.10 and SD = 8.88). They were recruited through non-probabilistic sampling for convenience. The theoretical model was evaluated using the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Model (PLS-SEM). A measurement model with adequate fit was obtained (α = between 0.909 and 0.955; CR = between 0.912 and 0.956; AVE = 0.650 and 0.923). Based on the results, it was observed that there was a positive impact of servant leadership on learning culture (β = 0.292), of empowering leadership on learning culture (β = 0.189), and of shared leadership on learning culture (β = 0.360). Likewise, there was a positive impact of culture of learning on dynamic capacity (β = 0.701). This research provides valuable insight for leaders in this sector who are seeking to achieve higher levels of learning culture and increase dynamic capability among their workers.

Keywords: leadership styles; learning culture; dynamic capability; nonprofit organizations; NPOs

1. Introduction

Studying the behavior of leaders has been a frequent topic of interest throughout history and the main focus of institutions in various business groups (Jung et al., 2021). Taking into account the definitions of leaders by Podgorniak-Krzykacz (2021) as a "caretaker", "consensus facilitator", "boss of the town" and "visionary", it is then essential to analyze how these typologies influence decision making, organizational performance and impact on collaborators. This skill is used to build trust between the leader and team members (Baykal et al., 2018). As history tells it, leadership has existed since ancient times; that is, since the time of the Sumerians, Egyptians, and Babylonians, among other great civilizations (Díaz, 2023). All of these civilizations had a leader, took over large crowds, presided over the government of a nation, controlled wars and promoted collective ideas, being highly educated in the practice of this skill (Díaz, 2023; Sözen & Şar, 2015). And as a response to economic, social, cultural, political, and technological changes, the study of

leadership should be viewed with special importance, since its impact is related to the behavior of people and their influence on the achievement of the objectives of an organization (Meirinhos et al., 2023).

A leader is seen as the heart of an organization and cannot be underestimated (Al-Mahayreh et al., 2016). Leadership is recognized by spreading ideas, thoughts, or actions. According to Covey (1994) a leader is one who solves problems in creative ways to achieve sustainable success. Researchers have demonstrated and proposed various forms of leadership (Amini et al., 2019), and with its evolution, renowned authors such as James Burns, Bernard Bass, and Steven Covey, among others, have contributed to the study of leadership styles, (Palafox et al., 2020); each style has methods or patterns of behavior that the leader ought to adopt in order to manage his or her organization effectively (Van Jaarsveld et al., 2019). It is important to note that different leadership styles seem to work for most leaders in various situations, leading to the claim that there is no best leadership style and that the most successful leaders tend to adopt most of the different styles (Espejo-Pereda et al., 2025; Laura-Arias et al., 2024; Mooroŝi & Bantwini, 2016; Van Jaarsveld et al., 2019).

Entities seeking to achieve high levels of effectiveness must proactively adjust to environmental transformations (Ramos et al., 2020). The ability to predict threats, confront adverse situations and adapt to changing circumstances is fundamental to their survival and success. In the present context, marked by continuous innovation, non-profit institutions also need to develop digital skills that will enable them to progress in their digital maturity. To address these challenges, it is essential to employ strategies such as education, effective communication, and active participation of employees in the transformation process, and this is where establishing a learning culture could generate significant changes (Martínez et al., 2020). Constant technological changes have made organizations aware of the competitive markets in which they operate, and which motivate them to seek a competitive advantage in learning and knowledge (Gil et al., 2023; Torgaloz et al., 2023). Organizations can maintain a competitive advantage and be innovative as long as they choose to seek more knowledge and know how to manage it effectively (Ramos et al., 2020; Udin, 2023). A learning-oriented culture aims to create an organizational environment that focuses on the collaboration between individuals and on stimulating creative processes. The organizational structure should support the sharing of knowledge (Gonzalez & Massaroli, 2017; Porcu et al., 2020; Yang, 2003). The organizational structure is responsible for determining the clear formalization of knowledge, the degree of autonomy of employees, connecting people, promoting multidisciplinary and communication channels between individuals, and utilizing the flow of knowledge (Gedifew & Muluneh, 2022; Maggi-da-silva et al., 2022).

For this reason, the learning culture plays an important role in the process of adaptation to a changing environment (Gedifew & Muluneh, 2022; Gil et al., 2023; Troskie-de Bruin et al., 2014). In the 21st century, companies operate in increasingly uncertain contexts (Atanassova & Bednar, 2022; Kelling et al., 2021; Silva & Ferreira, 2017), and they should learn faster and better, as this guarantees sustainability (Torgaloz et al., 2023). Additionally, maintaining a learning culture could optimize management skills, resulting in a good business performance (Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2021). A learning culture encourages experimentation and critical thinking (Barabasch & Keller, 2020). When employees feel it is safe to try new ideas and learn from their mistakes, organizations become innovative and can quickly adapt to industry changes (Jung et al., 2021; Porcu et al., 2020). Hence, organizations that value and foster a culture of lifelong learning will achieve better results (Raemy et al., 2023), since their employees, who are constantly acquiring new knowledge and skills, can better perform their functions and contribute to the overall success of the institution (Cavazotte et al., 2015).

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) are a type of organization whose main purpose is not to generate economic profit, but to fulfill a social, cultural, educational, humanitarian, or community mission (Bernstein & Fredette, 2024; Hodges & Howieson, 2017; Tosto & Tcherni-Buzzeo, 2025). This sector is undergoing a profound transformation due to environmental, social, political and economic changes in Europe and Latin America (Hodges & Howieson, 2017). An emphasis on leadership styles has influenced conversations about management and the general perception of leadership within NPOs (Shier & Handy, 2020). In this sense, it has been observed that the leadership style exercised in certain NPOs, such as religious organizations, is critical to their long-term survival, and this is one of the most widely researched topics, due to its impact on behavior (Ortiz-Gómez et al., 2020). This suggests that the success or failure of a NPO development project largely rests with its leaders. There is a growing recognition of importance in the context of NPOs (Aboramadan & Kundi, 2020). Therefore, those in leadership positions at all hierarchical levels should take the necessary precautions to increase the commitment of their members (Erdurmazlı, 2019). While leadership in NPOs presents similarities with that of the business sector, it also faces challenges with volunteer management, donations, limited resources, generally lower remuneration, and competition with other sectors seeking talent (Nave & Correia, 2020; Potluka et al., 2021). It has been shown that leadership in this sector varies according to the culture in which it operates. In addition, the scarcity of scientific research and the complexity of the environment make it necessary to analyze the nature of leadership and to identify the characteristics that favor the success of the sector in relation to the cultural context in which these entities operate (Brunetto et al., 2024; Debnath & Bhowmik, 2022).

Taking into account this background, a diligent review of literature has shown the evident emergence of a growing interest in studying these topics among the leaders of human and academic talent management. Bibliometric indicators reveal that the ten countries that most frequently disclose their scientific results are the United States, China, the United Kingdom, Malaysia, Indonesia, Australia, India, Pakistan, Canada, and Spain. These countries have applied their studies to various areas, sectors and populations, such as business management and accounting, social sciences, psychology, economics, and engineering.

However, in relation to the scientific dissemination of these three topics, no existing studies have been found that allow a more comprehensive scope of leadership behavior, even though evidence supports the idea that studying aspects of leadership and learning culture could not only increase the effectiveness of employee performance but also transform an organization into an agent of continuous learning (Udin, 2023). In fact, there is little research assessing the dynamic capacity of an organization, which could establish both objective and subjective conditions to support the process of innovative development (Santos et al., 2022). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to analyze whether leadership styles influence learning culture and dynamic capacity. The text below comprises the following sections: Section 2 contains the literature review and hypothesis development. Section 3 provides materials and methods. Section 4 describes the results. Section 5 contains the discussion and Section 6 focuses on the conclusions.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1. Servant Leadership

Servant leadership (SE) is described as an integrative and altruistic leadership style (Laura-Arias et al., 2024), where the leader focuses primarily on the needs of the work team and society as a whole (Page & Wong, 2000), instead of himself/herself and his/her superiors (van Dierendonck, 2011). This is an area of knowledge that deserves further research, as it has achieved many positive results in various work groups (du Plessis et al., 2015) and is committed to high moral and ethical standards that put people first (Gocen

& Sen, 2021). In 1970, Robert Greenleaf argued that the most accurate test of servant leadership is making a conscious decision to first be a servant and then to discover a natural desire to lead (Greenleaf, 1977). A servant leader is influential and knows how to favor his/her team before asking them to follow his/her ideals, because deep down everyone wants to be appreciated. The differentiating factor of this leadership model lies in making ethical decisions, in having good relationships with work team (Agustin-Silvestre et al., 2024; Boydak et al., 2017), and in carrying out their tasks (Ngah et al., 2022).

2.2. Empowering Leadership

Empowering leadership (EL) is defined as giving power and responsibility to lower-ranking employees in the organizational structure so that they can make decisions. (Tian & Chae, 2023). This implies that leaders delegate to their workers the ability to make key decisions in their respective work areas, while providing them with the resources, knowledge and adequate support they need in order to perform more effectively (Baykal et al., 2018). Additionally, empowering leadership focuses on the constant growth of employees' skills and abilities. Leaders who empower their team, dedicate efforts and resources to the training and professional growth of their members, build an environment of continuous education that creates a high-performance organization (Mohammed & AL-Abrrow, 2023).

Empowering leadership is often approached in two ways. First, it includes the behaviors of a formal leader or a leader who holds a position and power in an organization (Naqshbandi & Tabche, 2018), such as encouraging their team to express opinions and ideas, facilitating collaborative decision making, supporting information sharing, and teamwork (Sharma & Kirkman, 2015). Second, recent research conceptualizes empowering leadership as a method of sharing power between leaders, automatically increasing people's autonomy (both individually and in groups) and leading to more proactive participation in their workplace (Steinmann et al., 2018). Although there are many opinions about empowering leadership, there are differences in the dimensions according to its theoretical model (Hoang et al., 2021). However, management specialists have also studied it in relation to other factors, stating that it is sufficiently distinct from these leadership constructs to justify a single line of academic research (Sharma & Kirkman, 2015).

2.3. Shared Leadership

Much has been said about shared leadership (SD), but what specialists mostly agree on is that it is a leadership model in which the responsibility and authority to make decisions are distributed among all members of a team, instead of focusing on just one individual (Aufegger et al., 2019). This approach promotes collective responsibility, innovation, and commitment. Therefore, it involves increasing organizational adaptability and resilience (J. Zhu et al., 2018), cooperation, empowerment, active participation of all actors, and using different skills and knowledge to achieve common goals more effectively (Chen & Zhang, 2023). It is an organizational dynamic in which leadership is shared among several people on the team who assume roles based on their capabilities and skills to help the team to reach the institutional goals (Van Zyl & Hofmeyr, 2021).

2.4. Learning Culture

A learning culture (LC) can be defined as a culture designed to promote and facilitate employee learning, and the sharing and dissemination of learned knowledge for growth and success within an organization (Lefebvre et al., 2016; Marsick & Watkins, 2003; T. M. Rebelo & Gomes, 2011; Schmitz et al., 2014). Some studies affirm that employees with a desire to learn seek an environment that encourages growth and development. A robust learning system can help retain these key employees by giving them the opportunity to

develop and grow within the organization (Miño-Puigcercós et al., 2019; Walan & Gericke, 2023). Additionally, the ability to adapt in a changing business environment has been shown to be critical to the long-term survival of an organization (T. Rebelo et al., 2017). A learning culture encourages flexibility and speed (Barlow et al., 2023; Huang & Asghar, 2018; Khan et al., 2020; Koivula et al., 2022), allowing organizations to quickly adapt to new situations and opportunities (Gedifew & Muluneh, 2022).

Another important factor that focuses on leaders is that they value and encourage continuous learning (Cavazotte et al., 2015). This culture creates a sense of community and collaboration among employees (Hazzam & Wilkins, 2023; Udin et al., 2023), thus promoting commitment, teamwork, a supportive work environment (Tripathi & Kalia, 2022), learning transfer (Maggi-da-silva et al., 2022), dynamic capacity, team performance (Gonzalez, 2022), and corporate identity (Cooper et al., 2016; Mejía-Manzano et al., 2022; Urrutia et al., 2022). Consequently, studying, evaluating, and analyzing learning culture in an organization is essential to foster essential elements such as innovation (Lin & Huang, 2021; Matic, 2022), improving performance, retaining talent, increasing adaptive capacity, promoting effective leadership, and strengthening the organizational culture as a whole (Kucharska & Rebelo, 2022).

2.5. Dynamic Capacity

During the last decade of study, a new approach of strategy theory has emerged that allows organizations to adapt their strategies to fully meet their commitments (Zea-Fernández et al., 2020). This new approach, called dynamic capabilities theory (DBT), focuses on an organization's ability to create, update, change, integrate, and recreate its portfolio of resources in a rapidly changing environment in order to achieve high performance, sustainability, and long-term competitiveness (Brito-Ochoa et al., 2020; Fernandez-Pinto et al., 2024). When defining dynamic capability (DC), its origin goes back to thinking about a business approach (D. J. Teece et al., 1997). The contributions of D. Teece and Pisano (1994) noted for the first time that companies that can maintain a competitive advantage in the global market often have a timely response and rapid product innovation. This concept is considered an evolution of the resource-based view (RBV), which is based on the assumption that a company is composed of a set of resources and its sustainable competitive advantage is derived from its share of resources (Wang & Zhang, 2021; C. Y. Zhu & Zhang, 2022). In this sense, dynamic capabilities refer to a set of processes and capabilities that enable a company to continuously improve core processes (Gonzalez, 2022).

2.6. Leadership Styles Influence Learning Culture

The development of a firm and respectful leadership can, additionally, enable the development of a learning culture to encourage employees to have experiences that allow them to take risks through creativity and innovation (Rusindiyanto et al., 2024); this means that a leadership style can encourage employees to use their full potential responsibly, creating a scenario where their participation and contribution is significant for the company and/or institution (Bose et al., 2021). Therefore, it is stated that employee participation depends largely on the leader, since he/she is responsible for promoting continuous learning, training and skill development that allows employees to take on challenging situations with confidence and competence (Park & Park, 2019; Siahaan, 2017).

Based on the fact that the people-centered leadership style can be created by all three types, servant, empowering, and shared leadership (Cahyadi et al., 2022), it has been identified that servant leadership positively influences the learning culture (Dalain, 2023; Tsarkos, 2023). To further explain this association, research supports the idea that a leader whose priority of needs is mainly focused on his/her employees, concerned with

training human talent and shaping their capabilities, and producing the development of their maximum potential, could influence the sustained creation of a learning culture that significantly benefits the institution (Dalain, 2023). Therefore, the order of priority adopted by the leader will inspire in employees a positive attitude towards the institution, creating an environment where the culture of learning is highly valued (Akgün et al., 2023; Dalain, 2023; Tsarkos, 2023).

On the other hand, research has identified that establishes that servant leadership assumes an important role in the growth and development of employees. Therefore, a dynamic environment is generated where the leader assumes the role of mentor and facilitator while the employee increases his or her individual competencies (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016; Politis & Politis, 2017; Rosnani, 2018). On the other hand, the empowering leadership style has also been analyzed as a factor that positively influences the learning culture; that is when a leader promotes autonomy and delegates responsibilities, he/she awakens creativity, motivation, and the discovery of new skills in his/her work team; the same situation used as an essential tool to create assertive responses to any situation (Hanh & Choi, 2019; Xie, 2019). This is why it is necessary for an empowering leader to promote collaborative processes and to encourage feedback in order to create an environment where sharing knowledge in collaboration with colleagues becomes an activity that improves the skills of employees (Choi et al., 2015; Hanh & Choi, 2019).

Furthermore, studies have explored the concept that a leadership that supports the distribution of responsibilities and active participation of team members (shared leadership) positively influences the learning culture as well (Porter et al., 2024; Zhan et al., 2024). This means that collective efficacy arises as a result of shared leadership where team results are enhanced due to the collaboration and skills of team members, thus generating innovation, assertive problem solving, and the achievement of collective goals (Hoch, 2014; Sabir et al., 2022). Based on the above, the following study hypotheses are proposed:

H1: *Servant leadership positively influences the learning culture*.

H2: *Empowering leadership positively influences the learning culture*.

H3: *Shared leadership positively influences the learning culture*.

2.7. Learning Culture Influences Dynamic Capacity

According to research, when the culture of learning intervenes in dynamic capacity, a panorama is created where the ability of organizations to achieve the integration, construction and reconfiguration of both internal and external competencies are strengthened according to the demands of business environments (Naqshbandi & Tabche, 2018; Sabir et al., 2022). Another theory establishes that the learning culture, independently of allowing team members to exchange ideas, explore and exploit their knowledge, also empowers them, opening an important path to innovation and creativity within the organization, due to the development of a better understanding; this also allows the discovery of new opportunities that keep the organization competitive against the competition, which is called dynamic capability (Tripathi & Kalia, 2022).

Other studies establish that a crucial element to achieve the dynamic capacity of an institution is through the formation of a solid team; an integrated team whose motivation to learn continuously and collaboratively drives adaptation to changes will thus achieve a way to build an organization and allow it to thrive (Lin & Huang, 2021; Tripathi & Sankaran, 2021). Thus, it is important to promote an environment of trust and openness within work teams, providing them with the essential elements to strengthen their individual

and collective capacity, called a learning culture (Lin et al., 2019). Based on the above, the following study hypotheses are proposed:

H4: *Learning culture positively influences dynamic capacity*.

2.8. The Culture of Learning in Servant, Empowering and Shared Leadership

As specified in the previous paragraphs, there is an important link between servant, empowering and shared leadership in the learning culture, but how likely could it be that any of these types of leadership maintains an association with dynamic capability, taking as a variable mediator the culture of learning? Although, in the previous paragraphs it was argued that leadership is associated with the culture of learning, there are studies that place special emphasis on leadership as a factor that influences the organizational results that an institution can achieve, and the ability to survive in a competitive business environment; in this way, the leader's behavior can boost dynamic capacity, facilitating the acquisition of prior knowledge in this process (Khattak et al., 2020). Similarly, other research supports the idea that there is a significant link between leadership and continuous improvement (dynamic capability), which is reinforced through the knowledge acquired by employees.

In general terms, every time a leader displays a behavior that seeks the professional growth of his/her collaborators, making the collaborator a priority and allowing him/her to participate in the decisions that promote the well-being of the institution, individual and organizational benefits are generated (Tripathi & Sankaran, 2021), which are the same ones that are reflected in the positioning of an institution. Since the collaborator participates in decision-making, applying his/her knowledge to facilitate their implementation, this collaborator feels like an important element, which makes him/her exploit his/her skills with greater commitment, thus creating a greater effect on the dynamic capacity of a company (Hilverda et al., 2023; Rehman et al., 2023). Based on the above, the following study hypotheses are proposed:

H5: *Learning culture plays a mediating role in the positive influence of servant leadership on dynamic capability*.

H6: *Learning culture plays a mediating role in the positive influence of empowering leadership on dynamic capability*.

H7: *Learning culture plays a mediating role in the positive influence of shared leadership on dynamic capability*.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Context of the Study

Based on the assumptions presented above, the main objective of the study was to analyze whether leadership styles influence learning culture and dynamic capability or not. The research context was framed by the need to understand how different leadership approaches can foster an organizational environment conductive to knowledge acquisition and application, as well as to strategic adaptation in changing contexts within Latin American NPOs. The most important goal of the study was to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in organizational leadership for NPOs, offering valid and clear scientific evidence to improve institutional effectiveness.

3.2. Design, Procedure and Participants

The design of this study was instrumental (Ato et al., 2013). The population group was made up of workers from a non-profit agency, based in 9 Latin American countries.

This institution provides humanitarian aid and development in 130 countries around the world and has a very important impact in Latin America. The inclusion criteria were as follows: to be of legal age (minimum 18 years) and to have worked for more than one year in managerial, administrative and project implementation, and technical functions. To select the participants, non-probabilistic convenience sampling was applied (Otzen & Manterola, 2017), choosing those who were available and willing to participate in the research. This was obtained via a request for participation through the directors of each agency per country. A total of 300 workers aged between 19 and 68 years participated (M = 34.10 and SD = 8.88). The majority of the participants were women (61.67%), single (56%), with an age range of 19 to 29 years (40.33%), worked in the country agency of Ecuador (49%) and had been working for the institution for 1 to 5 years (82%) (Table 1).

Table 1. Sociodemographic profile of the participants (n = 300).

Category		Frequency	%
Sex	Female	185	61.67
	Male	115	38.33
Marital status	Single	168	56.00
	Cohabitant	10	3.33
	Married	108	36.00
	Divorced	14	4.67
Age range	19–29 years	121	40.33
	30–39 years	105	35.00
	40–49 years	54	18.00
	50–68 years	20	6.67
Country where you work	Ecuador	147	49.00
	Peru	69	23.00
	Chile	26	8.67
	Brazil	47	15.67
	Venezuela	4	1.33
	Mexico	3	1.00
	Colombia	2	0.67
	Argentina	1	0.33
	Paraguay	1	0.33
Years of service	1–5 years	246	82.00
	6–10 years	34	11.33
	11–15 years	5	1.67
	16 years or more	15	5.00

3.3. Measurement Scales

The online questionnaire was structured in three sections: the first section included the instructions and informed consent of the participants, the second section included the sociodemographic variables, and the last section contained the measurement scales. All of these were translated from English. Before use, these underwent a semantic validation process with the inclusion of 6 workers who met the profile of the participants, ensuring that the items were understandable in the context of each country. To respond to each item on the measurement scales, a 5-point Likert-type response format was used, ranging from 1 ("Totally disagree") to 5 ("Totally agree"). The scales used for this study can be viewed in Appendix A.

Leadership styles: To measure this variable, a short instrument of 9 items and 3 factors was used, which consisted of 2 items for servant leadership (SE) taken from previous studies (Cahyadi et al., 2022; Espejo-Pereda et al., 2025; Russell & Stone, 2002), 3 items for

empowering leadership (EL) extracted from short scales (Cahyadi et al., 2022; Espejo-Pereda et al., 2025; Naqshbandi & Tabche, 2018), and 4 items for shared leadership (SD) adapted from recent research (Chacón-Henao et al., 2022; Espejo-Pereda et al., 2025). Internal consistency was measured by Cronbach's Alpha (α = 0.917, 0.955 and 0.934 respectively).

Learning culture: To measure this construct, a recent model of 7 items structured in 3 factors was used (Gonzalez & Massaroli, 2017). The factors were coded as follows: Knowledge Sharing (KS), Management Active Participation (MAP), and Taking Risks and encouraging the Creative Process (RCP). Internal consistency was measured by Cronbach's Alpha (α = 0.909).

Dynamic capacity: A short scale of 6 items distributed in 3 factors was used. These factors were coded as follows (Gonzalez & Massaroli, 2017): Knowledge Absorption (KA), Knowledge Exploitation (KET), and Knowledge Exploration (KEL). Internal consistency was measured by Cronbach's Alpha (α = 0.912).

3.4. Ethical Considerations

The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of a Peruvian University (2023-CE-EPG-00153). Subsequently, during the period between January and May 2024, participants were invited to complete an online questionnaire through Google Forms. Before data collection, confidentiality rules and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (Manzini, 2000; Puri et al., 2009) were followed, informing the participants about the purpose of the research and obtaining their informed consent under the statement: "I acknowledge that by completing this questionnaire I am giving my consent to participate in the study".

3.5. Data Analysis

For statistical analysis of the data, the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Model (PLS-SEM) was used. The PLS-SEM consists of two stages: evaluation of the psychometric properties of the measurement scale, such as reliability, convergent and discriminant validity; and the testing of hypotheses through the system of structural equations.

3.6. Common Method Bias

In this research, several strategies were implemented to minimize bias, among them, the application of an anonymous and confidential questionnaire with the objective of reducing social desirability. In addition, the variables were presented in separate sections of the questionnaire, which helped to mitigate common method bias.

Furthermore, to verify that the model was free of common method bias, a Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) analysis was performed. According to this analysis, if all VIF values in the internal model, derived from a collinearity test, are equal to or less than 3.3, this indicates that there is no significant collinearity problem (Kock, 2015). As shown in Table 2, all VIF values were below this threshold, indicating that the model had no common method bias.

Table 2. Collinearity statistics (VIF)—inner model list.

	VIF
Empowering Leadership (EL) -> Learning Culture (LC)	2.420
Learning Culture (LC) -> Dynamic Capacity (DC)	1.000
Shared Leadership (SD) -> Learning Culture (LC)	2.157
Servant Leadership (SE) -> Learning Culture (LC)	2.071

4. Results

Evaluating a model using PLS-SEM comprises a two-step process that involves evaluating the measurement and structural models (Chin, 2010; J. F. Hair et al., 2011).

4.1. Convergent Validity

According to J. Hair et al. (2017), to evaluate the measurement model, an estimate of the reliability of the constructs (composite reliability and Cronbach's Alpha) and validity (discriminant and convergent validity) are used. Cronbach's Alpha values were between 0.909 and 0.955, and the threshold value of 0.70 falls below these values (J. Hair et al., 2017). Similarly, the composite reliability (CR) showed values between 0.912 and 0.956, which were above the suggested value of 0.70 (Kline, 2015). Based on these findings, all constructs were considered error-free and construct reliability was established (see Table 3).

Table 3. Convergent validity results.

Construct	Items	Factor Loading	α	CR	AVE
Servant Leadership (SE)	SE1	0.960	0.917	0.917	0.923
	SE2	0.961			
Empowering Leadership (EL)	EL1	0.958	0.955	0.956	0.918
	EL2	0.960			
	EL3	0.955			
Shared Leadership (SD)	SD1	0.906	0.934	0.935	0.835
	SD2	0.921			
	SD3	0.916			
	SD4	0.912			
Learning Culture (LC)	MAP1	0.868	0.909	0.912	0.650
	MAP2	0.863			
	MAP3	0.864			
	KS1	0.684			
	KS2	0.786			
	RCP1	0.775			
	RCP2	0.786			
Dynamic Capacity (DC)	KA1	0.854	0.912	0.916	0.693
	KA2	0.850			
	KET1	0.828			
	KET2	0.807			
	KEL1	0.830			
	KEL2	0.824			

Note. The convergent validity results ensured acceptable values (factor loading, Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability (CR) $\geq$ 0.70 and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) > 0.5).

Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and factor loading should be tested for convergent validity (J. Hair et al., 2017). Table 3 reveals that all the factor loadings had values above the suggested value (0.70). Table 3 also shows that the AVE performances had indicators between 0.650 and 0.923, which were above the threshold value (0.50). With these results, convergent validity for all constructs was adequately satisfied.

4.2. Discriminant Validity

In order to find the discriminant validity, two criteria had to be taken into account: the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT) (J. Hair et al., 2017). According to Table 4, the Fornell–Larker conditions supported these claims, as all AVEs and their square roots were greater than their correlations with other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 4. Fornell–Larcker scale.

	DC	EL	LC	SD	SE
DC	**0.833**				
EL	0.553	**0.958**			
LC	0.701	0.641	**0.806**		
SD	0.595	0.700	0.678	**0.914**	
SE	0.558	0.685	0.651	0.636	**0.961**

Note. The diagonal values in bold represent the square of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE).

The results of the HTMT relationship are provided in Table 5, which shows that the threshold value of 0.85 was greater than the value of each construct (Henseler et al., 2015). Therefore, discriminant validity was determined with these findings. These results confirm the validity and reliability of the measurement model. Consequently, the evaluation of the structural model could continue.

Table 5. Heterotrait–Monotrait relationship (HTMT).

	DC	EL	LC	SD	SE
DC					
EL	0.585				
LC	0.760	0.686			
SD	0.636	0.740	0.735		
SE	0.603	0.732	0.712	0.686	

4.3. Structural Model Analysis

The proposed hypotheses were contrasted using the PLS-SEM technique. Predictive relevance values were used for model fitting. Cross-validated redundancy values (R^2) represent the predictive relevance of the model. R^2 values must be greater than 0 for model accuracy (J. F. Hair et al., 2014b; Henseler et al., 2015). Table 6 shows the endogenous latent variables and their respective R^2.

Table 6. R^2 of the endogenous latent variables.

Construct	R^2
Learning Culture (LC)	0.556
Dynamic Capacity (DC)	0.491

Figure 1 graphically represents the structural model, illustrating the relationships between the latent variables and their respective path coefficients (β). The arrows indicate the direction and intensity of the relationships proposed in the hypotheses, and the values of the coefficients reflect the magnitude of the effect between the variables. A higher coefficient implies a stronger relationship, while the *p*-values and t-statistics help determine the significance of each relationship. This visual representation complements the detailed information in Table 7, which presents the same path coefficients along with statistical significance values in numerical format. Together, both presentations facilitate the interpretation of the results and the empirical validation of the proposed model.

Path coefficient values, *p*-value and t-statistics were used to accept and reject hypotheses, as shown in Figure 1 and Table 7. Path coefficient values close to +1 indicate a strong association and vice versa (J. F. Hair et al., 2014a). The *p*-values and the t-statistics refer to the acceptance and rejection of the proposed hypotheses. In this study, the conceptual model contains seven hypotheses. The results of the tested hypotheses are summarized in Table 7. H1, which proposed that servant leadership (SE) has a positive impact on

learning culture (LC) (β = 0.292, $p < 0.000$, t = 4.145), was accepted; H2, which proposed that empowering leadership (EL) has a positive impact on learning culture (LC) (β = 0.189, $p = 0.004$, t = 2.911), was accepted; H3, which proposed that shared leadership (SD) has a positive impact on the learning culture (LC) (β = 0.360, $p < 0.000$, t = 4.630), was accepted; and H4, which proposed that learning culture (LC) has a positive impact on dynamic capacity (DC) (β = 0.701, $p < 0.000$, t = 21.469), was accepted.

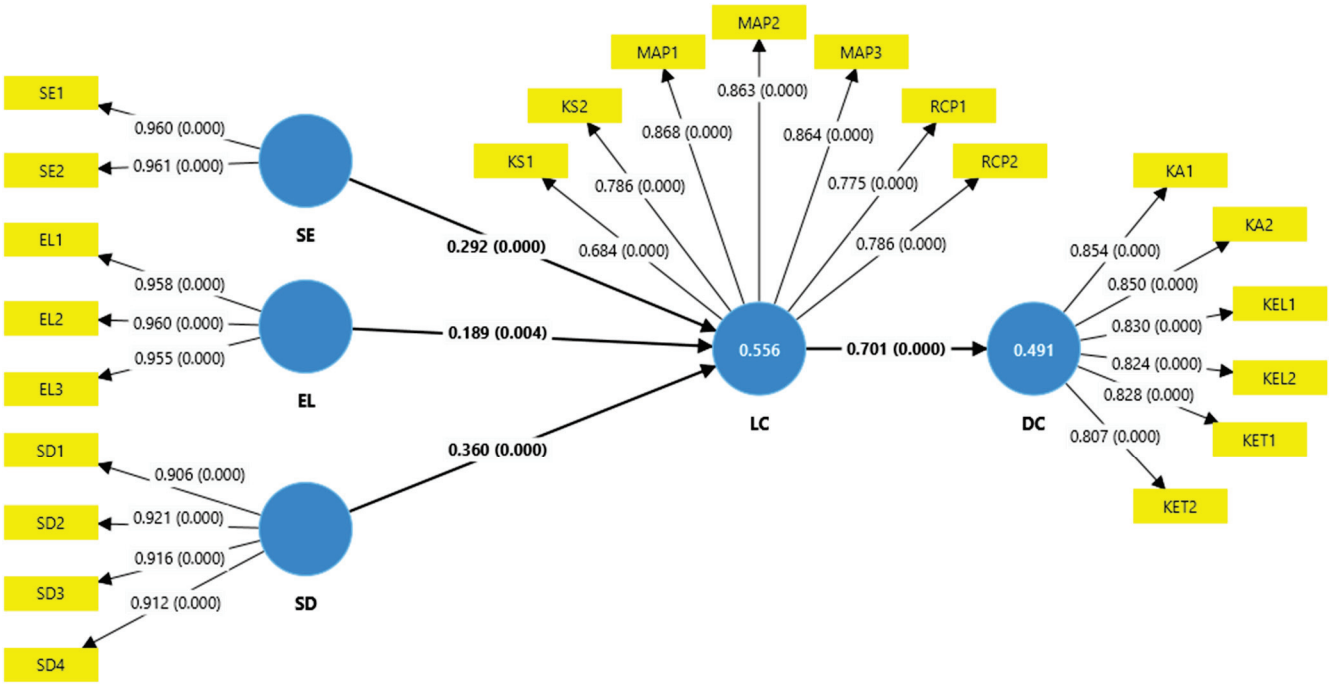

Figure 1. Structural model.

Table 7. Structural model results.

H	Hypothesis	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistic (|O/STDEV|)	*p*-Value	Decision
H1	SE-LC	0.292	0.290	0.071	4.145	0.000	Supported
H2	EL-LC	0.189	0.192	0.065	2.911	0.004	Supported
H3	SD-LC	0.360	0.359	0.078	4.630	0.000	Supported
H4	LC-DC	0.701	0.702	0.033	21.469	0.000	Supported
H5	SE-LC-DC	0.205	0.204	0.050	4.086	0.000	Supported
H6	EL-LC-DC	0.132	0.135	0.046	2.854	0.004	Supported
H7	SD-LC-DC	0.252	0.252	0.057	4.452	0.000	Supported

In addition, H5, which proposed that learning culture (LC) has a mediating role in the influence of servant leadership (SE) on dynamic capability (DC) (β = 0.205, $p < 0.000$, t = 4.086), was accepted; H6, which proposed that learning culture (LC) has a mediating role in the influence of empowering leadership (EL) on dynamic capability (DC) (β = 0.132, $p = 0.004$, t = 2.854), was accepted; and H7, which proposed that learning culture (LC) has a mediating role in the influence of shared leadership (SD) on dynamic capability (DC) (β = 0.252, $p < 0.000$, t = 4.452), was accepted.

Therefore, all hypotheses were tested, and from these findings it is clear that promoting servant leadership within an institution could strengthen and foster an environment where continuous learning and improvement are valued and practiced. Also, empowering leadership can motivate employees to constantly seek learning and development opportunities. Even more importantly, as shared leadership involves collaboration between

multiple leaders or the distribution of leadership roles among different individuals, it is likely to promote diversity of perspectives, experiences and skills within the organization, thus influencing the learning culture. On the other hand, as the learning culture implies that individuals and teams are constantly acquiring new knowledge and skills, this could improve the organization's ability to quickly adapt to changes in the external environment, such as recent changes in emerging technology. Finally, if learning culture mediates the influence of different leadership styles (service, empowerment, sharing) on the dynamic capacity of nonprofit organizations, this suggests that these leadership styles have a positive impact on the organization's ability to adapt and change through the promotion of an environment conductive to learning and continuous improvement. Furthermore, establishing a learning culture in nonprofit organizations in Latin America could make employees become increasingly eager to learn and continually strive to develop their potential and perform better.

5. Discussion

The objective of the present study was to analyze whether or not leadership styles influence learning culture and dynamic capacity. This study was developed in the context of nonprofit organizations at the Latin American level, a sector that is undergoing a major transformation as a result of the environmental, social, political and economic changes taking place in Europe and Latin America (Hodges & Howieson, 2017). In the early 1950s, leadership studies emphasized behavioral patterns and leadership styles (Schmid, 2006), focusing on the importance of leaders understanding the various models they can follow, as well as developing skills to identify their own strengths and weaknesses (Schmid, 2006), creating positive emotions, and preventing negative emotions in group members (Rowold & Rohmann, 2009). This is especially relevant in the field of nonprofit community and human service organizations, which face continuous change and transition (Lutz Allen et al., 2013), particularly due to the declining legitimacy of the welfare state (Schmid, 2006). Therefore, the leadership style exercised in certain organizations, such as religious ones, has been recognized as critical, and therefore is one of the most widely researched topics, due to its impact on behavior (Ortiz-Gómez et al., 2020). This sector is commonly characterized by volunteer management, donations, limited resources, typically lower remuneration, and competition with other sectors in the search for new talent (Nave & Correia, 2020; Potluka et al., 2021). Recent studies show that leadership within this sector differs, depending on the culture in which it operates (Brunetto et al., 2024; Potluka et al., 2021).

From a descriptive perspective of the results and statistical analysis, this research analyzes the evaluation of the measurement model, which indicated high levels of reliability of the constructs evaluated, which is essential to guarantee the validity of the conclusions. Cronbach's Alpha values obtained scores greater than 0.70, indicating solid internal consistency. Likewise, the composite reliability (CR) also exceeded the minimum valid scores, showing that the indicators of each construct adequately reflect the theoretical concept that it intended to measure. In that sense, the fact that Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability have had values higher than the minimum threshold establish the reliability of the construct to continue the process of testing the structural model. Two criteria were used to determine discriminant validity: the Fornell–Larker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT). In both cases the values obtained showed a robust model.

To verify the hypotheses, the PLS-SEM technique was used. The path coefficient values, *p*-value, and t-statistics were used to accept and reject the hypotheses. In the case of H1, it was accepted that servant leadership (SE) had a positive impact on the learning culture (LC). Dalain's (2023) study agrees with the results of this research by showing

that servant leadership in association with other variables, such as goal congruence and human talent practices, regulates innovation where learning culture plays an important role (Gonzalez, 2024). Likewise, by accepting H2, agreement is suggested with what was reported in the study by Babaee et al. (2021), who found a close association between empowering leadership and learning culture. In addition, this study accepted H3, which highlights the importance of shared leadership in promoting a learning-oriented organizational culture, which is essential to encourage continuous innovation and adaptation in an organizational environment.

The acceptance of H4 reinforces the idea that a strong learning culture is valued for the development of dynamic capabilities, which is a strategic path for organizations that wish to adapt quickly to changes in the environment through continuous improvement of their critical processes. These results are similar to the scientific dissemination of some recent studies (Gonzalez, 2022; Gonzalez & Massaroli, 2017). On the other hand, the acceptance of H5 suggests that servant leadership can foster dynamic capabilities in nonprofit organizations, mainly when it fosters the formation of a learning culture. This suggests a similarity with some scientific reports from Vietnam and other case studies (Irani et al., 2009; Hanh & Choi, 2019). H6, which was accepted, indicates a significant relationship, although more modest compared to the other leadership models. Finally, accepting H7 highlights the importance of shared leadership, not only in directly promoting a culture of learning, but also in its ability to translate this culture into dynamic capabilities (Gonzalez, 2022).

5.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study presents various theoretical and practical implications for the practice of NGO management in Latin American contexts. At a theoretical level, it expands knowledge about the behavior of NGO leaders in Latin America and how it influences the learning culture and dynamic capabilities of these organizations, providing literary support for the confirmed hypotheses. The aforementioned theoretical considerations highlight and reaffirm that leadership is an essential component for the development of dynamic capabilities, demonstrating that it is a dimension whose orientation is related to strengthening the competencies of organizational members for their transformation processes and for the fulfillment of organizational objectives and goals. In this sense, considering leadership as a key component that impacts the learning culture and dynamic capabilities of an NGO is a proposal that adds value to research on this topic.

One of the least discussed, yet most relevant, aspects in the field of leadership is that numerous researchers have analyzed it, often without considering its specific context. Social identity theory suggests that the way leadership is exercised is based on self-perception in relation to one's social group and collective identity. Thus, the economic, political, and sociocultural environment of Latin America may have affected the manifestation of these attributes among leaders. In this sense, a shift from hierarchical models to horizontal, participatory, and community-based leadership may be more appropriate and effective for NGO settings. Currently, NGOs face challenges such as limited donor funding, volunteer recruitment, and, to a certain extent, the socioeconomic situation in some countries in the region. At the same time, they must assume the responsibility of supporting vulnerable populations living in poverty. Considering this, it is believed that shared, empowered, and servant leadership could counteract these challenges by building trust, ethical alliances, and mobilizing local resources. These types of leadership can also purposefully attract new volunteers, forming genuine human bonds, and may also be capable of promoting emotional resilience, adaptability, and social justice, fostering solutions rooted in dignity and active participation.

On the other hand, leadership is a process that helps and encourages other organizational components to be intensely astute, innovative, collaborative, and transformative, providing organizations with skills to achieve greater managerial effectiveness. In this sense, the results of this study contribute to the strategic field by showing the benefits of promoting servant, empowering, and shared leadership in the pursuit of social added value. From the perspective of organizational practice, these data are important because, in the current context of Latin American NGOs, where the decline in international cooperation funds and high competition for access to resources for the execution of social projects predominate, this forces them to make internal adaptations. The adoption of differentiating, tangible and intangible practices to continue offering their humanitarian aid, being sustainable in the long term, and developing impact capacity are the constant challenges these institutions face. In this sense, this research is of interest to human resources professionals in order to promote the roles of servant, empowering, and shared leadership within their work teams. Investing in the training of effective leaders would develop and strengthen a learning culture and increase the dynamic capabilities of NGOs to achieve organizational sustainability and continue to fulfill their institutional mission.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

One of the possible limitations of this study is that we used a convenience sample. Despite this, the sample used included different work teams based in different Latin American countries that, in turn, belonged to different organizational and economic realities. Future studies should be aimed at unraveling causal pathways through longitudinal techniques. The use of multilevel methodology is recommended to explore longitudinal studies where the level of the organization and lower-level variables are related, such as human resources, where it would be interesting to explore the differences in perceptions between supervisors and employees regarding servant, empowering and shared leadership.

6. Conclusions

Leadership has been a key element in work environments, contributing to the construction of more competitive and efficient institutions. Its impact transcends different sectors, including non-profit organizations, where it is essential to improve management and achieve institutional objectives. Furthermore, organizations that want to be effective must adapt to certain changes that will take them to where they want to be, and this is where a true learning culture must be built. A learning-oriented culture aims to create an organizational environment that focuses on collaboration between individuals and stimulates creative processes. Additionally, the organizational structure should support knowledge sharing. In this context, this research aimed to analyze whether leadership styles influence learning culture and dynamic capacity.

To address the main objective of the research, an explanatory study was carried out considering 300 workers from nine Latin American countries who declared that they carried out work activities in a non-profit institution, aged between 19 and 68 years (M = 34.10 and SD = 8.88), all whom were recruited through non-probabilistic convenience sampling. The theoretical model was evaluated using the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Model (PLS-SEM). A measurement model with adequate fit was obtained (α = between 0.909 and 0.955; CR = between 0.912 and 0.956; AVE = 0.650 and 0.923). Based on the results, a positive impact of servant leadership on the learning culture (β = 0.292), of empowering leadership on the learning culture (β = 0.189), of shared leadership on the learning culture (β = 0.360), and the culture of learning on dynamic capacity (β = 0.701) was demonstrated.

The findings of this study highlight the critical role that leadership plays in fostering a culture of learning within nonprofit institutions, ultimately enhancing their dynamic

capabilities. Given the specific challenges faced by nonprofit institutions, such as volunteer management, donations, limited resources, generally lower compensation, competition with other sectors seeking talent, and the need for sustained social impact, leadership styles that prioritize collaboration, empowerment, and service-oriented values allow a pathway to success for institutions in the sector.

Servant leadership fosters a people-centered approach that nurtures trust and commitment, while empowered leadership enhances autonomy and decision-making, both of which are essential for adapting to changing environments. Additionally, shared leadership promotes collective responsibility and reinforces the cooperative nature of non-profit work. Furthermore, a robust learning culture in these contexts not only enhances internal knowledge sharing, but also strengthens their ability to innovate and effectively respond to new societal needs.

Through the development of leadership strategies that connect with a learning-focused mindset, these institutions can optimize their resilience, increase their impact and ensure long-term sustainability in an increasingly complex and dynamic global environment. Finally, this research offers valuable insight for leaders in this sector seeking to achieve higher levels of learning culture and increase dynamic capability among their workers. Therefore, this study suggests important managerial implications for nonprofit managers, human talent staff, and academic professionals.

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Data Availability Statement: Data are available on request by writing to the corresponding author of this publication.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Measurement scale in Spanish with an English translation.

Variable	Factor	Code	Item
Leadership Styles	Servant Leadership (SE)		*En la organización donde laboro, mi jefe inmediato me apoya para. . . [In the organization where I work, my immediate boss supports me to. . .]*
		SE1	Aumentar mis competencias en el trabajo. [Increase my skills at work].
		SE4	Mejorar mis habilidades de comunicación. [Improve my communication skills].

Table A1. *Cont.*

Variable	Factor	Code	Item
Leadership Styles	Empowering Leadership (EL)		*En la organización donde laboro, mi participación en la toma de decisiones organizacionales. . . [In the organization where I work, my participation in organizational decision-making. . .]*
		EL1	Es considerada. [Is considered].
		EL2	Es valorada. [Is valued].
		EL3	Es promovida. [Is promoted].
	Shared Leadership (SD)		*En la organización donde laboro, los miembros de mi equipo directivo. . . [In the organization where I work, the members of my management team. . .]*
		SD1	Planifican colectivamente las operaciones. [Collectively plan operations].
		SD2	Se alientan mutuamente en el trabajo. [Encourage each other at work].
		SD3	Se llaman entre sí para tomar decisiones importantes. [Call each other to make important decisions].
		SD4	Evalúan conjuntamente el desempeño empresarial. [Jointly evaluate business performance].
Learning Culture	Management Active Participation (MAP)		*En la organización donde laboro. . . [In the organization where I work. . .]*
		MAP1	Los directivos participan en actividades de mejora. [Managers participate in improvement activities].
		MAP2	Los directivos ayudan a la solución de problemas. [Managers assist in problem solving].
		MAP3	Los directivos guían a los colaboradores. [Managers guide employees].
	Knowledge Sharing (KS)	KS1	Los colaboradores comparten información y conocimientos sobre problemas que lograron resolver. [Employees share information and knowledge about problems they have solved].
		KS2	Los colaboradores cooperan con las ideas de mejora de sus colegas. [Employees cooperate with their colleagues' improvement ideas].
	Risks and Encouraging the Creative Process (RCP)	RCP1	Las iniciativas fallidas son parte de un proceso de aprendizaje. [Failed initiatives are part of a learning process].
		RCP2	Se promueve tomar decisiones y asumir riesgos. [Decision making and risk taking are encouraged].
Dynamic Capacity	Knowledge Absorption (KA)		*En la organización donde laboro, suele identificar y promover su uso para sus proyectos y procesos. . . [In the organization where I work, I usually identify and promote its use for its projects and processes. . .]*
		KA1	En las nuevas tecnologías de la información. [In new information technologies].
		KA2	En las innovaciones en el mercado. [In innovations in the market].
			En la organización donde laboro, los colaboradores utilizan sus conocimientos para. . . [In the organization where I work, employees use their knowledge to. . .]

Table A1. *Cont.*

Variable	Factor	Code	Item
Dynamic Capacity	Knowledge Exploration (KEL)	KEL1	Actividades de mejora continua. [Continuous improvement activities].
		KEL2	Resolver problemas en los procesos. [Solving process problems].
			En la organización donde laboro, las nuevas tecnologías de la información y comunicación. . . [In the organization where I work, new information and communication technologies. . .]
	Knowledge Exploitation (KET)	KET1	Se implementan en sus procesos y proyectos. [Are implemented in their processes and projects].
		KET2	Son útiles para el fácil acceso a consorcios, universidades, empresas consultoras, u otros grupos de interés. [Are useful for easy access to consortia, universities, consulting firms, or other stakeholders].

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Drivers of Flexible Labor Adoption in Nonprofit Organizations

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Abstract: As nonprofits operate in a competitive environment with limited resources, they constantly seek new ways to optimize their resources. This study investigates factors influencing nonprofits' decision to integrate flexible labor, such as independent contractors, into their workforce. Using longitudinal data from 2008 to 2018 in the arts and cultural sector in the United States, this study tests hypotheses related to the impact of an organization's financial health, cost of permanent employment, reliance on government funding and donations, organizational size, and service demand variations on flexible labor use. The findings confirm that nonprofits offering higher fringe benefits and facing greater service demand fluctuations rely more on flexible labor. However, contrary to our expectations, this study also finds that nonprofits with stronger long-term financial health are more inclined to adopt flexible labor, while larger nonprofits use less flexible labor than their smaller counterparts. This study advances our understanding of the organizational and sector-level factors behind flexible labor adoption in nonprofits and offers practical implications for managing it.

Keywords: flexible labor; human resource management; management innovation

From embracing market strategies and professionalization to leveraging collaborative relationships, nonprofits keep searching for innovative ways to respond to increasing competition and limited and unstable funding in their operational environment (Salamon, 2012). Their growth and survival, at times, hinge on the extent to which they can exhibit flexibility and responsiveness in the face of competitive pressures and environmental volatility (Alexander & Fernandez, 2025; Alexander et al., 1999; Salamon, 2012). Organizational flexibility can translate into changes in one or multiple aspects of operations, including structural design, production methods, and access to financial resources (Valverde et al., 2000).

One area where nonprofit managers continue to demonstrate such flexibility is in meeting their workforce needs through the strategic employment of flexible labor (Berenguer et al., 2024; Pynes, 2013). By using contractors, seasonal and on-call workers, nonprofits can proactively adjust staffing levels and skill composition in response to rising labor costs, ebbs and flows of project demands, and funding cycles. Additionally, these workers bring specialized expertise, contributing to nonprofit programs and enriching their organizations' knowledge base. The integration of digital platforms has further modernized this strategy by enabling access to a diverse talent pool across various geographical locations (Kalleberg & Marsden, 2015). Despite being a well-established strategy, flexible labor evolving applications and relevance to current challenges keep it at the forefront of innovation discussions.

The literature on flexible labor use in the nonprofit sector remains limited compared to well-studied areas on volunteers, managers, and boards of directors (Tschirhart &

Wise, 2007). Few studies, such as Woronkowicz et al. (2020) and Tschirhart and Wise (2007), provide insights into related aspects such as the substitution effect between flexible and wage labor in the nonprofit arts subsector and the demand for temporary foreign professionals by nonprofits, respectively. However, these studies do not fully address the reasons behind nonprofits' reliance on this type of labor.

This study asks: What are the drivers behind flexible labor use in nonprofit organizations? Drawing on the theoretical and empirical literature, we formulate six hypotheses on factors that may influence this adoption. These are financial health, fringe benefit costs of the permanent workforce, reliance on government funding and philanthropic donations, organizational size, and service demand volatility. Using data from a longitudinal sample (2008–2018) of U.S. nonprofit arts organizations, the findings confirm two of this study's hypotheses. Organizations offering higher fringe benefits and those experiencing higher service demand fluctuations are more likely to adopt flexible labor arrangements. However, the results also reveal two unexpected findings. First, nonprofits with better long-term financial conditions use more flexible labor, suggesting that flexible labor use may be a strategic choice rather than a reactive measure. Second, larger nonprofits employ less flexible labor than smaller ones, potentially due to their greater capacity to maintain a stable, full-time workforce.

This study contributes to the nonprofit management literature by identifying and testing organizational and sector-level factors under which nonprofits are more likely to rely on flexible labor. Unlike previous studies that have predominantly focused on broader external factors, such as labor market and regulatory conditions, this study emphasized the internal organizational decision-making behind its adoption. In doing so, this study offers novel insights into how organizational factors impact workforce decisions. The findings also challenge the dominant framing of flexible labor as purely a cost-cutting measure. In the context of arts nonprofits, flexible labor appears to be a proactive strategic decision leveraged by financially stable organizations.

1. Literature Review

Flexible labor, also called nonstandard, atypical, temporary, precarious, contingent, or market-mediated work arrangements, is "any job in which an individual does not have an explicit or implicit contract for long-term employment or one in which the minimum hours worked can vary in a nonsystematic manner" (Polivka & Nardone, 1989, p. 11). The shift from traditional full-time, permanent jobs to temporary and contract work started in the 1970s (see Kalleberg, 2009) driven by employers seeking greater flexibility in response to globalization, economic and demographic conditions, and technological change (Grossman, 2012; Mastracci & Thompson, 2005).

Rather than establishing workforce stability, which was the goal post-World War II, employers increasingly prioritized labor flexibility to manage market competition and uncertainty (Allan et al., 2021; Horemans, 2018). Economic stagnation led to unemployment and reduced opportunities for full-time employment (Allan et al., 2021); advancements in communication technologies enabled decentralized, geographically dispersed workforces (Kalleberg, 2009; Lent, 2018; Muntaner, 2018); and labor protections for permanent workers incentivized organizations to circumvent regulatory costs through contingent hiring (Cappelli, 1997). Demographic trends also expanded the flexible labor pool, as women and older workers sought part-time roles to facilitate caregiving responsibilities and transition into retirement, and structural barriers pushed immigrant and minority workers into precarious employment (Pfeffer & Baron, 1988; Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017).

In response, some organizations focused on enhancing the functional flexibility of their employees (i.e., enhancing employees' versatility in skills and tasks), while others used

numerical flexibility to quickly adjust workforce size by using different types of flexible labor (Kalleberg, 2009; Valverde et al., 2000). Most organizations adopted a combination of the two, depending on the nature of the task (Kalleberg, 2009).

Nonprofit organizations have not been isolated from the widespread use of flexible labor (Woronkowicz et al., 2020). Beyond the macroeconomic and demographic factors, two sector-specific forces also contributed to this shift. First, marketization has reshaped nonprofit operations, including human resource management (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004; Sandberg et al., 2020). The competitive environment has incentivized nonprofits to adopt more transactional labor strategies, prioritizing short-term, contingent staffing models to align with funders' performance metrics and cost-efficiency demands (Eidslott et al., 2024; Robichau & Sandberg, 2022; Sandberg et al., 2020). Second, many nonprofits face Baumol's cost disease, an economic challenge where wage growth outpaces productivity gains in labor-intensive sectors (Baumol & Bowen, 1966; Hartwig & Krämer, 2022). For example, live music performances require a fixed number of musicians regardless of technological advancements, yet wages must rise to retain skilled labor.

The lack of systematic and longitudinal data on flexible employment in the sector makes it difficult to capture the exact magnitude of the trend (Kalleberg, 2009). Nevertheless, the substantial growth in overall employment within the sector can serve as an indirect indicator. From 2007 to 2017, nonprofit employees increased by 18.6 percent, compared to a growth rate of 6.2 percent in the business sector (Salamon & Newhouse, 2020). This rapid increase was partly driven by the greater funding support provided to the nonprofit sector by both the Bush and Obama administrations (S. R. Smith, 2013). Given the competitive pressure and cost constraints nonprofits face, it is likely that these newly created jobs increasingly are flexible labor arrangements instead of permanent employment (Anheier & Seibel, 2001; Kalleberg et al., 2003).

Unlike previous studies that have predominantly discussed broader external factors like shifting labor markets and regulatory conditions, this study focuses on the internal organizational decision-making behind its adoption in the nonprofit sector. The nonprofit literature has started to explore these internal decision-making processes. For example, Woronkowicz et al. (2020) identify a substitution effect in the nonprofit arts subsector whereby the increased adoption of flexible labor reduces the reliance on wage labor. Similarly, Tschirhart and Wise (2007) analyzed nonprofits' use of temporary foreign professionals, showing that resource levels, mission, occupational demands, and wage considerations influence staffing choices. Akingbola (2004) also argues that using temporary staff is associated with lowered service quality. Drawing from theoretical and empirical research, we identify explanatory factors and develop hypotheses regarding their impact on nonprofits' reliance on flexible labor.

2. Theories and Hypotheses

2.1. Financial Considerations

Nonprofits have limited access to financial resources, which makes them vulnerable to financial pressures (Akingbola, 2013). The switch from permanent employment to flexible labor represents a common cost containment strategy that allows organizations to reduce various expenses (George & Chattopadhyay, 2015). Cost containment is crucial during periods of financial stress as it can increase cash flow and overall financial efficiency, thereby mitigating the risk of financial instability (Zietlow & Seidner, 2007).

Flexible labor can offer direct financial savings, as such workers are typically paid lower wages than their permanent counterparts (Fisher & Connelly, 2017). They are also ineligible for various fringe benefits, which saves employers additional expenses (George & Chattopadhyay, 2015). Beyond immediate savings, the use of flexible labor provides

managerial flexibility and minimizes long-term financial commitments. By adjusting workforce size and hours according to current needs, organizations can convert some fixed costs into variable ones (Kalleberg et al., 2003). This adaptability helps organizations dealing with variable workloads to scale their labor force up or down swiftly and avoid the expenses associated with a large permanent staff during slower periods.

Additionally, flexible labor offers a cost-effective way to access specialized skills, such as information technology or legal services, that may only be required occasionally (Broschak et al., 2008). Although some independent contractors may receive higher wages than their permanent counterparts, the nature of their employment ultimately costs less than maintaining permanent staff (Fisher & Connelly, 2017). Independent contractors are typically hired for specific tasks or limited durations, which reduces long-term financial commitments and overhead costs associated with full-time employees, making this arrangement less costly in the long run. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. *As a nonprofit organization's financial condition declines, it will likely rely more on flexible labor.*

From a value creation perspective, some labor costs, such as investments in employee training, development programs, and performance-based incentives, are viewed as contributing to long-term organizational effectiveness by enhancing skills, motivation, and retention (Noe, 2020). These expenditures build institutional knowledge and support sustained performance. In contrast, fringe benefits like health insurance, paid leave, and retirement plans are often seen as fixed obligations that offer limited immediate value to the employer (Davis-Blake & Uzzi, 1993). While essential for employee well-being and recruitment, such benefits may not directly translate into short-term organizational gains.

Also, fringe benefits represent a substantial share of total compensation costs, constituting approximately 31 percent of civilian workers' compensation in the U.S. in 2024 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024b). This cost differential is a key distinction between permanent and flexible labor. Mangum et al. (1985) suggest that firms with higher fringe benefit costs are more likely to rely on contingent labor, including call-in and temporary help service workers, to avoid these expenses. This argument suggests that:

Hypothesis 2. *The higher the level of fringe benefits offered by a nonprofit organization, the more likely it is to adopt flexible labor.*

2.2. Funding Sources

Many nonprofits rely on multiple revenue sources for their operations, including earned income, philanthropic donations, and government grants. According to Akingbola (2013), the predictability and stability of these funding sources influence strategic human resource management practices in nonprofits. When funding is consistent and reliable, nonprofits are better positioned to invest in long-term HR strategies, which include attracting and retaining skilled professionals through competitive compensation, offering training to enhance employee competencies, and fostering career development opportunities (Akingbola, 2004). Conversely, nonprofits relying on volatile or irregular funding sources can face constraints that limit their ability to commit to permanent staffing. Instead, they may adopt flexible labor arrangements (Akingbola, 2004). Furthermore, unstable funding can deter highly skilled workers from joining or remaining with an organization, as concerns over job security make such roles less attractive.

Compared to other sources, government funding is characterized as predictable and stable (Froelich, 1999; Qu, 2019; Toepler, 2018). For example, Gronbjerg (1993) highlighted that government funding is the most predictable source of revenue for social service

nonprofits. Kingma (1993) further confirms that nonprofits minimized revenue risk by prioritizing government funds due to their low volatility. Similarly, Qu (2019) suggested that organizations reliant on government grants had significantly lower portfolio risk than those relying on donations. Finally, in the arts sector, DiMaggio (1986) observed that public grants provided consistent support for experimental programs often overlooked by private donors.

Donations, however, are widely documented as an unpredictable and unstable revenue source for nonprofits due to their inherent volatility (Carroll & Stater, 2009; Froelich, 1999; Qu, 2019; Ranucci & Lee, 2019). Gronbjerg's (1992, 1993) case studies revealed that individual contributions often fluctuate by over 50 percent annually. This volatility stems from donors' detachment from service outcomes, which limits nonprofits' ability to directly influence donor decisions through programming (Gronbjerg, 1993). Similarly, Carroll and Stater (2009) concluded that nonprofits relying primarily on donative sources suffer from more revenue volatility over time than other nonprofits. Finally, Khieng and Dahles (2015) found high revenue volatility among Cambodian nongovernmental organizations reliant on donations, driven by shifting donor priorities, global economic downturns, and intensified competition among peer organizations. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3. *As reliance on government funding increases, the use of flexible labor decreases.*

Hypothesis 4. *As reliance on donative funding increases, the use of flexible labor increases.*

2.3. Organization Size

Larger nonprofits can be well positioned to adopt flexible labor arrangements due to structural and operational advantages (Houseman, 2001). Their broader scope of activities and higher staffing needs can necessitate the use of flexible workers (Davis-Blake & Uzzi, 1993) to cover employee absences, such as maternity or sick leave, or manage fluctuating workloads. Beyond addressing staffing gaps, large organizations usually offer a more extensive range of goods and services, which require specialized expertise that may not be cost-effective to develop in-house (Kalleberg et al., 2003). For example, a large museum might contract a guest curator who specializes in a specific art period or style to design and organize special exhibitions. This approach can improve program quality and avoid the long-term financial commitment of hiring a full-time specialist.

Moreover, economies of scale give larger nonprofits a cost advantage in managing flexible labor. With established administrative systems and HR infrastructure, they can spread fixed onboarding and training costs across a broader workforce, lowering the marginal cost of employing contingent workers (Uzzi & Barsness, 1998). This efficiency, coupled with a greater capacity to access targeted expertise as needed, makes flexible labor not only operationally feasible but also strategically appealing. As a result, larger nonprofits may be more likely to integrate flexible staffing models into their workforce strategies. Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 5. *The larger the nonprofit organization, the higher the level of flexible labor use.*

2.4. Variable Demand

Nonprofits facing fluctuating service demands are more likely to adopt flexible labor arrangements than those with stable, year-round operations. These arrangements offer numerical flexibility, the ability to scale the workforce up or down in response to changing needs, without the financial or legal burdens associated with permanent employment (Kalleberg et al., 2003). For example, performing arts organizations often experience surges in labor demand during specific seasons or weekends when performances occur

(Baldin et al., 2018; Corning & Levy, 2002). Staffing such intermittent peaks with permanent employees would be inefficient and financially unsustainable, as costs persist even during downtimes.

The use of flexible labor also acts as a protective strategy that allows nonprofits to safeguard their core competencies by insulating permanent staff from demand fluctuations (Kalleberg et al., 2003; Pfeffer & Baron, 1988). An organization's workforce can be divided into "core" and "periphery" roles (Atkinson, 1984). Core employees are critical to sustaining organizational competitive advantages, and periphery staff can perform supporting roles. By externalizing peripheral tasks, nonprofits can maintain the expertise of their core workforce while adapting to fluctuating demand. Therefore, we predict:

Hypothesis 6. *As fluctuations in service demand increase, the use of flexible labor increases.*

3. Data and Measurement

This study analyzes longitudinal data (2008–2018) from DataArts, an online survey platform that aggregates financial, programmatic, and demographic data on U.S. arts and cultural nonprofits. By 2018, the data included over 18,500 organizations. These organizations voluntarily contribute to the dataset to leverage standardized information for streamlining grant applications and to obtain reports derived from the data to inform decision-making (DataArts, n.d.). Compared to IRS Form 990, DataArts contains programmatic information and more detailed financial metrics (M. Kim & Charles, 2016). The reliability of the dataset is validated (M. Kim & Charles, 2016), and it has been widely used in nonprofit research (e.g., Altamimi & Liu, 2022; Liu & Kim, 2022).

The arts and cultural sector provides an ideal empirical context for analysis for multiple reasons. First, arts organizations experience intermittent and seasonal fluctuations in demand (Ferris & Graddy, 1986), which naturally encourage the use of flexible labor arrangements. Second, arts nonprofits frequently engage in project-based work, such as organizing special exhibitions and hosting guest artists (Menger, 2006). The episodic nature of these projects typically necessitates the involvement of independent contractors and freelance artists. Third, due to cost disease, the arts sector cannot reduce costs by cutting positions (Baumol & Bowen, 1966). Instead, organizations must innovate in how they manage and structure their operations to maintain financial sustainability. The use of flexible labor represents one of the solutions.

Several steps were taken to improve the data and measurement. We excluded all organizations that are not classified as NTEE-A arts nonprofits. We also eliminated observations with missing or erroneous values, such as negative expenses and age. To mitigate the impact of extreme values, we winsorized all financial measures at the 1 percent and 99 percent levels. The final sample size is 39,303, covering 9497 arts and cultural nonprofits from 2008 to 2018.

3.1. Dependent Variable

To test the hypotheses, we employ a flexible labor ratio as the dependent variable. It is operationalized as the total flexible labor spending divided by total personnel expenses. The total flexible labor spending is proxied by two categories of labor spending: the IRS Form 1099 expenses and professional fees. The Form 1099 expenses are used to report miscellaneous payments to independent contractors (Woronkowicz et al., 2020). Professional fees include payments made to external organizations for services such as fundraising. These expenses represent flexible labor costs because they reflect purchased services rather than fixed, in-house employment. In other words, organizations could

have produced these services internally using salaried employees but opted instead to outsource them.

3.2. Independent Variables

To test the first hypothesis, we use two financial ratios. The long-term financial indicator is measured by solvency, which evaluates a nonprofit's ability to meet its long-term financial obligations. It is calculated as the total net assets divided by total revenue (Tuckman & Chang, 1991). Short-term financial health is measured by months of spending, which is calculated by dividing an organization's total cash and cash equivalents by its annual operating expenses and then dividing the ratio by twelve (Prentice, 2016). Organizations with higher months of spending can better withstand revenue fluctuations or unexpected disruptions.

To test the second hypothesis, we use the fringe ratio. The ratio is calculated by dividing the expenses for payroll taxes and fringe benefits by the IRS Form W2 expenses. The W2 form, also known as the Wage and Tax Statement, reports an employee's annual wages, the amount of taxes withheld from their paycheck, and fringe benefits. The fringe ratio evaluates the proportion of fringe benefits expenses relative to the total wage expenses of an organization's employees.

For the third and fourth hypotheses, we operationalize the government reliance ratio as the proportion of total revenue derived from governmental sources and the donation reliance ratio as the proportion derived from donative sources. For the fifth hypothesis, size is represented by an organization's total assets. We use the natural logarithm of total assets to enhance the normality of the variables' distribution.

Finally, to operationalize demand fluctuations, we leverage variations in demand across arts subsectors, grounded in evidence that certain subsectors face greater demand volatility due to their programmatic nature. Specifically, performing arts organizations, such as theaters, orchestras, and dance companies, experience pronounced demand fluctuations driven by cyclical performance seasons and concentrated audience attendance during weekends and events (Baldin et al., 2018; Corning & Levy, 2002). In contrast, visual arts organizations (e.g., museums and galleries) typically exhibit more stable demand, as exhibitions often run for months and attract relatively steady visitation. Multidisciplinary arts organizations, which integrate different arts disciplines, are likely to experience moderate demand variability. To test this hypothesis, we constructed dummy variables for four types of arts organizations: multidisciplinary arts organizations, performing arts organizations, visual arts organizations, and other arts organizations.

3.3. Control Variables

We control for organization age, the number of volunteers, and fiscal years, as they are likely to affect their flexible labor spending. We control for organization age since the likelihood of using flexible workers tends to decrease as an organization ages. This is because job routines and practices are reinforced over time, both at the employee and organizational levels. Specifically, employees who have been in their roles for an extended period tend to resist changes to their established way of work. Similarly, as an organization matures, its procedures can become standardized and institutionalized (K.-J. Kim, 2023; Uzzi & Barsness, 1998). Consistent with this reasoning, V. Smith (1997) found that older organizations struggle to adopt flexible staffing practices due to the need to overhaul their employment practices. We control the number of volunteers since nonprofits may substitute flexible labor with volunteer labor for non-specialized roles. Year is introduced to the model to account for macroeconomic and societal factors that influence flexible labor use.

In the ordinary least squares model, we include state-level dummy variables to account for geographic heterogeneity in labor availability, as prior research indicates labor shortages may incentivize organizations to adopt flexible labor strategies (Kalleberg et al., 2003). These state dummies are omitted from the fixed effects specifications because they are time-invariant and, therefore, already captured by the model.

4. Findings

4.1. Descriptive Findings

Table 1 illustrates the annual trends in flexible labor spending as a percentage of total personnel expenses for nonprofits in the sample between 2008 and 2018. Overall, it exhibits an upward trend throughout the period. In 2008, organizations on average allocated approximately 25 percent of their personnel budgets to flexible labor arrangements. This figure dipped slightly in 2009 and 2010. However, starting in 2011, spending rose steadily for six consecutive years and peaked at over 30 percent in 2016. Though a modest decline followed in 2017 and 2018, the 2018 rate remained substantially higher than the 2008 baseline, representing the overall growth in reliance on flexible labor.

Table 1. Annual trends in flexible labor use.

Year	Obs	Percent of Flexible Spending
2008	3003	25.17
2009	3572	24.58
2010	4036	24.15
2011	4206	24.94
2012	4085	25.74
2013	3807	26.01
2014	4261	26.85
2015	4060	28.13
2016	3256	30.18
2017	2809	25.63
2018	2218	26.40

Beyond the hypothesized factors, this sustained increase may also be attributed to the implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), which was enacted in 2010. First, the ACA introduced the health insurance marketplace where flexible workers can purchase subsidized coverage, which reduces the financial burden associated with nontraditional work, making flexible labor arrangements more attractive (Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, n.d.). Second, the ACA's employer-shared responsibility provisions require organizations with over 50 full-time equivalent employees (termed applicable large employers or ALEs) to offer minimum essential coverage to full-time workers or face penalties (Internal Revenue Service, n.d.). This mandate may incentivize ALEs to hire flexible labor, such as contractors and seasonal workers, to avoid coverage obligations.

Table 2 presents summary statistics for all variables in this study. All financial values are adjusted to 2016 dollars using the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Nonprofits in the sample, on average, dedicate 26 percent of total personnel expenses to flexible labor arrangements. These organizations demonstrate strong financial health, maintaining a net asset value 3.4 times higher than total revenue and holding cash reserves equivalent to 3.1 months of total expenses. Additionally, 16 percent of personnel expenses reported on Form W-2 are allocated to payroll taxes and fringe benefits. Revenue composition for these nonprofits averages 13 percent from government sources and 59 percent from donative contributions. A typical organization in the sample holds USD 13.4 million in

total assets, utilizes 126 volunteers annually, and has operated for 43 years. In terms of subsectors, 37 percent represent multidisciplinary arts organizations, 43 percent are performing arts nonprofits, 12 percent are visual arts, and the remaining 9 percent are other arts nonprofits. Table 3 presents the correlation matrix for all variables, with no significant collinearity detected.

4.2. Regression Results

We employ two regression methods, fixed effects (FE) and ordinary least squares (OLS), to analyze factors influencing flexible labor adoption. The FE model is our primary analytical method to control unobserved time-invariant heterogeneity across organizations, such as institutional culture and geographic constraints that may affect flexible labor adoption. However, FE models eliminate time-invariant variables through within-unit transformation (Allison, 2005, 2009), making Hypothesis 6, which is proxied by time-invariant dummies (i.e., the type of arts nonprofits), untestable in this model. To address this limitation, we supplement our analysis with an OLS model.

Both models account for the panel structure of the dataset by clustering robust standard errors at the organizational level, addressing autocorrelation and within-cluster correlation that could inflate estimator precision (Cameron & Miller, 2015). To mitigate endogeneity, all non-dichotomous independent variables are incorporated with a one-year lag (Kennedy, 2008), except for organization age and number of volunteers, which are modeled contemporaneously. Volunteers are excluded from lagging due to their potential substitutive relationship with flexible labor (i.e., volunteers may directly offset the need for temporary staff) rather than a temporally causal one.

Table 2. Summary of all variables.

Variable	Description	Nonprofits (N = 39,303) [a]			
		Mean	SD	Min	Max
DEPENDENT VARIABLES					
Flexible Labor Ratio	(Form 1099 expenses + professional fees)/total personnel expenses × 100	26.134	22.671	0.000	99.999
INDEPENDENT VARIABLE					
Financial Indicators					
Solvency $_{t-1}$	Total net assets/total revenue	3.389	14.301	−0.594	130.125
Months of Spending $_{t-1}$	(Cash and cash equivalents/annual operating expenses)/12	3.114	4.283	0.000	27.527
Fringe Ratio $_{t-1}$	Payroll taxes and fringe benefits/total W2 personnel expenses	0.155	0.081	0.000	1.000
Government Reliance Ratio $_{t-1}$	Government funding/total revenue	0.125	0.178	0.000	1.000
Donation Reliance Ratio $_{t-1}$	Donative funding/total revenue	0.590	0.262	0.000	1.000
Size $_{t-1}$	Logged total assets	13,400,000 [b]	86,600,000 [b]	0.000 [b]	4,080,000,000 [b]
Arts Subsectors	A set of dummy variables that are created based on the classification system developed by National Standard for Arts Information Exchange				
Multidisciplinary	Interdisciplinary, Multidisciplinary, and Media Arts	0.366	0.482	0.000	1.000
Performing arts	Dance, Music, Opera/Musical theater, and Theater	0.429	0.495	0.000	1.000
Visual arts	Crafts, Visual arts, Design arts, and Photography	0.119	0.324	0.000	1.000
Other	Literature, Folklife/Traditional arts, and Humanities storytelling, Non-arts/Non-humanities	0.086	0.280	0.000	1.000
CONTROL VARIABLES					
Number of Volunteers	Logged number of volunteers	126 [b]	367 [b]	0.000 [b]	10,000 [b]
Age	(The filing year − the year founded)/100	0.430	0.329	0.000	3.820
Fiscal Year	A set of year dummy variables	2013	3	2008	2018
States	A set of state dummy variables	27	15	2	59 [c]

[a] 9497 unique organizations. [b] In this table, total asssets and number of volunteers are reported in unlogged numbers for ease of interpretation. In subsequent tables, values of the same variables are in logarithmic form. [c] Non-U.S. states are removed from the sample.

Table 3. Correlation matrix.

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	Flexible Labor Ratio	--											
2	Solvency	−0.108 ***	--										
3	Months of Spending	−0.022 ***	0.036 ***	--									
4	Fringe Ratio	−0.028 ***	0.041 ***	−0.044 ***	--								
5	Government Reliance Ratio	−0.035 ***	0.018 ***	0.010 *	0.023 ***	--							
6	Donation Reliance Ratio	0.002	0.017 ***	0.074 ***	0.008	0.383 ***	--						
7	Size	−0.095 ***	0.157 ***	−0.006	0.119 ***	−0.030 ***	−0.059 ***	--					
8	Arts Subsectors	−0.050 ***	0.013 *	0.006	0.011 *	−0.056 ***	−0.029 ***	0.037 ***	--				
9	Number of Volunteers	−0.087 ***	0.077 ***	−0.009	0.056 ***	−0.041 ***	−0.058 ***	0.163 ***	0.022 ***	--			
10	Age	−0.165 ***	0.012 *	−0.012 *	0.099 ***	−0.044 ***	−0.132 ***	0.203 ***	0.084 ***	0.106 ***	--		
11	Fiscal Year	0.049 ***	0.222 ***	0.029 ***	−0.074 ***	−0.022 ***	0.010 *	0.011 *	0.000	0.014 **	−0.095 ***	--	
12	States	−0.005	0.002	0.013 **	0.041 ***	0.040 ***	0.027 ***	0.017 ***	0.022 ***	−0.024 ***	0.083 ***	−0.017 ***	--

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The results of the FE model are presented in column 1 of Table 4. Contrary to Hypothesis 1, which posits a negative association between financial health and flexible labor adoption, the findings show that nonprofits with stronger long-term financial sustainability rely more on flexible labor. Specifically, a one-unit increase in the prior year's solvency ratio corresponds to a 0.08 percentage point rise in flexible labor spending as a share of total personnel expenses ($p < 0.05$), holding other variables constant. Hypothesis 2 is confirmed: a 10 percent increase in the prior year's fringe benefits rate is associated with a 1.4 percentage point increase in the flexible labor ratio ($p < 0.01$).

Table 4. Regression analyses.

	FE		**OLS**	
Variables	**Flexible Labor Ratio**			
Financial Indicators				
Solvency $_{t-1}$	0.081	**	0.020	
	(0.035)		(0.023)	
Months of Spending $_{t-1}$	0.049		0.056	
	(0.060)		(0.035)	
Fringe Ratio $_{t-1}$	14.017	***	−2.823	
	(3.775)		(2.584)	
Government Reliance Ratio $_{t-1}$	−1.395		−1.207	
	(2.035)		(0.893)	
Donation Reliance Ratio $_{t-1}$	0.019		−1.485	**
	(1.349)		(0.618)	
Organization Size $_{t-1}$	−0.338	***	−0.819	***
	(0.092)		(0.041)	
Arts Subsectors				
Performing arts			4.721	***
			(0.333)	
Visual arts			−2.170	***
			(0.435)	
Other			−4.257	***
			(0.493)	
Number of Volunteers	−1.526	***	−1.008	***
	(0.135)		(0.070)	
Age	−13.670		−6.800	***
	(12.991)		(0.414)	
Constant	38.243	***	37.323	**
	(5.916)		(13.055)	
Observations	31,188 [a]			
Within R-squared/R-squared	0.093		0.118	
Number of Organizations	7394 [a]			

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Fiscal Years are controlled in both models. States are only controlled in the OLS model. [a] Sample size is smaller compared to the descriptive table due to the incorporation of lagged variables. ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

However, Hypotheses 3 and 4 receive no empirical support. Neither government funding reliance nor donation dependence show a statistically significant relationship with flexible labor use. Contrary to Hypothesis 5, a 10 percent increase in organizational size is associated with a 0.03 ($-0.338 \times \log(1.10)$) percentage point decrease in the flexible labor ratio. Finally, Hypothesis 6 is supported by the OLS results presented in column 2 of Table 4. Performing arts organizations allocate the largest share of personnel expenses to flexible labor, nearly five percentage points higher than multidisciplinary arts organizations, all else equal. The models also reveal insights into control variables, notably a substitution effect between volunteers and flexible labor. The negative and statistically significant

coefficient on volunteers indicates that a 10 percent increase in the number of volunteers is associated with a 0.15 ($-1.526 \times \log(1.10)$) percentage point decrease in the flexible labor ratio, holding other factors constant.

While single-year effect sizes may appear modest, their persistence over time could yield non-trivial cumulative shifts in organizational labor practice. This is particularly true in contexts where organizational inertia impedes swift adaptation to external pressures. When organizations attempt change, they are often constrained by established procedures and norms that reinforce entrenched strategies and behaviors (Huang et al., 2013). Such rigidity can be more pronounced during disruptive changes, such as workforce restructuring involving hiring and layoffs, which also provoke strong resistance from employees (Altamimi et al., 2023). Consequently, even minor annual adjustments in flexible labor allocation reflect organizational strategic priorities and can aggregate into substantial changes over time.

The modest R-squared can be attributed to two factors. First, the use of lagged predictors, while mitigating endogeneity, captures less variance than contemporaneous terms due to time-lagged effects. Second, data limitations preclude the inclusion of all potential determinants of flexible labor adoption. Nonetheless, this does not invalidate the findings. As methodologists note, social science research prioritizes the identification of theoretically meaningful relationships over predictive power (Lewis-Beck & Skalaban, 1990). In such contexts, even modest R-square values remain acceptable when predictors exhibit statistical significance (Ozili, 2023).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The widespread use of flexible labor among nonprofits prompts questions about the factors driving this trend. Guided by arguments in the literature that emphasize organizational-level conditions and sector-level characteristics, this study uses a longitudinal sample of arts and cultural nonprofits from 2008 to 2018 to examine some of these factors, including financial health, fringe benefit costs of permanent employees, reliance on government funding and philanthropic donations, organizational size, and service demand volatility.

The findings show that nonprofits' adoption of flexible labor is shaped by their long-term financial health, costs of maintaining a permanent workforce, organizational size, and demand fluctuations. Although some results align with our hypotheses, others challenge initial assumptions. Notably, the results contradict the conventional understanding of flexible labor as a cost-cutting measure to mitigate financial instability. Instead, arts nonprofits with stronger long-term financial health are more likely to use flexible labor, implying that financially stable organizations may leverage flexible labor proactively as a strategic tool to enhance resilience rather than as a reactive response to resource scarcity.

The relationship between fringe benefits and flexible labor adoption further reinforces the perspective. Nonprofits offering generous fringe benefits to permanent workers face notable cost disparities between employment types, which incentivizes a strategic reallocation of resources. By leveraging flexible labor, organizations reduce expenses on fringe benefits, circumvent the fixed costs of a permanent workforce, and ultimately enhance their organizational adaptability. In line with our findings, Woronkowicz et al. (2020) observed a substitution between wage labor and flexible labor, providing additional evidence that the use of flexible labor is not merely a cost-containment tactic but a deliberate human resource management strategy to optimize resource use.

Contrary to our initial expectations, larger nonprofits allocate less of their personnel budget to flexible labor compared to smaller organizations. A plausible explanation is that large organizations generally have a greater number of employees and more organizational

slack, which allows them to redeploy existing staff to meet temporary demands (Davis-Blake & Uzzi, 1993). Additionally, large nonprofits, which usually have greater financial resources, may prefer to fill vacant positions with permanent staff, rather than flexible workers, to ensure more consistent and reliable workforce management and service delivery (Akingbola, 2004; Kalleberg et al., 2003).

The findings confirm that nonprofits with more demand fluctuations use more flexible labor, which underscores the importance of adopting different labor models based on the nature of the programs and services. This approach allows nonprofits to adjust labor costs based on variable demand, avoiding the financial strain of maintaining a full-time workforce during periods of low activity. Additionally, this finding implies the value of flexible labor in protecting mission-critical positions, ensuring that core staff, such as artistic directors in theaters, can focus on long-term organizational objectives without being overburdened by ebbs and flows in service demand.

The findings offer valuable insights for nonprofit organizations seeking to optimize their workforce strategies. First, the use of flexible labor should align with the organization's overarching mission, balancing its goals, resources, and operational demands (Guo et al., 2011). Rather than treating flexible labor as a reactive cost-cutting measure, nonprofits should proactively integrate it into their strategic planning to enhance organizational adaptability and resilience. This choice reflects the growing competitiveness of the nonprofit sector (Salamon, 2012), where persistent resource constraints push organizations to innovate staffing practices. One way to do so is by carefully identifying permanent positions that are peripheral to the mission and substituting them with flexible labor. Such reallocation allows nonprofits to redirect resources toward cultivating permanent staff in mission-critical roles, enhancing organizational competencies while navigating competitive, resource-scarce environments. Moreover, for organizations experiencing volatile service demands, reliance on flexible labor practices becomes essential. Flexible staffing allows nonprofits to scale operations efficiently during periods of high demand while avoiding the financial strain of maintaining a permanent workforce during downturns.

The study has limitations, which suggest directions for future research. First, following Woronkowicz et al. (2020), this study relies on contractor expenditures as a proxy for flexible labor use. While contractors represent the largest component of flexible labor (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024a), this measure excludes other arrangements, such as agency workers. Second, due to data constraints, this study does not fully explore all the factors that may influence an organization's decision to employ flexible labor, such as the level of unionization (Kalleberg et al., 2003). Future research can leverage more comprehensive data to investigate other factors that influence an organization's decision to use flexible labor. Finally, while this study's findings indicate that the use of flexible labor has been increasing in the nonprofit sector, our understanding of its organizational consequences remains limited. Akingbola (2004, p. 462) raised concerns about the impact of flexible labor on nonprofit performance, noting that a limitation of nonstandard labor is the "lack of consistency, retention, and quality." Future research should investigate the organizational consequences of flexible labor use. Despite these limitations, our study makes contributions by shedding light on the relationship between organizational and sectoral characteristics and the adoption of flexible labor in the nonprofit sector.

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Article

How Donor Advised Funds Change Fundraising

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Abstract: The rapid proliferation of donor advised funds (DAFs) and the rising prominence of their sponsoring organizations are among the most disruptive innovations in philanthropy in recent years. To examine DAFs' implications for major gift fundraising and nonprofit administration, we interview professional fundraisers from across the US (n = 46). We analyze their comments following a six-stage thematic process. We present a modified fundraising model called the "DAF Donor Relationship Management Cycle." This new model makes a theoretical contribution to nonprofit studies by highlighting challenges and opportunities for fundraisers in working with DAFs. Among other adjustments, the new model includes gift processing as a critical component and specifies two forms of donor identification—reactive and proactive. Six challenges and four opportunities associated with the stages of the cycle are also delineated. This new model documents how DAFs disrupt fundraising methods and systems, clarifies fundraising cycle assumptions and inferences, and offers important practical insights from fundraisers for other fundraisers. Ultimately, integrated organizational-level strategies are needed to guide DAF adaptation and DAF donor engagement and to inform training and coordination of gift processing and frontline fundraising efforts.

Keywords: donor advised funds; fundraising; donor relationship cycle

1. Introduction

The rapid proliferation of donor advised funds (DAFs) and the rising prominence of their sponsoring organizations are among the most disruptive innovations in philanthropy in recent years.[1] A DAF is a charitable giving account hosted by a nonprofit 501(c)(3) public charity sponsoring organization. Donors set up an account with the sponsor by making tax-deductible contributions to the fund. The contributed assets are invested by the sponsor and grow tax-free. Donors then make recommendations for the sponsors to grant funds to other nonprofit recipient organizations. DAFs are intermediaries; they essentially act as "middlepersons", collecting contributions from donors and then distributing grants to recommended recipients. DAFs have numerous advantages for donors, including ease in contributing non-cash assets, immediate tax deductions that provide flexibility in timing grant recommendations, and simplified record keeping (see Rooney, 2017). Because of these benefits, DAFs' popularity among donors has grown exponentially (see Figure 1).

Over 70% of nonprofits received DAF grants in one study of hundreds of organizations (Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, 2020). Among a small sample of relatively large nonprofits, a median of 12% of overall giving came from DAF grants (K2D Strategies & Chariot, 2024). The nature and effect of DAFs—and their 1200 sponsoring entities—on philanthropy has been increasingly explored by researchers (e.g., Giving USA Foundation, 2021; National Philanthropic Trust, 2023) and much discussed

by experts, commentators, and leaders (e.g., Colinvaux, 2017; Andreoni, 2018; Heist & Vance-McMullen, 2019; Stanford Law School Policy Lab on Donor Advised Funds, 2020; Forbes, n.d.; The Chronicle of Philanthropy, n.d.). Opinions related to the benefits and drawbacks of DAFs are numerous. Some extoll DAFs as a boon to democratizing philanthropy (Salmon, 2024); others criticize their lack of transparency and express concerns over delaying funds' distribution to programmatic charities (Colinvaux, 2017; Madoff, 2016; Matz, 2023). Nevertheless, there is general agreement that DAFs are changing the philanthropic landscape, generating a need for new structures and operational procedures (Daniels & Lindsay, 2016).

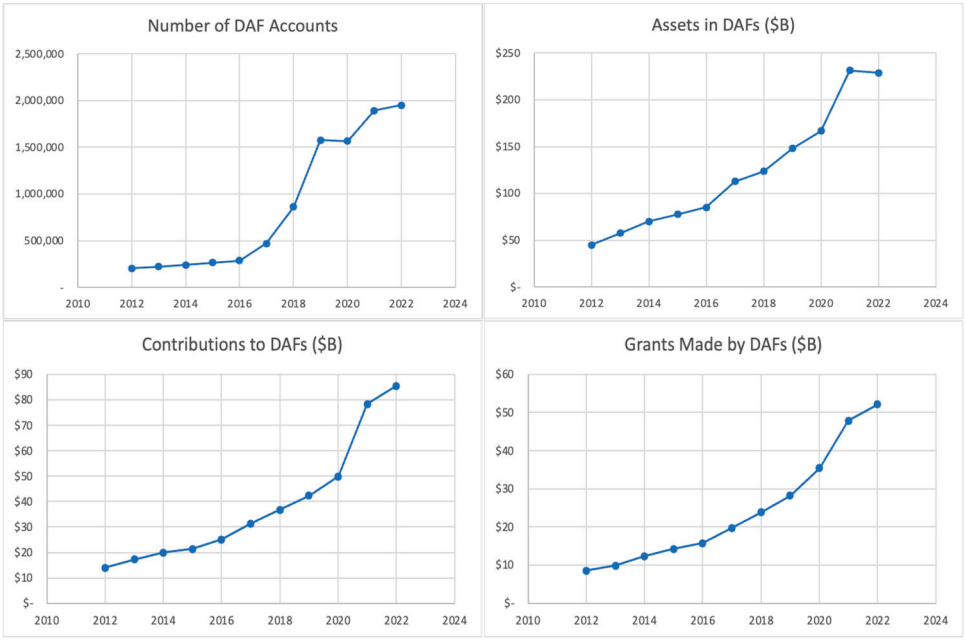

Figure 1. US donor advised fund growth 2012–2022. Note: data compiled from annual National Philanthropic Trust DAF reports (National Philanthropic Trust, n.d.-b). Contributions are donations made into a DAF account, and grants are distributions of money out of a DAF account.

The disruptive effect of DAFs' intermediary nature is evident within discussions of various fundraising activities, such as donor identification and donor information management (Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, 2020; K2D Strategies & Chariot, 2024). However, research has not explored how DAFs affect individual fundraising holistically. This organizational function has often been depicted as following a set of stages, such as in "The Eight-Step Solicitation Process" and the "Major Gift Development Process" (The Fund Raising School, 2001; Sprinkel-Grace, 2005). These models are associated with the relationship fundraising paradigm, which includes building knowledge about and connections with potential and current donors (Burnett, 1992)—particularly those with the capacity for larger gifts. The models help fundraising teams plan and manage how they approach and interact with individual donors to maximize effectiveness but lack detail about the implementation of the models' stages.

To understand DAFs' implications for fundraising, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with professional fundraisers from across the US (n = 46). These interviews focused on fundraisers' experiences with DAFs donors, their views about DAFs, and their organizations' DAF processes. In this article, a component of the larger study, we explore DAFs' ramifications for fundraising processes and practices using a codebook thematic analysis oriented to the stages of individual fundraising. We focus specifically on major gift fundraising in which fundraisers develop personalized relationships with

their donors. Most DAF grants (56%) are larger than USD 10,000, and the median DAF grant is between USD 10,000 and USD 50,000 (Heist et al., 2024), which aligns well with many nonprofits' thresholds for categorizing major gifts. This study makes a theoretical contribution to the nonprofit literature on fundraising by presenting a modified model for fundraising called the "DAF Donor Relationship Management Cycle". The new model adds gift processing as a critical aspect of the fundraising cycle and includes two distinct methods of identifying DAF donors—reactively and proactively. A set of six challenges and four opportunities is associated with the cycle stages and presents the implications of DAFs for donor information management and relationship management. This DAF Cycle is an important step forward in documenting how DAFs disrupt fundraising methods and systems and offers important practical insights from and for fundraisers. It also provides information about how fundraisers implement and navigate relationship fundraising with DAF donors.

2. Background and Literature Review

This section provides information about US DAFs as well as the donor relationship management and donor information management paradigms. In line with other US-based DAF studies (Heist et al., 2024), throughout the article, the terms 'DAF donor' and 'donor advisor' are used to refer to a person with advisory privileges to make DAF account grant recommendations. This may be the original donor(s) or additional advisors authorized by the original donor(s). The term 'sponsor' refers to a 501(c)(3) public charity sponsoring organization that hosts and manages DAF accounts. Additional definitions can be found in the Supplementary Materials (see Supplementary Text S1).

2.1. Donor Advised Funds

DAFs are the fastest-growing avenue for philanthropic giving in the US. DAFs are now accessible to households across income and wealth ranges. Several DAFs have no or low minimum opening contribution amounts; for example, Fidelity Charitable, the largest DAF sponsor by assets, does not have a minimum requirement (Fidelity Charitable, n.d.). In 2022, there were nearly two million DAF accounts, and 17% of all charitable contributions were directed to DAFs (Giving USA, 2022; National Philanthropic Trust, 2023).[2] The number of accounts has increased almost tenfold since 2012 (National Philanthropic Trust, 2023). Over the same period, DAF assets grew by a multiple of five, and DAF grants' value became six times larger (National Philanthropic Trust, 2023). In 2022, the assets under management at DAFs totaled USD 228.89 billion, and grants from DAFs amounted to USD 52.16 billion. A study of 20 mostly high-revenue nonprofits (USD 25 million+) found an increase of 83% in DAF gifts between 2019 and 2023 (K2D Strategies & Chariot, 2024).

As DAFs' prominence has grown, so too has interest from researchers, who have made notable inroads examining their utilization by donors. By analyzing 10 years of IRS Form 990 data from nearly 1000 DAF sponsors, Heist and Vance-McMullen (2019) found that DAF giving is resilient to macroeconomic shocks, like the Great Recession, indicating DAFs may be used by donors as rainy-day funds. From a massive collaboration of 111 DAF programs providing nine years of financial transaction data of over 57,000 DAF accounts, the DAF Research Collaborative (DAFRC) produced the National Study on DAFs (Heist et al., 2024). The research showed that less than 4% of all DAF grants are completely anonymous, about half of all DAFs have less than USD 50,000 in assets, and baby boomers form the largest proportion of DAF donors (Heist et al., 2024). Concerned about donors indefinitely leaving money in DAFs, Heist and Stone (2023) analyzed the internal policies of 158 of the largest DAF programs and found that almost all sponsors (83–91%) had inactive account policies designed to encourage donors to grant funds from their DAFs. DAF donors can

create succession plans directing the use of remaining funds in their DAFs following their death. Family members or others can be named as successor advisors and/or funds can be transferred to a different account(s) at the sponsor organization and/or granted to other charities (Heist & Stone, 2023). Ninety-two percent of DAF accounts have a succession plan, with about one-third (30%) directing the funds to either within the sponsor organization or to an external charitable organization (Heist et al., 2024).

In part to help fundraisers understand how to effectively interface with DAF donors and based on DAF donor interviews (n = 48), Heist et al. (2022) developed three archetypes of DAF giving strategies: tubs, tanks, and towers. "Tub" donors give quickly through their DAF. Like filling and draining a bathtub, tub donors typically move money in and out of the DAF annually. In contrast, "tank" donors move larger amounts over a slightly longer period. Much like a water tank that is used to set aside significant resources for upcoming use, tank donors contribute large lump sums to the DAF and then grant out the funds in the relatively near future. "Tower" donors take a calculated approach, using their DAF to sustain long-term philanthropic activity. Like a water tower, they use their DAF to preserve their philanthropic resources by slowly adding and withdrawing funds, always maintaining enough for the future. The researchers suggested that these archetypes could be used to characterize DAF donors, noting how important it is for fundraisers to discern and adapt to DAF donors' giving strategies.

DAF donor behaviors are increasingly documented, but DAFs' ramifications for fundraising teams are less known. One study explored nonprofit administrators' perceptions and concerns about DAFs using survey data from 448 nonprofit organizations and interviews with development/leadership officers at six organizations (Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, 2020). The largest concern was DAFs' potential disruption of the donor–recipient relationship. The study also showed that perceptions of DAFs were more positive among organizations that had received a DAF grant, where perhaps there were fewer unknowns about the process, as compared to those that had not. To help counter uncertainties and build the knowledge base, more research is needed on DAFs' actual impacts, such as their effects on fundraisers' everyday experiences.

2.2. Donor Relationship Management

Many aspects of the fundraising field remain under-examined, including analysis of the manner and effectiveness of various fundraising approaches, including major gift fundraising (Shaker & Nelson, 2022). Fundraisers proactively seek to build and maintain relationships with potential donors to garner charitable gifts. The hope is that donors will not only make a first gift, but some will eventually make large gifts, and, through continued and deepening relationships, some will make further, increasingly significant gifts to organizations. "Relationship fundraising" advocates for creating a personalized, potentially life-long relationship on behalf of the cause with supporters (with variable strategies based on giving capacity and interest), making donors feel important and valued; this philosophy is presented as counter to the "transactional" fundraising approach in which seeking and receiving a gift is a stand-alone activity (Burnett, 1992, 2002; Breeze, 2017).

In relationship fundraising, asking for a gift is part of an ongoing strategy implemented by the fundraiser on behalf of the organization. This is often presented as a process with stages for fundraisers to navigate (Sprinkel-Grace, 2005; Worth, 2015; Lindahl, 2009; The Fund Raising School, 2001). The Fund Raising School, The Indiana University Center on Philanthropy's "Eight-Step Major Gift Management Cycle" (The Fund Raising School, 2001, cited in Bout & Hodge, 2022), illustrates the stages as a cycle, and includes the following: *Identify*, *Qualify*, *Develop Strategy*, *Cultivate*, *Solicit and Negotiate*, *Acknowledge/Recognize*, *Steward*, *Renew* (see Figure 2). This process includes identifying potential donors; qualify-

ing their financial capacity and potential interest in making a major gift; developing an initial strategy for requesting a major gift; cultivating the donor relationship by building their knowledge about the organization and vice versa; soliciting and negotiating the philanthropic gift; acknowledging and recognizing the gift when completed; stewarding the gift through due diligence in using the gift, reporting on outcomes and maintaining other agreements; and, finally, renewing with additional gifts as possible (Bout & Hodge, 2022). Sprinkel-Grace's (2005) model adds the stages *Involve* after *Cultivate* and *Assign* before *Solicit* to signal the importance of involving donors in the organization and assigning an appropriate gift solicitor. Shaker et al.'s (2024) sequence for fundraising synthesizes the stages into the following five: *Preparation*, *Identification*, *Engagement*, *Solicitation*, and *Renewal*, adding *Preparation* to recognize the need for organizational planning prior to major gift fundraising. Although these models are each slightly different, they center on a common understanding of the functional stages required for organizing major gift fundraising programs and strategies.

Figure 2. Eight-Step Major Gift Management Cycle. Reproduced with permission from The Fund Raising School (2001), Indiana University Center on Philanthropy, 2001.

Despite the popularity of relationship fundraising paradigms and these cycles as, little research has explored how fundraisers implement the cycle stages. The fundraising literature recognizes that each donor is unique and that there are multiple practical and interpersonal factors to be considered in navigating and implementing major gift processes (Bout & Hodge, 2022). Affluent donors have reported that in their giving decisions, a "compelling pitch" is less important than their personal values and interest in the issue, the reputation of and their interaction with the nonprofit, and their perception of organizational financial need (Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, 2023). Fundraisers believe donors expect them to be fair in navigating organizational interests and donor considerations to reframe complex organizational needs, facilitate gifts, and build relationships based on trust (Breeze & Jollymore, 2017). Donors also appreciate it when fundraisers understand gift vehicles, systems, and structures and attend to the details and technicalities surrounding gift making (Shaker, 2023). According to these studies, major gift fundraisers must know their donors personally, be adept at navigating their organizational needs and systems, and be well-versed in philanthropic strategies and tools to facilitate donors' positive overall experiences with organizations—all of which are suggestive for how fundraisers may work with DAF donors in the cycle of fundraising.

2.3. Donor Information Management and DAFs

The management of donation and donor information are of fundraising that have heretofore been largely ignored in relationship fundraising models. Both forms of information are relevant for processing contributions, including DAF grants. Gift processing typically happens in four stages: intake, batch, entry, and finalize (Cannon, 2011). Intake

refers to the various channels by which donations arrive at the organization, including mail, in-person delivery, online, and electronic funds transfer (EFT) (Cannon, 2011). Batch describes the process of preparing gifts for entry and includes opening and sorting the mail, copying or scanning materials, accessing electronic reports, grouping the gifts by type, and creating a list of all gifts (Cannon, 2011). Entry refers to inputting the gift details, including the date received, amount, and gift purpose, to donor records and potentially creating records for new donors (Cannon, 2011). Donor records are often housed in Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software, which allows nonprofits to "track metrics about their donors and potential donors, including demographic and wealth information, communication history, and donation history" (Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, 2020). The finalize stage involves two key processes. First, the operations team ensures that donors are credited properly, including sending thank you letters and additional acknowledgments and initiating stewardship processes (Cannon, 2011). Second, the operations team ensures that gift details are accurately "shared and reconciled with the financial statements" (Cannon, 2011, p. 73).

Crediting donors properly in the finalize stage also includes assigning "hard credit" and "soft credit". Cannon (2011) defines hard credit as the "primary credit for a gift received", given to the "entity that issued the payment" (p. 212), an approach typically used in financial reporting. Soft credit is defined by Cannon (2011) as "secondary (non-financial) credit for a gift received, based on the soft-credited donor's involvement with a gift but not actual disbursement of the money" (p. 213). Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy (2020) notes that "many organizations track DAF gifts by hard crediting sponsoring organizations and soft crediting donor-advisors for all gifts from DAFs when the original donor is known" (p. 43).

Managing donor information is particularly complicated when working with DAF donors. When donors recommend grants from DAFs, they choose from four levels of information to accompany the grant. Donors can share (1) all their information, including their name(s) and contact information, along with the name of the DAF account. Alternatively, they may share (2) the name of the DAF account and their name(s), but no contact information. Another option is to provide (3) only the account name, which may or may not be identifiable to the donor, making it partially anonymous. Lastly, DAF donors can choose to be (4) completely anonymous, meaning no personally identifiable information is provided to the grantee. The sponsor then sends the selected information to the nonprofit grantee in a letter that accompanies the grant check or in the notes that accompany an EFT. Completely anonymous grants are particularly troublesome for fundraisers as they do not allow fundraisers to enter or continue the relationship management cycle. A survey by the DAFRC asked DAF sponsor managers about their default acknowledgment option and found that 36% defaulted to full information, 25% put the name of the account and donor name(s) as the default, 35% had the partially anonymous option of the account name, and 1% defaulted to complete anonymity (Heist et al., 2025).

In general, nonprofits are still adapting to the fragmented information coming from DAF sponsors. One study of 20, mostly large nonprofits concluded that "few organizations have detailed processes on DAF donor management and data tracking [for the limited data they do receive tied to DAF gifts]" (K2D Strategies & Chariot, 2024, p. 36). The report also found that many of the CRMs used by participating organizations were not well-equipped to track DAF grants, but it did not explore the ramifications of these difficulties for fundraisers.

3. Data and Methods

Qualitative methods are especially useful for exploring under-researched areas (Creswell & Poth, 2016) where theory is underdeveloped (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) or when complex processes occur (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). This project responds to the lack of research on DAFs and fundraising, and this article uses qualitative methods to explore the nuances of fundraising practices and systems.

3.1. Sample

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, which emphasizes identifying participants who could provide particularly relevant information (Maxwell, 2013) to "purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem" (Creswell, 2013, p. 156). Recruitment occurred through email and social media communications from the authors, participants, and especially via The Fund Raising School in the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy and its network of professional development participants and others.

Once recruited, volunteers completed a screening survey about their professional fundraising experience, DAF exposure and familiarity, and demographics. The interview selection process then foregrounded participants' familiarity with DAFs, the percentage of DAF donors in their donor population, and a combination of demographic, sector, and fundraising role factors. All interviewees had direct experience working with DAF donors and seeking DAF grants, and a few interviewees had also worked at DAF-sponsoring organizations or organizations that offered internal DAFs.

Recruitment and interviews were ongoing until data saturation and "informational redundancy" occurred, meaning that interviewees began sharing similar comments and sentiments (Sandelowski, 2008). In total, the researchers conducted 46 interviews between June and October of 2023. (See Table 1 for an overview of the sample.)

Table 1. Demographic summary and fundraising experience of interviewee sample.

Variable		Percent	Variable		Percent
Race *^	White or Caucasian	76.1%	Gender *^	Female	54.3%
	Black or African American	6.5%		Male	41.3%
	Asian	4.3%		Prefer Not to Say	4.3%
	Other	4.3%	Ethnicity	Not Spanish, Hispanic, Latine Origin	91.3%
	Prefer Not to Say	2.2%		Spanish, Hispanic, Latine Origin	6.5%
	No Response	6.5%		No Response	2.2%
Familiarity with DAFs *^	Very Familiar	65.2%	Percent of Sample with Current or Previous Experience in Subsector…*	Animals/Animal Welfare	4.3%
	Familiar	30.4%		Arts, Culture, and Humanities	6.5%
	Slightly Familiar	4.3%		Association or Membership Foundation	2.2%
Approximate Percent of DAF Donors in Fundraiser's Portfolio *	Less than 10%	11.1%		Civic or Public Affairs	2.2%
	10% to 19%	33.3%		Community/Economic Development	4.3%
	20% to 29%	24.4%		Education: Higher Education	32.6%
	30% to 89%	20.0%		Education: Not Higher Education	10.9%
	90% or more	11.1%		Environment	2.2%
Years of Professional Fundraising Experience	Less than 10	20.0%		Health	19.6%
	10 to 19	40.0%		Human Services	19.6%
	20 to 29	28.8%		International	4.3%
	30 or more	11.1%		Religion	10.9%
				Other	4.3%
Current Role ^	Chief Development Officer, Assistant/Associate Vice President for Development/Advancement				43.5%
	Major Gifts Officer, Individual Giving Officer				23.9%
	President, Agency CEO, or Executive Director				8.7%
	Associate Vice Chancellor, Deputy Director, Associate Director				4.3%
	Fundraising/Development Generalist				4.3%
	Consultant				2.2%
	Other				13.0%

Note: * Not all percentages add up to 100% due to rounding or the selection of multiple responses. ^ These variables exclude unselected response options (Not at all familiar; Non-binary/Third Gender; American Indian/Native American or Alaska Native, Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; Dean, CIO, CTO, Grants Manager, Annual Giving Manager).

There is no nationally representative dataset available for the US fundraising profession. The project sample, however, was similar to the Association of Fundraising Professionals (2021) and Data USA's (n.d.) information on fundraisers regarding the average time in fundraising (17 years for the sample compared to 15 years in other studies), representation of sectors (44% with experience in education compared to 33% and 45%, respectively), as well as racial and ethnic diversity (15% people of color compared to 14% and 15%, respectively; 7% of Spanish, Hispanic, or Latine origin compared to 4% and 6%, respectively). Balancing these factors and others related to DAF familiarity and fundraising position contributed to an overrepresentation of male fundraisers compared to the other US fundraising studies (41% compared to 18% and 29%, respectively).

3.2. Procedure

Interviews were semi-structured and conducted via Zoom by one of the two principal investigators (PIs). The interview protocol (see Text S2 in Supplemental Materials) covered a range of topics, including participants' fundraising backgrounds, typical experiences with DAFs, sentiments towards DAFs, and strategies when working with DAF donors. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of both PIs' universities, and participants were treated in accordance with these ethical standards.

Interviews averaged 51 min and were recorded and transcribed. Each transcript was checked for accuracy, all identifiable information was removed, and pseudonyms were assigned to protect participant confidentiality. The transcripts were then uploaded to MAXQDA 24, a qualitative analysis software.

3.3. Analysis

The analysis for this article focused specifically on the way that DAFs affect standard relationship fundraising and donor information processes. The analysis followed a thematic approach, a flexible method that aims to identify patterns and both manifest (explicit) and latent (underlying) meanings within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Finlay, 2021). In this study, the codebook thematic analysis approach was applied, which is a blend of the reflexive and coding reliability approaches (Braun et al., 2019; Morgan, 2022). Reflexive approaches recognize that coding is an inherently individualized process, whereas reliability approaches adopt a more structured approach (Braun et al., 2019). To apply this hybrid method, the team used a six-step process for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), involving 1. Familiarization, 2. Generation of Initial Codes, 3. Search for Themes, 4. Review of Themes, 5. Definition and Naming of Themes, and 6. Report Production.

After becoming familiar with the data through post-interview memo-writing and then interview transcription (1), the researchers collaboratively developed an initial coding scheme (2), including deductive and, later, inductive codes that emerged throughout the coding process. For this article, the thematic analysis centered on responses that related to the stages in the "Eight-Step Major Gift Management Cycle" and the underlying donor information management activities necessary to facilitate the cycle. Once an initial consensus on the scheme was reached, multiple researchers began independently coding each transcript using MAXQDA.

To build trustworthiness, the researchers recorded the reflexive memos immediately after conducting interviews as well as while coding the transcripts, including thoughts, impressions, and suggestions for coding adjustments. The coding memos were reviewed during weekly research team meetings and led to multiple adjustments to the coding scheme, including the creation, combination, and deletion of certain codes. The final codebook is provided in the accompanying Supplemental Materials (see Supplementary Table S1).

At the beginning of the process, several transcripts were coded by the entire research team to ensure fidelity to the codebook. Each transcript was independently reviewed by a PI and an additional researcher. The PI then reviewed the additional researcher's coding and made a final version. This process addressed analysts' blind spots, eventually leading to consensus among multiple coders (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This consensus coding process aligned findings and provided the basis for a singular, shared analysis of the data (Braun et al., 2019). At this point, the researchers reviewed coded segments and began searching for themes in the data (3), capturing them in a document that included quotes, memos, summaries, and personal insights. Care was taken to acknowledge and account for "the effect that [the PI's personal experience] may have [had] on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected, and its interpretation" (4) (Berger, 2015, p. 220; Dodgson, 2019). As the analysis progressed, some of the researchers' initial reactions were modified or expanded, highlighting the iterative nature of this thematic identification process (Teh & Lek, 2018). Identified themes were individually and collectively discussed, defined, and iterated upon in various conceptual models (5). Some of these themes are evident in the DAF Cycle.

During this stage, the authors recognized a pattern in the data wherein fundraisers naturally identified challenges and opportunities related to working with DAFs. These emergent themes were integrated by borrowing the distinctive analysis of opportunities and challenges from the common organizational evaluation method known as the SWOC (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Challenges) assessment (Aithal & Kumar, 2015). In this technique, strengths and weaknesses relate to an organization's internal assessment, whereas opportunities and challenges arise from an analysis of the external environment. The researchers considered conceptualizing findings as opportunities and challenges to be fitting, given that DAFs are part of the external environment in which professional fundraisers and nonprofit administrators operate. These challenges and opportunities were then associated with points in the fundraising relationship cycle. Given that several challenges and opportunities did not fit into the traditional Eight-Step Major Gift Management Cycle, the researchers added stages to the cycle and made other adjustments, creating a new model to more accurately and thoroughly depict relationship and donor information management with DAF donors. Finally, the team engaged in discrepant or negative case analysis by searching for and discussing elements of the data that did not support or appeared to contradict observed patterns (Patton, 1999; Creswell & Poth, 2016). The final themes were reviewed as the researchers began writing this report (6).

An external audit of the research process and report was conducted by a qualitative methods specialist to evaluate the trustworthiness and rigor of these methods and ensure that the findings were supported by the data (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

4. Findings

The findings of this study emerged through thematic analysis and represent the ways DAFs change fundraising. Our findings are built upon the Eight-Step Major Gift Management Cycle, which we took as generally representative of established models of major gift fundraising management.

4.1. The DAF Donor Relationship Management Cycle

The DAF Donor Relationship Management Cycle is a revision and expansion of Eight-Step Major Gift Management Cycle (The Fund Raising School, 2001). The changes to the traditional model are summarized in Table 2, and a diagram of the new cycle is presented in Figure 3. The model shows how DAFs affect fundraising practices and structures for front-line fundraisers as well as gift administration teams and provides a structure for the

findings presented in this article. The new model includes potential interactions fundraisers may have with DAF donors. Notably, not every stage of the cycle may be necessary in every DAF donor interaction. For instance, after an initial DAF gift is made and the donor is identified, some of the stages of the cycle may no longer apply for subsequent gifts. The DAF model makes several changes to traditional fundraising cycles as it integrates some of the complexities of managing relationships with donors who give through an intermediary. The new model shows that a donor must recommend a grant from the DAF to donate. It includes gift processing as a distinct stage because of the importance of accurate data entry with DAF donors. The new model also indicates two different types of donor identification, reactively and proactively, because finding DAF donors does not always occur through standard identification strategies. Finally, the new model denotes a set of six challenges and four opportunities that DAFs present to professional fundraisers.

Table 2. Eight-Step Major Gift Management Cycle as adapted and revised in the DAF Donor Relationship Management Cycle.

Eight-Step Major Gift Management Cycle	DAF Donor Relationship Management Cycle Changes, Adaptions, and Additions
*	The new cycle now starts and ends with *Donor Recommends DAF Grant* because receiving a DAF grant is often the first interaction with a newly identified DAF donor.
Identify	Removes *Identify* and adds *Identify Reactively* toward the beginning of the cycle, and *Identify Proactively* later in the cycle, during the *Qualify*, *Cultivate*, *Develop Strategy*, and *Solicit* stages.
*	Adds *Process Grant* as a formal part of the cycle; recognizes "Investigating DAF Donations" as an activity related to anonymous or partially anonymous grants; and highlights the importance of "Entering DAF Grants" into the CRM database.
Qualify	DAFs are relevant for "Signaling Intent and Capacity".
Develop Strategy	Moves *Develop Strategy* after *Cultivate* and focuses on "Gathering Strategic Information" about a donor's DAF giving.
Cultivate	Adds "Engaging in Deeper Conversations" with DAF donors.
Solicit and Negotiate	Adds "Experiencing Confidence in Solicitation" and emphasizes "Exchanging Information".
Acknowledge/Recognize	Note that *Acknowledge/Recognize* is placed before *Qualify* and specifies "Thanking the Donor" and not the DAF sponsor.
Steward	Recognizes regulatory consideration and points to the importance of "Understanding DAF Regulations".
Renew	The *Renew* step is removed from the new cycle. Instead, the cycle begins and ends with the organization receiving a *DAF Grant* at which point "Verifying the Organization" may be required.

Note: * Indicates stages added to the Eight-Step Major Gift Management Cycle. Stages in the cycle are presented in italic font, and challenges and opportunities are presented in quotation marks.

The discussion of the cycle begins at the point where a donor recommends a DAF grant. Fundraising cycles are typically presented as beginning with fundraisers identifying potential major donors. However, when a DAF grant itself is the first sign that a known or unknown donor uses a DAF, this order of events is often disrupted and not necessarily fundraiser-initiated.

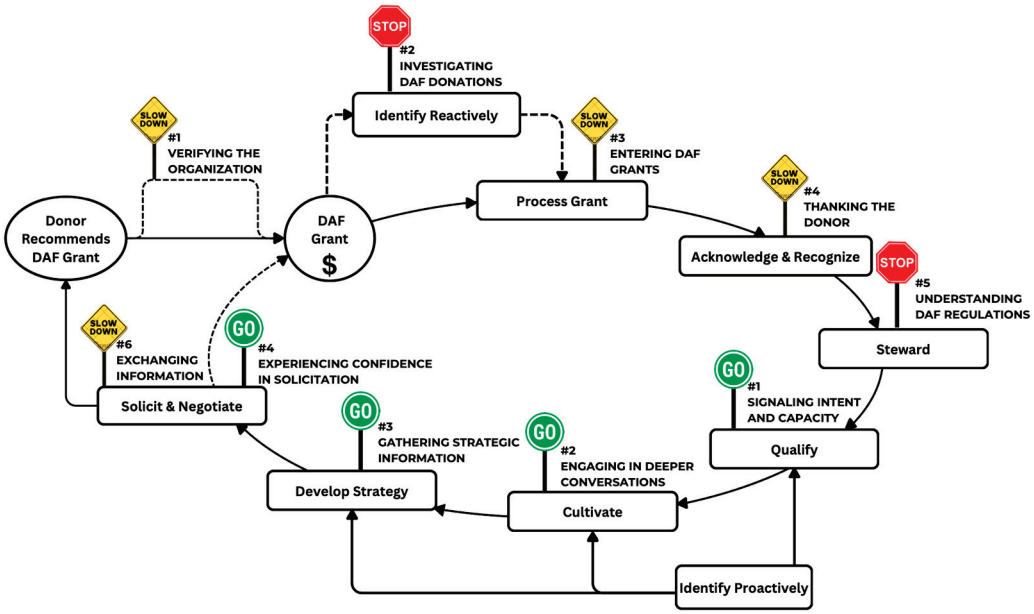

Figure 3. DAF Donor Relationship Management Cycle. Note: figure modified from the "Eight-Step Major Gift Management Cycle", used with permission from The Fund Raising School.

The stage *Process Grant* is added as a critical stage in the fundraising cycle following the receipt of the DAF grant and preceding the acknowledgment of the grant. While fundraising relationship models typically assume that donor data are being handled properly, the nuances that accompany DAF donor data management disrupt this assumption. When asked about the processes that followed the receipt of DAF grants, many fundraisers said that their efforts to identify and interact with DAF donors were contingent upon how grants were recorded and handled. The importance of gift/grant processing in working with DAF donors has been addressed in other venues (e.g., K2D Strategies & Chariot, 2024; Anonymous Member, 2024). This new addition in the DAF model delineates the importance of the fundraising team—beyond the frontline fundraisers—in developing an effective process for interfacing with DAF donors.

The Fund Raising School's (2001) Eight-Step Major Gift Management Cycle places *Develop Strategy* before *Cultivate* and is related to shaping the overall strategy. In the DAF Cycle, this stage now appears after *Cultivate*, with a focus on developing a strategy specifically for solicitation. This is because DAFs allow fundraisers to gain more strategic information about how donors are approaching philanthropy. Therefore, the information gained from DAF donors during *Qualify* and *Cultivate* allows for the development of a more strategic solicitation.

The DAF Cycle distinguishes between two forms of identifying donors: *Reactively* and *Proactively*. Donor identification is defined in our codebook as "How the fundraiser finds out if their current donors are using a DAF or finds other donors that use DAFs" (see Table S1 in Supplemental Materials). When asked about identifying donors who were using DAFs, most participants referred to gift processing and reports notifying them of donations, including DAF grants. We call this stage *Identify Reactively* because the fundraisers—whether they already knew the donor or not—often recognized DAF donors as the result of a grant. Briana, a higher education fundraiser, said, "I think probably 90% of the people that I have figured out they're using a DAF is because they have sent [a grant] from a DAF, not because they've shared, 'I have a donor advised fund'". Some fundraisers, however, also talked about intentionally seeking out DAF donors, which we call *Identify Proactively*. These methods included asking donors if they use a DAF during the *Qualify*, *Cultivate*, *Develop Strategy*, and *Solicit* stages, seeking donor referrals from community

foundations and other DAF sponsors, and communicating with financial advisors to find interested DAF donors. For instance, Koa, a fundraiser at a religious organization, asked donors in his portfolio, "What's the best method for you to make a contribution to us?" He shared that after asking directly, "many [DAF donors] will self-identify [by saying], 'I have a DAF at [sponsor]'". Ryan, a fundraiser at an arts and culture organization, approached the topic from a "curiosity angle" during *Cultivate* by asking donors about how they like to fund their philanthropy.

Because *Identify Reactively* and *Identify Proactively* do not take place during the typical *Identify* stage of the fundraising cycle, we do not include *Identify* in its traditional form. Instead, *Identify Reactively* and *Identify Proactively* are presented at the relevant points of the DAF Cycle. *Identify Proactively* occurs as part of the *Process Grant* stage. *Identify Proactively* occurs primarily during the *Qualify* and *Cultivate* stages and informs the *Develop Strategy* stage; it may also occur during the *Solicit* stage when exchanging information, but identification at this stage does not help develop strategy. Notably, none of these DAF donor identification activities is the same as identifying potential donors through research methods like wealth screening since DAF accounts are not public information.

The illustration of the DAF Cycle (Figure 3) includes challenges and opportunities presented by DAFs and represents them with figurative US traffic signs. The signs symbolize how professional fundraisers may approach the associated stage of the cycle, with consideration of donor and organization nuances. Yellow SLOW signs indicate challenges that require careful attention and take some extra time to appropriately address. Red STOP signs indicate challenges that also need careful attention and that may, at least temporarily, halt the fundraising cycle due to issues that may be unresolvable. The challenges included in the cycle are "Verifying the Organization", "Investigating DAF Donations", "Entering DAF Grants", "Thanking the Donor", "Understanding DAF Regulations", and "Exchanging Information". Green GO signs indicate instances where DAFs can enhance fundraisers' relationships with donors and are "Signaling Intent and Capacity", "Engaging in Deeper Conversations", "Gathering Strategic Information", and "Experiencing Confidence in Solicitation". Note that the challenges mainly appear during the early stages of the cycle. When challenges have been properly addressed, DAFs facilitate opportunities that arise in later cycle stages.

4.2. Challenge 1: Verifying the Organization (SLOW)

Many interviewees discussed how DAFs complicate gift processing procedures; this can include the requirement of verifying organizations' eligibility to receive DAF grants. If a grantee is a registered 501(c)(3) public charity with the IRS, it is generally considered eligible for a grant. Other qualified entities include religious organizations and municipalities. Some sponsors apply additional criteria in determining an organization's eligibility for their DAF program. These criteria may exclude organizations that have been charged with illegal activity, are not in compliance with the IRS, and/or are listed as "hate groups" by a third party or internal list (Stein, 2024; Heist et al., 2025). When questions of compliance arise, sponsors contact organizations' administrators to ascertain more information, check IRS compliance, and obtain other documentation. This additional verification process appears between *Donor Recommends DAF Grant* and *DAF Grant* in the DAF Cycle as a SLOW challenge because it is not always necessary and can be overcome for eligible organizations.

Verification interactions with DAF sponsors can be cumbersome for fundraisers, particularly for newly established nonprofits and organizations that are not 501(c)(3) entities but still qualify for DAF grants, and/or when the DAF sponsors have additional vetting requirements. Susan worked as a fundraiser for a municipal entity, which could legally receive DAF grants but did not appear in nonprofit databases. She was frequently asked

by DAF sponsors to verify the organization's ability to receive grants. She expressed frustration with the process, stating, "We're jumping through hoops and hurdles, and we can't even get a direct phone number to contact someone, and you're calling an 800 number, and you talk to . . . a different person every time". She continued to explain that some sponsors require verification "every few years". Some nonprofits in the study had overcome these difficulties by streamlining verification through precertification with large DAF sponsors, allowing funds to be wired directly without repeated verification calls. Julie, a higher education fundraiser, advocated for this approach: "If you pre-certify yourself, all they do is send you the wire . . . So, you're not sitting there on the phone, having to take . . . the calls and verify it every time they come along".

It was also difficult for fundraisers when verification-related misunderstandings were passed back to donors, leading to incorrect perceptions about organizations' DAF eligibility. Additionally, some sponsors look at ratings on GuideStar or other third-party vetting sources, which collect and organize information about IRS-registered nonprofits in their vetting processes. After being told that her donor's financial advisor said, "Maybe you shouldn't give to this group because it's not even a silver [on GuideStar]", Shannon reported that she felt pressure to help her membership organization "jump through GuideStar's hoops" to get a more favorable ranking.

Another issue for fundraisers was the time involved in awaiting sponsor verification, which, according to Stein (2024), "can be anywhere from a few weeks to a few months". While a one- or two-week delay may seem insignificant, it can lead to missed deadlines for "giving days" or other time-sensitive organizational program needs. Liam, a fundraiser for a religious organization, suspected some verification delays when he stated, "If [the donor] doesn't have that gift in by the 30th of the month, [the sponsor is] going to wait another 30 days to make a gift". All told, verification can disrupt or delay the fundraising relationship management cycle in some cases.

4.3. Challenge 2: Investigating DAF Donations (STOP)

A key theme of the interviews was the fundraisers' difficulties in knowing and connecting directly with donors advising the grants. When donors request DAF grants, they choose how much personal contact information to include. Eric, an education fundraiser, explained, "We've received some gifts from DAFs, and we didn't know who was behind them and couldn't find who it was and couldn't steward them well and engage them or thank them". Eric continued, "The hard part is when [the grant] is not named, and it doesn't follow any historical trends. Then we're kind of in the dark". Thus, fundraisers were inclined to do "detective work" to try to discover the donors' names and contact information. Kayla, a director of development, said that sometimes she felt "like [she] was sending [her] development coordinator on a wild goose chase to try to figure out who had made the donation".

Being unable to identify a donor breaks the fundraising cycle by hindering relationship development. This STOP in the fundraising relationship cycle noted between the *Identify Reactively* and *Process Grant* stages was the most common challenge for fundraisers in this study. Other research has reported that less than 4% of DAF grants are fully anonymous (Heist et al., 2024), so this was an unexpected finding. Anonymity was not a common occurrence in this study—most fundraisers reported it as relatively rare. But the prominence of this concern reveals just how much fully and partially anonymous grants can complicate how fundraisers are able to interact with their supporters.

When DAF grants were completely anonymous, many of the participants did not seek further information, respecting donors' preference for anonymity. At times, however, fundraisers questioned whether anonymity was actually donors' preference. Fundraisers

reported incidents when donors did not intend for their grants to be anonymous (or partially anonymous). Donors made mistakes filling out the DAF grant forms or incorrectly assumed that the nonprofit would know they had initiated the donation. For these cases, Tammy, a fundraiser at a large, well-established organization, explained, "There [are] times where we can look back at historical [data] and we know that [donor] always gives on 1 December, and she gives through [foundation]. We can sort of figure out, you know, that [it's] probably [donor]'s gift". While sometimes fruitful, detective work on anonymous (or partially anonymous) grants required time and effort and still generated uncertainty even when a possible donor was identified. For instance, a human services fundraiser, Alisha, recalled a casual conversation with a donor at an event that revealed them as the source of a particular anonymous DAF grant. But she was uncertain about proceeding with acknowledging the grant and thanking the person because she was unsure whether the donor wanted to be formally anonymous or not.

Fundraisers were more likely to try to track down partially anonymous grants. Ryan explained that "nine times out of ten, the name of their donor advised fund actually has their first and last name or . . . [at least] their last name, so we can pretty well figure out who the DAF belongs to". Even if a fund name was the only information provided, Shannon said that "we work our way through . . . no matter how the name comes, if we can, we find the person" and that her organization was "pretty successful" in these endeavors. Shannon worked at a large membership organization with an expansive database of individuals connected to the organization. For fundraisers at organizations with less comprehensive databases, similar efforts were neither feasible nor productive.

Some fundraisers' detective work also included contacting the DAF sponsors. They undertook this in the hope there might have been a mistake or lost documentation and/or that the sponsor might occasionally serve as a conduit to pass along information or an acknowledgment letter to the donor. Ryan explained the following:

"Sometimes, it's great because [the sponsor will] go, 'Oh, by the way, we forgot to print that on the check, here's the information'. Other times, it's a little more complicated, and they have to take my contact information down so that way they can share it with the donor, and then [the donor] can choose or not choose to identify". On the other hand, Eric believed that some sponsors were "very intentional about not sharing donor information" and DAFs were "designed as a black box". He was not alone in saying that contacting sponsors (especially large national organizations) was a dead end and recognizing that sponsors are, of course, obligated to respect DAF donors' wishes.

The fundraisers explained that, at times, investigations were required within their organizations' donor and donation information processes. For example, Megan, an education fundraiser, explained that her gift processing team "would enter the gifts from [the DAF sponsor] but not actually track who the donor was". Weston, a deputy director, shared that when insufficient donor information was provided, his gift processing team "does their best to try to connect dots or starts asking around, 'Were you expecting something to come in? Who's expecting this?'" This indicates that gift processing is a critical part of properly identifying DAF donors.

4.4. Challenge 3: Entering DAF Grants (SLOW)

Fundraisers recognized that some DAF donor identification problems could be solved by proper data entry. This finding led to the addition of the SLOW emphasis on the *Process Grant* stage of the fundraising cycle. Most interviewees were either chief development officers or major gift officers (see Table 2) and were not directly involved in processing donations but were hampered when there were related difficulties. In some cases, fundraisers reported that gift processing staff were underprepared for the intricacies of DAFs. The

standard gift entry process focused on information found on the paper check itself, leading information on the check stub or accompanying correspondence to be disregarded. At times, fundraisers reported that staff failed to document all relevant information from the DAF grant or assigned hard credit to sponsors but did not assign soft credit to donors. Consequently, fundraisers found themselves explaining DAFs' structure to colleagues in gift processing. When grants were not entered completely, fundraisers and gift processing personnel sometimes collaborated to try to recapture missing information and ensure data integrity.

Fundraisers reported various approaches to entering DAF grant data in CRM software. Ryan's arts organization input the grant "both as a soft credit on the gift line . . . but also as an additional attribute on their record that they have a donor advised fund". Kristin's health organization input the grant in a DAF subcategory, then flagged DAF donors with an interest flag. Kayla created a specific group in her database for those using DAFs. These methods allowed for the complete recording of grants and tracking of DAF donors. Unfortunately, not all CRMs were configured with attributes or interest fields to enable coding DAF donors in this way, and/or some organizations simply had not made this a part of their data architecture. Michelle, a highly experienced fundraiser, said she "always kept a running list in [her] head" of DAF donors—not the ideal, but a start, she noted. Clearly, there is room for improvement in the processing of DAF grants.

4.5. Challenge 4: Thanking the Donor (SLOW)

After a DAF grant has been properly recorded, it needs to be acknowledged. Fundraisers in the study recognized the importance of adjusting standard receipting and acknowledgment processes for DAF grants. This SLOW down challenge appears in the *Acknowledge/Recognize* stage of the DAF Cycle.

A well-known expectation of organizational accountability is that nonprofits will provide donors with a "gift receipt", verifying their 501(c)(3) public charity status. With DAF grants, however, donors have already received their gift receipt from the DAF sponsor and can use that in seeking a tax deduction. The fundraisers explained that even though providing a tax receipt is not necessary and is, in fact, incorrect, grants should still be acknowledged and donors thanked. Anna, a fundraiser in the health sector, explained, "Our non-DAF donors would receive a receipt. [However, the DAF donors] would just need to receive an acknowledgment letter because they don't get receipts". Most interviewees noted this difference and had a separate acknowledgment process for DAF donors—though some CRM systems required this to be a manual effort. Intentional separation of acknowledgment and receipting was especially important for organizations with tiered processes. At Anna's organization, donors who gave less than USD 250 usually only received a receipt, and at Elizabeth's health organization, this threshold was USD 10,000. Since DAF donors do not require receipts, Anna began questioning, "What are we doing for [DAF donors] under $250?" Elizabeth recognized that even though DAF grants do not require tax receipts, receiving this type of gift shouldn't "be a barrier to our gratitude".

Bradley, a major gifts officer, shared, "I have a fear that some nonprofits . . . take that literal language from the donor advised fund financial institution that says [fundraisers] do not have to receipt the grant because it's already been done by [the sponsor] . . . And are not doing anything". This would run counter to fundraising ethics and the belief in an organizational responsibility to inform donors upon receiving their contribution, affirming it has been processed correctly (Dwyer & Perry, 2022). A few organizations did not acknowledge DAF grants at all. Clara recognized this as a mistake: "We do not send acknowledgments for outright gifts that are funded by using a DAF. And I don't think anybody else at [the university] is doing that either, which is not good. So, that's definitely

a deficit". The principles of relationship fundraising recognize the importance of expressing gratitude within the fundraising cycle (Bout & Hodge, 2022).

Recognizing an acknowledgment gap, some fundraisers at small organizations took it upon themselves to send personal thanks to DAF donors. Others, recognizing potential delays in system-generated thanks, sent quick notes to donors when grants arrived. Emily said, "So, one of the things I'll do is when we get [the DAF gift is] sometimes I'll say, 'Hey, I just want to let you know we received your gift today! Thank you so much'". Curtis, a human services fundraiser, explained:

> I'll usually give them a little bit more care and more personalized communications just because I know that they probably have a propensity to give more. . . They'll usually get either a handwritten note or phone call from myself or a volunteer or someone within the organization, a board member, to make sure that initial connection [is made].

Note that Curtis recognized DAF donors as having the "propensity to give more", which affected his responsiveness and is discussed in more depth in Section 4.8. Opportunity 1: Signaling Intent and Capacity.

Most fundraisers did not send post-grant correspondence to DAF sponsoring organizations, but a few discussed whether there was value in acknowledging sponsors. Emily differentiated among DAF providers in making this decision:

> Having worked for a foundation that provides donor advised funds, we always just threw those [thank you notes] away. We didn't need one because we were a nonprofit. So, it depends on who the foundation is. If it's a huge [DAF sponsor], we don't even send a receipt to the charity because they're a nonprofit, so they don't need one. If it's our local community foundation, I do send those because they are more hands-on, and it's just a way of saying thank you to them as well.

Her comments hint at the possibility of forming relationships and cultivating some DAF sponsors.

4.6. Challenge 5: Understanding DAF Regulations (STOP)

A source of confusion and occasional difficulty for the professional fundraisers was the IRS rules regarding DAF grants. This STOP challenge appears in the *Steward* stage of the fundraising cycle because the IRS places some restrictions on how DAF grants may be used, and this was a source of misunderstandings with donors (see Figure 3).

4.6.1. Personal Benefit

IRS restrictions prevent DAF donors from receiving personal benefits, which can come as a surprise to some donors, leading to complications. Liam explained his experience with these restrictions:

> One downside I have with DAF donors is athletics; because of the benefits, it gets very messy with things like [booster club membership], and tickets. . . It's very frustrating to a donor if you don't tell them right upfront, and so I've made the practice of saying, 'Look, this [DAF giving] works for almost everything but athletics, you can still make gifts to athletics but you cannot expect to get any kind of [benefit]".

Specifically, DAFs cannot be used to make a donation where the donor receives a "tangible" personal benefit (more than "incidental" benefit) in exchange for their donation (National Philanthropic Trust, n.d.-a). Furthermore, DAFs cannot be used to bifurcate donations associated with tangible benefits. Here, bifurcation means to split a donation in which the

portion associated with a tangible benefit is paid directly by the donor, such as the cost of the dinner of a gala, and the remaining charitable donation is paid through a DAF.

A few interviewees prevented errant DAF grants during the *Solicit* stage by explaining the rules to donors before the grant was requested. However, if an organization received a DAF grant that was inappropriately designated, the fundraiser had to STOP the cycle, correct the grant processing, and have a potentially difficult conversation with the donor about DAF regulations. Julie's organization had a written policy specifically about bifurcation, so when issues arose, they could "give it to the donor . . . [and tell them] 'You already got the charitable deduction. . . . [The] IRS is trying to say you can't buy something now with it.'" While almost all sponsors have checks in their verification process related to personal benefit (Heist et al., 2025), such grants are sometimes still distributed, stressing how important it is for fundraisers to know the regulations.

4.6.2. DAFs and Pledges

Historically, the IRS interpreted the fulfillment of pledges as a personal benefit to the DAF donor because the grant released the donor from a financial obligation. But in 2017, the IRS changed its stance on this issue. According to Nusbaum (2019), "Section 4 of IRS Notice 2017-73 addresses personal pledges, which effectively allows DAFs to make grants that satisfy pledges so long as the DAF sponsor does not reference the pledge in the grant letter or check".

Interviewees' understanding of DAFs and pledges was mixed. Many fundraisers reported that DAFs could not be used to make or fulfill pledges in their organizations, a practice that does not reflect the 2017 IRS changes as they are frequently interpreted. Some fundraisers were familiar with the possibilities introduced by the 2017 legislation for alternative language for multi-year arrangements. Avoiding the word "pledge" altogether was one strategy fundraisers and their organizations used to provide donors with the option of multi-year commitments through DAFs. Shannon explained that "if the donor tells me she wants to make a multi-year gift and she has a donor advised fund, then I change the language from 'pledge' to 'intention'. . . and make a gift agreement instead of a pledge form". At Clara's university, a non-binding gift intention template was used instead of a pledge agreement for DAF donors. Another university fundraiser, Michelle, coordinated with her local DAF sponsor to craft a gift intention document that worked well for both parties. She explained, "I would openly say, 'We know that you cannot make a pledge from a donor advised fund. We and the [community foundation] have solutions for that'". Although many nonprofits and fundraisers in the study were gaining understanding and finding solutions related to pledges, the lack of clarity on IRS regulations around pledges disrupted the fundraising cycle.

4.7. Challenge 6: Exchanging Information (SLOW)

Several interviewees indicated the importance of exchanging information with DAF donors to prevent potential problems. This SLOW down challenge occurs in the DAF Cycle during the *Solicit* stage. Administrative burdens often arose from missing information and details about grants. To alleviate these burdens, fundraisers recognized that they must ask donors the right questions and provide them with appropriate information.

4.7.1. Obtaining DAF Information from the Donor

While some fundraisers reported that a few donors told them they used a DAF, many donors never mentioned it. Some of Weston's donors "sign off on [a gift] agreement, [but] never tell us it's coming from a DAF, and so like three months later we'll get the first gift, and it's a DAF grant". He went on to explain the issue this introduced as his "gift accounting team [started] scrambling, trying to figure out who's behind this and how [they

should handle it because] the grant wasn't designated appropriately". Some fundraisers, like Alan, carefully sought this information as part of the gift solicitation. As an experienced vice president working with the organization's largest donors, Alan wanted clarity before any paperwork was signed so his team "[didn't] have to go and do all this administrative stuff on the back end". Jennifer, a fairly new fundraiser, noted that upon discovering a donor has a DAF, she "collect[s] their fund name or other information like that [to] just help the gift entry person". Kristin started telling her gift officers to ask donors how they plan to make their gift and put "a little footnote in [her nonprofit's communications] that says, 'Please notify us of your gift so we can . . . be on the lookout for it'". These fundraisers realized the value of being proactive in their efforts to collect DAF information to facilitate solicitation efforts.

4.7.2. Providing Information to the Donor

Another best practice fundraisers spoke about was to "make it as easy as possible for the supporter to make the gift" (Victor) by ensuring donors had all the information necessary to designate the grant correctly. While Curtis noted that every sponsor is "a little different in what they require to make that first distribution", donors need information, such as the Employer Identification Number (EIN), to identify their grantee of choice when recommending DAF grants. Unfortunately, this information is not always easily accessible or up to date on many nonprofit websites (Kirchoff, 2022; K2D Strategies & Chariot, 2024). To provide donors with the necessary information, Jennifer said, "I give them our address, our title, our EIN, and then encourage them to connect with their advisor". Curtis gave donors his card so they or their financial planner could "reach out to [him] directly", and Emily offered to "walk [donors] through the process". Victor, a major gifts officer, told his donors that once they put in the nonprofit's EIN and address, they would "see something that says [scholarship name] of [geographic area]". Victor talked his donors through making the grant to the point where he could eventually say, "That's the one [to] click".

The level of detailed information fundraisers provided to their donors in this process depended on the donor's DAF familiarity and the fundraiser's familiarity with DAF gift portals. A small subset of participating fundraisers who had their own DAFs believed this shared experience was beneficial for helping donors navigate DAF logistics (see also Schneider, 2024). For instance, Kristin said, "If I'm going to speak about donor advised funds, I like to be able to speak intelligently from the donor seat". Because Kristin had set up a DAF, she could walk donors through the same process and tell them "how easy it is to make a grant".

4.8. Opportunity 1: Signaling Intent and Capacity (GO)

A major opportunity that DAFs created for fundraisers occurred when seeking to determine donors' financial wherewithal and their likelihood of donating. This opportunity is presented in the *Qualify* stage. Many fundraisers took a special interest and responded with a sense of urgency when they discovered a donor had a DAF so as not to let them "fall through the cracks" (Erika). This was because many of the fundraisers thought DAFs signaled philanthropic intent and financial capacity.

4.8.1. DAFs Signaling Philanthropic Intent

Since DAF donors have set aside funds for philanthropic purposes, many fundraisers recognized that "they've already committed to give" (Veronica) and saw them as more "serious about philanthropy" (Nic). Elizabeth, a major gifts officer at a large health organization, stated: "I am always checking to see if someone's making a gift via a donor advised fund... I reach out to these people right away because they've shown they're

philanthropic". Similarly, Lori, an experienced fundraiser, shared that she felt encouraged when her organization received a DAF gift "because it means [the donor is] philanthropic and . . . that they care enough to put money aside in this specialty fund to make gifts. . . [their charitable giving] is not just a knee-jerk reaction to a year-end appeal . . . [it] is an integral part of their well-being and of who they are". With this knowledge, a fundraiser can expedite the process of the fundraising cycle. The time that fundraisers may have otherwise spent gauging a potential donor's interest in philanthropy can instead be dedicated to "matching them with the right project" (Nic). Veronica, the executive director of a human services organization, stated, "DAF donors are people who have already committed to giving in some form. We just want to be one of the ones that they choose". Qualifying philanthropic interest is difficult. Many fundraisers used DAFs as an important clue indicating donors' commitment to giving.

4.8.2. DAFs Signaling Financial Capacity

Most fundraisers also saw DAFs as an indication of wealth. Susan said, "They're capable of making a larger gift because they have a DAF". Many interviewees assumed that donors used DAFs, at least in part, for tax reasons. The standard deduction is USD 14,600 for single filers and USD 29,200 for married joint filers (IRS, 2024); thus, DAF donors must have "some [high] level of income that would behoove [them] to do that for tax purposes" (Alisha). In line with these assumptions, some fundraisers viewed DAF accounts as a proxy for formal wealth screening. Ryan said, "If [donors] have a DAF, generally, that's an indicator of capacity".

Jamie, a fundraiser with 17 years of experience, had a different perspective about DAFs and these donors' capacity to give. She noted, "[DAFs] have evolved from like a real wealth indicator. I think today they're much more accessible to a larger audience". Hailey pointed out how beneficial this new level of accessibility is for expanding this charitable vehicle to a larger population of people. Indeed, although DAFs have long been considered a tool used by high-net-worth households, these ideas fit with the research showing that almost half of DAFs have USD 50,000 in assets (Heist et al., 2024) and the fact that some DAFs can be opened with very limited initial investments (Schneider, 2024).

The participants noted that they received DAF grants of all sizes and anticipated receiving more in the future. Several fundraisers noted that donors are not legally required to disclose their DAF account balances. While having a DAF does not automatically guarantee a donor's major gift potential and fundraisers "don't know if [a donor has] $2 or $200 million" in their DAF (Tammy), having a DAF was certainly seen as "a piece of the [qualification] puzzle" (Alisha) that could help determine financial capacity.

4.9. Opportunity 2: Engaging in Deeper Conversations (GO)

Multiple fundraisers' DAF donor stories showed how DAFs enabled strategic and holistic conversations with donors. Fundraisers who shared these insights tended to have substantial DAF knowledge and experience. The opportunity to have deeper conversations is presented in the *Cultivate* stage of the DAF Cycle. Fundraisers used DAFs as a talking point while cultivating relationships to have meaningful interactions with donors about their giving.

Many interviewees perceived DAF donors to be savvy, sophisticated, and strategic, allowing them to pursue deeper conversations. Eric said, "Having a DAF is one data point that would signify that there's a little more sophistication there. . . . It tells me they are more serious about their giving". Nic said that when he discovers a donor has a DAF, then he knows "they're further along in . . . their understanding of financial stuff and where philanthropy fits in" and "the conversation starts here [indicating a high level with his

hand], it doesn't start down here [moves his hand down]". Some fundraisers thought that the savviness of DAF donors was more of a reflection of their use of financial advisors or their own professional experience (in investments, banking, or other related fields) than anything else. Speaking to this, Alisha said DAFs "[suggest a] level of savviness too. Now, whether it's them or whether it's their financial person, they are at least savvy enough to have a financial person". Knowing this, some fundraisers sought to "build a really credible relationship with the [financial] advisors" (Anthony).

DAF donors were also perceived to be more direct than other donors and especially concerned about impact and reporting. For instance, Savannah, a health fundraiser, found her DAF donors to be "more ready to speak more directly about things, like their budget, or . . . dollar numbers". According to Charles, who had worked at animal welfare and human services nonprofits, "[DAF donors] want to know what's going on. . . . They don't want a lot of warm and fuzzy . . . They want to be sure that their [money is] being put to good use". When reflecting on the differences between DAF donors and other donors, Seth expanded on this idea by saying, "I've got a good chance of talking with them (DAF donors) . . . about a different way of giving that is a little more complex". Nyla, a higher-education fundraiser, shared that she used "different types of language with [DAF] donors. . . .because they have invested the time and effort into using a particular stream of donation . . . [and] have a bigger picture in mind". The perception that DAF donors were savvy and concerned about impact allowed fundraisers to engage in deeper conversations as a means to learn about their philanthropic priorities and advance relationships.

4.10. Opportunity 3: Gathering Strategic Information (GO)

Some fundraisers observed their donors' actions to discover DAF-specific giving strategies. These interviewees described patterns in how donors used their DAFs as related to timing and capacity, which provided valuable insights for forming a solicitation. This opportunity is associated with the *Develop Strategy* stage of the DAF Cycle.

Fundraisers said that understanding a DAF donor's gift timing helped them understand their overall philanthropic approach. Kristin reported that some of her DAF donors "really have very little grant generation. And then we also see people that [are] granting out a tremendous amount of their DAF every single year". Eric noticed that "some donors move funds in and out of their DAFs quickly". Emily and Charles, who had both been fundraising for 15 to 20 years, made similar points. They noticed, respectively, that some donors "bundle their giving in one year [to] get the tax deduction they need" and "then distribute it amongst multiple charities over a period of time". Other interviewees observed donors using a longer-term approach. Ryan saw that some DAF donors were "basically setting up their own private endowment". Taking it a step further, Tammy explained that understanding DAF donors' timing allowed her to "develop a cadence that's customized for them". These timing patterns are somewhat aligned with the tub, tank, and tower models developed by Heist et al. (2022).

Some fundraisers in the study also planned solicitations using insights about their donors' philanthropic capacity and DAF budget. This went beyond assuming a donor had financial capacity, as was described in Opportunity 1 (see Section 4.8), to researching the capacity level. Nic asked his DAF donors directly, "Do you put money in [your DAF] yearly? Do you track it? Was it a large sum?" Alan admitted that "how much is in the DAF?" is a question he "often think[s] about but never ask[s]". Hailey, a fundraising consultant, recommended, "Get to know your donor. . . so you can gauge just what [their philanthropic] budget is and if it's coming from the DAF how you can be prioritized to get those funds". Some fundraisers utilized public information to approximate a fund balance. For instance, Megan approximated capacity by looking up the minimum opening

contribution amount at a donor's DAF sponsor. She explained, "I know that [they] are making gifts through [DAF sponsor], where it is $25,000 to establish a fund". Another way Eric worked through this was by generalizing the size of grants: "I don't think we get DAF gifts for less than $1000 bucks". These are examples of how fundraisers analyzed the information that was available and sought additional insights relevant for solicitation.

4.11. Opportunity 4: Experiencing Confidence in Solicitation (GO)

Fundraisers described being confident when seeking donations from donors with DAFs. "Experiencing Confidence in Solicitation" is an opportunity in the *Solicit* stage of the DAF Cycle.

4.11.1. Asking with Confidence

Because funds in DAFs are already set aside for charitable purposes, fundraisers expressed less worry and greater confidence when discussing their solicitation efforts with DAF donors. Nic said, "If somebody has a DAF, I know they're serious about philanthropy. When you're working with a donor on their first major gift . . . [you worry], 'Are they going to get cold feet?' . . . but if they've already got a DAF, it's not a matter of if it's important to them or something they want to do, it's something they've already done". Veronica told us that knowing DAF donors "are committed to giving makes it mentally easier to ask, and helps the conversation flow a little easier". Furthermore, Jacob, a fairly new fundraiser, shared that "Just knowing that they've taken the time to set up [a DAF] shows that they are perhaps philanthropic in nature, [and] that they are used to making gifts", leading to an "increased level of confidence". Melissa, a community development fundraiser, echoing sentiments also expressed by others, said that this confidence leads to an ability to ask for larger amounts of money. "I just feel more confident, I think, in being bolder, in asking for larger gifts because I know that the money's available, sitting there". Of course, a donor's linkage and interest to the organization also need to be considered while soliciting (see Bout & Hodge, 2022), but DAFs can reduce other barriers fundraisers may feel regarding solicitation.

4.11.2. Asking as Needed

Several interviewees said they could solicit DAF donors any time of the year, especially when needs "popped up" or emergencies arose, in addition to existing organizational appeals and calendars. Megan explained that for DAF donors, there is a "greater propensity to ask for renewal throughout the year . . . [since] it's not just in December [that] everyone's making their disbursements. They have the money in [their] account". Emily explained it this way: Sometimes, it is easier for me to have major gift conversations earlier in the year [with DAF donors] because it's less a conversation of, you know, "Let me see what my bonus looks like", and it's more of a, "It's already there. I'm just asking you to consider directing part of it this year to us". Indeed, research confirms that grantmaking from DAFs occurs relatively consistently throughout the calendar year, and DAF grants are more likely to be made earlier in the year than other forms of donations (Heist et al., 2024).

Because she knew that DAF donors were likely to have resources ready to distribute, "during the height of COVID-19", Melissa's organization "went to [their] DAF advisors strategically and said, 'There's a lot of need right now. You have this money in your account. How can we help you put that on the street?'" Emily reported that during the pandemic, DAF donors "were some of [her] first calls". This aligns with the notion that DAF donors have more "slack" for responding to emergent causes like the pandemic and calls for racial social justice (Vance-McMullen et al., forthcoming).

4.11.3. Asking for Planned Gifts

Knowing a donor used a DAF was a benefit for having conversations about deferred gifts. Some fundraisers sensed that DAF donors were better prepared to have "robust discussions about planning giving topics" (Seth). Kristin used DAF "flags" in her CRM system "as a feeder system for planned giving and beneficiary designations", asking those with DAFs, "Have you ever considered leaving a portion of your donor advised fund at your death to support [our charity]?" Michelle informed donors "that [they] can name [their] favorite charity the recipient of [their] donor advised fund when [they] are no longer serving as advisors". In Anna's experience, DAF donors wanted to "ensure their DAF giving continues" and had thought "more about what they want to accomplish" and how they would accomplish it than other donors.

Several other participants realized that they were missing this opportunity. Gaps in knowledge about DAF succession plan options—and the ability to designate a charity as a beneficiary—were often the culprit in terms of failure to speak to donors about this possibility. Despite the high percentage of donors using DAFs at his organization (approximately 25%), Weston commented, "I don't think that our fundraisers have tapped into [planned giving with DAFs] very often". Although soliciting DAF-based planned gifts was less common—perhaps due to the specific positions of those interviewed—it represented an additional area where DAFs could support more confident fundraising solicitations.

5. Practical Implications for Nonprofit Administrators and Professional Fundraisers

The interviews detailed how fundraisers navigated their work when donors used DAFs, including associated challenges and opportunities. Based on the fundraisers' reports, the majority, if not all, organizations in the study—even those considered most advanced—could benefit from certain improvements in DAF practices. This section summarizes and frames the fundraisers' comments, practices, and recommendations around the key themes. The goal is to support the application of the findings of this study while recognizing the limitations of this work and the nuances of other organizational contexts and donor populations. Organizations and fundraisers can use this article to see what resonates and to assess their own responses to DAF-related challenges and opportunities.

5.1. Solutions for Challenges Related to DAF Giving

The overarching solutions from interviewees to the challenges identified in this paper related to requesting, tracking, and sharing information. To prevent some of the challenges surrounding anonymous DAF grants, fundraisers in our study recommended proactively asking donors if they have a DAF and intend to use it for their giving. Fundraisers should then collect the DAF account name and the sponsoring organization name and associate this information with the donor in their CRM to facilitate grant processing. Interviewees who had developed solutions for this explained that they created a record for the DAF account within their donor database and then linked that account to the individual donor's record. The entity for the DAF in the donor database is the name of the DAF account at the DAF sponsoring organization, not just the sponsoring organization. For example, the entity in the database may read "[Name of DAF account] at [Name of DAF sponsor]". This entity is then linked to the individual donor(s) known to be associated with that account. When a grant is received from this account, the DAF account receives hard credit for the donation, and the individual donor(s) receives soft credit. In the acknowledgment of the grants, fundraisers who understood DAFs well sent an acknowledgment note to the individual

donor(s) associated with the DAF but not typically to the DAF sponsoring organization. Tax receipts or tax deduction language in the acknowledgment is not appropriate to include.

Fundraisers also expressed the importance of providing all the proper information to the donor for them to make a DAF grant, including the organization's official name, EIN, and address. Intentional sharing of this information could help donors more easily recommend grants from their DAF platform and may help streamline the verification process. To further simplify the verification process, fundraisers can provide donors with their nonprofit's information through third-party vetting sources and keep profiles up to date so that the information needed to verify organizational legitimacy is easily accessible.

Also evident in the interviews was the importance of educating frontline fundraisers and administrative teams about DAFs. To do this, organizations can provide internal education or support fundraisers to participate in professional development to learn about DAFs. Another way fundraisers can familiarize themselves with DAFs is by opening a DAF account or by utilizing the demo accounts available through several commercial DAF providers to see what donors see (see also Schneider, 2024).

An important topic of education and professional development is federal DAF regulations, particularly given the confusion in this area. Once fundraisers obtain a sufficient understanding of regulations themselves, a proactive strategy clarifying the source of a donation can be used to avoid regulatory missteps and facilitate positive conversations with donors. Organizations should undertake a formal review of their DAF processes to ensure alignment with current regulations and expert guidance. Nonprofits should have clear policies about acceptable DAF grant designations and post the policies where donors can easily access them. Nonprofits should also have processes in place to correct DAF grants intended for purposes that include personal benefit. Finally, development teams should change the language of multi-year gift agreements to use the words "commitment" or "intent" instead of "pledge" to make them compliant with DAF expectations.

5.2. Recommendations to Make the Most of DAF Opportunities

For many in the study, DAFs were opportune because they provided a strong clue about donors' philanthropic intent and capacity. When a known donor is planning a donation, proactively identifying as early as possible whether the donor has a DAF is not just an administrative benefit but also a boost for relationship development. Asking donors if they have a DAF is not something to be feared and has even been recommended by those writing from a donor's perspective (Greer, 2024). Whether discerned initially or later, DAFs' signal of philanthropic intent and likely capacity can be institutionalized by organizations within donor evaluation systems for qualification, and/or individual fundraisers can use these assumptions in an ad hoc manner. Recognizing that donors have already earmarked funds for philanthropy allows fundraisers to rethink recurring and one-off solicitation cycles. Donations addressing urgent needs, such as those arising from natural disasters, could be specifically directed to DAF donors. This knowledge can increase fundraisers' confidence leading into a solicitation potentially generating more solicitations and success in fundraising.

Some fundraisers in the study saw their knowledge of donors' DAF use as an avenue for eliciting more information through deeper conversations. More fundraisers can capitalize on this opportunity by asking DAF donors questions to discern how they use the DAF, for example, like asking donors about when they prefer to make grants from their DAF and if they have a budget for their grantmaking. They could also ask what assets they contribute to the DAF or whether they use financial advisors in their giving decisions. Most donors have a succession plan for their DAF, presenting an opportunity for fundraisers to discuss planned giving options and to ask to be included as a charitable recipient in the

succession plan. Through deeper conversations, fundraisers may identify donors' DAF giving strategies and can create more informed solicitations.

6. Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

This study documented how fundraisers work with DAF donors within their organizational contexts and synthesized their experiences. We found the Eight-Step Major Gift Management Cycle to be an important tool for generally parsing aspects of the fundraising process as described in the interviews. However, it did not fully reflect the adjustments needed for the particularities of DAF grants and the potential of DAF donors. The DAF Donor Relationship Management Cycle provides a holistic perspective on how DAFs can affect every stage of fundraising and is a key contribution of this study. The new cycle is also indicative of the importance of revisiting and reimagining tools for fundraising practice and how research can facilitate this process.

The current study showed how DAFs impeded efforts in some fundraising phases and facilitated progress in others. The challenges in this study were associated with items in the cycle that typically follow the receipt of a grant. In part for this reason, the orientation of the DAF Cycle was reset from the original cycle, with *Donor Recommends DAF Grant* and receiving a *DAF Grant* added as starting points in the actual experience of working with many DAF donors. Traditional fundraising cycles do not include a stage for receiving the donation; adding this stage recognizes that the form a gift (or grant) takes is also significant for how the cycle proceeds. Gift processing is also implied but not explicitly included in past models, and proper handling of donors' data is simply inferred to occur in alignment with Cannon's (2011) process of intake, batch, entry, and finalize. However, DAFs disrupt typical gift processing patterns, and assuming accuracy is dangerous. Intake may be flawed when information is missing or not captured, and partially anonymous grants can be particularly challenging.

While most of the organizations in the study followed the "hard" and "soft" credit approach in associating individual DAF donors with grants from DAF sponsors, not all used other CRM features (if available) to denote DAF donors. DAF donors were also sometimes lost to administrative mishaps when DAF data management processes were not formalized or during staff transitions. In some of the organizations represented in this study, there was notable distance between gift processing staff/departments and the fundraisers. In other cases, the organizations were small, and the fundraisers were personally involved in sorting through donations they received. In either context, it was not uncommon for the fundraisers to raise questions or concerns about their systems during the interviews, pointing to the need for process reviews across many organizations. Integrated organizational-level strategies can be better developed to guide DAF gift adaptation, improve DAF donor engagement, and inform associated training and coordination of gift processing and frontline fundraising efforts.

The opportunities that facilitate fundraising appear in the section of the new cycle associated with preparing for and making the gift solicitation itself. The fundraisers made it evident that they generally subscribed to the principles of relationship fundraising and wanted to interact with DAF donors in a personalized manner before, during, and after grant making (Burnett, 1992, 2002; Breeze, 2017). Some reported treating DAF donors like any other individual donor, while others were stymied in attempting this when they could not identify the DAF donors. At times, organizational policies or systems that did not acknowledge DAF gifts (even when the donor was known) meant fundraisers felt compelled to take on additional responsibility to thank DAF donors manually. This is an example of how some took special measures to seek relationships with DAF donors. Many saw the DAF as an invitation to engage differently and more meaningfully with

donors because of their philanthropic intent. So long as the donor wanted to be known by the organization, it appeared that they were also comfortable revealing a commitment to philanthropy and, perhaps, embarking on a deeper relationship with the organization and the fundraiser.

Additional research is needed to test the DAF Donor Relationship Management Cycle in the US and abroad and identify the roles that fundraisers play in their interactions with DAF donors throughout the cycle, especially related to the nuances of the cycle when applied in different organizational contexts. Future studies could explore whether aspects of the new cycle, such as the addition of *Process Grant* and shift in *Develop Strategy*, help articulate contemporary fundraising practices and strategies beyond the DAF experience. Future research could also investigate how and why DAF grants are problematic for gift-entry personnel at nonprofits and whether and how CRM systems are adapting to the needs of DAFs. It would also be interesting to know more about the extent to which fundraisers' experience increased confidence in soliciting DAF donors and in what ways this confidence affects solicitations and grant making. DAF donor giving over time could be tracked at the organizational level, and factors leading to and facilitating DAF grants (and other donations from DAF donors) could be documented.

DAFs are a pivotal charitable vehicle that the nonprofit sector cannot afford to ignore, even as the constantly evolving regulatory environment may continue to shift the policies governing their utilization. While change invariably brings challenges, it also presents significant opportunities for those who are willing and able to adapt. Although the fundraisers in this study took a particular interest in DAFs, most of them had learned about DAFs through trial and error and limited professional education. Even those who had embedded DAFs into their thinking about relationship fundraising and whose organizations had sound systems for processing DAF grants craved more research, new tools, and additional insights on how to further adapt their practices to benefit from the full potential of DAFs. This research project seeks to help fill this gap and catalyze future analyses.

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Notes

1 The term "disruptive innovation" is borrowed from Christensen (1997).

2 This percentage is calculated from the total 2022 DAF contributions (USD 85.53B) divided by total charitable contributions as reported by Giving USA (USD 499.33B).

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Volunteer Management in Non-Profit Organizations: Experience of Huellas Foundation in Medellín, Colombia

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Abstract: This study explored how volunteer management is adapted to the specific context of a nonprofit organization (NPO). Through a participatory autoethnographic approach in Huellas Foundation, a Colombian NPO that supports its mission operation in volunteer action, it examined how management practices evolve and adjust according to the particular needs of the context. The analysis revealed two fundamental principles that emerge and guide volunteer management: self-realization and institutional recognition. It also identified four key components that shape the management process: the conversation between roles, profiles, times, and interests; the understanding of volunteering as a cultural reference; the balance between legal shielding and emotional construction; and the contribution of volunteer action to the social organization. The findings suggest that effective volunteer management requires continuous adaptation of practices according to the specific context, considering both the needs of the organization and the motivations of volunteers. This study contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence on how the contingent approach to volunteer management manifests itself in a Latin American context and offers valuable insights for the adaptation of practices in different organizational contexts.

Keywords: volunteer management; contingent approach; non-profit organizations; practices; participatory autoethnography

1. Introduction

Volunteer management is a set of organizational practices and processes designed to effectively recruit, retain, motivate, and coordinate volunteers, who play a critical role in delivering services and fulfilling organizational missions (Prince & Piatak, 2022; Sillah, 2022; Zesati, 2019). Recent research suggests that these practices cannot be universally standardized, but must be tailored to the specific context of each organization (Brudney & Meijs, 2014). Beyond simply being a form of unpaid work, volunteering represents a set of social and organizational practices that reflect and shape the values, culture, and structure of the organizations that host it. These practices are social and collective phenomena, influenced by material and historical factors, which shape the functioning of organizations and the experience of individuals within them (Geiger, 2009; Nicolini & Monteiro, 2016).

In order to understand how volunteer management practices are adapted in an NPO, the empirical context for this research was the Huellas Foundation, located in Medellin, Colombia. With more than two decades of history, this organization has developed an adaptive volunteer management model that not only sustains its operations and mission development, but has also come to define its organizational identity and its impact on the community. It is an experience that allows us to observe how volunteer management evolves and adapts in response to specific challenges and particular cultural contexts.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge on volunteer management by demonstrating how organizational practices are adapted to the specific context of a Latin American nonprofit organization. Through a participatory autoethnographic approach, two principles—self-realization and institutional recognition—and four key components that structure volunteer management were identified, revealing how these elements emerge and adjust according to the particular needs of the organization.

These findings not only illuminate the internal operations of a successful NPO, but also offer valuable insights into how volunteer management practices and processes can be tailored to the specific context to maximize impact and sustainability. At the same time, the study underscores the importance of considering cultural and historical context and how volunteerism can become cultural touchstones that transcend organizational boundaries and take root in the broader community.

To address and deepen the understanding of volunteer management in NPOs, this article presents a literature review of the universalist and contingent approaches, followed by a detailed description of the participatory autoethnographic methodology. It then presents the findings organized around the two fundamental principles and the four key components of volunteer management identified in the Huellas Foundation, concluding with a discussion of the implications of these findings for both the practice and theory of volunteering and a reflection on the limitations of the study, as well as suggestions for future research in this field.

2. Volunteer Management

Volunteer management encompasses a set of organizational practices and processes for effectively recruiting, retaining, motivating, and coordinating volunteers, who play a key role in delivering services and fulfilling organizational missions (Prince & Piatak, 2022; Sillah, 2022; Zesati, 2019).

This set of attributes of application and promotion that NPOs facilitate for the development of volunteer experiences is varied in global reading and particular to each organization (Hernández, 2016). In this regard, there is a fundamental tension in the literature between two different approaches to conceptualize and apply these practices: universalist and contingent (Brudney & Meijs, 2014).

The universalist approach assumes that volunteer management is essentially similar across organizations, leading to the formulation of generally applicable "best practices". This perspective is based on the workplace metaphor, where volunteers are viewed as unpaid part-time staff, and has led to a number of standardized management models (Brudney & Sink, 2017). However, empirical research suggests that this approach may be limited, especially in contexts where volunteers perform roles that differ significantly from paid staff or in organizations with less hierarchical structures.

In contrast, the contingent approach argues that volunteer management practices should be tailored to the specific context of each organization, recognizing that "one size does not fit all" (Ashworth & Robins, 1985). This perspective considers factors such as volunteer program characteristics, volunteer role, and organizational culture as crucial elements in determining the most appropriate management practices (Brudney & Meijs, 2014).

To better understand this diversity of approaches, Brudney et al. (2019) developed the Volunteer Stewardship Framework, which categorizes volunteer management models along two dimensions: The first dimension concerns access to volunteer power, which can be private when the organization has access to a limited and defined group of potential volunteers, or common when the organization recruits from the general pool of volunteers in the community. The second dimension concerns the orientation of volunteers, which can

be unitary when a single organization provides guidance and management, or shared when this is distributed between a sending organization and one or more host organizations.

Four distinctive models of volunteer management emerge from the intersection of the two dimensions: (1) the membership model, characterized by private access and unitary management, for example, where members volunteer for their own organization, with the home and host organization being the same; (2) the service model, combining common access with unitary management, is typical of non-profit social service organizations or government agencies that recruit volunteers from the community and manage them internally; (3) the secondary model, featuring private access but shared management, where the home organization sends volunteers to external host organizations; finally, (4) the intermediary model, with common access and shared management, is exemplified by volunteer centers that connect community volunteers with various host organizations.

Research by Brudney et al. (2019) revealed that organizations using shared management models (secondary and intermediary) need additional management practices beyond traditional HR approaches, particularly as they relate to external relationships and community engagement.

The relative importance of different management practices varies significantly by model. For example, models with a shared orientation require greater attention to external relationships and interorganizational coordination, whereas unit-oriented models may focus more on internal volunteer management (Brudney et al., 2019). This variation supports the need for a contingent approach to tailor management practices to the specific context of each organization, this being the context in which the present study is embedded.

In this sense, effective volunteer management requires a balance between the adoption of certain fundamental practices and their adaptation to the specific organizational context. Aspects such as social support, which can be emotional, informational, and/or material, are generated by both the organization and the volunteer's environment (Astray & De Roda, 2008). Its importance lies in that it consolidates the motivation, sense of belonging, and recognition of volunteers (Reyes, 2012; Cuevas et al., 2015; Faletehan et al., 2020).

The training and development of volunteers remain essential components, regardless of the model adopted. As Ferreira (2023) notes, well-structured training and supervision programs are generally well received by volunteers. This suggests that, although the specific approach may vary, certain fundamental practices maintain their relevance across different organizational contexts.

In essence, volunteer management under the contingent approach, rather than following a universal "best practice" model, recognizes that it must be adapted to the diversity of factors, including the characteristics of the volunteers, the nature of the organization, the type of work performed, and the social and cultural context. As such, it involves creating a structured and supportive environment that enables volunteers to contribute meaningfully to the organization while gaining personal satisfaction and professional development. Prince and Piatak (2022) suggest that the most satisfied volunteers can be valuable resources to volunteer programs, bringing unique perspectives and acting as advocates for the organization.

Volunteer characteristics consider volunteers' motivations, time availability, skills, and interests (Brudney et al., 2019). Volunteers are driven by a dynamic interplay between intrinsic factors, such as personal values, altruism, and desire for self-actualization, and extrinsic factors such as social connections and professional development (Carvalho et al., 2024; Kruglova et al., 2023). Effective management strategies must address both the desire to contribute to society and the personal aspirations of volunteers, given that motivations are neither universal nor static, but adapt according to specific cultural, social, and organizational contexts. This contingent nature of motivations suggests that organizations

must develop flexible management practices that recognize and respond to the diversity of drivers that lead people to volunteer.

With respect to the characteristics of the organization, the size, structure, culture, mission, and type of work the organization does are considered to influence how volunteering should be managed. A large, bureaucratic organization may require a more formalized approach to volunteer management than a small community organization, just as organizations working with vulnerable populations may need to implement stricter safety and training protocols for their volunteers (Brudney et al., 2019).

This is why volunteer management is strongly influenced by the organizational climate and leadership styles within the organization. Studies have shown that leadership styles, particularly transformational leadership, promote greater intention to stay, satisfaction, organizational commitment, and identity among volunteers (Ferreira et al., 2015; Nencini et al., 2016; Valencia et al., 2018; Almas et al., 2020; Faletehan et al., 2020).

To this, they add effective communication and continuous feedback as other pillars of volunteer management. Pawlak (2023) emphasizes the importance of setting clear expectations and maintaining open communication channels with volunteers. These practices not only help to align volunteer activities with organizational goals, but also contribute to their satisfaction and long-term retention.

Both volunteer and organizational characteristics respond to the context bounded by social and cultural norms, the availability of other resources, and the specific needs of the community, for the design of volunteer programs (Brudney et al., 2019). In this sense, volunteer management often involves navigating unique social challenges, limited resources that must be optimized, and the need to balance volunteer demands with organizational needs (Berenguer et al., 2023).

It is because of the social and cultural context that volunteer management must be sensitive to changing trends in the volunteer landscape. El-Amin (2023) highlights the need for NPOs to develop their capacity to maintain sustainability, which involves adapting volunteer management strategies to evolving economic and social realities.

In summary, volunteer management in nonprofit organizations is a dynamic, complex, and multidimensional phenomenon that requires a contingent approach, adaptable to the specific context of each organization. Management practices must consider both internal aspects—such as volunteer motivation, training, and development—and external aspects—related to the social, economic, and cultural environment. This understanding of volunteer management as a set of socially situated and materially mediated practices leads us to take a closer look at how these practices manifest and evolve in nonprofit organizations, a topic addressed below.

The Study of Practices in Not-for-Profit Organizations

The universalist approach, initially dominant, assumed that management skills were generic and transferable across different contexts. However, empirical research has shown that the effectiveness of practices varies significantly depending on factors such as the size of the organization, the presence of paid staff, and the nature of volunteer roles (Brudney & Sink, 2017). As Meijs and Ten Hoorn (2008) note, "there is no one best way to organize volunteers, whether in volunteer-run organizations, government organizations, nonprofits with mostly paid staff, or businesses" (p. 29).

From a sociological perspective, Geiger (2009) conceives practices as social and collective phenomena that reflect historical and social differences. Practices are understood and evaluated through intersubjective reasoning processes, highlighting their negotiated and socially constructed character. In the specific context of NPOs, practices would encompass the actions, behaviors, and routines that contribute to the organization's operations and

impact. This view supports the contingent approach by recognizing that practices cannot be universally standardized.

The contingent perspective is strengthened by the work of Nicolini and Monteiro (2016), who consider practices as actions and expressions structured and influenced by material factors, which shape the functioning of organizations. They stress that aspects such as social order, knowledge, institutions, identity, and power emerge and are reproduced through routine activities that give rise to everyday practices. In the context of NPOs, this implies that the effectiveness of practices depends on their alignment with specific organizational characteristics, such as size, structure, culture, and operating environment.

Rathi et al. (2016) refer to practices in terms of the knowledge needs of nonprofit organizations. Their study identifies five main categories of essential practical knowledge for these entities: knowledge about the community, about resources, about finances and funding sources, about access to funding agencies, and about sources of support. This classification underscores the contextualized nature of practices in the sector, which draws on the technical skills of its practitioners.

Taking a more action-oriented approach, Gazley and Guo (2015) examine collaborative practices in nonprofit organizations. Their systematic review reveals the importance of studying not only the antecedents and outcomes of collaboration, but also the specific processes and practices that facilitate inter-organizational cooperation. This emphasis gives rise to the dynamic and emergent nature of practices according to the specific context.

This resonance of adjusting practices to specific circumstances, needs, and contexts consolidates the contingent approach in the Volunteer Stewardship Framework (Brudney et al., 2019) raised in the previous section, by proposing that volunteer management practices should be adapted according to two key dimensions: access to volunteer energy and management orientation. This framework suggests that the relationships between practices and outcomes vary by organizational model, revealing that practices considered universal may have different effects in different contexts.

Fernandez et al. (2006) reinforce this perspective by analyzing volunteer management in emergency situations, where the effectiveness of practices depends significantly on the specific context and situational needs. Similarly, Ashworth and Robins (1985) argued that participation and management style should be adapted according to factors such as the value attributed by the participants, the level of skill, and the nature of the tasks.

Twelve volunteer management practices were identified in the literature and are presented in Table 1, not as universal prescriptions but as an adaptable repertoire according to the specific context of each organization, given that recent research suggests that their effectiveness varies according to the organizational context (Hager & Brudney, 2015). For example, while recruitment and selection are essential, their implementation must be tailored depending on whether the organization operates under a membership, service, secondary, or intermediary model.

Table 1. Volunteering practices identified in the literature. Source: Author's own elaboration.

Practice	Detail	Authors
Recruitment and selection	Organizations employ a variety of strategies to attract and screen volunteers, including the use of social media, community events, and referrals from current volunteers. The screening process often involves interviews and background checks to ensure the suitability of candidates.	(Hager & Brudney, 2015; Studer, 2016)

Table 1. *Cont.*

Practice	Detail	Authors
Guidance and training	A thorough introduction to the organization, its objectives, and volunteer responsibilities is provided. Ongoing training is essential to develop volunteers' skills and keep them engaged.	(Nesbit et al., 2018; Studer & von Schnurbein, 2013)
Assignment of tasks and roles	Organizations seek to align the skills and interests of volunteers with the needs of the organization, which increases satisfaction and retention.	(Studer, 2016; Walk et al., 2019)
Supervision and support	Supervisory systems are in place to guide and support volunteers in their roles, including regular meetings and access to resources.	(Nesbit et al., 2018; Studer & von Schnurbein, 2013)
Recognition and reward	Organizations develop recognition programs to value the contributions of volunteers, which may include awards, appreciation events, and personal development opportunities.	(Hager & Brudney, 2015; Nesbit et al., 2018)
Performance evaluation	Systems to evaluate volunteer performance and provide constructive feedback are implemented	(Studer & von Schnurbein, 2013; Walk et al., 2019)
Risk management	Organizations develop policies and procedures to protect both volunteers and the organization, including insurance and security protocols.	(Hager & Brudney, 2015)
Effective communication	Clear and open channels of communication are established between the organization and volunteers to maintain engagement and address any issues in a timely fashion.	(Nesbit et al., 2018; Studer, 2016)
Leadership development	Some organizations offer opportunities for volunteers to take on leadership roles, which can increase retention and long-term engagement.	(Walk et al., 2019)
Use of technology	Implementation of technology-based volunteer management systems to improve efficiency in coordination and communication.	(Studer & von Schnurbein, 2013)
Clear policies and procedures	Establishment of clear guidelines on expectations, rights, and responsibilities of volunteers.	(Hager & Brudney, 2015; Studer, 2016)
Integration with paid staff	Strategies for fostering effective collaboration between volunteers and paid personnel.	(Nesbit et al., 2018)

In line with the contingent approach, the implementation of these practices must consider multiple contextual factors. For example, orientation and training take on different dimensions depending on the management model: in unit-oriented organizations, they may focus on internal processes, while in shared management models, they must address coordination with multiple host organizations (Prince & Piatak, 2022).

Supervision and recognition practices also illustrate the need for the contingent approach. While some organizations require more formal structures, others benefit from more flexible approaches, depending on factors such as the type of work, volunteer characteristics, and organizational culture (Olden, 2016). As Kruglova et al. (2023) point out, volunteer motivation combines altruistic and selfish motives, requiring management practices adapted to these complexities.

Likewise, effective communication, recognition, and integration with paid staff must also be tailored to the specific context. For example, organizations operating under an

intermediary model need to develop more complex communication systems that facilitate coordination among multiple stakeholders (Brudney et al., 2019).

In the current framework, characterized by increasingly dynamic and complex environments, volunteer management must be especially sensitive to changing trends. El-Amin (2023) emphasizes the need for NPOs to develop adaptive capacities to maintain sustainability, which implies continuously adjusting management practices according to evolving economic and social realities.

This contingent perspective provides a better framework for understanding how NPOs can effectively manage their volunteer programs in different contexts. It recognizes that excellence in volunteer management does not come from the uniform application of predetermined practices, but from the ability to adapt these practices according to the specific needs of the organization and its environment (Berenguer et al., 2023).

3. Methodology

This research adopted participatory autoethnography as its primary method, recognizing that organizational practices are socially constructed phenomena that must be understood from multiple perspectives and cultural contexts. This qualitative research method combines personal introspection with cultural analysis, allowing the researcher to examine his or her own experiences in relation to a broader social context (Ellis et al., 2011; Adams et al., 2015).

The participatory autoethnographic approach is particularly appropriate for studying volunteer management from a contingent perspective, as it allows us to understand how organizational practices adapt and evolve in response to specific contextual factors. As Boyle and Parry (2007) point out, this method is valuable for understanding complex social phenomena, especially in organizational contexts where practices are deeply rooted in local cultural and historical realities.

Participatory autoethnography is distinguished by its emphasis on collaboration and recognition of multiple voices and forms of knowledge (Lapadat, 2017; Chang et al., 2012). This approach recognizes that organizational knowledge is socially constructed and that individual experiences are intrinsically linked to broader social and cultural structures (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). In the context of this study, this allowed us to examine how volunteer management practices emerge and adapt through the interaction between different actors and organizational contexts.

The empirical context of the study was the Huellas Foundation in Medellin, Colombia, a non-profit organization formally established in 2007, after nine years of community work without a formal structure. Its mission of social inclusion and promotion of the rights of children, youth, and women in contexts of vulnerability is based on voluntary action. This context offers a unique opportunity to examine how volunteer practices are managed and adapted in a third sector organization in a developing country. As Coraggio et al. (2018) point out, research in Latin American contexts can provide valuable and distinctive perspectives on NPO management, contributing to a more global and diverse understanding of the sector that transcends predominantly Western views.

In line with the above, participatory autoethnography answers the call to expand NPO management research beyond the contexts of the Global North (Mirabella et al., 2019). To achieve this, in the context of this study, the researcher not only reflected on her own experiences as a volunteer and director of the Huellas Foundation for 12 years, but also actively involved other volunteers from the organization in the process of data generation and analysis. This collaborative approach allowed for a richer understanding of volunteer management in the organization by incorporating multiple perspectives and experiences (Hernandez et al., 2017). It is a particularly appropriate method for this study,

as it allows for an in-depth exploration of organizational dynamics from the perspective of a participant-observer immersed in the context (Anderson, 2006; Herrmann, 2022).

In this sense, the research approach adopted is qualitative and interpretive, based on the premise that social reality is constructed and that knowledge is produced through the interaction between the researcher and the participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). It is, in itself, a particularly valuable reflexive wager for understanding the complexities of organizational life (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013). Aligned with the contingent approach to volunteer management (Brudney & Meijs, 2014), this methodological approach recognizes that organizational practices must be understood in their specific context and not as universal prescriptions.

4. Construction and Analysis of Data

Data collection was conducted through multiple methods, recognizing that understanding contingent practices requires diverse sources of information that capture the complexity of the organizational context (Flick, 2018). This methodological triangulation allowed us not only to validate the findings, but also to understand how different management practices emerge and adapt according to specific circumstances.

First, participant observation was used, a central technique in participatory autoethnography that allows the researcher immersed in the context to study and generate rich and detailed data on everyday practices (Bautista, 2011; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). The researcher, in her dual role as director and volunteer, was able to observe and participate on a daily and direct basis in the management of volunteerism over an extended period of time, documenting organizational practices and their evolution in response to different contextual challenges and needs.

Second, three focus groups were conducted with seven (7) active volunteers of the Huellas Foundation. Participants were selected based on specific criteria, including having a signed volunteer agreement and letter of desire for 2018 and having at least two years of volunteer experience with the organization. This technique allowed us to generate data on the collective perceptions and experiences of the volunteers, providing a complementary perspective to the researcher's observations (Aigneren, 2002; Barbour, 2018). The sociodemographic characterization of the participating volunteers is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Sociodemographic characteristics of focus group participants.

Participant	Age	Gender	Education	Duration of Participation in Fundación Huellas' Volunteering Experience	
				Admission Date	Exit Date
1	23	Female	University	2013	2019
2	20	Female	University	2010	2019
3	19	Female	Secondary	2017	2019
4	24	Female	Technical	2011	Present
5	25	Female	University	2016	2021
6	21	Masculin	Secondary	2016	Present
7	20	Masculin	Technical	2016	Present
8	19	Masculin	Technical	2017	2020

Finally, an exhaustive documentary review was implemented in three sources of the organization's archives: the first was related to the 7 volunteers participating in the autoethnography, of whom 39 voluntary action agreements and 39 letters of desire were

reviewed in physical documents. The agreements, although they share a basic structure, show the contingent approach to volunteer management: each volunteer declares annually the specific process or project he/she will accompany, the weekly hours he/she will dedicate, and the responsibilities he/she will assume. This customization responds to multiple contingent factors such as the changing needs of organizational projects, the volunteer's accumulated skills and experience, and his or her time availability according to other responsibilities (study, work, family). The systematic variation in these arrangements demonstrates how the organization adapts its management practices according to the specific circumstances of each volunteer and period, moving away from a standardized approach.

The second source was the review of audiovisual material, in which 5 videos of volunteers posted on the organization's social networks were analyzed to promote the call for new volunteers and recognize the importance of permanence and the contribution made by its protagonists.

The third source was the review of institutional documentation, in which 20 digital documents produced between 2009 and 2022 were examined, including project reports, systematizations of experiences, and research, which made it possible to trace the evolution of organizational practices over time.

Documentary evidence is central to this study because of its ability to reveal how volunteer management practices have evolved and adapted according to the specific organizational context. Institutional documents, especially voluntary action agreements and letters of desire, along with audiovisual material and project reports, provide tangible evidence of how the organization has adjusted its practices to particular needs and circumstances over time. This documentary review allowed for a more complete understanding of the contingent approach to volunteer management (Bowen, 2009; Coffey, 2014). The inventory of documentary review sources and audiovisual production is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Inventory of physical and digital documentary review sources, and audiovisual production.

Source Type	Digital, Physical, or Audiovisual Document	Quantity	Source	Year of Data Production
Source 1: Physical Documents	Voluntary action agreements P1	5	Historical archive of volunteering Huellas Foundation	2013–2018
	Voluntary action agreements P2	9	Historical archive of volunteering Huellas Foundation	2010–2018
	Voluntary action agreements P3	2	Historical archive of volunteering Huellas Foundation	2017–2018
	Voluntary action agreements P4	8	Historical archive of volunteering Huellas Foundation	2011–2018
	Voluntary action agreements P5	3	Historical archive of volunteering Huellas Foundation	2016–2018
	Voluntary action agreements P6	6	Historical archive of volunteering Huellas Foundation	2015–2018
	Voluntary action agreements P7	3	Historical archive of volunteering Huellas Foundation	2016–2018
	Voluntary action agreements P8	3	Historical archive of volunteering Huellas Foundation	2016–2018
	Letter of desire for voluntary action P1	5	Historical archive of volunteering Huellas Foundation	2013–2018

Table 3. *Cont.*

Source Type	Digital, Physical, or Audiovisual Document	Quantity	Source	Year of Data Production
	Letter of desire for voluntary action P2	9	Historical archive of volunteering Huellas Foundation	2010–2018
	Letter of desire for voluntary action P3	2	Historical archive of volunteering Huellas Foundation	2017–2018
	Letter of desire for voluntary action P4	8	Historical archive of volunteering Huellas Foundation	2011–2018
	Letter of desire for voluntary action P5	3	Historical archive of volunteering Huellas Foundation	2016–2018
	Letter of desire for voluntary action P6	6	Historical archive of volunteering Huellas Foundation	2015–2018
	Letter of desire for voluntary action P7	3	Historical archive of volunteering Huellas Foundation	2016–2018
	Letter of desire for voluntary action P8	3	Historical archive of volunteering Huellas Foundation	2016–2018
Source 2: Audiovisual material (Volunteer videos)	Viideo 1: Yeicy Tatiana, Voluntary work with love	1	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8bFDfgnuv4A (accessed on 26 November 2021)	2016
	Video 2: Bibiana Úsuga: voluntary work = happiness.	1	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0NQSiKA99_g (accessed on 26 November 2021)	2016
	Video 3: Lina Daily volunteer	1	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RaIMSV_CIrU (accessed on 26 November 2021)	2018
	Video 4: Voluntary work Yeniffer Fundación Huellas	1	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVki_d1B4v4 (accessed on 30 November 2021)	2016
	Video 5: Fundación Huellas Medellín Young volunteers	1	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JhsCyR9STDM (accessed on 30 November 2021)	2016
Source 3: Institutional documents (Reports and digital reports)	DR1. Yo También Cuento. Proyecto de formación integral y capacitación informal con niños, niñas y pre-adolescentes desescolarizados	1	Huellas Foundation digital	2009
	DR2. Ciclos de Oportunidad: Una Propuesta teórica a partir de la experiencia en comunidades pobres y sus dinámicas propias de desarrollo	1	Huellas Foundation digital	2013
	DR3. Informe final proyecto Alternativas de Desarrollo Humano Integral Sostenible para La Vereda Granizal, Municipio de Bello, Departamento de Antioquia. Convenio con PNUD	1	Huellas Foundation digital	2014

Table 3. *Cont.*

Source Type	Digital, Physical, or Audiovisual Document	Quantity	Source	Year of Data Production
	DR4. Informe de avance Proyecto Discapacidad. Vereda Granizal, Bello. Convenio con PNUD	1	Huellas Foundation digital	2014
	DR5. Informe de acompañamiento Ecomanatiales. Convenio PNUD	1	Huellas Foundation digital	2015
	DR6. Análisis información Encuesta de participación Caseta Comunitaria Altos de Oriente II (Ejercicio de visitas domiciliarias)	1	Huellas Foundation digital	2015
	DR7. Proceso de Producción Agroecológica. Sistematización de la experiencia	1	Huellas Foundation digital	2016
	DR8. Sistematización BPM	1	Huellas Foundation digital	2017
	DR9. Sistematización de la experiencia de producción agrecológica en la vereda Granizal del municipio de Bello-Antioquia	1	Huellas Foundation digital	2019
	DR10. Política de Protección a la Infancia Fundación Huellas	1	Huellas Foundation digital	2019
	DR11. Informe Final Luna Menstruante 2019	1	Huellas Foundation digital	2019
	DR12. Sistematización PASI 2019 [Prevención del Abuso Sexual Infantil]	1	Huellas Foundation digital	2019
	DR13. Informe Técnico final Servicios básicos [proyecto Promoción de los servicios básicos y el desarrollo económico, comunitario y cultural de la vereda Granizal, municipio de Bello/Antioquia/Colombia]	1	Huellas Foundation digital	2019
	DR14. Informe PPI Cuarentena	1	Huellas Foundation digital	2020
	DR15. Informe Técnico PPI [proyecto de Dinamización de la Política de Protección a la Infancia de la Fundación Huellas]	1	Huellas Foundation digital	2020
	DR16. Informe caracterización de las familias participantes en el proyecto "acompañamiento académico para niñas, niños y jóvenes de Medellín en tiempo de COVID-19"	1	Huellas Foundation digital	2021

Table 3. *Cont.*

Source Type	Digital, Physical, or Audiovisual Document	Quantity	Source	Year of Data Production
	DR17. Informe técnico AA [proyecto Acompañamiento académico para niños, niñas y jóvenes de Medellín en tiempos de COVID-19]	1	Huellas Foundation digital	2022
	DR18. Informe de sistematización de la experiencia: Proyecto Acompañamiento académico para niño, niñas y jóvenes de Medellín en tiempos de COVID-19	1	Huellas Foundation digital	2021
	DR19. Estatutos de la Fundación Huellas	1	Huellas Foundation digital	2022
	DR20. Acompañamiento académico para niños, niñas y jóvenes de Medellín en tiempos de COVID-19	1	Huellas Foundation digital	2022

Data analysis was conducted in an iterative and reflexive manner. This process involved open coding of data, identification of emergent themes, and construction of analytic categories (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The researcher used writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005; Ellingson, 2017), producing narratives that intertwined multiple voices and experiences to understand the contingent nature of volunteer management at Huellas Foundation with attention to the purpose of participatory autoethnography.

The ethical considerations of the research followed the recommendations of Tolich (2010) and Lapadat (2017) for autoethnography. Measures were taken to protect the privacy and well-being of participants, including the use of pseudonyms and obtaining informed consent. In addition, the researcher engaged in ongoing reflexivity, critically examining her dual position as a researcher and participant, and considering the ethical implications of representing the experiences of others (Ellis, 2007; Tullis, 2013).

5. Volunteering at Huellas Foundation

The evolution of volunteer management at Huellas Foundation reflects how organizational practices adapt to the specific context and needs. From its beginnings in 1998 as an informal community project to its formal constitution in 2007, the organization has developed a distinctive approach that responds to its particular reality. During the initial stage, volunteer management emerged organically from the community dynamics, adapting to the immediate needs of care for the unschooled population displaced by the armed conflict (DR2, Ciclos de Oportunidad, p. 40).

With formalization, although more structured processes were established, volunteer coordination was never deliberated by the organization and was assumed to be a direct responsibility of executive management, rather than creating a specific role for volunteer management. This unintended organizational decision, which might seem unusual from a universalist approach to management, reflects a contingent adaptation that has allowed sustaining volunteerism as a fundamental basis for organizational functioning (DR12, Sistematización PASI, 2019, p. 25).

The history of volunteering in the Huellas Foundation is marked by an organic evolution and a deep connection with the community. As evidenced by a historical document, "the collaboration of young volunteers, residents of the sector, high school graduates and university students, who exercise empirically teaching and accompaniment" (DR1, Yo También Cuento, p. 11) not only supported the initial operations, but established the basis for an adaptive management model that responds to the unique characteristics of the territory and its population.

Three main types of volunteering are formalized in the organization's volunteer management: daily, professional, and international (DR10, Política de proteccion a la infancia, p. 26). Professional and international volunteering have broadened the scope and capabilities of the Foundation. Professional volunteers bring specialized knowledge, while international volunteers offer new perspectives and skills, such as language training. For example, "An international volunteer, from the United States, led the English language seedbed" (DR17, Informe técnico AA, p. 13), demonstrating how these modalities complement and enrich the Foundation's service offerings.

Volunteer management at Huellas has evolved to include formal processes of recruitment, training, and accompaniment tailored to the specific needs of the context and structure of the organization. Huellas Foundation has developed specific profiles for each type of volunteer (DR10, Política de protección a la infancia, pp. 26–30), recognizing that management practices must respond to the different characteristics, motivations, and circumstances of volunteers. While framework policies such as the Child Protection Policy have been implemented, which "are aimed at all volunteers and collaborators of the Huellas Foundation" (DR10, Política de protección a la infancia, p. 8), their application reflects a balance between the need to establish general guidelines and the flexibility required to adapt practices to the particular realities of each territory and group of volunteers.

The integration of volunteerism into the organizational structure is evident in the way volunteers participate in various aspects of the Foundation's operation, reflecting the organization's ability to adapt its practices according to emerging circumstances and needs. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, volunteers were instrumental in the implementation of academic and emotional support programs to respond to the crisis context: "Expert volunteer advice was available in communication and entertainment for girls and boys" (DR17, Informe técnico AA, pp. 18–19), demonstrating how volunteers' specific skills are mobilized flexibly according to contextual demands.

A notable aspect of volunteer management at Huellas is its focus on the personal and professional development of volunteers. This is reflected in the Foundation's statutes, which include the objective to "structure and develop the management for the training and support of the volunteers of the Huellas Foundation, aimed at their personal and professional qualification" (DR19, Estatutos de la Fundación Huellas, p. 2). This statutory mandate, rather than a universal prescription, is a statement to materialize in differentiated practices in response to the diverse profiles, interests, and contexts of the volunteers.

Against this backdrop, volunteering at the Huellas Foundation exemplifies how effective management requires a dynamic balance between structure and flexibility. It demonstrates that management practices must continually adapt to the changing needs of the community and the challenges of the context. This integration of formal and informal aspects, far from being a weakness, is a strength that has enabled the organization to maintain its presence in the community. This contingent understanding of volunteer management, revealed through the participatory autoethnographic approach, lays the foundation for the results presented in the following section.

6. Findings

The participatory autoethnographic analysis of volunteer management practices in the Huellas Foundation revealed that they adapt and evolve according to the specific needs of the organizational context. This adaptation reflects the nature of practices as social and collective phenomena that respond to historical and contextual differences (Geiger, 2009), and likewise, as structured actions that dynamically shape organizational functioning (Nicolini & Monteiro, 2016). This contingent perspective made it possible to understand how volunteering practices not only fit the particular characteristics of the territory, but have also been fundamental in the configuration and evolution of the organization over time.

Through deep and daily immersion in the organization by the principal investigator and collaborative reflection with other volunteers, the study found that the volunteer management of the Huellas Foundation is characterized by two principles that underlie and guide volunteer management practices, and four components that shape the volunteer management process. They are presented in Figure 1 and described below.

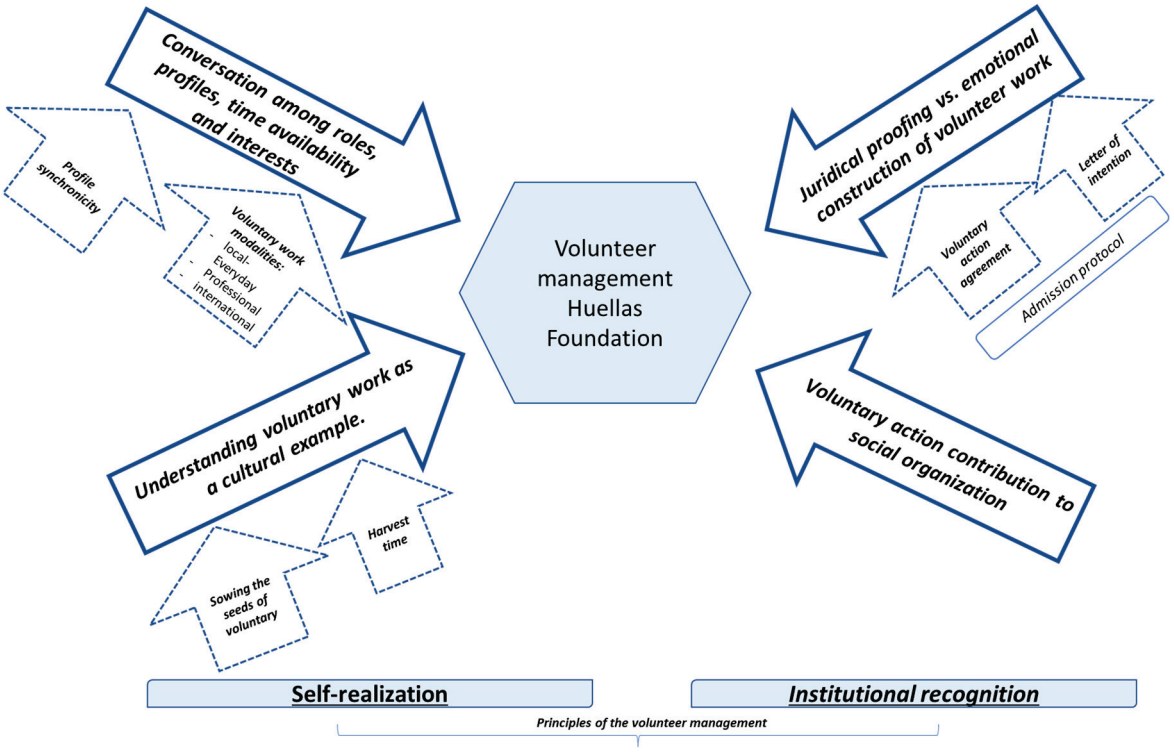

Figure 1. Principles and components of volunteer management Huellas Foundation. Source. Author's own elaboration.

6.1. Principles of Volunteer Management

> "My mother and my sister told me that it was possible that at home I needed so many things and I was giving away my time and work. . . what they did not know was that I had an inner peace and a desire to overcome so many things that I would not change for anything; now they value and thank God for my experience in Huellas, because it has allowed me to grow, be me, study, understand my family, accompany them with love and provide opportunities for others"
>
> (Fragment Focus Group—Participant 2)

The experience of volunteering at Huellas Foundation demonstrates how effective management must be adapted to the specific realities of each organizational and territorial

context. The testimony presented illustrates how management practices must respond not only to the operational needs of the organization, but also to the particular circumstances of volunteers and their family and social environments.

In response to this specific context, the Foundation has developed over the years an adaptive management model for its team of volunteers, which constitutes the main basis of its operational and administrative activity for the fulfillment of its mission. This model emerges from a deep understanding of local dynamics and the particular needs of its volunteers.

The constant satisfaction expressed by volunteers in their letters of desire, descriptions, and reflections in the focus groups and videos reviewed allow us to identify the existence of two principles that support the volunteer management process in the organization: self-realization and institutional recognition.

6.2. Self-Realization Principle

The principle of self-fulfillment seeks to facilitate the activation of personal capabilities and the feeling that what one does is important. This principle refers to the satisfaction or pleasure that people derive from satisfying their socioemotional needs through specific experiences or interactions. In the context of volunteering, it suggests that volunteers gain a sense of personal fulfillment and social utility through their participation in volunteer activities. The way in which this principle is realized varies according to the individual characteristics and particular circumstances of each volunteer and his or her motivations.

According to Olson (1992), there is no type of collective action that is not crossed by a particular interest; and this does not refer to the economic conception of interest, but in this case, it applies to the transcendent dimension of life of feeling fulfilled as a person and useful in society. This observation is aligned with the findings of the research, where volunteers express a deep personal satisfaction derived from their work in the Huellas Foundation.

This concept is supported by research showing how people seek emotionally rewarding experiences in various contexts. For example, Bartsch et al. (2018) found that people seek different levels of emotional gratification in their interaction with media, from simple hedonistic pleasures to more complex satisfactions related to social and cognitive needs. Similarly, in the context of the Huellas Foundation, volunteers experience a range of gratifications, from the immediate satisfaction of helping to long-term personal fulfillment.

6.3. Institutional Recognition Principle

Regarding the principle of institutional recognition, it is understood that the time, talent, and work carried out by a volunteer contributes to the growth of the organization and it must be able to make it explicit in a frequent and contextualized way to promote the self-realization of people. A concrete message, recognition, the provision of different opportunities, and other options are part of the possibilities to confirm to those who participate in the volunteer experience that what they are doing is really important.

This principle refers to the formal validation and acceptance that an organization gives to the contributions and status of its members or participants. In the context of volunteering, it implies that the organization explicitly and frequently recognizes the time, talent, and work contributed by volunteers, which in turn reinforces their self-gratification and commitment.

This is a relationship between belonging and recognition (Ferreira et al., 2015). This idea is reinforced by the findings of Prince and Piatak (2022), who note that the most satisfied volunteers can become valuable advocates for the organization, which underscores the importance of implementing effective recognition practices. At the Huellas Foundation,

this principle is manifested through various recognition mechanisms and development opportunities offered to volunteers.

Both self-realization and institutional recognition recognize that human relationships are inherently complex and require adaptive responses. For this reason, the Foundation has developed various guarantees of permanence that are tailored to the specific needs of each volunteer (DR2, Opportunity Cycles), including celebratory life, continuing education, participation and influence in decision making, autonomy for the development of the experience, activation of the Academic Life Support Fund (FAVA), and, in specific cases, transportation assistance (DR2).

The above considers the existence of barriers to the development of the volunteer experience. For example, the initial comment of families and socially validated "they are wasting their time" and "it is better to work and earn money instead of giving away their work", takes place in the dynamics of survival that young people in the territories involved in the modality of local-daily volunteering. To overcome it, Huellas Foundation activates dialogue with primary nuclei, betting on the reconfiguration of social thinking, from the construction of new references of being young people in the territory. It also implements practices such as home visits to their families "to chocolatiar" (take chocolate with bread), to know the particular situation and give them the opportunity to know the organization, clarify their doubts, and establish trust.

Likewise, the management includes recognition practices (certification of the experience and the first filter of hiring in case it is required in the framework of projects with other forms of financing). As a great learning from the last three years of volunteer management of the main autoethnographer in her capacity as director of the organization, the reflection on the closing of the volunteer experience (i.e., the exit stage of the volunteers) was included in the process, since this is an uncertain moment, particular to each case, it reflects the organic understanding of the contingent approach in the community times and has nuances that inscribe different emotions, implying the transition in time, space, and professional and labor projection. For the organization, it implies a management of constructed knowledge with the challenge of recruiting and training new volunteers.

6.4. Component 1 of Volunteer Management: Conversation Between Roles, Profiles, Times and Interests for the Success of the Volunteer Experience

> "...I started as a volunteer teacher... I studied a technique in recreation and sports... I grew little by little and now I do administrative support... I feel good and it allows me to be a reference for my son"
>
> (Fragmento de vídeo 4)

This component illustrates how volunteer management practices at the Huellas Foundation have been adapted to reflect the complexity of interactions between the organization and volunteers.

As reflected in the testimony presented above, an excerpt from one of the videos analyzed, the volunteer experience at Huellas goes beyond the simple assignment of tasks, involving a process of personal and professional growth that is aligned with the principles of self-gratification and institutional recognition.

This is because Huellas Foundation has developed an understanding that the volunteer experience is a two-way relationship, where all actors contribute and benefit, according to their abilities, interests, and experiences. This is supported by the fact that solidarity (in which the volunteer experience is inscribed), is disinterested perhaps in the "material accumulation", but it is not in the transcendent capacity of human existence, an example of this is the feeling of self-gratification or social recognition that generates the service, and that motivates and enhances new and greater solidarity actions.

Thinking about "doing without expecting anything in return" is related to the economic or transactional compensation that an action of service could have; however, it inscribes the need to activate the feeling of gratitude and the transformation of realities, which constitutes a higher compensation and is of an emotional nature.

This demystifies the idea that the volunteer does a favor to the organization by offering his or her time, generating eternal moral debts. Instead, it constitutes the idea of joint construction, horizontal conversation, and the assignment and follow-up of instructions, which make strengthening contributions to the life of the organization and to the inventory of opportunities for all the people who participate in it (human talent including volunteers, project and service participants, professionals, and others).

To achieve a successful volunteer experience, goodwill and willingness of time are not enough, but the practice of synchrony of profiles is required. This practice, which has emerged at Huellas Foundation, reflects what Rathi et al. (2016) describe as the need for knowledge about the community and resources in nonprofit organizations. It involves a careful process of alignment between volunteer profiles and the needs of the organization, which contributes to both volunteer self-gratification and institutional recognition of their contributions.

However, the profile category in the framework of this study does not refer to a checklist of academic curriculum to strengthen organizational life, but to the reading of both the academic inventory and the previous experience, and to give the possibility to people who know the profile of the organization.

For example, this is not because a person says "I want to volunteer" is already a volunteer. Often interview meetings occur in the Huellas Foundation with this intention, which fails to materialize. This is because the desire is no guarantee of profile, and in turn the profile of the volunteer is no guarantee of harmony with the organizational dynamics.

In this sense, the profile of volunteers refers not only to the willingness and availability of time, but also to the determined capacity to assume this time and desire, together with knowledge, in solidarity and social processes that meet personal interests.

Indeed, there will always be a personal and particular interest in each person who approaches the volunteer experience, which may be associated with the gain of expertise in a particular subject, empathy with a population group, enabling new opportunities, a sense of professional social responsibility, and many more reasons.

The option of letting interests emerge with the flow of the relationship will always be valid because the initial agreements of the volunteering experience are not static but vary with time and the building of trust. However, the interests that are made explicit by both parties from the beginning of the relationship will guide the construction and flow of the relationship.

This is why on the other side of the relationship is the profile of the organization, which is configured based on its mission, history, principles, decision-making mechanisms, leadership styles, management styles, composition of the human talent that drives the processes, the population group it accompanies, geographical location, needs and requirements, and all the other possible factors that characterize organizational life.

Just as it is necessary for the organization to have a clear profile of the person interested in the volunteer experience, for the latter, it is essential to know the possible dynamics of the organizational profile that will allow him/her to decide if his/her time, work, and talent can be effectively channeled into the processes and services offered by the organization.

It is this exercise that guides the practical synchronization of profiles, which, once achieved, allows for establishing the time requirements and availability, assigned and assumed responsibilities, inclination to teamwork and demand for individual work, as well as the expectation and capacity for commitment.

Failure to do so correctly places emotional and time burdens on both the organization and the individual, which will not come to fruition due to the absence of trust building (Olson, 1992).

The synchrony of profiles has led to the recognition in the organization and the various possibilities to promote the volunteer experience. In the case of Huellas Foundation, three modalities are identified: local-daily volunteering (young inhabitants of the territories where the organization is present and dedicate between 15 and 20 h to volunteer action, thereby configuring the support of missionary compliance); professional volunteering (residents of the metropolitan area who dedicate between 4 and 10 h a week to volunteer action in advisory tasks to the daily volunteering in projects or areas of work); international volunteering (managed by different channels of inter-institutional relationship or management of social networks, are people who are present in the organization between 4 weeks and a year)

The diversity of volunteering modalities offered by the Huellas Foundation (local-daily, professional, and international) demonstrates the adaptability of organizational practices to different contexts and needs, as suggested by Nicolini and Monteiro (2016). These modalities allow for greater flexibility in volunteer participation and better alignment with their interests and availability, which in turn fosters self-gratification and facilitates institutional recognition.

6.5. Component 2 of Volunteer Management: Understanding Volunteerism as a Cultural Referent

> "...I remember when I studied at the "la escuelita de tabas" (little boarding school) and I used to play that I was my teacher, now I walk around the neighborhood and all the children greet me and call me teacher"
>
> (Fragment Focus Group—Participant 6)

This component reflects how volunteering practices at the Huellas Foundation have become a social and collective phenomenon rooted in the history and local context, as described by Geiger (2009) in his conception of organizational practices, as illustrated by the testimony presented previously.

Through the participatory autoethnographic analysis, it has been revealed how the volunteering experience in the Huellas Foundation has evolved over 23 years (14 years of formal volunteer action experiences, plus 9 years of previous work as a community project), configuring itself as a cultural reference in the territory. This evolution reflects what Nicolini and Monteiro (2016) describe as the way in which practices shape the functioning of organizations over time.

This has allowed what the organization has called the **Harvest Time**, referring to the fact that 50% of the daily volunteers have in their childhood history the active participation in some of the processes or services offered by the organization (they studied in the "little school of boards", participated in a children's seedbed, the thematic Christmas, the toy library, sports festivals, among others), accompanied by those who at the time were the volunteers. Once they had the opportunity to go through the school and the college, they have returned to the organization with the intention of "giving back what they received", that is, to accompany other children as they were accompanied by the volunteers.

The "harvest time" phenomenon is aligned with the principle of self-gratification, since these volunteers find satisfaction in "giving back", and with the principle of institutional recognition, since the organization validates and celebrates this form of participation.

Therefore, it is understood that the mission fulfillment of the Huellas Foundation and its daily relationship with the community make possible the practice of growing volunteering. This does not refer exclusively to time, but to the provision of various channels to facilitate access to information from the volunteer experience. In this case, it

was not the construction of a plan to make it happen, but this autoethnographic exercise facilitated the understanding of what in the purpose of the organization and the form of daily relationship was being enabled as sowing.

The practice of "growing volunteering" reflects what Herrero and Kraemer (2020) describe as the acquisition of strategic skills through hands-on experience. This practice involves not only disseminating information about volunteer opportunities, but also creating an environment that encourages and values volunteer involvement from an early age.

Consequently, with Component 1 "synchronizing the profiles", it does not mean that all the seed grows, but that the seed germinates in some people who identify the reference of the volunteer experience as a possible personal opportunity and from there they carry out their own process, as emerged in the reflection of the focus groups with the volunteers participating in this autoethnographic study (participants 2, 3, 4, and 6 of the focus groups).

In order for "growing volunteering" to take place, other channels of access to information about the experience are added, such as referrals from the volunteers themselves to other people based on their valuable experience, school, or university social service, the creation of web channels, professional practice agreements with universities that then translate into periods of professional volunteering, and the targeting and accompaniment of pre-adolescents who express interest in volunteering.

The latter refers to the "volunteering seedbed" initiative for adolescents aged from 13 to 15, which began in 2018 with eight participants who grew up in the Foundation and declared their desire to participate as volunteers, but their ages and school stage still required constant accompaniment, so while supporting the logistics of the activities, they were supported by the psychosocial and pedagogical team of the organization. This is an initiative that reflects what Gazley and Guo (2015) describe as the importance of studying the specific processes and practices that facilitate participation and cooperation.

6.6. Component 3 of Volunteer Management: Legal Shielding vs. Emotional Construction of Volunteering

> "I want to be a volunteer this year because with the foundation I have learned to be a better daughter, a better sister and a better person"
>
> (Fragment letter of desire 2016, Participant 1)

This third component illustrates the tension between the formal and informal aspects of volunteer management practices at the Huellas Foundation, reflecting the complexity of organizational practices described by Nicolini and Monteiro (2016).

Through the analysis of the documentary review data in this autoethnographic study, it was revealed how the Huellas Foundation has developed a dual approach to volunteer management that combines legal compliance with building a deep emotional commitment to volunteerism.

On the one hand, the organization has implemented as a practice the signing of the "voluntary action agreement" in response to Law 720 of 24 December 2001, and National Decree 4290 of 2005 (both correspond to Colombian legislation). The agreement serves as a legal shielding mechanism, providing a clear distinction between volunteering and labor relations.

This is because one of the great fears and risks in the management of the volunteer experience is the establishment of an employment relationship with the existence of a schedule, remuneration, and instruction. To overcome this and generate shielding to the organization and differentiation of roles, responsibilities, and relationships, since 2008, each volunteer signs the agreement of voluntary actions with Huellas Foundation (which has gone through different formats in terms of density, design, and content). This document

is valid until the last working day of each year and is renewed in the first week of the beginning of voluntary actions of the current year.

However, although the agreement is important in the legal order that establishes the institutional shield and therefore is signed annually, on the other hand, for the Huellas Foundation, it is more relevant to the configuration of the desire to live the experience. Therefore, in a coexistent manner, the practice of writing the letter of desire was implemented for volunteers, in which the person expresses their intention to be a volunteer or volunteer considering the contributions that their attributes and knowledge can make to the organization and in turn, their understanding of what the Huellas Foundation can offer for their personal, professional, and social growth. They also declare their commitments for the year, the availability of time, and the process in which they want to focus their participation in voluntary actions.

It is a practice that is aligned with the principle of self-gratification by allowing volunteers to express their personal motivations and expectations. Proof of this is the fragment of testimony presented at the beginning of this component. This practice reflects what Herrero and Kraemer (2020) describe as the acquisition of strategic skills through practical experience, as it enables volunteers to reflect on their personal and professional growth.

The coexistence of these two practices—the formal agreement and the letter of desire—illustrates how the Huellas Foundation has adapted its practices to balance legal needs with emotional ones, returning to the importance of studying the specific processes that facilitate cooperation, as Gazley and Guo (2015) put it.

Both practices are delimited in the "**admission protocol**", a tacit agreement that starts from recognizing the need for dialogue between the profiles and gives rise to at least four moments to establish the process: the interview meeting, participation in a full meeting with the Huellas team in a weekly meeting space, a month of induction, the expression of desire through the letter, the signing of the agreement of voluntary actions, and participation in the commitments, services, schedules and territories assumed, resulting in an organic flow. The protocol has variations according to each volunteering modality proposed in Component 1.

The flexibility in the application of this protocol, particularly for international volunteering, illustrates how organizational practices adapt to different contexts, as suggested by Nicolini and Monteiro (2016).

The protocol also includes a cumulative archive of volunteer agreements and letters of desire for each volunteer and represents a knowledge management practice that allows the organization to track the development and contribution of volunteers over time. This aligns with Rathi et al.'s (2016) observation about the importance of community knowledge in nonprofits. The inventory of covenants and charters reviewed as part of this research was reported in Table 2.

6.7. Component 4 of Volunteer Management: Contribution of Volunteer Action to the Social Organization

> "I wanted to continue being part of this great work that was being developed in the community, and that could not be finished because of what was happening. . . I stayed supporting the sports area and I think we have done a very good job"
>
> (Fragment of Focus Group—Participant 7)

Component 4 on volunteerism management sets out how volunteering practices at the Huellas Foundation not only shape the functioning of the organization, but also contribute significantly to its sustainability and resilience. This reflects the situated and socially constructed nature of organizational practices (as suggested by Geiger, 2009; Nicolini &

Monteiro, 2016), and is reflected in the excerpt presented above, which highlights the desire of a volunteer to continue contributing to the organization.

Through participatory autoethnographic analysis, an exercise was conducted with one of the volunteers to quantify the economic impact of volunteering in the Huellas Foundation. The quantification of the contribution of volunteer action (AAV) to the organization's budget was weighted based on the equation[1] AAV = ((HS × $VH) × #HM) × MA × #V. The results showed that volunteering is equivalent to 50% of the organization's operation. This valuation exercise reflects what Rathi et al. (2016) describe as the need for knowledge about finance and funding sources in NPOs.

In addition to the economic contribution to support the sustainability of the organization, the specific participation of an international volunteer (Italian–German), between September and December 2017, to give continuity to his experience once he finished volunteering and recognizing the valuable work of the organization, he honorarily assumed the cost of renting a local house to install the administrative and operational headquarters of the organization since March 2018 and to date maintains his donation for that purpose.

However, the most relevant aspect of this finding is that in the documentary and audiovisual review, as well as in the focus group conversations, it was identified that the greatest contribution of the volunteer experience to the organization is its strength to give continuity to the organization's processes even in times of contingency and scarcity. In this sense, it is a high inventory of social capital, characterized by a historical solidarity and resilient capacity to make agreements and move forward together, building a common purpose to serve the community (Kliksberg, 2006; Ostrom, 2000; Olson, 1992).

The resilience demonstrated by volunteers, characterized by a historical solidarity and ability to make agreements and move forward together, reflects the principles of self-gratification and institutional recognition. Volunteers find personal satisfaction in their ability to keep the organization running (self-gratification), while the organization recognizes and values this crucial contribution (institutional recognition).

This component also aligns with the previous ones by demonstrating how volunteering as a cultural reference (Component 2) and the emotional construction of volunteering (Component 3) contribute to creating a strong sense of organizational commitment and resilience. The continuity of volunteer participation, even in difficult times, is a testament to the effectiveness of the practices of synchronizing roles, profiles, timing, and interests (Component 1).

The findings presented illustrate how volunteer management at the Huellas Foundation exemplifies the contingent nature of organizational practices. The two principles identified—self-realization and institutional recognition—along with the four key components, emerge as adaptive responses to the specific needs of the organization and its context. This empirical evidence not only contributes to the understanding of how volunteer management practices evolve in response to contextual factors, but also offers important implications for both the theory and practice of volunteer management in nonprofit organizations, which are discussed below.

7. Conclusions

Through a participatory autoethnographic approach, this study has contributed to a deeper understanding of the contingent approach to volunteer management, illustrating how organizational practices adapt and evolve in response to specific contexts.

The understanding of organizational practices that give rise to volunteer management were understood throughout the study, as social and collective phenomena (Geiger, 2009), and as actions and expressions structured and influenced by material factors that shape the functioning of organizations (Nicolini & Monteiro, 2016). This approach made it possible

to examine the management of volunteering at the Huellas Foundation as a set of dynamic and contextual practices and processes, rooted in the history and specific culture of the organization and its community.

The participatory autoethnographic methodology employed in this study proved particularly well suited to exploring the complexities of volunteer management in the organization. It incorporated both the perspective of the researcher as a participant-observer and the experiences and perceptions of other volunteers in the organization. This approach reflects what Anderson (2006) and Herrmann (2022) describe as the ability of autoethnography to provide an in-depth exploration of organizational dynamics from the perspective of a participant immersed in the context.

The research findings support and expand the contingent perspective proposed by Brudney and Meijs (2014) by revealing how the two fundamental principles identified—self-actualization and institutional recognition—emerge and adapt according to the specific context of the organization. These principles, far from being universal prescriptions, represent adaptive responses that reflect the reciprocal nature of volunteering in this particular context.

The four components identified in the management of volunteering at the Huellas Foundation exemplify what Brudney and Sink (2017) describe as the need to adapt practices according to the specific characteristics of each organization. The conversation between roles, the understanding of volunteering as a cultural referent, the balance between legal shielding and emotional construction, and the contribution of volunteer action demonstrate how management practices must be adjusted to the particular realities of each context.

From a practical perspective, this study provides valuable insights into how NPOs can adapt their volunteer management practices according to their specific contexts. The importance of aligning volunteer interests with organizational needs, creating a sense of belonging, and balancing legal and emotional aspects are lessons that can inform the adaptation of practices in diverse contexts.

The theoretical implications of this study support and expand the contingent approach to volunteer management. The findings illustrate how management practices cannot be universally standardized, but must be adapted by considering multiple contextual factors, as proposed by Rochester (1999) and Brudney et al. (2019). However, they have broader implications for understanding volunteering in developing country contexts.

It is important to note the limitations of the study. By focusing on a specific organization in Colombia, the findings, while valuable for understanding the application of the contingent approach, are not intended to be generalizable. The autoethnographic nature of the study, while providing insightful understanding, also introduces potential biases that should be recognized.

Future research could expand the understanding of the contingent approach by examining how different organizations adapt their volunteer management practices in different contexts and territories. It would also be valuable to explore how practices evolve over time and adapt to different cultural and socioeconomic realities.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data is contained within the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1] Equation conventions: AAV (volunteer action contribution)—HS (hours per week)—$VH (Hourly Value)—#HM (Number of hours per month)—MA (months per year)—#V (Number of volunteers). The exercise recognized that the hours per week (HS) of the volunteers ranged from 15 to 20. These data are equivalent to the daily volunteering modality, since the exercise did not include additional values that may mean the cost of professional and occasional volunteering, travel, lodging, and support costs of international volunteers.

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The Radicalness of Innovation in Nonprofit Community Sport Organizations

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Abstract: Our study examined and compared the type, process, conditions, and consequences of radical and incremental innovations in community sport organizations (CSOs), which are a type of nonprofit membership association. Interviews were conducted with the president (or representative) of 14 CSOs engaged with both radical and incremental innovations. Radical innovations were reported to be mostly technical (but also administrative), undertaken with the goal of club growth and enhancing club management, adopted and further adapted from outside the organization, influenced by the culture and expertise of the board and the culture and capacity of the CSO at large, and informed by market opportunity and best practices. The radical innovations were reported to be successful in reaching their intended goals, and a wide variety of unanticipated (positive) consequences was also realized. The findings have implications for the management of radical (and incremental) innovation in the focal nonprofit context and contribute to theorizing about the radicalness of organizational innovation.

Keywords: organizational innovation; radical innovation; incremental innovation; nonprofit membership association

1. Introduction

Community sport organizations (CSOs), also referred to as voluntary sport clubs, are grassroots membership associations that represent a unique subset of nonprofit organizations (Doherty et al., 2014). They tend to have a heavy reliance on member volunteers, a community focus, relatively informal structure, and modest budgets drawn primarily from membership fees (cf. Smith, 2000; Tschirhart, 2006, 2020). CSOs offer recreational and competitive sport programs that serve children, youth, adult, and/or senior participants. These local sport clubs can also be important mechanisms for civic activism, social capital, and community development (Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020; Feiler & Breuer, 2020; Misener & Trussell, 2020), similar to other nonprofits (Toepler & Anheier, 2020). They are common in Western countries (cf. Breuer et al., 2015; Nichols et al., 2015; Noble-Campbell et al., 2019; Scheerder et al., 2015) as the foundation of a nation's sport system (Hallman & Petry, 2013). CSOs are also innovating (see Corthouts et al., 2020, 2023; Delshab et al., 2022; Hoeber et al., 2015; Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012; Wemmer & Koenigstorfer, 2016) to meet member and community demands and to compete and survive in an ever-changing environment

(cf. Crossan & Apaydin, 2010). However, the "radicalness" of these innovations is not clear, specifically whether they constitute greater or lesser degrees of departure from existing practice and organizational impact (Damanpour, 2020). Understanding this distinction is important because it has implications for whether such nonprofit membership associations are likely to take up more radical innovations, which can add new value to members but may be viewed as risky, more unpredictable, and require an investment in new knowledge (Sharma et al., 2017), or they are limited to more incremental changes that are seen as safer and require less new knowledge (McDermott & O'Connor, 2002).

Given this potential range of innovations, as well as the associated conditions and implications for their uptake (e.g., Dewar & Dutton, 1986; Engen & Holen, 2014; Forés & Camisón, 2016; Koberg et al., 2003; Weerawardena & Mort, 2012), it is important to distinguish the nature of radical innovation in a particular context and the factors that shape its consideration, adoption, and further consequences. Incremental innovation provides a natural comparator that helps to enhance our understanding through contrast. Insight into these innovation attributes can contribute to a better understanding of how CSOs may respond to expectations and pressures, with implications for the effective delivery and impact of community sport (cf. Toepler & Anheier, 2020). To extend the literature and the understanding of innovation and specifically radicalness in these grassroots nonprofits, the purpose of this study was to explore the type, select aspects of the process, and the consequences of radical innovation in CSOs in comparison to incremental innovation. We begin with a review of the conceptual framework of innovation that guided the study and an overview of the related research literature on radical vs. incremental innovation, as well as innovation in community sport clubs. This is followed by a description of our qualitative methodology and then a presentation of findings and their discussion. Concluding comments highlight implications for theory and practice, as well as limitations of the study with directions for future research.

2. Conceptual Framework

Innovation represents, in its broadest form, "newness or novelty" (Damanpour, 2020, p. 5). However, its conceptualization becomes increasingly nuanced beyond that. An economic-based view of innovation tends to focus on newness in terms of a product or market—something that is new to a field—and is associated with a "competition-wealth" approach, where the primary concern is the competitiveness and superior performance that is intended with the innovation (Damanpour, 2020). This view aligns with organizations that are primarily economic or commercial entities, and related research tends to focus on the generation of new technology, products, and manufacturing. The economic-based view may be less relevant in the nonprofit context, which is traditionally more focused on creating social value than developing competitive advantage and maximizing profits (Svensson et al., 2020), although socially entrepreneurial nonprofits may be an exception (Weerawardena & Mort, 2012). A social-based view of innovation, on the other hand, focuses on the diffusion and adoption of products and practices by an organization and its members, and it is associated with an "adaptation-progression" approach for operational efficiency and survival (Damanpour, 2020). This view aligns with organizations addressing social needs and doing so efficiently and effectively, with related research focused largely on the innovation capability of the organization.

Although economic-based and social-based views are distinct theoretical approaches, they are not mutually exclusive (Damanpour, 2020), and organizational innovation may be considered from both perspectives. Our study does so as both club growth in terms of market share of members and the revenues they bring in, as well as effective operations and impactful programs, are the focus of CSO innovations in previous research,

as reviewed below. Our exploratory approach allows for the consideration of a range of innovations, generated or adopted by CSOs, for competitiveness and performance and/or efficiency and survival. It also addresses the call to bridge the fragmentation of the economic- and social-based views (Damanpour, 2020), as well as the possibility of an innovative product or practice generated by a CSO for itself and perhaps for the field (cf. Crossan & Apaydin, 2010).

Within these broader layers, Damanpour (2020) outlines elements that are foundational to understanding and supporting organizational innovation, including in nonprofit organizations. He conceptualizes a model that aligns innovation *type* (e.g., technical and non-technical), *process* (opportunity, generation or adoption, and implementation), and *radicalness* (novelty or newness, departure from existing practice, and impact on the organization) as a guide and a call for research that generates rich and more complex insights to better capture the phenomenon of innovation.

Typologies of innovation have been of interest to many scholars (Crossan & Apaydin, 2010; Damanpour, 2020), enabling researchers to theorize about some of the nuances of innovation. Innovations can be framed as a product or process, distinguishing a new product to address clients' needs and a new internal process for producing products or rendering services. This typology has received the most research attention, with a focus on products (or services) that are new to a market and new ways of manufacturing existing (or new) products that is consistent with the popular economic-based view of innovation (Damanpour, 2020). Another typology, and the focus of this study, is the technical and non-technical innovation dichotomy, with the latter also labeled more indicatively as administrative or managerial innovation. Technical innovations constitute new products, services, and the processes to provide them, and they are "directly related to the primary work activity of the organization" (Damanpour & Evan, 1984, p. 394). In contrast, non-technical administrative innovations are characterized by changes pertaining to strategy, structure, and control "that occur in the social system of an organization" (Damanpour & Evan, 1984, p. 394). The technical-administrative typology aligns with a social-based approach to innovation with its focus on the adopter's perspective of change for operational efficiency and survival through "adaptation-progression".

The process element of organizational innovation comprises its initiation (awareness, and intent or objective, of the innovation), the adoption decision (whom, and sources or driving conditions), and the effectiveness of its implementation (consequences) (Damanpour, 2020). The conditions potentially impacting the adoption decision are multidimensional: individual (leadership) factors refer to people, as well as particularly managers or strategic leaders, who may influence innovation adoption and implementation; organizational (internal) factors that may come into play include available resources, structure, climate, and culture; and environmental (external) factors that can drive innovation may be proximal or distal to the organization and are expected to vary by industry or sector (Damanpour, 2020). Together the elements of organizational innovation type and process frame our exploration of the radicalness of innovation in CSOs as a type of nonprofit grassroots membership association.

Radicalness—a third organizational innovation element—has received limited empirical attention in any industry context, particularly in combination with innovation type and process (Damanpour, 2020). The limited attention may be a reflection of the lack of clarity regarding what constitutes radical innovations (Sharma et al., 2017), or that they are less common in contrast to incremental innovations (Damanpour, 1996; cf. Hoeber et al., 2015; Koberg et al., 2003). Damanpour and Wischnevsky (2006) note that researchers have tended to label the radicalness of innovations themselves, selecting innovations and organizations to study with the presumption that they will be capturing radical innovation. However, it can and should be more accurately distinguished from incremental innovation by the

adopting organizations (cf. Sharma et al., 2017; Svensson et al., 2020), consistent with a social-based view of innovation (Damanpour, 2020). As Sharma et al. (2017, p. 18) note, "radicalness depends on prior experiences and competences of individuals, groups, and the adopting organization". The typical singular reflection on the degree of novelty or newness, a departure from existing practice, and/or the organizational impact of radical innovation may have merit; however, a richer and more meaningful understanding demands consideration of the types of innovations that are radical from the adopters' perspective, the conditions for their consideration and adoption, and ultimately, the consequences—positive or negative—for engaging in what is considered more radical than incremental innovation (cf. Damanpour, 2020). Our study is focused on this more holistic view of radicalness in the context of nonprofit grassroots CSOs.

3. Review of the Literature

3.1. Radical vs. Incremental Innovation

Several studies have examined and contrasted the adoption of radical and incremental innovation (e.g., Dewar & Dutton, 1986; Engen & Holen, 2014; Forés & Camisón, 2016; Koberg et al., 2003; Weerawardena & Mort, 2012), with a particular focus on conditions of that adoption. In an early study, Dewar and Dutton examined the adoption of radical (high degree of new knowledge) versus incremental (low degree of new knowledge) technical innovations by footwear manufacturing organizations and found that the availability of technical specialists was most critical to the successful adoption of more radical practices. Managerial attitudes and practices were no more important to the uptake of radical than incremental innovations. Koberg et al. (2003) found some variation in organizational and environmental factors that influenced the adoption of incremental and radical innovations in firms across a mix of industries. Incremental innovations were reported to a significantly greater extent, as the authors expected, and were uniquely (and positively) predicted by the age and size of the firm. These organizational factors had no bearing on radical innovations; however, the firms' support for experimentation was a unique predictor of these more novel changes. Notably, structural linkages within the firms that support the exchange of and collaboration around new ideas, as well as the amount and complexity of information available to the firms (environmental dynamism), were significant conditions for the adoption of both incremental and radical innovations.

Engen and Holen (2014) examined service firm innovations along the "novelty spectrum" (p. 16) and found information from and cooperation with customers to be far more meaningful for engagement in radical than incremental innovation. This finding extends Koberg et al.'s (2003) observation with the notion that both forms of innovation may be prompted by a dynamic environment, but radical innovation relies particularly on a connection with customers in that environment, although this may be specific to the service firms that Engen and Holen studied. In contrast, employee collaboration on ideas was only impactful to incremental innovation, while the need for new knowledge around the innovation was important for both types of innovation. In a study comparing the performance of radical and incremental innovations in industrial firms, Forés and Camisón (2016) considered the impact of internal knowledge creation capacity (the ability to generate, transfer, and integrate new knowledge within the firm) and absorptive capacity (the ability to identify, acquire, transform, and apply new knowledge from outside the firm). Both forms of knowledge accumulation capacity had a direct positive effect on the performance of the industrial firms' incremental innovations, while the ability to absorb external knowledge was the only significant direct determinant of radical innovation performance. The findings suggest that internal knowledge creation is sufficient for incremental innovation but not for radical innovation performance. To engage successfully with more novel changes,

organizations must rely on the ability to identify, acquire, transform, and apply new ideas from outside their boundaries (Forés & Camisón, 2016). Like Engen and Holen, Forés and Camisón found that radical innovations were more influenced by external knowledge.

In the context of nonprofits, Weerawardena and Mort (2012) examined the magnitude of innovations pursued by socially entrepreneurial service organizations and the environmental conditions for that effort. What were identified as incremental innovations included extending and changing the format of programming to serve new and different groups and building a computerized database, which had positive impacts for the targeted clients and for the organizations' financial capacity. Radical innovations included a program initiative that had not been tried in the industry before, and it was dependent on individuals' knowledge and networks, as well as several initiatives focused on system changes aimed at building sustainable capacity for financial survival, in response to the turbulent environment and beyond what incremental innovations could address (Weerawardena & Mort, 2012).

Each of these comparative studies was grounded in the same conceptualization and evidence of radical innovation as a clear departure from existing, fundamental practice, replacing what was present before, and incremental innovation as minor and more simple refinement changes were low in breadth of impact. Variations in select conditions driving the radicalness of innovation were reported, and this work contributes to theorizing about the radicalness with evidence of the conditions that limit or support more radical or more incremental changes but with a particular focus on for-profit organizations.

3.2. Innovation in Community Sport Clubs

Research on innovation in grassroots membership associations appears to be largely limited to a focus on CSOs, with little indication of the study of organizational innovation in other similar types of institutions. An exception is a case study of a specific innovation—membership structure—of a new political party (Gomez & Ramiro, 2019). Innovation research on membership associations more broadly (including commercial and industrial sectors) considered the establishment of a membership association as the innovation (Fiorito & Jarley, 1992), the role of professional and industry associations in diffusion within an innovation system (e.g., Koschatzky et al., 2014; Maennig & Ölschläger, 2011; Newell & Swan, 1995), and, relatedly, the impact of firm engagement in membership associations on the innovation performance of the firm (e.g., Guisado-González et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2019). There appears to be a dearth of research examining innovation, and radicalness in particular, within membership associations, as well as grassroots types specifically. To provide a foundation for our study, we turn to a review of existing research on innovation in CSOs, since they are a type of nonprofit membership associations.

Together, CSO research has considered the types, determinants, and processes of innovations pertaining to local sport programs and services for participants across the age span, as well as the structure and delivery of those programs and services. Innovations have been aimed at, for example, easing the burden of volunteers, strengthening the quality of sport programs and their delivery, and growing the membership of the club in its community, reflecting both social and economic views of innovation in this context. These foci align with fundamental goals of CSOs, so it is important to better understand the nature and process of innovation in this context.

Addressing an identified gap in the literature, Hoeber et al. (2015) explored the extent and nature of innovation in CSOs, focusing on the Canadian context. Interviews with leaders of 42 clubs engaged with either a traditional or more contemporary sport revealed that these grassroots membership-based nonprofits are indeed innovative, identifying a total of 188 innovations they had taken up in the previous three years. The investigators

reported that the innovations were predominantly administrative and focused on systems changes regarding information technology, human resource management, and finances (in comparison to technical innovations, which focused on program delivery and equipment); and they were predominantly determined to be incremental (as opposed to radical), as characterized by what seemed to be lesser degrees of departure from existing practice. However, the authors acknowledged the challenge of interpreting the degree of radicalness themselves because what may be considered minor or major can vary from setting to setting. They nonetheless highlighted the variety of innovations being pursued by CSOs, and they noted that clubs "need access to existing knowledge, from internal and external sources, or the ability to create new knowledge in order to adopt and implement the innovations" (Hoeber et al., 2015, p. 518).

In an earlier case study of a nonprofit soccer club, Hoeber and Hoeber (2012) focused on its adoption of a technical innovation (electronic game sheets) and the innovation process that unfolded in doing so, including conditions at the managerial, organizational, and environmental levels. They found that leader commitment (managerial factor) and club capacity (organizational factor) were critical determinants of the innovation adoption. More recently, building on the earlier work of Hoeber and colleagues, Corthouts et al. (2020) conducted a survey study of the conditions or determinants of different types of innovation adopted in CSOs in Europe. The innovations, "special initiatives" that were introduced into the clubs for specific target groups (women and girls, children and adolescents, people with disabilities, migrants, and the elderly), were classified by the technical-administrative typology. Managerial (attitude to social inclusion, health, and transformation), organizational (size, age, and capacity), and environmental (urbanization and competition) conditions for innovation were also considered. The authors reported that managerial attitude, financial capacity, and the extent of competition from commercial or for-profit clubs were significant predictors of both technical and administrative innovation in the clubs. Human resource capacity (presence of paid staff) was a singular predictor of technical innovations.

In a survey study with Flemish nonprofit sport organizations, including CSOs, Corthouts et al. (2023) applied their three-dimensional model of innovation form (process and product), nature (administrative and technical), and goal (commercial success and social benefit) to describe the nuances of innovations in clubs. They found that CSOs were more likely to implement technical rather than administrative innovations, which is in contrast to Hoeber et al.'s (2015) findings about the prevalence of administrative over technical innovations. Corthouts et al. (2023) suggested that the contrast may be a function of the lesser constraints on technical innovations by Flemish law and perhaps a particular uptake of technology and social media in the support of program delivery and club growth by the clubs studied. They also reported a predominant focus on social (e.g., inclusion and health focus) as opposed to commercial goals associated with the clubs' innovations. In their multi-layered study, the authors found very little impact of managerial (attitude towards change) or environmental factors (cooperation, competition) on innovation adoption. The most consistent organizational conditions for innovation were organization age and a focus on general health and healthy exercise. The authors suggest that nuances of innovation may not be captured in surface level survey research like theirs. Neither Hoeber and Hoeber (2012) nor Corthouts et al. (2020, 2023) considered the magnitude or radicalness of the innovation(s) they examined.

In a shift in focus, Wemmer and Koenigstorfer (2016) and Wemmer et al. (2016) examined open innovation in CSOs. Open innovation is "the purposive inflows and outflows of knowledge to accelerate internal innovation, and expand the markets for external use of innovation, respectively" (Chesbrough, 2006, p. 1). Based on interviews with leaders of 11 nonprofit sport clubs in Germany, Wemmer and Koenigstorfer found that

"coopetition", both competition *and* cooperation with other clubs, drives success in adopting and implementing outside knowledge in their innovating practices. Having members that are engaged and committed to contributing their human capital to the venture is also important. Subsequently, Wemmer et al. (2016) examined the impact of coopetition on open innovation and performance in German nonprofit sport clubs. The survey of club board members revealed that collaboration with competitors, and particularly the use of the outside knowledge aspect of open innovation, was a significant factor for innovations that supported the financial stability and membership development of the clubs. Building on that work and unpacking the knowledge aspects of innovation further, Delshab et al. (2022) conducted a survey study of CSOs in Iran and found that knowledge management processes (e.g., knowledge creation, knowledge sharing) led to a positive attitude toward newness among members, as well as openness to ideas. In turn, these attitudes supported open innovation and, ultimately, organizational performance. In these works, too, the radicalness of the innovations was not considered.

With some attention to more radical innovation, Chard et al. (2020) identified a deleterious phenomenon of ice hockey tournament scheduling that was causing elite adolescent players to miss a large number of school days, and they proposed what they believe to be a "disruptive strategic innovation" (p. 5) that would be expected to require a "shift in the mindset" (p. 10). However, they too wondered "what constitutes a relatively small change?" (p. 11). Their proposed innovation calls for research to better understand what clubs perceive to be more radical or more incremental changes and the conditions (and consequences) for each. We address this call and the need for greater insight to radicalness in CSOs in the current study.

Our exploration of the nature, adoption, and consequences of radical innovation, as well as its complement incremental innovation, builds on and extends what is known about innovation in the grassroots nonprofit context of CSOs. It also further supports theorizing about the radicalness of innovation by examining the "chain of innovation" more thoroughly (cf. Damanpour, 2020). To do this, our investigation was guided by several research questions:

(1) Do CSOs engage in what they perceive to be radical innovation?
(2) What type(s) of innovations (technical and/or administrative) are radical and incremental in CSOs?
(3) Does the adoption process and consequences of radical and incremental innovation differ for CSOs?

4. Method

We adopted a comparative case study design informed by a post-positivist interpretivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) to examine innovation in CSOs that perceived that they engaged in both radical and incremental innovation. Approval from the REBs of the lead authors' institutions was obtained prior to contact with participants.

4.1. Participants

We engaged in purposive sampling of CSOs that had considered or adopted both radical and incremental innovations in the previous three years. Waves of samples of CSOs across a variety of sports and small/medium (popn. less than 100,000) and large-metro (100,000+) communities in Ontario, Canada, were contacted based on email addresses available in the public domain. The president of each CSO was invited via email to participate in the study if their club met the stated inclusion criteria. Radical and incremental innovations were distinguished for prospective participants as that which "involves a significant departure from existing practice" and "involves less of a departure from how things are

done", respectively. Ensuring participants were able to compare between the two types of innovations increased their ability to distinguish respective attributes, conditions, and consequences. We conducted telephone interviews with the president (or representative) of 14 CSOs from 11 different sports in 4 small–medium and 5 large-metro communities across the province. Sampling continued until data saturation was reached. Club leaders we spoke with were in their role between 1 and 12 years (average 4.25 years), and all were or had been involved in their club in other ways between 2 and 31 years (average 13 years).

4.2. Data Collection and Analysis

In line with Damanpour (2020), a semi-structured interview guide was developed to elicit descriptions of the attributes of what the participants considered to, first, be a radical innovation in their club, aspects of the innovation adoption process (awareness and intent, conditions, and decision), and the impact or consequences of that innovation to date. The series of questions was then repeated for what the participants considered to be an incremental innovation in their club. Given our focus on innovation within CSOs and their experiences, we explored innovation from 'the eye of the beholder' perspective, which is consistent with the social view and contrasts the economic view of what the broader market considers to be innovative (Damanpour, 2020). This approach also helps to counter a possible 'pro-innovation' bias (Rogers, 2003), where innovation is presumed to be only positive for organizations, by uncovering clubs' actual experiences. The interviews were conducted at the convenience of participants, and all participants were audio recorded with their verbal consent. The interviews, which averaged 40 min, were transcribed verbatim and returned to participants for verification, with very few adjustments made.

The data were subject to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) involving both deductive and inductive coding. As a team, we developed open coding frameworks for what the participants indicated as radical and incremental innovations, based on the conceptual framework, prior research, and interview questions. The data were deductively coded as a first step according to the (1) meaning of radical/incremental innovation, (2) type (administrative, technical), (3) intent of the innovation, (4) awareness of the innovation, (5) managerial, organizational and environmental conditions, (6) decision process, and (7) consequences. Further inductive coding was undertaken by all team members independently and then collaboratively based on patterns of themes across the data within these open codes, where relevant.

5. Findings

5.1. Type and Radicalness of Innovations

The participants described innovations they deemed radical for their club as "huge" and "significant", and that they "affected everybody across the board". One club president noted that "nobody really has done anything like this at all in [the city]", while the leader of another club shared that "what we offer. . . has really changed the concept of [the sport for youth]". The radical innovations were also described as "foreign" and taking "a big step forward by doing that". Specific innovations that were described as radical included introducing events and programs for new members (eight clubs), hiring athletes to coach (one club), and introducing sport officials development (one club), which we interpreted to constitute technical innovations as new products, services, or ways to deliver those. Employing new interactive media platforms (three clubs), instituting a new organizational structure (two clubs), and partnering with a facility owner (one club) were determined to represent administrative innovations as changes to the social system of the organization. Radical administrative innovations were less common than technical ones (See Table 1).

Table 1. Radical and incremental innovations in CSOs.

Radical Innovations	Incremental Innovations
Technical innovations Introduction of events and programs for new members (8 clubs) Hiring athletes to coach (1 club) Introduction of sport officials development (1 club)	*Technical innovations* Adaptation to existing event program (4 clubs) Acquisition of new training equipment and instructional tools (2 clubs)
Administrative innovations Introduction of interactive media platform (3 clubs) New organizational structure (2 clubs) Partnership with facility owner (1 club)	*Administrative innovations* Adjustment to organizational structure and culture (4 clubs) Additional media platform (2 clubs) Development of strategic plan (1 club) Image rebranding (1 club) Collaboration with other clubs (1 club)

In comparison, incremental innovations considered or implemented by the clubs were described as "a no brainer" and "basic, mundane". These innovations were generally seen as an add-on to or adaption of existing practice, albeit new to their club that "didn't even register on the Richter scale" and were described as a "normal process" of club and sport evolution. The incremental innovations included adaptations to existing club events and programs (four clubs) and the acquisition of new training equipment and instructional tools (two clubs), which were technical in nature and less common. Administrative incremental innovations included adjustments to organizational structure and culture (four clubs), the addition of a media platform (two clubs), the development of a strategic plan (one club), image rebranding (one club), and a collaboration with other clubs (one club), and they were more common across the sample.

5.2. Innovation Adoption

5.2.1. Awareness and Intent

Most of the radical innovations were adopted from existing practices outside the club and were adapted to the club's particular needs and environment. As one club president described, "[the innovation] is not unique. There are other clubs that have youth programs. [However], this approach, maybe, was unique with mountain biking and road biking alternatively". The club did not previously offer any youth programming but knew of successful programs in other clubs and decided to introduce their own. Only two CSOs generated their ideas internally, and these pertained to introducing or substantially redesigning programs for greater fun and participation. The external sources of radical innovations were sport models (following recommended best practices), other clubs, the general environment, and a club member's previous experience. The incremental innovations were also predominantly adopted from outside the club but were taken up directly or adapted to the club's context in equal measure. When asked how the incremental innovation was first introduced, a club president explained that (similar to radical innovations) they "[were] just bringing best practices from another club I had belonged to when I lived in [another province]. It was just taking the best parts of all these different clubs and bringing it back to [the current club]". Both types of innovations were predominantly brought to the club, and specifically the board, by board/executive members; however, radical innovations were also notably introduced by club members and coaches outside the board. As one club president described, "We get [radical] innovation from everybody!"

The intent of the radical innovations were club growth and club management, with specific objectives of building membership and program offerings, introducing new pro-

gram design, enhanced human resources capacity, and improved operations. For example, one club implemented a more formal structure in order to expand their target market and, ultimately, increase their membership:

> What we wanted to do was. . . open [the club] up to children and youth to develop the sport in our area and in order to do that, anytime you work with children, you have to do what's more organized. So basically, it was out of necessity that drove [this]. . . radical change. (club president)

Another club, focused on improving their operations, took up the radical innovation as "hopefully it will allow us to get volunteers that we haven't had before" (club president). In contrast, the intent of incremental innovations was participant development along with club management, with specific objectives of member development and satisfaction, and improved club operations. A club president described the goal as follows:

> professionalization of the board, bringing best practices in how the board functions within the club. . .the incremental change was more in reflection with how the club operates, and how the board operates, and the confidence that everybody had. And the stability that, I think, having an active, strategic president.

5.2.2. Innovation Conditions and Decisions

Board-level factors. The conditions for the decision to adopt (and further adapt) the radical innovations included what was determined to be board-level factors given that the strategic leadership of the club is the board, as well as organizational and environmental factors (see Table 2). Board culture was consistently described as a key factor in the consideration and uptake of radical innovations, specifically an openness to innovation, willingness to take risks, and commitment to the survival/success of the sport and the club. A club president described the board's support of a new children's program:

> One thing I'm lucky enough to have is my board. My whole board is pretty open to the betterment of the program, so whatever we can do to make the program better, they're open to it.

In addition to a culture of openness and risk taking, another club president described the informality and trust that allows their board to move on radical ideas:

> We're a pretty laid back kind of group; not very formal. [A member] sent me an email and said 'how about this idea?'. . . and I said I'd poll the other members of the Executive. . . We don't usually hold. . . face to face meetings. We have email meetings simply because people work different shifts. Consequently, we asked them through emails and so on, the do's and don'ts and what-ifs.

Another key, and common, aspect of board support of radical innovation was an idea champion within the board who promoted the idea:

> I put [the idea] out as an email, saying this is the idea I want to propose at our next meeting. . .A few of our board members came back with a couple of concerns they had with it. When we had our next meeting, I already had prepared what we could do to rectify those issues. . . Once it was brought up, it was pretty much left to me. They said that everybody would support me whenever they can. (club president).

The impact of an idea champion was enhanced if that person was believed to be an expert on the topic. Indeed, board members' human capital was another factor identified as important to a positive decision to innovate. Their expertise and experience instilled confidence within the board when members shared their opinion about the potential change: "We kind of instill trust in each other. . . [if] someone is a financial expert, and they

bring up a financial issue, we. . . trust their judgement because it's their expertise" (club president). Board members' connections outside the club were also noted as valuable to the adoption of radical innovations. For example, a club president explained that "I looked and contacted some of my family members in [another country] who are playing, who played professional or semi-professional, and asked them what they do for that age group".

Table 2. Summary of conditions for radical and incremental innovation in CSOs.

Factor		Radical Innovation	Incremental Innovation
Board-level	Board Culture	• Openness to new ideas • Willingness to take risks • Commitment to sport/club success or survival • Informality • Trust	• Cooperation • Consensus
	Idea Champion	• Within the board	
	Human Capital	• Expertise, experience • Connections	• Expertise • Experience
Organizational	Club Culture	• Cooperation	• Transparency • Accountability
	Capacity	• Human resources (sufficient and skilled) • Financial resources (sufficient funds to implement) • Physical resources (available facilities and equipment)	• Human resources (sufficient and skilled)
Environmental	Market	• Opportunity	• Opportunity • Competition
	Institutional	• Best practice • Mandated	• Best practice
	Societal Trends	• Technology	

Board-level culture and human capital were also identified as factors for the adoption of incremental innovation but with far less emphasis on each, suggesting that they are less or perhaps of varying importance for the more evolutionary changes that characterize incremental innovation for the CSOs. A board culture that values cooperation for agreement and even consensus at this strategic level of the organizations was described as positive for incremental change. The expertise and experience of board members were highlighted as well, although, again, with far less emphasis than for radical innovations.

Organizational factors. These conditions also featured in the clubs' consideration and decision to adopt what they described as a radical innovation. The club culture, in general, was a common factor and specifically characterized as cooperative, with sharing and collaboration among members deemed an important condition for engaging in very new initiatives or practices. Club capacity was another common factor, with a particular focus on having sufficient and skilled human resources for the board to feel the club as a whole can take up the innovation and ensure its success. One club president described it as follows:

> The only concern people had [about the innovation] was where are we going to get the manpower. You know, we're a non-profit organization. . . [and] the project is based on volunteerism, so we're already thin as it is. There's not many people banging down our door, so that was a concern that people had, you know, who's going to run this, how can we run it, are we going to have more manpower?

This condition was the only evidence of resistance to radical innovation, with another president describing that "they were being pretty vocal in saying that their time was limited to help out".

Financial resources was another key and common organizational factor in the decision to adopt a radical innovation in the club. A club president explained that

> We had this business plan put together to [purchase necessary equipment to run a new program] through our annual revenue, but it would have taken eight years to get everything we wanted. With the [grant] award, we were able to purchase all [equipment] needed to start this. . .program.

Physical resources and particularly facilities and equipment to implement the idea were also noted as a key condition for the technical radical innovations of new programming. Notably, financial and physical resources were described as both driving and inhibiting conditions for radical innovation, in some cases prompting novel opportunities and in others being something to overcome in order to adopt a new practice.

For incremental innovations, club culture was also a factor in their adoption but with a focus on the importance of transparency and accountability in decision making across the club. As one club president noted, "[If] it's not transparent, it's not fair. We don't know, the general membership doesn't know what the criteria are and how the allocations have been made" in support of an innovation. Club capacity was also a key factor in incremental innovation adoption, and similar to radical innovation, the availability of skilled and reliable personnel was considered key. Sufficient financial resources, equipment, and space (physical resources) were rarely noted.

Environmental factors. The external environment was described as an important condition for the adoption of radical innovations, including market, institutional, and societal aspects. Perceived opportunities to draw in new members were a common driving force for big changes and align with the objective of club growth. A CSO president described the need and opportunity to do more:

> The way [the club] tried to attract people in the past was that they would print off a bunch of flyers, go to the local [sport shops], put up a flyer and hope people came. The problem with that is that you're attracting the same people who would come anyways. You're not really attracting a new demographic. So we decided we needed to look beyond.

Institutional forces, and particularly perceived best practices, were as prominent as market potential for radical innovations. Best practices were evident and shared from the clubs' governing bodies and other clubs. A club president described that "The [provincial sport governing body] is promoting a new approach to organizing [the sport] for younger players. . . So we're looking at carrying along with that organization of the game". Another president explained that "there are other clubs that have done this. They actually have posted on their websites, and we take them and modify them". One example was given of a mandated change (by the sport's governing body) that was perceived as radical innovation by the club. Finally, societal trends were described to a lesser extent as a condition for radical change, and they were related primarily to the adoption of new technology available to any users; the uptake of such technology may not be new to the world but was considered a great departure from normal practice for the CSOs involved.

The impact of environmental factors on the adoption of incremental innovations was less emphatic. It included market opportunity to attract new members and competition in the market which prompted new practices (even though club growth was not a strategic intent of incremental innovation). Interestingly, competition was not observed for radical innovation. In only a few cases, best practices observed in other CSOs served as a prompt from the institutional environment to adopt initiatives that had been taken up by other clubs.

Decision. The decision to adopt a radical innovation was exclusively a formal process for the clubs, requiring approval by the board in most cases and at the club's annual general meeting in the other cases. For incremental innovation, the decisions were primarily formal and only involved the board, although some were informal and adopted through casual discussion. One president described how the incremental change to a program of the club unfolded:

> I probably emailed the other executive members but there wasn't any real discussion about it. Most of our [programs] are set up that way. Somebody comes up and says "Well I'd like to start a [program] on Mondays and we would do this" and it's not too formal.

5.3. Consequences of Implementation

Two-thirds of the clubs had implemented their radical and incremental innovations at the time of the study, with the remainder still in the planning stages. For the radical innovations underway, the CSOs reported that objectives had been (or were being) met already, particularly around new programming and increased membership. A club president stated that "[the program] is doing things for us. . . and has helped us immensely in grooming young kids to get in the competitive field [of the sport]", while another shared that "we really widened our network" with the adoption of a new media platform.

Notably, the presidents or their representatives described a variety of unexpected, predominantly positive, outcomes of the radical innovations, including a stronger board culture because of the radical innovation experience; a greater sense of ownership, responsibility, and power on the part of the club within its domain; increased number of volunteers; existing member satisfaction; improved branding; new grants and partnerships; positive outcomes for the club's partner; and continued change within the club. A club president stated that

> It actually helped out the program. . . in the fact that we now have some very good people involved with the [children's] program and I think once their kids graduate. . . into the competitive side, I think those parents will probably also follow their children and go into competitive side and help out with the competitive board, which is. . . a lot more work. . . As well as getting teams, we're also getting more people on board to help out, which is key.

The objectives of sport participant development and club improvement were met as a result of the incremental innovations as well. Unanticipated outcomes were far more limited than for radical innovations, which focused on an expanded market for the CSOs' programs and services; again, something that was not a goal of incremental innovation from the outset.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings provide new and extended insights to radicalness in CSOs, addressing an apparent gap in the study of innovation in (grassroots, nonprofit) membership associations more broadly. Addressing the first research question, the presidents (or their representative) of the 14 CSOs we studied were clearly able to distinguish incremental versus more

radical innovations adopted by their club, in line with the characteristics of radicalness, namely the degree of originality or novelty, departure from existing practice, and impact (Damanpour, 2020). Radical innovations were identified as things that are brand new to the sport or to the community in which the club exists as a substantial change to existing practice and not just an adjustment or revision (incremental innovations were seen as more of an "add-on" to what the club was doing), as well as having a wide and deep impact that has "affected everybody" in the club by taking "a big step forward". What may be perceived as radical in the nonprofit grassroots membership associations we studied may not be viewed as such in larger nonprofit or in for-profit organizations. Both radical and incremental innovations focused on improving club management; however, the former also focused on club growth (e.g., through a new registration system), while the latter addressed participant development (e.g., new equipment for quality participation). An interesting feature of the radicalness of the innovations in the CSOs is that most of the radical innovations were adapted to the context and capacity of the club (infrastructure, finances, and human resources), while the incremental innovations were equally adopted directly or adapted further. This aspect of radicalness does not appear to have been considered and may be a valuable direction for further research in terms of exploring the extent to which new knowledge is adapted, perhaps rendering it incremental in the end. The findings also suggest that the adaptation-progression approach that is consistent with a social view of innovation, operational efficiency, and survival (Damanpour, 2020) also reflects a continuum that appears to coincide with radicalness: radical innovation observed in our study was consistent with higher adaptation and progression in the CSOs, while incremental innovation was consistent with both adaptation and direct adoption (lesser adaptation) as well as lesser club progression.

In response to the second research question, the radical innovations were predominantly technical, associated with the CSOs' basic work activity of providing sport programming (cf. Damanpour, 2020; Damanpour & Evan, 1984). New sport programs or events, for example, represent changes to the primary work activity of clubs, while expanding their potential membership market. The observation that incremental changes are more likely to be administrative in nature coincides with Hoeber et al.'s (2015) report that the CSOs in their study were more likely to engage in administrative (59%) compared to technical (41%) innovations, suggesting that these sets of attributes (radical, technical; incremental, administrative) align. However, radical innovations also included administrative changes, pertaining to clubs' organizational structure, administrative processes, and human resources development (cf. Damanpour, 2020). Thus, as Damanpour (2020) explains, not all radical innovations are technical in nature. While Weerawardena and Mort (2012) did not specifically consider the types of innovation in their study of radical and incremental innovations in nonprofit organizations, they do report what appear to be both technical and administrative changes, reinforcing that radical innovations may be a variety of types. Non-technical, administrative innovations may be assumed to be incremental, but some organizations undertake substantial changes to their operations.

With respect to the third research question, the CSOs' radical and incremental innovations were predominantly adopted from outside the organization. This reliance on knowledge and ideas for innovation from external sources is consistent with research on CSOs (Wemmer & Koenigstorfer, 2016; Wemmer et al., 2016), other non-sport industries, and the for-profit sector (Engen & Holen, 2014; Forés & Camisón, 2016; Koberg et al., 2003), and thus, this is not particular to the grassroots membership nonprofits in this study. Hoeber et al. (2015) contended that CSOs "need to access existing knowledge, or the ability to create new knowledge, in order to adopt and implement the innovations" (p. 531), and their heavy reliance on knowledge from outside the club is evident. There were a few examples of both radical and incremental

innovations generated within the CSOs, but that was certainly the exception. Forés and Camisón (2016) found that internal knowledge creation was sufficient for incremental innovation among the 952 firms they studied; however, it was insufficient for radical innovations in that context, where the absorptive capacity of the firms to identify, acquire, transform, and implement new knowledge was a direct condition of radical innovation, an observation that was reinforced by Engen and Holen's (2014) finding that the successful adoption of radical (vs. incremental) innovations was more dependent on information from customers. This is similar to radical innovation in the nonprofit CSOs we studied, as knowledge and ideas for these novel practices were also brought to the board by club members in what may be seen as a "co-production" between CSO "consumers" (Brandsen et al., 2020) and the governing board members.

The intentions of the CSOs in our sample for radical and incremental innovations were similar with regard to improving club management, albeit different aspects. However, radical innovations were also intended to address club growth (membership and sport programs) with an outward focus, while incremental innovations were targeted to participant development (sport participation, personal growth, and satisfaction), with an internal focus. Thus, the goals of the radical innovations appear to align with both economic-based (competition-wealth) and social-based (adaptation-progression) views. It suggests that, just as there may be a mix of types of radical innovations (technical and administrative), they may also have economic and social goals. Corthouts et al. (2023) found that the nonprofit sport organizations they studied had overwhelmingly social goals for their innovation, suggesting that they may have been examining predominantly incremental changes, which may be most common in CSOs anyway (cf. Hoeber et al., 2015). Taken together, the findings support the complexity and potential nuances of radical innovation and radicalness that warrant further exploration.

The research literature indicates that some conditions are different for radical and incremental innovations, and some are similar across the continuum of radicalness (in other words for all innovations). Our findings in the context of the nonprofit CSOs are consistent with this observation. A positive attitude or perspective at the managerial (or board) level has been reported to be an important condition for any magnitude of innovation in other studies (Corthouts et al., 2020; Delshab et al., 2022; Dewar & Dutton, 1986; Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012; Wemmer & Koenigstorfer, 2016). Highlighting a further nuance of radical innovation, the clubs in our study indicated the importance of a board characterized by openness to ideas and willingness to take risks for this degree of change in these nonprofit grassroots membership associations. Cooperation and consensus only were indicated for considering and making decisions about incrementally new ideas. Similarly, Koberg et al. (2003) found that a culture of experimentation, which supports flexibility and strategic responsiveness to a changing environment while remaining focused on the present, was only meaningful for radical innovations in firms across a variety of industries. Radical innovations, by definition, constitute big and perhaps never before experienced changes for organizations, so an assumption and acceptance of risk must inherently be part of their successful adoption.

Although nonprofit board members with expertise and experience that can support an innovation were important factors for both radical and incremental innovation, they were emphasized more for the former than the latter. The particular importance of individual expertise for radical innovation was highlighted by Weerawardena and Mort (2012) in their study of nonprofits and Dewar and Dutton's (1986) study of manufacturing firms, and in particular, it was highlighted in our study for radical idea champions. Weerawardena and Mort also reported the importance of radical innovation for individuals with outside networks, a finding that parallels our observation of board member connections for radical innovations in the CSOs. Thus, human capital appears to be a necessary condition for the

adoption of any magnitude of innovation, but relevant skills and experience, as well as external connections, appear to be particularly important for more radical changes. Future research is warranted to unpack the specific skills and experiences that may be critical to radical versus technical innovation in this context.

Club culture was an organizational condition for innovation across the radicalness spectrum, although the nature of that culture varied for radical and incremental changes. Cooperation and collaboration across the club was found to be important for radical innovations, suggesting that it is important if not necessary for members of these nonprofit grassroots associations (and not just the board) to be engaged in and committed to the idea and its implementation. This extends Wemmer and Koenigstorfer's (2016) conceptualization of the importance of managerial commitment; however, they did not specify the radicalness of innovation in their model. In contrast, incremental innovation in the CSOs was dependent on members being informed so that they can understand the relatively minor changes taking place.

Club capacity was another important condition, both in driving and deterring innovation in the CSOs we studied. Capacity continues to be of particular interest in CSO research, with attention to the multiple dimensions that may impact club performance in general (e.g., operations, quality programming, community presence; Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020) and specific initiatives (e.g., Kitchin & Crossin, 2018; Nowy et al., 2020). However, it does not appear to have been examined with regard to innovation. Human and financial resource capacity have been identified as consistently critical dimensions across a variety of CSO circumstances. The dimension of human resources, and specifically sufficient, skilled volunteers, was important to both incremental and radical innovations in our study, highlighting its centrality in this aspect of CSOs as well. However, financial (and well as physical resources) capacity was identified only for the adoption of radical innovations. CSOs, like other grassroots membership associations, have been known to do what they can with the personnel they have available. However, the findings suggest that radical innovations, which may require not just a bigger investment in knowledge (cf. Hoeber et al., 2015) but also finances, are circumscribed by this dimension. The findings also suggest that CSOs may innovate within their capacity to do so, particularly with regard to human resources and finances.

A number of environmental conditions for innovation in the nonprofit CSOs were identified, with some variation between radical and incremental. A market opportunity for the club was indicated as an important driver of both degrees of innovation, even though club growth was not an innovation goal of CSOs engaging in incremental innovations. They may have realized this opportunity as they drew on knowledge from other clubs and perceived that they would be more "out there" by adopting practices that other CSOs had been using. Notably, competition in the sport club environment was identified as a driver of incremental innovation only, and again perhaps surprisingly as their goals for innovation were improved for club management and participant development. Again, when drawing new ideas from outside the club, a perception of what others were doing in the same domain may have prompted a sense of competition to at least stay in the game. Competition is not innate to nonprofit organizations (e.g., Svensson et al., 2020); however, it is being examined particularly in the context of CSOs (e.g., Rossi et al., 2024) and may increasingly be a driver of innovation, as well as radicalness for these nonprofits.

A more complete investigation of the "chain of innovation", particularly regarding radicalness, is missing (Damanpour, 2020), and our study addresses this gap by also reporting at least a small contrast between decision making for radical compared to incremental innovations. As perhaps expected, given the magnitude of the respective innovations, decision making was exclusively a formal process for radical changes, involving the board most commonly but also the full club in some CSOs. This may be a function of the riskiness

of radical innovation, which may be tempered by the formality of the decision process, as well as the trust of members in an idea champion who carried the idea through. In contrast, some incremental innovations were decided on more informally and even through casual discussion. This too warrants further investigation to determine whether the formality of decision making aligns with the continuum of radicalness, with implications for managing those decisions.

It was encouraging to see the positive impact for the clubs that implemented radical and incremental innovations, although we note below that this may reflect a limitation of the study. Nonetheless, what may be most interesting was the evidence of unanticipated, positive consequences of the CSOs' innovations, with many more examples given for the radical than incremental changes implemented. The findings suggest that there is more of a ripple effect with the major changes in the CSOs, including an appetite for still further development.

6.1. Implications for Theory and Practice

Our findings make several contributions to innovation theory, particularly the concept of radicalness. The focus on CSOs, a type of nonprofit grassroots membership association, provides insight to the types, awareness of new knowledge, intent, conditions, decision making, and consequences of radical versus incremental innovations that may be found in this context. The specific findings may not be generalizable beyond the context of the 14 Ontario CSOs we studied; however, our observations highlight new insights concerning radicalness that may be explored further in a broader sample of CSOs and in similar types of nonprofit grassroots membership associations (e.g., arts groups, cultural associations, and recreation clubs).

Our findings suggest that radical innovations are more likely to be technical than administrative in type but not exclusively. Several examples of radical administrative changes to organizational structure and operations were considered to be of great magnitude. Economic-based innovations focused on competition-wealth in relation to the marketplace, and specifically, club membership growth in the current study may tend to be more radical than incremental in similar contexts, perhaps given their outward focus and a perceived need for bigger and even riskier change to attract new members. Radicalness of innovations may be distinguished by who brings the ideas to a decision making level and whether the new knowledge is adapted or adopted directly. Radical innovations in the current study were brought forward by members throughout the organization and were exclusively adapted to the context and capacity of the CSO. In contrast, more incremental innovations were identified by the board and were adapted and adopted in equal measure. Radicalness of the innovations described by the CSOs varied in the conditions driving (or impeding) the magnitude of changes, with radical innovations supported uniquely by a board's focus on the bigger picture (success, survival), willingness to take risks, expertise, champions, and capacity. Our findings suggest that these conditions exist along a continuum that parallels radicalness.

The findings extend our understanding of innovation in CSOs as an important and valuable mechanism for increasing their capacity to achieve their sport development goals. Research to date suggests that these nonprofit grassroots membership associations are clearly moving beyond traditional ways of delivering sport, and the clubs we studied were adopting programs and practices that represent both incremental and more radical changes. Radical changes tended to be around the growth and further development of the club in general, while athlete development tended to be associated with incremental changes, all implied in the degrees of change. The continuum of radicalness uncovered here, and associated conditions, may provide a platform to help the CSOs in our study,

and similar grassroots nonprofit membership associations, navigate a range of innovations in their context. Further, regional, provincial, and national sport governing bodies that direct sport policy and strategy to CSOs with the intention of guiding various changes at the community sport level (e.g., introduction of disability sport, changes to coaching development, and safe sport practices) should be aware of what CSOs consider to be innovative, as well as how they process innovation. Our research highlights what may be important considerations for the successful adoption of change that is considered innovative and radical for CSOs. Additional support from those governing bodies may be required. Important considerations for CSOs and stakeholders may include the possibility that idea champions who can push a radical idea through to implementation are critical and may be found anywhere in the club, although they are likely a skilled, experienced, and respected individual; the impetus and ideas to innovate can come from within and beyond the club; capacity barriers to innovation must be acknowledged and addressed before adoption, and existing capacity strengths that are fundamental to successful innovation adoption should also be recognized and leveraged. Radical, and seemingly to a lesser extent, incremental innovations may elicit unanticipated consequences that CSOs should be prepared for in order to capitalize on those (often) bonus outcomes. These findings have implications for CSOs to be aware of the seemingly greater potential of radical innovations to elicit other changes, as well as to be ready for those, especially as some may be incremental and subject to any of the conditions outlined in this study and even radical and reliant on the particular conditions associated with the update of that magnitude of change.

6.2. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

We aimed to counter a possible pro-innovation bias in favor of innovation as a positive organizational practice (Rogers, 2003) by uncovering CSOs' actual experiences rather than broader market perceptions of what is radical or even innovative. However, we only spoke with leaders of clubs that had successfully implemented, or were set to implement, radical and incremental innovations, and thus, our sample was limited to clubs that were able to move forward with both. The sample was intentionally delimited to nonprofit CSOs that had experience with both forms of innovation in order to help participants distinguish between and describe radical and incremental practices, which was the intent of the study. Building on this investigation, future research should explore a greater range of CSO experiences including clubs that prioritize one type of innovation over the other, those that reject innovation altogether, and those that fail to adopt or implement either type.

Given the investment associated with radical innovation in CSOs (by the board, members, and sometimes in partnership with other organizations) and the unintended but generally positive outcomes experienced, longitudinal qualitative study designs that follow radical innovations over time would be informative. These include participatory action research, action research, and/or ethnography that may be best served by researchers being closely aligned with or perhaps even embedded in organizations to be able to observe and follow the innovation process. Understanding the radicalness of innovation in CSOs may also be extended with field survey research that aims to quantitatively verify the themes identified in the current study, and in subsequent work, verify these themes in a broader sample of clubs and across different cultural, legal, and financial contexts.

Building on the work of Delshab et al. (2022) and Wemmer et al. (2016) in the CSO context, the phenomenon of open innovation and coopetition may be explored with respect to radical innovation (or the continuum of radicalness). These are intriguing practices in the context of nonprofit sport and other organizations and may constitute very effective approaches to growth and performance. Research can unpack the types, conditions, process, and consequences of these approaches with respect to radical innovation.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly as it has been a theme throughout this discussion, scholars should aim to examine and better understand more nuanced degrees of radicalness along its continuum, as well as the corresponding types, conditions, process, and consequences of levels of radicalness, beyond the dichotomy of radical and incremental. The findings of this study illuminate several aspects of innovation that suggest organizations may experience different levels of radicalness and may be limited to less radical innovations than they would like. Unpacking radicalness further can provide a platform for the effective management of this aspect of contemporary nonprofits and CSOs.

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A Polycentric Approach for Addressing Wicked Social Problems

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Abstract: Most social problems are "wicked", meaning that they are highly complex, intractable, open-ended, and multi-dimensional. In wicked learning environments, information is ambiguous, feedback may be slow, or causes and effects are difficult to ascertain. Using the insights from the Bloomington school of political economy, this paper argues that a polycentric approach is the most effective way to address wicked social problems. Polycentric systems are characterized by multiple, overlapping decision-making centers that have varying degrees of independence and interdependence. When decision-makers in governments, markets, and civil society tackle complex social problems simultaneously, various forms of cooperation and contestation emerge. These interactions subsequently produce the relevant knowledge and incentives to address wicked social problems on a variety of margins. Centralized, one-size-fits-all approaches are less likely to succeed because they have weaker epistemic and incentive-related qualities. We use two examples to illustrate our argument, including post-disaster recovery and climate change mitigation.

Keywords: polycentricity; institutional analysis; institutions; wicked problems; learning; adaptation; Elinor Ostrom; cooperation; contestation

1. Introduction

Societies across the globe face many large-scale problems simultaneously, such as poverty, drug abuse, environmental degradation, natural disasters, and pandemics. These kinds of social problems are difficult to address precisely because they are complex, overlapping, nested, multifaceted, costly, and subjective. This complexity causes most social problems to be "wicked", meaning that the knowledge necessary to address them is not clear, available, or explicit. Wicked environments make learning and adaptation difficult because information is ambiguous, feedback may be slow, or causes and effects are difficult to ascertain. This paper argues that polycentric governance systems (i.e., a constellation of multiple, overlapping decision-making centers that have varying degrees of independence and interdependence) are more likely to produce the knowledge and incentives that are necessary to address wicked social problems effectively.

Even though decision-makers in the public and private spheres may genuinely want to solve wicked social dilemmas, they face large epistemic limitations that hinder their ability to accomplish their ends. In more precise terms, individuals and communities have a difficult time solving wicked social problems because (a) they do not fully understand a problem's root causes, (b) they do not know the most effective or efficient means to solve the problem, and (c) they cannot foresee the full set of consequences that will arise from attempted solutions (Hogarth, 2001; Hogarth et al., 2015; Alford & Head, 2017; Lönngren & van Poeck, 2021; Hayek, 1945; Lavoie, 2016; Ikeda, 2005). To make matters more complicated, the scale and complexity of most wicked social problems means that a single organization does not have the resources to make a meaningful impact individually.

Additionally, people often face perverse incentives when attempting to address wicked social problems, such as the incentive to free ride on the efforts of others or engage in socially wasteful but personally beneficial rent-seeking behaviors (Olson, 1965; Holcombe, 2018).

Thus, this paper asks: What is the most effective means for individuals and organizations to address wicked social problems? Our answer is that a polycentric approach—as opposed to a monocentric, top-down, centralized approach—can and does address wicked social problems, even in the presence of epistemic limitations and perverse incentives. Each node in a polycentric system has a large degree of independence on many margins but is interdependent on other margins. One center does not strictly dominate the others in a hierarchy. The decision-making centers form an entangled web in which the various nodes can cooperate with and contest against one another in myriad ways (Ostrom, 2005; Aligica & Tarko, 2012, 2013). The Bloomington school of political economy, founded by Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom and Vincent Ostrom, has extensively developed a theory of polycentric governance and an empirical literature on how polycentric governance systems effectively address social problems (see McGinnis, 1999a, 1999b, 2000; Aligica et al., 2019; C. J. Coyne & Goodman, 2020; Lofthouse & Herzberg, 2023).

The overlapping interactions among individuals and organizations in the private and public spheres constitute a meta-polycentric order, which can effectively address wicked social problems by facilitating the strengths and mitigating the weaknesses of each sphere. An overlapping institutional configuration of markets, governments, and civil society facilitates contestation and cooperation along countless margins, which promotes the discovery and communication of knowledge, as well as providing checks and balances on various forms of power (see Lofthouse & Herzberg, 2023). Market firms compete against and cooperate with one another to deliver goods and services to willing customers, as opposed to pure monopoly (i.e., a monocentric market). Federalist systems of government have power dispersed among different branches and at different levels, as opposed to a dictatorship (i.e., a monocentric government). Civil society is composed of many associations, clubs, and nonprofit organizations that sometimes cooperate with one another but also occasionally contest against each other. Wicked social problems demand complex solutions, and a meta-polycentric order tends to provide those complex solutions. The epistemic and incentive-related characteristics of a meta-polycentric order gives a reason for optimism because individuals, organizations, and communities can find and are finding creative ways to address complex problems across many sectors.

To illustrate how polycentric governance systems can address wicked social problems, this paper explores two real-world examples: post-disaster recovery and climate change mitigation. We have chosen these two case studies because they are two of the "hardest" cases of wicked social problems. Many post-disaster recovery scenarios are especially dire, and in many cases, it is truly life or death. Climate change is perhaps the largest-scale problem, and its causes and consequences affect nearly every aspect of human life. Thus, if a polycentric approach can address these large-scale wicked problems, then such an approach can be applied widely to other scenarios.

Post-disaster recovery has been successful when many entities have provided the various goods and services that people in distress require. Empirical evidence has shown that societies have successfully bounced back after a disaster through the combination of activities in markets, government, and civil society (see Chamlee-Wright, 2010; Storr & Haeffele-Balch, 2012; Grube & Storr, 2014; Storr et al., 2015). Second, coping with human-caused climate change is a herculean task, but the combination of many government policies, innovations in market firms, and advocacy by nonprofits has yielded many successes so far. Of course, climate change is still a pressing problem, but the sheer scale and complexity of climate change necessitates an institutional configuration that promotes

the discovery of new knowledge and provides the necessary incentives for adjustments (see Ostrom, 2014, 2012; Cole, 2015; Jordan et al., 2018; Lofthouse & Herzberg, 2023).

Our paper's unique contribution is to synthesize the literature on the Bloomington school's approach to polycentricity with the literature on wicked social problems. The well-established literature regarding wicked problems and wicked learning environments has discussed action across multiple sectors and multiple levels of government. However, little scholarship has explicitly tied the Bloomington school's frameworks and theories to the existing work on wicked social problems. This paper is intended to help fill that gap. By explicitly tying together wicked problems/wicked learning environments to the Bloomington school's conception of polycentricity, we hope to bring together scholars and literatures that have not yet been connected, leading to a fruitful synergy. In particular, this paper outlines a theoretical framework and aims to set the stage for further research by defining key issues, methodologies, and perspectives.

This paper contributes to at least three bodies of literature. First, we build on the theoretical and empirical literature of the Bloomington school of political economy, and second, we expand the literature that examines wicked social problems and wicked learning environments (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Hogarth, 2001; Hogarth et al., 2015; Lönngren & van Poeck, 2021; Batie, 2008; Ferlie et al., 2011; Clarke & Steward, 1997; Crowley & Head, 2017). Third, we contribute to the literature in administrative sciences regarding the epistemic and incentive-related characteristics of for-profit, government, and nonprofit enterprises. Market firms, government agencies, and nonprofits each play a role in addressing wicked social problems, but there is no panacea. The complex interactions between these various entities yields the necessary knowledge and incentives to address complex social issues (see Taylor, 2015; Greller, 2015; W. Brown, 2017; Jaskyte Bahr, 2019; Leitão & Capucho, 2021; Mangai et al., 2023; Van Eijk et al., 2023).

This paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, we define and analyze the characteristics of wicked social problems and wicked learning environments. In Section 3, we describe the properties of polycentric governance systems and apply those properties to wicked social problems. In Section 4, we use the examples of post-disaster recovery and climate change mitigation to discuss how polycentric governance systems can address real-world issues. Then, we conclude with the implications of this research.

2. Wicked Social Problems and Wicked Learning Environments

The term "wicked problem" has several competing definitions, but despite some ambiguity, the various definitions have some commonalities. The primary issue that characterizes wicked problems is complexity. Relatedly, such problems are intractable, open-ended, and multi-dimensional. There is some element of unpredictability and uncertainty, especially in an environment of changing rules. The causes and effects are difficult to identify and model. The problems are often dynamic and interconnected with other problems, leading to a lack of consensus on what the problem is. A clear "right" answer often does not exist because of subjective (and often conflicting) values among stakeholders, and relevant knowledge and interests are fragmented. Wicked problems often lack immediate feedback systems, and attempted solutions can exacerbate the problems. Any attempted solution to a wicked problem—of which there are nearly infinite possibilities—will not have immediate or ultimate results, but instead, results will lag and be ongoing (see Rittel & Webber, 1973; Skaburskis, 2008; Lönngren & van Poeck, 2021; Alford & Head, 2017; Batie, 2008; Crowley & Head, 2017; Ferlie et al., 2011; Clarke & Steward, 1997). Most social problems are wicked, such as improving educational outcomes, reducing crime, promoting economic growth, and addressing human-caused climate change, just to name a few.

The opposite of a wicked problem is a "tame" problem—one that is clearly defined and has a single goal with a well-defined system of rules (R. Coyne, 2005). In other words, a problem is tame when the "problem and the solution are clear, and stakeholders readily share knowledge and have congruent interests" (Alford & Head, 2017, p. 404). Examples of tame problems include solving mathematical equations or calculating the trajectory of a ballistic missile because the problems and the solutions are unambiguous, even with subjectivity of preferences and knowledge. However, problems are not dichotomized into wicked or tame; instead, the wickedness or tameness of a problem is on a spectrum, and any problem can have different qualities of wickedness to different degrees (Alford & Head, 2017).

Wicked problems occur in wicked learning environments. A learning environment is an epistemic situation in which an individual acts, receives feedback on that action, and adapts future actions based on the feedback. In a wicked learning environment, feedback is absent, unclear, ambiguous, highly subjective, or misleading, which makes it difficult to adapt correctly. The opposite is a "kind" learning environment, which provides feedback in ways that are accurate, plentiful, and unambiguous, meaning that adaptation is a relatively straightforward process (Hogarth, 2001; Hogarth et al., 2015). Wicked learning environments are characterized by many interrelated, interconnected, and multi-dimensional factors that affect outcomes. Wicked learning environments are also highly unpredictable and dynamic, implying that solutions at one time may not work in the future. This constant change makes it hard to apply past learning to new situations. Wicked learning environments do not have a clear "right" answer and are context-dependent, and the interpretation of feedback might be highly subjective and based on value judgments, making it difficult to adapt when stakeholders in a group have conflicting views on what constitutes a successful outcome. Additionally, wicked learning environments lack immediate feedback, making it difficult to assess how an action has improved or worsened a situation.

Thus, unintended consequences are a large concern in wicked learning environments. Due to complexity and interconnectedness, any action will spur other outcomes that were not intended, but addressing those actions is difficult because those actions will then spur other unintended outcomes. Knowing the exact cause of any unintended consequence is not clear, and even if the source of the problem can be known, it is not clear what approach is appropriate, given the likelihood of creating more unintended consequences.

A study of wicked problems and potential solutions cannot be separated from the study of institutions. Institutions are "rules of the game" that structure human interactions, ranging from formal to informal (North, 1990; Ostrom, 2005). Examples of formal institutions include constitutions, legislation, and regulations. Informal institutions are social conventions, norms, and mores. Both kinds of institutions are critical for structuring human interaction, and different kinds of rules channel human behavior in different ways. All human action takes place in institutions, and different institutions have different epistemic and incentive-related qualities.

Some types of institutions are better suited to address certain forms of wicked social problems than others. A social problem can be solved through the market mechanism, government administration, or voluntary action within civil society, or some combination of the three. Since wicked social problems are fraught with shortcomings in terms of knowledge and incentives, solutions to any specific problem will need to be situated in an institutional environment that has appropriate epistemic and incentive-related qualities. In other words, a learning environment will need to yield helpful feedback (i.e., epistemics) and induce people to incorporate that feedback into their action in an accurate and timely fashion (i.e., incentives). Thus, addressing any wicked problem necessitates an institutional

analysis to determine the relative strengths and weaknesses of approaches within markets, governments, and civil society.

3. A Polycentric Approach to Addressing Wicked Social Problems

In what follows, we discuss the theoretical insights from the Bloomington school of political economy, which focuses on the epistemic and incentive-related properties of polycentric institutional arrangements.

3.1. Definition and Properties of a Polycentric System

One of the core areas of study in the Bloomington school is polycentric governance systems, which have multiple, overlapping decision-making centers that are both independent and interdependent. Decision-making occurs at a variety of scales and scopes and in many locations. The various decision-making centers engage in cooperation and contestation among one another (see Ostrom, 2005; Aligica & Tarko, 2012; Aligica et al., 2019; McGinnis, 1999a, 1999b, 2000). Examples of polycentric systems include federalist systems of government, the scientific community, competitive markets, and civil society.

The opposite of a polycentric system is a monocentric system, meaning that there is one centralized, top-down decisionmaker. Examples of monocentric systems include highly centralized bureaucratic organizations or centralized public utilities in which a single entity controls essential services without alternative providers. However, few truly monocentric systems in the world exist on large scales. Centralized national governments like the Soviet Union, or authoritarian regimes with strong central leadership like North Korea attempt to function as a monocentric system, but due to the real-world constraints on the centralization of control, their actual functioning becomes polycentric (Roberts, 1969; Boettke & Candela, 2018). Therefore, the relevant margins of analyzing large-scale social systems are the degree of polycentricity and the meta-rules of a society that determine the interactions between the nodes. Polycentric systems can—and often do—successfully address social problems, but polycentricity is not a panacea (see Ostrom, 1990; McGinnis, 1999a, 1999b, 2000). A polycentric system with institutional rules that hinder the discovery, aggregation, and communication of new knowledge will yield socially harmful results. Relatedly, poorly instituted rules in a polycentric system can sometimes create worse social outcomes than more centralized systems.

Polycentricity is not synonymous with decentralization. There will be a large degree of decentralization in many respects, but some decisions will still be made at higher levels. Complex social problems often necessitate many overlapping approaches to find workable solutions (Aligica & Tarko, 2012; Aligica et al., 2019). For example, in the United States, education is governed in a polycentric way because decisions are made at many levels and in many locations. The federal, state, and local governments all play a role. The decision-makers at these various levels cooperate with one another on many margins, but sometimes they push back against one another. The lowest levels (e.g., teachers, school administrators, and local school boards) have specific knowledge about the individual needs of students and their unique circumstances. Higher levels (e.g., state-level departments of education and the U.S. Department of Education) have access to experts or more funding that can improve the teaching process. Pure decentralization would miss out on the benefits of the higher levels, and pure centralization would neglect the benefits of the lower levels. Markets and civil society also play a role in education. Parent–teacher associations are private groups that supplement the learning process and provide resources for students and teachers. In the for-profit realm, tutors or after-school lessons supplement student learning in a variety of ways.

Below, we describe four socially useful properties of polycentric systems. Polycentric systems can aid in coping with and addressing wicked social problems because the complex interactions in the systems yield the requisite knowledge and incentives for individuals to accomplish their ends successfully. Four general properties of polycentric systems are (a) the discovery and communication of knowledge, (b) the creation of socially beneficial incentives, (c) resilience to shocks or failures, and (d) emergent outcomes that do not require central planning (see Ostrom, 2005; McGinnis, 1999a, 1999b, 2000; Aligica & Tarko, 2012; Aligica et al., 2019; Lofthouse & Herzberg, 2023). The broad literature on polycentric systems has analyzed other properties, but we have limited ourselves to these four, which are most relevant to addressing wicked social problems.

First, polycentric systems are well-suited to the discovery and communication of relevant knowledge because many different groups can work on similar social problems, meaning that they can engage in simultaneous experimentation. Due to human fallibility, institutions need means of discovering and correcting errors. The different nodes in the system can mutually observe the different means and ends that other nodes have chosen, and then they can learn from the apparent successes and failures. Market firms watch their competitors and innovate to out-compete them. Nonprofits and philanthropies test out their own approaches and learn from the successes and failures of others. In federalist systems, jurisdictions can see the effects of policies and learn what not to do if the policies fail to achieve the stated goals. Since polycentric systems have many decision-makers, entrepreneurship, innovation, and creativity can take place to a larger degree at different levels and locations.

Second, competition among entities in polycentric systems often provides incentives for decision-makers to act in socially beneficial ways by providing discipline to decision-making processes. Market competition induces producers to create higher quality goods at lower costs (Bresnahan & Reiss, 1991; Berry & Waldfogel, 2010). Nonprofits and philanthropies compete among themselves for donors' money, meaning that decision-makers in these organizations feel pressure to provide the services that donors want in efficient and effective ways (Storr et al., 2015; Novak, 2021). In government, interjurisdictional competition constrains the harmful impulses of policymakers because some citizen-taxpayers are likely to flee to other jurisdictions with preferable policies (Tiebout, 1956; Rhode & Strumpf, 2003). Of course, "voting with one's feet" by moving to another jurisdiction is not costless, both financially and socially, and many people may not be able or willing to do so. However, the polycentricity literature emphasizes that a competitive political environment in which (at least some) citizen-taxpayers can sort themselves provides a stronger incentive for policymakers to respond to the desires of their constituents when compared to a scenario with no competition (see McGinnis, 1999a, 1999b, 2000; Aligica et al., 2019). Additionally, polycentric systems provide checks and balances, as well as backstops, against abuses of power or imprudent choices. For example, the separation of powers in government mitigates the chances of tyranny from one branch, and the vertical division of power in a federalist system means that the lower levels can challenge the higher levels, and vice versa, when power is abused.

Third, polycentric systems are more resilient to shocks or failures than more centralized systems because a failure at a smaller scale or a lower level only affects a subset of a system instead of the whole thing. In this case, a "failure" is simply the difference between a stated end and an actual outcome that diverges from that end. For instance, if policymakers claim that they want to make housing more affordable, but they mistakenly choose a means that makes housing more expensive, they have failed to achieve their stated goal. Any given decision-making center in a polycentric system will occasionally fail, but failures can be more easily detected early and fixed quickly when the scale is relatively small. A centralized

approach implies that failures are large, if not systemwide, making it difficult, slower, and more costly to recover from a failure. Thus, polycentric systems may seem to have too much redundancy at first glance, but redundancy is a feature, not a bug in the system (see Ostrom et al., 1978; Boettke et al., 2016). Relatedly, different nodes can cooperate on an ad hoc basis, which facilitates the ability to address localized problems or failures that are not systemwide. For example, interstate compacts allow public policies to span multiple states without needing the federal government to be involved. Market firms and nonprofit organizations often create a wide variety of mutually beneficial contractual relationships that help all parties involved accomplish their ends more effectively and efficiently. The cooperation between various entities promotes both resilience and knowledge discovery (Aligica et al., 2019).

Fourth, socially beneficial outcomes can emerge from the complex interactions of many independent entities without a central planner. The various forms of cooperation and contestation in a polycentric system aggregate into large-scale outcomes. Although many social problems are on a global scale, such as human-caused climate change or a pandemic, global-level consensus is not necessary. In other words, many local actions can translate to global outcomes, without needing a global-level policy to coordinate everyone. Scholars in the traditional literature in public finance argue that large-scale externalities, such as climate change, should be governed at the higher levels (i.e., national or global governance systems) (Oates, 2011; Nordhaus, 2006). From a polycentric perspective, however, this argument is only partially right. Large-scale problems will likely have some degree of governance at high levels, but the combination of many medium-level and local-level actions is likely to produce more effective results than relying solely on a high-level action. Despite the benefits of the combined actions at many levels and in many locations, the bottom-up, emergent properties of polycentric governance systems have undeniable tradeoffs. For instance, coordination across polycentric units can—and often does—have high transaction costs. Relatedly, polycentric units can be at odds with one another, which can be a benefit in terms of experimentation and resilience, but contestation and conflict between nodes impose costs for overarching, systemwide coordination.

One of the clearest examples of the emergence of socially beneficial outcomes is in markets. Without central planners, billions of people interact each day to produce the goods and services that lead to human flourishing. In other words, the spontaneous order of the market allows supply to meet demand by coordinating the actions of producers with the desires of consumers. The processes of innovation and competition in a market generally tend to benefit consumers by increasing choice, lowering prices, and improving quality (see Hayek, 1945; Kirzner, 1997, 2018; Ikeda, 2005; Lavoie, 2016). When some countries, like the Soviet Union or Maoist China, engaged in central economic planning, the knowledge problems and incentive problems were insurmountable, and millions of people starved because food could not be efficiently produced and allocated (Boettke, 1990; Dikötter, 2010; Boettke & Candela, 2018).

In the nonprofit world, many other socially beneficial outcomes arise spontaneously from the dispersed actions of many individuals who are not centrally coordinated. Consider Wikipedia, a free, online encyclopedia that is written and revised collaboratively by its users, which is perhaps the largest compendium of human knowledge ever assembled (see Cummings, 2020).

Similarly, another nonprofit called E-NABLE—short for "Enabling the Future"—brings together individual volunteers from across the globe to share designs for 3D-printed prosthetics, often for children and even for injured animals. Rather than profit from their own design, the founders of E-NABLE opted to make it open source and launched a nonprofit. With the open-source approach, the community has since grown to 30,000 volunteers, 140

chapters, and hundreds of schools that have designed and gifted approximately 7000 3D-printed hands and arms in over 100 countries (see Thierer, 2020; Enabling the Future, n.d.). Thus, E-NABLE has provided a means for many people to contribute to a socially beneficial outcome without a highly centralized leader directing the outcome. Of course, some degree of centralized direction exists within E-NABLE, such as setting up the platform and coordinating among the various volunteers/contributors. E-NABLE's approach demonstrates how there is no strict binary between centralization and decentralization, which can vary even within the same organization.

As mentioned above, polycentric approaches are not panaceas, and the more polycentric a governance system becomes, there will also be costs and trade-offs. For example, as the number of nodes increases in a polycentric system, coordination costs will likely increase, as well as a potentially higher chance for conflicts between jurisdictions. Scholars in the Bloomington tradition—as well as the associated public choice tradition—are careful to engage in comparative institutional analysis between different types and levels of decision-making. No governance system is perfect, and recognizing limits and trade-offs is crucial.

3.2. The Meta-Polycentric Order of Society and Wicked Social Problems

Human action takes place in government, markets, and civil society, and the complex interactions of entities in all three of these arenas constitutes a meta-polycentric order—a high-level polycentric system composed of smaller polycentric systems (see Lofthouse & Herzberg, 2023). Since wicked social problems are characterized by complexity, the meta-polycentric order of society can cope with that complexity by providing useful epistemic and incentive-related qualities that allow individuals, organizations, and communities to create ways to address problems across many sectors. Markets, governments, and civil society each have their own strengths and weaknesses, but the cooperation and contestation among decision-makers in these three spheres leads to effective ways to address wicked social problems. Useful knowledge can be discovered, aggregated, and communicated. Decision-makers face stronger incentives to solve problems. There is more resilience to shocks or failures. Workable solutions emerge from the various interactions without requiring centralized coordination.

The Bloomington school's approach to polycentric governance is associated with a normative political philosophy of democratic self-governance that emerges from the literature in classical liberalism (Aligica et al., 2019). The Ostroms and many scholars in their tradition have relied on analytical and normative frameworks of the Austrian and Virginia schools of political economy, which also have their roots in classical liberalism. However, one does not necessarily have to ascribe to classical liberalism's normative views to appreciate the epistemic and incentive-related characteristics of a meta-polycentric order. Markets, governments, and civil society can all succeed and fail on many margins. One of the most important insights from the Bloomington school is that the combination and interactions of markets, governments, and civil society can mitigate the unique pathologies of each sector and bolster their strengths as well.

Markets are a complex spontaneous order that is composed of many cooperative and competitive interactions. Under a framework of the rule of law and private property rights protection, entrepreneurs produce and distribute the goods and services that consumers desire. Markets function well when prices exist and profits can be made, and markets do not function well in non-priced or nonprofit environments. Nobel Laureate F. A. Hayek argued that many important forms of knowledge are dispersed, tacit, and inarticulable, meaning that no central authority can make economically efficient decisions due to these epistemic limitations. Market prices are a critical epistemic feature of markets because prices are

signals that aggregate and communicate dispersed knowledge (Hayek, 1945). Thus, market firms can solve and have solved problems in which monetary prices exist and profits can be made, but entrepreneurs have weak incentives to solve problems that lack profit opportunities (Kirzner, 1997, 2018). For-profit firms excel at filling the needs and wants of consumers on many margins. For example, the inflation-adjusted price of televisions has gone down over time due to increased competition and the discovery of more efficient production processes (Delouya, 2023). When markets are relatively unencumbered, the lure of profit and competitive pressures induce entrepreneurs to provide goods and services at higher qualities and at lower prices, ceteris paribus. Under institutions that protect private property rights and a culture that facilitates experimentation, markets have led to the "Great Enrichment" in which billions of people today have vastly more wealth than their ancestors only a few generations ago (McCloskey, 2010, 2016).

However, despite the many benefits, markets are ill-equipped to deal with the provision of public goods or cope with negative externalities, among other market failures. In economics, the technical definition of a pure public good is one that is both nonexcludable (i.e., it is costly or impossible for one user to exclude others from using a good) and non-rivalrous (i.e., the use of a good by one individual does not prevent others from using the same good). Under this technical definition, many forms of knowledge are public goods because once knowledge is discovered, one person's use of it does not reduce its availability to others (i.e., non-rivalrous) and it is difficult to prevent others from using it (i.e., nonexcludable) (see Aligica et al., 2019). Others can then "free ride" on the knowledge production of those who have directly borne the costs, like those engaging in research and development. Thus, to overcome the public goods problem of knowledge, countries have instituted intellectual property regimes that give a government-granted monopoly called a patent, providing a stronger incentive for people to engage in research and development. Additionally, negative externalities, such as pollution, arise when property rights to air or water are not well defined or well enforced. Markets function well only under a system of private property rights, so other kinds of interventions are often necessary to cope with these negative externalities.

Governments are unique in that they have coercive power, and their most basic function is to protect life, liberty, and property, such as police, courts, and national defense. When those basic functions are achieved, governments can provide goods and services that are difficult to provide in markets, such as pure public goods or other goods that face large costs for voluntary collective action. Some common examples include national defense, flood control infrastructure, freeway systems, and public health initiatives, among others. Governments can also use their coercive power to tax and regulate in order to address market failures, such as the provision of public goods, addressing negative externalities, breaking up natural monopolies, correcting information asymmetries, maintaining macroeconomic stability, etc. Thus, government interventions or other public policies may be necessary to rectify market failures or other social problems. Many examples exist of governments providing public goods and sparking innovations that have improved the functioning of markets, such as the internet, GPS systems, biotechnology advancements, renewable energy technologies, etc. (see Mazzucato, 2013, 2018).

Interventions in the functioning of markets can be a double-edged sword because they are likely to distort price signals, which then induces producers and consumers to change their behavior, leading to economic inefficiencies and misallocations of resources (Kirzner, 2018). For example, when policymakers intervene, the complex and entangled nature of markets leads to unintended consequences, which then necessitates that policymakers intervene further to accomplish their desired ends. Thus, interventions into markets often

spark a metaphorical game of "whack-a-mole" in which one action sparks another problem that pops up elsewhere (Ikeda, 2005).

The literature in public choice economics provides much theoretical and empirical evidence of the weak incentives for policymakers to spend money prudently or work efficiently towards specific goals, yielding government failures. Additionally, policymakers have a strong incentive to concentrate benefits on favored groups while dispersing the costs across the general population, making many policies socially wasteful (Buchanan, 1999; A. C. Smith & Yandle, 2014; Holcombe, 2018). In other words, relying on government is a Faustian bargain because it can devolve into predation in which officials face an incentive to use their coercive power to redistribute wealth on a concentrated minority while dispersing the costs on a much larger group (Buchanan, 2000). Government officials also face epistemic limitations, so their ability to provide public goods or solve market failures, even assuming benevolent intentions, is limited (Lavoie, 2016; C. J. Coyne, 2013, 2015).

Civil society groups take many forms, such as clubs, philanthropies, community organizations, civic associations, mutual aid societies, and other nonprofits. Civil society can also take the form of unpaid voluntary efforts to improve society, unaffiliated with any formal organization, such as child rearing, or caring for aging parents. Such groups and organizations provide many goods and services that both markets and governments are not well-equipped to provide, including the conveyance of social values and a sense of belonging (Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2011; Storr & Haeffele-Balch, 2012; Storr et al., 2015). These groups help generate and sustain social movements, which bring about social change (Novak, 2021). The literature gives many examples of how civic associations and nonprofits, including philanthropies, community organizations, and mutual aid societies, have helped people cope with disasters and crises (Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2011; Storr et al., 2015).

Civil society groups face shortcomings too, such as the lack of relatively clear feedback based on profit and loss, like for-profit firms. In market firms, profits indicate success in satisfying consumer preferences, while losses signal a misallocation of resources. Losses provide a strong incentive for market firms to align their activities with market demands. Even without the profit-and-loss mechanism, civil society groups have some useful feedback mechanisms to guide behavior, such as donor satisfaction, community satisfaction, measurable outputs, etc. (Storr et al., 2015; C. J. Coyne, 2013). Feedback in the form of donations, grants, or volunteer contributions can give some indication of how well a nonprofit's activities are performing, but they are often less clear-cut than true profit and loss. Without market prices and the profit-and-loss mechanism, there is no way to ascertain the economic efficiency of a nonprofit's activities. Additionally, some nonprofits have broad objectives and ambiguous metrics of success, such as "improving well-being" or "increasing stability", meaning that it can be challenging to assess effectiveness (see C. J. Coyne, 2013). In other cases, nonprofit staff may struggle with prioritizing which actions to take, and they may experience burnout. Nonprofits and charities can suffer from the "fog of good intentions", referring to the confusion and challenges that arise when well-meaning efforts lead to unintended negative consequences (for examples, see C. J. Coyne, 2013; Easterly, 2013). In a nonprofit setting, results and impacts can be costly and difficult to assess. Another potential issue with many nonprofits is a dependence on government funding, which can often lead to a number of pathologies, such as principal–agent problems, mission drift, communication breakdowns, and catering to funders' whims rather than their core mission. When nonprofits and charities are bureaucratized to a large degree, inefficiencies in terms of time and money are exacerbated (see C. J. Coyne, 2013; Grube et al., 2017).

To cope with the various potential pathologies in both the private and public spheres, private–public partnerships (hereafter, PPPs) can be one potential polycentric institutional structure that promotes the best of both spheres while mitigating the shortcomings. The

three sectors mentioned above are made distinct for analytical tractability, but in practice they are often heavily interconnected. A growing literature has discussed how PPPs foster collaboration so that different entities can share resources and complementary expertise, making them more effective in many cases (e.g., Brinkerhoff, 2002; Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2002; O'Regan & Oster, 2000; Witesman & Fernandez, 2013; Incite, 2017). Social entrepreneurs are critical components of making functional PPPs, and the literature indicates that social entrepreneurs who incorporated multi-sector collaboration have facilitated effective collective action. In particular, social entrepreneurs can catalyze social learning and drive community-oriented innovations by using their diverse, localized knowledge to supplement actions in government or markets (e.g., Dees & Anderson, 2006; Frank & Shockley, 2016; Light, 2006; Moulaert et al., 2013).

However, if the rules setting up a PPP arrangement are not done well, a PPP can become a corrupt rent-seeking opportunity that is socially wasteful at the taxpayers' expense (Lv et al., 2021; Mulyani, 2021). For instance, Canada has been relatively successful at implementing PPPs, and between the early 1990s and 2018, provincial governments across Canada have developed and completed over 200 infrastructure projects through PPPs (Warsen et al., 2020). However, in other places, PPPs have become a boondoggle because the institutional rules did not have effective oversight, or there was collusion between government officials and private entities (Rybnicek et al., 2020; Schomaker, 2020).

A meta-polycentric order, however, is also more than just an assortment of PPPs. PPPs constitute part of a meta-polycentric order in which many kinds of entities collaborate with, contest against, and mutually adjust to one another. PPPs represent some of these centers but are joined by other entities, including community organizations, local governments, businesses, and civil society groups. Under certain institutional conditions, PPPs embedded in a broader polycentric order compete for influence, funding, or the pursuit of distinct goals, which can drive innovation and prevent stagnation (see Ostrom, 2005; Aligica & Tarko, 2012; Aligica et al., 2019; McGinnis, 1999a, 1999b, 2000).

Thus, wicked problems are best addressed with a combination of resources, knowledge, and skills from both the private and the public spheres. As wicked social problems evolve over time, institutional structures must be adaptable to cope with various forms of complexity and ongoing change. A meta-polycentric governance structure tends to provide long-term adaptability to wicked social problems because it creates a learning environment, mitigates abuses of power, promotes resilience, and accommodates a diversity of subjective preferences/worldviews.

4. Examples of Polycentric Governance in Action

In what follows, we describe how polycentric governance systems have functioned in two contexts: (1) post-disaster recovery and (2) climate change mitigation and adaptation. We have chosen these two contexts because they are especially difficult wicked social problems. The contexts of post-disaster recovery and climate change are characterized by intractability, open-endedness, and multi-dimensionality, as well as being highly unpredictable and uncertain. Although these two case studies are relatively short, they are intended to suggest how and why a meta-polycentric order can be useful even in the hardest cases. This section is intended to highlight how the interactions among governments, markets, and civil society can produce the relevant knowledge and incentives to address wicked social problems.

We analyze how polycentric systems have successfully addressed these problems in the past, and we discuss how further polycentric action can lead to more success in the future. The term "success", however, is fraught because different people define success differently. Following in the Bloomington school's tradition, we take a subjectivist approach

in which the people being governed define success for themselves. A wicked social problem will undoubtedly include individuals with a wide diversity of preferences and opinions. For instance, one person might deem a post-disaster recovery effort a success, but another person might consider the same action unsuccessful. One of the benefits of a polycentric approach to solving wicked social problems is that there is space for both a diversity of preferences and approaches to accommodate those preferences. There are, however, generally widespread sentiments about what constitutes success in situations of post-disaster recovery and climate change mitigation/adaptation. For post-disaster recovery, success is often defined as victims receiving the goods and services they need, as well as rebuilding communities to their former operations. For climate change, successes are often defined as reducing greenhouse gas emissions and making people more resilient to the effects of climate change.

4.1. Post-Disaster Recovery

Recovering from a disaster, such as a hurricane, earthquake, or pandemic, is a wicked social problem because of the complexity of the needs of an affected population and the means to address those needs. Nearly every aspect of a post-disaster situation is characterized by uncertainty on some margin. The scale and scope of a post-disaster scenario is overlapping and multifaceted because many interrelated concerns arise simultaneously, like housing, infrastructure, healthcare, economic recovery, etc. There is no clear or definitive point at which a community has recovered from a disaster. The effectiveness of an approach or intervention is subjective, with different stake holders viewing some as legitimate and just, while others do not. The results of any approach or intervention will also be evaluated subjectively by different individuals or groups. All disasters are unique because of differences in human populations, physical geography, and pre-existing social and economic conditions. Thus, even disasters that seem superficially similar, such as hurricanes, will require different responses depending on where they strike.

Despite the diversity and complexity of disasters, many communities have been able to bounce back successfully due to the cooperation and contestation among for-profit firms, various levels of government, and civil society organizations. Perhaps the most conspicuous entities in post-disaster recovery are government agencies. In the context of the United States, the federal government has several agencies that provide resources and services for recovery. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) allocates financial assistance and other resources to lower levels of government, individuals, and communities (Knapp, 2020). Especially after hurricanes, the Coast Guard uses resources and expertise to rescue people in flooded areas (Horwitz, 2010). Businesses, homeowners, and renters can receive low-interest disaster loans from the US Small Business Administration to repair and replace property damaged by disasters (Davis et al., 2018). The US Army Corps of Engineers builds, maintains, and repairs infrastructure, like levees and dams, which is meant to mitigate the chances of catastrophic flooding (Rosati et al., 2015). Additionally, each state has an emergency management agency to help when a crisis strikes. State agencies collaborate with FEMA and other federal agencies to provide necessary public services and rescue missions (Hoekstra & Montz, 2017; Williams, 2023). At the local level, emergency management offices are often the first to respond to disasters because they are closest a crisis and have the most local knowledge, but higher levels of government can sometimes crowd out or displace local-level responders (LePore, 2020).

Chamlee-Wright (2023) provides an intellectual framework for determining when government entities have a comparative advantage for post-disaster recovery compared to markets and civil society. In her framework, governments should focus only on post-disaster activities that are essential, big, simple, and for which government is comparatively

capable (which she calls the EBS-Cap Framework). The characteristic of "essentialness" may be self-explanatory, meaning that governments should not engage in post-disaster activities that are clearly superfluous, as defined by the people needing help. It is important to note that what one group or individual sees as superfluous may be a necessity for another group or individual, but often individuals in communities have socially shared preferences. Since governments generally have access to larger amounts of resources, they are relatively more well equipped to undertake "big" projects in a post-disaster scenario than civil society groups or market firms. Perhaps the most counterintuitive part of Chamlee-Wright's argument is that governments should prioritize simple tasks rather than complex ones when helping after a disaster: "The more elaborate, the more complex, the more complicated the project, the less likely it will be that government is well-situated to achieve success. [. . .] In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the first impulse was to create a government commission and charge it with the task of redeveloping the City of New Orleans so that it would be rebuilt better than it ever was before the storm. What emerged instead was a thicket of bureaucratic roadblocks, delays in relief assistance, and uncertainty about the rules and regulations that would govern the recovery process. All of this left displaced residents, business owners, and social service providers on the sidelines, exacerbating the crisis" (Chamlee-Wright, 2023, p. 25). Lastly, governments are well-positioned to accomplish certain tasks compared to market firms or nonprofits, such as providing cash quickly to individuals and service providers. Since government bureaucracies often have blunt, as opposed to precise, capabilities, government should focus on the large-scale blunt tasks that they are relatively capable of doing.

Chamlee-Wright's framework is not anti-statist in favor of bottom-up reconstruction. Instead, governments, especially at the highest levels, can (and often do) play a critical role in post-disaster recovery, but that role is best suited for particular types of activities. If federal agencies did not engage in "EBS-Cap" activities, it is unlikely that successful reconstruction could happen. Due to the foundation of a centralized federal decision-making apparatus, bottom-up action from markets and civil society can more effectively take place. Thus, a polycentric approach to post-disaster recovery often relies heavily on federal government-led projects, even with bureaucratic inefficiencies.

Market firms, although motivated by making profits, are an indispensable component of post-disaster recovery. After a crisis, firms sell necessary goods and services for a profit, and many firms also have a philanthropic wing that provides aid at no cost to consumers. For example, Walmart is known for opening up quickly after a disaster and shipping merchandise to meet customers' needs with food, water, and other necessities. Walmart also donates millions of dollars and essential supplies to affected communities (Horwitz, 2009; Linnenluecke & McKnight, 2017). The Home Depot is also known for opening quickly after a disaster so that people can buy necessary goods, including construction materials, electricity generators, plumbing materials, etc. On the philanthropic side, The Home Depot also donates supplies and funding to repair homes and rebuild other damaged structures (Ergun et al., 2013; Grube & Storr, 2018). Airbnb is a critical source of housing for people who flee a disaster before it strikes, and it also provides shelter for people who are displaced afterward. Airbnb has also offered to cover the costs of displaced residents and relief workers in some instances (Kaniadakis et al., 2022; Seddighi & Baharmand, 2020).

Civil society organizations, including nonprofits, philanthropies, churches, and community groups, are critical to post-disaster recovery because they provide necessary funding, resources, and social capital (Simo & Bies, 2007; Mathias et al., 2022). The American Red Cross and the Salvation Army are some of the largest and most well-known nonprofits, and they provide disaster survivors with emergency shelters, food, medical care, and psychological support (S. L. Smith & Grove, 2017; Hamner, 2008; Jellets, 2008; Hicks, 2014).

However, these large organizations are not without shortcomings. The Red Cross has been criticized for becoming increasingly bureaucratic over time as it has become entangled with governmental responsibilities, leading to a more centralized and rigid approach (Grube et al., 2017). Nonprofits like Habitat for Humanity engage in long-term rebuilding projects, helping to repair and reconstruct homes and infrastructure, thus enhancing resilience to future disasters (Chen, 2015). Feeding America distributes meals to those affected by disasters by partnering with local food banks. The organization is concerned with food security in both the short and long terms (MacNabb & Fletcher, 2019; Casellas Connors et al., 2023). Team Rubicon recruits military veterans as volunteers to provide disaster response services, including debris removal, home repair, and medical aid (Fraser, 2020). World Central Kitchen provides fresh meals to disaster survivors and emergency workers all over the globe (Firth, 2022). Local religious organizations help communities bounce back after a disaster by leveraging their social capital to provide the goods and services that parishioners need (Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2011; Storr et al., 2015).

Of course, these examples of civil society organizations are just a few of the bigger groups that have engaged in post-disaster recovery. However, many lower levels of governments, for-profit firms, and nonprofit organizations provide important goods and services. Thus, a full picture of how nonprofits, governments, and for-profit entities work together requires analyzing action at various levels and sizes. A growing literature has examined the multifaceted, multilayered approach to post-disaster recovery in a variety of scenarios (see Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2011; Storr & Haeffele-Balch, 2012; C. J. Coyne, 2013; Storr et al., 2015; Grube & Storr, 2018; Chamlee-Wright, 2023).

Thus, the literature on post-disaster recovery makes it clear that the meta-polycentric arrangement of society has allowed many communities to rebuild and revive themselves. Different entities, such as nonprofits and for-profit firms, have learned from the successes and failures of one another and adapted their own practices. If an organization or agency is tempted to engage in corrupt or wasteful practices, people have alternatives that can fulfill their needs, which disciplines how much corruption and waste is likely to happen. If one entity fails to achieve its goals, other entities have picked up the slack, leading to more resilience in a society overall. The wide variety of for-profit firms, government agencies, and nonprofits has accommodated a diversity of subjective preferences, which has allowed different communities to define and achieve their own kind of "success".

In contrast, a truly monocentric approach to post-disaster recovery would be limited to aid provided by a single, high-level government agency. Such an agency would likely lack local, context-dependent knowledge that is relevant for coping with a disaster, and actors within such a high-level bureaucracy often have weak incentives to act effectively and efficiently. One such example is the failures of the Federal Emergency Management Agency to provide necessary goods and services after Hurricane Katrina (see Pierre & Stephenson, 2008; Farazmand, 2009; Storr et al., 2015).

4.2. Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation

Human-caused climate change is another wicked social problem, and perhaps the biggest humanity has experienced. Climate change is highly complex because of many interrelated factors, such as greenhouse gas emissions from large-scale agriculture and fossil-fuel energy consumption, as well as deforestation and other industrial activities. Any of these factors is complex, so each one requires a unique approach. Therefore, the causes of and potential solutions to climate change cannot be comprehensively defined.

When looking at both mitigation practices and adaptation techniques, the climate change issue because even more multifaceted. There is no clear cut-off point when climate change has been "solved", and individuals widely disagree on the acceptable level of trade-

offs associated with mitigation and adaptation approaches. Any techniques or strategies of mitigation or adaptation will have slow, ambiguous feedback, meaning that adjusting is a murky process. Furthermore, climate change has differential impacts on different locations depending on their physical geography, as well as other economic, social, and political contexts.

There is no world government, so a truly global monocentric system does not exist. However, some scholars and activists have called for national governments to adopt highly monocentric approaches within their countries, such as comprehensive and non-comprehensive forms of top-down economic planning to combat climate change (Bartels, 2001; L. B. Brown, 2009; Delina, 2016; Klein, 2020; Malm, 2020). These scholars explicitly and implicitly argue that a polycentric governance approach to climate change will be ineffective because they are composed of many fragmented decision-makers pursuing their own contradictory objectives.

In response to concerns like these, Elinor Ostrom (2012, 2014) and other scholars in her vein (see Cole, 2015; Jordan et al., 2018; Lofthouse & Herzberg, 2023; Goodman et al., 2024) have argued that no centralized organization can orchestrate a consensus on the seriousness of climate change's existential threat or implement effective solutions. It is precisely because of the complexity of the geophysical processes and the socio-political dynamics that a polycentric approach is useful for climate change mitigation and adaptation. If an idealized form of a centralized, top-down approach could be implemented, then climate change could be effectively addressed. However, the Bloomington school's approach focuses on the real-world considerations of limited knowledge, preference heterogeneity, and disconnects between private incentives and social welfare. A well-constituted polycentric approach can generate new knowledge and provide a learning environment that facilitates adjustment. A polycentric approach can also accommodate a variety of preferences and promote "buy-in" from the people being governed, which aligns incentives for socially productive action.

Despite the complexity of the causes and consequences of climate change, the cooperation and contestation among for-profit firms, various levels of government, and civil society organizations has led to many improvements for mitigation and adaptation. For instance, governments across the world have implemented a variety of policies. Sweden and Canada have carbon taxes that have incentivized reductions in emissions (Sterner, 2020; Winter, 2020). The European Union created the Emissions Trading System, which is one of the largest carbon cap-and-trade programs in the world (Bayer & Aklin, 2020). In the United States, the Investment Tax Credit (ITC) provides funding and support for solar energy projects, especially for private households (Morgan, 2021). Many U.S. states have adopted Renewable Portfolio Standards policies, which set mandates or goals for how much of a state's energy must come from renewable sources (Joshi, 2021). China has implemented ambitious renewable energy targets, which has succeeded on some margins, but China's carbon emissions have still grown sharply in the recent past (Zheng et al., 2021). The U.S. federal government has long implemented Corporate Average Fuel Economy standards, and the European Union has implemented carbon emissions standards, which are meant to induce more fuel-efficient vehicles, and thus lower carbon emissions (Wang & Miao, 2021; Haas & Sander, 2020). Through the Paris Agreement, a majority of the world's countries have committed to reducing their carbon emissions, but the enforcement mechanisms lack stringency (Roelfsema et al., 2020).

Since entrepreneurs in market firms cater to consumers' desires, the competitive pressures of the market—as well as some pressures from public policies—have led firms to innovate cleaner, more efficient products (Anderson, 2021). Internal combustion engines have continued to become more fuel efficient and emit fewer pollutants, largely at the behest of consumers who want to pay less for fuel (Johnson & Joshi, 2018). Electric vehicles

have longer battery life and higher efficiency, also due largely to the demands of consumers (Feng & Magee, 2020). Energy storage technologies are improving electrical grid reliability, which is important for the proliferation of non-dispatchable types of renewable energy like wind and solar. Emerging technologies include pumped hydro storage, compressed air energy storage, and advanced grid-scale batteries (Ali et al., 2021; Huang & Li, 2022; Matos et al., 2022). Innovations with smart thermostats and HVAC systems have reduced energy consumption in domestic and commercial spaces, ultimately reducing carbon emissions (Stopps & Touchie, 2021). Agricultural innovations are allowing farmers to use less water, require fewer fertilizers/pesticides, and produce larger yields, which means fewer environmental impacts (Duncan et al., 2021). Innovations in carbon-capture-and-storage technologies are becoming more economical, which helps reduce atmospheric carbon that has already been emitted (Beck, 2020).

Civic associations and nonprofit organizations have played pivotal roles in the mitigation of and adaptation to human-caused climate change through various initiatives and actions. Their contributions span advocacy, education, policy influence, and direct action. Among the Sierra Club's many activities, it has lobbied policymakers to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, promote renewable energy, and protect natural habitats. Since the Sierra Club is one of the largest environmental groups in the United States, it influences how its members view the world and vote (Coley & Schachle, 2021). The Natural Resources Defense Council influences policymakers and engages in legal action to enforce environmental laws (Blair, 2023). The Nature Conservancy engages in reforestation, wetland restoration, and sustainable agriculture to promote ecosystem resilience and carbon sequestration (Mccarthy, 2012). The Environmental Defense Fund uses intensive litigation to advance a variety of environmental causes, including climate change and climate justice (Luke, 2024).

Several creative and strategic cross-sector partnerships have included innovative financial arrangements known as "blended finance", which is meant to reduce the risk involved in certain investments. In other words, this approach strategically injects funds into high-potential but high-risk projects so that the private sector will be less hesitant to invest. Civil society organizations, such as private foundations or charities, may identify certain goals that they want to help achieve, such as cleaner energy or other mitigation efforts. However, these organizations may not have the resources, wealth, or expertise to address the issues on their own. These private organizations then enter into collaboration with government agencies, commercial investors, and/or other types of investors to design a blended finance structure, which may include grants, concessional loans, guarantees, and equity investments. These potential finance structures are meant to de-risk the projects that the private organizations would like to see accomplished. For instance, private foundations may provide first-loss capital to protect investors from potential downsides by absorbing some initial losses. Foundations and nonprofits may also provide guarantees and insurance to offset certain risks like currency fluctuations, credit risk, or other forms of political instability. Blended finance can take a wide variety of institutional forms, but they are all meant to be de-risking mechanisms to facilitate certain desired outcomes (Rode et al., 2019; Farber & Reichert, 2023; Ostojić et al., 2024). For example, the Hewlett Foundation implemented a blended finance approach to jump-start the clean energy sector in developing countries (Waite, 2018, 2020). Of course, blended financing is not a panacea, but it is one potential set of approaches within a broader meta-polycentric order. Some forms of blended financing may succeed on some margins and fail on others. Within a meta-polycentric order, many different philanthropies and foundations can experiment with different types of blended financing schemes, which contributes to system-wide resilience and an environment of mutual learning.

To many people, it may seem that a global problem like climate change cannot be dealt with effectively with countless actors working at cross-purposes. However, the theoretical and empirical evidence from the Bloomington school indicates that a polycentric approach, if well constituted, can effectively address a global problem, even with a large degree of preference heterogeneity. Since the United Nations does not have binding power, and since national governments are sovereign, the world exists in a polycentric arrangement. Worldwide agreements that all countries voluntarily uphold are unlikely to arise in the short or long term. Thus, the real question is how to constitute or reconstitute a meta-polycentric order so that various governments, market firms, and civil society organizations drive each other towards effective climate action while also mitigating social harms. The most effective structure of such a meta-polycentric order is open to debate, and future research should focus on different institutional arrangements that generate the necessary knowledge and provide the correct incentives for effective climate action.

5. Conclusions and Implications

Most social problems are wicked because they are complex, ambiguous, multifaceted, and subjective. These problems lack straightforward answers, and feedback processes are unclear and slow, making adaptation difficult. A polycentric approach, rather than centralized, one-size-fits-all methods, tends to be the most effective way to cope with wicked social problems because of the associated epistemic and incentive-related characteristics. Governments, markets, and civil society can try different ideas, techniques, and institutional structures. Since no entity in the system fully dominates the other, various forms of cooperation and contestation can arise. These interactions produce necessary knowledge and induce socially beneficial behavior, which are essential to tackle wicked problems. Post-disaster recovery and climate change mitigation are just two examples of how a polycentric approach can address wicked social problems.

One of the main insights that comes from applying the Bloomington school's frameworks and theories to wicked social problems is that there must be an emphasis on the epistemic and incentive-related characteristics of different sectors. For example, actors in government will have different kinds of knowledge and different institutionally contingent incentives than actors in markets or civil society. If scholars and policymakers neglect the key differences among these sectors as they relate to knowledge and incentives, then attempts to address wicked social problems will be limited. As such, one recommendation for policymakers is to avoid placing too much emphasis on government approaches. As the Bloomington school's theoretical and empirical research finds, different spheres of human action have different epistemic and incentive-related qualities. To the degree that government action crowds out market-based or civil society action, useful forms of knowledge and incentives will be displaced or neglected.

Elinor Ostrom (2007) cautioned against the temptation to use panaceas to address complex social issues, and polycentric governance itself is not a panacea. The Bloomington school's work on polycentricity is intimately tied to institutional analysis, meaning that different institutional configurations will have different epistemic and incentive-related properties. In some cases, perverse polycentric governance systems can emerge, meaning that certain arrangements of overlapping institutions hinder the discovery of knowledge, obstruct adaptation, or promote unproductive incentives. Thus, when attempting to address wicked social problems, a well-constituted monocentric approach could outperform a poorly constituted polycentric approach. However, the growing literature on institutional analysis seems to suggest that there is a general tendency for polycentric approaches to outperform monocentric ones over time (see Ostrom, 2005, 2012, 2014; Aligica & Tarko, 2013; Aligica et al., 2019).

This paper has three implications. First, civil society organizations, particularly nonprofits and philanthropic groups, may often need to be at the forefront of addressing particular kinds of wicked social problems. In many cases, due to their unique kinds of knowledge, it may be most appropriate to rely on civil society organizations to address significant issues, such as post-disaster recovery or climate change. While civil society organizations offer many practical advantages, too much reliance on them may also be unwise. We do not want to describe civil society as a panacea. However, in cases where civil society organizations have the relevant knowledge, incentives, and resources, they should not be afraid to experiment with a variety of approaches. Civil society organizations are embedded within the communities they serve, allowing them to gather detailed and specific knowledge about the needs, preferences, and dynamics of those communities. Nonprofits and philanthropic groups can quickly respond to emerging issues, experiment with innovative approaches, and adjust their strategies based on feedback and changing circumstances. Nonprofits and philanthropic groups often facilitate the building of social capital and foster trust within communities. These civil society groups sustain collective action and community resilience because the community members are intimately involved in the decision-making processes, meaning that they "co-produce" the outcomes that they want to see.

Second, all too often, there is a natural tendency in organizations toward silo thinking and myopic thinking. If leaders in nonprofits are aware of polycentric thinking, they may be able to see the "big picture" more clearly, which helps them to be more effective in their mission. Even in nonprofits, leaders and workers can act entrepreneurially by being alert to and discovering alternative institutional arrangements that may improve learning and adaptation processes, find new means of collaboration with external organizations, and navigate complexity more effectively. By incorporating the principles of polycentric governance into organizational strategies, for-profit and nonprofit entities can better achieve their goals. Further research could develop practical guidance on how to improve mindsets and guiding principles by applying the Bloomington school's insights.

Third, a polycentric approach can be used within organizations to facilitate bottom-up empowerment. With some degree of decentralized decision-making, individuals at all levels of an organization can be empowered to innovate and act entrepreneurially. This distribution of leadership can increase engagement and motivation among staff and volunteers, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility. Furthermore, polycentric governance enables nonprofits to be more responsive to local needs and contexts. This local responsiveness can enhance community engagement and support, leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes.

Future research should apply the logic of polycentric governance systems to a wide variety of other wicked social problems, like housing affordability, homelessness, water management, species conservation, public health crises, education reform, and energy production, among others. The combination of multiple overlapping government policies, market firms, and nonprofit organizations is likely to generate the relevant knowledge and incentives to address these wicked social problems. Centralized, one-size-fits-all approaches hamper our ability to find solutions to complex problems.

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Article

A Framework for Messy Communication: A Qualitative Study of Competing Voices of Authority on Social Media

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Abstract: While governments, nonprofits, and influencers differ dramatically in their resource availability for social media content creation and their duties to public safety, health, and welfare, all play a role in communication with the public at large. Governments provide for the broader public good and nonprofits and influencers have the opportunity to serve isolated communities vulnerable to social ills and health crises. We explore how these three content creator groups concurrently and independently use social media to provide critical information. We qualitatively coded 1392 posts by governments, nonprofits, and influencers on 6 social media platforms shared across the United States during the 2022 Mpox outbreak. We constructed a framework defining a public health communication progression from chaotic to controlled. The findings indicated that governments can reach minoritized communities to resolve a public health crisis by partnering with nonprofits and influencers trusted by these audiences and, most importantly, practicing flexible control over shared messaging.

Keywords: social media; qualitative methodology; public communication; influencers; Monkeypox; Mpox; public health

Life is messy. Public administration is dynamic. Communication is ever-changing. Crisis-related communication strategies are often disorganized due to an absence of thoughtful planning (Mergel and Bretschneider 2013). Instead, public administrators concentrate on putting out fires and managing the crisis at hand. Therefore, how do public administrators use social media to distribute information and respond to constituents and stakeholders during critical moments? With the ever-evolving landscape of social media, this is an important question. Popular social media users with influence sometimes step in with attractive and concise messaging that is appealing to users (Albadri 2023) but is not always reliable or accurate (Mishra and Ashfaq 2023) to shift the public response to critical issues (Peter and Muth 2023). More people than ever obtain their news and information through social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter/X[1], Instagram, and TikTok (Matsa 2022; Shearer 2023). Furthermore, with misinformation and disinformation easily spread (Mishra and Ashfaq 2023; Hilton and O'Leary 2018), public organizations have to provide timely and trusted information. Here, we construct a framework where government employees can work through this messiness by working with nonprofits and social media influencers similar to their for-profit counterparts (Joshi et al. 2023). These three content creator groups (i.e., government, nonprofits, and influencers) can reach out to minoritized communities, create specialized messaging, and effectively use social media.

We explore how nonprofits, governments, and influencers used social media concurrently and independently to provide information and support to communities during the Mpox[2] outbreak. The Mpox outbreak is a strong example of scattered public health communication in the United States (U.S.). Though the U.S. government provided the vaccinations, each state and locality was in charge of distribution, leading to large variations in distribution and governmental communication strategies. For example, in Florida,

complaints about the governor's and surgeon general's low prioritization of Mpox in public health messaging led nonprofits to take the lead in vaccination outreach to the gay, bisexual, pansexual, and general MSM (men who have sex with men) communities (the gay community) (Sarkissian 2022). In contrast, Massachusetts directly addressed the outbreak, and when racial disparities were identified in the distribution of vaccination in Massachusetts, the state started outreach to at-risk minority communities (McCluskey 2022).

Though Mpox was not a new disease, it exploded amongst the LGBTQIA+ community, especially among gay and bisexual males, in the summer of 2022 (Beasley 2022). The first Mpox case in the U.S. was reported in Boston in late May (Beasley 2022). By June, the European Union approved a smallpox vaccine for Mpox, which the U.S. followed in July. In August, Mpox was finally declared a public health emergency in the U.S. (The American College of Surgeons 2022). Overall, there were almost 37,000 cases of Mpox in the U.S. between 2022 and 2023 (CDC Mpox in the U.S. n.d.).

In this article, we answer the research question: how do governments, nonprofits, and influencers interact to provide critical information through social media during a public health crisis? Specifically, by analyzing where, when, and what governments, nonprofits, and influencers post, we identified three intersectoral social media relationships between the three content creator groups: (1) vacuum (i.e., an absence of governmental messaging), (2) chaos (i.e., disorganized and conflicting messaging across the groups—chaos), and flex control (i.e., accurate and coordinated information sharing across all content creator groups). We contribute to public administration social media literature by providing a methodological approach for bringing influencer messaging into the scholarly dialogue and framing their position among public actors (see Zavattaro and Brainard 2019; Feeney and Porumbescu 2021). Influencers are a part of the communication network of messy communication in public administration and provide support when a public failure leads to inaction by governments and nonprofits. Influencers fill a vacuum of information. Total governmental control over social media is another possibility in public health messaging across content creator groups, but we did not observe governmental control within this context (Feeney and Porumbescu 2021). In this study, we use the progression of communication approaches (i.e., vacuum, chaos, control, and flex control) to outline a framework for understanding the messiness that is social media communication in public administration and provide recommendations for professionals and researchers.

1. Literature Review: Cleaning up the Social Media Mess

Social media provides a space for public health authorities to respond to crises in a timely, empathetic, and action-oriented way (Miller et al. 2021; Schillinger et al. 2020). This crisis response should promote self-efficacy and knowledge of at-risk audiences to affect risk protection behavior and reduce uncertainty and emotional turmoil (Miller et al. 2021). Audiences can be narrowly targeted to achieve these goals if the content creators are savvy in their social media approach (Schillinger et al. 2020; Vos and Buckner 2016). The public turns to trusted sources for direction during emergencies regardless of the source's status as an authority in an official capacity. Bridging reliable, action-oriented information with trusted sources opens the door for effective partnerships between public organizations and influencers.

1.1. Bridging the Public Administration Online Divide

Governments, nonprofits, and influencers differ dramatically in their resource availability for content creation and their duties to public safety, health, and welfare. Governmental content creators are responsible to the public and must demonstrate reliability and accuracy in every post. On the other hand, nonprofits devote their resources toward mission-oriented goals. In some cases, the nonprofit's duty to its funders may override pure mission focus. Regulatory constraints on programs and activities may drive publicly funded nonprofits addressing public health, safety, and welfare to align their external mes-

saging with their funders (Corrigan 2013; Young et al. 2020). The result may be polished messaging that is misaligned with a nonprofit's mission. Thus, while governments and nonprofits share public health goals, their execution of public health programming and communication may appear disorganized or contradictory. Other social media users may step up to help sort out the entanglement.

Social media users have grown savvy to branded content marketed directly to them (Freberg et al. 2011; Stephen 2016). Thus, when a targeted audience, such as Gen Z, seeks an online community, a sophisticated brand can actually disengage this audience because this audience is more media literate and seeks authenticity (DeMasters et al. 2024). This is where influencers may step in as trusted allies through perceived friendships (Peter and Muth 2023; Hudders et al. 2021) to promote their followers' safety, health, and welfare (Albadri 2023). Influencers are guided by self-defined goals that promote their "brand". However, influencers are bound by different accountability and transparency mechanisms than public administrators (Mishra and Ashfaq 2023). They are unique to this conversion because their social media generates income through direct payment from social media companies or fees for service to for-profit entities (Mishra and Ashfaq 2023; Christin and Lu 2023). Influencers lack a formal duty to the public yet possess a value essential to effective public governance: trust (Peter and Muth 2023).

We argue that social media serves as an influential public square, particularly when the COVID-19 pandemic reduced physical access to public spaces and national politics exacerbated political divides in online discourse (Hilton and O'Leary 2018). Social media influencer-generated content for the public good provides an opportunity to assess this proposition (Saldanha et al. 2023). To better understand public, nonprofit, and influencer intersections, we will first explore their social media behavior independently.

1.2. Government

How and why governments adopt social media (Mergel and Bretschneider 2013; Feeney and Porumbescu 2021; Jones 2015) versus the content of their posts (Zavattaro et al. 2015) present two distinct lines of inquiry. We focus on the latter, with the acknowledgment that social media users can be passive consumers of information (Zavattaro and Brainard 2019) with varying levels of trust in government messaging (Hilton and O'Leary 2018; Feeney and Porumbescu 2021).

The voice of the government on social media carries formal authority, similar to face-to-face interactions (Zavattaro and Brainard 2019). Appearing messy and disorganized can defeat this governmental function. The algorithmic drivers of TikTok content can make TikTok messaging appear complicated, opaque, and intimidating to figure out, which may explain governments' hesitancy to leverage this platform. However, Zhu et al. (2020) found TikTok an effective method for Chinese Provincial Health Committees to transmit essential COVID-19 public health information. Li et al. (2021) identified similar benefits to TikTok for audience-centered risk communication on an international scale.

Zavattaro and Brainard (2019) (p. 563) argue that social media can be used to build "public values such as collaboration, transparency, and connectivity". Governments designate resources to fulfill legislative goals, including their online messaging. They may prioritize organizational processes or outcomes and devote their pecuniary and human resources accordingly (Young et al. 2020). Federal, state, and local governments are bound by codified accountability and transparency mechanisms, which can limit their ability to quickly transmit meaningful messages to constituents during a public health emergency (Zhu et al. 2020). However, while government content creators value accuracy and reliability, social media users seek immediacy in access to information (Zavattaro and Brainard 2019). Thus, a more nimble social media content creator can more efficiently deliver valuable information into the hands of the public (Zhu et al. 2020; Li et al. 2021).

1.3. Nonprofits

Building social media capital is the first step in connecting with stakeholders online and ultimately, establishing trust. Social media capital is the attention and engagement a content creator can leverage, and it can be measured through metrics such as followers, likes, views, and reposts. However, translating social media capital into real capital and mission fulfillment is challenging (Morgan et al. 2024; Guo and Saxton 2020a). Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) developed the nonprofit social media engagement framework to explain how nonprofits engage in this space, which is also useful in making sense of government and influencer social media activity. They found that nonprofits use social media to communicate to stakeholders in three ways: sharing information, building community, and mobilizing followers into action (Lovejoy and Saxton 2012). In a meta-analysis of studies testing Lovejoy and Saxton's framework, Campbell and Lambright (2020) found information sharing to be nonprofits' primary social media function. This one-way communication is typical of nonprofits and governments in public health and safety messaging, as they tend to be the information authorities.

Mobilizing action is the second most used function (Campbell and Lambright 2020) and the most important in public health messaging. With ample social media capital, stakeholder mobilization can have a snowball effect, leading to crowdfunding and a critical mass of advocacy (Guo and Saxton 2020a, 2020b). Mobilizing followers to get tested or vaccinated for viruses or increase prophylactic usage can immediately affect community spread.

Third, nonprofits use social media to build an online community. While this is the least common function for nonprofits on traditional platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter/X (Campbell and Lambright 2020), Wiley et al. (2023) found that community building is the primary function for nonprofit TikTok accounts. Examples of community building include posts such as honoring volunteers, celebrating fundraising milestones, and engaging in two-way dialogue. Guidry et al. (2014) argued that interpersonal interactions and connections, as in community-building messaging, are what transform personal change or action into social change or action. Community-building content, however, does not provide clean outcome measures, as gained from information-sharing (e.g., changes in knowledge) and action-oriented content (e.g., funds raised). Assessing the value of such an approach to communication could facilitate an increased nonprofit social media capacity.

When adopting a social media platform, nonprofits prioritize their follower, like, and share counts, or social media capital, to magnify their voice (Guo and Saxton 2020b). Understanding adoption patterns and messaging strategies is useful when examining the nonprofit sector independently from its governmental counterparts. However, nonprofits are not alone in the medical and public health arena. Social media users seek and receive messaging from all sectors and user types, especially influencers (Peter and Muth 2023). In response to isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, social media users valued connectedness (i.e., attachment, belongingness, and relatedness) over expertise, trust, and attractiveness (Saldanha et al. 2023). This reality limits the value of siloed scholarly inquiries on government or nonprofit online behavior. A comprehensive analysis across content creator groups may reveal more about the messaging social media users view and consume.

1.4. Assessing the Role of Influencers in Public Administration

Influencers are "content creators with a trusted relationship with their audience" (Michaelsen et al. 2022, p. 9) who are often considered peers by their followers (Pöyry et al. 2022). What separates influencers from governmental and nonprofit content creators is that they typically monetize their online activities (Joshi et al. 2023; Christin and Lu 2023). These individuals leverage their first-hand knowledge, reputation, professional position, experience, content quality, and personality for social capital and pecuniary gain (Joshi et al. 2023; Morteo 2018). While governments and nonprofits can leverage similar capital, influencers have more freedom to engage with users in ways public entities cannot, and they have

the capacity to shift followers' attitudes (Joshi et al. 2023). Understanding influencers' reach and function can provide insight into how public administrators may partner with influencers, similar to how for-profit companies do (Albadri 2023; Joshi et al. 2023). For example, @nycgaydad used his followers' trust in his parenting practices to partner with Fiskar Scissors, used by his young children in their advertisements (Jose Rolon 2023). @Larray leveraged his followers' trust in his style choices to partner with Prada and Shein for the same purpose (Simonetti 2022).

Similar to nonprofit social media capital, influencer reach can be assessed through popularity factors, such as an overall footprint, engagement, and frequency of posts (Morteo 2018; Arora et al. 2019; Booth and Matic 2011). For instance, follower counts provide a simple way to sort influencers into mega-, macro-, and micro-influencers (Morteo 2018), but they tell us little about how their messages spread or are received. Thus, network centralities, indices, and algorithms can serve as stronger justifications for one's role as an influencer (Pöyry et al. 2022; Arora et al. 2019; Booth and Matic 2011; Morteo 2017; Bakshy et al. 2011; Cha et al. 2010). Such measures could also inform the influencer's role in information sharing during crises (Peter and Muth 2023).

Peter and Muth (2023) found that young adults tend to turn to mainstream media to receive the majority of their political information and they often look to influencers to make sense of political information they are learning about in school and online. Certain influencers who rarely discuss politics may not be seen as credible sources. Determining the context of influence (i.e., a profession or personal interest) and the source of their influence (i.e., reputation or experience) is an important step in assessing the value of an influencer's public health messaging, particularly with outbreaks such as Mpox in Summer 2022 when there was little information available (Michaelsen et al. 2022; Morteo 2017; Cao 2022). For instance, public health influencers can share epidemiological research and reports due to their professional access to such information (Cao 2022). Morteo (2017) framed eight influencer categories: opinion leaders, experts, consumers, social media luminaries, celebrities, trendsetters, bloggers, and potential influencers. So many voices lead to an overcrowding of messages regarding critical issues. Thus, a follower's trust in a particular influencer category will be guided by their reason for following them in the first place, such as when opinions align.

Opinion influencers can be categorized based on their expertise in one specific, narrow area or based on broader areas of knowledge (Pöyry et al. 2022). Personal beliefs and values affect the kind of information opinion leaders share. Thus, such influencers act as gatekeepers between government, nonprofits, corporations, news outlets, and their masses (Morteo 2018). Interestingly, when considering product messaging, social media users viewed company CEOs as more critical, skeptical, and difficult to impress than influencers. Instead, influencers were viewed as more likely to be sought out for advice and reassurance and more likely to give advice than CEOs were (Freberg et al. 2011). If users are equally critical of governmental messaging, that may challenge a government's attempt to build public value via social media, as proposed by Zavattaro and Brainard (2019).

Opinion leaders present instructions and general facts, share campaign messages, show examples, and post emotion-laden pictures or texts. Powerful posts result in followers' emotive reactions, further information disbursement, and the exchange of questions, advice, concern, and debate (Pöyry et al. 2022). Thus, in an epidemic, when governmental officials have few resources or facts to share, influencers, particularly experts and opinion leaders, could step in to maintain a dialogue on the public health concern and iron out some of the messiness of social media.

2. Research Design

We used a constructivist approach to assess and contrast the messaging of three content creator groups (governments, nonprofits, and influencers) across six platforms during the Mpox outbreak (Charmaz 2014). Because social media platforms are ever-evolving, the constructivist approach allowed us to make sense of social media posts within the context

of each unique platform and content creator. For instance, during the writing of this paper, two main social media platforms, TikTok and Twitter/X, experienced significant changes. TikTok was banned by state governments (Franklin 2023)[3], while CEO Elon Musk changed his newly purchased platform's name from Twitter to X and lost half its users (Dempsey 2023). How quickly content creators adopt new platforms and their target audience composition vary across content creator groups (Mergel and Bretschneider 2013), necessitating a broad overview of multiple platforms. Thus, to make sense of this mess, we examined social media across popular platforms to explore one of the two propositions put forth by Zavattaro and Brainard (2019, pp. 571, 574):

> "Reconceptualizing their social media as spaces for meaningful micro-encounters will shift the way public organizations use those spaces from direct information distribution to user-supplied content."

User-supplied content from influencers captures these encounters. In this analysis, we used a deductive coding approach paired with a constructivist analysis to determine how and when public organizations leverage an online community's trust in influencers to produce public good (i.e., public health) (Saldanha et al. 2023; Charmaz 2014).

2.1. Building the Dataset

The content creator was the unit of analysis, including government agencies, nonprofits, and influencers. To narrow our analysis, we focused on the Mpox public health crisis in six metro areas (Boston, Jacksonville, Miami, Portland, Reno, and St. Louis), with the goal of documenting all Mpox social media messaging in each metro area. This purposeful sample provided a diversity of metro areas, in consideration of policies affecting healthcare and LGBTQIA+ rights. For example, Boston and Portland are in states that are considered "blue" and more likely to support equality measures for gay men, while Tampa, Miami, St. Louis, and Jacksonville are in "red" states, less likely to support such rights. Reno is in a "purple" state. The Human Rights Campaign (2024) scored Massachusetts, Nevada, and Oregon very positively as "Working Toward Innovative Equality" for LGBTQ+ people and scored Florida and Missouri dismally as "High Priority to Achieve Basic Equality" for LGBTQ+ people. The public health systems in these states varied substantially, as ranked by the US News and World Report (2024): Massachusetts #1, Florida #15, Oregon #21, Nevada #30, and Missouri #41. Due to these variations in politics, public health, human rights, and healthcare access, we expected a variety of social media responses to this public health crisis.

The team of two university researchers and nine research assistants identified the social media accounts of national, state, and local public health agencies (ten agencies) and nonprofits with missions in public health or queer advocacy nationally and in each metro area (eighteen nonprofits). The team assembled a comprehensive list of governmental health agencies and nonprofits serving each metro area that would be expected to engage in public health crises and crises affecting queer communities (e.g., Departments of Health and Pride Centers). A team member would first check the organization's website to locate accounts. The team members then checked the major social media platforms for the organization's presence if their social media accounts were not linked from their web pages, including Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Flicker, and Pinterest.

The team then gathered the social media handles for all social media platforms for each entity and assessed whether they posted Mpox content. Those entities that did not post Mpox content were excluded. For instance, Florida's county-based Departments of Health only post content provided at the state level. The Florida Department of Health did not post Mpox content. Thus, Florida's governmental public health providers are not represented in this analysis.

Next, we identified health and queer influencers (10) (Agostino et al. 2019). We observed Mpox messaging on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok by searching #Monkeypox and #Mpox to identify active influencers in public health and queer issues

during the time period. We excluded queer and health influencers who did not post about Mpox or whose content included nudity or sexual acts. We selected three queer influencers, three public health influencers, and four queer health influencers with the largest following across the six platforms who posted about Mpox.

We located all Mpox messaging for each content creator from June to October 2022. This timeframe captured the outbreak detection by public health authorities in June, treatment protocol guidance, vaccine development and distribution, and a period when the spread was under control (Beasley 2022). Online communication about Mpox drastically cut-off in September. Early October was coded to fully capture public conversation about the virus.

Team members were assigned one content creator at a time and met weekly for five weeks to collect data as a group.

The full dataset was composed of 1392 posts by 38 content creators, including Twitter/X (733), Instagram (267), Facebook (211), TikTok (132), YouTube (21), and blogs (20). We systematically selected these six social media platforms for uniformity across the content creators and dataset robustness. These platforms were used most consistently by the content creators (see also Albadri 2023). The data were a combination of descriptive quantitative data and text-based qualitative data stored in spreadsheet format. The team transformed the qualitative data into a quantitative format for descriptive analysis in SAS.

Approximately 50% of government, nonprofit, and influencer posts were on Twitter/X. Approximately 20% of government and nonprofit and 15% of influencer posts were on Instagram. The biggest differences in platform usage were between Facebook and TikTok. Facebook represented 27% and 26% of government and nonprofit posts, respectively, but only a negligible percentage of the influencer posts. On the other hand, while 23% of the influencer posts were on TikTok, only 2% of nonprofit posts were on TikTok, and there were no government posts recorded on TikTok. YouTube and blogs were also represented, though they comprised a negligible percentage of the posts.

2.2. Method of Analysis

2.2.1. Coding

We used textual and content analyses to capture and analyze Mpox public health messaging (Wiley et al. 2023; McBeth et al. 2012). First, attributes such as platform, posting date, and content creator identification information were collected. Other attributes included originality, whether it was part of a series of posts, and inclusion of trends or memes. Second, the team employed a shared codebook and coding instrument designed for collecting uniform data across the six platforms using guidance from Wiley et al. (2023). An abridged codebook can be found in Appendix A. Word-based, manifest content was copied into the survey tool. Latent and video content were documented as one would when taking field notes: a brief description or interpretation (McKee 2003). For instance, emotive tone and target audience required interpretation by the coder (Saldana 2022).

The content creator's strategy for each post was coded to the social media framework (Lovejoy and Saxton 2012; Campbell and Lambright 2020; Wiley et al. 2023). The posts were coded as sharing information, building an online community, or mobilizing viewers to act. We extracted the data coded to information sharing for this analysis, which narrowed the dataset to 1320 posts. Informational posts were categorized by (1) the presence of location, instructions, and availability of Mpox vaccinations and treatment, and (2) descriptions, stories, and images of individual experiences with Mpox. For instance, while targeting queer communities, @PozRN shared his experience with Mpox through storytelling and videos of himself. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) posted infographics as updates on Mpox rates and vaccination sites targeting a general audience.

Lastly, the team drafted 1–2 sentence memos for each post, memos for each content creator's platform usage, and memos accounting for all Mpox messaging by a single content creator. The memoing process resulted in three sets of memos to guide the analysis and to

use as a theory-checking tool. Once a finding was considered, we referred to the memos to ensure an accurate dataset assessment.

2.2.2. Analysis

The first round of analysis occurred when the authors were coding the data. Following coding, we used descriptive statistics to make sense of the larger dataset and to break it down further into subsets, such as content creator categories and platforms. We compared the social media strategies across governments, nonprofits, and influencers and interpreted the associated discourse. Language and imagery were interpreted at creator and platform account levels for information-sharing posts. In other words, we assessed a creator's characteristics across all platforms and their characteristics for each of their accounts. We looked for continuity in the information shared. While we considered governments and nonprofits as classes, we did not look for consistency across all influencers due to their independent nature.

When all three were divided into groups, the authors started a grounded reading of the memos (Charmaz 2014). Through this reading, we observed certain trends in how influencers and nonprofits interacted with government agencies and vice-versa. Due to the focus on both federal and local government, there were some varieties. For example, Florida's local governments were nearly absent because the county-based health departments restricted their use of social media to the state's Department of Health authorized messaging, which was silent on Mpox. Influencers emerged in their absence. Others were overrepresented, such as Portland and Boston. The authors documented how these relationships seemed to be forming among the messiness, creating the framework.

2.3. Ensuring Trustworthiness in Data Collection and Analysis

While recognizing the messy nature of social media, research design trustworthiness was addressed via two techniques. First, the team was trained on the qualitative data analysis tool. Then, we practiced using the codebook on multiple posts as a form of inter-rater reliability checking. This allowed us to corroborate the coding schema and make clarifications where necessary in the codebook (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007). For instance, how we defined a set of sequential posts was reconsidered to account for Twitter/X threads, TikTok series parts, and influencer replies to others' tweets. Second, a graduate assistant supervised the data collection and coding in real time to ensure completeness and accuracy. These steps allowed for the constructivist analysis of the memos generated from the coding (Charmaz 2014).

3. Results

All content creator types posted information-sharing, community-building, and action-oriented content related to the Mpox outbreak. However, they all prioritized information sharing, as indicated in Table 1, as either the primary or secondary focus.[4] Twitter/X was mainly used for information sharing, aligning with the platform's mission at the time, "To give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers". Governments were more active on Twitter/X than influencers or nonprofits. Influencers tended to use Twitter/X to reuse their content from other platforms (e.g., reposting their TikToks or sharing their YouTube videos) or retweet others' content, but they received more engagement on other platforms. YouTube and blogs were solely used for information sharing and only by one content creator, @MarenHunsberger.

Table 1. Information-sharing content frequency by content creator group.

	Social Media Posts Sharing Mpox Information		
	Primary Focus	**Secondary Focus**	**Total Posts**
Government	474	90	563
Nonprofits	218	19	239
Influencers	471	87	558

3.1. Themes in Content Creation

During the analysis, we found themes in content topics from each content creator group, as presented in Table 2. Not surprisingly, each group (government, nonprofits, and influencers) had different focuses, though there was some overlap. For example, all three groups discussed vaccination locations. That said, as will be discussed later, when vaccination location information was disorganized, it was an influencer who worked toward providing information on when vaccinations would be available in different parts of the U.S. Updates and news on Mpox were provided by both influencers and nonprofits, mostly based on what the government had been reporting.

Table 2. Content topics by content creator group.

Influencers	**Government**	**Nonprofits**
Vaccination locations Diagnostic protocols and treatment updates on Mpox Dispelling myths and fighting stigma Personal photos, videos, and descriptions of having Mpox Advocacy	Vaccination locations Diagnostic protocols on identifying Mpox Assurances on viral spread and treatments Dispelling myths What to do if you have Mpox	Vaccination locations News and updates Fighting stigma Advocacy

Both influencers and nonprofits worked toward fighting stigma while, similarly, the government worked toward assurances on the dangers (or lack of dangers) of Mpox and dispelling myths around Mpox. For example, @thatgaydoctor created a TikTok (also posted on Instagram) explaining that Mpox is not a gay disease but, instead, is spread by close contact, while @doctor_carlton discussed the stigma of Mpox on podcasts.

Lastly, influencers, such as @pozrn, talked about their own experience with Mpox and what it looked like as a way to lessen the stigma of having Mpox. Influencers talked about the experiences of having Mpox by providing pictures and videos showing various ways they experienced Mpox. This personalization of the Mpox experience accentuated the government's sharing of information on what Mpox is and what it looks like.

One main area of difference is advocacy, in which both nonprofits and influencers participated. This advocacy specifically focused on getting the government to provide more resources, information, or support for people who were experiencing or at risk for Mpox.

3.2. Messy Communication: A Framework

To better understand the ways that information is distributed, we propose a framework to bring order to disorganized communication. Specifically, we present four types of communication realities: vacuum, chaos, control, and flex control. These four types represent how governments, nonprofits, and influencers coproduce information, though the main catalyst is the government, with the influencers and nonprofits following the government's lead and responding to the government's actions and inactions.

Messy communication takes into account the complex interactions between governments, nonprofits, and influencers in the way that information is spread on social media. Public administrators battle with oversight and regulations and an ever-changing social media landscape, which makes it difficult to know how to use social media effectively.

Through this framework, we can better identify how social media is used and make recommendations for governments and nonprofits to create content based on the communities' needs. Figure 1 provides an overview of how each of these players interact during the different phases of messy communication.

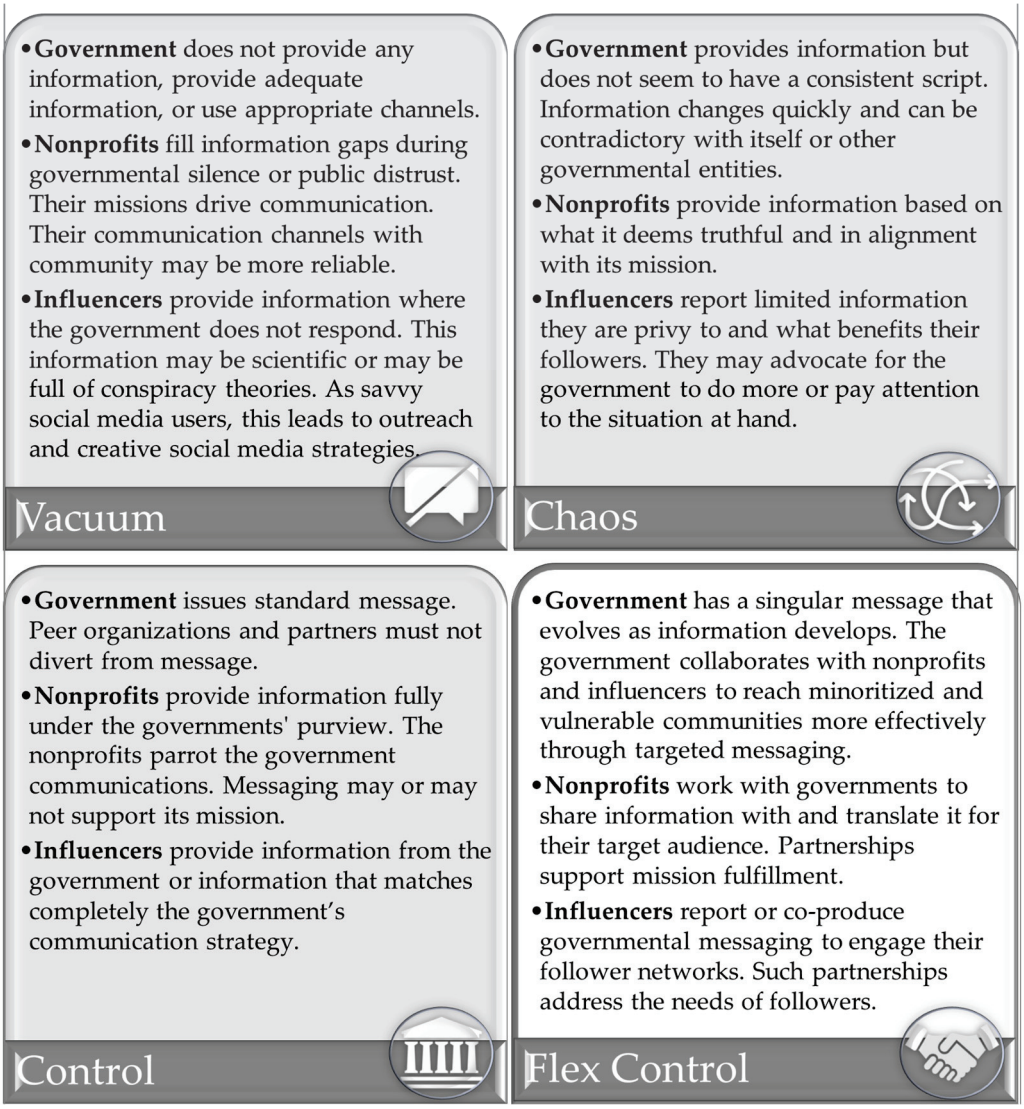

Figure 1. A framework for detangling public administrations' messy social media communication.

3.2.1. Communication Approach 1: Vacuum

In a vacuum, the government provides limited or no information. During this time, influencers and nonprofits fill in the void, not always with good information. Influencers may use the vacuum as an opportunity to present their own theories and perspectives, which may or may not be based on reliable sources. Due to being seen as a trusted source, influencers may be seen as a reliable source of information. While conspiracy theories will always be present, in a vacuum, the government is unable or unwilling to correct disinformation from influencers. This vacuum can be present if the government provides information, but it is not targeted appropriately. This could include not reaching out to vulnerable and impacted communities or not reaching out appropriately to said communities.

The impact of a vacuum is that citizens do not receive important information. A vacuum provides an opportunity for misinformation to fester and grow. When this information is provided by the government, they are not seen as a reliable source or provide incomplete information. This may be because the government does not know how to use social media

to reach out to minority communities, or they do not prioritize the minority communities' needs.

A vacuum can exist at any level of government, forcing local nonprofits to fill the gap. In this study, for example, some cities, such as Jacksonville, FL, had limited social media and did not provide information on Mpox for the local gay community. To fill this hole, organizations such as Equity Florida provided support for the gay community. This included a live-streamed town hall event. Nonprofits could not always fill all the holes, and limited information was provided via social media on where vaccinations and treatments were provided.

Nonprofits, such as Fenway Health in Boston, provided their own graphics and infographics for people to understand the realities of Mpox. On 1 July, Fenway Health tweeted out a five-party Twitter/X thread providing information and infographics on what Mpox is, what the vaccination entails, and fighting the stigma of it. During this time, the Boston Public Health Commission provided updates on how many people in the area had been diagnosed with Mpox.

In conclusion, a vacuum existed in how the government dealt with Mpox. Though we can see this absence in some of the information that the federal government provided, the larger vacuum was at the local level. This led to people being unaware of where they could receive vaccinations and treatment. Importantly, this vacuum was sometimes filled by nonprofits and influencers (as well as other levels of government), but not always.

3.2.2. Communication Approach 2: Chaotic

In a chaotic messaging system, the government provides inconsistent or sometimes contradictory information. This can be for a variety of reasons; for example, it might be that information is changing quickly or the government may not be good at explaining why information may be changing. Also, the government may not be proficient at using social media. Either way, the lack of consistent messaging is confusing to vulnerable populations looking for information. In this chaotic system, multiple groups may be providing information, and not all of this information is correct.

In a chaotic system, nonprofits and influencers provide information that may or may not be factual or helpful. They may also share outdated information while trying to be helpful. This information may be connected, in some way, to the government messaging. During this chaotic system, nonprofits and influencers may advocate for having the government provide more focused information. Nonprofits and influencers work with the government to move the chaotic situation into a more organized situation to reach vulnerable and isolated populations.

There were several examples of responding to the chaotic system. For example, Dr. Carlton (@doctor_carlton on Twitter/X) started organizing and tweeting information on vaccination events across the U.S., especially those that were not well advertised. This was due to a lack of centralization around vaccination information (or, as shown in the vacuum, no information at all about vaccinations). He also advocated for states to create centralized spaces to make this information more accessible.

In addition, @thatgaydoctor identified this confusion on his Instagram. In an Instagram post from 4 August, @thatgaydoctor explored the dos and do nots of Mpox and their personal and professional experience with Mpox. By providing this information, they guided individuals during a time when people were not fully sure how to prevent Mpox and what Mpox looks like. This provided a service when the government was not clear on the information provided. Many influencers started talking about their personal experience with Mpox in an attempt to destigmatize the disease. For example, @olliesinha, a TikToker, not only talked about his personal experience but also answered questions. Other influencers, such as @thatgaydoctor on Instagram and TikTok, worked hard to prevent Mpox from being seen as a "gay disease" to cut through the stigma. On TikTok, @MarenMicrobe provided question-and-answer sessions on Mpox when the information was not particularly clear. This provided clarity when information was being put out.

When the information that the government distributed lacked direction for the MSM (men who have sex with men) community, @PositiveRN2020 advocated for better messaging. In his tweet, he talked about how important it is to call Mpox a sexually transmitted infection. This was in response to what he felt was incorrect messaging around Mpox and its transmission. In this chaotic system, @PositiveRN provided information on Mpox that differed from how the government classified the virus.

In a chaotic situation, there is some information coming out from the government. In the case of Mpox, the information from local and federal governments was there but the information was sometimes unclear or disorganized. In response, influencers and nonprofits tried to translate the confusing information and organize information around vaccines to help the gay community understand what Mpox is and how to prevent it. However, nonprofits and influencers lacked coordination, furthering confusion and chaos.

3.2.3. Communication Approach 3: Control

Control would be what you would see in an authoritarian country, such as Russia or Iran, where the government has censorship control over the media (Motamedi 2024; Vendil Pallin 2017). Governments can also control the social media conversation to make certain topics illegal. For example, anti-LGBTQIA+ laws, which are popping up across the world, make it illegal for organizations to even talk about issues relating to the LGBTIQA+ community. In this frame, we will see all three major players (government, nonprofits, and influencers) having the same message. Specifically, nonprofits and influencers will be parroting the government's message. This is because the government may have control over the nonprofits and censorship over the influencers.

In this study, we found no instances of active control of messaging, unlike the control of COVID-19 messaging in some U.S. states (Blaskey 2021). Though some states and localities decided not to provide information on Mpox, this did not prevent nonprofits and influencers from communicating in the absence of state and local governments. Governmental actors may have ways to censor and limit information they do not want out, but in the ever-increasing social media climate and new ways to get around governments, it may be harder and harder to censor divergent perspectives.

3.2.4. Communication Approach 4: Flex Control

In a flex control system, governments, nonprofits, and influencers work together but are still independent entities. While the government plans a communication strategy, influencers and nonprofits may support it and create their own messaging tailored to their communities. This coordination allows nonprofits and influencers to use government messaging while maintaining autonomy.

The CDC attempted this when they hired Dr. Demetre to run the Mpox response. For example, the CDC tweeted a video on what Mpox is and how to respond if you have a concerning rash. Indeed, from the beginning, by hiring a doctor who is a part of the gay leather community, a subgroup of the LGBTQIA+ community focused on fetish and fetishwear, the CDC was attempting to create some sort of trust within an isolated community. Working through influencers who are healthcare professionals, the CDC advertised a virtual training on Mpox (tweeted on 25 July) and provided visualizations of what the Mpox rash looks like (e.g., Twitter/X and Instagram, 25 July). These services provided baseline information for individuals and medical practitioners on what Mpox is from a trusted source.

Local governments were also providing flex control through their information system. For example, on 18 August, the Nevada Department of Health and Human Services (NDHHS) advertised a town hall they were co-hosting with The LGBTQ Community Center of Southern Nevada, also called "The Center". This joint town hall between NDHHS and The Center allowed the nonprofit and government agencies to provide information on Mpox and how the State of Nevada responded to the pandemic. While this is a normal government process, it requires a coordination process (and trust) through social media.

In the flex control, governments, nonprofits, and influencers work together to provide information. This does not preclude nonprofits and influencers from advocating to the government if they are unhappy with the direction. This collaboration allows information to reach vulnerable populations through multiple avenues.

The reality is that government administrators do not always have control over the messaging. We can see this in the discussion of Mpox, where one influencer focused on providing information on where one could get vaccinated when vaccine information was disorganized. Other influencers used social media to destigmatize Mpox and provide education. While the CDC provided information on social media, the outreach was different when we looked at the local communities. In some cities and states, a lot of work was carried out to provide education and information, while others ignored the situation entirely.

3.3. The Benefits and Challenges of Messy Communication

Messy communication, as a framework, helps public administrators understand the complexities of messaging, specifically social media communication. It mimics the reality of the situations that public administrators face. The reality of trying to use social media to get ahead of a situation (or the decision not to use social media) is a tricky one that is constantly changing based on the information available and changing strategies. Two benefits of the messy communication framework are present. First, having multiple avenues of communication can help the government reach vulnerable communities, especially those who might not trust the government. Second, nonprofits and influencers can communicate in a language that matches the community in ways the government is not always able to.

Each of these four approaches will look different during various stages of a crisis. The CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Mission n.d.) identifies, for communication purposes, the stages of a crisis as pre-crisis, initial, maintenance, resolution, and evaluation. For example, in a pre-crisis stage, a vacuum would mean no treatment or vaccine information was shared, and governments were not preparing for the health crisis. Meanwhile, influencers or nonprofits might share limited (and often incorrect) information. In comparison, having flex control would allow governments to respond with ever-updating information not only to communities but also for influencers and nonprofits to distribute to harder-to-reach communities.

However, challenges are present as well. The issue with this framework is, in many ways, influencers and nonprofits may have a greater impact on minority communities than governments. Influencers and nonprofits may advocate for priorities different from the government's priorities. These may be professionals, or these may be people who are spreading disinformation. These nonprofits may have a confrontational relationship with the government, advocating for more attention and/or resources on a problem. The lack of governmental control over content creation and distribution creates challenges for public administrators.

4. Discussion

Social media research is an important part of broader public administration scholarship (Feeney and Porumbescu 2021; Zhu et al. 2020; Campbell and Lambright 2020). Our findings support the existing scholarship on the independent behavior of government and nonprofits, as well as Zavattaro and Brainard's (2019) argument for user-generated content to create more meaningful online encounters. We added to the field by constructing a framework to detangle how social media is used by the various players in public administration, including influencers. Governments, nonprofits, and influencers can work in concert to build public value, or in this case, "linking experts and novices", to support public health (Zavattaro and Brainard 2019, p. 572). However, some influencers are legitimized experts themselves. Considering the way that influencers can be seen as experts, social media platforms such as TikTok have changed the way information is disseminated, especially to underserved areas (Wang et al. 2023).

Though this study looked at the U.S., we can see this balance internationally. Examples of flex control include Finland, where researchers found that influencers took government communications and made them their own (Pöyry et al. 2022). Furthermore, in Spain, posts around COVID-19 articulated support for official information being disseminated and created social cohesion (El Mundo 2020; Santoveña-Casal et al. 2021). Lastly, in Italy, the government enlisted influencers during COVID-19 to provide information on the importance of masking (Amante 2020). In comparison, control of the media can be seen in countries such as Russia, which even includes blocking access to certain social media sites (Vendil Pallin 2017), and Iran, which blocks all major social media sites (Motamedi 2024).

The reality is that confronting public problems is often messy and unplanned for several reasons. Constantly changing information makes it hard to focus on messaging (Schillinger et al. 2020). A lack of social media savvy staff to reach out to communities or little authority provided to social media staff delays postings (Morgan et al. 2024). A public distrust of government and loud misinformation (and disinformation) can be difficult to challenge (Mergel and Bretschneider 2013; Hilton and O'Leary 2018; Zavattaro and Brainard 2019; Figenschou and Fredheim 2020). Other theories in public administration acknowledge this messiness, including garbage can models (See Zhu and Kindarto 2016) and contingency theories (See Alford 2002; McGrandle 2017). This social media framework allows us to think about the ways that we interact with public organizations. Instead of prioritizing strategy, this framework acknowledges that social media is sometimes messy. In fact, DeMasters et al. (2024) argued that TikTok users prefer the messiness.

Messy communication provides a framework for evaluating and discussing how public administration communication actually occurs. Take, for example, the cacophony on social media when Florida's Surgeon General released a report on gender-affirming care that misrepresented peer-reviewed medical studies (DeSantis 2022). The report was immediately challenged by the federal government, field experts, LGBTQIA+ advocacy organizations, and transgender influencers. In effort to control the social media space, chaos ensued. The framework operationalizes social media's multidimensional nature and acknowledges its constantly changing environment. The framework can be used to reconstruct the complex conversation between multiple parties in public administration and their constantly changing strategies. Thus, we build on Zavattaro and Brainard's (2019) propositions by offering two of our own:

Proposition 1a. *Influencers will use social media to supplement where they perceive governments as providing insufficient information for their audiences.*

Proposition 1b. *Influencers will leverage their followers' trust to further government reach.*

The messy communication framework is a tool for operationalizing how nonprofits and influencers either work in tandem with or in contrast to the government on social media. This framework pushes forward the question of how these content creator groups can work to provide public information, especially for minority communities or communities that may not trust the government (e.g., the LGBTQIA+ community and immigrant communities). Are the influencers and nonprofits providing their own perspective and information, or are they using government information (or a combination of both)? For example, in our study, Dr. Carlson used government data (the locations of vaccination sites) and organized it in his own way to reach the LGBTQIA+ community. While working with the government data, he informally partnered with the government and acted as an influencer to spread important information to those who may not have seen it.

Governments can incorporate influencers as part of the outreach process. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (Food and Drug Administration 2022) even has resources on how governments can engage with influencers. These relationships can help governments promote new campaigns or resources and increase credibility and trust. These partnerships could be beneficial for both the government and the influencer.

The CDC's Crisis and Emergency Communication Plan (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Mission n.d.) provides specific guidance on how governments should communicate during emergencies. This communication looks different in each crisis stage (e.g., planning, response, and recovery) for local, state, and federal governments as well as nonprofits. Missing from the CDC's report is working with influencers. Though governments have worked with influencers (see Amante 2020), more guidance on navigating this relationship is needed, especially for local and state governments.

One issue to prepare for is that influencers might be popular with minority communities but may not be so with larger communities. The New York City (NYC) Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (De Blasio Administration Publishes 2017) experienced this rejection when social media users unsupportive of NYC's LGBTQ Health Care Bill of Rights attacked Dr. Demetre. An online mob accused him of satanism for his "thirst trap," shirtless Bare it All campaign to encourage patients to be open with their doctors about their sex life and drug use (Daniels 2022, para. 4). We also observed influencers within the LGBTQIA+ community targeting the reduction of risky behavior by incorporating evidence-based crisis response communication strategies. They were action-oriented, timely, and respectful. They demonstrated an effort to increase audience self-efficacy and reduce audience uncertainty (Miller et al. 2021). For example, @pozRN provided important information on how to practice safe sex, get tested, and access vaccines. However, his tagline "Ho responsibly", while popular within the gay community, may be a turn-off for other audiences.

It is important, when talking about influencers, to adapt the approach to the community, or in this case, to "queer" communities' expectations (Meyer and Millison 2022). First, make sure that those influencers are credible to the target audience. Second, ensure partnering influencers represent the diversity of the minority communities targeted. Third, prioritize the safety of the at-risk audience over the comfortability of other audiences while following evidence-based crisis response tactics. This framework provides guidance on how researchers can look at the way information is spread through these multiple outlets to create information on important topics.

Proposition 2. *Social media is a constantly changing force. Governments can enhance their social media capacity by partnering with socially oriented influencers to distribute time-sensitive information.*

Feeney and Porumbescu (Feeney and Porumbescu 2021) discussed that government agencies do not have the knowledge and resources to use every social media platform. It is hard to keep up with the ever-changing landscape; as of this writing, Twitter/X has been rebranded as X, and it is unclear if it will still be around within a year (Ocampo 2023) and what, if anything, will take over, with multiple platforms, such as Bluesky, Mastadon, and Threads, vying for people's attention. However, Twitter/X has been essential in disseminating information to communities (Campbell and Lambright 2020; Moon and Hadley 2014).

Governments may find use in working with nonprofits and influencers to increase the effectiveness of their social media activities. Influencers can serve as network hubs in minoritized communities in ways governments may not. These partnerships can expand the capacity of governments to engage in social media, allowing them to support communities through diverse social media accounts when the government does not have the knowledge or connections. For example, @PozRN documented his personal experience with Mpox in a direct way that broke down barriers and decreased stigma. This framework provides guidance into how governments can evaluate how their relationship with influencers and nonprofits can work and proceed. Governments can look to Finland, Spain, Italy, and the U.S., as they pave the way for this public–private innovation as early adopters.

When preparing practitioners to work in public administration, we hope this study pushes forward the conversation on creating strategies on social media. As things change quickly, public administration can be at the forefront of practitioners understanding the complexities of social media. Instead of being nervous about the messiness, we hope this

research encourages practitioners to lean into the disorganization and be aware of it. Openness can help create a communication strategy that is flexible when information changes and helps guide others (i.e., influencers and nonprofits) to share a similar message and respond when misinformation becomes an issue (Mishra and Ashfaq 2023). Through working with nonprofits and influencers, governments are able to reach minoritized communities, as seen in this study, with @doctor_carlton and @PozRN providing information to the gay community. Influencers' ability to use various social media platforms and knowledge of their changing landscape provide the government with additional avenues to reach diverse communities.

Further research can explore how, in the ever-changing social media environment, government entities work with or against nonprofits, influencers, for-profit companies, and other parties (and vice-versa). For instance, scholars could use this framework to explore how influencers can work with governments and nonprofits for issues that are important to public administration, such as anti-vaping or other public health campaigns. The Australian anti-vaping campaign, which includes eight influencers, provides an excellent source for a case study (Lowrey 2024).

5. Limitations

There are, as with any study, limitations to acknowledge. To start, this study focused on one public health issue based in the U.S., a democratic republic. In every country, the government has different relationships with nonprofits and influencers. Therefore, this framework should be expanded to explore how different countries and regimes moderate conversations on social media. For instance, China's relationship with TikTok and the effect of that relationship on TikTok in the U.S. has resulted in wide-scale bans of the platform (see Franklin 2023).

Furthermore, with the growth of anti-LGBTQIA+ laws, how nonprofits and influencers interact with the government (or do not) to reach out to the LGBTQIA+ community is important to discuss. Such bans disrupt influencers' activities. Next, we did not measure the impact of this social media activity on audiences receiving the messages. Lastly, there is no uniform definition for influencers. The definitions vary across disciplines, audiences, and platforms. The influencers included in this study may not align with all definitions of the term.

6. Conclusions

During the summer of 2022, the Mpox outbreak in the U.S. mainly impacted the gay community. Governments, nonprofits, and influencers sent important information to the gay community through social media, including Twitter/X, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and blogs. Based on our findings and building on previous work on social media, we proposed a structure for analyzing and understanding the way that social media is used in public administration: messy communication (Zavattaro and Brainard 2019; Feeney and Porumbescu 2021; DeMasters et al. 2024; Li et al. 2021). Applying this framework, practitioners and scholars can better examine an ongoing challenge for public administration: social media. We offered two propositions for leveraging governmental and nonprofit partnerships with influencers via flex control. Through these propositions, we aim to guide scholars on operationalizing social media usage. Scholars could use ethnographic methods to observe online behavior and interview content creators (see DeMasters et al. 2024) or use network analysis to assess important vectors and measure reach (see Ocampo 2023). Most importantly, the framework provides guidance to public administrators who rely on social media in their work.

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Appendix A. Abridged Codebook

Coding categories, individual codes, and definitions
Attributes: Platform, date, username, content creator group, metro area or national, post originality, part of a post series or thread, presence of trend or meme, use of filters or backgrounds, accessibility accommodations.
Audience (primary and secondary): individuals and couples by sexual orientation; health professionals; queer-serving organizations; advocates, allies, friends, and family; unknown or unclear.
Queer discourse: mention of sexual orientation; qualifiers in the form of adjectives (e.g., *queer* community, *transgender* man, *same-sex* marriage); heteronormativity and heterosexist (e.g., words or images implying monogamous or heterosexual relationships); a creator promotes abstinence rather than safe sex; blocking or limiting healthcare or prophylactics for gay men because of their sexuality.
Social media strategy: information sharing, building an online community, motivating or pressuring the viewer to do something.
Mpox content: location, instructions, and availability of treatment or vaccinations; video, photos, or stories of experiences with illness.
Emotive tone: written, facial, verbal, or behavioral expressions.

Notes

1 Though X is currently the name of the social media platform formerly known as Twitter, when this research (as well as the research cited) was conducted, it was known as Twitter. Therefore, throughout most of the paper, we will refer to it as Twitter/X for consistency.

2 Mpox was initially called monkeypox. Due to racial stigmatization of the term monkeypox (Chappell 2022), the CDC changed the name of the virus in their public health communication.

3 TikTok was banned by Florida state universities following data collection and analysis, affecting one author's access to the platform.

4 It is important to point out that 50% of government posts were from the CDC. With the CDC removed from the government totals, the strategy pattern maintains information sharing as the primary strategy.

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Toward Greater Legitimacy: Online Accountability Practices of Ukrainian Nonprofits

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Abstract: This exploratory study examined recent innovations in online accountability practices adopted by Ukrainian nonprofits. A quantitative content analysis of Ukrainian nonprofit websites evaluated their adoption of online accountability practices across five dimensions: accessibility, engagement, performance, governance, and mission. The results reveal wide variability in accountability scores and low average disclosure of performance and governance practices. Nonprofits without a listed location have lower scores. International NGOs demonstrate stronger governance than domestic groups. Associations are leaders in online innovations. Overall, Ukrainian nonprofits are not fully capitalizing on digital platforms to enhance transparency and stakeholder engagement. This study provides unique insights into online accountability among Ukrainian nonprofits and highlights opportunities for nonprofits to leverage websites as strategic management tools for greater accountability, legitimacy, and impact.

Keywords: online accountability; Ukraine; nonprofit sector; nonprofit management

1. Introduction

Accountability is central to nonprofit work, involving organizations explaining, justifying, and taking responsibility for their actions (Cooper and Owen 2007). Stakeholders expect nonprofits to work for the public good while meeting expectations around financial reporting, performance, governance, and more. However, researchers note that accountability remains an underexplored area, with a need to develop more knowledge on voluntary disclosure practices (Ortega-Rodríguez et al. 2020). The emphasis on transparency in the UN Sustainable Development Goals also demonstrates the significance of accountability for credibility, and the adoption of online accountability tools represents an important innovation in nonprofit management processes.

Current scholarship on accountability practices focuses predominantly on Western contexts. This study examined the Ukrainian nonprofit sector to provide a non-Western perspective. Ukraine presents an excellent case for understanding varying nonprofit legitimacy globally. Recent crises like COVID-19 and war have impacted Ukraine's nonprofits, underscoring the need for accountability. Over USD 1.7 billion in aid has flowed to Ukrainian nonprofits since 2022, indicating massive new resources requiring oversight (Philanthropic Response to the War in Ukraine n.d.). One aspect of overall organizational accountability practices is online accountability, which refers to how an organization justifies actions and engages stakeholders through Internet technologies (Dumont 2010). Little prior research has examined nonprofit accountability in Ukraine specifically. Some scholars note that the informal, decentralized nature of Ukrainian nonprofits contributes to limited transparency, monitoring, or formal accountability mechanisms (Oleinik 2018; Shostko 2020).

This exploratory research project focused on (1) investigating the status of online accountability practices within the Ukrainian nonprofit landscape, and (2) identifying organizational factors associated with greater adoption of these innovative tools.

This project makes several key contributions to research on innovations in nonprofit management. First, we build on the legitimacy theory and explore the factors that contribute

to higher levels of nonprofit accountability. Second, we build on the available assessment tools, such as the Non-profit Virtual Accountability Index (NPVAI) (Dumont 2013), Online Accountability Practices (Cooley 2020), and navigation features from the most current website assessment tool (Al-Qallaf and Ridha 2019) to build an updated index evaluating these online innovations. Third, we contribute to the existing research landscape by addressing nonprofit accountability in non-Western contexts, as the current scholarly discourse predominantly centers around Western settings. From a practical standpoint, we intend to furnish Ukrainian nonprofits with a robust framework of accountability practices that can be readily incorporated into operational strategies, thereby enhancing transparency, stakeholder trust, and overall organizational effectiveness. The findings will help Ukrainian nonprofits understand how online innovations can strengthen transparency, legitimacy, and trust.

2. Literature Review

Our literature review will first examine the theoretical framework of legitimacy theory, and then explore online accountability including key concepts and definitions, followed by an analysis of the nonprofit sector in Ukraine covering the landscape overview, public trust challenges, prior research on accountability, and factors influencing online accountability.

2.1. Theoretical Framework: Legitimacy Theory

The legitimacy theory provides the theoretical foundation for this research project. According to this theory, nonprofit organizations aim to align their actions and behaviors with broader societal norms, expectations, and values to gain and maintain legitimacy among stakeholders and the public (Suchman 1995). Organizations seek to demonstrate, through their activities, communications, and disclosures, that they are serving socially desirable goals in ways that are acceptable and appropriate within their cultural context.

A key tenet of legitimacy theory is that an organization's perceived legitimacy significantly impacts its ability to attract resources, maintain public support, and ultimately achieve its mission. One important pillar of legitimacy emphasizes accountability—providing transparent information about an organization's activities, finances, management, and impact to assure stakeholders and the public of its legitimacy (Conway et al. 2015; Leardini et al. 2019; Ebrahim 2009).

Past scholarship has shown how accountability practices allow nonprofits to actively pursue legitimacy. For example, the 1992 high-profile scandal at United Way led many US nonprofits to increase their transparency, disclosure, and self-regulation to rebuild legitimacy in the eyes of the public and regulators (Bothwell 2004). Ongoing regional research finds variations in how nonprofits leverage different dimensions of accountability to signal legitimacy based on factors like organization type, size, location, donor base, and external environment (Dhanani 2009; Tremblay-Boire and Prakash 2015).

Utilizing new information technologies, online accountability has emerged as a key approach through which nonprofits demonstrate legitimacy to digital audiences. This involves proactively explaining and justifying organizational actions to stakeholders through detailed, two-way communication on the organization's website and social media platforms (Dumont 2010).

Drawing from legitimacy theory, this study identified and tested specific organizational and environmental factors that may drive the adoption of online accountability practices among nonprofits seeking to establish legitimacy. The theory suggests factors like nonprofit type, location, revenue sources, stakeholder expectations, and external environment may shape an organization's use of online tools to signal legitimacy. Examining these potential factors will provide theoretical and practical insights into nonprofit adoption of online accountability innovations.

2.2. Online Accountability

2.2.1. Definition and Key Concepts

Online accountability refers to how an organization justifies and accounts for its actions through Internet technologies and two-way communication with stakeholders (Dumont 2010). While organizational accountability has been studied extensively, accountability specifically in online spaces is less understood. The Internet provides opportunities for nonprofits to share information and engage stakeholders through websites, social media, and other innovative platforms (Jeacle and Carter 2014; Cho et al. 2009; Lowe et al. 2012; Mackenzie et al. 2013). Thus, online accountability has become an important part of nonprofits' accountability efforts and strategic management.

2.2.2. Instruments Measuring Online Accountability

Researchers have developed innovative frameworks to assess online accountability. Saxton and Guo proposed a model with two key dimensions—disclosure and dialogue—and tested it on community foundation websites. They found websites were more successful at disclosing information than enabling stakeholder engagement (Saxton and Guo 2011). Gandía analyzed Spanish nonprofits' disclosure on websites using a Disclosure Index. The study found that websites should provide more substantive information on work, funding, governance, and operations to aid nonprofit management (Gandía 2011).

The Nonprofit Virtual Accountability Index (NPVAI) is a comprehensive, validated tool measuring website accountability across several dimensions. First developed by Dumont (2013) and then tested within a hospital context by Cooley (2020), the NPVAI allows a comparative assessment of how well organizations facilitate online accountability. This index measures the extent to which nonprofit websites meet accountability expectations across five dimensions: (a) accessibility—ease of navigating the website; (b) engagement—ease of connecting with the organization; (c) performance—sharing financial/nonfinancial results and reports; (d) governance—information on leadership, bylaws, and meetings; and (e) mission—statements of mission, values, and goals.

2.2.3. Research on Nonprofit Online Accountability Practices

Despite the potential benefits, many nonprofits have not fully utilized websites and social media for transparency and accountability in their strategic management (Lee and Blouin 2019; Stevens et al. 2018). However, research shows that accountability practices on websites can increase donations. For example, disclosing IRS Form 990s correlates with higher donations, indicating usefulness for donor decision-making (Blouin et al. 2018).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, studies using the NPVAI found nonprofits focused more on attracting donors through accessibility and engagement features than sharing performance information (Uygur and Napier 2023). An analysis of social media usage for accountability by Indonesian nonprofits showed that platforms like Facebook and Instagram enabled various formal and informal accountability demands (Amelia and Dewi 2021). However, social media was used for short-term engagement rather than planned, strategic accountability and management.

Overall, the research indicates nonprofits are not fully capitalizing on websites and social media for transparency, interactivity, and accountability. More strategic use of online platforms could strengthen stakeholder trust and support through improved nonprofit management. Frameworks like the NPVAI guide comprehensive online accountability practices across multiple dimensions. We now turn to reviewing the nonprofit landscape in Ukraine, and how scholars understand Ukrainian nonprofit accountability.

2.3. Nonprofit Sector in Ukraine

2.3.1. Overview of the Nonprofit Landscape in Ukraine

The Ukrainian nonprofit sector has distinct characteristics. It is often described as weak (Martin and Zarembo 2023; Gatskova and Gatskov 2016) with a "notoriously low level of civic engagement" (Gatskova and Gatskov 2016). In addition, the political and

legislative environment where Ukrainian nonprofits operate is highly unstable and, at times, even antagonistic (Krasynska 2015). The Ukrainian understanding of civil society tends to emphasize informal action, values, responsibility, and a sense of community rather than just membership in formal organizations (Martin and Zarembo 2023). Not surprisingly, events like Euromaidan and the current Russian invasion have triggered massive grassroots civic mobilization (Martin and Zarembo 2023). The concept of a "sense of community" helps explain the dormant yet powerful nature of Ukrainian civil society during crises. The strong values, emotional connections, and responsibility Ukrainians feel toward their nation and community drive heightened civic activism when threats emerge (Martin and Zarembo 2023).

Notably, researchers report very low levels of public confidence and trust in the country's nonprofits (Krasynska 2015). Less than five percent of Ukrainians "fully trust" nonprofits, whereas 18 percent "fully mistrust" them (Razumkov Center 2013). Trust is a crucial precondition in people's engagement and participation in collective action (Gatskova and Gatskov 2016; Kuts and Palyvoda 2006; Sønderskov 2011), such as nonprofit work. Robust organizational *accountability* practices can be an answer to this challenge. Previous studies provide empirical evidence that accountability activities influence public attitudes toward nonprofits and contribute to financial and ethical integrity (Becker 2018). Virtually no academic literature is available on the subject of Ukrainian nonprofit accountability, and this project attempts to fill this gap.

2.3.2. Low Public Trust and Challenges with Legitimacy

The nonprofit sector in Ukraine faces challenges in establishing a strong sense of legitimacy within the perception of the Ukrainian public. Some academics label it as a "shadow third sector" (Krasynska 2015), whereas others highlight the challenge of low public trust, attributed by several scholars to lingering aspects of *Homo Sovieticus*—a distinct sociocultural personality marked by deindividualization (Levada 1993; Gatskova and Gatskov 2016). Heavily influenced by communist ideology, the ideal Soviet citizen was expected to be a member of several organizations (such as the communist party, trade unions, military associations, etc.), and these memberships were based on "obligation, obedience, and external conformity", rather than self-driven "internal and voluntary initiatives" (Howard 2003, p. 27). After the fall of the Soviet Union, the post-communist transformation was marked by people's unwillingness to join and maintain membership in organizations, as a backlash to years of "over-organization" of communist societies (Gatskova and Gatskov 2016, p. 680). Thus, organizational membership in Ukraine dropped from 81% to 30% in the first decade after the USSR collapse (Weßels 2003).

2.3.3. Prior Research on Ukrainian Nonprofit Accountability

To the best of our knowledge, there is very little previous academic research specifically examining nonprofit accountability in Ukraine. While examining Ukrainian volunteerism, one study suggested that the informal and decentralized nature of Ukrainian volunteer initiatives means limited transparency, performance monitoring, or formal accountability mechanisms (Oleinik 2018). Another scholar suggested that the decentralized nature of the nonprofit sector in Ukraine contributes to the lack of oversight and, hence, much lower levels of accountability, compared to the public sector (Shostko 2020).

Since very little literature on Ukrainian nonprofit accountability could be identified, we instead relied on and extrapolated from the available research on accountability in Ukraine's public sector. One research project tells us that the Euromaidan protest movement of 2013–2014 led to increased activism around transparency and accountability reforms in Ukraine, with civil society groups playing a major role in pushing anti-corruption initiatives (Tregub 2019). This movement contributed to gains like the creation of independent anti-corruption agencies, online procurement systems, and requirements for officials to disclose assets (Tregub 2019; USAID 2021). For example, groups like Transparency International Ukraine introduced tools to evaluate and provide feedback on local government

transparency, including a Code of Transparent Government promoting accountability best practices (USAID 2021). These online platforms allow Ukrainian residents to assess local transparency and accountability levels and communicate with officials (USAID 2021). The agency further argues for the need for continuous efforts to institutionalize public accountability mechanisms. This project contributes to the study of accountability practices, and the first two research questions address the current state of online accountability adoption among Ukrainian nonprofits and how these practices can be improved.

RQ1: What is the current state of online accountability adoption among Ukrainian nonprofits?

RQ2: How can Ukrainian nonprofits enhance their online accountability? What are the major areas for improvement?

2.3.4. Factors Influencing Online Accountability

Previous research has examined various factors that can influence the online accountability practices of nonprofit organizations. These include organizational characteristics like nonprofit type, service area, location, annual revenue, and age. For example, larger and more established nonprofits tend to have more robust accountability practices on their websites, likely due to their greater resources and capabilities (Saxton and Guo 2011). Nonprofits in service domains like education and health have also exhibited higher accountability practices online, while arts and culture nonprofits scored lower (Hsu et al. 2017). Geography can also be a factor, as urban nonprofits sometimes have more advanced online accountability than rural nonprofits (Kang and Norton 2004). In summary, a nonprofit's resources, capabilities, stakeholder expectations, and field of work all seem to influence the level of accountability present on its websites and online presence. Our third research question was set to determine these factors:

RQ3: Which organizational factors are associated with higher levels of online accountability practices among Ukrainian nonprofits?

Several studies have examined differences in accountability practices between domestic nonprofits and international NGOs. International NGOs demonstrate higher online transparency compared to domestic nonprofits, likely reflecting stricter accountability demands from global donors and supporters (Gandía 2011). As a result, international NGOs rely heavily on foreign donor funding for operations and prioritize upward accountability to donors over local needs (Wong 2010). This accountability to donors can lead NGOs to propose donor-driven solutions rather than locally appropriate ones (Wong 2010).

Specific examples illustrate issues with donor-driven priorities undermining nonprofit accountability. A study on US aid to women's NGOs in Ukraine found a disconnect between donor goals and local organizations' activities (Pishchikova 2010). The author argues the decentralized Ukrainian nonprofit sector appears susceptible to donor priorities that may hinder accountable outcomes, concluding that external aid can undermine domestic nonprofit accountability (Pishchikova 2010). Another study supports this, finding that Western-funded Ukrainian NGOs were criticized as unaccountable to local constituencies, prioritizing foreign donors over local needs (Gutnik 2007). While donors prioritize quantitative metrics and short-term results, this focus alone does not fully capture long-term impacts (Gutnik 2007). Given these findings, we examined any possible differences in how domestically operated nonprofits and NGOs approach online accountability practices.

RQ4: How do online accountability practices differ between domestic Ukrainian nonprofits and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in Ukraine?

We looked into the literature that focused on the service area of Ukrainian nonprofits and any relationships with accountability practices. One study focused on humanitarian-focused nonprofits that served Ukrainian populations after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022

and coined the term "distributed humanitarianism", which refers to flexible, temporary aid chains rather than centralized bureaucracies (Cullen Dunn and Kaliszewska 2023, p. 19). According to scholars, these loosely organized groups delivered more tailored, responsive aid compared to slow, inflexible international agencies focused on donor accountability and bulk logistics (Cullen Dunn and Kaliszewska 2023). These findings promote further questions on service area–accountability relationships, and our final research question emerges.

RQ5: How do online accountability practices vary based on the service area (child welfare, education, humanitarian, etc.) of Ukrainian nonprofits?

3. Methods

We used the quantitative content analysis method to assess online accountability practices in Ukrainian nonprofit organizations. This method offers a systematic and objective approach to analyzing textual data, enabling us to uncover patterns, trends, and relationships with a focus on numerical representations and statistical validation.

3.1. Sampling

We used a purposive sampling technique since probabilistic sampling was not a feasible option due to a lack of an updated, comprehensive list of Ukrainian nonprofit organizations. While the non-random nature of a purposive sample makes assessing representativeness and generalizability difficult compared to a randomized sample, it was the best option to use for this study. Using the platforms GlobalGiving.org and Dobro.ua, as well as the search engine Google.com, we selected a total of 101 nonprofit organizations for analysis. An organization was included if it had a working and accessible website and was operating in Ukraine. Ten organizations did not match these criteria and were, therefore, excluded from the final count. A total of 91 organizations were examined. An organizational website was a unit of analysis for this study. All websites were coded in March, April, and May 2023.

3.2. Coding Scheme

The coding scheme consisted of two blocks. First, we recorded organizational variables: name, website, type of a nonprofit (domestic NPO, NGO, or other/unable to determine), service area (child welfare, peace, and reconciliation, education, and humanitarian), location (Kyiv, regional, international, or other/unable to determine), and age (through year established).

Next, we refined the online accountability practices (OAP) instrument that was heavily based on Dumont's (2013) instrument, and later adapted by Cooley (2020). The OAP instrument includes five measures: accessibility, engagement, performance, governance, and mission (See Appendix A for a full instrument description).

The accessibility measure was heavily revised. A revision was much needed because accessibility measure questions in the original instrument were over a decade old, and website accessibility features have evolved significantly since then. The newly updated accessibility measure was based on Al-Qallaf and Ridha's (2019) best practices and included website navigation, a search feature, quick links, a help feature, a site map, and language options. Appendix A includes the full instrument description and indicates which questions were added from the Al-Qallaf and Ridha (2019) accessibility instrument. The engagement measure examined variables like the recency of updates, newsletters/community updates, links to foundations/giving, the number of social media links, instant connectivity, and sharing options. The performance measure looked at the sharing of information like annual reports, financial statements, and mentions of accreditations/honors/awards. The governance measure covered the disclosure of organizational bylaws, the board of directors/leadership team, and board meeting minutes/summaries. Finally, the mission measure included variables like goals/strategic plans/implementation plans, employee directory, mission statement, and statement of values.

The overall OAP score for each nonprofit was calculated based on the five OAP dimensions. Each dimension was weighted on a 20-point scale, which prevented any one dimension from having an outsized influence on the total score.

3.3. Internal Validity and Reliability

One coder was a Ukrainian speaker who verified and checked all the codes. Reliability was ensured by employing consistent data collection protocols (such as a clearly defined instrument and thorough coder training) and using inter-coder agreement measures to demonstrate the consistency and accuracy of the obtained results. After two rounds of pilot testing 12 websites, a sufficient overall intercoder reliability was reached (using Cohen's Kappa), with an overall intercoder reliability score of 0.97 and no individual categories below 0.82.

Next, we checked for the internal (reliability) consistency of the OAP instrument. The Cronbach's alpha for the OAP scores was 0.73, which indicates good reliability for the instrument according to previously established guidelines (Field 2009).

3.4. Analyses

We first ran a descriptive statistical analysis of the coded variables and then used a variety of statistical tests to answer the first two research questions. To answer RQ3, a multiple regression statistical model was employed. To answer RQ4, an independent group *t*-test was used to determine overall differences between domestic NPOs and NGOs in terms of OA practices and the five individual dimensions. For the last research question, RQ5, we ran a one-way ANOVA with a Tukey post hoc test. SPSS version 26 was used for all data analyses.

4. Results

RQ1: What is the current state of online accountability adoption among Ukrainian nonprofits?

RQ2: How can Ukrainian nonprofits enhance their online accountability? What are the major areas for improvement?

Ukrainian nonprofit websites in our sample varied dramatically in terms of online accountability, with some websites scoring as low as 5.6 to as high as 77 on the 100-point weighted scale of the OAP. Looking at a comparative analysis across all five dimensions, Ukrainian nonprofits overall scored very low on governance (M = 3.4) and performance (M = 5.9) dimensions while reporting their online accountability. The engagement dimension was the most robust (M = 12.3). Accessibility scores varied the least amongst the sample (SD = 3.2), while performance scores varied the most (SD = 5.7). Notably, some websites had no information at all on performance, governance, and mission, and were considered extremely inaccessible. See Table 1 below for more details on the range of OAP dimension scores for the Ukrainian nonprofit websites analyzed.

Table 1. Descriptions of weighted OPA scores and individual dimensions.

	Weighted Min	Weighted Max	Weighted Mean	Weighted SD
OAP	5.6	77.2	36.0	15.7
Accessibility	0	15.6	7.9	3.2
Engagement	2.2	20	12.3	4.1
Performance	0	20	5.9	5.7
Governance	0	13.3	3.4	4.2
Mission	0	20	6.5	5.2

RQ3: Which organizational factors are associated with higher levels of online accountability among Ukrainian nonprofits?

A multiple regression statistical model was specified as follows:

OAP = b0 + b1 domestic (dummy) + b2 NGO (dummy) + b3 child welfare (dummy) + b4 peace and reconciliation (dummy) + b6 humanitarian (dummy) + b7 military assistance (dummy) + b8 association (dummy) + b9 Kyiv (dummy) + b10 unknown location (dummy) + b11 international (dummy) + b10 age + e

The results of the regression indicated that the constructed model predicted 24.6% of the variation in the Online Accountability Practices scores [$F(1,64) = 2.084$, $p = 0.039$] (see Table 2). The unknown location of nonprofits was a significant predictor of lower OAP scores, while associations were generally predicted to have higher OAP scores.

Table 2. Summary of regression analysis results for variables predicting weighted OAP scores.

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	**Std. Error**	**Beta**		
(Constant)	26.99	9.78		2.76	0.01
Domestic NGO (dummy)	6.74	3.76	0.20	1.79	0.08
Age	0.00	0.11	0.00	−0.03	0.98
Location = Kyiv (dummy)	−0.98	4.11	−0.03	−0.24	0.81
Location = International (dummy)	1.80	5.96	0.04	0.30	0.76
Location = NA (dummy)	−17.32	6.53	−0.34	−2.65	0.01 *
ServiceArea = Child welfare (dummy)	14.74	9.12	0.46	1.62	0.11
ServiceArea = Peace and reconciliation (dummy)	5.15	13.90	0.05	0.37	0.71
ServiceArea = Humanitarian (dummy)	7.19	9.15	0.23	0.79	0.44
ServiceArea = Military assistance (dummy)	5.45	13.84	0.06	0.39	0.70
ServiceArea = Association (dummy)	34.16	13.61	0.35	2.51	0.02 *

* $p < 0.05$.

RQ4: How do online accountability practices differ between domestic Ukrainian nonprofits and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in Ukraine?

T-tests revealed that domestic nonprofits did not differ from NGOs in terms of overall OA practices, $t(89) = -1.115$, p = n.s. Looking at individual dimensions, only governance showed significance. NGOs had much more robust governance accountability practices, compared to domestic nonprofits ($t(89) = -2.122$, $p < 0.05$; see Table 3).

Table 3. Weighted scores of OAP dimensions by nonprofit type.

	Domestic NPOs (N = 59)		NGOs (N = 32)	
	Weighted M	**Weighted SD**	**Weighted M**	**Weighted SD**
OAP	34.7	14.7	38.5	17.5
Accessibility	8.2	3.1	7.3	3.3
Engagement	12.0	4.1	13.0	4.3
Performance	5.4	5.2	6.9	6.4
Governance	2.7	3.9	4.7	4.6
Mission	6.4	4.9	6.7	5.8

RQ5: How do online accountability practices vary based on the service area (child welfare, education, humanitarian, etc.) of Ukrainian nonprofits?

We ran the one-way ANOVA test to check for variance in online accountability practices among nonprofits within different service areas. In our analysis, we included the following service areas: child welfare, peace and reconciliation, humanitarian, animal welfare, military assistance, and association. Environmental and education nonprofits were excluded from the analysis because there was only one of each. We checked for homogeneity of variances. The significance value of the Levene statistic based on a comparison of

the medians was not significant, which means the requirement of homogeneity of variance was met, and the ANOVA test was considered to be robust.

We observed a statistically significant difference between the OAP means of the different service areas of the nonprofits ($F(6,84) = 2.22$, $p = 0.049$), but the Tukey post hoc test comparisons between each pair of group means did not indicate any significant differences. The lack of significant results from the post hoc test could be attributed to insufficient sample sizes in each group, limiting the statistical power to find differences between the means.

We removed service area nonprofits that had been underrepresented in our sample, and focused on three groups that dominated the sample: child welfare, humanitarian, and other. Then, we ran another one-way ANOVA that revealed no statistically significant differences ($F(2,88) = 2.86$, $p = 0.063$). Hence, we concluded that there was no variance in online accountability practices based on the service area of the nonprofits.

5. Discussion

This research project aimed to examine the use of online accountability practices by Ukrainian nonprofits and explore how these innovative tools can support strategic management. Specifically, we assessed the current landscape of website accountability adoption across the Ukrainian nonprofit sector. A key goal was determining what organizational characteristics are associated with greater utilization of online transparency and engagement features. The findings can provide insights into how nonprofits of different sizes, ages, and missions are leveraging technology for accountability. In addition, the results may point to management approaches and capacity issues influencing the integration of digital accountability practices. Overall, this research sought to understand the opportunities and challenges for Ukrainian nonprofits in employing online platforms for more effective transparency, stakeholder interaction, and organizational management. An enhanced adoption of web-based accountability tools has the potential to strengthen nonprofits' relationships with their communities and support their missions.

Our first finding was that Ukrainian nonprofit websites demonstrated wide variability in terms of online accountability practices, with some scoring quite low and others quite high on the weighted scale of the OAP Index. Looking across the five accountability dimensions, overall, Ukrainian nonprofits performed poorly in providing information related to governance and organizational performance on their websites, while achieving higher scores for engagement and accessibility features. This engagement emphasis aligns with previous research showing how NGOs prioritized attracting contributors rather than sharing details about performance (Uygur and Napier 2023). The accessibility scores showed the least variation among the sample, while performance scores varied the most. Notably, some websites provided no information at all about performance, governance, and mission, and were considered extremely difficult to access or navigate.

This project also focused on comparing online accountability management practices between domestic nonprofits and internationally based nonprofits (NGOs). While domestic nonprofits in Ukraine did not differ substantially from NGOs in overall online accountability practices, NGOs demonstrated notably more robust governance accountability compared to their domestic counterparts. This discrepancy in governance norms may be largely attributed to the differential organizational cultures and expectations placed on international NGOs versus locally grown Ukrainian civil society groups. As large global entities, international NGOs often import centralized policies and best practices from their institutional headquarters that reinforce strong governance structures. Ukrainian domestic nonprofits, by contrast, have typically emerged from a less structured civil society setting, leading to comparatively informal governance arrangements, as noted in previous scholarship characterizing Ukraine's nonprofit sector as a precarious "shadow third sector" (Krasynska 2015). Moreover, NGOs must satisfy strict accountability requirements imposed by international donors and supporters (Gandía 2011), which compels greater attention to transparent and legitimate governance mechanisms. Ukrainian domestic nonprofits enjoy

no such benefit, as studies have highlighted persistently low public trust and legitimacy hampering the local voluntary sector.

Ten nonprofits in our sample did not include their physical locations on their websites. Our analysis revealed that unknown locations of nonprofits are tied to significantly lower levels of online accountability. Not sharing a location may signal a general lack of strategic transparency and management. Another possible explanation is that these nonprofits have weaker community ties and limited external engagement. Nonprofits without a known location listed may not be strongly embedded within a geographic community, and this could translate to less public visibility and accountability pressures to innovate. It is also possible that these are organizations operating in challenging environments, especially considering the current climate in Ukraine. Nonprofits without a clear location may work in more insecure or risky environments where transparency could jeopardize operations. Security concerns could disincentivize full disclosure and use of digital tools. Further research on management approaches and innovative online practices is needed to understand how nonprofits lacking location transparency can strengthen their accountability given the constraints of their operating contexts.

Associations tended to have significantly higher online accountability practices compared to other nonprofit types in our sample. As member-based organizations, associations benefit from peer sharing of management innovations and accountability norms within their networks. Through informal collaborations and knowledge diffusion, associations are exposed to transparent best practices that spread rapidly across the field. This peer learning and accountability pressure motivates associations to adopt online innovations to demonstrate legitimacy. As pioneers and promoters of professional standards, associations can serve as role models and change agents for the broader Ukrainian nonprofit sector. Their professional orientation leads associations to proactively embrace proper management and governance practices seen as "best in class" reputation markers. By modeling cutting-edge accountability innovations, associations raise the bar and standards for the entire sector. Their competitive motivations, peer diffusion channels, and professionalism make associations potent catalysts for accelerating the adoption of online transparency tools as a norm.

Another finding of this study was the lack of variance in online accountability practices between Ukrainian nonprofits across different service domains. Rather than exhibiting divergence, online accountability practices appear largely uniform irrespective of whether organizations provide healthcare, education, social services, or other functions. This pattern points less toward peer standardization, whereby organizations model the behavior of compatriots in their field, and more toward indifference among influential sector stakeholders regarding differentiation in transparency norms. With the Ukrainian nonprofit sphere is still emerging, dominant players like government regulators and philanthropic funders may have yet to formulate distinct accountability expectations for diverse nonprofit subsectors. This stakeholder inattention to customizing accountability demands enables conformity born not of peer imitation but of the absence of pressures to tailor transparency efforts to individual organizational contexts. As the voluntary sector continues to evolve, stakeholders may sharpen their scrutiny and compel differentiation. For now, however, Ukrainian nonprofits of all varieties operate within a common normative horizon for online accountability practices, their convergence owing more to stakeholder inattention than peer emulation.

Innovations, Challenges, and Best Practices

This Special Issue focuses on nonprofit innovations, challenges, and best practices, and this study attempted to reveal both challenges and opportunities for innovation in online accountability practices among Ukrainian nonprofits. A key finding is the overall lack of performance and governance information disclosed on nonprofit websites. To enhance accountability, organizations should leverage platforms to share details on program outcomes, financial data, leadership structures, and policies. Interactive formats like annual

reports, searchable databases, and discussion forums can make this information engaging and accessible.

However, security and capacity issues pose barriers for nonprofits operating in high-risk environments. Organizations without a public location listing scored lower on online accountability, likely due to these challenges. Nonprofits confronting insecure conditions or limited resources may require creative transparency solutions like anonymized reporting and staggered disclosure policies. Partnerships with intermediary organizations could also help expand the technological capacity of small, grassroots groups through training programs and shared data platforms.

Associations seem well-positioned to champion wider transformation toward more accountable nonprofit management in Ukraine. Their capacities as networked incubators of innovation can drive faster propagation of online accountability practices. Associations have the scale, connections, competitiveness, and professional ethos needed to mainstream transparency innovations as a new standard for effective and ethical organizational leadership.

Ultimately, online accountability tools offer new avenues for nonprofits to demonstrate their impact and strengthen community trust. However, realizing this potential requires matching innovations to context. Organizations enjoying secure conditions can emulate global transparency norms by disclosing comprehensive, timely information on interactive websites. However, greater creativity is needed to tailor online accountability to the realities of groups working in restricted contexts. Ukraine's nonprofit sector would benefit from localized innovations that expand transparency while protecting vulnerable organizations.

6. Conclusions and Limitations

In conclusion, the examination of Ukraine's nonprofit sector points to opportunities for management innovation and strategic reorientation to strengthen nonprofit accountability. With low public trust hampering their legitimacy, Ukrainian nonprofits should pilot participatory initiatives that tangibly enhance people's well-being. As one study suggests, rather than pursuing broad democratization aims, focusing on projects that directly improve local conditions could help cultivate supporter relationships and organizational accountability (Gatskova and Gatskov 2016). Lasting accountability for Ukraine's nonprofits requires management approaches attuned to evolving public expectations and grassroots civic activism, along with political reforms addressing the climate of mistrust toward civil society. Navigating these complex, shifting dynamics will compel Ukrainian nonprofits toward creative experiments in accountable management and engagement.

This exploratory study has several limitations that should be noted. First, many service areas for nonprofits were underrepresented in our sample. With limited cases from fields like environmental and education nonprofits, we could not run a robust analysis to detect differences in online accountability between these different areas. Our sample also relied on a convenience approach rather than probability sampling from a complete nonprofit population list, since there is no publicly available database that fully enumerates all Ukrainian nonprofits. Additionally, we intended to include annual revenue in our model but found revenue information was only available for a fraction of groups, as no public data source compiles Ukrainian nonprofits' financials.

This study also used a quantitative content analysis to code and statistically analyze website content. While this enabled standardized comparisons, it provides a less rich interpretive analysis than qualitative methods could offer. By simplifying complex textual data into numeric scores, some deeper contextual meanings, implicit themes, subjective intents, and language nuances may be overlooked. Follow-up studies using qualitative approaches like interviews or inductive website analyses could strengthen these results by capturing undertones, motives, and explanations that quantitative techniques are less adept at revealing. A mixed-methods approach combining the breadth of quantitative content analysis with qualitative depth could provide a more comprehensive understanding of online accountability practices by Ukrainian nonprofits.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Online Accountability Practices (OAP) Instrument.

Accessibility Measures		
A1 *	Does the website have navigation tools that appear on each page?	3 = Yes; 0 = No
A2 *	Does the website have a search feature?	3 = Yes; 0 = No
A3 *	Does the website have quick links?	3 = Yes; 0 = No
A4 *	Does the website have a help feature?	3 = Yes; 0 = No
A5 *	Does the website have a site map?	3 = Yes; 0 = No
A6 **	What are the available language options?	0 = One language; 1 = Two languages; 2 = Three languages; 3 = More than three languages.
Engagement Measures		
E1	Does the site provide the date (month and year) of the **recent update** of a website?	0 = No; 1 = the date is more than three months old; 2 = the date is more than one month and less than three months old; 3 = the date is one month or less old.
E2	Is there a subscribe option available for the **e-newsletter, listserv, magazine, etc.**?	3 = Yes; 0 = No
E3	Does the site have a link for electronic **donations**?	3 = Yes; 0 = No
E4	How many links to **social media** sites are there?	0 = No social media sites listed; 1= 1–2 social media sites listed; 2= 3–4 social media sites listed; 3= 5 or more social media sites listed
E5	Does the site include options to **connect instantly** to the organization with one click (for example live chat or call now button)?	3 = Yes; 0 = No
E6	Does the site provide an option to **share** the content?	3 = Yes; 0 = No
Performance Measures		
P1	Does the site post the organization's **annual report**?	3 = Yes; 0 = No
P2	Does the site provide **financial statements** online?	3 = Yes; 0 = No
P3	Does the site include **accreditation/honors/awards** information?	3 = Yes; 0 = No
Governance Measures		
G1	Does the site have the organization's **by-laws** available?	3 = Yes; 0 = No
G2	Does the site list the names of the people who are on the **Board of Directors/Board of Trustees/Leadership Team**?	3 = Yes; 0 = No
G3	Does the site publish **summary/minutes** from the Board of Directors meetings?	3 = Yes; 0 = No

Table A1. *Cont.*

Mission Measures		
M1	Does the site list the organization's **goals, strategic plan, or implementation plan**?	3 = Yes; 0 = No
M2	Does the site offer an **employee directory** with contact information? (department contacts do not count)	3 = Yes; 0 = No
M3	Does the site contain a **mission statement** for the organization?	3 = Yes; 0 = No
M4	Does the site contain a statement of **values**?	3 = Yes; 0 = No

* Based on Al-Qallaf and Ridha (2019), ** Added to this instrument.

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