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Research Articles

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Poverty Reduction Through Partnership: The Role of Collaborative Civic Leadership
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The Impact of Personnel Actions on Official Bonding Activities: An Examination of County Governments
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The *Journal of Public and Nonprofit Affairs* (*JPNA*) focuses on providing a connection between the practice and research of public affairs. This is accomplished with scholarly research, practical applications of the research, and no fees for publishing or journal access. *JPNA* publishes research from diverse theoretical, methodological, and disciplinary backgrounds that address topics related to the affairs and management of public and nonprofit organizations.

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Editor’s Introduction

Christopher R. Prentice – University of North Carolina Wilmington
Richard M. Clerkin – University of North Carolina Wilmington

This issue of the Journal of Public and Nonprofit Affairs presents a collection of studies that explore leadership, communication, accountability, and engagement across nonprofit and public sectors. Together, these articles deepen understanding of how organizations and individuals adapt, collaborate, and innovate to address social challenges, strengthen institutions, and enhance public trust.

The issue opens with Faletehan and Wempe’s (2025) exploration of long-term volunteerism as a meaningful and sustained career path. Using narrative inquiry with volunteers in Indonesia, the authors identify three distinct phases of volunteering careers; motivational foundations, focused organizational engagement, and societal leadership across multiple organizations. They also highlight four key influences on sustained engagement: environmental, spiritual, personal, and ambassadorial factors. The study reveals both the deep fulfillment and challenges volunteers experience, emphasizing volunteering as a dynamic form of lifelong career development shaped by individual motivation and social context.

Building on the theme of civic engagement, Poudel and Kaufman (2025) examine how leadership within civic organizations contributes to poverty reduction in Virginia. Drawing from interviews with leaders across multiple organizations, the study identifies poverty as a systemic issue that demands participatory and humble leadership. Their findings show that collaboration, empathy, and active community engagement are central to addressing persistent poverty. The authors provide a framework for understanding how community-driven leadership can mobilize collective action to confront complex social problems.

Expanding the focus to civil society communication, Cooley and Nobel (2025) investigate how Ukrainian news media portray and frame nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from 2019 to 2024. Through quantitative content analysis of 306 news articles, they find that while NGOs receive generally positive coverage, they are often depicted episodically and as secondary story elements. This framing may limit public understanding of NGOs’ broader societal contributions. The authors suggest that NGOs engage more strategically with media outlets to promote thematic coverage and enhance public trust in their work.

Turning to public administration, Lee and Tantardini (2025) analyze the relationship between public sector entrepreneurship, organizational performance, and communication. Using data from the 2022 Public Employee Perception Survey in South Korea, the authors employ structural equation modeling to show that entrepreneurial orientation positively influences performance, with communication acting as a key mediator. Their findings emphasize that well-structured communication channels are essential for translating innovative initiatives into measurable performance outcomes, offering practical insights for improving management effectiveness in the public sector.

Prentice, C. R. and Clerkin, R. M. (2025). Editor’s Introduction. *Journal of Public and Nonprofit Affairs*, *11*(2), 123–124. https://doi.org/10.20899/jpna.qgqrn524

The issue concludes with Modlin, Stewart, and Goodman's (2025) study on how personnel actions influence bonding practices among county government officials in North Carolina. The authors find that appointed officials experience more standardized bonding requirements, while bonding for elected officials remains discretionary. Audit findings and finance staffing patterns significantly affect bond increases, particularly for accounts payable roles. The study underscores the importance of skilled finance personnel in safeguarding public assets, minimizing risk, and maintaining accountability.

Together, these articles underscore the interconnectedness of leadership, communication, and institutional integrity across nonprofit and public domains. From the motivations of lifelong volunteers to the mechanisms of financial accountability, this issue highlights the evolving practices that sustain public trust and advance the capacity of organizations to serve their communities.

References

Faletehan, A. F. & Wempe, J. (2025). Volunteering as a Lifelong Career: Calling, Multi-organizational Involvement, and Life Impact. *Journal of Public and Nonprofit Affairs, 11*(2), 125 – 149. https://doi.org/10.20899/jpna.ye5tbx82

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Research Article

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Volunteering as a Lifelong Career: Calling, Multi-organizational Involvement, and Life Impact

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This study explores how long-term volunteering can develop into a meaningful and sustained career path. Using narrative inquiry with 15 volunteers in Indonesia, we examine how individuals are motivated to begin volunteering, how they structure their ongoing involvement, and how they expand their roles across multiple nonprofit organizations. Our findings identify three flexible phases in the volunteering career: motivational foundations, focused involvement in one organization, and societal leadership across several organizations. We also identify four factors—environmental, spiritual, personal, and ambassadorial—that influence sustained engagement. While volunteers experience personal fulfillment and a strong sense of purpose, they also face challenges in balancing their commitments with family and work life. This study contributes to understanding volunteering as a form of long-term career development, shaped by both individual motivations and social contexts.

Keywords: *Volunteering career, Calling, Nonprofit organization, Narrative inquiry*

Introduction

Contemporary research on the intersection of personal drive and career tends to focus on lucrative jobs, often “funneling all paid work toward calling to achieve transcendent fulfillment” (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015, p. 163; Hall & Chandler, 2005). Most studies on careers have a tendency to view individual success primarily through the lens of paid work careers (Benson et al., 2020; Heslev, 2005). Consequently, individuals are often considered successful only when they build a reputation in financially rewarding jobs.

However, the literature provides little guidance on how careers can emerge in the context of meaningful but unpaid work. Although a few studies examine career development within nonprofit organizations, they largely focus on paid roles, such as social workers or salaried staff in social enterprises (Nelson, 2019; Stevens et al., 2012). As a result, the understanding of individual careers as volunteers in purely nonprofit contexts remains underexplored. This lack of attention hampers the development of a comprehensive theory of careers that integrates both paid and unpaid work. Contrary to the dominant focus on financial incentives, some individuals find meaningful work through a long-term unpaid volunteering career (Liu et al., 2017; Rodell, 2013). Existing theories that integrate financial motivations with personal commitment fail to adequately account for the career trajectories of non-paid volunteers. Many individuals, in fact, have extensive unpaid volunteering careers that span multiple organizations, as evidenced by our earlier empirical observations. Yet, there is limited

Faletehan, A. F. & Wempe, J. (2025). Volunteering as a Lifelong Career: Calling, Multi-organizational Involvement, and Life Impact. *Journal of Public and Nonprofit Affairs, 11*(2) 125 – 149. https://doi.org/10.20899/jpna.ye5tbx82

scholarly exploration of how and why volunteering career paths develop and what impacts they have on personal lives.

This study addresses these gaps by posing three key research questions: (1) How does a volunteering career path evolve?; (2) What motivates volunteers to engage in multiple organizations simultaneously?; and (3) How does volunteering impact personal life?. In this study, we conceptualize a career not merely as paid occupational work, but more broadly as a meaningful and sustained trajectory of personal engagement and development across the life span (Duffy & Dik, 2013; Dumulescu et al., 2015; Lysova et al., 2019). While careers are commonly associated with financial compensation and formal employment, we emphasize that unpaid work—when pursued with long-term commitment and purpose—can also form a coherent career path. A volunteering career, as we define it, does not necessarily replace paid work; rather, it is often pursued alongside paid employment, reflecting a dual pathway of professional and altruistic engagement. Clarifying this distinction is essential for understanding how individuals integrate non-remunerative roles into their broader career narratives.

Based on an exploratory narrative inquiry with Indonesian volunteers, we classify the volunteering career path into three flexible phases: motivational foundations, focused involvement, and societal leadership. In the third phase, individuals participate in numerous nonprofit organizations. An important issue that arises in this phase is the distinctive nature of commitment in volunteering careers. Volunteers demonstrate the ability to work effectively across multiple organizations simultaneously. Moreover, we find that the concept of calling plays a crucial role in motivating individuals to begin and sustain their volunteering careers (Angell, 2010; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Faletehan et al., 2021). Volunteers often regard their careers as a calling, aligning with the emerging construct of "career calling," which has recently gained significant attention in academic debates (Praskova et al., 2015). They sustain these callings due to various contextual factors, which have both positive and negative impacts on their personal lives.

In summary, this study contributes to career scholarship by introducing the concept of a volunteering career as a meaningful and sustained trajectory of engagement within the nonprofit sector. Rather than viewing volunteering as a secondary or transitional activity that merely complements paid employment (Mazanec, 2022; Nelson, 2019), we propose that long-term volunteering can represent a parallel form of career development—driven by personal values, social commitment, and a sense of calling. A volunteering career does not supplant paid work, but often coexists with it, forming a dual pathway of professional and altruistic identity. Our findings reveal how individuals construct and sustain this path across flexible phases of engagement, demonstrating that unpaid service can offer purpose, growth, and long-term commitment on par with conventional career frameworks.

Literature review

In career research, “career” broadly refers to "an individual's work-related and other relevant experiences, both inside and outside of organizations, that form a unique pattern over the individual's life span" (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009, p. 1543). However, this definition—while foundational—does not fully capture the meaning-oriented and developmental nature of how many individuals experience their careers. In this study, we define a career more specifically as a *personally meaningful, sustained pursuit of roles and activities that foster identity development, purpose, and contribution to others, regardless of whether these roles are paid or unpaid* (Duffy & Dik, 2013; Dumulescu et al., 2015; Hall & Chandler, 2005). This framing is consistent with our participants' narratives and with serious leisure theory, where careers may emerge through long-term volunteer work that offers psychological fulfillment, skill development, and a sense of calling (Cantillon & Baker, 2020a, 2020b).

While “career” is often used interchangeably with “occupation” in everyday language—especially in Western contexts—we distinguish between the two. Occupation typically refers to one’s paid employment, whereas career refers more broadly to the evolving sequence of meaningful roles and experiences across time, whether paid or unpaid (Cunningham et al., 2022; Discenna, 2016). This distinction is critical for our study. A volunteering career is not limited to individuals who forgo paid employment, but includes those who integrate sustained volunteer work into their broader career trajectories—often in tandem with paid roles. Recognizing this broader view enables a more inclusive understanding of how people build purposeful lives through both professional and voluntary commitments.

This study builds upon the concept of serious leisure to support the notion of volunteering as a career. Serious leisure, as defined by Stebbins (1996, p. 215), involves "the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial and interesting in nature for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience." Serious leisure differs from casual leisure, which consists of short-lived, relaxing activities that require minimal commitment or skill development (Stebbins, 2009). Serious leisure requires the practitioner to invest time, effort, and skill into an activity that offers fulfillment and a sense of purpose, even if it is unpaid (Cantillon & Baker, 2020a). This framework helps explain how some individuals adopt long-term volunteering as a core component of their identity and aspirations, deriving psychological and social rewards similar to those found in traditional careers (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014).

Volunteering as a career, therefore, carries characteristics such as skill acquisition, identity formation, and deep satisfaction derived from contributing to the well-being of others (Hudson & Inkson, 2006; Penner, 2002; Rodell, 2013). Research has shown that sustained volunteering contributes to civic engagement, social capital, and identity development over time (Einolf & Yung, 2018; Garland et al., 2008; Musick & Wilson, 2007). While some studies focus on short-term or instrumental motivations, such as résumé building among student volunteers (Fényes et al., 2021; Handy et al., 2010), others emphasize deeper personal and social motivations for sustained involvement (Hustinx, 2010; Hustinx et al., 2010). Motivations for long-term volunteering extend beyond altruism and include a desire for self-expression, meaningful connection, and role continuity across life stages (Faletehan et al., 2021; Grube & Piliavin, 2000; Ou et al., 2023). Classic work by Clary et al (1998) identified a set of functional motivations—including values, understanding, social, career, protective, and enhancement—that shape why individuals begin and continue to volunteer. This perspective helps explain how volunteers engage for both personal and social reasons, often in ways that evolve over time. Unlike paid nonprofit work, which is often hierarchical and remunerated (Einolf, 2022), a volunteering career is typically self-directed, intrinsically motivated, and may span multiple causes and organizational contexts. Some individuals even pursue sustained volunteer roles to compensate for a lack of meaning or recognition in their paid occupations (Rodell, 2013).

Despite its significance, the concept of volunteering as a career remains under-theorized. Much of the literature continues to portray volunteering as a supplementary activity—often framed as a stepping stone to paid employment or a tool for personal development—rather than as a primary, sustained life path (Mazanec, 2022; Nelson, 2019; Pavlova & Silbereisen, 2014; Stevens et al., 2012). The emphasis frequently rests on short-term outcomes, such as employability, social networking, or psychological benefits, with limited attention to how volunteers build cumulative experience, construct identity, and sustain long-term engagement across the life course (Handy et al., 2010). Furthermore, studies have tended to examine volunteer experiences within single organizations, leaving multi-organizational involvement and cross-contextual career trajectories largely unexplored (Einolf & Yung, 2018; Hudson & Inkson, 2006).

Viewing volunteering as a structured career path also enables a better understanding of the complex challenges volunteers face. These include managing role conflicts, sustaining motivation, and balancing time between volunteering, family, and paid work (Cuskelly et al., 2002; Nesbit, 2013). Serious leisure pursuits like long-term volunteering can demand high levels of commitment and role negotiation, which in turn affect family dynamics and psychological well-being (Cantillon & Baker, 2020b; Dalla Rosa & Vianello, 2020; Elkington & Stebbins, 2014). This study contributes to the literature by offering a grounded exploration of the structure, motivation, and consequences of volunteering careers across multiple organizations. Our findings underscore how individuals perceive their unpaid service as both personally fulfilling and occasionally burdensome—particularly when navigating competing demands across personal, organizational, and societal domains.

Research methods

Research design

This study employs narrative inquiry as a qualitative research method to understand participants' stories and experiences (Bleakley, 2005; Clandinin et al., 2007). Narrative inquiry was deemed the most suitable approach for this study because it allows researchers to "look back at the rich meanings" embedded in individual life stories (Clandinin, 2006, p. 44). Previous studies have successfully used narrative inquiry to explore topics such as individual careers (Hartman et al., 2020) and social work (Gola, 2009). Similarly, this approach enabled us to examine the trajectory of individual volunteering careers across multiple nonprofit organizations and their influence on the personal lives of participants.

Adopting this approach, we investigated participants' volunteer career experiences (spanning past, present, and future) and their interactions with external factors such as family, voluntary networks, and organizational contexts (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin et al., 2007). The narrative conception incorporated dimensions of place, temporality, and sociality within individuals' volunteering career paths. As Caine et al. (2013, p. 577) emphasized, "their stories were situated within larger cultural, social, familial, and institutional narratives." This framework allowed us to capture the dynamic and multifaceted nature of a volunteering career within the socio-cultural contexts in which they unfolded.

Participant selection

We recruited 15 volunteers to share their personal stories about their volunteering careers. To ensure diversity in gender, age, religion, volunteering experience, family status, occupation, and organizational membership, we used a purposive sampling strategy with snowball recruitment. That is, we defined specific inclusion criteria to select information-rich cases (Mays & Pope, 1995), and then used snowball sampling to locate participants who met those criteria but were difficult to access through public or organizational channels (Merriam, 2014).

A unique feature of this study was its focus on volunteers who were active in multiple nonprofit organizations simultaneously. Based on insights from our earlier studies, we observed that some volunteers maintain high levels of engagement across several organizations. To explore this phenomenon further, we classified participants into two groups: (1) volunteers who were active in more than one nonprofit organization simultaneously, and (2) those who were active in only one organization. This classification enabled a cross-case analysis of how volunteers experienced organizational commitment and navigated transitions across volunteering contexts.

Our combined purposive and snowball sampling approach ensured that the study captured both breadth (diversity of backgrounds) and depth (relevant, hard-to-reach cases), offering rich insights across the life span of a volunteering career. Table 1 summarizes participant profiles, with pseudonyms used to protect identities.

Table 1. Participant biographical information

No.	Pseudo-nym	Gender	Family status	Age	Number of member-ship	Educational background	Length of volunteer-ing experiences	Religion	Occupa-tion
1	Dani	Male	Married with children	54	6 <	Bachelor	16 years <	Islam	Freelan-cer
2	Yuli	Female	Single	55	3-5	Master	6-10 years	Christianity	Doctor
3	Narto	Male	Married with children	61	3-5	Bachelor	16 years <	Christianity	Retired
4	Siti	Female	Divorced with children	48	3-5	Bachelor	6-10 years	Islam	Entrepre-neur
5	Farid	Male	Married with children	48	6 <	Senior high school	16 years <	Islam	Freelan-cer
6	Eva	Female	Single	40	2	Diploma	11-15 years	Christianity	Entrepre-neur
7	Rudi	Male	Single	30	6 <	Senior high school	11-15 years	Islam	Private employee
8	Putri	Female	Married with children	55	3-5	Diploma	16 years <	Christianity	Nurse
9	Udin	Male	Married with children	42	3-5	Senior high school	11-15 years	Islam	Freelan-cer
10	Parto	Male	Married with children	28	1	Bachelor	6-10 years	Islam	Civil servant
11	Zainab	Female	Single	23	1	Bachelor	6-10 years	Islam	Freelancer
12	Riko	Male	Married with children	34	1	Senior high school	11-15 years	Islam	Private employee
13	Selamet	Male	Single	40	1	Senior high school	11-15 years	Islam	Private employee
14	Tutik	Female	Married with children	50	1	Diploma	6-10 years	Islam	Nurse
15	Panca	Male	Single	37	1	Senior high school	6-10 years	Christianity	Teacher

Data collection

This study was conducted in Indonesia, a country ranked highest in global volunteering levels according to the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) World Giving Index (CAF, 2021). The report highlights that Indonesia's high rates of volunteering reflect the cultural significance of *gotong-royong*—a deeply rooted practice of mutual aid that transcends islands, ethnicities, and religions and becomes especially prominent during emergencies.

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling methods. Because individuals meeting our sampling criteria—especially those involved in multiple nonprofit organizations—were difficult to identify directly, we began by contacting a known volunteer who was highly active on social media and met the inclusion criteria. We then requested referrals to other volunteers who met the same criteria (Flick, 2009; Merriam, 2014). Some participants were also recruited through networks from our previous studies. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews.

The interviews were conducted in 2019 and 2021 in two cities in Indonesia: Sidoarjo and Surabaya. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 80 minutes. The interview protocol covered four main sub-topics. First, we collected personal information, including participants' occupations, family status, religion, education, other interests, and the average time spent on both for-profit jobs and volunteering work. Second, we explored participants' narratives of how they began and developed their volunteering careers, focusing on their initial motivations and the individual and external factors driving their involvement. Third, we inquired about their engagement in multiple nonprofits, discussing the motives and factors influencing their simultaneous involvement in several organizations. Lastly, we examined the positive and negative impacts of their volunteering careers on their personal lives. Participants shared experiences that highlighted both the rewards and challenges of pursuing a volunteering career. The sample of 15 participants was deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation, as no new themes or insights emerged after the twelfth interview. The final three participants confirmed and enriched the existing themes, ensuring the completeness and depth of the data.

Data analysis

In order to capture volunteers' meaning in the narratives, we utilized an inductive thematic analysis, as a common data analysis method in narrative inquiry (Caine et al., 2013; Hartman et al., 2020), which involved "deriving categories inductively from raw data" (Bleakley, 2005, p. 535). To enhance the trustworthiness of our findings, we incorporated several validation strategies. First, member checking was conducted with participants to validate our interpretations of their stories and to ensure that the derived themes accurately reflected their experiences. Detailed descriptions of the narrative contexts were also provided to allow readers to assess transferability and applicability of our findings to other contexts.

Reflexivity played a vital role throughout the research process. While a formal reflexive journal was not maintained, reflexive practices were embedded in the research, beginning with detailed field notes that documented immediate reflections on participant interactions, setting, and emerging observations. These notes helped the researchers identify and mitigate personal biases, and they provided critical context that was revisited throughout data analysis to ground our interpretations firmly in the participants' perspectives

The interviews were conducted in Indonesian, the native language of both the participants and one of the researchers. This researcher, as the primary interviewer and translator, ensured that the participants' narratives were authentically represented in the transcriptions. To safeguard accuracy and maintain linguistic integrity, the transcriptions were carefully cross-checked against the original recordings. Additionally, we employed NVivo to store, code, and systematically analyze all transcripts, using NVivo coding to capture participants' exact language (Murphy et al., 2017) and retain contextual meaning during the coding process. These codes were iteratively refined into higher-level categories until abstract conceptual themes were formed, namely, the three phases of the volunteering career path, four drivers of sustained calling, and the impact on personal life (see Table 2).

Findings

The findings comprise three interrelated topics. First, we introduce the volunteering career path where calling plays a role. Second, we explain the drivers of volunteer involvement in multiple nonprofits at the same time. Finally, we explore the impact of this volunteering career on personal life.

Table 2. Data structure

First order concepts	Second order concepts	Conceptual codes	Themes
o I have been active in social work since I was young. o I was active in the Boy Scouts. o I realize that we are social creatures. We need others and they need us.	Passion in social activities		
o Islamic teachings about doing good things: be a beneficial person to others. o Inspired by a speech in the church: my volunteering is for my spiritual needs. o Buddhist teachings: love others without looking at their religious background. o Stories from Prophet Muhammad. o When I recognize Jesus, I suddenly like social things. o Having good religious background.	Religious teachings		
o Follow my heart to help others. o I like Greenpeace activities. I often go hiking and help search for people who are missing in the mountains.	Sentiments to easily get called to help others	Motivational foundations	
o It is just a genetic factor. My parents are social people. They participated in a foundation dedicated to the poor. They provided houses for the homeless. o My parent always advised me to do social services.	Genetic and familial environmental influences		
o I was asked by an NGO's staff to do volunteering and mentoring work in a rural village. o My friend who is a volunteer asked me to participate in this social work.	Inspired by others		**Three phases in the volunteering career path**
o I am still young. I want to seek new knowledge and challenges. o I love hiking and entering the forest, like Tarzan, and then helping people there.	Inclination to seek challenging activities		
Registered as new volunteers in various nonprofit organizations (e.g., environmental organizations, health care organizations, faith-based organizations, public traffic organizations, disaster mitigation organizations)	First encounter with a nonprofit organization		
o Unhappy with their membership. o They do not fit with the organizational culture. o Seeking other nonprofit organizations.	Unsatisfied and leave the nonprofit		
o Very satisfied with the situation in the organization. o Being strong loyalists so they do not pursue additional or consecutive membership in other nonprofits, but rather stay at the first organization.	Satisfied and loyalist in a nonprofit	Focused Involvement	
o Feeling satisfied with their first nonprofit. o They still develop their callings by participating in other nonprofits.	Satisfied and developing further		

○ Volunteers are devoted to their work, not to their organizations. ○ Having membership in multiple nonprofits at the same time.	Very active in multiple nonprofits at the same time		
○ Working as volunteers in formal nonprofit organizations. ○ Working as volunteers in informal social activities. ○ They compare one nonprofit with other nonprofits where they are also involved. ○ Their networks become broader and reach both national and international levels since they blend with various volunteering groups from other countries.	Participating in both formal and informal volunteering	Societal leadership	
○ I am surrounded by good people who like social activities. ○ We were only five volunteers left but we survived and could develop this volunteering group. ○ Impressed with the profile of nonprofit as they are a purely social organization and do not discriminate against our religion or economical background. ○ Feeling called to build strong community and networks.	Supportive volunteering group networks		
○ Crying when visiting patients in their houses. ○ My calling gets increasing if seeing others suffering. ○ Feeling happy when seeing others are cured and helped. ○ My friend's kid was lost in the forest, and I was called to help them. Other disasters also called me to volunteer again. ○ Surprised when finding fragile communities in the rural area that cannot see their potential.	Seeing others' suffering frequently	Environmental factors	
○ Concerned with others' negligence so I must participate to solve it. ○ If not us, who will help them. ○ I have observed that my communities have low awareness about caring nature and social work, so we must handle it.	Concern with many disasters, socio-economic vulnerabilities, and low awareness		**The four drivers of sustained calling in multiple nonprofit organizations**
○ Religious teachings (e.g., Buddhist teachings in loving others regardless of any religious background; Christian teachings on compassion; Islamic teachings to do good things and be a beneficial person to others). ○ Safety guarantee from God for me and my family (e.g., If we help others and then others will help our family in the future; Because of God, my friend helps my family when I am volunteering). ○ Religious duties (e.g., Collecting provision for the afterlife by volunteering; Volunteering is part of gratitude to God)	Religious values	Transcendental factors	
○ Although exhausted, I feel spiritually satisfied. ○ It feels like throwing away my burden when I help others, I feel really satisfied. ○ Volunteering is the fuel for my spiritual needs.	Spiritual satisfaction		
○ Moral obligation (e.g., The bigger we are, the bigger responsibility we have; This is something	Personal perspectives	Personal factors	

we must do; When you have moral obligation, we will be connected with beneficiaries). ○ Self-actualization (e.g., I can take part to help others; To be beneficial to others). ○ Redemption of self-failure in the past (e.g., I was poor and sometimes stole money, now I want to become a good person; I was selfish and rich, now I must give back and pay my mistakes to communities).			
○ Passion and habituation in social activities (e.g., Volunteering is my comfort zone. Although I have problems here, I don't leave this organization; I don't seek advantage for myself; I have social groups in churches and hospitals). ○ Humanism (e.g., I realize that I am a social creature, so we need people and they need us; We cannot live alone; religious teachings are universally applicable to all humans).	Individual traits		
○ Helping other volunteers to find their passion. ○ We must train young volunteers for the next generation.	Responsibility to pass knowledge and skills to younger generation		
○ I feel that I have not fully sacrificed myself as a volunteer yet, so I want to do more. ○ The volunteer profile is still underestimated in our communities. ○ Spreading the good things with our friends and building new communities.	Responsibility to promote the profile of volunteer	Responsibility as volunteer ambassador	
○ Every day we send everybody religious messages. ○ We are already old, so we must remind other volunteers to collect transcendental rewards by volunteering. ○ We must inspire other volunteers.	Responsibility to motivate other volunteers		
○ God's insurance for the safety of volunteers and their families in the future ○ I believe God will take care of my children in the future. ○ We must help others, Allah will provide everything for us, so don't worry. ○ God always helps me; it's based on my 15 years of volunteering experience.	Increasing faith in the transcendental		
○ I feel needed by others. ○ Building new networks with beneficiaries. ○ My mission is to educate the young generation.	Social networks	Positive impact	
○ We can teach social activities to our families. ○ Focus on quality time with family. ○ We love family more than before.	Family issues		
○ Helping others is like charging a phone; it's spiritually satisfying. ○ Volunteering on the field makes me more grateful to God. We are luckier than those who are suffering. ○ When people can be cured, as a doctor, I feel spiritual satisfaction, relief, and priceless.	Spiritual satisfaction		**The impact of volunteering career on personal life**

o Volunteering is a path to becoming a social worker in nonprofit organizations. o Volunteering can help my paid work career as a doctor. When I participated in an event, I obtained a certificate. o Volunteering is a form of relaxation after being busy with study or work.	Volunteering career can help paid work career	
o Less time with family. o A lack of attention to family. o Potential conflict with children and wife. o Financial problems in the household. o A lack of a plan for family welfare in the future.	Family issues	Negative impact
o Feeling insecure about a lucrative job in the future. o I am a full-time volunteer because I don't have a profitable permanent job. o Neglecting the current job and focusing more on volunteering.	Job insecurity	
o I do not care about the time. Although today is my off day, I still go on the field when there is a disaster, even at night. o Neglecting their own health. Because of volunteering spirit, they ignore the Covid-19 protocol.	Health issues	
o I finished my bachelor's degree in 13 years because I was busy with volunteering activities. o Neglecting study seriously. When the date of the national exam was approaching, I went to the location of the mountain eruption to help others.	Educational issues	

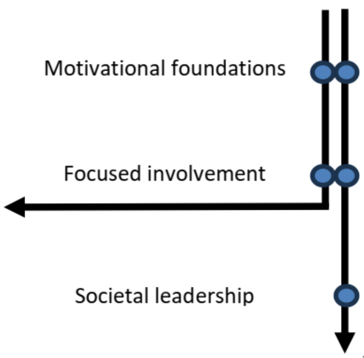
Volunteering career path

In delineating the volunteering career path, we observe three distinct phases: motivational foundations, focused involvement, and societal leadership, as depicted in Figure 1 and detailed in Table 3, based on the experiences of our 15 participants. Figure 1 presents the sequential growth of volunteers from initial motivation to a sustained commitment that often expands into multiple organizations, with Table 3 illustrating each participant's unique journey across these phases. Although we describe the volunteering career in terms of three phases, we do not present this as a strictly linear or universal sequence. Not all participants follow the same sequence. The model is considered non-linear because it does not imply a fixed progression through phases; rather, it accommodates divergent pathways. While many participants described a developmental progression from involvement in a single organization to broader engagement, others remained committed within one organizational context. We therefore treat these phases as flexible stages in a potential volunteering career trajectory, conceptualized in the Dual Pattern of Volunteering Career Path model, which accommodates both divergent pathways and developmental progression over time.

In the motivational foundations phase, volunteers establish their emotional foundations and embrace altruistic roles, often shaped by personal experiences, religious teachings, familial guidance, and external inspiration. This phase reflects an early stage of development, where volunteers' sense of duty and empathy is rooted in formative experiences. As one participant noted, *"When I was young, I used to accommodate my friends having broken family issues to sleep at my house. I also taught them some skills such as organizing events and performing religious rituals. Until now, I am already very familiar with social activities" (Udin).* Another participant shared that *"I always learn and am motivated from the stories of Prophet who kept helping the needy" (Parto),* demonstrating the influence of religious teachings. Other factors include familial encouragement, as one participant described: *"My father was a soldier and I grew up in the military family. He advised me to do genuine social services. His sayings hit me so much" (Farid)*. The inclination to seek challenging activities also contributes to the volunteering spirit, as illustrated by the statement, *"these are like our new battle for me" (Rudi),* with several participants noting how outdoor activities led them toward related volunteer work, such as search and rescue missions.

After gaining confidence and experience through informal volunteering, individuals transition to formal involvement with nonprofit organizations, marking the second phase of the volunteering career path: focused involvement. At this stage, motivations diversify as participants join organizations for various reasons—peer encouragement, organizational missions, or inclusivity. For example, volunteers cited friends' invitations to join (Yuli, Rudi, Narto, Riko, Selamet, Tutik), attraction to the organization's mission (Eva, Zainab), or feelings of acceptance despite disabilities (Parto). This phase involves a maturing sense of commitment, with some volunteers opting to stay with their first organization, while others expand into multiple organizations, fostering a deepening dedication.

Figure 1. Dual pattern of volunteering career path



Name of the phase	Characteristics of the phase	Description of the phase	Growth of the individual and societal impact
Motivational foundations	Orientation, discovering and developing passion/engagement	Passion in social activities, religious teaching, sentiments to easily get called to help others, genetic aspect, inspired by others, and seeking challenging activities	Discovering own social/religious involvement/passion
Focused involvement	Organizing passion/ involvement, long-term commitment in a single organization	First touch with a non-profit organization, unsatisfied and leave/satisfied and loyalist in this non-profit/satisfied and developing further	Discovering supporters and developing talent to address passion/involvement in an organized setting
Societal leadership	Giving social direction within the movement, multi-organizational engagement and leadership	Very active in multiple non-profits, participating in both formal and informal volunteering	Discovering the potential of the movement of which one's own organizations are a part, developing the talent to lead the movement

For some participants, this involvement phase marked a stable point of long-term commitment to a single organization. However, for others, this phase served as a stepping stone toward broader engagement, as their confidence, networks, and sense of mission grew over time. As Dani reflected, *"At first, I joined only one organization that focused on environmental cleanups. But as I met more people, I got invited to disaster response teams, education programs, and now I'm active in at least six different volunteer groups."* Similarly, Narto shared, *"I started volunteering just with my campus organization. I thought that was enough. But later, I felt I could help more communities, and I began joining other groups with different missions."*

In the societal leadership phase, volunteers embody a broader sense of calling that transcends individual organizations, allowing them to engage fluidly across multiple groups. The societal leadership phase is often the result of a gradual expansion from earlier involvement. For many participants, a deepening personal calling and the accumulation of experiences in one organization led them to engage across multiple nonprofits. This phase is characterized by independence, spiritual connection, and broader social influence. As Farid described, *"At the beginning, I was just volunteering with one group in my neighborhood. But over time, I felt the urge to go beyond that. Now, I feel like I belong to the whole movement, not just one place."* Yuli also reflected on this expansion: *"I used to limit myself to one organization. I was* *afraid to get overwhelmed. But gradually, I found that working with different groups gave me more energy, not less. Now I help coordinate between them."*

This stage, characterized by independence, spiritual connection, and an expanded social reach, reflects volunteers' dedication beyond any one organization. They may serve *"as free persons who do not attach to one particular nonprofit organization but are ready to assist anytime everywhere" (Dani).* Their career trajectory at this phase is built across various nonprofit organizations and includes both formal and informal volunteering activities. Volunteers often compare organizations and expand their networks to national and international levels, blending with diverse volunteering groups. As one volunteer noted, *"Volunteering is my comfort zone. I still volunteer although we have conflicts with paid staff or volunteer colleagues. Any bad situation does not prevent me to help others" (Rudi).* In this phase, they take on informal leadership roles, guiding others and expanding their impact across organizations.

Our findings suggest that while most participants share common motivational foundations, their paths diverge after initial involvement. Some individuals maintain long-term engagement with a single organization, driven by loyalty, clarity of mission, or time constraints. Others demonstrate a developmental progression, gradually expanding their commitment into multiple nonprofit organizations and assuming broader leadership roles. These represent both distinct patterns and, in some cases, sequential stages of a volunteering career, shaped by personal growth, evolving motivations, and external opportunities.

Table 3. Participants' volunteering career path

No.	Participants	Phase 1: Motivational foundations	Phase 2: Focused involvement	Phase 3: Societal leadership
1	Dani	o Passion in social activities o Sentiments to easily get called to help others o Inclination to seek challenging activities	Environmental organization	Member of six nonprofits *[Environmental group, rescue team, disaster mitigation group]*
2	Yuli	o Passion in social activities o Religious teachings	Health care organization	Member of three nonprofits *[Faith-based organization, health care]*
3	Narto	o Passion in social activities o Religious teachings	Faith-based organization	Member of four nonprofits *[Faith-based organization, health care]*
4	Siti	o Sentiments to easily get called to help others	Public traffic organization	Member of five nonprofits *[Charity organization, health care, public traffic voluntary group]*
5	Farid	o Passion in social activities o Sentiments to easily get called to help others o Genetic and familial environmental influences o Inspiration from others o Inclination to seek challenging activities	Environmental organization	Member of six nonprofits *[Environmental group, rescue team, disaster mitigation group, health care, charity organization]*
6	Eva	o Religious teachings	Faith-based organization	Member of two nonprofits *[Faith-based organization]*
7	Rudi	o Passion in social activities o Religious teachings o Inspiration from others o Inclination to seek challenging activities	Faith-based organization	Member of six nonprofits *[Charity organization, rescue team, community broadcasting group, environmental group, firefighter volunteer, faith-based organization]*
8	Putri	o Passion in social activities o Religious teachings	Health care organization	Member of four nonprofits *[Faith-based organization,*

				health care]
9	Udin	o Passion in social activities o Religious teachings o Genetic and familial environmental influences	Disaster mitigation organization	Member of four nonprofits *[Social emergency response, faith-based organization, disaster mitigation group, education and community empowerment]*
10	Parto	o Religious teachings o Genetic and familial environmental influences	Faith-based organization	-
11	Zainab	o Passion in social activities o Religious teachings o Genetic and familial environmental influences	Faith-based organization	-
12	Riko	o Religious teachings o Inspiration from others	Faith-based organization	-
13	Selamet	o Religious teachings o Inspiration from others o Inclination to seek challenging activities	Faith-based organization	-
14	Tutik	o Passion in social activities o Religious teachings o Inspiration from others	Faith-based organization	-
15	Panca	o Passion in social activities o Religious teachings o Inspiration from others o Inclination to seek challenging activities	Faith-based organization	-

The societal leadership path: Factors sustaining calling in multi-organizational volunteering

Nine out of 15 participants followed what we describe as a societal leadership path in their volunteering careers, engaging actively in multiple nonprofit organizations and driven by a strong sense of personal calling. They view volunteering as an integral part of their life mission and plan to continue for years to come. In contrast, six participants focused their commitment on a single organization, citing reasons such as loyalty (Parto, Zainab), time constraints (Tutik), or a preference for focused contribution (Riko, Selamet, Panca). These findings suggest two distinct patterns of long-term volunteering engagement: one characterized by organizational depth, the other by breadth and broader societal influence. The societal leadership path, in particular, was shaped by a blend of environmental, transcendental, and personal factors, along with a sense of ambassadorial responsibility.

Environmental factors

Environmental factors that empower a volunteer's sustained calling and support their decision to pursue a volunteering career include supportive volunteering groups, frequent exposure to others' suffering, and concerns about recurring disasters and socio-economic vulnerabilities.

Volunteers who maintain a high level of commitment to their callings are often surrounded by like-minded individuals and inspiring voluntary groups. They are embedded in supportive environments characterized by a strong commitment to social work: *"We were lucky because we were introduced to volunteers who had the same spirit as us" (Farid, Siti).*

Additionally, volunteers develop deep empathy for beneficiaries or disaster victims, which compels them to act. For instance, one participant shared: *"I could not see this suffering* *anymore, so I had to go to the field even though it was my day off from volunteering" (Farid).* Volunteers often form emotional bonds with beneficiaries, with some saying they felt like close family to the people they helped: *"I cried when visiting the homes of the needy" (Putri); "We were considered part of the beneficiaries' close family" (Eva).*

While connecting with beneficiaries, volunteers also remained aware of recurring disasters caused by human activity. Volunteers who were also environmental activists felt a sense of urgency to address these issues: *"We never stop seeing disasters because humans have created them. Our nature is damaged because of ourselves" (Dani).* Another shared: *"If not us, who will help restore our earth?" (Udin).*

Transcendental factors

The second factor involves the spiritual and non-physical aspects that sustain volunteers' callings and enable them to develop their volunteering careers. Given that most participants followed formal religions such as Islam and Christianity, religious values played a significant role in maintaining their motivation. Religious teachings encouraged participants to consistently sustain their callings and view their volunteering as a form of religious duty. Volunteers often expressed that their efforts were acts of thankfulness to God: *"Volunteering is part of gratitude to God" (Putri).*

Beyond fulfilling religious obligations, participants also believed in transcendental rewards for their efforts. They viewed volunteering as a way to secure divine blessings and protection for their families: *"We believe God will save our families in the future if we continue volunteering" (Eva).*

In addition to religious values, volunteers described experiencing spiritual satisfaction through their work, which they regarded as a profound emotional state beyond ordinary feelings of happiness. This unique satisfaction differed from typical pleasure or joy, as it was rooted in their connection to the suffering of others. Udin and Siti reflected: *"Of course, who could be satisfied while we saw their sorrow and suffering? It was not that type of regular satisfaction because seeing others' misery did not satisfy us" (Udin, Siti).*

Spiritual satisfaction often acted as a powerful source of motivation, with some volunteers likening it to an addiction that drove them to do more. Eva explained: *"Yes, we were very exhausted, but we were delighted and needed more."* This type of satisfaction allowed volunteers to continue their work, even without recognition: *"We could continue helping others, even without appreciation, because our motivation came from the transcendental, the highest spirit" (Udin).*

Personal factors

In considering volunteering work as a career calling, personal factors encompass two key elements: (1) individual perspectives, which are dynamic, and (2) individual traits, which are relatively stable over time and across situations. Individual perspectives are shaped by prior experiences and self-awareness, while individual traits, as aspects of personality, can be assessed through habitual patterns of emotion, thought, and behavior.

We identified three crucial individual perspectives influencing volunteers' callings: moral obligation, self-actualization, and redemption of past failures. Based on our findings, volunteers felt a deeper connection to social actions when they regarded their volunteering careers as a moral obligation. One volunteer explained: *"This is something we must do. The bigger we are, the bigger responsibility we have in society" (Udin).* Additionally, volunteers were motivated by a desire to actualize their talents and skills to benefit others. Three participants (Rudi, Putri, Yuli) expressed that they were driven to showcase their roles and competencies by contributing to their communities.

Another compelling factor binding individuals to sustained involvement in multiple nonprofits was the redemption of past failures or mistakes, such as being selfish, arrogant, or engaging in unethical behavior. Many volunteers sought to "repay" their perceived debts by developing a volunteering career. One participant shared: *"When I was young, I was poor and had many wishes. Sometimes I pickpocketed or misused money that my friends trusted me with. Now, I've changed since meeting someone who introduced me to volunteering" (Rudi).*

In addition to these perspectives, we also identified two significant individual traits that influence sustained calling in a volunteering career: passion for social activities and humanism. These traits appeared to emerge during the motivational foundations stage—before formal involvement—and continued to develop as volunteers matured. For instance, passion drove volunteers to actively seek out new social activities without waiting for invitations. A female volunteer stated: *"We love social actions. We always ask our friends, 'When can we go again? Where is the next social event?'" (Yuli).* This passion fueled their pursuit of future volunteering opportunities.

Passion is closely related to humanism, which emphasizes the intrinsic value of helping others. As one volunteer reflected: *"As I've grown older, I've realized that we are social creatures who must care for others. It's like when I hike in the mountains—I always create new paths so others can follow my trail" (Dani).*

The responsibility as volunteer ambassador

The final factor influencing the decision to develop a volunteering career is an individual's sense of responsibility to promote the profile of volunteers within their communities, akin to the role of a volunteer ambassador. Seven participants, particularly those of middle and late age, expressed a commitment to elevating the image of volunteering as a career. While no formal title of "volunteer ambassador" was conferred upon them, their stories reveal that they played significant roles as informal ambassadors in their daily lives.

As informal volunteer ambassadors, participants described three key responsibilities they undertook to advance the profile of volunteering. First, they felt responsible for passing on knowledge and skills to the younger generation. Many participants expressed concern about their age and the future of volunteer development programs. *"We are already old, and we need regeneration" (Dani),* one volunteer explained. Another added: *"We must train younger volunteers seriously and build their esprit de corps as volunteers" (Siti).*

Second, participants felt compelled to promote the profile of volunteering to broader society, even without formal recognition. Some volunteers observed that *"the profile of a volunteer has not yet been considered a popular career" (Udin).* To address this, they actively promoted volunteering through social media, visits to educate communities, and recruitment efforts targeting young volunteers in schools.

Third, participants took responsibility for motivating other volunteers. Recognizing that volunteers cannot work alone, they emphasized the importance of mutual encouragement to sustain their collective efforts. One participant shared: *"I tell my colleagues that we don't know when we will die, so we should use our lives to collect good deeds through volunteering" (Putri).*

The impact of volunteering career on personal life

When volunteering is pursued as a career, it inevitably influences an individual's personal life, as this career is developed within the context of unpaid work. This section explores the dual impact of a volunteering career, highlighting both positive and negative effects on personal feelings, paid work careers, social relationships, and family dynamics.

Positive impact

Participants in this study perceived numerous positive impacts of their volunteering careers on their lives. First, they experienced an increase in faith and a deeper connection to the transcendental while building their careers as volunteers. As explained earlier, volunteering created a unique relationship between individuals and their spiritual beliefs. Two participants remarked, *"We could not use logical reasoning in volunteering when we felt the presence of God here" (Siti, Farid).* Volunteers often adopted metaphysical perspectives, believing that God ensured their families' welfare and safety in the future.

Additionally, participants frequently mentioned feelings of spiritual satisfaction, which they described as a form of transcendental happiness. This satisfaction arose from *"feeling needed by others" (Eva, Riko)* and *"seeing that others' suffering had been reduced" (Yuli, Zainab, Udin, Parto, Selamet, Tutik).* These experiences rejuvenated their spirits and motivated them to continue volunteering despite challenges: *"We would not stop volunteering, even as we grew older or faced illness" (Narto).*

Volunteering also had positive effects on family dynamics, although, as discussed later, these were sometimes outweighed by the negative impacts. Over time, volunteers indirectly influenced their family members by modeling the value of social engagement. One participant noted, *"At least, my son's passion for social activities is increasing. Yesterday, he joined rescue training in our volunteering group. He knows this skill is important for himself and others" (Farid).* Another shared an effort to instill volunteering values early: *"I registered my newborn as a donor in this nonprofit so I hope he will become a volunteer like me in the future" (Riko).*

In addition to personal and family benefits, a volunteering career also fostered the development of robust social networks. Volunteers built strong connections with colleagues, paid staff in nonprofits, local government representatives, beneficiaries, and non-volunteer friends. These networks, in turn, contributed to their professional growth. While volunteering, many participants were also pursuing paid careers as doctors, nurses, students, and entrepreneurs. For example, some nonprofits provided certificates or awards that could be used for professional credit, benefiting participants' roles as doctors or students. Long-term volunteering experiences also opened opportunities for some individuals to transition into careers as social workers within nonprofit organizations.

Negative impact

While a volunteering career generates positive outcomes, it also presents significant challenges. Participants revealed that volunteering in multiple nonprofits often led to dilemmas, although they were reluctant to share these stories openly. Based on their experiences, three participants reported neglecting their education to focus on volunteering. For instance, one participant chose to prioritize volunteering during the national school examination period: *"I focused on volunteering work during the period of national examinations at school" (Zainab).* Another participant sacrificed their education savings for volunteering activities. Reflecting on this decision, a young volunteer shared:

> *"My father left me some money for my future education, but I didn't use it for study. Instead, I spent it on volunteering work. I was a volunteer coordinator at the time and had to take care of my subordinates. My mother became suspicious, furious, and even printed out my bankbook to check my spending history" (Rudi).*

Participants also reported overlooking their personal health to fulfill their callings. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, some volunteers worked tirelessly, assisting communities by delivering masks, spraying disinfectants, and organizing emergency hospitals, even in areas with extremely high transmission rates: *"We kept assisting communities even when the rate of COVID-19 transmission was very high in that area" (Siti, Farid).* Some volunteers ignored the risks of contagion by approaching and caring for COVID-19 patients without wearing personal protective equipment.

Another challenge involved job insecurity. While 10 participants had stable jobs that supported their volunteering activities, five were full-time volunteers who relied on their faith in God for their families' welfare. They believed that their role was to volunteer and that God would provide for their needs. This "transcendental transaction," as they described it, often resulted in financial uncertainty, which could jeopardize their families' futures. Family members expressed concerns about the lack of a lucrative permanent job and its implications for long-term stability.

All participants acknowledged that volunteering in multiple nonprofits negatively affected their families in five key ways: reduced family time, lack of attention to family, uncertainty about children's future, household financial problems, and family conflicts.

First, volunteers spent less time with their families. As one participant shared: *"I went home at night when my kids were sleeping. In the morning, I was sleeping while my kids were awake. We only met at noon when they weren't taking a nap" (Udin).* Second, **v**olunteers were unable to prioritize family needs. For instance, one participant's children complained because their father never took them on vacations, unlike other families: *"My kids complained because I never brought them on Sunday vacations like normal families" (Dani).* Another participant reported that their husband felt uncomfortable because he couldn't predict his wife's volunteering schedule: *"My husband felt uncomfortable since he couldn't predict my volunteering hours" (Putri).* Third, **s**ome volunteers admitted they lacked concrete plans for their children's welfare. Instead, they entrusted their families' futures entirely to God: *"We surrendered our families' fates completely to God" (Dani). Others described their approach as living life "just like the flowing water" (Udin).* Fourth, reduced focus on paid work careers led to financial instability, causing anxiety within households. One single volunteer explained: *"I realized that my mother sometimes disagreed with my volunteering activities because she always encouraged me to work and get married. My other family members also suggested the same" (Rudi).* Fifth, tensions often arose between volunteers and their families, stemming from the accumulation of these issues. Conflicts worsened when volunteers perceived their careers as inherently righteous and disregarded their families' opinions. One participant stated: *"I told my wife, please don't ask me when I'll come home from volunteering. I don't like to be controlled" (Rudi).*

Unmarried participants also reported familial challenges. For instance, one participant described the tension with her mother, despite support from her grandparents: *"I'm not married yet. My grandparents allowed me to volunteer, but my mother didn't agree and was always angry with me" (Zainab).* These issues often became more complex as family size and extended family involvement increased.

Discussion

This study addresses a significant gap in the literature by exploring the concept of a volunteering career as a distinct trajectory within the broader framework of nonprofit engagement. The findings highlight the three flexible phases of a volunteering career (motivational foundations, focused involvement, and societal leadership) and provide insight into how volunteers sustain their commitment across multiple nonprofit organizations. Unlike traditional paid work careers, volunteering careers are uniquely driven by intrinsic motivations, including alignment with personal values, callings, and a commitment to meaningful work.

Implications for the concept of volunteering career

Volunteering career, as described in this study, challenges conventional understandings of careers as financially motivated endeavors. Existing research often focuses on paid work careers, which emphasize financial returns, hierarchical advancement, and professional growth (Benson et al., 2020; Heslev, 2005). While volunteering is often viewed as supplementary to paid employment, our study illustrates how it can form a central, fulfilling career path grounded in serious leisure (Stebbins, 1996). Serious leisure offers a valuable lens to understand volunteering careers, highlighting the intentional pursuit of meaningful work, skill acquisition, and identity formation, even without financial incentives (Cantillon & Baker, 2020a). This perspective positions a volunteering career as fulfilling and career-like, emphasizing personal growth and societal contributions over financial gain.

Participants in this study illustrate the flexibility and plurality of a volunteering career, integrating them with paid work careers to create meaningful dual career trajectories. The three phases identified in this study—beginning with motivational foundations, followed by focused involvement in a single organization, and for some, expansion into societal leadership across multiple organizations—reflect both developmental progression and divergent pathways. This layered model illustrates that not all volunteers follow the same route, and some remain deeply committed to a single organization, while others broaden their influence across causes. Unlike traditional career ladders focused on advancement within a single organization (Stewart & Kuenzi, 2018; Suarez, 2010), a volunteering career often involves movement across multiple organizations, with volunteers exercising autonomy in choosing when and where to contribute. A volunteering career in this study may differ from other aspects of the career path as it is not about “going up an organizational ladder” (Millward & Kyriakidou, 2004, p. 20). This phenomenon highlights the distinctive nature of a volunteering career, where loyalty lies with the cause rather than any single organization, allowing individuals to navigate their career paths dynamically.

The role of calling in sustained volunteering

We suggest that many volunteers tend to regard their careers as a calling (Faletehan et al., 2021; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Volunteers view their callings as a personal mission to help others. Especially at the intersection of career and calling topics, the presence of individual calling and personal career development are considered to be closely related (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Hirschi & Herrmann, 2013; Lysova et al., 2019). In fact, contemporary literature combines calling and career at the same time (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015, p. 163; Hall & Chandler, 2005). Scholars still seek to understand how individuals can have a meaningful career (Dumulescu et al., 2015), and the construct of “career calling” has received a lot of attention in academic debates recently (Praskova et al., 2015). It seems that individuals can feel psychological success (i.e., subjective feelings of achievement) when their careers are also calling (Hall & Chandler, 2005).

In our study, calling emerged as a central theme in participants' narratives, driving their decisions to pursue and sustain volunteering career. Reflecting both neoclassical and modern perspectives on calling, participants described their motivations as stemming from either transcendental summons or personal passion (Molloy & Foust, 2017; Shimizu et al., 2018). This dual perspective underscores the versatility of calling as a motivational construct. In Indonesia, with its strong religious traditions, transcendental factors often played a dominant role, particularly among volunteers affiliated with faith-based organizations (Faletehan, 2024; Faletehan & van Burg, 2023). However, participants from secular organizations also emphasized personal fulfillment and a sense of purpose, highlighting the broader applicability of the concept.

These findings contribute to the literature on meaningful work and career calling by demonstrating how volunteers integrate their callings into a structured career path. This aligns with prior research indicating that individuals who view their careers as callings experience greater satisfaction and engagement (Duffy & Dik, 2013; Steger et al., 2012). In our study, participants at the societal leadership stage embodied their callings by committing to their roles as volunteers across multiple organizations, transcending organizational boundaries to prioritize the broader purpose of their work.

This study builds on previous research by showing that calling in a volunteering context is not only a motivator but also a mechanism for navigating multiple organizational affiliations. Participants often described themselves as “free agents,” driven by their callings to assist in diverse contexts rather than attaching loyalty to a single organization. This finding extends the work of Cuskelly et al. (2002), who examined the shifting levels of organizational commitment in volunteering roles within a single nonprofit organization, by introducing insights from volunteers engaged across multiple organizations Additionally, it enriches the concept of super-volunteers—defined as “individuals who volunteer 10 or more hours per week with a single organization” (Einolf & Yung, 2018, p. 789)—by exploring the dynamics of high-intensity volunteering across diverse nonprofit contexts.

Challenges of a volunteering career

While the positive impacts of a volunteering career, such as personal fulfillment and societal contributions, are well-documented (Hudson & Inkson, 2006; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), this study also reveals challenges. Family tensions were frequently mentioned, with participants describing conflicts arising from differing priorities between their volunteer commitments and family expectations. Existing studies claim that family is an important construct that must be considered when individuals decide to volunteer (Cowlishaw et al., 2010; Nesbit, 2013). Our findings align with research on work-life balance in unpaid roles, which identifies risks such as workaholism, burnout, and neglected relationships (Cardador & Caza, 2012; Dalla Rosa & Vianello, 2020). Addressing these challenges requires volunteers to navigate the balance between their paid work, volunteering career, and personal lives, ensuring sustainable engagement.

The COVID-19 pandemic further influenced the dynamics of a volunteering career. Participants noted heightened demands for their services during the pandemic, particularly in health and disaster response, which intensified personal pressures. However, the crisis also fostered innovation, such as virtual volunteering, which provided new avenues for balancing commitments. These shifts underscore the evolving nature of volunteering careers in response to external challenges and highlight areas for future research on the long-term effects of the pandemic on volunteer engagement.

Our findings offer practical implications for nonprofit organizations in managing and retaining volunteers. Recognizing that volunteers often commit to the nature of their work rather than specific organizations can inform retention strategies. Flexible engagement models, opportunities for skill development, understanding personality characteristics (Hudson & Inkson, 2006; Paterson et al., 2009), and support for balancing commitments can enhance volunteer satisfaction and sustainability. Organizations should consider the unique needs of multi-organizational volunteers, acknowledge their autonomy, and encourage collaboration across networks to maximize societal impact.

In addition, this study has several limitations. First, the narrative inquiry approach focuses on in-depth individual experiences, which may limit the generalizability of findings. Second, the research was conducted in a developing country context and involved participants primarily affiliated with religious organizations, which may restrict the applicability of insights to more secular or differently structured nonprofit environments. Third, the cross-sectional design does not capture how volunteering careers evolve over time. To build on these findings, future research should consider longitudinal approaches that explore how individual trajectories shift across life stages. Comparative studies could also examine how cultural, institutional, and economic contexts—such as labor markets, civil society structures, and religious traditions—shape the relationship between paid work and long-term volunteer engagement. Although this study centers on Indonesian volunteers, we believe the proposed flexible and non-linear model offers valuable conceptual insights that may be applicable in other settings where civic engagement intersects with identity, spirituality, and community life.

Conclusion

This study introduces the concept of a volunteering career as a meaningful trajectory within nonprofit engagement, comprising three flexible phases: motivational foundations, focused involvement, and societal leadership. While some individuals deepen their commitment within a single organization, others expand their influence across multiple organizations, demonstrating plural career pathways shaped by evolving motivations and life contexts. Our findings show how volunteers integrate values, spiritual calling, and personal meaning into long-term service, often alongside paid work and family responsibilities. This trajectory is sustained by a blend of environmental, transcendental, personal, and ambassadorial factors that reinforce commitment across multiple nonprofit roles. While many volunteers experience fulfillment and purpose, this career path can also introduce tensions in personal life, including time-related strain and relational challenges. This research reframes the notion of career to include unpaid, non-linear forms of contribution, extending theories of serious leisure and calling to better reflect the dynamic realities of volunteer engagement.

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The author(s) declare that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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Research Article

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Poverty Reduction Through Partnership: The Role of Collaborative Civic Leadership

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Despite national efforts to address poverty, it remains a significant challenge in the United States. This study focuses on leadership strategies employed by civic organizations in Virginia to address poverty. Using a qualitative approach, the research explores how leadership influences poverty reduction. It studies the existing systemic barriers, organizational dynamics, and leadership approaches that can be most effective in addressing poverty in the communities. Interviews with 14 representatives from various civic organizations reveal three key themes: poverty as a systemic challenge, progress through participatory leadership, and humble leadership as a way forward. Findings suggest that effective poverty reduction requires collaborative efforts, active listening, selflessness, empathy, and community-driven leadership. These insights contribute to understanding how leadership can be leveraged to address complex social issues of poverty and provide a framework for applying these strategies in similar contexts.

Keywords: Leadership, Poverty, Systems

Introduction

Despite significant national efforts, poverty remains a persistent issue in the United States (Parrott, 2022; U.S. Census Bureau, 2025). Leadership is critical to poverty reduction and sustainable development (Bunch & Sulamoyo, 2016; Burns, 2004; Chanda & Chitondo, 2024; Oliphant, 2016; Shields, 2014; Sowcik et al., 2015; Worthy et al., 2019). However, more research is needed to understand the characteristics of effective leadership for reducing poverty (Bigelow, 2025; Brennan, 2014; Briscoe, 2022). Virginia has experienced decreasing poverty rates, better than the national average (Kutner, 2024), making it a relevant case for examination. In 2023, Virginia's poverty rate was 10.2%, approximately 2% lower than the national average, and the state's income inequality in 2022 stood at 0.475, just below the national figure of 0.478, with both trends declining since 2017 (Statista, 2024; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

Egholm et al. (2020) note that civic organizations help to strengthen social bonds, encourage civic engagement, and uphold public welfare. Civic organizations are nonprofit, voluntary groups that operate independently from the government and focus on promoting community welfare, social causes, or public interests through citizen engagement and collective action (Salamon et al., 2003). The stakeholder approach in civic organizations reflects the role of relationships and how

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different groups influence value creation, leadership, and management challenges (McIntyre et al., 2024). Understanding these dynamics can provide valuable insights into strategies that can be applied in other regions facing similar challenges.

The purpose of his study is to explore the leadership strategies employed by civic organizations in Virginia, identifying the key factors contributing to their success or failure in poverty reduction efforts. By exploring the contextual factors contributing to successful poverty reduction, the research seeks to identify leadership practices that can be applied to similar initiatives in other regions. The study also explores how the dynamics of organizational leadership influence the effectiveness of poverty reduction efforts. The major questions that the research addresses are:

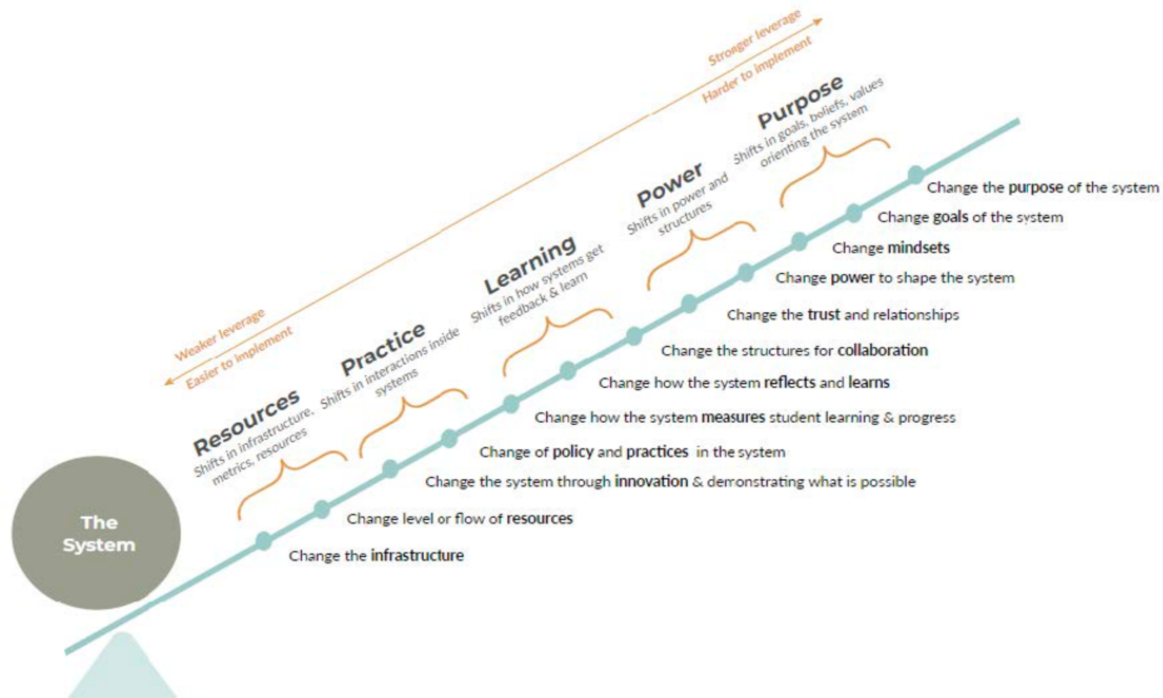
1. What factors affect the poverty reduction efforts by civic organizations in Virginia?

2. What are the key considerations for effective leadership in alleviating poverty?

Literature Review

In Virginia, poverty is caused and influenced by several factors (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2023). Beyond unemployment issues, increasingly high rent levels have created financial strain for low-income families (Cebula & Davis, 2022). While 10.2% of Virginia's population currently lives in poverty, the rate has been declining (Statista, 2023). Research suggests the recent success may be due to collective leadership, which is known to enhance community resilience through improved group performance (Arkedis et al., 2023). The collective leadership framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Collective Leadership Framework

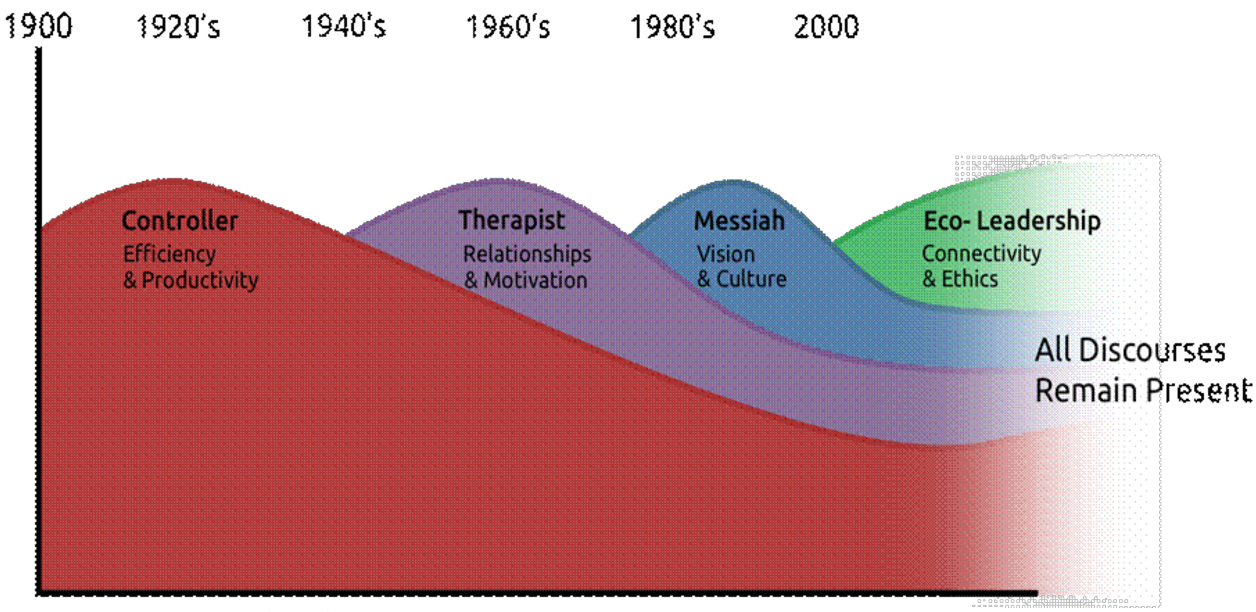


Note. From Arkedis et al. (2023, p. 21).

As noted by Van De Mieroop et al. (2020), leadership is a product of ongoing interactions, meaning that understanding it requires studying contextual elements in which these interactions occur. Effective leadership helps communities recognize challenges, find solutions, and take action (Allen & Lachapelle, 2015; Israel & Beaulieu, 1990; Ridzi & Prior, 2023). Leadership plays a vital role in promoting economic sustainability and investing in essential services like education, healthcare, and affordable housing (Mkapa, 2008). However, collective leadership can falter and lead to setbacks if not managed properly (Shirk, 2022). This supports the need to understand the role of civic organizations in alleviating poverty through different strategies, such as building networks that support underserved communities (Cordeiro, 2024).

Perceptions of leadership are evolving as they adapt to tackle the complex and persistent challenges we face in society (Grint, 2022; Western, 2019). Grint (2005) suggests that as problems become increasingly uncertain, there is a need to transition from coercive methods of leadership (i.e., hard power) to more collaborative and normative approaches (i.e., soft power). Western (2019) categorizes leadership into four distinct discourses: Controller, Therapist, Messiah, and Eco-Leadership (Figure 2). Leadership theory has progressed from control and charismatic transformation toward more relational and reflective approaches, with a growing emphasis on leadership styles that value shared purpose over individual heroism (Justino Alves et al., 2025; Zhang, 2014). Eco leadership has emerged as a response to shifting social landscapes, and the need for leadership approaches that are more adaptive and collaborative (Cletzer & Kaufman, 2020; Kaufman et al., 2019).

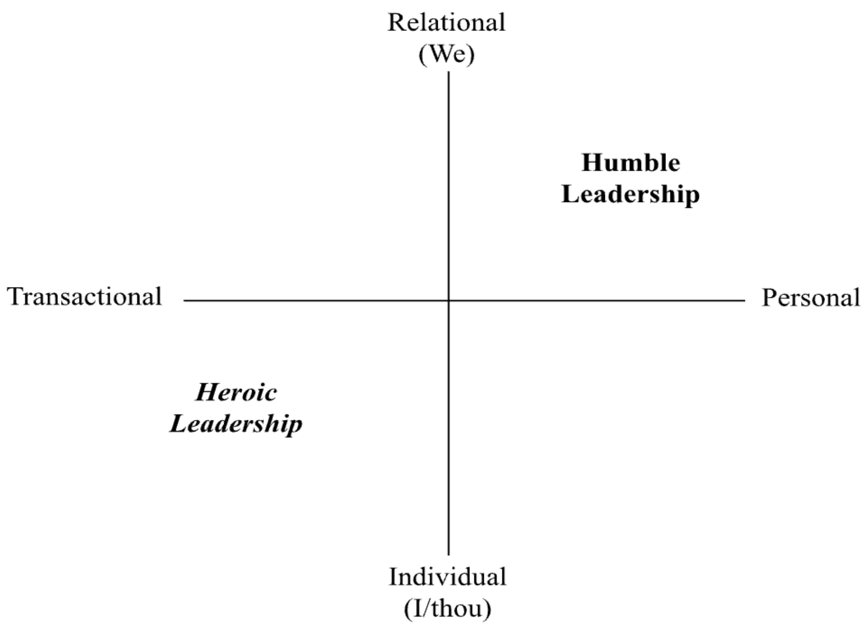
Figure 2. The Discourses of Leadership



Note: From Western (2013).

In today's interconnected world, humble leadership is increasingly recognized for its role in countering self-serving leadership and promoting ethical solutions to global challenges (Chandler et al., 2023; Council & Sowcik, 2020; Kelemen et al., 2023). Morris et al. (2005) define humility as “a personal orientation founded on a willingness to see the self accurately and a propensity to put oneself in perspective” (p. 1331). Schein and Schein (2023) note that humble leaders (Figure 3) focus on building trust, developing relationships, and embracing empathy as a strength. Leaders who show humility can work together with the team to improve the organization, and this can lead to exceptional outcomes (Cable, 2018). When followers perceive their leader as humble, they regard the leader, team, and themselves as modest, united, and focused on development (Davis et al., 2023). Narcissistic leaders, characterized by self-serving attitudes and low empathy, may be harmful to both organizations and employees; and this has increased the interest of practitioners in exploring humble leadership characteristics (Luo et al., 2022). Local civic leaders practice humble leadership by creating spaces for new leaders and raising awareness in the communities regarding civic opportunities (Kaufman, 2018); however, their contributions are often undervalued (Vlahos, 2023).

Figure 3. Humble Leadership: Leader's Perspective



Note. Adapted from Schein and Schein (2023).

According to Magzan (2012), complex social issues require bringing together communities and stakeholders to leverage collective knowledge and wisdom. Effective leadership is not about having all the answers; moreover, creating a participatory environment where team members can share ideas leads to greater progress (Minnesota Management and Budget, n.d.). Similarly, Osei-Kufuor and Koomson (2014) found that community participation has positive outcomes for poverty reduction through skill development and enabling the members to take group initiatives. Table 1 summarizes the definitions and relationships among the humble, participatory, and collective leadership approaches that form the theoretical foundation of this manuscript.

Methodology

The research process began with the validation of online information to identify organizations within Virginia that are actively working to reduce poverty. It involved reviewing publicly available data and directories through organizational websites. A stratified sampling method was employed to include various organizational leadership styles and strategies. The organizations were selected from ten primary areas of focus: Economic Development, Education, Food and Hunger, Grantmaking and Philanthropy, Housing, Legal Assistance, Mental Health, Regional Planning and Collaboration, Violence and Assault, and Youth Development.

The study involved interviews with 14 representatives of civic organizations working within the state. Each interview was conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 60 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured, with open-ended questions designed to encourage detailed responses and exploration of the challenges and opportunities faced by the participants. Some examples of questions include: "*As you think about the type of leadership that is most effective in addressing poverty issues, what characteristics come to mind?"* and "*In your experience, what difference does leadership make in the success or failure of efforts to reduce poverty in a community or region?*" The qualitative data collected from these interviews provided insights into the personal and professional experiences of the participants.

Table 1. Relationship and Comparison Among Collective, Humble, and Participatory Leadership Styles

Style	Definition	Relationship to other styles
Collective Leadership	Characterized by an approach where one or more leaders leverage the abilities and knowledge of members within a network, and responsibilities are distributed and adjusted as circumstances demand (Friedrich et al., 2009).	More fluid and decentralized than participatory leadership. Like humble leadership, it requires trust and respect but emphasizes distributed responsibility over individual humility.
Humble Leadership	Characterized by a leader's ability to assess their own strengths and weaknesses, recognize and value contributions of others, and remain open to learning and accepting feedback (Owens et al., 2013).	Closely related to participatory and collective leadership through its emphasis on valuing team members. However, it is distinct in focusing on the leader's self-awareness and teachability.
Participatory Leadership	Characterized by an approach where leaders actively involve members of a community or organization to achieve a common goal or shared responsibility (Suherni et al., 2023).	Shares common ground with collective leadership in involving others in decision-making, but the final decision is typically made by the leader. It is more structured than collective leadership.

The verbatim transcripts of the interviews were first examined and coded. In the initial step, open coding was used to identify keywords, phrases, and concepts related to leadership and poverty reduction. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is a widely used method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process involved several rounds of coding to refine and categorize the themes to ensure that all relevant aspects of leadership in poverty reduction were captured. To reduce personal bias, we read and reviewed the interview transcripts multiple times and discussed them together. Additionally, we documented detailed records of analysis steps to be transparent about how the conclusions were reached. As the analysis progressed, themes were grouped into broader categories to understand the connections between leadership actions and poverty alleviation. We checked themes across different participants to confirm the validity and reliability of our findings. Throughout the process, special attention was given to how leadership practices influenced poverty reduction strategies and the experiences of different stakeholders. The findings were synthesized to understand the leadership dynamics in tackling poverty. Similar qualitative studies have employed interviews and thematic analysis to explore related areas such as leadership for community change (Folta et al., 2012), rural poverty experiences (Pitt, 2021), poverty-related stress among youth (Hall et al., 2019), and school leadership in high-poverty contexts (Woods & Martin, 2016).

Table 2 illustrates the organizational representatives who participated in the interview and their focus. To make sure that the identities of the participants are protected, the direct quotes of the participants are referenced through alphabets.

Table 2. Organizational Foci of Interview Participants

Participant	Organizational Focus
A	Youth Development
B	Economic Development and Education
C	Violence and Assault
D	Economic Development
E	Economic Development, Food, Housing and Mental Health
F	Legal Assistance
G	Economic Development, Food, and Housing
H	Economic Development, Food, Housing, and Education
I	Housing
J	Regional Planning and Collaboration
K	Food and Hunger
L	Housing
M	Economic Development, Education, Housing, and Violence and Assault
N	Grantmaking and Philanthropy

Note. The table represents the alphabetic codes for the civic organizations' representatives and organizational foci. The codes are also used in the results section of this manuscript.

Results/Findings

Analysis of the interviews revealed three overarching themes: (1) Poverty as a systemic challenge, (2) Progress through participatory leadership, and (3) Humble leadership as a way forward.

*Theme 1: Poverty as a Systemic Challenge*Interview participants noted that poverty often stems from systemic inequities, generational cycles, and economic mobility challenges. Numerous barriers were revealed, such as limited access to education, healthcare, work opportunities, and economic systems that impact the working poor. The sub-themes that emerged include Structural Barriers, the Benefits Cliff, and Stigmas Related to Poverty.

Structural Barriers - Access to safe housing, transportation, and food emerged as concerns for both urban and rural communities. Participants mentioned that reliable transportation is essential for accessing jobs and services. Beyond these immediate needs, they also discussed the deep-rooted and generational nature of poverty. Poverty can be caused by economic stagnation, limited job opportunities, and restricted educational pathways. As one participant noted, "Stagnant wages or stagnant wage growth... and a lack of educational opportunities" (I) are the factors that perpetuate financial hardship.

The conversations further explored how systemic inefficiencies contribute to poverty. One participant described how dysfunction within relationships and institutions compounds over time:

> "When relationships and systems don't work how they are supposed to, it creates distorted and messed-up relationships and systems. And as those things create layers and layers and layers of things that aren't working right, poverty is a result of those things." (A)

This perspective reflects how poverty is not merely an individual struggle but a structural issue that can be reinforced by long-standing barriers. Additionally, the participants also mentioned that official poverty measurements may not always be able to measure the struggles of people living in poverty. One participant pointed out: "There are many, many more hundred, if not thousands, of Virginians in poverty than the Federal poverty guidelines would indicate" (F).

Benefits Cliff - Participants discussed the challenges of the "benefits cliff," where even a small increase in income can trigger the sudden loss of public assistance. They mentioned that this can make it harder for individuals to achieve financial stability. This abrupt cutoff discourages economic progress, as individuals may find themselves struggling despite earning more. As one participant explained:

> "There's a threshold of income which they can make before they start to lose those benefits, and they don't just lose them gradually—they're losing them. It's called a cliff for a reason because, literally, if you go, you know, half a dollar more over a certain threshold, you suddenly lose all of your benefits. That's a really big discussion right now in the workforce development space." (B)

Participants also noted that poverty does not simply disappear once individuals surpass the eligibility thresholds for assistance programs. In the words of a participant:

> "Many of our programs serve individuals under 200% of federal poverty. And so, you know, [including] extreme poverty. But poverty still exists for those families once they get past that 200%; and so especially, I would say, the working poor who are working, but experiencing poverty still, struggling to maintain their basic necessities." (H)

To address these challenges, participants suggested policies that provide a more gradual transition out of poverty rather than abrupt benefit cutoffs. A more graduated approach may allow individuals to adjust as they increase their earnings. For example, one participant described a priority to "reward working and trying to get a leg up, but [a program that] doesn't snatch the

In addition to stigma, poverty is sometimes mistaken for neglect. One participant described how financial hardship can be unfairly used against parents:

> "Poverty is used as a weapon, particularly against parents. And, you know, there are oftentimes cases where cases of quote, unquote, 'abuse' are reported; and it's really a case of poverty and lack of housing, [which] is used as the reason for removing a child or children from the home." (C)

This expresses how struggling families may face punishment instead of receiving the support they need. Participants also emphasized that poverty should not be seen as a personal failure but as a safety net out from under you very quickly; but it's graduated just so that people can adjust to bringing in their own income" (G).

Stigmas - Participants discussed how the stigma surrounding poverty affects both individuals and entire communities. When poverty is concentrated in certain areas, it can lead to social isolation and fewer opportunities, making it harder for people to improve their circumstances. One participant mentioned that "there's also the stigma that accompanies being in poverty and the effect that has on communities; [like] if you have a high concentration of poverty, it could have really negative impacts" (I).

more significant issue that affects communities as a whole. They pointed out that economic hardship is often linked to emotional and mental stress, not just a lack of money. As one participant explained:

> "It's spiritual, emotional, mental—all of that is included, not just the physical aspect of lacking something. There's always something else that might be lacking that's causing that lack. So, we try to come at it from a different point of view by asking about their emotional state, their stress state, and all of that." (G)

The participants pointed out that leaders need to recognize that a better way to address poverty is by treating it not simply as the result of individual decisions but rather as a systemic issue. This supports the notion that the people living in poverty should not be viewed in isolation as "us" vs. "them."

Theme 2: Progress Through Participatory Leadership

The participants mentioned that a participatory approach involves actively engaging community members in decision-making. They shared that it is not just about involving people in the process but about how organizations function based on their input. The following aspects emerged under this theme: Community-Driven, Adaptive Learning, and Collaborative Reciprocity.

Community-Driven - Participants discussed that if organizations can involve those with lived experience on the organizational board or in leadership roles, it helps make the decisions more practical. In this way, decisions and strategies are grounded in the actual needs and challenges faced by the community. In the words of a participant:

> "I think some of the most influential and impactful leaders that I've met in this space are individuals who've had lived experiences with poverty. So, even if it was not them directly who experienced poverty at some point in their life, they've had a close family member, they've had a best friend, [or] they've had some interaction with the individuals that we're talking about." (B)

Another participant added that many organizations already integrate lived experience into their advisory structures: "Most of these organizations that I am familiar with have advisory groups that are led by and deeply informed by people who have lived experience in spaces, either economically or health-wise" (J).

They also emphasized that while knowledge and expertise are valuable, leadership benefits from directly engaging with the communities affected. There is a growing recognition that leadership in the anti-poverty movement centers the voices of the people who are actually experiencing poverty in real-time:

> "I think it's particularly important for leaders in the anti-poverty movement to prioritize the ideas and priorities of people living in poverty right now. You know, theory is not enough. It really needs to be a community. Any good leader in the anti-poverty movement has to be following the community that they serve." (F)

This encourages a shift in traditional hierarchical structures, where leaders are often external from the realities of the people they aim to serve. The priority is for a deeper form of engagement, where the community is not just an object of service, they are key stakeholders in the process of organizational growth and development. This approach can be helpful in addressing the systemic nature of poverty, as the context-specific solutions can be used to address root causes of poverty and not just the symptoms.

Adaptive Learning - Participants mentioned that continuous learning and adaptation helps a leader to be more effective in addressing the challenges associated with poverty. Structural barriers are often embedded and vary across communities. So, community members were mentioned as essential knowledge sources that informed both the immediate needs of the community and long-term strategies. This learning process is not a one-time exchange; it is an ongoing relationship where the community provides feedback, and organizations use that feedback to adjust and evolve their strategies. This learning and reflection can help leaders recognize the interconnected systems—such as education, healthcare, and employment—and better understand the barriers within them. In the words of a participant:

> "There's leadership with a capital 'L' that I see, and then I see leadership, maybe with a lowercase 'l'.... The capital 'L' leadership is leaders of organizations who are moving and trying to move big agendas forward. I mean, they are critical, and certainly, their focus is on realizing there's an end game—that there's going to be bumps in the road and that you've got to keep fighting through those critical elements of that leadership. Then I think there's the lowercase 'l' leadership, where families—who really are the experts on what they're going through—help them understand their roles as leaders, which may be lowercase 'l,' but as leaders in telling the stories of their family and families like them. [They] are critical in helping, whether it be local administrators or legislators at the state level, even at the federal level—helping them understand the value of the services that we often talk about, or they see on paper—in abstract—what this means to a family, and how it affects them." (C)

This idea of leadership as a two-way process was further supported by another participant, who emphasized the importance of openness to change:

> "For me, the mindset changes, the power changes—that's going to be a door that swings both ways. It's not just saying, 'Hey, I work with under-resourced youth.' It's not just ensuring that a teenager from a low-income home on the autism spectrum gets to have a say in how our organization runs—like we bring him onto the board, right? That's one thing. It's another thing to be willing for our whole board to be changed by him. So, our mindsets change. We're not just trying to change his mindset. We're willing for him to change our mindset." (A)

These perspectives explained the different dimensions of leadership. The organizational leaders who drive large-scale change and individuals of the community who advocate for their needs play a symbiotic role in helping one another. Effective leadership requires continuous learning and the ability to adapt, which relies on this partnership. A participant noted that "participating in various initiatives, being collaborative, and working with different types of entities" (L) are some of the characteristics of an effective leader.

Collaborative Reciprocity - Participants emphasized that addressing complex social issues like poverty cannot be done in isolation. They mentioned that no single organization can solve these challenges alone, and a coordinated, multi-sectoral approach is necessary. This calls for the navigation of invisible leadership within the sector and collaboration among various organizations, stakeholders, and community groups. In the words of a participant:

> "You know, one of the things that I find—day in and day out—is you've got [to have] collaborative reciprocity, well-working partnerships, and collaborations. Then, when there is a need, you can pick up the phone because you already know who your peer is at the [certain organization]. And I think from a CEO or chief leadership perspective, I think that is probably one of the most important roles for leaders to have would be developing those trusting relationships." (M)

Another participant explained the value of understanding the broader ecosystem of services: "Do we know who works on housing, who works on food insecurity? Do other organizations know that we deal with employment and training to help people get better jobs?" (D). This implies that effective leadership in the poverty reduction space involves building strong, trust-based relationships across different organizations and sectors. By doing so, leaders can more efficiently mobilize resources and expertise. The partnership across sectors can also be helpful in implementing the systemic solutions to poverty that single entities may not be able to solve alone. As explained by one participant, there is importance in "understanding that a single organization can't tackle it—[that] all individuals in that leadership space know who needs to be at the table, or which table" (B).

Although the leaders are working in different organizations and sectors, they are connected by a common goal of poverty reduction through community service. Thus, the findings reflect that it is important to recognize the common goal and work in collaboration.

Theme 3: Humble Leadership as a Way Forward

Humble leadership stood out as an effective leadership approach to address poverty. This leadership style is characterized by a leader's ability to be open to different perspectives, appreciate others' contributions, and prioritize serving others over personal recognition. The following sub-themes emerged: Active Listening, Selflessness, and Compassion in leadership.

Active Listening - A major subject that came through in discussions was the importance of active listening as a component of effective communication. Participants mentioned that, according to their experience, effective leaders in poverty reduction are those who take the time to understand the needs of the people they serve through active communication. As one participant noted, an effective leader is "somebody who listens to what people need rather than assumes what people need" (E).

They mentioned that this approach requires closely engaging with individuals and families, which allows leaders to develop a better understanding of the complex, systemic challenges they face. Humble leaders recognize they do not have all the answers and that one-size-fits-all solutions may not work in all cases. One participant illustrated this perspective:

> "They're not just solving a math problem, but they're serving individuals. They're serving human beings—people who have real needs and, you know, real complicated lives. And

> not everybody is the same, right? Everybody has unique needs when they're experiencing poverty…. And as long as we are seeing people that we're serving for who they are, you know, then we can do better to serve them.” (K)

Another participant supported this perspective that leaders who effectively communicate with families over time gain valuable insights into their stressors and can help them access services in a more effective way:

> “To be able to see the broad picture of issues that families face and not trying to be myopic in focus [are some characteristics of an effective leader]. So oftentimes, particularly with our home visiting programs, the home visitors talk with their families and, over time… uniquely figure out and understand what their stressors are and what services or what help they need, and then work with them to find those, or get access to those services rather than just being a one size fits all.” (C)

Selflessness - Effective leadership in poverty reduction also requires selflessness. Participants described effective leaders as those who prioritize the well-being of the people they serve over their personal interests. Selfless leaders are more likely to build trust and encourage collaboration because they focus on the collective good. One individual emphasized this, stating that an effective leader demonstrates "selflessness… openness to new ideas, willingness to work with other people, willingness to listen, [and the] ability to set one’s ego aside" (F).

The discussions revealed that this sense of humility can enable leaders to recognize the systemic nature of poverty instead of attributing it solely to individual choices. When leaders can set aside ego and personal bias, they can view poverty as changeable rather than a fixed personal failure, and they are more likely to reduce the blame and shame associated with poverty. Because they are less ego-driven, humble leaders are more willing to question existing systems and mindsets. A participant explained that financial instability is often shaped by broader societal factors:

> "An attitude of humility and unity, a recognition that—'Hey! You know your lack of financial instability isn’t really just about you making great decisions, right? Maybe you made a bunch of great ones, but you have made bad ones, too; we all have.’" (A)

Moreover, many leaders who work in poverty reduction are motivated by a sense of purpose rather than financial gain. As one participant observed:

> “Those of us that choose to work in this field—it's not because we want to be independently wealthy; it's because we are able to recharge our batteries and get up the next day to fight another battle, because we do see on an individual or a family basis how what we do is impacting their lives positively.” (M)

Compassion - Compassion was identified as an essential quality for effective leadership in poverty reduction. Participants mentioned that leaders who genuinely care about their communities recognize the different ways in which poverty might impact individuals. They are able to put themselves in the shoes of these people and recognize the best set of actions. In the words of a participant: “Our organization has many different denominations involved in it, and all of them have that one key ingredient, which is the compassion that they need to see so many different sides of an issue, not just one” (G).

It was discussed that beyond addressing material needs, leaders must also be able to challenge misconceptions about poverty. Participants explained the importance of moving beyond a purely transactional approach. They stated that leaders should not view individuals as problems to be fixed but instead develop an understanding of the ways poverty affects people's lives:

> "I think people need to really be able to not look at individuals and go, 'Oh, gee! We're here to fix you,' but really have a sense of how poverty may be impacting their lives in a variety of other ways rather than just, you know, 'Do I have housing? Do I have clothes?' So, I think that empathy is one of those key strengths." (D)

Additionally, participants noted that poverty is often misunderstood, as public perceptions can be shaped by classism, racism, and ignorance. One individual emphasized the need for leaders to actively listen, empathize, and challenge these biases:

> "I guess an issue is that people have misconceptions about the reason that people are in poverty. And I think that, too often, a lot of that is based on classism, racism, and ignorance. And so, an important thing to do is to listen, empathize, and understand that people don't choose to be in poverty." (I)

The statements reflect that leaders who are compassionate and genuinely care about the people that they serve recognize that poverty extends beyond material needs. This is an important characteristic in poverty reduction efforts as they do not view poverty as a problem to be fixed; they attempt to see the bigger picture of the challenges the people face and offer relevant help.

Discussion and Recommendations

Through this research, we have identified the leadership characteristics and approaches that can be most effective in tackling the system of poverty. Sklaveniti (2020) mentioned that leadership is a continuous process driven by relationships and collective action, which can play a key role in addressing wicked problems like poverty. In our research, humble leadership stands out as an important leadership framework in poverty reduction efforts. Humble leadership has been found to build trust between leaders and their followers in an organizational setting (Cho et al., 2020). Our research emphasizes how it can be leveraged by the organizations and leaders working to address poverty.

According to Kostrzyńska and Littlechild (2024), the stigma around poverty comes largely from how society views people in need, not from poverty itself, which often leads to exclusion and ineffective support. This calls for leadership approaches that can challenge these negative perceptions, and address the barriers to poverty alleviation (Hauer, 2020). For instance, having a growth mindset and an ability to view the problem from different perspectives in leadership can help reduce this stigma by decreasing blame and negative views about the people living in poverty (Hoyt et al., 2022). Similarly, Ugoani (2025) mentions that selflessness in leadership is important for resource management within organizations working to serve communities. In terms of practical approaches to poverty alleviation, Lade et al. (2017) explain three poverty escape strategies: (1) material support, (2) systemic changes that remove barriers, and (3) deeper transformations that integrate sustainable, culturally rooted practices. These perspectives align with our findings that poverty is a multi-dimensional, complex issue, and it cannot be solved with simple asset provision. The leadership characteristics identified in the study (e.g., active listening, selflessness, and compassion) are central to humble leadership and can be helpful in guiding civic organizations to address poverty—not only at the surface level but through its systemic roots. Building on this, understanding how individuals and communities across multiple scales can collaboratively adapt to changes is also useful for building long-term resilience in poverty-affected contexts (Bashir et al., 2022; Béné et al., 2012; Bunch & Sulamoyo, 2016; Dudley-Marling & Dudley-Marling, 2020; Hauer, 2020).

Based on the findings of the research, we recommend the following steps moving forward:

1. *Integrating Humble Leadership Principles into Leader Development*

   We recommend providing necessary training and resources for organizational leaders to expose them to the evolving research and educational initiatives in this field. Given the proven benefits, organizations working in poverty reduction may want to explore incorporating related concepts of humble leadership such as self-awareness and openness to feedback into their leadership training (Bunch & Sulamoyo, 2016; Remy & Sané, 2024).

2. *Encouraging Community Participatory Decision-Making*

   The research findings indicate the potential impact of community members in advocating for their own needs. We recommend supporting community leadership initiatives and encouraging people to participate actively in decision-making regarding poverty reduction efforts. This may be done by creating local decision-making spaces and partnerships between community leaders and organizations (Cletzer & Kaufman, 2020; Kaufman et al., 2019).

3. *Facilitating Collaboration Among Leaders*

   We recommend strengthening the network of leaders working for poverty reduction so that they can collectively support one another in achieving the common goal. To achieve this, regular knowledge exchange through workshops, mentorship, and online platforms may be helpful (Bigelow, 2025; Brennan, 2014).

Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of literature on leadership and poverty reduction. It can offer practical implications for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers alike. In the future, comparative studies can be done across different states or regions. This can be useful in gaining valuable insights into the contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of leadership in poverty reduction. Future research can identify best practices that can be scaled and adapted to different settings. The findings of this study also have implications for public policy. Policymakers can leverage the results of this research to adopt policies and strategies that promote effective leadership approaches and address systemic barriers to poverty reduction.

Limitations of Research

The following limitations have been identified:

- *Regional Focus*: The study is limited to the civic organizations in a selected state, so it may not reflect the challenges and leadership styles found in other regions. This limitation could be addressed in future research by conducting similar studies in other states or regions for comparative analysis.

- *Dynamic Nature of Poverty:* Poverty changes with economic, political, and social shifts. Thus, the relevance of findings may also change over time. Future research could explore how civic organizations adjust their leadership strategies as the issues related to poverty evolve.

- *Subjectivity of Qualitative Data:* The data from the interviews reflect the personal views and experiences of the participants, which may be affected by external factors. Future studies could adopt a mixed-methods approach to better document and control for variables not reflected in this study.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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Research Article

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Ukrainian News Media Representations and Framing of NGOs

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This study examines how Ukrainian news media portray and frame nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from 2019 to 2024 using quantitative content analysis. Despite NGOs' crucial role in Ukrainian society, they face low public trust, political instability, and a lack of research on their media representations. Findings from 306 news articles reveal that NGOs received positive coverage, focusing on their activities and role as information sources. However, episodic framing and portrayal as story attributes rather than primary subjects dominated, potentially limiting public understanding of their broader impact. The study suggests that NGOs should engage proactively with media to promote thematic framing and showcase their work, while journalists should consider the implications of their framing choices. This research contributes insights for stakeholders working to strengthen civil society in Ukraine and highlights the importance of strategic communication for NGOs in challenging environments.

Keywords: NGOs, Ukraine, Media framing, News coverage, Nonprofit sector

Introduction

News media play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions and bringing attention to issues that benefit society. One such area is the coverage of the nonprofit sector, which includes nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that provide essential services and advocate for various causes. Media publicity is vital for NGOs to meet their organizational goals, such as shaping public opinion and advocating for their causes (Akboga & Arik, 2019). However, limited research has explored media representations of NGOs, especially across cultural contexts outside of Western media (Cooley, 2020). This study aims to fill this gap by examining how Ukrainian media portrays and frames NGOs in its coverage, guided by the framing communication theory.

NGOs operating in Ukraine face distinct challenges that provide a strong rationale for this media analysis. Scholars have described the Ukrainian nonprofit sector as "weak" with "low civic engagement" (Gatskova & Gatskov, 2016), operating in a highly unstable and, at times, antagonistic political environment (Krasynska, 2015). Moreover, public trust in nonprofits is worryingly low (Krasynska, 2015). The recent war has brought over $1.7 billion in new international aid to Ukrainian nonprofits (*Philanthropic Response to the War in Ukraine*, n.d.), indicating a massive influx of resources requiring more oversight and public accountability.

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Despite this growth in funding, no known research has specifically analyzed Ukrainian media portrayals of NGOs until now.

This study has several practical implications. It aims to inform discussions among media professionals, nonprofit leaders, policymakers, and scholars regarding strategies for strengthening the role, impacts, and capacity building of NGOs operating in Ukraine. By elucidating how Ukrainian news media frames NGOs in its coverage, this project provides insights to support Ukraine's NGO organizations amidst its volatility and lack of public confidence. The project also applies communication theory to an understudied cultural context, helping fill gaps in research on media portrayals of NGOs. Its analysis aims to both build theoretical understanding and inform practical strategies for supporting Ukrainian civil society, given the dependence of NGOs on media publicity. The project has significant implications amidst the distinct challenges facing Ukraine today.

This project is guided by a large research question: How do Ukrainian news media portray and frame NGOs in their coverage. By examining the framing, valence, and roles of NGOs in media coverage, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the media landscape surrounding Ukraine's nonprofit sector. The findings will contribute to the limited body of research on media representations of NGOs in non-Western contexts and offer valuable insights for media professionals and policymakers working to strengthen civil society in Ukraine.

Literature Review

NGOs operate independently from the government and work towards the betterment of society by advocating for various causes, providing services, and promoting social change. Studying NGOs operating in Ukraine is crucial due to their significant role in addressing social, economic, and humanitarian issues, their resilience in the face of political instability and legislative challenges, and their ability to rapidly respond to the needs of recipients, especially in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, which has led to an influx of aid money requiring oversight and accountability from these organizations. This literature review begins by providing an overview of the Ukrainian nonprofit sector more broadly. Then, this review discusses media portrayals of the NGOs with particular focus on the Ukrainian context. Subsequently, this review introduces the theoretical framework that will guide this study as well as the research questions and hypotheses posed.

The Ukrainian Nonprofit Sector and NGOs

The Ukrainian nonprofit sector plays a crucial role in the country's social and economic landscape. Research indicates that Ukraine's nonprofit sector has been influenced by various factors such as political instability, legislative challenges, and the impact of geopolitical conflicts. The sector has shown resilience in the face of political turbulence and legislative changes (Krasynska, 2015). Despite increased civil liberties, voluntary work rates in Ukraine have declined, highlighting a complex relationship between civil liberties and volunteering (Kamerāde et al., 2016).

The emergence of the nonprofit sector in the early 1990s (after the fall of the Soviet Union) as a realm of citizens' initiatives financially supported by supranational development agencies underscores its importance in Ukraine (Gressgård & Husakouskaya, 2020). Furthermore, the sector faces challenges such as a decrease in charitable activities despite an increase in the number of nonprofit organizations (Novikov, 2021). The author characterizes Ukraine as having inadequate institutional frameworks, insufficient financial mechanisms, and limited statistical oversight. Additionally, he suggests that there are gaps in regulatory systems and the need for more effective state involvement in nonprofit management through improved financial reporting, greater transparency, and reformed tax policies (Novikov, 2021).

One scholar suggested that while Ukraine has developed a conducive regime and legal framework for nonprofits, resulting in approximately 17.6 NGOs per 10,000 inhabitants, the sector still faces significant challenges such as corruption, limited governmental support, and heavy reliance on international funding (Bidenko, 2018). The study indicates that about 45% of Ukrainian NGOs' funding comes from international grants, with only 8-10% from state and local budgets. Furthermore, while Ukraine has seen growth in registered organizations, many exist only on paper, with estimates suggesting only 10% of registered NGOs are fully active. The sector is characterized by small organizational capacity, with most NGOs having just two to five full-time employees, and facing challenges in sustainable funding, professional development, and effective public engagement (Bidenko, 2018).

The importance of charitable organizations in Ukraine is evident in their rapid response to the needs of recipients through small charitable projects, highlighting their significance in the nonprofit sector (Vysochan & Hyk, 2021). Moreover, the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on Ukrainian nonprofits has been studied, with evidence suggesting transformations in the nonprofit sector due to cryptoaltruism, a movement where distributed ledger technologies, such as blockchains, are changing the nature of the sector (Chen, 2024). NGO involvement in humanitarian responses during conflicts has been noted, emphasizing the role of grassroots associations in providing aid and developing organizational processes (Konrad, 2023).

NGOs have adapted their operations in response to the evolving needs of the population during wartime. They have become "first responders," leveraging their established networks to provide immediate assistance and support to those affected by the conflict (Lazarus et al., 2024). This includes not only health services but also humanitarian aid, such as food, shelter, and psychosocial support for displaced individuals and families (Reis, 2024; Shablystyi et al., 2023). The resilience of NGOs in Ukraine has been highlighted as a key factor in promoting social cohesion and justice amid the crisis, showcasing their ability to mobilize resources and community efforts effectively (Reis, 2024).

In recent years, the number of NGOs in Ukraine has grown significantly, highlighting their importance in the country's civil society landscape (Palyvoda & Golota, 2013). We will further review available literature on media representations of the nonprofit sector in general and NGOs in particular, with a focus on the Ukrainian context.

Media Portrayals of NGOs

The representation of the nonprofit sector in news media plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions and influencing various aspects of nonprofit organizations. Several scholars highlight the impact of media coverage on how nonprofits are perceived by the public and policymakers, affecting their ability to raise funds and mobilize resources (Hale, 2007; Krlev & Lund, 2020). Kensicki (2004) delves into how nonprofit organizations and individual actions are portrayed in newspaper coverage of social issues, shedding light on the importance of media representation in shaping narratives around societal problems and potential solutions.

Nonprofit organizations heavily rely on the media to promote their causes due to limited communication budgets, as indicated by Liu (2012). Effective communication with stakeholders is pivotal for nonprofits to maintain a positive reputation, secure financial resources, and advance their missions, as emphasized in the study by Suh et al. (2021). Some scholars explore the role of nonprofit organizations in influencing public policy through lobbying, underscoring the importance of nonprofit interest group representation in shaping public policy (Nyland, 1995). Additionally, the evolving definition and classification of the nonprofit sector, as discussed by Barman (2013), have implications for how these organizations are perceived structurally and normatively in society.

In the context of communication strategies, Yue et al. (2023) highlight the importance of nonprofit leaders engaging with the media to drive attention, build partnerships, and advocate for their missions. Another study suggests establishing models linking media publicity to fundraising success and the image of nonprofit organizations to enhance their impact (Helmig et al., 2012).

Some scholars characterized the relationship between NGOs and media by a complex interplay of trust and credibility. Lee et al. (2010) emphasize that media serves as a critical platform for NGOs to build public trust and accountability. However, the reliance on media also poses challenges, as NGOs must navigate the potential for misrepresentation or oversimplification of their messages in the pursuit of broader media coverage (Powers, 2016).

Overall, the literature underscores the significant role of news media representations in shaping perceptions of NGOs influencing fundraising efforts, public engagement, and policy advocacy. The current body of research on media representations of NGOs is somewhat limited, with a notable lack of studies focusing on cultural contexts outside Western media, and no known research specifically addressing Ukrainian media portrayals of these organizations. We now turn our focus to the theoretical framework that will guide our study.

Theoretical Framework: Framing Theory

Framing theory in news media coverage is a significant approach that helps in understanding how media shapes public perception by presenting information in a particular way. Framing involves selecting and highlighting certain aspects of an issue while downplaying others, thus influencing how audiences interpret the news (Jakopovic, 2017). It is through framing that the news media can set the agenda and tell the audience not just what to think about but also how to think about various issues (Ashwell & Murray, 2020). This theory highlights the role of framing in presenting news stories by emphasizing specific aspects, which can impact how individuals cognitively process and interpret the information presented (Hale, 2007). Framing involves various processes such as frame building, frame setting, individual-level processes of framing, and feedback loops from audiences to journalists (Scheufele, 1999). It is through these processes that media outlets construct narratives that guide the audience's understanding and emotional responses to the news (Kepplinger et al., 2012).

In the context of how media portrays NGOs, the framing theory has been a useful approach to study the representation of nonprofits in the media (Cooley, 2020, 2022; Hale, 2007). These studies aim to understand how nonprofits are depicted in news coverage and how this portrayal influences public perception of the sector. Hale (2007) recognizes that the story setting is significant for the coverage of the nonprofit sector. The story setting denotes the geographical context in which the story unfolds. Prior studies indicate that news articles about nonprofits tend to focus more on local level in some countries (Gould et al., 2003; Hale, 2007; Kensicki, 2004b; Martens, 1996) and national level in other countries (Cooley, 2020).
Framing theory suggests that media outlets select and emphasize certain aspects of reality while downplaying others, based on what they consider most salient or relevant to their audience

(Entman, 1993). When covering organizations, media framing tends to highlight the geographic scope and scale at which these organizations primarily operate (Cooley, 2020; Hale, 2007). NGOs, by their very nature, often operate transnationally, maintain international funding relationships, implement global standards, and address cross-border issues (Martens, 2002; Reimann, 2006). This inherent international orientation distinguishes them from many domestic nonprofits or locally-focused charitable organizations. Based on this characteristic and framing theory's emphasis on highlighting salient organizational attributes, we would expect media coverage to reflect this international dimension. Therefore, while previous studies found that nonprofit coverage in some countries emphasizes local contexts (Gould et al., 2003; Hale, 2007) and national contexts in others (Cooley, 2020), we hypothesize that the international character of NGOs will influence Ukrainian media to prioritize international framing in their coverage:

> *H1: Ukrainian news media will prioritize coverage of NGOs at the international level rather than local and national levels.*

Cognitive and affective framing

Cognitive attributes and affective attributes are two significant components in news media coverage, influencing the presentation and perception of information by the audience. Cognitive attributes encompass the intellectual aspects of news content, focusing on the substantive information provided and its role in shaping the audience's comprehension of events or issues (Kiousis, 2004). On the other hand, affective attributes involve the emotional elements embedded in news stories, which can elicit feelings, attitudes, and responses from the audience (Kiousis, 2004).

Affective attributes in news media coverage concentrate on the emotional impact of the information presented. They encompass elements that trigger emotions such as empathy, sympathy, anger, or joy among the audience (Kiousis, 2004). Affective attributes are designed to establish an emotional connection with the audience, influencing their emotional responses and engagement with the news content (Bowe et al., 2013). By incorporating affective elements, news media can evoke specific emotional reactions from the audience, shaping their overall experience and perception of the news (Moreno et al., 2019). Affective attributes have been previously explored by researchers in the context of nonprofit organizations (Cooley, 2020, 2022; Hale, 2007), but not in the context of NGOs.

The types of nonprofit organizations that receive the most favorable media coverage can vary based on several factors. Research suggests that larger nonprofit organizations tend to receive more media publicity as they have the capacity to professionalize their public relations efforts (Brown, 2014). Additionally, nonprofits that are more highly institutionalized, with ample resources and full-time paid staff, tend to adopt social media quickly, which can positively impact their media coverage (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Nonprofits that strategically use social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter for stakeholder communication may enhance their capacity for positive media relations (Svensson et al., 2020). Furthermore, the nature of the nonprofit organization itself can influence media coverage. For instance, research indicates that some agencies, like executive and regulatory bodies (i.e. Charity Navigator, The Nonprofit Technology Enterprise Network (NTEN), Common Knowledge and Blackbaud) receive more media attention compared to other types of nonprofits (Kim et al., 2014)

We do not know from extant literature what types of nonprofit organizations (based on service areas) receive most favorable coverage, and therefore, the next research question emerges:

> *RQ1: What types of NGOs receive most favorable coverage in Ukrainian news media?*

Cognitive attributes is another fruitful area to explore. Cognitive attributes are linked to the substantive aspects of the news, including the topics discussed, the facts presented, and the overall framing of the story (Graf-Vlachy et al., 2019). These attributes aim to inform the audience, offer context, and mold their cognitive understanding of the subject matter (Kiousis, 2004). Cognitive attributes assist in structuring information, directing the audience's interpretation, and influencing their opinions and attitudes towards the news content (Golan & Wanta, 2001). Nonprofit organization cognitive attributes have been previously explored by researchers (Cooley, 2020, 2022; Hale, 2007), but have not been applied specifically to NGOs. This project poses the following question:

> *RQ2: What NGO cognitive attributes are most prominent in Ukrainian news media?*

Existing research does not look at the intersectionality of affective and cognitive attributes within the context of NGOs, and this project attempts to fill this gap with the following research question:

> *RQ3: What NGO cognitive attributes are associated with favorable coverage in Ukrainian news media?*

Episodic and thematic cognitive framing

While further exploring cognitive framing, we learn that there is a distinction between episodic and thematic cognitive framing. While *episodic framing* involves presenting news stories in an event-centered manner, focusing on specific events or individuals, *thematic framing* contextualizes events within a broader perspective, incorporating analysis, expert opinions, and statistical data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issue (Foster et al., 2014; Ödmark, 2018; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Zhang et al., 2014).

Studies have shown that episodic framing tends to lead to individualistic attributes, emphasizing personal stories detached from the broader context, while thematic framing encourages societal attributions by highlighting how issues are influenced by governmental policies or broader societal factors (Lee et al., 2014). Episodic framing often involves storytelling and focusing on the personal or human aspects of an issue, aiming to attract the audience's attention and serve the commercial interests of media organizations (Ödmark, 2018; Zhang et al., 2014).

Furthermore, the shift from episodic to thematic framing in news coverage can contribute to public awareness by presenting issues within a wider social context, fostering a deeper understanding of societal problems (Sela-Shayovitz, 2018). Research has indicated that episodic framing is more common in media coverage, with a tendency to focus on specific events or individuals rather than placing stories in a broader social, economic, or political context (Baum, 2004).

When looking at the nonprofit context, researchers argue that episodic frames tend to focus on specific events or stories within an organization, potentially leading to a more favorable portrayal. Conversely, thematic framing may result in more critical coverage, highlighting broader issues and systemic challenges faced by nonprofits (Hale, 2007). Media coverage in the nonprofit sector often adopts episodic framing when reporting on individual organizations rather than the sector as a whole (Cooley, 2020), therefore our next hypothesis emerges:

> *H2: NGOs will be more likely to be episodically than thematically framed in Ukrainian news media.*

Relevant to the discussion of episodical and thematical framing is the idea of the role that nonprofits play within the news story. In other words, who is the main actor within the news story, and who drives the coverage. We hypothesize that the news media will be more likely to portray NGOs as supporting actors (story attributes) rather that the primary media object, and the following hypothesis emerges:

> *H3: NGOs will be more likely to be story attributes rather than primary media objects in Ukrainian news media.*

Finally, we seek to determine the relationship between cognitive framing and the role that nonprofits play within the news story. Previous research found that news stories that provide context for the issue and place it within a larger cultural and social narrative (thematic stories) are more likely to feature nonprofits as primary subjects within the story; while stories that zoom in on individual, isolated episodes (episodic stories) are more likely to include nonprofits in a supporting role. This project aims to test these hypotheses within NGO context in Ukraine. We propose the following two hypotheses:

> *H4a: Thematic stories will be more likely to cover NGOs as primary media objects in Ukrainian news media.*

> *H4b: Episodic stories will be more likely to cover NGOs as story attributes in Ukrainian news media.*

Methods

Data Collection

Sample selection was conducted using the Factiva online database, which aggregates and stores international news media articles. A keyword search was performed for "nongovernment organization" (Неурядові організації) or "NGO" (НУО) to retrieve all stories published in the Ukrainian language. The unit of analysis was an individual news article. The search covered a five-year period from January 24, 2019, to January 24, 2024, yielding a total of 818 publications (see Table 1). A random sampling technique was employed to select the sample. After excluding duplicate articles and those not relevant to the study (e.g., obituaries and wedding announcements), the final sample consisted of 306 articles. This sample size meets the requirement of a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error, where a minimum of 260 articles was needed. All articles were translated into English using Google translate.

Channel 24 is a news television channel based in Lviv that broadcasts primarily in Ukrainian, known for its extensive coverage of current events and political news. With an average daily viewership of 4.2 million, it maintains a comprehensive news website reaching approximately 12 million unique visitors monthly. *ICTV TV Channel* is one of Ukraine's major nationwide television networks owned by StarLightMedia group, reaching an audience of approximately 9 million viewers daily and offering a mix of news, entertainment programs, and original content since 1992. Similar to Channel 24, it maintains a website with news stories averaging 8 million monthly visitors. *Golos Ukrainy* is the official newspaper of the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament), with a daily print circulation of 170,000 copies, publishing legislative acts, parliamentary news, and official government communications. *Delo.ua* is a leading Ukrainian business news website that focuses on economics, finance, and business developments, reaching over 3 million unique visitors monthly and providing analysis and reporting on both national and international business trends. *Marketing Media Review* is a specialized Ukrainian media outlet focused on marketing, advertising, and media industry news, reaching approximately 100,000 industry professionals monthly. Finally, *Energobusiness Monitoring* is a specialized business publication focused on Ukraine's energy sector, serving roughly 50,000 subscribers and providing industry analysis, market data, and news coverage of the country's power, oil, gas, and renewable energy markets. These sources were selected due to their availability on Factiva.

Table 1. News stories by Ukrainian news media outlets

Source	**Population**	**Sample**
Channel 24	369	138
ICTV TV Channel	122	41
Golos Ukrainy	120	45
Delo.ua	103	27
Marketing Media Review	29	16
Energobusiness Monitoring	27	6
*Other**	48	33
Total	**818**	**306**

* Publications with fewer than two articles selected in the final sample were classified as "other."

Coding Guide

A deductive coding guide was developed based on the frameworks proposed by Hale (2007) and Cooley (2022). Specifically, Hale's (2007) framework contributed the structural elements for analyzing media portrayal, including the focus and framing categories, while Cooley's (2022) work informed the development of the cognitive attributes section, particularly the categorization of NGO activities and roles in public discourse. The initial coding categories were pretested through the intercoder reliability analysis with three rounds of pilot testing. The coding guide included the following sections: General Information, NGO Media Portrayal, NGO Category and Valence, and NGO Cognitive Attributes.

The General Information section covered the title of the article, date of publication, name of the publication, article length (word count), relevance (binary measure indicating whether the article was relevant to the study), and setting (local, national, international, or multiple settings). The NGO Media Portrayal section recorded the focus (whether the NGO was the primary subject or an attribute of the story) and frame (episodic or thematic).

The NGO Category and Valence section recorded the category of the first mentioned NGO (1 = culture and recreation, 2 = education and research, 3 = health, 4 = social services, 5 = environment, 6 = development and housing, 7 = law, advocacy, politics, 8 = philanthropic intermediaries, 9 = international, 10 = religion, 11 = business and professional associations, unions, 12 = other, 99 = unable to determine). Also, this section recorded the valence of NGOs (1 = favorable, 0 = neutral, -1 = unfavorable, 99 = unable to determine).

Finally, the NGO Cognitive Attributes section captured the presence (1) or absence (0) of the following attributes: NGOs are engaged in fundraising, NGOs are involved in various activities (e.g., providing humanitarian aid, conducting research and policy analysis, organizing educational programs and workshops, environmental conservation and cleanup efforts, advocating for human rights, delivering healthcare services, supporting refugees and displaced persons, etc.), NGOs acting in court proceedings, NGOs attacking an issue or group, NGOs as an information source, and NGOs releasing a report.

Coding Process

The coding team comprised a Ukrainian speaker and two coders who received training on the coding instrument. To ensure inter-coder reliability, the team conducted three rounds of pilot coding. After each round, the coding instrument was adjusted to improve inter-coder reliability. The final inter-coder reliability assessment yielded an average Cohen's kappa of 0.94, with individual measures ranging from 0.57 (the lowest agreement) to 1.00 (perfect agreement).

Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 29. Initially, the dataset was cleaned, and descriptive statistics were computed to identify outliers, handle missing data, and address Research Question 2. To test Hypotheses 1, 2 and 3, a series of chi-square goodness-of-fit tests were performed. These single-sample nonparametric tests are commonly employed to determine whether the distribution of cases in a single categorical variable follows a known or hypothesized distribution. The regression analyses were conducted to address Research Questions 1 and 3. The last two hypotheses, H4a and H4b, were tested by conducting the chi-square tests of independence. These are nonparametric tests that determine whether there is an association between categorical variables.

Results

Descriptives

News media articles varied in length from the shortest (53 words) to the longest (5,344 words). The average article length was 543 words (mean). Stories about NGOs were set within international context (n = 147), national context (n = 102), and local context (n = 35). Most stories were thematically framed (n = 192), compared to episodic framing (n = 98). Overall, NGOs received very positive media coverage, M = .65, SD = .578. NGOs appeared as story attributes (n = 189) and as primary media objects (n = 108).

> *H1: Ukrainian news media will prioritize coverage of NGOs at the international level rather than local and national levels.*

To test H1, a chi-square goodness-of-fit test was conducted. Data showed that there are statistically significant differences in the distribution of story settings within the data, $\chi2(3)$ = 134.8, p < .001. Ukrainian news media clearly prioritized international news settings (n = 147), compared national (n = 102) and local stories (n = 35). Therefore, H1 was supported.

> *RQ1: What types of NGOs receive most favorable coverage in Ukrainian news media?*

To answer this research question, a regression analysis was conducted with NGO valence as a dependent variable and types of NGO as independent variables. The regression model was not significant, and therefore, the data cannot explain positive media coverage of NGOs by the types of NGOs covered by the media.

RQ2: What NGO cognitive attributes are most prominent in Ukrainian news media?

The second research question focused on the cognitive attributes of NGOs. A series of frequency tests were conducted to determine which NGO cognitive attributes are most prevalent within the new media coverage. NGOs involved in activities (n = 156) and acting as information sources (n = 59) were the two highest categories. Ukrainian news media almost never reported on NGOs acting in the courts (n = 7). See Table 2 for more details.

Table 2. *NGO cognitive attributes presented by Ukrainian news media*

Cognitive attributes	All stories (N = 306)	Percentage of all stories
NGOs are raising money	32	11%
NGOs are involved in activities	156	51%
NGOs acting in the courts	7	2%
NGOs attacking an issue or group	21	7%
NGOs are an information source	59	19%
NGOs release a report	14	5%

RQ3: What NGO cognitive attributes are associated with favorable coverage in Ukrainian news media?

To answer RQ3, we ran a regression model with NGO valence as a dependent variable and a series of dummy variables for NGO cognitive attributes. A significant regression was found, F (6, 216) = 6.241, p < .001). There are statistically significant differences in the positive coverage of NGOs involved in activities (β = .258, p < .001) and NGOs raising money (β = .298, p < .01). NGOs attacking an issue or a group were associated with more negative portrayals in the news media (β = -.561, p < .001).

H2: NGOs will be more likely to be episodically than thematically framed in Ukrainian news media.

To test H2, we ran the chi-square goodness-of-fit test and found that there are statistically significant differences how Ukrainian news media framed NGOs, $\chi 2(1) = 30.47$, p < .001. Ukrainian news media clearly prioritized thematic framing of NGOs (n = 192), compared to episodic framing (n = 98). H2 was supported by the data.

H3: NGOs will be more likely to be story attributes rather than primary media objects in Ukrainian news media.

Similarly, to test H3, we ran the chi-square goodness-of-fit test and found that there are statistically significant differences in how Ukrainian news media portrayed NGOs, $\chi 2(1) = 26.47$, p < .001. Ukrainian news media clearly treated NGOs as story attributes (n = 198), rather than a primary media object (n = 108). H3 was also supported by the data analysis.

H4a: Thematic stories will be more likely to cover NGOs as primary media objects in Ukrainian news media.

H4b: Episodic stories will be more likely to cover NGOs as story attributes in Ukrainian news media.

The last two hypotheses were tested by conducting the chi-square tests of independence. This test is useful to determine statistical independence or association between two categorical variables, in our case episodic/thematic framing and story attribute/primary media object. We found no significant association between episodic/thematic framing and story attribute/primary media object, $\chi2(2) = 4.97$, $p > .05$. Therefore, H4a and H4b were not supported.

Discussion

This study offers several important insights into how Ukrainian news media portrays NGOs. First, the findings indicate that NGOs generally receive very positive coverage when they are featured in the news. The media tends to focus on NGOs' involvement in various activities and their role as information sources. Specifically, coverage of NGOs engaged in activities and raising money is associated with more favorable portrayals, while attacking issues or groups leads to more negative coverage. This aligns with previous research showing that nonprofit actions and fundraising efforts predict positive media coverage (Cooley, 2020). For NGOs seeking to cultivate a positive public image and build trust, these results suggest they should prioritize publicizing their activities and fundraising work, while avoiding combative stances that could paint them in a negative light.

Second, this study found that Ukrainian media situates NGOs primarily within an international context, rather than national or local settings. This contrasts with prior research on nonprofit organizations, which has indicated nonprofits receive more local coverage in the U.S. (Gould et al., 2003; Hale, 2007; Kensicki, 2004b) and national coverage in Russia (Cooley, 2020). The greater emphasis on NGOs' international scope in Ukraine may reflect the influx of foreign aid and the global interconnectedness of the humanitarian issues these organizations address. However, this international focus could potentially distance NGOs from local stakeholders. NGOs operating in Ukraine may need to balance highlighting their international relevance with demonstrating their local impact and connection to communities.

Third, this study found that Ukrainian news media were more likely to use episodic framing than thematic framing when covering NGOs. This aligns with previous research suggesting that episodic framing is more common in general news coverage, with a tendency to focus on specific events or individuals rather than placing stories in a broader social, economic, or political context (Baum, 2004). The predominance of episodic framing in NGO coverage suggests that Ukrainian media tends to present these organizations through the lens of isolated cases or incidents, rather than exploring their systemic impacts or contextualizing their work within larger societal issues.

This finding has important implications for public understanding of NGOs and the issues they address. Research has shown that a shift towards thematic framing can contribute to increased public awareness by presenting issues within a wider social context, fostering a deeper understanding of societal problems (Sela-Shayovitz, 2018). However, the prevalence of episodic framing in Ukrainian media coverage of NGOs suggests that audiences may be receiving a more fragmented and case-specific portrayal of these organizations, potentially limiting their ability to comprehend the full scope and significance of NGOs' work.

To counter this trend and promote a more comprehensive public understanding of their efforts, NGOs in Ukraine may need to work proactively with journalists to encourage thematic framing in coverage of their organizations. This could involve providing reporters with background information, data, and expert analysis that situates specific events or programs within a larger context. Alternatively, NGOs could invite journalists to accompany their teams in the field for longer durations. This approach could be particularly valuable in conflict zones, where NGOs can facilitate access to areas that would otherwise be challenging for journalists to reach safely. Thus, by helping media outlets connect the dots between individual cases and broader patterns, NGOs can foster more substantive and informative coverage that enhances public awareness of the issues they address.

Moreover, NGOs may benefit from developing their own communications strategies that emphasize thematic narratives, highlighting the systemic nature of the problems they confront and the wide-ranging impact of their interventions. By consistently framing their work in terms of broader societal challenges and solutions, NGOs can help shape public discourse and understanding, even if episodic framing persists in media coverage.

Conclusions

In summary, this study provides valuable insights into how Ukrainian news media portrays NGOs, offering a nuanced understanding of the framing, valence, and roles these organizations play in media coverage. The findings highlight several key patterns, including the generally positive tone of NGO coverage, the emphasis on international contexts, the prevalence of episodic framing, and the tendency for NGOs to serve as story attributes rather than primary subjects.

This study makes several important theoretical contributions to both framing theory and nonprofit media research. First, the research advances our understanding of the relationship between cognitive attributes and media valence in NGO news media coverage, revealing that certain attributes (such as involvement in activities and fundraising) consistently predict positive coverage while others (such as attacking issues) predict negative coverage. Second, this study challenges existing assumptions about the relationship between episodic/thematic framing and story roles, finding no significant association between these variables in the Ukrainian context, contrary to previous findings. Finally, by examining NGO media representations during a period of significant societal transformation (as in the case in Ukraine), this research contributes to our understanding of how framing theory operates in dynamic, crisis-affected environments, providing a theoretical foundation for future studies of media framing during periods of social and political turmoil.

These findings have important implications for both NGOs and media professionals in Ukraine. For NGOs, the results suggest that proactively engaging with journalists to showcase their activities, fundraising efforts, and thematic narratives may be an effective strategy for garnering positive coverage and raising public awareness of their work. By providing compelling examples, data, and spokespeople, NGOs can help shift coverage from cursory mentions to more substantive explorations of their impact.

For journalists and media outlets, this study underscores the importance of considering how framing choices and story roles shape public understanding of NGOs and the issues they address. By incorporating more thematic framing and positioning NGOs as central actors in relevant stories, media professionals can provide audiences with a more comprehensive and contextual understanding of these organizations' efforts.

Ultimately, fostering more nuanced and informative media coverage of NGOs in Ukraine has the potential to enhance public trust, engagement, and support for these organizations. As NGOs continue to play a vital role in addressing societal challenges and promoting social change, it is crucial that media representations effectively convey the scope and significance of their work.

Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. First, the sample was limited to a specific time frame and set of media outlets available through Factiva, which may not fully represent the broader landscape of Ukrainian news coverage of NGOs. This analysis also only focused on NGOs operating in Ukraine, not a broader nonprofit sector. The study's search strategy may not have captured the full range of terminology that Ukrainians use to name organizations operating within the nonprofit sector, and future research could employ additional search terms to potentially identify a broader array of stories. Future research could also expand the scope of analysis to include a wider range of media sources and time periods, providing a more comprehensive understanding of coverage patterns over time.

Second, this study focused primarily on quantitative content analysis, which, while valuable for identifying broad patterns, may not fully capture the nuances and complexities of NGO representations in the media. Future research could employ qualitative methods, such as discourse analysis or in-depth interviews with journalists and NGO representatives, to gain a more granular understanding of the factors shaping media coverage and the strategies NGOs employ to influence their media narratives.

Third, while this study provides insights into the content of NGO coverage in Ukrainian media, it does not directly assess the impact of this coverage on public perceptions, attitudes, or behaviors. Future research could employ survey or experimental methods to examine how different framing and story role choices in NGO coverage influence audience responses and engagement.

Additionally, it is important to note that this paper represents the first part of a larger study. While this research focuses on the general patterns of NGO media coverage, the second paper specifically examines the transformative impact of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on media coverage of NGOs, comparing pre-war and post-war periods. The war's significant influence on media coverage patterns, content and frequency is comprehensively addressed in the subsequent paper, which provides detailed comparative analysis of how media portrayal of NGOs evolved during these distinct periods.

Finally, it is important to note that the media landscape and sociopolitical context in Ukraine are dynamic and evolving, particularly in light of ongoing geopolitical tensions and war as well as the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the patterns and implications identified in this study may not necessarily reflect future trends or developments in NGO media coverage. Ongoing research will be necessary to track how representations of NGOs in Ukrainian media continue to evolve in response to changing circumstances and events.

Despite these limitations, this study provides a valuable foundation for understanding the current state of NGO media coverage in Ukraine and identifies key areas for future research and practical interventions. By building on these findings and addressing the limitations outlined above, researchers, NGOs, and media professionals can work together to foster more informed, nuanced, and impactful media representations of these vital organizations.

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Research Article

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The Dynamics between Public Sector Entrepreneurship and Performance: The Mediating Effect of Communication

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This empirical study analyzes the dynamics among public sector entrepreneurship, organizational performance, and communication. This study presents a conceptual model to explain how entrepreneurial orientation in the public sector enhances public organizations' performance through the mediating effect of communication. This study utilizes the 2022 Public Employee Perception Survey produced by the Korea Institute of Public Administration, which presents a variety of public servants' perceptions and administrative features of public organizations in South Korea. To test the proposed hypotheses, this study employs structural equation modeling. The results show that entrepreneurial orientation has a positive effect on public organizations' performance, and communication within the organizations mediates the relationship between these two variables. This study offers a nuanced perspective on implementing an entrepreneurial orientation in the public sector by explaining how public-sector entrepreneurship can promote organizational performance through well-structured communication. This insight is valuable for public administration scholars and practitioners.

Keywords: *public sector entrepreneurship, communication, organizational performance, structural equation modeling, mediating effect*

Introduction

Public organizations have faced a variety of wicked problems (Head, 2019; Peters, 2017; Rittle & Webber, 1973) that are not easily solvable largely due to the presence of various stakeholders (Head & Alford, 2015) and conflicting values inherent in the public sector (Peters & Tarpey, 2019; Van Der Wal et al., 2011). In addition, multiple stakeholders contribute to increased complexity in the decision-making process, which may lead to disagreements and conflicts among stakeholders as well as uncertainty in decision-making (Head & Alford, 2015). Due to rapidly changing environmental factors, governments adhering to traditional bureaucratic principles were not able to effectively address administrative challenges, leading to various government failures (Awamleh et al., 2021; Bryson et al., 2014; Jones & Hameiri, 2022). For example, during the COVID-19 Pandemic, many governments failed to manage or control the spread of the disease because of the deficiency of administrative capacities, including responsiveness, leadership, speed, innovativeness, and adaptability, to deal with such an extreme event (Moon, 2020;

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Schismenos et al., 2020)

Even though most governments have recovered from the significant aftermath of COVID-19, most public administration researchers question the role and capacity of the traditional bureaucratic government systems in a turbulent environment, and they suggest reinventing governing models to be better prepared to face future crises. Consequently, scholars and practitioners turned to new governing models to respond to various extreme situations characterized by high volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014; Horney et al., 2010) as well as to improve organizational capacities, such as agility, adaptability, and responsiveness (Janssen & Van Der Voort, 2020; Moon, 2020).

In addition, public administration scholars have highlighted entrepreneurship as a valuable approach to improve organizational capacities and adapt to changing environments. Entrepreneurship involves the strategic adoption of new and innovative technologies and resources with manageable risks to achieve specific goals, such as efficiency, productivity, performance, and collaboration (Bernier & Hafsi, 2007; Diefenbach, 2011; Kim, 2010a; Klein et al., 2010). The entrepreneurship model introduces a new approach to making organizations innovative and competitive under uncertain conditions. It proposes that public sector entrepreneurship is an integrative framework that focuses on strategic activities and principles in response to environmental changes (Kearney et al., 2009; Moon, 1999). While public sector entrepreneurship can be defined as a "multi-level phenomenon characterized by a context dependent combination of proactivity, innovation, and risk-taking, that serves to drive change and renewal, promote resilient organizations, and resourcefully exploit opportunities for public value creation, with the ultimate aim of achieving positive societal and environmental outcomes" (Vivona et al., 2024, p. abstract), the term entrepreneurial orientation captures how organizations develop a strategic attitude to encourage entrepreneurial behavior (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996).

As a result, extant research has identified three dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation, including innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking (Bernier & Hafsi, 2007; Kim, 2010b; Moon et al., 2020; Morris & Jones, 1999). Accordingly, some empirical studies have focused on establishing a theoretical linkage between the dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation and other important topics in public administration, including but not limited to leadership, job satisfaction, organizational culture, and economic growth (Demircioglu & Chowdhury, 2021; Hafer, 2013; Karyotakis & Moustakis, 2016; Moon et al., 2020). However, some researchers argue that many discussions on public sector entrepreneurship only highlight conceptual implications of the framework or replicate measurable variables from the private sector in empirical studies on this topic (Diefenbach, 2011). In other words, even though these studies have contributed to the theoretical discussion of public sector entrepreneurship, they do not sufficiently explain how the principle can be indicated as a measurable variable and how it influences other factors in practice. The purpose of this study is to explore how entrepreneurial orientation impacts performance in public organizations. While previous studies have established a relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and performance in both the public and private sectors (Caruana et al., 2002; Ireland et al., 2003; Kim, 2010a, 2010b; Rauch et al., 2009), most of those studies mainly focus on a linear and direct relationship between these two variables. Therefore, to discover other significant influences on the relationship between entrepreneurship and performance from other latent variables, this study examines the role of communication as a mediator in the causal relationship. Scholars have suggested that communication has significant influences on entrepreneurship and performance in public organizations (Chang, 2015; Garnett et al., 2008).

As one of the notable variables in organization studies, communication has been one of the key factors that can have a significant impact on various organizational outcomes, such as productivity, organizational effectiveness, and performance (Ananda et al., 2018; Elving, 2005; Garnett et al., 2008; Mercader et al., 2021; Mohd Adnan & Valliappan, 2019). Furthermore, existing studies demonstrate that communication can play a significant role in performing information activities, such as creating, accumulating, and diffusing information as a channel to secure resources as well as achieving successful organizational changes (Elving, 2005) and desired outcomes, such as operational success, high performance, customer satisfaction, and profitability that are in accordance with the purpose of entrepreneurship (Chang, 2015, p. 8). In other words, as a tool for transmitting and sharing informational resources, communication can not only be considered an outcome stemming from the implementation of entrepreneurship but also a predictor of performance. This study aims to empirically test a theoretical framework that illustrates the causal dynamics between entrepreneurial orientation and performance based on extant literature. Additionally, the study seeks to investigate the impact of communication as a mediator in the conceptual model. To examine the conceptual model empirically, this study postulates several hypotheses and conducts a quantitative analysis. This study will contribute to revisiting the theoretical dynamics between entrepreneurial orientation and performance through the mediating role of communication. The study's empirical findings described in this article are important for their contribution to the literature on performance management in the public sector and for practitioners serving the public.

The article unfolds as follows. First, through a review of the extant literature, it discusses the main variables in this research, including public sector entrepreneurship, communication, and organizational performance. Subsequently, it proposes a conceptual framework indicating how entrepreneurial orientation affects organizational performance through the mediating role of organizational communication and develops the hypotheses to be tested. Following that theoretical discussion, this study employs structural equation modeling to analyze the proposed hypotheses and presents the results. Lastly, it discusses the findings and limitations of the study and provides implications and recommendations to practitioners.

Theoretical Background

The Concept of Entrepreneurship

The concept of 'entrepreneur' was introduced by Cantillon in the 1800s to emphasize the necessity of innovative and creative behaviors among private actors seeking lucrative business opportunities and resources in uncertain circumstances. This concept particularly highlights the importance of creativity to achieve organizational development and goals by applying this new perspective (Bernier, 2014; Cuervo García et al., 2007). Following the development of this concept, many scholars and practitioners have sought to understand the principle of entrepreneurship. For instance, Schumpeter (1942) refers to the entrepreneurial perspective as "creative destruction" highlighting how innovation drives economic growth and organization development. In the business world, entrepreneurship involves strategic practices such as risk-taking, proactively seeking opportunities, and product innovation to achieve sustained effectiveness (Covin & Slevin, 1991). Lumpkin & Dess (1996) explain that entrepreneurship refers to an integrated multidimensional managerial framework that includes understanding the strategic dynamics of new market entries, including practices, decision-making processes, and activities, which are associated with future-oriented values. Likewise, many entrepreneurship scholars in various fields have discussed entrepreneurship's implications and concluded that it is effective for organizations in creating wealth, value, and development (Covin & Slevin, 1991; Kearney et al., 2009; Kim, 2010b; Klein et al., 2010; Low, 2001). Hence, the existing literature suggests that entrepreneurship refers to a multidimensional concept and includes various individual or organizational attributes as measures to investigate various behavioral patterns and phenomena in contexts such as business, management, marketing, economics, or ethics (Wales et al., 2013).

Dimensions of Entrepreneurship

Even though various scholars have defined the main attributes of entrepreneurship in different ways, the literature identifies three main dimensions of entrepreneurship orientation (Caruana et al., 2002; Covin & Slevin, 1991; Diefenbach, 2011; Kim, 2010a, 2010b; Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Miller, 1983; Morris & Jones, 1999; Smith, 2012, Vivona et al., 2024). First, innovativeness refers to an aptitude to develop and engage in novel and creative practices, such as ideas, services, processes, and solutions, in order to achieve lucrative results (Kim, 2010a; Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Moon et al., 2020). Caruana et al. (2002) explain that innovativeness refers to one of the core values of the entrepreneurial initiative, which focuses on the pursuit of new approaches or alternatives instead of depending on extant processes or solutions. In other words, innovativeness is associated with openness to new practices and techniques for problem-solving as well as organizational development (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001; Kim, 2010a). Second, proactiveness is an active and agile attitude that recognizes changes happening in the environment, seizes opportunities, and creates new products and services to stay competitive. Organizations with a proactive approach pursue new ways of operating in changing markets ahead of competitors to secure valuable resources (Caruana et al., 2002) and maintain a competitive advantage (Ireland et al., 2003). For instance, according to Davis et al. (1991), proactiveness can improve the organization's capacity to respond to various potential challenges by allowing them to anticipate and react to future demands and environmental changes. As a result, this approach allows organizations to achieve a high level of performance since proactiveness can improve their operational efficiencies through behavioral changes, such as introducing innovation, reallocating resources, and creating an innovative environment (Kim, 2010b, p. 786). Third, risk-taking is the propensity to adopt new business opportunities with manageable risks. This factor refers to the willingness to take chances with a reasonable possibility of economic failures to achieve high performance by appropriately calculating risks and rewards (Caruana et al., 2002). These three conceptual dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation can be understood as one integrated attribute that pertains to the advantage-seeking perspective, highlighting the pursuit of opportunities that can lead to organization development and increased productivity (Kearney et al., 2009, p. 38). Even though each dimension implies a slightly different perspective of entrepreneurial orientation, all three represent the diverse facets of this concept rather than isolated features of an organizational phenomenon. Therefore, in this study, those three dimensions are encompassed by the term entrepreneurship and measured as one variable to reflect the entrepreneurial orientation of organizations (Chang, 2015; Davis et al., 1991).

Why Organizations Should Embrace an Entrepreneurial Mindset: A Resource-Based Perspective

Entrepreneurship is closely associated with the resource-based view, specifically in terms of acquiring resources and identifying business opportunities in uncertain environments (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001; Chang, 2015; Ireland et al., 2003). For example, Ireland et al. (2003, p. 979) argue that strategic resource management, which involves acquiring, accumulating, and divesting resources, is a critical part of establishing organizations. Therefore, all organizations prioritize securing available resources to maintain competitive advantages through strategic resource management. Even though all organizations focus on securing and managing key resources, they differ in how they acquire them due to their characteristics in the organizational environment, such as non-substitutable, unique, and irreproducible (Vibert, 2004, p. 50). To be specific, resources are heterogeneous and immobile assets (Barney, 2001; Ireland et al., 2003), which demonstrates that competing organizations can retain and manage different resources (resource heterogeneity), and the imbalance in resources secured by each organization may persist (resource immobility). Therefore, the degree of acquisition and accumulation of resources among organizations inevitably varies. Similarly, implementing an entrepreneurial orientation may encourage members to explore and elaborate on new ideas and practices, which contribute to knowledge sharing or exchange across the units or departments (Bratianu et al., 2023). This organizational propensity indicates that entrepreneurial orientation emphasizes embedded information systems or institutions, such as knowledge sharing and communication, to generate, assimilate, diffuse, and refine core knowledge resources for expected outcomes (Butkouskaya et al., 2020; Hormiga et al., 2017).

Consequently, when organizations succeed in acquiring the resources that they need, they can gain sustainable competitive advantages over their competitors and improve organizational efficiency and performance (Ireland et al., 2003). Based on the resource-based model, entrepreneurial orientation, which involves advantage-seeking behaviors, allows organizations to explore and exploit available resources and opportunities that are untapped or not yet preempted. In addition, the increase in available resources through the implementation of an entrepreneurial orientation can perform as a major input in improving the organization's productivity and performance, providing additional opportunities that help the organization maintain sustainable competitive advantages over other organizations (Vibert, 2004).

The Introduction of Entrepreneurship in the Public Sector: Public Sector Entrepreneurship

Various administrative issues and shortcomings in the public sector prompted public administration scholars to develop new initiatives for reforming traditional bureaucratic paradigms, which emphasize hierarchical decision-making and established rules. To tackle these challenges, New Public Management (NPM) came about. This movement aimed to create small and effective governments by applying managerial techniques inspired by public sector entrepreneurship (Frederickson et al., 2018). Scholars argued that public organizations should be more innovative and proactive to survive in a rapidly changing environment (Arundel et al., 2015; Demircioglu & Chowdhury, 2021). As the NPM initiative gained attention, public management scholars asserted the necessity of reinventing government to redefine its role as well as make it more innovative and creative: public servants gained the freedom to manage, while granting politicians greater authority to establish strategic directions and allocate resources (Grimm & Bock, 2022). Consequently, various managerial strategies rooted in public sector entrepreneurship have been developed and implemented to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of governments (Bernier & Hafsi, 2007; Kim, 2010a). Indeed, public sector entrepreneurship has been developed and considered a new managerial principle allowing governmental organizations to achieve sustainable social prosperity and organizational development through creative changes (Klein et al., 2010).

Recent perspectives on public sector entrepreneurship emphasize that the initiatives taken by entrepreneurial governments and public sector organizations have been the primary drivers of innovation and industrial renewal, and that independent entrepreneurs and large companies have largely followed and leveraged these efforts over the years (Mazzucato 2013; 2021; Kattel et. al

2023). This perspective is also in line with recent studies on public sector innovativeness (Cinar et al., 2024; Demircioglu et al., 2024; Gullmark, 2021; Suchitwarasan et al., 2024).

In the field of public administration, entrepreneurial orientation has been associated with various terms and concepts, such as public service motivation, governance, public value, public leadership, and performance (Bernier, 2014; Caruana et al., 2002; Diefenbach, 2011; Kearney et al., 2009; Klein et al., 2010; Moon, 1999; Rauch et al., 2009; Vogel & Masal, 2015). Recent research on public sector entrepreneurship attempts to show, through empirical analyses and case studies, how an entrepreneurial orientation in public sector organizations impacts organizational outcomes, including productivity and performance (Caruana et al., 2002; Kim, 2010a, 2010b; Moon et al., 2020; Seo & Chung, 2012). In essence, entrepreneurial orientation can be seen as an integrated cognitive framework to understand organizational behaviors and the ability to acquire resources and seize opportunities in the public sector.

Theoretical Linkages with Public Sector Entrepreneurship

Government Performance: When assessing organizational outcomes in the public sector, government performance is often seen as a key indicator of productivity. Performance can be measured not only by financial indicators or outputs, such as the efficiency and effectiveness of programs, but also by perceptual and value-oriented indicators, including responsiveness, communication, equity, and cooperation (Walker & Boyne, 2006). Notably, public organizations have multifaceted dimensions of performance encompassing several managerial aspects and public values (Brewer & Walker, 2010). In addition, there are multiple stakeholders with different interests in the decision-making process in the public sector. Because each stakeholder has a unique priority and propensity to assess performance, the participation of multiple stakeholders in the decision-making process can contribute to divergent dimensions of performance (Walker et al., 2013). Due to these inherent characteristics of public organizations, measuring performance in the public sector should consider more comprehensive and broad facets of performance than other types of organizations.

In discussing how to measure government performance, scholars have considered two approaches: perceptual and archival data (Kim, 2010a; Walker et al., 2013). Some studies conclude that compared to perceptual data, archival records can help enhance the validity of measuring performance (Johnson et al. 2015), but this approach may not encompass all dimensions of performance that represent the capacity of organizations. Perceptual data sources can capture a broader range of dimensions of performance (Moynihan & Pandey, 2004; Walker et al., 2013), which can be conducive to identifying the latent effects of indicators on performance (Brewer & Walker, 2010, p. 238). Moreover, due to the challenges of developing unbiased and comprehensive predictors of public organizations' performance, many extant studies have relied on perceptual measures to evaluate organizational performance (Kim, 2010a; Moon et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2013), such as an employee-defined measure (Moynihan & Pandey, 2004, p. 429) or the perception of performance at the manager level (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2017, p. 607). For example, Moon and colleagues (2020) in a study on public entrepreneurship and organizational performance in China and South Korea, employed the following perceptual measures of organizational performance: "In the past two years, the productivity of my work unit has improved" and "The customer satisfaction toward my organisation is very high" (p. 348). These measures aim to capture two aspects of organizational performance: the efficiency/productivity of an organizational (inward focus) and the quality of and satisfaction for the service and goods provided to citizens (outward focus). Furthermore, researchers found that self-reported subjective measures of organizational performance are internally consistent and therefore can be successfully employed to assess organizational performance in lieu of objective measures (Singh et al., 2016).

With respect to the linkage between entrepreneurship and performance, the extant literature highlights that entrepreneurial orientation can be positively associated with organizational performance and other outcome variables; this insight is supported not only by theoretical reasoning but also empirical evidence (Arabeche et al., 2022; Arnold, 2019; Caruana et al., 2002; Covin & Slevin, 1991; Ireland et al., 2003; Kearney et al., 2009; Kim, 2010a; Moon et al., 2020; Rauch et al., 2009). For example, Rauch et al. (2009) report that entrepreneurship can play an important role in building strategy-making processes that contribute to some organizational achievements, such as higher performance, productivity, and competitive advantages (Ireland et al., 2003; Rauch et al., 2009). Furthermore, Arabeche et al. (2022) demonstrate that an entrepreneurial orientation encompassing the three dimensions of innovation, proactivity, and risk-taking, which are closely associated with the attribute of entrepreneurship, can improve organizational performance. Concerning the impact of entrepreneurial orientation on performance in public organizations, some public management researchers attempted to examine the conceptual linkage between the two subjects. For instance, Kearney et al. (2009) posit that performance can be considered as the consequence of entrepreneurship because creativity and innovation, which refer to the core values of entrepreneurial initiatives, contribute to a higher level of performance and well-performing organizations in the public sector (Kearney et al., 2009; Vigoda, 2002).

As highlighted above, even though public sector entrepreneurship differs from private entrepreneurship in several ways, such as goals, expected outcomes, main actors, and structural characteristics, both types of entrepreneurial orientation are positively associated with organizational performance (Jin et al., 2018; Kearney et al., 2009; Kim, 2010a; Moon et al., 2020; Rauch et al., 2009). For example, Kearney et al. (2009) stress that the impact of entrepreneurship on organizational performance depends on how much the organization embraces entrepreneurial principles. When organizations are open to innovation by supporting and adopting new technologies or processes, entrepreneurship may positively impact performance. Likewise, various organizational aspects, including culture, structure, control, and decision-making can significantly influence the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and organizational outcomes (Kearney et al., 2009).

When it comes to empirical studies of public sector entrepreneurship and related subjects, Kim (2010a) found that adopting public sector entrepreneurship can contribute to higher performance in public organizations. Kim (2010a) argues that as governments prioritize entrepreneurial attributes that are associated with action-oriented and opportunity-seeking perspectives, they can seize additional opportunities as well as achieve improved performance. Similarly, Vuong (2023) highlights that innovative work behaviors that include the willingness to adopt new technologies, generate new ideas, and secure resources to achieve goals are positively associated with performance. Furthermore, Moon et al. (2020) emphasize that entrepreneurial leadership and other organizational factors are associated with an increase in organizational performance through the mediating role of public sector entrepreneurship. These findings emphasize that adopting entrepreneurial practices is necessary to improve organizational performance. Based on the existing research, this study proposes the following hypothesis regarding the components of public sector entrepreneurship, including innovativeness, proactiveness, risk-taking, and organizational performance.

> *Hypothesis 1:* Entrepreneurial orientation is positively associated with public organizations' performance.

Communication

As one of the significant determinants influencing organization development, entrepreneurship has been a subject of extensive discussion across various disciplines (Abaci, 2022). Consequently, the study of entrepreneurship has prompted numerous experts in management to explore the features of entrepreneurship. This subject not only involves the development of theoretical frameworks but also the implementation of practical implications based on empirical findings (Kuratko et al., 2015). These academic contributions have led to in-depth discussions on the manifestation and application of entrepreneurship in practice, along with the expansion of theoretical connection with other influential factors in organization study, such as leadership, culture, structure, competency, collaboration, performance, and communication, which we define as the complete set of behaviors resulting from interactions among the members of an organizations or between organizations (Butkouskaya et al., 2020; Caruana et al., 2002; Fortunisa et al., 2018; Halim & Razak, 2014; Mercader et al., 2021; Rauch et al., 2009; Suh et al., 2018).

With respect to the aspect of entrepreneurship as a determinant of communication, extant literature posits that an entrepreneurial orientation is closely associated with dynamic capabilities, which refers to the core ability to search and obtain new opportunities and to secure knowledge-based resources and supplemental assets for competitive advantages (Augier & Teece, 2009; Teece et al., 1997). Also, effective organizations with entrepreneurial orientation and leadership attempt to actively share information with organizational members as a strategy of resource management in leveraging accumulated knowledge resources through institutionalized channels, including communication, for expected advantages and benefits (Ireland et al., 2003).

Considering the acquisition and accumulation of information and knowledge as one of the aspects of resource management, entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in exploring and exploiting resources, including new business opportunities, knowledge, and information (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001; Foss et al., 2015; Ireland et al., 2003). This aligns with communication within organizations. As mentioned above, an entrepreneurial orientation aims to help organizations identify untapped resources in internal and external environments (exploration of resources) and utilize them (exploitation of resources). Kirzner (1997), for instance, states that entrepreneurial discovery is “the driving force” behind the “systematic process" by which market participants gain “more and more accurate and complete mutual knowledge of potential demand and supply attitudes” (p. 62). Therefore, actors exhibiting an entrepreneurial orientation not only are willing to be more innovative in acquiring the necessary informational resources aimed at enhancing their capabilities (Butkouskaya et al., 2020; Kraus et al., 2019), but they also effectively communicate it and involve subordinates in the implementation process, ensuring that subordinates are fully accountable for the success of these initiatives while fostering a sense of inspiration, motivation, and commitment towards them (Vivona, 2024; Westley and Mintzberg 1989).

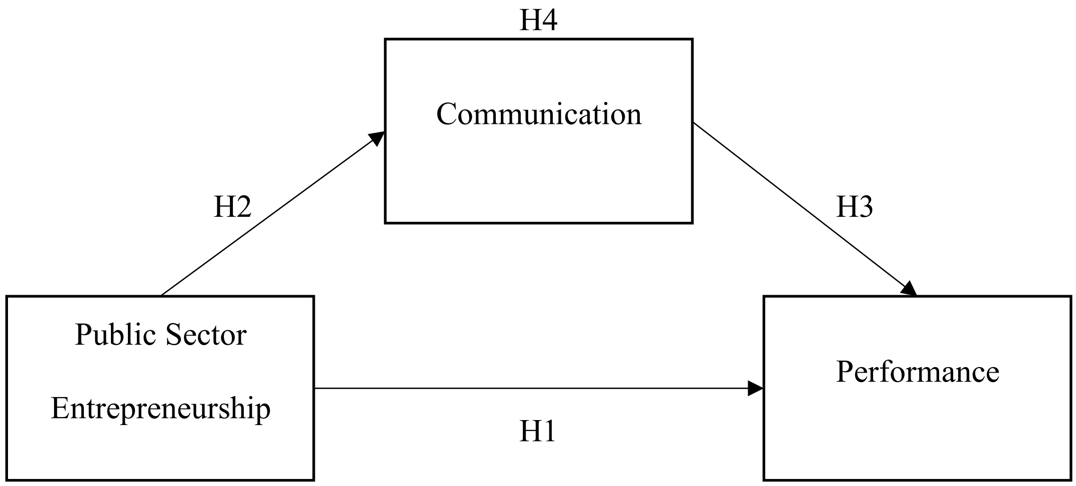
As a part of strategic resource management, developing an entrepreneurial orientation helps organizations foster communication inclinations and practices. Therefore, entrepreneurial orientation can promote integrated communication within the organization (Reid et al., 2005) and improve core capabilities (Jin et al., 2018; Zahra et al., 2006). This study defines entrepreneurial orientation as an antecedent that can positively affect organizational communication (Butkouskaya et al., 2020; Chang, 2015).

Regarding the influence of communication on organizational performance, communication plays a pivotal role in transferring and elaborating information through multiple channels, including verbal and non-verbal instruments (Garnett et al. 2008; Suh et al., 2018). In an organizational system, communication performs integrated functions that can lead to generating valuable assets and realizing procedural improvements, such as acquiring knowledge, sharing information, and establishing an organizational culture at all levels of the organization (Cuganesan et al., 2017; Kalla, 2005; Suh et al., 2018; Tantardini, 2019, 2022). For instance, Tantardini (2019, 2022) emphasizes how communication and communication channels allow organizations to attain, share, and allocate fundamental information to promote the quality of the decision-making process and reinforce the legitimacy of the decision (Tantardini, 2019, 2022). Likewise, Cuganesan et al. (2017) emphasize that communication from organizational leaders contributes to improving employees' self-efficacy through information sharing and stewardship (Cuganesan et al., 2017, p. 875). Those findings suggest how communication plays a crucial role in managing useful information resources in the organization, which explains the role of communication as one of the influential factors in performance, including efficiency and effectiveness in organizations. Accordingly, many studies conclude that communication is vital for enhancing the managerial capabilities of organizations as a strategic management practice (Ananda et al., 2018; Butkouskaya et al., 2020; Jin et al., 2018) and carrying out various managerial functions within organizations, including planning, creating, and developing services and products (Keyton, 2017). The literature recognizes two types of communication: vertical, which refers to top-down communication between managers and subordinates, as well as bottom-up communication from subordinates to managers, and horizontal communication across departments (Simpson, 1959). Top-down vertical communication may facilitate decision-making and enhance efficiency with clear instructions (Gbarale & Lebura, 2020); conversely, bottom-up vertical communication may encourage feedback and knowledge sharing, leading to better decision-making and increasing employee commitment (Zhang et al., 2020). Similarly, horizontal communication may enhance teamwork across the organization (Kim et al., 2016) and improve knowledge sharing (Yin et al., 2024). Both communication channels may then positively affect performance as shown in several studies (Kemal, 2024; Fadzil & Listyanti, 2024).

In terms of organizational change and development, which is one of the main perspectives of entrepreneurial orientation, communication can be used as a channel or a nexus that helps organizational members interact with other members, facilitating not only the sharing of useful knowledge and experience but also to fostering a sense of community that leads to functional improvements, such as organizational commitment, trust, responsiveness, and the like (Elving, 2005; Kalla, 2005; Keyton, 2017; Suh et al., 2018). Additionally, communication is vital in resource management embedded in the organizational process, promoting the exchange and integration of information and knowledge (Fang et al., 2018). In other words, communication is a strategic managerial technique for managing informational assets to improve organizational performance through accumulated knowledge-based assets (Ananda et al., 2018; Butkouskaya et al., 2020; Garnett et al., 2008; Hormiga & García-Almeida, 2016) as well as achieve innovative success (Chang, 2015). In sum, this study posits the following hypotheses and derives the following conceptual model based on these theoretical discussions.

> *Hypothesis 2:* Public sector entrepreneurship is positively associated with communication.
>
> *Hypothesis 3:* Communication is positively associated with organizational performance.
>
> *Hypothesis 4:* Communication positively mediates the relationship between public sector entrepreneurship and organizational performance.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model



Data and Methods

Sample Data

To test the proposed hypotheses, this study employed data from the 2022 Public Employee Perception Survey produced by the Korea Institute of Public Administration (KIPA). This annual survey has been conducted under the supervision of the KIPA to create a database to promote research in the public sector. The purpose of this database is to provide public administration scholars and practitioners with essential information to improve the government's capacities and enhance the development of the administrative system by collecting various perception data, including various administrative features and aspects of the Korean government from public officials. Data collection was conducted in 2022, targeting general government officials affiliated with various levels of government, such as central administrative agencies, metropolitan autonomous bodies, and basic local governments in South Korea. The survey data includes some of the perceptions and features of public organizations at the individual and organizational levels, including work environment, personnel management, organizational citizenship behavior, public service motivations, organizational culture, leadership, and performance, which are associated with public management. Most survey questions, including public sector entrepreneurship, communication, and performance, were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (e.g., 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

There are 6,170 respondents who participated in the survey. The survey population consists of public servants belonging to different levels of government, including central administrative agencies, metropolitan governments, and local government headquarters in South Korea. Since each level of government agency has different structural characteristics, such as size, number of employees, and number of departments, the sampling method that the survey used is stratified cluster sampling. Therefore, in this survey, each type of government is treated as a different subpopulation, and samples were selected independently from each subpopulation (Korean Institute of Public Administration, 2023). Table 1 shows the demographic breakdown of the samples employed in this study. The number of male respondents was 3.532, which accounts for 57.2 percent, while the number of female respondents was 2,638, which was 42.8 percent of the total number of respondents. Most respondents were in their 30s (34.3 percent) and 40s (32.3 percent), which refer to the largest and second-largest groups in the age range of respondents. Of the total respondents, 3,767 (61.1 percent) were married, while the remaining 2,403 (38.9 percent) answered they were single. Most respondents had a bachelor's degree, counted 4,687 (76 percent), and 711 respondents had a master's degree (11.5 percent), which was the second largest group of respondents' education attainment. Regarding respondents' rank, more than 90 percent of the respondents are grade 9 to grade 5, and they mainly act as the general staff (grade 9 to 6) or the deputy directors (grade 5). Other specific characteristics and figures of the respondents in the survey can be found in Table 1.

Measures

Dependent Variable: Organizational Performance

The dependent variable in this study is the level of performance of the organization. As noted above, the level of performance was measured on a 5-point Likert scale based on perceptual data from the respondents, which refer to the result of the questions of performance, such as (a) "our organization has sufficiently achieved the performance goals," and (b) "our organization's performance has been evaluated as excellent in quality." Like the contribution by Moon and colleagues (2020), these two perceptual measures of organizational performance have an inward focus (question a) and an outward focus (question b). Together, despite their limitations, these two measures may provide an acceptable representation of the performance of the organizations where our study participants work.

Independent Variables: Public Sector Entrepreneurship

The independent variable in this study refers to public sector entrepreneurship, which has significant effects on communication and organizational performance. To measure the level of public sector entrepreneurship, respondents were required to evaluate the level of entrepreneurial orientation in the organization on a 5-point Likert scale. Public sector entrepreneurship includes three questions on three dimensions: innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking. For instance, respondents rated each statement on a 5-point Likert scale, such as (a) "our organization emphasizes creativity/innovativeness/challenge," (b) "our organization is versatile and responds to changes immediately," and (c) "our organization is willing to take risk in a way for innovation." Those scores are operationalized by public sector entrepreneurship, which refers to one of the latent variables in the research.

Mediator: Communication

To measure the influence of communication within the organization, this study leverages two types of internal communication (Pandey & Garnett, 2006), including horizontal and vertical communications. For example, horizontal communication refers to peer-to-peer interactions, focusing on a lateral direction between similar levels within the organization. On the other hand, vertical communication emphasizes the hierarchical directionality of interactions, which includes upward and downward communications across different levels of units or departments (Bartels et al., 2010; Keyton, 2017). In fact, communication involves both verbal and non-verbal methods to distribute information or command for tasks, which foster performance in operations as well

Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample[1]

		Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	3,532 (57.2)
	Female	2,638 (42.8)
	Subtotal	6,170
Age	20 to 29 years old	707 (11.5)
	30 to 39 years old	2,116 (34.3)
	40 to 49 years old	1,993 (32.3)
	50 to 59 years old	1,329 (21.5)
	Above 60 years old	25 (0.4)
	Subtotal	6,170
Marital Status	Single	2,403 (38.9)
	Married	3,767 (61.1)
	Subtotal	6,170
Education Attainment	High school degree	318 (5.2)
	Junior college degree	343 (5.6)
	Bachelor's degree	4,687 (76.0)
	Master's degree	711 (11.5)
	Doctoral degree	111 (1.8)
	Subtotal	6,170
Rank[1]	Grade 9 (the lowest)	658 (10.7)
	Grade 8	887 (14.4)
	Grade 7	1,702 (27.6)
	Grade 6	1,678 (27.2)
	Grade 5	1,002 (16.2)
	Grade 4	223 (3.6)
	Grade 3	14 (0.2)
	Grade 2	6 (0.1)
	Grade 1 (the highest)	0 (0)
	Subtotal	6,170

[1] According to the Ministry of Personnel Management in South Korea, grades 6-9 are referred to the general staff; grade 5 is deputy director, grades 3-4 are division directors, and grade 2 and above is senior civil service (SCS). (https://www.mpm.go.kr/english/system/publicOfficials/)

as a perceived cultural dimension within the organization (Garnett *et al*., 2007). This research identifies communication as a mediator that is measured by two survey items. These items combined refer to the measurement of the level of communication within the organization. Specifically, respondents were required to answer two questions. The first question refers to the measurement of vertical communication, which is presented as (a) "In our organization, vertical communication is well operated in performing the tasks of the organization." The second question implies horizontal communication, which is written as (b) "In our organization, horizontal communication is well operated in performing the tasks of the organization." In the same way as the above questionnaire items, all questions corresponding to communication were measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

Common Method Bias: How to Treat the Potential Threat in This Study

Concerning the potential presence of systematic error variance within self-reported surveys, the current study considers the likelihood of encountering common method bias, which may arise when both independent and dependent variables are gathered from a single source, simultaneously involving the same respondents and questionnaires in the survey (Jakobsen & Jensen, 2015; Kock et al., 2021; Podsakoff et al., 2003). With regards to the statistical strategies employed to address the common method bias, researchers can conduct Harman's single factor test either through a confirmatory factor analysis or an exploratory factor analysis (Jakobsen & Jensen, 2015; Kock *et al*., 2021). According to Kock (2021), this test helps researchers ascertain the presence or absence of common method variance within the survey data. In general, Harman's single factor test presents that "the percentage of variance associated with the first component (or factor), the one referring to the highest eigenvalue, is compared against the threshold of 0.5. Such percentage is also referred to as the "total variance explained" by the first component extended through the analysis" (Kock, 2021, p. 2). To detect any potential common method bias within the present research, this study undertakes Harman's single factor test utilizing all survey items selected for this study. The result of Harman's single test shows that the first factor encompassing all measurements explains 48% of the variance, which falls slightly below the established threshold of 0.5 (50%) (Kock *et al*., 2021; Kock, 2021; Podsakoff *et al*., 2003). Therefore, common method bias may not be a problem in this study.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

To confirm the hypothesized structure of variables in this research model, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for the three main variables: public sector entrepreneurship, communication, and performance, by using R (Version: 4.3.2.) and R studio (Version: 2023.12.0.369). Table 2 presents the validity and reliability of measurement in the model for structural equation modeling. In terms of the estimation of the goodness of fit for the model, there are several criteria with cut-offs to assess the goodness of fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1992; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kyndt & Onghena, 2014; Xia & Yang, 2019). For example, the recommended value of Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) is .1, which means an RMSEA value should be less than .1 to verify the goodness of fit of the model. To be specific, Browne & Cudeck (1992) suggest that if a RMSEA score is less than .05, this result presents a "close fit," and a score of less than .08 refers to a "reasonable model fit" (Kyndt & Onghena, 2014, p. 9; Xia & Yang, 2019, p. 409). Also, the comparative fit index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) values should be greater than .95, and an SMRM value should be less than .08 to accept the goodness of model and data fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). According to Table 2, all results of indicators in the research model are accepted to confirm that the model has a satisfactory level of goodness of the model fit.

Table 2. Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis

	χ^2	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Cut off	p < .05		> .95	> .95	< .1	< .08
Model	354.455 (p=.000)	11	.981	.963	.071	.028

Evaluation of the Structural Model

The following part evaluates the fit of the structural model by using several indices, which helps assess the reliability and validity of the measurement instruments. Table 3 displays some of the results of the measurement model analysis, including factor loading score, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and Cronbach's alpha. First, to measure the internal consistency and reliability of the latent factor in the model, this study calculates CR values for each latent factor. Table 3 indicates that all CR scores exceed .7, demonstrating that this measurement model has acceptable reliability for the latent construct (Hair et al., 2021, p. 77). Additionally, Cronbach's alpha is another criterion to measure the internal consistency of the latent model. Existing literature suggests that a threshold of .7 is acceptable. As shown in Table 3, all values of Cronbach's alpha in the model reach the acceptable threshold, confirming they are greater than .7.

Table 3. Results of the Assessment of the Structural Model

Latent factor	Variable (Item)	Factor Loading	SE	p-value	CR	AVE	Cronbach alpha
Entrepreneurship	1. Our organization emphasizes creativity/innovativeness/challenge	.606	.009	.000	.786	.555	.776
	2. Our organization is versatile and responds to changes immediately	.863	.006	.000			
	3. Our organization is willing to take risks in a way for innovation	.754	.007	.000			
Communication	1. In our organization, vertical communication is well-operated in performing the tasks of the organization	.780	.008	.000	.721	.565	.717
	2. In our organization, horizontal communication is well-operated in performing the tasks of the organization	.719	.008	.000			
Performance	1. Our organization has sufficiently achieved the performance goals	.827	.007	.000	.748	.597	.747
	2. Our organization's performance has been evaluated as excellent in quality	.731	.008	.000			

Second, in terms of assessing the convergent validity of the model, AVE provides the criteria for whether the measurement model meets good convergent validity. In order to determine the validity of the model, each AVE value should exceed at least .5, which refers to the minimum acceptable level for convergent validity (Hair et al., 2021, p. 78). In this model, all AVE values are greater than .5, and those results explain that this model has an acceptable level of convergent validity.

Third, when it comes to factor loading, this value refers to the indicator reliability of the measurement model. Considering the cut-offs of factor loading, Hair et al. (2021) suggest a value of .7, which is the acceptable level to conduct CFA. However, other scholars argue that the recommended cut-off of factor loadings is .6, which pertains to the acceptable level for indicator reliability (MacCallum et al., 2001; Tabachnick et al., 2019). Table 3 presents that most of the values of factor loading are greater than .7, except the factor loading of the item of innovativeness (first row). However, this factor loading is greater than .6, which presents a satisfactory level of indicator reliability. In conclusion, based on the results of the evaluation of the structural model derived from several parameters, this model achieves the acceptable fit to conduct a path analysis in structural equation modeling.

Results and Discussion

Diagnostic Test for Multivariate Normality

To test the hypotheses on the influences of public sector entrepreneurship, communication, and performance, this study conducts a path analysis for the research model. Considering the normality of the statistical model, this study conducts Mardia's test for multivariate normality by using "Mardia" package in R. This diagnostic test calculates the statistics of skewness and kurtosis for the data as well as univariate normality for each variable (Mardia, 1970). Table 4 displays the results of the normality test for the data.

Table 4. Results of Test for Multivariate Normality

	Indicator	Statistic	p-value
Multivariate Normality	Mardia Skewness	1664.223	<. 001
	Mardia Kurtosis	47.636	<. 001
Anderson-Darling Test for Univariate Normality	Innovativeness	283.062	<. 001
	Proactiveness	298.248	<. 001
	Risk-Taking	300.963	<. 001
	Vertical Communication	312.832	<. 001
	Horizontal Communication	378.509	<. 001
	Inward-focused Performance	488.403	<. 001
	Outward-focused Performance	338.380	<. 001

From the results, both p-values of Mardia skewness and kurtosis are less than .05, indicating that the assumption of multivariate normality is violated in the data. In addition, for univariate normality, the results of Anderson-Darling test show that all variables significantly deviate from the normality because all indicators have p-values less than .001.

Path Analysis for Hypotheses Testing

Regarding the mediating effect of communication, this study considers the statistical method for the non-parametric model due to the violation of multivariate normality in the statistical model. To be specific, this study performs a bootstrapping procedure (n = 2,000) to calculate an accurate standard error of the indirect effect in this model, which helps address the violation of normality in the data (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The bootstrapping method offers benefits for structural equation modeling by eliminating the need for normality assumptions. This approach enables the calculation of more accurate confidence intervals and enhances statistical power when testing mediating effects, serving as an alternative to the Sobel test for evaluating mediation models with non-parametric statistics (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). Table 5 presents the results of the path analysis that reports direct and indirect effects among variables in this study. In terms of significance probabilities in this model, all coefficients are statistically significant, which concludes that all research hypotheses are accepted.

Regarding the interpretation of the results, hypothesis 1 focuses on the direct effect between public sector entrepreneurship and performance. According to the results, public sector entrepreneurship has a positive effect on organizational performance (0.362, $p < .001$). Hypothesis 2 postulates that there is a positive relationship between public sector entrepreneurship and communication. In accordance with the results in Table 5, public sector entrepreneurship positively affects communication (.762, $p < .001$). Hypothesis 3 demonstrates that communication is positively associated with an increase in organizational performance. The third result in Table 5 shows that communication is related positively to performance (.543, $p < .001$).

Table 5. Results of Path Analysis

Path	Independent	Path	Dependent	Coefficient	SE	ci.lower	ci.upper
H1	Entrepreneurship	→	Performance	$.362^{***}$	.031	.302	.423
H2	Entrepreneurship	→	Communication	$.762^{***}$	.012	.738	.786
H3	Communication	→	Performance	$.543^{***}$	.032	.480	.606

All coefficients are standardized estimates.

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

In respect of an indirect effect in the model, the coefficient of indirect effect can be calculated by multiplying two path coefficients as following formula: Indirect effect = a × b, a: path coefficient from X (entrepreneurship) to Mediator (communication); b: path coefficient from Mediator to Y (performance). Based on the formula, the indirect effect is equal to .762 ×.543 = .414. Table 6 reports that the relationship between public sector entrepreneurship and performance is statistically significant under the mediating effect of communication and the coefficient value of the direct relationship between public sector entrepreneurship and performance (.362, $p < .001$) is less than the coefficient value of indirect effect (.414, $p < .001$). Therefore, this result indicates that communication has a partial mediation effect on the relationship between public sector entrepreneurship and performance. Regarding the total effect in the model, the total effect should be equal to the sum of the direct (.362) and indirect (.414) effects; thereby, the coefficient of the total effect is .776, highlighting a strong influence on performance. In conclusion, all the hypotheses proposed in the study are statistically significant, and communication positively mediates the relationship between public sector entrepreneurship and performance. Figure 2 illustrates a schematic plot to provide the results of path analysis at a glance.

Table 6. Results of Indirect and Total Effects

Path	Independent	Path	Dependent	Coefficient	SE	ci.lower	ci.upper
H4	Entrepreneurship	→	Performance	$.414^{***}$	.026	.362	.465
Total				$.776^{***}$	.012	.753	.799

All coefficients are standardized estimates.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Figure 2. Schematic Diagram of Path Analysis

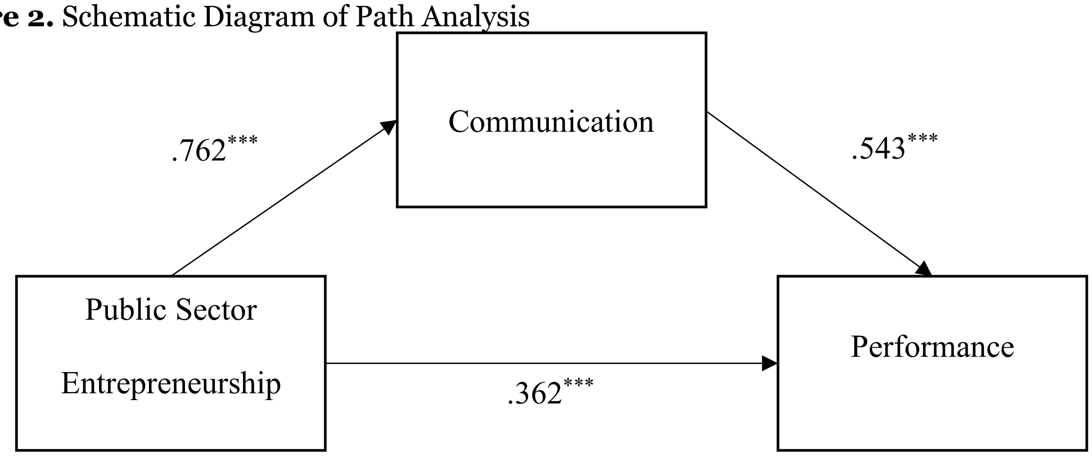


Table 7. Summary of Hypotheses Test Results

	Hypothesis	Result
H1	Public sector entrepreneurship is positively associated with public organizations' performance	Accepted
H2	Public sector entrepreneurship is positively associated with communication	Accepted
H3	Communication is positively associated with organizational performance	Accepted
H4	Communication positively mediates the relationship between public sector entrepreneurship and organizational performance	Accepted

Discussion and conclusion

Implications and Limitations of the Study

Based on existing literature, this study investigated the dynamics among public sector entrepreneurship, communication, and performance and tested this model using structural equation modeling. While prior research has explored the direct linear relationships between these variables, this study presents new insights that enrich our understanding of the interconnections among the three factors. First, this study reveals that public sector entrepreneurship is a significant antecedent of communication. According to the resource-based view (Barney, 2001; Ireland et al., 2003), public sector entrepreneurship can be one of the strategic initiatives to identify and leverage available resources. Communication can be vital to managing secured resources, especially information and knowledge. Therefore, to effectively manage resources for organizational development, entrepreneurial organizations should utilize communication as a managerial channel to deliver, modify, and integrate information resources (Chang, 2015; Gochhayat et al., 2017). Hence, as previously mentioned, adopting an entrepreneurial orientation in the public sector can enhance internal communication to better acquire and manage additional resources.

Second, this study found that communication positively mediates the relationship between public sector entrepreneurship and performance. Building on extant research, this study suggests that public sector entrepreneurship and communication have positive effects on organizational performance. Also, considering the role of communication in this model, this study finds that communication positively moderates the relationship between public sector entrepreneurship and performance. This result demonstrates the significant role of communication in promoting organizational performance in an entrepreneurial manner. These findings offer a fresh perspective on adopting an entrepreneurial orientation in the public sector, benefiting both public administration scholars and practitioners. This explains how public organizations can effectively leverage public sector entrepreneurship to improve organizational performance through well-structured communication channels within organizations.

Despite the significance of the implications, this study also has limitations that should be considered. First, while the determinants of organizational performance vary, this study only focuses on the influence of entrepreneurship and communication on performance. Even though the proposed conceptual model is statistically verified, this study does not control other latent variables that may have an impact on the model. To address this limitation, future research should consider conducting a systematic literature review and employing pertinent statistical methods for an advanced research model. Second, this study does not consider unintentional influences of the structural characteristics of each organization and the specificity of administrative culture in South Korea. For example, Moon et al. (2020) posit that Confucian culture, which refers to one of the representative cultural aspects of Korean society, has a significant influence on entrepreneurship and performance in the public sector. Those exogenous influences that were not treated in this study can threaten the validity and reliability of the research model and distort statistical results. Third, this study acknowledges there are significant methodological limitations in this study due to the inherent characteristics of the survey data. For instance, this study measures the level of organizational performance based on perceptual measurements, which can lead to conflicting interpretations of statistical results. To address the potential threats, future research should consider the usage of different data sources and/or the separation of data collection (Jakobsen & Jensen, 2015), as well as the inclusion of more comprehensive (perceptual) measures of organizational performance and/or the inclusion of objective performance measures. Fourth, this study emphasizes the notions of communication as a core mechanism for knowledge sharing and information distribution within the organization, contributing to promoting government performance. However, this study fails to clearly articulate how communication effectively leads to high performance in entrepreneurial settings due to the use of oversimplified measures of communication. Specifically, communication is a comprehensive and complex concept that not only refers to verbal and non-verbal interactions among members but also determines other salient features of the organization system, such as procedural routines, structural formations, cultural contexts, and leadership styles. Those multifaceted concepts of communication require in-depth theoretical and analytical backgrounds in investigating the functions of communication to identify latent influences and outcomes. To deal with a lack of justification in measuring communication in this study, future research should provide more rigorous theoretical discussions and rational indicators, encompassing various aspects of communication. Finally, additional research questions can also be developed in the area of public sector entrepreneurship, particularly concerning the most effective communication forms and leadership styles within the public sector context. Investigating whether different communication strategies vary according to various leadership styles or specific public sector organizations or policy areas would be worthwhile.

In conclusion, this study expands on the implications of existing research on the link between public sector entrepreneurship and performance. It also introduces a new empirical research model, including communication as a mediator. These academic contributions can not only provide public administration scholars with a new insight into the dynamics between public sector entrepreneurship and other variables but also give practitioners a new managerial alternative to improve organizational performance through the implementation of public sector entrepreneurship along with effective communication within an organization.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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Research Article

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The Impact of Personnel Actions on Official Bonding Activities: An Examination of County Governments

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The protection of government assets is often a public policy feature that can easily be overlooked. Proper bonding of public officials with asset responsibilities provides an assurance of resource protection and public trust. This study examines the level of impact that internal and external county characteristics have on the incremental bonding practices of appointed and elected government officials in North Carolina. Preliminary findings indicate more standardized bonding practices for appointed officials while bonding for elected officials is more discretionary to a point. Traditional finance office staff and audit findings influenced bond amount increases for both appointed and elected officials with specific importance placed on the accounts payable position. Implications of the study include the importance of well-trained finance personnel that can limit unnecessary risks and additional bonding increases.

Keywords: official bonding, risk management, local government management, local government finance, internal controls

Providing government service delivery with the highest level of efficiency is an ongoing objective among governments at all levels. Part of this process is to ensure the protection of all government owned assets to avoid uninterrupted public policy implementation. Local government accountability remains despite the unintended consequences of natural disasters, external business impacts, accidents with public property, or even the misuse of assets by public officials. Loss of property due to employee misconduct at the local level occurs frequently but receives less attention than practices at other levels of government due to the localized nature of the act, whether or not an elected official was involved, and rapid news cycle changes. However, the misconduct can take place at multiple levels of the administration with losses of more than $1M, and in some cases, the appointed manager may have engaged in these practices for many years and at multiple levels (U.S.DOJ, 2018). For these reasons, a comprehensive risk management plan is essential to sustain normal operations with a central focus on the bonding of specific personnel as well as public officials that have positions of responsibility related to the temporary possession of key assets, especially funds (Coe, 2007). The goal of this exploratory study is to determine if specific local government organizational characteristics are related to the incremental bonding amounts implemented by county governments. One presumption is that adequate personnel are a product of formalized policy statements and sustained

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recordkeeping leading to a reduction of liability and lower bond coverage. Overall findings point to a link between specific accounting positions and bonding practices with elected and appointed positions among North Carolina county governments. Relationships have also been established between elected office bonding and specific financial audit findings.

Additional transparency in all phases of government operations is the motivation for the study. The Governmental Accounting Standards Board (GASB) continues to introduce standards that increase clarity, especially as it relates to audit presentation (GASB, 2019; GASB, 2021). Statement proposals provide critical information for stakeholders, but especially for those that have a substantial financial interest. Audit information is even more critical for units that are engaging in an intial bond solicitation. The note disclosures or *Notes to the Financial Statements* provide more specified information concerning the basis for financial statement presentation along with assets that affect current and future personnel activities (Modlin, 2016). In this case, bonding information for selected officials is available demonstrating adherence to asset protection policy with all counties in this study stating some amount of specific official coverage.

The study advances the literature in several ways. First, there is a gap in the literature concerning risk management policies among local governments (Bullock, Greer, & O'Toole Jr., 2018), especially as it relates to official bonding practices. Second, the findings illuminate the need and sometimes ongoing struggle to employ qualified staff with accounting responsibilities capable of implementing generally accepted accounting principles (GAAP) that identify potential discrepancies with transactions (Modlin, 2024B). This could eliminate overall necessary bond coverage. The study also identifies a key area within the budgeting process that is often overlooked or expended annually on a repetitive basis without evaluation of coverage change. Major emphases are usually placed on salary and benefit changes along with capital investment leaving some critical mundane aspects with very little attention. Counties with risk managers can easily assist with these updates and changes. Finally, the study illustrates how local government policy is driven by a heavy state oversight process. Local government autonomy, especially as it relates to finances, varies considerably from state to state (Cahill & James, 1992; Coe, 2008; Honadle, 2003; Kloha, Weissert, & Kleine, 2005).

The study is organized accordingly. The next section consists of state legislation that provides bonding parameters for types and amounts. The following section includes the literature review and hypotheses development. The research design will be introduced with an overall model that lists the factors that are expected to influence the level of county government official bonding amounts. Mutivariate models will also be presented that provide further analyses along with robust model testing. Finally, there will be an evaluation of the findings with a discussion of the overall impact and implications of the study.

Literature Review

A gap exists within the extant literature concerning the changes and amounts of bond coverages. Thus far, the literature consists primarily of risk management practices encompassing emergency preparedness management and some form of corruption associated with public official practices. Most studies examined the impact of alternate levels of political corruption and ensuing organizational perception (Cailler, 2018; Graycar & Villa, 2011; Lee & Liu, 2021; Liu & Mikesell, 2014; Meier & Holbrook, 1992; Thompson, 2014). From an institutional standpoint, increased preparedness was necessary for government officials with responsibilities for disaster mitigation (Donahue, Eckel & Wilson, 2014; Lee, 2020; Meyer, Soloman, & Wolf, 1984;

Soloman, 1986). No previous study examined whether there was some type of active organizational plan of risk management with clearly identified goals and objectives that are considered necessary for increased efficiency as well as loss prevention (Stanton & Webster, 2014).

Organization factors and especially bureaucratic activities can be primary factors in determining bonding activities which are an essential part of risk management policy. For the purposes of this study, there will be a heavy emphasis on personnel and additional contributing factors that have some impact on unit financial activity and financial statement accuracy. Cuny, Mehta, and Kim (2020) found less accountability with the implementation and reporting of intergovernmental fund usage by local governments located within the districts of influential Congress members as defined by vote share. However, an additional study found that quality audit firm presence and some voter oversight mechanism increased initial financial statement accuracy and lessened the chance of a more costly debt service issuance (Baber, et al., 2013). During the budget preparation process, variations in expectation levels between elected officials and staff can significantly alter the process and increase the likelihood of an internal control problem (Modlin, 2019).

State Legislation Driving the Process

The official bonding process for specific local government officials has origins dating back to 2005 and is driven by North Carolina General Statute (N.C.G.S.) 159-29. Each official, employee, or agent that is in possession of at least $100 of the unit's funds at any given time including accessibility to unit inventories or public authorities (secondary units) is required to give a faithful performance bond with sufficient sureties payable to the local government entity. All bonds are approved by the governing board and are deposited by the clerk to the board. Officials, no matter whether they are elected or appointed, cannot fulfill the associated occupational obligations until bonding requirements are fulfilled. Finance officers specifically are required to provide a true accounting and performance bond with sureties in an amount that would be determined by the governing board. Bond premiums are to be paid by the unit, and the finance officer cannot be appointed until bonding securement. In this study, most finance officers have a performance bond through a commercial surety bond. The legislation also states that bonded amounts cannot be less than the greater of $50,000 or an amount equivalent to 10% of the unit's annually budgeted funds up to $1M. Costs for $1M bond coverage for finance officers in North Carolina have ranged from $1,500 to $6,000 (Crews, 2022). It is not uncommon for the finance officer to be bonded through a separate insurance company with an occurrence limit exceeding other offices.

It is not unusual for numerous employees within a unit to have occupational responsibilities that require some type of transfer of sums greater than $100 or management of inventory that exceeds the statutory threshold. In these cases, the legislation provides a method of blanket protection that covers these positions without the need for specific position bonding. The blanket bonds provide a base coverage primarily for line and staff employees that manage assets on a daily basis, but that are not usually in management positions. Individually bonded employees such as the finance officer and tax collector can also be covered under the blanket bond if the individual bond does not protect against risks identified in the individual bond (N.C.G.S. 159 2022-53 9(a)). The Register of Deeds (ROD), the elected official that will be evaluated in the study, has bonding statutory requirements as well. Bonding requirements for the ROD cannot be less than $10,000 or more than $50,000. Statutory requirements also include commissioner approval; however, the bonding amounts are payable to the state versus the clerk as with the beforementioned personnel (N.C.G.S. 161-4).

The North Carolina Association of County Commissioners (NCACC) provides assistance with basic insurance coverages through two self-funded risk financing pools: workers compensation and liability and property. Approximately 75% of counties participate in the liability and property pool which is the primary pool that would be affected with many of the bonding policies. The pool was created to assist counties mitigate budgetary impacts of a continually changing insurance market (NCACC, 2024) collaborative risk management. Through any one of the pools, counties can obtain property coverage equal to the replacement cost value or up to a specified limit, usually in the millions. Most counties had general liability coverage of $2M per occurrence with many including a reinsured policy with a multi-state public captive with much higher occurrence limits.

Theoretical Application and Hypotheses Development

Bonding coverage implementation takes place through the actions of multiple actors. The beforementioned state statutes are the initial policy drivers; however, specific formulation and implementation occurs at the local level. Commission-manager forms of county governments are the research subjects; therefore, the Dichotomy-Duality Model developed by James Svara (1985) provides a comprehensive overview of policy implementation by multiple official actors, specifically designed for the commission-manager form of government. Four distinct spheres divide service responsibilities between the elected commission or council and the appointed manager: overall mission, policy directives, administration, and management. The overall mission of the unit, level and extent of service provision including budget ratification are the responsibilities of elected officials. Policy development responsibilities within the model are shared between the manager and elected officials although level of influence can vary tremendously depending on overall board objectives (Benton, 2002).

The model has a diminishing elected official role with the matriculation of the initial policy directive into the administration and management spheres. For instance, during the budget formulation and implementation process, executives and staff have the primary responsibility for budget formulation (Sokolow and Honadle, 1984). For governments in North Carolina, the manager will usually make the budget presentation well in advance of ratification due to potential elected official suggestions and change requests. The ratified budget carries the process into the management and administration phases and subsequently execution is almost the exclusive province of staff. An increase in the role of administrative staff increases at this point as the role of the manager devolves to that of supervision. Previous research has substantiated this portion of the model with findings that suggests that managers have minimal involvement in specific accounting practices including audit preparation (Modlin and Stewart, 2014). For the purposes of this study, the elected representatives, the commissioners, approve the bonded amount as recommended by a member of the staff or the manager with finance staff executing payment.

Previous studies have provided a foundation of the need for literature extension that can assist with bonding explanation. Studies have thus far demonstrated some impact of official or employee activity involving the use of public funds; therefore, the following hypotheses have been developed to provide an initial examination between county government characteristics and the set bonding amounts for local government officials. There are no preconceived expectations concerning hypotheses direction predictors.

> *Hypothesis 1: Local government official bonding amounts are associated with type and experience of key personnel.*

Under North Carolina law, each county is required to appoint a designated finance officer (N.C.G.S. 159). Bonding amount for this position is critical due to the numerous responsibilities required including budget preparation, implementation, the monitoring of all transactions, and the oversight of the audit process. The establishment of internal controls within financial transactions is one of responsibilities of the position as well. Previous research suggests that fewer irregularities take place under more experienced finance officers (EXPERIENCE) (Modlin, 2012; Modlin, 2017; Rich & Zhang, 2016). Additional positions within the finance office also assist with the mitigation of internal controls. The separation of revenue collections and disbursements is critical deterrent for a material weakness finding. However, one recent study has found an increase in significant deficiency findings for governments with additional accounts payable positions (PAYABLETECH) (Modlin, 2024B). However, findings have determined that with the addition of each staff accountant (ACCOUNTANT), there can be an expectation of less material weakness audit findings (Modlin, 2024B). Although no previous research exists surrounding this position, the payroll technician (PAYROLLTECH) has the challenging responsibility of ensuring proper employee disbursements in a timely manner and in many cases, has the additional responsibility of ensuring any type of pay schedule changes, types of alternate payments such as holiday, sick leave, etc. as well as actual employment changes in some cases. Governments with larger full-time equivalencies (FTE) have a higher likelihood of an internal control finding due to the numerous transactions associated with workforce size (EMPLOYEE). However, capacity issues can exist due to personnel availability (Lofton & Ivonchyk, 2022; Shybalkina, 2024). Smaller counties however generally have the problem of employees that are not familiar with generally accepted accounting principles (GAAP). The hiring of personnel with the proper education and training of these positions falls under the responsibilities of the finance officer.

> *Hypothesis 2: Local government official bonding amounts are associated with county organizational characteristics.*

The second hypothesis examines the relationships between county characteristics and the amount designated for official bonds. Changes among the financial position of the organizations can substantially determine levels of risk. In the case of net position change (NETPOSITION), significant deviations can be the result of major capital infrastructure activities such as debt service issuance or retirement. Among county audits, county net position is a primary focus within the Management Discussion & Analysis (MD&A) along with levels of fund balance (Modlin, 2024A). Debt issuance among county governments is primarily associated with public school construction projects; therefore, it is not unusual for educational spending (EDUCATION), as a functional classification area, to have the largest expenditure sum compared to other areas. Local government assets (ASSETS) among all governmental funds provide a portion of overall fund balance which is a major predictor of bond ratings; however, the amount of discretionary funds within overall fund balance totals is usually significantly less. More overall assets within government funds could provide further information concerning bonding activities.

> *Hypothesis 3: Local Government Official Bonding Amounts are associated with audit findings and classifications.*

Audit findings provide insight into many personnel actions associated with financial transactions. If statement presentations include many inaccuracies, it is difficult to assess the proper standing of the unit. The audit can also determine actions that have created the inaccuracies such as problems with internal controls over compliance. The most serious of these is a material weakness finding inclusive of findings among financial management activities among statements (FINSTATEMENTMW), material weaknesses in federal award distributions as well as awards from or transferred through the state or from state agencies (FEDERALAWARDMW, STATEAWARDMW). With this finding, the activity of noncompliance can occur with only a remote chance of detection, prevention, or correction on a timely basis. This finding requires the immediate attention of management (AICPA, 2007). Bonding requirements could easily increase with these findings since a material weakness finding can reveal financial issues related to excessive waste and inefficiency, fraudulent employment practices, and statement inaccuracy (GAO, 2011). Prolonged essential position vacancies, unqualified personnel performing accounting responsibilities, and lack of proper supervision or oversight are the more customary sources of material weaknesses. Some type of questioned cost (QUESTIONEDCOST) is usually a prompt for an internal control finding. For county governments in North Carolina, subsequent material weakness probabilities can easily increase due to the elevated level of vehicles purchased with cash (Modlin, 2016). One study found links between different types of material weakness findings and questioned costs (Modlin, 2024B). However, the higher likelihood of questioned costs exists with larger governments (Edmonds, et al., 2023). Overall, organization size has previously had an impact on internal control findings (Baber, et al., 1987; Copley, 1989; Rubin 1988).

Additional internal control information provided by the author include whether any findings are repeat (REPEAT) findings compared to the previous fiscal year (FY) and to state whether the county classification is ‘low’ or ‘high’ risk based on based on the standards found in 2 CFR 200.520 (RISK). To obtain a ‘low’ risk designation, the auditee was required to have financial statements prepared under GAAP principles with a clean audit for the last two audit cycles. Personnel capabilities have found to be influential with the classification as links have been found between ‘low’ risk auditee classifications and organizations that contract with large CPA firms (Keating, et al., 2005). Moreover, smaller governments with less staff capability were also found less likely to get the ‘low’ risk designation (Lopez & Peters, 2010; Modlin, 2024B).

Research Design

All 100 county governments in the state of North Carolina are under analysis for this study. Uniformity among subjects is easily obtained since all counties operate under the commission-manager form of government and are under a state oversight process that determines a vast amount of policy directives concerning financial activities. In this case, the examination has a focus on the bonding practices of government officials both appointed and elected. A majority of the data for the study came from 2023 or earlier annual comprehensive financial reports (ACFRs) depending on availability. Information from previous audits (approximately 10%) correlated with comparable units with very similar bonding practices. Audits from fiscal year 2023 provide an opportunity to examine more traditional operations outside of the pandemic associated anomalies of extenuating intergovernmental funding and policies. Information from predictors demonstrate the varying levels of government service provision and priorities.

The predictors used for the study examine the impact of specific personnel, certain county characteristics, and audit findings on official bond amounts. Along with ACFRs, other additional sources provided information for the predictors. Information for the personnel variables was obtained from the UNC School of Government and included finance officer experiences (FINEXP), the number of staff accountants (ACCOUNTANT), the number of accounts payable technicians (PAYABLETECH), and payroll technicians (PAYROLLTECH). Additional finance officer experience information was obtained through county contact.

The underlying base model developed utilized the most available predictors that could impact bond rating amounts. The exploratory nature of the study precludes any previous predictor use and eliminates any preconceived predictor direction. The model below tests more specified predictors for policy use compared to traditional studies with the utilization of *BONDING* as a proxy for all dependent variables that will be tested against the predictors.

$$BONDING = \beta_0 + \beta_1 EXPERIENCE + \beta_2 ACCOUNTANT + \beta_3 PAYABLETECH + \beta_4 PAYROLLTECH + \beta_5 EDUCATION + \beta_6 EMPLOYEE + \beta_7 ASSETS + \beta_8 NETPOSITION + \beta_9 FINSTATEMENTMW + \beta_{10} FEDERALAWARDMW + \beta_{11} STATEAWARDMW + \beta_{12} RISK + \beta_{13} QUESTIONEDCOST + \beta_{14} REPEAT$$

Variable measurements for the study can be found in Table 1. The study will examine the bonding amounts of two appointed officials (finance officer and tax administrator) and one elected official (Register of Deeds). The dependent variables in the study are binary with the most utilized bonding amount coded as one (See Table 1). High levels of consistency among bonding amounts set by counties provided a basis for the chosen method of measurement. The multivariate analyses will provide a more comprehensive investigation of the relationships between the predictors and official bonding practices. Directional hypotheses for the predictors are limited for the multivariate analyses.

The presumption taken with this study is that proper staffing and subsequent actions of employees are a contributing factor to internal control occurrence findings and potential liability therefore possibly acting as a catalyst for bonding increases. Finance officer experience (EXPERIENCE) is expected to have some type of association with bonding amounts due to the daily position responsibilities and requirements which include the monitoring of transactions and ensuring GAAP standards are followed, oversight of the budget and audit process as well as ensuring service provision. Previous research has suggested that internal control findings could be the result of responsibility delegation (Modlin, 2024B). Additional finance office staff members, especially well-trained staff accountants (ACCOUNTANT) not only ensure the proper coding and entry of transactions, but can provide efficiency throughout the entire budgetary process. The accounts payable technician (PAYABLETECH) and payroll technician (PAYROLLTECH) both ensure the timeliness of disbursements demonstrating financial solvency of the unit and face increased challenges with elevated numbers of employee transactions.

Several county internal factors associated with the current financial status will be examined as well. Increased demand for services usually has an equivalent full-time (FTE) equivalency increase, especially if the request is from the elected officials. At times, associated outcomes of these changes include an increase in temporary employees and multitasking for current employees. All of which can reduce proper internal controls; therefore, the number of full-time employees will be used as a predictor (EMPLOYEE). All positions are coded according to actual FTE as a percentage of county residents with a percentage of two or more equal to three. In conjunction with the statutory finance officer requirements stated previously, the total amount of county assets among all funds (ASSETS) will be analyzed in addition to the largest amounts of FY expenditures that occurred within a service area (EDUCATION). In this case, public education will be used due to the intergovernmental transactions and debt service impact on county net position (NETPOSITION).

Specific audit findings related to internal control issues and more specifically material weaknesses will be examined (FINSTATEMENTMW, FEDERALAWARDMW, STATEAWARDMW). If there are enough material weakness findings with a subsequent *adverse* finding and bonding downgrade, debt issuance can greatly increase due to the related investor risk (Edmonds, et al., 2023; Park, Matkin, & Marlowe, 2017; Gore, Henderson, & Ji, 2016). Findings have also suggested that questioned costs (QUESTIONEDCOST) are related to material weaknesses (Modlin, 2024B); therefore, this will predictor be examined as well. Other variables associated with audit findings that will be examined is if the county is a 'high' or 'low' risk (RISK) and if there was some type of repeat finding (REPEAT) compared to the previous FY. All variables related to audit findings are dichotomous.

Table 1. Variables for Measurement

Finance Officer (DV)	Total Finance Officer Bonded Amount; 1 = $1M or Greater Source: ACFR
Tax Administrator (DV)	Total Tax Administrator/Official Bonded Amount; 1 = $100K or Greater Source: ACFR
Register of Deeds (DV)	Total Register of Deeds Bonded Amount; 1 = $50K or Greater Source: ACFR
EXPERIENCE	Finance Officer Experience; 5 = More than 20 Years Source: UNC School of Government County Salary Study, ACFR
ACCOUNTANT	Number of Staff Accountants; 5 = Five or More Source: UNC School of Government County Salary Study
PAYABLETECH	Number of Accounts Payable Technicians on Staff; 5 = Five or More Source: UNC School of Government County Salary Study
PAYROLLTECH	Number of Payroll Technicians on Staff; 5 = Five or More Source: UNC School of Government County Salary Study
EDUCATION	Functional Classified Area with Highest Level of County Expenditures; 1 = Education Source: ACFR
EMPLOYEE	Number of County Employees as a Percent of County Population; 3 = More than 2% Source: ACFR
ASSETS	Total accumulated assets in all governmental funds; 5 = More than $200M
NETPOSITION	Net Position Change from Previous Year; 3 = Increase by More Than 10% Source: ACFR
FINSTATEMENTMW	Auditor Finding of a Material Weakness among Financial Statements; 1 = Yes Source: ACFR
FEDERALAWARDMW	Auditor Findings of a Material Weakness among Federal Awards; 1 = Yes Source: ACFR
STATEAWARDMW	Auditor Finding of a Material Weakness among State Awards; 1 = Yes Source: ACFR
RISK	County Government Designated High Risk by Audit Firm; 1 = Yes Source: ACFR
QUESTIONEDCOST	Auditor Finding of a Questioned Cost among Service Distribution; 1 = Yes Source: ACFR
REPEAT	Auditor discovery of a repeat finding from the previous FY; 1 = Yes Source: ACFR

Summary Statistics and Preliminary Results

All descriptive statistics for the entire sample are found in Table 2. Among all 100 counties, finance officer bonding practices had the most diversity, especially according to centile values.

Finance officer bonding amounts averaged approximately $570K for the entire sample. The mode was $1M and became the new statutory requirement during the 2023FY. Approximately half of the counties within the state will have to adjust these coverages. Tax administrator coverages exceeded just over $160K with quarterly centiles remaining constant at $100K. Register of Deeds coverage had a quarterly centile of $50K. More information concerning bond averages by county budget size is on Table 4.

The personnel quarterly centiles illustrate many of the staffing differences based on population size. Finance officer experience is much higher in quartile 3 as well as more staffing including the presence of additional staff accountants. Also, among larger counties, educational spending is the primary functional classification expenditure due to the availability of additional asset funds and debt service capability. Nearly all 100 counties had an increase in net position with more than half having an increase of more than 10%. Unfortunately, repeat findings related to audit findings primarily took place among counties with populations less than 100K. Material weakness findings were quite limited overall; however, some of the smaller counties had multiple findings.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics, Full Sample (N=100)

Variable	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	Q1	Q3
FINANCE OFFICER	0.51	1	0.50	0	1
TAX ADMIN.	0.55	1	0.50	0	1
REGISTER/DEEDS	0.33	0	0.47	0	1
ACCTOUNTANT	0.92	1	1.24	0	1
PAYABLETECH	1.75	1	1.53	1	2
PAYROLLTECH	0.88	1	0.88	.5	1
EDUCATION	0.27	0	0.44	0	1
EMPLOYEE	1.46	1	0.54	1	2
ASSETS	2.63	2	1.57	1	4
NETPOSITION	2.43	2	0.87	2	3
FINSTATEMENTMW	0.29	0	0.46	0	1
FEDERALAWARDMW	0.15	0	0.36	0	0
STATEAWARDMW	0.07	0	0.26	0	0
RISK	0.54	1	0.50	0	1
QUESTIONEDCOST	0.13	0	0.34	0	0
REPEAT	0.35	1	0.48	0	1

Table 3 categorizes bonding amounts and the predictors based on differences between the most recurrent county bonding amount by office and discretionary bonding. The table also tests for significance among predictor variances. The findings demonstrate that organizational characteristics and audit findings, especially among the appointed positions, do impact bonded amounts. The first two panels consist of predictor relationships for the appointed officials. One overall conclusion is that counties with more customary bonding amounts have additional personnel, more experienced finance officers, stronger positions financially, and less internal control problems. Both of the initial panels had significant findings for the total number of employees as a percent of county population and total assets suggesting that counties with benchmark bonding amounts for these two positions have more assets, but less employees as a percent of the population. The mean value for net position is also slightly higher in the Finance Officer Model for counties with the standardized bonding amount (differences in NETPOSITION at $p < .05$). Both models also had significant relationships with audit findings, but with different predictors. The Finance Officer Model had significant relationships among financial statement material weaknesses and state award material weaknesses, whereas federal award material weaknesses was significant with the Tax Administrator Model. Counties with standardized bonding amounts for the Tax Administrator had fewer internal control findings concerning intergovernmental transfers (0.07) in contrast to counties with more incremental practices. Interestingly, STATEAWARDSMW was significant in the Finance Officer Model even though the mean values suggest more findings with counties with the premium bond amounts.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics Based on Bonding amount Differences
Panel A. *Finance Officer*

	BOND $1M = 1 (N = 51)			**BOND < $1M = 0 (N = 49)**			
Variable	Mean	Median	Std. Dev	Mean	Median	Std. Dev	Significance
EXPERIENCE	2.58	2	1.54	2.22	1	1.50	
ACCTOUNTANT	0.92	1	1.18	0.92	1	1.30	
PAYABLETECH	1.84	1	1.62	1.65	1	1.47	
PAYROLLTECH	1.04	1	0.72	0.90	1	1.03	
EDUCATION	0.43	0	0.50	0.10	0	0.31	***
EMPLOYEE	1.25	1	0.48	1.67	2	0.52	***
ASSETS	3.10	2	1.62	2.14	2	1.38	**
NETPOSITION	2.47	3	0.84	2.39	3	0.90	**
FINSTATEMENTMW	0.18	0	0.39	0.41	0	0.50	**
FEDERALAWARDMW	0.10	0	0.30	0.20	0	0.41	
STATEAWARDMW	0.11	0	0.33	0.02	0	0.14	**
RISK	0.45	0	0.50	0.63	1	0.49	**
QUESTIONEDCOST	0.09	0	0.30	0.16	0	0.37	
REPEAT	0.25	0	0.44	0.45	0	0.50	**

**** represents significance at the .001 level; ** at the .05 level; *at the .10 level.*

Panel B. Tax Administrator

	BOND ≥ $100K = 1 (N = 55)			**BOND < $100K = 0 (N = 45)**			
Variable	Mean	Median	Std. Dev	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.	Significance
EXPERIENCE	2.41	2	1.46	2.40	2	1.62	
ACCTOUNTANT	1.03	1	1.44	0.78	1	0.93	
PAYABLETECH	1.81	1	1.64	1.67	1	1.41	
PAYROLLTECH	1.07	1	0.88	0.84	1	0.88	
EDUCATION	0.29	0	0.46	0.24	0	0.43	
EMPLOYEE	1.38	1	0.53	1.56	2	0.55	*
ASSETS	2.90	2	1.62	2.29	2	1.46	**
NETPOSITION	2.45	3	0.88	2.40	3	0.86	
FINSTATEMENTMW	0.24	0	0.43	0.36	0	0.48	
FEDERALAWARDMW	0.07	0	0.26	0.24	0	0.43	**
STATEAWARDMW	0.03	0	0.19	0.11	0	0.32	
RISK	0.53	1	0.50	0.56	1	0.50	
QUESTIONEDCOST	0.13	0	0.34	0.13	0	0.34	
REPEAT	0.33	0	0.47	0.38	0	0.47	

*** represents significance at the .05 level; *at the .10 level.*

Panel C. Register of Deeds

	BOND ≥ $50K = 1 (N = 37)			BOND < $50K = 0 (N = 67)			
Variable	Mean	Median	Std. Dev	Mean	Median	Std. Dev	Significance
EXPERIENCE	2.36	2	1.39	2.43	2	1.60	
ACCTOUNTANT	0.85	1	1.46	0.96	1	1.12	
PAYABLETECH	1.88	2	1.51	1.69	1	1.56	
PAYROLLTECH	1.09	1	1.01	0.91	1	0.81	
EDUCATION	0.21	0	0.42	0.30	0	0.46	
EMPLOYEE	1.45	1	0.51	1.46	1	0.56	
ASSETS	2.36	2	1.41	2.76	2	1.64	
NETPOSITION	2.58	3	0.75	2.36	3	0.92	
FINSTATEMENTMW	0.21	0	0.41	0.33	0	0.47	
FEDERALAWARDMW	0.12	0	0.33	0.16	0	0.37	
STATEAWARDMW	0.03	0	0.17	0.09	0	0.29	
RISK	0.42	0	0.50	0.60	1	0.49	*
QUESTIONEDCOST	0.06	0	0.24	0.16	0	0.37	
REPEAT	0.24	0	0.43	0.40	0	0.49	

**represents significance at the at the .10 level.*

Findings among the elected official model had many contrasts. For the Register of Deeds panel, finance officer experience and the number of accountants for counties with standardized bonding amounts was actually lower than with the other models. The mean number of assets was lower as well. It also appears counties with smaller populations prefer this bonding practice. The only significant relationship among the predictors was with the RISK variable. Counties with this designation had lower bond coverages for the Register of Deeds. Based on panel information, it appears that larger counties choose to bond the finance officer and the tax administrator at the largest available threshold while choosing alternative amounts for the Register of Deeds. In many cases, deductible amounts, premium costs, and the blanket coverage with additional occurrence coverage could be explanations as well.

Official bonding averages demonstrate bonding importance depending on the budget group (Table 4). More than half of all counties bond the finance officer for $1M, which was the limit for any county. For the first two budget categories, the amounts were more staggered with 16 counties bonding for $5,000 with another 11 requiring a $10,000 bond. The largest budget group average was slightly lower than the $150M-$200M group. This was due to all counties but one bonding the finance officer for $1M. The $200M+ group had four with bonds of $250K. Bonding choices for the tax administrator had many similar patterns. The $50M-$100M bond group had more bonding of $100K compared to the other groups. Smaller governments preferred bond amounts of $50K for this position. Tax administrators in the largest two groups had some $1M bond coverages.

Bonding amounts were more consistent with the Register of Deeds except for the largest budget group. Numerous governments covered the position with the blanket bond which would be less costly than the addition of an individual bond for the position. Only seven RODs were individually bonded and more than half of those were for $10,000 lessening the mean value for the group. Interestingly, among the lowest budget groups, five RODs were bonded for $100K or more. Numerous counties in the study have bond coverages that exceed the statutory limitations. This is allowed; however, the surety has to agree to pay the increased premium for the coverage issuing a certificate of the change with a specified date for new coverage authorization.

Table 4. Average Bonding Amounts by County Budget Size

Category	Less than $50M	$50M-$100M	$100M-$150M	$150M-$200M	More than $200M	Official Average
Finance Officer	$379,310	$527,941	$656,000	$911,000	$727,777	$570,100
Tax Administrator	$83,333	$130,968	$109,900	$362,500	$206,250	$168,478
Register of Deeds	$46,000	$42,045	$40,714	$47,000	$23,571	$41,475

Multivariate Results

Table 5 presents three logistic regression models that examine the incremental changes in county government official bonding amounts. The analyses provide a method of examining the dependent variables with the interaction of the predictors. Support for the initial hypothesis exists with all three models. Each model now has at least one significant predictor among finance personnel with the Finance Officer Model having two significant predictors. Increased levels of finance officer experience and less accounts payable technicians were significantly related to a probable bond amount of $1M or more. The accounts payable (PAYABLETECH) position was the only significant variable among personnel factors within both the Tax Administrator Model and as a positive relationship in the ROD model (PAYABLETECH = .3548; Odds Ratio = 1.4259).

The number of findings associated with organizational attributes had similar findings. The Finance Officer Model had again had two significant variables. Counties that designated more spending for education related activities versus other object specification areas were more likely to have bonding amounts for finance officers at $1M or more (EDUCATION = 2.2218; Odds Ratio = 9.2235). The odds ratio indicates that counties with this type of spending structure are nine time more likely to have a $1M bonding amount for the finance officer, given the other variables remain constant, compared to counties with elevated spending in another area. Interestingly, this same model suggests that slightly less employees are associated with higher finance officer bonding amounts indicating some type of perceived risk by either internal personnel or sureties. For both the Tax Administrator Model as well as the ROD Model, the number of county assets was significant, but had opposing directions. With the ROD Model, the relationship was negative with a modest odds ratio.

Internal control findings extended across all models and provided support for the third hypothesis. It appears that with these predictors, for the most part, bonding increases occur with divergent findings among internal control findings. Contrasting findings emerged from the Finance Officer Model suggesting that with an internal control finding concerning state awards, the chances of a higher bond rating increases by 71 times given that the other variables are held constant (STATEAWARDSMW = 4.2667; Odds Ratio = 71.3592); however, the model also suggests this is in conjunction with the absence of a federal award finding. The omission of a federal award finding also led to an increased probability of an increase in the tax administrator's bond but was present in Register of Deeds bonding increases as well as the probability of a clean audit in recent years (REPEAT). In addition to internal control findings within the compliance section of ACFRs, there are corrective action plans that are implemented by the official with departmental responsibility. The combination of these procedures and the state oversight mechanism which includes further audit oversight could negate official and surety concerns over losses leaving coverage amounts based on market changes. One of the models (Finance Officer) was significant at the .05 level while the other two models (Tax Administrator and ROD) were significant at the .10 level after being tested against a constant-only model; therefore, this is an indicator that as a set, the predictors are reliable for determining the varying levels of finance officer and tax administrator bonding practices among county governments.

Table 5. Determinants of Bonding Amounts by Government Position

EXPERIENCE	.2842	(1.3286)*	.0170	(1.0171)	-.2338	(.7915)
ACCTOUNTANT	-.2069	(.8131)	.1559	(1.1687)	-.1547	(.8566)
PAYABLETECH	-.4259	(.6532)**	-.3220	(.7247)*	.3548	(1.4259)*
PAYROLLTECH	.2566	(1.2925)	.4166	(1.5168)	.3536	(1.4242)
EDUCATION	2.2218	(9.2235)**	-.6734	(.5100)	-.0403	(.9605)
EMPLOYEE	-1.3157	(.2683)**	-.4109	(.6631)	.0927	(1.0971)
ASSETS	.2845	(1.3291)	.4943	(1.6393)**	-.5046	(.6037)**
NETPOSITION	.1955	(1.2159)	-.0978	(.9068)	.4404	(1.5533)
FINSTATEMENTMW	-.9236	(.3971)	-.5276	(.5900)	-.9563	(.3843)
FEDERALAWARDMW	-2.6881	(.0680)**	-2.3664	(.0938)**	1.0166	(2.7638)*
STATEAWARDMW	4.2677	(71.3592)**	-1.2291	(.2926)	-1.2769	(.2789)
RISK	-.4975	(.6081)	.1379	(1.1479)	-.5067	(.6025)
QUESTIONEDCOST	1.3177	(3.7348)	1.2382	(3.4494)	-.6366	(.5291)
REPEAT	-.2663	(.7662)	.0184	(1.0185)	-.9631	(.3817)*
Constant	.8523	(2.3450)	.2406	(1.2720)	-.1236	(.8837)
N	100		100		100	
Log. Lik.	-45.9991		-58.3490		-54.4913	
Wald Chi-Squared (14)	35.87**		22.39*		21.09*	
McFadden's Pseudo R-Squared	.3362		.1521		.1408	

*Notes: Cell entries are unstandardized parameter estimates; **p < .05; *p < .10 (Two-tailed test) with robust standard errors. Odds ratios in parentheses. The table presents estimates of logistic regression specifications. For the dependent variables, Finance Officer = 1 if bonding amount is $1 million or greater; Tax Administrator = 1 if bonding amount is $100K or greater; Register of Deeds = 1 if bonding amount is $50K or greater.*

Model robustness results were tested by the substitution of two predictors (Table 6). The number of staff accountants (ACCOUNTANT) was replaced with the business officer position (BUSINESS). This position is coded as a dichotomous variable since the position is budgeted by choice. This position is usually in departments with high FTE counts and is an intermediary for human resources and finance departments providing assistance for payroll and job classifications among other responsibilities. Business officers can normally be found in human service, law enforcement, and education departments. The highest level of spending based on functional classification area (EDUCATION) was also replaced with public safety or sheriff department spending (DEPTLAW). Among North Carolina county governments, this area has consistently comprised of the highest level of expenditures and in many cases FTE.

Table 6: Alternative Determinants of Bonding Amounts by Government Position

EXPERIENCE	.2315	(1.2605)	-.0127	(.9873)	-.2355	(.7901)
BUSINESS	-.7398	(.4772)	-.2367	(.7892)	-.5628	(.5696)
PAYABLETECH	-.4577	(.6328)**	-.2679	(.7650)	.3394	(1.4042)*
PAYROLLTECH	.3023	(1.3530)	.4145	(1.5137)	.3372	(1.4010)
DEPTLAW	-1.5350	(.2155)**	.5276	(1.6949)	-.0109	(.9892)
EMPLOYEE	-1.4285	(.2397)**	-.3868	(.6793)	.0901	(1.0943)
ASSETS	.3647	(1.4400)*	.5136	(1.6713)*	-.5164	(.5966)**
NETPOSITION	.1407	(1.1511)	-.0716	(.9309)	.4636	(1.5897)
FINSTATEMENTMW	-.8870	(.4119)	-.5009	(.6060)	-.8902	(.4106)
FEDERALAWARDMW	-2.7616	(.0632)**	-2.1783	(.1132)**	.8822	(2.4161)
STATEAWARDMW	3.9592	(52.4153)**	-1.3826	(.2509)	-1.2981	(.2731)
RISK	-.5144	(.5978)	.2006	(1.2222)	-.4050	(.6670)
QUESTIONEDCOST	1.3637	(3.9104)	1.1508	(3.1608)	-.6086	(.5441)
REPEAT	-.4618	(.6301)	-.0315	(.9690)	-1.0836	(.3384)
Constant	2.8906	(18.0038)**	-.2757	(.7590)	-.0460	(.9550)*
N	100		100		100	
Log. Lik.	-46.5345		-58.5808		-54.7040	
Wald Chi-Squared (14)	39.27**		21.38*		19.67	
McFadden's Pseudo R-Squared	.2385		.1487		.1473	

*Notes: Cell entries are unstandardized parameter estimates; **p < .05; *p < .10 (Two-tailed test) with standard errors clustered by county. Odds ratios in parentheses. The table presents estimates of logistic regression specifications. For the dependent variables, Finance Officer = 1 if bonding amount is equal to or greater than $1 million; Tax Administrator = 1 if bonding amount is $100K or greater; Register of Deeds = 1 if bonding amount is $50K or greater.*

Model findings are still fairly consistent with some new findings. The Finance Officer Model had a substitution among significance with two variables. An increase in bonding for finance officers were higher in this model in counties as asset levels rise. The odds of a finance officer bonding increase remain quite high with an audit finding among state awards which is consistent with the previous model. The Tax Administrator and ROD models were extremely consistent with significance among many of the same predictors and with the same directions. The only real change was the loss of the accounts payable position in the Tax Administrator Model and the audit repeat finding variable in the ROD Model; however, the position still retained significance with the other models. Changing the highest expended functional classification to law enforcement produced a significant, but *negative* outcome in the Finance Officer Model. If counties dedicate the largest amounts of expenditures to some other functional classification area which would most likely include either public education or human services, finance officer bonding increases. The variable had no significance with the other models. Two models retain significance with the predictor changes.

All of the findings thus far provide some support for all hypotheses in some manner. *Initially, were local government bonding amounts influenced by personnel type and finance officer experience?* It can be concluded that some type of staff presence is associated with bonding practices and that the presence of the accounts payable position does have an impact and to a lesser degree, finance officer experience. Proper staffing can easily assist with the prevention of internal control issues. *There was also the question of whether organizational characteristics influenced bonding amounts*. Government asset level provided most of the support for the second hypothesis with the number of employees providing support for finance officer bonding practices. *Hypothesis three questioned whether audit findings and classifications influenced bonding amounts*. All models provided some support for this hypothesis. A very strong relationship exists with finance officer bonding increases and a state award finding, but the relationships were mostly negative with the other models indicating the presumption of risk explaining a probability of a bonding increase among all officials versus actual audit findings concerning internal control findings.

Concluding Discussion

This study has examined the bonding practices of county government officials in North Carolina. Overall findings appear to suggest a two-tier system of bonding with specific personnel and organizational factors correlating with more bonding for appointed officials while the bonding for the Register of Deeds appears to be more autonomous. Counties with more accounts payable technicians and audit findings associated with federal awards were more likely to apply higher bonded amounts for the Register of Deeds. A consensus of the models suggests bond increases at alternate times between the appointed and elected officials, but different catalysts. The first two models suggest that for the larger counties with a more experienced finance officer, budgets and service levels are continuing to increase adding more responsibilities to the finance officer thus leading to higher levels of risk. The accounts payable technician finding suggests that these positions have not been filled or other personnel including the finance officer are possibly performing some of these responsibilities. For end of year purposes in which audit presentation is based on accrual accounting, all amounts are reconciled with eventual internal control resolutions as a result of changed procedures, thus explaining the negative relationships with some audit predictors. For the Register of Deeds, counties are choosing to bond for lower amounts overall even though the data does not pick up all associated information (Table 3 Panel C; Table 4). According to the model, counties only increase bond premiums if an event occurs such as some type of findings that is associated with the department. The repeat finding suggests that the event was an initial occurrence.

The study was exploratory therefore there is no direct relationship to previous studies. However, portions of the study did verify previous findings that suggested capacity issues can exist due to the availability of proper personnel (Lofton & Ivonchyk, 2022; Shybalkina, 2024). The study also verified findings that suggests less overall audit irregularities were associated with more experienced finance officers (Modlin, 2012; Modlin, 2017; Rich & Zhang, 2016). State driven statutes and increased scrutiny of the risk process along with the acquisition of proper bonding was evident among many of the governments as well (Stanton & Webster, 2014).

There are many limitations with the study. First, there is no information concerning the number of claims that can be directly attributed to the study positions. With the exception of the finance officer, any type of occurrence could be a factor for bonding determination. This information would not be readily available in compliance reports due to the high probability of classified personnel activity that would only be discussed in closed session commissioner board meetings. Second, we do not have all of the relevant information concerning the full complimentary of finance staff members and the related position descriptions. A list of positions responsible for accounts receivable and positions responsible for elected official financial transactions would have provided more significant information. Third, more information concerning the surety and types of available coverages would provide more explanation concerning bonding amounts, especially as it relates to blanket bonding.

The study has illustrated many important factors concerning service delivery and the bonding process for elected officials. Government responsibility is quite apparent as there is statutory language concerning bonding implementation related to the protection of government assets. The importance of skilled positions has also been proven, but proper staffing is important for internal controls therefore reducing unnecessary risks. While the vast majority of finance officers have strong accounting backgrounds and are familiar with GAAP principles, many staff members, especially those within finance departments with cash management responsibilities, may not have received this training and can easily be overlooked in the risk assessment process. These same staff issues are even more apparent in departments that do not have a high level of trained oversight such as those in law enforcement and that handle numerous transactions such as public utilities or deed offices. The challenges are even more pronounced in smaller governments that cannot offer competitive salaries. The study has indeed demonstrated that risk management and bonding practices are an essential part of the overall implementation and evaluation process providing even more transparency among government activities.

Disclosures

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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