

Aid Organizations on Instagram: Do Government-Funded Groups Differ from Non-Government-Funded Groups?

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Abstract

The relationship between aid organizations and social media has been a prominent topic of discussion among scholars and aid critics. This study investigates the Instagram accounts of aid organizations that operate through donations and aid organizations that are government-funded. A content analysis driven by Robert Entman's Framing theory and using a "perception" coding method by Russmann and Svensson compared the Instagram accounts of Peace Corps (representing government-funded aid organizations) and Habitat for Humanity (representing non-government-funded aid organizations). It was hypothesized that the two Instagram accounts would differ, as non-government-funded aid organizations would use Instagram as a platform to gain donations while government-funded aid organizations would focus on brand recognition. However, this study found that both organizations, whether seeking donations or not, focused on the same aspect throughout Instagram: volunteerism.

I. Introduction

Effective and ethical humanitarian aid has been a topic of discussion since the early 1960s when aid organizations began forming and multiplying worldwide, and the need to respond to an array of devastation became unavoidable. For the government, this came in the form of creating government-funded aid organizations, such as Peace Corps, to carry out aid. For the average individual, this came in the form of volunteering or donating money, time and/or resources to aid organizations, such as Habitat for Humanity. As aid volunteers of both government-funded aid organizations and non-government-funded aid organizations increased by the thousands, so did its appearance on social media.

Today, humanitarian aid is essential for many individuals and communities around the globe. Meanwhile, social media has become an organizational necessity that aid organizations are now relying on. To raise awareness – and oftentimes donations – successful aid organizations are present on several social media platforms. However, there is a significant lack of research addressing the ways in which aid organizations present themselves on social media platforms– specifically Instagram.

This study explores the similarities and differences between the Instagram accounts of government-funded aid organizations and non-government-funded aid organizations, specifically focusing on how each

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account frames its content to appeal to Instagram followers. This study analyzes the Instagram account of Peace Corps (representing government-funded aid organizations) and Habitat for Humanity (representing non-government-funded aid organizations) to draw conclusions based on prior research and specific methodology.

II. Literature Review

The relationship between aid organizations and social media has been a prominent topic of discussion among scholars and aid critics. Aid organizations rely on the use of social media for overall brand awareness and donation success, making it increasingly important to analyze how aid organizations are presenting themselves via one of social media's most popular platforms: Instagram. This literature review focuses on multiple aspects pertaining to aid representation on Instagram: Framing theory, necessity vs. ethics, and positive appeals vs. negative appeals.

Framing theory

Framing theory suggests that media can impact the ways audiences think about a certain topic or issue based on the strategic facts that are presented. More specifically, framing is defined by one of its most prominent researchers as “the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation” (Entman, 2007, p.164). Entman concludes that the power of framing in the media is underestimated, arguing that framing has the power to seriously impact one's way of thinking, and is therefore used by not only the government (which Entman specifically focuses on in this research study) but by organizations seeking public attention and/or a specific reaction from a desired audience (Entman, 2007).

In addition to these findings, previous researchers have focused on framing from the perspective of not only those who are sending out the framed message, but also from the receiver's perspective, the message itself, and the culture surrounding the message (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015). More specifically, Ardèvol-Abreu found that the reliance and lack of restriction on technology and the ability to see an abundance of framed content can be both manipulative and informative, sometimes simultaneously (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015).

Social media and aid organizations: necessity vs. ethics

Social media has become an essential aspect of successful aid organizations, especially those who rely on donations. Therefore, it is important to analyze how the relationship between aid and social media has transformed and adapted to the digital age.

Researchers have conducted studies regarding aid organizations' interactions with social media and suggest that such platforms are an effective approach for addressing both the logistics and the ethics of aid. Specifically, some scholars conclude that the natural, open communication that social media fosters allows for transparency between organizations and donors (Seo, Kim & Yang, 2009). Other scholars similarly suggest that social media is bridging the gap between donors and aid organizations, decreasing ethical concerns regarding transparency within the giving-receiving relationship (Richey, 2018). Richey elaborates by suggesting that social media has been inevitably looped into everyday humanitarianism. In other words, aid work is now equally as important on an iPhone screen as it is on the ground.

However, some researchers disagree entirely. Cottle and Nolan (2007) argue that social media has negatively impacted aid organizations. They suggest that aid organizations putting money, time, and resources into social media runs counter to their ethical missions in the first place, and therefore should be heavily scrutinized. While Cottle and Nolan do not deny that aid organizations need to use social media, they suggest that the ways in which aid is presented through these platforms needs to be further examined.

While scholars still continue to debate whether or not social media is enhancing or destroying the ethical missions of aid organizations, they can agree on one critical point: social media is not going anywhere, and aid organizations' use of social media is not going to decline any time soon. In order to keep brands recognizable and donation rates up, aid organizations are not only persuaded to use media, they now absolutely depend on it (Cottle & Nolan, 2007). Therefore, the following question arises: how do aid organizations present themselves effectively on a specific social media platform?

Instagram: positive vs. negative appeals

Instagram is one of the fastest growing social media platforms. Averaging 1 billion users worldwide, organizations can simply no longer pass Instagram off as a mere millennial obsession and are now treating the platform as a tool (Benedek, 2018; Statista, 2018). Because Instagram includes images, pictures and videos, this platform plays a new and important role in online communication (Russmann & Svensson, 2016). In fact, Instagram is now an active factor in reaching primary goals for aid organizations around the world.

Through surveys of communications representatives at 75 different non-government organizations (NGOs), researchers have found that the two most important and effective functions of Instagram include promoting the overall image or brand of an organization and encouraging fundraising (Seo, Kim, & Yang, 2009). With this in mind, an important factor to consider and analyze is how to promote these two functions in an Instagram feed.

While no research has specifically studied how NGOs use Instagram, researchers have previously looked at aid organizations' online advertisements and focused on the users' willingness to donate based on two common types of image-specific posts: positive appeals and negative appeals (Erlandsson, Nilsson, & Västfjäll, 2018). These researchers analyzed whether or not donors react to negative advertisement appeals (such as a sad, struggling child who receives aid) or to positive advertisement appeals (such as a smiling child enjoying life who also receives aid). They found that, while donors generally enjoy the positive appeals more than the negative appeals, the negative ones are more likely to produce donations. They argue that this is due to a guilt effect that is produced when shown a negative image. In other words, no one likes to feel guilty, so to alleviate that feeling, users will feel they must donate.

In addition to this finding, previous research discovered that individual morals and ego-focused emotional appeals played the largest role for philanthropists when making donation decisions (Xu, 2017). Therefore, it is essential for aid organizations to understand their audiences to strategically post content that will affect the ways their organization is viewed and to encourage their followers to take action, whether that action is donating or passing along a message. This finding directly emphasizes the importance of framing theory for aid organizations.

While donation response based on image appeals is telling, it becomes clear that there is a critical comparison missing from prior research. Previous research focuses on aid organizations seeking donations and how they present themselves through media— but what about aid organizations that are government-funded and are not seeking public donations? Government-funded aid organizations such as Peace Corps provide similar aid compared to non-government-funded aid organizations such as Habitat for Humanity. However, there is no research comparing social media accounts (and, specifically, no research involving only Instagram accounts) of aid organizations that seek donations, and those which do not.

Therefore, this study aims to address the following questions:

RQ1: What are the major differences and similarities between how government-funded aid organizations (GFAOs) versus non-government-funded aid organizations (NGFAOs) present themselves on Instagram?

Based on prior research, this study includes the following hypotheses:

H1: Non-government-funded aid organizations (NGFAOs) will actively and consistently seeking donations via Instagram, while government-funded aid organizations (GFAOs) will not.

H2: Both non-government-funded aid organizations (NGFAOs) and government-funded aid organizations (GFAOs) will focus on promoting brand recognition via Instagram.

This research will not only support future studies on this topic, but it will also inform scholarship on how differing aid organizations communicate via Instagram. This study will act as a place of reference for aid organizations attempting to communicate through their own Instagram accounts. Using this study, aid organizations will be able to understand how two widely known and respected aid organizations are specifically framing themselves on Instagram and will be able to adapt their own accounts based on the findings of this study.

III. Methods

This study conducts a thorough content analysis of the Instagram content of Peace Corps (representing GFAOs) and Habitat for Humanity (representing NGFAOs). Content analysis study allows for emergence of common themes and patterns between two sectors that seem unlike, such as GFAOs and NGFAOs (Evans, McBride, Queen, Spyridakis, & Thayer, 2007).

Peace Corps and Habitat for Humanity were chosen for analysis due to their positive and widespread reputations and the similarity in their rates of posting. While Habitat for Humanity focuses on building homes for those in need, Peace Corps focuses on engaging communities through the following sectors: agriculture, environment, economic development, health, education, and youth in development. Although the two organizations' aid actions differ, they were selected for analysis due to the similarity in their main objective: sustainable development (Habitat for Humanity, 2019 & Peace Corps, 2019). Due to an imbalance in Instagram followers between accounts, this study will not be comparing the number of likes or comments between sites.

This study analyzes a sample of 25 posts from each account between April 1, 2018 and April 1, 2019. A random number generator produced 25 numbers between 1-100. These 25 numbers were used to sample posts corresponding to the chronological order of publication (the number "6" being the sixth most recent post from April 1, 2019, for example). This study uses a *perception* category coding method from previous Instagram research, which breaks image coding into three sections: the "perspective" of the picture (does the picture aim to represent the organization in a professional/official or a casual manner?), the "broadcast" of the picture (does the picture spread an organizational view or standpoint?), and "mobilization" (does the picture imply a call to action, such as donations?) (Russmann & Svensson, 2016).

This study also codes Instagram captions via *in-vivo coding*, or taking direct quotes and assigning them to a section of data (King, 2008). Out of the 25 posts randomly selected from each account, the 10 most-liked posts are selected for caption analysis. This study uses in-vivo coding to discover overarching themes, similarities, and differences between Peace Corps' (representing GFAOs) and Habitat for Humanity's (representing NGFAOs) posts.

IV. Findings

Table 1

Organization	<u>Perspective</u> Casual (C) vs. Professional (P)	<u>Broadcast</u> Org. Standpoint (OS) vs. No org. Standpoint (NOS)	<u>Mobilization</u> Call to Action (CTA) vs. No Call To Action (NCTA)
Habitat for Humanity	C: 9 P: 16	OS: 19 NOS: 6	CTA: 3 NCTA: 22
Peace Corps	C: 21 P: 4	OS: 16 NOS: 9	CTA: 0 NCTA: 25

Analyzing the "perspective" of an Instagram photo determines whether or not the photograph aims to represent the organization in a professional or casual manner. This study identifies a photograph as "professional" if it either has the organization's logo or title (if you can see "Habitat for Humanity" or "Peace Corps") in the photograph, or if the photograph directly enhances or portrays the organizational mission. If these traits are not portrayed in the photograph, then the photo is deemed "casual."

This study found that 16 of the 25 photos from Habitat for Humanity's Instagram feed are professional, while nine out of the 25 selected are deemed as casual photos (Figure 1). In addition, four out of 25 photos from Peace Corps' Instagram feed are professional, while 21 out of the 25 selected are casual photos. This means that 64% of the randomly selected photographs analyzed on Habitat for Humanity's Instagram feed are viewed as professional, while only 16% of the photographs analyzed on Peace Corps'

Instagram feed are viewed as professional.

This study found that Habitat for Humanity and Peace Corps used professional photographs very differently. For example, 15 out of 16 of Habitat for Humanity's professional photographs were coded as professional due to the presence of "Habitat for Humanity" and/or the Habitat for Humanity logo somewhere in the image (Figure 1). On the other hand, the Peace Corps logo was barely presented throughout the studied photos. Instead, Peace Corps posted professional photographs through images that enhance the organizational mission (Figure 2). This may be because Peace Corps' volunteers do not have a uniform, while Habitat for Humanity volunteers are given t-shirts to volunteer in, making the logo much more visible on volunteers.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

These findings may be due to a number of factors. Habitat for Humanity may seek to display the organization more professionally due to reliance on donations. Posting more professional than casual photographs may be a tactic to help increase donations and to display that they are a trustworthy organization to give to. On the contrary, Peace Corps may want to keep Instagram casual to show its applicability to a wide range of volunteers.

Broadcast

Identifying the "broadcast" of an Instagram photo is determined based on if the photo aims to spread an organizational view or standpoint.

This study found that 19 of the 25 (76%) randomly selected photos from Habitat for Humanity's Instagram feed are broadcasting an organizational standpoint. In addition, 16 out of 25 (64%) randomly selected photos from Peace Corps' Instagram feed are broadcasting an organizational standpoint.

Further analysis of the broadcast functions of both organizations' Instagram feeds reveal a striking similarity. Habitat for Humanity broadcast three main organizational themes: 14 photos broadcast volunteerism (see Figure 3 for example), three photos broadcast public figures, and two photos broadcast the importance of donating. Peace Corps also broadcast three main organizational standpoints: 12 photos broadcast volunteerism (see Figure 4 for example), three photos broadcast feminism, and one photo broadcast organizational advocacy for malaria prevention.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

While there is not a significant overlap between five out of six of the broadcasting themes, volunteerism is an organizational broadcast that both Habitat for Humanity and Peace Corps preach to Instagram users frequently. This suggests that, while the main difference between these two organizations is how they are funded, their main similarity is clear: neither organization can function without volunteers, and both organizations are willing to broadcast that via Instagram.

Mobilization

Determining the “mobilization” of an Instagram photo is based on if the photo presents a direct call to action.

This study found that three of the 25 (12%) randomly selected photos from Habitat for Humanity’s Instagram feed present a call to action within the photograph; none of the 25 randomly selected photos from Peace Corps’ Instagram feed do so. Determining the direct mobilization of an image without analyzing the accompanying text may be one reason why the percentages of mobilization for each organization are so low.

The fact that both Peace Corps and Habitat for Humanity have very little mobilization presence on their Instagram feeds may be because they are not attempting to use Instagram as a call-to-action platform. Instagram may be, as it is for many organizations, a platform to share and promote the recent actions of the

organization instead of a platform to change the behavior of its viewers. The lack of mobilization may also suggest that both organizations are close to achieving organizational goals and are not seeking external or public assistance at this time. This may be due to a steady or heavy number of volunteers for both organizations.

Due to the fact that Habitat for Humanity is a NGFAO, the three call to action images found during analysis come as no surprise, as two of the three of the call to action messages lead viewers to a site to donate. However, these overall findings reject H(1), which hypothesized that NGFAOs would be heavily using Instagram to gain donations.

Caption Analysis

Of the 25 randomly selected photographs from each organization's Instagram feeds, 10 photographs with the most likes were chosen to for content analysis of their captions.

The themes that emerged from Habitat for Humanity's Instagram captions include: volunteering in exotic places is fun, volunteering with Habitat for Humanity can be done in many forms, Habitat for Humanity believes every child deserves a home, Habitat for Humanity appreciates their volunteers, donating to Habitat for Humanity is important and worthwhile, and public figures enjoy volunteering with Habitat for Humanity. Themes that surface from Peace Corps' Instagram captions include: volunteering leads to adventure, volunteers connect with the community members they are serving, volunteering allows for growth and confidence, volunteers enact change in communities worldwide, and volunteering with Peace Corps can be done in many forms.

The results reinforce the broadcasting findings. Both organizations' captions focus heavily on the life of a volunteer and the positive impact it has on both the volunteer and the organization. Once again, volunteerism is the main factor that both organizations attempt to push in both their Instagram images and captions.

One of the biggest differences noted between the two organizations' captions is Peace Corps' use of direct quotes from their volunteers about their experiences. Of the 10 captions analyzed on Peace Corps' Instagram account, half use direct quotes from volunteers as a caption, while Habitat for Humanity do not use direct quotes in any of the analyzed captions. This may be because Peace Corps volunteers volunteer for two years and, therefore, the organization has a wide range of time to receive meaningful quotes, while Habitat for Humanity volunteers stay involved for a much shorter period of time.

V. Discussion

Through the analysis of Habitat for Humanity, this study was able to uncover how NGFAOs represent themselves on Instagram. Through the images and captions analyzed, this study found that common themes of NGFAOs' Instagram feeds are, in no particular order, brand promotion, volunteerism, and displaying public figure volunteers.

This study found that NGFAOs present their title and/or logo often, increasing brand recognition and, therefore, confirming the second hypothesis. Commonly using the organization's logo makes the Instagram feed appear more professional rather than casual. This may be due in part to the fact that, as organizations seeking donations, NGFAOs may want to give off a trustworthy and organized aesthetic throughout their Instagram feed. However, this study found that NGFAOs are not using Instagram as a primary platform to receive or promote donations, rejecting the first hypothesis. While NGFAOs do attempt to promote donation participation, it is clearly not the primary goal. Through analyzing the broadcasting of images and through the analysis of captions, this study found that NGFAOs promote the power of volunteering throughout Instagram most frequently.

After analyzing Peace Corps' Instagram content, this study is able to discuss findings on how GFAOs represent themselves on Instagram. The main themes of GFAOs Instagram representation include the power of volunteering and the cultural exchange and knowledge gained from volunteering.

GFAOs' Instagram content represents much more cultural diversity than NGFAOs. This may be because GFAOs have more reliable funding than NGFAOs, and therefore GFAOs are able to send selected

volunteers to more countries around the world. This study also found that GFAOs do not present their logos on Instagram nearly as much as NGFAOs, but instead focus more on the landscapes and the community in which volunteers actually give their time. This specific finding addresses the hypothesis that GFAOs and NGFAOs would equally seek to promote brand recognition. While both sectors aim to promote their brand via Instagram, NGFAOs emphasize their brand much more than GFAOs.

VI. Conclusion

This study explored the similarities and differences between government-funded and non-government-funded aid organizations on Instagram. This study found more similarities between government-funded and non-government-funded aid organizations than originally hypothesized. Much of previous research suggested that non-government-funded aid organizations would be seek donations via Instagram to stay in business but, while donation-seeking was present, it was by no means the main goal of the Instagram account. In fact, the findings showed that the majority of non-government-funded aid organizations and government-funded aid organizations' Instagram feeds were focused on the same thing: highlighting their volunteers. This allows the study to conclude that both government-funded aid organizations and non-government-funded aid organizations use Instagram primarily for brand recognition and to inform their followers of recent organizational activities rather than a donation-seeking platform.

The major limitation of this study was that only two Instagram accounts were analyzed through content analysis. In addition, only 25 posts from each Instagram account were selected to analyze and, therefore, generalizations made throughout this study may not be representative of all aid organizations on Instagram. With more time and resources, researchers could ideally select multiple government-funded and non-government funded aid organizations Instagram accounts to analyze instead of just one account from each sector.

This study lays a solid foundation for future research to examine whether or not volunteerism increases or decreases based on the Instagram methods of government-funded and non-government-funded aid organizations. This could be conducted through a qualitative study to incorporate interviews and focus groups from those who follow certain aid organizations' Instagram accounts.

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