International Journal of Communication 19(2025), 1448–1467 1932–8036/20250005

Determinants and Challenges of NGO Social Media Communication: Explaining Tensions Around "Looking Cool" for Social Change

MICHAEL DOKYUM KIM
Sejong University, South Korea

Public communications of development nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have long been criticized concerning their depoliticized nature, not least in the social media space. Drawing on discussions of the "politics of development" and interviews with NGO social media managers, this study identifies three thematic factors that contribute to this trend. First, the pursuit of social media "engagement insights" incentivizes crafting concise, spreadable messages to northern audiences, further decontextualizing the complexities of development and silencing local voices. Second, the need to protect institutional reputations discourages NGOs from engaging in more critically oriented and dialogic public interaction. Third, NGOs struggle with intraorganizational incongruencies, which further complicate the potential for repoliticizing development communication in the digital space. The study builds toward an argument of "looking cool," a persistent tendency in NGO communication driven by the ethos of the attention economy, where crafting evermore compelling, yet appropriately appealing content suitable to the social media logic caters to the northern gaze, which raises significant concerns about the repoliticization of humanitarian and development communication online.

Keywords: humanitarian communication, social media, communication for social change, NGO, depoliticization, production studies

Mediated messages of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have long been criticized concerning their decontextualized representations of the Global South, which undermines their philanthropic claims to social justice. The advent of social media has arguably expanded the communicative dimensions of NGOs, extending possibilities for their public communication strategies with digital affordances and participatory culture (Cooper, 2019; Li & Voida, 2024). However, studies reveal a mixed outlook about NGOs' presence in social media spaces. Although cyber-enthusiasts celebrate their deliberative and dialogic potential, others adopt a more skeptical view, suggesting that they remain self-serving and decontextualized. Against the normative claims of NGO social media's politicized and dialogic potentials for social change, these studies have observed the *depoliticized* nature of NGOs' social media engagement, which largely remains unidirectional, institutionalized, and reductive, failing to generate a deliberative online space for social change (Kim, 2022; Rodriguez, 2016). The "depoliticization" refers not only to social change communication being politically inert but also to its discourses privileging the language of efficiency and technical solutions,

Michael Dokyum Kim: dkkim@sejong.ac.kr
Date submitted: 2023-12-13

while critical attention to hegemonic problems, context, and power is deferred (Ferguson, 1994; Fisher, 1997). Although existing studies have contributed to consolidating knowledge in NGOs' social media performances and in generating normative discussions, critical investigations into the determinants and challenges of NGOs' social media practices remain scant.

This gap connects to a long-standing concern in the sociology of development mediation. Media scholars have examined the factors that influence NGOs' publicity strategies and how they may mediate the notion of development to the public (Dogra, 2012; Thompson & Weaver, 2014; Yanacopulos, 2015). However, scholars have been slower to raise these questions concerning NGOs and their performances on social media typically because immediate attention was given to investigating their usage patterns and potential for achieving organizational goals (Guo & Saxton, 2018; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012).

Moreover, numerous studies conducting text-based analysis of NGOs' digital content have highlighted that NGOs may continue to mediate problematic discourses of social change in both communicating *for* development (intend to "do good" for social change) and communicating *of* development (intend to "look good" for organizational branding and publicity; Pamment & Wilkins, 2018), but less is known as to why this persists, and how NGOs and practitioners negotiate their strategies around these challenges, as the subject still largely suffers from a limited number of production research. Although recent studies have drawn attention to these questions, they remain scattered as either implicated in content analysis or limited to a specific part of NGOs' social media engagement (Campbell & Lambright, 2020; Sun & Asencio, 2019). Recognizing the lack of production studies within humanitarian communication literature, particularly about NGO social media, the study responds to Orgad and Seu's (2014b) critical call for more research on the production of humanitarian communication and aims to contribute to our understanding by explaining the factors that incentivize NGOs to reproduce potentially problematic social media messages.

In this regard, the study draws on the "hierarchy of influences" model in mediation (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014), which theorizes that media messages and strategies are attributed to complex structural underpinnings of content creation, such as political, economic, institutional, organizational, and occupational factors. The model addresses "the multiple forces that simultaneously impinge on media and suggests how influence at one level may interact with that at another" (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 1). This study applies this model to examine the politics of development, including the systemic, institutional, and organizational complexities within the international development and humanitarian sectors, which shape the environment of NGO communication and influence the production of their social media content.

Against this backdrop, the study draws on discussions surrounding the politics of development and insights from interviews with 12 social media managers from NGOs operating in the development and humanitarian sectors. Through the interviews, the study explores the meaning-making processes of NGO communication and investigates the factors that incentivize NGOs to engage with social media in a depoliticized manner. The research questions addressed in this study are: How do NGO social media managers experience and negotiate with the intra- and extraorganizational politics of development? What factors explain the shaping of NGOs' social media messages and incentivize them to remain depoliticized?

In what follows, I review the literature discussing the complex politics of development and put into dialogue the existing studies on NGO communication, emphasizing the importance of considering the ambivalent motives of NGOs involved in the production of messages. Next, I outline the details of the interview procedures in the methods section. Drawing on interviews with NGO social media managers, I then discuss three thematic factors, along with two subthemes, that explain how NGOs' social media messages are shaped and the drivers that lead these messages to remain depoliticized. The study concludes by discussing the notion of what I call "looking cool" as an emerging dimension of development mediation in social media space. This is characterized by a persistent depoliticizing tendency in NGO communication, driven by the ethos of the attention economy, which raises significant questions about the challenges of repoliticizing NGO communication in the digital age.

NGOs and the Politics of Development

Understanding NGO communications as a practice merits attention to the divergent forces that constitute their playing field. Although studies examining NGO communication pay critical attention to the systemic and ideological forces shaping their outcomes (Beddington, Hickey, & Mitlin, 2008; Wilson, 2011), those investigating the productional dynamics of NGO publicity messages caution against this deterministic explanation. These studies offer a more nuanced explanation for understanding NGO communication and highlight the importance of organizational politics in play (Ong, 2019; Orgad, 2013; Orgad & Seu, 2014a; Powers, 2014), such as intraorganizational intricacies concerning departmental priorities and extraorganizational dynamics concerning their institutional priorities.

According to Fisher (1997), NGOs share the same characteristics of bureaucratization that befall other organizations. Whereas these organizational structures could promote internal coherency through the alignment of professionalized routines, differences in the priorities between departments could also interfere with the message construction. For example, Dogra (2012) observed that perceived antagonism between fundraising and advocacy imperatives can be one of the primary tensions that influence the shaping of NGOs' public face. By interviewing NGO professionals, Orgad (2013) also suggests the ambivalent tensions between marketing and communications departments influencing the visual strategies of NGOs. Also, as Ong (2019) argues, the messages of development organizations should be seen as a product that translates the work of producers' ethical concerns, whereby their professional positions, moral commitments, and social backgrounds may come to play a role in shaping the messages. These influences suggest that organizational communication strategies are influenced by the managerial characteristics of an organization as well as its members.

Furthermore, studies highlight a range of extraorganizational factors that influence NGO publicity strategies, reflecting the practical concerns NGOs face in a competitive landscape for marketing and visibility. As Powers (2014) argues, NGOs become not only "path dependent," adhering to the internal logic of the development field but also become interdependent on the proximate fields such as politics and media. Cottle and Nolan (2007) similarly observed that NGOs' external communication strategies are influenced by media logic, as they seek to brand themselves and produce tailored "media packages." Thompson and Weaver (2014) also found that NGOs often produce reductive representations to gain visibility. Moreover,

NGOs' publicity strategies may differ depending on their desired impact, alignment with public values, and their relationships with governments (Dimitrova & Ozdora-Aksak, 2022).

Edwards (1996) suggests that these ambivalent tensions faced by development NGOs arise from their struggles between developmental and institutional imperatives. The developmental imperatives reflect the NGOs' fundamental motives for advocacy, empowerment, mobilization, and politicizing social change, embodying their foundational commitment to "doing good" for the underprivileged and vulnerable others. Although these imperatives imply the theoretical purity of NGOs, pragmatically, NGOs must also navigate institutional imperatives to ensure their survival. These include concerns related to securing organizational capacity, market share, funding, and political support by "looking good" to key stakeholders (Pamment & Wilkins, 2018). These two imperatives are often in conflict: The former emphasizes values of social justice, ethical development practices, and downward accountability, whereas the latter promotes opportunism, ad hoc development practices, and upward accountability (Edwards, 1996).

Studies on NGOs and social media suggest that these intra- and extraorganizational politics of development extend into, if not exacerbate within, the digital space (Chouliaraki, 2021; Cooper, 2019; Dencik & Allan, 2017; Sun & Asencio, 2019). Although the significance of social media for NGOs and its normative directions is well-documented, less is known about why and to what extent the politics of development is reflected in or negotiated by NGO professionals managing social media for external communication.

Exploring this gap is essential to comprehensively understanding the digital mediation of humanitarianism as a multisited process. This involves considering the challenges faced and negotiated by practitioners, moving beyond normative suggestions based solely on textual and functional analyses of NGO social media. This study seeks to contribute to our knowledge of development of NGOs' social media engagement by addressing the following research questions:

RQ1: How do development NGOs' social media managers experience and negotiate the intra- and extraorganizational politics of development?

RQ2: What factors explain the shaping of NGOs' social media messages and incentivize them to remain depoliticized?

Methods

These questions are explored by analyzing data from 12 semistructured interviews with social media managers, each working at different NGOs in the development and humanitarian sectors. The interview method allows access to rich personal insights and enables a deeper understanding of the context and motivations behind media content production. The interviews were conducted online via secure Zoom meetings between May 2022 and March 2023, each lasting 70 to 123 minutes, and were conducted in English. When necessary, follow-up questions were addressed via e-mail.

The interviewees included practitioners who are either currently managing or have recently managed an NGO's official social media accounts, such as Facebook, Twitter (now "X"), LinkedIn, YouTube,

TikTok, and Twitch. The recruitment process combined purposeful and snowball sampling. The researcher initially identified and contacted key informants by sending messages to the respective NGOs' social media pages, e-mailing professionals through the online directories available on their websites, and contacting personal networks who then introduced them to suitable candidates. The messaging and e-mailing process first targeted practitioners from different branches of prominent NGOs (so-called the "big names"), such as Oxfam, Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Save the Children, ActionAid, World Vision, Amnesty International, BRAC, and the International Rescue Committee. Although the initial response rate was low, the researcher gained several contacts and sought their help in snowballing interviewees within their professional networks.

Consequently, the interviewees were recruited from a range of NGOs operating at various scales and across regions. This included eight interviewees from regional and national branches of internationally prominent NGOs based in the United States, United Kingdom, South Korea, South Africa, and Jordan. Additionally, four interviewees represented smaller-scale NGOs founded by individuals in their base countries, whose operations still extend beyond their national or regional boundaries. These NGOs were based in Uganda, India, North Macedonia, and South Korea.[1] Despite the varying sizes and locations of these organizations, all 12 NGOs are engaged in addressing international development and humanitarian issues related to poverty relief, education, refugees, and human rights advocacy.

Although the interviewees' status ranged from full-time employees to contract-based interns, and their responsibilities varied from exclusively handling social media to overseeing broader communication channels, they commonly shared a role of crafting social media messages and managing their NGOs' official social media pages. Furthermore, all interviewees primarily worked within the realm of public relations, specifically managing "unpaid" media tasks. These tasks included managing social media comments and posting regular content that did not require purchasing additional screen space or time. In contrast, "paid" media work, such as creating sponsored advertisements, was typically managed by the marketing and branding teams. Although the managers' primary responsibilities centered on public and stakeholder relations, their roles extended beyond mere risk management or damage control. Working in NGOs, the managers regarded themselves as having broader responsibilities as advocates and educators of social issues. Although the interviewees' specific job titles varied by organization, I refer to them as "social media managers" for consistency. Several respondents requested anonymity for their organizations. Thus, their names have been removed from the findings and are reported using random numbering.

The interview questions covered a range of topics, including the structures of social media management, decision-making processes, strategies of social media, and the factors that they consider when creating and uploading content online. When interviewees discussed internal and external factors, follow-up questions were asked to clarify specifics and explore how they negotiated with these influences.

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed according to the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involved six phases: familiarizing with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report. The second

[1] See Appendix A for the complete list of interviewees.

through fifth phases involved continuously moving back and forth between entire transcripts, coded extracts, and the congregated themes. This was supported by NVivo, a qualitative research software that allows researchers to systematically track and record the coding process. This analytic procedure was both iterative, where insights from early interviews helped refine the thematic focus for subsequent interviews, and theoretically grounded in discussions from the literature on NGO communication production and the politics of development. The research has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at a university in the southern United States.

From this analysis, I identify three major themes that explain the experiences of NGO social media managers and explore the challenges of repoliticizing NGO communication in the digital space. The three primary themes are (1) the quest for engagement insights, (2) safeguarding institutional reputation, which includes two subthemes—"showcasing institutional neutrality" and "selective interaction for reputation management," and (3) intraorganizational incongruencies. These themes reflect NGOs' mediatizational, institutional, and organizational struggles in navigating the increasingly complex environment of digital communication. Although they may not exhaustively explain the entire complexity of the issue, these offer significant insights into the key drivers that shape NGOs' social media communication.

The Quest for Engagement Insights

The *quest for engagement insights* is a central focus for social media managers, driven by the pressure to maintain strong performance metrics often evaluated through "engagement insights." These insights track audience exposure and interaction through a series of metrics, such as the number of views, likes, comments, and shares. The interviews revealed that social media managers are acutely aware of the "noisy" digital environment where it has become competitive to increase these insights and place significant emphasis on strategically crafting messages that stand out and capture attention. As one manager put it, "The attention span is getting smaller and smaller day by day and unfortunately it is quite tricky when you're fighting against hundreds of other things online" (NGO 9). This sentiment was echoed by other respondents, who framed this challenge as part of their sense of duty to sustain audience engagement. Dealing with this challenge was implicated as a significant part of strategic consideration for their team that they internally evaluate their content in terms of its potential attractiveness. As another manager explained, "We ask ourselves internally on the team, would I stop and read this? Is this interesting? And do I think this is cool?" (NGO 12). This internal drive to capture attention encouraged the creation of more compelling and eye-catching social media posts, with crafting content that looks "cool" enough to attract audiences becoming a key factor in their decision making.

The emphasis on engagement insights often led social media managers to rely on shorter, more impactful messages designed to quickly "hook" followers, rather than longer, more detailed communications that provide in-depth information about the situation. One interviewee succinctly noted, "You've got to hook people in with some strong message, so you can get their attention and hope that they stay" (NGO 11). This reflects the pressure within their sense of duty to capture the audience's attention in a fast-paced digital environment, often outweighing their motivation to educate on complex development issues with more contextual information. As another manager added:

> When you do a social media analysis you do see that what works best is strong quotes and strong affirmations with strong language. For example, saying "200 million people are facing food insecurity today" will be much more successful than saying, "In the past few years we have noticed that there was an increase in the number of people that are food insecure due to this and that, and that number is growing to 200 million." So, we'll try to use short, strong language, because we have realized that these affirmative quotes work better. (NGO 7)

Moreover, this preference for brevity and impact was reinforced by the repetition of messaging strategies that had previously proven successful in capturing audience attention, which raises concerns about how problematic communication practices may become internalized in their routines. Evaluating the outreach of past social media posts and replicating the styles of a "successful" post has become a natural part of their strategic thinking. As one interviewee described, "We follow the outreach of each post, and if we realize that something really hits the audience, then we try to replicate that for the next content" (NGO 8). For many social media managers, stronger and shorter messages came through despite internally reflecting on their ethical responsibilities to convey stories in a more contextualized manner. The ethical dilemma was echoed by others who expressed distress when having to compromise their developmental motives, doing what they know is "right," over their professional motives, doing what they know "works." As one interviewee puts it, "theoretically, you know what's good, but then again, you just have to adapt to the social media environment" (NGO 9). Thus, in part because of the quest for engagement insights in a highly competitive information environment, social media managers tended to lean toward crafting relatively more episodic and simplified social media messages, even if it meant sacrificing depth in their messaging.

Several informants also highlighted how the ethical dilemmas arising from their focus on engagement insights often influenced their choice of images. Although many expressed a strong aversion to using stereotypical representations of poverty, they occasionally had to compromise their standards in favor of maximizing engagement. For instance, despite a shared commitment to avoiding disempowering depictions, some social media managers admitted selecting images that featured "women or children facing the camera because they generate higher engagement and tend to lead to more donations" (NGO 4). One informant acknowledged this ethical tension, saying, "children and sad images do attract more engagement, more pity, and it's just kind of sad . . ." (NGO 10).

On a further note, the focus on engagement insights often led social media managers to tailor and gatekeep their content to better align with the taste of their core target audience in the Global North who tends to be more active on social media. This sometimes meant compromising the organization's broader goals to maintain audience interest. One interviewee shared a specific example of this tension, explaining how they had to prioritize engagement insights over raising awareness about COVID-19 issues in the Global South:

> Most people in our audience [the Global North] are past COVID, it's all done. So that's the kind of thing where we really have to sort of thread the needle, because as an organization that [the pandemic] is a top priority, but it's not really resonating with our audience. (NGO 1)

This concern for audience engagement often meant that important issues were withheld from being discussed until they gained prominence in the global news cycle. Several interviewees emphasized that "being on time with the global event" was a key factor in deciding when and what to upload on social media given that this timing allowed social media managers to tap into the minds of their core audience, helping their posts gain more engagement.

In a similar vein, another interviewee discussed how the pursuit of engagement insights influenced her preference for using videos with English-speaking actors over those featuring actors from the Global South speaking in their local languages. Given that their core audiences—the potential donors in the Global North—are predominantly English-speaking and that captioned videos tend to yield lower outreach, this decision often came at the expense of ensuring the inclusion of local voices. As the interviewee explained:

> It's sometimes tricky because then you've got to put subtitles, and a video that is captioned tends to have lower engagement. For example, a video that's speaking Swahili—those videos tend to get less views, which is very annoying because they're very good stories that deserve attention. (NGO 11)

These tensions underscore the ongoing struggle NGO social media managers face between two competing priorities: raising the visibility of underrepresented stories versus raising the visibility of their organizations. As several interviewees noted, there is a constant balancing act between highlighting topics that are important to raise awareness and focusing on content that they know will raise their visibility.

In short, the depoliticization of social media content partly arises from NGOs' efforts to capture audience attention in a competitive digital landscape. Social media managers, tasked with maintaining engagement in "noisy" online spaces, often rely on verbal and visual strategies that have proven effective in appealing to their core audiences in the Global North. This pursuit of engagement insights incentivizes managers not only to select issues that align with Western worldviews and audience preferences but also to craft messages designed to "hook" attention, sometimes at the cost of providing nuanced, contextualized, and empowering depictions of the distant others. These pressures contribute to a depoliticization of social media communication, privileging the interests and voices of the Global North over those of the Global South.

Safeguarding Institutional Reputation

The second theme, *safeguarding institutional reputation*, reflects social media managers' desires for positive branding and legitimacy to mitigate financial and operational risks influencing the depoliticized communication on social media. Specifically, this was a constant theme as it appeared in two types of discussions: (1) the tendency to avoid political content to *showcase their institutional neutrality*, and (2) the tendency to *selectively use social media's connective affordances* to maintain brand reputation and legitimacy.

Showcasing Institutional Neutrality

The interviewees explained that they often avoid discussing social issues that could "color" their organizations with a specific political stance, even when those issues align with their organizational

mandates. Maintaining bipartisan support was a recurring concern, as it helped them cultivate stable relationships with potential donors and core audiences in the Global North. This caution was particularly evident among managers from larger NGOs that rely heavily on a wider scale of individual donations and institutional funding, while less pronounced among smaller NGOs. As one interviewee from a big-name NGO explained, "It is important to showcase the position of, quote-unquote, 'neutrality' because, of course, we do very much have our mandates, but we cannot have a political stance, because it can then have an impact on our funding and reputation" (NGO 7).

The concern for perceived neutrality not only discouraged engagement with politically sensitive topics but also pressured managers to rely on simplified and "dumbed-down" framing of messages. This approach was aimed at minimizing the risk of audience reactance and the potential misinterpretation of their political stance, both in their responses to the comment sections and posting social media posts. This reflects NGOs' concerns about avoiding alienating their audiences while navigating the complexities of maintaining a neutral image. As one manager summarized, "So, we tried to keep it to simple messaging on social media that everybody can understand, and nobody can really argue with" (NGO 11).

This sentiment was further echoed when the interviewees discussed the pressure to retain positive stakeholder relationships with important institutional donors. Many social media managers expressed a tension between their developmental imperatives and the institutional pressures they face in their work, noting the need to be very careful when making these decisions. For example, an interviewee from a large U.S.-based NGO shared his dilemma when having to negotiate his views on an issue over projecting a nonpartisan stance to secure bilateral funding. As the interviewee explains:

> We don't really weigh in on anything that happens in the US, because we are technically a nonpartisan organization . . . and so much of our funding comes from USAID, I mean it's just kind of these big block grants. But because of the nature of the kind of work we do, we can't really burn those bridges . . . So personally, giving money to you know feminist women's health centers and everything like that, a lot of people in the organization are in favor of that . . . But I understand that the place that I work isn't really allowed to have an opinion on that . . . It is tricky to talk about these in social media. (NGO 1)

As the pursuit of engagement insights raised ethical dilemmas for managers, such pressure to maintain institutional neutrality also posed ethical challenges, preventing them from crafting messages in morally desirable ways and instead pressing them to create messages that are more institutionally desirable. One interviewee articulated this dilemma, saying:

> When we're talking about institutional donors, they are potentially conservative audiences, maybe, so you can come to a sort of a paradox, which for you to do the work that you do, you might have to communicate in a way that you don't necessarily think it's the best way. (NGO 7)

He further reflected on the ethical conflict, describing it as "a challenge of the financial viability versus what would be more ethical" (NGO 7).

Beyond the institutional drive for financial viability, the quest for neutrality was also motivated by a need to mitigate operational risks on the ground. This concern reflects NGOs' responsibility to ensure the safety of their staff dispatched in the field and to prevent any political sanctions that could immobilize and diminish their efforts on the ground. One interviewee explained:

> We just like to try and stay out of it . . . to make sure that we don't make anything difficult for other teams. In countries like Myanmar or Ethiopia or Somalia, [our] team that are in those countries can become a target and be shut down at any point by the government. (NGO 11)

Thus, safeguarding institutional reputation through social media is not only about maintaining funding but also about protecting the organization's operation and the safety of the staff on the ground. This focus on minimizing risks partly explains why NGOs often face challenges in communicating with downward accountability. It also sheds light on why their social media engagement may lean toward depoliticization, as navigating these constraints limits their capacity to address significant global issues more openly.

Selective Interaction for Reputation Management

Another significant theme centered on the incentives that drive managers to engage with social media's connective affordances—such as commenting, following, and sharing. Although maintaining a positive institutional reputation among donor audiences explains the depoliticized nature of their content, it also explains their nondialogic use of social media. For many, engagement with connective affordances is driven by a desire to construct organizational credibility and validate their brand's legitimacy. As one interviewee noted, "Once you follow or tag or share some other organizations, and if they follow you back, this can become a source of credibility," providing "validation" for the potential and current followers (NGO 7). This inclination to connect with "legitimate" actors and professional networks was especially pronounced among smaller NGOs, who seek to benefit from the halo effect by friending with and mutually following more reputable organizations. As one interviewee noted, "We limit our following and sharing to bigger organizations, and institutions related to our work" (NGO 9). Such practices are considered part of their long-term strategy for building organizational image and legitimacy.

When asked what drives their interactions with the public on social media, the desire to maintain image and representativeness was a common theme. Accordingly, the managers expressed that they selectively respond to comments and tagged posts that they can add value to and keep their distance from responding to others. As one interviewee explained, "I mean even if it's just a comment, it can represent the whole organization . . . so we tried to stay silent in the comment section" (NGO 3). This cautious approach stems, in part, from a desire to avoid the often hostile nature of online comment spaces, as well as to prevent engaging in conversations that could spark controversy and potentially harm their institutional image. This sentiment reflects NGOs' strategic adaptation to the noisy and polarized digital public sphere,

further limiting their social media activity to unidirectional communication rather than fostering a more participatory and deliberative public engagement.

Several informants recalled the early times when they had tried to respond to online audiences more proactively. However, they regretfully explained how these efforts have gradually diminished as NGOs adapted to the evolving digital environment. One interviewee shared:

> When I first worked in the team [seven years ago] . . . at the time was very keen that we engaged absolutely as much as possible . . . that might have been great in the first few years of social media, but the way it is now there's absolutely no point in getting into conversations because there's lots of people who are just there to provoke and be negative and they're not going to change their opinion. (NGO 5)

This shift underscores a broader trend in which NGOs selectively respond to social media posts that enhance their public reputation, incentivizing them to avoid deeper engagement and dialogue in favor of a safer, more controlled approach.

In short, NGO social media managers are acutely aware of their professional duty to safeguard institutional reputation. They recognize that the complex politics of visibility within social media spaces can pose unexpected risks to their financial and operational security, as well as their legitimacy. This quest for institutional stability incentivizes them to communicate in ways that showcase their "neutrality" to secure bipartisan funding and to use social media's connective affordances primarily to "add value" to their reputation, rather than to foster public dialogue. Consequently, NGO social media managers find themselves navigating the tensions between developmental imperatives and institutional demands, often compromising their motives to politicize social issues in favor of institutional legitimacy and survival.

Intraorganizational Incongruencies

The above themes highlighted two key drivers—mediatizational (stemming from social media logic) and institutional (driven by the need for organizational survival)—that may disincentivize NGOs from engaging in politicized and participatory ways on social media. Interviewees further explained that these factors are often intensified by intraorganizational influences. These include a lack of digital leadership, which creates vertical tensions within a unit and inconsistencies in cross-departmental coordination, leading to horizontal tensions and limitations in digital resources, such as insufficient human resources, training, and guidelines. These internal challenges further constrain NGOs' capacity to adapt to the demands of social media and can promote depoliticized communication.

When asked about the internal factors influencing their work, many interviewees discussed their relationships with senior staff and supervisors, who often had a say in shaping social media messages. Specifically, senior leaders' lack of understanding of the importance of new media can discourage their performance. As one interviewee noted:

> I think our boss was somewhat less enthusiastic about social media because he was coming from a conventional media press sort of background. So, whenever I wanted to try out different things, he didn't quite understand the importance of it. (NGO 4)

This disconnect was partly attributed to senior staff's close ties with journalism and conventional media work, making them less receptive to the potential of digital platforms. Another interviewee added that NGOs could remain somewhat "robotic" in the digital space "unless we convince them [senior staff] the importance of social media beyond the conventional media work" (NGO 12). This lack of digital leadership was a recurring theme, particularly among social media managers from NGOs that do not have a designated team for digital media, posing a challenge to more dialogic and innovative use of social media.

In addition to vertical tensions, social media managers discussed horizontal challenges arising from cross-departmental incoherencies. These challenges stem from differences in departmental priorities and discrepancies in understanding about the expectations of social media across units. Such discrepancies often distract social media managers from working more effectively in the digital environment and partly explain why social media managers further resorted to the "golden standard" of content creation that they know is safer to publicize. One interviewee described this dynamic:

> We often have other teams, like the donations team, brand team, come and say that this is a priority, 'could you put this out on social media?' But I mean, we are the ones who have to deal with all the comments and if anything happens, we're the ones who take all the blame. (NGO 4)

Another interviewee from a larger NGO summarized how these incongruencies can complicate and delay the decision-making process:

> You got lots of different people [from different departments] all having their say. But when there's something in the public eye, you need to move fast and quickly before the public moves on to the next thing . . . and I think it's always better to have a few closely working groups of people who can make decisions quickly, rather than big groups of people all chipping in, which is something [the organization] needs to learn. (NGO 5)

This sentiment resonated with the need for a more coherent and structured working environment for digital strategies. Because of the volatile nature of attention span on social media, managers are often under pressure to perform their duties promptly, despite limited human resources and unclear guidelines there to support their work. One interviewee described the experience as:

> Very overwhelming and stressful . . . the amount of information you have to deal with every day, and the speed that is required from people that work with digital communications . . . to respond to an increasing amount of work and knowledge that our digital world today is requiring. (NGO 7)

In smaller NGOs, the shortage of staff was a particularly significant barrier that led to more static and decontextualized social media engagement. As one interviewee lamented, "At times I felt like I couldn't do my job properly because I was relying on people who are too busy to support me" (NGO 10).

Beyond human resources, many interviewees pointed out the need for clearer guidelines and more comprehensive training around social media. "Internally, we are seeing that there is an urgent need to be trained on using social media or actually understanding the effectiveness of social media" (NGO 9). The lack of specific guidelines led social media managers to rely on their internal judgment, which often results in them defaulting to universally accepted standards and messaging strategies that have proven effective in the past. As one interviewee noted, "We do have a policy that is quite vague . . . so it's more of a judgment call essentially" (NGO 11), while another remarked, "Without getting the clearest guidance, we had to kind of resolve internally, and at the end we've universally adopted the ethical storytelling practices and things like that" (NGO 1).

In sum, the "static" performance of NGO social media, despite the managers' willingness to improve, is attributed in part to intraorganizational factors that limit their abilities to work to their fullest capacity. Amid the increasingly complex dynamics of digital information work, where accuracy and timeliness are critical, the challenges may stem from discrepancies in how digital strategy is understood and valued across organizational hierarchies and units. Specifically, this section highlights how the lack of digital leadership, alignment across departmental understandings and priorities, and adequate digital infrastructure can contribute to the depoliticization of NGO social media communication.

Discussions and Conclusion

Ferguson (1994), in his analysis of development interventions in Lesotho, argued that "development" often becomes an autonomous social entity through a set of institutional and ideological idiosyncrasies, leaving its dysfunctional, political, and hegemonic aspects unquestioned. This suggests that when efforts toward social change are reduced to promising "technical solutions to the sufferings of powerless and oppressed people," they could serve as a principal means through which the question of power is depoliticized in the world today (Ferguson, 1994, p. 256). Scholars examining NGO communication have similarly raised concerns that, despite the digital environment's potential to challenge persistent issues in both communications *for* and *about* social change, it may reinforce this depoliticizing undercurrent. However, empirical studies exploring the reasons behind this remain limited.

Drawing on discussions of the politics of development and insights from interviews with social media managers from development and humanitarian NGOs, this study sought to address how NGO social media managers experience and negotiate the intra- and extraorganizational politics of development, and the factors that shape NGOs' social media in a depoliticized manner. The study identified three key themes that underscore the challenges social media managers face as they struggle to adapt to the increasingly complex realm of online information work. These themes reflect the layers of the politics of development that NGO social media managers must navigate, as they struggle to balance between NGOs' developmental and institutional imperatives.

First, the quest for engagement insights incentivizes NGOs to craft messages that are adequately concise, impactful, and appealing to their core audiences in the Global North, further alienating and decontextualizing the voices of distant others. Second, the imperative to safeguard institutional reputation disincentivizes NGOs from adopting more politically engaged, critically oriented, and dialogic social media performances. Third, intraorganizational incongruencies and lack of organizational support for digital strategy may exacerbate these challenges, making it difficult for NGOs to repoliticize their communication practices.

The findings contribute empirically to the study of NGO communication by identifying the factors that shape NGO social media performances. Specifically, this study complements previous research that problematizes the decontextualized and nonparticipatory nature of NGO social media (Kim, 2022; Soboleva, Burton, Daellenbach, & Basil, 2017; Waters & Jones, 2011). Additionally, it extends the scholarship on NGO communication from quantitively explaining its association with institutional factors (Zhou & Pan, 2017) to qualitatively elaborating on the intricate logic behind those associations and extends the discussion that not only the lack of digital leadership and sophistication among NGOs results in uninventive social media performances (Campbell & Lambright, 2020; Sun & Asencio, 2019) but also how it may lead to depoliticized performance.

This investigation into the production dynamics of NGO social media illuminates the complex politics of development that interfere with the decision making of NGO communication. It suggests that the contemporary public face of NGO social media is shaped by multiple sociological forces—mediatizational, institutional, and intraorganizational—that interact to influence the parameters of content producers. Although NGO social media managers are often motivated by their commitment to social justice in both how they communicate *for* and *about* social issues, they must also navigate these constraining forces in performing their professional duties.

These insights encourage a shift beyond mediacentric analyses based on textual interpretation and support the growing call for production studies in NGO communication practices. As Yanacopulos (2015) suggests, such studies enable us to move the focus from the "face" of NGO communication, understood as representation, to its "space," conceptualized as a site of representation that accounts for mediational struggles faced by NGOs. In this context, the present study highlights the different yet complementary ways in which depoliticized and dysfunctional communication can be reproduced in the site of representation around social media. This reproduction occurs as NGOs search for what works best while navigating the complex politics of visibility in the digital space.

Critical studies on development communication argue that when development organizations communicate to "look good" for upward accountability, they often fail to address the structural inequalities and discourses that sustain the status quo (Enghel & Danielson, 2019). This study builds on this argument by suggesting how this challenge may loom large in the digital environment through the layer of what I call "*looking cool*." I conceptualize this as a persistent tendency in NGO communication driven by the ethos of the attention economy, whereby crafting evermore compelling, yet appropriately appealing content suitable to the social media logic caters to the northern gaze, raising significant concerns about the repoliticization of development and humanitarian communication online. This explains that NGO communication faces

additional challenges beyond their efforts to look "good"—presenting themselves as legitimate and reputable and are pressured to look "cool"—presenting themselves as attractive enough to catch the fleeting public attention in an increasingly competitive and sensitized digital environment. This pressure leads NGOs to prioritize creating content that is "online worthy," inadvertently distancing themselves from their fundamental motives of advocating for social justice and educating the public on the contextual and historical complexities underlying the issues they aim to address.

As Chouliaraki (2021) argues, the explosion of social media platforms has contributed to a neoliberal "new normal" of NGOs' information management, where increased competition for organizational visibility promotes messages to be more appealing and simplified, foregrounding the pleasures of consumerist "good-doing" and accelerates the monetization of vulnerability through a spectacularized politics of visibility (p. 12). The emphasis on "looking cool" further corroborates this claim, as the constant struggle for audience attention likely defers critical reflection on systemic development issues for audiences in the Global North, who are presented with depoliticized spectacles of development and humanitarianism. The depoliticized spectacles invite audiences to shallow and superficial engagement with the distant suffering at the expense of explaining the structural and political causes of poverty and injustice.

In this regard, the layer of "looking cool" raises significant ethical concerns about the responsibilities of NGO advocacy communication in the digital age. According to Wilkins (2020), advocacy communication with a sensibility toward social justice must be based on "understanding the global contexts in which social problems emerge, to position the potential for strategic intervention to be effective as well as ethical" (p. 58). If NGOs act as representatives of social change and have the power to focus public attention on particular instances of distant suffering, the consequences of their communications cannot be justified solely by their intentions of "doing good." NGOs must be held accountable for the discourses they (re-)produce, which shape how audiences of the Global North understand their relationships with the Global South and distant sufferers (Kogen, 2018). Depoliticized communication with inattention to systemic issues fosters superficial engagement and bland moral responsibility toward the situation at stake. Such trends represent a regression from the normative path of communication about development, which, as Scott (2014) argues, should "always seek to maximize the potential for dignity, understanding, proximity and effective action" (p. 138). For NGOs' social media practices, this entails highlighting the complexities of global issues and providing a platform for the voices of distant others to articulate these complexities.

While considering the agency of content producers, these conversations shift the focus away from blaming individual agents and toward a holistic examination of the complex mediating forces that shape the communication process. At this point, it is also worth noting that the trend toward "looking cool" and shallow engagement may be accelerated by algorithmic influence on social media. NGOs engage in concerted efforts to search for what "works best" to capture public attention, but social media platforms may assign more weight to keywords, visuals, and hashtags based on distinct algorithms that favor content deemed more attractive and spreadable. This dynamic raises the need for critical examination of the "platformization" of development communication, where algorithmic attention reinforces neoliberal and ad hoc change-making logic and contributes to the depoliticization of NGO communication.

However, as Scott (2014) points out, and as the current study reveals, the tensions associated with NGO communications are more deeply rooted than the technological dimension alone. Although new media may expand opportunities to offer more complex accounts of distant others, they do not address, and may even exacerbate, the underlying drivers that constrain NGOs' willingness to do so (Scott, 2014). As NGOs' operational capacities inevitably feed on financial and moral support contingent on public attention and reputation, "looking cool" may be critical for enhancing their operational outreach on behalf of development. The critical implication, then, is not so much about interrogating the effectiveness of "looking cool" as a strategic performance per se, but about interrogating the discourse it creates and the cumulative impact it has on mediating the relationship between the Global South and North in the digital space.

If we take this question seriously, collective efforts must be made to work toward repoliticizing NGO communication. For starters, this may require addressing the organizational barriers that prevent key decision makers and producers from performing to their fullest capacities. NGOs have good reasons to publicize messages that can challenge the formulaic ways of conventional NGO communications. However, as this study reveals, discrepancies in staff members' understanding of the significance of social media, combined with a lack of human resources to support this work, can significantly impede managers from performing more normatively responsible and effective communication practices. Ensuring that social media managers can operate with a coherent and organized set of goals may be the first step toward improvement.

More importantly, there is also a pressing need to openly discuss what they mean by "better" social media communication. Although NGOs recognize the importance of social media, there remain ambiguities surrounding the justification for their social media work. In many cases, NGOs may simply be entering the social media world because of its ubiquity, leading to a gap where their motives for "being present" outpace the critical deliberation on "how they should make their presence" on social media. Consequently, managers are left with unclear guidelines, leaving performance assessments to be based primarily on engagement insights. A productive starting point would be for professionals to ask reflective questions such as: What is a successful social media post or a campaign? For whom do engagement insights matter? What inevitable compromises arise from new media strategies, and how can they be challenged? By more fully appreciating the experiences and challenges faced in NGO communication, we may begin to see hope in repoliticizing NGO communication in the digital space.

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Appendix

Appendix A. List of Interviewees.

#	NGO size	Branch/ Location	Primary focus	Sex	Experience	Managing social media (in order of importance)
1	Large NGO	United States	Global poverty, gender	M	5 years	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Linkedin, YouTube, TikTok, Twitch
2	Small NGO	South Korea	Global poverty, children	F	10 months	Instagram, YouTube
3	Large NGO	South Korea	Refugee, Human rights	F	8 months	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter
4	Large NGO	South Africa	Global poverty, children	F	2 years	Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Linkedin, YouTube, TikTok
5	Large NGO	United Kingdom	Global poverty	M	7 years	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok
6	Large NGO	Jordan	Human rights	F	1 year	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram
7	Large NGO	United Kingdom	Global poverty	F	1 year	Twitter
8	Small NGO	North Macedonia	Human rights	F	5 years	Facebook, Instagram
9	Small NGO	India	Education	F	5 years	Facebook, Instagram, Twitter
10	Small NGO	Uganda	Global poverty	F	4 years	Facebook, Instagram
11	Large NGO	South Africa	Global poverty	F	13 months	Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Linkedin, TikTok, YouTube
12	Large NGO	United States	Refugee, Human rights	M	3 years	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram