



Research Article

From Digital Outreach to Community Dialogue: Mapping Communication Practices Among Philippine NGOs

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Abstract

Communication sits at the heart of every non-government organization's capacity to reach the people it serves, yet little empirical work has mapped the actual structure of these outreach efforts within the Philippine setting. This study set out to uncover the underlying components that shape how Philippine-based NGOs interact with community stakeholders, drawing on exploratory factor analysis of responses gathered from 150 individuals with direct exposure to NGO programming. Four coherent components emerged from the data: an online and social-media-driven presence, conventional outreach channels such as radio and print, dialogue practices that draw the community into program design, and organized public gatherings tied to advocacy work. Together, these components account for roughly sixty-two percent of the variance captured in the dataset, pointing to a layered rather than singular approach to community outreach. The findings reinforce the view that although digital tools now dominate much of the conversation around NGO visibility, grassroots organizations cannot afford to abandon older, more familiar channels, particularly where internet infrastructure remains uneven. The study closes by proposing that Philippine NGOs adopt a blended communication model that folds digital innovation into a framework still anchored in participatory dialogue, cultural sensitivity, and sustained community trust.

Keywords: Non-governmental organizations (NGOs); Community communication; Development communication; Social media; Traditional communication channels; Participatory communication; Community engagement; Social marketing; Philippine NGOs; Exploratory factor analysis.

Introduction

Grassroots organizations across the Philippines carry a heavy mandate: they are expected to reach the poor, the displaced, the undereducated, and the geographically isolated, often in places where government services arrive late or not at all [1]. Whether the setting is an upland Indigenous village, an informal settlement on the edge of a city, or a coastal barangay recovering from the latest typhoon, these organizations depend on their ability to talk to, and more importantly listen to, the people they hope to help [2]. Without a working communication strategy, even a well-funded program can fail to gain traction, because trust and mobilization are built through dialogue, not through the mere delivery of services [3]. Reports from development agencies have long flagged that Philippine NGOs

frequently operate without a coherent communication plan, which weakens their capacity to draw stakeholders into active participation [4]. The ambition, as several scholars describe it, is to move beneficiaries from passive recipients toward active co-owners of the change process, a shift that depends heavily on how information and dialogue are structured [5,6].

A second and persistent difficulty lies in the relationship between NGOs and local government units. Some accounts describe productive partnerships that align community needs with donor expectations [7], while others describe friction and limited cooperation, particularly in conflict-affected regions such as Mindanao [8,9]. This absence of coordination makes it harder to sustain communication efforts over the long run and to evaluate whether they are actually working [3]. Layered

on top of this is the challenge of reaching beneficiaries who have limited formal schooling or who come from Indigenous communities with distinct cultural expectations around information sharing [10]. NGO planners often recognize, at least in principle, that community participation should guide how outreach materials and channels are designed, yet organizational habits and resource constraints frequently keep planning centralized rather than shared [11]. When communication does not account for local literacy levels, language, and cultural norms, program messages risk being misunderstood or ignored altogether, undermining efforts to improve living conditions in remote or marginalized areas [12].

Prior research on this subject has tended to isolate one channel at a time. An early study of Philippine NGO websites concluded that most organizations were using their sites for basic information posting rather than for deliberation or mobilization, leaving considerable potential untapped [13]. A separate strand of research examined face-to-face and interpersonal approaches, showing how community-driven mobilization efforts against a proposed infrastructure project succeeded largely through direct interpersonal contact rather than mass media [14]. What neither strand has done is treat digital and interpersonal approaches as parts of one integrated system. This study addresses that gap by applying exploratory factor analysis to identify the natural groupings, or dimensions, that structure how Philippine NGOs actually communicate with community stakeholders, offering a data-driven map rather than a channel-by-channel description.

The analysis is grounded in social marketing theory, which treats the promotion of socially beneficial behavior as a process requiring more than the transmission of facts [15]. The theory identifies a sequence of tasks: building audience awareness, defining the target group precisely, sharpening the message, cultivating favorable attitudes, sparking interest, and ultimately achieving the intended behavioral outcome [16]. This lens fits NGO communication well, since organizations routinely combine print, broadcast, digital, and face-to-face contact to build understanding and sustain audience involvement over time [15]. Related work has similarly argued that organizations promoting socially valuable causes are, in effect, applying a marketing logic to behavior change, using structured campaigns to plan, deliver, and evaluate their messaging [17,18].

Methods and Materials

The research followed a quantitative, survey-based design intended to surface the underlying structure of NGO communication practices through exploratory factor analysis. The survey instrument, built from a review of the

existing literature, contained fifty items describing specific communication behaviors and channels used by NGOs. Responses were recorded on a five-point scale ranging from never manifested to always manifested, allowing the frequency of each behavior to be quantified.

Participants were selected through simple random sampling, yielding 150 respondents who had direct exposure to NGO programs and could speak knowledgeably about the communication practices they encountered. The sample skewed female (59.3 percent) relative to male (40.7 percent), spanned a wide age range, and represented varied levels of schooling, from those who had never attended school to college graduates. Respondents also identified across several ethnic groups common to the study area, including Bisaya, Mandaya, and Ata Manobo communities, and reported a mix of employment situations, from wage employment to self-employment and unemployment. This spread was intentional, aimed at capturing a realistic cross-section of the socio-economic and cultural backgrounds that NGOs in the region actually serve (Table 1).

Before full deployment, the instrument was vetted by specialists in development communication, an NGO practitioner, and a community stakeholder, and then piloted with thirty respondents, returning a Cronbach's alpha of 0.8, an acceptable level of internal consistency. Items that produced ambiguous readings or weak item-total correlations during piloting were revised or dropped. Ethical clearance was secured from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Southeastern Philippines, and every respondent received an informed consent explanation covering the purpose, risks, and rights associated with participation before data collection proceeded. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity were used to confirm that the resulting data were appropriate for factor extraction.

Results

Sampling adequacy checks supported the use of factor analysis: the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value reached 0.744, and Bartlett's test of sphericity produced a chi-square of 2249.133 with a significance level below 0.001, both indicating that the correlation matrix was suitable for extraction and that meaningful underlying structure was present in the data.

Extraction using an eigenvalue threshold of 1.0 initially produced six components, but a scree plot showed a clear inflection after the fourth factor, and the fifth and sixth components each retained only a single item with limited interpretive value once a 0.5 loading cutoff was applied. On that basis, the analysis retained four substantive dimensions, together explaining approximately sixty-two percent of the

Table 1: Profile of Study Participants.

Characteristic	Category	Percentage / Description
Sample size	Total respondents	150
Gender	Female	59.3%
	Male	40.7%
Age	Respondent age groups	Wide age range
Educational background	No formal schooling to college graduates	Varied
Ethnic groups	Bisaya	Represented
	Mandaya	Represented
	Ata Manobo	Represented
Employment status	Wage employment	Represented
	Self-employment	Represented
	Unemployment	Represented

Table 2: Exploratory Factor Analysis of NGO Communication Practices.

Factor	Identified Dimension	Number of Items	Main Communication Practices	Interpretation
1	Online and Social-Media Presence	10	Organizational websites, Facebook, Instagram, social media personalities, short videos, digital graphics, YouTube, email, mobile applications	Strongest communication dimension
2	Conventional Outreach Channels	9	Local radio, door-to-door visits, leaflets, brochures, community television, radio guesting, telephone outreach, tarpaulins, billboards, print reports	Second-largest communication dimension
3	Participatory Dialogue	4	Focus group discussions, stakeholder feedback, community stories, coordination with government offices	Dialogue and community participation
4	Organized Public Engagement	3	Conferences, seminars, outreach activities, stakeholder workshops	Public-facing engagement and advocacy

Table 3: Factor Analysis Adequacy and Retention Criteria.

Statistical Criterion	Result	Interpretation
Sample size	150	Adequate survey dataset for the analysis
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)	0.744	Data suitable for factor analysis
Bartlett’s test of sphericity	$\chi^2 = 2249.133$	Correlation matrix suitable for factor extraction
Significance level	$p < 0.001$	Statistically significant correlations among variables
Initial components extracted	6	Based on eigenvalue > 1.0
Final factors retained	4	Determined using scree plot and interpretability
Loading cutoff	0.50	Used to assess substantive factor loadings
Total variance explained	$\approx 62\%$	Four retained factors captured the major structure

total variance, with the first four alone carrying the bulk of the meaningful pattern in the data (Table 2).

The first and strongest dimension, an online and social-media presence, retained ten items and accounted for the largest single share of variance. It grouped together behaviors such as maintaining an interactive organizational website, using Facebook and Instagram for outreach, partnering with social media personalities, producing short videos and digital graphics, running a YouTube channel,

and communicating through email and dedicated mobile applications.

The second dimension, built around nine items, centered on conventional outreach channels: local radio programming, door-to-door visits, printed leaflets and brochures, community television slots, radio guesting, proactive phone outreach, tarpaulins and billboards, and annual print reports. This cluster remained the second-largest source of variance after the digital dimension (Table 3).

A third dimension, comprising four items, captured participatory dialogue: conducting focus group discussions to shape and refine programs, actively soliciting feedback, using stakeholders' own stories as teaching tools, and coordinating with government offices to sustain direct, face-to-face contact with communities. This dimension explained a comparatively modest share of the total variance relative to the first two.

The fourth dimension, with three items, involved organized public engagement: hosting conferences and seminars, running outreach activities, and holding stakeholder workshops. Of the four retained dimensions, this one carried the smallest share of explained variance.

Discussion

Read together, the four dimensions extend social marketing theory's core claim that effective communication must go beyond simple information transfer and actively involve the audience [16].

The prominence of the online and social-media dimension mirrors a broader trend documented elsewhere: NGOs that build a strong digital footprint tend to widen their reach, particularly among younger and urban audiences, and gain a faster route to disseminating updates [19, 20]. Scholars have noted that social platforms turned the internet from a one-directional information channel into a space for coordination and shared action, a shift that has reshaped how advocacy organizations build public credibility [21,22]. Common uses documented in the literature include recruiting volunteers, cultivating donor relationships, and building brand recognition around a cause [20,23]. The practical takeaway is that a strong digital presence should not be treated as optional, but organizations need to pair it with strategies suited to communities where connectivity remains limited. This fits the theory's emphasis on precise audience targeting, since online tools let organizations shape messages for specific groups and adjust them quickly.

Despite the rise of digital tools, the traditional-channels dimension remained the second-largest source of variance, underscoring that older channels still carry real weight, especially in rural areas where connectivity is inconsistent [24]. These traditional formats tend to fit more naturally with the cultural expectations of communities where formal schooling is limited or where Indigenous audiences may find digital tools less familiar [25,8]. Sustaining these channels, rather than phasing them out in favor of digital-only strategies, appears necessary for NGOs seeking genuinely inclusive reach [26]. The continued relevance of these channels speaks to the theory's attention to structural and technological inequality: for communities without reliable internet access, radio and

printed material remain the practical entry point for outreach.

Although the participatory-dialogue dimension explained a comparatively modest share of variance, it aligns closely with long-standing arguments that participatory approaches, built on dialogue and shared decision-making, are central to lasting behavioral and social change [27,28]. Participatory communication, as it is generally defined, invites stakeholders into the process rather than treating them as an audience to be informed [29], and other researchers have argued that this kind of engagement should run through every phase of a project cycle to keep interventions responsive to actual community needs [30]. This dimension illustrates the theory's argument that behavior change holds up better when audiences help shape the message rather than simply receive it [16]. Its smaller statistical footprint likely reflects how demanding genuine participation is to sustain, since it depends on trust built over time rather than a single campaign push [27].

Such gatherings as those captured in the public-engagement dimension, while more resource-intensive and episodic than digital or traditional channels, remain valuable venues for relationship-building, knowledge exchange, and visible advocacy [31,32]. Even though their day-to-day reach is narrower than more continuous channels, well-organized events can still mobilize communities and reinforce the other three dimensions identified in the analysis, functioning as a reinforcing layer that creates face-to-face spaces where the other three dimensions can be discussed, tested, and strengthened.

These findings translate into several concrete steps for practitioners. Organizations should treat a strong online presence as a baseline expectation, investing in staff training, consistent content production, and a modest paid promotion budget where resources allow, while recognizing that this presence must be paired with offline outreach rather than substituting for it. Local radio partnerships, printed materials, and door-to-door engagement should remain funded lines in a communication budget, not legacy activities kept only out of habit. Participatory practices, including structured feedback loops, storytelling sessions, and joint planning with local leaders, deserve deliberate investment, since they are the dimension, most tied to long-term trust and ownership even though they show up as a smaller statistical factor. Finally, events should be planned strategically rather than opportunistically, timed to reinforce ongoing digital and traditional messaging and to strengthen partnerships with local government, media, and private-sector allies.

A conceptual model can help visualize how these four dimensions relate to one another. Rather than existing as separate, competing channels, they appear to function as an interlocking system: participatory dialogue sits at the functional

center because it shapes and refines what gets communicated through the other three channels, even though it carries a smaller share of statistical variance. Digital platforms and traditional channels serve as the primary delivery systems for that content, while events and public relations activities provide recurring opportunities to gather feedback and feed it back into the participatory core. Viewed this way, the four dimensions are not a ranked list but a mutually reinforcing cycle, in which no single channel can substitute for the others.

Limitations

Several caveats apply to these results. The sample was drawn specifically from NGOs and community stakeholders operating within the Philippine context, where language diversity, local politics, and uneven technological access all shape communication choices in particular ways; the resulting dimensions may not transfer cleanly to NGOs operating under different infrastructure or political conditions elsewhere. The study also centered on the perspectives of community stakeholders alone, leaving out the views of funders, policymakers, and media partners, any of whom could add depth to a fuller picture of how NGO communication actually functions.

Conclusion

Digital tools extend reach and speed, traditional channels preserve accessibility and cultural familiarity, participatory practices build the trust that keeps programs viable over time, and organized events knit the other three together through direct human contact. Several Philippine NGOs already illustrate elements of this blended approach in practice. Organizations working with Indigenous communities have paired local radio broadcasts with mobile-friendly digital updates to reach audiences with and without internet access at the same time. Others have adopted participatory rural appraisal techniques, using structured community forums and storytelling sessions to keep beneficiaries directly involved in shaping program design rather than simply receiving finished plans. These examples suggest a practical path forward: pairing a community radio slot or print materials with short digital explainers and SMS updates, building structured feedback channels such as suggestion boxes or regular town-hall meetings, forming partnerships with local government and media to extend reach and funding, and investing in basic digital-literacy training so that staff and community leaders alike can use online tools with confidence.

Future research would benefit from extending this framework to NGOs operating in other national and regional contexts, allowing for comparison across differing political and technological environments. A larger sample would also

strengthen the stability of the factor structure, and pairing the quantitative approach used here with interviews or ethnographic fieldwork could surface the contextual nuances that a survey instrument alone cannot capture, sharpening our understanding of how community-facing organizations can communicate more effectively over the long term.

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