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Brand credibility in a social media ecosystem: Building trust between NGOs and donors

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how brand credibility functions within a social media ecosystem to shape trust between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and their donors. As the Malaysian NGO landscape becomes increasingly crowded and competitive, with tens of thousands of registered organizations competing for limited resources, credibility has emerged as a critical differentiator that strengthens legitimacy, accountability, and public confidence. Yet donors increasingly struggle to determine which organizations are genuinely trustworthy, transparent, and effective in delivering on their missions. Guided by Erdem and Swait's brand credibility framework and Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, this research identifies the key organizational and digital signals that donors use to assess trustworthiness and expertise. Through semi-structured interviews with eleven NGO representatives, eight donors, and three sector experts, the study reveals that credibility is primarily built through transparent reporting, official registration, regular audits, consistent communication, and visible demonstrations of impact, particularly through social media platforms. Donors rely heavily on these cues when deciding whether to contribute, continue, or discontinue support, and they were shown to withdraw when transparency or accountability appeared compromised. The findings suggest that brand credibility is closely associated with donor trust, which in turn appears to strengthen long-term engagement and sustained giving. By integrating a measurable credibility framework with a socially grounded theory of practice, this study contributes to non-profit branding literature through an integrated model that explains how organizational practices and social media signals jointly shape donor behaviour. It also provides practical, evidence-based guidance for NGOs seeking to enhance credibility, maintain public trust, and build resilient donor relationships in an increasingly digital and networked environment.

Keywords: ***Brand credibility, donor trust, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social media, non-profit branding***

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INTRODUCTION

The challenge of coordinating and collaborating among the many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and their donors, each with diverse procedures and orientations, may have disrupted efforts to benefit beneficiaries. As of July 2026, there were at least 90, 288 NGOs in Malaysia (Jabatan Pendaftaran Pertubuhan Malaysia, 2026). This is a huge number, and imagine how much effort these NGOs have put into serving the community. In Malaysia, NGOs are generally grouped into eleven main categories: politics, mutual benefit, human rights, religious, professional, welfare, culture and arts, security, trade, recreation, and social.

However, this proliferation has created significant challenges for NGOs seeking to secure donor funding and maintain public trust. With numerous organizations competing for limited resources, donors increasingly face a credibility challenge: determining which NGOs are trustworthy, transparent, and effective in their missions. Chantal (2025) recognized that institutions such as NGOs function as critical agencies shaping social and economic systems. In Malaysia's context, this institutional role requires NGOs to establish credibility not only through their operational outcomes but also through transparent communication and consistent reputation management, especially as trust in digital contexts depends heavily on visibility and accessible information (Cordery et al., 2023; Ghoorah et al., 2025).

Despite the diversity of donors, NGOs have to consider that past research demonstrates a substantial dependence on funding and government approval, which may have an undesirable impact on the volume of funding they receive (Kuruppu & Lodhia, 2019). There are various issues pertaining to NGOs in Malaysia, such as the large number of NGOs, poor governance, accountability issues, and a lack of visibility and trust, which underscore the need for research on brand credibility.

As NGOs compete for limited donor resources, three interconnected challenges have emerged as critical to organizational success: visibility (Kousar et al., 2020), trust (Wakefield et al., 2018), and stakeholder engagement (Dewi et al., 2019). These factors collectively underscore the fundamental importance of brand credibility in the non-profit sector. Erdem and Swait (2016) emphasized that organizations must retain and increase their significance while maintaining consistency with their values, a principle that applies equally to NGOs navigating transitional operating environments. Yet despite this importance, the dynamic forces shaping the progression of brand credibility in NGOs remain poorly understood.

This knowledge gap is particularly evident when examining the relationship between organizational visibility and donor confidence. Assad and Goddard (2010) observed that while donors' willingness to fund NGOs is influenced by organizational transparency, the relationship between financial visibility and actual donor trust remains weak and underexplored. This suggests that visibility alone is insufficient; credibility must be actively built and communicated through strategic organizational practices. Building credibility, in turn, is closely associated with whether donors choose to contribute, sustain their engagement, or withdraw support (Harb et al., 2026).

The urgency of this issue has been magnified by recent transformations in the NGO operating environment. Traditional operational models are no longer adequate for meeting contemporary effectiveness demands. Recent scholarship demonstrates that

strategic management practices in NGOs must evolve significantly, with organizations increasingly adopting new operational models, restructuring, and implementing innovative funding approaches (Hadden & Teixeira, 2026; Zhang & Saadé, 2025). However, while these organizational transformations are necessary, little is known about how NGOs should strategically communicate their credibility during periods of operational change, or how donors interpret credibility signals within evolving digital and social media contexts.

Research questions

To address these gaps, this research poses the following questions:

1. How do NGO representatives build and communicate brand credibility through organizational practices and social media platforms?
2. How do donors perceive and interpret credibility signals when deciding whether to contribute, sustain, or withdraw support?
3. How can brand credibility be positioned as a key mechanism linking NGO practices to donor trust and sustained engagement?

While prior research has examined brand credibility and donor trust separately, limited scholarship explores how these interconnect within social media-mediated NGO environments. This study addresses this gap by providing an integrated model that links NGO practices to donor trust, applying Erdem and Swait's credibility framework to the non-profit context, and offering practical guidance for NGOs seeking to build credibility during organizational transformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand credibility: Definition and dimensions

A brand is defined as a name, term, sign, symbol, design, or combination thereof intended to identify and differentiate the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers from competitors (Kotler, 1997). The credibility of a brand signal is perhaps its most imperative characteristic, particularly in contexts where consumers must make trust-based decisions.

Erdem and Swait (1998, 2016) developed a foundational framework for understanding brand credibility. They defined credibility as the believability of an organization's intentions and its consistent ability to deliver what it promises. Their research identified two core dimensions of brand credibility: (1) Trustworthiness — the brand's willingness to deliver on its promises and act in the consumer's best interest, and, (2) Expertise — the brand's capability, knowledge, and resources to deliver quality outcomes.

Erdem et al. (2006) found that trustworthiness often has a stronger influence on consumer choice than expertise, suggesting that consumers prioritize integrity and reliability over technical competence alone. Their work suggests that brand credibility can be enhanced through consistent communication, transparent operations, and a demonstrated track record of delivering promised value.

NGOs and brand credibility in social media ecosystems

In the non-profit context, brand credibility functions differently from commercial marketing. NGO credibility is less about product quality and more about organizational integrity, impact delivery, and mission alignment (Ortega-Rodríguez et al., 2024). However, the core dimensions identified by Erdem and Swait, trustworthiness and expertise, remain relevant. Donors assess an NGO's trustworthiness by examining governance practices, financial transparency, and accountability mechanisms. They evaluate expertise by considering whether the organization has the competence, networks, and resources to effectively address social problems.

Social media has transformed this assessment process. Digital platforms enable NGOs to communicate credibility signals in real time and create opportunities for donors to verify claims through peer testimonials, donor reviews, and visual evidence of impact. Amelia and Dewi (2021) demonstrated that non-profit organizations increasingly use social media to demonstrate operational transparency and financial accountability. Digital communication reduces perceived risk for donors by providing accessible, verifiable information about organizational practices and program outcomes.

Basically, there are two types of NGOs: (1) specialist NGOs that are fixated on a specific segment of motion, and (2) generalist NGOs, categorized by the establishment of different amenities in numerous segments of motion (Batouth, 2021). NGOs are also divided into three broad areas: international, national, and grassroots. Other categories of NGOs include developmental, environmental, relief, women, and human rights NGOs (Shin-Wha, 2000).

Previous studies have shown that NGOs face significant financial challenges, relying heavily on fundraising efforts that are often difficult and unpredictable. Beyond direct care work, NGOs also engage in a range of research, education, and advocacy activities to address societal issues (Duvaga et al., 2026). Many NGOs in Malaysia emphasize community palliative care through home care and day-care services. This matter has also been established in our preliminary research. Funding is also a key limiting factor in expanding NGOs' service offerings (Durst & Gerstlberger, 2021). Thus, many NGOs are hesitant to expand not only their suite of services, but also their service coverage (Lau & Pickersgill, 2018). NGOs, in particular, have an increasing standing in the business network, and they can deliver and mediate services competently to achieve social acceptance (Cheah, 2019).

Malmir and Zobel (2021) applied a practical, multi-stakeholder approach in the context of humanitarian operations, and this study adopted a similar orientation to explore NGO credibility and donor trust in Malaysia. In research on social policy in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, it can be seen that the governments are devoted to the nation's humanitarian system, but it is also important to identify which institutional formations need growth in social spending (Putra, 2019).

Brand credibility in NGOs: Erdem & Swait and Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

Erdem and Swait (2016) defined brand credibility in two dimensions: trustworthiness (the willingness to deliver on promises) and expertise (the capability and resources to deliver quality outcomes). In the non-profit context, these dimensions manifest as organizational integrity, impact delivery, and mission alignment rather than product

quality (Ortega-Rodríguez et al., 2024). However, understanding how credibility operates within the NGO sector requires contextualizing these measurable dimensions within broader social dynamics. Bourdieu's Theory of Practice provides this context by examining how credibility functions as a symbolic capital, accumulated resources recognized and rewarded within a competitive field.

Bourdieu's framework posits that organizational practices are embedded in social fields where agents compete according to established rules and forms of capital. Within the NGO field, habitus (donors' internalized values and dispositions) shapes how individuals interpret credibility signals, while doxa (shared field expectations of transparency and accountability) establishes normative standards for organizational practice. Symbolic capital, reputation, and recognition accrue to NGOs that align their practices with both donor habitus and field-wide doxa. Social media platforms amplify this dynamic by making credibility signals visible and subject to peer evaluation, intensifying both signal production by NGOs and signal interpretation by donors.

The integration of these frameworks operates as follows: Erdem and Swait's dimensions provide specific, operationalizable indicators of credibility, while Bourdieu's theory contextualizes how these signals are produced, interpreted, and rewarded within the competitive NGO field. This combination addresses the research gap by explaining not merely what credibility is, but how it functions as a mechanism linking organizational practices to donor trust and sustained engagement. The framework informs the research questions by specifying: (1) which credibility signals NGOs communicate through practices and social media (trustworthiness and expertise indicators); (2) how donors interpret signals through their habitus and field expectations; and (3) how credibility accumulates as a symbolic capital that generates donor trust and support.

Table 1. Theoretical integration

Dimension	Erdem & Swait	Bourdieu	NGO Application
Content of Credibility	Trustworthiness and expertise	Symbolic capital	Measurable signals of integrity and capability
Signal Production	Organizational practices	Field positioning	Communication through transparency, accountability, and responsiveness
Signal Interpretation	Stakeholder judgment	Donor habitus	Values-based evaluation shaped by personal dispositions
Field Context	Trust determinants	Competitive arena (Field/Doxa)	NGOs compete for donors, visibility, and legitimacy
Outcome	Behavioural choice	Capital accumulation	Sustained donor engagement and resource allocation

By integrating Erdem and Swait's credibility dimensions with Bourdieu's field theory, this study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how organizational practices translate into donor trust within social media ecosystems. The approach addresses the literature gap by explaining both what credibility signals mean and how they are socially constructed and valued within the NGO field. This integrated framework guides how NGO practices generate symbolic capital that sustains donor engagement.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to capture the complex social dynamics of brand credibility and donor trust in the Malaysian NGO context. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for this research because they enable in-depth exploration of how participants construct meaning around credibility, trust, and decision-making (Creswell, 2013), a phenomenon that cannot be fully understood through quantitative measurement alone.

Participant selection and sampling strategy

A combination of purposive, snowball, and convenience sampling was employed to recruit a diverse and relevant participant pool (Campbell et al., 2020). The study included 22 participants across three stakeholder groups.

NGO representatives (n=11): Senior staff members holding positions such as executive directors, program managers, or communications officers. Selection criteria included: (1) minimum two years of tenure in the organization; (2) direct involvement in organizational branding, communications, or donor engagement; (3) employment in Malaysian-registered NGOs; (4) willingness to participate and discuss organizational practices openly. These participants provided insights into how NGOs intentionally construct and communicate credibility.

Donors (n=8): Active donors to Malaysian NGOs with selection criteria including: (1) active donation to one or more Malaysian NGOs within the 12 months preceding the study; (2) minimum cumulative annual donation of RM1,000 or equivalent; (3) age 21 years or older; (4) willingness to discuss their motivations for donating and decision-making process. Donors were recruited from both individual and corporate donor populations. These participants articulated how they perceive and interpret credibility signals.

Sector experts (n=3): Individuals with at least five years of professional experience and representatives from NGO monitoring bodies. Sector experts provided contextual understanding of credibility challenges and best practices in the Malaysian NGO landscape.

Data collection procedures

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method. All interviews were conducted between July 2022 and November 2023, spanning approximately 17 months. Ethical standards were followed during the research. Before collecting data, participants were told about the research's purpose, that joining was voluntary, and that they could stop at any time without any consequences. All participants gave their permission, and their identities and answers were kept private by using anonymous data.

The interview format was flexible to accommodate participant preferences and scheduling. Among the eleven (11) NGO representatives, five were interviewed via online video conference and six in person. Of the eight donors, five participated in person and three via WhatsApp video call. All three sector experts were interviewed in person at their respective organizations. Interviews were scheduled in advance to align with participants' availability.

Each semi-structured interview lasted 45–70 minutes, with an average of 58 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with explicit written consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Interview guides were developed to ensure consistency across participants while allowing flexibility for follow-up questions and emergent topics. Interview schedules were tailored to each stakeholder group to reflect their unique perspectives; NGO staff were asked about credibility-building practices, donors about evaluation and trust-building factors, and sector experts about field-wide challenges and best practices.

As with any qualitative study, several boundaries define the scope of these findings. The sample size (n=22) and purposive sampling, appropriate for the study's in-depth, exploratory aims, mean the findings are analytically rather than statistically generalizable. Recruitment through professional networks may also have favoured more visible NGOs, and the cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point rather than over time. These boundaries are compensated by the depth and contextual richness of the data, which illuminate how brand credibility shapes non-profit–donor relationships in ways quantitative methods alone could not.

Data analysis: Thematic analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, a method well-suited to qualitative research exploring complex social phenomena. The analysis process began with familiarization, in which researchers engaged in repeated readings of interview transcripts and field notes, taking preliminary notes on patterns and meanings. Line-by-line coding was then conducted to identify semantic units, with codes that were both data-driven (emerging from participants' language) and theory-driven (informed by Erdem and Swait's (2016) brand credibility dimensions and Bourdieu's (1990) Theory of Practice framework).

Related codes were systematically grouped into candidate themes reflecting key patterns in how participants discussed credibility, trust, and donor decision-making. Next, candidate themes were refined by revisiting the data to ensure they were grounded in participant responses, with clear boundaries and descriptive labels. All themes were then checked against the entire dataset to verify their coherence, distinctiveness, and representativeness. Finally, themes were named and defined, with illustrative quotations selected from the data to support each theme. Analysis was triangulated with theoretical frameworks to strengthen interpretations.

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the qualitative analysis, this study applied established criteria outlined by Nowell et al. (2017). Dependability was ensured through careful documentation of methodological decisions, including sampling rationale, interview guide development, data collection procedures, and coding protocols. A detailed audit trail of analytical decisions enables readers to assess the transparency and logic of the research process. Transferability was enhanced through rich contextual descriptions and diverse participant perspectives, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar contexts. The integration of Erdem and Swait's (2016) framework with Bourdieu's (1990) theory enhanced the credibility and richness of the interpretations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Branding is crucial in determining the success and longevity of NGOs. A robust and clearly defined brand fosters trust, credibility, and recognition, enabling NGOs to secure funding, form partnerships, and engage a broader range of stakeholders (Becker et al., 2020). Aside from visibility, branding provides a clear mission and direction, ensuring that actions align with organizational objectives.

In the digital age, social media has broadened NGOs' influence, enabling them to tell stories, show impact, and encourage community engagement. Professional branding boosts credibility and impact, establishing NGOs as authoritative figures in policy dialogues. A robust brand consistently maintains awareness and donor support, helping NGOs remain significant and effective. In the end, branding serves not just as a marketing instrument but as a strategic basis for trust, impact, and lasting organizational power.

The role of brand credibility in NGO success

Brand credibility emerged from this research as a fundamental strategic asset for NGOs. Participants consistently emphasized that robust, clearly defined branding fosters trust, recognition, and donor engagement, enabling NGOs to secure funding, form partnerships, and connect with diverse stakeholders. This finding aligns with Becker et al. (2020), who established that non-profit branding significantly shapes public trust and donor relationships.

In the digital age, social media has amplified the importance of branding. NGOs increasingly use platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to tell stories, demonstrate impact through photos and videos, respond to stakeholder questions, and build community. This visibility serves not only a promotional function but also provides transparency that strengthens credibility. As one sector expert elaborated:

> *Social media is now where credibility is made or broken. When an NGO is transparent about their work, responsive to comments, and regularly shows outcomes, donors can see it directly. That visibility builds confidence.*
>
> (Expert 01)

This observation reflects the growing scholarly recognition that social media functions as a critical channel through which non-profits signal legitimacy and cultivate donor confidence (Harken, 2025). Professional branding establishes organizations as authoritative figures in policy dialogues and community conversations. Ultimately, branding functions not merely as a marketing tool but as a strategic foundation for trust, impact, and lasting organizational sustainability.

Brand credibility and donor behaviour

Donors' decisions to support NGOs were shaped by a blend of trust, personal connection, transparency, and perceived impact. Transparency and accountability, demonstrated through clear reporting on how funds are used, measurable outcomes, and credible leadership, appeared fundamental to building donor confidence. One donor explained:

> *I need to see where my money goes. Annual reports, audit statements, and program updates make me confident that the NGO isn't wasting funds. Without transparency, I'm giving blindly.* (Donor 03)

This emphasis on financial transparency corroborates findings by Dethier et al. (2024), who found that donor-perceived transparency has become a central mechanism by which non-profits respond to demands for accountability. Beyond financial transparency, personal connection to a cause, such as family involvement or prior volunteer experience, often deepened donor commitment. Alignment between the NGO's mission and the donor's personal values strengthened their decision to give, with many donors motivated by personal beliefs, religious duty, and empathy.

The ease of donating through digital platforms appeared to significantly lower barriers to contribution, enabling both regular and spontaneous giving (Shakil et al., 2023). Over time, giving often became a sustained habit, driven by continued trust, satisfaction with perceived impact, and a desire to make a meaningful difference. Ultimately, donors were most engaged when they felt confident that their contributions were being used effectively and aligned with missions that resonated with their personal and ethical values.

Recognition and donor motivation

For most donors in this study, the primary motivation for giving was selflessness and a desire to create meaningful change, rather than the pursuit of personal recognition. While formal recognition, tax benefits, or awards were appreciated by some, these incentives were generally viewed as secondary. Convenience and efficiency in the giving process also shaped behaviour, with many donors preferring automated or recurring donations, reflecting a mindset in which giving became a natural part of life rather than a deliberate act intended to seek attention. When recognition did occur, it could reinforce commitment, but it was rarely expected or the primary focus. In essence, donors were motivated by intrinsic satisfaction, empathy, and a sense of responsibility rather than by external validation.

Push and pull factors in donor contributions

Donors' decisions to contribute were shaped by push factors (discouraging giving) and pull factors (encouraging giving), often rooted in trust, transparency, and values alignment, as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Donor contribution dimensions

Dimension	Pull Factors (Encourage)	Push Factors (Discourage)
Trust & Transparency	Clear reporting, open use of funds, ethical practices, and audit statements	Lack of transparency, unclear/ incomplete reporting, missing financial statements
Impact & Effectiveness	Visible outcomes, evidence of real impact, photos/testimonials from beneficiaries	Doubts about effectiveness, perceived misuse or waste of funds, inability to verify outcomes
Communication Style	Respectful, informative, consistent messaging across platforms, responsive to inquiries	Aggressive solicitation, repeated/ pressured requests, poor or inconsistent communication

Table 2. (con't)

Dimension	Pull Factors (Encourage)	Push Factors (Discourage)
Values Alignment	Cause matches donor beliefs and personal values, the mission resonates with donor priorities	Misalignment with donor priorities or ethical concerns, perceived inconsistency with the stated mission
Experience of Giving	Easy digital payment options, emotionally fulfilling, inclusive culture, feedback loop	Complicated donation processes, poor customer service, a sense of insincerity, and a lack of impact updates

Donors reported being discouraged by aggressive solicitation tactics, such as repeated unsolicited calls and pressure to donate beyond their means, which caused discomfort and fatigue. Lack of transparency regarding fund use, unclear reporting on outcomes, and perceptions of unnecessary spending significantly eroded trust. One donor stated:

> *I stopped giving to one NGO after getting repeated phone calls pressuring me to donate more. That aggressive approach made me question whether they really needed my money for programs or just wanted it for themselves.*
>
> (Donor 05)

Conversely, donors were drawn to NGOs demonstrating credibility, transparency, and ethical practices. Clear communication about fund use, visual evidence of impact, and accessible financial information built confidence and loyalty, particularly when the mission aligned with personal beliefs and contributing brought emotional fulfilment.

Why donors discontinue support

Donors appeared to discontinue support when trust, transparency, or ethical standards were compromised. A major factor was a lack of accountability, including missing financial reports, unverified use of funds, or unclear reporting on how donations were spent. These gaps raised doubts about organizational integrity and actual impact. As one sector expert noted:

> *When NGOs don't report back to donors about what happened with their money, donors naturally become suspicious. They assume the worst and stop giving. Accountability and impact reporting are non-negotiable.* (Expert 02)

Loss of trust also occurred when donors encountered suspicious activities, such as repeated requests for large sums without clear justification, recycled beneficiary stories, or signs of potential scams (Ingard, 2021). This finding resonates with Dethier et al. (2024), who emphasized that perceived breaches of transparency may undermine donor confidence. Ethical concerns, such as suspicions that funds were misused for personal or excessive administrative purposes, further discourage continued support.

Social media signals and credibility building

This research identified several social media practices that donors interpreted as credibility signals. Transparent updates were among the most influential: NGOs that

regularly posted impact reports, audit summaries, and financial breakdowns appeared to signal trustworthiness and openness. As one donor explained,

> *When an NGO posts their audit results or shares detailed program updates on Facebook, it shows they have nothing to hide.* (Donor 02)

Closely related was visual evidence of impact, photos and videos from program sites, beneficiary testimonials, and before-and-after documentation, which made abstract claims concrete and verifiable. Notably, participants perceived authentic, unpolished field images as more credible than heavily edited promotional material.

Beyond content, the manner and consistency of communication also shaped perceptions of credibility. Donors valued responsiveness, particularly prompt replies to comments and inquiries, which signalled that organizations took stakeholder engagement seriously. Markers of legitimacy such as verification badges, official registration numbers, and consistent branding across platforms further reinforced perceptions of professionalism. Finally, NGOs maintaining regular posting schedules and coherent messaging appeared more stable and trustworthy than those with sporadic or contradictory communication. These findings align with recent evidence that meaningful, consistent social media interaction strengthens donor engagement and long-term retention (Harken, 2025).

Interconnectedness of brand credibility and donor trust

The findings suggest that brand credibility among NGOs is closely linked to donor trust. Credibility is built through consistent accountability, transparency, and visible impact. Participants emphasized that donors were more likely to support NGOs that were officially registered, regularly audited, and transparent in their operations, a pattern consistent with systematic evidence that financial transparency and accountability are foundational to non-profit legitimacy (Ortega-Rodríguez et al., 2024). The ability to demonstrate these qualities not only built trust but also enhances the organization's reputation, making credibility crucial for long-term sustainability (Table 3). As one NGO representative noted:

> *We understand that donors expect complete transparency from us. It's not negotiable; it's what donors believe we should do. So, we publish everything: audits, program reports, donor lists. That's the cost of running an NGO these days* (NGO 08)

Table 3. Bourdieu's Theory of Practice: Application to brand credibility and donor trust

Bourdieusian Concept	Application in NGO Context	Relevance to Brand Credibility
Habitus	Donors' ingrained values, beliefs, dispositions, and 'feel for the game' of giving	Shapes how donors evaluate and perceive credibility signals; trustworthy donors favour transparent NGOs
Field	Competitive NGO sector, where organizations compete for donors, visibility, and legitimacy	NGOs must establish credibility within this competitive space to differentiate themselves and attract support

Table 3. (con't)

Bourdieusian Concept	Application in NGO Context	Relevance to Brand Credibility
Capital	Professional systems, audit records, networks, reputation, and symbolic resources that NGOs accumulate	Brand credibility is a form of symbolic capital that donors recognize and reward through trust and donations
Doxa	Shared, taken-for-granted expectations that 'good' NGOs should be transparent, accountable, respectful, and impactful	NGOs that align with field doxa are perceived as more credible; misalignment erodes trust
Push-Pull Dynamics	Donors' positive experiences (pull) reinforce credibility and trust; negative experiences (push) challenge and disrupt it	Credibility is continuously negotiated through donor-NGO interactions; single failures can significantly erode trust

Collectively, these concepts demonstrate that brand credibility operates as socially constructed symbolic capital, continuously negotiated within the NGO field through the dynamic interplay of donor habitus, field-wide doxa, and organizational practices.

A conceptual model of brand credibility in NGOs

Figure 1 presents the integrated conceptual model derived from the study's findings. NGO practices, such as transparent reporting, official registration, regular audits, evidence of impact, and consistent communication, form the foundation on which brand credibility is built. Following Erdem and Swait's (2016) framework, these practices signal the two core dimensions of credibility, trustworthiness, and expertise, which, through Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, operate as symbolic capital accumulated within the competitive NGO field.

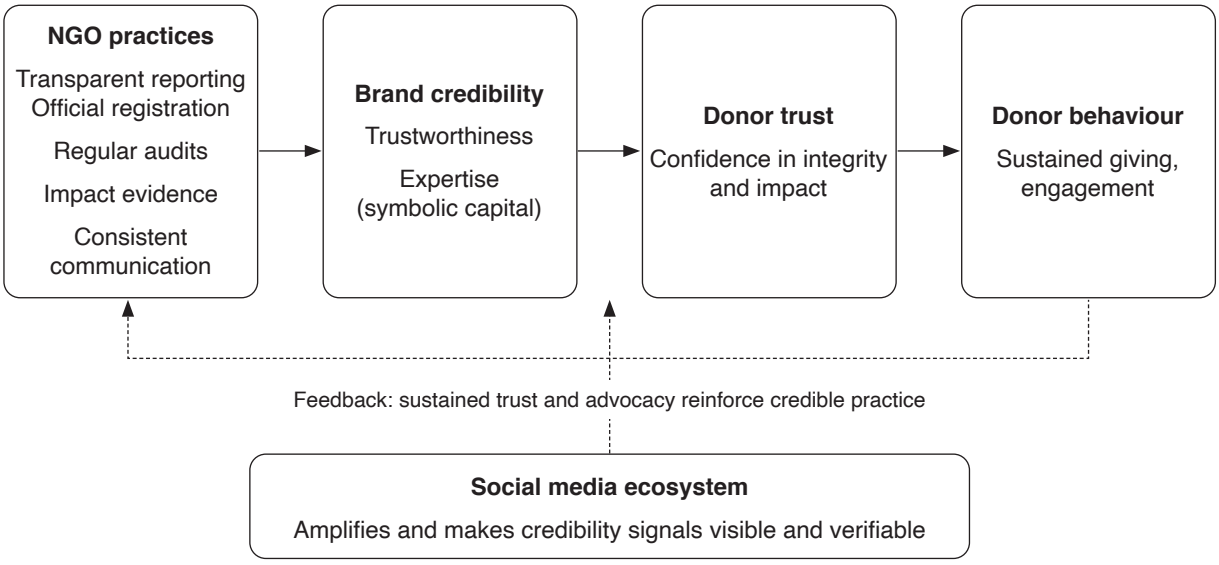

Figure 1. Conceptual model of brand credibility in NGOs

The model shows that credibility strengthens donor trust, which in turn encourages ongoing support such as regular contribution and long-term engagement. This relationship works both ways: positive experiences encourage NGOs to maintain good practices, while negative ones weaken the trust and reputation they have built.

Social media plays an important role throughout, making an NGO's credibility easier for donors to see and verify. The model therefore positions brand credibility as the key link that turns good organizational (NGO) practices into lasting donor relationships in today's increasingly digital environment.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that brand credibility functions as the central mechanism linking NGO practices to donor trust and sustained engagement in Malaysia. Drawing on Erdem and Swait's credibility framework and Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, the findings reveal that credibility operates as a symbolic capital accumulated through transparency, accountability, and demonstrated impact, positioning NGOs competitively within their field and aligning them with donors' expectations of a trustworthy organization. These insights are synthesized in the study's proposed conceptual model (Figure 1), which maps how NGO practices translate into brand credibility, donor trust, and ultimately sustained donor behaviour, with social media serving as an amplifier and donor experiences forming a continuous feedback loop. This model represents the study's primary theoretical contribution, offering an integrated framework that connects organizational practice, credibility, and donor engagement within a single explanatory structure.

Critically, the findings show that donors today demand more than good intentions; they seek verifiable integrity, evidence of results, and consistent alignment with their values. Social media has become the primary arena where these credibility signals are communicated and evaluated, transforming transparency and responsiveness from optional virtues into fundamental expectations. As the Malaysian NGO sector confronts persistent challenges of accountability and financial governance, credibility emerges not merely as a reputational asset but as a safeguard for organizational legitimacy and survival. NGOs that embed credible practices into their operations, and communicate them effectively through digital channels, will be best positioned to sustain donor trust and secure their missions in an increasingly digital and scrutinizing environment.

While this study illuminates how credibility shapes donor trust, several questions remain open for future investigation. Future research could extend this study in three directions. First, Fraud Prevention and Credibility Recovery research could examine how brand credibility mechanisms serve as early warning systems for financial mismanagement, corruption, and fund misuse, a focus that is particularly critical in the Malaysian NGO context. Investigating how donors use credibility assessments to identify risk and how organizations restore trust following scandals would strengthen NGO governance and donor protection. Second, Longitudinal Studies tracking how perceptions of credibility and donor behaviour evolve over time would reveal how external events and organizational changes affect trust and giving patterns. Third, Cross-Cultural Comparative Studies examining how brand credibility shapes donor trust across different cultural and regulatory contexts would enhance theoretical generalizability and reveal context-specific credibility factors.

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