Crowdfunding for Cancer: Success and Challenges of a Female Physician’s Organization in Nigeria

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Abstract

Background: Crowdfunding is emerging as an innovative method of financing and has been applied in different settings in developed countries. However, this concept is largely unknown in developing countries. This paper documents the experiences of two crowdfunding campaigns for cancer done to raise funds to support cancer patients.

Methods: The campaigns were designed as a hybrid model for crowdfunding, shared on online social media platforms via WhatsApp and the Organization’s Facebook page. Personal messaging, print, and audiovisual media campaigns were also carried out. Intensive, repeated, and captivating motivational messaging was carried out and a cancer-branded and personalized T-shirt was perked for the donors.

Findings: The campaign raised over a 2.5million naira (USD 9765.7), which was donated to cancer patients seen via the routine and outreach cancer screening programs. A post-campaign online survey revealed that while 30% of the funding came from family, over 70% of donations came from friends who did not know the organizers of the campaign personally. Over 90% of respondents were willing to donate to future campaigns. The campaign WhatsApp platform has remained a viable and vibrant online community actively engaged in raising funds for other women helping women projects.

Conclusions: With dwindling foreign aid for many programs in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC), the application of crowdfunding may provide a complementary source of income for programs and projects. The policy implication of this emerging concept is that it could be widely used in low- and middle-income settings as an innovative funding mechanism for health projects by tapping into the ‘wealth of the crowds’.

Keywords: Cancer, Crowdfunding, Fundraising, Nigeria
Introduction
Crowdfunding is a method of raising funds online for a project by soliciting small donations from many people. The concept of crowdfunding finds its roots in the broader concept of microfinance and crowdsourcing. Crowdsourcing can be defined as “the act of a company or institution taking a function once performed by employees and outsourcing it to an undefined (and generally large) network of people in the form of an open call”. This concept makes use of the “wisdom of the crowds”, thus a form of citizen science where non-experts can make contributions to a particular field of endeavour.

As an emerging concept, there is no universally accepted definition for crowdfunding, with various authors attempting to describe it based on what it achieves. Mollick defines Crowdfunding as “the efforts by entrepreneurial individuals and groups – cultural, social, and for-profit – to fund their ventures by drawing on relatively small contributions from a relatively large number of individuals using the internet, without standard financial intermediaries.” This strategy of fundraising has been used in developed countries like Canada, United States, and Spain.

The use of crowdfunding has skyrocketed in high-income countries in the last decade due to the availability of modern technology and the social media revolution. It has found application in health start-ups, medical research, individual health care funding. Crowdfunding in medical research is becoming more popular owing to increasing competition for the shrinking amount of government funding and is used as a supplemental or alternative sources of funding. The main reason for this trend is that traditional research grants are highly competitive and usually require pilot data and preliminary analyses in order to be funded.

Crowdfunding can also be useful for start-ups. In many low-middle-income countries (LMICs), many individuals and organizations have little or no access to public funds, despite having laudable initiatives that could contribute to the development of their communities. On this account, a lot of projects become ‘dead on arrival’ due to a lack of funds to execute them. Crowdfunding can thus be used as an alternative source of income for such projects.

As an emerging form of funding, various platforms for crowdfunding have been established for use both for the high-income countries and LMICs. These include Kickstarter, GoFundme, RedCrow, Indiegogo, OpenExplorer, and Experiment. In high-income countries, the number of successful science-related crowdfunding campaigns is growing. The success of these campaigns demonstrates the public’s willingness to support and participate in scientific projects. However, despite the availability of these online sites and successes in these high-income countries, crowdfunding remains largely unknown and unexplored in LMICs. The potentials of crowdfunding remain poorly understood and underexploited in LMICs with scarce resources that may benefit most from this emerging concept of fundraising for health projects.

The Medical Women’s Association of Nigeria (MWAN) is a national organization of not-for-profit female medical and dental practitioners in Nigeria. It is an affiliate of the oldest medical organization in the world, The
Medical Women International Association, an international organization of female medical doctors and dentists globally. There are over 30 member states in the 36 states of Nigeria. Medical Women’s Association of Nigeria (MWAN) AKS branch based in Uyo, was inaugurated in 1990. In 1998, the branch started screening for breast and cervical cancers as a pet project, screening routinely and at outreaches in various districts in the state. The challenge for most of the indigent women screened and found positive for cancers has been funding for treatment. To address this need, the organization decided to carry out fundraising campaigns for cancer. This paper documents the experiences, successes, and challenges of an application of crowdfunding by the Medical Women’s Association of Nigeria (MWAN) AKS branch.

This paper answers the following questions: How were the crowdfunding campaigns carried out? How successful were the campaigns at achieving their goals? What factors contributed to the success of the campaigns? What challenges did MWAN face in carrying out the campaigns? What lessons can be drawn for future fundraising campaigns and for other LMICs?

Methods
This paper discusses crowdfunding using the key elements in the design and implementation of crowdfunding as described by Dahlhausen et al as a framework. The project, the goal, the platform, the campaign Video, Campaign page, Contribution levels, Perks, Campaign launch and Post campaign. The two campaigns were carried out between January to February 2018 and January to March 2020.

The Project
The idea of building a crowdfunding campaign came by brainstorming within a sub-group nicknamed ‘the think tank’ on innovative ways to fund activities planned for the World Cancer Day of February 4, 2018. Three activities were planned as follows; a 3km Cancer Walk, the inauguration of the new set of executives, and a Pink Charity Ball.

The project was titled MWAN AKS 2018 Cancer Walk and Pink Charity Ball. We used our well-known professional organization MWAN, which the community had come to see and trust as a brand and logo. We anticipated that people would support the project on the basis of the importance of the project in that the funds were to be used to support cancer patients, their affiliation with MWAN, and the perks advertised. Our target audience included members of MWAN and other professional bodies, our friends and family as well as the general public. The ultimate goal of the project was to raise funds to support the indigent cancer patients, beyond organizing the Pink Ball. This thus allowed for flexibility in planning.

Campaign Launch
The 2018 campaign was launched online three weeks to the date for the events. The 2020 campaign was launched six weeks ahead of the event. The launch was carried out as online messaging with chats and videos were that were eye-catching and widely shared on social media.

Campaign Page, Video, and Platform
The main platforms that were used in both campaigns were WhatsApp and Facebook pages. Other online social media platforms used included the organization’s Twitter handle and Instagram page. However, the campaign was hybrid because
we also carried targeted appeals to our social networks – family, friends, and followers via text messaging and cold calls. There were also print and audiovisual campaigns including radio and television talk shows highlighting the events.

Campaign Video and Messages
The campaign videos featured life stories and interviews with cancer survivors seen via the screening program. Motivational campaign messages were sent out with appeals such as ‘Donate to a worthy cause’ and ‘Help our women who can’t afford cancer care…’. The perks of donation and health benefits of the walk were also highlighted in the adverts. These videos were sent out daily on social media platforms. For 2020, we leveraged on the success of the 2018 Cancer Walk, hyping the event. These messages were repeated intensively often twice daily up till the date of the events.

The Perks
In reward-based campaigns, donations are rewarded with symbolic gifts (e.g., T-shirts, mugs, mention in a paper). Usually, the project is uploaded among others on an internet platform that enables project owners to launch their campaigns. For both MWAN events, a customized, personalized, cancer-branded T-shirt was perked for the donors, participation in the 3km Road walk, recognitions on MWAN social media pages, and branding on the Pink carpet for the Charity Ball for SME and corporate organizations. Another perk was attendance at the Pink Charity Ball which doubled as the Inauguration of the newly elected executives.

Contribution levels
In the first campaign, a minimum of three thousand naira (N3000)($11) was requested as a minimum contribution for individuals and ten thousand (N10,000)($40) for SMEs and Corporate organizations. For the second campaign, a minimum of N5000 ($18) was requested from participants, while SMEs were encouraged to contribute in different categories with perks attached to each contributions were sought from family, friends, neighbours, and corporate organizations. The 2018 campaign was launched on WhatsApp on January 18 and lasted for one month, ending on February 3, 2018. The 2020 campaign lasted for 3 months, starting January 24, till March 7. Both Campaigns closed on the eve of the Cancer Day celebration with a massive increase in contributions and orders in the last week of both events.

Post Campaign
This featured follow up on promises made during the Charity Ball and the fulfilment of the promised perks. For the 2020 campaign, the Corona Virus pandemic lockdowns caught up with us delaying follow-up and prompt fulfilment of perks promised.

Results
The 2018 campaign raised a total of 2.67 million naira ($10419), while the second campaign raised 3.2 million naira ($10415). This came from various sources as outright donations, perked contributions, and contributions made during the Pink Charity

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1 This was at the prevailing dollar rate of 1USD to 256 Nigerian Naira in 2018
2 In 2020, the dollar rate had increased from 1USD to 302 Nigerian Naira
3 The prevailing exchange rate for 2018 was 256naira to 1USD
4 In 2020 the exchange rate was up to 302naira to 1USD
Ball. For the perked contributions, over 428 T-shirts were ordered in 2018 and a total of 486 T-shirts were ordered by over 200 individuals, SMEs, and corporate organizations in 2020.

Figures 1 and 2 show the daily trend of donations during the campaigns. During the first campaign, there were two peaks observed, one during the first week of the launch and in the last week. The campaign duration was short, lasting for just 18 days. Figure 2 shows the trend of donations in 2020, with multiple peaks especially during the second half of the campaign period. Total money raised in 2018 was ₦2,780,000 and ₦3,163,500 in 2020, this was besides money raised during the Pink Ball. Funds raised from the 2018 Pink Charity Ball was donated to cancer patients seen via the routine MWAN cancer screening clinic.

The funds raised were used to mark the World Cancer Day events. The Cancer Walk events had an overwhelming turnout and publicity with over 400 individuals joining the street party in 2018 and an even larger turnout in 2020. The Pink Charity Ball for both years had a turnout of over 200 people although being a strictly ticketed event. The successful Cancer Walk raised awareness levels for the routine cancer screening program. There was a surge in cancer screening attendance in the months following the outreach. Figure 3 shows the trend in the routine cancer screening clinic two years pre and post-campaign. There has been a steady increase in screening attendance post-campaign and this can be attributed to the increased awareness levels created by the campaign.

During the campaigns, the planning team also crowdsourced ideas for a successful event from the donors. This led to the creation of an online WhatsApp group of over 200 people from diverse backgrounds, spanning women from other professional bodies like the Federation of International Female lawyers (FIDA), Nigerian Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ), Association of Lady Pharmacists, individual entrepreneurs from Small and Medium-Scale Enterprises (SMEs) to many public-spirited individuals including a few men. As at the time of this publication, the campaign WhatsApp platform formed in 2018 has remained a viable and vibrant online community actively engaged in raising funds for other women helping women and children projects. This platform served as the foundation for the 2020 campaign.

A post-campaign survey conducted online about a year post the 2018 event had 71 respondents who participated in the events. Of the 71 respondents, 22 (29.9%) were friends and family of MWAN members. Figure 4 shows the age range of participants, 53.5% were aged 31-40 years and 21% were aged 41-50 years. Figure 5 shows the source of information of the respondents, 46.5% were reached via WhatsApp platform, Facebook page (16.9%), 28.2% were reached by personal cold calls and referrals, and 4.2% others (which included text messaging).

Reasons, why respondents supported the campaign, are seen in Figure 6. These included that MWAN is offering important

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5 Funds raised during the Pink Ball itself is excluded in both counts as some pledges were redeemed close to 2 months post events.
community services (94.4%), desire to have their names written down as having donated for cancer (66.2%), knowing someone who had cancer (26.8%), a personal invite from a known person (40.8%), desire to have the branded T-shirt (46.5%), desire to have fun with other ladies (32.4%) and others who wanted to learn about cancers (11.3%). When asked to rank the strongest motivating factor, (Figure 7) the ranking was as follows.
MWAN is offering important community services (87.3%), desire to have their names written down as having donated for cancer (32.4%), knowing someone who had cancer (26.8%), a personal invite from a known person (33.8%), desire to have the branded T-shirt (22.8%), desire to have fun with other ladies (18.3%) and others who wanted to learn about cancers (5.6%). About 80% of participants who responded scored the events excellent and would recommend them to a friend. The survey also revealed that 92% of respondents were willing to donate to future campaigns.

**Challenges**

However, the major challenges noted by the campaign team included the short timing for the first post-launch of the campaign. The team would have raised more funds given a longer period post campaign launch. People brought money on the date of the event for T-shirts. More challenges emerged during the post-campaign as we needed time to follow up on the promises some of the contributors made.

In seeking innovative ways of funding, we were able to carry out two successfully crowdfunded events. The success was even more remarkable considering that the country was in an economic recession in 2018 and the situation is worse with Nigeria fast becoming the poverty capital of the world. The major reason for our innovation was to find alternative sources of funding we had failed over the years to successfully raise funds from traditional sources like the government and corporate bodies to support indigent cancer patients.

Future campaigns need to be carefully planned, giving time for appropriate launch and donations. The project must be truly crowdfundable as seen in our case, ‘a worthy cause’. Setting attractive perks really paid off and this needs to be carefully thought out as to what might motivate the target audience. There are concerns that crowdfunding may actually increase health disparities as it can create an unequal and biased marketplace for those seeking financial support to access healthcare.

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**Figure 3:** Trends in MWAN Routine Cancer Screening Program 2016-2019
In fact, some researchers view it as counterproductive to achieving the goals of Universal Health Coverage; an antithesis to the global goal of universal health coverage. Despite these contrary lines of thought, the fact that in most LMIC countries, government spending on health is usually low, crowdfunding may actually serve as an alternative and supplemental source of funding for projects. More importantly, it can also serve as a platform to engage private sector participation in health care, in essence, tapping into the ‘wealth of the crowds’.
Figure 6: Most common reasons for Supporting MWAN 2018 Campaign

Figure 7: Strongest motivating factor for contributors to MWAN 2018 Campaign

Discussion
The success of a crowdfunding campaign strongly depends on a number of factors such as characteristics of the project, the content of the message, and the network of the Project Owner.\textsuperscript{18-20} The fundraising was a success because it was a crowdfunding
project, besides carrying out the cancer awareness, we were able to raise funds for cancer patients. As described by Sauerman et al, existing evidence suggests that projects with non-profit goals are more likely to be funded than projects with for-profit goals. The initial contributions from members of MWAN were key to kickstarting the campaign launch. With the names of contributors publicly acknowledged online on the campaign platform, more people were motivated to donate. The campaign team also enjoyed maximum cooperation and support from other MWAN members as they snowballed the campaign messages to friends and family.

Some researchers describe that a characteristic of crowdfunding campaigns is that half of the donations arrive at the beginning and end of the campaign. This was evident in both campaigns. The trend in the 2018 campaign (Figure 1) shows two spikes in the first and last weeks. However, the 2020 campaign lasted longer, almost double the duration of the first one. We had noted the short duration in 2018 as a challenge that we aimed to overcome. The trend was different as seen in Figure 2, there were multiple peaks especially towards the last weeks of the campaign period.

The success of the campaign was also evident in the trend in attendance at the routine cancer screening clinic. As seen in Figure 3, attendance at the clinic increased and remained above the pre-crowdfunding periods.

A key strategy for successful crowdfunding is the establishing and maintaining of professional contacts through social media.

MWAN succeeded in creating a network of people online via social media, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. These people came together on a WhatsApp platform to successfully plan and execute World Cancer day events in 2018 and 2020. The WhatsApp group established gave us a platform for contributor participation leading to high turnout and active participation. The platform remained and was used to plan and execute the second Cancer walk which drew an even larger crowd and turned out to be the largest street Walk for cancer in the South of Nigeria.

Another factor for successful fundraising is the motivation to participate. Motivation determines the quality and number of contributions. Many theories are available to explain public behavior and motivation for crowdfunding. The four Fs that motivate online contributors—Fun, Feeling good (fulfillment), Fame, and Fortune—were seen in this campaign. As seen in the survey, (Figures 6 and 7) many people felt MWAN was doing something important and wanted to help people with cancer, contributing to the medical community. This altruistic trait has been seen to be a strong motivating factor in crowdfunding and crowdsourcing campaigns.

Another important strategy for successful fundraising is messaging. The campaigns featured personalized, targeted messages via cold calls and referrals. It was essential to mobilize all connections during the project on a crowdfunding platform. As stated by other researchers, such repeated messaging such as tweeting to keep people engaged have been seen to contribute to successes in campaigns. This helped to overcome the
challenges of low turnover for crowdfunding campaigns.

Offering attractive and acceptable perks helped in fundraising. The demand for the branded T-shirts was overwhelming for the organizing team on both campaigns. This is in keeping with findings that reward-based crowdfunding for creative ventures and start-ups have been found to be more successful.\textsuperscript{24} The large turnout for the Cancer Walk too was evidence of the acceptability of the perks to the audience. The timing for the first campaign proved to be a challenge. Funding duration up to around 30 days increases the likelihood of success, after which longer duration seems to reduce the likelihood of success, as campaign momentum stagnates, and contributors become harder to engage.\textsuperscript{27}

**Conclusion**

The concept of and awareness of crowdfunding as a strategy for fundraising was zero as at the planning, launch, execution of the campaign carried out by the MWAN AKS Team. However, we were able to launch and run a successful campaign from the scratch. We were also able to raise funds for indigent cancer patients thus achieving our set goal. Crowdfunding can be a source of alternative and complementary funding for health projects in LMICs. Health and social development organizations need to learn the art of crowdfunding and be deliberate in designing campaigns to maximize the chances of achieving set goals.

**Key Messages:**

Crowdfunding as a strategy for fundraising is underexploited and poorly understood in LMICs. Crowdfunding can be successfully used as an alternative method of financing health projects in LMICs

Crowdsourcing alongside crowdfunding can lead to improved citizen participation in health and development projects

Campaigns designed to fund projects should be carefully designed to give time for adequate planning and execution of the campaign to improve amounts raised and achieve intended goals.

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