



# Understanding online community citizenship behaviors through social support and social identity



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## ABSTRACT

As with other types of online communities, the success of an online support community depends on members' behaviors that benefit the community as a whole. Such discretionary conduct is called online community citizenship behavior (OCCB). This study integrates social support and social identity theory to examine factors affecting citizenship behaviors in online support communities. In the research model, we theorize that online community citizenship behavior is driven mainly by two social mechanisms: (1) the social support mechanism, which transfers the effect of online social support first to self-efficacy, self-esteem, and subjective well-being, and then to citizenship behavior; and (2) the social identity mechanism, which relates the perceived external prestige and distinctiveness of online support communities to community identification and, in turn, to citizenship behavior. Data collected from 159 valid users of online support communities provides partial support for the research model. The findings indicate that perceived external prestige and community distinctiveness positively affect an individual's identification with an online support community, which in turn has a positive effect on OCCB. Social support has a positive effect on self-efficacy, self-esteem and subjective well-being. Subjective well-being has a stronger effect on OCCB than does community identification. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

An online support community or group is an Internet-based space for people to exchange aid and assistance (e.g., informational and emotional support) through social relationships and interpersonal transactions. There are online support communities for people dealing with cancer, HIV/AIDS, pregnancy, weight loss, etc. Support groups play an important role in promoting mental and physical health (Uchino, Bowen, Carlisle, & Birmingham, 2012). Online support communities are quickly becoming one of the most frequently accessed resources on the Internet (Coulson, Aubeeluck, & Buchanan, 2007). Since online support communities are social entities comprised of people and their relationships, their success depends on members' behaviors that benefit the community as a whole. Such discretionary conduct is called *online community citizenship behavior* (OCCB). The literature has validated

the fundamental role of citizenship behaviors and their potentially positive impact on organizational performance (e.g., Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1997). Successful strategies for online support communities cannot be designed without a deeper understanding of individuals' citizenship behaviors and the factors affecting those behaviors.

In accordance with Organ's (1988) definition of *organizational citizenship behavior* (OCB), this study defines OCCB as members' behaviors that are discretionary, not directly monetarily rewarded by the online support community, and that – in aggregate – promote the effective functioning of the community. OCCBs include showing concern for the development of the online support community, suggesting positive changes to the community, helping other members solve their problems, and showing courtesy toward other members. OCBs are neither enforced on the basis of formal role obligations nor elicited by a contractual guarantee of recompense, but they may benefit the organization (Organ, 1990). Since members of online support communities (as opposed to traditional organizations) have more freedom to decide their behaviors or level of involvement, the success of online support communities

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is even more dependent on the citizenship behaviors of their members.

According to social identity theory, identification or a sense of oneness with an organization induces an individual to take the organization's perspective and goals as his or her own, which in turn strengthens the motivation to perform citizenship behaviors (Van Knippenberg, 2000). Identification has been considered to be an important driver of OCB (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002; Van Dick, Grojean, Christ, & Wieseke, 2006). In accordance with Tajfel's (1972) definition of social identity, this study defines community identification as an individual's knowledge of belonging to a given online support community, together with some emotional and value significance the individual ascribes to this community membership. Community identification is an individual's sense of oneness with or emotional bond to the online community. Thus, people who are strongly identified with an online support community should be more likely to be committed to, invest in, and even make sacrifices for the community, resulting in pro-social actions that benefit the online support community and others within the community. For example, individuals may develop an identity-based attachment to a group within the online community, which increases their willingness to help the group (Ren et al., 2012). Ray, Kim, & Morris (2014) also suggest that individuals who experience a strong identification with an online community may have a sense of community engagement, which motivates them to contribute knowledge and promote the community via word of mouth (Ray et al., 2014). However, as people tend to identify with few online support community, identification alone might not be sufficient motivation for them to engage in OCCB.

Whereas happiness and life satisfaction have been used to represent subjective well-being in the real world, happiness and satisfaction with one's online social life is crucial in representing subjective well-being in the virtual world (Ong, Chang, & Lee, 2015). For example, obesity may be a common problem for members of online weight loss networks; happiness and satisfaction with online social life then become crucial because they can increase members' capacity to cope with obesity-related emotional stress. Based on Diener, Oishi, and Lucas's (2002) definition of subjective well-being, this study defines subjective well-being in virtual life as a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her online social life. This can be manifested by cognitive evaluations of one's online social life (virtual life satisfaction), positive affect, and negative affect. Prior studies on organizational behavior have shown that individuals in a positive mood are more likely to perform citizenship behaviors at work (e.g., George & Brief, 1992). Analogously, people with a high degree of subjective well-being tend to partake in online community activities through reciprocal adaptation (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Chiu, Cheng, Huang, & Chen (2013) also suggest that individuals who have a strong sense of satisfaction with their online social life tend to continue to participate in the activities of the online community and recommend the community to others.

Although members' subjective well-being and community identification are crucial to the development and success of an online support community, their importance in fostering OCCB may be different. Individuals participate in online social support communities because of the psychological need for social support, happiness and social affiliation. Satisfaction of these psychological needs should yield well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), an individual with a sense of subjective well-being tends to reciprocate the favorable treatment received from other members of the online support community by engaging in OCCB as a form of social exchange. We believe that because of the fulfillment of the psychological need for social support, happiness and social affiliation, and the obligation to

maintain reciprocal relationships, subjective well-being should be a more powerful driver of OCCB than is community identification. However, the relative importance of subjective well-being and community identification in determining OCCB has received less attention in the literature regarding online support communities.

This paper deals with two key aspects with which the owner or operator of an online support community should most be concerned: enhancing members' happiness and satisfaction with online social life, and facilitating their identification with the community. Accordingly, we propose that there are two complementary factors for promoting OCCB: subjective well-being and community identification. Thus, this study proposes a theoretical model that includes both the social support and social identity paths to influencing OCCB so as to empirically examine whether subjective well-being and community identification play different roles in explaining OCCB. The social support path links social support to coping resources, subjective well-being and OCCB, whereas the social identity path links characteristics of the online support community to community identification and OCCB. Although prior research has discussed the impact of various characteristics of online communities on identification (e.g., Ren et al., 2012), we are aware of no study which has tested the underlying causal mechanism or empirically confirmed the impact of online social support on subjective well-being. Our findings, based on survey data collected from 159 users of online support communities, support the assertion that social support and the characteristics of online support communities are crucial determinants of subjective well-being and community identification, respectively, both of which foster OCCB. These findings yield important implications for research and practice.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section discusses the conceptual foundation of the research. Section 3 develops the research model and hypotheses. Section 4 explains the methods and analyzes the data. The results and their implications are discussed in Section 5. The paper concludes with the limitations of the study, along with suggestions for future research directions.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The dimensionality of OCCB

Organ (1988) identified five conceptual dimensions of OCB: (1) *altruism* (voluntary behaviors that help others with a work-related problem), (2) *conscientiousness* (discretionary actions beyond the minimum requirements of the organization), (3) *sportsmanship* (willingness to tolerate the inevitable inconveniences without complaining), (4) *courtesy* (actions aimed at preventing problems with others), and (5) *civic virtue* (responsible, constructive participation, and involvement in the political process of an organization).

As shown in Table 1, recent studies have applied the concept of OCB to the online community context. Most studies have measured OCCB with one of two approaches: unidimensional (e.g., Xu, Li, & Shao, 2012; Yu & Chu, 2007) or multi-dimensional (e.g., Yong, Sachau, & Lassiter, 2011; Yoon & Wang, 2011). The unidimensional approach uses some items of a multi-dimensional OCB scale as the manifest indicators of the OCCB construct. The multi-dimensional approach treats existing OCB dimensions as separate constructs and determines the antecedents and consequences of each dimension. The unidimensional approach results in considerable loss of information regarding the associations between dimensions of OCB and other variables, while the multi-dimensional approach leads to a complex research model. A meta-analysis by LePine, Erez, & Johnson (2002) revealed that most of the dimensions of OCB are highly intercorrelated, suggesting that OCB is best conceptualized as a latent construct. A more recent meta-analysis by Hoffman,

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