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ABSTRACT

By exploring online helping behavior, this study developed and tested a conceptual framework to understand local residents' contribution to online travel communities. The conceptual framework was established based on the attribution-empathy theory and the social identity theory. A web-based survey was conducted in the online travel community "CouchSurfing", and a total of 377 cases were included in the analysis. The findings indicate that the conceptual framework is statistically significant, and variables of social identity of local resident, attachment to the online community, participation in the online community and personal distress are significant predictors of helping behavior. Based on the results, both theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: *local resident, online travel communities, helping behavior, social media*

INTRODUCTION

The technology trend has made the online community a new venue for tourists who seek for unbiased information for their travel planning (Casaló, Flavián & Guinalíu, 2011). Online travel communities have reshaped the decision-making process of people around the world (Arsal, Backman & Baldwin, 2008). In addition to the communication from travelers, it is noted that local residents also contribute to the information sharing process. Online sites have been regarded as reliable information sources (Arsal et al., 2008; Arsal, Woosnam, Baldwin, & Backman, 2010). As a local resident and a member of the online travel community, why do they offer help online? This is a question that has not yet been answered through a rigorous research process. Therefore, by examining online helping behavior, this study aimed to develop and test a conceptual framework to understand local residents' contribution to online travel communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the conceptual similarities between online helping behavior and general helping behavior, we started with a literature review that examined people's helping behavior in regular settings. Attribution theory (Weiner, 1980) and empathy theory (Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, & Birch, 1981) are two dominant social-psychological approaches to understand individuals' helping behavior. Attribution theory suggests that helping behavior could be raised through an attribution-affect-action motivational sequence (Weiner, 1980); while empathy theory focuses on the emotional responses in the helping motivations (Batson et al., 1981). Considering

the overlaps of these two theories, Betancour (1990) established an attribution-empathy model to explain people's helping behavior, and suggested that helping behavior could be determined by the perceived controllability of casual attributions and related empathetic emotions (i.e. sympathy, anger, personal distress).

Further, recent research has noted that social identity is another important concept to understand people's pro-social behaviors (Dholakia et al., 2004; Thomas, McGarty & Mavor, 2009). By categorizing themselves into different social groups, individuals can foster a sense of belonging, generate emotional attachment and practice positive activities within the group (Dholakia et al., 2004). Previous studies have identified three components in the social identification process, namely: (1) cognitive social identity, (2) affective social identity, and (3) evaluative social identity (Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999). Within online communities, researchers (Qu & Lee, 2011) have found that members' affective identification can be developed through participation in communities. Thus, online participation and emotional attachment to an online community are regarded as two dimensions to examine social identification as an online community member (Qu & Lee, 2011).

METHODS

Based on the attribution-empathy model and social identity theory, a conceptual framework is presented (Figure 1). As antecedents, three factors (online travel community member, local resident, socio-demographic) are listed to describe the characteristics of the subjects. From the perspective of attribution-empathy model, it is assumed that helping behavior can be affected by perceived controllability and different emotions (sympathy, personal distress, anger). With respect to dual social identities, helping behavior can be influenced by online member participation, attachment to online communities, cognitive identity of a local resident, affective identity of a local resident, and the evaluative identity of a local resident.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework
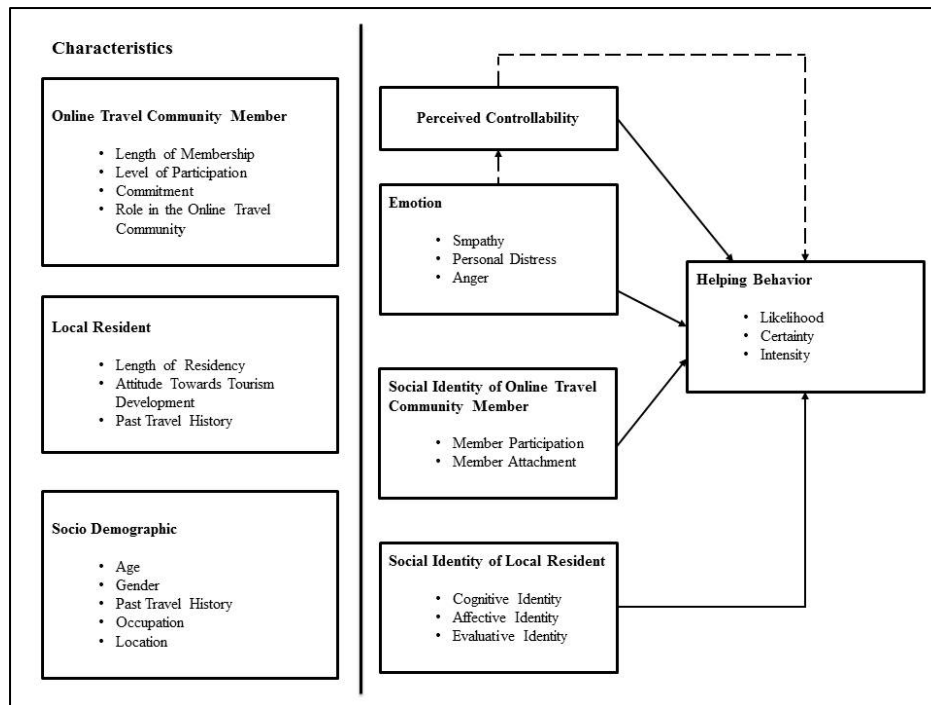
To test the conceptual framework, an online survey was conducted in the online travel community "*CouchSurfing*". A total of 1,289 members residing in the Southeastern United States were invited through a systematic sampling approach and three-hundred-seventy-seven completed responses were included in the analysis.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, the 377 participants had a mean age of 32 years old, ranging from age of 18 to 65. Over half of them (52.9%) were male, the majority of them (86.5%) had college or higher degrees, and about six out of ten of them (57.7%) were employed full-time. In regards to online travel community, the majority of respondents (78.3%) held a single membership, while a small amount (9.6%) had a membership for longer than 5 years. For the length of residency, about four out of ten of the respondents (42.0%) have lived in their current community for 1-5 years.

Table 1
Demographic Profile of the Sample

Variable		N	Percent
Gender			
	Male	198	52.5%
	Female	178	47.2%
Age			
(M=31.93;	18-24	114	30.2%
SD=11.80)	25-34	161	42.7%
	35-44	39	10.4%
	45-54	36	9.5%
	55-64	20	5.1%
	65 and above	8	2.1
Education			
	Some high school or less	1	0.3%
	High school graduate	50	13.2%
	College/University graduate	198	52.2%
	Graduate/postgraduate	130	34.3%
Occupation			
	Student	102	27.0%
	Full-time worker	218	57.7%
	Part-time worker	37	9.8%
	Unemployed	11	2.9%
	Retired	10	2.6%

Factor analyses was conducted to examine the underlying dimensions of each construct. For the attribution-empathy section, four factors were generated and labeled as anger, sympathy, personal distress, and perception of controllability. They together explained 72.88% of the variance, with reliability values of .92, .88, .71, and .65 respectively. Three factors were generated for the social identities, and labeled as online participation, online community attachment, and social identity of local resident. They explained 76.91% of the variance with reliability values of .96, .90, and .74 respectively.

Moreover, as shown in Table 2, the results of the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) analysis indicated that the conceptual framework was statistically significant ($p < .01$). Social identity of local resident ($p < .01$), online community attachment ($p < .01$), personal distress ($p < .01$), and online participation ($p < .01$) were positively related to the helping behavior; while anger ($p = $

.10), empathy (p =. 55) and perception of controllability (p= .23) were unrelated. The mediating effects did not occur either.

Table 2
OLS Regression Summary *(N=377)*

Variable	Helping Behavior		
	B	t	p
Social Identity of Local Resident	0.19	4.22	$<.001$ *
Member Attachment	0.19	4.23	$<.001$ *
Anger	-0.74	-1.64	.10
Sympathy	0.027	0.61	0.55
Personal Distress	0.156	3.45	.001*
Member Participation	0.457	10.08	$<.001$ *
Perception of Controllability	-0.054	-1.12	0.23
R^2	0.319		
Adjusted R^2	0.304		
F	22.25**		

Notes: *$p< .01$

DISCUSSION

This study examined local residents' helping behavior in online travel communities, and the findings indicated that social identity of local resident, online member participation, attachment to the online community and personal distress were positively related to local residents' online helping behavior.

From an individual level, the findings suggested that personal distress was a significant predictor of local resident's online helping behavior. Personal distress refers to an aversive, self-focused emotional reaction (e.g., anxiety, worry, discomfort) to the apprehension or comprehension of another's emotional state or condition (Eisenberg et al, 1989). In other words, participants had a relieved mental status after helping others, and this could be one of the main reasons that lead to their pro-social activities in an online travel community. In addition, the results of this study revealed that neither perception of controllability nor anger was able to explain the online helping behavior; and perception of controllability did not act as a mediating factor. These differences might be caused by the unique environment in cyberspace.

With respect to the dual social identities, the result suggested that as an online travel community member, their normal participation and attachment to the online community affect the helping behavior. This is consistent with previous literature, which suggests that members' participation and attachment were significant related to their contribution in online communities (Wang & Fessenmaier, 2004). While as a member of the residing community, the influence of this social identification process in reality are so strong that could even produce impacts on their online activities; and this might also lead to a friendly attitude and positive behaviors towards incoming tourists.

CONCLUSION

The increasing popularity of online travel communities has created new opportunities for both tourism organizations and its customers (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2002). The online interaction between local residents and travelers are not confined with information exchange, it also contributes to the process that tourists establish destination images (Govers, Go, & Kumar,2007).

Thus, as important as to understand the value of local residents' involvement, it is also essential to explore the reason why they offer online helping, and how to active their positive contribution.

From the findings of this study, two aspects should be addressed in an online travel community website design. First, due to the strong influence of the social identity as a local resident, it is necessary to set up a connection between online communities and physical environments. For example, the online travel community could cooperate with the physical community to develop sub-groups or divisions for the website, soliciting advice from local residents. Second, the findings of this research illustrates the importance of dispositional feelings and members' normal participation in the online community, therefore, rewarding system along with a notification system could be provided in the website to acknowledge member achievements. These measurements could strengthen the sense of fulfillment after practicing helping behavior and therefore encourage more active participation and contribution in the online communities.

Finally, as this study was conducted in one travel online community, future research needs to be replicated in other online travel communities. Also, the helping behavior in the *CouchSurfing* community was interpreted as different kinds of online activities (i.e., providing advice, hanging out, offering hospitality). However, the term of helping was still too vague and general for most members, and their reactions might vary in different situations. Such considerations should be taken into account in future studies.

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