Chapter 37
Online Prosocial Behaviors

Michelle F. Wright
Pennsylvania State University, USA

William Stanley Pendergrass
American Public University System, USA

ABSTRACT

Prosocial behaviors in the cyber context (i.e., the internet, text messages) can be traced back to when the internet was just a message board, used to share open source software. Following these early investigations of prosocial behaviors, clinicians recognized that the internet might remove barriers to help seeking. Recent investigations have provided support for the internet as a place to seek help among various populations. Prosocial behaviors in the cyber context also have benefits for the givers as well, including health benefits, personal satisfaction, and reputational increases. This chapter draws on multidisciplinary research to review prosocial behaviors in the cyber context.

INTRODUCTION

Over three billion people use electronic technologies (e.g., cell phones, the internet) everyday (Internet Live Stats, 2016). Although there are many investigations and news stories about negative online behaviors, less attention has been given to positive online behaviors. There are many opportunities to receive help or to perform prosocial acts through electronic technologies. This chapter focuses on online prosocial behaviors. The chapter includes eight sections:

- Section one provides the definition of offline and online prosocial behaviors.
- Section two examines the unique characteristics of the cyber context and how such characteristics are conductive to prosocial behaviors.
- Section three focuses on various online prosocial behavior, including helping through electronic groups, online mentoring, online donations to charities, virtual voluntarism, and helping in other electronic contexts (e.g., social networking sites).
- Section four investigates the value of online prosocial behaviors to the giver and receiver.
- Section five provides theoretical explanations for why people engage in online prosocial behavior.

- Section six describes solutions and recommendations for organizations wanting to harness electronic technologies for various helping opportunities.
- Section seven presents suggestions for future research on online prosocial behavior.
- The last section provides concluding remarks regarding the chapter.

BACKGROUND

Prosocial behaviors are defined as voluntary acts directed toward people or society (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). Such behaviors may include helping, sharing, donating, and volunteering. Online prosocial behaviors can take various forms, including donating time and attention to electronic discussion boards and Wikis (e.g., Antin, 2011; Butler, Sproull, Kiesler, & Kraut, 2007), helping among corporate employees (e.g., Duranova & Ohly, 2016), helping players in computer games (e.g., Molyneux, Vasudevan, & de Zuniga, 2015), online mentoring (e.g., Cheng, Hanuscin, & Volkmann, 2016), sharing and contributing to open source software (e.g., Lakhani & Hippel, 2003), virtual voluntarism (e.g., Kim & Lee, 2014), and making charitable donations to organizations online (e.g., Bennett, 2006). There are various characteristics of the online environment that are favorable for helping online.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ONLINE PROSOCIAL BEHAVIORS

Online prosocial behaviors have some characteristics that set them apart from the same behaviors offline. Search engines make it easier to find opportunities to help or receive help online (Sproull, Conley, & Moon, 2013). It is easier to give or receive help online because one's physical appearance or personal attributes do not influence other's opinions (Brennan, Moore, & Smyth, 1992). Individuals can use fake names or screen names and hide their identities online, which reduces stigmas associated with seeking help (Wright & Li, 2012). The online environment offers flexibility to individuals wanting to help or give help, allowing them to give help or receive help even with restricted schedules. There is high controllability over online prosocial behaviors. The online environment allows givers to choose when they want to help and if they want to help again without feeling pressured (Sproull et al., 2013; Wright & Li, 2012).

Although there are noticeable differences between online and offline prosocial behaviors, there are similarities. The relationship between the giver and receiver of prosocial behaviors in either environment can include strangers (e.g., Sproull et al., 2013), friends (e.g., Cornejo, Tentori, & Favela, 2013), and business colleagues (e.g., Duranova & Ohly, 2016). Prosocial behaviors are rewarding for givers in either social context (Butler et al., 2007; Eichhorn, 2008). Furthermore, prosocial behaviors can occur through formal and informal organizational institutions (Wright & Li, 2011). There is typically no expectation of direct reciprocity of prosocial behaviors in offline and online contexts (Sproull et al., 2013).

PROSOCIAL BEHAVIORS IN THE CYBER CONTEXT

This section presents a review of the literature on opportunities for prosocial behaviors via open source software and Wikis, electronic support groups, online mentoring, electronic fundraising and crowdfunding, virtual voluntarism, and other technologies, such as social networking sites (SNS) and online gaming.

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