

Exploring the Impact of Parasocial Interaction on the Effectiveness of Nonprofit Organizations through Social Media Engagement Strategies

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Abstract: This research surveys how parasocial interaction (PSI) affects the leadership effectiveness of nonprofit organizations (NPOs) on social media. Literature review survey derivation and propositions were proposed. The findings showed parasocial interaction mediates the impact of NPOs social media credibility (which includes reliability, credibility, and attractiveness of the information source) on NPOs' effectiveness (community Identification and citizenship behavior). This implies that parasocial interaction is crucial for nonprofit organizational effectiveness on social media and proposes NPOs' social media engagement strategies.

Keywords: Parasocial interaction, NPOs' effectiveness, community identity, community citizenship behavior.

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Introduction

According to the 2023 data, there are 4.76 billion social media users globally, which is close to 60% of the world's population. Of these users, 53.7% are male and 46.3% are female. On average, active users on social platforms use 7.2 different social media applications each month and spend approximately 2.5 hours daily on these platforms (E-commerce Book Club, 2023). This information highlights the high penetration rate of social media globally and in Taiwan, and the substantial amount of time users spend on multiple platforms, emphasizing the importance of social media in modern life.

Based on previous literature reviews of non-profit organizations (NPOs), three themes summarize their internet usage (Han, 2013; Han & Hsu, 2018):

1. Online Disclosure, Advocacy, and Lobbying: This involves the accountability of community organization websites (Saxon & Guo, 2011), the link between online disclosure and donations for Spanish NPOs (Gandia, 2011), online discussions between police and residents (Brainard & McNutt, 2010), and how advocacy alliances use websites to build relationships (Waters & Load, 2009).

2. The Interaction Between NPOs and the Internet: Research on how organizational factors affect Internet application, such as organizational type, size, leadership style, resources, etc. (Brainard & Siplon, 2002; McNutt & Boland, 1999), and how internet technology changes NPOs' cooperation, service provision, and lobbying actions (Burt & Taylor, 2003; Bergan, 2009).

3. Virtual Communities Within NPOs on the Internet: Studies on the survival, accountability, and governance of virtual communities (Dumont & Candler, 2005), and the impact of virtual communities on public administration practices (Brainard & McNutt, 2010).

Interactive and two-way communication platforms are crucial for NPOs to promote their mission, achieve their goals, and maintain relationships with stakeholders (Waters et al., 2009). Interactions on the Internet and social media have evolved from one-way communication to more dynamic and diverse engagement. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the development of new methods of contactless economic transactions and human interaction while changing the operating model of nonprofits.

In today's era of social media marketing, NPOs must collaborate with for-profit entities to embrace this trend, quickly grasp social media's influence, and effectively utilize and leverage its positive impact to advance their mission. However, previous research on online nonprofits remains limited and has not kept up with current trends in social media. There is little research on how NPOs use social media to enhance their influence and operational efficiency.

In 1957, Horton and Strauss described parasocial interactions as direct, personal, and reciprocal experiences perceived by an audience and shared in a fantasy manner on social media. This study aims to investigate whether parasocial interactions on social media can help NPOs generate positive organizational behavior outcomes and explore the factors influencing parasocial interaction on social media. Its purpose is to propose effective strategies for NPOs to better connect with their supporters.

Literature Review

Dumont and Candler (2005) concluded that virtual communities focusing on medical issues are unstable and prone to crises. They suggested that these communities could benefit from learning from real-world communities and non-profit organizations. Brainard and McNutt (2010) observed that online interactions between the Washington D.C. police and residents did not have the expected interactive effects and were mostly limited to traditional official information dissemination. Uzunoğlu and Kip (2014) discovered that out of 50 Turkish NPOs' social media sites, 35 did not fully meet dialogue requirements, with only 4 meeting all social media standards. In contrast, Koyama et al. (2020) found that the diversity of social networks has a positive impact on adolescents' mental and physical health, with a significant negative correlation with depression, especially for children with lower perceived influence in the classroom.

Non-profit organizations are not very active or effective in using online communities, particularly in dialogue and relationship-building. Lim et al. (2020) looked at the role of personality in NPOs' social media advertising. They found no interaction between personality traits and ad appeal types. Still, social media indicators significantly moderated the effect on ad attitudes and donation intentions for trend followers and highly conscientious individuals. Therefore, this study will examine the impact of parasocial interaction on NPOs' effectiveness.

Parasocial interaction (PSI)

PSI was introduced by Horton & Wohl in 1956. It examines how media content influences the relationship between consumers and media figures. When media content aligns with consumers' expectations, they develop feelings of closeness and trust towards the media figures. Rubin et al. (1985) defined PSI as the virtual interpersonal interaction between media users and media figures, noting that the greater the attractiveness of the media figure, the stronger the PSI.

Early studies focused on the relationship between audiences and broadcast media personalities. However, with the development of the virtual world, the importance of PSI has increased. PSI reduces audience uncertainty and enhances resonance with media figures, leading to greater willingness to continue viewing (Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Park & Lennon, 2004). Labrecque (2014) described PSI as an imagined experience, where fans are more likely to interact with media figures if they find them attractive. Subsequent research extended to websites and online blogs, finding that PSI significantly impacts brand identification (Thorson & Rodgers, 2006; Labrecque, 2014).

Hwang & Zhang (2018) and Yang & Sanchi (2022) found that empathy and low self-esteem positively influence PSI, while loneliness does not. PSI further affects purchase intentions and electronic word-of-mouth. Recently, PSI has been widely applied in marketing, especially in influencer marketing, where PSI between influencers and followers significantly impacts purchase intentions (Bu & Thaichon, 2022; Sokolova et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2020). Social media platforms also facilitate PSI between users (Jansom & Pongsakornrunsilp, 2021). Studies have found that the physical attractiveness and attitude similarity of beauty bloggers positively influence PSI (Hsu et al., 2022), and PSI combined with perceived value can encourage viewers to increase donations

(Wang et al., 2023).

Therefore, PSI is a crucial psychological phenomenon that affects the relationships between consumers and media figures, brands, and influencers. With the proliferation of the internet and social media, PSI's application in marketing has become more extensive. NPOs and businesses can leverage PSI to enhance connections with supporters or consumers, increasing trust and engagement.

Community Identification

Social identity theory proposed by Tajfel & Turner (1986), an individual's self-concept is influenced by the social groups to which they belong. Community identification allows members to feel a sense of belonging and encourages participation and contribution. Ellemers et al. (2002) indicated that strong community identification makes members more likely to participate in community activities and exhibit positive behaviors, leading to enhanced commitment and loyalty. Algesheimer et al. (2005) emphasized the close relationship between community identification and members' participation behaviors, highlighting the importance of emotional interaction and experience sharing in fostering community identification. When members feel connected to their community, they are more willing to invest time and resources to support its growth. Thus, community identification significantly influences member engagement, community cohesion, and organizational effectiveness.

Community Citizenship Behavior

In 1988, Organ proposed the concept of organizational citizenship behavior, which refers to behaviors that employees voluntarily display at work and are not directly rewarded. These behaviors are critical to the functioning and effectiveness of the organization. Podsakoff et al. (2000) categorized organizational citizenship behavior into five main types: altruism, conscientiousness, loyalty, consideration, and citizenship behavior. These behaviors promote collaboration among colleagues and enhance overall organizational effectiveness. Borman & Motowidlo (1993) highlighted the significance of organizational citizenship behavior in enhancing teamwork and improving the work environment, emphasizing that these behaviors can directly impact organizational performance and employee job satisfaction. Together, these literatures underscore the importance of organizational citizenship behaviors in enhancing organizational effectiveness.

Since organizational identification and citizenship behavior are both important indicators of organizational effectiveness, this study focuses on the operational effectiveness of NPOs' PSI on social media. Therefore, it selects community identification and citizenship behavior as the effectiveness of NPOs' indicators.

Effectiveness of NPOs and PSI

PSI plays a crucial role in successful brand relationships, positively affecting loyalty and identification (Labrecque, 2014). The way community members evaluate each other impacts their identification with community organizations. Positive emotional exchanges and experience-sharing interactions can improve the community's evaluation, which in turn fosters organizational identification (Tajfel, 1981).

Hence, this study proposes proposition 1: NPOs' PSI on social media significantly affects community identification.

Algesheimer et al. (2005) pointed out that PSIs encourage community members to actively help others, share knowledge to resolve doubts, and voluntarily participate in joint activities, thus enhancing the value of the community and individuals. According to Blau's social exchange theory (1964), social interaction occurs within social groups and individuals are attracted to groups because they expect rewards and acceptance. To be accepted, an individual must offer certain rewards to the group. Mus (1954) believed that in social interaction, gifts or services are given voluntarily. Through PSIs, members automatically tend to help solve community problems or follow rules, which are forms of community citizenship behavior. Therefore, PSI and community citizenship behavior are intertwined.

Hence, this study proposes proposition 2: NPOs' PSI on social media significantly affects community citizenship behavior.

Social Media Source Credibility

Ensuring the credibility of the source is crucial for the effectiveness of information (Hovland et al., 1953). Solomon et al. (2006) note that the effectiveness of information depends on the credibility and expertise of the endorser. When assessing the effects of celebrity endorsements, some scholars suggest evaluating the characteristics of celebrities and their impact on information dissemination. Ohanian (1990) categorizes research on endorsers into two main models: the Source Attractiveness Model and the Source Credibility Model. Source credibility refers to the extent to which the communicator has relevant characteristics related to the subject and provides an objective viewpoint, which influences the receiver's acceptance of the information. Source attractiveness refers to the idea that an attractive communicator can positively influence consumer attitudes (Ohanian, 1991).

This study focuses on examining the impact of source credibility on receivers and adopts the Source Credibility Model for exploration. Ohanian (1991) notes that when consumers engage in discussions and receive feedback within a community or obtain information through interpersonal interactions, these interactions help satisfy their needs and build trust (Kim et al., 2008; Suntornpithug & Khamalah, 2010). Research also shows that PSIs on social media make people view public figures as more credible (Ledbetter & Redd, 2016) and trustworthy (Chung & Cho, 2017). These findings emphasize the importance of source credibility in social environments and its profound impact on information reception and behavior formation.

Furthermore, Ohanian (1991) also highlights that consumers build trust through community discussions and interpersonal interactions (Kim et al., 2008; Suntornpithug & Khamalah, 2010). However, physical attractiveness can influence PSIs, with more attractive individuals on social media platforms having a more positive

impact (Swami et al., 2008; Carr & Walther, 2014). Lee & Watkin (2016) found that on YouTube, the physical and social attractiveness of media personalities significantly affects viewers. Therefore, the following propositions are proposed:

P3: Source credibility has a significantly positive effect on PSI.

P3-1: Attractiveness has a significantly positive effect on PSI.

P3-2: Trustworthiness has a significantly positive effect on PSI.

P3-3: Expertise has a significantly positive effect on PSI.

The Mediating Effect of Parasocial Interaction on Social Media Source Credibility and NPOs' Effectiveness

In virtual communities, members' expertise often leads to more active participation, which further enhances community identification (Shen et al., 2010; Tonteri et al., 2011). Interactions among members not only facilitate value co-creation between customers and brands (Hsu et al., 2015) but also build reliability, which reduces uncertainty and fosters trust (Shen et al., 2010). This trust, discovered through interactions, further enhances community awareness (Chang & Wu, 2015).

PSI is a key element in successful brand relationships, positively influencing consumer loyalty and identification through two-way communication (Labrecque, 2014). Additionally, group cohesion and members' sense of community ownership are crucial for the success of virtual communities, promoting loyalty and organizational citizenship behavior (Organ, 1988; Koh & Kim, 2004). In summary, the success of virtual communities relies on members' expertise, the establishment of interaction relationships, the enhancement of reliability, and the application of PSI. These factors collectively strengthen community identification, trust, and loyalty, promoting the stable development of the community. Therefore, the following propositions are proposed:

P4: PSI mediates the relationship between source credibility and NPOs' effectiveness.

P4-1: PSI mediates the relationship between source credibility and community identification.

P4-2: PSI mediates the relationship between source credibility and community citizenship behavior.

Conceptual Framework

The independent variables in this study are the three dimensions of source credibility: attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise. The mediating and dependent variables include PSI, community identification, and citizenship behavior. This study examines the mediating effects of PSI on community identification and citizenship behavior within the community. The research framework is depicted in Figure 1.

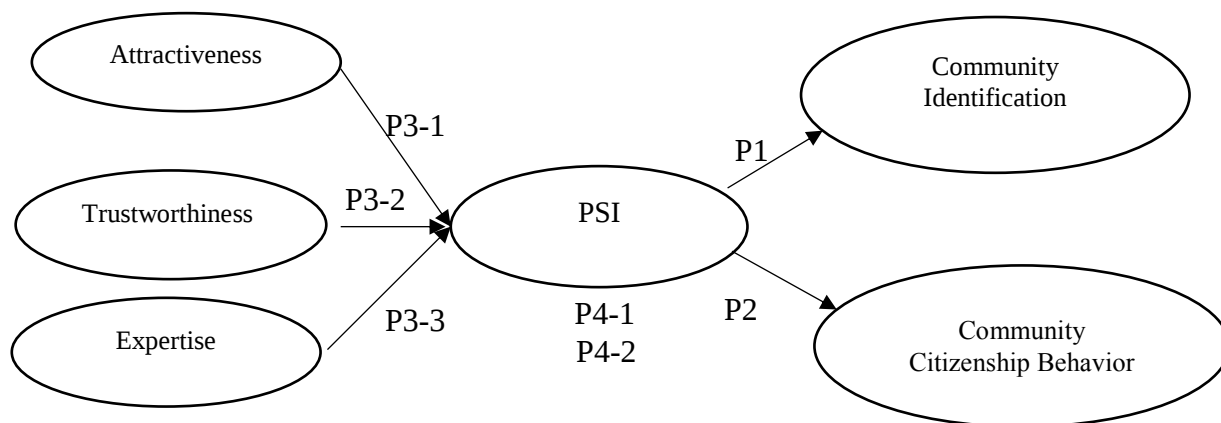


Figure 1. The conceptual framework of this study

Discussion and Suggestion

The credibility of the social media source positively effect on parasocial interaction

The study shows that attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise significantly affect PSI, with attractiveness having the most excellent effect, followed by expertise. This indicates that when media figures or entities possess attractiveness and expertise, they more effectively facilitate positive interaction (Perse & Rubin, 1989; Labrecque, 2014; Swami et al., 2008; Carr & Walther, 2014; Yang & Sanchi, 2022).

Non-profit organizations (NPOs) should enhance the attractiveness and expertise of their representatives or the organization itself to strengthen PSI with supporters. This includes improving public image, increasing the dissemination of professional knowledge, and ensuring that interactions are sincere and engaging.

Parasocial interaction positively influences community identification and citizenship behavior

Community members are more likely to proactively help others or share, thereby increasing their sense of identification with the organization (Lu, 2013; Hsu et al., 2015). The higher the level of PSI, the stronger the positive impact on community identification and citizenship behavior.

NPOs should leverage PSI to enhance resonance and trust among community members, thereby strengthening organizational cohesion. This can be achieved by creating resonant content and activities, such as online forums, mutual aid activities, and volunteer story sharing.

Parasocial interaction is a crucial mechanism for nonprofit organizational effectiveness on social media

In addition to routine information announcements, NPOs should leverage PSI models to foster resonance and trust among community members, thereby enhancing community awareness and identification (Chang & Wu, 2015).

NPOs should develop strategic communication plans that fully utilize the mediating role of PSI to strengthen the impact of source credibility on community identification and citizenship behavior. This includes designing interactive content and activities that meet the target audience's needs and continuously monitoring and adjusting strategies to ensure optimal results.

In the future, research should focus on surveying NPO members and analyzing the results to ensure accuracy. It should also delve into the influence of audience characteristics such as gender, age, loneliness, and extroversion, and explore these factors further.

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