

How Volunteer Commitment Differs in Online and Offline Environments

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Abstract

The contemporary media environment transforms the organization-volunteer relationship by attenuating the formation of organizational belonging, often thought to be the result of direct interactions and face-to-face meetings. We examine and compare factors that influence offline and online volunteering. We investigate the ties for communicating about volunteering that bind individuals to nonprofit organizations (NPOs) and the ways that multiple levels of identification influence volunteer commitment to these NPOs. Using structural equation modeling, the results from an online survey of 816 volunteers suggest that online volunteers, unlike offline volunteers, are not motivated to volunteer more by exclusive relationships with organizational members or their volunteer identity. Their volunteering is related to their communication ties with both members and nonmembers and their identification with both the organization and the social issue. We discuss implications regarding how the changed dynamics in online volunteering complicates the traditional organization-volunteer relationship.

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Online volunteering has been increasing in the nonprofit sector and has recently gained more attention as the traditional form of offline volunteering has been threatened by the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic (Lachance, 2020). The prevalence of online volunteering (e.g., conducting online mentoring and tutoring, preparing tax returns, translating, updating an NPO's website, or offering legal support; Amichai-Hamburger, 2008; Cox et al., 2018; Ihm, 2017) has implications for organizational communication research and NPOs. Theoretically, it represents the transformed relationships between organizations and individuals. Because online volunteering provides limited opportunities for natural interactions compared to offline volunteering (Gasiorek & Giles, 2013; Ihm, 2017), such volunteering may attenuate the formation of organizational belonging, often thought to result from direct interactions and face-to-face meetings (Wiesenfeld et al., 1999).

Practically, such transformed relationships may lower the sense of organizational commitment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Scott et al., 1999) and challenge NPOs. Indeed, in the United States, the rate of volunteering declined from 28.8% in 2005 to 24.9% in 2016 (Grimm & Dietz, 2019). Specifically, two measures of organizational commitment (the total time spent in volunteering and organizational allegiance, or volunteering exclusively for a single organization) decreased. Both types of commitment behaviors are essential for NPOs because experienced volunteers are a resource. Engagement often leads to other kinds of support for the focal NPO, such as donations or offline participation (Guo & Saxton, 2018).

This article investigates and compares mechanisms leading to online and offline volunteering by examining two types of organizational commitment behaviors: (1) the total time spent volunteering and (2) organizational allegiance. Drawing from social identity theory (SIT), we use structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine both the communication ties that bind volunteers to NPOs and the ways multiple levels of identification can influence volunteers' commitment to these NPOs.

This article contributes to communication research and the nonprofit sector in three ways. First, it extends communication research by capturing and explaining the transformed organizational role and organization-volunteer relationships in the contemporary media environment. Second, this study enriches communication research by developing a comprehensive identity model, reifying the concepts of multiple targets of identities, and revealing

identities' different relationships to offline and online engagement behaviors. Finally, this study provides practical implications for motivating online volunteering.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) in Online and Offline Volunteering

SIT explains that individuals define themselves by identifying with social categories (e.g., gender, nationality, and political affiliations; [Tajfel, 1978](#); [Turner & Onorato, 1999](#)). Individuals place themselves in relevant categories by accentuating their similarities to members within the same category and their distinctiveness from individuals in other categories.

We derived organizational identification from SIT ([Ashforth & Mael, 1989](#)). Organizational identification refers to the extent to which individuals perceive the focal organization as self-defining and the extent to which individuals identify with the organization's objective and values ([Ashforth & Mael, 1989](#); [Bednar et al., 2020](#); [Scott, 1997](#)). Organizational identification has been identified as a major predictor of organizational commitment behaviors. For instance, individuals who identify with an organization are less likely to leave that organization and more likely to invest time in the organization ([Ashforth & Mael, 1989](#); [Scott et al., 1999](#)).

In traditional organizational settings such as offline volunteering, volunteers receive messages about the organization through face-to-face communication ([Gasiorek & Giles, 2013](#); [Ihm, 2017](#)). Messages include shared organizational language, knowledge, and tasks ([Wiesenfeld et al., 1999](#)). Organizations can rely upon such explicit and concrete cues to serve as the basis for volunteers' identification with the organizations ([Hogg & Reid, 2006](#); [Kuhn & Nelson, 2002](#)), leading to more organizational commitment ([Ashforth & Mael, 1989](#); [Scott et al., 1999](#)).

In online volunteering, the organizational cues resulting from colocation are limited, diminishing opportunities for developing a strong sense of identification with the NPO. Also, many types of online volunteering are based on individual tasks and lack opportunities for communication (e.g., preparing tax returns, translating, or offering legal support; [Amichai-Hamburger, 2008](#)). Online volunteers communicate online, specifically for official meetings. However, such communication require deliberative planning ([Murray & Harrison, 2005](#)) and limit natural communication opportunities (e.g., sharing relational or informational support when coming across one another in a hallway, [Irving et al., 2020](#); [Monge et al., 1985](#)).

Considering the limited opportunities for organizational identification in online volunteering, we first investigate how varied types of identities besides organizational identification may catalyze organizational commitment behaviors. Second, given the limited face-to-face communication among

volunteers in online volunteering, we extend past research traditionally focused on communication among members to nonmembers. Finally, we present a model proposing that more robust communication ties lead to a volunteer identity that influences organizational commitment behaviors. In the remainder of this review, we describe each element of the proposed model. (Figure 1)

Three Types of Identity for Volunteers

SIT suggests that identity is not a single unified construct, but a constellation of personal conceptions individuals have about themselves. Likewise,

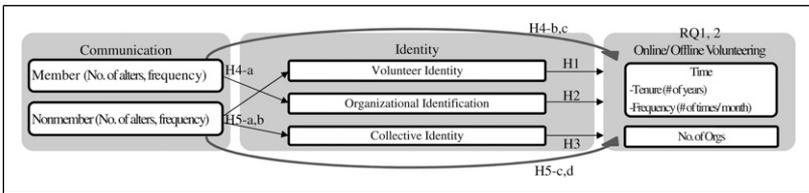


Figure 1. Model of communication and identity in online and offline volunteering.

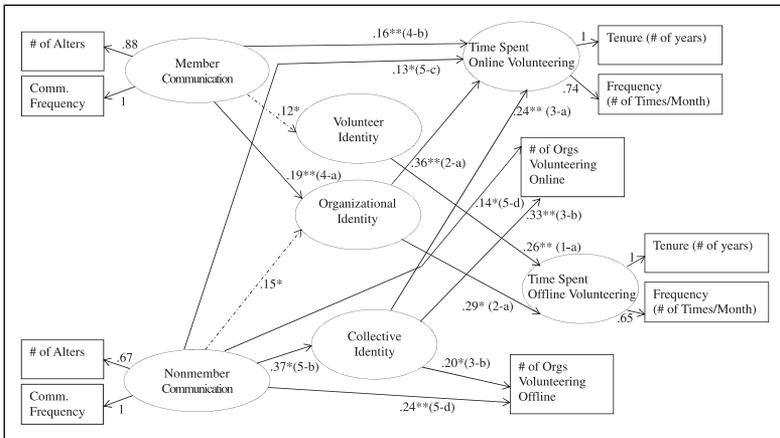


Figure 2. Structural equation modeling of communication and identity in online and offline volunteering. Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. To avoid overcrowding the figure, only significant paths as well as covariances among exogenous variables and endogenous variables have been omitted. Standardized coefficients are reported. The hypotheses numbers are indicated in parentheses. Paths modified from the hypothesized model based on the modification index of the LaGrange multiplier test are indicated in dotted lines.

individuals possess multiple identities. Previous research has explained that “various rules and resources available to an agent get regionalized” (Scott et al., 1998, p. 313) into multiple identities or multiple identities are “nested” within each other in organizational settings (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001). Other scholars have distinguished identities into different levels or hierarchies, such as organizational, professional, and workgroup identities (Lammers et al., 2013) or music, family, and community organization identities (Kramer et al., 2013; Meisenbach & Kramer, 2014).

The centrality of an identity to the person and the situational relevance makes it more salient (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001), higher in the hierarchy (Kramer et al., 2013; Meisenbach & Kramer, 2014), or larger-sized (Scott et al., 1998). More salient identities have a more significant impact on a person’s behaviors (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001).

Volunteers also possess multiple identities, and more salient identities have more influence on their volunteer behaviors. While online volunteering may provide limited organizational identification opportunities, other types of identities out of multiple identities may influence volunteer commitment behaviors. Indeed, three strains of scholarship separately explain the three types of identities relevant to volunteering: volunteer, organizational, and collective identity. This study introduces each of them and investigates how they may influence offline and online volunteering differently.

Volunteer Identity

In SIT, personal identity refers to a category of defining an individual as a unique person focusing on the person’s traits and attributes (e.g., attitudes, values, and goals) in contrast to other individuals (Turner & Onorato, 1999). Most relevant to this research, an individual may define themselves as unique because of their role as a volunteer, their moral traits, or their values toward volunteering (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Finkelstein, 2008; Grube & Piliavin, 2000; Hart et al., 1998). We define volunteer identity as the salience of a person’s volunteer role, the values of volunteering (Finkelstein, 2008; Grube & Piliavin, 2000), and the moral traits associated with volunteering (Hart et al., 1998; Wilhelm & Bekkers, 2010) incorporated into the self-concept (van Ingen & Wilson, 2017).

Studies on volunteering have found that individuals’ degree of identification with their volunteer identity predicts the amount of volunteering they do (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Finkelstein, 2008; Grube & Piliavin, 2000; Hart et al., 1998) and their volunteer tenure (Penner, 2002). Scholars have attributed this positive association to individuals’ motivation to maintain a consistent identity by engaging in behaviors consistent with the norms of their identity. Grube and Piliavin (2000) also observed that volunteers who identify strongly as a general volunteer, instead of as a volunteer in a specific NPO, are

more likely to lack focus and volunteer for multiple organizations rather than a particular NPO. They explained that volunteer identity encourages volunteers to take advantage of any opportunity to participate in any NPO as long as they can actualize their identity; which NPOs they volunteer for does not matter. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1: Volunteer identity is positively related to (a) the amount of time spent volunteering and (b) the number of organizations for which a person volunteers.

Organizational Identification

As mentioned above, organizational identification refers to the perception of the focal organization as self-defining and oneness with the organization's objective and values (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Bednar et al., 2020; Scott, 1997). For instance, volunteers can identify themselves with the focal NPO, such as volunteers for the Red Cross; they perceive that volunteering for the Red Cross, as well as its objectives and values, define them. We define organizational identification as the salience of the volunteer's identification with a specific NPO. This concept differs from volunteer identity because it focuses on volunteers' oneness with the focal NPO and its organizational values. In contrast, volunteer identity focuses on volunteers' oneness with their role as volunteers and values related to volunteering (e.g., morality).

Previous research suggests that individuals who identify with an organization are less likely to leave that organization and more likely to invest time in the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Scott et al., 1999). While these studies mostly dealt with organizational employees, volunteers may also identify strongly with focal NPOs (e.g., Kramer et al., 2013), specifically because volunteers choose and join NPOs based on organizational objectives and values more than employees in corporations (Ihm & Baek, 2021). Indeed, previous research has found that volunteers who strongly identify with an NPO also work more hours for the NPO and fewer hours for other NPOs (Grube & Piliavin, 2000). They are also less likely to leave the NPO than volunteers with lower levels of organizational identification. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H2: Organizational identification is (a) positively related to the amount of time spent volunteering and (b) negatively related to the number of organizations for which a person volunteers.

Collective Identity

Polletta and Jasper (2001) described a person who presents "cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community" as exhibiting

membership in a collective identity (p. 285). Individuals identify themselves as active promoters of a social issue when they share feelings of injustice, perceive apparent opponents, and demonstrate their opposition on a collective level (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). For instance, individuals can identify themselves with social causes, such as feminists actively promoting women's issues, because they perceive that the focal issue is an important part of themselves and that the focal issue defines who they are (Kelly & Breinlinger, 1995). While these studies have discussed collective identity in the context of social movements, the concept of collective identity explains individuals' identification with a social issue beyond self-interest (personal identity) or organizational boundaries (organizational identification). Applying this to the volunteering context, we define collective identity as the volunteer's salient perception of the focal social issue as self-defining. Unlike organizational identification, collective identity crosses organizational boundaries and is more concerned with social issues in the broader community than in specific organizations (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). Unlike volunteer identity, collective identity's primary focus is not on moral traits or the individual's role as a volunteer (Wilhelm & Bekkers, 2010), but on their view of themselves tied to advocating for a social cause.

Individuals with higher collective identity are more conscious of belonging to the same community. They regard the community's social values as more important than the cost of social engagement (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). As a result, they are more likely to participate in activities for a social cause to accomplish the collective objectives (Klandermans, 2014). Further, because individuals with high collective identity focus on a specific issue for the collective rather than a particular organization (Simon & Klandermans, 2001), they may engage in multiple organizations to promote social values beyond an organizational boundary. Applying prior research to the volunteering context, we hypothesize:

H3: Collective identity is positively related to (a) the amount of time spent volunteering and (b) the number of organizations for which a person volunteers.

While the three strains of scholarship reviewed here suggest relationships between the three types of identities and volunteering, each identity may have a different role in the offline and online environments. For instance, research on the positive correlation between volunteer identity and commitment behaviors is in the offline context, which often involves directly helping the recipients (Finkelstein, 2008; Grube & Piliavin, 2000). Volunteer identity involves oneness with moral values, such as caring and compassion (Aquino & Reed, 2002), so individuals may more easily perceive consistency between their volunteer identity and physically helping the recipients than in online

volunteering. Individuals with high organizational identification or collective identity may prefer to be exposed to tangible cues related to the focal organization or social issue with which they highly identify. In another way, the online domain provides more opportunities and reduces the cost of reaching out to a wide range of individuals (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Priante et al., 2018), so individuals with higher organizational identification or collective identity may choose to go online instead of offline. Considering different or confounding mechanisms in online and offline volunteering, we ask:

RQ1: How are volunteer, organizational, and collective identities differently related to offline and online volunteering?

Communication in Volunteering

SIT suggests that communication among members is an important predictor in categorizing those members into relevant social group and influencing their identification with the relevant category (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Specifically, organizational identification research explains that communication makes particular aspects of an individual's identity more salient (Scott et al., 1998). For instance, a person is most likely to identify as a team member during interactions with other team members. Still, the same person is most likely to identify as a member of the company during interactions with several teams in company meetings.

The context of online volunteering challenges many assumptions in organizational communication. Like that of Scott et al. (1998), most research assumes that members will communicate with internal members more often than nonmembers about their association with the organization. However, online volunteering provides limited opportunities to communicate with other members (Ihm, 2017). While traditional volunteering assumes communication about volunteering with internal members of the organizations (members, hereafter), online volunteers may lack opportunities to meet other members and may turn to their ties external to the organization (nonmembers, hereafter) to communicate about volunteering.

These two types of communication (with members and nonmembers) may make different types of volunteer identity more or less salient. For example, interactions with members in the organization may enhance organizational identification more than volunteer or collective identity. In contrast, interactions with nonmembers may enhance volunteer or collective identity more than organizational identification. Previous research has rarely discussed identities across different types and does not explain how and why individuals identify with a particular identity in this situation (Ashforth, 2016). We define member and nonmember communication as communication about volunteering with internal organizational members and general alters, respectively.

We investigate how characteristics of member and nonmember communication are related to varying identity types and volunteering.

Member Communication

Communication with an organization's members is crucial for maintaining and (re)constructing organizational identification (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Kuhn & Nelson, 2002). Specifically, when members have multiple identification targets, their communication influences which identity they identify with more. For instance, Kuhn and Nelson (2002) found that those who interacted within their divisions concentrated on the specific identities pertinent to their interaction scope, whereas those who communicated across divisions distributed their identities equally to four identities (i.e., workgroup, division, organization, and profession).

In their study on a community choir, Kramer et al. (2013) found that more communication inside the choir increased the certainty of the volunteers' role in the organization and strengthened the volunteers' identification with the choir. Similarly, volunteers of the same NPO may communicate about volunteer experiences or issues that concern the organization, enhancing the salience of their organizational identification (Kramer, 2005). Therefore, we hypothesize:

H4(a): The number of communication alters and the frequency of member communication is positively related to the salience of their organizational identification.

Member communication may influence volunteering directly. Farrow and Yuan (2011) explained that frequent interactions among university alumni strengthen their connection with the university by providing repeated exposure to organizational issues and reinforcing their university volunteering. In the same manner, frequent communication among members may keep individuals connected to the focal NPO and increase their volunteering for the NPO. Other studies suggest that more extensive communication diversifies the resources and information useful to focus on volunteering for the focal organization. More extensive communication provides better explanations about tasks, upcoming meetings, and appropriate practices in the focal organization (Gasiorek & Giles, 2013; Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011; Walden et al., 2017). Therefore, we hypothesize:

H4: The number of communication alters and the frequency of member communication is (b) positively related to the amount of time spent volunteering and (c) negatively related to the number of organizations for which a person volunteers.

Nonmember Communication

Nonmember communication may influence the salience of a person's volunteer and collective identities. First, volunteer research has indirectly addressed the connection between nonmember communication and an individual's volunteer identity. For example, [Deaux et al. \(1999\)](#) found that if members of volunteers' social networks appreciate volunteering, they are more likely to identify with their volunteer identity. [Amichai-Hamburger \(2008\)](#) suggested that nonmember communication with higher frequency and a greater number of communication partners may provide more opportunities for perceiving how others think about volunteering, revealing oneself as a volunteer, and refocusing on volunteering values. Self-disclosure as a volunteer during communication with nonmembers accompanies salient self-awareness and self-perception of one's volunteer role ([Tajfel, 1978](#)). Specifically, because morality and volunteering are socially favorable values, individuals may refocus easily on them for self-enhancement purposes when communicating with general others ([Turner & Onorato, 1999](#)) and become more likely to identify with them.

Second, nonmember communication may act as an integral component of collective identity. As individuals communicate about their grievances, concerns, and anger related to a social issue with others, they strengthen their connection to and identification with the issue ([Simon & Klandermans, 2001](#)). For example, active communication about social issues in social media develops participants' identities related to the problems ([Bennett & Segerberg, 2012](#); [Priante et al., 2018](#)). Similarly, if volunteers communicate with nonmembers about the focal issue of their volunteering, their collective identity is likely to increase. As such, we hypothesize:

H5: The number of alters and the frequency of nonmember communication is positively related to the salience of their (a) volunteer identity and (b) collective identity.

Nonmember communication may also encourage individuals to stay engaged in volunteering. More extensive nonmember communication represents a more stable and supportive community for volunteering ([Ackermann & Manatschal, 2018](#); [Wilson, 2000](#)), and more frequent communication provides greater exposure to volunteering issues ([Shah et al., 2005](#)). Such communication may support individuals' connection to volunteering opportunities ([Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011](#)). In this way, individuals may have greater chances to participate in various NPOs and increase their time spent volunteering. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H5: The number of alters and the frequency of nonmember communication is positively related to (c) the amount of time spent

volunteering and (d) the number of organizations for which a person volunteers.

While member and nonmember communication suggest different relationships to each type of identity, the role of communication may also differ between online and offline volunteering. Online volunteers are not colocated with other volunteers or staff, so they have limited opportunities to communicate with other members about volunteer roles, language, and tasks, which contribute to their socialization process and facilitate their volunteer experiences (McPhee & Zaug, 2001). Online volunteers also lack opportunities of member communication about volunteer values and issues which keep them engaged in volunteering (Farrow & Yuan, 2011). Nonmember communication may make up for such limited member communication opportunities. However, whether and how the two types of communication complement or substitute for each other in volunteering requires further investigation. Therefore, we ask:

RQ2: How are member and nonmember communication related to offline and online volunteering differently?

Methods

Pilot Studies

We conducted two pilot studies before the actual survey. The first pilot study involved in-depth interviews with volunteers. For this study, we posted recruitment flyers around a Midwestern university and sampled student participants who “had given time to good causes in the previous 3 months” and participants external to the university by snowball sampling (Female: $n = 23$, Male: $n = 8$, Age: $M = 35.36$, $SD = 13.52$). During the unstructured, in-depth interviews, the 31 interviewees described all of their offline and online activities in which they had given time for good causes in the previous 3 months. The purpose of the interviews was to capture words that online volunteers used to describe their volunteer activities. We used their words in the survey to improve the content validity of the questions. The survey included four types of offline activities and five types of online activities.

The second pilot study followed 2 months later. We recruited 28 participants from a research participant pool of undergraduate students at a Midwestern university. The students received an extra point on their final grades for signing up for the study. We used the same survey questions we planned to use in the actual study to pretest the survey. In particular, we confirmed that respondents understood online volunteering as described and verified the appropriate number of names for the name generator questions in the study

context. The maximum number of names provided was 10 in the pilot study, so we provided 10 blanks in the actual survey without designating the number of alters (e.g., [Campbell & Lee, 1991](#)). Because the survey generally took no more than 15 minutes, we did not modify the number and content of survey questions.

Participants

We obtained a sample from a Qualtrics online panel. In June 2015, online survey links generated by the research company Qualtrics were distributed to 17,635 individuals. Among the 8286 individuals who clicked the survey link, 1836 individuals were screened out of the survey for 1) being under 18 ($n = 70$) or 2) not having participated in offline or online volunteering ($n = 1766$). In order to examine whether individuals had participated in offline or online volunteering, the survey first asked individuals to indicate every offline and online activity in which they had participated among four offline categories and five online categories developed in the first pilot study. The offline categories were: (1) volunteering; (2) advocacy; (3) protests/demonstrations; and (4) promoting social issue(s). The online categories were: (1) online volunteering (i.e., performing volunteering tasks for NPOs for a good cause via the internet); (2) signing or initiating an online petition; (3) commenting on or creating a post in an online forum or social networking site about a good cause; (4) encouraging others online to support a good cause; and (5) sharing or forwarding information about a good cause with others online. The 6450 effective target population answered “yes” to the qualifying question that they had engaged in offline or online volunteering (i.e., #1).

Among the 6450 effective target population, 827 individuals completed the survey. We compensated participants \$5 for this 15-minute survey, a comparable compensation fee for samples from research firms ([Sheehan, 2018](#)). Based on the formula for online opt-in panels, the completion rate was 12.65%, which is within the acceptable range for online surveys’ response rate ([Sauermann & Roach, 2013](#)). For data quality, we included nine reverse-worded questions and three “trap questions” (e.g., ‘If you are reading this item, please check “strongly agree,”’ [Sheehan, 2018](#)). 11 responses were deleted from the analysis because of invalid or low-quality responses (e.g., missing data, failed attention check, and finishing the survey in less than half of the median time), leaving 816 valid responses. On average, the participants were 41 years old and earned \$52,200 per year; 61% were females, and 55% had at least an undergraduate degree. Respondents reported the following ethnicities: 77% were Caucasian, 10% were African American, 6% were Hispanic, and 5% were Asian.

Measures

Volunteering. The survey measured two aspects of offline and online volunteering: the amount of time spent volunteering and the number of volunteer organizations. To count the *number of volunteer organizations*, the survey first asked participants to list the name of every organization for which they had volunteered in the previous 3 months in the offline and online environments, respectively. For every organization mentioned, participants indicated the *frequency* (times/month) and the *tenure* (years) they had committed to offline and online volunteering, respectively. We combined frequency and tenure into two latent variables: *the amount of time spent offline volunteering* and *the amount of time spent online volunteering*. (Table 1)

Identity. The survey asked participants about their volunteer, organizational, and collective identities (see [Supplementary Appendix A](#) for full measures). We combined 5-point Likert scales of moral identity ([Aquino & Reed, 2002](#)) and volunteer role identity ([Grube & Piliavin, 2000](#)), (which previous research has shown correlates with the degree of offline volunteering) in our measure of volunteer identity ($\alpha = .76$). The moral identity measure examines the degree to which respondents internalize and symbolize moral characteristics, such as caring, compassion, and fairness (e.g., “I strongly desire to have these characteristics” or “Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am”). The volunteer role identity measure captures the importance of the volunteer role and volunteering values in defining the respondent’s self (e.g., “I would feel a loss if I were forced to give up volunteering” or “Volunteering is an important part of who I am”).

For organizational identification, participants first indicated the primary organization for which they had volunteered (hereafter “Organization A”) among all of the organizations they listed. The survey then adapted and combined 5-point Likert scales from previous research ([Brown et al., 1986](#); [Grube & Piliavin, 2000](#)). The measure included identification with the primary organization (e.g., “I feel strong ties with” or “I see myself as belonging to” Organization A) and volunteer role identity with that organization (e.g., “I would feel a loss if I were forced to give up volunteering for Organization A”) ($\alpha = .87$).

To measure collective identity, participants identified the primary social issue relevant to their volunteering among seven categories of social issues (i.e., humanitarian, artistic, health care, social service, educational, environmental, religious, and others; [Isham et al., 2006](#)). The survey adapted the language used to measure organizational identification ([Brown et al., 1986](#); [Grube & Piliavin, 2000](#)) by changing the term “organization” to the identified social issue (e.g., “Volunteering for Issue A is an important part of who I am”; $\alpha = .87$). These scales for each type of identity were combined into three latent variables of *volunteer identity*, *organizational identification*, and *collective identity*, using factor scores.

Table I. Descriptive Statistics and Pairwise Correlations of Key Variables.

	M	SD	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)
Identity	4.06	.49	–												
(1) Volunteer	4.41	.56	.37**	–											
(2) Org	4.34	.56	.34**	.30**	–										
(3) Collective	1.98	1.32	.18**	.18**	.17**	–									
(4) No. of alters	1.54	1.20	.07	.02	.04	.45*	–								
(5) Frequency	1.98	1.50	.07	.10*	.15**	.01	.00	–							
(6) No. of alters	1.60	1.43	.10	.03	.04	.22**	.37**	.36**	–						
(7) Frequency	1.45	.93	.12*	.10	.13*	.09*	.30**	.09*	.17*	–					
(8) No. of orgs	7.63	8.19	.16*	.10	.14*	.04	.24*	.04	.01	.40*	–				
(9) Frequency	5.44	8.70	.05	.13*	.16**	.04	.26*	.04	.16*	.42*	.15*	–			
(10) Tenure	1.84	1.09	.10*	.13*	.12**	.22**	.07	.16**	.03	.26*	.13*	.25**	–		
(11) No. of orgs	6.21	9.37	.13*	.19**	.15**	.18**	.09*	.12*	.04	.13*	.00	.16*	.55*	–	
(12) Frequency	4.33	8.92	.19*	.20**	.29**	.18**	.15**	.20**	.08	.24*	.13*	.10*	.64**	.39**	–
(13) Tenure															

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

For illustrative purposes, the mean and standard deviation of the variables were in the average form instead of the factor score form.

Communication. The survey applied a name generator approach to evaluate member and nonmember communication. We amended the General Social Survey name generator question (Marsden, 1987) to account for the context of this study: “discuss” was changed to “communicate with,” and “important matters” was changed to “volunteering.” After the participants listed up to 10 communication partners from the same organization (“Organization A”) and general others, respectively, they indicated how often (1 = yearly to 5 = daily) they had communicated with each of these individuals. We combined the number of communication partners and the frequency of communication into two latent variables depending on whether the partners were affiliated with the same organization (i.e., *member communication*) or not (i.e., *nonmember communication*, see [Supplementary Appendix B](#) for explanations about these latent variables).

Analysis

We modeled *member communication*, *nonmember communication*, *volunteer identity*, *organizational identification*, *collective identity*, *time spent offline volunteering*, and *time spent online volunteering* as latent variables. Considering the effect of sociodemographic variables on volunteering (Wilson, 2000), this study controlled four variables (gender, age, income, and education). We also controlled for the type of primary social issue that volunteers focused on, with “social service” as the baseline category.

We employed the Stata 14 software (StataCorp, 2015) with maximum likelihood estimates (see [Supplementary Appendix C](#) for more about this method). Variables were normally distributed, except for member and nonmember communication size. We transformed the two variables using the natural logarithm as in previous research (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011). The Variance Inflation Factor of every variable was lower than 2.5, indicating no multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2010).

The Stata 14 software provides a modification index for each possible parameter that was not specified in the original theoretical model. A large modification index indicates that the model fit is likely to improve when that path is added to the model (Holbert & Stephenson, 2002). Modification indices are usually employed in conjunction with theory to determine whether the addition of any paths to the model is theoretically defensible (Kline, 2016). Following the recommended procedures (Holbert & Stephenson, 2002; Kline, 2016), we modified the model until it achieved strong indicators of goodness of fit: ratio of Chi-Square χ^2 to degree of freedom less than 5, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) value less than .07, a Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) greater than .95, a comparative fit index (CFI) greater than .95 (Hooper et al., 2008). The *p* values were significant in every model. However, the χ^2 value is sensitive to large sample sizes, so we used other fit indices to decide

the overall fit of the model as suggested by previous research (Hooper et al., 2008).

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Current Characteristics of Volunteering

The results capture the current trends of volunteering. First, many volunteers had committed “fewer than 6 months” to offline (17%) or online (31%) volunteering, which seems to reflect episodic volunteering (Lewis, 2013). Second, participants volunteered for more than one organization on average (offline: $M = 1.45$, $SD = .93$; online: $M = 1.84$, $SD = 1.09$). Both results are consistent with previous research on volunteering trends.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

Following the recommended procedure (Kline, 2016), we tested the fit of a measurement model of identities first before testing the structural model’s fit. The measurement model indicated a less-than-adequate fit: $\chi^2 (135) = 1839.67$, $RMSEA = .08$, $TLI = .78$, and $CFI = .83$. We removed items with factor loadings lower than .45 from the measurement model (Tabachnick et al., 2007). A low loading indicates that the item is a poor measurement of the latent variable. After we deleted three items for volunteer identity and four items for organizational and collective identities, the measurement model fit improved significantly: $\chi^2 (131) = 421.26$, $RMSEA = .05$, $TLI = .95$, and $CFI = .96$ (see [Supplementary Appendix D](#) for final items measuring the three types of identities).

Next, we added structural links among variables to create a full structural model and test hypotheses. We modeled member communication, nonmember communication, volunteer identity, organizational identification, collective identity, time spent offline volunteering, and time spent online volunteering as latent variables, using the above measurement model. The baseline, hypothesized model did not show a good fit: $\chi^2 (43) = 1399.70$, $RMSEA = .10$, $TLI = .94$, and $CFI = .96$.

The modification index of the LaGrange multiplier test provided by the Stata 14 software indicated the potential for model improvement. Therefore, we modified the baseline, hypothesized model. Based on the sizes of modification indices, we added two paths with the largest modification index in conjunction with a theoretical rationale: (1) member communication and volunteer identity, and (2) nonmember communication and organizational identification. Communicating with internal members may include many cues related to volunteering activity and identity (Kramer et al., 2013). Additionally, Tajfel (1978) suggested that communicating with nonmembers may

enhance organizational identification because it provides opportunities to contrast their organizational values with other values. These conversations can enhance the distinctiveness of their organization's values in comparison to those of other organizations. For instance, promoting their organization to nonmembers or confronting opponents who disagree with their organizational values may increase organizational identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). After the two paths were added, the model showed a good fit: $\chi^2(41) = 128.30$, RMSEA = .05, TLI = .96, and CFI = .98. Thus, we decided to use this model as the final structural model to examine the statistical significance of the variables' relationships (Figure 2).

Because in SEM multiple models may fit the data equally well, we also tested alternative models to ensure that this model fits the data best (Kline, 2016). We reversed all the causal orders between identity and communication in the first alternative model, examining whether higher identity leads to more volunteering, indirectly via communication. The model did not converge. In the second alternative model, we reversed the whole model's causal order, examining whether greater volunteering leads to higher identity, and thus more communication. The model showed a poor fit: $\chi^2(35) = 401.10$, RMSEA = .17, TLI = .52, and CFI = .72. In the third alternative model, we reversed causal orders to examine whether greater volunteering leads to more communication and higher identity. The model did not converge. The results from these alternative models provided us with confidence in the final model (see [Supplementary Appendix E](#) for a summary of fit indicators of every model).

H1, H2, and H3 examined relationships between identities and volunteering. Volunteer identity was positively related to the amount of time spent offline volunteering ($\beta = .26, p < .01$), not online volunteering. Organizational identification was positively related to the amount of time spent both offline ($\beta = .29, p < .05$) and online volunteering ($\beta = .36, p < .01$). Collective identity was positively related to the amount of time spent online volunteering ($\beta = .24, p < .01$), as well as the number of volunteering organizations both offline ($\beta = .20, p < .05$) and online ($\beta = .33, p < .01$). Thus, H1a and H3a were partially supported. H2a and H3b were fully supported. H1b and H2b were not supported.

H4 examined relationships between member communication and (a) organizational identification and (b, c) volunteering. Member communication was positively related to organizational identification ($\beta = .19, p < .01$) as well as volunteer identity ($\beta = .12, p < .05$). Member communication was also positively related to the amount of time spent online volunteering ($\beta = .16, p < .01$). Therefore, H4a was supported. H4b was partially supported. H4c was not supported.

H5 examined relationships between nonmember communication and (a) volunteer identity, (b) collective identity and (c, d) volunteering. Nonmember communication was positively related to organizational ($\beta = .15, p < .05$) and collective identity ($\beta = .37, p < .05$). Nonmember communication was also

positively related to both the amount of time spent online volunteering ($\beta = .13, p < .05$) and the number of organizations for which a person volunteered both offline ($\beta = .14, p < .05$) and online ($\beta = .24, p < .01$). Therefore, H5a was not supported. H5c was partially supported. H5b, and H5d were supported.

Discussion

This study examined how communication and identity are related to the total time spent and organizational allegiance in offline and online volunteering. The results suggest different mechanisms in these environments. There was a small, but significant, positive relationship between volunteer identity and the amount of time spent offline volunteering ($\beta = .26, p < .01$), corresponding with previous research (Grube & Piliavin, 2000; Wilhelm & Bekkers, 2010). However, volunteer identity was not related to the amount of time spent volunteering online. Individuals with strong volunteer identity can fulfill self-enhancement motivations (Tajfel, 1978; Turner & Onorato, 1999) by engaging in various online behaviors that are not online volunteering (e.g., signing online petitions or sharing information about a social issue¹). These opportunities may diminish the relationship between online volunteering and volunteer identity.

Organizational identification was positively related to the amount of time spent volunteering offline and online, although the relationship with offline volunteering was weak ($\beta = .29, p < .05$). This relationship corresponds with previous research on organizational identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Scott et al., 1999). Regardless of the transformed organization-individual relationships in the online environment, there is a positive correlation between organizational identification and commitment behaviors to the organization, as evidenced by time spent. However, organizational identification was not positively related to volunteering exclusively for a focal organization. Volunteers now have many ways to participate in multiple organizations, specifically in the online environment, so even strong identification with a specific organization may not necessarily enhance the focus on that organization.

There was a weak, yet positive, connection from collective identity to time spent online volunteering ($\beta = .24, p < .01$), but not to time spent offline volunteering; volunteers enact their collective identity through their online activities but not offline ones. Collective identity was also the only significant variable among identities positively associated with the number of both offline and online volunteering organizations. This result suggests that while the online environment may attenuate the formation of organizational belonging (Wiesenfeld et al., 1999), it may provide opportunities for both volunteers and organizations to promote their issues across organizational boundaries. Indeed, there was a high correlation between volunteer hours and the number of volunteering organizations online ($r = .55$). This result reflects the current

phenomenon of individuals' active use of online and social media for collective action without a strong affiliation with a specific organization (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Priante et al., 2018). However, no relationship between collective identity and the time spent offline volunteering also indicates the challenges of extending the online engagement to the offline environment.

Communication was positively related to the salience of identities. As hypothesized, there was a positive relationship between member communication and volunteers' identification with the organization (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Kramer, 2005; Kramer et al., 2013). Nonmember communication was also positively related to organizational identification; communicating with nonmembers may provide opportunities for volunteers to perceive and appreciate their organizational values compared to those of other organizations and enhance their identification with their organizations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These results suggest that communication with either members or nonmembers may compensate for the limited opportunities for interaction that characterize much of online volunteering and contribute to the sense of organizational belonging.

There was a weak, yet positive, connection from member communication to volunteer identity ($\beta = .12, p < .05$), but not to collective identity, whereas there was a stronger, positive connection from nonmember communication to collective identity ($\beta = .37, p < .01$), but not to volunteer identity. This contrast suggests that the role of the two types of communication may differ. Member communication may include volunteer experiences or issues related to the organization (Kramer, 2005), which contribute to the certainty of volunteers' role in the organization (Kramer et al., 2013) and consequently enhances both volunteer identity and organizational identification. On the other hand, as prior research suggests (Simon & Klandermans, 2001), volunteers seem to share grievances, concerns, and anger related to a social issue with others outside the organization, strengthening their connection to and identification with the social issue. Specifically, the relationship between nonmember communication and collective identity was much stronger than the relationship between member communication and volunteer identity. This result theoretically extends the previous focus on member communication in organizational communication research (Scott et al., 1998). It distinguishes the role of communication beyond the organizational boundary (e.g., its connection to collective identity) in volunteering. This result also provides the practical implication that while online volunteering may provide limited opportunities for natural interaction in comparison to offline volunteering, NPOs may encourage nonmember communication as a more effective way for individuals to relate to the focal issue.

Both member and nonmember communication were positively related to time spent online volunteering. The breadth and the frequency of interactions may provide the necessary social proof (Cialdini, 2009) of the value of

volunteers' efforts, catalyzing even more generous contributions. Additionally, more frequent interactions with a greater number of others about volunteering may act as a support environment for volunteering, providing an additional identity that reinforces their behavior.

However, neither type of communication was positively related to organizational allegiances. Instead, more frequent interactions with a broader set of nonmembers were positively related to the number of organizations for which people volunteered offline and online. More frequent communication with nonmembers may provide more information about volunteering opportunities. Such communication may denote a supportive community among individuals that is more important than any organization.

In summary, individuals engage in offline and online volunteering for different reasons. Offline, individuals have greater commitment behaviors when their volunteer identity and organizational identification are more salient. Online, people spend more time volunteering when they frequently communicate with others about volunteering, have high organizational identification, and identify with the social issue the NPO addresses. These results suggest that online volunteering complicates member-organization relations because online volunteering is, in part, based on factors outside of the organization's control.

These findings have important implications for understanding both online and offline volunteering. Collective action, including volunteering, was previously assumed to be more accessible when controlled by a focal organization (Olson, 1965). However, online volunteering provides limited opportunities for organizational identification and belonging, limiting the organization's role in organizing and mobilizing volunteers. As Bennett and Segerberg (2012) explained about the concept of connective action, individuals can identify with social issues beyond the organizational boundary and "do good" without an organizational intermediary in the online environment. The changed dynamics of identities in online volunteering extend the traditional understanding of participation behaviors from an outcome or enactment of organizational identification to a complex combination of multiple identities both within and beyond the organizational boundary. Which identities individuals personally want to emphasize and express may shape volunteer participatory spaces beyond the organization's management and control. This new beyond-intermediary affordance also creates significant challenges for organizations that rely on volunteers.

Our research suggests that individuals volunteer for organizations online when they identify with the organization or the social issues the organization seeks to address. Moreover, they are motivated to volunteer when they have partners with whom to communicate about online volunteering. However, the more time individuals contribute to organizations online, the more likely they are to contribute to several organizations. Thus, these "high-commitment"

volunteers have multiple identification sites which may fuel their volunteering and offer alternatives to any organization. All of these factors suggest that traditional organization-member relations are transformed in an online environment because the most socially engaged individuals have multiple allegiances or, worse, no allegiance to any organization at all.

Practical Implications

This study provides practical implications for motivating online and offline volunteering. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) pose challenges to NPOs, because they prevent volunteers from focusing on identification and volunteer participation within the organizational boundary. However, this challenge also means that ICTs provide opportunities for communication, identification, and volunteer participation across organizational boundary. In response to the challenges ICTs pose, NPOs can and should take advantage of ICTs. First, NPOs should use ICTs to encourage broad communication among members and nonmembers. They could engage in volunteer campaigns, providing talking points to share about their volunteering, and use social media as a platform for active interaction with members and nonmembers (Ihm, 2019). Second, NPOs should use ICTs to enhance different levels of identity for different purposes. NPOs could use ICTs to connect with volunteers to promote organizational values and mission and enhance organizational identification. When NPOs rely on offline volunteers, they should use ICTs to promote volunteer events that encourage member communication and the work's values, such as compassion or caring, that enhance volunteer identity. NPOs should take special care when communicating about the broader social issues to which their organization responds, because collective identity is positively related to online volunteering but negatively associated with organizational allegiance. NPOs that emphasize their role in the larger social issue space may spur active volunteers who serve several allied organizations. ICTs may facilitate this process for volunteers to participate in multiple organizations and for NPOs to collaborate with other NPOs and work with the volunteers together.

Conclusion

Limitations and Future Directions

This study examined offline and online volunteering from a new perspective by investigating different communication and varied types of identity. As with all research, it has several limitations. First, because it is cross-sectional, we cannot determine causality. Neither alternate models, which used reversed directions of causal relationships, produced a better-fitting model than the

result presented here. However, longitudinal studies are still needed to confirm this model's causality, specifically the relationships between communication and identity (McPhee & Corman, 1995). Second, we only studied individuals who had volunteered. Future studies may direct the same questions to non-volunteers to gain insight into how their communication and identities differ. Finally, the estimated paths of the SEM are not strong (beta coefficients ranging from .12 to .37), leading to relatively weak explanatory power of the model. This result may stem from 1) having Likert-scales and raw counts in the same model and (2) other influential factors in volunteering that this study did not investigate. This study examined the concept of identity based on 5-point Likert scales which measured how much participants subjectively identify themselves with each social category, whereas other variables were mostly based on raw counts (e.g., number of communication alters, number of years spent in volunteering, and number of volunteering organizations participated). Having Likert-scales and raw counts in the same model may have resulted in such low correlation coefficients. Indeed, a study (Farrow & Yuan, 2011) that measured the relationship between raw counts (i.e., number of university alumni groups active in social media) and Likert-scales items (i.e., degree of participation in varied forms of communication with other alumni and emotional closeness to alumni) found relatively low correlations (communication participation: $\beta = .17$; emotional closeness: $\beta = .06$). Further, future studies may investigate more influential factors other than identities leading to online and offline volunteering. For instance, other types of communication (e.g., direct communication between the organization and volunteers) and types of identity related to different motivations (e.g., career development or relationship maintenance; Clary et al., 1996), may contribute to a more robust model and reveal more diverse aspects of communication and volunteering.

Theoretical Contributions

This research makes two contributions to communication research. First, it extends communication research by capturing and explaining the transformed organizational role and member-organizational relations in the contemporary media environment. Building on studies describing the decline of organizational belonging (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Bimber et al., 2012), this study discloses the theoretical mechanism of organizational identification and commitment in the online environment. The significant role of communication in our findings sheds light on the autonomous social ties among volunteers when contrasted with the traditional organizational strategies for communication between an organization and individuals (Ihm, 2019). The strong relationship between organizational identification and online volunteering, on the other hand, suggests that the social bonds between organizations and individuals are still

important amid the decline of organizational trust and belonging in the current era. These findings provide directions for future research on different organizational mechanisms and member-organizational relations situated at the intersection between traditional organizational communication and the contemporary connective action (i.e., the decreased role of NPOs, [Bimber et al., 2012](#)).

Second, this study enriches communication research by developing a comprehensive identity model and revealing its different relationships to offline and online behaviors. Prior research on organizational communication mostly explained multiple identities in professional organizational settings (i.e., professional, organizational, and workgroup identities, [Kuhn & Nelson, 2002](#); [Lammers et al., 2013](#); [Scott et al., 1998](#)). Most research on volunteering has focused on personal or moral identity ([Finkelstein, 2008](#); [Grube & Piliavin, 2000](#); [Hart et al., 1998](#); [Wilhelm & Bekkers, 2010](#)). Extending previous research, this study captures different dynamics of three types of identities leading to offline and online volunteering and introduces a new theoretical framework to investigate offline and online participatory actions for future communication research.

The development of ICTs both provides opportunities and poses challenges to NPOs; it facilitates online volunteering, but changes how individuals become attached to organizations. In line with the increased individual autonomy and loose organizational intervention ([Bimber et al., 2012](#)), online volunteering allows individuals to form communication ties about volunteering that transcend organizational boundaries and encourages the most dedicated online volunteers to affiliate with a greater number of organizations.

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Note

1. The online volunteers also participated in other online activities: signing or initiating an online petition ($n = 581$); commenting on or creating a post in an online forum or social networking site about a good cause ($n = 399$); encouraging others online to support a good cause ($n = 476$); and sharing or forwarding information about a good cause with others online ($n = 518$).

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