Chapter 28
Prosocial Behaviors in the Cyber Context

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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 AND DEFINITION

Over a hundred million people use electronic technologies (e.g., cell phones, the internet) everyday (Smith, 2010). Through these technologies, there are many opportunities to receive help or to perform prosocial acts. Prosocial behaviors are defined as purposeful and voluntary acts directed toward other people or society as a whole and may include such behaviors as helping, sharing, donating, and volunteering (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987;

Oswalt & Gordon, 1993; Sibary, 2006). Prosocial behaviors in the cyber context can take various forms, including donating time and attention to electronic discussion boards or technical support groups (e.g., Butler, Sproull, Kiesler, & Kraut, 2007), helping among employees at the corporate level (e.g., Finholt & Sproull, 1990), voluntarily helping players in computer games (e.g., Wang & Wang, 2008), online mentoring (e.g., Bennett, Tsikalas, Hupert, Meade, & Honey, 1998), sharing open source software (e.g., Lakhani & Hip-

pel, 2003), virtual voluntarism (e.g., Sproull & Kiesler, 2005), and making charitable donations to organizations online (e.g., Bennett, 2006).

Prosocial behaviors in the cyber context have some noticeable characteristics that set it apart from the same type of behaviors in the nondigital environment. For example, search engines make it easier to find opportunities to help or receive help in the cyber context (Sproull, Conley, & Moon, 2005). Furthermore, it is easier to give or receive help online because one's physical appearance or personal attributes (i.e., age, gender, race) do not influence other's opinions of them (Boberg, Gustafon, Hawkins, Chan, Bricker, Pingree, & Peressini, 1995; Brennan, Moore, & Smyth, 1992). Additionally, individuals can use fake names or screen names, and hide their identities in the cyber context, which may also reduce the stigma behind asking for help (Brennan et al.,, 1992; Hassett, Lowder, & Rutan, 1992; Karabenick & Knapp, 1988). The cyber context offers more flexibility to the individuals wanting or giving help when compared to the nondigital environment, allowing individuals to give help or receive help even with restricted schedules (Hassett et al., 1992). There is also a high level of controllability over prosocial behaviors in the cyber context. Specifically, an individual in the nondigital environment may worry that giving help may result in requests for additional help (Constant, Sproull, & Kiesler, 1996; Sproull et al., 2005). However, the cyber context allows the giver to choose when they want to help and if they want to help again.

Although there are noticeable differences between prosocial behaviors in the cyber context and the nondigital environment, there are some similarities. The relationship between the giver and receiver of prosocial behaviors in either environment can include strangers (e.g., Constant et al., 1996), friends (e.g., Anderson-Butcher, Lasseigne, Ball, Brzozowski, Lehnert, & McCormick, 2010), and business colleagues (e.g., Finholt & Sproull, 1990). Furthermore, prosocial behaviors are rewarding for the givers in either

social context, just as they are supporting for the receivers (Alemi, Mosavel, Stephens, Ghadiri, Krishnaswamy, & Thakkar, 1996; Bennett et al., 1998; Brennan et al., 1992; Butler et al., 2007; Eichhorn, 2008; Winzelberg, 1997). Additionally, prosocial behaviors can occur through formal and informal organizational institutions in both social contexts (Lorig, Laurent, Deyo, Marnell, Minor, & Ritter, 2002; Wright & Li, 2011). Furthermore, in both social contexts, there is typically no expectation of direct reciprocity of prosocial behaviors (Kollock, 1999; Sproull et al., 2005).

This chapter draws on research from psychology, sociology, computer science, and marketing in order to review prosocial behaviors in the cyber context. The chapter includes five sections. Section one examines the intellectual history and current developments within the field. In the second section, various prosocial behaviors in the cyber contexts will be discussed, including helping through electronic groups, online mentoring, donating to online charities, virtual voluntarism, and helping in other electronic contexts (e.g., social networking sites). Section three provides theoretical explanations for why people act prosocially in the cyber context. The fourth section examines the benefits of online prosocial behaviors to both the giver and receiver. The last section presents suggestions for future research on prosocial behaviors in the cyber context.

BEGINNING AND CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

Prosocial behaviors through the internet occurred when the internet was just a message board. IBM's release of its coding source for their operating system as well as the SHARE user group (i.e., volunteer run association providing enterprise technology professionals with education and training) are both early examples of open source software systems (Fisher, McKie, & Macke, 1983; Akera, 2001). These systems guided the usage of

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