An Examination of Online Volunteers' Organizational and Work-Group Identification and Intent to Leave: A Case Study of OCEF

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AN EXAMINATION OF ONLINE VOLUNTEERS’ ORGANIZATIONAL AND WORK-GROUP IDENTIFICATION AND INTENT TO LEAVE: A CASE STUDY OF OCEF

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AN EXAMINATION OF ONLINE VOLUNTEERS' ORGANIZATIONAL AND WORK-GROUP IDENTIFICATION AND INTENT TO LEAVE: A CASE STUDY OF OCEF

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This study examined the relationships among organizational identification, work-group identification and intent to leave of online volunteers in a nonprofit organization—OCEF. A total of 245 participants completed the online questionnaire. Consonant with previous research findings, organizational identification and work-group identification has positive relationships; however, the hypothesis that both organizational identification and work-group identification negatively predict intent to leave of online volunteers was not supported in the present study. Furthermore, the level of organizational identification and work-group identification of online volunteers were high, but did not have difference in this study.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has brought significant changes to human life. One of the most interesting phenomena lies in how the Internet is being used to develop society. Individuals and organizations can operate projects online to close socioeconomic gaps and help others through the work of volunteers (Amichai-Hamburger, 2007). For example, the department of United Nations Volunteers provides specific online volunteering services and programs to connect organizations working for sustainable human development (Mukherjee, 2010). Given the increasing number of virtual organizations and online services being developed today, some researchers have been studying the role of employee identification in geographically dispersed organizations and online teams. Despite the increasing number of these studies, little attention has been paid to another type of organizational member: online volunteers, who can identify with their nonprofit organization in the virtual environment (Dohrman, 2009; Isbell, Pfiester, & McDonald, 2007; Schroer & Hertel, 2009).

The Internet provides opportunities for nonprofit organizations to blend volunteering service with the online world, and the number of online volunteers has increased rapidly (Dhebar & Stokes, 2008). As an Internet-based service, VolunteerMatch provides volunteer assignments to 15,523 online volunteers (Wallace, 2001). In 2005, thousands of organizations provided online volunteerism, whereas less
than 200 organizations involved online volunteers 10 years ago (Cravens, 2006).

Although the number of nonprofit organizations seeking online help is rising, online volunteers are not “centrally organized, managed, or measured” (Moon & Sproull, 2008, p. 494). These nonprofit organizations face the challenge of retaining online volunteers. Dhebar and Stokes (2008) found that only a “small percentage of online volunteers went on to complete their second assignment;” however, “the quality of future assignments depends on retaining the best volunteers” (p. 504).

Retaining volunteers has a significant impact on nonprofit organizations for the following reasons: (a) continuing volunteers can work as mentors of new volunteers, as they have experience in dealing with common questions in a more efficient and effective way and can provide appropriate help and advice for new volunteers; (b) based on prior experience, continuing volunteers can be more efficient in recognizing and addressing “common problems expressed in different terms” than new volunteers; (c) and continuing volunteers can communicate with new volunteers more effectively regarding the norms, values, and cultures of their organizations; and, (d) continuing volunteers are more familiar to their organization, therefore, they may provide more effective peer review of others’ work (Moon & Sproull, 2008, p. 499).

To retain online organizational members, organizations should actively work to decrease actual turnover. Scholars believe that intent to leave can predict actual turnover (e.g., Apker, Propp, & Ford, 2009; Scott, Connaughton, Diaz-Saenz, Maguire et al., 1999); hence, organization managers can decrease actual turnover by reducing intent to leave of organizational members. However, little research has explored this
topic within the context of online volunteerism. Studies of employees’ intent to leave have shown that organizational identification is negatively associated with intent to leave (e.g., Ando & Hirose, 1999; Apker, Propp, & Ford, 2009; Ciftcioglu, 2010; De Moura, Abrams, Retter, Gunnarsdottir, & Ando, 2009; Scott & Stephens, 2009).

On the contrary, some research has found that organizational members had higher levels of identification with their work-group; and work-group was a better predictor organizational members’ intent to leave (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2008; Janssen & Huang, 2008; Riketta & Van Dick, 2005; Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000). However, little research has explored the organizational identification and work-group identification of online volunteers in a virtual environment. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the relationships among organizational identification, work-group identification, and intent to leave of online volunteers. The results of this study will guide nonprofit organizations in retaining online volunteers.

To accomplish this goal, I will begin with literature review. The following chapter will provide the theoretical background on organizational identification along with past studies relating to the relationships with work-group identification and intent to leave.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

The number of online volunteers has been increasing along with the diffusion of the Internet technologies (Cravens, 2006, Peña-López, 2007). In the following section, I will first discuss about online volunteers and online volunteering service. Next, I will discuss volunteers’ organizational identification and work-group identification, and how these types of identification can be developed and maintained in virtual environment. Third, I will examine intent to leave. I will then discuss the relationships among organizational identification, work-group identification, and intent to leave.

Online Volunteers

Volunteers are a significant human resource in the United States who provides numerous benefits to society (Phillips & Phillips, 2010). More than one-fourth of Americans volunteered an average of 52 hours for nonprofit organizations in 2008 (Phillips & Phillips, 2010). The volunteer rate has increased 0.5% to 26.8%, and about 64.3 million people have volunteered for at least one organization in 2011 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). In an age of information, technologies have changed volunteer forms, and a new type of volunteering, online volunteering, has emerged (Mukherjee, 2011).

“There is not a great tradition in online volunteering, not even a short tradition” (Peña-López, 2007, p.1). Since the first online volunteering projects were developed in 1996, online volunteering has spread mostly among nonprofit sectors (Cravens, 2006; Peña-López, 2007). The definitions of online volunteering are similar across literature
because it has been named in different ways. The following definition of online volunteering is most used: “volunteer activities that are completed, in whole or in part, via the Internet on a home, work, or public access computer, usually in support of or through a mission-based organization (nonprofit, NGO, civil society, etc.” (Cravens, 2006, p.16). While online volunteering is also called virtual volunteering, cyber service, tele-mentoring, etc. (Peña-López, 2007), this study mainly uses the term “online volunteer” referring to volunteers who complete their tasks via the Internet. As the benefits and interests of online volunteering grows, nonprofit organizations post assignments relating to operational or functional activities (e.g., web design, fundraising, IT development ), consulting services (mentoring or advising), and mission-related program activities (e.g., translation, research, writing and editing) (Cravens, 2006; Dhebar & Stokes, 2008).

As a new phenomenon, online volunteers have great potential to benefit nonprofit organizations (Moon & Sproull, 2008). Online volunteers provide free services to nonprofit organizations, and these organizations obtain various benefits from online volunteers including increasing diversity and openness of the organizations, having professional skills with their broad experiences, which the current organizational members do not have, and, of course, saving costs (Cravens, 2006; Wallace, 2001). A great number of organizations posted more than 50% of all tasks online in the hope of recruiting online volunteers to work, and those organizations create specific programs for them; as a result, the number of nonprofit organizations’ managers who are searching for new ways to recruit and supervise online volunteers for
their on-site programs is growing (Dhebar & Stokes, 2008). Hence, how to effectively manage online volunteers will become increasingly an important issue for nonprofit managers to consider. This study addresses the importance of organizational identification as well as work-group identification in order to retain online volunteers.

**Organizational Identification**

Identification “is an active process by which individuals link themselves to elements in the social scene” (Cheney, 1983b, p. 342). When individuals identify with their organizations, they are inclined to connect themselves with the norms and values of their organizations and act to pursue the best interests for their organizations (Scott, 1997). Identification enables individuals to make sense of their experience, influence decision-making processes, and organize their thoughts (Cheney, 1983b; Cheney & Tompkins, 1987).

Depending on individuals’ self-defining process within an organization, organizational members have different levels of identification. The more identities that individuals experience during their discourse of self-defining and self-categorization, the more identifications they will have (Van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, & Christ, 2004). Members will emerge through different levels of self in organizations from lower levels of identities (e.g. team identity, relational identity, work-based identity) to higher levels of identities (organizational identity) (Ashforth et al., 2008). Van Dick et al. (2004) further clarified levels of identification as: (a) personal levels when members identify with their own career; (b) group levels when members identify with different subunits within organizations (e.g. teams,
departments, work groups), or with the whole organization. In organizational contexts, research has shown that employees are inclined to have more salient work-group identification than organizational identification (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2008; Janssen & Huang, 2008; Kramer, 1991; Riketta & Van Dick, 2005; Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000).

Even though organizational members may not have physical contacts with each other in virtual environment, they may also identify with their organization and work-group (Schroer & Hertel, 2009). However, little is known about the relationship between organizational identification and work-group identification of online volunteers. Further, virtual nonprofit organizations have been overlooked in the research on organizational identification. Accordingly, this study will investigate online volunteers’ organizational identification as well as work-group identification in a virtual nonprofit organization, and explore the relationships between these two levels of identification.

Organizational Identification and Organizational Outcomes

Organizational identification has been recognized as a crucial element of organizational behaviors. Derived from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), organizational identification “is the perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) in which he or she is a member” (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p.104). From this perspective, individuals who identify with their organization tend to divide themselves into different social categories with those who share similar emotions and value significance of group
norms, values, and interests (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000).

Organizational identification is a process of self-definition based on organizational membership (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). The significance of organizational identification has been widely studied. For example, organizational identification has a great effect on both the organization and their members (Cheney, 1983a). Ashforth et al. (2008) concluded that organizational identification leads to: (a) individual outcomes relating to belongingness, desire of enhancement, motives of contribution, satisfaction, etc; and (b) organizational outcomes relating to cooperation, participation, decision-making process, job performance, turnover, etc. Members who identify with their organizations may adapt their behaviors and attitudes to do best for the organization (Cheney, 1983a; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). In addition, organizational identification has positive relationships with job performance, job satisfaction, decision-making and negatively associations with turnover intentions (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Cheney, 1983a; Ciftcioglu, 2010; De Moura et al., 2009). Furthermore, strong organizational identification can increase pro-social behaviors of volunteers in nonprofit organizations, such as financial commitment and increased time contribution (Tidwell, 2005). Because retaining volunteers is one of important tasks that nonprofit organizations need to accomplish (Dhebar & Stokes, 2008; Tidwell, 2005), it is important to investigate the relationship between organizational identification and turnover intentions of online volunteers so that nonprofit managers have better knowledge to manage and retain online volunteers.
Online Volunteers’ Identification with a Nonprofit Organization

Several researchers have investigated volunteers’ identification, especially identification with nonprofit organizations. The outcomes of organizational identification are consistent with volunteers’ potential financial contributions, volunteers’ pro-social behaviors, commitment, satisfaction, and the continuous participation of volunteering (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Isbell, Pfiester, & McDonald, 2007; & Tidwell, 2005).

In nonprofit settings, organizational identification also serves as a strong predictor of volunteers’ performance. Strong organizational identification could increase volunteers’ participation within their organization. Tidwell (2005) explained that volunteers’ organizational identification positively relates to pro-social behaviors, organizational satisfaction and organizational commitment, which can lead people to volunteer from objective or subjective aspects and contribute to financial support. Moreover, volunteers who have stronger organizational identification have more positive emotions to their nonprofit organizations and higher possibility of continuing commitment (Isbell, Pfiester, & McDonald, 2007). As a result, nonprofit managers can work to establish and reinforce interpersonal relationships with volunteers to increase volunteers’ organizational identification (Tidwell, 2005). However, virtual environment may be different for volunteers. Given the development of information technologies, more and more nonprofit organizations begin to recruit online volunteers (Dhebar & Stokes, 2008; Tidwell, 2005), yet little research has investigated the organizational identification in virtual environment.
The advent and advances of information technologies allow organizations to hire online employees to save costs. However, the Internet also challenges organizations while providing new opportunities to manage their online employees. Unlike conventional organizations, the online environment is anonymous and has a “lack of traditional gating features” (e.g., physical appearance, face-to-face interaction, dress code) (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002, p. 23). The physical dispersion of online members reduces actual contact, which weakens ties between the organization and online employees. Furthermore, in the technology age, traditional management skills may be less practical and effective (Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 2001). As a result, it is the psychological link between organizations and online members that glue organizations firmly as a whole (Wiesenfeld et al., 2001). Similar to online employees, online volunteers have little shared organizational activities. Therefore, compared with traditional volunteers, online volunteers may experience some levels of difficulty in developing identification with the organization.

That said, the Internet can still be a platform for nonprofit organizations to foster volunteers’ organizational identification. Identification is a cognitive process that can be created without any behaviors or affective situations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Some scholars propose identification as a symbolic process; for example, individuals might perceive themselves as an “actual or symbolic member of the group” when they identify with organizations (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 104). Cheney (1983a) stated that identification is a communicative process where individuals share symbols “underlying basic tendencies in social relations” (p. 143). Hence, when
online volunteers communicate with each other even without physical contact, they can also develop identification. However, little research has examined organizational identification and its outcomes of online volunteers. Given the significance of organizational outcomes in online environments, further examination of online volunteers’ identification is warranted at the group and organizational levels.

**Work-group Identification in Virtual Environment**

Scholars have found that individuals not only identify with their organization as a whole, but also identify with work-based teams, their departments, or their occupation (e.g., Johnson, Morgeson, Ilgen, Meyer, & Lloyd, 2006; Millward, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007; Scott, 1997; & Van Dick et al, 2004). As research about organizational identification has become widespread, scholars are investigating lower levels of identification, such as the relationships between organizational identification and work-group identification, identification with multiple targets, multiple professional identities, etc. (e.g., Johnson et al., 2006; Millward et al., 2007; Scott, 1997).

Work-group is defined as “an interdependent collection of individuals who share responsibility for specific outcomes for their organization” (Sundstrom, DeMeuse, & Futrell, 1990, p. 120). The definition of work-group identification is the process that team members perceive themselves “in terms of the values, goals, attitudes, and behaviors they share with other team members” (Janssen & Huang, 2008, pp. 70-71). Work-group identification is a cognitive, emotional, and evaluative process indicating a sense of oneness that individuals perceive based on their work-groups’ goals, values, interests, and norms as their own (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Van
Knippenberg, 2000). Therefore, when individuals perceive (a) a stronger awareness of membership in the work team; (b) a positive attachment with this work team membership; (c) an emotional involvement with the work team, they will identify more strongly with their work-groups (Janssen & Huang, 2008).

Work-group identification has been broadly studied in for-profit sectors; however, research about organizational identification and work-group identification of online volunteers has been overlooked. Scholars have investigated work-group identification among virtual organizations, as well as geographically dispersed teams. For example, Scott and Fontenot (1999) tested both organizational and work-group identification scores of members between conventional meetings and computer-supported meetings. The results showed that the scores of members’ identification decreased during electronic meetings. However, some scholars have found that leaders or managers can increase employees’ team identification. For example, Sivunen (2006) interviewed, observed, and recorded actual communication among four leaders and their followers within online teams. She identified four tactics that leaders can use: (a) meet the demand of followers; (b) give positive feedback to the followers; (c) share and reinforce common goals and workings; and (d) proclaim team activities and face-to-face meetings (Sivunen, 2006). Volunteers who work in a virtual environment may share many of the same challenges with virtual employees. Moreover, a small-size group setting may be easier for nonprofit managers and online volunteers to communicate with each other (Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000), which, in turn, contributes to the formation and maintenance of identification. Therefore, work-group
identification of online volunteers needs to further explore relating to organizational identification.

**Organizational identification and work-group identification**

Research has shown that members are inclined to have stronger identification to lower levels (such as teams, work-groups, and departments) of an organization than to the organization as a whole (Ashforth et al., 2008). Consequently, employees often have stronger levels of work-group identification than organizational identification. For example, Riketta and Van Dick (2005) conducted a meta-analysis and found that employees’ identification to a work-group is stronger than to the organization as a whole. It is the organizational members’ “purpose, the forum, and/or the process of participation” that determines if their identification is salient with team or organization (Millward et al., 2007, p. 548). Therefore, if members spend more “meaningful” time with their team, they will have a higher degree of work-group identification than organizational identification (Millward et al., 2007, p. 548). Furthermore, work-group identification is a better predictor of job satisfaction, job involvement, job motivation, and turnover intentions (Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000). When individuals identify more strongly with their teams or work-groups, they engage in more civil behaviors with team members (Janssen & Huang, 2008). Although there is little research studying about work-group identification of online volunteers, online volunteers may have more contact with their work-group than the organization as a whole because “identification-enhancing interventions” might be easier to apply at work-group level than organizational level (Knippenberg & Schie, 2000, p. 145);
hence, they may feel more belongingness to the lower level group. In line with the above discussed literature, the following hypotheses regarding the salience of identification of online volunteers are posed:

**H1**: Online volunteers are more likely to have a higher degree of work-group identification than organizational identification.

**Intent to Leave**

Organizational research has specifically explored the intent to leave of employees and volunteers because intent to leave primarily indicates that individuals actively consider leaving and predict actual quitting (Cho & Lewis, 2012). The definition of intent to leave is “a conscious and deliberate willfulness to leave the organization” (Tett & Meyer, 1993, p. 262). Most organizations try to avoid valued employees’ turnover because the organizational investment (e.g. recruiting, training, and promotion) will be wasted (De Moura et al., 2009). A high turnover rate has a series of negative outcomes. For example, a high labor turnover in the assembly environment reduces the annual production, wastes extra time in production, and decreases efficiency of production (Hutchinson, Villalobos, & Beruvides, 1997). If a high turnover rate happens in nonprofit organizations, a series of negative outcomes will happen: (a) the leave of a volunteer will make a nonprofit organization pay double costs to recruit and train a new volunteer; and, (b) the leave of a volunteer will have a negative impact on continuity of on-going assignments, the perceptions of paid workers to volunteers, and the development of nonprofit organizations (Jamison, 2003; Skoglund, 2006). Therefore, successful groups and organizations need to retain
well-performing employees or volunteers for long-term development.

**Organizational Identification, Work-group Identification, and Intent to Leave**

Past research has investigated the relationship between identification and intent to leave. A sense of organizational identification is both important for the organization and their members because members can get close to their organizations and are likely to remain and contribute to their organization (Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000). There are two main reasons why organizational identification could play a vital role in one’s intent to leave (Van Dick et al., 2004): First, when individuals strongly identify with their organizations, they will act based on the organizational norms and values, and provide support to their organization. When an individual identifies with an organization, he/she will take the organization’s perspective and act with the organization’s best interests (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Thus, if individuals identify with their organizations, they have a strong intention to stay with their organizations. Second, when individuals strongly identify with their organization, they will create a kind of psychological link with their organization, and individuals will treat their organization as part of their self-concept and incorporate their self-images with the organization (Van Dick et al., 2004). Therefore, individuals will connect their future with their organization’s future, which leads individuals to stay in their organization. Thus, intent to leave is viewed as an outcome of organizational identification (Ashforth et al., 2008; Scott & Stephens, 2009). Several studies about employees and volunteers have shown that organizational identification can negatively predict intent to leave (e.g., Ando & Hirose, 1999; Apker, Propp, & Ford, 2009; Ciftcioglu, 2010; De Moura et al., 2009;
Scott & Stephens, 2009; Van Dick et al., 2004).

As previously stated, several organizational studies have shown that organizational members are inclined to identify with smaller work-groups than the whole organization (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2008; Janssen & Huang, 2008; Riketta & Van Dick, 2005; Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000). In addition, Olkkonen and Lipponen (2006) stated that organizational identification had a direct impact on organization-focused outcomes (e.g., job performance, job satisfaction, intent to leave), and work-group identification is related to work-group-focused outcomes (e.g., beneficial behavior that goes beyond the existing role expectations). These researchers found that while organizational identification was negatively associated with intent to leave, there was no significant relationship that work-group identification has an impact on intent to leave. On the contrary, other researchers have found that work-group identification was a strong predictor of organizational outcomes and behaviors, such as job satisfaction, intent to leave, job involvement, and job motivation (e.g., Cicero & Pierro, 2007; Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000). Some scholars propose that both organizational identification and work-group identification have interactive effects, and that high identification with both organizations and work-groups can lead to more positive outcomes (e.g., a high level of job satisfaction, low level of turnover, better job performance) than when employees identify strongly with one identification but weakly with the other one, or have low levels of identification with both organizations and their work-groups (e.g., Van Dick, Van Knippenberg, Kerschreiter, Hertel, & Wieseke, 2008). Although it is unclear which
level of identification has stronger influence on intent to leave, Kramer (1991) suggested that work-group identification is usually more salient than organizational identification. Though lacking of face-to-face communication, electronic communication could also help online organizational members create a “psychological link between individuals and the organization” (Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 1999, p. 784). In a similar way, online volunteers could also have both organizational identification and work-group identification. Therefore, given these arguments and the related research, the following hypothesis and research question were posed:

**H2:** Both organizational identification and work-group identification negatively predict online volunteers’ intent to leave.

**RQ1:** Will work-group identification be more strongly related to intent to leave than organizational identification for online volunteers?

In summary, this chapter has presented the theoretical background on online volunteers organizational identification, work-group identification, and intent to leave. The following chapter will discuss the methodology to investigate these issues.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Given the limitation and dearth of identification and intent to leave research on online volunteers, it seemed appropriate to focus on one virtual nonprofit organization rather than attempting to explore the breadth of voluntary organizations. Furthermore, a majority of online volunteers work only with one manager in the organization, and few have the experience of working in groups (Dhebar & Stokes, 2008). In order to investigate organizational identification and work-group identification of online volunteers, this study focused on one specific nonprofit organization that employs work-group structures for online volunteers. The organization was selected via personal contact.

Case Study

Overseas China Education Foundation (OCEF) was first registered as SOS (Save Our Soul) China Education Fund in 1992. As an independent, nonprofit organization with no political or religious affiliations, OCEF’s aim is to help children who lack opportunities for higher education in China. OCEF is a very unique organization where directors and staffs are all volunteers without receiving any monetary compensation. OCEF has over 300 volunteers and more than 3,000 OCEF members and donors. OCEF is also an international organization whose members, donors, and volunteers are not only Chinese but also Americans, Taiwanese, Japanese, Europeans, and others. The age range of online volunteers in OCEF is wide, from youths to retired seniors, and many of them are professional (e.g. college professors, IT developer).
Participants

Online volunteers in this study were defined as those who communicate and work only via the Internet.

According to OCEF official website, there are about 3000 online volunteers registered and about 300 active online volunteers. Even though there are 3000 registered online volunteers, there are only about 300 online volunteers (10%) actively participate in the activities and volunteer in the organizations. All online active volunteers from OCEF were contacted via email and asked to participate in this research project.

Among them, 245 people responded to the survey within two months. However, 94 respondents did not complete the whole survey and were excluded. Thus, data from 151 respondents were used for analysis. Among the 151 participants, a total of 106 respondents were female (71.1%) and 44 respondents were male (28.9%). Their age range was from 18 to 62 years old, and their average age was 32.14. These online volunteers have been with the organization from 1 year to 15 years, with an average of 2.41 years. They spent an average of 2.95 hours working per week. Among the 151 participants, 72 respondents conducted work involving writing, editing, and translating; 21 participants were consultants; 16 respondents worked for IT development of the organization; 30 participants managed projects in the organization; 54 participants coordinated and facilitated services for the organization; and 66 participants reported engaging in “other” types of work.
Procedures

I first received an approval both from the director of OCEF and WKU’s Institutional Review Board for data collection. The data were collected by a survey questionnaire relating to organizational identification, work-group identification, and intent to leave among online volunteers of OCEF. The survey questionnaire was posted online at www.wku.qualtrics.com. After posting the survey, I contacted the director of OCEF to ask for assistance to forward the URL of the online survey link to all online active volunteers of OCEF. The consent form was shown on the top page of the survey. Those who agreed to the consent form were asked to click the “agreed” button and were then directed to complete the questionnaire. In order to protect anonymity of participants, I did not obtain any personal information (e.g., job titles, addresses, and phone numbers) about participants. The online survey was posted for two months. I followed up the recruiting process by sending emails to the leaders and managers of the organization every week. The leaders and managers of the organization forwarded my emails to their team members and encouraged them to participate in my study every week. Also, I explained the survey to the participants when they contacted me by e-mail to ask for information or when they felt unclear about the survey.

Measures

The scales outlined below are detailed in the Appendix.

Organizational identification. As discussed, scholars define organizational identification as “the perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where an individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) in which he or
she is a member” (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 104). Simon (1976) provided an operational definition for organizational identification: “A person identifies with a group when, in making a decision, he evaluates the several alternatives of choice in terms of the consequences for the specified group” (as cited in Cheney, 1983b, p. 346). Based on this definition, Cheney (1983b) created 25 items of Organizational Identification Questionnaire (OIQ). In addition to reviewing Cheney’s OIQ, I also compared various organizational identification questionnaires that had been used for different studies.

After a careful investigation, organizational identification in this study was measured by a modified version of Scott’s (1997) Identification Questionnaire which has been used to measure employee identification among geographically dispersed employees. Scott (1997) modified Cheney’s (1983b) OIQ for four identification targets (county, area, state, and occupation). The scale consists of 9 items for each target using a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability coefficient values in Scott’s (1997) study were: 0.89 for county, 0.88 for area, 0.81 for state, and 0.70 for occupation.

**Work-group identification.** The definition of work-group identification is a psychological linkage between the work-group and the members who view their work-groups as “an extension of his or herself” (Reding, Grieve, Derryberry, & Paquin, 2011, p. 379). Similar to organizational identification, the operational definition of work-group identification is “a person identifies with a group when, in making a decision, he evaluates the several alternatives of choice in terms of the consequences
for the specified group” (as cited in Cheney, 1983b, p. 346).

The work-group identification questionnaire used for this study was also modified from Scott’s identification questionnaire (1997). Scott (1997) applied the Identification Questionnaire to measure employees’ identification with different levels of the organizations. The reliability coefficients in Scott’s (1997) research about four identification targets were: 0.89 for county, 0.88 for area, 0.81 for state, and 0.70 for occupation. Hence, I modified this questionnaire to measure the work-group identification. A 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strong agree) was employed.

**Intent to leave.** Intent to leave is a kind of consideration and willfulness of organizational members to leave the organization (Tett & Meyer, 1993). This variable was measured with a four-item scale developed by O’Reilly, Chatman, and Caldwell (1991). This four-item scale had produced satisfactory levels of reliability. For example, Scott et al. (1999) produced an Alpha coefficient of 0.83 to assess the intent to leave among employees in their study. The items were adapted specifically for the online volunteers in this study. The four items were: “I would prefer a more ideal online volunteer job than the one I now work in” (reverse coded), “I have thought seriously about changing [the organization] since I began working (volunteering) here,” “I hope to be working (volunteering) for [this organization] until I retire from volunteering,” and “I seriously intend to look for another volunteering opportunity instead of the current one within the next year” (reverse coded). Participants responded using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).
Background/demographics. Demographic questions included age, gender, type and grade of job, years in the organization, and time spent for volunteer work. I collected both discrete data and continuous data about participants.

Data analysis

In this section, I present the procedures for statistical analyses used to test each hypothesis.

First, I downloaded the data from www.wku.qualtrics.com onto SPSS and compiled the raw data into a dataset. Descriptive analysis gave a basic and clear understanding about the dataset as a whole. The analysis included calculations of means, standard deviations, ranges, and numbers of respondents.

Next, I computed the Alpha coefficients of each measurement. For the hypotheses testing, I set the significance level at 0.05 to do t-test and correlation analysis. Below section will further explain the results for each hypothesis and research question.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Preliminary Analysis

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations of all variables. The organizational identification ($\alpha = .74$) and work-group identification ($\alpha = .81$) scales exhibited strong reliability. Reliability of intent to leave with 4 items was originally low ($\alpha = .31$). In order to maximize the reliability, two original items (i.e., I have thought seriously about leaving OCEF since I began volunteering here; I hope to be volunteering for OCEF until I retire from volunteering.) were eliminated. Final reliability with 2 items (i.e., I would prefer more ideal online volunteer job than the one I now work in; I seriously intend to look for another volunteering opportunity instead of the current one within the next year.) was .69. Across the entire sample, the participants did not have strong intentions to leave the organization ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.43$).

Hypotheses and Research Question

Hypothesis 1 predicted that online volunteers would have stronger work-group identification (WI) than organizational identification (OI). The mean of organizational identification was 3.97 ($SD = .61$), and the mean of work-group identification was 4.0 ($SD = .61$). This indicated that the respondents have a slightly higher level of identification with their work-group than organization. In order to test if the level of identification with OI and WI is significantly different, a paired-samples t-test was conducted. The results revealed that there was no significant difference between the
mean of organizational identification and work-group identification \( (t (150) = -0.85, p = .40) \). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Hypothesis 2 stated that both organizational identification and work-group identification would negatively predict intent to leave of online volunteers. The results of correlation analysis demonstrated a significant negative relationship between work-group identification and intent to leave, but it was a weak relationship \( (r = -0.14, p < .05) \). Organizational identification was not significantly related to intent to leave \( (r = -0.06, p = .27) \). Based on these results, only work-group identification was forwarded to a linear regression analysis to see if work-group identification is a predictor of intent to leave. The dependent variable is intent to leave, and the independent variable is work-group identification. The result of linear regression showed that work-group identification is not a significant predictor of intent to leave \( (\beta = -0.14, R^2 = 0.02, p = .08) \).

Research Question 1 explored if work-group identification is a stronger predictor than organizational identification regarding the intent to leave of online volunteers. As described above, the correlation results showed only work-group identification is significantly related to intent to leave \( (r = -0.14, p < .05) \). However, no significant result was found in regression analysis to support that work-group identification can predict intent to leave of online volunteers. Hence, neither work-group identification nor organizational identification can predict intent to leave of online volunteers.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

The wide applications of Internet technology and the increasing number of nonprofit organizations that take advantage of technology have gained more attention with regard to organizational identification of online volunteers. This study explored this issue and built on past identification research of nonprofit organizational communication studies. This study first discussed organizational identification and work-group identification of online volunteers. Second, it examined intent to leave of online volunteers since the turnover rate of volunteers in nonprofit organizations is usually high (Dhebar & Stokes, 2008). This study was conducted among online volunteers who work in groups in a completely virtual environment. The findings provided some insights into the organizational identification, work-group identification, and intent to leave in a virtual nonprofit organization.

The quantitative research results with this sample indicated that online volunteers in OCEF have a high level of both organizational identification and work-group identification; however, the levels of organizational identification and work-group identification of online volunteers did not have much difference. The means of organizational identification and work-group identification indicated that online volunteers have a slightly higher level of work-group identification than organizational identification; however, there was no statistically significant difference between these two levels of identification.

This finding is in dissonance with previous research that has shown the level of
organizational members’ work-group identification is higher than organizational identification (e.g., Millward et al., 2007; Riketta & Van Dick, 2005). As Millward et al. (2007) stated, it is the organizational member’s decision on which level of identification is more salient based on his/her participation, goal and purpose, and communication. As a pure virtual organization, the system and environment of OCEF is invisible, and the activities are operated within groups. As a result, online volunteers may not have a clear distinction between their organization and their groups. Online volunteers in OCEF spent more time within their groups than within the organization as a whole. Hence, the online volunteers may treat their groups as organizations, and the organization as their groups. In that case, the levels of organizational identification and work-group identification may not be different for them. Future studies should investigate both online volunteers and on-site volunteers to see if there is any difference between their work-group identification and organizational identification.

This study sought to determine whether organizational identification or work-group identification was more salient in predicting outcomes such as intent to leave. The findings in this study did not provide a clear answer. In past research, scholars established a link between organizational identification and organizational outcomes, such as turnover intention, job satisfaction, and job performance. For example, according to social identity theory, organizational identification has a positive relationship with intent to leave (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Van Dick et al., 2004). However, some scholars have found that it is work-group identification, not organizational identification; that could correlate with online volunteers’ intent to
leave (e.g., Cicero & Pierro, 2007; Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000). This study indicated that only work-group identification is related to intent to leave of online volunteers, but neither work-group identification nor organizational identification were predictors of intent to leave of online volunteers.

The results of descriptive analysis showed that online volunteers in OCEF somewhat preferred to stay ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 1.43$). However, the results also showed that some volunteers in OCEF want to leave the organization (See Table 2). For example, 16.6% of participants exhibited some degree of intent to leave, and 18.5% of participants reported that they neither want to stay in the organization nor leave, which can be interpreted that they did not have a strong level of intent to stay or leave. This 18.5% of participants may be unstable because they have no feeling about their leave intentions.

These results raised questions regarding why nonprofit organizations including OCEF still suffer the loss of online volunteers. For example, OCEF has 3000 registered online volunteers, yet only about 300 online volunteers are active. This may occur for several reasons: First, unlike employees, online volunteers can leave their organizations at any time without any obligations and monetary loss, thus, they can leave whenever they feel no extra spare time or energy to engage in the volunteering work. Second, online volunteers usually do not know each other in real life, and there is no physical organization for online volunteers to visit. As a result, the relationships among organizations, groups, and online volunteers may be very weak.

Third, Kramer (2011) found that schedule conflict was the main reason for
volunteers to temporarily or permanently leave the organization. Because schedule conflict is an ongoing and unchangeable process in a relatively life period, conflict with volunteers’ work and family activities may keep them from the volunteer work. The average age of online volunteers in OCEF is 33.28 years old. At this age, people may be married, have babies as well as other life change, etc. Hence, even the online volunteers who have a high level of identification to the organization or work-group and a low level of intent to leave may also have to leave the organization due to their life changes and/or schedule conflicts. Future studies should examine if age and marital status relate to intent to leave for highly identified volunteers to their organizations.

The findings also raise critical questions for managers of nonprofit organizations: In what situation do online volunteers have a high level of organizational identification and work-group identification? Why is their intent to leave relatively low at the same time? How can nonprofit managers retain and recruit online volunteers? Recruiting the former online volunteers could be a good way for nonprofit managers to solve this problem. Unlike traditional employees, leave of volunteers is usually ambiguous, and volunteers might or might not officially inform the organization about their temporary or permanent leave (Kramer, 2011). Volunteers usually devote their spare time to nonprofit organizations (Ashcraft & Kedrowicz, 2002), and schedule conflicts in a volunteers’ life cannot be avoided. However, some online volunteers may take temporary leave and come back to OCEF at their convenience.
Although the results showed that only work-group identification is associated with intent to leave of online volunteers, future research should examine if there is any relationship among organizational identification, work-group identification, and intent to return. Compared with new online volunteers, experienced online volunteers already know the system and process of the organization because they have actual experience in their jobs. Whenever online volunteers want to come back to the organization, they can quickly pick up the job responsibilities with little or no training, unlike new online volunteers. Therefore, it is important to know if a stronger level of organizational identification or work-group identification could predict whether online volunteers have a stronger level of intent to return. Nonprofit managers should also keep in touch with those inactive but highly identified online volunteers in case they can come back in the future.

Furthermore, it is significant for managers of nonprofit organizations to be fully aware of which volunteers are on a temporary leave and their intent to return. For example, an online volunteer may temporarily leave OCEF because of childbirth; however, if she has strong identification to the organization or work-group, will she come back when her time becomes more flexible? What can nonprofit managers do to bring this volunteer back when she is available in the future? There may be ways for nonprofit organizations to better manage an online volunteer workforce in the future. For example, nonprofit managers can keep in touch with volunteers on a temporary leave and send updated information about their work-groups and organization to help them stay involved with the organization.
In addition, the results showed that organizational identification and work-group identification have a strong relationship \((r = 0.76, p < .01)\), which means that online volunteers who have strong work-group identification also strongly identify with their organization, and vice versa. Hence, organizations can increase the level of work-group identification of its members in order to increase the level of organizational identification because organizational members are inclined to identify with smaller groups (Ashforth et al., 2008; Janssen & Huang, 2008; Riketta & Van Dick, 2005; Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000). Knippenberg and Schie (2000) also pointed out that when individuals identified with larger groups, it would create a threat to individual distinctiveness because s/he will share his/her identification with more people. On the contrary, not only would smaller-sized groups provide a “sufficient level of distinctiveness,” but also members could fulfill his/her need for inclusiveness (p. 138). As stated above, although the relationship between work-group identification and intent to leave of online volunteers may be very weak, it seems smaller-sized groups will be the best way for nonprofits to manage online volunteers because small-sized groups could enable members to share similarities and distinctiveness. Also, compared with the whole organization, communication within work-groups could be easier and more frequent.

Furthermore, the findings showed that work-group identification is slightly negatively associated with intent to leave, while organizational identification does not have any significant relationship with intent to leave. Organizations can lead their members to spend more time within their groups in order to have better organizational
outcomes. For example, organizational leaders can create activities for online
volunteers to attend and get to know each other; work-group leaders can emphasize
team-work to improve the communication among work-group members; and leaders
can be more active in online discussion groups and encourage work-group members
to participate.

As a consequence, a manager of a nonprofit organization can create small
groups that online volunteers can share their interests, hobbies, or experiences. This
could assist in developing online volunteers’ work-group identification, thereby
maintaining their identification with the organization. Once online volunteers begin to
have regular time commitments to the work-groups, they may develop and maintain
their identification to both the work-group and the organization.

Limitations

First, for practical reasons, the study focused on a small group of online
volunteers who are in a complete virtual environment. The relatively small sample
size of this study may limit statistical power, thereby limiting significant results.
Future researchers should explore these variables with a larger sample size. Many
nonprofit organizations operate internationally, and OCEF is one such organization.
The participants in this study are from diverse cultures; however, this study did not
consider the impact of multi-cultures in the levels of identification and intent to leave.
Future research should explore more about this aspect to fulfill the research for the
outcome of identification.
Second, there is an interesting phenomenon that a lot of previous online volunteers return to the organization. Future research should also compare online volunteers’ levels of intent to leave and the levels of willingness to return. Comparative studies on relationships among organizational identification, work-group identification, and the willingness to return should also be conducted among different samples such as elderly online volunteers, younger online volunteers, online volunteers with a high level of organizational identification, and online volunteers with a high level of work-group identification.

Conclusion

The present study explored the relationships among organizational identification, work-group identification, and intent to leave of online volunteers in a complete virtual environment. The findings suggest that even though the online volunteers have high levels of work-group identification and organizational identification, only work-group identification is slightly related to intent to leave. The present findings differed from previous research among employees of traditional (i.e., not virtual) organizations. Despite the unexpected findings, this study raised significant topics for future research on identification of volunteers in virtual organizations or groups.
APPENDIX A

ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTIFICATION QUESTIONNAIRE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Strongly</td>
<td>Moderately</td>
<td>No Feeling</td>
<td>Moderately</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td></td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. I’m very concerned about the success of my [organization].
2. I don’t like working with my [organization].
3. I don’t like to hear others criticize my [organization].
4. I am proud to be a member of this [organization].
5. My [organization] is like a family to me.
6. When I make job-related decisions, I think about how my decisions will affect my [organization].
7. I am willing to put in extra effort in order to help my [organization] be successful.
8. I identify closely with my [organization].
9. I don’t feel much loyalty to my [organization].
APPENDIX B

WORK-GROUP IDENTIFICATION QUESTIONNAIRE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Moderately Disagree</td>
<td>No Feeling</td>
<td>Moderately Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. I’m very concerned about the success of my work-group.
2. I don’t like working with my work-group.
3. I don’t like to hear others criticize my work-group.
4. I am proud to be a member of this work-group.
5. My work-group is like a family to me.
6. When I make job-related decisions, I think about how my decisions will affect my work-group.
7. I am willing to put in extra effort in order to help my work-group be successful.
8. I identify closely with my work-group.
9. I don’t feel much loyalty to my work-group.
## APPENDIX C

### INTENT TO LEAVE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Moderately Disagree</td>
<td>Slightly Disagree</td>
<td>No Feeling</td>
<td>Slightly Agree</td>
<td>Moderately Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. I would prefer a more ideal online volunteer job than the one I now work in.

2. I have thought seriously about changing OCEF since I began volunteering here.

3. I hope to be volunteering for OCEF until I retire from volunteering.

4. I seriously intend to look for another volunteering opportunity instead of the current one within the next year.
APPENDIX D

DEMOGRAPHICS

1. How old are you? (Example: 23 years old)

2. What is your gender? Please select one.
   Female  Male

3. How long have you volunteered in your organization online?
   ____years ____months

4. How much time do you spend for online volunteering in a typical week?
   ______hour(s) ______minutes

5. What services have you done in your organization? Select all applied.
   ● Writing, editing, and translating
   ● Consulting
   ● Project management
   ● IT development
   ● Coordination and facilitation
   ● Other

6. How many projects have you engaged in OECF so far? Select one.
   ● 0-1
   ● 2-3
   ● 4-5
   ● 6 or more
APPENDIX E

Table 1  Scale Means, Standard Deviations, Reliability, and the Correlation Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>α</th>
<th>OI</th>
<th>WI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizational identification</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-group identification</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.76**</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intent to leave</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p<0.01. one-tailed

*p<0.05. one-tailed

OI = Organizational Identification; WI = Work-group Identification
### APPENDIX F

Table 2  Frequency Table of Intent to Leave

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Intent to Leave</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Accumulated %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>36</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>56.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>64.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>83.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>87.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>90.7</td>
</tr>
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<td>5.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>92.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>96.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>96.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Scale range from 1 through 7, with high values indicating strong intent to leave.
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