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DEVELOPING A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK TO UNDERSTAND WHY LOCAL RESIDENTS CONTRIBUTE TO ONLINE TRAVEL COMMUNITIES

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DEVELOPING A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK TO UNDERSTAND WHY LOCAL
RESIDENTS CONTRIBUTE TO ONLINE TRAVEL COMMUNITIES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science
Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management

by
Bingjie Liu
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

Online travel communities have reshaped travel behaviors and decision-making of people around the world. In addition to the communication between different travelers, it is noted that local residents also contribute to the information sharing process. Why do local people offer help online? This is a question that has not been answered through a rigorous research process. By exploring why local residents' display helping behavior in online travel communities, the purpose of this study was to develop and test a conceptual framework to understand local residents' contribution to online travel communities. Two models rooted from social psychology to understand the helping behavior were examined. A conceptual framework, which was constructed based on the two social psychological approaches, was tested as well. Variables of perceived controllability, sympathy, anger, personal distress, member participation in the online travel community, member attachment to the online travel community, cognitive identity of local resident, affective identity of local resident and evaluative identity of local resident were used to explain the helping behavior.

The research was conducted on the CouchSurfing online travel community, which is the world's largest online travel community and has a large amount of members. One-thousand-two-hundred-eighty-eight CouchSurfing members residing in the Southeastern United States were invited to participate in an online survey through a systematic sampling approach and three-hundred-seventy-seven individuals completed the questionnaires and were included in the analysis.

The results of the study indicated that the conceptual framework functioned better than the previous two individual models. Variables of sympathy, personal distress, member participation in the online travel community and evaluative social identity of local resident were found to be significant in explaining local residents' helping behavior in online travel communities. Theoretical and practical implications were discussed, followed by suggestions for future research, recommendations for online travel community construction and strategies for encouraging local residents' involvement in the online travel community participation.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

With the development of information technology, online communities have become increasingly popular. These online communities not only enable interactivity among different groups of people and satisfy needs of communication, information and entertainment, but also act as communities of trust and belonging (Wu & Chang, 2005). Tourism is an information-intensive industry (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010); therefore the growing role played by online travel communities in the travel decision-making process cannot be neglected. As a matter of fact, online travel communities, which make up an important part of social media, have already gained substantial popularity in travelers' use of the Internet by providing a forum for users to post and share the travel-related comments, suggestions and personal experiences. This new information transfer processes also assists other users in making trip plans and tourism product consuming options (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

In recent years, the emergence and popularity of online communities have generated a great deal of interest and enthusiasm among academic researchers. Different aspects of online communities have been studied, varying from the loyalty of online community members (e.g., Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002), essential factors that contribute to the success of online communities (e.g., Irriberry & Leroy, 2009; Lin & Lee 2006) and the helpfulness and usefulness of online communities (e.g., Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, Kossinets, Kleinberg & Lee, 2009; Kim, Pantel, Chklovski & Pennacchiotti, 2006; Siersdorfer, Chelaru, Nejd, & Pedro, 2010). For tourism businesses, online communities

have been regarded as central to models of electronic commerce, Internet marketing and advertising (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004a), as well as effective tools for customer relationship management (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004b).

Arsal, Backman and Baldwin (2008) found that online travel communities, which exert effects in terms of electronic word of mouth (eWOM), could reshape travelers' trip plans and purchase options. Other researchers (Wang, Yu & Fesenmaier, 2002; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004a; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004b; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) have devoted efforts in analyzing the general experiences of online travel community involvement as well as members' participation and active contributions to the communities.

Problem Statement

Local residents, through the information exchange process, were found highly involved in online travel communities as reliable information providers (Arsal, et al, 2008; Arsal, Woosnam, Baldwin, & Backman; 2010). Previous studies have proved that online travel communities, which act as one of the best examples of the Web 2.0, have reshaped travel behaviors and decision-making of people around the world, and recognize the importance of local residents' role in online travel communities. However, there is paucity in these studies to examine the contribution to the online travel communities' constructions on the behalf of local residents. Specifically, it has not been explained why local residents would like to offer help to potential tourists in online travel communities.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to develop and test a conceptual framework explaining why local residents offer help in online travel communities. A survey was

conducted in the online travel community CouchSurfing through the use of SurveyMonkey electronic software (www.surveymonkey.com). Funding for this study was provided by the Southeast Chapter of Tourism and Travel Research Association (SETTRA); as a result, the study was conducted with CouchSurfing members who lived in the Southeastern United States.

Research Objectives

There are two objectives in this study:

1. To develop a conceptual framework to understand why local residents contribute to online travel communities in terms of helping behavior.
2. To test the conceptual framework and identify variables that could significantly explain local residents' online helping behavior.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions will apply throughout the whole:

CouchSurfing Community: An online travel community that aims to construct a “worldwide network for making connections between travelers and the local communities they visit” (CouchSurfing Organization [CS org], 2012).

Online Community: A broad term describing a collection of people who communicate online. These people can be special interest groups for education, professional issues, and hobbies who fulfil a specific, narrowly defined purpose, and aim to draw only members sharing that interest. The

term online community is also often used to include community networks (Wang, Yu & Fesenmaier, 2002, p. 409).

Online Travel Community: Online communities where users attempt to fulfil their travel-related tasks, ranging from seeking travel information and tips, making travel transactions, fostering relationships with people from far away, finding travel companions, or simply playing games for entertainment purposes (Wang, Yu & Fesenmaier, 2002, p. 407).

The following definitions will apply to the conceptual framework and methods section of the study:

Affective Social Identity: One of the three components that contribute to social identity, it refers to the emotional attachment to the group (van Dick et al., 2004, p. 173).

Attribution-Empathy Model: An integration of an attribution approach and empathy approach to helping behavior, which suggest that variables of perceived controllability and empathic emotions could affect the helping behavior (Betancourt, 1990).

Cognitive Social Identify: One of the three components that contribute to social identity, it refers to the knowledge of being a member of a certain group (van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher & Christ, 2004, p. 173).

Evaluative Social Identity: One of the three components that contribute to social identity, it refers to the value connotation assigned to that group from inside and/or outside (van Dick et al., 2004, p. 173).

Group-Helping Model: A group-level perspective examination on the social identity of helping and advantaged groups' prosocial emotions, and a novel framework by exploring the ways these emotions shape group processes to produce action strategies (Thomas, McGarty, & Mavor, 2009).

Helping Behaviour: An act performed voluntarily to help someone else when there is no expectation of receiving a reward of any form (Chu, 2009, p. 280).

Interpersonal Emotion: An affective reaction. According to Batson and Coke (1981), witnessing another person in need can produce two different emotional actions -- personal distress (e.g., upset, worry, alarm) and empathic concern (e.g., sympathy, compassion).

Member Attachment in Online Travel Community: A main perspective of dynamic social identification, it refers to "a member's emotional attachment to their group" (Qu & Lee, 2011, p. 1263).

Member Participation in Online Travel Community: Assessment of members' activities in an online travel community (Qu & Lee, 2011).

Perception of Controllability: Perceived controllability refers to how much a participant perceives the cause to be subject to volitional control or influence (Batencourt, 1990, p. 576).

Social Identity: Social identity captures the main aspects of the individual's identification with the group in the sense that the person comes to view

himself or herself as a member of the community, as “belonging” to it (Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo, 2004, p. 245).

Social Identity in Online Travel Community: In the context of an online travel community, community identification could be defined as “the perceived membership to a certain online travel community” (Qu & Lee, 2011, p. 1263).

Assumptions

It is assumed that the respondents’ helping behavior in online travel communities as local residents is the result of a sequential decision-making process, similar to that exhibited in reality. Therefore, the behavior could be explained by the attribution-empathy model and the group-helping model. Further, it is assumed that the presented conceptual framework, which combines the two social psychological approaches to helping behavior, could better explain the members’ online helping behavior. Also, as a member of online travel communities and a local resident, the members’ online helping behavior not only acts as communication between members, but could also be interpreted as a kind of contribution to the online travel communities.

In the context of the CouchSurfing community, the helping scenario was depicted as “if you saw other members asking for help in the CouchSurfing community”, and the helping behavior could be practiced as online helping activities (e.g., providing advices) and off-line helping activities (e.g., hanging out, offering hospitality). It is also assumed that characteristics of study subjects could be reflected through their dual social identities of online travel community member and local resident.

Outline of Thesis

The rest of this thesis includes five chapters, followed by appendices and references. Chapter II provides literature review that is related to host-guest relations, online travel communities and helping behavior and the conceptual framework. Chapter III describes the research methods that have been used in this study, including the pre-test information, data collection and analysis approaches. Chapter IV presents the descriptive results of the study. Chapter V presents the hypotheses and the hypotheses testing results. Chapter VI summarizes the results, conclusions, research implications and future study recommendations.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter is organized in sections describing different factors that contribute to the conceptual framework. The first section briefly reviews the host-guest relationship studies conducted in the tourism and travel field in the past four decades. The second section introduces recent studies on the subject of online travel communities. The third section presents the conceptual framework and testing variables as suggested by the literature.

Guest-Host Relationships in Tourism Destinations

Guest-host relationships in tourism destinations, which could be characterized as a “series of encounters [between] visitors who are on the move to enjoy themselves... and hosts who are relatively stationary and who have the function of catering to these visitors’ need and wishes” (Sutton, 1967, p. 220), has been examined by numerous researchers since the 1970s (Cohen, 1984; Smith, 1989). Cohen (1984) concludes that there are three principle dimensions to measure the nature and dynamics of the guest-host relationship: peoples’ interactions, perceptions, and attitudes.

From the perspective of community development, considering both positive and potential negative outcomes associated with tourism development at a local level, there has been a rising interest in studying local residents’ attitude towards tourism development, and it continues to be an important issue (Ko & Stewart, 2002). In fact, in the past two decades, approximately 10% of the empirical studies published in *Annals of Tourism Research* and *the Journal of Travel Research* examined residents’ attitudes

toward tourism (Arsal et al., 2010). Harrill (2004), in his literature review on local residents' attitudes towards tourism development, points out five basic characteristics in the literature: socioeconomic factors, spatial factors, economic dependency, resident and community typology, and measurements on the residents' attitudes toward tourism development.

Meanwhile, a diversity of models have been developed and tested to examine tourism impact as well as independent variables to evaluate residents' attitude towards tourism development. Lankford and Howard (1993) constructed a multiple item tourism impact attitude scale (TIAS) to provide a standardized measurement of residents' attitudes toward tourism development and tested the model in their empirical research in the Columbia River Gorge region of Oregon and Washington, USA. Ap and Crompton (1998) successfully developed and tested a 35-item tourism impact scale model, which comprised seven domains: social and cultural, economic, crowding and congestion, environmental, services, taxes, and community attitudes.

In addition, numerous social science theories have been applied as theoretical frameworks to examine local residents' attitudes toward tourism development, and have sparked new directions for future research. For example, Ap (1992) developed a conceptual model to analyze residents' attitudes toward tourism using social exchange theory. Ap (1992) found that local residents who benefit from the tourism industry tended to have a positive perception of tourism development, while those who did not benefit from it displayed a negative perception. Another theory that has been utilized in the tourism field to understand local residents' attitude towards tourism development is

social representation theory. Fredline and Faulkner (2000) propose that local residents construct their perceptions and develop their attitude towards tourism development based on their direct experience and interaction with tourists. Further, the commonality or consensuses of residents' perceptions were important in determining social representations within local communities (Fredline & Faulkner, 2000). More recently it was found that a modified EUH (Experience-Using History) model, with a focus on prior travel experiences and exposure to tourism, could help provide a new framework to understand residents' attitudes towards tourism in local communities (Draper, Woosnam & Norman, 2011).

Without question, local residents' attitudes towards tourism development is essential in understanding the guest-host relationships in tourism destinations. While the majority of studies focus on on-site communications and interactions, the new venue of online travel communities have largely been neglected (Arsal et al., 2010). Most recently, Arsal et al. (2010) have conducted empirical research in online travel communities, analyzing the local residents' role as information providers. It was found that local residents were influential to tourists' travel decisions, especially in accommodations and food and beverage recommendations. However, a deeper understanding of the local residents' role in the environment of online travel communities has yet to be explored.

Online Travel Communities

By providing group participation experiences without physical interaction, online communities have occupied the central position of Internet's use since its establishment (Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, 2002). Rheingold (1994) defines online travel community as

“social aggregations that emerge from the Internet when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feelings, to webs of personal relationship in cyberspace” (p. 57). Rabanand and Rafaeli (2007) further identify that online communities could be understood as self-organizing systems of informal learning that allow members to interact and learn together by engaging in join activities and discussions.

However, due to the diversity of member characteristics, it is hard to capture the benefits that could attract members’ participation (Wang, & Fesenmaier, 2004a). Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo (2004) have established a use and gratification paradigm to understand the motives of online community participations and have found that most online community members are looking for four types of values: purposive value, self-discovery value, value of maintaining interpersonal connectivity, and entertainment value.

Another important factor that has been found to affect members’ activities in online communities is social capital (Chu, 2009; Fetterman, 2002; Lesser & Everest, 2001; Nahapiet & Ghoshao, 1998). Social capital may be understood as “the invisible bonds that connect people into smaller and larger social groups and allow people to work together cooperatively, for the good of the group rather than the benefit of the individual” (Chu, 2009, p. 280).

Similarly, Wang & Fesenmaier (2002, 2004a, 2004b) have developed a function-need theoretical framework to explain members’ participation in online travel communities after conducting a series of studies. It is argued that the nature of members’

participation may be understood by two dimensions: the amount of time a member spends in community activities and the interactivity with other community members (Wang & Fensenmaier, 2002). Further, there are four sets of benefits that can help explain the extent of an online travel community's member participation: functional benefits, psychological benefits, social benefits, and hedonic benefits (Wang & Fensenmaier, 2004a). A recent study (Qu & Lee, 2011) finds that that members' active participation fortifies their sense of belonging to the online travel community, which in turn encourages members to support the community by showing positive member behaviors, such as knowledge sharing, community promotion, and behavioral changes. Travel member's interaction levels were further revealed to strengthen the magnitudes of the proposed relationships.

Recently, helping behavior has been utilized to examine the interactions between community members (e.g., Chu, 2009; Stümer, Snyder, & Omoto, 2005; Stümer, Snyder, Kropp, & Siem, 2006; Thomas, McGarty & Mavor, 2009). Generally speaking, helping behavior may be understood as a form of prosocial behavior (Betancourt, 1990), as well as an act performed voluntarily to help someone else when there is no expectation of receiving a reward of any form (Chu, 2009). While in the context of online communities, helping behavior may be interpreted as "comprising of information sharing in response to request for assistance"(Chu, 2009, p. 281). It is noted that this information sharing and exchanging processes not only encourages the reciprocity between members (Raymond, 2003), but also serves as active contributions to the online community constructions (Chu, 2009). Moreover, it is suggested that examining members' online behavior may

lead to a greater understanding of the nature of online interaction and how it may be optimized in different contexts (Herring, 2004). Although previous studies have acknowledged that understanding online helping behavior has many potential benefits, little empirical research has been done in the context of online travel communities.

Understanding Individual Level Helping Behavior

Normative Explanations

The various motivations for offering help have been a subject of research in the field of social psychology from the 1970s to early 1990s. It is noticeable that norms, which “influence behavior through the anticipation of sanctions (positive and/or negative) in response to a line of behavior to which the norms are perceived to apply” (Schwartz, 1973, p. 351), have been regarded as one of the earliest acceptable explanations. Wilke and Lanzetta (1970), for example, use social exchange theory to demonstrate how social norms, specifically experiences of prior helping, influence people’s subsequent helping behavior. In addition, Schwartz (1973) presents two basic types of normative explanations. By examining different situational conditions, the first type of normative explanation is to examine “when...norms have an impact on people’s behavior” (Schwartz, 1973, p. 351). The second type is to analyze the personal social norms by examining the individual differences in similar situations. Measurements of content, intensity and scope were applied as instruments in the second type of studies (Schwartz, 1973).

However, the normative explanations have received some criticisms. Schwartz (1973) presents four sets of criticisms pointing to the disadvantages of these normative

explanations. First, it is argued that norms, which mostly serve intrinsically, are vague and too general in that they fail to concretely and precisely demonstrate the mechanism accounting for behaviors in different situations. Second, it is difficult to construct a constant measurement scale in norms since it is hard to distinguish functions of each norm independently. Third, the existence of intrinsic contradiction among different norms may be confusing or lead to some misunderstandings in interpreting the experiment results. Fourth, the discrepancies between one's mental planning process and actual behavior may lessen the reliability of these normative explanations. After conducting an empirical research, Schwartz (1973) proposes an explanation: a better understanding of the norms' influence on the behavior may be attained if specific instruction on the functions of each norm-predicator in different situations are identified and provided distinctively in advance.

Attribution Approach

The attribution approach has been widely used in a number of studies to understand the helping behavior. Weiner's (1980) attributional model of helping behavior states that people's helping behavior is raised through an attribution-affect-action motivational sequence. Through two stimulations experiments, Weiner (1980) further suggests that attributions determine our feelings and feelings direct our behaviors. For example, if attribution of a person's need is a controllable cause, then anger will be elicited, which inhibits helping. If the cause of person's need for help is uncontrollable, sympathy is elicited, which increases the probability of helping.

Although the attributional approach was once regarded as lacking scientific support (Schwartz, 1973), Schmidt and Weiner (1988) replicated this model with path-analytic methodology and confirmed the reliability and usefulness of the attribution-affect-action model. Also, replications of the model in a diversity of contexts, such as conflict situations (Betancourt & Blair, 1992), and nursing environments (Fopma-Loy & Austin, 1997), lend support to its reliability in explaining the helping behavior.

Empathy Approach

Apart from the normative explanations and the attributional approach, some scholars (Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley & Birch, 1981; Eisenberg, Miller, Schaller, Fabes, Fruliz, Shell & Shea, 1989; Schroeder, Fovidio, Sibicky, Matthews & Allen, 1988) have adopted an empathy approach to analyze helping behavior. Instead of merely observing specific situations or events that may encourage an occurrence of help, this research focuses on the motivations underlying helping behavior. More specifically, it explores the kind of motivation produced by the empathic concern--an egoistic motivation reducing one's own distress or an altruistic motivation reducing another person's distress (Schroeder et al., 1988). The primary scope of these studies is to look at the role of various emotional responses in helping behavior motivations (Batson et al., 1981).

Batson and Coke (1981) constructed an empathy-altruism model to explain helping behavior and argue that personal distress and empathic concern, two emotional reactions produced by witnessing another person in need, result in two different motivations in offering help: an egoistic desire, which would reduce self-distress prompted by the

personal distress feeling, and an altruistic desire, which would reduce distress of that person in need. Baston and Coke (1981) and Baston et al. (1981) further point out that different emotional patterns generate different outcomes regarding the difficulty of escape in that specific situation. Evidence supporting the empathy-altruism model was found in several replicated experiments testing emotional reactions in different settings (Schroeder et al., 1988).

As an extension of this research, numerous resulting studies attempted to analyze the existence of altruistic personality as well as the role of sympathy and altruistic personality traits in helping (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 1989). Batson and his colleagues (Batson et al., 1981) have suggested that empathy leads to altruistic motivations to help, based on their findings of two experiments that focus on female college students. Eisenberg and colleagues (Eisenberg et al., 1989), in their reexamination of the altruistic personality, prove that both dispositional and situational self-reported sympathy are positively related to helping, as are other personality indices viewed as altruistic characteristic reflections.

Attribution-Empathy Model of Helping Behavior

Considering the overlaps of the attribution approach and empathy approach, Betancourt (1990) constructed an attribution-empathy model that integrates both attribution and empathy approaches (see Figure 2.1). According to Betancourt (1990), helping behavior (H) may be affected by casual attributions for a victim's need (A) or the perspective (P). Perceived controllability (C) of the cause may influence the attributional process (path A-C-H) and the potential helpers may also be affected by their empathic

emotions (EE) (path A-C-EE-H). The effect of perspective is mediated by empathic emotions (path P-EE-H) and perceptions of controllability of causes (path P-C-H and/or path P-C-EE-H).

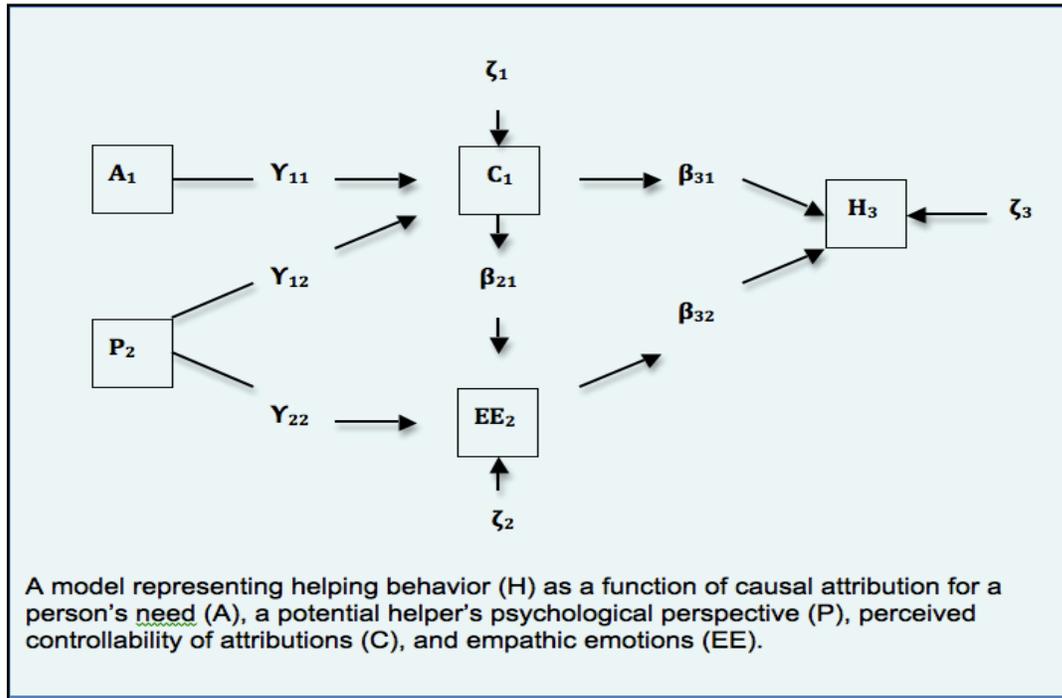


Figure 2.1. Attribution-Empathy Model of Helping Behavior
Source: Betancourt (1990)

Understanding the Group-Level Helping Behavior

Social psychologists widely accept that people's social behaviors may be affected by group memberships. Numerous research has already attempted to explain the helping behavior from either an individual level or an interpersonal level, and the majority of them try to explain the helping behaviors by the role of individual dispositions (Sturmer, Snyder & Omoto, 2005). However, the links between the prosocial behaviors and group memberships are neglected in these studies, and only recently have researchers begun to

systematically study the role of group memberships in helping behaviors (Stumer et al., 2005). Community membership fosters a sense of belonging for an individual and has emotional and evaluative significance (Dholakia et al., 2004). As a result, emotional social identity generates the in-group loyalty and citizenship behaviors, and the evaluative social identity is constructed by the group-based or collective self-esteem that is conducted through group activities (Dholakia et al., 2004).

Recently, Thomas, McGarty and Mavor (2009) developed a new framework to explain the transforming “apathy into movement” by exploring the ways emotions shape group processes to transform advantaged groups’ apathy into positive prosocial actions (see Figure 2.2). In this framework, it was assumed that emotions shape group process to produce action strategies that emphasize either social cohesion or social exchanges, and that social identity was one of the important elements in this exchange process (Thomas et al., 2005).

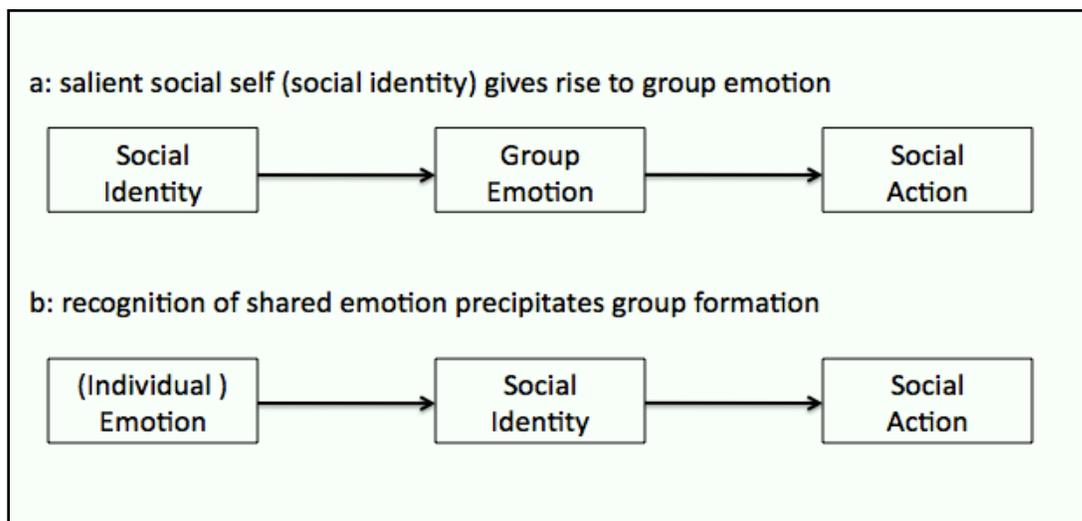


Figure 2.2. A Dynamic Causal Model of Social Identity and Group Emotion
 Source: Thomas, McGarty and Mavor (2009)

Similar findings are found in other research studying the role of group membership in empathy-motivated helping behaviors. Stumer, Snyder and Omoto (2005) present two laboratory experiments to test the role of empathy in group-level helping behaviors. The results indicate that the role of empathy in helping would be strengthened if the helper and helpee share a similar group membership, and it is further argued that two distinct but related causing factors for helping behaviors could be identified as the empathy and interpersonal oneness (Stuimer et al., 2005). In this sense, social identity could be interpreted as one of the core dimensions reflecting the impacts of group membership (Thomas et al., 2009).

Conceptual Framework

From the literature review, it may be concluded that: First, there are numerous studies that have been devoted to studying the guest-host relationship. However, a majority of the empirical research in this field was conducted on-site while the new venue of online environment is missing; Second, with the increasing popularity of online communities, it appears to be essential to understand members' active participations and interactions. In this sense, members' helping behavior may be regarded as a new perspective to examine these online interaction, as well as contributions to the online communities. However, in the field of tourism, little research has been conducted on members' helping behavior in online travel communities; Third, in the field of social psychology, both the attribution-empathy model and group-helping model may serve as useful explanations to understand people's helping behavior. However, the adaptabilities of these two models in the environment of online communities have not yet been tested.

Based on the literature, a conceptual framework (see Figure 2.3) was proposed integrating the attribution-empathy model of helping behavior and the group-helping model.

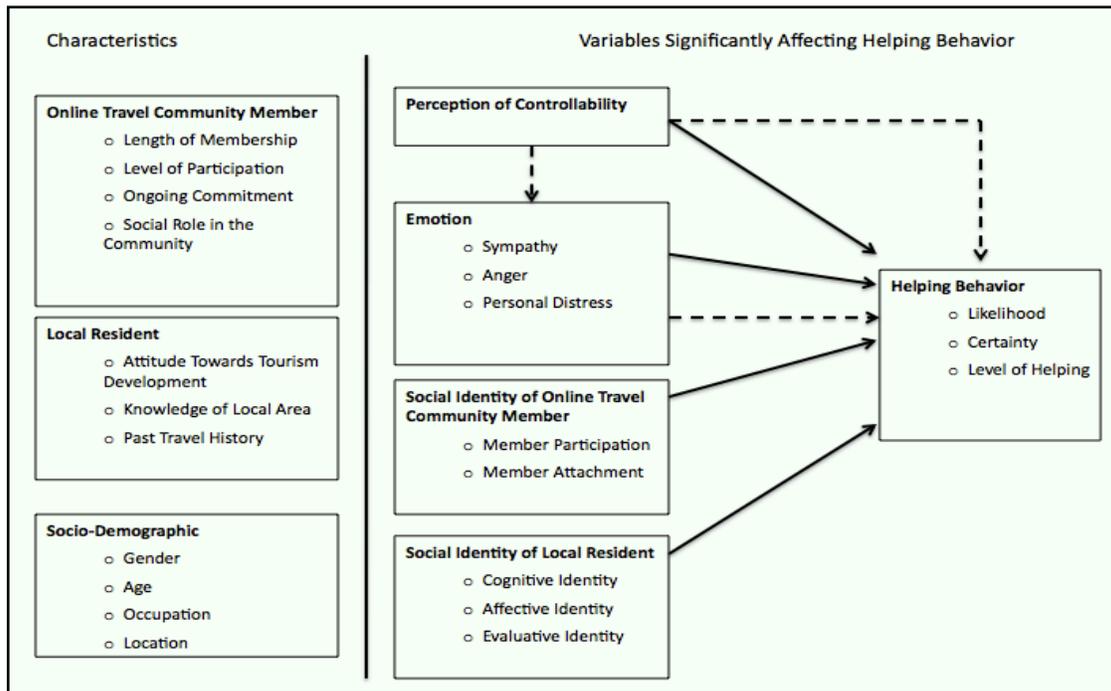


Figure 2.3 Conceptual Framework

According to Loy and Austin (1997), attribution theory is concerned with two perspectives: “perception of causality and characteristics that are assigned to people or objects”(p. 210). The causality process is taken into account in the helping model and reflected through the perception of controllability (Schmidt & Weinier, 1988). Therefore, in the presented conceptual framework, characteristics of research subjects are presented but not included in the analysis process.

Three factors are used to describe the characteristics of the research subjects on the left side of the framework. First, they are labeled as online travel community

members. As suggested by Wang and Fesenmaier (2004a), the nature of online travel community member participation may be reflected through two dimensions: the amount of time members devote to community activities and the extent to which members interact actively with other members. Thus, the average amount of time a member spends in the community and the social role of the community (i.e., tourist, mingler, devotee, or insider) are used to measure the interaction with other members. Type of membership (i.e., single membership, or multiple membership) is used to measure their ongoing commitment to the community. Second, these members undertook the role of local resident. As reported earlier, when examining the host-guest relationships in tourism destinations, local residents' attitude towards tourism development and their past travel history serve as two important elements, and are therefore included in this section. Third, previous research has found that the socioeconomical factors of age, gender, and length of residency are significantly related to local residents' attitudes (Harrill, 2004); therefore, these three factors, along with other social demographic variables, are included as descriptions of their characteristics.

A testable model is provided on the right side of the conceptual framework and aims to explain the helping behavior. The first sub-model is extracted from the attribution-empathy model. To start with, it is assumed that the influence of attribution is mediated by the perceived controllability of the cause (attributional process – perceived controllability – helping behavior) and the empathic emotions experienced by the potential helpers (perceived controllability – empathic emotions – helping behavior). Specifically, if the perception of the cause of the helping situation is controllable, then the

potential helper would feel sympathy and be more likely to help; if the perception of cause is uncontrollable, then the potential would feel angry, which inhibits the helping behavior (Schmit & Weiner, 1988). Therefore, variables of perceived controllability (anger and sympathy) are listed. Next, the influence of empathy was generally found to be significantly related to helping behavior. In this research, empathic perspective is defined consistently with Betancourt's (1990), which conceives the empathetic emotions as the "result of adopting an observational set and is characterized by both apprehension of the other's emotional state and one's experience of particular affective reactions"(p. 575). Empathic emotions and distress emotions are classified as the main affective reactions associated with induced empathy (Betancourt, 1990). Although some differences exist between sympathy and empathy, the empathic emotions and sympathy in this study share the same measurement and are labeled as Sympathy. Also, considering the nature of affective reactions, sympathy, anger, and personal distress are listed under the category of Emotion.

Within the perspective of the group-helping model, it is suggested that social identity serves as one of the essential elements that drive the group level prosocial behavior (Thomas et al., 2009). Two constructs were utilized to examine social identities. The first construct was to measure social identity as online travel community members. According to Qu & Lee (2011), two dimensions that reflect online social identity are member participation in the community and attachment to the community. The other construct adopted in this research was to examine social identity as a local resident. According to Dholakia et al (2004), social identity represents an individual's self-

representation within the group and may be measured from three dimensions: cognitive, affective and evaluative. Based on the literature, two scales were used to test social identities in regular communities and online travel communities. Therefore, in this research, these two different scales were adopted.

Additionally, the dashed lines in the conceptual framework represent the mediating effects of perceived controllability (attributional process – perceived controllability – helping behavior) and emotions (perceived controllability – emotions – helping behavior). Other lines represent the assumed casual relationship between the variables (i.e., perceived controllability, emotions, social identity of online travel community member, social identity of local resident) and helping behavior.

Model Variables

As presented in the conceptual framework, helping behavior is the dependent variable in this research, and the independent variables are perception of controllability, emotions and social identities (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1

Main Constructs and Measurements

Variable	Type	Measurement
Helping Behavior	Dependent Variable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likelihood • Certainty • Level of Helping
Perception of Controllability	Independent Variable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree of Perceived Controllability
Emotions	Independent Variable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sympathy • Anger • Personal Distress
Social Identity of Online Travel Community Member	Independent Variable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member Participation • Member Attachment
Social Identity of Local Resident	Independent Variable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive Identity • Affective Identity • Evaluative Identity

Dependent Variable

1) **Helping Behavior:** a form of prosocial behavior that is independent of its altruistic or egoistic nature (Betancourt, 1990), as well as an act performed voluntarily to help someone else when there is no expectation of receiving a reward of any form (Talor-Greene, 1997). In Batson's (1990) study, three dimensions are used to measure the helping behavior: the likelihood of offering help, certainty of offering help and the actual helping behavior. Similar to Betancourt's (1990) study, three measurements of the helping behavior are included as follows:

- a. *Likelihood of offering help*—how likely members would like to offer help to potential tourists in the online travel community.
- b. *Certainty of offering help*—how certain members would like to offer help to potential tourists in the online travel community.
- c. *Different levels of helping behavior*—how much help members would like to offer to potential tourists in the online travel community ranging from “ignore” to “offering both online and offline help.”

Independent Variables

1) Perception of Controllability – how much a participant perceives the cause to be subject to volitional control or influence by the help request (Betancourt, 1990).

Perceived controllability is an important mediating variable as it theoretically determines the emotional reaction and the possibility of helping (Betancourt, 1990).

The measurement of perception of controllability is used as follows:

- a. *Degree of personal controllability*—if members see other members asking for help in the online travel community, how much controllability do members perceive from the other member’s situation.

2) Emotions—an affective state that arises spontaneously rather than through conscious effort and is often accompanied by physiological changes. In Weiner’s (1983) study, it is suggested that a potential helper will search the cause of need for aid when help is requested. As a result, the emotion of anger is generated if there is explicit or implicit pressure to provide assistance when the need for aid is perceived as controllable.

The emotion of sympathy would be elicited if the cause of the need for aid is perceived as uncontrollable. In other words, the emotion of anger and sympathy may help reflect the potential helpers' perception of need for aid as well as reveal potential helpers' intention of providing helps. Meanwhile, Batson and Coke (1981) also point out that two different emotions would be produced when a person witnesses another person in need. These two emotions of personal distress and empathic concern may lead to two qualitatively distinct motivations to help. However, considering the similarities between sympathy and empathic emotions, the same measurement is used to examine these two items. Due to the nature of exploratory study, the three items measuring sympathetic/empathic emotions, have different concentrations. The first item is to ask how much sympathy members would feel for the help requester, while the next two items are to ask how sorry or concerned they feel for the help requester. It is noticeable that the next two items were more intense at a dispositional perspective.

- a. *Sympathy*—members were asked how sympathetic, sorry and concerned they would feel if saw other members asking for help in the online travel community.
- b. *Anger*—members were asked how angry, annoyed and irritated they would feel if saw other members asking for help in the online travel community.
- c. *Personal Distress*—members were asked how worried or relieved they would feel if saw other members asking for help in the online travel community.

3) Social Identity— Social identity captures the main aspects of the individual's identification with the group in the sense that the person comes to view himself/herself as a member of the community, as “belonging” to it (Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo, 2004).

- a. *Social Identity of the Online Travel Community Member*— scale measuring the social identity of the online travel community member, obtained from Qu & Lee's study (2011) on travellers' social identification and membership behaviours in online travel community. Two dimensions adopted in the research are the member participation in the community and their attachment to the community.
- b. *Social Identity of Local Resident*— according to Dholakia et al. (2004), the social identity in certain groups confer a shared or collective representation of who is, and involves cognitive, affective and evaluative components. Thus, cognitive identity, affective identity and evaluative identity are specially examined in this study.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

This chapter describes the methods used in this study. Brief introductions of the study site, approach to the participant recruitment and pre-test information are provided in the next section. Lastly, information about the data collection procedure and the analysis method are also included in the remainder of this chapter.

Study Site

The CouchSurfing community (www.couchsurfing.org) is a “worldwide network for making connections between travelers and the local communities they visit” (CS Org, 2012). Established in 1999, CouchSurfing.com has become the largest online travel community, with millions of members in over 230 countries and territories around the world (Lauterbach, Truong, Snah & Adamic, 2009). As a non-profit organization, the CouchSurfing community aims to construct meaningful connections with the people and places they encounter. This network is a collection of people around the world who are willing to be guests and hosts in new environments.

Following are basic functions of the CouchSurfing community website:

- 1) By participating in this website, each user may construct their own profile webpage that includes their basic information, such as location, gender, occupation, hobbies, favourite activities and life philosophies.
- 2) Based on a variety of themes, such as places, people, idea and sport, the CouchSurfing community provides the service of discussion groups.

Members are able to join the groups according to individual interest and have discussions with other members.

- 3) Each member may obtain the community's activity information through CouchSurfing's e-mail notification system.
- 4) It is encouraged to build up a physical connection between the host residing in a desired location and the potential visitor in the community. When logged in, notifications of potential visitors and nearby activities are shown to each member in regard to their respective geographical location.

Couchsurfing .com was selected as the study site for the following reasons:

- 1) CouchSurfing community is one of the Internet's most influential travel communities and contains a large number of members (Lauterbach et al., 2009).
- 2) The CouchSurfing network is a collection of people around the world who are willing to be guests and hosts in new environments. Interaction between host and guest is thoroughly encouraged in the community.
- 3) Local residents' helping behaviour in online travel communities may be reflected through different levels of interactions between members. While members initially interact through virtual message, the core purpose of this network is an affordance of physical interaction. The extension of a social network provides a broader horizon for this study.

Participation Recruitment

The participants of this research were selected through a systematic sampling procedure of members who reside in the Southeastern United States. With a confidence level of .95 and a population of 21,972 people, the expected sample size was calculated as 378 people. The sample was extracted from the population of CouchSurfing members who live in the Southeastern United States. By searching locations of different states, the list of members was displayed on the webpage. From a random starting member, a message was sent to invite the member to participate in the study with an interval of 12 people ($378/21,972$). Using this procedure, each element in the population has a known and equal probability of selection. Based on the location dispersion in the CouchSurfing community, an expected sample was constructed (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1

Population of CouchSurfing Community Members Located in the Southeastern United States

Region	Population	Expected Sample Size	Percentage
Alabama (AL)	677	12	3.1
Arkansas (AK)	500	9	2.3
Florida (FL)	6177	106	28.1
Georgia (GA)	2665	46	12.1
Louisiana (LA)	1278	22	5.8
Maryland (MD)	1910	33	8.7
Mississippi (MS)	173	3	0.8
North Carolina (NC)	3054	53	13.9
South Carolina (SC)	935	16	4.3
Tennessee (TN)	1603	28	7.3
Virginia (VA)	2690	46	12.2
West Virginia (WV)	310	5	1.4
Total	21972	378	100.0

Following approval by the CouchSurfing organization, the author registered as a member and brief descriptions of the research project were displayed on the author's profile page. In this way, the author was able to invite other members to participate in the research using the community message system. Invitation letters (see Appendix A) were sent to each systematically selected member along with a link to the online survey.

Pre-test Information

The pre-test was conducted in the CouchSurfing online travel community from March 14, 2012 to March 23, 2012. A total of 100 subjects were systematically selected.

Thirty-six people took part in the survey and 29 people completed the entire questionnaire. The adjusted response rate was 29.0%, which is slightly higher than the general response rate of a web-based survey of 26.0% (Hamilton, 2009).

The pre-test was conducted to: (1) test the functionality of the online survey system; (2) ensure the clarity and understandability of the questionnaire; (3) calculate the response rate for the full survey; (4) examine the length to complete the questionnaire and to (5) test the reliability of the scales used to measure the variables.

The result of the pre-test indicated that both the sampling method and the online survey system were functional. In addition, the approximated response rate was 29.0% and the average length of time to complete the survey was 9.51 minutes. The majority of the questionnaire was clear and understandable. However, some participants reported that the term “helping behavior” was somewhat confusing. Thus, examples of the helping behavior were added along with the question in the adjusted questionnaire.

In addition, the reliability of the scales was tested using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient to measure the internal consistency or reliability of a scale. George and Mallery (2003) provide the following rules of thumb: “ $\geq .90$ -Excellent, $\geq .80$ -good, $\geq .70$ -acceptable, $\geq .60$ -questionable, $\geq .50$ -poor, and $< .50$ -unacceptable” (p. 231). While a high value for Cronbach’s alpha indicates good internal consistency of the items in the scale, it does not mean that the scale is one-dimension. The outcome (See Table 3.2) indicates that all the scales are acceptable ($\geq .70$), except the scale measuring sympathy ($\alpha = 0.67$), helping behavior ($\alpha=0.65$) and member participation ($\alpha=0.40$). However, due to the nature of exploratory study, scale measuring sympathy ($\alpha=0.67$) and helping

behavior ($\alpha=0.65$) were still adopted in this research. For the member participation scale, the item “I often observe community discussion without participation” was changed to “I often observe community discussions.”

Table 3.2
Pre-Test Results of Scale Reliability

Variable	Mean	Number of Items	Cronbach's α
Perception of Controllability	2.58	3	0.85
Anger	1.49	3	0.95
Sympathy	2.93	3	0.67
Personal Distress	3.23	3	0.85
CouchSurfing Member Participation	3.13	3	0.40
CouchSurfing Member Attachment	3.79	4	0.93
Helping Behavior	3.23	3	0.65
Cognitive Social Identity of Local Resident	5.50	2	0.97
Affective Social Identity of Local Resident	5.55	2	0.92
Evaluative Social Identity of Local Resident	5.21	2	0.91

Data Collection Procedure

Based on the results of the pre-test, a full version of the questionnaire (see Appendix B) was constructed and used in the online survey. The formal study was conducted from April 1, 2012, to April 30, 2012.

It was suggested that the number of contacts, personalized contacts and precontacts were the factors most associated with higher response rates in the web-based

surveys (Cook, Heath & Thompson, 2000). Therefore, in the formal study, the first message of invitation letters (see Appendix A) were sent from April 1, 2012 to April 15, 2012; the second message of reminders (see Appendix C) were sent from April 16, 2012 to April 30, 2012; and the last messages of thank-you notes as well as a non-response short survey (see Appendix D) were sent from May 1, 2012 to May 10, 2012.

Analysis

The raw data was obtained from the SurveyMonkey electronic software (www.surveymonkey.com) and downloaded into a SPSS file. The analysis of data was completed using SPSS 20.0 statistical package and consisted of three steps. First, a data screening process was conducted to ensure the purity of the data. Second, descriptive analyses were run to profile the participants. Third, hypotheses were tested in the study using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) analysis.

Table 3.3

Research Timeline

Task	Start Date	End Date
Pre-Test	3/14/12	3/22/12
Invitation Letter	4/1/12	4/16/12
Reminder	4/15/12	4/30/12
Thank-you Note/Non-Response		
Check Invitation	5/1/12	5/11/12

CHAPTER FOUR

DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

The descriptive results of the study are presented in four sections. The first section presents the response rate and data screening process. The second section presents the profile of the respondents, including the sample distribution, socio-demographic charters, online community activities and the past travel history. The third section presents results of non-response bias-check. The fourth section examines the reliability of measurement scales.

Response Rate

A total of 1,289 surveys were sent out to systematically selected CouchSurfing community members residing in the Southeastern United States to participate in the study. Five members declined to fill out the survey. Three-hundred-ninety-five people participated in the research and 377 people completed the entire questionnaire. The response rate was 30.8% $(395/1289-5)$ and the adjusted response rate was 29.5% $(379/1289-5)$. The response rate was consistent with the pre-test result (29.0%).

Data Screening

In order to obtain an accurate analysis on the data set, certain data checks were completed on the data prior to the formal analysis. Since the raw data was obtained from the SurveyMonkey electronic software (www.surveymonkey.com), the accuracy of data entry could be ensured. Missing values and variable normality were checked. Considering the use of systematic sampling procedure, the observed sample distribution was also examined.

The missing value analysis showed that none of the variable items had missing values exceeding 5%; however, 6.3% ($n=24$) of the subjects had missing values. The pattern of the missing value is found to be random (MCAR test non-significant, $\chi^2(3422, N = 397) = 1793.39, p = 1.00$) and expectation-maximization (EM) technique was utilized to replace the missing value. EM could help “avoiding impossible matrices, avoiding over fitting and producing realistic estimates of variance” (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001, p. 63).

Tests of skewness and kurtosis were run on the variables using SPSS. Skewness was to test the assumption of normal distribution, which should be within the range ± 1 . Kurtosis was to test the assumption of whether or not the data is normally distributed, and the Kurtosis value should be within range ± 3 . As indicated in Table 4.1, all of the measures were valid in this study except for the measure of “anger.” A further investigation revealed that for the three items measuring the emotion of anger (“I would feel annoyed by that person”; “I would feel irritated by that person”; and “I would feel aggravated for that person”), the majority (more than 80%) of the respondents checked the lowest options on those scales. This result led to a highly skewed distribution with very low variability. However, considering the importance of this variable, it was included in the analysis. In addition, two multivariate outliers were detected through the Mahalanobis distance metric ($p < .001$), and they were removed, which left 377 cases for analysis.

Table 4.1

Skewness and Kurtosis Test Results for Measurements

Measure	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Helping Behavior	3.48	0.79	-0.23	-0.56
Perceived Controllability	3.00	0.75	-0.21	0.18
Sympathy	2.73	0.88	0.29	-0.61
Anger	4.72	0.65	-2.71	6.87
Personal Distress	3.18	0.89	-0.12	-0.65
Member Participation	3.24	0.84	-0.22	-0.27
Member Attachment	3.86	0.79	-0.66	0.55
Cognitive Identity of Local Resident	5.18	1.54	-0.89	0.11
Affective Identity of Local Resident	5.01	1.60	-0.77	-0.12
Evaluative Identity of Local Resident	4.81	1.52	-0.53	-0.29

Profile of Respondents

Sample Distribution

As mentioned, the systematic sampling procedure adopted in this research was constructed based on the geographic distribution of Southeastern members and an expected sample frame was proposed. The Wald–Wolfowitz test and Kolmogorov-Smirnov test were run to test the distribution of the observed sampling (see Table 4.2). The Wald-Wolfowitz test is a non-parametric statistical test used to test if the elements of the sequences are mutually independent, and the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test is to test if two data sets differ significantly. The results of the test indicate that the distribution of the expected sample is consistent with the observed one.

Table 4.2

Sample Distribution Test Summary

	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.	Decision
1	The distribution of VAR00001 is the same across categories of VAR00002	Independent-Samples Wald-Wolfowitz Runs Test	0.97	Retain the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of VAR00001 is the same across categoris of VAR00002	Independent-Samples Kolmogrov-Smimov Test	1.00	Retain the null hypothesis.

Notes: VAR00001=sampling distribution; VAR00002= group (1=expected sample distribution, 2= observed sample distribution)

Member Activities in CouchSurfing Online Travel Community

As indicated in Table 4.3, participants were asked several questions about their membership in the CouchSurfing community, such as length of membership, amount of time spent in the community, and classification of personal roles in the community.

Table 4.3

Member Activities in CouchSurfing Online Travel Community

Item		N	%
Length of Membership	Less than 1 year	110	29.2
	1-2 years	94	24.9
	3-5 years	137	36.3
	More than 5 years	33	9.6
Total		377	100.0
Length of Time Participated in the CouchSurfing Community Website	Less than 1 hour/week	242	64.3
	1-5 hours/week	117	31.0
	More than 5 hours/week	18	4.8
Total		377	100.0
^a Type of Activities in the CouchSurfing Community Website	Looking for host to stay with	211	53.4
	Looking for travellers to host	184	46.6
	Looking for information about local events	152	38.5
	Looking for locals to hang out with	140	35.4
	Looking for travellers to meet	128	32.4
	Provide advices for other members	98	24.8
	Looking for trip advice	85	21.5
	Share travel experience	60	15.2
	Meeting other members online	34	8.6
Single Membership of CouchSurfing	Yes	293	78.3
	No	81	21.7
Total		374	100.0

Table 4.3 (Continued)

Roles in the CouchSurfing	Tourist	124	33.0
Community	Mingler	178	47.3
	Devotee	59	15.7
	Insider	15	4.0
Total		376	100.0

^aMultiple-option question, and the total responding rate might be over 100%

When asked about the length of the membership in CouchSurfing community, over one third (36.3%) of the respondents claimed that they have been members of the CouchSurfing community for 3-5 years; about three out of ten (29.2%) were new members, belonging for less than 1 year; about a quarter (24.9%) have been members 1-2 years. A small group of participants (9.6%) were experienced members who have belonged for more than 5 years.

When asked about the average amount of time devoted to the CouchSurfing community website per week, about two thirds (64.2%) indicated that they spend less than one hour per week, three out of ten (31.0%) spend one to five hours per week, and very few (4.8%) spend more than five hours on the website per week.

When asked about the main activities in which they participated on the CouchSurfing online travel community, about half of the respondents reported that they were either looking for hosts with whom to stay (53.6%) or to looking for travelers to host (46.6%). About four out of ten (38.5%) of the respondents were looking for information about local events and about one third were either looking for locals with whom to hang out (35.4%) or looking for travellers to meet (32.4%). A quarter (24.8%) of the participants were open to providing advices for other members and about one fifth

(21.5%) of the participants were looking for trip advices. In addition, a small amount of participants spent time sharing their travel experiences (15.2%) or meeting other members online (8.6%).

Finally, based on categories developed by Wang and Fesenmaier (2004), participants were asked to classify themselves in the CouchSurfing community. About half (47.3%) categorized themselves as “Mingler,” or maintaining somewhat social ties with the group and sometimes contributing to the community. About one third (33.0%) of the respondents labeled themselves as “Tourist,” or lacking social ties with the group and seldom contributing to the community. About one fifth of the respondents viewed themselves as either “Devotee” (15.7%), or maintaining strong social ties with the group and often contributing to the community, or “Insider” (4.0%), maintaining very strong social and personal ties with the group and very actively contributing to the community.

Attitude Towards Tourism Development

As indicated in Table 4.4, about four out of ten of the respondents (42.0%) have lived in their current community for 1-5 years. About one fifth of them have lived in their current area for either more than 10 years (21.8%) or less than 1 year (21.5%). A small group of respondents (14.6%) have lived in their current community for 6-10 years.

Table 4.4

Results of Attitude Towards Tourism Development

Item		N	%
Length of residency in current community	Less than 1 year	81	21.7
	1-5 years	156	41.7
	6-10 years	55	14.7
	More than 10 years	82	21.9
Total		374	100.0
		^a Mean	Sd. Deviation
Attitude Towards Tourism Development	I am happy to see tourists coming to my community.	5.70	1.21
	I support tourism having a vital role in my community.	5.38	1.41
	Tourism industry plays a major economic role in my community.	4.57	2.04
	Tourism is one of the most important industries in my community.	4.45	1.00
	I personally benefit from tourism development in my community.	4.18	1.88

^aBased on a seven-point Likert scale, varying from 1=*Strongly Disagree* to 7=*Strongly Agree*

As a local resident, participants' attitude towards tourism development was also examined. A series of statements were presented based on a 7-point Likert-style scale (1=*Strongly Disagree*, 7=*Strongly Agree*). For the statement "Tourism is one of the most important industries in my community," about one fifth (21.8%) of the respondents strongly agreed, followed by a modest amount of respondents who either agreed (14.9%)

or somewhat agreed (15.4%). The rest of the respondents were either neutral (13.8%), somewhat disagreed (9.8%), disagreed (16.5%) or strongly disagreed (7.7%).

For the statement “Tourism industry plays a major economic role in my community,” about a quarter (25.1%) of the respondents strongly agreed, followed by a modest amount of respondents who either agreed (15.8%), disagreed (15.8%), somewhat agreed (14.4%), were neutral (12.3%), somewhat disagreed (8.6%) or strongly disagreed (8.0%).

For the statement “I am happy to see tourists coming to my community,” about one third (36.5%) of the respondents agreed, followed by respondents who strongly agreed (28.3%), somewhat agreed (19.2%), were neutral (11.7%), somewhat disagreed (8.3%), disagreed (5.3%) or strongly disagreed (4.3%).

For the statement “I support tourism having a vital role in my community,” nearly three out of ten (31.2%) respondents agreed. About a quarter (23.7%) strongly agreed, about one fifth (20.3%) somewhat agreed, and about a quarter (24.8%) were neutral, followed by a small group of respondents who somewhat disagreed (8.3%), disagreed (5.3%) or strongly disagreed (1.6%).

For the statement “I personally benefit from tourism development in my community,” it was found that about one fifth (22.1%) were neutral, while about half of respondents somewhat agreed (18.6%), agreed (13.0%) or strongly agreed (13.8%). The rest strongly disagreed (11.4%), disagreed (12.8%) and somewhat disagreed (8.2%).

Past Travel History

With respect to the past travel history, as indicated in Table 4.5, in the past two years, about two thirds (61.8%) of the respondents have taken more than 15 domestic trips, about three out of ten (29.9%) respondents have taken 6-15 domestic trips, and only a few (7.5%) of them have taken less than five trips within the United States. Meanwhile, over one half of the respondents (50.7%) reported that they have taken less than five international trips in the past two years, and about one fifth (20.9%) have taken more than five international trips. The remaining (28.4%) respondents have not travelled outside United States in the past two years.

Table 4.5

Past Travel History

Variable		<i>N</i>	%
Domestic Trips	Less than 5 trips	28	7.5
	6-15 trips	112	29.9
	More than 15 trips	231	61.8
Total		371	100
International Trips	None	106	28.4
	1-5 trips	189	50.7
	More than 5 trips	78	20.9
Total		373	100.0

Socio-Demographic Characters

As Table 4.5 indicates, males comprised 52.9% of the respondents and females made up 47.1% of them. The average age of respondents was 32 years old with a standard deviation of 12. The median was 28 years old. The age category of 25-34 formed half of the responses (42.7%), followed by the age category of 18-25 (30.2%). Together they made up 72.9% of the total respondents, followed by the age categories of 35-44 (10.4%), 45-54 (9.5%) and 55-64 (5.1%). The oldest individuals, who were over 65 years old, made up the smallest group of participants (2.1%).

Table 4.6

Socio-Demographic Charters of Respondents

Variable		<i>N</i>	%	Mean	Sd.Deviation
Gender					
	Male	198	52.5		
	Female	178	47.2		
Age					
				31.93	11.80
	18-24	114	30.2		
	25-34	161	42.7		
	35-44	39	10.4		
	45-54	36	9.5		
	55-64	20	5.1		
	65 and above	8	2.1		
Education					
	Some high school or less	1	0.3		
	High school graduate	50	13.2		
	College/University graduate	198	52.2		
	Graduate/postgraduate	130	34.3		
Occupation					
	Student	102	27.0		
	Full-time worker	218	57.7		
	Part-time worker	37	9.8		
	Unemployed	11	2.9		
	Retired	10	2.6		

With regard to education, the majority of respondents (86.5%) were well educated; most participants either had graduated from college/university (52.2%) or graduate school (34.3%). A modest amount of individuals had graduated from high school (13.2%) and very few (0.3%) had education from high school or less.

About six out of ten (57.7%) of the respondents were employed full-time; over a quarter (27.0%) were students. The remaining respondents were employed part-time (9.8%), unemployed (2.9%) or retired (2.6%).

The number of respondents by state is listed in Table 4.7. Individuals from Florida comprised around one fifth (22.7%) of the responses, followed by individuals from North Carolina (15.2%), Georgia (14.9%), and Maryland (10.7%). The remaining respondents were made up of small groups from West Virginia (8.3%), South Carolina (6.4%), Tennessee (6.4%), Alabama (4.5%), Arkansas (3.5%), Louisiana (3.5%), Virginia (2.4%) and Mississippi (1.6%)

Table 4.7

Respondents Listed by State

Region	<i>N</i>	%
Florida (FL)	85	22.7
North Carolina (NC)	57	15.2
Georgia (GA)	56	14.9
Maryland (MD)	40	10.7
West Virginia (WV)	31	8.3
South Carolina (SC)	24	6.4
Tennessee (TN)	24	6.4
Alabama (AL)	17	4.5
Arkansas (AK)	13	3.5
Louisiana (LA)	13	3.5
Virginia (VA)	9	2.4
Mississippi (MS)	6	1.6
Total	375	100.0

Testing for Non-Response Bias Check

Non-Response bias refers to the mistake one expects to make in estimating a population characteristic based on a sample of survey data in which, due to non-response, certain types of survey respondents are under-represented (Berg, 2002). In order to test the non-response bias, a non-response bias check survey was conducted. A two-page online survey was developed and an invitation message was sent to 150 randomly selected members (see Appendix E). Thirty-nine people filled out the short survey and the data collected from this short survey was used to compare with other respondents' data to test whether there were any biases caused by non-response (Deming, 1960).

There were nine items in the short survey. Three of them were demographic variables and the other six items were from the independent and dependent variables. The variables chosen from the socio-demographic characters were gender, education and occupation. The variable chosen from the dependent variables was the level of actual helping behavior. The variables chosen from the independent variables were self-classification of the role in CouchSurfing online community, perceive controllability, sympathy, anger and personal distress. All the emotion items were measured on a five point Liker-type scale ranging from 1="Strongly Disagree" to 5="Strongly Agree."

In chi-square tests, there should be at least five subjects in each cell. Therefore, each socio-demographic measure was recoded into two categories: male vs. female, college or higher degree vs. non-college or higher degree, full-time employed vs. non-full-time employed. The measure of self-identification in online travel community was recorded as tourist vs. non-tourist.

As indicated in table 4.8, the chi-square test results reveal that there are not significant differences between non-respondents and respondents for gender ($\chi^2=0.03, p=0.87$), education ($\chi^2=0.10, p=0.75$), occupation ($\chi^2=0.605, p=0.44$), and their self-identification of the role in the online travel community ($\chi^2=0.70, p=0.40$).

Table 4.8

Chi-Square Results of Comparison between Respondents and Non-Respondents

Variable	Respondents %	Non-Respondents %	Chi-Square	p
Gender	90.6	9.4	0.027	0.870
Education	90.6	9.4	0.103	0.748
Occupation	90.6	9.4	0.597	0.440
Role in the Online Travel Community	90.8	9.2	0.700	0.403

As indicated in Table 4.9, the t-test results suggest that there are no significant differences between respondents and non-respondents for helping behavior ($t=-0.51$, $p=0.61$) and sympathy ($t=0.37$, $p=0.71$). However, significant differences were found between these two groups for perceived controllability ($t=0.71$, $p<.01$), anger ($t=-3.98$, $p<.01$) and personal distress ($t=2.23$, $p=0.02$). If asked for help in the online travel communities, respondents would perceive the cause of the help requesters' situations as more controllable and would feel more annoyed with the help requester. Also, the non-respondents would feel much better after helping others than the respondents.

Table 4.9

T-test Results of Comparisons Between Respondents and Non-Respondents

	Respondents		Non-Respondents		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	^a M	SD	^a M	SD		
Perceived						
Controllability	3.30	1.00	2.61	0.91	0.71	<0.01
Sympathy	3.68	0.96	3.74	0.88	0.37	0.71
Anger	1.30	0.70	1.07	0.27	-3.98	<0.01
Personal Distress	3.86	1.04	4.25	0.78	2.23	0.02
Helping Behavior	3.27	1.10	2.07	1.24	-0.51	0.61

^aBased on a five-point Liker scale varying from 1="Not at all" to 5="Very much"

Reliability of the Measurement Scales

Prior to the hypotheses test, the reliability of the measurement scales was examined. Cronbach's alpha reliability test was used to determine how reliable a multi-item scale might be adaptable for a given population (see Table 4.9). Scales adopted in this research testing the perception of controllability, anger, sympathy, personal distress and helping behavior were obtained from Weiner's attribution-affect model of helping behavior (Weiner 1980; Reizenzein, 1986). Although the reliability coefficient for perception of controllability ($\alpha=0.65$) and personal distress ($\alpha=0.62$) were slightly lower than the general acceptance level of 0.7, due to the nature of exploratory study, they were still adopted in this research.

Table 4.10

Results of Measurement Scale Reliability Tests

Variable	^a Mean	Sd.Deviation	N of Items	Cronbach's α
Perception of Controllability	3.00	0.75	3	0.65
Anger	3.78	1.85	3	0.91
Sympathy	2.72	0.88	3	0.67
Empathy	2.26	1.11	2	0.80
Personal Distress	3.17	0.89	3	0.62
CouchSurfing Member				
Participation	3.24	0.84	3	0.74
CouchSurfing Member Social				
Attachment	3.86	0.49	4	0.89
Cognitive Social Identity of				
Local Resident	5.18	1.54	2	0.91
Affective Social Identity of Local				
Resident	5.01	1.60	2	0.91
Evaluative Social Identity of				
Local Resident	4.81	1.52	2	0.91
Helping Behavior	3.48	0.79	3	0.74

^aBased on a five-point Likert scale varying from 1="Not at all" to 5="Very much"

It is noteworthy that the original scale sympathy contained three items, while the test result indicates that Cronbach's α for this scale increased from 0.67 to 0.80 if the item "I feel sympathetic for that person" was moved. As reported earlier, because of the similarities as induced emotions, the same scale was used to measure both sympathy and empathy. However, the changes of Cronbach's α value suggest that a discrepancy exists between these two emotions. Previous studies on the subject of helping behavior have addressed the importance of sympathy in a diversity of situations (e.g., Weiner, 1980;

Betancourt, 1990; Stumer et al., 2005; Thomas et al., 2009). Recent studies on the host-guest relationship in tourism destinations also find that local residents often feel sympathetic for tourists (Woosnam, 2008). According to Eisenberg et al. (1989), although sympathy is regarded as positively related to prosocial behavior, the reaction of sympathy varies in situations of general trait and dispositions to react sympathetically. As a result, considering the importance of the variable and the differences between sympathy and empathy, the original sympathy construct was divided into two measurements; one was the single item “I feel sympathetic for that person” (labeled as sympathy) and the other two items (“I feel concerned about that person” and “I feel worried about that person”) were treated as the adjusted construct of sympathy, which were labeled as “empathy” and implied for a more intense dispositional empathetic concerns.

Further, it is suggested that for a member of the online community, their social identification of the membership may be reflected by their participation and their social attachment to the group (Lin, 1996; Wang & Fensimer, 2004; Qu & Lee, 2011). Thus, member participation and member social attachment were used as two dimensions to measure the social identity of CouchSurfing members. Both the member participation scale and the member social attachment scale were adopted from Qu & Lee’s (2011) study on travelers’ social identification and membership behaviors in online travel communities. The coefficients of the member participation ($\alpha=0.74$) and social attachment ($\alpha=0.89$) both reached the acceptance level of 0.7. In addition, the scale used in this research measuring the social identity of local resident was obtained from the social psychology studies. These studies point out three dimensions to measure the social

identities—cognitive identity, affective identity and evaluative identity (Dholakia, Bagozzia & Pear, 2004). Results of the scale reliability tests reveal that scales for cognitive identity ($\alpha=0.91$), affective identity ($\alpha=0.91$) and evaluative identity ($\alpha=0.91$) were reliable in this study. As an exploratory attempt, different scales were used in this research testing the social identity of online travel community member and the social identity of local residents. Both scales have been experimented in specific situations and testing results confirm the reliability of these scales.

CHAPTER FIVE

HYPOTHESES TESTING AND RESULTS

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section is to test the attribution-empathy part of the conceptual model. The second section is to test the social identities section of the conceptual framework. The third section is to test the conceptual framework and present corresponding hypotheses testing results. A modified conceptual framework has been presented in the end of this chapter.

Attribution-Empathy Model Testing

Two analyses processes are presented in this section: The first part is to test the casual relationship in the model (see H1a—H1e), and the second part is to test the relationship between the mediating variables and helping behaviour (see H1f—H1g).

The following analyses (H1a—H1e) examine the relationship between perceived controllability, emotions (sympathy, empathy, anger, personal distress) and helping behaviour using the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis. OLS regression is a useful tool for examining the relationship between two or more interval/ratio variables.

H1. *The attribution-empathy model significantly explains local residents' helping behaviour in online travel communities.*

H1a. *Online travel community members' perception of controllability negatively affects their helping behaviour.*

H1b. *Online travel community members' sympathy positively affects their helping behaviour.*

H1c. *Online travel community members' empathy positively affects their helping behaviour.*

H1d. *Online travel community members' anger negatively affects their helping behaviour.*

H1e. *Online travel community members' personal distress positively affects their helping behaviour.*

As indicated in Table 5.1, the overall model is significant ($F=19.8, p< .01$), and explains 21.0% of the total variance. Variables of sympathy ($\beta = .22, p< .01$) and personal distress ($\beta = .37, p< .01$) are positively related to helping behaviour. Empathy is negatively related ($\beta = -.14, p< .05$) to helping behaviour, while perceived controllability and anger are found not related to helping behaviour.

Table 5.1

Summary of OLS Regression Analysis Attribution-Empathy Model (N = 377)

Variable	Helping Behavior		
	<i>B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>p</i>
Perceived Controllability	0.001	0.051	0.981
Sympathy	0.175	0.046	<0.01
Empathy	-0.103	-0.143	0.028
Anger	0.109	0.066	0.099
Personal Distress	0.330	0.061	<0.01
R ²		0.221	
Adjusted R ²		0.210	
F		19.8	
<i>p</i>		<0.01	

In addition to the causal relationship, the original attribution-empathy model suggests that the perception of controllability and empathic emotions might undertake the role of mediating variables. Therefore, the mediating effect of perceived controllability and empathetic emotions (H1f—H1g) were examined using the approach proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986).

***H1f.** In online travel communities, the influence of attributions is mediated by members' perception of controllability to the helping behaviour.*

***H1g.** In online travel communities, perceived controllability of attributions is mediated by empathic emotions to the helping behaviour.*

A simple regression was run to examine the mediating effect of perceived controllability. As indicated in Table 5.2, there is not a significant relationship ($p=0.26$) between the perceived controllability and helping behaviour. According to MacKinnon, Fairchild & Fritz (2007), since the relationship between the mediating variable and outcome variable and the relationship between predictor and outcome variable were not existed, it may be concluded that mediation was not possible or likely to occur. Thus the result of testing hypotheses H1f and H1g were to reject.

Table 5.2
ANOVA Table of Mediating Effect Test

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	p
Regression	0.797	1	0.797	0.26
Residual	223.103	361	0.618	
Total	223.900	362		

A summary of the hypotheses testing results is presented in Table 5.3.

Hypothesis 1, claiming that the attribution-empathy model significantly explains local residents' helping behaviour in online travel communities, was accepted. Hypothesis 1a and Hypothesis 1c, which claim that online travel community members' perception of controllability and anger negatively affect their helping behavior, were rejected.

Hypothesis 1b, 1d and 1e, which claim that online travel community members' sympathy, empathic emotions, and personal distress positively affects their helping behavior, were accept. Lastly, Hypothesis 1f and 1g, claiming that in online travel communities, the influence of attributions is mediated by members' perception of controllability and empathic emotions to the helping behavior, were rejected.

Table 5.3

Results of Testing Hypotheses 1a-1f

Hypothesis	Mean	t-value	p-value	Result
1. Overall Model			<0.01	Accept
1a. Perceived Controllability	3.01	0.02	0.98	Reject
1b. Sympathy	3.68	3.81	<0.01	Accept
1c. Empathy	2.25	-2.21	0.03	Reject
1d. Anger	4.75	1.65	0.10	Reject
1e. Personal Distress	3.17	5.43	<0.01	Accept
1f. Mediating Effect of Perceived Controllability		1.29	0.26	Reject
1g. Mediating Effect of Empathic Emotions		1.29	0.26	Reject

Group Helping Model Testing

From a group level perspective, the following analyses (H2a—H2f) examine the relationship between the dual social identities of online travel community member and local resident. As presented earlier, member participation and attachment are two dimensions to measure the social identity of online travel community member. The three constructs to measure the social identity of local resident are cognitive identity, affective identity and evaluative identity.

***H2.** The overall model significantly explains members' helping behaviour in online travel communities.*

***H2a.** In online travel communities, members' participation to community activities positively affects their helping behaviour.*

***H2b.** In online travel communities, members' attachment to the community positively affects their helping behaviour.*

***H2c.** The cognitive identity of local resident positively affects members' helping behaviour in online travel communities.*

***H2d.** The affective identity of local resident positively affects members' helping behaviour in online travel communities.*

***H2d.** The evaluative identity of local resident positively affects members' helping behaviour in online travel communities.*

OLS regression analyses were employed to test hypotheses H2a-H2d. As indicated in Table 5.4, the overall model was significant ($F=12.33$, $p<0.01$) and explains for 14.0% of the variance. For the social identity of online travel community member, the

member participation ($\beta=0.15$, $p<. 01$) and member attachment ($\beta=0.18$, $p<. 05$) were significantly related to the helping behaviour. For the social identity of local resident, the evaluative identity ($\beta= 0.60$, $p<. 01$) was significant related to helping behaviour, while the cognitive identity and affective identity were found not related to the helping behaviour.

Table 5.4

Summary of OLS Regression Analysis Group-Helping Model (N = 377)

Variable	Helping Behavior		
	<i>B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>P</i>
Member Participation	0.153	0.164	0.005
Member Attachment	0.184	0.187	0.002
Cognitive Identity	-0.015	-0.029	-0.797
Affective Identity	-0.058	-0.118	0.312
Evaluative Identity	0.165	0.321	<0.01
R ²		0.152	
Adjusted R ²		0.140	
F		12.33	
p		<0.01	

A summary of the hypotheses testing results is presented in Table 5.5.

Hypothesis 2, claiming that overall model significantly explains local residents' helping behavior in online travel communities, was accepted. Hypothesis 2a, 2b and 2e, which claim that online travel community members' participation, attachment to the online community and their evaluative identity of local resident affect their helping behavior, were accepted. Hypothesis 2c and 2d, which claimed cognitive identity of local resident

and affective identity of local resident positively affect members' online helping behavior, were rejected.

Table 5.5
Hypotheses Testing Results for Group-Helping Model

Hypothesis	Mean	t-value	p-value	Result
2. Overall Model			<0.01	Accept
2a Member Participation	3.24	2.81	<0.01	Accept
2b Member Attachment	3.85	3.16	<0.01	Accept
2c Cognitive Identity	5.18	-0.26	0.78	Reject
2d Affective Identity	5.01	-1.01	0.31	Reject
2e Evaluative identity	4.81	3.53	<0.01	Accept

Testing the Conceptual Framework

Previously, a conceptual framework was presented integrating the above two models. The following analyses were to examine the effectiveness of the new proposed conceptual framework and to test the relationship between perceived controllability, emotions (sympathy, empathy, anger, personal distress), social identities (online travel community member, local resident) and helping behavior. Results of attribution-empathy model testing suggest that influences of attributional process was not mediated by the perceived controllability and empathic emotions. The mediating effect test was not included in this section.

H3. The conceptual framework significantly explains the members' helping behavior in online travel communities.

H3a. *Online travel community members' perception of controllability negatively affects their helping behaviour.*

H3b. *Online travel community members' sympathy positively affects their helping behaviour.*

H3c. *Online travel community members' empathic emotions positively affect their helping behaviour.*

H3d. *Online travel community members' anger negatively affects their helping behaviour.*

H3e. *Online travel community members' personal distress positively affects their helping behaviour.*

H3f. *The participation as an online travel community member positively affects their online helping behaviour.*

H3g. *The attachment to the online travel community positively affects members' online helping behaviour.*

H3h. *Online travel community members' cognitive social identity of local resident positively affects their helping behaviour.*

H3i. *Online travel community members' affective social identity of local resident positively affects their helping behaviour.*

H3j. *Online travel community members' evaluative social identity of local resident positively affects their helping behaviour.*

According to Table 5.6, it may be concluded that the model is statistically significant ($F=16.36$, $P<0.01$) and accounts for 31.2% of the variance. Compared to

previous two models, the increased value of adjusted R square (M1=0.21, M2=0.14, M3=0.32) reveals that model 3 is able to explain more variance of the dependent variable (helping behavior). In other words, model 3 is more functional to explain online community members' helping behavior.

Table 5.6

Summary of OLS Regression Analysis of Conceptual Framework (N = 377)

Variable	Helping Behavior		
	<i>B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>p</i>
Perceived Controllability	-0.008	0.049	0.867
Sympathy	0.118	0.044	0.008
Empathy	0.106	0.046	0.002
Anger	-0.146	0.065	0.104
Personal Distress	0.363	0.059	<0.01
Member Participation	0.152	0.050	0.003
Member Attachment	0.074	0.055	0.179
Cognitive Identity	-0.018	0.053	0.737
Affective Identity	-0.073	0.052	0.165
Evaluative Identity	0.180	0.043	<0.01
R ²		0.333	
Adjusted R ²		0.312	
F		16.359	
p		<0.01	

In addition, variables of sympathy ($\beta=0.15$, $p< .05$), personal distress ($\beta=0.41$, $p< .05$), member participation ($\beta= 3.02$, $p<.05$) and the evaluative social identity of local resident ($\beta= 0.35$, $p<.05$) are positively related to helping behavior; while empathic

emotion ($\beta = -0.20, p < .05$) is negatively related to helping behavior. Moreover, the perceived controllability, anger, member attachment, cognitive social identity of local resident, and affective social identity of local resident is not related to helping behavior.

A summary of the hypotheses testing results is presented in Table 5.7.

Hypothesis 3, claiming that overall model could significantly explain members' helping behavior in online travel communities, was accepted. Hypothesis 3b, 3e, 3f and 3j, which claim that online travel community members' sympathy, personal distress, participation in the online community and their evaluative identity of local resident affect their helping behavior, were accepted. Hypothesis 2c and 2d, which claim cognitive identity of local resident and affective identity of local resident positively affect members' online helping behavior, were accepted. Hypothesis 3a and 3c, which claim that perceived controllability and anger negatively affect members' helping behavior in online travel communities, were rejected. Hypothesis 3d, 3g, 3h and 3i, which claim that empathic emotion, member attachment, cognitive identity of local resident, affective identity of local resident positively affect members' helping behavior in online travel communities, were rejected.

Table 5.7

Hypotheses Testing Results of Conceptual Framework

Hypothesis	Mean	T-value	P-value	Result
3. Overall Model			<0.01	Accept
3a. Perceived controllability	3.01	-0.17	0.87	Reject
3b. Sympathy	3.68	2.66	<0.01	Accept
3c. Empathy	2.25	-3.19	<0.01	Reject
3d. Anger	4.75	1.63	0.10	Reject
3e. Personal Distress	3.17	6.13	<0.01	Accept
3f. Member Participation	3.24	3.02	<0.01	Accept
3g. Member Attachment	3.85	1.35	0.18	Reject
3h. Cognitive Social Identity	5.18	-0.34	0.74	Reject
3i. Affective Social Identity	5.01	-1.39	0.17	Reject
3j. Evaluative social Identity	4.81	4.19	<0.01	Accept

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

There are three sections in this chapter. The first section briefly discusses the findings of this study, including the results corresponding to research objectives, descriptive analysis results and hypothesis testing results. The second section discusses the implication of the findings both theoretically and practically, and limitations of this study. The third section provides recommendations for futures studies.

Conclusions

Research Objective 1

The first research objective of this study was to develop a conceptual framework to understand local residents' contribution to online travel comments in terms of helping behavior. A recent study (Chu, 2009) has examined the antecedents and consequence effects of members' helping behavior in general online communities and concludes that the phenomenon of helping behavior among members may become a major source and channel for information tin the decision making process. In the field of online travel communities, it has been shown that for potential tourists, online travel communities have become one of the most important ways to obtain destination information and they tend to view local resident as reliable information providers (Aral et al., 2010). It was therefore necessary to develop an understanding of these online travel community members' helping behavior as a contribution to the communities, especially for members who represent their local communities.

Based on the literature, a conceptual framework (Fig 6.1), which combined the attribution-empathic model of helping behavior and group-helping behavior, was presented in chapter three. It was assumed that online helping behavior could be divided into three phases: attribution, affect and action. The attribution process could be affected by their dual identities of online travel community member and local resident, as well as certain social demographic characteristics. The first part of the model was obtained from the attribution-empathy model, which suggests that perception of controllability, anger, empathetic emotions (sympathy), and personal distress might serve as predictors of individual's helping behavior. The second part of the model was obtained from studies related to group level helping behavior. The basic assumption of this model was that the in-group social identities could positively affect their prosocial behavior of helping. Therefore, the social identity of online travel community member and social identity of local resident were examined.

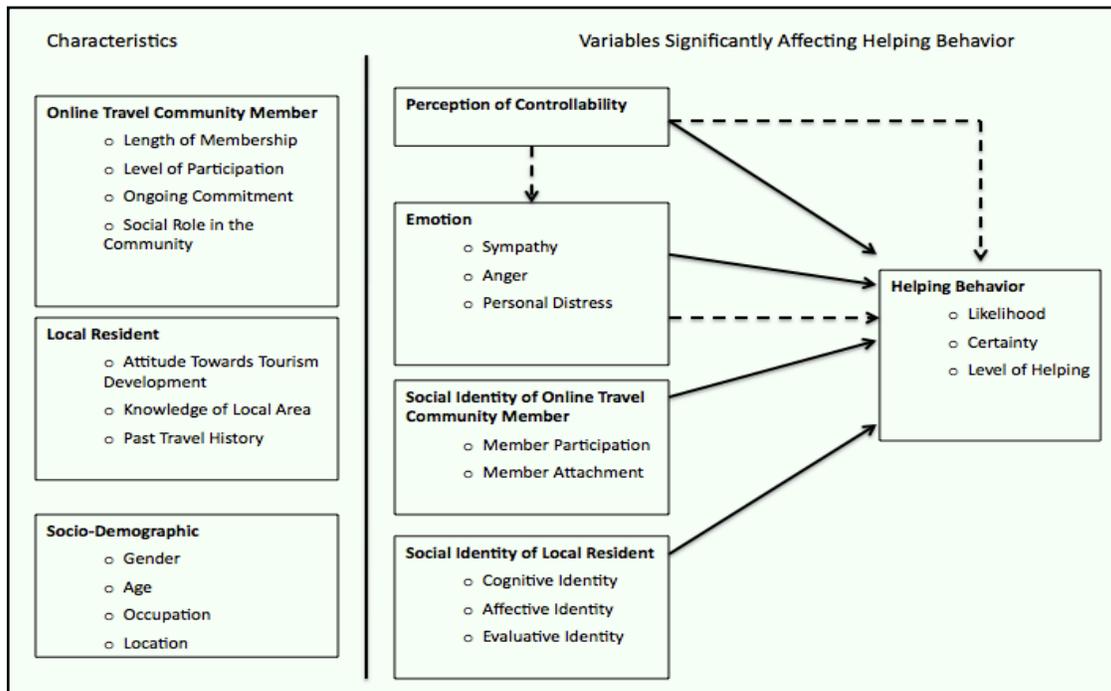


Figure 6.1 Conceptual Framework

Research Objective 2

The second research objective was to test the conceptual framework and to identify key variables that could significantly explain local residents' online helping behavior. Based on prior hypothesis testing results, a modified conceptual framework was presented (see Figure 6.1). Characteristics of the subjects, including their social identity of online travel community member, social identity of local resident, and socio-demographics, were examined to obtain basic understanding about their situation. On the right side of the conceptual framework, variables that could predict helping behavior were presented. It was assumed that variables of sympathy, personal distress, participation to the online travel community and evaluative identity of local resident could produce positive impacts on helping behavior, while empathy could negatively

affect members' helping behavior.

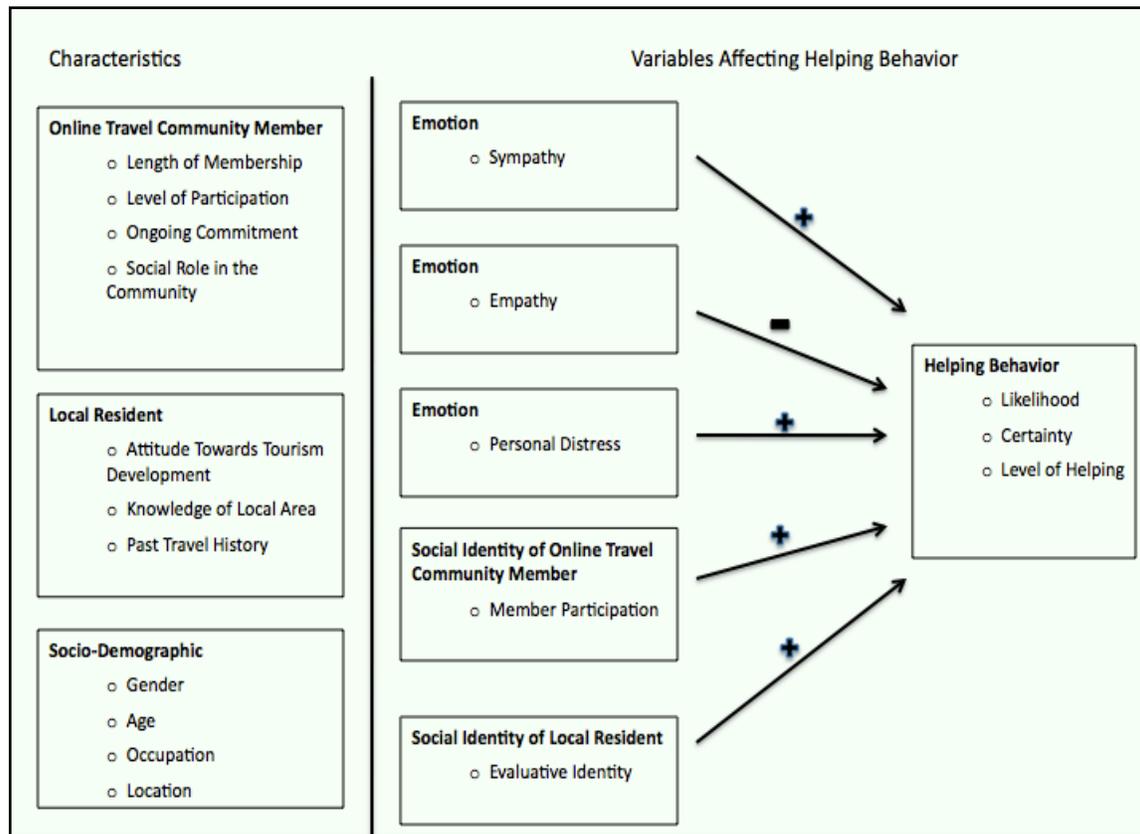


Figure 6.2. Modified Conceptual Framework

Descriptive Analysis Findings

Descriptive analysis was employed in this study to obtain a basic understanding of the characteristics of these CouchSurfing community members residing in the Southeastern United States. From the socio-demographic characteristics, it is observed that most participants were young age, well educated, and employed full-time. The majority of participants were located in the states of Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and Maryland.

With respect to online activities, the majority spent less than one hour per week in the CouchSurfing website and did not have other online travel community memberships in addition to the CouchSurfing community. Activities most often practiced in the CouchSurfing community were to look for chances to interact with potential tourists and other local residents. Although a large amount of these members admitted that they were passively involved into activities in CouchSurfing community, they still maintained social ties to CouchSurfing at different levels.

In terms of actual physical travel, it was found that the majority of participants had rich experiences in tourism and traveling. In the past two years, nearly two thirds of the participants have taken more than 15 domestic trips, and about half have traveled outside United States.

From the previous description, it may be concluded that the CouchSurfing community serves as a social collect made up of individuals who have a special interest and rich knowledge in tourism and traveling. The interactions between members were not confined within the boundary of tourists and locals; instead, members indicate an interest in extending their own social networks with other people through information sharing and exchange.

Hypothesis Testing Findings

Based on the literature, a conceptual framework was presented and tested. The conceptual framework was constituted by the attribution-empathy model and group-helping model. Both of these two models were significant, but only explain 21.0% and

14.0% of the variance, while the combined model may account for 31.2 % of the variance, which was better than the previous two models.

In the data screening process, in order to ensure the scale reliability, the sympathy scale was divided into two measurements that examined the sympathy and empathetic emotions. The results of the first attribution-sympathy model testing indicated that in the environment of online travel communities, the overall model was significant, and variables of sympathy and personal distress could exert positive impacts on the helping behavior. Although the variable of empathy was found to be significantly related to the helping behavior, the produced effects were negative, which was different from the hypothesis. Next, anger was found unrelated to the helping behavior; however, the previous data screening process indicated that most participants checked low points of the scale. Additionally, it was found that perception of controllability and emotions were not mediating variables of the attribution process as predicted. When testing the second model, the results indicated that the overall model was statistically significant, and variables of member participation, member attachment and evaluative social identity of local resident were found positively related to the helping behavior.

When testing the proposed conceptual framework, the results revealed that the model was statistically significant, and variables of sympathy, personal distress, member participation, evaluative social identity of local resident positively affected the helping behaviour. Although empathic emotions were significantly related to helping behaviour, it was interpreted as exerting negative effects. Similar to previous model results, perception of controllability, anger, cognitive and affective social identity of local

resident were found unrelated to the helping behaviour. However, in the combined model, member attachment was interpreted as unrelated to the helping behaviour, which was different from the prior result.

From an individual level, although sympathy and personal distress proved to exert positive impacts on helping behavior, these two variables were subjectively different (Eisenberg et al, 1989). Personal distress is an aversive, self-focused emotional reaction (e.g., anxiety, worry, discomfort) to the apprehension or comprehension of another's emotional state or condition, and it referred to the relieved mental status after members practiced the helping behavior.

Further, as mentioned earlier, the original sympathy scale was divided into two assessments. Empathy (i.e. worried, concerned) was found to negatively affect members' helping behavior. This discrepancy suggests that the level of participants' sympathy for helpes is superficial. They might be slightly affected by their emotion of sympathy, but an intense level of empathic emotion inhibited the helping behavior.

Another noticeable difference was that perception of controllability and anger did not explain helping behavior. Perception of controllability did not act as a mediating factor, either. This difference might result from the special environment of cyberspace.

In addition, the result suggested that member's participation was a significant factor in determining the helping behavior. In fact, previous studies have found that members' participation and attachment were significant related to their contribution (Wang & Fessenmaier, 2004). In this case, a reasonable explanation might be that a large of members in the CouchSurfing community were not active towards the community

activities and that their social attachments to the community might be weak. In this case, the outcome might be different in other online travel communities.

Also, the evaluative social identity, which stands for “a positive or negative value connotation attached to this group membership” (Bergami and Bagozzior, 2000, p. 556), and could be interpreted as “group self-esteem” (Bergami and Bagozzior, 2000, p. 556) was found to affect one’s helping behavior as well. In this sense, pride and self-esteem related to the residing area were important to them and might even affect their online behaviors.

Theoretical Implications

From the perspective of theoretical implication, this research is one of the very first attempts to explore members’ activities in online travel communities as local residents, and the results of this research extend the existing knowledge on members’ contribution to online travel communities with a new perspective. The most important contribution of this research is the finding related to the special feature of cyberspace. As indicated from the results, variables motivating members’ activities or contributions to the community are generally similar to those influencing ones in reality. However, certain negative effects have been lessened in the online environment. Also, the emotions were less intense than those aroused in reality. Other empirical research has proven that local residents do feel sympathy for coming tourists (Woosnam, 2008), however, their emotion of sympathy in online communities tend to be more ego-centered and are maintain at a superficial level.

In addition, perception of controllability is regarded as one of the important factors in understanding the helping behavior since “it showed the causal attribution for each condition was actually perceived as controllable or uncontrollable by the subject” (Betancourt, 1990, p. 576). Also, perceived controllability serves as an important mediating variable because both emotional reactions and helping behavior are regarded as theoretically determined by the level of perceived controllability. However, in this research, it was found that perception of controllability is unrelated to the helping behaviour and the mediating effects did not occur. In other words, when offering help to other members in the online travel community, these local residents did not take into account whether these help requesters’ situation was under personal control or not. It is highly possible that these local residents regard those help requesters as peers, and did not care about other members’ situations. As a result, they spontaneously offer help to the incoming tourists. In this sense, further research is needed to understand the inefficacy of perceived controllability in online travel communities.

Another difference found in this research is that member attachment is not significantly related to members’ helping behavior. Previous research has found that the successful operation of an online travel community is based upon the understanding of members’ participation and active contribution to the online travel community, and the level of active contribution may be explained by three instrumental, efficacy and expectancy related incentives (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004). In this research, where helping behavior is regarded as voluntary based and non-incentive driven, the social identity of local resident positively affects their helping behavior. This identity

transformation from reality to cyberspace provides a new standing point to understand the phenomenon of online travel communities.

Finally, a very important phenomenon observed in this study is the consistency and transformation from reality to cyberspace. For example, in both environments, sympathy is detected in local resident's attitude towards tourists. Personal distress, sympathy and the social identity also act as predictable factors in explaining one's online helping behavior. In addition, the social identity of local resident is regarded as one of the influencing factors accounting for members' online helping behavior. This finding is not only consistent with prior studies in social capitals (e.g., Mathwick and Kelbba, 2003; von Iwan, Katja and Thorsten, 2004), but also best exemplifies this social influence transferred between two environments.

Practical Implications

Previous studies of helping in general communities have implied that helping behavior may serve as a major source of information in the decision making process for product purchases and may be utilized as a promising source for new product development (Chu, 2009). The research in online travel community also proves that for tourists, local residents are widely regarded as reliable information sources (Arsal, et al., 2010). In this case, one of the most important implications of this research for practitioners is how to motivate local residents to become involved and contribute to online travel communities.

From the outcomes of this study, three aspects should be addressed in the community website design. First, since members particularly value their pride and self-

esteem to the residing community, individual characteristic could be featured in the website design. For example, members' characteristics such as geography location, past experiences, main activities and contributions to the community could be shown on their personal webpage, and related information, such as local events and other local members, could be provided to them. In this way, relationships between members and their community at large could be better constructed. Second, according to the above findings, members who have certain advanced knowledge about their community would love to take part in this community construction. As a result, a reward system along with a notification system could be provided to acknowledge the member achievements, and this could help encourage more contributions to the online community. Also, pride and self-esteem were listed as important elements affecting their helping behavior. In this sense, it is necessary to empower the local residents; that is, providing appropriate chances and channels for them to share their knowledge with incoming tourists. Third, it might be better to set up connections between online communities and physical communities. For example, the online travel community could cooperate with the physical community to develop sub-groups or divisions for the website, soliciting advice from local residents. Hyperlinks to the local CVB website or tourism agency could also be listed as references for information searching.

Limitations

One limitation of the research is the adaptability of the conceptual framework. The original model is obtained from the field of social psychology and has been tested in a diversity of reality-based situations. However, it has never been tested in the

environment of online travel communities, and more research is needed based on the findings of current research. Also, the helping behavior, in the CouchSurfing community, was interpreted as different kinds of online activities (i.e., providing advice, hanging out, offering hospitality). However, the board term of helping was still vague and general for the respondents and their reactions might vary in different situations.

Another limitation of this research is the study site. First, a special function of the study site in this research was to bridge the potential tourists and local residents through possible hospitalities and meetings. It might be difficult to generalize the result from this study to other communities. Thus, it is expected that this research could be replicated in other kinds of online travel communities. Next, there were some technical problems during the research period due to the study site undergoing an upgrade. A number of participants had difficulty accessing the invitation messages, which might have contributed to a lower response rate. Last, with support from the Southeast states Chapter of Travel and Tourism Research Association, the participants were limited to members residing in the Southeastern United States. This geographic constraint might act as another limitation of the study.

Also, in the non-response bias-check section, it was found that there were significant differences between respondents and non-respondents for the perceived controllability, anger, and personal distress. A casual relationship should be taken and a follow-up study might be needed.

Additionally, a change was made to divide the original sympathy scale into two scales measuring sympathy and empathy, and a single-item was used to examine the

emotion of sympathy. This change might lead to another limitation of this research, and future empirical research on the emotions might be conducted using different kinds of measurements.

Future Research

This study attempts to understand guest-host relationship in tourism destinations and members' contributions to the online travel communities in terms of helping behavior.

With respect to the conceptual framework, it is expected that the conceptual framework could be repeated in other online travel communities. Also, it is desired that different types of theoretical frameworks could be applied to understand the members' contributions to the online travel communities. The conceptual framework presented here is rooted in social psychology studies conducted in reality-based situations. Therefore, model testing in a variety of situations is necessary.

Emotion is another subject that might require intensive research. From the hypotheses testing results, it is suggested that most of these emotions should be related to the helping behavior; however, in online travel communities, these emotions might exert adverse impacts. For example, the outcome of this study suggests that empathetic emotions could negatively affect the helping behavior, while anger is not related to the helping behavior. These differences from previous literature deserve further explorations.

Deeper understanding is needed with respect to the role of online travel community membership. From the results of group-helping model testing, both member participation and member attachment were found to be significantly related to the helping

behavior, while in the conceptual framework testing, member attachment was found to be not significantly related. As mentioned, two different scales were adopted in this research examining the social identity of online travel community member and social identity of local resident; the same scale could be utilized to examine the dual social identities. Meanwhile, there are several other approaches to understand the member performance in the online travel communities. Thus, an attempt to further illustrate the online travel community membership might be available with another theoretical framework.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Invitation Letter

Hi, XXX (USERNAME),

My name is Becky Liu, currently a graduate student in the Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management at Clemson University. My professor and I are working on a research project studying local residents' helping behavior in the CouchSurfing community. We invite you to participate in our research by filling out an online questionnaire, which will take about 10 minutes of your time. Also you will have a chance to win a \$100 Amazon.com Gift Card when you complete this survey, This research is monitored by the Clemson University Institutional Review Board. Your answers will be confidential. NO record is kept of your name linked to your answers. We only publicly report combined data that will not single out individual responses. We would appreciate it if you would complete the questionnaire today, or within the next couple of days. If you have any difficulty in accessing the survey or if you have questions, please feel free to contact me at icebecky(private message), bingjil@clemson.edu or call 864-656-5334.

Take the survey here!
<Survey Link>

Many thanks to your help!

Sincerely,
Becky Liu
MS Student
Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management,
Clemson University
Clemson, SC29634, United States.

Appendix B

Local Resident's Helping Behavior in Online Travel Community Questionnaire

Section A. Questions about your activities in the CouchSurfing community *(Please check the appropriate box)*

1. How long have you been a member of the CouchSurfing community? *(Please check one)*
 - A. Less than 1 year
 - B. 1-2 years
 - C. 3-5 years
 - D. 6-10 years
 - E. More than 10 years

2. On average, how long do you participate in the CouchSurfing website per week? *(Please check one)*
 - A. Less than 1 hour per week
 - B. 1-5 hours per week
 - C. 5-10 hours per week
 - D. 10 hours or more per week

3. What are you usually doing in the CouchSurfing website? *(Please check all that apply)*
 - A. Looking for locals to hang out with
 - B. Looking for travelers to meet
 - C. Looking for travelers to host
 - D. Looking for hosts to stay with
 - E. Looking for information about local events
 - F. Looking for trip advice
 - G. Providing advice for other members
 - H. Meeting other members online
 - I. Sharing travel experiences
 - J. Other *(Please specify)* _____

4. As a member, how do you classify your role in the CouchSurfing community? *(Please check one)*
 - A. **Tourist:** you lack strong social ties to the group, and seldom contributes to the community
 - B. **Mingler:** you maintain somewhat strong social ties with the group, and sometimes contributes to the community
 - C. **Devotee:** you maintain strong social ties with the group, and often contributes to the community

D. **Insider:** you maintain very strong social and personal with the group, and very actively contribute to the community

5. Which of the following statements best describe your status in the CouchSurfing community? Please indicate your agreement for each statement on a scale “1=strongly disagree” to “5=strongly agree”

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I often observe the online activities in the CouchSurfing community	1	2	3	4	5
I often take part in the activities in the CouchSurfing community	1	2	3	4	5
I am enthusiastic about the activities in the CouchSurfing community	1	2	3	4	5
I feel strong ties to other members in CouchSurfing community	1	2	3	4	5
I find it easy to form a bond with other members in CouchSurfing community	1	2	3	4	5
I feel a sense of community with other members in the CouchSurfing community	1	2	3	4	5
I feel a strong sense of camaraderie with other members in the CouchSurfing community	1	2	3	4	5

6. Besides CouchSurfing, are you a member of other online travel communities?

A. Yes

B. No

If Yes, how many online travel community memberships do you have besides CouchSurfing? _____

Section B. Questions about help-related requests in CouchSurfing community

(Please check the appropriate box)

7. If you saw other members asking for help in the CouchSurfing community (i.e. request information, advice, hospitality), how would you feel about it? Please rate the each following statements on a scale ranging from “1=Not at all” to “5=Very much”

	Not at all	Slightly	Somewhat	Moderately	Very much
I would feel sympathetic for that person	1	2	3	4	5
I would feel worried for that person	1	2	3	4	5
I would feel annoyed by that person	1	2	3	4	5
I would feel better after helping them	1	2	3	4	5
I would feel sorry for that person	1	2	3	4	5
I would feel concerned for that person	1	2	3	4	5
I would feel aggravated by that person	1	2	3	4	5
I would feel irritated by that person	1	2	3	4	5
I would feel relieved after helping them	1	2	3	4	5

8. If you saw other members asking help in the CouchSurfing community, would you think the cause of that person’s present situation is under personal control?
- A. Not under personal control at all
 - B. Slightly under personal control
 - C. Somewhat under personal control
 - D. Moderately under personal control
 - E. Totally under personal control

9. If you saw other members asking help in the CouchSurfing community, would you think it was that person's own fault that he/she is in the present situation?
- A. No, not at all
 - B. No probably not
 - C. Maybe
 - D. Yes, probably so
 - E. Yes, absolutely so
10. If you saw other members asking help in the CouchSurfing community, how responsible would you think is that persons for his/her present situation?
- A. Not at all responsible
 - B. Slightly responsible
 - C. Somewhat responsible
 - D. Moderately responsible
 - E. Totally responsible
11. If you saw other members asking help in the CouchSurfing community, how likely would you help that person?
- A. Definitely would not help
 - B. Probably would not help
 - C. Probably would help or probably would not help
 - D. Probably would help
 - E. Definitely would help
12. If you saw other members asking help in the CouchSurfing community, how certain would you feel that you would help that person?
- A. Not certain at all
 - B. Slightly certain
 - C. Somewhat certain
 - D. Moderately certain
 - E. Extremely certain
13. If you saw other members asking for help in CouchSurfing, which of the following actions would you most likely take? (*Please check one*)
- A. Offer help both online and off-line (providing advice, hanging out, and offering hospitality)
 - B. Offer online help and partial off-line help (providing advice and hanging out)
 - C. Offer online help (providing advice)
 - D. Offer partial online help (occasionally providing advice)
 - E. Ignore the request

Section C. Questions about the community you currently reside *(Please check the appropriate box)*

14. How long have you lived in your current community?

- A. Less than 1 year
- B. 1-5 years
- C. 6-10 years
- D. More than 10 years

15. As a resident in your community, please indicate your agreement with EACH of the following statements, on a scale of 1= “Strongly Disagree” to 7=“Strongly Agree”

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Some-what Disagree	Neu-tral	Some-what Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I identify myself as member of the community where I live	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I feel myself attached to the community where I live	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am a valued member of the community where I live	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I identify myself as a part of the community where I live	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I feel I belong to the community where I live	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am an important member of the community where I live	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section D. Questions about yourself *(Please check/fill in the appropriate box)*

1. What state do you live in?

_____ (State)

2. What’s your gender?

Male Female

3. What’s your age?

4. What's your highest level of education? (*please check one*)

some high school or less

high school graduate

college/university graduate

graduate/postgraduate

5. What is your primary occupation?

A. Student

B. Full-time worker

C. Part-time worker

D. Unemployed

6. What is your zip code?

Appendix C

Reminder

Hi, XXX (user name),

A few days ago, you were invited to participate in a research project studying helping behaviors in CouchSurfing community by completing an online survey.

If you have completed the questionnaire, thank you so much! If not, we hope you can take a few minutes to go the URL below and fill out the questionnaire.

<Survey link>

If you have any difficulties in accessing the survey or if you have questions, please feel free to contact me at icebecky (private message), bingjil@clermson.edu, or call 864-656-5334.

And don't forget to submit your email address at the end of the survey if you wish to enter the drawing for a \$100 Amazon Gift Card!

We truly appreciate your time and effort.

Many thanks!

Best,

Becky

MS Student

Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management

Clemson University, Clemson, SC29634, USA

Appendix D

Thank-you Note/Invitation Letter of Non-Response Bias Check Survey

Hi, XXX (user name),

Few weeks ago, you received an invitation from us asking you to take part in a research project studying helping behavior in CouchSurfing community. If you have completed the questionnaire, thank you so much!! If for some reason, you don't want to participate in the research, we still hope you could take a few minutes to go to the URL below and complete a five-question **short** survey.

<New Survey Link>

Many thanks!

Best,

Becky

MS Student

Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management

Clemson University, Clemson, SC29634, USA

Appendix E

Non-Response Bias-Check Survey Questionnaire

1. As a member, how do you classify your role in the CouchSurfing community?
(Please check one)
 - A. **Tourist**: who lacks strong social ties to the group, and seldom contributes to the community
 - B. **Mingler**: who maintains somewhat strong social ties with the group, and sometimes contributes to the community
 - C. **Devotee**: who maintains strong social ties with the group, and often contributes to the community
 - D. **Insider**: who maintains very strong social and personal with the group, and very actively contribute to the community

2. If you saw other members asking for help in the CouchSurfing community (i.e., request information, advice, hospitality), how would you feel about it? Please rate the following statements on a scale from “1= not at all” to “5= extremely”.

	Not at all	Slightly	Some- what	Moder- ately	Extre- mely
I would feel sympathetic for that person.	1	2	3	4	5
I would feel annoyed by that person.	1	2	3	4	5
I would feel better after helping that person.	1	2	3	4	5
I would think the cause of the situation was under personal control	1	2	3	4	5

3. If you saw other members asking for help in CouchSurfing, which of the following actions would you most likely take? (Please check one)
 - A. Offer help both online and off-line (providing advice, hanging out, and offering hospitality)
 - B. Offer online help and partial off-line help (providing advice and hanging out)

- C. Offer online help (providing advice)
- D. Offer partial online help (occasionally providing advice)
- E. Ignore the request

Questions about yourself *(Please check/fill in the appropriate box)*

7. What's your gender?

- Male Female

8. What's your age?

9. What's your highest level of education? *(please check one)*

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> some high school or less | <input type="checkbox"/> high school graduate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> college/university graduate | <input type="checkbox"/> graduate/postgraduate |

10. What is your primary occupation?

- A. Student
- B. Full-time worker
- C. Part-time worker
- D. Unemployed

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