

# From Traditional Volunteering to Online Volunteering: Moving Beyond Real Border

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**Abstract**— The rapid growth in the Internet technologies and social media networks has changed the world in unpredictable ways. Social media for example is transforming the way people communicate, sharing knowledge, deliver the services and support their activities. The new form of volunteering work utilizing the social media platform created a phenomenon that overcomes many obstacles present in traditional volunteering. This paper presents the definition of online volunteering which has become a popular phenomenon with the advent of technology. Next, the paper goes on to review the why and wherefore people volunteering online as well as the views of online volunteering situations in Malaysia. Lastly, the paper briefly reviews the virtual border created when individuals volunteer online, from the perspective of border theory and concluded with further suggestion.

**Keywords**— border theory; online volunteering; virtual border

## I. Introduction

The global Internet technology has changed the world in unpredictable ways. According to the International Communication Union (ITU) [1], by end of 2018, 51.2 percent of the global population or nearly 3.9 billion people have accessed to the Internet. In addition, in 2019 the number of mobile phone users around the world is predicted to reach 4.68 billion people or 67 percent of the population in the world [2]. This circumstances has influence various aspects of economies, human lives and jobs to become more digital, more connected and gradually more automated. In addition, with the wide usage of social media, a new form of volunteerism called online volunteering has become a phenomenon [3].

As a result, many non-profit oriented organizations have opened the door to attract professionals' participation in a growing number of virtual communities offered online volunteering opportunities. In Malaysian, one of the

significant player in this field is the DoktorBudak.com; an online avenue comprises of pediatrician's online volunteers who share knowledge with parents to respond to children's health-related issues.

Online volunteers commit their time and skills over the Internet, for free and without financial considerations and for the benefit of society. Online volunteering has greatly increases the freedom and flexibility of volunteer engagement since it eliminated the need for volunteerism to be tied to specific times and locations. Online volunteerism also allows organizations to extend the benefits of their current volunteer programs and deploy volunteers in new areas [4]. Moreover the volunteering tasks done through the Internet can bring a real world impact [5]. For example, non-profit organizations who rely on grant or donation from outside can benefit from online volunteering [6]. Online volunteers (OV) engage in operational and managerial tasks such as fundraising, technological support, communications, marketing and providing professional consulting expertise. Increasingly, they also engage in activities such as research and writing and leading e-mail discussion groups.

## II. Online Volunteering Definition

[7] and [8] stated that there is no general consensus on the definition of online volunteering. Various terms have been used to refer to online volunteering. They include virtual volunteering, digital volunteering, micro-volunteering, cyber service, crowdsourcing telementoring, teletutoring, and online mentoring. The variations of terms arise as they represent the same concept, such as doing work away from the work site, using the Internet as the medium, formal or informal involvement as workers, volunteers or consultants, and whether the tasks involved are short-term or long-term. In

general, the different terms connote that the tasks done are voluntary and with no expectation of monetary rewards. However, not all terms are suitable to be used when referring to online volunteers as the setting may be different.

[9] used 'online volunteering' in most of their research works. They expressed the notion of online volunteering as any volunteer tasks completed off-site from the organization, in whole or in part, through the Internet at home, work or public access through a mission-based organization (non-profit, civil society etc.). From this definition, there are some OV tasks that can be done entirely online while there may be some tasks that can be implemented in a mixture of online and offline. Then, the voluntary projects could be proposed by individuals, a company or any public or other mission-based organization. Even though some researchers refer OV as virtual volunteering, [5] argued that the word 'virtual' implies that as if the person who volunteers do not exist for real. Thus, they suggested using the term 'online volunteer' to represent volunteers' tasks done through the Internet. The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) agreed with the term used by [5], which they use officially in their organization. The UNV identified three main characteristics for volunteering: (1) volunteering is done willingly by the volunteers, (2) no incentive is received (e.g., monetary reward), and (3) it is done for the sake of the community [10]. These characteristics can be applied to online volunteering, too, as its philosophy is similar. Meanwhile, [8] reviewed thoroughly the concept of online volunteering. She suggested that the terms teletutoring and telementoring do not reflect online volunteering because the context is rather different in that the activities are profit related. That is, the concepts are about tutoring in a virtual learning environment (teletutoring) and providing a private coach in an organization (telementoring). Instead, she suggested the use of online volunteers, virtual volunteers, and e-volunteers.

### **iii. The Why and Wherefore Volunteering Online**

In the United States and several European countries, the highest rate of engagement in the volunteering sector comes from individuals in the labor force. A study by [11] reported that those in the workforce are likely to volunteer than the unemployed (e.g., students, housewives, senior citizens) and most of them are between 35 and 44 years old. Thus, studying the experience and the state of mind of the employed individuals especially professionals who go beyond the realm of work and juggling the different life domains is warranted.

[5] identified several reasons for individuals to volunteer online. They include factors as being impossible to reach by the onsite means due to disability, issues on mobile or home obligation, and preference for working from home using a computer and communicating online. They stressed that volunteering online takes time just as onsite volunteering because the information provided must be updated and the latest. Their view is in line with [11] and [12], who pointed

out that volunteering cannot be easily restricted to either work or leisure, as its activity is characterized by the freedom of choice of the individuals; yet, a strong social commitment is required which differentiates it from other leisure activities, such as hobbies.

The impact of voluntary work on the individual can take many forms, ranging from positive to negative. A considerable amount of literature published on the advantages of online volunteering. These studies viewed the advantages from the perspective of the employees, organizations, and communities. The most significant benefits of online volunteering identified are increased job performance [13], promotion of leadership, increased family interaction, and lower depression level [14]. [15] and [16] pointed out that participation in volunteering is also associated with individuals' ability to build job-related skills. As an example, individuals may acquire other skills that are not possible in their present job. Other researchers asserted that the positive impact of onsite volunteering can be achieved also for online volunteering [5], [17]. For example, individuals may gain social recognition, better health, self-esteem, and job-related skills and expand career paths [18]. They also may experience a low depression level, overall life satisfaction, and other health-related outcomes [11]. According to [19], volunteerism through the Internet may improve pro-social behavior among volunteers just as onsite volunteers, and, therefore, supports a helping behavior to occur. The pro-social behavior could be defined as "voluntary actions that are intended to help or benefit other peoples or group of peoples" [19]. He grouped the success factors of online volunteering into three: the individual level, interpersonal level, and group level.

It was also found that OV claimed that their work followed a very flexible pattern with no time commitment [20], thus enabling them to improve their work-life balance. For example, the use of Internet whether at home or at work, especially via mobile devices, allows their OV tasks to take place at any time of the day or night, which eventually give a chance for the volunteers to plan their leisure times and to balance their time between work and family.

In addition, some organizations are considering online volunteering as one of the keys to solving their staffing ,problems which need immediate attention [21] and to support a flexible workforce [22], thus reducing shortages of experts. Many managers reported that they employ OV to do tasks that they are not able to afford in the past. In this case, the volunteers acquired are those with available skills in specific areas, such as information technology. Online volunteering also allows small or startup organizations to employ volunteer online, particularly expert workers beyond their locations [21]. Thus, organizations can structure their operations to cut costs, maximize resources, and improve productivity.

One of the potential drawbacks of online volunteering is the inability of OV to effectively manage their time well at home or at work. As doing online volunteering tasks means that individuals may be removed from the traditional spatial

and temporal boundaries of work or family [23], the activity may blur the boundaries between the domains and become challenges toward developing workplace behavior [24]. Lacking physical workspace where OV of professional (e.g. doctors) may accomplish their online voluntary activities at work or at home changes how they manage their boundaries.

A study on the use of health virtual community (HVC) for ParkinsonNet, a professional network for Parkinson disease, found that doctors feel uncertain to adopt the Internet-based platform as a medium to deliver patient care [25]. Doctors imply that these technologies may cause an interruption to their traditional practice pattern and require their additional times. Similar findings by [26] reported that doctors perceive extra burden of time and resources as one of the barrier hinders them to use social media for health-related purposes.

Some organizations also have concerns with online volunteering. As reported by [22], online volunteers may replace the current employees, especially those with a specific skill, with unskilled OV as tasks are split into smaller tasks. Even simple or complex tasks, such as translation, speech transcription, and product design can be done by the OV with a suitable process design and technological support. Besides, [27] argued that managers of OV are facing the same issues with onsite managers in terms of dependability and quality of work produced by the volunteers. The same opinion is shared by [28], where she recommended that organizations should give some time for online volunteers to familiarize themselves with the tasks given and the organizations or communities they serve and have a clear communication with them. As there are a few barriers for employees to volunteering online, [16] suggested that companies should take preventive actions to mitigate the obstacles faced by OV. Among their suggestions are that managers provide flexible hours to OV, provide a culture that recognizes the values of volunteering, support volunteer to find the right roles, and enables the formation of teams.

#### **iv. Online Volunteering in Malaysia**

In Malaysia, even though online volunteering represents a small proportion of voluntary sector, it is a growing field. According to the World Giving Index (WGI) report, Malaysia moved to the 7th place in 2014 from the 71st place in 2010 in the global league of generosity, indicating a significant improvement in all three ways of giving behavior such as volunteering time, donating money and helping a stranger [29]. Another survey on seventeen traditional and online volunteer platforms in Malaysia showed that approximately less than 30% of Malaysians were actively volunteered for an organization [31]. This situation reflects that Malaysia has a strong culture of helping and giving back to the community, but there is much more to be done to make volunteering, particularly online volunteering, a mainstream in the Malaysian culture. By taking into account that the

volunteering patterns have revolutionized from face-to-face volunteering to online channels, more studies need to be conducted on volunteerism among Malaysians, especially professionals who are engaged in online volunteering.

In the year 2013, the Malaysian government gave its strong support for volunteering activities by allocating a hundred million ringgit grant under the 1M4U program [32]. One of the government key propositions was to increase the number of professionals, such as doctors, counselors, and teachers, to meet the needs of skilled volunteers. This initiative was geared towards achieving the status of a developed country, whose success is not merely measured in terms of its progress and development but also in the volunteering activities as a lifestyle, regardless of its platform, online or onsite. Thus, the effort made to volunteer online by Malaysian is in conformity with the country's aspiration.

One example of an online volunteering work is the HVC, known as DoktorBudak.com, which is a collective effort of several pediatrician volunteers in Malaysia. This HVC aims at aiding parents and sharing knowledge with them by creating an online channel to respond to children's health-related issues about. The members of the community are volunteers of pediatricians and pediatric-related specialists who work in the government and private hospitals all over Malaysia. Although most of the online volunteer project aims at eliminating geographic barriers, to allow for a more diverse volunteer workforce and access to wider skill sets and expertise [21]); sometimes OV working online also may volunteer onsite for the organization, [28] such as the DoktorBudak team did.

Although there have been a number of volunteer projects undertaken by several non-profit organizations or groups that focus on online volunteering, minimal research has been done on online volunteering groups in Malaysia. This may be due to the fact that such organizations operate in a 'faceless network' [4]. The groups work on diverse projects in a combination of onsite and online activities in various areas, such as healthcare [33], [35], leadership development [33], [36] and humanitarian [37], [38].

#### **v. The Virtual Border**

Technology has moved from workplaces to become part of nearly every aspect of everyday life. To a certain extent, difference between activities that are work-related and are not is becoming less significant, as often the domains of work and family blur into each other. [39] suggest that the Internet should not be viewed as an external world as it has becoming integrated into the normal practices of daily life. Technologies such as the Web 2.0 applications coexist with other technologies that consume our time in the day and at the same time they have become deeply embedded in our lives. Therefore, individuals volunteering online who used the social media as their main platform has add another new domain from the online world into their everyday life. Whether OV are at work situations or at home domains, technology such as

smartphone, social media applications or instant messaging have truly blurred the boundaries between work and family as they are 'always on' through these technology. Thus, a broader understanding of different forms of 'life' is needed [40], by taking into account that the concept of border theory is relevant to further study individuals who volunteer online.

The Border theory hypothesizes that work and family are independent spheres that influence each other separated by physical (place), temporal (time), and psychological borders between them [42]. The strength of the border between the work and family domains will dictate the degree of interaction between them. According to [42], individuals are border-crossers in that they make frequent crossings between the work and family domains. To a certain extent, border-crossers are capable of structuring the environments in which they exist and negotiating the borders between their family and home domains. Moreover, this theory explains how the integration or segmentation of the boundary, boundary management and its characteristics, and the relationship between border-crosses and others at work and home influence work-family balance. The characteristics of the borders may bring great impact on the way individuals segment or integrate their work and family life, which may influence work-family balance.

However, this theory can be extended to understand of how the embracement of Internet technology for volunteering online affects the negotiation of work-family boundaries as the work and non-work (e.g. family, online volunteering) activities are no longer bound to a particular place or time. Even the Internet technology provides the OV flexibility to balance their work and family responsibilities; the existence of virtually borderless world requires a re-examination of work-family border theory. This is particularly important because the emerging online volunteering phenomenon among working individuals may affect their lives directly or indirectly.

[42] argued that it is difficult to provide specific definition of the virtual border that could cover all the manifestations that are taking place online. The virtual border are created when real borders and online borders overlap, producing the blurry border domains and may affect the interaction situations in life outside online world. We can indeed say that the technology could play a role in maintaining, negotiating, changing and facilitating boundaries.

## VI. Conclusion

Online volunteering proliferation enhance opportunities for individuals and organizations to volunteer. Obviously, the technologies used by individuals to volunteer online may appear in the workplace and at home with no boundaries. However, little is known regarding how OV mark the boundaries between different activities in life, particularly as the borders change from real border to virtual border over time. Further studies are needed to understand and identify how the dynamics of virtual borders help individuals

volunteering online work to define the boundaries themselves. This has implications for both conceptually as well as practically in relation to design of pervasive and cooperative technologies.

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